“Fighting Sexism with Racism:” Anti-Immigration, Secularism, and the Politics of Shame in French Banlieues

Denise Recinos
Professor You-me Park
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Mentor: Sara Hoverter
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I. Introduction

“Fear, hate, and impotence shattered me. I remembered the impact of his punches, the force he was capable of putting into them. He flung his arm at me, landing me on the floor, and ordered…” – Samira Bellil

In Samira Bellil’s autobiographical account, Dans l’enfer des tournantes (In the Hell of Gang Rapes), she describes her troubled youth living in Seine-St. Denis, a suburb of Paris. Seine-St. Denis has the greatest concentration of poverty and of minority ethnic groups than any other department in France (Bellil, xii). This department is ethnically diverse with a large part of the population from North African countries such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, former French colonies. The violence occurring in these neighborhoods is associated with immigrant males, who dominate the public sphere (Bellil, xv). One form of violence that has caught the attention of French officials during recent years is sexual violence towards women, in particular tournantes, gang rapes. ¹ Men living in banlieues, the suburbs and outskirts of large cities in France, take turns raping girls. In order to feel a sense of control and dominance over women, they commit these acts of sexual violence.

French media associates gang rapes in banlieues with immigrants, in particular those of Maghreb and Muslim background. It portrays “women of Muslim heritage” as “being protected by the Republic from Islamic misogyny allegedly enveloping the banlieues” (Bellil, xviii). The media categorizes Muslim men as barbaric and violent, taking a sensationalist approach and at times being Islamophobic. As a result, immigrant

¹ In French, tournantes literally means taking turns.
men, especially those of North African descent, are used as scapegoats for many of the social issues occurring in France; however, it is important to remember the reality that these men still commit acts of sexual violence towards women living in banlieues and that they should not be excused for their actions.

I had read about immigration issues in France in my French classes, but it was not until I studied abroad in Paris that I realized the propensity of the issue. The country is more diverse than I imagined, yet I did notice that minorities tend to live in the outskirts of the city. Being a female in an unknown city also made me more aware of my surroundings; I ignored men when they catcalled, I avoided going to sketchy areas, and I “learned” that after a certain hour I could not go out on my own. After talking to other females in the study abroad program I was enrolled in, I found out that they also felt the same way and took similar approaches when going out in public. Before I studied abroad, I always thought that women should be able to travel on their own. After my experience, though, I realized that I would not necessarily travel on my own again because of the risks involved in doing so.

While in France, I also took a course about female Algerian writers. I read texts by Assia Djebar, Taos Amrouche, and Leila Sebbar and learned about the postcolonial experience of North African women in France and the identity issues they face when immigrating to a new country. I became more interested in the experience of immigrant women in France. As a result, I decided that I wanted to learn more about these women and the ways in which contemporary issues in the French state affect them.

Throughout this paper, I analyze the case of gang rapes in French banlieues. I explore the reactions women have towards sexual violence, such as the shame rape
survivors experience in their communities when speaking out. I also examine Samira Bellil’s memoir about being gang raped to further understand the implications and trauma rape survivors face, in particular those living in French banlieues. I analyze the ways in which the French Republic highlights sexual violence in banlieues and associates men of Maghreb and Muslim background as the main perpetrators of gang rapes. Even though the French state addresses sexual violence, highlighting and associating rape with men of North African countries creates a double bind for women living in banlieues. Survivors want to speak about their suffering, but at the same time they do not want to further stigmatize the communities they come from. As a result, the community demonizes and adds pressure to women to stay silent.

The French state plays up feminism with policies meant to stop sexual violence, such as the ban against the veil. Such policies though, sabotage the communities in banlieues through the promotion of anti-immigration politics. These anti-immigration politics are a reflection of France’s former “colonial notion of hierarchy” over North African countries (Guérif-Souilamas, 23). Sexual violence does occur in banlieues, but the French state should not use anti-immigration politics to generalize that all Arab and Muslim men are perpetrators of sexual violence. Once these politics no longer exist, survivors are more likely to speak out about their experiences because they will no longer fear that they are betraying their communities. The political rhetoric behind sexual violence needs to stop exoticizing Maghreb and Muslim women as the “Other,” and instead include survivors themselves in discourse surrounding the issue.

II. The Banlieue
News coverage has created this stereotype that gang rapes only occur in banlieues. Laurent Mucchielli, a French sociologist, studies gang rapes and concludes that gang rapes have occurred since the 1960s and do not solely occur in banlieues. Mucchielli states that Native French men are also involved in gang rapes; however, when native French men commit these crimes, the media does not pay attention to them because they will not receive as much publicity as the violence committed by the “Other.” In fact, the incidence of gang rapes has “not increased over the past twenty years,” countering the media’s sensationalist approach towards gang rapes in banlieues (Bowen, 214). Mucchielli also argues that the practices of gang rapes have not changed, but the claims about them have (Bowen, 214). It was not until the 1990s, when immigration became an issue, that, “the public and state that had not been interested in rape or sexual violence suddenly” became “concerned about it” (Ticktin, 864).

During the 1990s, France suffered a period of unemployment. This period of mass unemployment affected the housing projects in banlieues dramatically. Immigrant workers were the first to be laid off, depriving them of work and social status (Amara, 62). As a result, these men felt as if they lost their sense of masculinity because they had always been “kings within their family and nobodies outside the home” (Amara, 68). These men decided that the only way they could regain their masculinity was in the streets. Today, young men believe that they can “exercise their mastery in the only space they know;” the banlieue (Amara, 68). According to Fadela Amara, former president of the French feminist organization Ni Putes Ni Soumises, “rather than turn against French

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2 Tournantes began to receive constant attention from the media when the film La Squale was released in 2002. That same year, Samira Bellil published a book about her life in the French banlieue. The activist movement Ni Putes Ni Soumises held protests and marches during the years of 2001-2003 also increasing media attention about sexual violence in banlieues.
society and the symbols of the republic,” these young men “oppress their sisters and all the girls within the limited space of the projects” (Amara, 68). Feeling powerless, they decide that the only way they can feel a sense of domination is to commit acts of violence towards the females in their community.

Young men in banlieues are socially marginalized due to their ethnic origin. Every day these young men, many of them second-generation immigrants, are constantly stigmatized for their background even if their lifestyle may have “little to do with an ‘Arab’ or ‘Algerian’ way of living” (Cesari, 2). As a result, they suffer from post-colonial syndrome, “in which an Arab or Muslim background becomes a symbol over determined with all the negative imagery built up over decades of colonialism (Cesari, 2). These young men “assuage the frustration arising from the exclusion from mainstream society by victimizing ‘soft’ targets, especially women” (Bellil, xvi). They feel aggravated that French society does not welcome them, making them feel as if they have lost part of their masculinity. The young men who live in banlieues feel that their identities as individuals are threatened. They have difficulty identifying with their ethnic values and those imposed by French society. For them “ethnicity signifies an experience of difference and discrimination…simultaneous with the loss of cultural identity” (Cesari, 2). The discrimination and structural violence they suffer from, as well as the high unemployment rates, lead them to become involved in gangs.

In order to regain their masculinity, they target young women because they see overpowering them as the only way they can have control in their lives. Having control over women and being violent makes them feel masculine. In order for these young men to be accepted in French banlieues and to feel a sense of community, they decide to join
gangs and to engage in violent and rioting behavior. Meanwhile, men that do not portray these characteristics are not considered “masculine.” They are viewed as being secular and moving away from patriarchal notions of being male. On the other hand, being aggressive reinforces the stereotype that in order to be masculine and in control, one needs to be violent. Not having a sense of power and dominance encourages these young men to be involved in violence. It is not until they dominate women that they feel in power.

Since banlieues have a large Maghreb population, the sexual violence that occurs there is linked with Arab and Muslim origins. Tournantes are “attributed to Arab-Muslim culture rather than to urban social problems” (Bowen, 214). Instead of focusing on the structure of these urban areas and banlieues, the media and public officials place the blame on Arabs and Muslims. The media connects incidents of gang rapes to Islam and makes Muslim men seem uncivilized and barbaric as a form of anti-immigration rhetoric. By making women seem vulnerable and weak, the French Republic argues that it needs to protect them from the dangers of Muslim men, when in reality it is enforcing anti-immigration policies. These anti-immigration policies are supported by public outrage that argues that Muslim men are backwards and incapable of assimilating. By making it seem as if all Muslim men oppress Muslim women, French society supports these politics. The issue is that all Muslim men are generalized as being barbaric; however, it is imperative to remember that women in banlieues do suffer from sexual

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3 Neighborhoods where working-class, immigrant, postcolonial families live are marginalized and viewed as sexist. Grouping all these individuals together by nationality, community, or ethnic origin is seen as “reminiscent of the grouping of native populations under the colonial regime (Guérif-Souliamas, 29). As a result, sexism is “constructed as the exclusive and natural practice of uncivilized and ‘uncivilizable’ men,” men known as garçons arabe (Guérif-Souilamas, 25). This sexism is viewed as representative of a type of domination that has “supposedly disappeared from the rest of society” (Guérif-Souilamas, 25).
violence and their suffering should not be trivialized. There are Muslim men and non-Muslim men that commit these crimes, and they need to face the consequences for the injustice they do. Before they commit these crimes though, the French Republic needs to address the local problems occurring in banlieues to help these young men find employment or become involved in other activities that will prevent them from being in the streets and being involved in tournantes.

In “Sexual Violence as the Language of Border Control: Where French Feminist and Anti-Immigration Rhetoric Meet,” Miriam Ticktin argues that the French Republic is “fighting sexism with racism” (Ticktin, 865). It may seem as if French officials are trying to prevent sexual violence, but they are using it as a political means. Sexual violence is prevalent in other parts of France, but it is seen as more of a phenomenon in banlieues because “sexuality is often recognized only through the framework of racial, cultural, and religious difference” (Ticktin, 865). This sensationalism does bring sexual violence in banlieues to the public sphere, but it actually belittles the suffering of women who experience gang rapes. They are less likely to share their stories because they are afraid of the shame they will face in their communities for speaking out.

III. The Politics of Shame

Survivors of gang rapes stay silent because they are afraid of the possible humiliation and shame they will experience if they tell their stories. Hellen Block Lewis would argue that they suffer from the “trauma of the disempowered” (Fayard, 35). The situation these young girls face, living in poverty-stricken suburbs of French cities, ultimately haunts them throughout their lives. Not having anyone to talk to about these incidents leaves them alienated and causes them to lose their sense of self.
Survivors of rape have a very difficult time speaking out about the sexual violence they suffer from because they blame themselves for what happened. Many women feel that if they had been “wise” and not hung out with the wrong crowd, they could have prevented being raped. They blame themselves for being in those situations. Not only do they blame themselves, but the community they live in also places the blame on them.

The case of a young girl from Vigneux-sur-Seine is an example of how women encounter blame from their community after being raped. One of her neighbors questions, “What were the girls doing in the afternoons down in the basements? ... Why did their parents let them go there? They know what happens if they follow the boys. They know what happens if they go to the basement” (Sciolino). The neighbor’s statement exemplifies that women are blamed for getting themselves in situations that lead to sexual assault. Such reactions blame the victim, reinforcing the idea that females have the responsibility of doing something to prevent being raped. The men that commit these crimes need to be blamed instead. Such accounts demonstrate that unfortunately, it is up to women to take measures to prevent rape; men need to be taught not to sexually assault women.

Rape victims also experience further shame because they think about the ways in which speaking out will affect the lives of their relatives. They do not want their families to be associated with someone who is raped. Some families are threatened and harassed so much by their community that it causes psychological damage. For example, the father of the girl from Vigneux-sur-Seine became so depressed after his daughter’s sexual assault becomes public that he hanged himself (Sciolino). The same girl also tried to
commit suicide (Sciolino). Becoming public about being raped causes great stress on female survivors that many of them decide to suffer privately and stay silent rather than encounter harassment from the community.

Staying silent about being raped does not make the situation better for women. While one has to understand that women have the choice to decide if they want to speak out about being assaulted, choosing not to say anything only encourages further silencing of rape. The reality, however, is that our society has created this culture in which young girls who speak out feel attacked by those around them. In order for women to share their stories and experiences, society needs to create a culture that is more understanding and sympathizing to survivors of rape. An environment where they feel comfortable, rather than threatened needs to be created. If survivors stay silent, then sexual violence continues to occur. Since this violence never goes away, it becomes invisible.

Women who suffer from sexual violence often look for validity in others in order to feel accepted. In many cases, survivors of rape have lost their self-respect and have low self-esteem, so they decide to regain it by trying to be accepted by others. In “Rape, Trauma, and Shame in Samira Bellil’s Dans l’enfer des tournantes,” Nicole Fayard claims “shame involves the desire for the approval by another” and “is a reaction to loss of face when this relationship breaks down” (Fayard, 35). When looking for this approval, many times survivors are judged for what happens to them. As a result, this makes them feel even worse than before, often causing certain relationships to deteriorate.

In The Mask of Shame, Léon Wurmser describes that shame comes from a primary conflict: “the self feels empowered by the object it wants to control” and “the
self also wants to be loved by the other, but encounters indifference” (Fayard, 37). The shame that emerges from rape does not occur only as a “moral or psychological reaction to sexual abuse” but is also a result of “unequal sexual relations” (Fayard, 36). When a woman is raped, she realizes that the male is in control of her body. He takes advantage of her bodily integrity. As a result, females feel shame for not being able to control the actions done to them.

Survivors of rape do not tell their stories because they do not want their reputation to be tainted. In banlieues, the reputation of a woman is very important. Their reputation is determined by how they are categorized. Girls in banlieues are categorized into two groups; they are either “good girls” or “bad girls.” “Good girls” are respected for listening to their elders and following the rules of the home. “‘Good’ girls stay at home, do housework, take care of their brothers and sisters, and leave their home only to go to school” (Bellil, 27). On the contrary “bad girls” hang “around outside like boys… the ones…who do what’s forbidden, wearing makeup, going to clubs, and smoking” (Bellil, 27). The fact that these young women are labeled as “bad girls” implies that there are many things wrong with them. Having this label means that the community does not value or respect them. Being a “bad girl” is “enough to make a rep for being ‘easy,’ for being a ‘cellar slut,’ for being a little whore” (Bellil, 27). As a result, men living in banlieues believe that they can do anything to “bad girls” because they have already broken the rules of society.

Perpetrators feel that their acts are justifiable because “bad girls” act against the traditional gender roles of the community. Unfortunately, society believes that if something does happen to the “bad girl,” it is because she put herself in that situation. On
the other hand, when something happens to a “good girl,” then people are in a state of shock and wonder how something so horrible could have happened to her. They are surprised because they cannot imagine that “good girls” would put themselves in a situation that would lead to rape.

The categorization of girls into certain groups only makes it acceptable for girls in banlieues to act under the subordination of men. Only “good girls” who respect the men in their lives are valued. In banlieues, the reputation of women is associated with the relationships they have with their male relatives. Their honor is affected by the presence of men in their lives. Young women who live in families in which men are the head of the household are more likely to obey the rules of the home and not rebel against them. These young women are the “good girls.” Meanwhile, “bad girls” face the possibilities of being raped because they act in defiance to the men in their lives. It is unacceptable that they suffer simply because they make a choice not to live an “honorable” life, one that is different than the life of a traditional female in a banlieue.

Survivors of rape feel that they have lost their dignity, further exacerbating the shame they experience. Helen Merrell Lynd argues that “‘shame is defined as a wound to one’s self-esteem, a painful feeling or sense of degradation excited by the consciousness of having done something unworthy of one’s previous idea of one’s own excellence’” (Fayard, 35). Since women are no longer “pure,” they feel a sense of inferiority and of having “‘violated prescribed code’” (Fayard, 35). In the French banlieue, women are the “guardians of rules of honor” (Fayard, 35). Women who stay at home and obey the men in their families have honor, while those who do not are not valued. Females who break the rules of honor are made to experience shame. Women who speak about being
sexually assaulted are threatened for breaking the code of not protecting the reputation of their community.

Girls who speak out are viewed as disturbing the norm, thus reinforcing and increasing the shame they already feel. Meanwhile, “rapists consider themselves victims, ‘heroes’ who complain because they get sent behind bars, because someone ‘sold them out’” (Bellil, 28). When a girl makes her rape public, it is assumed that the lives of the perpetrators are ruined. These perpetrators are viewed as victims, while the young women who are raped are viewed as causing a disruption to the their neighborhood. Women who want to combat oppression are seen as “traitors to their community” (Las, 9). These young women are viewed as causing a disruption to the banlieue because if they do speak out about the sexual violence they suffer from, then the public’s perception of Arab-Muslim men as barbaric is reinforced. The banlieue would rather want girls to stay silent, so the stereotypes of Muslim men are not perpetuated. Instead of protecting women, banlieues want to protect the community as a whole.

In fact, the lives of these young women are ruined furthermore. They have to face the daily struggle of knowing that someone invaded their body, that someone took control of their space. Many of the men who commit gang rapes believe that if a woman is no longer a virgin, then they are not causing any harm because the woman no longer has anything to lose⁴ (Sciolino). However, they have many things to lose; these women lose their dignity and respect. It is women who face the consequences if they decide to speak out. Girls who are raped have to deal with the fact that others will talk about them.

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⁴ Some men feel that as long as a woman keeps her “virginity” when she is raped, then they have not committed any crime. As a result, they find other forms to sexually violate them (Sciolino). The definition of virginity is questioned in such a case.
negatively for deciding to make their rape public. It should not be that way; perpetrators need to be punished.

Rape survivors not only experience psychological damage, but may also suffer from medical conditions caused from the stress of being raped. When female survivors of rape begin to suffer physically rather than psychologically, their bodies are medicalized. Society individualizes the public crisis of rape by making it seem as if it is the individual who has the problem, rather than an issue found in society. By making it seem as if it is the individual who is responsible, it justifies the fact that society should not do anything to fix the social issues occurring since her suffering is being categorized as “private.” Arthur Frank describes that “society prefers medical diagnoses that admit treatment, not social diagnosis that require massive change in the premises of what that social body includes as part of itself” (Fayard, 42). According to Fayard, “when the problem is turned into a medical one, the larger, social problem of society’s attitude to rape goes unnoticed, thus further naturalizing rape and the shame of rape” (Fayard, 42). Even when their bodies are medicalized, many survivors of rape do not have the means to receive treatment.

These females are also less likely to be able to afford a lawyer who will support them if they do decide to speak out about their rape case. Even if they can afford a lawyer, many times survivors of rape decide not to retell their experience because of issues in the justice system. They would rather not say anything because they know that if they do they will be judged and victim blamed, with the possibility of their case not going anywhere. The shame and suffering they experience will not be worth it, if the

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5 It is very difficult to argue rape cases in France, just as it is in the United States.
legal system does not take their case seriously. A rape survivor will not be at peace until she knows that perpetrators who commit acts of violence are put in jail. If they are set free, then they are likely to continue committing these crimes and making more girls suffer. Since rape is also difficult to prove, the legal system does not put any effort into rape cases. The suffering of female survivors is not considered important, making it seem as if these women are unworthy of receiving assistance from the law.

Survivors of rape lose their dignity and self-respect after being raped. They are in a vulnerable position, and unfortunately they do not have a network of support that they can confide and trust in without feeling attacked and victim blamed. Many of these females want to speak out about their experiences so sexual violence in banlieues can be stopped, but they know that if they do they will be judged for threatening the reputation of their community. In the next section, I will use the case of Samira Bellil to further analyze the issues that a female in a banlieue faces when deciding to make her experience of sexual assault public.

**IV. Samira Bellil: Dans l’enfer des tournantes (In the Hell of Gang Rapes)**

Samira Bellil became a French feminist activist after she published her memoir, *Dans l’enfer des tournantes*, in 2002. In her narrative, she describes the sexual violence she faced in the banlieues of Paris. Bellil discusses the effects she faced after she was gang raped at the age of 14. The day she was raped, Samira expected to spend time with her boyfriend, but when she met up with him all his friends were there as well. They insulted her. They then took turns raping her. A month later, as she rode the metro, one of the men involved in her gang rape saw her. When she arrived at her stop, he also got off the train and followed her. He forced her to go to the basement of an old housing project
with him and raped her again. A few years later, during a trip to Algeria, Samira was assaulted once more. These three incidents had a tremendous effect on Samira Bellil. She spent fourteen years trying to find a way to cope, and it was not until she wrote her memoir that she felt she had reached some type of healing.

I analyze Samira Bellil’s memoir to understand the aftermath she faces after being sexually assaulted. Her book is one of the first to highlight and bring attention to tournantes. Her case appealed to me because her narrative has been used by feminist organizations in France to promote awareness of sexual violence in banlieues. Bellil uses her text as a “social function whose aim may be to renegotiate the rape victim’s perception of herself by testifying about her experience and shame” (Fayard, 34). Her narrative breaks the silence of the gender and sexual violence that occurs in banlieues.

After reading her memoir, I conclude that gang rapes are not products of Arab or Muslim culture but are rather derivatives of social and economic issues negatively affecting banlieues. Samira’s account illustrates that gang rapes are not about ethnicity but about male-domination (Fayard, 38). The youth who are involved in these incidents use rape as a “way for the dominant to mark out their territories and assert their domination over those perceived as weaker” (Fayard, 38). These men do not commit crimes as a product of religion; they commit these crimes because they feel powerless. In Samira Bellil’s book, she only mentions religion once, illustrating that there is very little evidence that Islam plays a role in gang rape attacks. Samira is Muslim but does not practice it. It can be argued that as a result of this Samira is not well informed about religion, but religion still has an influence on a population even if people may not necessarily practice it. Misogyny exists, not because of Islam, but because men in these
neighborhoods lack guidance and control in their lives, and the only way they believe they can find it is by dominating women.

Similar to other women who have been raped, Samira also feels humiliated and rejected. She blames herself for being in the position that led to her sexual assault. When she remembers what led to the event, she mentions she was a “stupid idiot” (Bellil, 7). Using these words illustrates how she blames herself for what happened. She keeps thinking that if she had done something differently, then she would not have been put in that situation. She feels that she has no right in pressing charges because she should have known better than to go out at night and meet up with her boyfriend.

Samira decides to not press any charges because she knows that if she makes her rape public, the community will attack her. They will also associate her past behavior of rebelling against her parents as one of the reasons that led Samira to be involved in a crowd that is more vulnerable to violence. In Bellil’s case, the blame is placed on her because she goes against her parents and chooses the life of a “bad girl.” Samira breaks the family code by going out and being raped. The negativity she receives from others leads to her low self-esteem, making her feel “rejected, useless, dirty and guilty” (Fayard, 37). The fact that she also had a boyfriend before suggests that there is a possibility that she had lost her virginity, making her seem as an “easy lay.”

Samira decides to stay silent because she knows that her family will be threatened as well. The reputation of her family will be ruined. However, Samira is more afraid of what her family will think of her if she speaks out. She knows that if she tells her family about being raped then she will get in trouble. She believes that her family will make her feel ashamed because they will question why she put herself in that situation. Bellil
senses that there is no reason in making her rape public if she will not even have the support of her relatives.

Samira never feels comfortable with her family. Throughout most of her life, Belli’s father is absent. 6 When he returns back home, he is very violent and does not respect his wife or his daughters. After she is raped, her father does not say anything until later on when he tells her that she cannot look at her because he is in disgust. In many cases, households in which men have all the control have broken relationships because family members are more likely to be loyal to the head of the household. For example, Bellil states that her mother does not help her because she “supports” everything her father does; she is too afraid of what he will do if she decides to say something. As a result, Samira feels that she cannot trust anyone in her family. Even before she is raped, Bellil feels her family relationships deteriorating. 7 Without the support of her relatives, Samira has no one that she can really talk to. She suppresses her feelings, increasing the emotion and anger inside of her. When young women like Bellil experience violence and oppression, they learn to normalize their suffering. If their own family members do not value them, they do not value themselves as individuals.

In order to feel worthy of being loved, Samira looks for approval and acceptance outside of the home. Samira “sought the love” she “didn’t find at home” in Jaïd, her boyfriend. Unfortunately, she realizes that their love was never real after he allowed his friends to rape her. Bellil cannot believe that her boyfriend allowed his friends to commit such an atrocity against her. Her account illustrates that gang rapes are usually not

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6 Her father was arrested when she was young and was never present during her childhood. Bellil never mentions the reason why her father was arrested.

7 Samira feels further alienation and isolation between her family members because she lived with a foster family in Belgium when she was young.
committed by strangers but by people the survivor knows. Bellil knows every single guy who raped her. These cases make it more difficult for survivors to be public about their experiences because they do not necessarily want to punish someone whom they thought actually cared about them. Unfortunately, not saying anything perpetuates the cycle of sexual violence. Men begin to believe that if the women they assault do not say anything then sexual violence is acceptable.

Silence has become a sixth sense in banlieues because gang rapes occur so frequently that the community has become numb to it (Sciolino). In her memoir, Bellil states that no one is “surprised by tournantes, they’ve become the norm. The violence of what happens in the basements and in the trash rooms, or elsewhere, has only gotten worse…gang rapes are now commonplace, and the perpetrators are getting younger and younger” (Bellil, 26). She states that she “was already so used to violence and bad treatment at home and on the street” that she “thought it was a fact of life” (Bellil, 37). She begins to believe that it is something she can never escape from. Even though people in banlieues notice that the violence is present, nothing is done about it because they do not want to further stigmatize their neighborhood. However, staying silent only normalizes gang rapes.

Young women who suffer from gang rapes decide to speak out about their experiences when they meet other survivors. Knowing that there are other women that also have similar experiences creates a connection with them and solidarity to seek justice. They are more likely to speak out, if they know they have the support of others. For example, it is not until Samira finds out that the same guy who rapes her almost sexually assaults two other girls in her neighborhood that she decides to press charges.
Samira finally gains the courage to speak out only to realize that the rape culture society has created victim blames individuals.

When Samira and the two other women go to the police station, the police try to persuade them not to press charges. The police tell them that it is not worth pressing charges because nothing will be done. They also mention that it is most likely that the females put themselves in that situation. The fact that the police are telling them not to say anything demonstrates society’s idea that staying silent is considered more important than going through the ordeal of pressing charges. The other girls who are with her manage to escape being raped. When Samira tells public officials what happened to her, they keep asking her why she is the only one that is not able to escape. They begin to think that if she really did not consent, then she would have managed to escape like the others. This example implies how the public uses women’s actions to victim blame them, while the actions that men do are justified.

The incidence at the police station makes Samira lose faith in the legal system. She states, “Fighting against the justice system…I knew that tune, ‘Justice, the system stinks…’ Fight for what? For whom? For me? Since what I’d heard a few minutes ago, I had ceased to exist” (Bellil, 129). Samira does not feel that she can confide in her lawyer, the very person who is supposed to help her with her case. When she first speaks to her attorney, she victim blames Bellil when she asks her why a fourteen-year old girl would be out so late at night. Later on, her lawyer does not inform Samira of her trial date. Her lawyer does not put any effort into her case because many times public defendants receive very little monetary compensation. They do not want to spend as much time in getting to know their clients when they know that they will most likely not win the case.
Before Samira spoke to her lawyer, she had believed that the criminal justice system in France was egalitarian compared to the law system in Algeria. When Bellil is sexually assaulted in Algeria, she chooses not to do anything about it because the Algerian law system is corrupt. She decides that she wants to go back to France, where egalitarianism and liberty are valued. She states, “at least the laws count in France” (Bellil, 86). She believes that she will receive justice in France, but she becomes frustrated when she is proven wrong. The French have promoted a false universalism of the Republican ideals of French citizenship, which promises liberté (liberty), égalité (equality), and fraternité (fraternity), but in reality it only applies to the ideal French citizen that is white, male, and middle-class (Kemp, 21). Even though Samira is a citizen of France, she cannot receive justice because she does not fit into any of these categories.

After giving up on the French legal system, she finally meets a lawyer that takes her case seriously. Bellil is surprised when he tells her that he will look at her case pro bono. At the beginning, she is suspicious of this lawyer because all of the lawyers she had met before only wanted to make a profit. With the help of this attorney, Bellil wins her case and receives compensation. This compensation proves that she suffered legal “injury” and “damage,” demonstrating that rape had a negative effect on her wellbeing. Even though winning her case is a great accomplishment for Bellil, she still feels that she is not healed completely. She comes to the conclusion that the trial had not given her dignity back.

Throughout her memoir, Bellil describes the negative impact rape had on her physical and mental health. In order to cope with the added stress and shame she experiences, she finds solace in drinking and drugs. At certain points in her narrative,
Bellil sells her body because she no longer feels that it belongs to her. She ends up experiencing medical conditions such as epilepsy and phlebitis and also attempts to commit suicide. In 2004, she suffers from stomach cancer and dies just two years after publishing her book. With all the physical and mental conditions placed on Samira, she feels worthless and wants to escape the life of the banlieue.

Many young women try to find ways in which they can cope with the shame they experience after being raped. With shame, there are some defense reactions that one can employ: fight or flight reactions (Fayard, 37). With a fight reaction one “turns the tables” on another (Fayard, 37). Meanwhile, with flight reactions one decides to escape. Samira experiences flight reaction after she is raped. For example, she chooses to stay at her friend’s place while she decides what she wants to do. Later on in the story, she also runs away and moves in with one of her boyfriends, spending less time at home and looking for ways to escape. She eventually leaves home but never has a stable environment to go to, often having to find ways to survive. After being hospitalized for several medical conditions, Bellil decides that her only option is to go back home.

When she gets home, her father finally speaks to her. The only reason he speaks to her again is because she is diagnosed with a medical condition. When Samira’s father finally talks to her, she states, “My father is talking to me at last! ... He finds it easier to approach a woman who is mad than one who’s been raped” (Bellil, 171). Samira’s father is only able to talk to her when she is diagnosed as having a medical problem. Her medicalization makes it seem as if Samira did not choose to suffer herself, leading her father to view her as approachable. Her case exemplifies once more how women’s bodies are only taken into consideration when they are viewed through a medical lens.
Samira Bellil is able to find herself again through the process of writing. Writing “evokes not only the experience of the past through the transcript of the story, but also the psychological re-integration of the subject who has suffered trauma” (Oktapoda, 1). She describes that after writing, she recovered a form of dignity (Bellil, 203). For years, she defined herself according to the horrible things that happened to her, but she finally feels that with writing she no longer needs to play her “victim ID” anymore; she claims that “she exists in other terms” (Bellil, 203). Even though, Samira knew that she would have to relive her experiences by writing, she also realizes that it was the only way in which she could share her story. She knew that with a book she could decide what to write, “each word would be chosen, mulled over, allowed to ripen” (191). She shares her story because she wants to break the silence of rape in banlieues. Her memoir ultimately opens up discussion of gang rapes in banlieues and makes the French Republic aware of this specific type of sexual violence. The way in which stories such a Samira Bellil’s have been used by the French media though, have been misconstrued to portray citizens of banlieues in a negative way, reinforcing racial and anti-immigration rhetoric.

V. The Politics of the Veil

One way in which French society has focused on stopping sexism in the context of anti-immigrant politics is with the introduction of the controversial law banning the headscarf. I analyze the issue of the veil because the French Republic has promoted the idea that banning the veil will eventually end sexual violence, especially for North African women. The law on the hijab, instead, takes away agency and ignores the voices of women who experience sexual assault. French legislators believe that expelling girls from schools who wear a hijab will encourage girls “to remove the veil, to erase a sign of
oppression, and to break with the "bearded men" who impose it (Guérif-Souilamas, 32). Instead of women making their own decisions, French legislators make the decision for them.

The headscarf affair first began in October 1989, when three junior high school girls refused to remove their hijabs in class. In September 1994, education minister François Bayrou issued a directive about the display of religious symbols in schools, one of the precursors to the 2004 law (Winter, 282). Social tension led President Jacques Chirac to create a special commission on secularism, with Bernard Stasi as the head of it (Amara, 21). The commission came up with 25 proposals, and Chirac decided to adopt only one, the ban in all public schools of the wearing of religious symbols of all kind (Amara, 21). This law was signed on March 2004. Even though the law bans all types of religious symbols, it is known as the anti-headscarf law, stigmatizing Islam even further. This law is meant to help Muslim women “free” themselves from oppression, but it has actually reinforced anti-immigration politics.

French society values secularism or laïcité, “the belief that a uniform, secularized identity is the best guarantor of national identity” (Ticktin, 869). Secularism is seen as being “threatened by the growing Muslim population in France” (Ticktin, 869). The French Republic feels the ban on the veil will protect secularism. According to Ticktin, French society views the ban as a way to “protect young Muslim girls in banlieues and elsewhere from patriarchal practices associated with a radicalizing Islam” (Ticktin, 869). The veil is seen as a “fundamentalist flag” (Las, 7). As a result, communities with large Muslim populations are perceived as radical; a “neocolonial, anti-Muslim discourse” emerges (Ticktin, 869). In addition to this, the law reinforces the “legitimacy for the
policing of men and boys of Arab or Maghrebian origin and for deporting those without French nationality if they are violent” (Ticktin, 870). This violence becomes associated with Islam.

French officials police Muslims because they fear “the loss of ‘French identity’ in the process of integrating the Muslim community” (Amara, 21). The French Republic views young Muslim women from North Africa, as a “racialized ‘other,’ visible evidence of all” that is “foreign in contemporary French society” (Amara, 21). This point of view does not acknowledge the fact that many of these young women were born in France. The only reason they are viewed as the “racialized other” is because they do not posses the characteristics of being a traditional French citizen, of being a white male. The law is meant to stop the oppression of women, but since it is associated with Muslim men, it has instead strengthened racism towards the “other exception” and developed into a “common practice, concealed beneath a virtuous mask” (Guérif-Souilamas, 39).

Since banlieues have large populations of individuals of African, Maghreb or Muslim backgrounds, they are identified as the “‘Fifth Column” of a new barbarism” that “threatens the West and its ‘values’” (Las, 12). Supporters of the ban argue that the law was passed to fight sexism, but it was in fact passed because French society feels threatened by other cultures. As stated by Joan Scott, “racism was the subtext of the headscarf controversy, but secularism was its explicit justification” (Scott, 90). According to Joan Scott, “banning the veil also became a substitute solution for a host of pressing economic and social issues; the law on headscarves seemed as if it could wipe

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8 Fifth Column is a term used for a group of people who act as traitors out of an enemy of their country. In this case, individuals of African, Maghreb or Muslim backgrounds are viewed as enemies of the French Republic.
away the challenges of integration posed for policymakers by former colonial subjects” (Scott, 17). Scott states that the real issue in question is the French state’s anti-immigrant policies. The French state does not want to explicitly declare that it is racist and against immigrants, so it uses other types of policies, including those relating to sexual violence, to mask its true intentions. Laws such as the ban on the hijab are just temporary solutions to the entrenched social and economic issues in suburban ghettos. Instead of analyzing why violence is occurring in banlieues or how it compares to other areas in France, the ban against the veil becomes a way to police individuals of Muslim origin. Just as France policed North Africans during colonization, the state now feels the need to do the same with descendants from former colonized countries.

The veil challenges French values because “French universalism insists that sameness is the basis for equality” (Scott, 12). French officials state that French ideals are being challenged, but what is actually being challenged is the masculinity of French men. French men are so used to seeing women’s sexuality portrayed in a public manner. The increased population of North Africans and Muslims in France means that there is an increase of women wearing the hijab. French men are not used to seeing women covering themselves, so they feel that they are being denied seeing a women’s sexuality. When Chirac made a speech about the veil in Tunisia in 2003, he stated that “wearing the veil, whether it is intended or not, is a kind of aggression” (Scott, 158). Through his statement, he expresses that women’s sexuality is repressed, but he also states how “the aggression of the woman consisted in denying (French) men the pleasure-understood as a natural right (a male prerogative) to see behind the veil” (Scott, 159). This aggression is “taken to be an assault on male sexuality, a kind of castration” (Scott, 159). Wearing a veil
deprives “men of an object of desire” which undermines “the sense of their own masculinity” (Scott, 159). French politicians may state that the veil threatens French ideals, but the masculinity of French men is threatened as well. Despite this, French society and the media use the law as a form of fighting sexism.

The fact that feminist organizations have also supported the ban reinforces the French state’s idea that the law is legitimate. The feminist organization Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Neither Whores Nor Submissives) supports the ban on the hijab, “suggesting that it promotes violence, sexism, and patriarchy” (Ticktin, 871). When the law against scarves in schools was being debated, Ni Putes Ni Soumises did not support it, but later on the organization stated that the scarf was a form of misogyny (Bowen, 215). The organization’s support implies that there are cultural or religious explanations for violence (Ticktin, 871). According to the organization, the violence that these women suffer from is perceived as a “recognizable, culturally marked, exoticized form of violence,” suggesting that Islam oppresses women (Ticktin, 883).

Fadela Amara, former president of the feminist organization Ni Putes Ni Soumises, published a book under the same name as the organization that tells the stories of the challenges women in banlieues have faced. Amara and other women involved in these organizations are of North African origin. Many of these women do not come from “‘troubled’” neighborhoods, but since they are of North African descent, they meet “the political need to have ‘authentic’ female voices against the scarves” (Bowen, 215). The women in these organizations support the Left, but they receive funds from the Right, implying that there might have been a possibility that the group changed their agenda to

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9 Her book was published in 2003 to coincide with the anniversary of Sohane Benziane’s death. Sohane was a French girl of Algerian ancestry who was burned to death in October 2002 by her boyfriend in the banlieue of Vitry-sur-Seine, south of Paris.
align with the work of the Right (Bowen, 215). For example, Ni Putes Ni Soumises was given free space, automobiles, and book prizes. Such incentives might have led them to change their agenda. According to Bowen, all this attention would not have occurred if Ni Putes Ni Soumises had only spoken for women’s rights (215). Bowen’s analysis demonstrates society’s idea that there needs to be more at stake than women’s rights for action to take place. Instead of fighting for just women’s rights, immigration and secularism is also embedded into the fight. Women’s rights alone are not considered important and worthy of seeking justice for, when they should be.

Women in these organizations portray themselves as the “good” version of immigrant children who are unveiled and speak for their rights (Bowen, 215). They attack the negative image that the media has created about them; “the veiled woman” who is a silent victim and “the violent young Arab, whose natural instincts are to gang-rape his female counterparts” (Bowen, 215). Ni Putes Ni Soumises suggests that Arab culture is backward, and it reinforces the arguments by politicians that “Arab culture and Islamic folkways simply” have “not yet developed to the point where they” will “be on the same level as those of Europeans” (Bowen, 216). As a result, immigrants from North Africa have been categorized as the “Other.”

Officials of the Right view the fact that Ni Putes Ni Soumises changed their agenda to coincide with that of the Right as a blessing. For example, Ni Putes Ni Soumises explains the violence occurring in the banlieues as a result of sexism “rather than as the result of policies of labor migration and residential segregation” (Bowen, 216). The French government does not want to claim that violence in banlieues rose from problems of labor and discrimination because it would require expensive policies
(Bowen, 216). Instead they use Arab sexism, which calls for denunciation (Bowen, 216). Proponents against Ni Putes Ni Soumises condemn “the instrumentalization of women’s suffering for political ends” to “produce a violence that is ethnicized and used to mark the boundaries of otherness and the enemy within” (Ticktin, 872). Organizations such a Ni Putes Ni Soumises try to hide the racism in French politics by stating that it fights sexism. They try to make it seem as if they promote awareness of sexual violence, and they do, but they also associate it with anti-immigration rhetoric.

Ni Putes Ni Soumises reinforces the stereotypes of Muslim women being capable of assimilating to French values and Muslim men being incapable. Fadela Amara’s book “serves the old colonialist rescue narrative in which brown women need to be saved by the white men” (Lindbom, 3). Amara perceives the men from her culture as barbaric. Her point of view makes it seem as if Muslim men are incapable of treating women with respect, supporting the French Republic’s idea that these men subjugate and are violent to women. Organizations such as Ni Putes Ni Soumises, “allow women to name and struggle against violence,” but they can also “serve to perpetuate such violence as part of larger nationalist and imperial projects” (Ticktin, 865). Instead of focusing and placing the blame on Muslim men, Ni Putes Ni Soumises needs to focus on the women who face sexual violence and ask them what they want to do to seek justice. It needs to stop imposing the organization’s idea of what it believes is right for these women, without asking for their input. The organization needs to take into consideration the point of view of sexual assault survivors themselves.

Ni Putes Ni Soumises is only able to identify with women that embody the image of the beurette. The organization promotes the image of the beurette, rejecting women
who do not conform to this stereotype. The beurette is the young French Arab woman who complies with the “standard of integration” (Guérif-Souilamas, 31). The beurette has been used to promote an “assimilationist model of integration in the name of young Muslim women who are perceived to suffer oppression and violence at the hands of their families and communities” (Kemp, 20). The beurette tries to be like her “white, French counterpart” (Kemp, 23). Instead of giving voice to minority women in France, the beurette stereotype is used to promote the “notion of French womanhood as an ideal to be emulated” (Kemp, 31). Meanwhile, the veiled French Muslim young woman is seen as “unable to liberate herself from an oppressive patriarchal Muslim order” (Guérif-Souilamas, 31). Since these Muslim women are not able to conform to the ideal French feminist, they are completely ignored in the involvement of discourse surrounding sexual violence. The discourse may be about them, but these women are not included to speak for themselves in the conversation.

The case of Zina, a Muslim female, illustrates how the French Republic only values a woman who conforms to the beurette stereotype. Zina was born in Algeria, but she speaks French like a native because she was schooled in France. When she applies for her French nationality, it is refused because she wears a hijab, a “‘foreign’ practice imposed on her, one that compromised her freedom and, crucially, her bodily integrity” (Ticktin, 883). Wearing a hijab is viewed as a form of oppression. Since she decides not to assimilate to French society, her immigration status is affected. Her refusal to assimilate is viewed as breaking away from French ideals. Her case illustrates how sexism and immigration are associated with one another.
The law against the wearing of the hijab also punishes women and instead “fails to punish those men who do exert pressure on women” (Kemp, 32). The law does not take into account the voices of Muslim women. Most Muslim women cannot relate to the “feminism” the law promotes. While feminists and organizations want to help these women out, they are not listening to the experiences of North African females. Instead of helping these young females, this type of “feminism” has “denied Muslim women the possibility to challenge, critique and rethink Islam on their own terms” (Kemp, 31). Anne Souyris, founding member of Femmes Publiques10, describes that while French feminism may promote itself as universal, it fails to account for difference (Kemp, 26). According to Souyris, many feminists are only able to see other women’s experiences in relation to their own history and struggle, one of the reasons why the hijab affair has been very troubling for them (Kemp, 26). They do not understand what Muslim women experience to formulate policies that concern them. Women who face sexual violence in banlieues need to be included in the debate and asked what they want when forming laws about the veil or any policies having to do with sexual violence.

VI. Conclusion

The recent accounts of women in French banlieues have led to greater awareness of the social inequalities occurring and the oppression they face. Unfortunately, many of these stories are sensationalized and used to promote anti-immigration politics, taking away the focus of the true suffering women face. Muslim women are exoticized as the “Other.” Since they are exoticized, their experiences are viewed as foreign. Gayatri Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot participate in hegemonic representations and

10 Femme Publiques is an organization that defends the rights of female sex workers in France who, like Muslim women, are not seen by mainstream feminists to conform to a ‘normal’ notion of womanhood and who are often excluded from debates that concern them (Kemp, 26).
“does not have access to foundational narratives of nationalism, internationalism” and “secularism” (Dornhof, 123). However, women in banlieues, such as Samira Bellil, have “publicly talked and written about their personal situation and experience” (Dornhof, 123). Feminist organizations in France have brought the experiences of rape survivors to the forefront of public debate. Nevertheless, these organizations have not allowed survivors to speak for themselves, since the French state has portrayed their communities in a negative way. Scholars need to value women’s experience as essential and not view them as the “Other.”

Muslim women need to be included in the discourse surrounding sexual violence. Organizations such as Ni Putes, Ni Soumises need to consider the point of view of women who suffer from sexual violence, instead of just speaking for Muslim women. The French state should ask females to speak in accordance with it. According to Joan Scott, “French politicians and intellectuals need to come up with new ways of addressing difference, ways that acknowledge its existence rather than refusing to engage it” (Scott, 180). They need to realize that having an equal society is about being open to difference. Not everyone can adapt to one form of universalism. As Joan Scott states, “it is not, as the French lawmakers assumed, the sameness of all individuals that defines commonality, but the recognition of their difference” (Scott, 182).
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