

# Reinventing the *Banlieue* in Contemporary Urban Francophone Literature

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In contemporary urban Francophone literature, the theme of “banlieue” has established itself as a subgenre that could be considered part of the “Beur” literary movement, born in the 1980s. Jacomard explains: “Préoccupée en premier chef par les questions identitaires, la littérature beure s’articule toutefois sur une symbolique des lieux tellement puissante qu’une subdivision se dessine au sein de ces écrits, celle de la littérature de banlieue” (Jacomard 105). The socio-economical, political and historical context of “beur” novels is to be found in the urban fabric of the French “banlieues,” from the *bidonville* to the *Grands Ensembles* at the outskirts of Paris, Lyon or Strasbourg. From the “beur” literary wave of the 1980s and 1990s until the breakthrough of new talents named “de banlieue” at the dawn of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century how do novels written by French ethnic novelists reinvent the urban space of the “banlieue”?

In contemporary urban narrative, does the “banlieue”—taken in its geographical sense—determine the fate of its residents, or are the inhabitants modeling new positive forces allowing them to act upon the urban space? To answer this question, light will first be shed on the term “banlieue” in order to articulate the current paradox that distorts its representations in the minds of people. We will then analyze how the “monstrous” banlieues of

“beur” novels are presented as de-humanizing spaces, and how geographical determinism models the lives and identities of the characters. We will finally focus on the analysis of two recent novels by Faïza Guène (*Kiffe Kiffe Demain*, 2004) and Mabrouck Rachédi and Habiba Mahany (*La Petite Malika*, 2010) in which characters are able to act upon territories in order to humanize the space that they inhabit and that also lives in them. We will then take the guided tour of the “banlieue” to see how characters, through social, civic and activist acts, re-invent, re-humanize and re-enchant the urban space of the “banlieue.”

### 1. Mis-Representations of the “Banlieue”

The etymological analysis of the substantives “ban” and “lieue,” in French, which form the term “banlieue” reveals a paradox. The term “ban” refers to law and order in feudal times and would also be a law in Francic law “dont le non-respect provoque la sanction une ‘lieue’ à la ronde autour du château (about 4 kilometers)” (Wihtol de Wenden 5). Yet, we can see today that “banlieues” in media representations have lost their original meaning of law and order to be assimilated to spaces of chaos and disorder as shown in Wihtol de Wenden and Body-Gendrot (5). A negative and false image of the “banlieue” has spread in French mentalities through the stereotypical and distorting prism of the media, state institutions and political discourses. If it is the result of a wrong interpretation of the etymological meaning of the term, nevertheless the confusion between “banlieue” and “bannissement” (banishment) is constantly done today.

“Banlieue” no longer refers to the charming little residential village in the city suburbs, composed of mixed social classes (middle and upper classes), as opposed to the American model. On the contrary, it designates the territories that are known to be spaces of exclusion and often called “quartier populaires” (where lower classes would live), as embodied in the “Zones Urbaines Sensibles” (ZUS). Those urban spaces invest the “collective imaginary” of the nation by the gigantism of their architecture, in the shape of high rises and HLM blocks, also known as “Grands Ensembles.” Law

and order are no longer enforced in those spaces. The rules of the Republic have deserted them. Through a sharp manipulation and exaggeration of reality, “banlieues” have all become “lawless urban zones” in French consciousness. In reality, it is impossible to deny the fact that ZUS are, indeed, suffering territories, but they only represent a tiny portion of “banlieues” in France. For instance, amongst the ZUS, only 44 are Zones Franches Urbaines (ZFU) on French territory that is to say among the poorest urban spaces where public institutions are operating (Engelbach).

All “banlieues” therefore are not ZUS but are polymorphous territories, in constant movement and evolution, put forth as fixed and condemned entities in public and political discourses, as well as in the media. Residents of those urban spaces themselves become the victims of preconceived ideas and are “ban-ished” from the rest of society, as Jacomard explains (105).

We must here acknowledge the fact that when it comes to “banlieues” in France, there is extreme confusion. As pointed by Body-Gendrot and Wihtol de Wenden, “quand on parle de la banlieue, on parle en fait de sa population; quand on se réfère aux habitants, on parle des lieux où ils habitent” (6). Yet, after the Second World War, the “Grands Ensembles” were initially conceptualized to improve the living conditions and well being of its residents, and to accommodate them to the comfort of Modernity.

## 2. Monstruosity of the “Banlieues”?

Urban development projects, at the end of the Second World War, had a gigantic scope but were not monstrous *per se*. The functionalist architectural mode of development of the 1950s influenced the development of “banlieues” at the periphery of major cities such as Paris, Toulouse, Lyon, Clermont Ferrand, Strasbourg, Marseille, *etc.* . . . They bore the name of “Grands ensembles” and mushroomed all over France. “Banlieues” soon became zones of reclusion in the minds of people, for instance in Toulouse, “la cité Le Mirail”; in Paris, “La Courneuve”; in Marseille, “Les Quartiers Nords,” *etc.* . . . Yet, urban development projects were originally

planned as visionary, and aimed at bringing modernity to French society by providing modern conveniences, ready for the new transportation means at the time of the “Tout Automobile,” under the Presidency of George Pompidou. The “Grands Ensembles” encouraged the well-being of residents in spaces that were neighborly, salubrious and more spacious. Those superstructures were offered to specialized workers, to rural populations attracted to the new jobs generated by the industrial “boom” or else to the middle-classes. It was the time of “Triumphant Urbanism” in France, which was the urbanistic counterpart of the “Trente Glorieuses,” in French industrial development (Wihtol de Wenden 48). By the 1970s, the failure of “mixité sociale” (social mingling) brought to light the monstrous character of some urban spaces: the ghettoization of foreign manpower and their families; the increase of the unemployment rate after the successive oil crises. The socio-economical traumas generated therefore led to the pauperization of “banlieue” residents and revealed the monstrosity of their environment.

This harsh reality is depicted in “Beur” literature, at its origins: monstrous “banlieues” appear as spaces of de-humanization. In Medhi Charef’ *Thé au Harem*, the monstrous characteristics of the architecture in the “banlieue” is personified, and de-humanizes its residents: “[le béton] est partout présent, pesant, dans les gestes, dans la voix, dans le langage, jusqu’au fond des yeux, jusqu’au bout des ongles [. . .] A jamais. Il suit partout comme une ombre” (281). The environment overruns the characters who are unable to act upon it and end up petrified by the concrete. The “banlieue” is personified and like the mythological Medusa, soaks its inhabitants’ living energies into its urban fabric.

Moreover, Charef and Boukhedenna alike present the “banlieue” as a prison, which condemns individuals to wander at the margins of society, victims of their fate. From this space, there is no escape, no way out. Rachédi and Mahany add: “la banlieue c’est plus facile d’y aller que d’en sortir” (46). “Banlieue” therefore symbolizes the total absence of mobility, which can only lead its inhabitants to prison or to commit suicide. According to

Hiddleston, the structure and the geographical space of the “Grands Ensembles” contribute to the social deprivatization of its residents.

The spatial representation of the “banlieue” is therefore a monstrous territory personified to devour the body and soul of its inhabitants. The stereotypical and problematic vision of the “banlieue” that we know today is exhibited in the corpus of “Beur” novelists through monstrous territories that control the identities and lives of fiction characters. Here, “ce ne sont pas les identités qui créent le territoire mais le territoire qui crée les identités” (Wihtol de Wenden 14). The evolution and development of narratives lead to a form of geographical determinism where territories act upon passive characters.

We can notice that characters play no role in the development of the “banlieue” but are on the contrary overrun and suffocated victims of the superstructures. The “banlieue” acts upon individuals. This is the first portrayal of the “banlieue” that emerges from the “beur” corpus. Yet, more recently, the novels of French ethnic young novelists and more particularly of the members of the association “Qui fait la France ?” are working to “break the stereotypes” and to “re-humanize” the banlieue.

### 3. Banlieues with Human Dimension

In *Kiffé Kiffé demain* and *La Petite Malika*, the characters are no longer victims of their environment. On the contrary, narratives show how they act upon and interact with their territories. In *La Petite Malika*, the reader follows the evolution of the eponymous character, a genius child educated in the “banlieue” of Paris. As a young adult, Malika studies in the best French universities, works for a senator and gets an executive position in a firm before realizing that her life and true self belong to somewhere else, or rather to the place where she grew up: in the “banlieue.” In *Kiffé Kiffé demain*, we follow the adventures of Doria, seventeen years old, over the course of one year. In high school, Doria lives “in tempo” with American soap operas, sentimental novels, Maghrebi novels and “poètes maudits,” whom she discovers. She realizes that the men, women and friends with whom she lives in her block in

Seine-Saint-Denis are both fulfilling her life and transforming the “banlieue” as well.

A new literary trend shapes contemporary urban spaces. Even though those two novels are a declaration of affection for a territory, the “quartier,” the “banlieue” itself, they do not omit to put forward the positive as well as negative aspects of the urban space. In that way, they allow to break with the binarism of “beur” literature, which was according to Dominic Thomas *miserabilist* (42). In *La Petite Malika* more specifically, a new space is invented as the main character re-enchants the “banlieue” around her. In *Kiffe Kiffe demain*, the actions of the inhabitants who are actors and citizens of their geographical environment allow for the emergence of new spaces in which better social harmony amongst citizens can rise.

In *La Petite Malika*, fraternity and mutual aid recreate a form of law and order that State institutions would have failed implementing. Each apartment in the novel, for instance, has a small garden, which is not cultivated. When Malika decides to take care of hers, fraternity and encouragements from her community allow her to stop stealing plants in public gardens: the neighbors buy flowers for her and offer her all that she needs to cultivate her own garden. Kindness and solidarity allow for new possibilities of “vivre-ensemble” (living together) in a space no longer characterized by an absence of law and order. Malika also re-enchants the world around her through the affirmation of her deep self. She serves as a guide for her students, and her acts and pedagogical professionalism allow them to realize the existence of a new space, open for future possibilities. The message she sends them is clear: they are not prisoners of “banished” territories; there only exist imaginary barriers.

“Banlieues” are re-humanized in Guène’s novel as well, against the grain of stereotypical representations. Two elements allow us to understand how a new space of civic responsibilities is being created where residents are able to evolve on territories as citizens of France. The novel first focuses on the gigantic superstructure. In drastically downsizing the point of view, a little community appears to the reader, that is a small village at the heart of the

“Grands Ensembles.” The novel then portrays the civil rights struggle and activism of females in the novel.

Through the characters, the neighborhood takes on a human dimension. Humanity is being envisioned in all its complexity and meanings: the best ones (success, kindness, *etc.*) and the worst ones (failure, violence, cruelty, *etc.*). Residents give life to a new space where it is possible to live in fraternity: the “Grands Ensembles” here give birth to a small, human-sized village.

We can also note that the female characters in *Kiffe Kiffe demain* act upon their environment and transform it directly. Their desires and actions nourish the narration. First of all, their actions take the shape of a civil rights struggle. Fatima Konare, a migrant worker of African origin, is successfully bringing to fruition the workers’ strike of the Hotel “Formule 1” in the city of Bagnolet. The civic conscience of female characters in the novel is aroused, and has a direct impact on their environment.

Moreover, Doria’s awakening to civic responsibilities adds a new perspective to the concept of “citizenship” in the novel, which is intertwined with the right to vote and civic duties, that resides at the heart of the novel. Indeed, the narrator says: “Moi, à dix-huit ans, j’irai voter. Ici, on n’a jamais la parole. Alors quand on nous la donne, il faut la prendre” (98). Through the acquisition of civic consciousness, the citizen is capable of creating his/her space of action and to become the actor of political changes: “[i]ci, y’a plein de trucs à changer. . . . Tiens, ça me donne une idée, ça. Pourquoi je ferais pas de la politique ? “Du CAP coiffure à l’élection présidentielle, il n’y a qu’un pas. . . .” C’est le genre de phrase qui reste [. . .] (98)

## Conclusion

“Beur” literature and its subgenre, “banlieue” literature, do not exist. They take shape in the imagination and self-interest of the media, and institutional discourses that create a “fashion” phenomenon with lucrative or political goals (Harzoune). Besides, those denominations relegate both texts and authors to the “ban,” to the margins of society. As for novelists, they refuse those categorizations. Rachédi

explains: “On ne fait pas de la littérature de banlieue, parce qu’on ne veut pas être relégués à la périphérie de la littérature.”

Contrary to “beur” literature in the 1980s and 1990s, which described “banlieue” spaces as urban spaces where characters were anti-heros, victims of their environment, the new wave of writers, today, refutes both the “banlieue” and “beur” denominations, and present a new creative touch to literature, by replacing the Human at the heart of the territories. The fiction characters are able to create territories by reversing stereotypical representations of the “banlieues.” Territories no longer act upon characters to determine their fate and dictate their destiny.

In recent texts, we witness the advent of a new urban space: a “banlieue” reinvented by its characters and by its writers, which is a space in constant evolution. *Kiffé Kiffé Demain* and *La Petite Malika* therefore present characters, who stand against the stasis and victimization that were dictated by the “tyranny of territories” (Wihtol de Wenden 7). as it appeared in the first “beur” novels. Characters are citizens in the political sense of the term: they are actors in the “polis,” the Greek city. Those novels break with “beur” and “banlieue” categorizations by presenting characters, who are social actors, impacting change on their local community, being active citizens of France.

Those novels break with the stereotypes by creating citizen-individuals who act upon their environment and re-enchant them by re-drawing the urban map of the territories they inhabit. From this new conception of the “banlieue” emanates a sentiment of hope, a call to civic activism, and literature becomes the space where change may occur. A literature of “combat,” “engagée,” and focused on “political activism.” Literature therefore revisits the “banlieue” to create a dynamical space for a creative discourse on citizenship and on French contemporary society.

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