

The long road to Damascus

Interview with Arabic
translator *Djûke Poppinga*

Hanneke van der Heijden

When we meet in February, in a café on a waterfront in Amsterdam, Djûke Poppinga has just retired as a lecturer of Arabic at the University of Amsterdam. She is busy nonetheless: in a few days she will hand in a new book translation, her 63rd.

Her long career started more or less as a coincidence. “Honestly, I didn’t have a clue what to study after secondary school. There was just one thing I knew for sure: it had to be a language, a special language. And so I started with Arabic.” Not an easy choice, it turned out. “At first I thought it was horrible; mastering the alphabet alone took me forever. But after spending a few months in Tunisia, I went to Damascus and stayed for nearly a year. That changed everything. In Syria I worked my way through a long list of Arabic literature in preparation for my exams at the University of Amsterdam, and then the language finally came to life, I got a grip on it. That’s when my love for Arabic began.”

Boat on the Nile

From early on, Poppinga’s love for the language was closely connected to her love for Arabic literature. As a student she translated one of her favourite novels, *Al-Mahdi* by the Egyptian author *Abd al-Hakim Qasim*, just for the fun of it.



Djûke Poppinga
Photo: Private Archive



Naguib Mahfouz in café, 1968.
Photo: Public Domain, AUCpress

“I did all kinds of things to learn more about Arabic literature and the literary world,” Poppinga says with a smile. “When I was in Cairo together with a friend at the beginning of the 1980s, we heard that Naguib Mahfouz, the later Nobel laureate, used to host a reception every Sunday on a boat on the Nile, and we decided to go there. We were welcomed and seated at the end of a long, long table, among a crowd of people who all wanted to talk to the author. Every ten minutes the person sitting next to Mahfouz would give up their seat to their neighbour. Slowly we made our way up to the author, and all this time we were part of the other conversations going on at the table.”

Poppinga’s translation of Qasim’s novel was never published, but in the mid-1980s she was more lucky. “A Dutch

feminist publishing house was looking for a translator. As the Arabic texts were written by female authors, the publisher preferred the translator to be female too. The few other active translators were male, and so I got my first commission.”

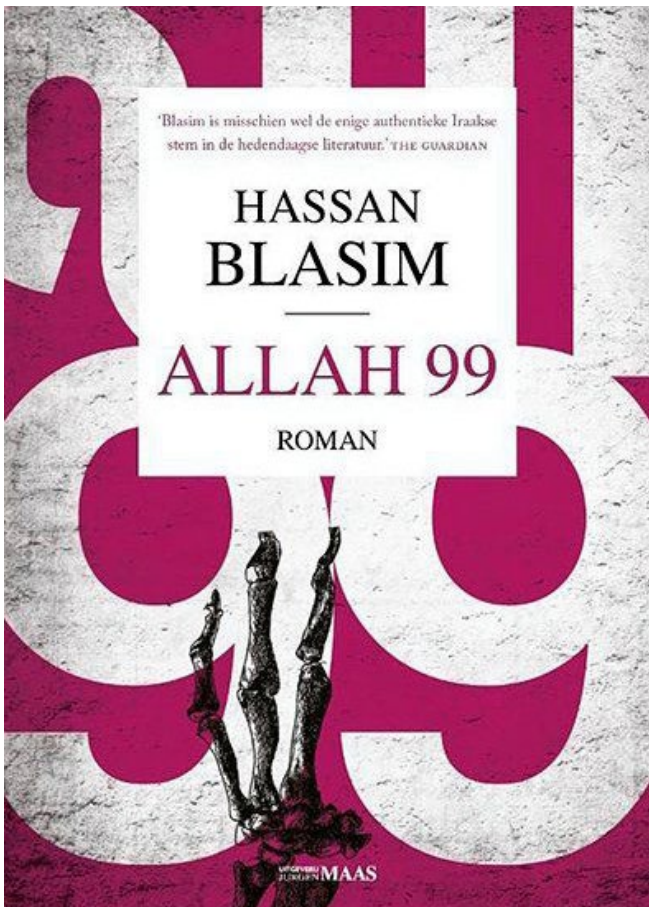
Since then, Poppinga has pursued a career as a literary translator. She occasionally translates poetry, but specialises in prose from the Middle East, novels by Egyptian authors Naguib Mahfouz and Alaa Al Aswani, by Hanan as-Sjaykh from Lebanon, Khaled Khalifa from Syria, and the Palestinian author Adania Shibli, among others. One of her recent translations, *Allah 99 (God 99)* by Iraqi author Hassan Blasim, was nominated for the Filter Translation Prize, an important award in the Netherlands.

Terra incognita

In the beginning of the 1980s when Poppinga started out, Arabic literature was still terra incognita for many publishers. When Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, publishers became a little more open to literature from the Arab world. Meanwhile, grants and exchange programmes for translators from organisations such as the **European Cultural Foundation** enabled Poppinga and her colleagues to discuss texts with colleagues and authors and develop their skills as translators. Looking back, Poppinga is happy that some progress has been made, but her frustration about the lack of interest from the Dutch book market is easily tangible too.

“Most publishing houses don’t have anything close to a policy regarding translations from Arabic. Decisions on

what to publish are often haphazard, a scattergun selection of Arabic books that have been published in English. As a translator, you simply don't get the chance to talk to publishers about interesting titles from the Arab world that could fit their programme." Over the years Poppinga has tried hard to bring about some improvements: she frequently gives lectures and talks, and has worked with many advisory bodies. "Usually, it's only once the rights for an Arabic book are bought that publishers get into contact with a translator. But even then that's not always the case. It happens regularly that publishers prefer to commission a translator from the English."



"The books that do make it to the Dutch market broadly fall into two categories. There are the easy reads, plot-driven stories that in form and theme are familiar to Western readers, such as novels by Alaa Al Aswany. But also books about Islam, sex and oppressed women, such as *Girls from Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanea, belong to this category. The English translation of this novel was adapted for American readers' taste by the American publisher, in collaboration with the author. The translator Marilyn Booth wrote an [interesting article](#) about this. It's a disturbing incident, also for us, because the English book market has such a big influence on the Dutch." "A second category of translations consists of high-brow literature, complex and intellectually challenging novels, such as works by Abdul Rahman Munif and Adania Shibli. Compared to Western novels these books have a different narrative structure and are less plot-driven. In the Netherlands they are mostly brought out by niche publishing houses."

Gatekeepers

As a result of these preferences, large segments of the Arabic book world remain invisible to the Dutch readership. Non-fiction is one of the gaps. Whereas newspapers and magazines in the Netherlands are filled with news from the Middle East, books about political topics written by authors and journalists living in the region are not considered for translation. "An utterly harrowing situation," Poppinga says. "Why shouldn't we read a book about the war in Syria by an Arab writer or

journalist? Or, for that matter, a book about climate change? But things are even worse than that. I know academics at Dutch universities who spent their lives studying the Middle East without even being able to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in Arabic. As Middle East historians they completely rely on sources from the West. An example of Western arrogance, there’s no other word for it.”

Arabic belongs to the family of Semitic languages and is the mother tongue of an estimated 360 million speakers. All Arabic speaking countries share the same writing language (Modern Standard Arabic; MSA) but have their own Arabic dialect for speaking: Syrian Arabic, Lebanese Arabic etc. For educated language users, Arabic dialects are mutually understandable. In present day literary texts dialogues are often written in the dialect of the country while descriptive parts are written in MSA.

Well-written books with a good story are lacking too. Finding a readership can’t be a problem, Poppinga believes. “The Netherlands has a large community of Moroccan-Dutch people. The children and grandchildren of Moroccans who migrated from the 1960s onwards to work as labourers in the Netherlands are very interested in what’s going on in the Maghreb and the Middle East. Many were brought up in a Berber language, their Arabic is simply insufficient to read books in that language. Unfortunately,

Dutch publishing houses don’t consider this migrant community a readership.” The limited selection of books doesn’t bring the Arab world to life in the Netherlands. “A wider, more diverse selection of titles would give a much better impression of what’s going on in this vast territory. It would arouse the reader’s curiosity instead of reinforcing stereotypes,” says Poppinga. But the gatekeepers of the Dutch book market are either too impatient or not daring enough. “Publishing houses were looking for novels about the Arab Spring when the revolution had just begun. Literary festivals that want to invite ‘new voices’ often get cold feet when it turns out that the numbers of Western followers of these authors is rather low. As if that weren’t inherent in being a ‘new voice’.”

Commas and full stops

It doesn’t stop baffling Poppinga, who knows how much there is to discover. But it also doesn’t stop her translating. She points out some of the differences between Arabic and Dutch that make translating an extra challenge.

“Whether one looks at the grammatical and logical structure of the language, or the use of imagery by literary authors and their love of a bit of drama, an Arabic text is different from a Dutch one in nearly every respect.”

One of the first challenges is something so seemingly trivial as punctuation.

“Commas and full stops were introduced fairly late in Arabic, which is still noticeable in the often erratic use of punctuation. Sentences tend to be long and winding, with clauses connected by conjunctions such as *wa* ‘and, while’ and *fa* ‘then, hence’. In the twists and turns such a long sentence takes, the tense of

verbs can change many times – much more than would be possible in Dutch. Interpreting the logical coherence within page-long sentences and finding out which moment or period the author is referring to are two of the difficulties the translator has to tackle. This is even more true for books written in a fragmentary fashion, such as Hassan Blasim's *God 99*.'

“Why not read a book about the war in Syria by an Arab writer? Or about climate change?”

The Arabic lexicon has its own difficulties. “In Arabic it's very common to combine a noun with three or four adjectives which are all near-synonyms. In a literal translation this would stand out much more than it does in Arabic, so I often translate only one or two.” Poppinga has a similar approach to the lyrical descriptions and imagery that can sound exaggerated to Dutch ears. “I don't smooth them out, but I make sure the translation doesn't sound too exotic when the Arabic is down to earth. When translating texts from a region with a culture very different from the Dutch in a language that's more formal by nature, the issue of finding a balance between foreignisation and domestication is always in the back of one's mind.”

“A little while ago, this issue took on a different dimension when I had a discussion with the Palestinian author Shibli about the word *intifada*. In her view, keeping Arabic words in the Dutch translation would be a case of colonialism. I disagreed. Yes, the word *intifada* (‘uprising’) can be translated without a problem, but in the context of the Palestinian protests against Israeli occupation it became a proper name, a term, widely known abroad. In a similar vein, translating *hummus* with ‘chickpea paste’ would make the translation less neutral than the original; nowadays every Dutch supermarket sells hummus. Leaving the Arabic word in the Dutch translation is sometimes less exotic than translating it.”

“I love this thinking about words,” Poppinga says. “But for me every translation starts with defining the tone of the book. That specific tone, and its equivalent in Dutch, is my guideline in the choices and decisions every translation requires. And there are many decisions to make. Arabic is such a rich language.”