

“A Stowaway of Emigration”: Polarization in Hafid Bouazza’s Work

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Introduction

An important subject of rhetorical criticism is the study of polarization, the process by which public opinion divides and goes to the extremes. Rhetoricians can examine how, in public discourse, opposition is constructed throughout texts, how competing choices of oppositions are put to work, or how fixed oppositions are changed into new ones. They can explore how groups are formed around certain oppositions and how different parties react to one another’s challenges and arguments. The rhetorician’s focus is often double, as both style and argument are involved in the analysis. Inspired by Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, scholars of rhetoric use the intersection of style and argument as a way to typify rhetorical discourse and characterize types of practices (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 168).

A case in point for this study is the Dutch author Hafid Bouazza (born 1970), whose initial refusal to take part in public debate on matters such as intercultural relations gradually evolved into strong participation and outspoken positions. I will study a collection of his non-literary work in general, and particularly his stance toward the politically correct polarization warnings he emphatically rejects. In an evaluation of Bouazza’s own “inverted” strategy I will examine both the arguments Bouazza comes up with in his defense of polarization and the polemical style in which he often tries to make his point. In order to obtain a better view of Bouazza’s polarization strategies, I will study his ethos and involve his personal history and the reception of his literary work in the discussion. It will appear that despite the apparent differences both in style and argument, his literary and essayistic works have more in common than first assumed, and his polarization strategies have a clear and well-defined focus.

Hafid Bouazza and polarization

That's how I know my Muslims: after the murder of Pim Fortuyn many talked about demonization of Islam; now they learned a new word: polarization. It is a riddle to me why the many Islamite organizations are not polarizing, but an association of ex-Muslims is (Bouazza 2011, p. 292).¹

These explicit words are found in a text in defense of a Dutch committee of ex-muslims. The author is the Dutch writer and columnist Hafid Bouazza, and the tone of his argument is clear: he reproves a Dutch muslima for adopting the politically correct term *polarization* in her critique on the new organization. This text "Noble Savages" is part of a collection of columns and essays, in its turn a chapter of a larger collection of essays and reviews that Bouazza published in 2011, *Heidense vreugde: gepeins en gezang (Heathenish Joy: Pondering and Chant)*. The chapter "A Stowaway of Emigration" ("Verstekeling van de Emigratie") is a compilation of work on intercultural relations published recently in Dutch quality newspapers.

Morocco-born author Hafid Bouazza, who left his homeland for Arkel (the Netherlands) at the age of seven, presents himself as a clandestine passenger (stowaway) of emigration. As a Moroccan-Dutch writer of short stories, novels, plays, reviews, columns, essays and polemical pieces, and a translator of Arabian and English poetry, Bouazza generally is considered an important representative of so-called migrant literature in the Netherlands.

In "A Stowaway of Emigration" the author tackles present-day questions such as the way western cultures and politics ought to look at Arab or Muslim culture, religion and politics, and vice versa. The occasion for these articles can be a current event, such as the murder of film director Theo Van Gogh (2004) or the expulsion of the Dutch-Somali politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2006), but also a less dramatic occasion such as the publication of a book or a debate on television, as is the case of "Noble savages." Gender issues come into the picture, evidently, as well as more autobiographical stories and childhood memories about Ramadan in the last pages of the collection (pp. 314, 317). Generally, the reviews are written in an unmarked, matter-of-fact tone and style; they are well documented and well argued. Some texts, however, are animated by a satirical, ironical, and polarizing touch.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine (HvB).

The question is now how to assess the polarization issue. As rhetoricians, we tend to believe in the power of persuasion by means of rhetorical strategies such as audience adaptation and a drive for consensus, but what about the places where those modes are bluntly denied and the discussion is set in an openly polemical style? Bouazza satirizes the kind of public debate that shuns intense discussion and condemns conflict of ideas. This so-called politically correct thinking is naïve and self-destructive, he claims, as it does not properly counter the violence of fascist, fundamentalist or right wing populist discourse (pp. 284-289).

Bouazza's polarizing style is not new, nor is it unique. It refers to a rich tradition of polemic work all through Western history, from Martin Luther to Karl Marx, from Robespierre to Noam Chomsky, from Desiderius Erasmus to Michael Moore. Polemics is a widely accepted and appreciated genre,² not least by the media, which hunt for the wittiest polemicist and the spiciest controversy.

Moreover, antithetical thinking refers to fundamental human cognitive structures. We try to interpret and organize our world essentially through frames such as analogy and opposition. In other words, the construction of an argument in terms of opposition is nothing more than a basic mode of thinking. Trudy Govier defines the apparent inevitability of this phenomenon as such:

Dare I say it? It even seems (somehow) *natural* for human creatures to think in binaries. And this despite the fact that two is a small number, a fact that we all know perfectly well (Govier 2007, p. 3).

Scholars such as George Kennedy suggest that thinking in oppositions might be a typically Western habit that originated in antiquity and still dominates our argument structures. His interpretation is based on cultural rather than natural tendencies:

It would doubtless be an exaggeration to say that speakers in other cultures do not understand logical contradiction, but it is perhaps true that Western contentiousness tends to identify and sharpen contradictions. In other cultures, and now in poststructural thought in the West, there is a greater inclination to entertain

² For an excellent introduction, see Angenot (1982).

the possibility that two seemingly contradictory statements may both be true in some sense; for example, if a term is used metaphorically in one of the statements. Yang and yin in Chinese thought are complementaries, not opposites; ... Western thinking, beginning with the Greeks, has tended to polarize truth and fiction, good and bad, body and soul, conservative and liberal, and other such concepts, for the sake of clarity but often unnecessarily (Kennedy 1998, p. 206).

In an attempt to delineate the phenomenon, Govier observes that polarizing discourse comes with our tendency to inflate a distinction into a dichotomy, to confuse contradictories (e.g., *a* / not *a*) and contraries, and to commit the *error of contrariety* by excluding a middle (e.g., safe / unsafe, wise / unwise, healthy / unhealthy). In what she calls a “slippery journey,” Govier proposes to differentiate between forms of distinction reaching all the way from *difference* to *de-humanization*.

Difference

Distinction 1 (early exclusion)

Distinction 2 (exclusive disjunction)

Dichotomous framework

Opposition (logical > social opposition)

Polarization (us/them)

Demonization

De-humanization

This scalar method shows similarities with Ruth Amossy’s proposal for a modal conception of the argumentation that recognizes polemics. According to her, different positions can be defined along a continuum that goes from the co-construction of answers in the middle to the shock of antagonistic ideas at the far ends of the continuum. The arguments are the same, but they can appear in different modalities (Amossy 2014, pp. 54-55).

This perspective, focusing on the way arguments are delivered, shows that polarization is not only a way of thinking, but a rhetorical strategy as well. We present ideas and arguments within a particular interpretation, perspective or action. We choose which opposition we will highlight and what solution we will present. For example, nationalist political discourse presents the national or regional identity as basic, creates an opposition between “us” and “them,” and suggests solutions that promote “us” and punish “them.”

Thinking in binaries is one of our most fundamental cognitive structures, just as arguing along those lines determines the basic dynamics of argumentation in general. Scholars such as Christian Kock, Chantal Mouffe and Ruth Amossy endorse these structures when they stress the importance of conflict and opposition in the social and political field and argue that, despite the risk of excess, conflict represents a constructive and vital dynamism in our democracy. The model of dialogue as a verbal exchange along the lines of rationality that aims at one party convincing the other and reaching a consensual solution is too limited (Kock 2009, p. 105, Amossy 2014, p. 208). In a pluralistic democracy, differences and tensions should be voiced and heard, despite the utopian or theoretical ideal of consensus. Polemics are situated in the rhetoric of *dissensus*, where the existence of differences is considered not as a sign of failure, but rather as a fundamental characteristic of democratic functioning (Kock 2009, pp. 105-6, Amossy 2014, pp. 214-5).

The Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe stresses the potentially positive aspects of certain forms of political conflict as an essential and constructive aspect of pluralist democracy. It is the aim of democratic politics to transform *antagonism* into *agonism*, so that the other is not an enemy but an adversary. Chantal Mouffe rejects the model of deliberative democracy as it aims at a rational consensus in the public sphere. This consensus is impossible, because the idea is based on the negation of conflict as the essence of modern pluralism. Denying elements of conflict and passion denies the very nature of politics, thus creating not only political apathy but also the possibility of dangerous antagonisms that try to undermine democracy itself (Mouffe 2009, p. 8).³

So, when Bouazza writes in defense of polarization, he positions himself within a long and powerful (Western) tradition. Now the question is

³ The dismissive attitude towards conflict is common in our own field as well. To quote just one arbitrary scholarly work – on the topic of dispute mediation: “Conflict is a problematic event, and as such, it needs to be managed. Also, it is natural to look for ways to resolve the conflict, because it undermines and endangers existing relationships. It triggers alliances and oppositions which polarize [!] the parties’ positions; it creates a situation of precarious rapport that may block any constructive initiative; and it focuses attention and energy on the parties’ reciprocal endeavour to hinder the realization of each other’s desires. ... Yet human beings strongly desire not only to close conflict but also to have the possibility of saving valuable relationships and to live in a stable and friendly environment” (Greco Morasso 2011, pp. 14-15).

why he feels the need to do so, why he passionately claims the right to camp near one end of the pole. I argue that Bouazza manages to defend the right to polarize and the need for dissensus and conflict, without however dropping the concept of rationality. By building a strong ethos, he is able to defend passionately a whole series of democratic values, and to reject other perspectives just as vehemently. In order to prove this point, I will analyze both Bouazza's arguments and his ethos.

No doubt Bouazza's polarizing strategies can be connected to his ethos, i.e., his personal development and his public position on the one hand, and the way he presents himself in his literary and his polemical work on the other hand. This concept of ethos as presented by Ruth Amossy reconciles the pragmatic viewpoint where all ethos is discursive and the sociological perspective where discursive elements are nothing but the alibi of the "real" power battle that is going on elsewhere. Amossy proposes a rhetorical point of view, not least because the appeal to the audience and the process of persuasion play a significant role in the creation of ethos. The effectiveness of discourse is neither exclusively external (institution), nor purely internal (language), she claims, and it plays simultaneously at different levels. The discursive ethos cannot be cut off from the institutional position of the *locutor*, nor can discourse be cut off from social interaction in its symbolic exchange à la Bourdieu (Amossy 1999, p. 147).

Bouazza's essays cannot be separated from his literary work, or from his personal history. The key to his polarizing strategies is to be found in the way he manages his triple ethos as a writer, a polemicist and a public figure.

A first and superficial rhetorical analysis of the *Stowaway* set of essays does not reveal any specific features or anomalies. Bouazza clearly plays his role as an intellectual and a writer who takes part in public discourse. His arguments concern the domain of politics, religion and culture, and his rhetorical strategies often consist in a questioning of prevailing lines of thought, proposing new perspectives and oppositions.

The bulk of the seventy pages take on a wide public scope as it consists of book reviews, essays and columns. In one way or another, they all display a well-documented, engaged, often satirical and ironical plea against religious fundamentalism, misogyny, and all sorts of orthodoxy and repression. Bouazza favors reason, language, freedom of speech, imagination, individual responsibility and diversity. Without any doubt, most of this intellectual work comes down to the impassioned and sustained defense of free speech.

The case for free speech: Politics

Time and again, Bouazza warns his fellow Dutchmen that their comfortable belief in the power of rationality and human goodwill denies the agonism and the conflicts that mark the political sphere. For example, he blames the leftist political parties for treating muslims as noble savages that form a "perfect screen on which to project their own meekness and understanding" (Bouazza 2011, p. 292). He rejects the politically correct interpretation of terms such as diversity because politics should not be confused with morals. He claims the right to ridicule a project called *In Praise of Diversity* by bluntly stating that the distribution of poems in 48 languages will not have any effect on the promotion of mutual understanding between different cultures (p. 320).

Bouazza's main argument against politically correct discourse is the elementary right to free speech as a basic achievement of enlightenment and an indispensable condition for democracy. Politics is to be interpreted in its agonistic sense, and freedom of expression guarantees debate and the constant reinterpretation of any issue. It is remarkable how Bouazza stresses the Western principles of free speech and democracy again and again, wondering why Westerners seem to have forgotten the very values that this newcomer so dearly appreciates.

Bouazza claims the right to speak up and call the oppositions and conflicts by their names, in the name of political freedom. According to him, conflicts should be recognized before they can be tackled, and argument is no pathology but rather a means of communication. Bouazza refers to political, cultural and economic history in order to reveal the complex relation between disappearing and emerging conflicts. The wish for peace does not absolve one from recognizing the multiple appearances of political conflict, Bouazza claims. And when minorities *create* conflict in their desire to change inequality and injustice, this conflict may very well carry the positive-sounding name of revolution and make its way into the official history books.

Bouazza understands the righteous concerns about right-wing populist discourse, but he refuses to let anybody set the terms of the debate.⁴

⁴ Indeed, one might wonder whether it is actually possible to agree upon them. To give one example: in his study of manipulative racist propaganda techniques Manfred Kienpointner judges right-wing populists by the content of their standpoints, for example the call for capital punishment or for repatriation of legal immigrants, or by the fact that their arguments

Figures such as hyperbole or metaphor are very familiar and popular tropes in many kinds of discourse (Ritter 2012, p. 407, Angenot 1982, p. 254), and in his arguments rejecting polarization warnings and paralyzing paternalism Bouazza does claim the unconditional right to use them. Likewise, he could not be more explicit in his argument on the Theo Van Gogh murder than when he bluntly declares that the profile of a victim never ever excuses criminal acts (Bouazza 2011, p. 286).

When confronted with the increase of “hate speech” in the public sphere,⁵ Bouazza argues in his defense that he stands by his basic right to free speech as long as he takes responsibility for his words and does not incite people to harm or kill others:

Of course it's not a bad idea to reflect before you say something. But I think: even the sharpest comment should be possible, as long as there's no call for violence – that is most important. What is the alternative? Should we cosily hold each other's hands and treat one another with plain silky respect and subservience? That is outrageous! (Geels 2011).

He is more concerned with dissecting current topics than with attacking particular people, and as such he sees a difference between vital political polemics and hate speech that runs wild in excessive enemy construction.

Interestingly, at some point Bouazza himself recognizes the roles of both style and argument when he explains how Hirsi Ali is caught in a double bind between Muslims who attack her arguments and Western politicians who blame her for her polemical style.

only mention the negative effects of immigration. Stylistic techniques that distinguish racist populist discourse are the use of “emotionally exciting language, for example, hyperbolic exaggerations” (Kienpointner 2005, p. 226), or metaphors like “invasion” and “flood” that “arouse dangerous emotions such as fear and hate” (p. 229). This example reveals how problematic it is to pin down and condemn right-wing populist discourse: Kienpointner's arguments and his references to alleged manipulative techniques do not really observe his own caveats, which warn against the begging-the-question fallacy in assuming that right-wing populism is a dubious, dangerous and irrational tradition, or against the straw man fallacy, while blotting out the evident fact that “populist techniques of persuasion have even been used within the whole political spectrum, from the far right to the far left” (pp. 214-215).

⁵ This term is coined by Judith Butler (2007).

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is caught between two fires. Muslims want to impose on her what to say, the ladies and gentlemen of politics want to command her how to express herself (Bouazza 2011, p. 290).

He keeps insisting on the opposition between the “meek Dutch” who underestimate the problem and downsize the problems of intercultural society to matters of style, and fanatical Muslims who entirely reject the democratic principle of free speech. His opinion is as clear as it is ambitious: the “meek Dutch” should be more fanatical about their democratic principles, the fanatical Muslims should embrace free speech and democracy, and he himself should definitely have the right to say so. Bouazza shows that the opposition is not only a matter of style, but also the reflection of a fundamental conflict between religious thinking and democratic politics.

The case for free speech: Religion

Next to politics, one of Bouazza’s key topics is, understandably, religion. Many articles in the collection reject all forms of religious fundamentalism (not only the Muslim type) as “monolithic,” i.e., having no place for different perspectives or debate. The opening quote of the “Noble Savages” article is followed by the remark that “If anything should be called polarizing, then it is the sectarian character of Islam, with its virulent, excluding monoperception of Allah” (p. 292). This exemplifies Bouazza’s recurring reflection that some Muslims tend to adopt the terms of the “meek Dutch” in order to explain away their own stubbornness. The idea that Westerners fail to see how Islamic fundamentalism attacks the foundational principles of democracy – similar to a predator that pretends to be a prey – dominates the collection: “Why should the obstinacy of Muslims be seen as loyalty to a religion, while the defense of Western values should be considered racist?” (p. 298).

Bouazza reviews much work that brings him to this topic. For example, his review of *God Against the Gods* (Jonathan Kirsch), a historical work about the evolution from polytheism to monotheism, gives him the chance to promote diversity as the basis of paganism or polytheism, and to contrast the gentle pagans to the rigorous and misogynic Christian monotheists in the ages before the fifth century A.D. “The core of paganism or polytheism is diversity,” Bouazza concludes (p. 257).

A biography of Mohammed serves as an occasion to condemn religion as a desire for myths and to celebrate science and the quest for facts.

The review then evolves further into a plea for question marks, but also for literature – apparently Mohammed is a frustrated poet – for irony, for criticism and jest (p. 284): “Believers will take care of themselves. Only skepticism, curiosity and doubt lead us, other mortals, further. And let’s not forget humor” (p. 270). The author clearly defends the enlightenment ideas that consider religion to be a personal and private matter.

Gender issues are treated in a most expressive way, as in Bouazza’s defense of Ayaan Hirsi Ali and her right to attack Islam, or in his fulminations against macho-imams:

It is a travesty to think that the Netherlands, or Ayaan Hirsi Ali, or Theo van Gogh are responsible for the radicalization of the Islam (p. 286).

Ambassadors of Islamic countries complain to Gerrit Zalm that Ayaan Hirsi Ali ‘doesn’t handle carefully the right to free speech.’ Of course not, for Islamists this right is only to be handled ‘carefully’ in order to rage against gentiles, Jews, Christians, women, homosexuals and dissidents (to macho-imams these are all synonyms) (pp. 290-291).

Bouazza plainly calls Islamic extremism a worldwide phenomenon that combines totalitarian ideology with masculine aggression, and concludes with a merry recital of wishes in a salutation to Ayaan: “long live you, long live womanhood, long live free speech, long live jest, long live verbal anarchy” (pp. 286-289).

The main argument in this refutation is again freedom of speech, thinking and religion, as this symbolizes civil society in the light of the American and French Revolutions. In his attacks on Islamic fundamentalism, Bouazza time and again invokes the roots of Western democracy that encompasses the possibility of change through debate, calling for a separation of the religious and political domains. The archaic wording of the very book title is not without meaning in this context, as *Heathenish Joy: Pondering and Chant* explicitly evokes the old times of religious suppression in the West. As such, Western history is strategically linked to contemporary Muslim regimes in order to remind Westerners of their own (former) struggle with religious institutions and repression.

Bouazza tries to persuade his fellow Dutchmen that the most important aspect of the diversity question is public and political. He dismisses the

dominant view that reduces the discussion to “essential” differences between cultural or religious groups, redirecting it towards the political domain, where dominant patterns of argument can be questioned again and again, and where the struggle for different social groups to make themselves heard should be considered part of the political enterprise.

The case for free speech: culture, language and literature

Intercultural references. The third argument in Bouazza’s refutation of “politically correct thinking” concerns the domain of culture, language and literature, i.e., the domain where most of his work is situated. Again, free expression serves as a basic argument, this time presented as a plea for a colorful individual patchwork of styles, genres and cultural references. The book shows a substantial cultural and literary breadth. Bouazza presents elaborate reviews and essays on, e.g., Nabokov, Shakespeare, Wagner, on musicals such as *Moulin Rouge*, and in those various topics more often than not we see intercultural associations emerge.

In the “Stowaway of Emigration” pieces suggestive and striking passages evoke the literary power of the author: “I quickly zapped away: the fragment gave me the spiritual equivalent of a swig of beer from a can that has been used as an ashtray” (p. 292). The reference to the *sins* of smoking and drinking in this metaphor that expresses his disgust with politically correct polarization warnings is clever and effective. Note that “Noble savages,” the title of this piece, is a playful reference to the rich cultural tradition of fascination for the primitive and exotic, as displayed by authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Daniel Defoe, John Dryden, James F. Cooper and Henry W. Longfellow, to name but a few. Not surprisingly, similar intercultural references and associations appear in Bouazza’s literary works. To give but one example:

Like a Bridal Veil we Children followed the Crowd of Women that my Mother
with Abdullah in her Hands led towards the Mosque: I can’t express the narcotic
magnificence of the moment any better than with the use of Teutonic capitals
(1996, p. 34).

This “Teutonic” way of evoking the otherwise very Moroccan setting of this story is but one of Bouazza’s many ways to play with cultural references and mix perspectives.

Overall, the reception of Bouazza's literary work has been positive; he has received several prizes⁶ and has appeared on prestigious cultural TV shows such as *Zomergasten* (Summer Guests). Critics praise his sensual, flowery and baroque style that reveals his love for exuberant language and multiple perspectives (Louwerse 2007, pp. 37-39). Bouazza's essays definitely have a more polemical and polarizing style. It would be misleading to say that the openness and diversity of Bouazza's literary work simply counterbalance his sharp statements elsewhere, but it does make sense to identify the stance of an author who proclaims the power of language to be the centre of his intellectual life and who concentrates his political arguments around the principles of free speech.⁷

This double focus can enrich our conception of Bouazza's ethos and our understanding of his polarizing strategies.

Bouazza's arguments

Hafid Bouazza's debut collection of short stories was published in 1996, and from that very moment he shows irritation for the way he is being typecast by critics and academics. He refuses to play an exemplary role in accordance with the new ideal of the so-called multicultural society.

I write because I want to write, not because I aim to further intercultural relations. Get over it. And I certainly don't write because I feel a spokesperson for second-generation migrants. I am not a social worker. Does a Dutch author write in the name of others? (Louwerse 2007, p. 15).

⁶ In 1996 he was awarded the *E. du Perron* prize for *De voeten van Abdullah*. In 2003 he was awarded the *Amsterdamse prijs voor de Kunsten*. In 2004 he received *De Gouden Uil* for his novel *Paravion*.

⁷ The suggested interaction between literary and non-literary work aligns with Alain Lempereur's notion of the two separate domains within the study of rhetoric: one that focuses on literature and cherishes constant rupture and innovation, while another emphasizes persuasion and efficiency and cherishes constant identity (Lempereur, 1990). The former fosters the original and the marginal, the latter goes for the stereotypical. As both domains suffer from this restriction, Lempereur proposes that theories of literature should not deny the reference to the topical, while theories of persuasive rhetoric should not aim exclusively at closure but rather leave enough room for innovation and questioning.

Personal history has nothing to do with art, he claims, and it is neither a driving force nor an excuse for success, even if the stories of his debut collection are set in Bertollo, the actual Moroccan village he left with his family in 1977. He refuses the label “migrant writer” and ridicules the literary establishment for its biographical obsession and its fixation on the exotic: “A French writer is somebody that writes in French, an immigrant writer is somebody that writes in Immigrantese, and a Dutch writer is somebody that writes in Dutch” (Bouazza, *NRC-Handelsblad* 21-6-96). And indeed, while at first some critics interpret his unique baroque and archaic style as a reminiscence of Arab poetry, others soon take to criticizing this view (Anbeek 2002). Hans Goedkoop ridicules its paternalism: “We take the Dutch for something exotic, tremendously fascinating and we pay the author a compliment because as a non-native he is so charmingly different” (p. 39).

Even more significantly, in her outstanding study on the reception of Bouazza’s literary work Henriëtte Louwerse stresses the fact that Bouazza’s style and perspective are actually based on the Dutch art movement *De Tachtigers*, known to many Dutchmen for the statement by Willem Kloos that “art is the most individual expression of the most individual emotion.” According to her, this absolute fascination with language, individual expression and imagination, far from everyday worries, is what constitutes Bouazza’s real homeland (pp. 48-49).

In 2001, Bouazza was selected to write the national Dutch *boekenweekgeschenk* (the CPNB Book Week Present): a commissioned essay with the theme “Country of Origin: Writing between Two Cultures.” The most famous quote from *Een beer in bontjas* (“A Bear in Fur”) goes:

If I were to believe most critics, I am a Moroccan writer. But I don’t believe most critics. According to other, benevolent people I am a Moroccan-Dutch writer. However, this signification sounds uncomfortable. It walks at the same time in a slipper and a clog – quite a tricky way of walking! Then there are the careful people who aim at integration (they are a minority), for whom I fabricated the title D.A.M.D.D.N. (Dutch Author of Moroccan Descent with Dutch Nationality). This is socially speaking the only correct signification, but it prevents you from making friends. It sounds like a rare disease. The D.A.M.D.D.N. syndrome. You don’t walk into the pub with it (2001, p. 49).

An author finds inspiration for his subjects and style in art and literature, not in his personal background or social, religious, sexual or racial circumstances – that was Bouazza’s claim at that time. Individual maturation, creative imagination and artistic freedom are to guarantee an escape from compulsory classification. However, as Louwerse observes:

Hafid Bouazza’s strategy in *Een beer in bontjas* is characteristically paradoxical: he writes an autobiography in order to emphasize that the author’s life-story is irrelevant when it comes to producing or reading literature (Louwerse 2007, p. 227).

Indeed, the interplay between the role(s) he is expected to assume and the strategies he develops to resist is more complex than one would assume at first sight. The strict line between the literary and the extra-literary cannot be drawn all that clearly, and Bouazza cannot really escape his role of “migrant writer.” In 2002, shortly after the publication of *Een beer in bontjas*, he enters the public scene and engages in a “full-fledged genre of public discourse” that goes under the name of “debating diversity” (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998, p. 11). He gives up the embargo on his private identity and tries to find a new way to challenge his readers in their perception of him as both an insider and an outsider to “their” culture. This did not go unnoticed; in November 2011, for example, Bouazza won the Scalpel 2011 prize for his polemics about the Arab Spring.

According to Louwerse, Bouazza’s essays differ considerably from his literary work, both in topic and in tone. She claims: “Despite of his sharp statements in his political publications, in his literary texts he resists the need to reduce multicultural tensions to unambiguous oppositions” (Louwerse 2008, p. 10). It is remarkable that there seems to be an inconsistency between Bouazza’s literary and non-literary work. A closer look at Louwerse’s appreciation of his literary work, however, rather reveals a striking similarity between the literary and political issues: “Much of Bouazza’s writing foregrounds communication gaps – between orient and occident, between man and woman, between animal and man, between reality and the imagination, between oppositional places, between character and narrator.” (Louwerse 2007, p. 96) If anything, Bouazza in his polemical work tries to define these communication gaps as clearly and explicitly as possible. Also the notion of the preconceived ideas and stereotypical expectations is mentioned:

Bouazza playfully exploits cultural expectations by painting an Arab setting which echoes the one-dimensional Western views of the Arab world ... What had initially seemed a ‘safe’ opposition between us and them, is now revisited upon the readers as a confrontation with their own preconceived ideas (p. 231).

In “A Stowaway of Emigration,” time and again, Bouazza warns his readers about their preconceived ideas and their “Noble-Wild” projections. Louwerse perfectly captures Bouazza’s rhetorical strategies when she describes his literary work in polemical terms: “What appears to start off as an exposure of cultural opposites ... evolves into a literary attack on the notion of unified, homogenous societies or cultures” (p. 233).

From the start, Bouazza refuses to follow the standard course of the political debate and develops a personal way of thinking and writing. In his public life, time and again he takes up the defense of free speech, argumentation, imagination, style play, humor, education, and individual maturation. He rejects religious and political fundamentalism in general (not just Islamic fundamentalism) and the excesses of fear and naiveté that go with it. Misogyny and all kinds of orthodoxy are disapproved of, as well as literary norms and stylistic restrictions. To Bouazza, imagination and argumentation do not exclude one another. His literary and polemical writings are closely connected and intertwined: they frame and reinforce one another. The right to develop both imagination and argumentation could be considered to be the basic tenor of his ethos.

Throughout all of his work, Bouazza shows his audience that openness towards the diversity of cultures and literatures does not stand on its own, but has a political dimension as well. It is no coincidence that he connects his very personal intellectual and cultural life with the fundamental concept of democracy. His own history reveals that “the basic biological fact of diversity” is part of the *condition humaine* (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998, p. 14). He is fully aware of the decision to enter the political debate and try to find ways out of the prevailing polarizations that classify people into certain groups with certain fixed features that promote homogeneity as the norm and makes diversity a problem (p. 117).

Conclusion

Louwerse’s earlier remark that Bouazza’s political work is characterized by “sharp statements” and “unambiguous oppositions” needs reservations, I

suggest. The rhetorical construct Bouazza presents in his non-literary work shows clear oppositions indeed, but they are oppositions of a specific kind: they draw the sharp line between fixity and repression on the one hand and political freedom and imagination on the other hand. This corresponds to Louwerse's appreciation of Bouazza's literary work as a constant challenge of comfortable identities and a powerful confirmation of hybrid positions, movement and interaction.

Opposing versions of the truth do not cancel each other out. In Bouazza's works, the representation of the 'real' has also come unhinged, and this reality is engaged in a ceaseless struggle against the desire for a fixed, fossilized reality that believes in the essential, in the absolute, in purity and authenticity. Undermining that belief is the essence of Bouazza's writing (Louwerse 2007, p. 233).

Bouazza's literary work is marked by the shifting and energizing of existing polarizations; in his non-literary work, he reveals the political conditions that make the shiftings possible. In this light, it is perfectly possible to read Louwerse's comment on his literary work as an evocation of his political program: "His work is a study of sustained opposition, but at the same time, an engagement with the underlying assumptions of these same oppositions. Interpretative closure or unity is not an option. Fixity is there to be squashed." (p. 76)

While Bouazza "squashes fixity" in his literary work by presenting a multitude of interpretations and shifts, in his polemical work he aims at the same target by revealing and safeguarding the very borders of this freedom of expression. His well-argued pleas for reason, freedom of speech, imagination, individual responsibility and diversity show that he wants the public domain to be rich and diverse. That is why he draws a sharp line between all kinds of fundamentalism and the politics of free speech.

Bouazza clearly endorses a concept of democracy that accepts dissensus and a concept of language that embraces polemics. This does not mean that his occasional harsh rhetoric should be interpreted as blind aggression or incitement to violence. Far from it. By pursuing related themes across different contexts, he manages to build a powerful ethos. In light of this ethos, my analysis of his polarization strategies has brought to the fore that Bouazza's polarization practices and his passionate plea for free speech reflect a deep involvement with the Dutch language, a commitment to very diverse audiences, and a sustained creativity in the fostering of mutual understanding.

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