Rebecca E. Léal
Elmhurst College

Française de deuxième génération: Constructions of Girlhood in Banlieue Literature

This paper examines popular cultural representations of girlhood in Arab-French communities and the literary depiction of the generational divide between mothers and their young daughters from the Trente Glorieuses through the Twenty-First century. Although the birth of the Beur novel made famous in the 1980s has largely been credited with opening a polyphonic discourse about multiculturalism in France and with breaking the silence associated with first generation North African immigrants, it has also lead to the development of a master narrative inscribed in stereotypes and representations acquired from cultural institutions. Through a primary focus on the representation of immigrant women in France through the voices of young girls as narrators, this paper develops a critical analysis of the processes of stereotyping and projection of North African women as Other in popular cultural productions.

In the evolving genre of late twentieth and early twenty-first century autobiography and autofiction, the theme of adolescence is fundamental. At the same time, contemporary Franco-Maghrebian works attempt to reroute the colonialist usage of labels such as “Beur,” “Islamist,” “First Generation Immigrant” and “Second Generation Immigrant,” which carries a colonial heritage into present practices while segmenting the contemporary French nation geographically, judicially, and linguistically. In fact, this linguistic segregation through labeling freezes immigrants and their descendants in discourse as “Other” and “Foreigner” and prevents complete integration through the discrimination that this terminology provokes.

Although recent years have seen the appearance of works such as Inch’Allah Dimanche (2001), which promises a change in the representation of Maghrebi-French communities, children of first generation North African immigrants and their descendants have most
often been represented in the context of the banlieue, isolated and distanced from the larger familial context and appearing to function independently, without parental guidance. Dominant media has tended to create and reinforce stereotypes as these cultural productions interpret immigrant lifestyles without accounting for the diversity which exists within the North African immigrant experience in France along socio-economic, ethnic, and gender divides. Historically, Maghrebi-French literature and films adopt a masculine perspective and women are largely absent from them as primary or secondary characters. In a patriarchal community, it is hardly surprising that the erasure of women is also reproduced in Arab-French cultural productions. In some cinematographic works, for example, Carrie Tarr has pointed out that women are depicted either in a manner that highlights their sexuality, thus equating women outside of the home to prostitutes, or in a manner that characterizes them solely as victims of patriarchy, equating the woman who stays at home to a victim. When women are present in Maghrebi-French cinema, the films present two extremes: the Other’s exoticism, such as in Le Thé au harem D’Archimède, or the construction of scenes in which a damsel in distress is liberated by Western society in films such as Aicha (2009) (Tarr 29). Descendants of North African immigrants, perceived as victims of their own tradition and familial milieu, attract sympathy from French audiences who are quick to criticize a culture perceived as “Arab” and in conflict with “the West” (Tarr 29).

Fictional identity constructions concerning North African immigration, however, have consequences outside of the fictional world, spilling over into real-world society as these constructions in literature and films redefine, redistribute, and reorient ethnic identities. Today, with the presence of three generations of women of North African origin in France, stereotypical discourse continues as each generation is subject to its own popular representations and stereotypes in literature, cinema, and the media; certain stereotypes slowly disappear with the birth of others. This article will examine the particular generational divide between mothers and young daughters in cultural productions of the banlieue through a comparative critical analysis of Soraya Nini’s Ils disent que je suis une beurette (1993) and Faïza Guène’s Kiffe kiffe demain (2004). Separated by a decade, these literary works focus on the representation of Maghrebi-French women through the voices of young girls as narrators. Further, this article will develop a critical analysis of the processes of stereotyping of North

---

1 See in particular masculine, adolescent centered Beur novels such as Mehdi Charef’s Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed (1985) or banlieue films such as Mathieu Kassovitz’s La Haine (1995).