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AN INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN LITERATURE A STUDENT'S GUIDE

Dr Mohammed Senoussi



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An Introduction to African Literature

A Student's Guide

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1. INTRODUCTION

This handbook is a result of my humble academic and pedagogical engagement with African literature in the past years with university students. It is based on a series of courses that I have developed and taught to provide a comprehensive and captivating introduction to the rich and diverse literary traditions of Africa. This guide is intended for both students and novice researchers who are interested in exploring the complexities of African literary texts, especially those who are making the transition from undergraduate to graduate studies. I hope also to contribute to the promotion of African literature in Algerian universities bringing it back to the centre of study and research, particularly in the departments of letters and English language, where it is marginalised and neglected. I therefore believe it is the job of syllabus and curriculum designers to tailor courses that celebrate Africa. No African can claim he is knowledgeable of World, English and American literatures without knowing his own. Our literatures are an important

component in the construction of our students' personal identity and strengthening their sense of belonging.

As a teacher of African literature, I encounter a major challenge in the form of the limited awareness and exposure that most undergraduate students possess regarding the literary genres that Africa has to offer. They are familiar only with a narrow spectrum of British and American literature, which dominates a large part of the curriculum. They seldom encounter the works of African writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Nuruddin Farah, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nadine Gordimer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and many others, who have enriched world literature with their distinctive voices and perspectives. It is only at the graduate level that students begin to discover and appreciate some of the literature of their own continent.

Departments of letters are indeed cutting the maternal cord that binds students to the literatures that they are supposed to celebrate, many of which are written in a variety of languages. Unfortunately, even lecturers and curricula designers are guilty of marginalising and

excluding their own literary heritage in favour of Western literatures, which are often presented as superior and universal. This creates a sense of alienation and inferiority among students, who are deprived of the opportunity to learn from and relate to their own literary traditions.

For example, a common fallacy among many of my students is that Yasmina Khadra, the Algerian author, is a female writer. However, in reality, he is a former army officer who used his wife's name as a pen name to avoid the military censorship. Yasmina Khadra is one of the most famous novelists in the world, yet he is mysteriously unknown to our students. Besides, I was once confronted by a student who claimed that Assia Djebar was not a genuine Algerian because she did not wear the veil. This statement stunned me, as Djebar is a renowned writer who always asserted her Algerian and Berber identity in her works. She is one of the most influential voices of Algerian literature who explores the themes of women, history, and culture in her novels, essays, and films. But this student was blinded by

extremism, and could not appreciate the beauty and diversity of art. He could not see beyond the superficial appearance of the author, and missed the depth and richness of her expression. This was not his fault alone, but also the fault of the educational system that failed to foster critical thinking and open-mindedness among students.

In fact, I believe that part of the problem is that we do not have African or Algeria literary encyclopaedias. Literary history writing is necessary for all cultures and nations as they need a register for their cultural productions. We need to keep literary history up to date. There are African countries like my country, Algeria, that do not have up-to-date statistics on how many literary productions and critical works are published each year. I have never encountered a literary historical encyclopaedia of Algerian literature even though our literary history can be traced back to the second century AD with the publication of the first known novel in world history entitled *The Golden Donkey* by the Numidian Latin-language author Apuleius.

The purpose of this handbook and the courses it encompasses is therefore to bridge the gap between students and their African artistic heritage. I present an introduction to African literature that enables students to relate to the stories, histories, philosophies and realities that shape the diverse and dynamic forms of African literary expression. This handbook covers various topics, such as the oral and written forms of African literature, the impact of colonialism and independence movements on African writers, the themes and styles of African literature, the role of gender and identity in African literature, the influence of globalisation, exile and diaspora on African literature and so forth. With this handbook, I aim to provide a useful resource and a clear, easy and informative guide for anyone who wants to discover more about the fascinating world of African literature and to share my passion and knowledge of the continent's vibrant and varied literary expressions.

Besides, this book is a humble attempt to introduce a colossal and complex topic that defies any simple or singular explanation: *Africa*. In fact, no book no matter

how comprehensive can fully unravel the complexities and realities that shape and inform the act of writing and reading of African literature. Africa is a continent of unparalleled linguistic and cultural diversity, spanning from the Mediterranean to the Cape of Good Hope, and encompassing over fifty sovereign nations. It is the cradle of humanity, where our ancestors first appeared and from where they spread across the globe. It is also the land of ancient civilisations, some of the oldest in the world, such as Egypt, Kush, Carthage, and Punt. Throughout its history, Africa has witnessed the rise and fall of many kingdoms and empires, each with their own political and cultural achievements, such as Mali, Kongo, Benin, and others. Africa is a rich and colourful mosaic of diverse peoples, traditions, and histories. This book is a humble attempt to introduce this fascinating continent to the curious reader. In fact, students have to know the centrality of Afrocentric studies like that of Cheikh Anta Diop, who challenges the Eurocentric views of African history and culture. Diop argues that Africa had a cultural unity, that Egypt was an African magnificent civilisation, and that Europeans had appropriated the legacy of Africa

for themselves. Africans are not barbarians who wear animal skins, live with elephants and crocodiles. Africa is not the land of riddles, superstitions, diseases and hunger as represented in the Western literary imagination notably works such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Diop advocates for the teaching of African history and art as a way of restoring the dignity and pride of Africans who had suffered centuries of oppression and domination by whites.

In this book, I shall thus put flesh on the bones of questions concerning African literature by exploring its nature and scope, which reflects the diversity and dynamism of the continent. I shall address various questions that have shaped the study and appreciation of African literature, such as: *how to define it, what languages to use, what movements and schools of thought to follow, and what characteristics to highlight*. I shall also examine the historical, political, social, and cultural contexts that have influenced the production and reception of African literature, as well as the challenges and opportunities that it faces in the contemporary world.

The book follows a structured and student-friendly methodology (PPP: Presentation, Practice, Production). To put it simply, we begin by introducing the course content after a warm-up. Next comes the practice phase, where we assess students' comprehension through testing. Finally, we transition to the production stage, where students are encouraged to enhance and deepen their understanding by exploring related subjects.



Summary

Explore the captivating world of African literature with this comprehensive guide that is the result of years of academic and pedagogical dedication. Developed from a series of carefully designed courses, this guide offers an accessible introduction to Africa's diverse literary traditions. Ideal for students and novice researchers, it bridges the gap between undergraduate and graduate studies, rekindling the study of African literatures in the Algerian academic sphere. It attempts to bring back Africa to the centre of literary studies in the Algerian University. Encompassing oral and written forms, colonial impact, identity themes, and more, this handbook is a gateway to understanding and celebrating the continent's vibrant literary expressions. It aims to dismantle the dominance of Western literature and foster appreciation for Africa's literary heritage, enhancing critical thinking and cultural connection. This guide empowers learners to engage deeply using activities and production exercises.

Biography

Dr Mohammed Senoussi is a senior lecturer at the University of M'sila, Algeria. He is the vice dean in charge of scientific research, postgraduation and external relations at the faculty of letters and languages. Previously, he was the head of the scientific committee at the department of letters and English language. His research interests include literature with relation to politics, African and Middle Eastern communities, culture, philosophy and language. He is the author of twelve articles that tackle the problematic relationship between literature, philosophy, identity, dictatorship, immigration and terrorism. Most of these articles appeared in top-notch American, Asian and European journals by famous houses of publications such as Brill, Taylor and Francis and Pennsylvania state university press.

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