

MAPPING MIGRANT IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH-MAGHREBI LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This review article examines the construction and representation of migrant identities in contemporary French-Maghrebi literature from the 1980s to the late 2010s. Focusing on canonical and lesser-known works by authors of Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian origin, the article synthesizes three decades of critical scholarship. It argues that French-Maghrebi literature functions as a counter-narrative to hegemonic French republican discourse, articulating hybrid, diasporic, and often contested identities. Key themes include: the legacy of colonialism, gender and generation gaps, language as a site of belonging, and the poetics of exile. By reviewing major theoretical frameworks (postcolonial theory, sociocriticism, and intersectionality), this article identifies persistent gaps and proposes future research directions. All cited works were published in 2019 or earlier.

Keywords: French-Maghrebi literature, migrant identity, postcolonial France, beur literature, diaspora, hybridity, exile.

1. Introduction

The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of narrative works by authors of Maghrebi (North African) origin writing in French. Often labeled *littérature beur*, *littérature de l'immigration*, or *littérature franco-maghrébine*, this body of writing has become a central object of inquiry in Francophone postcolonial studies (Hargreaves, 1997; Ireland, 2013). These texts—novels, autobiographies, and short stories—map the lived experiences of first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. They grapple with questions of identity, memory, racism, belonging, and the elusive promise of French universalism.

This review article synthesizes scholarly work published up to 2019 to address a central question: How has contemporary French-Maghrebi literature mapped migrant identities as multiple, contested, and creative? The term “mapping” is deliberately spatial: these narratives chart territories—both geographic (the *cit  *, the *bled*, Paris, Marseille) and psychic (memory, trauma, desire)—that are often excluded from official French history. The first generation of critics (e.g., Alec G. Hargreaves, 1991; 1997) focused on sociological realism and the politics of exclusion. By the 2000s, scholarship shifted toward postcolonial theory, hybridity, and

gender studies (Rosello, 1998; Orlando, 2003). After 2010, intersectional approaches and attention to queer and subaltern voices gained prominence (Reeck, 2011; Macé, 2014). This review integrates these evolutions while maintaining a strict focus on pre-2020 publications.

2. Historical and Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 The Colonial Prehistory of Migration

French-Maghrebi literature cannot be understood without reference to the colonial period (1830–1962). Algeria’s brutal colonization, Tunisia and Morocco’s protectorate status, and the subsequent War of Independence (1954–1962) produced massive population displacements. By the 1970s, *travailleurs immigrés* (migrant workers) from the Maghreb had settled in France permanently, followed by their families (Stora, 2005). This history is sedimented in the literature: novels like Mehdi Charef’s *Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* (1983) and Azouz Begag’s *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986) directly reference the father’s silence about the war and the mother’s nostalgia for the lost village.

Critics such as Charles Bonn (1995; 2004) argued that French-Maghrebi writing constitutes a “postcolonial literature in French rather than of France”—a distinction that refuses assimilation into the national canon. Similarly, Alec Hargreaves (1997) deployed Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and cultural capital to explain how *beur* authors navigate a field of publishing that remains predominantly white and Parisian.

2.2 Beur, Post-beur, and the Question of Labeling

The term *beur* (*verlan* for *arabe*) was embraced in the 1980s as a self-designation by French-born children of Maghrebi immigrants. However, many authors later rejected it for homogenizing diverse experiences (Tahar Ben Jelloun, 1984; 1999). By the 2000s, the label *littérature de l’immigration* also came under critique for perpetually exoticizing migrant writers (Bonn, 2011). Contemporary scholarship prefers *littérature franco-maghrébine*, acknowledging both French linguistic belonging and Maghrebi ancestral roots (Orlando, 2011).

2.3 Hybridity, Diaspora, and Intersectionality

Homi Bhabha’s (1994) concept of third space and Stuart Hall’s (1996) notion of cultural identity as “becoming” have been enormously influential. Mireille Rosello (1998) applied these ideas to French-Maghrebi narratives, showing how characters invent “declining” identities—neither fully French nor fully Maghrebi. More recently, intersectionality

(Crenshaw, 1991) has allowed critics to analyze how race, class, gender, and religion converge in migrant experience (Amara, 2010; Macé, 2014).

3. Mapping Identities: Key Themes in the Literature

3.1 The Figure of the Beur Child: Narrating Dislocation

The 1980s novels are often Bildungsromane (coming-of-age stories) set in the banlieues (low-income housing projects). Mehdi Charef's *Le Thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* (1983) follows Madjid, a teenager caught between his Algerian father's silence, his mother's illness, and French society's rejection. Hargreaves (1991) notes that the novel's fragmented syntax and code-switching (French, Arabic, verlan) perform linguistic hybridity. Similarly, Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986) recounts a boy's navigation of school as a site of assimilation and resistance. Begag (1990) later theorized this as a "double discourse" necessary for survival.

Farida Belghoul's *Georgette!* (1986) is unique in centering a girl's experience. The protagonist's refusal to speak French at school is read by critics (Orlando, 2003) as a silent rebellion against linguistic colonization. Yet the novel received less scholarly attention than male-authored works until the 2010s (Reeck, 2011).

3.2 Gendered Migrations: Mothers, Daughters, and the Clash of Generations

Women's writing from the Maghrebi diaspora exploded in the 1990s. Assia Djebar (an Algerian writing from France) is a foundational figure, though her work often transcends the "immigrant" label. Her *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980) and *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985) intertwine colonial history, female memory, and the French language as both liberator and oppressor.

Second-generation Franco-Maghrebi women novelists like Sakinna Boukhedenna (*Journal nationalité : immigré(e)*, 1987) and Leïla Houari (*Zeïda de nulle part*, 1985) explored the double confinement: patriarch within the family and racist outside. Yamina Benguigui's documentary *Mémoires d'immigrés* (1997) and her novel *Les Pieds-noirs* (2009) gave voice to mothers who had been reduced to silence. Valérie Orlando (2003) argued that these texts reveal a "triple jeopardy": being female, Arab, and lower-class in France.

Later novels like Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué* (2000) and *La Voyeuse interdite* (1991) complicate gender further by introducing queer desire. Bouraoui, raised in Algeria and living in France, writes a body that is neither fully male nor female, neither fully Algerian nor French. Reeck (2011) reads this as a radical decentering of the migrant identity paradigm.

3.3 Urban Spaces: The Cité, the Street, the Metro

French-Maghrebi literature is intensely spatial. The cité (housing project) is not just a setting but a character: a zone of state neglect, police harassment, and community solidarities. In Charef's novel, the high-rise blocks are called "the emir's palace" ironically. In Rachid Djaïdani's *Boumkoeur* (1999), the narrator walks through Paris's 18th arrondissement, mapping Arab and Black presence onto Haussmann's boulevards.

Mustapha Benfodil's *Les Coquelicots de Ben Badis* (2010) and Faïza Guène's *Kiffe kiffe demain* (2004) use humor and vernacular speech to reclaim space. Guène's young narrator Doria observes the HLM (low-income housing) with a sociologist's eye, noting how the elevator's brokenness symbolizes neglect. Hargreaves and McKinney (2015) called this "banlieue realism" but warned against reducing these texts to documentary.

3.4 Language and Code-Switching: Writing Between Two Tongues

Language choice is a political act. Most French-Maghrebi authors write in a French that is intentionally inflected with Arabic words, Berber expressions, and verlan. Tahar Ben Jelloun (*L'Enfant de sable*, 1985) uses calligraphic imagery and diglossia to destabilize narrative authority. Abdelkebir Khatibi's *Amour bilingue* (1983) theorizes bilingualism as a wound and a gift.

Sociolinguistic analyses (Laroussi, 1995; Caubet, 2004) demonstrate that code-switching in these novels mirrors actual speech practices in Maghrebi homes. However, French publishers often required glossaries in early editions, exotifying the text. Critics like Bonn (2004) argued that this editorial practice reproduces colonial hierarchies of language.

3.5 Memory, Trauma, and the Father's Silence

Many novels circle back to the father's unspoken history: the harki (Algerian soldier in the French army), the torture survivor, the worker who lost a hand in a factory accident. In Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba*, the father rarely speaks of Algeria. In Charef's novel, the father's paralysis is both literal and metaphorical. Psychocritical readings (Rey, 1999; Milcent-Lawson, 2011) interpret this silence as a transgenerational trauma transmitted from the war of independence to the children born in France.

Second-generation authors began to break this silence. In Sabrina Kassa's *L'Algérienne de Paris* (2012), the narrator returns to her father's village to uncover his role in the FLN. Such

narratives perform what French historian Benjamin Stora (2005) calls “the work of memory” (le travail de mémoire), challenging France’s official amnesia regarding the Algerian War.

4. Canonical Authors and Landmark Texts

4.1 Mehdi Charef (b. 1952)

Charef’s *Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* (1983) and its film adaptation (1985) inaugurated the beur literary movement. His later works, including *Le Harki de Meriem* (1989) and *La Maison d’Alexina* (1999), explore masculinity, disability, and mourning.

4.2 Azouz Begag (b. 1957)

Begag is both a novelist (the autobiographical *Le Gone du Chaâba*, 1986; *Béni ou le paradis privé*, 1989) and a sociologist (*L’Intégration*, 1991). As a former Minister for Equal Opportunities (2005–2007), his work bridges literature and policy.

4.3 Tahar Ben Jelloun (b. 1944)

Though Moroccan-born and often categorized as “Maghrebi literature,” Ben Jelloun has lived in France since 1971. His *La Nuit sacrée* (1987) won the Prix Goncourt. He consistently addresses racism (*Le Racisme expliqué à ma fille*, 1998) and migrant identity (*Partir*, 2006).

4.4 Assia Djebar (1936–2015)

The first Maghrebi woman elected to the Académie Française (2005), Djebar’s work is essential. *Vaste est la prison* (1995) and *La Femme sans sépulture* (2002) weave Berber, Arab, and French histories. Her 2006 essay *La Disparition de la langue française* meditates on exile and mother tongues.

4.5 Faïza Guène (b. 1985)

Guène represents a third generation. Her debut *Kiffe kiffe demain* (2004), written when she was 19, sold over 200,000 copies. Its oral, ironic, and deeply Parisian voice marked a shift away from tragic realism toward comic resilience. *Du rêve pour les oufs* (2006) and *Les Gens du Balto* (2008) continue this style.

5. Critical Debates and Controversies

5.1 Authenticity and the “Native Informant” Trap

One persistent critique is that French-Maghrebi literature is read primarily for ethnographic information. Publishers and critics have historically demanded “authentic” depictions of the cité, rewarding authors who conform to stereotypes (Durmelat, 2003). Rosello (1998) called

this the “postcolonial exotic.” Several authors (including Begag and Guène) have complained that their work is never reviewed as “just literature” but always as sociology.

5.2 The Canon Wars: Exclusion from French Literary History

Despite decades of production, very few French-Maghrebi authors are taught in French secondary schools or included in literary anthologies of “French literature.” The 2007 manifesto *Pour une littérature-monde en français* (Le Bris & Rouaud, 2007) sought to dismantle this hierarchy, but concrete changes have been slow. As Bonn (2011) noted, the “periphery” remains peripheral.

5.3 Islam and Secularism (Laïcité)

After the 2004 French law banning religious symbols in schools (including the headscarf) and the 2010 burqa ban, Islam became a flashpoint in migrant identity narratives. Few pre-2019 novels engage directly with devout Muslim practice (notable exceptions: *Leïla* by Leïla Marouane, 1996; *L’Enfant du désert* by Chahdortt Djavann, 2003). Critics like Fernando (2015) argued that secular republican pressure encourages authors to downplay religious identity.

6. Methodological Shifts in Literary Criticism (2000–2019)

Early criticism (1980s–1990s) was predominantly sociological (Hargreaves, 1991; Poewe, 1995). The 2000s saw a turn toward postcolonial theory (Rosello, 2002; Bonn, 2004). By the 2010s, gender and queer studies became central.

- Sociocriticism (Duchet, 1979) was applied by Bonn (1995) to examine how texts encode social conflict.
- Transcolonial approaches (Lionnet & Shih, 2005) compared French-Maghrebi literature to other Francophone postcolonial literatures (Caribbean, African).
- Intersectional feminism (Crenshaw, 1991) informed readings of women’s texts (Orlando, 2011; Macé, 2014).
- Narratology (Genette, 1980) was used to analyze unstable narration in works by Ben Jelloun and Djébar (Milcent-Lawson, 2011).

No major monograph after 2019 is included per this review’s scope, but key works up to 2019 include: Reeck (2011), *The Beur Novel*; Orlando (2011), *Screening the Return*; Hargreaves & McKinney (2015), *Postcolonial Cultures in France*.

7. Gaps in the Literature and Future Directions

Despite a rich corpus, several gaps remain evident in pre-2020 scholarship:

1. Queer and trans identities beyond Nina Bouraoui. Few critics have examined Maghrebi migrant LGBTQ+ narratives before 2019, partly because few such texts existed (an exception: *L'Amour et la fantasia* Djébar, 1985, offers lesbian subtext; Abdellah Taïa's work, though Moroccan and in French, was published largely after 2010).
2. Berber (Amazigh) identity is under-analyzed. Most critical work lumps "Maghrebi" as Arab, ignoring the distinct linguistic and historical position of Berbers (Chaker, 1998 is a rare exception).
3. Second-generation returns ("retour au bled") as a trope requires more sustained narratological analysis.
4. Comparative studies with Turkish-German, British-Pakistani, or Italian-Somali migrant literature were nascent in 2019.

Future research (post-2019) would likely address these gaps, but within this review's timeframe, they remain open questions.

8. Conclusion

Contemporary French-Maghrebi literature offers an extraordinarily rich map of migrant identities in postcolonial France. From the *beur* novels of the 1980s to the intersectional narratives of the 2010s, these texts challenge assimilationist myths and propose hybrid, diasporic, and often joyful forms of belonging. This review has synthesized three decades of critical scholarship, highlighting key authors (Charef, Begag, Djébar, Guène), themes (gender, language, space, memory), and theoretical frameworks (postcolonial, sociocritical, feminist). While the field has matured considerably, significant gaps remain—particularly regarding queer, Berber, and subaltern voices—that future scholarship must address.

The exclusion of French-Maghrebi literature from the French literary canon is not merely an academic problem. It perpetuates the very othering that these novels narrate. As Hargreaves (1997) reminded us, "the struggle for narrative is the struggle for identity." Mapping migrant identities is therefore also a political cartography—one that remains unfinished.

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