

Refocussing the lens of Orientalism

In *Orientalism*, a seminal study that was first published in 1978, Edward Said coined the famous term that still bears great relevance today.¹ Orientalism has become a term used by literary and cultural studies scholars and art historians, to denote the imitation or depiction of East Asian and Middle Eastern cultures by Western writers, designers and artists.² However Said's definition, which is seen as a development that will forever redefine the word,³ has been highly influential and Said's work is now a fundamental text in Post-colonial studies.⁴ Orientalism according to Said is a "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture"⁵ that directly influences our attitudes towards the countries that we exclude from the umbrella term 'the West'.⁶ It has a far-reaching effect that has many serious outcomes when examined in closer detail.

Similarly to *Orientalism*, Yusuf el Halal's book *Man zoekt vrouw om hem gelukkig te maken* and Hafid Bouazza's *De voeten van Abdullah* were at the centre of literary debate in Dutch society. Publicised as an autobiographical glimpse into the life of an allochtone Moroccan man searching for recognition as a writer and a place he could truly feel at home,⁷ *Man zoekt vrouw* came under the spotlight when the real identity of the author emerged: Ernest van der Kwast, who significantly had no Moroccan heritage. Comparably, Bouazza also created a stir with his debut collection of short stories, not only because of the literary quality of the text, but also because of his multicultural background and his strong objection to being labeled a 'migrant author'.⁸ This essay will discuss Said's concept of Orientalism and its central components. It will sketch parallels between the literary techniques used by El Halal and Bouazza, and illustrate that the literary style and tone applied by these authors - including hyperbole, irony and exaggeration - draw on similar processes described by Said.

1 Edward Said, *Orientalism as a tool of Colonialism 1/4*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdE18HdfanI>, (28.03.13)

2 A.L.Macfie, *Orientalism*, (Great Britain: Pearson Education, 2002), 3

3 Macfie, *Orientalism*, 85

4 Edward Said, *Orientalism as a tool of Colonialism 1/4*, (28.03.13)

5 Khondakar Mowla, *The Judgement against Imperialism, Fascism and Racism against Caliphate and Islam*, (USA: AuthorHouse, 2008), 62

6 Carol Breckenridge, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, (USA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 2

7 W.A, *Man zoekt vrouw om hem gelukkig te maken*, <http://www.bol.com/nl/p/man-zoekt-vrouw-om-hem-gelukkig-te-maken/1001004002608799/>, (26.03.13)

8 Henriette Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment - On Hafid Bouazza's Literary Writing* (Germany: Peter Lang, 2007), 11-12.

Said was first inspired to begin research into what was to become his famous theory during the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, as a result of the prevailing media message portraying the Egyptian Army as “cowardly” and “not modern”, and the Egyptian Army’s subsequent demonstration of their military power that shocked many people.⁹ The disconnection between the Western expectations of the Egyptians and their actual military strategy and action, suggested that there was something at work on a deeper level to cause this mismatch of belief and reality.¹⁰ Said’s aim was therefore to illustrate the structures and ideologies that cause and support this process, which we now call Orientalism.¹¹

Orientalism is explained by Said as the lens through which we view people from the ‘Orient’, places such as the Middle East, Asia and Africa, that distorts the actual reality of those places and people.¹² This lens however serves a function; the relationship between the Orient and the Occident is a relationship of power and domination,¹³ and the reason for this lens is to maintain the Occident’s position of superiority. The fundamental issue with Orientalism is that it stems not only from cultural belief and speculation, but also from sources and literature considered to be objective and factual (4). It is this aspect that Said believes is so dangerous, because it exists as an invisible film over much of the ‘data’ that the West creates and catalogues about Eastern countries. For example, the notion that there is an inherent divide between the East and the West has been accepted by many writers as a starting point for elaborate theories, novels and political accounts (2), however the idea that this is truly the case is questionable (2).

The topic of ‘stereotype and prejudice’ is one that is widely discussed in modern day culture, however Orientalism is much more than just imagining that all Germans like to eat sausages, or that all English people drink tea. Said claims that Orientalism has been institutionalised into our psyche as Westerners, and has formed our expectation of others, without giving the ‘others’ a chance to represent themselves (8). This automatic and systematic pigeonholing of anybody who bears our definition of Eastern characteristics extends itself over all aspects of our society, and is a particularly prevalent issue of debate in the world of literature, the second focus of this essay.

9 Edward Said, *Orientalism as a tool of Colonialism 1/4*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdE18HdfanI>, (26.08.13)

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2003), 5, further references to this source will be indicated by page numbers in the text.

Hafid Bouazza produced his first collection of short stories *De voeten van Abdullah* amidst a bloom of publications from fellow migrant authors, during a time in which young migrant literature was being hailed as being the latest, greatest phenomenon to appear in Dutch society.¹⁴ This heightened interest in so called 'second generation migrant writers', originated from the emerging debate on multiculturalism in the Netherlands and the desire of Dutch publishers to be considered worldly and undiscriminating (12). However, Bouazza rejects this label, or in fact any other label that either relates to his dual cultural background or indicates that he is anything other than a 'Dutch writer' (12). In spite of his objection, the focus on the author's 'otherness' persisted and it is this fascination with foreign, particularly Moroccan and Turkish writers, that will be analysed in terms of Orientalism in the later discussion of El Halal. This section will first directly concentrate on Bouazza's literary techniques in the short story *De visser en de zee* from the afore named collection and their relation to Orientalism.

Bouazza's final story in the collection opens in an undetermined place and time period, set against a background highly reminiscent of the Arabian Nights (121) - one of the most prolific texts in discussions of Orientalism, and the quintessential example of Western stereotyping of the Orient.¹⁵ The characters are not distinguished by name, only by the role that they play in a typical Middle Eastern setting; an imam, women, sheikhs, fishermen etc (122). This setting is well known to Western readers, and the characters initially fulfil our expectations of them;

'Zie,' zei de eerste sjeik zonder te wijzen, 'daar gaat een goede, godvrezende man die voor elk dagkrieken, vertrouwend op God, zijn net uitgooit om met al wat God behaagt hem te schenken zijn vrouwen en kroost te voeden.' Hij lurkte met goedkeurend hoofdgeknik aan zijn hasjpijp, die hij precies in de leegte tussen twee geruïneerde, gelige paardetanden liet rusten.¹⁶

Here we are greeted in the first sentence with some of the most common ideas from the West; all Arabs are Muslims and all Muslims are inherently pious.¹⁷ Bouazza even uses

14 Henriette Louwse, *Homeless Entertainment - On Hafid Bouazza's Literary Writing* (Germany: Peter Lang, 2007), 12, further references to this source will be indicated by page numbers in the text.

15 Said, *Orientalism as a tool of Colonialism* 1/4, (28.03.13)

16 Hafid Bouazza, 'De visser en de zee', *De voeten van Abdullah*, (Amsterdam: Arena Amsterdam, 1996), 135, further references to this source will be indicated by page numbers in the text.

17 D. Roudani, *The Representation of Arabs and Muslims in Western Media*,

<http://www.uef.fi/documents/1084476/1084497/Dialnet-TheRepresentationOfArabsAndMuslimsInWesternMedia.pdf/2841b5bb-d841-42db-9def-b5627421596e>, (05.04.13)

imagery that relates to the classic visual representation of the stereotypical Arab - decaying, yellowing teeth,¹⁸ even referring to them as horse teeth, a reference that would be considered clichéd perhaps to the point of racism, if it were not such a stock image.

It can be argued that Bouazza paints a picture of the Orient that sits comfortably with the Occident's ideas, a fisherman praying to Allah to grant him an adequate catch to feed his family. "O, God open voor mij de zee zoals U haar opende voor Mozes en zijn volk" (136), he is not relying on his own skill or reasoning, but instead turning to a deity for guidance in a display of blind piety, compounding our beliefs as Western readers. However, Bouazza can be seen as playfully exploiting our cultural expectations, as he subsequently turns his fiction into a rather more upsetting affront to our happy assumptions,¹⁹ with the transformation of the fisherman into a woman and the consequent trouble she encounters. Even this transformation is further example of the author's reference to ideas of Orient - a mystical land full of unknown magic,²⁰ nonetheless from this point onwards in the story the plot takes uneasy turns, both unexpected and undesirable to the reader.

The following pursuit of the woman by the other fisherman in order to sexually assault her, under the pretence of God bestowing her as a gift to the fisherman, quickly changes the atmosphere of the story. The woman flees the harbour, only to be met with hostility when trying to seek shelter with the fisherman's wives (139), and is finally captured by the other fishermen, taken to the mosque and the insinuation is that she is gang raped by the group of men led by the imam (140). Bouazza's distant almost detached tone is striking²¹ and in the final line one of the sheikhs comments nonchalantly, "Vreemd...dat de imam nog niet tot het ochtendgebed heeft opgeroepen." (140) The author is never explicitly sympathetic or derogatory in his description of the events that happen, however, the effect of this sustained 'neutral' registration is a highly critical text in which Bouazza playfully but insistently bares his critique of the inevitable oppression and exploitation that he believes, is borne out of religion.²² The reader slowly becomes aware of the cruel reality of the tale: the fairy tale mood and setting combined with the mellifluous language initially obscure the harsh reality: this is a tale of rape.

18 D. Roudani, *The Representation of Arabs and Muslims in Western Media*, (05.04.13)

19 Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment*, 81

20 Said, *Orientalism as a tool of Colonialism* 1/4

21 Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment*, 81

22 Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment*, 123

Bouazza cleverly uses our own prejudices against us, we are “lulled into smug Orientalism”²³ with his satirical portraiture of the East, only to become the ‘butt’ of the joke ourselves (123). What Bouazza is truly mocking is our tendency as Western readers to believe that we have the ultimate understanding and insight (81). We believe that ‘our’ reading of his work is the true reading (81) and Bouazza happily manipulates this, along with his own game with the autobiographical migrant story, that was so ‘exciting’ in the media and literary spheres (80). In addition to this, he is also able to produce scathing literature that attacks gender inequality and hypocrisy, which according to him is present in all, but in this instance particularly the Islamic religion,²⁴ and he does so whilst postponing public criticism or indignation in the reader. This is again because of his skilled manipulation of our preconceptions, we see him as a Moroccan man who must therefore be an expert on all things ‘Moroccan’ and ‘Islam’ - despite the fact that he left the country when he was seven.²⁵ It can be argued that the author utilises our politically correct tendency towards cultural relativism - the idea that all cultural practices are of equal worth,²⁶ and therefore we as Westerners feel we cannot criticise Muslim or Moroccan culture because it is not ‘ours’. However the events and practices that appear in his stories confront us with our own double standards, we feel uncomfortable in the position where we must admit that his literature paints a very negative view of his subject matter. In short, Bouazza operates the lens of Orientalism for his own purpose and through this he is able to highlight both ‘Oriental’ and ‘Occidental’ weaknesses.

With Yusuf el Halal’s *Man zoekt vrouw om hem gelukkig te maken* it is possible to draw links to Bouazza’s manipulation of our expectation of otherness. This book, about an aspiring migrant author with huge motivation and desire for fame, was actually written by Ernest van der Kwast and a group of other Dutch writers, collectively known as the El Halal project.²⁷ It tells the ever popular tale of a Moroccan immigrant trying to find a career and a place to call home. The main section that will be focused on here is the chapter ‘Kapot’.

23 Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment*, 123, further references to this source will be indicated by page numbers in the text.

24 Hafid Bouazza, *Bouazza en Ruhlessin in debat over steniging*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbTGXIIQcdI>, (28.03.13)

25 Tim Ficheroux, *Hafid Bouazza - Roes van vrijheid*, <http://www.ans-online.nl/interview/hafid-bouazza-roes-van-vrijheid>, (28.03.13)

26 James Rachels, *The Challenge of Cultural Relativism*, <http://faculty.uca.edu/rnovy/Rachels--Cultural%20Relativism.htm>, (05.03.13)

27 Kees van der Pol, *Yusuf el Halal Man zoekt vrouw om hem gelukkig te maken*, <http://www.scholieren.com/boekverslag/56637>, (05.04.13)

The Dutch fascination with 'young migrant authors' became apparent in the early 1990s, as a result of the then political climate and debate on migration policy.²⁸ There was and has since been a desire to see these writers as 'exotic' and to discover 'their world'²⁹ - a fitting example of the how Said argues the West perceives the East under the influence of Orientalism: as inherently different and opposite to us. The Dutch writers involved created the El Halal project in response to the fact that they felt that the publishing game was no longer fair - as long as you had a foreign, preferably Moroccan or Turkish name, and performed in a manner that met 'our' expectations, publishers would be keen to print your work.³⁰ They felt that success was no longer based on the merit of your literature, but on your cultural background and so sought to produce a book that would expose this double standard.

In 'Kapot' El Halal speaks of his love for Najoua and his Uncle Oulilidat's opinions and life in Morocco. Similarly to Bouazza's *De visser en de zee* the Western eye is mocked with its expectations, but in this instance also with its 'own' literature: "Denkend aan Marokko zie ik miljoenen gesluisde vrouwen..."³¹ To the Dutch reader this immediately reminds them of Marsman's poem *Herinnering aan Holland*, but rather than wide rivers meandering slowly through lowlands, El Halal describes veiled women with no purpose other than to bear children, cook and follow the orders of men (43). However El Halal is not portraying this as truth, one might argue that Van der Kwast would have no idea what Morocco is really like, what he is in fact doing is telling the reader what they want to hear. Western readers are used to discovering oppressed peoples and corrupt cultures through literature and more often than not, a genuine interest in the cultural other is mixed with a desire to reinforce a sense of self as the 'righteous West', which feeds into the ingrained ideals of Orientalism.³²

Thus El Halal gives the people what they want. Many aspects of El Halal's story reflect those in Bouazza's. For example, we see staunchly religious people trusting only in the word of God, such as when Oom Oulilidat is asked about the one-legged beggar of the village, "De imam denkt dat het een straf van Allah is," zegt oom Oulilidat. 'De bedelaar is namelijk homo.'" (44) We also hear of the oppression of women, as El Halal's aunt is described with a ball and chain attached to her leg in order to keep her captive in the

28 Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment*, 12

29 Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment*, 13

30 Kees van der Pol, *Yusuf el Halal Man zoekt vrouw om hem gelukkig te maken*, (05.04.13)

31 Yusuf El Halal, 'Kapot', *Man zoekt vrouw om hem gelukkig te maken*, (Amsterdam: Nijgh en van Ditmar, 2004), 43, further references to this source will be indicated by page numbers in the text.

32 Macfie, *Orientalism*, 76

kitchen (47). Furthermore the imam in this story is also dishonest, and in the penultimate paragraph of the chapter we discover that it was in fact he that stole El Halal's shiny red trainers (49).

Ook in dit verhaal worden de vooroordelen ten opzichte van Marokkanen weer volledig ingelost: het jatten, het afkeuren van homofilie, het vastbinden van de vrouwen.³³

This story is not without its shocking elements, they are however arguably toned down compared to those in *De visser en de zee*. When discussing the village beggar, oom Oulilidad tells El Halal of an unusual ritual they hold each year,

'Op bepaalde feestdagen gooien we rotte tomaten naar hem,' zegt mijn oom.
'Waarom?' vraag ik.
'Dat vinden we leuk.' (47)

Although one may see throwing rotten tomatoes at someone as a lesser form of abuse compared to sexual assault, this nonetheless shocks the European reader, after all, this is organised homophobic humiliation presented as 'fun'..³⁴ For it is El Halal's, or rather Van der Kwast's exact intention to do so because he knows that under the moniker 'El Halal' he will receive no criticism, and will be hailed as a progressive migrant author:

Wanneer een Marokkaanse schrijver de samenleving waaruit hij afkomstig is, bekritiseert, is er sprake van humor en zelfkritiek, wanneer een Nederlander dat doet, is het toch min of meer van een bevestiging van vooroordelen [...] hoewel de verhalen humoristisch bedoeld zijn.³⁵

This again relates to the idea of cultural relativity, and it is precisely the above mechanism that Van der Kwast wants to expose. The way in which humans try and make things fit into patterns can be interpreted through the eyes of Orientalism: our expectation pattern tells us what to expect from 'migrant writers' and so when Van der Kwast wrote this novel with the other members of the El Halal group, he anticipated the reaction and controversy that

³³ Van der Pol, *Yusuf el Halal Man zoekt vrouw om hem gelukkig te maken*, (05.04.13)

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

followed the exposition of his true identity. This is what he sought to create in order to prove his point and to reveal the underlying suppositions of the reader.

Even the pseudonym that is chosen has meaning, 'Yusef el Halal' is stereotypical to the point of being farcical, and yet it is attractive to the Western reader: "Yusef el Halal klinkt als een vibrator. Lekker." (48) 'Yusuf el Halal' sounds like a 'typical' Moroccan name to the ignorant reader, it functions in the same manner as the literature in the book; initially meeting expectations, fulfilling stereotypical beliefs and prejudices and then turning on the presumptuous reader in order to expose them when the truth is disclosed.

The literature of Yusef el Halal and Hafid Bouazza can be seen as not only unique, but also exciting; the way in which our preconceptions are challenged, through the authors' skilful manipulation of those exact same preconceptions is impressive. Said's aim was to describe and expose the institutionalised prejudice that he believes works against those that we class as inherently 'other' under the label of 'the East', and it can be argued that both Bouazza and El Halal utilise processes that are part of, or relate to the structure of Orientalism in order to aid their objective: to illustrate that the world of contemporary literature is not immune to institutionalised prejudice.

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