

Female, French, Arab

by Mariem Guellouz

How have French women of Arab and North African descent become the subject of a collective fantasy? If the language of immigration reveals collective imaginaries and social and discursive practices that are worth analyzing, then the word *beurette* also deserves our attention.

Reviewed: Sarah Diffalah and Salima Tenfiche, *Beurettes. Un fantasme français*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2021, 320 pp., €21.50.

At a time when the debate on intersectional theories and minority rights is gaining ground in French academic and media circles, the authors of *Beurette. Un fantasme français* ["Beurette. A French Fantasy"] take a closer look at the problematic term *beurette*¹ used since the 1980s to refer to French women of Arab immigrant background, and rightly criticize the normalized usage of the word. Their analysis reveals a host of racist imaginaries and discriminatory practices.

With no academic or scientific pretensions, the book is presented as an essay intended for non-specialist readers, and it acknowledges its methodological limitations. Nevertheless, Sarah Diffalah and Salima Tenfiche hope to follow in the footsteps of a rigorous and prolific body of scientific work on the trajectories and lives of the children of immigrants in France. Accordingly, the book abounds in references to the important research of sociologist Nacéra Guenif-Souilamas (Guenif-Souilamas,

¹ *Beurette* is a colloquial French term used to refer to European-born women whose parents or grandparents are immigrants from the Maghreb. The equivalent term for men is *beur* (or alternatively, *rebeu*). The terms *beur* and *rebeu* were coined by inverting the syllables of the word *arabe*.

1999). What else can be said about *beurettes*? Since the sociologist's work has already covered every facet of the issue, the book has a difficult task. This is not a criticism, but rather an observation on the inertia regarding the social condition of French Arab women over the past few decades.

The book is divided into four parts, each addressing a different theme: the body, culture, religious belief and visibility. Based on interviews with several women impacted by the label *beurettes*, the authors have chosen to explore a number of subjects, including sexuality, relationships, religion, racism, school and family. The interviews were conducted in 2019 and are presented as a "portrait gallery that is plural but not exhaustive" (p. 33). The authors acknowledge the non-representative nature of these interviews, which they present as discussions aimed at enabling "our fellow citizens to get to know us better, and young girls of North African origin to construct their identity away from caricatures, self-shame and the denial of their cultural heritage" (p.33). The authors' decision to include themselves in the testimonies is reflected in their use of the word "we" and their preference for personal accounts. The words of those involved give the book a dynamic, embodied feel. Gathering testimonies from Maghrebi women in France, the two authors seek to grasp what is common to these different life paths.

Shame, class and race

At the heart of this book lies the realization of a long-suppressed sense of self-shame, and the desire to make it visible to others and share it in order to rid ourselves of it. (p. 26)

This is how Sarah Diffalah and Salima Tenfiche explain the original idea behind their project. Shame, a cross-disciplinary theme in their investigation, is studied as a common and inescapable feeling experienced by every French woman of Arab parentage. Both the interviewees and the authors describe the shame they have experienced on various levels: shame of self, of kitsch aesthetics, of an embroidered doily, of plastic flowers, or of a parent's strong accent. The women's testimonies oscillate between recounting the shame of their origins and denouncing the imposed model of legitimacy that triggers this feeling. A key question is raised: "As we unpacked the list of shameful details of our everyday life, feeling the relief of those who had long kept them secret, we wondered whether it was more a problem of cultural shame or social shame? Were we ashamed of being Arabs or of being poor?"

(p. 137). The book struggles to answer this question, given the difficulty of distinguishing between the two sources of shame: class and/or race. The testimonies describe the shame of popular habitus, those of the banlieues and of working-class North Africans, but also the shame of their body, appearance, language, and a distinctive physique. Racism, sexism and class contempt intertwine to form a double or triple punishment in the lives of French North African women.

Although the authors rightly analyze the impact that the incorporation of the prevailing norm has on creating feelings of shame, the absence of a distanced sociological analysis of the words recorded sometimes gives the impression of a study that downplays the consequences of institutional and ideological violence. While we do not refute the hypothesis of the dual social and racial contempt from which *beurettes* suffer, we believe it is important to extend it by linking personal and family histories, and interpersonal relationships of racism or solidarity, to institutional and legal violence. Arabophobia is also rooted in a neoliberal context characterized by the exploitation of human resources through immigration, labor and the new brain drain from Arab countries.

Why are only certain stereotypical figures of Maghrebi immigrant women portrayed in the media and in politics? Where are the women who are actively succeeding in society? The book's final chapter, entitled "Our role models", raises the question of "positive" representation. The authors deplore the lack of representative North African female media figures, and rightly denounce stereotyped and racist representations. Should we not then be promoting successful women? The danger of such a bias is that it highlights success stories based on a neoliberal model, forgetting the ordinary heroes who are so well described in the chapter dedicated to memory and anti-colonial struggles (pp. 147-161). Transmission as a gesture of rehabilitation emphasizes figures made invisible by school curricula and the national narrative. We should also recall the importance of in-depth work on archives, as in the documentary by Hejer Ben Boubakr, *Une histoire des luttes des travailleurs arabes* ["A history of Arab workers' struggles"], (Ben Boubakr, 2021), and in Rachida Brahim's work *La race tue deux fois : Une histoire des crimes racistes en France* ["Race kills twice: a history of racist crimes in France"] (Brahim, 2020, Boutros, 2021).

While the final sentence of the introduction makes the important point "[t]hat being an 'Arab' in France is no longer a problem but a simple fact." (p. 33), the book's conclusion seems to contradict this fact and engages in complex geopolitical reflections that are difficult to summarize in a few lines for fear of falling into the trap of certain

shortcuts, as evidenced by this passage: "the claim to the term 'Berber' rather than 'Arab' is not just a verbal subterfuge to vainly use the word to escape the stigmatized group, but a rejection of the erasure of the plural identity and thousand-year-old history of the Maghreb peoples" (p. 311). This assertion deserves to be explored in greater depth by considering the geopolitics of the Arab world and its peoples. Should the doxa of self-shame not be turned on its head by offering an analysis that links the production of subjectivities to the processes of exploitation of material and immaterial wealth?

Beurette, rebeu, arabe

Who names whom? Who is named by whom? Every act of naming/appellation is an ethical and ideological gesture that reveals social relations of class and gender, while at the same time being embedded in a discursive memory and a dialogical process. The authors examine the political implications of the process of naming a social group represented by French women whose parents come from Arab countries, and more specifically from the Maghreb. Self-naming, as a political act, is a process of reappropriation that is both individual and collective, revealing a tension between imposed designations and the choices of those concerned. The authors take a clear stance on the term *beurette*, which they, like the interviewees, consider demeaning and stigmatizing: "To put an end to the stereotypes of *beurettes*, Muslim girls, or any other misogynistic and racist prejudice that hangs over women of North African origin, we decided to attack them head-on without being afraid to name them" (p. 32). They point to attempts at linguistic emancipation such as *#pasvosbeurettes* ("notyourbeurettes") (p. 55) or the artistic and socially engaged work of Lisa Boutelja, who coined the term *beurettocratie* ("beurettocracy") (p. 78).

Rejecting linguistic attributions, they analyze the term *beurettes* by treating it as a discursive construct that reveals a host of racist and discriminatory practices. They propose to shed light on a well-known contradiction in representations of Arab women in France, namely the traditional axiology that pits them between submissive and pornographic figures (Guenif-Souilamas, 2006, Durand and Kréfa, 2008). In their introduction, the authors recall the infatuation with *rebeu* women in the pornographic industry, and attribute this phenomenon to a colonial and Orientalist doxa that shapes the imaginations projected onto Arab and Arab bodies and sexualities: "So, whatever the stereotype of the hypersexualized ' *beurette 2.0*' or the submissive and alienated

'veiled woman', the bodies of these women of North African origin are still a subject of debate". The book supports its arguments by referring to Malek Chebel's sometimes unsatisfactory analysis, but forgets to refer to major academic works on the relationship between sexuality and Islam, such as those by Dakhliya (Dakhliya, 2005, 2007) and Lagrange (Lagrange, 2007).

To round off this debate, we believe it is important to point out that feminist movements in the Arab world have often been associated with social, political and anti-colonial struggles, but that Arabic-language productions, under-appreciated and under-translated in France, have suffered from invisibilization in the European feminist field. A careful analysis of the social and linguistic complexity of Arabic also reveals social distinctions between those who master the "classical" Arabic language, read and write it, and those who only use the oral dialect form not officially recognized by Arab countries. These linguistic ideologies create a double disadvantage for some immigrant children in accessing Arabic culture and literature. The status of the Arabic language and its teaching policies in France have fostered this malaise and the intergenerational disconnect between Arabs in France and those on the other side of the Mediterranean.

The book focuses on the experiences of women of North African parentage in France, but can we separate their experiences from the circulation of practices and discourses between the Maghreb and France? In addition to each woman's subjective relationship with the "hometown" back in North Africa, it is also important to analyze the complex institutional and political relations between countries. Political conditions in Arab countries also play a part in shaping representations of the self for Arabs in France. First, several Arab countries have regimes that fiercely repress social and trade union movements, including the struggles of both national and immigrant workers, not to mention the role played by the liberal policies of Northern countries in exploiting these driving forces. Second, in their fight against Islamist parties, these regimes have also largely discriminated against veiled women and turned the veil into a symbol of political resistance. Finally, since the 1980s, the Maghrebi and Arab middle classes have shown social contempt for the children of immigrants in France, who are often referred to as *zmigris* or *chez nous là-bas* when they return home²... All of these factors help us to address the question of the term *beurettes* in its historical context, beyond personal experiences or French fantasies, as an international issue shaped by political and economic processes.

² Expressions used in Tunisia.

Rather than seeking to overturn or deconstruct stigma, or reclaim hybridity or dual culture, is it possible to embrace our status as Arabs in France and, as Luisa Yousfi (Yousfi, 2022) puts it, "remain barbarians"? The book's epilogue defends the choice of the term *rebeu*, which the authors and women interviewed seem to prefer when referring to themselves. They consider the term to reflect their dual culture, linking their North African origins to their French identity. So, it is fair to ask one final question. Who is afraid to call themselves Arab, plain and simple?

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