

Nymphs and Nymphets: How Hafid Bouazza Evokes Nabokov to Demand Artistic Freedom

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Abstract

Over the past decade Hafid Bouazza has emerged as the most influential contemporary Dutch writer with a multicultural profile. He is also the one who objected most vociferously to the general expectation that his personal circumstances influence, or even drive, his artistic expression. Bouazza, who was born in Morocco but has lived in the Netherlands since his early childhood, demands to be read away from his biographical background, even if his debut collection of short stories, *De voeten van Abdullah* (Abdullah's Feet), is largely set in Morocco. With 'Apolline', the story of a transcultural love affair set in Amsterdam, Bouazza appears to respond to the expectation of his readers. However, this article argues that it is through this story in particular that Bouazza stakes out his artistic case: he is an author who takes his inspiration from art, who engages with intertextual play and who refuses to be shackled by and to the expectations of his readers. I aim to demonstrate that Bouazza enlists his highly venerated 'literary forebear' Vladimir Nabokov to underline this call. Bouazza's literary trade involves simultaneously activating and denying the author's personal circumstances, yet it is through engagement with the text as a literary gesture that its full interpretive potential is released. How nymphets become nymphs.

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When in 1996 Hafid Bouazza published his debut collection of short stories *De voeten van Abdullah*, it caused quite a stir.¹ Besides the obvious literary qualities of the collection, it was the author's background that so excited its readers. Hafid Bouazza, born in Morocco, the son of one of the many 'guest labourers', had moved to the Netherlands at the age of seven, young enough to be regarded a second-generation migrant. It is worth remembering what the literary landscape was like in the mid-1990s. The first writers born outside of the Netherlands and its colonial structures were breaking onto the stage: in 1994 Mustafà Stitou estab-

lished a name for himself as a poet. On the prose front, Kader Abdolah had published his first collections of short stories in 1993 and in 1995. At the time of Bouazza's debut, the reading public – and the publishing houses in particular – were ready for a 'serious' migrant author. The success of Naima El Bezaz's *De weg naar het noorden* ('The Way to the North') and Hans Sahar's debut novel *Hoezo bloedmooi* ('How's That Gorgeous') had encouraged an active recruitment policy on the part of various publishing houses, but the former's teenage and the latter's late adolescent orientation had left a niche for serious literary prose. That gap was more than filled by Bouazza's collection and publishers and readers alike readily hailed him – and, to a similar extent, Abdelkader Benali – as the first signs of a new spring of literary multiculturalism. Bouazza was eagerly put on display and the fact that his writing arguably satirised exactly this trend in the fashion-driven cultural market, did little to discourage them.

The predominantly mono-cultural Dutch literary landscape had already encountered a number of 'outsiders' before the emergence of young migration writers in the mid-1990s. Authors from the (former) Dutch colonies of Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, such as Albert Helman, Frank Martinus Arion, Tip Marugg and Astrid Roemer had, by then, made a name for themselves in literary circles. The Dutch literary field accommodated so-called *Indische literatuur*, writing in Dutch associated with the former colony of Indonesia, as well as Surinamese and Dutch Caribbean literatures. However, the tremendous interest in second-generation migration authors such as Bouazza was an as yet unknown phenomenon and cannot be disconnected from the *zeitgeist* of the late 1980s and 1990s when the multicultural society started to dominate the political and social agenda. Public debate and government measures were shifting from the 1980s policies of social integration with the preservation of cultural identity and original language (known as 'integratie met behoud van eigen taal en cultuur') to mandatory Dutch language courses and civic integration training resulting from the 1998 Integration of Newcomers Act (*Wet Inburgering Nieuwkomers*). The nation's mood swung from a celebratory multiculturalism characterised by a belief in the value of the immigrants' own culture and language as an important integration tool to an anxious insistence on social and economic integration through the knowledge of the Dutch language and cultural practice.

With the multicultural society emerging as the dominant political and social concern, the new multicultural writers caught the public and media limelight, often for reasons other than their literary work. Firstly, they were trumpeted as the embodiment of successful social and cultural integration, taking the cultural bastion of literature as the ultimate proof. Secondly, the bicultural authors were often regarded as spokespersons and their emergence as an opportunity to 'unlock' the immigrant communities for a predominantly Dutch reading public. What made Bouazza stand out – apart from the literary quality of his debut – was his explicitly advertised resistance to the ways in which his work was received and

to the labels attached to his writing. He strongly objected to being considered a 'migrant' author, an 'ethnic' author, or even a 'Moroccan-Dutch' author. He argued that since he wrote in Dutch, he was a Dutch writer and that no further qualifications were required.² Also, he insisted that his art had nothing to do with his personal background, not even if most of the stories of *De voeten van Abdullah* were set in an imaginary Moroccan village which carried the same name as the actual village from which the Bouazza's emigrated in 1977, Bertollo.³

De voeten van Abdullah in its first edition consisted of eight separate short stories which show a significant degree of coherence: there is overlap in the setting, the same characters recur, and there are various cross-references between the stories. At the heart of the collection are four stories that cover a period of about a decade, all set in the village of Bertollo, a small, dusty Moroccan village. I will need to say a few words about the Bertollo stories first before moving on to 'Apolline', the main concern of this discussion. My argument will be that, although 'Apolline' is the only story in the collection entirely set in Amsterdam, it is in line with the Bertollo stories and that they all underline Bouazza's appeal to not reduce his writing to his personal circumstances. My position will be that while the extra-literary deserves attention, it should not distract from, nor is it necessarily at odds with, a serious engagement with the text.⁴

The protagonist of three of the Bertollo stories (on two occasions referred to as Hafid) is a younger version of the narrator who recalls the events of his youth in a retrospective first-person narrative.⁵ Although the present location of the narrator remains undisclosed, the reader senses a cultural gap: this narrator has moved away, has taken a step back and observes the Bertollo community from a critical distance. This detached narrator constructs the village and its characters from cultural clichés and fairytale-like occurrences: feet can think and talk, trees turn into humans and vice versa. Yet the stories are far from idyllic: sexual aberrations and religious fanaticism rule, the spiritual leaders are as corrupt and degenerate as the rest of the people and stealing and cheating are the order of the day. There is no intercultural encounter *per se*: the cultural gap is created by the 'native' narrator who distances himself from the world of his past and who shares the one-dimensional views of the Arab world that are predominant in the West, both exotic and cruel, romantic and perverted, horrifying and fascinating. This narratological construct creates a 'comfort zone': a distance shared by the reader and the narrator who remain at a critical and emotional distance from the world and fortunes of the people of Bertollo. However, as the Bertollo stories progress, the critical distance gap narrows until it has entirely disappeared. The narrator has been sucked into his own stories: he has turned into a demon wandering the ruins of oppressive cultural orthodoxy. Bertollo has become a ghost village and literally goes up in flames.

Cultural Re-education

With Bertollo burnt to the ground, up rises the city of Amsterdam as the setting of an intercultural encounter, in which for the first and only time in the collection a woman plays an active role. In the opening lines of the story *Bouazza* is careful to link ‘Apolline’ to the previous Bertollo stories: the narrator, called Humayd Humayd – a name that has not occurred before – used to live in Bertollo before he moved to Amsterdam. Why or when this happened we do not know, but presumably a while ago because he cannot recall his first impression of Amsterdam since he has become one with his new environment:

I can no longer recall my first impression of Amsterdam, grafted as I am onto the vertebrae of her cobbles, the wooden wombs of her bars and weathered loins of her seedy neighbourhoods. I moved into a bedsit in the Eglantine Street: a cavity in a row of decaying teeth.⁶

The description of the narrator’s fusion with Amsterdam is overwhelmingly physical: vertebrae, womb, loins, teeth. The second mention of the capital is along the same lines: ‘a naked, omnivorous, much-loved overbearing city’⁷ and with this personification, the city becomes inextricably linked with Apolline, the heroine of the story and the embodiment of the sensuality of the city, of sexually assertive femininity, of vocal independence: ‘Taller than I, blonde, high-cheek-boned, bushy-lashed, full-hipped, she was the perfect embodiment of my first lonely golden summer in Vondel Park.’⁸

‘Apolline’ appears to be the recording of a predictable story: the confrontation of a ‘typical’ migrant Muslim male with a ‘typically’ Western European, ‘liberated’ female. The text – effectively a melancholy monologue – opens in the present tense with the narrator’s retrospective interpretation of an event from his childhood: he had fallen into a ditch and was rescued by a solitary old man shunned by the rest of the village who takes the boy back to his house to dry off. Here the narrator finds that the walls of the old man’s house are covered with pictures of naked women, and the narrator credits his younger self with the surmise that ‘these were bound to be the munificent Sirens of the Occident’.⁹ Looking back, the narrator is convinced that in this past experience the seeds of his love, or perhaps better, obsession, for Apolline were sown. The text then shifts into the past tense, recounting the protagonist’s first impressions of Amsterdam, and his first encounter with Apolline, the blonde goddess he worships and whose ‘personality began to dominate my world’.¹⁰

Apolline’s domination effectively takes shape as a programme in cultural re-education and identity reform. Apolline shows no respect for Humayd’s religion (he is not allowed to pray in her presence) and seeks to strip him of what he refers to as his ‘identity’ (she calls it ‘the beads and henna tracery of folklore’). She

introduces Humayd to pork, alcohol and 'sophisticated' sex. The pinnacle of her efforts indeed appears to be his 'sexual re-education'. Humayd feels humiliated but must comply because: 'She wouldn't take no for an answer: she was so domineering, so uncontradictable, so vibrant, so womanly. So I gave myself up – reluctant, dragging my feet, with dark circles under my eyes.'¹¹

Humayd is clearly so overwhelmed that he does not speak: his words are not recorded in direct speech at any moment in the story. Humayd's speechless state stands in stark contrast with Apolline's powerful verbal presence. Indeed, it is as if her words deprive her lover (albeit in his version of the affair) not only of his identity but also of his speech:

At strange moments she would sprawl on my chest, trace my lashes with a fingernail and say: 'I can see myself in your eyes.' I could see myself in her eyes, too – foreshortened, deformed, no less puny than I always felt when I was with her.¹²

When Apolline, 'at strange moments', says that she sees herself in Humayd's eyes, Humayd interprets her remark as her seeing herself. Her seeing is determined by her aggressive European identity and her lover's 'oriental' identity. At least that is how Humayd interprets her words. The dissymmetry in cultural power structuring their relationship has rendered him weak and defenceless, again, in his eyes, the only eyes we as readers have. Apolline seeks to strip Humayd of his 'Moroccan' customs and preferences. She calls him, with a degree of derision, 'son of the dead desert'; it is Apolline who decides that he has 'primitive principles' and that he comes from a country 'where sex served for procreation and where aphrodisiac contortions prior to penetration were not on the cards'.¹³ Humayd adds meaningfully here, 'These are her words.'¹⁴ It appears that Apolline's re-education programme boils down to an attempt to eradicate Humayd's orientalist identity that she had projected onto him in the first place. In other words, Humayd is caught in a cultural conflict between the 'oriental' identity Apolline has attached to him and wants to strip him of, and the 'European' identity Apolline holds up to him. By the same token, Humayd refuses to take Apolline and her attempts at communication seriously. When she goes and visits Morocco, he assumes it is one of her jokes and at no point does he interpret her move as an attempt to genuinely 'see' him, as an attempt to rise above orientalist prejudice. He records her best moments as moments of silence: typically when she is asleep, lying in a position pleasing to his eye – 'At such times she was my Apolline, more than during the livelong day'.¹⁵ He expresses a wish for a mute Apolline, so passive that she almost appears dead.

We are not told what precisely led to the end of the affair, just as we were never told how Humayd ended up in Amsterdam in the first place. Instead, Apolline is painfully returned to the two-dimensional state of her 'origin' in the narrator's

memory: he has stuck her pictures all over the walls of his house. He has become the Amsterdam counterpoint of the village outcast who saved his life at the beginning of the story.

‘Apolline’ does not paint a picture of successful migration. It does not show the transition from ‘native’ culture, through migrant limbo, to multicultural utopia. Instead, it shows us mutually fantasising about the orientalist and occidentalist other, and silence. As such, Bouazza’s story challenges both the clichés of cultural essentialism and the facile, utopian fantasies of multiculturalism. What he presents instead is the genuine multicultural condition: convoluted, uncomfortable, full of misunderstanding but with the potential for ‘shared difference’. This is confirmed in the final two sentences of the story when the text circles back to the opening scene, superimposing the image of Amsterdam onto Humayd’s childhood village in two long and touchingly poised final sentences:

Dark-bricked, grimy Amsterdam swaggers and staggers alongside my youthful mirror image in the murky ditch under the carob trees, where, reversed in watery reflections, the trees take on the shapes of tall, step-gabled canal houses jostling with the ruins of lives – plastic rubbish bags, bicycle carcasses – and where the sun cannot reach the naiads languishing under the rippled surface. The blistering, deathly quiet of the afternoon siesta, the dusty footpaths and the olive trees, the clamour of my disorderly childhood, these provide the background to a life in Amsterdam with rare golden summers in Vondel Park, rainy Sundays, carefree boredom, quenched evening hours – they constitute the difference I shared and will forever share with Apolline.¹⁶

Bertollo and Amsterdam have become and inextricably intertwined – bicycles and naiads hide side by side in a canal cum ditch – the way one’s past will always also be part of one’s present. It is the recognition of the possibility of ‘shared difference’ in which differences are not eradicated but respected for what they are without foreclosing communality.

Two Melancholy Monologues

In the context of *De voeten van Abdullah* – as the debut collection of a young Moroccan-Dutch author in which most of the stories are set in Morocco – this appears to be the type of multicultural reading that Bouazza invites his readers to make. It satisfies the readers’ desire for clear cultural opposites, it offers the Western reader an insight into oriental sexuality and the way ‘our’ cities and ‘our’ women are perceived, in other words, it satisfies the expectation and desire often driving a multicultural reading. However, this is not the full story. Bouazza, with his unrelenting attack on sociological or anthropological approaches to literature in general and to his writing in particular, is unlikely to leave unchallenged the assump-

tion that concerns of identity and cultural heritage will dominate, or at least impact on, the author's literary choices and aspirations. Sneja Gunew, in *Haunted Nations*, describes the expectations levied on multicultural authors as follows: 'Minority writers [...] are invariably confined to the issue of their 'identity' and even in a poststructuralist world of decentred subjectivity. [...] Their ability to produce 'textuality' or to play textual games is rarely countenanced.'¹⁷ Yet the key to an alternative reading lies exactly in Bouazza's 'textual games', in the dialogue that 'Apolline' offers with arguably the quintessential recoding of male obsession, Nabokov's *Lolita*. An intertextual reading, focusing on composition and style to reveal intention, will both support and extend my earlier multicultural reading and will reveal 'Apolline' as a rewriting of the obsessive male in a time dominated by multicultural worries. At the same time, lifting the text above the multicultural context by explicitly engaging with Bouazza's 'textual games' will defy the tendency to lock up his writing in assumptions based on knowledge of the author's personal circumstances.

On frequent occasions Bouazza has expressed his admiration for Nabokov, whose style and craftsmanship he admires and whose strictly aesthetic approach to literature he shares.¹⁸ In his informal poetics, *Een beer in bontjas* ('A Bear in a Fur Coat'), Bouazza links his artistic drive directly to Nabokov when he argues that the creative force necessary to produce art can only be inspired by art itself and not by personal circumstances. It is the inspiration provided by the confrontation with great literature that will mould a writer and awaken the need or the will to write, not his or her personal or social background:

Authorship does not spring from the first trauma, but from the first discovery of literature. A migration from, let's say, Morocco to the Netherlands could give rise to a degree of homesickness and a sense of alienation and the journey could render interesting material for a story, but the need to write, the will to write only arises when the mind is transformed, for example, into a nacreous, trickling Berlin in the 1930s as described in *King, Queen, Knave* by Vladimir Nabokov.¹⁹

In 'Apolline' he gives literary expression to this admiration when the musing of Humbert Humbert's variations on *Lolita*'s name in the opening lines of *Lolita* reverberate in the words of the other H.H., Humayd Humayd:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always *Lolita*.²⁰

Apolline, my will o' the wisp, my heart's fancy. How odd that a name can acquire a taste on the tongue. This taste – I know it – is physically determined, the taste of Apolline's womanhood: the taste and pungency of rose water and musk grains.

At first she was Abouline in my mouth; during the halting ascent of sexual peaks (which she would not allow to be wordless) she was Appelin. But now she is Apolline, she will always be Apolline, a whisper above the widening eddies of a moist death.²¹

Not only does Bouazza allude on a stylistic level to Nabokov's *Lolita*, but also in terms of structure does 'Apolline' show parallels with Nabokov's novel. In *Lolita* Humbert suggests an explanation for his obsessive interest in young girls by offering the reader an incident from his early youth: as a twelve year old, he was thwarted during his first sexual encounter with Annabel, which, he speculates, created a rift in his life: 'I am convinced [...] that in a certain magic and fateful way *Lolita* began with Annabel.'²² For Humayd, it was the encounter with the pin-up images in the house of the old man after his fall in the local ditch that prepared the way for his obsession with Apolline:

These were bound to be the munificent Sirens of the Occident, and in my heart at that very moment the seeds were sown of my love for Apolline, in whom I was to find tangible evidence of that two-dimensional voluptuousness. I loved her before I saw her.²³

However, it is the narratorial frame that evokes the intertextual link most relevant for our discussion: both texts are melancholy monologues, confessions of a lost love, recorded solely through the eyes of the male narrator. The narrator's verbal souplesse and stylistic exuberance manipulate the reader into viewing the objects of their loves through the interpretive eyes of the narrator. Humbert, in his eloquent self-deceptive defence, would like the 'Jury' and his readers to believe that *Lolita* is a devious, perverted little girl, a budding prostitute, 'hopelessly depraved', 'a little deadly demon'.²⁴ This evocation of the sexually avaricious nymphet is employed to distract from the deviant sexual preferences of a middle-aged man who takes advantage of his twelve-year-old step-daughter.²⁵ Humayd's portrayal of the all-powerful Apolline as a sexually liberated and insatiable being, who is not only disrespectful of Humayd's cultural heritage but also out to corrupt, humiliate and feast on the protagonist, is equally carefully and skilfully constructed. Not only in his description of forced sexual activities, but also from the metaphors Bouazza employs, Apolline emerges as the adult version of Nabokov's perilous nymphet. Nabokov's required age gap between the nymphet and her victim – 'never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty' – is replaced by a cultural distance between the occidental siren and her defenceless oriental prey.²⁶

Nabokov's nymphets possess a 'perilous magic', they are 'not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)²⁷ and the attributes of a normal little girl ('purity and vulnerability') are not part of her demonic make-up. It is she who brings susceptible older men under her spell. In Bouazza's version, the nymphet is changed into a nymph, a naiad or a siren, mythical creatures associated with water, rivers, and all to a greater or lesser extent dangerous and out to tempt and destroy men. Recognising Apolline's mythical qualities explains a number of Humayd's mysterious descriptions and comments. Bearing in mind that naiads live in fountains, these words recorded by Humayd fall into place: 'She paused by a fountain and said pensively: "Funny how water always sounds so inviting. But you'd know all about that wouldn't you, son of the dead desert?"'²⁸ Similarly, Humayd notices that 'sometimes she would raise her shoulders and fold her back feathers' or that she would lie 'naked on the bed [...] twirling her socked-feet in the air'.²⁹ Sirens are birdlike women with wings and one wonders if Apolline insists on wearing socks to hide her bird feet. Not only does Bouazza commingle the human with the animal, but he also fuses the animate with the inanimate when Apolline is at times indistinguishable from her environment, the city of Amsterdam. As mentioned earlier, Amsterdam, like Apolline, is depicted in very physical language, using images that are not only full of sexual resonance ('naked, omnivorous') but also of decay: 'weathered loins', 'decaying teeth'. Amsterdam as a deliciously dangerous and depraved city is the perfect match for an equally dangerous transgressive life form such as Apolline: 'she was the perfect embodiment of my first, lonely summer in Vondel Park'.³⁰ To complete the picture, the threat constituted by Apolline is also implied in her name. Humayd remembers how she herself revealed the meaning: 'It's amusing to think my name derives from Apollo, but it doesn't, my sweet. My name comes from Apollyon, also known as the Destroyer, another name for the devil.'³¹

Alternative Vision

As in *Lolita*, where the reader is only offered Humbert's version of events – a version shaped by its purpose: to defend his case in front of a jury – in 'Apolline' we are only ever offered Humayd's account of the merciless temptress. It is through his language that the opposition between the sexually insatiable, liberated female versus the defenceless male is constructed yet, again following Nabokov, Humayd cannot keep an alternative vision from sporadically breaking through his dominant interpretive frame. The most striking example of this is when the text quite abruptly shifts to a letter Apolline wrote to Humayd when she was on holiday in Morocco, his 'fatherland'. Apolline relates how she experienced a culture shock: when she asked an old man squatting under a palm tree what he was doing, he replied 'Just squatting', and Apolline offers an interpretation: 'I think I understand you better now. This must also be how you undergo my love: when you

squat, why not under a palm tree? I have always refused to believe there was nothing hidden behind your introversion. What does it matter? I love you.³² Her reading of Humayd's 'submission' to her love as somehow indifferent to her ('when you squat, why not under a palm tree?'; when you undergo love, why not mine?) is an indication of Humayd's refusal to look beyond his depersonalized obsession with the Playboy-like woman and his unwillingness to actually communicate with her as an individual. It is telling that the narrator does not pursue the point of Apolline's letter but instead retraces his feelings of jealousy over the numerous 'pregnant men' he imagines she has left behind in Morocco. Instead of responding to an invitation to genuinely communicate, the narrator prefers to re-experience the tormenting thought of 'her golden and pink beauty in the dust and the sun of that noisy, sullen country with its eyes of prey'.³³ Humayd will not allow his Apolline to be anything other than what he wants her to be: a 'Siren of the Occident', a projection for his hysterical fantasies.

The presentation of a passive, victimized Humayd is further undermined when he records: 'Red-framed sirens beckon behind deaf glass to me, wearing the same lingerie I liked to see Apolline wear, but which she hated'.³⁴ The use of the word 'siren' further aligns Apolline with the Amsterdam prostitutes, and Humayd's wish for her to wear presumably provocative underwear encapsulates how he would like to see her: sexually available. He seemingly fleetingly records Apolline's resistance to this role in her rejection of her lover's preferred lingerie but, similarly to the prostitutes, he positions Apolline 'behind deaf glass', that is, imprisoned in silence. It must be noted here that at no point in the text does Humayd actually speak to Apolline, or to anyone else for that matter – apart from us, listeners, readers. He tells us repeatedly that Apolline 'did not tolerate contradiction' and the text of his memory faithfully obeys this command.³⁵ In the memory of her presence the narrator is quite literally speechless: there are only some seven instances of direct quotation in the text and, with the one exception of the old man in Apolline's letter, they are all Apolline's. Yet it is the extreme sophistication with which Humayd remembers this speechlessness that makes his monologue such a haunting experience. The text alternates between a past in which the protagonist is absolutely silent and a present in which he displays extreme textual articulacy. The question arises why he did not 'speak' in the past, why he persisted in silence in the face of Apolline's determination to discard the 'beads and henna painting of folklore' he thinks of as 'identity' or when he is hurt by her 'frivolous intelligence and untroubled cynicism'.³⁶ It is difficult to read in his curiously controlled 'remembered' silence anything other than a persistent refusal to communicate, to move beyond his carefully drawn construct of Apolline as the dominant, irrefutable female who is out to strip him of his 'ethnic pride and primitive principles'.³⁷ Clearly the narrator has an ulterior motive when he persistently rejects communication, thereby keeping the clichéd representation intact.

In an interview in *De Groene Amsterdammer* shortly after the publication of *De voeten van Abdullah* in 1996, Bouazza briefly refers to his narrator's wish for a passive, silent Apolline:

Apolline was a kind of dream image for the boy, as he knew it from pictures in *Playboy*. But when he is in Amsterdam, that blonde woman with breasts and buttocks turns out to have a soul as well, and a character that proves to be a lot stronger than his own. He cannot deal with that. He discovers that in his native village he never received any education in love, only in sex. He even says on one occasion: 'She had her good, tender moments. This was when she didn't say anything and lay in a position he liked seeing her in. It would be better if she were not alive, that would be best'.³⁸

The narrator's wish for the death of his beloved is represented more subtly in the text than in its author's interpretive paraphrase ('At such times she was my Apolline, more than during the livelong day'), but the gynocidal fantasy remains.³⁹ Apolline, associated with life throughout the text, abruptly disappears and Humayd, musing on his Apolline-less state, chillingly records: 'I am a Bluebeard's castle for the daughters of my memory'.⁴⁰ Circling back to the beginning of the story, Humayd's description of Apolline takes on a different meaning: 'But now she is Apolline, she will always be Apolline, a whisper above the widening eddies of a moist death.'⁴¹ The multiple meanings of 'moist death' only strike the reader in retrospect: from what at first appears a shrouded reference to the sexual climax in Humayd's typically lyrical style, the possibility of a literal moist death emerges: 'she will always be Apolline' because has the protagonist drowned his 'naiad' in an Amsterdam canal? It is worth noting that in the Dutch text Bouazza coins the expression 'vochte dood' rather than the more common 'vochtige dood'. The word 'vochte', however, has a strong connotation of struggle: 'vocht' being the imperfect of the verb 'to fight', possibly referring to the resistance Apolline puts up to avert her death. In this context the closing lines – which again echo the final words of *Lolita* – take on quite a different meaning: 'the difference I shared and will forever share with Apolline' implies that there will be no new memories for Apolline. Her death consigns her eternally to the obsessive fantasies of her jealous lover.

Textual Play

In 'Apolline' Bouazza displays a textual, self-conscious manipulation of his readership's orientalist bias. In line with the Bertollo stories – in which Bouazza playfully exploits cultural expectations by painting an Arabic setting which, at least initially, responds to the one-dimensional Western view of the Arabic world – Bouazza appears to play a similar card in 'Apolline' but this time in a Western

setting. Bertollo, the village erected out of cultural clichés (heat, dust, oppressive religion, active djinns, forbidden sexual encounters and large, incestuous families), is replaced by an Amsterdam equally captured in stock images: smoky bars, prostitution, alcohol, sexually assertive women. Amidst this setting of clichés, Bouazza launches his appeal, namely to move beyond predictable oppositions, to reject the temptation to classify and generalise, and to respond to the individual, the unique behind the veneer of cultural expectation. In his 2003 novel *Paravion*, Bouazza revisits the affair between Apolline and Humayd in the failed encounter of a migrant teacher and his *Paravion* (read: Amsterdam) mistress. There is, however, an important difference: in *Paravion* Bouazza makes starkly explicit what remains unsaid in Apolline:

Real love was never part of the plan. If there was anything that could erode his being then it would have to be love. Or maybe not his being, but his... well... what would you call it... his *identity*: a carefully cultivated identity would quite definitely crumble if he could not be the man he had always been and who he wanted to be and that for the very simple reason that she was not the kind of woman he thought a woman should be.⁴²

In Bertollo, speaking trees and evil spirits are part of the ‘natural’ setting. In Amsterdam however, the magical and the mystical are brought in line with the less exuberant environment; this is particularly manifest in the portrayal of Apolline as a dangerously transgressive being, both realistic and mythological. Humayd, on first impression, is a subdued villager who appears an easy victim for Apolline’s worldly ways and demands. However, it is only after a serious engagement with Bouazza’s textual play that the full picture emerges. Exploring the intertextual reference to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, the protagonist emerges as an unreliable narrator who confidently manipulates his audience by exploiting predictable expectations of a multicultural encounter. By establishing a textual connection with arguably the most well-known unreliable narrator in Western literature, we are also reminded that, although the socio-political, historical and cultural circumstances of migration authors should not be ignored, it should not distract from attention for the way in which the writing itself confronts its prescribed position within the cultural field. ‘Apolline’ must therefore also be read as an appeal to not lock up the work of a migration author in the ‘Bluebeard’s castle’ of perceived expectations. Only by allowing Bouazza’s text to be more than a socio-cultural statement, by respecting it for what it ostentatiously is, a literary text, the full potential of Bouazza’s text is released.

Since 1956 editions of *Lolita* have always included Nabokov’s short afterword ‘On a Book Entitled *Lolita*’, in which Nabokov refutes any moralistic or referential reading of his text. In response to accusations of his novel being anti-American, he declares: ‘I chose American motels instead of Swiss hotels or English inns only

because I am trying to be an American writer and claim only the same rights that other American writers enjoy'.⁴³ Nabokov was acutely aware that his readers and critics responded partly to Nabokov's status as 'an outsider author' and that they exhibit different sensitivities when reading his texts from ordinary home-grown authors. Bouazza's work in general, and perhaps 'Apolline' in particular, shares Nabokov's awareness and stakes a similar claim: the claim to the same rights as Dutch authors, that is, the freedom to enjoy, or better perhaps, *revel*, in textual play.

Notes

1. Hafid Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah* (Amsterdam: Arena, 1996). I will base my discussion on the revised edition of 2002 (Amsterdam: Prometheus). All English translations of 'Apolline' with some minor adjustments are based on Ina Rilke's translation *Abdullah's Feet* (2000). Translations of all other quotations into English are my own [HL].
2. See, for instance, Ingrid Hoogervorst, "'Ik houd van woorden met een geschiedenis': Het lyrische taalgebruik van Hafid Bouazza", *De Telegraaf*, 14 July 1996; Wilma Kieskamp, 'Bekroonde Hafid Bouazza gebruikt archaisch Nederlands in sprookjesachtige verhalen', *Trouw*, 21 January 1997; Willem Kuipers, "'Ik ben een Nederlandse schrijver": Hafid Bouazza wil geen model-Marokkaan zijn', *De Volkskrant*, 1 May 1998.
3. See also Henriëtte Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment: On Hafid Bouazza's Literary Writing* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 79-102.
4. See also Ortwin de Graef and Henriëtte Louwerse, 'The Alteration of Amsterdam: Hafid Bouazza's Entertainment of Cultural Identity', in *Beyond Boundaries: Textual Representations of European Identity*, ed. by Andy Hollis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 35-53.
5. The one exception is in the story 'Satanic Eggs', where the narrative perspective moves to Abdullah, the son of one of the village greengrocers.
6. 'Ik kan de eerste indruk die Amsterdam op mij maakte niet meer terugroepen, vergroeid als ik nu ben met de ruggenwervels van haar straatkeien, de houten baarmoeders van haar kroegen en de verweerde lendenen van haar vele buurten. Ik nam mijn intrek in een kleine woning in de Egelantiersstraat, een kiesholte in het rotte gebit van de stad.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 110.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 97.
8. 'Langer dan ik, blond, hooggejukbeend, slordiggewimperd, breedheupig, was zij de volmaakte belichaming van mijn eerste, eenzame gouden zomer in het Vondelpark.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 111.
9. 'Dit moesten de gastvrije Sirenen van het Avondland zijn.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 110.
10. 'Haar persoonlijkheid begon mijn wereld te beheersen.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 111.
11. 'Zij duldde geen tegenspraak: zij was zo overheersend, zo ontgensprekelijk, zo in leven, een al-vrouw. Dus ik gaf mij over – met tegenzin, met moeite, met wallen onder mijn ogen.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 113.

12. ‘Op vreemde momenten lag ze op mijn borst, nagelstreeelde ze mijn wimpers en zei: “Ik zie mezelf in je ogen.” Ik zag mijzelf in haar ogen, vervormd, vertekend, niet nietiger dan ik mij in haar bijzijn altijd voelde.’ Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 116.
13. ‘waar seks slechts zou dienen voor kinderverwekking, en waar geen plaats zou zijn voor de afroditische kronkelingen vóór de penetratie’. Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 112.
14. ‘Dit zijn haar woorden.’ Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 112.
15. ‘Dan was ze mijn Apollien, meer dan in de levende dag.’ Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 116.
16. ‘Donkerbakstenig, vuil Amsterdam zwalpt en zwalkt met mijn jonge weerspiegeling in troebel slootwater, onder johannesbroodbomen, die in omgekeerde waterweerkaatsingen de vormen aannemen van hoge, puntige grachtenpanden en waarin levensruïnes ronddobberen – plastic zakken, fietskarkassen – en waar het zonlicht de zieltogende najaden onder het rimpelend oppervlak niet bereikt. ‘De verzengende doodsstilte van siëstamomenten, de stoffige wegels en olijfbomen, het misbaar van mijn wanordelijke kindertijd vormen de achtergrond van een leven in Amsterdam met zeldzame gouden zomers in het Vondelpark, regenachtige zondagen, zorgeloze verving, gelaafde avonduren – dit is het verschil dat ik met haar deelde en dat ik altijd zal delen met Apollien.’ Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 118.
17. Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimension of Multiculturalisms* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 72-3.
18. For example in Hafid Bouazza, *Beer in bontjas* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2004), pp. 92-9.
19. ‘Het schrijverschap ontstaat echter niet bij het eerste trauma, maar bij de eerste ontdekking van literatuur. Een migratie van, laten we zeggen Marokko naar Nederland kan het nodige heimwee en de nodige vervreemding met zich meebrengen en de reis kan mooie stof opleveren voor een verhaal, maar de noodzaak tot schrijven, de wil om te schrijven, ontstaat wanneer de geest, bijvoorbeeld, getransformeerd wordt naar een paarlemoeren, droppelend Berlijn in de jaren dertig zoals beschreven in *Heer, vrouw, boer* van Vladimir Nabokov.’ Bouazza, *Beer in bontjas*, p. 16.
20. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (London: Penguin Red Classic, 2006), p. 7.
21. ‘Van Apollien, mijn dwaallicht, mijn hartenspinsel. Vreemd hoe een naam een smaak kan krijgen op de tong. Deze smaak – ik weet het – is fysiek bepaald, de smaak van Apolliens vrouwdom; de smaak en geur van rozenwater en muskuskorrels. In het begin was zij Aboelien in mijn mond; in de haperingen van seksuele hoogtepunten (die voor haar nimmer woordenloos mochten zijn) was zij Appelin. Maar nu is zij Apollien, zal ze altijd Apollien blijven, een gefluister boven de uitcirkelende rimpels van een vochte dood.’ Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 110.
22. See also Hafid Bouazza, *Heidense vreugde. Gepeins en gezang* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2011), pp. 31-3.
23. ‘Dit moesten de gastvrije Sirenen van het Avondland zijn, en het was op dat moment dat in mijn hart de kiem werd gezaaid van mijn liefde voor Apollien, in wie ik de tastbare werkelijkheid vond van die tweedimensionale wulpsheid. Ik hield van haar voordat ik haar had gezien.’ Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 110.
24. Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 16.

25. See also Eric Goldman, 'Lolita: Sexual Deviance and Normality in Nabokov's *Lolita*', *Nabokov Studies* 8 (2004), pp. 87-104, and Jen Shelton, "'The Word Is Incest': Sexual and Linguistic Coercion in *Lolita*,' *Textual Practice* 13 (1999), pp. 273-94.
26. Nabokov, *Lolita*, pp. 16-7.
27. Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 150.
28. 'Ze bleef peizend bij een fontein staan en zei: "Vreemd dat water altijd zo uitnodigend klinkt. Jij weet er alles van, niet, zoon van de dode woestijn?" Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 112.
29. 'Soms verhief ze haar schouders en vouwde de ruggenveren. Of ze lag buikelings naakt op bed en las een tijdschrift, haar gesokte beweeglijke voeten opgetild.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 116.
30. 'Zij [was] de volmaakte belichaming van mijn eerste, eenzame gouden zomer in het Vondelpark.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 111.
31. 'Het is prikkelend om te denken dat mijn naam is afgeleid van Apollo, maar dat is niet zo, mijn schat. Mijn naam, liefde, is afgeleid van Appolyon, de vernietiger, een bijnaam van de duivel.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 117.
32. 'Ik denk dat ik je nu beter begrijp. Zo zul jij mijn liefde ook ondergaan: als je hurkt, waarom dan niet onder een palmboom? Ik heb altijd geweigerd te geloven dat er niets school achter je introvertie [sic]. Wat doet het ertoe? Ik hou van je.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 115.
33. 'Het was en is een kwelling om te denken aan haar gouden en roze schoonheid in het stof en de zon van dat luidruchtige, balorige land met zijn roofogen.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 115.
34. 'In rode omlijstingen roepen betaalde sirenen achter doof glas in dezelfde lingerie waarin ik Apollien graag zag, maar die zij verafschuwde.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 118.
35. 'Zij dulde geen tegenspraak.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 113.
36. 'de kralen en hennaschilderingen van folklore', Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 111; 'haar frivole intelligentie en onbekommerd cynisme', *ibidem*, pp. 112-3.
37. 'etnische trots en primitieve principes', Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 113.
38. Sander Pleij and Mirjam Vosmeer, "'De abele spelen, die vind ik prachtig": Gesprek met Hafid Bouazza', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 1 May 1996.
39. 'Dan was ze mijn Apollien, meer dan in de levende alledag.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 116.
40. 'Ik ben een Blauwbaardburcht voor de dochters van mijn geheugen.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 114.
41. 'Maar nu is zij Apollien, zal ze altijd Apollien blijven, een gefluister boven de uitcirkelende rimpels van een vochte dood.' Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah*, p. 110.
42. 'Werkelijke liefde was niet de bedoeling geweest. Als er iets was wat zijn wezen kon doen afbrokkelen, dan was het wel liefde. Of niet zijn wezen, maar zijn... tja... hoe noem je zoiets... zijn identiteit: een zorgvuldig gecultiveerde identiteit zou onherroepelijk bezwijken als hij niet de man kon zijn die hij altijd was geweest en die hij wilde zijn en dat om de simpele reden dat zij niet zo'n vrouw was zoals hij vond dat een vrouw moest zijn.' Hafid Bouazza, *Paravion* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2003), p. 164.
43. Nabokov, *Lolita*, pp. 358-9.

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