Inscribing a Maghrebian Identity in French

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From Maghrebian Mosaic: A Literature in Transition, edited by Mildred Mortimer.

Introduction

In Le Blanc Algérie (1995) Assia Djebar pays tribute to well-known writers who lived in Algeria, among them Frantz Fanon, Albert Camus, Jean Sénac, Mouloud Feraoun, Mouloud Mammeri, and Kateb Yacine. The book is dedicated to the memory of three distinguished Algerians, Mahfoud Boucebci, M'Hamed Boukhoubza, and Abdelkader Alloula. Boucebci, a psychiatrist, and Boukhoubza, a sociologist, were assassinated in 1993. Alloula, a playwright, was killed in 1994. Victims of religious fundamentalists, they died in what Djebar describes as " la ténèbre de luttes fratricides " [the darkness of fratricidal struggles] (Vaste est la prison, 345) . What is particularly striking about Le Blanc Algérie is Djebar's constant reference to the varieties of Arabic she hears spoken. She distinguishes between " un arabe littéraire d'élégance, de beauté " [a literary Arabic of elegance and beauty] that creates in her " une nostalgie ... de cette langue maternelle que je n'écris pas, langue étincelant devant moi telle une fugitive en robe diamentée de poésie !" [a nostalgia for this mother tongue which I do not write, a language sparkling in front of me like a fugitive in a dress studded with diamonds of poetry!] (32) and the institutionally imposed, stilted Arabic " dit moderne, qu'on enseigne à la jeunesse sous le terme pompeux de 'langue maternelle' " [so-called modern, which they teach to the young under the pompous title of "mother tongue"] (273) . She describes the language spoken by Abdelkader Alloula as an " oranais " type of Arabic with a rural flavor (47), whereas the concierge who witnessed the execution of Mouloud Feraoun gave his testimony in a heavy southern Algerian dialect (115) . As far as French is concerned, she simply refers to it as " langue de travail " [the language of work] (39) .

For Djebar, as for many other fellow Maghrebians, French is a functional language used in writing as well as in intercommunal discourse. Being globally more accessible than Arabic, it has allowed Maghrebian francophone writers to acquire a wide international readership. Yet, according to Djebar, francophone writers do not live in a world of " monolinguisme stérilisant " [sterile monolinguism] (274) . Kateb Yacine, for instance, " est d'emblée entre deux langues: son écriture française côtoyant l'arabe maternel " [is between two languages, his written French running alongside his Arabic mother tongue] (180) . Most francophone writers, moreover, live in an atmosphere that encompasses more than just Arabic and French. They are usually surrounded by different native and nonnative languages mingling with each other. In her tribute to Taos

Amrouche, who grew up in Tunisia, Djebar says: " Taos baigne dès le début dans un bain de langues: celles de la rue, l'italien, le sicilien, l'arabe dialectal tunisois, celle de l'école, le français, bien sûr, qu' elle lit et qu'elle écrit, enfin celle de l'exil et du secret familial, le berbère kabyle " [Taos has bathed from the start in a bath of languages: those of the street, Italian, Sicilian, the dialectal Arabic of Tunis, the language of school, French, of course, which she reads and writes, and finally the language of exile and of family secrets, Kabyle Berber] (202) .

Ever since Maghrebian francophone literature made its mark internationally almost half a century ago, debate and controversy have revolved around the type of language used by writers from the Maghreb. French continues to be the main medium of expression of a large number of Maghrebian writers. In their hands it becomes a flexible tool, unlike literary Arabic with its rigid grammatical rules and strictures, which many French-educated people from the Maghreb have yet to master. Most francophone writers, however, tend to breathe a new life into standard French by honing it and shaping it to approximate their own mother tongue varieties. In their efforts to give their writing a distinctly Maghrebian identity, writers resort to using Arabic or Berber words and expressions or changing the word order of a sentence to resemble Arabic syntax. This practice seems to have been begun by some of the first francophone writers and has continued until the present. In a number of works by Beur writers born in France, it is not unusual to come across Arabic or Berber terms and expressions, even whole sentences in the mother tongue.

In several of her works, Djebar frequently introduces Arabic words, sometimes replacing a French term with what she feels is a more apt Arabic one. In Le Blanc Algérie, for example, she refers to those Algerians who have lost their lives as chahids (martyrs) and chouhadas, the latter term being the Arabic plural form. Djebar calls Algerian writers abtals (heroes, 122) . There are also a number of Arabic terms in L'Amour, la fantasia (1985), Ombre sultane (1987), and Vaste est la prison (1995), the first three volumes of her Algerian Quartet. [1] In Loin de Medine she delves into the annals of classical Arabic literature. Deriving the factual material from the work of the Arab historian Al-Tabari (c. 836-923), Djebar recreates in French the Arabo-Islamic milieu of the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his successor the Caliph Abu Bakr (c. 573-634). In Vaste est la prison she celebrates the Berber language, " cette langue, celle de Jugurtha " [that language, Jugurtha's] (145), the ancestral language of Algeria, with its varieties, including Touareg, which has a distinct script carved into stone and immortalized for posterity. There are times, however, when Djebar simply refers to an Arabic or Berber term in French translation, without mentioning it, as when she says in a poem, " L'oeil qui dans la langue de nos femmes, est fontaine " [The (word) eye that in the language of our women means fountain (also)] (347), because in Arabic 'ayn or 'ain can mean both "eye" and "water source" or "fountain." Djebar occasionally explains the meaning of a name, as, for example, in L'Amour, la fantasia, where she says that the male name Tahar signifies " le pur " [the pure] (47), while the female name Badra means " lune pleine " [full moon] (98) . In Vaste est la prison she says that Aïchoucha means " petite vie " [little life] (272), and in Ombre sultane she claims that the names of the two central characters, Hajila and Isma, mean " petite caille " [little quail] and " nom " [name] (16), respectively. [2]

Apart from being a more flexible language than standard Arabic, French is also a medium in which writers can express themselves more freely than in their mother tongue. That is because, according to Mildred Mortimer, "Islamic culture is bound to the non-dire, or unspoken, in other words, to silence; it prohibits personal disclosure" (103) . In a review of Djebar's L'Amour, la fantasia that appeared in Le Monde (May 10, 1985), Tahar Ben Jelloun says that writing in French, Djebar has been able "to unveil." Francophone authors do not feel restricted when dealing with taboo subjects or political issues criticizing the status quo, especially if their works are published in France. Those authors, both men and women, who write in French for the home market tend to toe the line and write material that the authorities deem suitable. Many of the novels and collections of short stories published in Algeria since independence provide a

good example of this self-imposed censorship.

That writers feel more liberated when writing works for an international rather than a national readership is evident in the works of the late Rachid Mimouni. His first novel, Le Printemps n'en sera que plus beau, published in Algeria in 1978 and glorifying the Algerian national struggle (1954-1962), is a far cry from the daring exposés angrily voiced in some of his later novels, including Le Fleuve détourné (1982), Tombéza (1984), and Une Peine à vivre (1991), showing his disenchantment with postindependence Algeria. The ability to express feelings more freely in French is also apparent in the works of bilingual authors. When Amin Zaoui lived in Algeria, he wrote fictional works in Arabic. Since he moved to France in 1995 he has published two books in French. The first, Sommeil du mimosa (1998), comprises two novellas, the title story and Sonate des loups, dedicated to Rachid Mimouni. The second work is a novel titled La Soumission (1998). These francophone works, in which Zaoui depicts the traumatic times Algerians are enduring and condemns the atrocities that he has witnessed, might never have appeared in print had he tried to publish them in Algeria.

Perhaps the best-known bilingual writer from the Maghreb is Rachid Boudjedra, who began his literary career as a francophone poet and novelist in the late 1960s. Having written six novels in French, Boudjedra turned to writing in Arabic in 1981. By 2000 he had published six Arabic novels, each followed by its francophone version. Boudjedra's Arabic novels have been rendered into French, mostly by the author himself or in collaboration with Antoine Moussali, his Lebanese mentor. 3 In nearly all his novels and especially his Arabic ones, autobiography, fiction, and fantasy are almost indistinguishable. It is this fact/fiction/fantasy thematic structure that gives Boudjedra's works their distinctive dynamism. His francophone novels stand out as individual creations, since their themes and plots are unconnected. His Arabic novels, however, characterized by the same events and people reappearing in each one of them, give the impression of being a cohesive whole. It is as if the author were weaving a large web linking together the various strands of his works. In an interview in the Algerian newspaper El Moudjahid (November 11, 1984), Boudjedra stated that all the subjects of his novels were the usual themes of life with its twists and complexity (" tous les sujets de mes romans ... sont ... les thèmes habituels de la vie ... avec ses méandres, sa complexité ").

Boudjedra's novels define his own cultural position as a man of two worlds. He seems to have access to and firsthand knowledge of a Franco-European universe, while at the same time celebrating his own Algerianness and his Arabo-Islamic roots. His pride in his cultural heritage injects into his works a deep emotional quality full of lyrical imagery. Having juggled with French syntax and lexis for more than a decade, Boudjedra came to Arabic as a mature and confident writer. Not afraid of taking liberties with the sometimes rigidly structured and rhetoric-ridden Arabic language, he began by coining new words and concepts novel to Arab experience. Throughout his Arabic works he shows an almost unique mastery in twisting words into far-reaching nuances and drawing on the different sounds of Arabic phonology to create the images he wants. Harshness and brutality are effected by using gutturals and back vowels and melancholia and tragedy by soft consonants and long vowels, which creates a dirgelike effect. Monotony is evoked by using a continuous string of syllables with short vowels.

The two versions of each Boudjedra novel are a good example of how a Maghrebian author divided between two conflicting worlds--the Arabo-Muslim and the Franco-European--can direct each text at a specific group of readers. If one were to take a close look at the French versions of his Arabic novels, one would find that there are whole sections in French that do not occur in Arabic and vice versa. Dialogue in Arabic tends to be longer. It is frequently reproduced in colloquial Algerian Arabic and occurs as direct speech. In French the corresponding sections are usually shorter and are often rendered as indirect speech. Family matters are given in detail in Arabic but not in French. For example, in the Arabic text of La Prise de Gibraltar the narrator says that his

Uncle Hocine divorced his wife, Warda, six months after he married her (13) . In the French version there is no mention of any names, and the narrator merely says that his uncle divorced his wife a few days after marrying her (25) .

Another difference between the two versions is that names of well-known Europeans--André Gide, Henri Matisse, Vincent Van Gogh--and titles in French are usually omitted in the Arabic. The French texts abound in such expressions as ce putain de livre, ce salaud de père, and mon oncle le bougre [this bitch of a book, this swine of a father, my uncle the rascal] . In Arabic the "offensive" word is omitted. References to drinking alcohol and getting drunk in the francophone versions are often left out in the Arabic. Popular Arabic sayings and ditties are not mentioned in the French versions. In La Prise de Gibraltar (1987), for example, the narrator merely asks, " Comment traduire un tel arabisme ?" [How does one translate such an Arabic expression?] (25) .

Rhetorical questions and irony that have been introduced into the French versions are not found in the Arabic texts. The fluctuations of anger and fun lacking in the Arabic give the French versions a feeling of intimacy and confidentiality. It is as if the author, through his narrator, were interacting with his peers, siblings, or equals. The formality and politeness that characterize the Arabic texts create a feeling of aloofness and respect. Here it seems as if the narrator were addressing people he is in awe of. Most of the Arabic texts include anticolonial statements uttered with nationalist fervor. The words colonialist or imperialist, repeated in Arabic, are omitted in the French versions. Feelings of love or hatred are more freely expressed in French. Although Boudjedra is considered to be fairly outspoken when writing about matters relating to sex, he nevertheless appears to be more reserved in Arabic. In La Pluie, for instance, there is a lengthy description of the central character's aunt's lesbian affair that is not mentioned in the Arabic original.

It was in his second francophone novel, L'Insolation, that Boudjedra first introduced readers of French to Arabic writing when he reproduced three short passages in handwritten Arabic script, including a short stanza in Algerian Arabic chanted by a blind storyteller who accompanies himself on the tambourine (156) and a verse in literary Arabic attributed by the author to a certain " Omar, le fou " [Omar the mad] (151) . In later francophone novels, Boudjedra began to assert his cultural heritage by referring to notable people from Islamic history and writers from the golden age of medieval Arabic literature, followed by a few words of explanation for French readers. In his Arabic novels, however, quotations from the works of well-known Arab writers are sometimes cited without the authors' names being mentioned. It is as if the author, in his French texts, wants to assert his Maghrebian-Arab identity to a francophone readership, whereas in his Arabic works he feels he does not need to do that.

Like Boudjedra, Tahar Ben Jelloun also introduces selections of handwritten Arabic verse in his novel La Prière de l'absent (1981), a work strongly influenced by the oral heritage of Morocco. This novel, together with Ben Jelloun's other works, including L'Enfant de sable (1985) and its sequel, the 1987 Prix Goncourt winner La Nuit sacrée, have been inspired by Maghrebian oral fables, poems, anecdotes, and proverbs. In the former novel, the word sable (sand), besides symbolizing dearth and barrenness, evokes the Maghreb with its vast expanses of desert. The title of the latter novel implies the "holy night" from the twenty-sixth to twenty-seventh night of the month of Ramadan, on which the Qu'ran was revealed. Ben Jelloun uses it to refer to the night on which the father reveals to Ahmed, the " enfant de sable," who is a girl raised as a male, the story of her birth and upbringing. La Prière de l'absent also has an Islamic significance. It refers to the prayer for all those who died without their bodies being found and buried in consecrated ground. One of the selections of verse in Arabic script that Ben Jelloun includes is by the tenth-century Sufi mystic Al-Hallaj, an "absent" who was imprisoned in Baghdad in 922, tortured, crucified, decapitated, and eventually burned and his ashes scattered in the Tigris (193) . Ben Jelloun goes on to say, " mais sa voix ne cesse de traverser les siècles et les

déserts " [but his voice continues to travel across centuries and deserts] (194) . Apart from verses from Al-Hallaj's ode, Ben Jelloun has also reproduced short snippets in Arabic script, among them Islamic incantations and anticolonial, nationalist slogans.

Feelings of pride in one's origins and culture can also be found in pre-independence francophone writing. They can be traced back to 1920, when Mohamed Ben Chérif's novel Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier, considered to be the first example of francophone fiction by a Maghrebian, was published. Critics do not seem to give this work its due, dismissing it together with other fictional works that appeared between 1920 and 1950 as being of little literary merit. In his Littérature maghrébine de langue française, Jean Déjeux refers to Ben Chérif's novel and other pre-1950 works as didactic and full of ethnographic and folkloric detail, describing events from the point of view of the colonizer (20) . In La littérature algérienne contemporaine (1975), Déjeux goes on to say that pre-1950 novels are mediocre: " Il s'agit de montrer qu'on est capable d'écrire en bon français sans faire de faute de syntaxe " [They merely amount to showing that (their authors) are capable. of writing in good French without making syntactic errors] (61) . This may be true of some works that are now out of print. But to dismiss Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier as a "moralizing" work whose author is intent on currying favor with the French is to do Ben Chérif a great injustice. It is only recently, in 1997 to be precise, that this novel was reprinted, with an introduction by Ahmed Lanasri. Thanks to Lanasri, present-day readers can now form their own opinion of Ben Chérif's autobiographical work.

One should not forget that during the early decades of the twentieth century, it was very difficult for Algerians to express openly anticolonial feelings. In Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier, a first-person narrative, the author, an Algerian of the Ould Si M'Hamed clan who joined the French army in 1899, is striving for a kind of modus vivendi in which the two cultures, the French and the Algerian, can coexist peacefully. Although Ben Chérif seems to be resigned to the fact that he and his fellow Algerians are ruled by the French, at times he expresses feelings of utter dissatisfaction. Drafted into the French army, the central character, Ben Mostapha, is sent with a contingent to Morocco to quell a nationalist uprising. When a Moroccan shows him his travel permit, Ben Mostapha exclaims: " Tu as besoin de ce papier pour circuler dans ton propre pays ?" [Do you need this paper to move about (freely) in your own country?] (67) . Ben Mostapha mentions with pride the Algerian nationalist leader, Emir Abdelkader (1808-1883), who led an uprising against the French colonial powers.

Despite the fact that Ben Chérif's central character seems to have studied French history and literature, which he admires, he is equally well versed in his own cultural heritage, language, and history. He is proud of being of nomadic descent, glorying in the way of life of the desert. He shows his love for Arabic literature by quoting lines from classical odes and recalling the names of pre-Islamic Arabian bards. Ben Chérif depicts Ben Mostapha's French commanding officer as someone who also speaks fluent Arabic and has great respect for Islam and Arabic literature. Like the texts of later francophone writers, including Djebar, Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier is a novel full of Algerian and standard Arabic terms and sentences. Among the Arabic words the author uses are some that occur in contemporary texts, such as calam, "pen" (27) ; cheitan, "the devil" (60) ; Nasrani, "Christian" (65) ; djerad, "locusts" (80) ; kholkhal, "anklet" (126) ; and aman, "safety, security" (123) . The words ouatan (homeland, referring to Algeria) and Moujahedines (those who die in a Islamic holy war) are used more than once. In later years these two terms came to acquire strong nationalist, anticolonial dimensions, with the latter being applied predominantly to those Algerians who took part in the war of independence (1954-1962).

Descriptions of a nomadic life in the Algerian desert also characterize works published in the 1990s, including Malika Mokeddem's first two novels, Les Hommes qui marchent (1990) and Le Siècle des sauterelles (1992). Some of the Arabic words used by Ben Chérif, including kholkhal and djerad, occur also in

Mokeddem's texts. Mokeddem's second novel, which includes the French word for locusts in the title, describes a once relatively peaceful country ravaged by marauding locusts. The setting of the novel is the vast expanses of the southern Algerian desert where Mokeddem herself grew up. In her first novel, Les Hommes qui marchent, also set in the desert, Mokeddem presents her readers with two female characters, Zohra, an old, illiterate nomad, and her educated granddaughter Leïla, who later leaves her nomadic existence and goes to France, where she studies medicine, which is in fact what Mokeddem herself did. The events of both novels take place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during the colonial period, which Mokeddem calls, in Les Hommes qui marchent, Algeria's " longue fièvre française " [long French fever] (266) . Mokeddem, like other fellow francophone writers, introduces characters from classical Arabic literature and Maghrebian legend into her texts. She constantly refers to her nomadic existence and Arab heritage, stressing the point that her Algerian experiences are an integral part of the Arab way of life.

More than the works of any other francophone author to date, Mokeddem's first two novels are interspersed with a large number of Arabic terms, for which she provides glossaries at the end of each work. In her later novels, where Arabic terms are reduced to a minimum, she gives their meaning in footnotes. Mokeddem's sound knowledge of Arabic is evident throughout her works. In Des Rêves et des assassins (1995), she describes in detail the imaginative expressions Algerian women coin to describe types of material. The French-born Slim, one of the characters in the novel, is baffled by all the colorful terms he hears. He exclaims: " Tout le cinéma et la fantaisie qui manquent à leur vie, ils les mettent dans les mots. Même pour désigner des tissus !" [All the drama and imagination which is missing from their lives, they put into words. Even in the names they give to fabrics!] (189) . 4 Mokeddem likes to give her characters names, which she invariably explains. In her latest novel, La Nuit de la lézarde (1998), for example, which is also set in the Algerian desert but in more recent times, one of her central characters is called Nour lumière [light] (12) . She also includes a female character called Dounia monde [world] (91) . She explains that the name Zbida, a shortened version of Zoubeida, means " petit beurre," a diminutive for butter (132) . Like Le Siècle des sauterelles, the title of this latest novel also includes the name of a creature that lives in the desert: the lizard. Names invariably give characters in francophone works a Maghrebian identity, and some writers tend to choose them carefully to convey certain meanings.

One of the first Maghrebian writers to choose a name to describe a character in a novel is Albert Memmi. In his first novel, La Statue de sel (1966), Memmi calls his central character Alexandre Mordecai Benillouche as proof of the different cultures that can sometimes constitute the makeup of one single Maghrebian individual. At the root is his Maghrebian Berber origin, indicated by the name Benillouche. Added to that is his Jewish middle name, Mordecai, pinpointing his Jewishness. Finally there is his superimposed Franco-European first name, Alexandre, given to him no doubt by parents who wanted him to have a foothold in the dominant French culture of preindependence Tunisia.

Names also play a significant role in the titles of novels by writers of Maghrebian origin in Europe. In Autour du roman beur (1993, 57-59), Michel Laronde mentions eight titles of Beur novels that bear the first name of the central character, among them Leïla Houari's Zeïda de nulle part (1985) and Ahmed Zitouni's Aimez-vous Brahim? (1986) and Attilah Fakir (1987). Laronde says that an Arabic name appearing in a title " parle l'identité et signifie l'arabité " [speaks of identity and signifies Arabness] (59) . Further on Laronde says that names in Beur novels have a symbolic function (88) . Houari must have chosen Zeïda as an appropriate name for someone who is de nulle part [from nowhere] . Houari, a young woman of Moroccan origin, was living in Belgium when her first novel, Zeïda de nulle part, was published. The work describes the two conflicting worlds of the central character, Zeïda, who, like Houari herself, does not feel at home among the host community. Houari's first language is Arabic, which created a barrier between her and the people in Belgium (Hargreaves, Voices, 17) . Zeïda, like Houari also, no longer feels at home in Morocco where

she was born, as she discovers on a visit to see her relatives. This results in her feeling unwanted in both countries and thus redundant. In fact, the name Zeïda means "extra," "additional," "appendage," "appendix (anat.)," and hence "superfluous and unwanted." It is the name sometimes given to yet another daughter born to a large family of mostly daughters when a son had been desired.

Ahmed Zitouni, whom Laronde includes among Beur writers, is older than the average Beur. Unlike the majority of Beur authors who grew up in Europe, he was born in Algeria in 1949 and went to France as an adult. The title of his second novel, Aimez-vous Brahim?, is almost a word-for-word reconstruction of Françoise Sagan's novel Aimez-vous Brahms?, where the names Brahms and Brahim have five letters in common. By simply substituting Brahim for Brahms, Zitouni immediately creates in the minds of his readers a Maghrebian setting that is a far cry from the world of Western music and culture evoked by Sagan's title.

Attilah Fakir is Zitouni's third novel. Here he also recreates a Maghrebian universe by introducing Arabic words and phrases into his text and referring to well-known writers, both classical and modern, the latter including Kateb Yacine. He bestows the title of Hadj (someone who has performed the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca) even on Western writers whom he admires, such as "Hadj Gogol," "Hadj Dostoïevski" (32), and "Hadj Rainer Maria Rilke," all of whom belong to " la grande confrérie des Hadj " [the big brotherhood of Hajjis] (38) . Zitouni's novel, as its title suggests, follows the events in the life of the eponymous central character, an Algerian immigrant living in Aix-en-Provence. He frequents the Royal Bar in Aix, where he encounters other immigrants like himself, all struggling to eke out a living despite poverty, deprivation, unemployment, and rampant racism. In colloquial Arabic Attilah means "handicapped," "destitute," "useless," or "unemployed," and Fakir in both standard and colloquial Arabic is the word for "poor." The title of this novel, therefore, describes the eponymous character and his fellow Maghrebian immigrants who are "unemployed" and "poor."

" Je suis un Arabe et je peux le prouver " [I am an Arab, and I can prove it] (107), shouts the central character of Azouz Begag's Le Gone du chaâba (1986) to taunts from his school friends that he is not an Arab. Begag, another Beur writer, chooses a title made up of gone, the local Lyonnais word for "lad," and chaâba, an Arabic term signifying "of the people," to pinpoint the Franco-Arab world of the first-person narrator of the novel, a young boy called Azouz, like the author himself. According to Samia Mehrez ("Azouz Begag," 34), "on the linguistic level the title attaches Azouz, the protagonist, to two symbolic worlds and two systems of signification, both of which are on the margins of two official discourses: literary French, and literary Arabic." The novel is semiautobiographical, charting Azouz's early years in Chaâba, the name given to the shantytown on the outskirts of Lyons where a large number of Maghrebians live. In a lighthearted way, Begag sets out to describe the misunderstandings that can occur when people from different cultural backgrounds have to communicate with each other. Paying attention to detail, he recreates the varieties of language used by the different people he encounters. He produces verbatim the words that his parents and their generation mispronounce when they try to speak French, like "rizou" for " raison " [reason], "l'bomba" for " pompe " [pump], and "filou" for " vélo " [bicycle] . He also mocks the way members of his community use Algerianized French words to refer to certain everyday objects, like "li zalimite" for " les allumettes " [matches], "la taumobile" for " l'automobile " [car], and "le chiffoun" for " le chiffon " [rag] (213) . The author provides an entertaining glossary of all these terms at the end of the book.

In subsequent works, Begag continues to explain to French readers what it means to be an Arab or an Algerian in France. In his two most recent novels, Zenzela (1997) and Dis Oualla! (1997), he continues the humorous strand that characterizes Le Gone du chaâba, using Algerian Arabic words and expressions throughout. These are usually followed by their explanations, such as in Zenzela,

where he says "yemma préparait du khobz ed-dar" [Mommy was preparing homemade bread] (124) and follows it immediately with " de la galette maison," since khobz means "bread" in Arabic and ed'dar is "of the house." The titles of these two novels are also carefully selected to present the Arabo-Algerian universe of the central characters. Zenzela is the name of an ogress who figures in a number of Algerian children's stories, and Dis Oualla!, means literally "say by Allah" or "swear!," which is what one usually says when wanting to make sure that the person speaking is telling the truth. Despite the fact that the latter novel describes the world of young people of different ethnic backgrounds all living in France, the Arabic in the title shows that the speech of people of Maghrebian descent continues to be under the influence of Arabic.

According to Alec Hargreaves (Voices, 25), "the Beurs are in fact rediscovering the language and culture of their parents. Several Beur authors have dabbled in Arabic though none is able to write fluently in that language." Of course, one should add that not only Beur writers but older writers born and bred in Algeria and schooled in French are also unable "to write fluently in Arabic." The sociolinguist John Edwards distinguishes between the communicative and symbolic uses of language. In the former case, speakers are able to express themselves fluently in the mother tongue, whereas in the latter they incorporate terms and expressions from the mother tongue into their dominant language. Not being able to speak the mother tongue or to write in it fluently in no way diminishes their loyalty to their language of origin or their identity with their cultural heritage (Language, Society, and Identity, 16-18) .

Since the emergence of francophone literature, writers of Maghrebian origin have been influenced by their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Whether in the somber tones of Ben Chérif living in Algeria during its colonial period, the words of a French-educated intellectual like Assia Djebar, or the humorous jargon of Azouz Begag and some of his fellow Beurs, many francophone writers seem intent on stressing their Maghrebian identity. It is their way of defining themselves rather than allowing "Others" to define or label them.