



Intercultural Representations of Diasporic Amazigh (Berber) Writers in/from the Netherlands

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to reconceptualise the idea of an Amazigh literature with regard to the transnational and plurilingual experiences from which this literature arises. Along these lines, the second generation of Amazigh writers born in the Netherlands – and/or those who migrated when they were children – rejects the label of writing ethnic literature, and/or being categorised under the umbrella of Dutch authors of Moroccan descent.

Keywords: Moroccan literature / Marokkaanse literatuur, Dutch literature /
Nederlandse literatuur, Migration / Migratie, Riff/Amazigh

Through a study of two literary texts, I question the ideological construction of migration literature in its role of ‘enriching complement’ to national literatures. The authors studied, Abdelkader Benali and Hafid Bouazza, both subvert and consolidate the discursive construct ‘migrant’ through the use of creative/ productive stereotypes that interact with and subvert the social imaginary and dominant discursive representations made by Europeans about North Africans (particularly Moroccan/Imazighen).¹ This article therefore calls into question binary representations and interrogates the image foreigner/native in integration and migration debates. Furthermore, the texts, *Wedding by the Sea* (1996, trans. 2000) by Benali, and *Abdullah’s Feet* (1996, trans. 2000) by Bouazza, point to the thorny European-North African history and its omnipresence in the identity constructions of self and other.² In the texts written by these two authors, who belong to the second generation of immigrants, we witness a reconstitution of the European cultural heritage alongside a notable modification of certain literary and stylistic practices inherited from the past, such as irony, orientalism and the ethnographic novel. A cultural and multilingual phenomenon alters both the content and form of European literature today.

Introduction

In this article, I propose a postcolonial theoretical approach akin to the one I have used in my analysis of diasporic Amazigh authors in the Iberian Peninsula. Therefore, seeking points of convergence between Amazigh-Catalan and Amazigh-Dutch authors is a given because, as Elleke Boehmer and Sarah De Mul observe, the emergence of a new translinguistic consciousness forces us to engage different colonial trajectories and their contemporary legacies with europhone spaces and languages (5).³ That said, the absence of any colonial relation between Morocco and the Netherlands such as the one between France and Spain would prevent a straightforward postcolonial approach to Dutch-Moroccan/Amazigh literature. However, the comparative and historically informed outlook of this article allows for a re-evaluation of the relationship between migration and postcolonial literary studies. On the other hand, I intend to contest that *Wedding by the Sea* and *Abdullah’s Feet* are deemed as a celebration of multiculturalism ‘by the Dutch establishment’ (Elboubekri, 25–6). Instead, I argue that no national or international literary laws

¹ Throughout the article, I will use the word Amazigh to refer to the culture commonly known as ‘Berber’. Amazigh refers to a native woman from North Africa, although it could be also used for a male. Tamazight is their language, and it has many dialects. Imazighen is the plural of Amazigh. Imazighen are not only located in the Riffian-Northeastern area of Morocco, but also throughout Morocco; the Ishelhiym in the South-Central area of the country; and the Shluh or Swasa of the Southwest. Imazighen represent 40% of the population of Morocco, and 30% of Algeria. There are Imazighen to the Southern Sahara (the Tuareg), in Mali and Niger. As of today, there are 315.000 Riffians in Holland. The authors selected for this article are Riffians (or Irifiyyen). The Riffians were colonised by the Spanish, the Portuguese and the Turks in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they were colonised by the French and the Spanish.

² *Wedding by the Sea* was the 1996 winner of the Best Literary Debut Prize in the Netherlands, and the Best First Novel in a Foreign Language in France.

³ My theory is informed by the works of Abdelkébir Khatibi, Walter Mignolo, Mohamed al-Jabri, Assia Djebar and Fatema Mernissi, among others. See Cristián H. Ricci’s “Laila Lalami: Narrating North African Migration to Europe,” “A Transmodern Approach to Afro-Iberian literature,” “Abderrahman El Fathi: Between ‘Paterista’ and Testimonial Poetry,” and “African Voices in Contemporary Spain.”

control our two authors' 'freedom of imagination' (Khatibi, 4).⁴ In fact, my goal is to re-conceptualise the idea of an Amazigh literature with regard to the transnational and plurilingual experiences from which it arises. Along these lines, the second generation of Amazigh writers born in the Netherlands – and/or those who migrated when they were children – rejects the label of writing ethnic literature, and/or being categorised under the umbrella of Dutch authors of Moroccan descent.⁵ What they advocate in its place is for 'a diasporic transnational position which resists social exclusion and sees dialogical cosmopolitanism as an adequate *home* for identities that are constantly on the process of emerging' (Elboubekri, 25, emphasis added). In *Immigrant Fictions*, Rebecca Walkowitz underscores that in an era of globalisation, contemporary literature is in many ways a comparative literature since works circulate in several literary systems (and languages) at once and can be read within multiple national traditions (529). Therefore, the point in question is to analyse the extent to which immigration has shaped the whole literary system and not just books generated by immigrant populations, which would mean extending the label to include all the works produced in a time of immigration. If this is the case, the label 'migrant' or 'immigration literature' would be redundant or, more importantly, it would raise questions about discursive construct and its underlying restrictions.

The choice of language by the writers and the location/system from which Benali and Bouazza write need to be taken into account in any study of representations. This idea is particularly interesting for the purposes of this article since it subverts the 'immigration literature' label and extends it beyond the scope of origins. When analysing Amazigh-Catalan writers Najat El Hachmi (*The Last Patriarch*, 2008), Laila Karrouch (*De Nador a Vic*, 2004, no trans.) and Jamila Al Hassani (*La lluita de la dona bereber*, 2013, no trans.), I underscore the coexistence of North African characters with Catalans/Spanish, and the voluntary adoption of Catalan as an artistic expression. This combination results in four perfectly defined cultures, with their sum acting as the basic foundation for a fifth: hybrid, interstitial and interpellating in equal terms the Amazigh culture as well as the Catalan.⁶ Moreover, in the case of Amazigh-Catalan writers, regardless of the fact that they were all born in the Rif, Catalan is their first language. For second generation Amazigh-Dutch writers, not only is Dutch their first language but, as stated by Abdellah Elboubekri, the hybridisation process also occurs when their 'narrative inconsistencies and ruptures weaken the normality system established by the notion of cultural relativism' (28). Hennie van Coller confirms to some extent Elboubekri's assertion when stating that 'migrant literature (necessarily?) differs from mainstream Dutch literature, which is sometimes already slighted because of its typical 'closet realism' [...]. Bouazza is known as a writer who uses a correct but slightly archaic and esoteric Dutch' (143–44).⁷ Similar to Bouazza's use of Dutch, Najat El

⁴ In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie confers that literature is self-validating and is not the business of copywriting certain themes for certain groups, and, again, that good writing 'assumes a frontierless nation' (14–5).

⁵ Henriëtte Louwerse notes that Bouazza resists 'the way in which his work [*Abdullah's Feet*] was received and to the labels attached to his writing. He strongly objected to being considered a "migrant" author, and "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'. (Louwerse, 'Nymphs', 6; 'Games of Deception', 244–46).

⁶ In this sense, Boehmer and De Mul observe that there is a need to 'address the question of literature as memory-work making a bridge to the colonial past so as to build a *creolized* future' (12, my emphasis).

⁷ According to Gilleir, 'travel and migrancy may indeed have metaphorical values that make the easily identifiable motif of displacement not entirely consistent with the structure or meaning of the texts as a whole' (258). It is not a coincidence that Najat el Hachmi, Abdelkader Benali and Hafid Bouazza refer to Riffian Tamazight either as a dead language, and/or

Hachmi uses a formal Catalan, claiming that her influences are canonical Catalan writers such as Mercè Rodoreda and Víctor Català. A possible explanation, continues Van Coller, is that migrant writers often see their medium as objectifying, especially where the standard language is strange (144).

For her part, Najat El Hachmi writes a ‘Carta d’un immigrant’ in 2004 [Letter to an immigrant, no trans.], a message to an anonymous immigrant, whose ending I consider very appropriate for the development of the borderland concept: ‘You will learn to live, finally, in the interstice of these two worlds, a place that could mean division but that also represents an encounter. One day you will think yourself lucky to *enjoy this interstice* and you will discover yourself more complete, more *hybrid*, more immense than any other person’ (2004, n.p.; my emphasis and trans.).⁸ In this mutation process, we must acknowledge, as Walter Mignolo points out, that language is not merely a neutral tool that represents the honest wish to tell the truth, but it is also – and here lies the literary fact in itself in the narratives of Benali and Bouazza – a tool for the construction of a history and the invention of realities (Mignolo, 122); it is closer, I think, following Anjali Prahbu, to the process of creolisation that possesses the potential to elucidate cultural creation, as well as the judgment of power relations (inequality, prestige and resources) that promote innovations, cultural and linguistic exchanges (4–5).

The exploration of language, creating literary communities of resistance and freeing the imagination are some of the concerns facing many writers and critics. In his book *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, Iain Chambers understands writing as not necessarily involving a project intent on ‘penetrating the real’, to re-cite it, but rather as entailing an attempt to extend, disrupt and re-work it; and it involves a certain distancing between ourselves and the contexts that define our identity (14). In this context, the migrant’s position as both *here* and *there* provides a privileged site from which to reflect on both societies. Chambers, like Abdelkebir Khatibi, also underscores the partiality and partisanship of language itself: it speaks for someone and from a specific place; it constructs a particular space, a habitat, a sense of belonging and being at home (24). Just like Najat El Hachmi, Abdelkader Benali and Hafid Bouazza combine both impulses, crucial to the forging of a discourse suitable for the multiple tactics required for a successful postcolonial praxis. This is why I consider that the literary project of the Amazigh authors is definitely significant in the sense that it goes beyond the merely multiculturalist view as a plain criterion of analysis of the social situation, to render what could be the origin of an Afro-European identity, free from political considerations as well as critically engaged in feelings of *unhomeliness* and exclusion.

Changes in thinking about migration require changes in thinking about belonging, community and civic recognition. It is all about rejecting the assumptions that migrants move

a language deemed inferior when compared to Moroccan Arabic (Hachmi, *Jo també sóc catalana/I Too Am Catalan*, 47; Benali, *Wedding*, 154; Bouazza, *Abdullah’s Feet*, 12). The latter is an explicit denunciation of how the Moroccan government has overshadowed Amazigh language and culture, considering it as an articulation against the arabisation project that began with Hassan II. In Bouazza’s short story ‘Satanic Eggs’, we can read: ‘we had always pictured the members of our venerable government as men who went about in Western-style suits [...]. After the promulgation of the Law [...] their appearance changed. The men suddenly grew imposing beards [...], speaking a high Arabic which they peppered with quotations from the Koran to lend weight to their political assertions’ (*Abdullah’s Feet*, 48).

⁸ ‘Aprendràs a viure, finalment, a la frontera d’aquests dos móns, un lloc que pot ser divisió, però que també és encontre, punt de trobada. Un bon dia et creuràs *afortunat de gaudir d’aquesta frontera*, et descobriràs a tu mateix *més complet, més híbrid*, més immens que qualsevol altra persona.’

between two worlds that are distinct and coherent and that migrants bring with them or enter into literary systems that are unique and strictly local (Walkowitz, 534). Instead, I am interested in exploring new shapes of collective histories of migration that can help shed light on Sneja Gunew's argument that 'minority writers [...] are invariably confined to the issue of their "identity" [...] even in a poststructuralist world of decentred subjectivity. [...] Their ability to produce "textuality" or to play textual games is rarely countenanced' (72–3, qtd. in Louwse, 'Nymphs', 9). In the same vein, new concepts of belonging, divided identity, resistant emotion, relationality and even Dutchness can be subversively drawn (Boehmer and Gouda, 40; Louwse, "A Way of Seeing", 5).

The above brings us back to the need to rethink ideas about belonging and community in harmony with what Homi Bhabha and Jan Nederveen Pieterse have been calling for – making liminality (space across and between boundaries) of a kind into a collective awareness (Pieterse, 239), and an exploration of *vernacular cosmopolitanism* and *symbolic citizenship*. Bhabha observes that in the context of the world dis-order in which we are immersed, symbolic citizenship is currently characterised by a surveilling culture of 'security' – how do we tell the good migrant from the bad migrant? Which cultures are safe? Which unsafe? (Bhabha, xvii). The 'vernacular cosmopolitan', then, is aligned with a commitment to a 'right to difference in equality' (Bhabha, xvii). In other words, it refers to a process of constituting emergent groups and affiliations which has less to do with the affirmation or authentication of origins and 'identities', and more with political practices and ethical choices (Bhabha, xvii). To some extent, the selection of the texts might easily fit into what Abdelkebir Khatibi establishes in his essay 'Literary Nationalism and Onternationalism' as 'paraliterature' – 'it is not sustained by a secret nor by a force of writing. It is a monumental reproduction [...] determined by the bookselling market, mass-media circulation and commercial exchange. It is the entropic circulation of words in an economy of interchangeable objects' (8). This article by no means seeks to discredit the 'literariness' of the works of fiction under study, but it simply seeks to underscore the external competing elements that influence and condition their production and reception.

Wedding by the Sea: Troublesome Homecoming for Second-Generation Migrants

Nostalgia for an imagined past drives this fable-like first novel of diaspora and return. Lamarat Minar's father moved the family 'not just to any old country in Europe – not to Spain where those dirty Franco dogs spit on you, not France, not Deutschland, but the best country in the whole wide world: Ollanda!' (22). The family moved to Holland when Lamarat was six months old and his mother was pregnant with his sister. Nineteen years later, Lamarat and his family have returned to their native village near the Spanish enclave Melilla, Iwojen, for Lamarat's sister Rebekka's marriage to their uncle Mosa, who is looking to emigrate with the bride. Mosa, 'the man from Touarirt, that picturesque village by the sea, had become hooked on women at an early age [...]. Nobody knew what he did in Melilla [...], but he quickly made his way to that female paradise, Lolita's bar'. (19). When Mosa panics and races off to Lolita's bar the morning of the scheduled wedding, Lamarat is sent to find him. He enlists the help of local cab driver Chalid, whose running internal commentary functions as a collective voice to the drama unfolding in Iwojen. After Mosa is finally rounded up, Rebekka stages a 'wedding' of her own in a violent

confrontation that has elements of ritual sacrifice. Benali perfectly captures the shaky ground on which memory stands: Lamarat dreams of the North African life he might have lived as Parcheesi champion; his father sends money to build a dream house that turns out to be rapidly falling into ruin, much like the family itself. Episodes of exile, family betrayal and violent catharsis spiced with elements of Moroccan-Amazigh magical realism, a backward-looking dream of immigrants everywhere.⁹

As a diasporic narrative exploring transhistorical trauma and cultural displacement, *Wedding by the Sea* reflects different forms of personal and collective distress and its intergenerational transmission. In an interview with the newspaper *Het Parool*, Hafid Bouazza argues that '[w]ith the exception of gastronomy – and perhaps not even that – people are scared of diversity, they fear the loss of what is generally known as identity without recognising that identity is not static, but organic and fluid' (trans. and qtd. by/in Louwerse, "All Things Do Change", 176). Border crossing affects identity formation and can accelerate the emergence of postcolonial agency as shaped and informed by cultural links and shared historical memory. Despite the fact that Lamarat's father moves to Europe to, later, send money to his hometown, following ancestral modes of life linked to their land, he is dubious when confronting the reality of an old tradition in 'decay', like his house. At the same time, he is torn when he acknowledges that his children have too much interest in 'other people's faith' in Europe (*Wedding*, 64). When Lamarat befriended two sisters who would call him 'Goofy', he would think:

Do you know about the splash-splash? Oh god, how can I explain it to them, how can I explain that there's something, I don't know what, sloshing around in my head? But it was hard for Lamarat to make contact, harder than dangling from his knees, so he gave up trying, and the sloshing sound that set him running to the bathroom remained part of his inner world [...].

'[T]oday I met up with the Christian religion, or to be more precise: the Catholic Religion.' 'You dirty dog, you haven't gone all popey-dopey on us, have you? Tell me, what's wrong with our very own honest upright Prophet? Well, tell me!' [...].

'Whattaya mean? The churches around here are being turned into mosques, and you think I want to convert. No way! Besides', he added in a small voice, 'the whole thing was a mistake on my part.' (69–71)

In a grotesque fashion, 'as if he was in a café', the father tries to improvise an Amazigh traditional repertoire by improvising an authoritative speech: 'it is darn well time for a darn bit of Islam in this house [...]. And one of those things, asides from hanging up a *lomia*, a prayer calendar, and buying a big fat prayer book, was making Lamarat go to Koran school' (73). Chalid, the cab driver, whose option is to remain in the homeland recording the village's story, ironically asserts that he 'do[esn't] understand people who leave heart and home so they can be the same ... somewhere else' (143). This way, *Wedding by the Sea* presents clear similarities to Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Palace in the Old Village* (2000). The realisation of Ben Jelloun's character longstanding dream

⁹ The reference to magical realism in Bouazza's book is not arbitrary. In his novel *Paravion* (2002), the action takes place in two fictitious countries: Morea and Paravion. The latter country, which is described as being very similar to the city of Amsterdam, appears in the text as a mirage that incites the Moreans to take to their flying carpets and travel northwards. The text presents the emigrational experience as a modern day chivalric novel in which a great deal belongs to the realm of fantasy and magical realism.

of returning to the old village – an action that, for men of his generation, represents the *sine qua non* of the initial departure – clashes with the inevitable fact that the country of his ancestors has also changed. Moreover, his own offspring, which now constitutes the part of the family that is most important and dear to him, has taken root in France and has become Frenchified. In *Wedding by the Sea* the result of the father's unsuccessful attempts to keep something of the home in his children's minds is indicative of his trauma of the unsuccessful immigrant experience.

Along this line, Rosemarie Buikema remarks that the 'ongoing recounting underlines the narratological axiom that memory is the epic resource par excellence and those memories handed down from generation to generation create the chain of tradition' (183). The father's memory is sated with events that make him long for the return home. The *haram* (sin) is spreading all over Holland, a fact that urges him to revive his religious identity and try to inculcate it into his children: 'I'll be gone for six months [...]. He stayed a year, two years, ten years [...], announcing at every meal that this year would be the last. I am going back. Away from this land of pork and rotten bananas' (30–1). The father's tireless attempts to maintain links to the past, home and tradition are faced with modern conditions the children make use of. In 1983 Ahsème Zahraoui referred to the first generation of Maghrebian immigrants to France in the following terms: 'The question of returning (which, furthermore, seems more like a *departure* for children born in Europe) can be put on the back-burner, even though it is never absent from the *mental image* people have of their future'. ('Le retour', 231; trans. and qtd. by/in Ieme van der Poel, 221). Home and away are constantly in dialogue and collision; they are constantly in motion, to use Roger Bromley's words (10). Mobility, be it spatial or temporal, is what characterises migrant subjectivities. Lamarat's journey in the taxi could be regarded as an epitome of mobility and non-belongingness:

He had been taught 'in the West' that when something goes wrong, you have no one to blame but yourself [...]. So what do you do at moments like this, when you're driving somewhere and you don't know where you're supposed to go and you feel like there's a sword hanging over your head that's just dying to fall? (43)

Both the father's journey towards the port and Lamarat's journey in search of his uncle could be seen as examples of a mobile existence: they are both on the way in search of a lost past. Looking for home seems a mythical desire, or a contingent substance. The father makes his best to make the house visible, tangible, but fails: '*a man who had built a showcase of a house [...], who has taken his brother under his wing so he could clothe him for one evening in the paraphernalia of machismo, could have been hit by the ruthless, one time wind of scandal in a peanut shell of a village?*' (210, emphasis in the original). Conversely, Lamarat, with his constant trips back and forth between the Netherlands and Morocco, leaves him bereft of the notion of home and he remains placeless always looking for a permanent residence.

To maintain attachment to the left behind culture within the host space, diasporas create a microcosm of Amazigh space. These transitional families are 'continually onward and outward bound, quite different from diasporic communities that instill social imperatives for going back to their places of origin [...]. [They] only refer to the dispersal, not to the idea of return' (Vuorela, 81). Here lies the importance of Benali as a diasporic writer accentuating the dilemma of being

nowhere, of being 'here' and thinking of 'there'. Liesbeth Minnaard makes a clear statement about Benali's narrative:

He considers his writing as an obligation [...]. This positioning testifies a strong belief in literature's socio-political impact. In a time in which Dutch multiculturalism is heavily debated and ethnic minority groups among Dutch population are fiercely criticized, Benali keeps believing in the transformative power of the imagination. His literature constitutes his personal and positive contribution to a polarizing discourse (202).

Benali's use of overlapping narratives and temporal shifts briskly reflects the diasporic condition of this writer. So as not to be pure 'absence', migration calls on a form of impossible 'ubiquity', a way of being that affects the conditions of the absence it causes, only being partially absent from where one is absent, and, correlatively, not being totally present where one is present – it is the condition or the paradox of the immigrant (Sayad, 381; trans. and qtd. by/in Van der Poel 225).

The ritual sacrifice performed by Rebekka on Mosa at the end of the novel cannot go unnoticed. After Mosa is found drunk in Lolita's brothel in Melilla, Rebekka undoes his belt and says: 'According to the whispers I've heard tonight, this young man was the darling of all the girls in Melilla, and when I think about my future, I can only conclude that I'll be another one of those darlings' (202). Rebekka stops talking, grabs a pair of scissors and cuts his genitals off. She tucks a piece of flesh in her cleavage and says: 'And now, my dear man and husband, it's off to the water with you, or what's left of you, so you can wash away your drunkenness along with the blood of sacrifice' (203). A simplistic reading of the sacrifice, and regardless of the violence of the act, can lead us to prove that the female character exercises the rights of equality learned in Europe. A deeper reading of the sacrifice can take us to the oral tales in Amazigh areas. As such, female characters manifest continued perseverance and determination to overcome the hurdles of macho society, subverting the familiar relegation of women to subordination and invisible roles when it comes to the performance of resistance.¹⁰ Fatema Mernissi is eloquent in highlighting the correspondence between the 'subversive' content and 'heretical traditions' of Moroccan oral folklore (and Muslims in general), and the power of women: 'The storyteller has reduced even the most tyrannical of despots to powerlessness [...]. If Muslim laws give men the right to dominate women, the opposite seems to be true in the oral tradition' (4–5, 9). In Amazigh society women are the centre of the family (Lacoste-Dujardin, 174; Hart, 36). They are the most exposed to the storm that shakes the whole fabric and evolution; their freedom is bound up to that whole.

Fatema Mernissi, Sophie Bessis, Assia Djebar or Malika Mokeddem (the last two Amazigh) are just a few outspoken names who reserve harsh and justified criticism against (localised) restrictions to which women are subjected in different Islamic or patriarchal contexts. Both Djebar and Mokeddem conceive of female action as transgressive, and their characters and plots are structured in such a way so as to privilege movement, wandering and a search for space. Along these lines, a marked solidarity permeates Abdelkader Benali's novel, and a privileging of multiple diverse female voices: her mother, her grandmother and, obviously, her sister. The novel ends when Rebekka's grandfather thinks that the trail of blood meant 'business' (206). In

¹⁰ Numerous examples could be found in Nora Aceval's *Cuentos libertinos del Magreb* [Libertine Short Stories of the Maghreb]. Moreover, both Benali and Bouazza have expressed their critical view of Islam, especially the inherent neglect of women that is present in the religion (Van Coller, 142; Elboubekri, 31).

addition, he continues, looking at his wife: ‘tomorrow we’ll play deaf, dumb and blind’ (206). Grandma replies: ‘Oh woe is me [...]. He [Mosa] didn’t take our feelings into account, nor did he stop for a second to consider the dignity and frailty of a woman...’ (206). Mosa will die. Therefore, Benali’s narrative can overcome the guilt complex caused by transgression, overcome fear and shame. Reporting and overcoming patriarchal values through the erasure of taboo experiences that promote tradition leads to the encounter of a woman with herself. The latter transcends the symbolic violence of compulsory maternity, the sublimation of the unwritten codes of obedience and decency, acceptance of infidelity, and the denial of sexual practices requiring the submission, passivity and inability of full enjoyment. In a similar fashion, with *The Last Patriarch*, Najat El Hachmi accounts for the complex, controversial and contradictory literary and hybridising processes of marginal and borderland literatures, aware that the colonial difference of the ‘borderland enunciating subject’ (Mignolo, *Local Histories*, 28) is not only uttered through a resisting and dissenting discourse, but is also materialised in the literary representation of the pain and anger of her ‘fractured’ stories, of her memories, of her subjectivities. Overall, the novel highlights the *misovire* nature of the narrator, that is, of a woman who doesn’t seem to find a man worthy of admiration, as well as the clear intention to apply what Abdelkébir Khatibi defines as ‘the double criticism of the paradigm-Other’ (‘Maghreb plural’, 72); the narrator questions and ‘disengages’ (73) the values imposed by Muslim society (in our case Muslim-Amazigh), ‘so theological, so charismatic, so patriarchal’ (72) and the hegemonic structure of Western societies, be it Catalan, Spanish or European.¹¹

In short, the reader of *Wedding by the Sea* is driven to the very circumstance that the ‘here’ and ‘there’ are interchangeable simply to reflect ubiquitous postcolonial subjectivity. The interchangeability of home and exile, memory and forgetting, points to the fact that all concepts of origin and belonging that one venerates are mere fictions that one can construct as well as deconstruct. The narrator’s construction of the Amazigh space in the present narrative is based on an unreliable memory enabling this space to be constructed and reconstructed, reflecting the diasporic experience of a narrator who undergoes identity fragmentation after confronting the Dutch cultural space.

Abdullah’s Feet: The Longing for an Imaginary Homeland from Amsterdam

The heady imagination of a young boy – peopled by veiled women, suggestive vegetables, malevolent djinns and dismembered war heroes – is set against his cosmopolitan adulthood in Amsterdam, where the prodigal son discovers that he can never entirely leave his past behind him. It is a strange territory, an old Moroccan village – a ‘wonderland’ of djinns, debauchery and Arcadian landscapes – teeming with brothels, beggars, fishermen and mosques described from the distance of adulthood and urban lifestyle in Europe, evoking both a real place and something straight from the pages of *Arabian Nights*; interconnected stories, intricately wrought, and

¹¹ The starting point of Muslim women’s *narratives* consist in telling their own lives and surrogating for the rights they have been claiming for themselves since the 1980s (Rocca, 132); by denouncing the exploitative religious and patriarchal stereotypes, the author reassesses what needs to be improved in her life and society at large, departing from previous definitions, and re-evaluating what women want to see within their own family, community and country (Rocca, 133).

suffused with bawdy humor.¹² Before the eyes of a fanciful young boy are buxom females with welcoming posteriors like ‘ostrich-down cushions for the spasmodic euphoria of manly release’ (21); lascivious boys sharing intimacies with goats; lusty women satisfying their passion with aubergines and cucumbers. Amid these caricatures, the feet of Abdullah (freshly severed, yet still animated) guide the reader from one highly entertaining scenario to another. The book draws on this complicated heritage to create a past that is half remembered and half imagined: ‘In my blind state this period of my life is a playground of sunny reminiscences, a pool of light in my greedy memory’ (11).

Dominant themes include migration, cultural confrontation and the abrupt movement between the traditional and the cosmopolitan world. The stories use memory as a space to reflect the predicament accompanying diasporic writers. Memory is used as an alternative space to voice a deeply fragmented consciousness and a split identity. Nuruddin Farah observes that:

One of the pleasures of living away from home is that you become the master of your destiny, you avoid the constraints and limitations of your past and, if need to be, create an alternative life for yourself. That way everybody else becomes the Other, and you the center of the universe. You are a community when you are away from home – the communal mind, remembering. Memory is active when you are in exile (65).

Bouazza, as a diasporic writer, lives with the obsession of existing nowhere. He touches on rebellion against both religion and family tradition. He also makes use of sharp irony to craft a safe distance between the world he creates in his fiction and the world of migrant issues ‘that are predominant in the West, both exotic and cruel, romantic and perverted, horrifying and fascinating’ (Louwerse, ‘Nymphs’, 7). At the same time, Bouazza resorts to non-belongingness as a strategy to flee limited categorisations. He finds in detachment from his origins a solution to small restrictive labels by Dutch and European media as a marketing tool.¹³

In *Abdullah’s Feet*, the readers’ senses are awakened to the very fact that the present narrative is based on obscure memories that come to the narrator’s mind ‘in the dark chasm’ (20) dividing him from the landscape of his past and ‘outlines of words, a slurping of hot-baked divinity, the flash of a gold tooth. Then a few stones roll down into the depths, disturbing my arcadia’ (20). And he continues: ‘Shades of traditional shame haunt me, intent on preventing me writing an autobiographical story’ (19). Cultural practices in the home-nation are collected to serve the narrator’s basic need, which is to reinvent his past in the migrant space inflected by a feeling of exile. According to Robin Cohen, the narrator experiences a diasporic life in which he is ‘positioned somewhere between nation-state in a physical sense, but travelling in an ancestral or spiritual way that falls outside the nation-state’s space/time zone’ (68). The narrative of *Abdullah’s Feet* presents the persons as blurred characters moving between the real and the imaginary. Abdullah and Fatima are recurrent and interchangeable names: Abdullah refers to

¹² The reference to the *Arabian Nights* is because the author considers that it cannot be typified as a book of flying carpets: ‘It is the world. A universe. The mirror of Salomon where the world is reflected. An example of a triumph of the human imagination’ (qtd. in Van Collier, 147).

¹³ It is worth underscoring the powerful attempts by editors and publishing houses to control and manipulate ‘immigrant’ representations, as well as their desire to promote works which will attract the widest audience, thereby crippling or stifling, to some degree, alternative creations. This point is well worth emphasizing in view of the number of narratives published with sensational images on the front cover and catchy titles that reinforce essentialist representations.

the father, the brother, and the son-in-law; while Fatima refers to the mother and all the sisters. The second short story in the collection is 'Abdullah's Feet'. It deals with the homecoming of the narrator's elder brother, Abdullah, who left two years earlier to fight the *jihad*. His two feet are the only parts of his body that are left. These two feet joyfully return home on the sacred day of Muslims, Friday. Anke Gilleir reads the return of Abdullah's feet not just as a sign of the disappearance of the individual, but as of 'literature's self-awareness of its own completion, fragmentation, and disruption of reality. In other words, the metaphor expresses the meaning, always metonymical, of the literary text' (259). The feet represent mobility, and stand for the postcolonial subjectivity that undergoes the experience of migration with all the cultural and linguistic ruptures that migrant people go through.

Furthermore, diaspora literary texts reflect the non-homogeneity of cultures in Europe through cultural clashes and minority existences. To the narrator, 'the return of what was left of [Abdullah] meant more than a personal victory: it also meant the triumph of the Holy War, which was why our instinct directed us to the mosque' (29). One can succinctly notice the rather disturbed tone with which the narrator pictures this naughty space, especially if the text is read after 9/11, after the London, Madrid, Paris and Brussels bombings, Theo van Gogh's death and the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. That said, the text, if read in the context of the mid 1990s, represents a nostalgic feeling of an immigrant in search of his identity, coupled with the traumatic state of the diasporic subject. The Holy War Abdullah participated in is undeclared, which leaves readings open to a number of interpretations. Mine is that the war is against tradition as well as hegemonic discourses both in Morocco and in the Netherlands. In this regard, Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd strongly defend an awareness of cultural collectivity in the literature of minority authors: 'Minority discourse is, in the first instance, the product of damage, of damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures by the dominant culture' (7, qtd. in Gilleir, 257).

Together with Tomaž Mastnak, we have to acknowledge that there has been a long history of deep-rooted hostility towards the Muslims in European history. I believe that this hostility cannot be separated from Europe's most cherished ideals of liberty, rights, justice, peace, and a long list of well-intentioned etcetera. It is, rather, part and parcel of the same complex web of thought as those ideals. If the existence of anti-Muslim ideas and sentiments is not acknowledged, the complexity of what is called European thought gets lost, the ideals of liberty, peace, etc. cannot be taken seriously, and their realisation, either willing or enforced, is going to keep playing havoc with the world (Mastnak, 214–15). No doubt, a more thorough look at the collusion of the construction of Europe and the common enemy of Islam would provide a useful perspective in examining and contextualising some of the current tides of migration.

'Apolline' is a striking example of East/West dis/encounter and, according to Louwerse, 'Bouazza's appeal to not reduce his writing to his personal circumstances' (Louwerse, 'Nymphs', 6). The story consists of the retrospective first person narrative of Humayd, a native of Bertollo, an imaginary village in the Rif, now living in Amsterdam, and recounting his love affair with Apolline, a blonde Western Dutch self-confident and perfectly beautiful female. Amsterdam, a space of astonishing attractions, makes the narrator confess his love for both the city and Apolline. In fact, the boy lured by Apolline could be transformed into the migrant lured by Dutch openness and tolerance; 'those were the days when we emigrants still had a certain exotic appeal' (97). Visibility, directness and flat meadows suggest a transparent geography that undoubtedly gives rise to a rational, realist and sober culture where there is a wide acceptance of things that

could remain invisible elsewhere. On the other hand, in an intercultural exchange, Apolline visits Fez. She writes back to Humayd claiming that she now ‘understands him better [...]. I can see myself in your eyes’ (100). The latter could be interpreted as a reading of Humayd’s identity, an attempt to start a dialogue, and an intention to help him assimilate in the new country.¹⁴

However, moments appear in this narrative when the ambition of an intercultural enterprise is punctured and turned upside down. Humayd seems to be wary of her domination and her attempts to denigrate his religious repertoire: ‘She would not have me perform my prayer duties in her presence. My devotion and loyalty to a religion were meaningless to her. She scoffed, wishing to divest me of what was to me my identity but to her merely the beads and henna tracery of folklore’ (97). Derived as it is from ‘Apollyon’, ‘the destroyer’, and ‘the Devil’ (102), Apolline tries to establish a self/other relation based on power. Therefore, the cultural difference the text tries to raise turns into utopia. ‘Cultural difference’, as James Clifford puts it, sees ‘self/other relations as a matter of power and rhetoric rather than essence’ (328). At this point, what is at stake is Bouazza’s irony, which functions as a double-edged discursive strategy that targets, in equal measure, Moroccan fundamentalism and the fear, as unfounded as it is irrational, of the Dutch islamophobes; ‘Islam and conservatism share the same cradle’ (106), claims the narrator of ‘Apolline’.¹⁵ Along these lines, I believe that the ultimate message from *Abdullah’s Feet* implies that the periphery has now positioned itself at the very heart of Europe; in other words, leaving its peripheral position with regard to Dutch society, immigration now positions itself at the centre of current developments as a tell-tale sign of social, political and cultural changes and a foreclosure in a history of misunderstandings.

My position coincides with Caroline B. Brettell’s: ‘The act of migration brings populations of different backgrounds into contact with one another and hence creates boundaries. It is the negotiation across such boundaries, themselves shifting, that is at the heart of ethnicity and the construction of migrant identities’ (132). In the representation of stereotypes, not only superficial relationships are criticised in communities that do not understand or want to understand each other. In contrast, in Bouazza’s text we are presented with a clear mockery of multicultural society debates where every community stubbornly clings to stereotypes and essentialist visions. This complex interplay between reinventing and ‘cover-up’ of the migrant subject through the oscillation between reproductive and creative stereotypes erases binarisms and shows in a mocking and contemptuous way the painful process of settling in a new context. I maintain, then, that this process of ‘self-masking’ is not just understood for security and protection, but as a defensive and a critical form against intrusive desires to know everything, to address the author and the text (‘foreign’) from an ethnographic angle that facilitates a ‘real knowledge’ of the other. Bouazza questions the ideological constructs that deepen ignorance and rejection of one and the other. His intercultural perspectives offer a critique of double consciousness that challenge both confronted communities towards a shared responsibility to confront conflicts, and confrontations produced by contact with the other. The questioning of the term ‘migrant’ and its

¹⁴ Louwse opines that ‘Apolline’s domination effectively takes shape as a programme in cultural re-education and identity reform’ (‘Nymphs’, 8).

¹⁵ In his short story ‘Satanic Eggs’, there is an example that illustrates my assertion; speaking on how he and his girlfriend were apprehended by the police after having sex, the narrator concludes: ‘Perhaps our blessed government was right after all: what else could such perversions be but the work of Satan? It is and was essential to secure the purity of women, in both body and mind. Perhaps it was the influence of the West’ (61).

variations indicates the need for new models that situate the diversity of national literatures without exclusionary categories that limit the production and reception of ‘works of migration’. An intercultural reading of Bouazza’s short stories collection shows the literary creative fantasy (through humor and irony in particular) produced from a critical perspective of social imaginary, and the use of dynamic and oscillatory ideological and utopian images in the literary text.

Conclusion

Both Hafid Bouazza’s fiction and that of Abdelkader Benali probe the interplay of home and exile in an intercultural Dutch space. Storytelling becomes for them the only space to mitigate the trauma of homelessness, that of immigrants in host countries. Regardless of the fact that both authors debunk or ridicule concepts such as cultural identity or cultural community, I believe that the quest for identity in a new cultural space is always a given, creating, as Hafid Bouazza observes, a ‘land of imagination’, a non-topographical land where nothing is static (*Een beer in bontjas* [A Bear in a Fur Coat], 73, trans. and qtd. by Louwerse, “All Things Do Change”, 177, ‘Games of Deception’, 242).¹⁶ The search for identity is carried out in the unfamiliar intersections that displacement creates between self and the other in space, language and time. Through this process, however, displaced and defamiliarised voices and visions are repositioned at the centre of narratives, reaffirming Liesbeth Minnaard’s consideration of ‘migrant literature as largely constitue[nt] of European national identities today’ (54), or what Homi Bhabha calls ‘symbolic citizenship’, a literature that effectively deals with the new faces of Europe and the need for its redefinition (xvii). Benali’s and Bouazza’s literary productions are located within the historical context of Dutch artistic renewal and in the light of public debates on literary belonging. Both narratives use literary strategies to outmanoeuvre the insider-outsider situation in order to negotiate discursively dominant constructions of national identity and to imagine alternative forms of belonging. The Netherlands, the space of cosmopolitan exile, feeds the Amazigh-Dutch authors with inspiration despite the fact that this interstitial space is alien to the them. The contrast between the native country and the host country is at the centre of the two texts discussed in this article. But instead of spelling out the contrasts between the two countries, as is the case in Ben Jelloun’s *A Palace in the Old Village*, the authors of the two literary works analysed, Benali and Bouazza, manage to incorporate one country into the other. In doing so, their writings illustrate the idea that fiction has the power to overcome the immigrant’s predicament of impossible ubiquity.

¹⁶ Ieme van der Poel comes to a similar conclusion: ‘[I]nstead of trying to find “traces of home” in diasporic writing, critics must consider these texts as “imaginary sites” where cultural orientation is being radically rethought’ (222).

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