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**MOROCCAN DUTCH DIASPORA LITERATURE:  
IM/POSSIBILITIES OF AN INTERCULTURAL ENTERPRISE:  
H. BOUAZZA'S *ABDULLAH'S FEET* AS A CASE STUDY**

Since the 1990s the Netherlands has been host for thousands of Moroccan immigrants who sought economic refuge in the country. The process of migration in this country intensified as it was in need of workers because of market expansion. And thanks to Dutch liberal tradition, these immigrants gained recognition and rights as ethnic and religious minorities. In the beginning they came with hope of returning to their country of origin after making money; yet they ended up by staying for good and making their families join them. This brought about the birth of second generation immigrants that now impeccably contribute to the political social and cultural scene in the Netherlands. Among those are Moroccan-Dutch writers who stamp the literary scene with remarkable and praise-worthy literary work.

The second generation of Moroccan immigrant writers received a wide recognition by the public and critics. They have had a prominent position in the new production since the 1990s. Writers such as Hafid Bouazza, Abdelkader Benali, Mustapha Stitou, and Naima Elbezzaz, who belong to the second generation of Moroccan immigrants have impressed the Dutch readership with brilliant literary work. They won important literary prizes in the Netherlands and in Belgium including the yearly Elhizjra literary prize.

To speak of migrant literature has become a rather problematic issue in the literary realm. It creates much turbulence and disagreement when it comes to labelling those migrant authors. A cluster of speculations might emerge while tackling this issue of migrant literature. Historically speaking, it might be categorised as a subcategory of postcolonial literature since it is a result of a historical period, that is the end of the colonial era and the beginning of independent and post independent period. Thematically speaking, migrant literature is characterised by specific preoccupations such as the question of home and belonging, language and identity. It emphasises themes of the

journey, the abundance of metaphors of displacement, confinement, and alienation. Daniella Merolla and Sandra Ponzanesi declare that the immigrant category:

is meant to express the reopened traffic between center and periphery, to contest those frontiers that cut across languages, cultures, and religions in hegemonic ways, and to convey the space where multiple selves, origins, and belonging can be articulated and jostled.<sup>1</sup>

Migrant writers are diasporic, to take S.Hall's approach to cultural identity into consideration. Cultural identities, as proposed by Hall, are constantly produced and changed. They are not understood as something constant or a fixed essence or reality, but as something always changing and shifting, and never complete. The production of identity is a process and is unstable. Hall uses the term diaspora as a new experience of cultural identity that interrogates its essentialised constructions. The idea of diaspora has been celebrated as expressing notions of hybridity, heterogeneity, identity fragmentation and reconstruction, double consciousness, fractures of memory, ambivalence, roots and routes, discrepant cosmopolitanism, multi-locationality and so forth:

The diaspora consciousness is conceived as a specific awareness, supposedly a characteristic of people living 'here' and relating to a 'there': Diaspora consciousness is entirely a product of cultures and histories in collision and dialogue. Diasporic subjects are, thus, distinct versions of modern, transnational, intercultural experience.<sup>2</sup>

Migrant writers represent the transcultural tendency of the contemporary world. Seen through the lenses of Mary Louis Pratt's notion of 'contact zone' "in which peoples geographically and historically separated come onto contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. It is also an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect."<sup>3</sup> These migrant writers could be framed within the context of transculturalism.

Being migrant, diasporic, and transcultural, Moroccan-Dutch writers grapple with questions of origin and belonging by negotiating a space inbetween, that is hovering between what is local and what is global. Because of global relocations of people and cultures, this literature "becomes tainted by further questions of hybridity, syncretism, inbetweenness, interculturality, multiculturalism, transformativity, cosmopolitanism."<sup>4</sup> These writers live with differ-

<sup>1</sup> Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniella Merolla, eds., *Migrant Cartographies. New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Postcolonial Europe*. (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> James Clifford, « Diaspora » *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (3): 302-338.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Louis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniella Merolla, p. 8.

ent homes and worlds. They grapple to find an alternative space or a third geography. Like most diasporic writers, they create an imaginary homeland as Rushdie named it. Their father's homeland is an enlivening presence in the scenery of the narrative. The protagonist, usually a young bicultural, experiences feeling of loss and is in search of a new identity. Critics agree that these writers are innovative both in their use of language and in the subject they choose as their main themes.

Writers such as Bouazza touch on rebellion against religion and family tradition. They also make use of sharp irony to create a safe distance between their depicted world and the world of migrant issues. *Abdullah's Feet* is comprised of a set of interrelated stories in an imaginary village in Morocco and in Amsterdam. Dominant themes include migration, cultural confrontation, and the abrupt movement between the archaic and the metropolitan worlds. These stories are told from the point of view of an adolescent Muslim boy living in Morocco. The cast of characters include numerous Fatimas and Abdullahs, a dishonest Imam and the owner of a grocery store selling fruits. The stories are brimming with sexual tension. As Bouazza himself put it, 'a repressive atmosphere is the best setting in which to describe the frustration of inarticulate sexual desire'. Two of the stories are set in the Netherlands, and these describe the loves of a Moroccan Dutch boy called Humayd.

Some critics consider the book a fairwell to Morocco, in each of the eight stories a game is played with tradition. He ignores his belonging to Moroccan community. In his response to questions of identity, Bouazza declares "What is my identity? Moroccan? As a writer there is no need to worry about that, identity has nothing to do with literature. For an identity you need a community, and I don't feel part of the Moroccan community."<sup>5</sup>

"Apolline" is a striking example of East/West meeting/encounter. It suggests a platform for an intercultural communication between the East and the West. The story consists of the retrospective first person narrative of Humayd, a native of Bertollo, an imaginary village in Morocco, now living in Amsterdam, and recounting his love affair with Apolline, the blonde Western Dutch self-confident perfectly beautiful female. The text brings to the fore two different cultures: The Moroccan and the Dutch. On the one side there is Humayd, "son of the dead desert", as Apolline likes to name him, and on the other side there is Apolline, the tall white civilised Dutch. Two different worlds are brought together in an attempt to create an intercultural exchange/enterprise. However, one might wonder about possibilities and/or impossibilities of this ambitious project.

A close reading of the text depicts moments where this intercultural meeting is possible and worthy of indepth discussion; yet there are other moments

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<sup>5</sup> Henriette Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment: On Hafid Bouazza's Literary Writing* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 74.

in the story which puncture this possibility and make such an ambition just impossible.

To begin with, the narrator's fascination by Apolline, an epitome of the Dutch /European Western character, is declared from the very outset of the narrative.

These were bound to be the munificent Sirens of the Occident, and in my heart that very moment the seeds were sown of my love Apolline, in whom I was to find tangible evidence of that two-dimensional voluptuousness. I loved her even before I saw her. (p. 96).

Amsterdam, a very different and hauntingly attractive space makes the narrator declares his love for the city as well as for Apolline, an inhabitant of the city. In fact, the boy's fascination by Apolline could be transformed to the migrant's fascination by the Dutch openness and tolerance. Open landscape attracts the migrants and the new comers as well. Visibility, directness, and flat meadows suggest a transparent geography that undoubtedly give rise to a rational, realist, and sober culture where there is a wide acceptance of things that could remain hidden elsewhere.

Another instance of possibilities of an intercultural interprise /exchange is Apolline's visit to Morocco. She goes to see the narrow streets of Fez, and to hear the muleteer yelling, and to expose her clean, pink, and gold beauty to the dust and 'unmerciful climate'. Apolline, in a letter to Humayd from Morocco, after experiencing culture shock in the narrow streets of Fez, writes "I think I understand you better now." (p. 100). The visit makes Apolline uncover a new cultural reality that remained obscure to her for a long time. Without her visiting Morocco, she could have never understood Humayd nor his fatherland's culture. Now when things appear clear in front of her, she confesses, "I can see myself in your eye". The fact that she sees the real image of a Morocco that was to her postcards of exotic people half naked and bereft of any sign of civilisation makes Apolline unfasten the knot and resolve the puzzle Humayd. Constantly consists to her.

Mutual comprehension is one basic and fundamental element for an intercultural project. Humayd, an epitome of the Moroccan immigrant who, while in the homeland, dream of getting a European woman and fly, is in need of refinement in terms of courtesy and love. The 'exotic attraction immigrants had' turns to be an understanding and a communication. The very sentence "I see myself in your eyes" could be read as a reading of Humayd's identity, an attempt to start a dialogue, and an intention to help him assimilate to the new country. That she sees herself in his eyes denotes a confidence from the part of Apolline, a confidence that could be transformed into an acceptance, an understanding, a dialogue, and a communication.

However, there appear moments in this narrative when the ambition of an intercultural enterprise is punctured and turned upside down. Apolline

dominates the world of Humayd. She wants him to turn his back on his cultural repertoire and ridicule the cultural practices of his country.

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. (p. 97).

Apolline's domination takes shape as a programme in cultural reeducation and identity reform. What is cultural pride for Humayd is primitiveness for Apolline. She refuses the presence of another culture and finds her own the only suitable one that everybody has to abide by. She parades him through Amsterdam, initiates him to the disturbing sensations of pork and alcohol, and the problematic pleasures of sophisticated sex. She makes him relinquish the 'ethnic pride and primitive principles' of his country. Hence the hard moments of such an intercultural enterprise.

Apolline seeks to fashion an identity for Humayd in line with what it appears to be the unified cultural identity of the West. She performs what might appear as a process of identity erosion and transplanting an alternative Western cultural paradigm. Apolline is determined to discard Humayd's identity manifested in the 'beads and henna tracery of folklore' and replace it with what she sees as a convenient unified identity.

Throughout the narrative Humayd is being silenced. What appears as a dialogue with Apolline turns out to be a mere monologue. Humayd's passivity and speechlessness is contrasted to Apolline's skillful eloquence and 'irrefutable' wit. Of the seven direct quotations that appear in the text, six are Apolline's. She dominates the scene through her verbal presence at the expense of Humayd's introversion. Humayd's silence and voicelessness indicate a total submission to Apolline's reeducation programme. Therefore, possibilities of an intercultural exchange appear to be blocked.

Another moment in the text when hints of unrediness for a dialogue appear quite luminous is when Apolline explains to Humayd the etymology of her name 'Apolline':

Apolline is the name of one of the three gods who, in the Middle Ages, were said to be worshipped by the Moors...my name derives from Apollyon, also known as the Destroyer, another name for the devil. (102).

The etymology of her name is suggestive of obedience, destruction and evil. Apolline is a factor of destruction to Humayd. Her devilish nature, as her name suggests, puts into question all the process of refinement that she intends to impose on Humayd. Apolline becomes the author of a sinister space whereby she authorises destruction as it is ironically encoded in her name. Derived as it is from 'Apollyon' 'the Destroyer', and 'the Devil', Apolline tries to establish a self/other relation based on power. Therefore, the cultural

difference the text tries to raise turns into a utopia. 'Cultural difference' as J.Clifford puts it, sees 'self/other relations as a matter of power and rhetoric rather than essence.'<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the text displays with very in-depth critical tone the hard moment of East/West confrontation and raises the predicament of cross-cultural communication, "the sharing of a difference in identity which both enables and forecloses understanding."<sup>7</sup>

Bouazza, like many other Moroccan diasporic writers in the Netherlands, expresses the trauma of geographic and identity mobility and exposes with very delicate atmosphere the multi-locationality of immigrant experience.

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<sup>6</sup> James Clifford, p. 328.

<sup>7</sup> Ortwin de Graef and Henriette Louwse, "The Ateration of Amsterdam: Hafid Bouazza's Entertainment of Cultural Identity", *Yearbook of European Studies* 15 (2000): 35-52.