Chapter One
Introduction

When in 1996 Hafid Bouazza published his debut collection of short stories, *De voeten van Abdullah (Abdullah’s Feet)*, the book created a stir. The excitement was not simply in response to the literary qualities of the collection. It was also inspired by the background of the author, Hafid Bouazza, who was not just another new young author: he was a Dutch writer of Moroccan origin, son of one of the many ‘guest labourers’ who had been recruited to work in unskilled and low-paid jobs during the late 1960s and 1970s, a time of fast economic growth in the Netherlands. Initially it was expected that the guest labourers would return to their countries – mainly Morocco and Turkey – as soon as the economic boom was over and the demand for their labour decreased. However, in spite of an economic recession, few of the migrants returned home. Many used their savings to bring over their brides or families. Hafid Bouazza arrived in the Netherlands with his mother and six siblings in 1977, at the age of seven. His father had been working in a factory in Arkel since 1972.

The predominantly mono-cultural Dutch literary landscape had already encountered a number of ‘outsiders’ before the emergence of young migrant writers in the 1990s. Authors from the (former) Dutch colonies of Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, such as Albert Helman, Frank Martinus Arion, Tip Marugg, and Astrid Roemer had made a name for themselves in literary circles. In 1983, the author, filmmaker and sculptress Marion Bloem, born in the Netherlands of Indonesian-Dutch descent, gained considerable commercial success with her novel *Geen gewoon Indisch meisje* (No ordinary Indonesian girl). However, the tremendous interest in the second generation migrant authors such as Bouazza was an, as yet, unknown phenomenon and could not be disconnected from the *zeitgeist* of the late Eighties and Nineties when multiculturalism and the multicultural society started to emerge as the dominant political and social issue in the Netherlands. 
Public debate and government measures were shifting rapidly from the 1980s’ policies aimed at the preservation of cultural identity and original language of minority groups to the more 1990s’ view of mandatory Dutch language courses and civic integration training. These new ‘outsider’ writers caught the interest of the public and media because they were the embodiment of successful social and cultural integration and it was hoped that they could ‘unlock’ their communities for a predominantly Dutch reading public.

Hafid Bouazza was not the first or the only ‘migrant’ author to burst onto the literary scene in the 1990s. His collection arrived in a rich spell of publications from fellow migrant authors. What made him stand out – apart from the literary quality of his debut – was his explicitly advertised resistance to the ways in which his work was received and to the labels attached to his writing. He strongly objected to being considered a ‘migrant’ author, an ‘ethnic’ author or even a ‘Moroccan-Dutch’ author. He argued that since he wrote in Dutch, he was a Dutch writer and that no further qualifications were required. Also, he insisted that his art had nothing to do with his personal background, not even if most of the stories of De voeten van Abdullah were set in an imaginary Moroccan village which carried the same name as the actual village from which the Bouazzas emigrated in 1977, Bertollo.

From his earliest appearance, Bouazza stressed repeatedly that he neither felt a spokesperson for the Dutch-Moroccan community nor aimed to further understanding between cultural groups. He positioned himself as an ‘ordinary’, autonomous author giving expression to a highly individual artistic drive through literary texts. Most critics and academics, however, were of a different opinion. The literature by the young migrants was hailed as a ‘new’ phenomenon, which gave rise to high hopes and expectations. Its potential was believed to stretch far beyond merely literary-aesthetic values: migrant writing was destined to change general conceptions of literature and rewrite literary canons. It was believed that it would further understanding and tolerance throughout society, to impact on the emancipatory trajectories of all

1 For example, Kader Abdolah, Hans Sahar, Naima El Bezaz, and Abdelkader Benali.
minority groups, to globalise the world of literature – to name only some of the more striking claims.

These high expectations underlined the critical problem concerning migrant writing: it is inextricably linked with the social context of its creators. Whether the reader is more positively or more critically inclined, the reality remains that ignoring the specific circumstances of the author seems (as yet) well-nigh impossible. Yet it is exactly the fact that migrant writing is often seen as a social as well as a literary phenomenon that creates an uncomfortable or even undesirable situation for many authors. Their predicament is that, because of their specific position within a dominant cultural system, they are destined – or doomed – to turn the migrant theme into the driving force behind their writing. The dominant system favours labelling them as ‘exotic’: it is different, it is commercially attractive, and it keeps the migrant writer in a well-defined position. Yet this segregation from mainstream literature can lead to a double alienation on the part of the migrant writer: their writing is set aside from the dominant Dutch system, while the category assigned by the dominant system – ‘migrant writers’ – is, for them, nothing short of a meaningless label.

In spite of the clear commercial advantages, most authors were less than enthusiastic about the migrant adjective being stuck to them and to their work. Their ‘outsiderdom’ became the focal point for readers and critics alike, at times obscuring their literary ambitions and achievements, or, in some cases, rendering their success suspect.² However, Ton Anbeek and others argued that there were principled ‘literary’ reasons for embracing the migrant marker.³ The migrant author’s possible desire for inclusion expressed in their rejection of

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² When Abdelkader Benali won the prestigious Libris Literatuurprijs in 2003 for his second novel, De langverwachte (The Long-Awaited), the Flemish magazine Humo suggested that the choice of Benali was for political rather than literary reasons. See, Bart Vanegeren, ‘Abdelkader Benali: De langverwachte’, in Humo, 20 May 2003.

the migrant label could prevent them from exploring their full potential. Bill Ashcroft and others point out in their seminal publication *The Empire Writes Back*, that early postcolonial literature was produced ‘under imperial licence’, which had the effect that the ‘available discourse’ restrained the authors’ options.\(^4\) Equally it was argued that the available discourse offered by the predominantly mono-cultural Dutch literary establishment restricted migrant writers in their powers of expression. Creating the umbrella term ‘migrant writing’ could free up the necessary space to explore fully the potential of the authors. In other words, rather than suggesting that ‘migrant writing’ was a derogatory term keeping the authors in their place, labeling simply allowed their specific, distinctive merits to flourish.

Such arguments did not hold water with many of the authors themselves. In the foreword of *Het land in mij* (*The Country in Me*), a collection of short stories by second-generation Turkish, Moroccan and Lebanese writers, Ayfer Ergün strongly opposed classification of their writing as ‘allochthonous’ or ‘migrant literature’.\(^5\) Ergün suggested that branding the literary production as ethnic, migrant, or allochthonous (as opposed to autochthonous or native Dutch) exposed the patronising attitude of the Dutch autochthonous literary establishment:

> Since the second generation of immigrants has spoken out, there has been a lot of media interest. As a result of their Turkish or Moroccan background, their shared exoticism, their work was soon labeled as ethnic literature. This label soon became a stigma. What makes somebody a migrant writer? Their skin colour, their language or their subject matter? Surely the fact that you speak another language apart from Dutch or that you write about Islam does not turn you into a migrant writer? The term migrant literature is only an indication of

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\(^5\) Although the Dutch term *allochtoon* is an exactly defined statistical term, in everyday use it refers to all ethnic minorities within Dutch society, in particular of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinam and Antilles origin. In the English translation I will use the adjectives ‘ethnic’, ‘non-native’, ‘migrant’, ‘minority’ or ‘allochthonous’ (versus autochthonous) to cover the different nuances.
the author’s background and does not say anything about the content of their stories.6

In 1997, Bouazza was awarded the *E. du Perronprijs* for his debut collection. This annual prize is awarded to those artists who, through their work, contribute to intercultural relations within Dutch society. When confronted with a quotation from the jury report, which suggested that with the publication of *De voeten van Abdullah* Bouazza had contributed to the understanding and relations between the various population groups in the Netherlands, Bouazza reacted with some irritation:

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?7

Ergün’s insistence that ‘we should be regarded as Dutch authors’ and Bouazza’s rejection of the distinction between the drive behind his writing and that of an ‘ordinary’ Dutch author contain an appeal to be taken seriously, to avoid or escape a biased reading or treatment by readers and critics.

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6 *Het land in mij*, ed. by Ayfer Ergün (Amsterdam: Arena 1996), p.8, ‘Sinds deze tweede generatie van zich liet horen, hebben de media veel aandacht aan hen besteed. Door hun Turkse of Marokkaanse afkomst, hun gemeenschappelijke kenmerk, werd hun werk direct getypeerd als allochtone literatuur. Een typering die algauw een stempel betekende. Maar wat maakt iemand tot een allochtone schrijver? De huidskleur, de taal of het onderwerp? Het feit dat je naast de Nederlandse taal een andere taal spreekt of dat je over de islam schrijft maakt je toch niet tot een allochtone schrijver? Het begrip allochtone literatuur zegt eigenlijk uitsluitend iets over de herkomst van de auteurs en niets over de inhoud van hun verhalen.’ Translations unless otherwise indicated are my own, H.L.

One radical way to respond to this appeal would be by way of a principled exclusion of any reference to whatever we know of the author’s background in the consideration of his or her writing – a return to New Critical orthodoxy with its strictures on the ‘biographical fallacy’. Yet such an exercise is in danger of simply submitting to yet another powerful mechanism of that same literary system: the relegation of ‘real’ literature to a realm of aesthetic disinterestedness far removed from the messy contingencies of the present. The appeal from migrant authors to be taken seriously as producers of Literature does not mean that their texts should be locked up in a methodological vacuum. The production of the literary text is a particularly intense language act which, like all language acts, is inextricably embedded in a complex linguistic and para-linguistic context. Migrant authors who are irritated by the way in which they are being typecast, read and reviewed have every right to demand more respect for and focus on their literary merits. However, this justly desired respect is not well served with a denial of the reason for irritation in the first place. The relationship between the literary work and the context of its creator is, and always will be, a complicated and delicate issue, but just ignoring the issue by focussing exclusively on the literary side will not lay the ghosts to rest. A more responsible and balanced response lies in an analysis of the irritation of both the author and the text. Clearly this tension between the literary and the extra-literary is a feature of all writing; migrant authors will therefore have areas of irritation that have nothing to do with their migrant status. Yet there is undeniably a red patch where literature and background do rub.

My decision to write a sustained monograph on one author only, Hafid Bouazza, should be seen as a response to the demand by that author to be respected and taken seriously as a Dutch literary writer. But this Dutch author, Hafid Bouazza, is also, and perhaps even more emphatically so in his artistic role, a ‘Dutch writer of Moroccan origin’. The fact that he may not like this is the whole point. I hope to show that this dislike, tension or irritation is a good thing and that Dutch literature as a whole must count itself lucky that he started scratching the patch where literature and background rub. It has led to some of the best prose contemporary Dutch literature has to offer.
Hafid Bouazza has been producing literature for over a decade. He has grown from a trendy migrant writer to an established author with an oeuvre that includes short stories, novels, an autobiography, essays, literary reviews, a play, a libretto for a short opera, as well as translations of plays by Shakespeare and Marlowe. He is also active as a translator and commentator of Arabic poetry. In 1996 he was awarded the *E. du Perronprijs* for *De voeten van Abdullah* and in 2003 he won the *Amsterdamse prijs voor de Kunsten* (Amsterdam Prize for the Arts) for his entire oeuvre. In 2004, he was awarded the prestigious literary prize *De Gouden Uil* (The Gold Owl) for his novel *Paravion*. This study will offer a sustained and critical analysis of Bouazza’s literary writing. It includes an overview of the early response to the arrival of migrant authors, Bouazza’s own commentary on his position as a writer, a discussion of his writing in relation to the Dutch literary tradition as well as a theoretical framework for the analysis of his main publications which forms the bulk of the book. In the final chapter I will focus on Bouazza’s literary strategy of creating hybrid spaces paying particular attention to his translation of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. 