THE IMAGE OF ISLAM IN BEUR LITERATURE

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Abstract

Islam, as a religion and a culture, is an important topic in literature nowadays, due to the conflicting interpretations that have sprung up around it and to the terrorist attacks that have been committed on the pretext of serving it during the 20th and the 21st century. That is why it is also a major subject in North African literature, especially because some countries, mainly Algeria, have suffered intensely from Islamists and their radicalism. North African immigrants in France and their children, known as Beur, also suffered from demonizing Islam and Muslims. Because of this current image of Islam in the West and its media, it is interesting then to study the representation of Islam in Beur literature of the twentieth century and Beur literature of the twenty-first century; knowing that this literature does not only hold a message for their alike, for the natives of North Africa, and for Muslims in general, but also it shows a certain image of the religion to the Western reader. Beur--i.e. French people born to immigrants of North Africa—is a term that was created by this group of people to refer to themselves in a culture that rejects them. In this literature, the representation of Islam differs based on time frame, and on gender. Islam in Beur literature of the Eighties and early Nineties is presented as a culture and an ethnic background, while in novels by Beur writers of the 21st century, such as Leila Marouane, Islam is discussed as a religion that caused conflicts between Beur and France, the only land they know. These two distinct representations of the same religion from a group of people who shares the same roots stimulates questions of how Islam is purposely exiled from some of their novels, as well as how it was one of the main reasons for exile for some characters in the novels under study.

Keywords: Beur, Exile, Francophone, Identity, Islam, North Africa

The Study

Islam, as a religion and a culture, is an important topic in media and literature nowadays, due to the conflicting interpretations that have sprung up around it and to the terrorist attacks that have been committed on the pretext of serving it during the 20th and the 21st century. That is why it is also a major subject in North African literature, especially because some countries, mainly Algeria, have suffered intensely from Islamists and their radicalism. John Esposito states: “Too often interest in and coverage of Islam was driven by explosive headline events, acts of violence and terror committed in the name of Islam” (*Islam the Straight Path* xiv). Because of this current image of Islam in the West and its media it is necessary then to study the representation of Islam in North African literature written in French, mainly by Beur writers, knowing that this literature does not only hold a message for the natives of North Africa, but also shows a certain image of the religion to the Western reader. Three notable examples which I study here are *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed, Le gone du Châaba*, and *La vie sexuelle d’un islamiste à Paris*. These are books by Beur writers, that is, authors who have North African roots and who happen to be French too. Nada Elia defines this label as follows:

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> "Beur" is the label used to refer to the children of North African (Maghrebi) immigrants to France, previously known as "second-generation immigrants." They are not immigrants in the traditional sense of the word, for the Beur generation consists of children born into involuntary minority status, with none of the dreams and illusions that prompted their parents to leave North Africa in hopes of a better life. (47)

"Beur," then, is a category of French citizens who are struggling between two identities and cultures: that of their parents and that of the land of their birth. This struggle reflects also in their relation with Islam and their association with it both as a religion and as cultural heritage.

From the selected works I am studying I found that Islam is represented in two distinct ways: as a religion and as a culture. For Beur writers of the early eighties, especially male ones, Islam is represented as a culture and a passed-on tradition. They do not deal with it directly, and the reader has to read between the lines to figure it out. It is somehow exiled as a religion, basically because this generation of Beur does not have an academic teaching of the religion. They learned it, or more accurately, learned about it, from their parents and the French media. But in fiction by Beur writers of the 21st century such as Leila Merouane, Islam is discussed as a religion that caused their alienation because of being misunderstood, and being deliberately limited to radicalism. These two distinct representations of Islam stimulate questions of how Islam is purposely exiled from some of these novels, as well as how it was one of the main reasons for exile for some of their characters.

In *Le thé au harem*, Mahdi Charef presents two understandings of this religion, and links them to two different groups of people. Islam is present in this novel as a culture among the young Beur community, especially males, and this is obvious in their names and their behavior with women. Charef presents a character named Abdallah, the oldest sibling, who represents the law in the family. Abdallah controls his brothers and sisters. For instance he mistreats his young sister, Naima: "Elle n'a que seize ans et déjà enceinte. La honte de la famille, le Malheur….tout le monde dans la cité sait qu'elle est en cloque…C'est pour ça que l'Abdallah la laisse plus sortir. Il faut cacher la misère" (113). She is locked in the house because she committed a religious sin, fornication. Abdallah plays the role of God and punishes her for the sin she committed. The community also misjudges her based on this religious mistake, regardless of how her morals usually are. It is worth noting that in Islam it is not permitted to have sexual relations before getting married. Therefore, breaking this rule is an enormous sin and it brings shame to the entire family, especially when committed by females, since the honor of the family relies more on the chastity of their daughters, more specifically on their virginity. For this category of male immigrants, Islam is nothing but a cultural heritage. They do not practice the religion but they have it in their subconscious as a guide to how females and youth should behave.

In the novel, none of the father-figure characters, whether brother or father, prays or reads the sacred books, nor do they go to a mosque once in a while to practice. They just rely on their limited acquired knowledge of this religion to control the youth, especially females, when they break the rules. In fact, Charef does not mention the existence of a mosque in the neighborhood of "la cité des fleurs." From this religion the father figures extract the punishing rules that help put back some order in their lives, or so they think. That is why the father of Balou, "le ligota, le fourra à la baignoire, et le roua de coups jusqu'au sang" (91), when Balou steals money from the cash drawer of the bakery in which he worked. Balou's father who has a mistress—which is against the religion—divorced his first wife, the mother of his children including Balou, on the pretext that she "n'avait pas su élever ses gosses" (91) according to their religious and cultural background, of course. Her failure as a mother causes her a divorce, but his failure as a father and as a good Muslim does not cause him any harm, and does not make of him a faulty person in the eyes of his community either. Islam, then, is used by the more powerful in this community as a system of punishment when mistakes happen among the weakest amid them.

However, among the female community in this novel, this religion is a tool for supplication and unification with the weak and miserable. Indeed, the elderly female community is the one that really practices the religion. All the mothers and grandmothers presented in this novel pray and supplicate God for help and guidance. For instance, Malika, Madjid's mother, always prays not only for her family but also for her French friends who are struggling too. Charef states:

> Elle récite la prière à genoux sur une peau de chèvre importée d'Algérie, en direction supposée de la Mecque…. Elle cause au bon Dieu, les yeux mi-clos, les mains jointes, elle le supplie pour Madjid, pour Josette, du travail pour ceux qui sont dans la misère, du mieux pour tous ceux qui vivent dans l'angoisse, elle demande force et protection. (135)

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Malika is the representation of the moderate devout Muslim. She uses the religion as a tool to get closer to God, and to pray for the needy. Even when she has problems with her son Madjid, she prays for him "en implorant tous les saints du Coran" (16); she does not punish him or cut him off. She understands religion differently from the male community. For her, it is an escape from the harshness of the materialistic world of "humans." This same understanding applies to the grandmother of Naima, who consoles her and treats her as a human being who deserves tenderness and special care instead of being continuously beaten with "les coups de pied dans le ventre" (113). This grandmother who spends her time praying does not see only a sinner in her granddaughter.

These two different ways of understanding Islam may be linked to the level of power that each category has. While men are strong and powerful, they tend to practice only the laws that help them maintain this position; accordingly, they continue to be figures of fear in the house and the community as a whole. Yet women, being weak, tend to rely on the mercy of God to help them survive the harshness of their entourage. Moreover, all the practicing females in the novels are wives or grandmothers who joined their husbands or sons later in life. They have always relied on prayers and supplications to get them through the problems they faced in their lives in their native lands, and to shield them from the harm of their patriarchal society back home, whereas the men have essentially relied on their physical strength to survive the harshness of their lives in the host culture, forgetting to cultivate their spirituality, especially because the host land, France, sees their religion as an intruder in the native culture. They rely only on some religious rules that allow them to use their physical strength when their power or their honor is challenged. They have not practiced Islam since their arrival in France; consequently, they only recall the restrictions related to honor and reputation.

In fact, all of the male community in this novel does nothing but break the laws of Islam, such as hanging around in bars, drinking, taking drugs, having mistresses, abusing the weak among them, stealing, etc. For them, the restrictions of Islam apply to females only—the carriers of the family's reputation. After all, a man is a man; he has no virginity to lose. He is free to do anything because nothing can harm his reputation, but for a female the situation is different; the tiniest mistake she commits classifies her as a "Salope! Putain!" (112), a dirty whore ruins her future, and dishonors her family. Lilian Vassberg explains the reasons for this social classification in detail:

> Une fois qu'elles ont atteint la puberté, les pressions familiales se font plus fortes… La sexualité féminine et la virginité font l'objet d'une préoccupation quasi-obsessionnelle. Car la virginité reste le capital le plus précieux des filles dont elles doivent rendre compte à toute leur famille. Elles sont surveillées de près pour les préserver du danger que constituent les hommes. (714)

Thus Naima's father "a failli la tuer, un soir qu'il rentrait ivre. Il voulait la jeter par la fenêtre" (113). She is not pure anymore. She has committed the worst of mistakes that a female Beur can commit. He sees in her life a disgrace to the family, because not only did she lose her virginity—her only honor and identification—but also the whole community knows about it, now that she is pregnant. Along with the other family members, he considers her a source of shame, but he does not see in his continuous inebriation any harm to his reputation. For the father figures, Islam serves as a means of control and as a rigid tradition for females only; it does not serve as a religious system that helps organize the life of a community or the relations among families. In such conditions, and with such a discriminatory understanding, Islam imprisons Beur girls and makes their lives harder than that of the men around them. This generation of females, despite their minimal exposure to Islam as a religious system, and despite their ignorance of its basic teachings, find themselves obliged to obey it through the heavy control of the males in their community. It is the males' way of imposing their rules and thus proving their existence.

Islam, as a religion, has not been practiced or studied by the majority of the young Beur community for a long time. This is true once we know that France did not provide religious institutions for the laborers that it brought to work in its factories and to build its infrastructure during and after the two devastating world wars. Ben Jelloun notes that since then Islam "est perçu comme une différence menaçante et récalcitrante… L'islam, celui de ces hommes maghrébins célibataires, était vécu dans la discrétion et le silence. Il n'en parlaient pas" (*Hospitalité française* 38). This distancing from their religion marginalized it, and made these immigrants forget its core teachings that it shares with the other monotheistic religions, such as mercy, tolerance, caring for each other, etc. This distancing also marginalized this community of immigrants. They remained the exiled other—the disregarded community—and consequently, once the females joined them, these immigrants found in their arrival a chance to regain some lost power and some dignity. Therefore, they heavily controlled their female community to the point of imprisoning and mistreating them. This behavior seeks to save their females, i.e., their honor, from the lure of France the host culture, which offers a freedom that their native culture and their religion do not allow, especially regarding sexual freedom. It also seeks to

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save the men's image as the controllers, the ones in charge, and not the ones being controlled. Hargreaves confirms this: "Their marginalization at the hands of the majority ethnic population…and a sense of frustration among young males…appears to have fueled cases of sexual abuse against women" (49).

This community of males is not an educated one, especially the first generation of immigrants: they are the workers who came for manual labor. They do not have any education even from their native lands. They learn about Islam from what they hear or from what their parents told them when they were young. Their religious knowledge is not an academic one nor is it a solid one. Consequently, it is more a culture than a religion. This is very obvious in Azouz Begag's novel in which no mention is made of the religion until towards the middle when the narrator speaks about the preparation for his circumcision ceremony. Azouz says: "En devenant bon musulman, j'ai perdu un bout de moi-même, mais j'ai gagné un vélo rouge" (*Le gone de la Chaaba* 112). Azouz's first exposure to the religion is physical. Indeed, he has never been taught anything about how to be a Muslim, except that males have to be circumcised. Even about this, he found out about it from the other children of the Châaba, and indirectly from his parents'conversations when they were preparing for the event. His parents do not explain to him the reasons for which he and his brother have to be circumcised, nor do they tell them about the religious story related to it. Islam as a religion and a tradition is alienated here. It is not discussed, nor even mentioned to the children. The parents do not mention to their children that this action relates them to the prophet Mohamed (Pbuh) and the earlier messengers reaching back to Abraham. The parents are practicing a tradition in the same way their parents did, without explaining to the children its meaning, as if they are living in their native country, Algeria, in which such matters are simply evident. Circumcision is a religious practice that is dealt with as a cultural heritage in North Africa, and the North African immigrants maintain it in their host land. In Begag's novel the narrator follows this tradition as well. He speaks amply about the festive and cultural preparation for the ceremony—food preparation, clothes, songs and dances, etc., as well as the ceremony itself—but he never speaks about its religious meaning, nor any religious prayer or tradition used to perform it. Islam is withdrawn from it, because among this community even Islam is treated as an obtained heritage, a tradition, not a faith.

In Begag's novel, the only moments during which the main characters rely on a divinity is when they swear. Saïd, Azouz's neighbor, exclaims at him "Salopard…Tu es maudit. Allah te fera payer ton ignominie" (130) when Azouz has shown to the police the place in which, Saïd illegally slaughters lambs following the Muslim way. Also, Zidouma, Saïd's wife, yells at Bouzid, Azouz's father, "Qu'est-ce que tu es donc? Allah en personne?" (131). She uses religion to insult Bouzid and to remind him of his status. This Maghrebi community includes God mainly in their disputes, to challenge the other person. God, then, has been linked at different moments in the novel to cursing and to moments of anger. It is an ironic way of showing the distancing of this community from their religion. The name of the divine is connected most of the time with swearing and cursing, not with praying and beseeching. In Ben Jelloun's words, Islam has become "Une culture ainsi détachée de la terre et du peuple, où elle vit et évolue, [et] se trouve vite réduite à une expression réactive et pas forcement positive. Elle est perçue comme un voile qu'on essaie de poser sur quelque blessure, sur des problèmes qui font peur" (*Hospitalité française* 149). It is the only power that can be defied without fearing an immediate punishment or expulsion. Bouzid and the other immigrants know that when they break the law it causes them big troubles with the French government, which can send them back to the native land they escaped, but breaking the rules of Islam, such as drinking alcohol, is not that scary; in fact, it might make them blend in easily with the host culture, and it gives them a feeling of power that they have lost as mistreated immigrants. Defying God harms them in the afterlife, but defying the rules of France gives them troubles right away. Hence, it is better for the immigrants to discharge their tension and stress on the religion, on God.

Moreover, among this community of exiles, the reliance on God is used to explain events that they cannot control. For instance, Bouzid answers Azouz's question about the reasons that led the Bouchaoui's family to leave, saying: "Eh bien parce que Allah l'a voulu ainsi. C'est tout" (140). Bouzid does not want to recognize his actions and those of his son as one of the main reasons for which the Bouchaouis left the Châaba. This reliance on the religion to explain things that happen in their lives is related to the concepts of destiny, predestination, and God's will that North Africans and people of Muslim descents, believers or not, rely heavily on. Although they do not understand it completely, it has always been their way to cope with all the things they believe that they cannot control. It shows both an ignorance of their religion, and also an intellectual and social laziness from their sides, because in Islam, it is explained that humans are created with free will, and that God gave them two paths to choose from: that of good and that of evil. In the Quran, the main and first source of the teachings of Islam, in Surat Al Balad, it is clarified: "And have shown him the two ways" (90:10). So, good Muslims should believe in free will in their actions and their consequences, and not blame it on predestination. The Scholar Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari explains this concept in greater

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depth: "Their exercise of free will is part of the chain of causality that leads to their acts, and it is men themselves who decide to do either good or bad deeds" ("God's Attribute: Lesson Eighteen"). He adds: "Our ability to choose freely whether to perform good or evil deeds arises from our freely exercised capacity of discernment. Man's being and the natural effects of his acts are, indeed, subject to God's will, but his volitional acts arise from his own will" (Lesson Nineteen). Therefore, Bouzid's answer to his son reveals his ignorance of this concept, which proves that his knowledge of Islam, and that of the other Maghrebi immigrants, is not academic.

In another moment of the novel, trying to explain the reason behind his son's success, Bouzid states:

> - Tu vois mon fils…Dieu est au-dessus de tout. Allah guide notre mektoub à nous tous, à moi, à toi, à ton broufissour binoir…
> J'ai souri légèrement.
> - Faut pas rire de ça, mon fils.
> - Je ris pas, Abboué.
> - Tu crois que c'est par hasard si toi, un Arabe, tu es plus fort que tout les Français de l'école? Et ton broufissour! Qui c'est qui lui a appris à écrire Allah dans notre langue?
> - Il a appris tout seul, Abboué!
> Alors là, Bouzid a pris son air le plus grave pour conclure:
> -Non, mon fils. Allah. C'est Allah qui nous mène. Personne d'autre. (226)

This is the first moment in the novel during which Bouzid gives a religious lesson to a member of his family. Yet, instead of bringing him closer to his son, this lesson builds a small gap between them. Obviously the educated son does not believe in his father's explanation, because it does not make sense. The son knows that his pied-noir professor learned Arabic when he was in school in Algeria, and that it is not "Allah" who taught him to speak it and write it. Therefore, Azouz, the smart child, begins to use this lesson against his father every time he wanted something, linking his future actions and his will to predestination in the same way his father explained to him. For example, he challenges his father, using this excuse to break the prohibition of watching television:

> - Où tu vas? a demandé Bouzid
> - Je vais manger en regardant la télévision, ai-je répondu, sûr de moi.
>   Bouzid a tenté de protester, mais j'ai aussitôt coupé court à son intervention.
> - C'est Allah qui guide ma main. (Le gone 227)

Azouz knows that his father cannot deny this, i.e. God's will in his action, because he has just finished explaining this concept to him. With such a spontaneous innocent explanation, the father and many Maghrebi immigrants like him distance their children from them and from Islam. They cannot teach them the religion and they cannot explain even the simple concepts related to it, so their children's attachment to it grows weak. This can explain the absence of Islam as a religion from the Beur novels of the eighties and early nineties. Indeed, in the novel, when Azouz challenges his father, the latter suggests: "Tu devrais aller à l'école coranique les samedis matin…" (226). This can be understood as an invitation from the father to his son not only to learn about the religion, but also to understand his father's way of reasoning and his source of wisdom. Yet the son resists again: "Alors là, je me suis rebellé: Ah non, Abboué, j'ai déjà assez de travail à l'école…" (226). Azouz refuses to go to this religious school because of being busy with his school, which he considers more important since he knows that it will grant him a bright future in France. It has already granted him a good position in his current school, a position better than that of the other children of the Châaba, who are struggling there, and even a position better than the French in his class. Azouz and his like do not see Islam as part of their identity because, as explained earlier, they do not practice it as a religion, nor do their parents practice it in front of them as a religion. Subsequently, the father does not insist on sending Azouz to Sunday school, nor does he resist his son's refusal. He does not have an academic understanding of Islam, so he does not see the need to give one to his son. Nowhere in these two novels is Islam discussed as a religious practice; it is brought up as a cultural source for certain codes and behaviors. That is why for them, the children at least, Islam does not necessarily constitute part of their identity. Vassberg explains that this attitude continues even nowadays among the young generation of Maghrebi immigrants : "pour les jeunes, l'Islam est le plus souvent 'une référence culturelle ou éthique, relativement détachée des contraintes de la pratique'" (712). This explains the alienation of Islam as a religion from these two Beur novels.

In Leïla Marouane's more recent novel, Islam is present from the beginning in the title—*La vie sexuelle d'un islamiste à Paris*—a title that catches the attention of readers from the west and the east in the same way. By choosing to grant the noun "Islamiste" to her main character, Marouane indicates that his struggle is

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related to his religious choice. This shift from being merely a tradition to being practiced as a religion is due to the increasing interest of the presence of Islam in Europe and the Western world in general, and in France in particular, especially after the 9/11 attacks on the USA. Marouane presents to her reader a middle-aged North African who came to France as a two year old with his mother to join his working father who could not save enough money to buy a house in Algeria and so return there definitely to live with his family. Mohamed Mokhtar is the original name of this novel's character, which starts it by breaking up with the norms of his North African culture after accepting it for forty years. Finally Mohamed is ready to move out of his parents' house and live on his own, like any regular French man. Breaking this rule marks the starting point for the breaking of many other rules, especially the religious ones, he who has been a devout and a very strict practicing Muslim. He describes himself as a Beur who is religiously trained:

> J'étais le bon musulman, le gentil islamiste—aujourd'hui on dirait "intégriste" ou "terroriste"; respecté et consulté par tout le quartier. A telle enseigne qu'on me sollicitait pour guider une prière, déclamer un prêche, ou me prononcer sur des questions aussi simples que compliquées. (*La vie sexuelle d'un Islamiste* 26)

Mohamed Mokhtar's identity changes from one period to another, not only for him but also for the community in which he lives. He used to be the person his community seeks for religious advice because of his knowledge, while now he is viewed as a nuisance and a source of trouble among them. This might be one of the reasons for which he is now detaching himself from this identity and adopting a different lifestyle. Mohamed, who tells the readers that he is very well educated religiously thanks to his grandfather who taught him all the doctrines and rules of the religion, exiles himself from his community and then exiles Islam from his new life. Mahmoud, his youngest brother, brags to him, to their brother-in-law:

> Mohamed est très calé en religion. Il maîtrise les règles et les dogmes peut-être aussi bien que l'imam el-Ghazali lui-même. Il le doit à notre grand-père… Mohamed est le seul d'entre nous qui a eu la chance de profiter des connaissance de notre grand-père, de fréquenter une madersa, de lire et d'écrire l'arabe comme un sortant de la Zitouna. (137)

Knowledge of his religion grants him an elevated status in his entourage in Saint-Ouen and makes of him the pride of the whole family.

Nevertheless, comparing Mohamed to el Ghazali is huge; the latter is a highly respected Imam and scholar in the Muslim world. "al-Ghazali received the best Islamic education available in his time…He mastered law, theology, and philosophy" (*Islam the Straight Path* 127). His teachings and interpretations are still studied, taught, and taken in consideration when trying to explain or to understand the theological dogma of Islam. Indeed, "Because of his profound knowledge he was called "*Hujjat al-Islam*" and "*Zauniddin*" which mean the evidence of Islam's being truth" (Samil). Imam el-Ghazali was a purist who fought to revive the understanding of Islam based mainly on the Quran and Hadiths at a time, the fifth century of Islamic calendar, in which the spread of philosophy reached Muslim scholars in their interpretation of the literature of this religion. He stood up against this Western "invasion" in Islam. Samil states: "Imam Ghazali prevented all invalid dangerous thoughts…from spreading all around the Muslim World and blocked all beliefs and thoughts which are against the Qur'an with books that he wrote and thousands of students that he trained." Comparing Mohamed Mokhtar to el-Ghazali is very metaphorical. He should be as puritanical as this scholar and as protective of his religion as his idol. This information about Mohamed's religious knowledge and the moments during which he shows off and shares this mastery of Islam are also the tool that Marouane uses to shock her readers, especially of Muslim and North African background, who witness a dramatic change of this character. It is shocking because usually a change in the opposite direction happens, especially if the person is not suffering financial, educational or social crisis.

From the description of how Mohamed used to be, Leïla Marouane reveals how the meaning of things changes from one period to another. Before the attacks committed in different parts of the Western world, Muslims who behave and act like Mohamed were respected and were considered the model of their culture, but after the attacks, they are feared and classified as the frightening other. Marouane demonstrates that by changing the definition of things a whole category of people have been exiled in France, mainly among the Muslim immigrants. Indeed, Marouane notes this through the words of Mohamed's mother when she opposes his suggestion that his brother should go with her to do the weekly shopping: "Ton frère ne va tout de même pas traîner en tenue afghane sur le marché de Saint-Denis et se faire arrêter comme un vulgaire terroriste" (115). This statement shows the alienation that Muslims go through in France, even if they have French nationality. Mahmoud, the youngest brother, was born and raised in Saint-Ouen. He has never left France, and he does not speak Arabic fluently, yet he fears being himself in public because of the racism exerted against citizens like him. These people live in a religious exile in addition to their ethnic exile.

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Truly, France made it difficult for such a group of people to live calmly within its territories. It put many restrictions on “the proper” way to dress publically, suffocating its citizens who belong to this religion. For instance, it banned such outfits in workplaces, and also it banned covering the hair and the face for Muslim women even in schools, which has created a debate in French society about the necessity of such measures in a land that acknowledges freedom of beliefs and freedom of expression. Bell states: “In recent years, the most ferocious debates over French identity have not concerned immigrant groups, per se, but Islam, and particularly the wearing of headscarves by Muslim girls in the public schools, which the French state has banned” (2). This debate does not only alienate Islam as a religion in France, it also demonstrates a direct discrimination exercised on a regular basis on this community of people, a discrimination that spreads fear and distrust on both sides of French society. These immigrants no longer believe in the idea of the existence of a tolerant France, a republic that accepts all ethnicities and religions as normal components of its diverse society, nor do the “typical” French accept this community as safe and trustworthy. It is a debate that causes frustration from both sides, and that is why it has elicited a literary reaction from writers of North African origins, who try, through their works, to study the reasons behind this alienation. In this novel, Marouane criticizes the radicalism of some members of her community, not through Mohamed, the main character, but through his youngest brother, Mahmoud, who despite his weak knowledge of Islam tries to fit in through a dress code. It is Mahmoud’s way of covering his weakness publically, a weakness that he acknowledges in front of his brother and his brother-in-law.[1] Unquestionably, the adjective “afghane” that Marouane uses to describe the outfit shows her disagreement with the use of this type of clothes as proof of being a good Muslim. This adjective shows that this outfit is not originally religious; on the contrary it is ethnic. Yet because of certain political and militant fundamentalist groups, specifically the Qaeda and Taliban who have their base in Afghanistan, this outfit became associated with the supposedly puritanical Muslims who call for cutting with the west to purify the soul starting with the way to dress. Indeed, never in the history of Islam was this religion related to a dress code, nor does it dictate in its sacred book a designated type of clothing. Since its revelation to Mohamed (Pbuh) in 610 B.C. in Mecca to its spread in the following centuries, Islam has embraced the traditions and dress type of the places it has reached. Hence, a Muslim in the Arabic peninsula dresses differently from a Muslim in Indonesia or a Muslim in Turkey. The only thing that Islam asked for is modesty. It is only nowadays that we see a specific type of clothes, the Afghan style, associated with the image of the Muslim model. This trend reduces most of the religion to materialistic practices, forgetting that authenticity lies in following the prophet’s morals and high ethics and those of the other messengers, not his dress code and hair style. In fact, the majority of this group are not very well educated and do not master the religion very well. They hold on to the secondary things at the expense of the essentials of this religion. Definitely, following the way the prophet looked or dressed has nothing to do with the principals of the religion; his style reflects the style of his times and not of Islam. Certainly, even non-Muslims had long beards and long hair, as it was the norm in those days.

Fundamentalists are usually from the less fortunate members of their community. They are the jobless and the less educated category, and they are presented as such in the novels under study. They represent an easy target for fundamentalist religious groups, because of all the psychological issues that discrimination and unemployment have imprinted in their lives. Mahmoud belongs to this category. He says: “Le chômage me sera finalement un mal pour un bien” (138). Mahmoud, then, like many others of his age and race, is unemployed, not because he does not have the necessary education, but because of his ethnicity, of his “frisettes et sa barbichette” (98), as his brother Mohamed explains. About this David Bell writes: “Islamist radicalism can gain a foothold in Europe. And it is hard to see better candidates for religious radicalization than the alienated young people of the French suburbs, dismissed as ‘immigrants’ in the land of their own birth” (5). These young people are suffering from racism and social exile in the only land they know; for this they find refuge in religion—the only identity that gathers them without taking into consideration their ethnicity or their countries of origin. Islam for this group of people is a way to exist, not simply a religion, it is a path to regain or acquire an identity, a meaning to their lives, something that they never had; and the radical groups play on the alienation of these youths to gain more support, and to control them like puppets.

Then, using irony, Leïla Marouane criticizes the fundamentalists’ interpretation of some verses of the Quran. In a family gathering during which Mahmoud is giving a religious lesson to Mohamed and their newly converted brother-in-law, Alain “alias Ali,” Mohamed tells the readers that the subject of the promised seventy “houris” did not interest him anymore because:

[1] He admits to his newly converted brother-in-law: “Je suis encore jeune et Allah m’aidera à me maintenir, inchallah, sur le droit chemin…J’ai tout le temps de lire et d’approfondir mes connaissances, et un jour je pourrai entrer dans une grande école islamique, à Damas ou au Caire. Inchallah” (138).

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> Par solidarité à ma mère à mes sœurs à toutes les pieuses de la terre qui, elles, ne bénéficieraient pas de l'équivalent des soixante-dix houris. Qui se contenteraient de ce qui aurait été leur mari. Et si ce dernier n'est pas admis dans les Jardins, eh bien, qu'elles soient rassurées, affirme le Livre, elles seront remariées à un Elu.
>
> En se joignant à un élu, qu'il eût été le mari sur terre ou un autre choisi pour elles dans les recoins du Paradis, cela signifie que ces femmes, ces soumises à Allah et à ces hommes, partageaient leur époux avec les soixante-dix houris. Ce qui, au final serait une nouvelle forme de polygamie, encore plus contraignante et plus injuste que celle établie sur terre. D'abord par le nombre de coépouses. Ensuite par leurs qualités esthétiques, avec lesquelles, une Terrienne, la plus belle des belles, ne pourrait en aucun cas concourir … (133-134).

Through the words of Mohamed, the former fundamentalist, Marouane mocks the way with which radicals interpret the Quran—calling for a literal interpretation of its words, refusing to accept that every word conveys a connotative meaning as well. William Chittick explains this concept as such: "Il n'y a pas de verset du Coran qui n'ait un sens manifeste (zahr), un sens caché (batn), une limite (hadd), et un lieu d'où l'on puisse s'élever (muttala')" (363). So, Muslims should take into consideration all these factors when interpreting Islam, and obviously this group of radicals relies only on the "zahr" in their reading of the Quran. Marouane also criticizes the way in which the fundamentalists see the position of females in the afterlife. Obviously, they consider them second-class citizens, inferior to men, even in heaven despite their chastity and piety. They are also in heaven to please men, not because they were pious. They put them in a position similar to what they are experiencing on earth: serving the males in their community. Based on this, any reader understands that heaven is just like earth for Muslim females. In fact, it is more stressful, since they enter into a competition with the "houris," the females from heaven.

To convey such an idea, Marouane relies on humor. So, through the use of humor Marouane criticizes this understanding of the sacred text, and ridicules the unjust fundamentalists' interpretation. About this use of humor Hargreaves explains: "Humor…is an ideal vehicle for immigrant youths struggling to reconcile their often conflicting cultural heritage" ("Beur Fiction" 663). Through humor, Marouane exposes not only the struggles that female Muslims have to go through to prove themselves equal to males, but also the existential struggles that her character Mohamed is experiencing in his phase of changing identity. As a matter of fact, right after this moment, Mohamed questions the sincerity of his brother-in-law's conversion, exclaiming: "Et si Alain alias Ali n'était venu à l'islam que pour la chair et le stupre promis par le Livre? Et si, malgré ses airs d'ange, ce jeune homme désormais délesté de son prépuce n'était qu'un pervers sexuel?" (134). Mohamed's doubt about the new affiliation of Alain is metaphorical. It reflects his own situation. Through him he is questioning the fundamentalists' attachment to the religion and to the literal understanding of the book. It is for materialistic reasons that they hold on to their chastity in this life. This is very ironic also because Mohamed quits Islam for the motives that he thinks Alain converted to Islam: to seek sexual freedom. He is the one who should be described as "un pervers sexuel." Mohamed moves to his own apartment in Paris, far from his mother and his brother, to be able to meet with females, as he affirms: "Ici. Là…Ainsi et plus tôt que prévu, mettrais-je un terme à ma chasteté" (53). Mohamed, the former "intégriste," is changing his life from a devout religious person to a French-like person to please his repressed desires, and to experience a world that is forbidden for him under the laws of his religion. He declares to the reader when he has signed the contract of his apartment:

> J'étais raide amoureux de mon logis. Mon superbe magnifique divin écrin. Où des perles de toutes beauté seraient par mes soins dorlotées/ choyées/bues/ mangées/ broutées/tournées et retournées/ dans tous les sens/ sous toutes les coutures/dans toutes les postures/ licites ou illicites/ divines ou diaboliques. (52)

Mohamed, who questions Alain's honesty in his conversion to Islam, is actually reflecting his personality, which he projects on his brother-in-law. Unquestionably, Alain was not denied this "indulgence" before being a Muslim. He got his share of "houris" in this world. Hence, converting to Islam was not "pour la chair et le stupre promis par le Livre" (134), as Mohamed thinks. This sarcasm that Marouane exploits does not only ridicule the radicals, their interpretation of Islam, and their views of women, it also demonstrates her loathing as an intellectual for the image they represent of this religion, an image contradictory to what we can find in the Quran. About this image Leila Ahmed states: "L'Islam des pouvoirs établis…articule un Islam différent du message éthique que le profane entend ou lit légitiment dans le Coran" (225). Their interpretation of Islam serves only their ideologies and their interests, power and control. So, through Mohamed's mind, Marouane critiques these radicals and their ways of thinking, which reflects her disagreement with their views on Islam and its core concepts.

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Marouane's novel was written recently, and she presents a different generation of Beurs.[2] Although at the beginning it looks like she wants to please the west with her novel *La vie sexuelle d'un Islamiste à Paris*, especially with all the humor that she uses to mock Mohamed, his brother, and their ideas and actions, she actually ends the novel celebrating Islam and Muslims. Marouane ends with a chapter in which she shows Mohamed and his brother praying and reciting the Quran together in the presence of their mother and Mahmoud's fiancée, in the same apartment that Mohamed bought in order to distance himself from this religion. Nonetheless, in an act of compassion, Mohamed gives a house that he bought to his brother, who is unable financially to afford one, so that he can finally marry his fiancée of four years. With this action, Marouane shows that Mohamed is nothing but a compassionate moderate Muslim who helps others and who cares about his family, this being the essence of being a good Muslim. Djebar states in *Women of Islam*: "pour le musulman, c'est la vie privée en famille qui est capitale" (cited in Bourget 66). Thus, in the last chapter of her novel Marouane presents Mohamed surrounded by his family.

Nevertheless, she directs more criticism to French society, condemning its racism when some of the invited pilgrims come disguised in "uniformes de pompier, leurs visages glabres, leurs bottes, leur regard embrassé" (312), instead of wearing the clothes intended for going to pilgrimage, because they fear prejudice in such a prestigious neighborhood of Paris. He says: "Mon frère m'a expliqué qu'ils n'avaient pas voulu prendre le risque de traverser Paris en tenue afghane, qu'on les aurait à coup sûr alpagués comme de vulgaires terroristes" (312). Marouane shows current French society its injustice towards a whole community, overgeneralizing and condemning the fate of a whole group based on the actions of a minority of radicals who do not represent no one but themselves. For this reason, Mohamed's family moves the party of welcoming the pilgrims to the house near "la mosque Jean-Pierre-Timbaud," in an immigrant neighborhood whose inhabitants will not judge these pilgrims because they know that it is the season to perform this pillar of Islam. As such, Marouane demonstrates that the French of Muslim roots are exiled in their land by being somehow restricted to some areas over others. Indeed, Mohamed's mother, although she is an educated female who speaks French properly, has never left her neighborhood of Saint-Ouen despite living in France for over twenty-two years, out of fear of discrimination. This also explains the urge that Mohamed feels to completely change his identity and his name for a considerable period of time. Unlike his brother, he understands that sticking to his culture and his religious beliefs will cause him more harm than benefits in a society that sees in him an alien, and a threat to her ideologies. He confesses:

> Je ne saurais situer le moment précis où ce reniement avait commencé ni par quel truchement il s'était installé. Sans doute dès le début de ma vie active, alors que j'ouvrais les yeux sur la ville, la vraie, alors que je découvrais la cité et ces arcanes, la cité et ses lumières. Ou bien plus tôt, à la mort de mon père et des révélations qui ont suivi sa mort. Je ne sais. (131)

Mohamed's impulse to change his affiliation begins when he embarks upon his active life and when he discovers Paris and its lifestyle. He says "la ville, la vraie," which implies that his confrontation with the city has unveiled its true spirit to him, a city that does not accept the other, a city that alienates even its own citizens if they do not fit into its norms. The use of the word "arcanes" reflects this truth. The revelations that he finds, about his father, who died broke, alienated, and alone in Algeria after spending his youth building this city, is another motive for changing his identity and adopting a new one that confirms with the model expected by this city. About the alienation of North Africans, Amelia Lyons explains:

> The racial, cultural, and religious differences of North Africans…were considered 'immutable.' Thus their presence in France could be tolerated inasmuch as they constituted productive temporary additions to a depleted workforce, but workers from the colonies were not afforded access to services that encouraged them to settle in France. The possibility of procreation was considered a threat to Western hegemony. (495)

Islam was and still is among the main reasons for which these immigrants remain exiled in their host land. This is clear in the laws that the west keeps implementing in its societies such as banning the veil and the niqab—full covering of the face—in France, and limiting the number of mosques and banning the Minaret in Switzerland as recently as 2009.[3] Beur and North African writers, in general, have not written yet on such a

[2] Amel Boubekeur has written an interesting and very informative article about this generation and their relation with Islam entitled "Islam militant et nouvelles formes de mobilisation culturelle." It explains the change in the way in which different schools and movements tried to engage Muslims born in France to relate to their Islamic heritage and to be proud of it.

[3] Alan Fisher reports to al Jazeera News that "Voters in Switzerland have approved a ban on the construction of minarets on mosques, official results show. Of those who cast votes in Sunday's poll, 57.5

metaphorical social exile. They have not written on the sufferings of Muslims, whether immigrants or Beur, in the western societies in which they live. Beur literature did its part in reporting the social problem and the problem of adjustment to the norms of the host land, but more talk is necessary about the religious hardship that this community faced and still faces, especially because Beur themselves were religiously exiled and marginalized for long a while in the only land they know. Writers of North African roots have yet to bring into light the religious discrimination under which their community lives nowadays.

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per cent approved the ban, while only four cantons out of 26 rejected the proposals. The result paves the way for a constitutional amendment to be made. Supporters of the ban say minarets represent the growth of an alien ideology and legal system that have no place in the Swiss democracy" ("Minaret Ban").

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