

Bessora: An Authentic Immigrant Voice from France

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Over the past forty years, racial and political conflict has served as a backdrop to France's struggle with its immigration population. Despite the strain of French political forces' unwillingness to embrace newcomers, literary work from its immigrants has flourished.

One cannot speak of French immigrant texts and authenticity without mentioning the work of Sandrine Bessora van Nguema, better known by her pen name, Bessora. The product of a Gabonese father and Swiss mother, Bessora's novels are peppered with allusions to her experiences as a woman, immigrant and mother in multiple cultural contexts.

In 1999, Bessora arrived on the international scene with her first novel, *53cm*. Subsequent publications prove that Bessora is not only prolific, but also true to her own literary style. Her novels reflect the effects of French colonial history on present-day immigrants and their lives in hexagonal France.

Bessora's works are not only startlingly authentic; they're also daring and highly-entertaining. *53cm*, refers to the measurement of her protagonist's rear end. This notion comes from the true story of Saartje Baartman, a South African woman who was "discovered" by French scientist Georges Cuvier in the eighteenth century, forced to undergo countless medical examinations, and put on international display as a result of her "oversized" buttocks and labia.

Bessora's fictional character, Zara, is a young mother who immigrated to France and is seeking a residence permit. In this satirical novel, Bessora critiques both French racism and the absurd bureaucratic systems that make it near impossible for immigrants to gain residency. In her quest, Zara is forced to negotiate not only bureaucratic obstacles, but also physical ones as she shapes her body into the "form" required by the nation. As Zara explains it, acceptance into the French nation is highly conditional, based on the "correct" condition of not only the body, but also of one's very identity.

To become French, the normalization of one's body required, and one must also reshape his or her identity to fit French mainstream cultural ideals. In this case, the hybrid or "impure" identity of the immigrant must be transformed in order to gain access to the nation. Bessora's underlying message is that there is no "normalcy," so she creates protagonists whose very beings subvert expectations placed on them by French society.

Bessora has written these novels to subvert French definitions of race, gender, and sexuality within the context of immigration. She supplies readers with protagonists who

serve not as simple models of “abnormality” or “difference,” and who also call into question the systems of knowledge that define normalcy to begin with. She demonstrates her writing versatility in her 2002 novel, *Deux bébés et l’addition (Two Babies and the Bill)*, which chronicles the life of Yéno, a male midwife, as he negotiates his identity amidst French social discourses regarding normative constructions of gender, sexuality, and acceptable forms of employment. His identity is particularly problematic in the eyes of the French because of his ambiguous sexuality and feminized persona. As a result of his fragmented and enigmatic identity, Yéno defies all definitions of “normalcy” imposed on him by French republican values. In short, he is not classifiable according to French definitions of masculinity; therefore, he does not “belong.”

Bessora’s voice is authentic precisely because she does not rely on the prescribed roles for “French” or “African” female (and male) protagonists. Likewise, her novels tend to avoid the literary traps and expectations of a black woman writing from France. Through her innovative use of prose, flashback sequencing, and unexpected literary allusions, she creates novels that represent her specific experiences as a female immigrant instead of the role created for her by French politics and imposed definitions of “normalcy” or “Frenchness.”