



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 6 June 2020



no title | 2019 | Avelina Crespo (courtesy of the artist)

AGAINST THE **BABAR COMPLEX**.
POST-MEMORY, PERIPHERIES
AND LITERATURE

Fernanda Vilar



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La discrétion, by Faïza Guène, scheduled for release in August 2020, tells the story of how it was discretion that led part of a generation to resist within post-colonial France. Yamina, the main character, is a model for women who moved to France and passed on to their children, through silence, a memory of experiences under colonialism, and of the mishaps of immigration. Faïza Guène is a French writer of Algerian descent. Her books expand social visibility of the knowledge, still not widely recognized or symbolically represented, of immigrants from the former French colonies. In an interview with MEMOIRS, conducted in March 2019 in Paris, Guène explained that “fiction allows you to write things that you would not dare say in a testimony. Fiction enables intimacy without embarrassment. My father held back so many stories from his life because he is from a generation drenched in modesty. He didn’t realize that it was important that we know his story” (1).

Faïza Guène was born in Bobigny, on the outskirts of Paris, in 1985. Her Algerian parents migrated to France at different times, her father in 1952, during the colonial period, and her mother in 1981, twenty years after independence. Guène came to literature through what she calls a “happy accident”. It was thanks to a writing workshop that she wrote her first book, *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* (2004), translated into 26 languages. Her fiction feeds on differential experiences of French society. It exposes the conflicts experienced by second and third generations of people whose parents migrated from the Maghreb. While questioning stereotypes that surround spatiality and colonial origins, her novels allow her to inscribe post-memory in a specific space: the outskirts of large cities.

In *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* the 15-year-old narrator, Doria, recounts the shock of an Algerian family arriving in France in the 1980s:

My mom always dreamed France was like in those black-and-white films from the sixties. The ones where the handsome actor’s always telling his woman so many pretty lies, a cigarette dangling from his lips. [...] So when she and my dad arrived in Livry-Gargan, just north of Paris, in February 1984, she thought they must have taken the wrong boat and ended up in the wrong country. She told me that when she walked into this tiny two-room apartment the first thing she did was throw up. I’m not sure if it was seasickness or a sixth sense warning her about her future in this bled (2).

Unlike the first generation, who held onto the “French dream” of a better life, and the illusion of returning to Algeria, Guène is conscious that her parents’ relationship with their country of origin is based on a form of denial, a carefully nurtured illusion of a country that no longer exists. She adds: “for us, too,



it was a country that did not exist. For me, Algeria is divided between the real and the imaginary, and Algeria is as much a part of me as France. Today I define myself as Franco-Algerian, because I learned very early on that, although I consider myself French, the society formed by the ‘school of the republic’ has always seen me as less French than others, and has never been interested in our history”.

France’s disinterest in including the French history that took place outside ‘hexagonal France’ in school textbooks and public discourse is deeply frustrating for Faïza Guène’s generation. As she put it in her interview with MEMOIRS, “to enter an Algerian migrant’s apartment is to enter a foreign territory: the language is different. We spoke Arabic at home. The objects, the food, our bodies are different; I learned early on that we didn’t have the same opportunities as others and that people didn’t understand me”.

Faïza Guène points out that this difference has been ignored since school. She maintains that this territory is still marked by a colonial history that has not been dealt with by France. She adds: “France does not know how to manage its colonial past. There are vast but underestimated traces visible in society: not to mention the contempt and condescension with which we are often treated. We have internalized the feeling of oppression in the same way that some have internalized the feeling of domination. This determines relations in French society. I became interested in the colonial question precisely because I had no answer to my own questions”.

Faïza Guène’s books deal with the same question in different ways: what do we do with an inheritance? “My characters are archetypes of a particular position, because we are always built according to our history: either in opposition to it, or in reproducing it. It is always a choice”, she says. The journey of choosing inheritance is the germ of Guène’s novel *Un homme, ça ne ne pleure pas* (2014). In it, she questions the fate of three characters from the same family. The Algerian parents immigrated to France. The narrator, Mourad, is caught between the burden of family heritage and a culture that is different from that of his origins, but which he likes a lot. Dounia, the older sister, wants to pursue a political career in France “filling the diversity quota”. The younger sister, Mina, follows the path set out by her parents, marrying a Muslim man and building a family in France.

Through this family portrait, Faïza Guène questions how we can choose our own heritage, as well as the problems each life choice brings with it. It is particularly interesting to examine Dounia’s choice. She carries only the inheritance of her genetics, and her name. She moves away from family and rejects her cultural heritage: “Dounia pleases people because she symbolizes what the Republic does best:



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accidental success” (2014: 95) (3). Despite all his efforts to erase his family inheritance and adopt all the codes of the French republic, Dounia’s brother concludes that migrants are victims of the “Babar complex”: “Babar might walk with two legs, wear three-piece suits and a bow tie, and cruise around in a convertible, but he will always be an elephant!” (4).

The disrespect of difference leads to problems in contemporary society, such as in France’s relationship with its urban peripheries, seen through the negative connotations of “communitarianism”. For the author, “to be a community is a positive thing. If I am among people who look like me, we can reflect together on problems that concern us. So I feel less alone in a system that doesn’t recognize me. It is not for nothing that in our neighbourhood our role models came from the United States, with its minorities, and its problems with racism. When I wrote my first book, I saw for the first time that a part of my readership found a role model in it and identified with the story that I was telling. It was then that I understood why I wrote. To write is to be able to leave a trace of your history, and to recount your experience. My desire is to transmit this history without denaturalizing it”.

Nowadays, Faïza Guène says she is proud to be the inheritor of resistance: “I write to be honest about this history and I want to pass it on. If there are problems in French society today, we have to analyse the past. [...] Our generation must consider a new identity, starting from a vertical relationship of power, so that new generations do not have to face the same old problems. [...] And the novels that I write are about bringing forward more histories to create new forms of identification and belonging”.

Guène’s literature is closely linked to her personal history. She seeks out fragments of people’s histories, and private archives, that are linked to the French colonial past to shape her own history and leave a legacy for those who up to today have not had role models on which to anchor their identity in contemporary Europe.

Guène, Faïza. *Kiffe Kiffe Demain*. Paris: Hachette, 2004.
---. *Un homme, ça ne pleure pas*. Paris: Fayard, 2014.



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- (1) All quotations in this text, when not expressly stated otherwise, are part of the interview with Faïza Guène on March 28, 2019 in Paris, within the scope of the fieldwork of the project MEMOIRS – Children of Empire and European Post-Memories. To date, 169 interviews have been conducted to collect data on the memories inherited by the children and grandchildren of the generation that lived through the processes of decolonization of territories dominated by Portugal, France and Belgium on the African continent.
- (2) «Ma mère s’imaginait que la France, c’était comme dans les films en noir et blanc des années soixante. Ceux avec l’acteur beau gosse qui raconte toujours un tas de trucs mythos à sa meuf, une cigarette au coin du bec. (...). Alors quand elle est arrivée avec mon père à Livry-Gargan en février 1984, elle a cru qu’ils avaient pris le mauvais bateau et qu’ils s’étaient trompés de pays. Elle m’a dit que la première chose qu’elle avait faite en arrivant dans ce minuscule F2, c’était de vomir. Je me demande si c’étaient les effets du mal de mer ou un présage de son avenir dans ce bled». (Guène, 2004:13). English translation by Sarah Adams, from *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* (2006).
- (3) “Dounia plait parce qu’elle symbolise ce que la République fabrique de mieux : une réussite accidentelle” (2014: 95). English translations are by Archie Davies.
- (4) “Babar aura beau marcher sur deux pattes, porter des costumes trois-pièces, un nœud papillon, et rouler dans une voiture décapotable, ce sera toujours un éléphant!” (2014: 96).
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Translated by **Archie Davies**

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MEMOIRS is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (no. 648624) and is hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra.

