



## **From Writing to Image: Reconfiguration of the Immigrant Figure Between Novelistic Text and Cinematic Representation in *Le Gone du Chaâba* and *La Graine et le Mulet***

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the mechanisms by which the figure of the North African immigrant is reconfigured in the transition from the novelistic text to the cinematographic work, through two foundational corpora of immigration literature and cinema in France.

*Le Gone du Chaâba* by Azouz Begag (1986), adapted for cinema by Christophe Ruggia in 1997, and Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Graine et le Mulet* (2007) represent two essential milestones in the representation of the migratory experience. Drawing on the tools of comparative narratology, image semiology, and cultural studies, this study analyzes the identity construction of the immigrant character, the strategies of intercultural mediation, and the political and aesthetic stakes inherent in generic transposition. The aim is to demonstrate how cinema does not merely translate a literary narrative into visual form, but proceeds to a genuine rewriting of migrant subjectivity, oscillating between collective memory, the quest for integration, and the affirmation of a plural identity.

**Keywords:** figure of the immigrant, beur literature, immigration cinema, cinematographic adaptation, migrant identity, comparative narratology, interculturalism.

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## 1. Introduction: Migration as a Literary and Cinematic Subject

The question of the representation of the immigrant in French narrative arts constitutes a field of inquiry as rich as it is complex, crossing generic and media boundaries with a consistency that attests to its entrenchment in the social and identity concerns of contemporary French society. Since the 1980s, so-called "beur" literature—a problematic but historically embedded term—has opened up an unprecedented space of expression for long-marginalized voices, before cinema in turn took hold of these narratives to project them onto a screen that is simultaneously national and globalized.

At the crossroads of these two narrative arts, two works stand out as indispensable references: *Le Gone du Chaâba* by Azouz Begag, published by Éditions du Seuil in 1986, then adapted for cinema by Christophe Ruggia in 1997, and Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Graine et le Mulet* (2007), winner of the Palme d'Or for artistic creation and the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. While the first corpus involves an explicit transposition from novel to film, the second is an original cinematographic creation whose kinship with the tradition of immigration novels is nonetheless manifest. Together, these two works allow us to interrogate the modalities of construction and transformation of the immigrant figure between distinct semiotic regimes.

The central question structuring our analysis may be formulated as follows: in what ways does the passage from text to image—whether in a strictly adaptational sense or through a community of thematic concerns—reconfigure the immigrant figure, and what identity, political, and aesthetic stakes does this reconfiguration set in motion? To address this question, we will draw on the contributions of comparative narratology as developed by Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal, the film semiology of Christian Metz's tradition, and the work of Homi K. Bhabha on the "third space" and Stuart Hall on cultural identity.

Our approach will be structured in four stages: after situating the two corpora in their historical and generic context (section 2), we will analyze the narrative strategies for constructing the immigrant figure in written texts (section 3), then the reconfigurations effected by cinematic adaptations and rewritings (section 4), before concluding with the political stakes of these representations in the contemporary French context (section 5).

## 2. Historical Contexts and Generic Genealogies

### 2.1 Beur Literature: The Emergence of a Marginal Voice

The emergence of beur literature in the 1980s corresponds to a pivotal moment in French social and political history. The 1983 "March for Equality and Against



Racism"—known as the "Marche des Beurs"—constitutes the sociopolitical context in which the first works of a generation born in France to Maghrebi immigrant parents began to appear. Mehdi Charef opened the way with *Le Thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* (1983), followed by Azouz Begag, whose *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986) marked a decisive step through its explicit autobiographicism and its hybrid language blending standard French, Lyonnais slang, and Arabic expressions.

As Alec Hargreaves emphasizes in his landmark study, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, this literature is defined less by aesthetic coherence than by a common enunciative position: that of a generation "in-between," neither entirely French nor entirely Maghrebi, questioning inherited identity categories.<sup>1</sup> This in-between position corresponds to what Homi K. Bhabha theorizes as the "third space": a hybrid space of enunciation where cultures neither simply mirror nor oppose each other, but mutually negotiate and transform themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Begag's novel is distinguished by its autobiographical inscription: the author, born in 1957 in the Chaâba shantytown in Lyon to Algerian parents, delivers a childhood narrative in which the young Aâzouz's academic pursuit—a transparent alter ego—functions as an allegory of a successful but painful integration. Susan Ireland and Patrice Proulx have shown how the republican school becomes in this text an ambiguous space: a vehicle for individual emancipation and an instrument of assimilation that demands the partial abandonment of cultural inheritances.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 Immigration Cinema: A Space of Identity Negotiation

French cinema has maintained an ambivalent relationship with the question of immigration, oscillating between condescending folklorization and militant engagement. It is within this landscape that the 1990s–2000s saw the emergence of what is called "banlieue cinema" or "immigration cinema," of which Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995) constitutes the most publicly visible crystallization point, even if its scope is broader.

The adaptation of Begag's novel by Christophe Ruggia in 1997 is part of this context of renewal. With a modest budget and a cast mixing professional actors and amateurs from the housing projects, Ruggia chose a realist aesthetic inheriting from both the



Nouvelle Vague and cinéma-vérité. The decision to film partly in the very neighborhood where Begag grew up lends the film a documentary dimension that enriches its symbolic reach.

Abdellatif Kechiche, born in Tunis in 1960 and arriving in France at the age of six, represents a generation of filmmakers who make their own experience of cultural estrangement the raw material of a cinema in which the staging of the body, the meal, and speech constitutes an anthropology of everyday migrant life. *La Graine et le Mulet*, awarded the BAFTA for Best Foreign Language Film and the César for Best Film in 2008, stands as a world-work in which the preparation of a couscous becomes the site of a meditation on transmission, dignity, and cultural survival.

### **3. The Immigrant Figure in the Written Text: Between Testimony and Literary Construction**

#### **3.1 The Narrative Voice and the Question of Enunciative Legitimacy**

One of the central questions raised by immigration literature is that of the narrative voice and its legitimacy. Gérard Genette, in *Figures III*, distinguishes the homodiegetic narrator—who participates in the story being told—from the heterodiegetic narrator, absent from that story.<sup>4</sup> In *Le Gone du Chaâba*, Begag adopts a homodiegetic and perspectival narration: it is a child—Aâzouz—who tells his own story, with the cognitive limitations and affective benefits that this implies. This choice is not trivial: it confers on the narrative an aura of authenticity that disarms criticism and establishes immediate identification with the reader.

This childlike voice was already central to Alec Hargreaves's analysis, which, in his study of beur fiction, emphasizes that the use of the child's point of view allows authors to "neutralize the most acute identity conflicts" while preserving intact emotional charge.<sup>5</sup> The child is not yet caught in the network of contradictory allegiances that adulthood imposes; they observe, absorb, suffer, and dream without yet systematically naming racial or national categories.



Language occupies a particularly significant place in Begag's novel. The author wields with irony and tenderness a hybrid French that integrates Arabisms, Lyonnais speech expressions, and syntactic constructions characteristic of what sociolinguists like Louis-Jean Calvet describe as the "popular French" of the suburbs.<sup>6</sup> But this linguistic hybridization is also a literary strategy: it signals belonging to a community while asserting full mastery of the host country's language.

### 3.2 The Immigrant Body: Between Stigma and Resistance

If the narrative voice is the primary vehicle of subjectivity in the novel, the body constitutes the object par excellence of social categorization and stigma. Erving Goffman, in his foundational study of stigma, showed how certain bodily characteristics become markers of a "spoiled identity" in the social gaze.<sup>7</sup> In *Le Gone du Chaâba*, the young Aâzouz's body is the site of contradictory tensions: it is simultaneously the body that "smells" (the spiced cooking odors that other pupils notice), the body that works (integration through academic merit), and the body that dreams (of full and complete belonging).

Kechiche, in *La Graine et le Mulet*, brings this theme of the immigrant body to its paroxysm. The central character, Slimane (Habib Boufares), is a worker at the Sète shipyard whose body, worn down by decades of silent labor, literally embodies the economy of immigration: he has given his labor to France, and this France is preparing to lay him off. Kechiche's film effects a translation from the individual biographical to the collective allegorical: Slimane is not merely a man—he is a generation.

The dance sequence of *Rym* (Hafsia Herzi)—long, exhaustive, almost unbearable in its duration—has prompted numerous analyses. Ginette Vincendeau sees in it a staging of the female immigrant body that oscillates between empowerment and objectification.<sup>8</sup> This tension is constitutive of Kechiche's poetics: the filmmaker photographs bodies with an insistence that can be read both as a celebration and as a surveillance—thus replicating, in the very apparatus of the film, the contradictory gazes that French society casts upon immigrant bodies.



### **3.3 The Space of the Shantytown and the Housing Project: Geographies of Exclusion**

Topography plays a structuring role in the literary construction of the immigrant figure. In *Le Gone du Chaâba*, the space of the Lyonnais shantytown is described with quasi-documentary precision that legitimates the narrative and anchors fiction in a verifiable historical reality. Henri Lefebvre, in *La Production de l'espace*, showed how space is never neutral but always the product of social relations and logics of power.<sup>9</sup> The Chaâba is a space produced by the colonial and post-colonial economy: by relegating immigrant workers to shantytowns on the urban periphery, French society spatialized exclusion.

In *La Graine et le Mulet*, the city of Sète functions differently: it is not a space of topographical exclusion, but one of economic and symbolic marginalization. The immigrant characters are visible in the city, but their very visibility is precarious: Slimane can walk through Sète's streets, but financial institutions close their doors to him. Kechiche's urban space is the theater of an economic exclusion that has substituted for—without entirely replacing—the spatial exclusion of the shantytown.

## **4. Cinematic Reconfigurations: Translating, Betraying, Recreating**

### **4.1 The Transition from Novel to Film: Stakes of Generic Transposition**

The theory of cinematographic adaptation constitutes an established field of research that has undergone significant development since the foundational work of Seymour Chatman and Brian McFarlane. The central question is no longer that of "fidelity" to the source text—a notion long since deconstructed—but rather that of the transformations imposed by transposition and the new meanings it generates.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Christophe Ruggia's adaptation of *Le Gone du Chaâba*, several transformations merit sustained attention. The first concerns the treatment of the narrative voice: the novel employs first-person narration that grants access to the protagonist's thoughts and feelings, while the film must find visual and sonic equivalents for this interiority. Ruggia partially resolves this problem by recourse to



a voiceover that reprises certain formulations from the text, thereby creating a constant dialogue between the two media.

The second major transformation concerns childhood as a space of play and freedom. In the novel, the childlike narration implies a degree of unawareness of the political and social stakes underlying the immigrant situation. The film, by rendering bodies visible in space, cannot maintain this perspectival innocence: the misery of the shantytown is immediately perceptible to the viewer's eye, even if the young Aâzouz does not always perceive it as such. Cinema thus creates a gap between the character's focalization and the viewer's perception, a meaning-producing gap that Mieke Bal analyzes under the concept of "external focalization."<sup>11</sup>

#### **4.2 Image and Body: A Semiotics of Movement**

Christian Metz, in *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, established that cinema is a particular sign system whose specificity lies in the combination of multiple codes: image, sound, movement, and montage.<sup>12</sup> This combination produces effects of meaning that literature can only evoke but never fully reproduce. In the context of immigrant representation, this has fundamental consequences: the cinematographic image cannot merely describe—it must show, and this showing implies political choices.

In Ruggia's film, the physical presence of non-professional actors from the Algerian community brings an authenticity that the novelistic text seeks differently through its work on language. The actors' bodies carry a history that fiction need not enunciate: their gestures, accents, and habitual ways of moving constitute a narrative in and of themselves. From this standpoint, the film achieves what Roland Barthes called the "reality effect," but through the living body rather than through the accumulation of descriptive details.<sup>13</sup>

Kechiche pushes this logic even further. His camera, always close to faces and bodies, practices what some critics have described as a "cinema of the skin": an extreme attention to bodily textures, fleeting expressions, and micro-gestures that compose the everyday experience of immigrant existence. Jean-Michel Frodon, in his analysis of Kechiche's style, notes that this camera-body proximity is not



voyeuristic but ethical: it forces the viewer into a presence that is in itself a political act.<sup>14</sup>

### **4.3 Language on Screen: Voice, Accent, and Belonging**

If language is in the novel a fundamental marker of hybrid identity, its treatment on screen raises specific problems. Accent, in particular, is a sonic phenomenon that can only be represented in writing at the cost of what is often a caricatural transcription. Cinema, by contrast, captures accent in all its nuance and complexity.

In *La Graine et le Mulet*, Kechiche uses North African-accented French not as a picturesque element but as a sign of anthropological truth. The dialogues, often improvised or semi-improvised, produce a living language that bears the traces of a migratory trajectory. Generations in the film distinguish themselves by their relationship to language: Slimane's generation speaks an accented French mixed with Arabic, while his children master standard French while retaining Arabic expressions for intimate moments. This linguistic gradation is a cartography of integration.

Farid Chenoune, in his work on Maghrebi cultural identity in France, emphasizes that the question of language is always also a question of power: speaking French without an accent is cultural capital, while speaking with an accent is a marker of difference that can equally signify social disqualification or aesthetic distinction depending on context.<sup>15</sup> Kechiche transforms this ambivalence into cinematographic material.

### **4.4 Memory, Transmission, and Cultural Identity**

One of the most prominent themes in both works—and their respective adaptations—is that of intergenerational transmission. In *Le Gone du Chaâba*, the tension between the paternal model (Bouzid, who embodies an intact Algerian identity but one enclosed in nostalgia) and the republican educational model (the teacher who sees in Aâzouz an exceptional pupil) structures the entire narrative.

Paul Ricoeur, in his analysis of memory and narrative identity, proposes that personal identity is not a substance but a configuration: it is the synthesis each



subject effects between what they have received (idem-identity, sameness) and what they project (ipse-identity, selfhood).<sup>16</sup> This Ricoeurian distinction illuminates the fundamental conflict lived by the characters of both works: they are caught between an inherited idem-identity (the Maghreb of their parents, cultural and religious practices) and an ipse-identity in formation (France, modernity, social advancement).

In *La Graine et le Mulet*, the central scene of the family meal—in which the couscous prepared by Slimane is simultaneously the catalyst of an economic project and the memory of a culture—constitutes the symbolic pivot of the film. Food, as Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrated in his reflection on the raw and the cooked, is a sign system that codifies social relations and cultural allegiances.<sup>17</sup> By making couscous the gravitational center of his film, Kechiche inscribes the migrant experience within an anthropology of cultural survival.

## 5. Political and Aesthetic Stakes of Representation

### 5.1 The Question of the Gaze: Who Represents Whom?

The question of representational legitimacy is central in postcolonial studies. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, showed how systems of representation of the non-Western world by the West are always also systems of power that objectify and reify those they claim to represent.<sup>18</sup> In the French context, this problematic takes specific forms linked to colonial and post-colonial history.

Begag and Kechiche share a particular enunciative position: they are members of the immigrant community or its descendants who take charge of their own representation. This "self-representation" is not without tensions: it exposes these artists to the critique of representing only themselves and not a diverse community, but it also constitutes a fundamental break with the modalities of representing the Other that had previously dominated.

Stuart Hall, in his analysis of the politics of representation within diasporas, distinguishes two moments in minority cultural politics: a first moment concerned with visibility and the claiming of the right to represent, and a second that



interrogates difference within representations themselves.<sup>19</sup> Begag and Kechiche position themselves at the junction of these two moments: they assert the right to represent their experience while introducing complexities that subvert stereotypes.

## 5.2 Republican Universalism and Its Limits: An Implicit Critique

One of the most politically charged aspects of both works is their critical relationship to the republican ideology of integration. The French republican model rests on the fiction of a public space stripped of cultural particularisms, where each individual accesses national belonging through the abandonment of community specificities. Both works studied here reveal the internal tensions of this model.

In *Le Gone du Chaâba*, Aâzouz successfully integrates the republican model—he achieves the best grades in his class—but this success comes at the price of communal isolation: he is envied by his cousins and condemned, in order to succeed, to distinguish himself from his peers. The text does not condemn the republican school, but it reveals its identity cost. Nacira Guénif-Souilamas has analyzed how this tension between republican demands for assimilation and the maintenance of cultural inheritances constitutes one of the most complex nodes of the French postcolonial condition.<sup>20</sup>

In *La Graine et le Mulet*, the critique is more direct and more bitter. Slimane's project—creating a couscous restaurant on a boat—is a transparent metaphor for the attempt at economic integration through cultural offering. French society appreciates couscous but does not readily grant the necessary funding to its immigrant entrepreneur. Republican universalism valorizes the immigrant's cultural contribution while refusing him the material conditions for its flourishing.

## 5.3 Gender, Femininity, and Immigration: Complementary Voices

The dimension of gender constitutes an unavoidable analytical axis in the study of both works. While *Le Gone du Chaâba* is centered on a masculine subjectivity, it nevertheless grants considerable attention to the women of the shantytown—in particular to the narrator's mother, a figure of silent resilience whose suffering is only partially rendered visible. Norma Moruzzi and Frances Trix have emphasized



how immigrant women are often confined in immigration narratives to secondary or witness roles, rarely to roles as agents of their own stories.<sup>21</sup>

Kechiche significantly complexifies this picture. In *La Graine et le Mulet*, women are central and active figures: the daughter-in-law Rym, whose dance at the film's denouement is its most memorable moment, is not a victim but a strategist, a woman who mobilizes her body and her culture to save the family project. Feminist criticism has read this scene differently: some, like Carrie Tarr, celebrate it as an affirmation of female power; others, like Dina Sherzer, see in it a reactualization of Orientalist fantasies about the Oriental dancer.<sup>22</sup>

## **6. Toward an Aesthetics of In-Betweenness: Hybridizations and Identity Inventions**

At the conclusion of this comparative analysis, it appears that the figure of the immigrant in the two works studied here—and their respective cinematic transpositions—cannot be reduced to any of the stereotypes that long dominated its representation: neither passive victim of French society, nor agent of a linear and frictionless integration, nor representative of an essentialist alterity. These figures are subjects in becoming, constructing their identity in constant interaction with multiple and contradictory forces.

Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, proposes the notion of "mimicry" to describe the strategy by which colonized and postcolonial subjects adopt the signs of dominant culture while subtly displacing them, creating an effect of ambiguity that destabilizes the identity certainties of the dominant culture.<sup>23</sup> This mimicry is present in Aâzouz, who adopts the republican school codes while remaining irreducibly a "gone du Chaâba"; it is present in Slimane, who aspires to create a business according to the codes of Western capitalism while grounding his project in a North African culinary culture.

The passage of these figures from the literary text to the cinematographic image does not impoverish them but enriches them with a carnal and visual dimension that opens other modes of signification. If the novel can exploit the resources of narrative



interiority to grant access to the immigrant's subjective life, cinema renders visible what the text can only name: bodies that touch and repel each other, spaces that welcome and exclude, gestures that transmit a culture without words being necessary.

The reconfiguration of the immigrant figure between text and image is therefore less a loss than a productive transformation: each medium illuminates what the other cannot see, and it is in this dialogical relationship between literature and cinema that a more complete and more honest representation of the migrant experience is constructed.

## 7. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *Le Gone du Chaâba* and *La Graine et le Mulet*—considered both in their literary and cinematographic dimensions—reveals the richness and complexity of the dynamics of representation of the migratory experience in contemporary France. These two works do not merely testify to a social reality: they constitute it as an object of aesthetic and political reflection, mobilizing the resources specific to each medium to construct immigrant figures irreducible to stereotypes.

The passage from text to image operates a reconfiguration that is never neutral: it implies narrative, aesthetic, and political choices that redefine the meaning and scope of the narratives. Ruggia and Kechiche, each in their own way, appropriate the materials of immigration narrative to produce works that question dominant modes of representation and propose visual and narrative alternatives to essentialism and folklorism.

These analyses invite us to continue the reflection in several directions: the study of the reception of these works by audiences of diverse origins would make it possible to assess how the meanings produced circulate and transform according to contexts of reading and viewing. Furthermore, the emergence of new forms of digital narrative and interactive representation of the migratory experience raises



unprecedented questions about the future modalities of constructing the immigrant figure in post-migratory societies.

Ultimately, the figure of the immigrant in these two foundational works reminds us of what Hannah Arendt formulated in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: that the question of belonging and recognition is at bottom the most fundamental political question, the one upon which depends the very possibility of shared humanity.<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

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2. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36.
3. Susan Ireland and Patrice Proulx, eds., *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 78.
4. Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 252.
5. Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity*, 98.
6. Louis-Jean Calvet, *Les voix de la ville: introduction à la sociolinguistique urbaine* (Paris: Payot, 1994), 145.
7. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, trans. Alain Kihm (Paris: Minuit, 1975), 13.
8. Ginette Vincendeau, "Kechiche's Couscous and the Politics of Representation," *Screen 50*, no. 3 (2009): 332.
9. Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974), 48.
10. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 19.
11. Mieke Bal, *Narratologie: essais sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977), 122.
12. Christian Metz, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, 2 vols. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968–1972), 1:72.
13. Roland Barthes, "L'effet de réel," *Communications*, no. 11 (1968): 87.
14. Jean-Michel Frodon, "Kechiche, le cinéma au présent," *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 630 (2008): 19.
15. Farid Chenoune, "Langue et identité dans la France postcoloniale," in *Identités en débats*, ed. Nacira Guénif-Souilamas (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), 201.
16. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 143.
17. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked. Mythologiques I* (Paris: Plon, 1964), 9.



18. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, trans. Catherine Malamoud (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 15.
19. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.
20. Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, *Des « Beurettes » aux descendantes d'immigrants nord-africains* (Paris: Grasset, 2000), 87.
21. Norma Moruzzi and Frances Trix, "In Their Own Voices: North African Women in France," *Feminist Review*, no. 45 (1993): 16.
22. Carrie Tarr, *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 178; Dina Sherzer, ed., *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism: Perspectives from the French and Francophone World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 3.
23. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122.
24. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, trans. Jean-Loup Bourget, Robert Davreu, and Patrick Lévy (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 597.

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