

An In-Between Identity: Azouz Begag in Shantytown Kid

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to examine the double identity in Begag's *le Gone du Chaâba*. Taken between two completely different cultures, the beur writer exploited the language to translate and transmit this duality. *Le Gone du Chaâba* is a 1986 novel by Azouz Begag, a French-born author of Algerian parentage, who offers an autobiographical glimpse of his childhood in and around Lyon. Set in the 1960's, the novel presents Azouz navigating his experience between the slum where his family lives and the various French schools he attends. The text traces the issues of children of immigrants who essentially live between four language varieties: a cherished, formal Arabic, a version of Arabic or Berber spoken at home (rarely studied in written form), a "proper" French learned in school, and slang French spoken with friends. This study will explore the language issues as they appear in Begag's *le Gone du Chaâba*, where they contribute to the process of identity formation for the child Azouz. In this novel the narrator presents himself as the voice of an individual who negotiates a place in an environment in the course of creation.

Key words: Identity, Immigrants, Beur Literature, Argot, School

INTRODUCTION

Identity can be collective and cultural. Cultural because the identification is made by cultural traits and collective because it refers to a group that is family, ethnic, national, linguistic, religious or artistic. The notion of identity thus refers to several parameters ranging from the way in which the individual perceives himself and is inscribed in time to the multiple modalities allowing the recognition of the latter.

Taken between two completely different cultures, the beur writer exploited the language to translate and transmit this duality. If he writes in French, he does not pledge allegiance to France. He writes as an Algerian, he becomes the spokesman of the immigrant Maghreb community. Begag's account of life in the immigrant shantytowns of the 1950s and 1960s is perhaps the best-known discussion of this geographic region and historical moment, when North African immigrants spent years in temporary housing without basic amenities.

Azouz Begag traces his own childhood; every day he has to travel from his house in the Algerian slum to the French school in Lyon and then back. His struggle to ride these two worlds is what guides the progress of this story.

Begag's autobiography *Le gone du Chaâba* seeks out a positive construction of identity, adapting to life among the dominant ethnic majority in French society, while also integrating fragments of his parents' cultural identity. The divergence between family life and life in the public sphere (starting with school) is sometimes chaotic: Beur writers try

to reconcile the two spaces. The classroom thus becomes a critical site of mediation between practices learned at home and the expectations of various forms of French society.

In this novel, there is a fixation with an interstitial, or "in-between," space in which the narrator is caught up in the midst of two identities. Language undoubtedly plays a part in this, as we see in the life of the protagonist. Among other factors, this child must practice a juggling act between the language spoken at home and that spoken at school. The author focuses with attention the different linguistic background in which Beur children grow up, showing both the impact of the mother tongue (Arabic dialect or Berber) as well as the degraded French spoken by his family at home.

The language of Begag's novel conveys an alive experience that is specific to characters who constantly slip between two worlds of opposite cultures. And in order to reflect through the text an experience that is situated in an in-between universe, Begag uses in-between language.

[It is] in the process of living interaction with specific environments that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape [...] All words have the 'taste' of [...] a tendency [...] a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group [...] each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions (Bakhtin 1981: 293).

Begag also discussed the conflicting allegiances and cultural practices members of the beur population supposedly

had to navigate to find a place for themselves in French society, which reinforced the social stakes of his writing.

THE BEUR GENERATION

Before beginning our study, we first wish to clarify the use we make of the term “beur”. The term “beur” entered the French dictionaries in the mid-1980s. Since then on, the definitions of the term “beur” multiplied and diversified. Nevertheless, the definitions generally refer to the immigrants’ children of Maghreb origin. Then, the controversial definition «Immigré de la deuxième génération»¹ was popularized. Michel Laronde emphasizes the irony of this expression: «Par définition, il n’y a pas d’immigration au-delà de la «première génération», sinon sous forme de préjugé.» (Laronde 1993: 55). The origin of the word “beur” is vague. Many critics agree that the term would come from the verlan². The term would be a double syllabic inversion of the word “Arab”: from “Arab” to “Rebeu”, then “Beur”.

The use of the word “beur” is disputed since it tends to marginalize French citizens of North African origins by maintaining an antagonism between French people of “French origins” and French people of “North African origins”. Moreover, the expression maintains this antagonism over generations. Thus, born to Algerian, Moroccan or Berber parents, a Frenchman indefinitely keeps the mark of “the foreigner” through his “beur” identity. For Azouz Begag and Abdellatif Chaouite, the word “beur” always implies the word “arabe”; but it is considered a less stigmatizing expression (Begag and Chaouite 1990: 82).

Alec Hargreaves, a specialist in French literature of Maghreb origin, describes the conditions for the emergence of “beur” literature. He explains for example that a certain censorship is necessary for the publication of a literary work whose protagonist would be of Maghreb origin:

Although most of the novels produced by writers of Algerian origin in France centre on a single protagonist, it is very unusual for his or her name to be included in the title. To supply such a name would be to run the risk of inducing in the reader misleading preconceptions. (Hargreaves 1993: 340)

The “beur” writer is therefore confronted with the prejudice of the reader. In the process of creation, the writer must anticipate his readers’ impressions by considering their preconceptions. Writers who are more or less directly related to the “beur” movement must struggle and protect themselves against preconceptions in order to gain access to «à une “visibilité” ou une “lisibilité” non stigmatisée.» (Begag and Chaouite, 1990: 104). Thus, the so-called “beur” literature is marked by clichés on which certain critics rely to denigrate its literary value or even to exclude it:

Les auteurs nés en France de parents immigrés algériens [...] sont très souvent classés comme autres que français par les éditeurs, bibliothécaires et libraires, qui les renvoient sur les rayons de la littérature «francophone» ou «maghrébine», si ce n’est dans une section «immigration», «sociologie» ou «témoignage», comme s’ils étaient dénués d’intérêt littéraire. (Hargreaves 2004: 29)

The cliché that refers to “beur” literary production some-

times becomes a pretext for questioning its legitimacy within the literary institution (El Galaï 2005: 35). Some critics, for example, attack the form of “testimony” in order to exclude its literary value: «Ils ont écrit des témoignages, dit-on, et non des textes littéraires.» (Begag et Chaouite 1990: 105). Begag and Chaouite disagree with this widespread criticism. Instead, they emphasize the advent of a «nouveau genre d’écriture» that is distinguished by its fragmented style and syntax, a literature marked by humor, revolt and critical reflection (Begag and Chaouite 1990:101). For Begag and Chaouite, the so-called “beur” writing deserves its title of “Literature.”

Beur writers are at the crossroads of different cultures and identities. They are part of France and its culture while being aware that their roots lie elsewhere, in the Maghreb territory. Their works reflect this identity anxiety.

By defining themselves as “beur”, these writers claim a French identity but would also take into account the characteristics of their own history. This right to the recognition of a plural identity is essential to precisely redefine French nationality.

The cultural capital of the children of immigrants emanates from a third space defined by multiple linguistic, cultural and religious hybridities. As Homi Bhabha rightly summarizes: «For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘Third Space’, which enables other positions to emerge» (Rutherford 1990: 211). The “third-space” is the possibility of a new sense of identity, an open sense. It is the fruit of hybridization.

IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

In *Le Gone du Chaâba* that we propose to study, the narrator presents himself as the voice of an individual who negotiates a place in an environment in the course of creation. Azouz Begag recounts his early memories of childhood and depicts a journey through space as well as through time. It is through this spatial and temporal crossing that the author draws up a testimony of the construction of his identity. Moreover, we find the marks of the multitude of references through the language and through the structure of the novel.

In the beginning of the novel, Begag offers a scene of the daily life of the Chaâba. In this scene, Begag immediately transposes us into a circle of the working class which is linguistically marked. It is by this marker that we begin our analysis of the bifurcations of identity. Zidouma and her neighbor are fighting for the *bomba* in front of the *baissaine*:

Zidouma was doing her morning laundry. She had gotten up early so she could take up position at the only source of water in the shantytown, l’*bomba* [the hand pump], which drew drinking water from the Rhône. [...] That someone was indeed waiting a few yards away. It was Zidouma’s neighbor, who lived in the shack right next to her. She was holding a bucket in which were piled dirty sheets, children’s clothes, rags. She waited patiently, patiently. Zidouma, untiring, did not even bother to look around, although she had already felt the presence of someone standing behind her for a couple

of minutes, someone showing signs of annoyance. She even started to slow down. The neighbor still waited patiently, patient... no, she lost her patience. Dropping her bucket, she charged forward like a billy goat toward her rival. The collision was terrible. (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 1-2).

This excerpt symbolizes the first linguistic issue. The narrator acts both as a witness and as an interpreter. These words, *l'bomba* and *baissaine*, are those of his universe but he is able to "translate" them and put the French word in parenthesis.

For Begag, language is a very important element. It is precisely the instrument that gives birth to a highly personalized language, and in the case of our writer, language emerges from a space of an in-between culture. Language becomes another element that aggravates the character's problems as it reveals its Arab origins. Azouz, who was first educated in the language of Chaâba, realizes that his language differs from his French comrades' language: «Pupils were saying words I had never heard before I felt ashamed. I often used to come out with words straight out of our Chaâba vocabulary when I spoke to the teacher. One day I had even said to him. – Sir, I swear to you on my mother's life that it's true.» (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 45). It is in this space that Azouz becomes aware that he is evolving between two languages that are not complementary and socially incompatible because this Arabic lexicon which he says in a French syntax remains incomprehensible to people outside the Maghreb universe. This speech which borrows from the French and Arabic languages is exemplified by the scene in which Azouz actively participates in a debate on hygiene. When Monsieur Grand asks what is needed to wash himself, the French answer: a towel and soap; Azouz hastened to add: «M'sieur, you also need a chritte and a Kaissa ! – A what ?! A what he said, with his eyes wide open in surprise. – A chritte and a Kaissa, I said, in a voice that was three times softer than earlier, sensing that something was going wrong.» (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 78).

Yet the master, instead of ignoring Azouz's words, encouraged him to describe Arabic terms so that he could give him the equivalent in French: "- That's what it is, he said. It's a washcloth. And you call it Kaissa at home. [...] And what's a chritte, then? – Well, Sir, it's like a lots of bits of string that are tangled together, and it scratches a lot. [...] It's called a loofah, he concluded, smiling. I blushed a little, but he spoke encouragingly.» (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 79). As the narrator explains, both French and Arabic linguistic purists would be horrified by the language Azouz's family uses at home, in particular with regard to the use of French words in Arabic and Arabic words in French. As these examples indicate, Begag has played with variations of common expressions, dosing them carefully within his French text to give it both texture and humor.

By correcting Azouz gently, the teacher eliminates contributions that do not conform to the French linguistic model. Using Arabic terms, Begag reveals that the child does not distinguish between the two linguistic registers. The school system, by assisting Azouz in the mastery of French, ends by

suppressing the notion of complementarity, which makes the child feel obliged to eliminate this shift between the French and Arabic languages. The school space becomes for Azouz the source of the loss of the mother tongue: «[...] celle qui est nourrie de ses sensations, ses passions et ses rêves [...] celle enfin qui recèle la plus grande charge affective, celle-là précisément est la moins valorisée [...] sa langue maternelle est l'humiliée, l'écrasée.» (Memmi 1957: 126). It is then that the school becomes: «[...] le foyer de la langue, et la langue, c'est le véhicule de la culture.» (Gazabon 1995: 14). And it is in this process of schooling that language dragged the child into the dominant culture.

At school, Azouz³ realizes: «[...] that there were some words that I knew only in Arabic» (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 46). Identically, he says that: «At home the Arabic we spoke would no doubt make the residents of Mecca flush with anger». (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 175). These two observations illustrate what Bourdieu defines as: «une compétence en situation» (Bourdieu 2002: 130), that is to say a competence for a particular environment. The school environment represents a situation where there is a relationship of linguistic domination. It is a sort of official situation in which the interactions are really established and conform to the objective laws of the environment; an environment which is dominated by dominant values; an environment in which the linguistic competence of Azouz is a little shaky. Rather than concluding that he cannot speak, Azouz sees in this experience an opportunity to utilize this gap. He decides to "change his skin", "to prove" that he is as capable as the French pupils:

I was ashamed of my ignorance. For a few months now I had been resolved on changing sides. I did not like being with the poor and the weak pupils in class. I wanted to be among the top of the class alongside the French children. (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 46).

With these comments Begag sets himself up as the quintessential success story of the French school system: encouraged by his father not to repeat the social conditions of his family, he found the guidance he needed from a select group of school teachers who were personally invested in his success. School becomes one of the child Azouz's favorite activities, and he vows to surpass expectations and prove that an Arab can succeed.

We can say that this desire to change skin is the culmination of a long quest for identity. As he recounts in *le Gone du Chaâba*, it was difficult for him to negotiate his place within the dominant culture and maintain good relationship with the members of his community. He was perceived as a traitor by his classmates who reproach him:

Yeah, yeah, why aren't ya at the bottom with us? He (the teacher) put you second, with the French kids, because you're not an Arab; you're Gaouri (French) like them. [...] Well, tell us why you're always with the French at break. (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 85).

Azouz is convinced that he comes from a different culture. This is why he continually strives to situate himself in groups other than his own, since they are esteemed by the French community. This behavior of Azouz is particularly

evident in the scene where he poses as a Jew. Once his family moves to the Croix Rousse, Azouz finds himself in a new school where he meets the Taboul brothers, Jews, who are in the same class as him. They ask him about his origins to know whether he is Arab or Jewish:

The moment that terrible question was asked, I had enough time, in a fraction of a second, to see the thousand and one consequences that my answer would have. I mustn't give the impression that I was hesitating. -"I am a Jew", I said with conviction. (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 155).

This process will become more tragic when Azouz himself becomes the actor who excludes his original values. This is perfectly represented by the scene where Azouz's mother comes to pick up her child after leaving school. When he sees her planted in front of the school gate, he is horrified by her presence:

Suddenly a terrible vision loomed in the doorway. There; on the sidewalk, obvious for all to see in the middle of the other women, her binouar draped down to her heels, her hair hidden under a green head scarf, the tattoo on her forehead even more visible than usual, stood Yemma. There was no way to pass her off as Jewish and still less as French. (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 156).

He motions to his mother to hide, takes a separate direction, and then rejoins her once his friends have disappeared. Azouz is at an age where he is painfully conscious of everything that makes him different; his mother with her henna and bright clothing represents everything about his family that does not conform to traditional French society.

His mother, who contrasts sharply with the mothers of the other pupils, is a painful reminder of belonging to an inadaptable culture which cannot, moreover, disappear in the criteria of the other. So, throughout the novel, he explains it several times; among many examples: «I was always playing with French kids during break. I wanted to be like them.» (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 85); «How could I tell him (the teacher) that I didn't want to bare myself to all those pupils [...] I told myself that now I could no longer hide my Moorish origins, that Yemma could now come and wait for me at the school gate». (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 172-173).

Moreover, in the description of the rite of circumcision, Begag projects the real feelings of the narrator towards customs which he judges to be absurd because he cannot determine their usefulness and meaning. Begag's representation of this ceremony is not at all done to instruct the foreign reader on the beliefs of the space of Chaaba, but to express a personal opinion with regard to a custom imposed on the protagonist. For the child these habits belong to the domain of the mysterious. Having no direct contact with Algeria, Azouz does not conceive of the tradition of circumcision as a sacred event that reflects his passage from the state of childhood to that of the adult.

The author, by the manner in which he recounts this episode, withdraws the religious features of this ceremony. This ritual is invested with terms that reflect that the character is led to the slaughterhouse to face his "hangman":

The tahar had left the table to go into the execution room. [...] the tahar prepared his instruments and other items.

[...] Then four men seized me. In a fraction of a second I was lifted up onto the gallows, where my limbs were held down. [...]. The tahar took my member between his fingers and pulled out the pink head. Seeing him do this, my anguish redoubled, and I cried out loudly. Then he pulled up all the extra skin to the front by pushing the head of my penis back with his thumb. I screamed, but the songs and the chants of the women drowned out the sound of my suffering. My son is a man; he doesn't cry, my father kept telling me. (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 89-90).

The lexicon that Begag uses to describe the circumcision of Azouz reveals that the narrator was not previously instructed by his parents on the importance of this ceremonial. In the absence of a cultural explanation, the narrator inevitably uses the culture of the other to understand the meaning of such rites. The author himself does not seek to understand in retrospect the reasons for such practices and limits the look of his character to a description that flows from a strictly French context: «I've earned my diploma as an Arabe. [...] In becoming a Muslim, I lost a bit of myself, but I gained a red bike». (Hargreaves and Wolf 2007: 91).

By comparing this circumcision with a diploma, by proclaiming himself a good Muslim, and by insinuating that he gave his piece of flesh for nothing, Begag insisted, in a way, that this custom had no consequence on the internal world of Azouz. It merely marked him physically. This negativity which emerges from the cultural description of the rite shows the author is committed to a cultural route that is distant from the spirit of his community. He sympathizes with these early immigrants who cling to traditions that help them endure their exile. He does not, however, accept blindly to conform to the model prescribed by his group, and tries to rethink this legacy in order to find a model that best meets the needs of a person who wants to get rid of any aspect that keeps him in a secondary status. For him, the future is taking shape in France thanks to his education. Emotionally, nothing binds him directly to Algeria because he has never lived there. The identity under construction that he reveals is a French identity. This identity makes his vision of Algeria as some other place.

In *Écartis d'identité*, Begag recalls that «le vécu de l'espace-temps de l'émigré est parasité par des dépôts, ceux d'un ailleurs». (Begag and Chaouite 1990: 41). The other place to which he refers is obviously the country of origin of the immigrants. The cultural background made by immigrants is found in the education of their children, who are then caught between two cultures: that of their parents and that of the host society, in this case here, that of France.

CONCLUSION

We can say that we are faced with individuals who cannot claim a unique and precise identity because their existence is marked by the seal of interbreeding be it biological or cultural. In the case of Begag, the confrontation with reality is not the result of physical and personal migration, but of acute awareness of belonging to an in-between universe, as Caroline Quignolot-Eysel says: «la confrontation à une dou-

ble appartenance culturelle construite sur un double regard intérieur/extérieur, une double image» (Quignolot-Eysel 1999: 45-46).

In *Le Gone du Chaâba*, there is a hybrid identity that refers not only to the constant use of language registers but also to the use of slang expressions; specific formulas of Contemporary French Cities (FCC); Arabic and other languages. Henri Boyer said it with words that apply very well to our situation: «A travers ses choix de langue, à travers les marques transcodiques qu'il utilise, c'est bien son identité-langagière, sociale que l'individu exprime et (re)construit lors de chaque événement de communication». (Boyer 2000: 162).

His decentralized writing, which overturns the canonical form, is not limited to the lexical domain but also touches syntax. We have also seen how collective history; individual experience; relations with the Other, the language, the writing, are important data for the construction of a plural identity. In fact, the author presents his ethnic identity as a source of enrichment rather than of conflict or feelings of inferiority.

Begag's creative mix of French and Arabic constitutes one of the defining characteristics of the identity issues addressed in the book. His novel has been widely used in French middle schools, as it is both accessible and interesting and supports the encouraging idea that the school system can provide children with the tools necessary to improve their lives.

END NOTES

- 1 The definition of the word "beur" proposed by the Petit Larousse in 1988 was the expression "Immigrant of the second generation", followed by the parenthesis: (born in France).
- 2 Verlan is an argot in the French language, featuring inversion of syllables in a word. For example, français becomes cèfran.
- 3 I would like to point out that I used the name (Azouz) when I talked about the pupil's character in the novel and used the name (Begag) when I was talking about the adult narrator.

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