

# The Dutch, the Europeans, and the World: An Interview with Abdelkader Benali

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## Introduction

Last November, Sheffield's department of Germanic Studies was fortunate to have the Dutch-Moroccan author Abdelkader Benali as a writer in residence. Benali is best known for his award-winning novels *Bruiloft aan zee* (*Wedding by the Sea*, 1996), published when the author was twenty-one, and *De stem van mijn moeder* (*The Voice of my Mother*, 2009), both of which address issues of migration and the immigrant experience. As a respected voice in the so-called *multi-culti* debate, Benali is regularly asked to comment on the immigrant situation in the Netherlands as well as the political climate surrounding the attendant problems of integration. Most recently, Benali has written on the political climate in the Middle East, having been resident in Lebanon during the war with Israel in 2006. His book *Oost=West* (*East=West*, 2011) offers perspectives on this situation from around the Arab world as well as North Africa.

Benali's visit was made possible by funding from the Dutch government, as well as through the exciting international programme City Books, for which he will be writing a text on Sheffield. City Books is a project aimed at promoting European unity through cultural exchange, with a focus on cities which are lesser-known beyond their borders than the traditional centres of culture. The project sees itself as responding to the breakdown of national and religious identities in Europe by returning to the primary site of identity, the

hometown.<sup>1</sup> During his three weeks in Sheffield, two postgraduates from the Department of Germanic Studies were able to interview Abdelkader Benali. This interview, conducted in English, is printed below.

*Are there any themes that you see binding your work as a whole and to which you consciously return?*

If I had to choose something that I seek to discover again and again in my work, it would have to be ‘transformation’. Every subject, every character in my work is changed in one way or another by the historical and social circumstances they are in. I strongly believe that as a human being you have to adapt in order to survive. I don’t believe in fixed identities or fixed ideas; they are manmade and can be changed.

*Do you see your themes as particularly relevant today?*

Of course! If you look at the political and social themes that are now under scrutiny in Europe, the economic crisis and the Euro, we see that they are dividing countries, especially Germany and Great Britain. Is who we are, our identity, tied to a currency?

My themes and subjects are also tied to my personal story. I look at immigration not only to Europe, but also within Europe. People want a better life for their children, and this is one of the defining themes of our age. Added to this, to my great surprise and joy, are the changes taking place in the Arab world. I have travelled extensively in the Arab world and have written about this. From Rabat to Damascus I have a very good network of friends, artists, and journalists, and they have talked to me about how they would love to see their society changed. Transformation is at the core of things that are happening now.

*You have written for several Dutch newspapers about your travels in the Arab world. Do you see political commentary as something which goes hand-in-hand with being an author?*

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<sup>1</sup> More information on both Benali’s time in Sheffield and the City Books project can be found on the project’s homepage <[www.city-books.eu](http://www.city-books.eu)>. It features information on each of the cities featured in the project, as well as recordings, pictures, and information on Benali and other authors who have worked in partnership with the University of Sheffield as part of the project.

For me, yes. I have always been on the lookout for political agitation. What happens in the world and in my neighbourhood has always been a concern for me. I am from the generation that grew up in the Cold War. We heard people discuss the atomic bomb and nuclear armament. We saw meetings between Reagan and Gorbachev. We saw the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was great fear, but also excitement and hope. Since then, I have been a political animal.

*In a Guardian column in October 2010 you described yourself as the ‘dream of multiculturalism, a foreigner who showed he could adapt to their [Dutch] culture through language’. Does language still hold the same relevance?*

If anything, it has become more important, and it will only continue to do so because Dutch society is changing tremendously. Not only because of the influx of immigrants, but also because the world is changing. We are a small country of only seventeen million; most of the inhabitants live in the confined areas of industrial zones; we have many borders and we are dependent on trade with foreign economies. We are an international people, but we tend to be provincial.

Today, people feel hollow, that they are a product that is being produced. They feel like they have no identity. It’s not Christmas or holidays that hold us together; even in politics we are becoming a more and more divided country. It is our language that holds us together, that allows us to speak to each other, to talk about our differences and our similarities. We can create our identity through our language. It’s important for a small country to be able to do this.

*In the same article you described immigration as a ‘totem for the left-wing elite, of which there could be no criticism’. With the announced end of multiculturalism in Europe and the ongoing economic crisis, do you think that the left is abandoning the immigrant?*

The left is in a big state of confusion now. It’s not a good period for left-wing policies or parties, as we have seen in Spain, where the Conservative party won the recent general election by an overwhelming majority. In the 1990s multiculturalism was cherished by the left wing and was something that they were proud of. In their concept of a multicultural

society, all the good things in the Netherlands came together: tolerance, open mindedness, cosmopolitanism, and the idea of putting the individual above nationality. The left hasn't tried to defend its stance towards multiculturalism because it wasn't a theme in the Netherlands. Though it had been touched upon by some politicians, such as Pim Fortuyn,<sup>2</sup> it wasn't an issue that could win you votes. The whole idea of the foreigner, the immigrant, was seen as positive by the average Dutchman. This has changed, of course, since 2001 and the murder of Theo van Gogh.<sup>3</sup>

*You mentioned the polarisation of Dutch politics. There has also been a trend towards right-wing populism in other European countries in the last decade. Do you see any reasons for this?*

We live in the age of fear, estrangement, money, and military power. These make good soil for the seeds of right-wing policies and populism. People are insecure not only about their identities, but also about paying their mortgage. They are looking for hard stability, and right-wing governments have always been much better at providing this than left-wing ones. Left-wing policies are about making the world better for everyone. It's much more utopian and for this you need a different mindset. Right now, people don't want utopia, they want reality and security, yet they aren't willing to give up the economic and social privileges of the welfare state to gain this. This is the biggest problem facing society today, but it is a necessary one because our economies are changing so drastically.

*As a child of immigrants, you have spoken before about the position of the immigrant in Dutch society. How important do you think immigration is in the modern world?*

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<sup>2</sup> Fortuyn was a controversial and outspoken Dutch politician who, despite distancing himself from right-wing politicians, is known for being fiercely anti-Islam. During his campaign to become Dutch Prime Minister in 2002, Fortuyn was shot dead, his Dutch killer citing Fortuyn's anti-Muslim stance as his motivation. In 2004, he was voted by the Dutch public as the greatest Dutchman of all time.

<sup>3</sup> Van Gogh was a Dutch filmmaker who produced the film *Submission* in 2004, which looks at the role of women in Islam. It caused controversy amongst Muslims because of its blasphemous content. Van Gogh was cycling to work in 2004 when he was stabbed to death by a Dutch-Moroccan man with ties to terrorist organisations. His death sparked outrage in the Netherlands and sparked a strengthening of anti-immigration tendencies amongst the Dutch public.

For democracies, I think the proof of the pudding is in the way they behave towards their immigrants. The only way to judge a democracy is to see how the majority treat the minority. I can't see another test for democracies; freedom of expression, speech, and religion are all agreed on.

In the long term, immigration is the only way of making a society survive. It gives a new energy, dynamics, and openness. There are many good things to it. There are also many bad things to it.

Unfortunately we don't have a laboratory for democracy and migration: society is the laboratory.

*You say that there is a tendency for left-wing politics to look to the future and for right-wing politics to look to the past. Do you think that expressions of imperial nostalgia, such as those from former Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende<sup>4</sup> and from British Prime Minister David Cameron,<sup>5</sup> have motives beyond winning votes?*

I do not think that they believe what they say. They are just feeding the public and producing political spin. But they are also misleading the public by saying we need to go back to the feeling of empire, the pride of empire, and having the Union Jack planted everywhere; it's a misreading of history. But in times of economic crisis and in times of weak self-identity, people tend to believe what politicians tell them. It's a bad sign that politicians are coming out with this kind of nonsense. In my opinion, it's a good indicator of how bad things are. Instead of trying to take the confusion away and trying to create stability for their country, politicians are creating more insecurity through this kind of rhetoric, and it's dangerous. But I also think that for a whole generation now the VOC or the British Empire says absolutely nothing.

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<sup>4</sup>In 2006 Balkenende gave a speech on the economy in which he called upon the Dutch to readopt a '*VOC-mentaliteit*' (VOC-mentality). The VOC was the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Dutch East India Company), whose function as a quasi- empire from the early 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century make it a continuing source of pride for the Dutch, to whom it was held up as proof of the nation's enterprising spirit. The nationalisation of the company in 1800 marked the beginning of the modern Dutch Empire.

<sup>5</sup> In a 2011 speech at the Conservative party conference, Cameron called upon the spirit of the British Empire as a means of lifting Britain out of an economic crisis and improving the national mood.

*Scholars such as the Portuguese historian Paulo de Medeiros<sup>6</sup> say that Europe today needs to address its imperial past, much as Germany had to address its Nazi past, in order to move on from the present political situation. Do you think that's a valid argument?*

Let me bring relate it to the Dutch situation. I think that slavery should be part of the school curriculum in primary schools. I think it should be something you talk about and discuss. I think that what was done to the Jews in the Second World War should be part of the curriculum, and it is. I think the fact that Holland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was one of the most multicultural societies in the world should be an integral part of the school curriculum. I believe this, that we can learn from our history.

Learning about history makes you relativise your own society. It gives you greater insight into developments, prejudice, and stereotyping. It gives you some knowledge of how everything is rooted in circumstances, whether social or economical. There's always a story behind a story, and it's important to learn that, especially to counteract those monolithic two-dimensional stories about our 'common past' or our national identity. Sadly, I think history will lose against actuality, but actuality will disappear in the end — it is history that stays.

*How do you see the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world? Do you think Europeans look at the problems of the rest of the world and think, 'That doesn't concern me'?*

If you look at the way Europe is now dealing with its young population, its history, and its problems, they are so slow in acting; they are so slow in making decisions. Everybody brings every European problem back down to the level of their own country: the way politicians react, the way they are partially jingoistic and partially act for their own political interests, the way they do that slows down the European project and creates the image for other continents that we are a continent that is lost, a continent that is like two old men fighting over a cow, that we are wasting our time instead of investing in education, technology, durability, green economic models, rejuvenating our universities and the political system.

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<sup>6</sup> Is a joint coordinator of The Postcolonial Studies Initiative and is director of the Portuguese Studies Centre at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. He has published widely on issues of postcolonial identity and memory in a Lusophone context.

If you are born in India, Brazil, China, and you are in the lower middle class, you know that you will get a chance to improve your life. You will end up more or less securing a better future for your children. Here in Europe, we don't know. Our children will probably not be able to create a better living standard for their children because the biggest progress there has been was already made in the 40s, 50s, 60s. So I think other continents are better off. Their living standards are still lower than ours, but they are growing, and we as Europe, I think, look to them like a museum. We have the Eiffel Tower, some remnants of the Berlin Wall, and we have Big Ben. We could turn Europe into one big museum and we could make good money with that, but everything else I think is not in our hands. We don't have the dynamism and aggression that the other continents have. They want to prove something and they are very eager; they want to be in competition while we are maybe a little bit too spoiled.

*Do you think Europe's lethargy became visible in the last twelve months with the lack of reaction to events in the Middle East?*

Yes definitely. Here we say, 'freedom, freedom', but what we mean is spare time. Here, freedom means meeting our deadline and going to the pub to see our friends, watching a football game and getting drunk. In Cairo, freedom means everything. It means being willing to give up your own life. Today was the so-called end of three days of violence in Tahrir Square. There were thirty deaths; people like you and me, with just one word, 'freedom'. Change really means something there, people there don't need you to tell them what freedom is; freedom is something they are willing to sacrifice their lives for. Of course, their circumstances are much, much worse than ours, they have something to fight for and of course, if the circumstances are bad, you go for it. Thank God we have our way of life here so well protected by democratic institutions, etc. But in other countries, it's totally different. For a Chinese peasant boy who gets the privilege of going to university in Beijing, going to Sheffield to do engineering is like going to the moon, it's like being Columbus. He will feel like he's discovering the world. It's a big thing for him while for us, even if we go to Beijing and study Chinese, we will feel more like privileged tourists. So I think words like freedom, equality, wealth, and culture mean different things in those cultures, and I think what we can do in Europe is share the wealth we have and be open to those voices, the voices that are shouting 'freedom', because we produced those ideas in Europe in the sixteenth, seventeenth,

and eighteenth centuries; they are European ideas, the ideas of Enlightenment, the ideas of revolution, the ideas of equality, the ideas of socialism, the ideas of freedom of expression. They are all very European. So I believe that, let's call it European ideology, is still being imported. The problem with Europe is that we don't know how to export it.

*Do you think the Arab spring will have far-reaching effects in a similar way to the fall of communism in the late 1980s?*

Yes, especially for those countries. I don't know how or what will happen, but something has changed in 2011. I have travelled the region so much and so widely, and in doing so I walked into so many taboos, restrictions, censorship, poverty, and inequality that it almost gave me the feeling of nausea just smelling the air of Morocco. You know that while you're preparing for all the beautiful things that you're going to see, you will also see things that will leave you feeling pessimistic. Now finally the young people there and their mothers and fathers and society are not bending; they are rising up to take their future in their own hands and it is impressive. Yes, there will be far-reaching effects, also because there is more to come. It's now not only happening in Egypt — we should prepare ourselves for similar situations in Syria and maybe even Morocco and Algeria. It is a very interesting time.

As to similarities with the fall of communism, I hope so. I hope that it could be like that in the end. I just hope that a Putin doesn't appear in the Arab world: some dictator who feeds the middle class with bread and games, but then still uses the mass media and communication to keep the common man stupid. I don't think that will happen, but we will see.

## **Conclusion**

Though the political situation in the Netherlands differs from that of Britain, many topics that dominate public debate there also dominate public debate here. Thanks to the looming threat of a second recession in Britain and recent developments in the Eurozone, the government and press of the United Kingdom are able to find an easy scapegoat in the form of immigrants. Rather than seeing the economic advantages to immigration, newcomers are marginalised and painted as a threat to the social fabric of our society.

Revolution is sweeping the Arab world, as country after country rises up against dictatorships that have often been buffered by support from European nations. With the



exception of Libya, the general response has been to ignore these developments. However, if we do not respond to these changes, we are in danger as a continent of being left behind. Adopting an increasingly introspective attitude is not what we should be doing. Rather, Europe needs to do something. It needs to act.