



# Transmitting Authenticity – Kader Abdolah and Hafid Bouazza as Cultural Mediators

*Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar, University of Groningen*

**Abstract:** Around the turn of the millennium, two public intellectuals became central figures in the nationwide debate on Islam in the Netherlands: Kader Abdolah, a refugee from Iran and Moroccan-born Hafid Bouazza. Both authors have consciously assumed the role of cultural transmitter, using a wide variety of media and genres: opinion pieces, columns, literary work, poetry translations, prose and religious texts... In this paper, I will compare the autobiography element in their cultural mediation. Kader Abdolah presents his Oriental background as a guarantee of authenticity. He always frames his texts within his life story, which is suggested to be a *pars pro toto* for the Orient and to aim to convince the reader that his work offers a genuine insight into the Muslim world. Hafid Bouazza, on the other hand, uses autobiography as a guarantee of authenticity as yet another mask in his continuous obstruction and deconstruction of orientalist and occidentalist prejudices. On one level, the author presents himself as the exotic Other, while on another, he constantly reminds his readers that his exoticness is nothing but a mimicry of their own exoticist prejudices. There is an interesting paradox between Abdolah's claims to authenticity and Bouazza's ridiculing of genuineness on the one hand, and the fact that Abdolah's cultural mediation seems much more geared to a Dutch target culture, while Bouazza's seems to strive for an exact representation of the source text on the other.

**Keywords:** Kader Abdolah, Hafid Bouazza, Orientalism, Life Writing, Cultural transmitters, Cultural mediators, Translation studies, Transmission of culture

## Introduction

According to Edward Said, contemporary orientalism is partly characterised by the tendency to treat the discourse of a specific Oriental as a *pars pro toto*, thus allowing it limited scope:

The idea encouraged is that in studying Orientals, Muslims, or Arabs, 'we' can get to know another people, their way of life and thought, and so on. To this end it is always

better to let them speak for themselves, to represent themselves [...]. But only up to a point, and in a special way.<sup>1</sup>

A good example of this can be found in the Netherlands throughout the 1990s and beyond, when authors of Muslim descent were expected to write works that educated readers about their cultures of origin. Critics praised Dutch-Moroccan author Hafid Bouazza for giving an ‘unexpectedly frank insight into Muslim society’ in his debut collection of short stories, for instance.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the debut of another Dutch-Moroccan author, Hans Sahar, is said to have few literary merits, but is worth reading as a ‘document humain’, an ‘uneasy insight’ into the living conditions of young Moroccans in the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> In other words, many expected authors of Muslim descent to be spokespersons for the Muslim world, its religion and its culture.<sup>4</sup> They were often cast in the role of cultural transmitters or cultural mediators, for which their biography – their descent, migration and minority position in Dutch society – was deemed highly relevant.

In this paper, I will analyse how two of these authors, Kader Abdolah and Hafid Bouazza, have negotiated the role of cultural transmitter and the assumed relevance of their biography for their work since the second half of the nineties. Both are successful literary authors who have published bestselling collections of short stories and novels as well as opinion pieces, essays and, in the case of Abdolah, a weekly column. In these texts they have regularly given their views on issues such as migration, the social integration of cultural minorities and the position of Islam in Dutch society.

Petra Broomans has given the following working definition of a cultural transmitter:

A cultural transmitter [...] often takes on various roles in the field of cultural transmission [e.g.] translator, reviewer, critic, journalist, [...] scholar [and] writer [...]. Transmitting another national literature and its cultural context to one’s own national literature and cultural contact is the central issue in the work of a cultural transmitter [...]. The motivation can be aesthetically, ideologically, politically and/or economically based.<sup>5</sup>

Although Broomans mainly focuses on the cultural transmitter as a literary translator, I will broaden the term ‘cultural transmission’ here to include all types of mediation (e.g. artefacts, notions, texts) from one culture in the context of another. As Broomans herself writes: ‘Cultural transmitters [...] also mediate culture, and therefore even ideas, sometimes transformed into ideologies. Cultural transmitters are in this case also transmitters of images. They create images

---

<sup>1</sup> E. W. Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 293.

<sup>2</sup> T. Hakkert, ‘Hafid Bouazza verbrandt alle schepen achter zich’, *de Volkskrant*, 14 May 1998.

<sup>3</sup> A. Heumakers, ‘Forse halen helemaal van top tot bottom’, *de Volkskrant*, 29 September 1995.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the reception of authors with a Muslim background, see S.J. Moenandar, ‘The Evaluation and Positioning of Literary Work by Authors with a Muslim Background’, in *The Autonomy of Literature at the Fins de Siècles (1900 and 2000)*, ed. by G.J. Dorleijn, R. Grüttemeier and L. Korthals Altes (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 241-60.

<sup>5</sup> P. Broomans, ‘Introduction: Women as Transmitters of Ideas’, in *From Darwin to Weil. Women as Transmitters of Ideas*, ed. by P. Broomans (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2009), p. 2.

and mediate these images'.<sup>6</sup> Bouazza and Abdolah are cultural mediators in both the broad and the narrow sense of the term.

It is important to stress, at the outset of this paper, that cultural transmission always conveys a point of view about the transmitted culture. Cultural transmission is, after all, a form of representation and, as Jürgen Pieters puts it, all representation is an act of negotiation that 'involves a certain degree of semiotic transformation that either confirms, subverts or elaborates upon the object's original meaning'.<sup>7</sup> And as an act of negotiation, the transmitted texts, artefacts and notions serve a specific purpose in their new context. Thus the transmission always has a rhetorical element, whether intentionally or unintentionally, blatantly or implicitly: it is structured in a particular way to serve a particular purpose, which in turn means that the way in which notions, ideas or artefacts are recontextualised implies a particular point of view about the original culture from which they – supposedly<sup>8</sup> – stem.<sup>9</sup> In this paper, I will analyse this rhetorical element in the cultural transmissions by Hafid Bouazza and Kader Abdolah.

This analysis will address two aspects of Kader Abdolah's and Hafid Bouazza's roles as cultural transmitters. First, I will discuss how each author has positioned himself vis-à-vis the expectation that they and their literary work are cultural mediators 'by default', or in other words that they automatically represent their culture of descent because of their position of 'stranger in a strange land'. This is cultural transmission in a broad sense, as described above. As I will also discuss, both have strategically used life writing – that is, personal narratives in the form of anecdotes, memoirs, and remarks in interviews<sup>10</sup> – to clarify and strengthen this positioning. Abdolah has willingly assumed the role of a cultural mediator, presenting his Oriental background as a guarantee of authenticity. He has constantly framed his texts within his life story, which he presents as a *pars pro toto* for the Orient. In this way, he attempts to convince his readers that his work offers a genuine insight into the Muslim world. Hafid Bouazza uses autobiography as a guarantee of authenticity as yet another mask in a continuous obstruction and deconstruction of orientalist and occidentalist prejudices. On one level, the author presents himself as the exotic Other, fully aware of the expectations that his foreign name carries, while on another he constantly reminds his readers that his exoticness is nothing but a mirror image of their own exoticist prejudices.

---

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> J. Pieters, *Moments of Negotiation. The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001), p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> In a sense, it does not matter whether the artifact, notion or idea really stems from the source culture or not. Many elements in European adaptations of the 'Arabian Nights' have no root in the Arab originals and yet I would argue that these adaptations are as much a form of cultural transmission - the recontextualisation of (elements of) one culture in another - as the versions that are truer to the original.

<sup>9</sup> Again, this is the basic principle of representation: the underlying rhetoric of all representation is not only that it conveys a reality, but also that it is the best possible way to convey that reality, viz. that the point of view from which the representation is made is the *right* point of view.

<sup>10</sup> I follow Paul John Eakin here, who defined 'life writing' as 'an umbrella term [...] to cover the protean forms of contemporary personal narrative, including interviews, profiles, ethnographies, case studies, diaries, Web pages, and so on'. P.J. Eakin, 'Introduction: Mapping the Ethics of Life Writing', in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. by J.P. Eakin (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 1.

Both authors' approaches to their role of cultural transmitter is in line with their *posture*: their discursive and non-discursive utterances clarify what kind of authors they are and what kind of literature they stands for and, more importantly, that 'insure[s] attention and authority'. An author's posture communicates why their work is worth the reader's time and money.<sup>11</sup> The way in which Kader Abdolah has presented himself over the years is typical of the classic posture of the engaged author, in the tradition of authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. This classic posture of the engaged author is characterised by a '*pervasive ethicization*, which extends to a writer's literary work the moral norms considered to hold in everyday life, such as 'adhesion to, and responsibility for one's words, or the direct bearing of one's conduct in real life to the value of one's work'.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the notion of authenticity plays a central role in Kader Abdolah's thinking about his own work. Hafid Bouazza adopts a posture that is no less classic, namely that of a '*pervasive aestheticizing*: the extension, to the public and private sphere, of norms prevailing in the autonomous aesthetic domain, such as ambiguity, or impunity of transgression and provocation'.<sup>13</sup> A posture, in other words, which seems to leave little room for authenticity. Yet, as I will show in this paper, Bouazza's work as a cultural mediator does hold a certain notion of authenticity. In fact, both Abdolah's 'pervasive ethicization' and Bouazza's 'pervasive aestheticizing' imply their own specific notions of authenticity when applied to their work as cultural transmitters – although they differ significantly.

Following an analysis of the authors' positioning as cultural transmitters and their reflection upon this positioning, I will analyse their cultural transmission in a more narrow sense: their translations of classic Arab and Persian texts. As I will discuss, there is an interesting paradox between Abdolah's claims of authenticity and Bouazza's ridiculing of genuineness on the one hand, and the fact that Abdolah's translations from Persian and Arabic to Dutch seem much more geared to the Dutch target culture, whilst Bouazza's translations from Arabic to Dutch seem to strive for an exact representation of the source text and its cultural context on the other. This paradox can be solved by viewing it in the light of each author's posture. Both Abdolah's 'pervasive ethicization' and Bouazza's 'pervasive aestheticization' can be discerned in the strategies they use for translation. This is in line with the fact that, however many different strategies of cultural transmission these authors may use, their commonality is that their cultural transmission is not only embedded in personal narratives, but can itself in many ways be seen as a form of life writing, functioning as self-fashioning as much as it is an attempt to mediate texts and cultural notions from one culture to the other. This becomes particularly clear when we compare – as I will do towards the end of this paper – a passage that both authors have translated from the Koran.

---

<sup>11</sup> L. Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation. The Negotiation of Values in Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming). An author's posture does not solely consist of utterances by the author him- or herself. Publishers, critics and interviewers may facilitate and thus mediate a posture. See J. Meizoz, 'Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau', in *The Autonomy of Literature at the Fins de Siècles (1900 and 2000)*, pp. 83-6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> L. Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation*. Original emphasis.

## Kader Abdolah: From ‘Black Author’ to Son of the Koran

Kader Abdolah is the pen name of Hossein Sadjadi Ghaemmaghami Farahani, born in Arak (Iran) in 1954. He arrived in the Netherlands as a refugee in 1988. Abdolah made his Dutch debut in 1993 with a collection of short stories. A second collection of short stories (1995) and the four novels that followed between 1997 and 2005 sold increasingly well. Abdolah was praised for his stories about the lives of refugees and the 1979 Islamic Revolution and its aftermath, which critics tend to read as eyewitness testimonies. Abdolah was also praised for his adaptation of the Persian classic *Kalila-o Demna* (2002). In 2008, he published a box set containing two books, *De Koran. Een vertaling* [The Koran. A Translation] and *De boodschapper. Een vertelling* [The Messenger. A Narration], which met with mixed reviews from critics. This proved to be a turning point. His subsequent publications, the novella *De kraai* [The Crow] and the novel *De koning* [The King], received mainly negative reviews. However, this has not affected Abdolah’s considerable popularity as an author and public intellectual since the publication of his debut.

An essential element in how Abdolah has presented himself is the notion that his background and his place in Dutch society guarantee the authenticity of his work. This is, as Benoît Denis has argued, typical for the engaged author:

Engagement, in its different forms, from Romain Rolland to Sartre, requires the maintenance of a strong relationship between author and work. That is, for a work to be a choice and an act indeed leads to the postulation of a convergence between the political subject and the writing subject, with the one testifying in favour of the other and vice versa.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Abdolah often stresses the convergence between his literary work and his biography. The necessity of convergence would explain why Abdolah has increasingly presented himself as an author of Muslim origin since 2001, rather than of a general ‘foreign’ origin, as he did during the first few years following his 1993 debut: by changing the terms he uses to describe himself, he has kept his engagement up to date, as it were, since terms like ‘alien’ and ‘foreigner’<sup>15</sup> have now mostly been replaced by ‘Muslim’ in Dutch media.

At the outset of his literary career, Abdolah presented himself as part of a group of what he himself described as ‘dark authors such Halil Gür, Astrid H. Roemer, Mustafa Stitou, Lulu Wang, Hafid Bouazza [...] and dozens of others’.<sup>16</sup> Whilst Abdolah seems to use the term ‘dark authors’ here to designate all authors from a non-Western background, he later increasingly emphasised that his Muslim background was the common characteristic that he shared with the group of authors he belongs to. One example can be found in a 2004 column that reads like an advertisement blurb for his own novels:

---

<sup>14</sup> B. Denis, ‘Criticism and Engagement in the Belle Époque’, in *The Autonomy of Literature at the Fins de Siècles (1900 and 2000)*, pp. 34-5.

<sup>15</sup> The Dutch words referred to are ‘allochtoon’ and ‘vreemdeling’. Translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>16</sup> [D]onkere schrijvers als Halil Gür, Astrid H. Roemer, Mustafa Stitou, Lulu Wang, Hafid Bouazza [...] en nog tientallen anderen’. K. Abdolah, *Een tuin in de zee* (Amsterdam: De Geus, 2001), p. 14. Halil Gür, Astrid H. Roemer, Mustafa Stitou and Lulu Wang are of Turkish, Surinamese, Moroccan and Chinese descent respectively.

The Quran has given its sons and daughters to this country [...]. Look at Dutch literature. Who has written the most beautiful Dutch book in the last two, three years? Writers who were raised in a strict Muslim culture!<sup>17</sup>

Abdolah himself has claimed that it was the event of 9/11 that made him feel Muslim first and foremost:

I was in France when I heard [of the attacks]. [...] I was there with a number of French, Italian and Spanish writers and I suddenly realised I did not belong with those people. That I was different. That I had more in common with those terrorists than my colleagues.<sup>18</sup>

The dichotomy in this text is remarkable: on the one hand the West, with the 'French, Italian and Spanish authors', on the other Islam, with its 'terrorist'. It is the distinction between 'us' and 'them' that is apparently so fundamental that even Abdolah himself, because of his Muslim background, cannot escape. However, it is precisely this idea – that Abdolah is part of 'them' – that allows him to present himself as the mouthpiece of Islam:

I come from a traditional, religious Persian family [...]. But the tendency in the Netherlands is: the Quran is a stupid book, Islam a backward culture. An answer to that was needed. I was confronted with myself, sent back to where I came from. [...] The knowledge of Islam is limited in the West. I see it as an almost religious duty to lift the curtain.<sup>19</sup>

It is interesting to note how Abdolah's stance on Islam has changed over the years. In earlier opinion pieces (published around 1997), Abdolah presented himself as a mouthpiece for refugees and depicted Islam as the religion of the oppressive regime of the ayatollahs from which he had fled. In these texts, Islam is dealt with as a religion that is not even really part of Persian tradition, but that belongs to 'Arabs with the holy book in their left hand and the sword in their right'.<sup>20</sup> The image of the fanatic Koran- and sword-wielding Arab is a long-standing, clichéd Western image of Islam, and Abdolah's use of it contrasts with the 'religious duty' of challenging notions of Islam as a backward culture that the author adopts later. As said, the

---

<sup>17</sup> 'De koran heeft haar zonen en haar dochters aan dit land gegeven [...]. Kijk naar de Nederlandse literatuur. Wie heeft de afgelopen twee, drie jaar de mooiste Nederlandse boeken geschreven? De schrijvers die in een strenge islamitische cultuur opgevoed zijn!' K. Abdolah, 'Mijn mooie koran', *de Volkskrant*, 20 September 2004.

<sup>18</sup> 'Ik was in Frankrijk toen ik [van de aanslagen] hoorde. [...] Ik zat daar met een aantal Franse, Italiaanse, en Spaanse schrijvers en ik merkte plotseling dat ik niet bij die mensen hoorde. Dat ik anders was. Dat ik meer met die terroristen gemeen had dan met die collega's'. K. Abdolah, 'Altijd dit lege hart, altijd', *de Volkskrant*, 7 September 2002.

<sup>19</sup> 'Ik kom uit een traditionele, gelovige Perzische familie [...] Maar de tendens in Nederland is: de koran is een rotboek, de islam een achterlijke cultuur. Daar was een antwoord op nodig. Ik werd geconfronteerd met mezelf, teruggestuurd waar ik vandaan kwam [...] De kennis in het Westen over de islam is beperkt. Ik zie het bijna als een religieuze plicht een gordijn op te lichten'. Cited in L. Schut, 'Dwingende roman Abdolah over de islam', *De Telegraaf*, 25 November 2005.

<sup>20</sup> 'Arabieren met het heilige boek in hun linkerhand en een zwaard in hun rechter'. K. Abdolah, 'Vrouwen achter de gordijnen!', *de Volkskrant*, 18 January 1997.

events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent debate on the position of Islam in Dutch society seem to have played a significant role in this change.

There is an interesting paradox in the way that Abdolah has profiled himself as a cultural mediator. On the one hand, he claims that he wants to mediate between ‘East’ and ‘West’ and on the other he often reminds the readers of his columns that there is a fundamental difference preventing a meeting of ‘East’ and ‘West’. He regularly employs old, orientalist stereotypes: ‘West’ is rational, straightforward and active; ‘East’ is irrational, traditional and passive. The paradox can be explained if we read these columns as an attempt by Abdolah to position himself as a transcultural author and public intellectual who can act as a bridge between ‘East’ and ‘West’:

Thousands of people coming from elsewhere bring with them their experiences, culture and history. It would be no more than decent to share those experiences with the Dutch. I admire straight thinking, from A to B. I use Western reasoning. But I also think in a circular manner and this is based on the Eastern way of thinking.<sup>21</sup>

In between straight and circular, Abdolah presents himself as the right person to explain the East to the Dutch.

The underlying rhetoric is that, because of his origin, Abdolah can function as a *pars pro toto* for the Orient: to listen to him and to read his work is to encounter the East in its entirety. Abdolah formulates this first and foremost as an ethical issue: the alien gains a voice through him. Thus, he repeatedly calls himself a ‘witness’ for his people, for foreigners and for Muslims living in the Netherlands. There is also aesthetic gain in this. Abdolah’s Oriental origins make his work special:

There is a story [in my second collection of short stories] that shows a successful merging between [Persian and Dutch]. Its title gives a clear example: ‘Then It Was Our Turn’. This is the ancient narrative style used in *One Thousand and One Nights*. The reader immediately notices the link to something Persian [...]. I am someone who adds something, something more than words. [...] These are all Dutch words and yet you taste something ancient in them. The rhythm is different...<sup>22</sup>

Again, whether the gain is ethical or aesthetical, there is an underlying rhetoric: the Dutch reader may find an entire world disclosed by Abdolah’s work. The supposedly unchanging character of the Orient – suggested by the idea that Abdolah, born in twentieth-century Iran, has a direct connection to an Arabian medieval text – and the inherently archaic and fairy tale-

---

<sup>21</sup> ‘Duizenden die ergens anders vandaan komen, hebben ervaringen, hun cultuur en hun geschiedenis meegenomen. Ik denk dat het fatsoenlijk is wanneer ze die ervaring met de Nederlanders delen. Ik bewonder de rationele manier van denken, rechtstreeks van A naar B. Ik maak gebruik van de westerse ratio. Maar ik denk ook rond en dat is gebaseerd op de oosterse manier van denken’. K. Abdolah, *Karavaan* (Amsterdam: De Geus, 2003), pp. 111-2.

<sup>22</sup> ‘In *De meisjes en de partizanen* is er een verhaal dat een geslaagde samenwerking laat zien tussen de twee talen. Dat blijkt al uit de titel: ‘Toen waren wij aan de beurt’. Dat is een oude manier van vertellen; het vertellen van Duizend-en-één-nacht. Je weet onmiddellijk dat er hier iets Perzisch mee verbonden wordt [...]. Ik ben iemand die iets toevoegt, iets anders dan woorden. [...] Het zijn allemaal Nederlandse woorden en toch proef je er iets ouds in. Het ritme is anders...’ Cited in O. Heynders and B. Paasman, “‘De ziel van dit volk komt goed in gedichten naar voren, maar in proza niet.’”, *Literatuur* 16 (1999), 365-369 (pp. 366-7).

like character of everything that stems from it: to emphasise his value as a cultural transmitter, as someone who adds value to Dutch culture, Abdolah employs orientalist notions which, as we will see, Hafid Bouazza would strongly disclaim.

## Hafid Bouazza and the Lies and Masks of Art

Hafid Bouazza was born in 1970 in Oujda (Morocco). When he was seven, he joined his father who had moved to the Netherlands as a so-called guest worker. Bouazza's first publications were translations of modern Arab poetry. He made his debut in 1996 as a writer with a collection of short stories, followed by a novella in 1998, both of which were met with mostly positive reviews. Bouazza received a great deal of attention for what Henriëtte Louwse has called his 'unexpected language': 'archaic Dutch words, neologisms and unexpected word combinations, as well as his preference for long descriptions', or in other words not the language you would expect from a migrant author.<sup>23</sup> Although Louwse asserts that when Bouazza entered the literary scene it 'was readily assumed that classic and modern Arabic literature provided the explanation for what was clearly a very un-Dutch style of writing'<sup>24</sup> and Bouazza himself has often claimed that critics assumed this style stemmed from his exotic origins, most critics did actually recognise Bouazza's method of evoking an older Dutch literary tradition in his work. Reviews of Bouazza's literary work often compare his style to that of famous Dutch literary aestheticists of the late eighteenth century, such as Louis Couperus (1863-1923), one of the Netherlands' foremost literary authors, known for his highly aestheticised style. Another name that is often linked to Bouazza's style is that of the *Beweging van Tachtig* (The Eighties' Movement), a group of poets from the 1880s who are often seen as the founders of modern Dutch literature and who are known for their aestheticist poetics.<sup>25</sup> When Bouazza's 2001 novel *Salomon* appeared, critics unanimously agreed that he had taken his 'flowery' style too far, resulting in a mostly unreadable book. His next novel *Paravion* (2003) was viewed as a promising comeback. Alongside his literary work, Bouazza has also worked as a translator of medieval Arab poetry and erotica, which has appeared in several annotated collections.

In 2001, Bouazza was commissioned by the organisation of the annual Dutch 'Book Week' festival to write the annual Book Week Essay. The theme for that year's festival – and thus for the essay – was 'writing in-between two cultures'. While the festival was meant to celebrate such 'in-between' writing, Bouazza turned against it. Bouazza starts his essay by expressing his annoyance with his critics' and readers' tendency to label him a 'migrant writer', 'foreign writer' or 'Moroccan writer', a topic he has dealt with before in columns and interviews. He starts by saying he will examine the validity of such labels by discussing the extent to which his origins have contributed to his literary work. He then makes a generic shift in the text: to

<sup>23</sup> H. Louwse, 'Metamorphosis in the Work of Hafid Bouazza', in *Literature, Language and Multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries*, ed. by W. Behschnitt, S. de Mul and Liesbeth Minnaard, (Amsterdam-New York: Editions Rodopi, 2013), pp. 247-9.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, p. 247.

<sup>25</sup> For a thorough analysis of the strategic value of these references to the *Tachtigers*, especially in Bouazza's essay *Een beer in bontjas*, see H. Louwse, *Homeless Entertainment* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 46.



enable his examination, Bouazza starts telling his life story. Thus, a strange paradox ensues: a text that aims to prove the irrelevance of an author's 'private information' ends up consisting largely of an autobiography-like text – the 2004 edition was even subtitled '*Autobiographical Sketches*'.

Bouazza's 'autobiography' is embedded in a fictional narrative setting: a group of striking characters gathered around a 'guest of honour', the writer Hafid Bouazza, at the Book Week festival. They have come together to discuss his life story and its relevance for his work. Several narrative voices can be discerned. First, the author himself seems to speak in the essayistic part. A second voice is used for the autobiographical passages. This voice is typical for the genre: an older 'I' narrating the memories of his youth and migration. However, the fictional embedment means we cannot simply conflate this narrator with the author himself. A third voice is that of the heterodiegetic, non-dramatised narrator describing the fictional Book Week festival. The fourth and final voice is given to a festival attendee who delivers a speech, the fictional migrant author Haaris Boelfachr, whose name suggests he is an alter ego of the author himself.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the narrative voice in Bouazza's essay alternately belongs to the author – either dramatized or not –, to narrators and to characters.

This continuous switching of narrative voices – several of which at least belong to fictional narrators and characters – interferes with the claim of truth that characterises the autobiographical genre. It similarly interferes with the basic assumption of the essay as a format in which the author specifically expresses his or her own views. This fits in with Bouazza's tendency to playfully speak and write in bad faith. As I argue elsewhere, this tendency seems influenced by nineteenth century aestheticists such as Oscar Wilde, whose essay 'The Decay of Lying' Bouazza repeatedly alludes to and even paraphrased in his Book Week essay.<sup>27</sup> Wilde's praise for 'art's rejection of sincerity and accuracy in favor of lies and masks' is echoed in Bouazza's strategy to use the notion of authenticity as precisely such a mask. Right after his debut was published, Bouazza made it clear how well aware he is that his origins and the exotic elements in his works will incite the reader to read it as an autobiography. He plays with this possible reading by naming the narrator of many of the stories in his debut *Hafid*. Yet, he scolds the reader if he or she falls for this teasing:

In one of the [...] stories [in his debut] the author has a character consider the difficulty of writing an autobiography, since the very act could make a writer lose their Muslim soul. 'Is that true, readers ask me. People are constantly looking for human interest; they're like children who want to believe that fairy tales are true [...].'<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> As Henriëtte Louwerse remarks, Haaris Boelfachr is synonymous with Hafid Bouazza: 'both names mean "defender of pride"'. H. Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment* (2007), p. 34n.

<sup>27</sup> For a fuller discussion of Bouazza's allusions to Oscar Wilde in his essay, see S.J. Moenandar, *Depraved Borderlands. Encounters with Muslims in Dutch Literature and the Public Debate* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 160.

<sup>28</sup> 'In een [...] verhaal laat de schrijver een personage de overweging maken hoe moeilijk het is een autobiografisch verhaal te schrijven, omdat je daardoor als islammit [sic] je ziel kan verliezen. Is dat echt zo, vragen de lezers dan. De mensen zoeken steeds naar human interest; ze zijn als kinderen die willen geloven dat sprookjes waar zijn'. Paraphrased and cited in P. Jacobs, 'De kunst van het misverstand', *De Standaard*, 24 October 1996.

Bouazza's deconstruction of authenticity by mimicry seems to target what Salman Rushdie has called the 'bogy of authenticity': the demand that the alien element will characterise the style and themes of the non-Western author.<sup>29</sup> Bouazza, in *A Bear in Fur Coat*:

[T]he space normally assigned to the [Dutch author of Moroccan origin and Dutch nationality] is rather confined. [...]. Because of his specific social place within the dominant culture [the migrant author] seems destined –or doomed – to make his position, 'the migrant theme', the driving force behind his authorship. [...] Any other subject that the migrant author might choose will be seen by readers as a wilful deviation from the themes imposed upon him, i.e. the situation of the immigrant or some devious obfuscation of these themes.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, since readers are in any event likely to read his work as an autobiography, Bouazza chooses to trick them by turning elements of his work and his authorial posture into a mock autobiography.

This element of mock autobiography ties in with what Henriëtte Louwerse has called Bouazza's 'mockery of the reader': styles and themes in Bouazza's work may seem to be Eastern or Oriental at first, but turn out to be an ironic performance of orientalist discourse.<sup>31</sup> Both mock autobiography and Bouazza's 'mockery of the reader' function as a trap for the unsuspecting reader, who may think he or she is dealing with authentic oriental art, but betrays his or her own Orientalism by drawing that conclusion. And indeed, there are some spectacular examples of readers and the occasional critic falling into Bouazza's trap.<sup>32</sup> By taking Bouazza's work to be genuinely autobiographical and authentically Arab, they reveal their own orientalist prejudices of how an Arab author should write. However, Bouazza's critics are hardly as unanimously dim as he portrays them in his Book Week essay and interviews.<sup>33</sup> The author claims that not a single one of his critics has recognised the Dutch literary tradition in which he writes and that critics fail to understand that the exotic world he portrays in his works is an orientalist fantasy rather than a true-to-life description of life in the Arab world. Although the vast majority of critics do actually recognise this, Bouazza's authorial posture seems to now have essentially become that of the author who fights a polluted literary climate where origins rather than literary quality are valued. This is in line with his autonomist poetics and his aestheticist posture. It also explains his disdain for authors of foreign descent who present their

---

<sup>29</sup> S. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 70.

<sup>30</sup> '[D]e ruimte die de [Nederlandse schrijver met Marokkaanse Achtergrond en Nederlandse Nationaliteit] meestal toegewezen krijgt, is nogal beperkt. [...]. Vanwege zijn specifieke sociale plaats binnen een dominante cultuur lijkt [de migrant-schrijver] voorbeschikt – of gedoemd – om zijn positie, 'het migrantethema', tot de drijvende kracht achter zijn schrijverschap te maken. [...] Elk ander onderwerp dat de migrant-schrijver kiest, zal door de lezers gezien worden als een moedwillige afwijking van de opgedrongen thematiek, namelijk de situatie van de immigrant, of een slinkse versluiering van dat thema'. H. Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas* (Amsterdam: CPNB, 2001), pp. 11-2.

<sup>31</sup> H. Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment*, p. 130.

<sup>32</sup> S.J. Moenandar, *Depraved Borderlands*, p. 169n.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*, pp. 131-2.

descent as a guarantee for the value of their work: ‘I hate authors who pride themselves on being Jew, black or Moroccan’.<sup>34</sup>

The fact that Bouazza constantly makes such remarks shows him to be an active manager of his own authorial posture. The same can be said of his repeated warnings that his work should not be read as social commentary: ‘in literature, an author does not take up a social position, but rather an artistic position’. In other words, his work should be read for its aesthetic value, not because of the social values that some critics may expect of it. Bouazza’s assertion is complicated by his extensive contributions to the public debate and the fact that his essays and opinion pieces seem to imply the same ethos as his literary work: both contain scolding and satirical images portraying Muslims and the Muslim religion as backward and incompatible with modern Dutch society and depicting the Dutch as being hopelessly naïve about the threat that Islam poses to the Netherlands. Two contradictory conclusions can be found in critical studies with respect to the relationship between Bouazza’s literary work and his opinions on society and literature.<sup>35</sup> A number of studies conclude that his novels, short stories and theatre texts do indeed contain the same social commentary as his op-eds.<sup>36</sup> Literary critics in newspapers and magazines largely draw similar conclusions. However, a number of scholars have seen Bouazza’s literary style and themes as an ingenious deconstruction of how ethnic and religious minorities are treated in Dutch society. In her monograph on Bouazza’s work, Henriëtte Louwerse reads Bouazza’s novel ‘Salomon’ as an attempt to resist the call by publicist Paul Scheffer to ‘take Dutch language, culture and history much more seriously’.<sup>37</sup> As we will see in the next section of this paper, a similar ambiguity can be found in Bouazza’s activities as a cultural mediator: should his representations of Arab culture be interpreted in the light of his remarks about Arab culture being backward in his essays and opinion pieces, or rather as ironic subversions that deconstruct such an essentialist approach?

## Translating Authenticity

Strikingly enough, Bouazza presents himself as being much more alien in his role as translator than when he speaks about himself as an author. He does this through the alien character of his translation, but also through the way he speaks about the process of translation: ‘I wanted something Arabic to echo in the Dutch, and I hope that *my nomad’s flute* doesn’t sound too dissonant in the meadows and waters of my stepmother tongue’.<sup>38</sup> This remark sounds strange in the light of the previous section. The notion that Bouazza plays the ‘nomad’s flute’ rather

<sup>34</sup> ‘Ik heb een hekel aan auteurs die zich laten voorstaan op hun jood, neger, of Marokkaan zijn’. Cited in I. Hoogervorst, *Geletterde mannen* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2000), p. 101.

<sup>35</sup> Ieme van der Poel sees a similar dichotomy in critical studies on Bouazza and his work and rejects the assumption that Bouazza’s literary work and activities have are in line with each other. I. van der Poel, ‘Literatuur-met-een-accent’, *De academische boekengids* 77 (2009), pp. 13-18 (p. 15).

<sup>36</sup> See for instance Liesbeth Minnaard, *New Germans, New Dutch* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), p. 42 and Moenandar, *Depraved Borderlands*, p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Scheffer, cited in Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment*, p. 168.

<sup>38</sup> ‘[I]k wilde in het Nederlands iets van het Arabisch laten doorklinken en ik hoop dat mijn nomadenfluit niet al te dissonant klinkt in de weiden en langs de wateren van mijn stiefmoedertaal’. H. Bouazza, *Rond voor rond of als een pikhouweel* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2002), p. 11.

than the recorder when writing in Dutch seems to directly contradict the point of view expressed earlier that his writing should not be seen as the transmission of foreign authenticity.

According to James S. Holmes, translation takes place on three levels: the linguistic context, the literary intertext and the socio-cultural situation.<sup>39</sup> On the latter two levels, Bouazza chooses what Holmes calls a strategy of ‘exoticisation’, rather than ‘naturalisation’. His translations tend to retain the original form and rhyme schemes of the poems (literary intertext) and he makes no attempt to replace cultural notions and behaviour in the original poems with notions that might be less alien to his Dutch readers (socio-cultural situation). Although he does provide extensive annotation to redeem this, these foot- and endnotes arguably reinforce the alien character of this poetry even more, implying that these texts are so alien that they need constant explanation. The linguistic context is slightly more complicated. Bouazza tends to retain traces of Arab syntax in his poetry – which is exoticisation on a linguistic level. And although he does not leave Arab words in his text, his ‘quite neurotic’ tendency to ‘honour the holiness of the original word’<sup>40</sup> results in a far-fetched choice of words and neologisms that make reading the texts quite jarring at times. In a way, this is also a form of exoticisation (see below for a good example of this the discussion on Bouazza’s translation of a passage from the Koran).

There seems to be an interesting paradox here. On the one hand, there is the teasing deconstruction of the very notion of authenticity itself mentioned earlier. And, on the other hand, there is the notion that transmission of the authentic experience of ‘the original word’ should, if not possible, at least be attempted.

In his essay on ‘writing in-between two cultures’, Bouazza claims – through his alter ego Haaris Boelfachr – that he has translated Arab poems ‘because I found them beautiful’. He rejects the notion that he aimed for the ‘transmission of cultural information’.<sup>41</sup> This is in striking contrast with the footnotes that accompany many of his translations, in which Bouazza sounds like an old-fashioned orientalist, making claims like ‘Arabs believed (and believe) that a woman’s libido is nine times as strong as a man’s’ and ‘Arabs preferred a tight vulva and a dry vagina’.<sup>42</sup> He even goes so far as to praise nineteenth century orientalism: ‘[It] understood one thing correctly: Their love poetry clearly shows that Arabs saw love first and foremost as a physical phenomenon’. Although we can discern a certain ironic tone of voice in these paratexts that accompany his translations, the irony is directed against what he calls the ‘sweetening’ of Arabic culture in modern-day Western perception, and not against the notion of the existence of an essential ‘Arabness’. Thus, Bouazza seems to present himself here very much as Said’s informant, the Oriental whose ‘nomad’s flute’ conjures up the Orient *as it is* for the bedazzled eyes of the Westerner. All this is reminiscent of the work of orientalists like Richard Burton.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> J.S. Holmes, ‘Rebuilding the Bridge at Bommel: Notes on the Limits of Translatability’, in *Translated! Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies*, ed. by J.S. Holmes (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1988), pp. 45-52.

<sup>40</sup> ‘[I]k ben daar nogal neurotisch in en eerbiedig de heiligheid van het oorspronkelijke woord’. Bouazza, *Rond voor rond*, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Ik heb de gedichten vertaald omdat ik ze mooi vond.’ Bouazza, *Beer in bontjas*, p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Arabieren geloofden (en geloven) dat het libido van een vrouw negen keer zo sterk is als dat van een man’; ‘Arabieren gaven de voorkeur aan een nauwe vulva en een droge vagina’. Bouazza, *Rond voor rond*, p. 64, p. 65.

<sup>43</sup> The comparison with Burton is fitting: Burton himself was a master of both disguise and footnotes. He often posed as ‘one of them’ to give his works on the Orient credibility for his Western audience (the idea being that Burton is more

Indeed, what Said has written in *Orientalism* about Burton is in many ways true for Bouazza as well:

[W]e are never directly *given* the Orient; everything about it is presented to us by way of Burton's knowledgeable (and often prurient) interventions, which reminds us how he had taken over the management of oriental life for the purposes of his narrative.<sup>44</sup>

In other words, Bouazza's cultural transmission can be read as a form of life writing – as conveying a personal narrative<sup>45</sup> – as much as an attempt to give his readers insight into Arab culture. Although this is the case for all cultural transmission – after all, since the cultural transmitter always functions as a kind of filter, the transmission will tell us as much about the transmitter as it does about the culture transmitted, if not more – it seems especially true of Bouazza because of his Burtonian approach.

However, the 'pervasive aestheticizing' of Bouazza's authorial posture does raise the question whether this Burtonian manipulation of the Orient that is used to serve a certain narrative is not, at least in part, yet another mask and another lie for the author to delight in. As always with Bouazza, we do not know whether the posture that speaks from his cultural transmission can be taken at face value. Through his ironical tone, Bouazza – an ardent reader of Burton and well aware of nineteenth-century orientalism and its critics<sup>46</sup> – exposes and thematizes the manipulation itself, as it were. By ironically posing as a latter day Burton, Bouazza targets the belief itself that it is possible to show the Orient *as it is* – much in the same way as he does through the fake oriental 'authenticity' of his literary work.

Abdolah's cultural transmission reveals a similar attempt at life writing, but his translations and adaptations of 'Eastern' texts follow a strategy that is the exact opposite of Bouazza's: Abdolah clearly aims for what Holmes calls 'naturalisation'. This is in line with Abdolah's project to explain the Orient to the Western reader. We see this in Abdolah's translation of the Koran, which was accompanied by a novel narrating the life of the prophet Mohammed.<sup>47</sup> The two books were sold in a box set which proclaimed that 'Abdolah's translation will give everyone access to the Koran'. This 'everyone' seems to refer first and foremost the uninitiated Dutch reader, who is presented with a translation of the Koran adorned with small pictures of Dutch icons such as cows, wooden shoes and windmills. These icons seem to be saying 'There is nothing strange about this text'. The same message seems to be implied in the author's explanation of a Sura that mentions Jesus Christ: Abdolah tells his readers that Jesus 'was

---

a native informant than a Western observer, i.e. that the Orient *speaks for itself* in his work) and donned the garb of a Pashtun doctor in order to travel to Mecca.

<sup>44</sup> E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 196.

<sup>45</sup> See note 10.

<sup>46</sup> See for instance W. Kuipers, "Ik ben een Nederlandse schrijver", *de Volkskrant*, 1 May 1998; H. Bouazza, *Schoon in elk oog is wat het bemint* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2000), pp. 55-6; and the fact that when Bouazza edited a volume of the Dutch literary magazine *Optima*, he included two texts by Richard Burton (R. F. Burton, 'To Alexandria', in *Optima* 20:2 (2002), pp. 71-2; R.F. Burton, 'How Abu Hasan Brake Wind', in *idem*, pp. 73-5).

<sup>47</sup> It is not unusual for translations of the Koran to be published together with a re-telling of the prophet Mohammad's life. Many translations of the Koran contain the prophet's life story, since many passages in the Koran only make sense when viewed in the light of events from Mohammad's life. However, where most of these re-tellings are slightly narrativized enumerations of generally accepted occurrences in Mohammad's life, Abdolah's version embellished these into a full novel.

crucified and killed. But he came to life again'.<sup>48</sup> This is the story of Jesus as it is known to the average Dutch reader. It is, however, in contrast with the common belief among Muslims – not to mention the Koran itself, which states that '[t]hey say, "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah" – but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them'.<sup>49</sup> This is naturalisation at a socio-cultural level, bringing the Koranic text in line with the general knowledge of a Western audience. Something similar can be seen at a textual level. Abdolah explains in his foreword that he has removed most of the repetitions in the Koran: 'The Koran is a narrative and it was meant for the illiterate. The repetition was necessary at that time'.<sup>50</sup> The suggestion is that the text has been adapted to the time and place in which the translation has to operate, as opposed to its original context.

There is a significant contrast between Abdolah's own claim that he represents the Orient, the 'Other' element, and his emphasis on authenticity as opposed to this naturalisation of 'oriental' texts. In his foreword to the Koran, Abdolah writes: 'I have created a hole in the wall that you can now use to view Mohammad's gardens'.<sup>51</sup> Every attempt has been made, however, to make this world seem less strange, less Other, for the Dutch reader (his little pictograms of stereotypical Dutch symbols such as tulips, clogs and windmills should be seen as part of this attempt).

As I see it, the author tries to negate this contrast by presenting the act of translation as an almost mystical activity. Abdolah's foreword to his adaptation of *Kalila-o Demna*, for instance, explains how this text existed first in Hindi, was subsequently translated into Persian and then into Arabic. With the original Persian version lost, it was then reintroduced into Persian in an adaptation from the Arabic text by Abol Ma'ali Nasrollah Monshi, or Abol Maali, as Abdolah calls him. Abdolah states: 'Let me be clear. You will find almost no sentence that is a direct translation of master Abol Maali [...], but I think my approach has brought me very close to the original Indian narratives'.<sup>52</sup> Abdolah makes a similar claim in his foreword to the Koran, when he writes that he will show his readers at least 'something of Mohammad's divine prose'.<sup>53</sup> He added to that in an interview that he thinks 'Mohammad and his Allah would be happy with

---

<sup>48</sup> 'Hij werd gekruisigd en gedood. Maar hij kwam weer tot leven'. K. Abdolah, *De Koran. Een vertaling* (Amsterdam: De Geus, 2008), p. 94.

<sup>49</sup> Koran 4:157. A heated theological dispute surrounds this verse, as 'they' in this context refers to the Jews who indeed, technically speaking, did not crucify Christ; even according to the Bible, the Romans did. Thus, there are some Muslim commentators who have concluded that the Koran does not rule out or contradict the biblical account of the crucifixion. See for instance A. Wessels, *De Koran verstaan* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1986), pp.173-4. This opinion, however, hardly has any influence in the Muslim world: the vast majority of Muslim Koran commentators hold that either the crucifixion did not take place or that someone else who was made to resemble Jesus by divine intervention was crucified in Jesus' place (which would explain the Koranic 'but so it was made to appear to them'). See for example Ibn Kathir, *Stories of the Prophets* (El-Mansoura: Dar Al-Manarah, 2000), pp. 259-61.

<sup>50</sup> 'De Koran is een vertelling, en hij was bedoeld voor de analfabete mensen. De herhaling was noodzakelijk in die tijd'. Abdolah, *De Koran*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>51</sup> 'Toch heb ik een gat in de muur gemaakt waardoor u nu naar de tuinen van Mohammad kunt kijken'. Idem, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> 'Laat ik duidelijk zijn. U kunt bijna geen zin in dit boek vinden die een letterlijke vertaling van een van de zinnen van de meester Abol Maali is. [...] maar ik denk dat ik met mijn benadering heel dicht bij de oorspronkelijke Indiase vertellingen ben gekomen'. K. Abdolah, *Kelil  en Demn * (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2002), pp. 12-3.

<sup>53</sup> 'Het doet Kader Abdolah goed dat hij zo iets van het goddelijke proza aan zijn lezers kan laten zien.' Abdolah, *De Koran*, pp. 10-1.

the result'.<sup>54</sup> The suggestion is that the author intuitively grasps the 'true' meaning and divinity of the text he is making available to his Dutch reader, thus redeeming the fact that he is not literally translating. The above-mentioned naturalisation is presented as a virtue, rather than a vice (as it is with Bouazza), in a quest for the authentic text.

Again, the author's biography is an important element in this claim to authenticity. When he published his adaptation of the Medieval Persian animal fables known as the *Kalila-o Demna*, Abdolah implicitly placed himself in context of an age-old oral tradition by saying that he often 'had to call home to ask my uncle to explain the meaning of sentences'.<sup>55</sup> Four years later, this uncle is given centre stage in interviews, promotional texts and the foreword for Abdolah's translation of the Koran. Time and again, it is stressed that Abdolah could count on the advice of his 'elderly uncle Aga Djan [who] is now ninety-four years old [and who] has read the Koran at least seven hundred times. We read newspapers in the morning and evening; he reads the Koran'.<sup>56</sup> The biographical detail that '[Abdolah] used his father's old Arabic Koran as source text'<sup>57</sup> seems to imply a sense of authenticity.

Bouazza tends to translate fringe literature rather than the 'great classics' or texts that are central to Muslim culture that Abdolah opts for – this in itself is rather telling about the different nature of each of these authors' project of cultural mediation. However, Bouazza has also published translations of several short chapters of the Koran, thus enabling a comparison of their strategies of cultural transmission. The differences occur at all levels and are quite revealing.

As discussed above, Abdolah adapts the Koranic Jesus into a figure that is very similar to the Christian, Western version. Bouazza chooses to do the exact opposite when he stresses in a footnote that Maryam (=Mary<sup>58</sup>) wore a Hijab, which is the veil that has become almost iconic for Islam and its uneasy relationship with the West.<sup>59</sup>

Linguistically, Bouazza tends to focus on the difficulties of translating a centuries-old Arabic text, rather than glossing them over as Abdolah does. One of the many examples of this is Bouazza's translation of the hundredth Sura, usually called 'The Chargers'. The sura contains a prophesy of the apocalypse that starts with a series of oaths. Before announcing the final judgment awaiting all humans, the text calls upon someone or something running and panting and causing sparks. Most commentaries explain that the text is referring to a herd of horses during a raid.<sup>60</sup> Abdolah chooses to integrate this in his own translation and writes 'By the

---

<sup>54</sup> 'Ik denk dat Mohammad en zijn Allah blij zouden zijn met het resultaat'. Quoted in S. Kooke, 'Kader Abdolah. Mohammad lijkt heel erg op mij', *Trouw*, 26 April 2008.

<sup>55</sup> 'Vaak moest ik naar huis bellen om de betekenis van één zinnetje aan mijn oude oom te vragen.' Abdolah, *Kelilé en Demné*, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> 'Aga Djan is nu 94 jaar oud. Hij heeft de Koran minstens zevenhonderd keer gelezen. Wij lezen kranten 's morgens en 's avonds, hij leest in zijn Koran'. Quoted in A. van den Kieboom, "'Alles wat ik heb geschreven, heeft hiernaartoe geleid'", <http://www.degeus.nl/auteurs/abdolah/index.html> (accessed 29 April 2008).

<sup>57</sup> 'Als brontext nam [Abdolah] de oude Arabische Koran van zijn vader'. Abdolah, *De Koran*, back cover.

<sup>58</sup> It is telling that while Abdolah adopts the Dutch names of Jesus and Mary ('Jezus' and 'Maria' in Dutch), Bouazza sticks to the Arabic 'Isa' and 'Maryam'.

<sup>59</sup> H. Bouazza, 'Maryam', in *Optima* 20:2 (2002), pp. 22-4.

<sup>60</sup> Alternative titles for this sura are 'The Courser' or 'The Galloper'. M. M. Pickthall translates the first few verses as follows: 'By the snorting coursers/Striking sparks of fire/And scouring to the raid at dawn' in M.M. Pickthall, *The*

racing, fighting horses that breathe short and quickly/And by the sparks they beat from their hoofs/and by the fighters in the early morning'.<sup>61</sup> Abdolah conflates translation and commentary in simple, clear language, making his text easily accessible to the uninitiated reader. This fits in with the 'pervasive ethicization' of Abdolah's posture: to him, cultural transmission is first and foremost a didactic undertaking and the main aim of his translation is to teach the uninitiated Dutch reader about Islam. In this light, it makes sense that Abdolah opts for adaptation rather than literal translation: what is being transmitted is not so much the translated text, but the insight (or sense of insight) for which this translation is a vehicle. This stands in stark contrast to Bouazza's adherence to the 'original word'. In his translation, Bouazza chooses to keep the hermetic quality of the original texts and to use pleonasm and archaisms to approach the linguistic characteristics of the original Arabic texts: 'By the snorting [Bouazza uses 'bremmende', an archaic word that is hardly used in modern Dutch texts] gallopers/The sprinklers of sparks [Bouazza uses the pleonasm 'vonkensprenkler' here]/The attackers of the morning [idem: 'ochtendaanvallers']'.<sup>62</sup> As with Abdolah, the choices Bouazza makes in his translation are typical of his authorial posture of 'pervasive aestheticization'. It would seem that Bouazza has little interest in providing his readers with an insight into Muslim culture by clarifying the meaning of the text. Rather, his translation seems geared towards transmitting the experience of the text, its aesthetic form.

## Concluding Remarks

As I said at the beginning of this paper when quoting Petra Broomans, cultural transmission involves the transmission of images of another culture. One could even say that the cultural transmitter re-imagines the source culture's artifacts and ideas in the context of the destination culture. In this sense, Said's remarks about Richard Burton rearranging the Orient in order to make it fit in with his own personal narrative (directed, of course, at a Western audience) is true for all cultural transmitters. Both Bouazza and Kader Abdolah have at times presented themselves as experts on all things Oriental, as cultural transmitters making the Orient accessible to their Western audience. While doing so, they have moulded the Orient to fit in with their personal narrative: one acting as a bridge between cultures (Abdolah) and the other continuously stressing he does *not*, in any way, belong to any Oriental tradition (Bouazza). In doing so, they have both made abundant use of old, orientalist clichés and related them to their own biography. While Abdolah seems to embrace an orientalist worldview as a point of departure for his work,<sup>63</sup> Bouazza uses it much more self-consciously. Clearly aware of the

---

*Meaning of the Glorious Koran. An Explanatory Translation by Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall* (New York: The New American Library, 1956).

<sup>61</sup> 'Bij de dravende, vechtende paarden, die kort en snel ademen/En bij de vonken die ze uit hun hoeven slaan./En bij de strijders in de vroege morgen.' Abdolah, *De Koran*, p. 33.

<sup>62</sup> 'Bij de bremmende galoppers/De vonkensprankelers/De ochtendaanvallers'. H. Bouazza, 'Soera 100', in *Optima* 20:2 (2002), p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> Which might also be called an occidentalist worldview, since it equally reduces the West to one overruling aspect, i.e. its rationality.



existing criticism of orientalism such as Said's, Bouazza plays the orientalist cliché, rather than perpetuating it. An ironic tone permeates his work even when he presents himself as an expert orientalist, proclaiming eternal truths about Arabs and their thinking. So, while Abdolah assumes the role of oriental informant, Bouazza's continuous deconstruction of authenticity can easily be read as a critique of that role – to strengthen the critique that the author sometimes exaggerates the extent to which this role is forced upon him.

Neither author explicitly uses the word 'authentic' for their cultural transmission. However, by implying that their translational approach gives Dutch readers the opportunity to perceive the original *as it is*, the notion that they are transmitting authenticity becomes a central aspect in the way these authors position themselves as cultural mediators. Yet, what they mean by this authenticity – by the Orient *as it is* – is altogether different. This difference is in line with the authors' authorial postures. As I have argued in this paper, each author has taken up one of two classic authorial postures. Abdolah's claims that he has a 'special task' to fulfill as an informant, as a 'bridge between cultures', fit his posture of engaged author well. Bouazza's playful and ironical deconstruction of the role of informant matches his posture of the aestheticist who has no responsibilities beyond beauty and imagination. The same can be said of the authors' cultural transmission and the sense of authenticity it conveys. Abdolah's claim to authenticity lies in his claim of adherence to the *original meaning* of the text, while Bouazza's claim to authenticity lies in his claim of adherence to the *original experience* of the text. For Abdolah, cultural transmission, like his authorship, is an ethical project. His aim is to explain the Orient 'to everyone'. Hence the naturalisation and simplification of the texts he translates. For Bouazza, cultural transmission, like everything else, is an aesthetic project. His 'neurotic' tendency to 'honour the holiness of the original word' can be interpreted as an adherence to the original aesthetic form of the text and the implication is that his translations strive to convey this form to his readers.

## Bibliography

- Abdolah, K., 'Vrouwen achter de gordijnen!', *de Volkskrant*, 18 January 1997.
- Abdolah, K., *Een tuin in de zee* (Amsterdam: De Geus, 2001).
- Abdolah, K., *Kelilé en Demné* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2002).
- Abdolah, K., 'Altijd dit lege hart, altijd', *de Volkskrant*, 7 September 2002.
- Abdolah, K., *Karavaan* (Amsterdam: De Geus, 2003).
- Abdolah, K., 'Mijn mooie koran', *de Volkskrant*, 20 September 2004.
- Abdolah, K., *De Koran. Een vertaling* (Amsterdam: De Geus, 2008).
- Broomans, P., 'Introduction: Women as Transmitters of Ideas' in *From Darwin to Weil. Women as Transmitters of Ideas*, ed. by P. Broomans (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2009), pp. 1-20.
- Bouazza, H., *Schoon in elk oog is wat het bemint* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2000).
- Bouazza, H., *Een beer in bontjas* (Amsterdam: CPNB, 2001).
- Bouazza, H., *Rond voor rond of als een pikhouweel* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2002).
- Bouazza, H., 'Soera 100', in *Optima* 20:2 (2002), p. 25.
- Bouazza, H., 'Maryam', in *Optima* 20:2 (2002), pp. 22-4.
- Burton, R.F., 'To Alexandria', in *Optima* 20:2 (2002), pp. 71-2.

- Burton, R.F., 'How Abu Hasan Brake Wind', in *Optima* 20:2 (2002), pp. 73-5.
- Denis, B., 'Criticism and Engagement in the Belle Époque', in *The Autonomy of Literature at the Fins de Siècles (1900 and 2000)*, ed. by G.J. Dorleijn, R. Grüttemeier and L. Korthals Altes (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 29-40.
- Eakin, P.J., 'Introduction: Mapping the Ethics of Life Writing', in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. by J.P. Eakin (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004).
- Hakkert, T., 'Hafid Bouazza verbrandt alle schepen achter zich', *Dagblad Tubantia*, 14 May 1996.
- Heumakers, A., 'Forse halen helemaal van top tot bottom', *de Volkskrant*, 29 September 1995.
- Heynders, O., and Paasman, B., "De ziel van dit volk komt goed in gedichten naar voren, maar in proza niet", *Literatuur* 16 (1999), pp. 365-9.
- Holmes, J.S., 'Rebuilding the Bridge in Bommel: Notes on the Limits of Translatability', in *Translated! Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies*, ed. by J.S. Holmes (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1988), pp. 42-52.
- Hoogervorst, I., *Geletterde mannen* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2001).
- Jacobs, P., 'De kunst van het misverstand', *De Standaard*, 24 October 1996.
- Kathir, I., *Stories of the Prophets* (El-Mansoura: Dar Al-Manarah, 2000).
- Kieboom, A. van den, "Alles wat ik heb geschreven, heeft hiernaartoe geleid", <http://www.degeus.nl/auteurs/abdolah/index.html> [accessed 29 April 2008].
- Kooke, S., 'Kader Abdolah. Mohammad lijkt heel erg op mij', *Trouw*, 26 April 2008.
- Korthals Altes, L., *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation. The Negotiation of Values in Fiction* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming).
- Kuipers, W., "Ik ben een Nederlandse schrijver", *de Volkskrant*, 1 May 1998.
- Louwerse, H., *Homeless Entertainment* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).
- Louwerse, H., 'Metamorphosis in the Work of Hafid Bouazza', in *Language and Multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries*, ed. by W. Behschnitt, S. de Mul and Liesbeth Minnaard (Amsterdam-New York: Editions Rodopi, 2013), pp. 243-62.
- Meizoz, J., 'Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau', in *The Autonomy of Literature at the Fins de Siècles (1900 and 2000)*, ed. by G.J. Dorleijn, R. Grüttemeier and L. Korthals Altes (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 83-6.
- Minnaard, L., *New Germans, New Dutch* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).
- Moenandar, S.J., 'The Evaluation and Positioning of Literary Work by Authors with a Muslim Background', in *The Autonomy of Literature at the Fins de Siècles (1900 and 2000)*, ed. by G.J. Dorleijn, R. Grüttemeier and L. Korthals Altes (Leuven: Peeters 2007), pp. 241-60.
- Moenandar, S.J., *Depraved Borderlands. Meetings With Muslims in Dutch Literature and the Public Debate* (Frankfurt am Main: PL Academic Research, 2013).
- Pickthall, M.M., *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran. An Explanatory Translation by Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall* (New York: The New American Library, 1956).
- Pieters, J., *Moments of Negotiation. The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001).
- Poel, I. van der, 'Literatuur-met-een-accent', *De academische boekengids* 77 (2009), pp. 13-18.
- Rushdie, S., *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981 – 1991* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).
- Said, E.W., *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995).
- Schut, L., 'Dwingende roman Abdolah over de islam', *De Telegraaf*, 25 November 2005.
- Wessels, A., *De Koran verstaan* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1986).

## Author's Biography

Dr. **Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar** teaches philosophy of art and transmediality at the University of Groningen. He recently published *Depraved Borderlands. Meetings with Muslims in Dutch Literature and the Public Debate*. His current research focuses on life writing and self-fashioning in the literary field and beyond.