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LIVING IN BETWEEN: CULTURAL CONFLICT AND DÉCHIRÉE IDENTITY IN BEUR WRITERS

ABSTRACT:

I romanzi degli scrittori *beur* – figli di immigrati del Maghreb in Francia – sono caratterizzati da un complesso conflitto culturale e da una percezione dell'identità fortemente scissa. In bilico fra la cultura islamica dei loro genitori e la cultura occidentale che pervade la loro vita quotidiana, i giovani *beur* cercano di colmare il divario fra la Francia e il Maghreb per curare le loro identità 'lacerate'. Il saggio si propone di mostrare i tentativi di riconciliare questi mondi opposti, attraverso l'analisi di quattro romanzi, *Journal. Nationalité: immigré(e)* di Sakinna Boukhedenna, *Beur's story* di Ferrudja Kessas, *Le Gone du Chaâba* di Azouz Begag e *Georgette!* di Farida Belghoul, evidenziando i 'luoghi' in cui i giovani *beur* si trovano al bivio fra due modi di vivere: la casa familiare, cioè le radici e le tradizioni islamiche; la *banlieue*, stigma di povertà, delinquenza e esclusione, e infine la scuola, simbolo dei valori secolari della Francia contemporanea.

The literary works of *beur* writers, the sons of North African immigrants in France, are characterized by a strong cultural conflict and an uncertain sense of identity. Divided between Islamic culture of their parents and the western culture of their daily life, *beur* writers try to bridge the gap between France and Maghreb in order to unify their conflicting and '*déchirées*' identities. The paper tries to show how and if these writers succeed to reconcile these opposite worlds, through the analysis of four Beur novels: *Journal. Nationalité: immigré(e)* by Sakinna Boukhedenna, *Beur's story* by Ferrudja Kessas, *Le Gone du Chaâba* by Azouz Begag and *Georgette!* by Farida Belghoul. The article focuses on the 'places' where young *beur* find themselves at a crossroads between two ways of life: "home", representing the family, the roots and Islamic traditions; "house", coinciding with the French *banlieue*, stigmatized by poverty, delinquency and social exclusion, and "school", identified with the secular values of contemporary France.

PAROLE CHIAVE:

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J'ai pris l'avion, déchirée par ces deux pays qui ne veulent plus de nous. J'étais pour l'un la putain, l'immigrée, et pour l'autre la Fatma qui fait l'ménage et la bougnoule.¹ Je rêvais de construire une île entre Marseille et Alger, pour enfin qu'on ait, nous, les immigrées et immigrés, la paix. Je compris que nous n'étions ni Arabes ni Français, nous étions des «Nationalité: Immigré(e)»...²

¹ 'Bougnoule' is a pejorative term for 'North African'.

² S. BOUKHE DENNA, *Journal. «Nationalité: immigré(e)»*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1987, pp. 102-103.

Exasperated by the racism to which she is subjected as an Arab in France, Sakinna, the narrator-protagonist in Boukhedenna's *Journal*, decides to seek a new life in Algeria. Bitterly disappointed by Islamic constraints and unwilling to comply with the subordinate role expected of women, she returns to France, resigned to live like a foreigner in the country where she was born.

The bi-cultural condition and the uncertain sense of identity are central themes in the writings of many Beur authors. 'Beur' is the name popularly applied to the sons of North African immigrants in France: the term was formed by inverting the syllables which make up the word 'arabe', according to 'verlan', a type of slang formed by inverting the first and last syllables of words.³

According to Sylvie Durmelat, 'beur' is a middle term, a compromise between inclusion (French) and exclusion (Arab). The popularization of the term seems to indicate the will to integrate the young sons of immigrants, but actually it presupposes a segregating designation, a way to affirm their non French identity.⁴

As children of migrants, the Beurs are heirs to a dual cultural heritage: at home, their parents transmit them the language and religion of North Africa, but outside the home, they are immersed, through school and mass media, in French culture and education. North Africa stands for past, family, roots, Islam, whereas Europe represents the West, the present and the future. How does one reconcile these opposite worlds and unify their conflicting identities? How does one bridge the gap between France and Maghreb and construct a third place independent of both of them?

The aim of this paper is to answer these questions, through the analysis of four Beur novels which offer poignant examples of youths who grow up straddling two cultures and whose main themes are the conflict between cultures, the tensions of growing older, the need to reconcile one sense of belonging with another and the consequent hybrid notion of the self.⁵ They are *Journal. Nationalité: immigré(e)* by

³ The word entered circulation during the 1970s as a way of self-designation among young members of the North African immigrant community in Paris. Slowly the term was picked up by the press in 1982, following what became known as 'la Marche des Beurs', a march which took place in 1983 in response to the elections of Jean-Marie Le Pen's extreme right-wing Front National and the worsening of political climate towards immigrants. The objective of this demonstration was mainly to sensitize the public to the Beurs' socio-economic marginalization. For an historical reconstruction of the term 'beur' see A.C. HARGREAVES, *Immigration and identity in Beur fiction. Voices from the North African immigrant community in France*, Berg, Oxford 1997, S. DURMELAT, *Petite histoire du mot beur. Ou comment prendre la parole quand on vous la prête*, in «French Cultural Studies», 9, 1998, pp. 191-207; ID., *Fictions de l'intégration. Du mot beur à la politique de la mémoire*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2008.

⁴ See S. DURMELAT, *Petite histoire du mot beur. Ou comment prendre la parole quand on vous la prête* cit. The topic of Beur identity has also received considerable attention in the scholarship of P. DE SOUZA, *De l'errance à la dé(sap)partenance. Journal "Nationalité: immigré(e)" de S. Boukhedenna*, in «The French Review», 75, 2001, pp. 94-109; N. ELIA, *In the Making. Beur Fiction and Identity Construction*, in «World Literature Today», 71, 1997, pp. 47-54, A.C. HARGREAVES, *The Beurgeoisie. Mediation or mirage?*, in «Journal of European Studies», 28, 1998, pp. 89-102; ID., *Immigration and identity in Beur fiction. Voices from the North African immigrant community in France*, Berg, Oxford 1997, ID., *Language and identity in Beur culture*, in «French Cultural Studies», 1, 1990, pp. 47-58, S. IRELAND, *Writing at the Crossroads. Cultural Conflict in the Work of Beur Women Writers*, in «The French Review», 68, 1995, pp. 1022-1034, M. LARONDE, *Autour du roman beur. Immigration et identité*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1993.

⁵ Beur generation produced several works in the domain of music, theatre, cinema and literature. Beur literature began in the late 1980s. The first work of Beur fiction is considered *Le Thé au harem d'Archi-Ahmed* (Mercure de France, Paris 1983) by Mehdi Charef, depicting the life of two boys living in

Sakinna Boukhedenna, *Beur's story* by Ferrudja Kessas, *Le Gone du Chaâba* by Azouz Begag and *Georgette!* by Farida Belghoul. All authors were born in France to Algerian parents who settled in France at the end of the war of independence in 1962. The novels were published between 1986 and 1990 and they reveal close parallels with the life experiences of their authors.⁶

The article will focus on 'places' where young Beurs' existence is marked by a split between two different parts of the self: *home*, representing the family, engaged with the Islamic traditions of North Africa; *house*, coinciding with the poor suburbs associated with delinquency, crime and social disorder; *school*, identified with the secular values of contemporary France. In each of these locations, young Beurs are engaged in a struggle, finding themselves at a crossroads between two ways of life, in relation to which they must define themselves and reconcile the conflicting sides of their identities.

1. Home

Home is the place where young Beurs live between the culture transmitted by their parents and French influences penetrating the home through mass media, particularly television. At home young Beurs are expected to behave in conformity with Islamic precepts. As a matter of fact, girls are not allowed to go out freely and without any kind of security.

In *Beur's story*, Ferrudja Kessas depicts the life of two teenage friends, Malika and Farida, whose families treat them as they would in Algeria. Malika experiences the conflict between her desire to improve herself as a good student and her role at home as the eldest daughter:

[Malika] avait été obligée de concilier sa vie d'écolière et de petite maman. Mais sa tâche ne s'arrêtait pas là. Fatiguée, le plus souvent malade, sa mère restait au lit et les corvées ménagères revenaient tout naturellement à la petite aînée. Malika s'occupait de la maison, continuellement en désordre, que ses petites mains infantiles n'arrivaient pas à garder propre. Ses frères ne lui proposaient jamais de l'aider, trop occupés à leurs jeux ou leurs sorties.⁷

Her mother shows no interest in her daughters' education, considering home life as the only training necessary for a good Arab Muslim woman. So Malika and her sister Fatima have to conceal to their family their interest in school:

Madame Azouïk portait une haine invétérée aux études de ses filles. Sans l'intervention de ses deux fils aînés, elle ne leur aurait jamais permis de les poursuivre. Elle avait la profonde conviction que leur place se trouvait à la maison et non à l'école, car elles échappaient à sa surveillance et Dieu seul savait ce qu'elles y faisaient. Un jour que Fatima s'était insurgée contre ce manque de confiance, sa mère lui avait répliqué violemment: - Une femme, c'est

the suburbs of Paris among violence, alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution. Among other Beur novels: A. TADJER, *Les A.N.I. du Tassili*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1984, L. HOUARI, *Zeida de nulle part*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1985, A. KALOUAZ, *Point kilométrique 190*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1986.

⁶ Regarding the autobiographical aspects of Beur novels see the chapter 'Autobiography and Fiction' in A.G. HARGREAVES, *Immigration and identity in Beur fiction* cit., pp. 36-87.

⁷ F. KESSAS, *Beur's story*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1990, p. 65.

comme une chienne! Les Arabes connaissaient le pouvoir des mots, le pouvoir des mots qui tuent.⁸

Malika is unable to escape these tensions and finds herself constantly caught between a series of opposites. Her friend Farida lives the same conflicts and, moreover, she is humiliated by her step-mother and deceived by her father who has arranged for her a marriage with an Algerian cousin. Torn between her own desires and those of her parents, she is unable to reconcile her two conflicting identities, and the only way she finds to escape to her lack of identity is suicide. Her neighbors interpret her suicide as a result of losing her virginity, but Malika knows the real reasons that led Farida to death: «y'a des milliers de raisons pour qu'une fille veuille se suicider. Pas seulement parce qu'elle a été déchirée dans sa chair, sans votre permission; mais aussi parce qu'elle est déchirée dans sa tête!».⁹

Both daughters perceive the attempt to impose a traditional Islamic lifestyle on them as a form of imprisonment and consider their parents responsible for forcing them to adopt ambiguous behaviours. As Malika observes, the parents feel they cannot exert the same kind of control over their sons, «alors ils se rabattent sur les filles qu'ils capturent dès la naissance tissant, savamment un filet autour de leurs corps et âmes, insufflant leur propre volonté, leurs propres désirs, sans penser le moindre instant à faire mal».¹⁰

In *Journal. Nationalité: immigré(e)*, Sakinna Boukhedenna expresses her criticism towards the authority of her father, representing patriarchal Islamic traditions: «Nous sommes des femmes arabes algériennes. Nous devons donc nous plier au système du père. Il ne voulait pas qu'on sorte».¹¹

Submitting to her father's regime means accepting restrictions in every domain, and the notion of 'interdit' constitutes a refrain in Sakinna's *Journal*:

De retour à Mulhouse, nous avons eu droit à l'interdit total. Toute notre liberté était interdite. Plus de sortie, de piscine, etc. Nous avions un droit: celui de la fermer et d'obéir. J'avais la certitude que nous étions non dans un foyer familial, mais dans une taule. [...] Il est interdit pour les femmes de faire l'amour, il est interdit pour les femmes de fumer, c'est haram! Interdit de s'imposer, de s'affirmer. Interdit de regarder la liberté seule, l'homme est là pour ça...¹²

Trying to rebel and to live like her French friends, she feels judged and rejected by Arab community:

Les familles arabes nous regardent d'un mauvais œil. Nous ne sommes pas honorables et respectables à leurs yeux car ils pensent que nous, les filles, on n'est plus vierges. C'est tout ce qui compte quand on est une bonne musulmane. C'est ce qu'ils veulent les hommes arabes. Nous ligaturer notre sexualité, nous convaincre que nous sommes inférieures. Le malheur, c'est que beaucoup de femmes arabes-musulmanes, croient à cette bêtise. [...] Moi, je ne veux pas être honorable.¹³

⁸ Ivi, p. 23.

⁹ Ivi, p. 214.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 222.

¹¹ S. BOUKHEDENNA, *Journal. "Nationalité: immigré(e)"* cit., p. 12.

¹² Ivi, pp. 14, 56.

¹³ Ivi, p. 51.

Home emphasizes Sakinna's lack of identity («Je pensais aussi que j'étais victime d'un manque: mon identité culturelle»¹⁴), and her shame for being obliged to share a faith she doesn't know and understand («Je ne sais pas où est la direction de la Mecque. J'ai honte»¹⁵).

Islam is one of the strongest areas of conflict. Beurs' parents are usually not inclined to see their children renounce to such an important aspect of North African culture, so they expect their children to show the concrete signs of Muslim belief: the prayers in the direction of Mecca five times a day, the strict dietary regulation including fasting during the month of Ramadan, the restrictions in regards to female sexuality.

Wavering between the religious norms of family home, and the secular values of France, young Beurs often follow Islamic faith just as a sign of loyalty to their parents, but they don't know Arab language and don't share their parents' beliefs, like Sakinna, who follows Ramadan just to prove to the Arab community in which she lives that she fits in:

Oh! Ramadan je me mets à t'aimer, je te supporte car je dois leur prouver à eux, Dalila, Yamina et les autres que je suis traditionnellement Arabe. Je veux leur prouver qu'en France nous sommes restés Algériens. Alors je jeûne pour montrer que je suis une musulmane et non une roumie de France. Alors je supporte la douleur, j'ai mal à la tête, j'étouffe, j'ai faim, mais je sens comme une fierté qui m'oblige à suivre en silence la norme musulmane. Mais, me disent-elles «pourquoi vous les immigrées, vous ne faites pas la prière? Euh, ai-je répondu en bégayant: nous ne savons pas l'arabe!» - «Pourquoi vos parents vous ont pas appris», etc. Que, de questions, quoi leur répondre, l'immigrée a toujours tort.¹⁶

2. House

Most North African immigrants' families were concentrated in the industrial areas of the main towns. During the 1950s and 1960s many families lived in the 'bidonville', a settlement of jerry-built dwellings on the outskirts of a city, characterized by squalor and extreme poverty. During the 1970s the Government decided to clear these slums and build the 'cité de transit' or HLM, houses at moderate rents with the purpose of containing France's labor force imported most specifically from North Africa, Algeria in particular, within the limits of the suburban city.

Settled in the margins of the city, hidden from tourists' eyes, bidonvilles represent the periphery, the borderline, the unclassified, liminal sites of exclusion and deviance which threaten the solidity of the city.

As Homi Bhabha argues in the *Introduction of Nation and Narration* «the margins of the nation displace the centre; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history of the metropolis»,¹⁷ making it clear that incorporating new people in a body politic generates new sites of meaning and unpredictable forces for political representation, and that the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity.

In these hybrid sites young Beurs lead their identity struggle among loneliness, shame and desire to belong. In their novels, the descriptions of the physical

¹⁴ Ivi, pp. 74-75.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ H. BHABHA *Nation and narration*, Routledge, London 1990, p. 6.

environments emphasize their transitory state between two worlds and the irreconcilable opposites of their existence.

Malika and Farida in *Beur's story* live in the Marais Noir, an infamous area of Le Havre. The term itself suggests a dangerous and threatening location, reflecting a marginal social status, associated with ugliness and grayness: «Dehors, les rues étaient désertes, le temps avait gardé son aspect maussade et rude, donnant un air de deuil aux HLM qui bordaient l'avenue principale où des autos sans âme roulaient à la même allure».¹⁸

Similarly, Sakinna's description of her 'cité' in Mulhouse in *Journal. Nationalité: Immigré(e)* is associated with fear, isolation and exclusion:

C'était des lieux où la police avait peur de passer. Là où on ne cherche pas à savoir. Ce n'était pas le ghetto, non, mais ça faisait partie du même sac. Le bidonville. Le lieu où les chats sont noirs la nuit. Où l'on entend la mère qui chiale car le père est rentré saoul et l'a battue. Là où les enfants se réfugient sous le lit pour ne pas entendre. Là où l'argent a de l'odeur puisqu'il n'y en a point. Là où le fric fait à peine survivre. Là où on mange du couscous au lait caillé tous les jours. Là où le flic ne manque pas. Le flic qui vient renifler l'odeur du bougnoule.¹⁹

In *Le Gone du Chaâba*, Azouz Begag marks in the title of the novel itself his double belonging and his personal tensions and uncertainties: the word 'gone' means 'kid' in the dialect of Lyon, Begag's city of origin; 'chaâba' means 'popular' in the Algerian dialect and it is the name given by the Algerian immigrant community to the French bidonville in which they live.²⁰ As Samia Mehrez notes in her study about the question of territory in Begag's works:

The name *chaâba* becomes a way of marking territory within the dominant culture, a space which the community, in the book, can refer to as "chez soi." In identifying himself as *le gone*, Begag imposes upon the *chaâba* the outer space, Lyon, which it deliberately tries to ignore. By creating this title, then, Begag claims both: his identity is simultaneously *of* Lyon, and *of* the *chaâba*, yet different in and from both as well.²¹

The description of the chaâba is sometimes marked by amusement and life community: in the bidonville children chase dustcarts to find treasures and rally together to drive away prostitutes. Azouz enjoys this life, but when it is compared to French houses, the chaâba becomes a place of poverty and shame:

Je sais bien que j'habite dans un bidonville de baraques en planches et en tôles ondulées, et que ce sont les pauvres qui vivent de cette manière. Je suis allé plusieurs fois chez Alain, dont les parents habitent au milieu de l'avenue Monin, dans une maison. J'ai compris que c'était beaucoup plus beau que dans nos huttes. Et l'espace! Sa maison à lui, elle est aussi grande que notre Chaâba tout entier. [...] Moi, j'ai honte de lui dire où j'habite. C'est pour ça qu'Alain n'est jamais venu au Chaâba. Il n'est pas du genre à prendre plaisir à fouiller les immondices des remblais, à s'accrocher aux camions de poubelles, à racketter les putes et les pédés!²²

¹⁸ F. KESSAS, *Beur's story* cit., p. 39.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 36.

²⁰ Azouz Begag was born in a French bidonville in Lyon. The times and the locations of events described in the novel mainly correspond with the author's childhood itinerary.

²¹ S. MEHREZ, *Un si zafas di bidoufile or The Beur Writer. A Question of Territory*, «Yale French Studies», I, 82, 1993, p. 34.

²² A. BEGAG, *Le gone du Chaâba. Roman*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1986, p. 57.

In the *Introduction of The Location of culture*, Homi Bhabha, describing the ways in which colonized peoples have resisted the power of the colonizer in South African literature, speaks about a «halfway house of racial and cultural origins» which can contain the anguish of cultural displacement and diasporic movement, and where «private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy [...] that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed».²³

In French banlieue and bidonville the binary oppositions rich/poor, colonizer/colonized, Maghreb/France are linked through an «in-between temporality» that produces a narrative representing «a hybridity, a difference ‘within’, a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality».²⁴

3. School

After the family home, the most important location in Beur fiction is school. At school young Beurs live strong cultural conflicts: the language they have acquired at home denies them access to what they must learn at school and the religious beliefs which permeate their daily life at home are by law excluded from state school.

In *Le Gone du Chaâba* the life of the young protagonist, Azouz, is divided between the love for his friends and family at the bidonville and the determination to do well at school. Suffering from shame for living in a bidonville and for his ignorance, Azouz decides to change his life and become more like the French: «J’ai honte de mon ignorance. Depuis quelques mois, j’ai décidé de changer de peau. Je n’aime pas être avec les pauvres, les faibles de la classe. Je veux être dans les premières places du classement, comme les Français».²⁵

So Azouz begins to show mastery of French language, diligence in schoolwork and conformity with the moral precepts transmitted by his teacher, but his Arab friends feel betrayed, and so his efforts produce the effect of excluding him from both French and Arab culture. When his teacher tells the students to write a composition about a holiday in countryside, Azouz writes what he imagines his teacher would expect, rather than something based on his own reality: «Je ne peux pas lui parler du Chaâba, mais je vais faire comme si c’était la campagne, celle qu’il imagine».²⁶

While he achieves the second highest grade for that composition and earns a seat next to the star pupil, a French student, the Arab students are ridiculed for their weak performance and so Azouz is accused of infidelity:

T’es pas un Arabe! T’es un Français! Faux frère! Fayot! [...] Si! Je suis un Arabe et je peux le prouver: j’ai le bout coupé comme eux, depuis trois mois maintenant. C’est déjà pas facile de devenir arabe, et voilà qu’à présent on me soupçonne d’être infidèle.²⁷

²³ H. BHABHA, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York 1994, p. 13.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ A. BEGAG, *Le gone du Chaâba. Roman* cit. p. 58.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 64.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 103.

Azouz is rejected by his Arab friends, so he reminds them the sufferings of what is for him the real proof of being an Arab: the rite of circumcision.

Me traiter de faux frère, avec tout ce que j'ai donné! Dix jours sans pouvoir enfiler la moindre coulotte, sans oser pisser de crainte de détacher mon bout restant, dix jours à marcher en canard pour éviter les frottements. Non, cousin Moussaoui, j'ai passé mon diplôme d'Arabe. J'ai déjà donné.²⁸

Unable to win his struggle for a place in the social system and aware of the impossibility to import Islamic traditions into republican France, Azouz feels alone and ashamed.

In *Beur's story*, Malika considers school as a place where she is obliged to play the role of the good French student and home the place where she is prisoner of a culture that she doesn't feel as own. Only with her Maghrebian friends she feels free to dream for another reality away from oppressive home and away from the French behaviour imposed at school, a place where they can imagine a better future and choose, without conditioning, an 'in-between' space of growth, imagination and possibility.

Ensemble, elles parlaient le même langage; elles oubliaient la maison, leur pauvreté, les menaces et les portes qui se refermaient si lourdement derrière elles. Ensemble, elles n'avaient plus à s'ingénier à s'imaginer autres. Elles laissaient tomber leur masque de petites lycéennes modèles presque francisées et renouaient avec leur origine. Ensemble, elles aimaient parler d'elles, de leurs espoirs, de leurs désespoirs, de leurs études aussi qui leur entrouvraient la porte vers un avenir différent, moins désespéré que celui de leurs mères.²⁹

School plays a relevant role in the novel *Georgette!* by Farida Belghoul, a first person narrative of a seven-years-old girl who lives with her poor Muslim parents in a Paris suburb and calls herself Georgette but whose real name is unknown. The action takes place in a single school day and follows the stream of consciousness of the child who jumps from one culture to another through associations of ideas and metaphors.

At school, the teacher, counting her students to form a line, affirms: «Je ne veux voir qu'une seule tête»,³⁰ suggesting linear mental conformity to French school system. The child wants to integrate, but her bi-cultural condition causes incidents at school and tensions at home. Her father is totally ignorant of the system of writing taught in French schools, so when his daughter has homework to do, he opens her exercise book at what for Arabs is the first page, which is the last page by French conventions. The girl writes on the last page, and when the schoolmistress finds nothing on the first page, she concludes that her pupil has failed to do what was required of her.

Mon cahier dans les mains, elle recherche mon écriture. Et ne trouve que des feuilles blanches. Elle est très ennuyée. [...] Mon écriture est de l'autre côté! Je me tais et je respire plus tellement je pue dans ma bouche. [...] Elle pose plein de questions. – Alors? Tu travailles pas? Ni à l'école ni à la maison?³¹

²⁸ Ivi, p. 109.

²⁹ F. KESSAS, *Beur's story* cit., pp. 32-33.

³⁰ F. BELGHOUL, *Georgette! Roman*, Barrault, Paris 1986, p. 12.

³¹ Ivi, p. 42.

The child is ashamed of her father's ignorance, and the clash of the two cultures is violent. Home is a place to which she does not belong, and school the place where her process of assimilation fails.

4. *(Ir)reconciling identities*

Inhabited by two conflicting identities, Beur writers emphasize in their novels a feeling of 'déchirement', a tearing they try to heal through different solutions and compromises.

Torn between France and Algeria, Sakinna Boukhedenna suggests in her *Journal* an imaginary territorial solution to her problems: a third place, symbolically located between the two countries, for those who may be classed as neither French nor Arab, but just 'immigrés'. Sakinna's artificial island can be associated with what for Homi Bhabha is the 'third space', an active moment of resistance against the dominant cultural power, which «challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People». ³² This hybrid space transcends the binary opposites, in this case France and Maghreb, and allows the emergence of new cultural forms: defying the political logic of 'francophonie', by being residents and citizens of France, Beurs cut off the binary logic that opposes 'insiders' to 'outsiders', and escape French cultural domination through hybridization.

Beurs' creative expressions in writings, art, theatre, music can be seen as acts of resistance against the dominant cultural discourse and French assimilationist policy. Considering resistance as Homi Bhabha defines it:

Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power – hierarchy, normalization, marginalization and so forth. ³³

So while assimilation grows from the colonialist's desire for the subject's recognizability, it also insists on his difference and on the silent repression of native traditions; therefore a change of perspective occurs and enables a form of subversion, leaving room for hybridization.

Sakinna's third space is a place of a neither/nor identity. In the *Preface* of her *Journal* she remarks a feeling of being neither French nor Algerian, of belonging nowhere: «C'est en France que j'ai appris à être Arabe, c'est en Algérie que j'ai appris à être l'Immigrée», ³⁴ making it clear that while the French have marginalized her because of her ethnicity, the Algerians have done so because of her gender. The incapacity to belong leads to a desire to escape for a better physical and mental place, but, as Michel Laronde suggests, the dialectics of double exclusion (neither French nor Arab) and of double belonging (both French and Arab) produces an ambiguous identity, and the

³² H. BHABHA, *The location of culture* cit., p. 37.

³³ Ivi, pp. 110-111.

³⁴ S. BOUKHEDENNA, *Journal*. "Nationalité: immigré(e)" cit., p. 5.

attempts to reconcile two different political and cultural entities are destined to fail.³⁵ At the end of the *Journal*, aware of the difficulties to resolve her identity problems, Sakinna admits her permanent unsettled condition:

Femme arabe, on m'a condamnée à perpétuité, car j'ai franchi le chemin de la liberté, on m'a répudiée, maintenant me voilà immigrée sur le chemin de l'exil, identité de femme non reconnue je cours le monde pour savoir d'où je viens.³⁶

As Nikos Papastergiadis points out in his study about the consequences of the 'turbulence of migration', hybridity can offer a new understanding of identity only when the dual forces of movement and bridging, displacement and connection, are operating together, and there is a consciousness of the oscillation between the different positions and perspectives.³⁷

The ambivalence that characterizes Beur novels reflects this dual movement of approachment and estrangement, belonging and disbelonging, in a constant dialogue between past and present, near and far, foreign and familiar.

In *Le Gone du Chaâba*, the most difficult step for the young Azouz is to unify his inner and outer self in order to construct a hybrid identity. He has to balance his respect for French rules and institutions and his life as an Arab in the bidonville. Azouz seems to be rescued only by living in the interstices, between the two cultures that make up his identity, in a third space where he tries to reconcile his dual belonging. But the figure of the hybrid as a 'bridging person' is destined to fail: *Le Gone du Chaâba* ends with the family about to move from the city center to the La Duchère housing state.³⁸ As Hargreaves points out:

Because Beur narratives are built in an in-between world, it is natural that many of them should retain an unfinished feel. The fresh departures with which so many Beur protagonists bow out are a measure of their inability to find a settled sense of belonging.³⁹

In *Beur's story* Farida, aware that her features make her immediately visible as 'the Arab', tries unsuccessfully to hide her origin and to imitate her French friends. Like many other Beur adolescents she moves back and forth from one side of her identity to the other. For example she puts on her make-up in school restrooms so her family will not see the French side of her life, while she hides her home and her family's traditions from her French friends:

Être obligée de jouer la comédie, dissimuler nos origines, cacher l'endroit où nous habitons. [...] Je me mêlais le plus possible à la foule, j'essayais de ressembler aux autres filles, je m'habillais comme elles. [...] J'ai volé aussi pour m'acheter du maquillage que je mettais en chemin et que j'enlevais rapidement dans les wc du lycée avant de partir. Mais tous les efforts que je faisais n'arrivaient pas à faire oublier mes yeux de «cochon», mes cheveux hennifiés et mon teint!⁴⁰

³⁵ See M. LARONDE, *Autour du roman beur* cit.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 126.

³⁷ See N. PAPASTERGIADIS, *The turbulence of Migration. Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2000.

³⁸ La Duchère is a district on the edge of Lyon including a great number of rented social housings.

³⁹ A.C. HARGREAVES, *Immigration and identity in Beur fiction* cit., p. 165.

⁴⁰ F. KESSAS, *Beur's story* cit., pp. 114-115.

Also her face and her name remind of her non-French roots and her position of outsider in French dominant society:

Elle s'était méprisée en se contemplant avec horreur dans la glace, se donnant de terribles gifles, pour essayer de détruire cette face, un peu trop basanée qui lui rappelait qu'elle s'appelait Farida et non Francine.⁴¹

Malika tries to mask her origins metaphorically replacing her family's 'migrant identity' with a hybrid one, living a multiple life in a syncretic culture and constructing characters in the borderlands, with complex and multiple belongings, 'deterritorialized' and living between cultures.

Beurs can be considered 'deterritorialized' subjects as their culture cannot be conceived as reflecting a coherent and distinct identity in a precisely defined territory. So they develop a dynamic relationship between past and present, familiar and unfamiliar, and offer more fluid and open interpretations of the notion of identity.⁴²

Beur's story ends with Farida upset by her friend's Malika suicide: Farida's efforts to reconcile her cultural and psychological conflicts are made fruitless by her young friend's death, unable to bear the burden of her frustrated desires.

Georgette! is also based on the impossibility to establish a fixed identity for the young protagonist: the title of the novel is taken from a passage where her father reproaches her for her behaviour, telling she might as well be called "Georgette". At no point do we know her real name, an omission symbolic of Beurs' lack of identity. Negating all names imposed on her by her parents, her teacher, her friends, and unable to identify herself as either Arab or French, she repeatedly adopts different identities: she is an Arab or a Frenchman, but also a wild cat, a donkey, a member of a group of pissing angels, a spider, a devil, a daughter of a great Indian chief, a quintessential victim, a respectable old man, an illiterate Arab, a Red-skin. In this case there is an attempt to construct a hybrid cultural identity through a negotiation of differences and through the presence of gaps and contradictions, bridging both differences and similitudes between the self and the other. The result is an extreme incompleteness and indistinctness; once again, an impossibility to define a fixed and unique identity. Bhabha defines identity as hybrid, not only to suggest that origins, influences and interests are multiple, complex and contradictory, but also to stress that our sense of self in this world is always incomplete.

At the end of the novel the child is running through the streets afraid that her teacher is going to her home to talk to her parents. She meets an old woman who has invented three sons and writes letters from them to herself to show off to her friends.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 14.

⁴² The concept of 'deterritorialization' was first used by Deleuze and Guattari to locate the moment of alienation in language, referring to Kafka's relationship to German literature. Deleuze and Guattari stress that Kafka's radical practice of defamiliarizing the everyday, his distancing from the conventions of the dominant language and his refusal to undermine the certitudes of belonging, heighten the experience of exile and articulate a mode of becoming which is open, fluid and nomadic. For Deleuze and Guattari 'deterritorialization' is most evident in what they call 'minor literature', where the code of representation is deterritorialized as identities and meanings are dissociated from their conventional positions in order to produce a nomadic effect in language. See G. DELEUZE, F. GUATTARI, *Kafka. Towards a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1986. Regarding 'cultural deterritorialization' see the chapter 'The Deterritorialization of Culture' in N. PASTERGIADIS, *The turbulence of Migration* cit., pp. 100-121.

The woman solicits the girl's help in copying the letters so they will have different handwriting. Although she can barely write, the child is asked to use her new skill and assume an identity associated with different names, Pierre, Paul and Jean, clearly connected to French and Christian traditions. So she imagines her father's reaction to her composing such letters:

Et j'écris «chère maman» à une vieille toute nouvelle dans ma vie. Et je signe Pierre, Paul, ou Jean. Et si mon père l'apprend, il me tue immédiatement. Il ne m'enterre même pas: il ne creusera jamais la terre pour des inconnus pareils. Surtout, il gueule: «j' t'envoie à l'école pour signer ton nom. À la finale, tu m'sors d'autres noms catastrophiques. J' croyais pas ça d' ma fille. J' croyais elle est intelligente comme son père. J'croyais elle est fière. Et r'garde-moi ça: elle s'appelle Georgette!».⁴³

The identity of the girl is falsified, the only name given to her is a French-sounding name. The novel ends with the child's death. While she runs home imagining her parents receiving her teacher at home, the so-called Georgette is run over by a car. Death prevents the girl from placing a full stop at the end of her narrative. She lies naked in the road, her dresses torn, a car wheel upon her stomach. She is sinking into an ink-pot: her obsession to learn to write in French is killing her. Her process of assimilation has failed. She didn't manage to define her confused identity. She remains a victim of social and familiar exclusion, leaving the reader with a feeling of uncertainty and incompleteness.

Je grille un feu et je traverse. Le bonheur est dans... La roue de la voiture est sur mon ventre. J'ai déchiré mes vêtements. Je suis toute nue comme une saleté. Je saigne sur la rue. J'ai joué ma chance: manque de pot. J'étouffe au fond d'un encrier⁴⁴

⁴³ F. BELGHOUL, *Georgette! Roman* cit., pp. 147-148.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 163. The final sentence contains no full stop.