EVERY CARPET A FLYING VEHICLE? MULTICULTURALITY IN THE DUTCH LITERARY FIELD

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On 28 March 2010 the literary critic and scholar Jaap Goedegebuure published an article in the national Dutch quality newspaper *Trouw*, "Allemaal allochtonen, ja gezellig" ("All allochtoons, yes, *gezellig*"), "gezellig" being the Dutch adjective *par excellence* to refer to a state of comfortable and pleasant cosiness.[1] The subtitle of this article ran: "Van Halil Gür tot Hafid Bouazza: hoe de migrantenliteratuur emancipeerde" ("From Halil Gür to Hafid Bouazza: How Migrant Literature Emancipated Itself"). About ten years before, in 1999, the scholar Ton Anbeek published an article on literary work by

[1] "Allochtoons" (as opposed to "autochthons", from the Greek roots *allos* (other), *authos* (same) and *chtoon* (soil) is the official terminology in the Netherlands to refer to Dutch citizens of migrant background. According to the government CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek/Central Office for Statistics), an "allochtoon" is a person of whom at least one parent was born abroad. The CBS distinguish between first-generation "allochtoons" who themselves were born abroad and second-generation "allochtoons" who were born in the Netherlands. Besides, the CBS make a distinction between western and non-western "allochtoons" on the basis of a long list of "non-western" countries. In common usage, however, the term "allochtoons" exclusively refers to non-western "allochtoons". As Böcker and Groenendijk demonstrate, this terminology is not without controversy, as it often works to stigmatize non-indigenous Dutch as "other" (Anita Böcker and Kees Groenendijk, "Einwanderungs- und Integrationsland Niederlande: Tolerant, liberal und offen?", in *Länderbericht Niederlande. Geschichte – Wirtschaft – Gesellschaft*, eds Friso Wielenga and Ilona Taute, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2004, 303-61). In his insightful study *The Perils of Belonging*, Peter Geschiere carefully dissects the powerful and highly problematic workings of claims of "autochthony" (Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 2009). I will come back to the controversial semantics of the term in the Dutch context when I discuss its use in the literary field.

Moroccan-Dutch writers, "Fataal succes: Over Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs en hun critici" ("Fatal Success: Concerning Moroccan-Dutch Writers and their Critics"); this article was reprinted three years later, in 2002, now titled "Doodknuffelen. Over Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs en hun critici" ("Cuddling to Death").[2] The titles of these three articles seem to suggest that much has improved in the ten years in between 1999 and 2010, both in respect to the quality of migration literature and in respect to the position of this literature within the literary field. Anbeek's early assessment of what was then, in the late 1990s, considered a new phenomenon, is cast in rather dramatic terms; the title of Goedegebuure's retrospective article evokes an image of a harmonious multicultural coffee table idyll.

In this article I set out to provide a critical overview of the development of multicultural literature in the Netherlands. I focus in particular on the influence of and the discussion on that strand of literature that is nowadays mostly called migrant or migration literature.[3] The choice to focus on this migration literature instead of on the broader category of multicultural literature that is central to this volume demands some explanation. In the following discussion of multicultural literature I leave out what one could call Dutch postcolonial literature, the Dutchophone literature that results from and reflects on the Netherlands' colonial history. Although in many cases writers of this kind of literature have gone through processes of migration as well, the huge differences in background and history necessitate careful differentiation between postcolonial and migration literature as two particular strands of multicultural literature. In starting my discussion of multicultural literature in the Netherlands with the publication of *Gekke Mustafa* (*Mad Mustafa*) by the Turkish migrant Halil Gür in 1984, and by putting the public celebration and

[2] Ton Anbeek, "Fataal succes: Over Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs en hun critici", *Literatuur*, VI (1999), 335-41, and "Doodknuffelen. Over Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs en hun critici", in *Europa Buitengaats. Koloniale en postkoloniale literaturen in Europese talen*, ed. Theo D'Haen, Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2002, 289-301.

[3] As my article will make clear there is no consensus in Dutch academia about the most adequate terminology for literature by writers of non-Dutch ethnic origin. Each term has its historically determined qualities as well as its deficiencies, and it seems that every particular case requires a new decision for the most suitable term in that particular case. Meaning, connotations, and boundaries change over time.

popularity of multicultural literature in the late 1990s at the centre of my discussion, this article very much follows the dominant readers' opinion. I concentrate on that strand of multicultural literature that more or less caused – or is at least at the centre of – the heightened discursivity of multicultural literature. It was literary work by writers of migrant background that triggered broad public attention and seemed to raise an awareness of the multiculturalization of Dutch letters. The socio-political context of multicultural literature should be taken into account here as well: the heightened discursivity of multicultural literature and that of the multicultural society go hand in hand.

This article will now demonstrate how the appearance of "migrant writers" on the literary scene prompted the public and academic reflection about the multiculturalization of the Dutch literary field. It discusses the appearance, the hyped popularity, the politicization, and finally the integration of multicultural literature in the Dutch literary field. It aims to provide insight in the development from multicultural literature as a new and extremely popular phenomenon that rose to fame in the 1990s, towards the mainstreaming of writing by authors of multicultural background in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The critical overview starts with the one and only lonely migrant writer Halil Gür in the 1980s, and concludes with the bicultural poet Ramsey Nasr, who was elected Dutch "dichter des vaderlands" ("poet of the fatherland") in 2008. Finally, it reflects on the question of whether multicultural literature has now become a full-fledged part of Dutch mainstream literary culture, or whether it still occupies a position of ethnicized Otherness.

Multiculturality in the Dutch literary field

As I already mentioned in my introduction, the Dutch history of "migration literature" began in 1984 with the publication of Halil Gür's story-collection *Gekke Mustafa* (*Mad Mustafa*). This collection of ten stories answers to the contemporary expectations of first-generation migrant writing perfectly well: the stories offer insight in the hard life of the stereotypical guest labourer "Ali" – "what does it matter, Hassan or Ali"– who tries to survive hardship and hostility in

the Dutch host country.[4] It is not difficult to reductively read the stories as social documentary with an emancipatory aim: opening the eyes of a Dutch readership for the deprivation of their Turkish fellow human being.

It was exactly this emancipatory potential that was praised when, two years after its publication, *Gekke Mustafa* won the first "multicultural" E. du Perron Prize. This E. du Perron Prize was founded in 1986 by the municipality of Tilburg in cooperation with the Arts Faculty of Tilburg University in order to reward groups or individuals working in the cultural field who made an extraordinary contribution to the good relations and understanding between the various ethnic groups living in the Netherlands. The prize was named after the Dutch writer E. du Perron (1899-1940), who spent many years of his life in the former Dutch Indies, now Indonesia, and wrote several literary and essayistic works in which he reflects on questions of humanity and interculturality. The E. du Perron Foundation explains that the prize aims to award persons who, like him, dare to critically question social circumstances and who help to transcend cultural boundaries and divisions. The E. du Perron prize was the first initiative in the cultural field that acknowledged the multicultural transformations taking place in Dutch society and culture, and aimed to encourage critical reflection on this process within the cultural field.[5]

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[4] "Wat maakt het uit, Hassan of Ali" (Halil Gür, *Gekke Mustafa en andere verhalen*, Breda: De Geus, 1985, 25).

[5] Prize-winners were, among others, Gerda Havertong, Marion Bloem, Max Velthuijs, Hafid Bouazza, Anil Ramdas, Carl Friedman, Nilgün Yerli, Nicolaas Matsier, and Abdelkader Benali. The aim of the E. du Perron Prize is not without controversy, as the award of the prize to Bouazza illustrates. Bouazza won the E. du Perron Prize in 1996 for his story-collection *De voeten van Abdullah* (*Abdullah's Feet*). The winning of this prize, which primarily decorates a cultural contribution to a harmonious multi-ethnic society, posed a problem for Bouazza's self-positioning. In an interview with Wilma Kieskamp in the national newspaper *Trouw*, he comments that the award in some way also feels like an affront: "Ik schrijf omdat ik wil schrijven, niet omdat ik de bedoeling heb om meer begrip tussen de culturen te kweken. Hou toch op. En ik schrijf al helemaal niet omdat ik me de tolk voel van de tweede generatie allochtonen. Ik ben geen maatschappelijk werker" ("I write because I want to write, not because I have the intention to foster more understanding between the cultures. Please leave off. And I write even less because I see myself as the interpreter of the second-generation 'allochtoons'. I am not a social worker") (Bouazza quoted in Wilma Kieskamp,

Halil Gür's *Gekke Mustafa* as well as its successor *De hemel bleek grauw* (*Heaven Appeared Grey*) that was published in 1988, were, and for quite some time remained, odd exceptions within the Dutch literary field. Unlike the situation in the neighbouring country Germany, where several first-generation labour migrants have been contributing – in the German language – to the literary scene since the early 1980s, Gür remained very much the only one of his kind.[6] It was only during the second half of the 1990s that young writers of labour migration background – mostly those called the "one-and-a-half" (who migrated before the age of thirteen) and second generation – entered the Dutch literary field in any considerable measure.

This does not automatically mean that migrants were not writing, but in any case it means they were not publishing, at least not in the Dutch language with Dutch publishing houses.[7] An initiative that tried to change this situation was the annual writing contest that the El Hizjra Foundation started organizing in 1992. Since then, this foundation has allocated several El Hizjra Literary Prizes, meant to encourage persons of migrant background to write poetry or short prose in Dutch, or in the Arab or Tamazight language. The awarded work was published in a small anthology and prize winners were offered a master-class in creative writing. Initially the contest was explicitly meant for migrants of Moroccan and Arab origin, and thus an activity restricted to the respective minority, but by now the

"Bekroonde Hafid Bouazza gebruikt archaïsch Nederlands in sprookjesachtige verhalen", *Trouw*, 21 January 1997).

[6] See Liesbeth Minnaard, "Between Exoticism and Silence: A Comparison of First Generation Migrant Writing in Germany and the Netherlands", *Arcadia: International Journal for Literary Studies*, XLVI/1 (2011), 199-208 for a discussion of this discrepancy in the appearance of labour migrant writing in the Dutch and the German cultural fields.

[7] It seems that the Dutch early acknowledgement of cultural pluralism and the official support for cultural activities within minority groups (and in native languages) resulted in a striking absence and silence of the first-generation migrant group in the dominant culture and language. In a country like Germany, where migrants' participation in society was independent of state support, several quasi-private or semi-institutional initiatives had a stake in stimulating the contribution of first-generation labour migrants to the dominant cultural field. These initiatives resulted in a cultural production by labour migrants in the German language much larger than in the Dutch situation. See Liesbeth Minnaard, *New Germans, New Dutch: Literary Interventions*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008, 15-50.

criterion of origin is applied less strictly. In 2010, the foundation's website proclaims that the El Hizjra prize has developed into an important multicultural prize. This is true insofar that it has certainly gained resonance far beyond the boundaries of its minority margin. Since its institution in 1992, the El Hizjra Prize has functioned as an important springboard for a literary career in the Dutch cultural field. Writers like Mustafa Stitou, Abdelkader Benali, Muhammed Benzakour, Rashid Novaire and Khalid Boudou, well known by now, all started their careers within the El Hizjra "literary school".[8]

It was only in 1994, however, that this kind of migration literature managed to reach a broader, more mainstream audience. Mustafa Stitou's performance as poet on the Poetry International festival of that year, and the ensuing publication of his poetry collection *Mijn vormen*, are often seen as the breakthrough, not only of Stitou himself but also of literature of migration in general.[9] Both Stitou and his poetry collection were granted a very positive welcome, and also rather suddenly stirred public interest in work by other writers of migrant backgrounds. Several writers followed in Stitou's footsteps, among them Hans Sahar, Naima el Bezaz, Hafid Bouazza, and Abdelkader Benali.

The Dutch "alterity industry"

The sudden interest in literature by writers of non-Dutch ethnic origin was not restricted to literature of labour migration, but also concerned work by writers of colonial or refugee background. Almost all works by ethnic minority writers, at that time generally labelled "allochtoon" writers, shared in a hearty welcome and a growing public interest. In retrospect, several critics maintain that at that time all major

[8] For a more elaborate discussion of the role of El Hizjra in the Dutch cultural field, see the contribution by Laroui and Nijborg in this volume.

[9] In the previous year, the Iranian-Dutch writer Kader Abdolah published the story-collection *De adelaars* (*The Eagles*, 1993). His presence in the Netherlands resulted from flight rather than from labour migration, which made him, in comparison to most Dutch writers of migrant background, a relative newcomer in Dutch society and in the Dutch language. Although the literary work of writers of very diverse refugee background – Moses Isegawa and Lulu Wang are other examples – is generally included in the category of multicultural literature, it nevertheless occupies a distinctive position in the discussion of this literature. For a discussion of Stitou's poetry, see the contribution by Yves T'Sjoen in this volume.

publishing houses were eagerly searching for "allochtoon" writers to include on their list. They disapprove of the fact that this concern to bring these writers into the spotlight mainly stemmed from marketing reasons: they were hyped as "exotic fruit" on the Dutch literary scene. The literary merits of the work of these new, ethnicized celebrities often appeared only of secondary importance, after the "fascinating Otherness" of their literature and, even more so, of themselves. Their work was supposed to represent the Dutch world from the critical and refreshing perspective of the outsider. Lisa Kuitert addresses the commercial aspects of "migrants' literature" in her article "Niet zielig, maar leuk. Nederlandse uitgevers van multiculturele literatuur" ("Not pathetic, but nice: Dutch publishers of multicultural literature"). She critically discusses the policy of Dutch publishers in respect to literature by ethnic minority writers and assesses that literary quality indeed appears to have been only of secondary importance after the commercial interest of "exotic-sounding names" ("exotisch klinkende namen").[10]

In this sense the Dutch cultural field eagerly participated in what Graham Huggan in his study *The Postcolonial Exotic* describes as the "alterity industry" that boomed in the 1990s. Huggan argues that this global alterity industry successfully trades literature by the ethnic other as a cultural commodity. This literature is subjected to a "domesticating process through which commodities are taken from the margins and reabsorbed into mainstream culture".[11] Whereas Huggan primarily refers to postcolonial "world literature", literature that travels from one place (often the margin) to another (mostly the West), his argument also holds for the situation within, for instance, the Dutch national space. Literature from the margin, written by ethnic minorities, is labelled "different" and marketed accordingly. On book covers publishers promise access to foreign and exotic worlds, provided by writers who are expected to represent or even incorporate this exoticness themselves. This promise is independent of the theme, language, or content of the literary writing: it is the writer's "other" ethnic identity that guarantees for the work's cultural difference.

[10] Lisa Kuitert, "Niet zielig, maar leuk: Nederlandse uitgevers van multiculturele literatuur", *Literatuur*, VI (1999), 364.
[11] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, New York: Routledge, 2001, 22.

Many of the "allochtoon" writers themselves were not too happy with this alterity industry, despite the fact that it enabled them to publish and provided them with a readership. First of all, they criticized the term "allochtoon" writer for its stigmatizing impact. In response to the question as to whether he could be considered the "allochtoon" of the publishing house, Benali, for instance, replied as follows:

> De indeling allochtoon-autochtoon is onzinnig op literair en menselijk niveau. Ik kan er niets over zeggen zonder dat het lijkt dat ik er met gespeelde onverschilligheid over praat. Echt, het gaat mij om mijn eigen krediet voor het boek, niet om mijn afkomst.[12]

Secondly, writers of migrant backgrounds objected to the ethnicizing and marginalizing effect of the alterity industry: they were grouped together purely on the basis of their different ethnic origin and independent of their writing. Bouazza especially, at that time a young debutant of Moroccan origin, time and again spoke out against his ethnicization and marginalization in the Dutch literary field. In his opinion, Dutch publishers were mainly looking for a model Moroccan, a Moroccan noble savage. He, however, did not fancy this role and vehemently rejected the imposed Moroccan identity. In a context of ethno-marketing and ethnic commodification, Bouazza kept arguing and pleading for his literary acceptance as a Dutch writer.

[12] Benali quoted in Marijke Vlaskamp, "Hier is de model-Marokkaan", *Het Parool*, 5 April 1997. "The categorization allochtoon-autochtoon is nonsensical both on a literary and on a human level. I can't say anything about it that does not seem to be said with feigned indifference. Really, I'm concerned about the credits for my book, not about my origin." Six years later Benali repeats his critique and pleads for a general dismissal of the stigmatizing term: "Het is een inhoudsloos word …. Je moet gewoon iedereen Nederlander noemen, dan ben je van het probleem af" ("It is a word of little substance …. you should just call everyone Dutch, then you get rid of the problem") (Benali quoted in Sietse Meijer, "Je hoorde overal: Oek, Oek, Oek", *Het Parool*, 10 May 2003). In the Mosse lecture of 2002, Bouazza, on the contrary, doubts the transformative impact of exchanging terms when – not without irony – he wonders: "wordt het niet tijd om de mensen te veranderen in plaats van de onschuldige taal geweld aan te doen?" ("isn't it time to change the people instead of doing violence to the innocent language?") (Hafid Bouazza, "Nederland slikt te veel onzin van moslims: Mosse lezing", *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 September 2002).

Bouazza's recurrent objection that he is a Dutch rather than an "allochtoon" writer is well known. In an interview in the Dutch daily *De Volkskrant*, he famously positioned himself as follows:

> Ik zeg altijd: ik ben een Nederlandse schrijver, want ik schrijf in de Nederlandse taal en daarom heb ik dezelfde rechten en plichten als welke andere Nederlandse schrijver ook .... Ik wil best mijn bijdrage leveren aan een multiculturele samenleving, maar alleen doordat wat ik schrijf niveau heeft.[13]

The fact that Bouazza makes the Dutch language into the determining criterion for his Dutch authorship can be regarded as quite typical of the Dutch situation. Both Bouazza and Benali, probably the two best-known writers of migrant backgrounds, are praised for their skilful use of the original Dutch language. Whereas Benali explores the elasticity and the limits of the Dutch language by using a dynamic mix of genres and linguistic repertoires (for example, the combination of children's songs with quasi-philosophical reflections), Bouazza is well-known for his archaic Dutch vocabulary. In reviews of his work, he is often acknowledged as the treasure hunter of the Dutch language: he digs up and refurbishes words that have long been lost and forgotten. In an interview with Marita de Sterck he even describes himself as committed to a "holy battle": "I believe that the Dutch language is the actual protagonist of my book. With my style I try to hold on to the specific identity of the language, to return the Dutch language from the kingdom of the dead, as it were".[14] The experimentation of these two writers with and their innovation of the Dutch language cannot be placed within the realm of creolization or pidginization; also, the idea of textual bilingualism as described by

[13] Bouazza quoted in W. Kuipers, "Ik ben een Nederlandse schrijver", *De Volkskrant*, 1 May 1998: " I always say: I am a Dutch writer, because I write in the Dutch language and for that reason I have the same rights and obligations as any other Dutch writer whatsoever .... I am surely willing to make my contribution to a multicultural society, but only in that what I write has quality."

[14] Bouazza quoted in Marita De Sterck, "Schoonheid en betekenis: Hafid Bouazza en de grenzen van taal en verlangen", *Kultuurleven*, IV (1997), 96: "Ik denk dat het Nederlands de echte hoofdfiguur van mijn boek is. Ik probeer met mijn stijl het eigene van de taal te behouden, als het ware het Nederlands uit het dodenrijk terug te halen". For a more elaborate discussion of Bouazza's figurative language and writing, see the contribution by Henriëtte Louwerse in this volume.

Declerq and Boyden does not apply. On the contrary, the overwhelming Dutchness of their writing confronts and disarms any ethnicized assumptions readers may have about the presumably accented language of "allochtoon" writers.[15]

A third point of resistance to the alterity industry concerned the idea that literature by "allochtoon" writers necessarily reflected on and contributed to the Dutch multicultural society. It seemed as if the theme and purport of their literary writing was predetermined by their migratory backgrounds and the outsider position appointed to them in Dutch society. Besides, they felt as if they were assigned some kind of social responsibility: to foster intercultural understanding and even to improve social integration.

Thus, on several levels the combination of commercial exoticization and a hypercorrect reception of "migrants' literature" had fatal consequences for the writers concerned: their non-Dutch ethnic origin overshadowed the literary quality of their writing. Several indigenous Dutch (and Flemish) writers and critics joined in criticizing the hyped ethnicization of Dutch literature. However, these more settled actors in the literary field tended to disqualify and even dismiss with the new exotic writing altogether – exactly because of its hyped appearance. The literary authority Jeroen Brouwers formulated this critique in his provocative collection of pamphlet- and persiflage-like texts *Feuilletons*. He explicitly attacks Hans Sahar as a "youthful Hague-Moroccan pilferer and giggling gigolo", and describes the publication of Sahar's work as an illustrative example of the commodification of literature. The real target of Brouwers' anger, however, is the publishing houses he accuses of merely thinking in terms of profit: "'Allochtoon literature': that could well become a lucrative Trend … !"[16] A similar attack on publishers' exoticist policies was the fake publication of a collection of short prose by the Moroccan-Dutch writer Yusef el Halal. Soon after its publication the name Yusef el Halal appeared to be the pseudonym of a group of

[15] Although the lack of code-mixing in most popular Dutch multicultural literature strikes the eye, this does not mean that all multicultural literature is written in a standardized Dutch. The work of the Persian-Dutch writer Kader Abdollah is a good example of the alienating as well as innovative use of accented language in literature.

[16] Jeroen Brouwers, *Feuilletons*, Zutendaal: Uitgeverij Noli me tangere, 1996, 64: "jeugdige Haags-Marokkaanse kruimelaar en giegelende gigolo." And "'Allochtone literatuur': dat zou wel eens een lucrative Trend! kunnen worden… !"

ethnic Dutch writers who aimed to unmask the privileging of "exotic" ethnic backgrounds by Dutch publishing houses.[17]

For "allochtoon" writers, the available means of protest and resistance to the ethicized commodification of their writing were rather limited: ethno-marketing simply established opportunities and publicity that they would not have had without the emphasis on their "other" ethnic identity. A practical dilemma, for instance, consisted in either publishing in one of the anthologies of writing by "allochtoon" writers, or not publishing at all. The positioning of Ayfer Ergün, the editor of one of these anthologies, *Het land in mij: Nieuwe verhalen van jonge schrijvers op de grens tussen twee werelden* (*The Country Within Me: New Stories by Young Writers at the Border Between Two Worlds*, 1996), illustrates this dilemma.[18] She strongly opposes the categorization "allochtoon" literature in the preface to the volume:

> In fact the term "allochtoon" literature only says something about the origin of the authors and nothing about the content of their stories. For that reason the authors themselves are not unequivocally pleased with this imposed categorization. They emphasize that they want to be regarded as Dutch writers and that they do not want to be grouped under one label.[19]

[17] For a full discussion of this masquerade as well as its implications, see Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar, "The evaluation and positioning of literary work by authors with a Muslim background", in *The Autonomy of Literature at the Fins de Siècles (1900 and 2000)*, eds Gillis Dorleijn, Ralf Grüttemeier, and Liesbeth Korthals Altes, Leuven: Peeters, 2007, 241-60.

[18] For a more elaborate discussion (and critique) of the "two worlds paradigm", see Leslie A. Adelson, "Against Between: A Manifesto", in *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading*, eds Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi, Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans van Beuningen and NAi Publishers, 2001, 244-56, as well as Jim Jordan, "More Than a Metaphor: the Passing of the Two Worlds Paradigm in German-Language Diasporic Literature", *German Life and Letters*, IV (2006), 488-99.

[19] *Het land in mij: Nieuwe verhalen van jonge schrijvers op de grens tussen twee werelden*, ed. Ayfer Ergün, Amsterdam: Arena, 1996, 8: "Het begrip allochtone literatuur zegt eigenlijk uitsluitend iets over de herkomst van de auteurs en niets over de inhoud van hun verhalen. De auteurs zelf zijn dan ook niet onverdeeld gelukkig met dit hokje waarin ze zichzelf geplaatst zien. Zij benadrukken dat ze beschouwd willen worden als Nederlandse schrijvers en willen niet onder één noemer worden gebracht."

The anthology itself, however, contributes to exactly the categorization that these writers, according to Ergün, oppose. Ergün's preface also seems to communicate a double message: she makes a plea for the acknowledgment of personal and literary diversity among migrant writers, but at the same time she suggests that their literature gives testimony of their experiences as second-generation migrants.

Academic interest, terminology, and categorization

The academic discussion on migration literature also developed quite a bit later in the Netherlands than in other multicultural European countries (for example, Germany, Great Britain, and France).[20] In 1997, Henriëtte Louwerse published the first analysis of the "new phenomenon" that she describes as "The Emergence of Turkish and Moroccan Migrant Writers in the Dutch Literary Landscape" in the article's subtitle.[21] Her article (in the international journal *Dutch Crossing*) was a forerunner in academic circles: despite the persistent public popularity of multicultural literature, this interest did not yet have an academic counterpart. Whenever Dutch multiculturality was addressed as an issue at all, then this attention generally concerned colonial and postcolonial literature. This is, for instance, the case with the volume *Tussenfiguren: Schrijvers tussen de culturen* (*Intermediary Figures: Writing Between the Cultures*) that was edited by Elisabeth Leijnse and Michiel van Kempen and published in 1998. In this volume Dutch literature of migration is strikingly absent among analyses that mostly focus on postcolonial literature. Something similar is true for the literary journal *Armada* that a year later, in 1999, dedicated a special issue to the theme "Migrants" and engaged the same Michiel van Kempen as guest editor. Here, too, it is either Dutch postcolonial literature or foreign migration literature that feature as objects of study. The absence of Dutch literature of migration in this

[20] But earlier than in Flanders and Denmark, as the articles by Dörthe Gaettens and Sarah De Mul in this volume demonstrate. It is hard to explain this discrepancy as it cannot be linked to either a colonial history or the history of labour migration exclusively, as the comparison with a country like Germany makes clear. For a discussion of literature of migration in the German context, see Minnaard, *New Germans, New Dutch*, 59-61.

[21] Henriëtte Louwerse, "The Way to the North: The Emergence of Turkish and Moroccan Migrant Writers in the Dutch Literary Landscape", *Dutch Crossing*, I (1997), 69-88.

special issue on "Migrants" is especially striking given the fact that in March 1996 *Armada* had already featured an issue on the theme "Postcolonial literature". At least the title of the 1999 issue, "Migrants", raises expectations as to a shift of focus from postcoloniality to migration.

The introductory articles to both *Tussenfiguren* and the *Armada* "Migrants" issue, however, offer several points of reference for the reflection on Dutch literature of migration. The question of categorization and the search for an appropriate terminology, for example, are prominent topics of discussion. In *Armada*, van Kempen maintains in his introduction that "Except for their moving house, migrant writers do not have that much in common; the individual imagination wins by far from the shared experience". Nevertheless, he simultaneously assesses that these writers share a particular characteristic: the perspective of the outsider on the dominant Dutch Self. He writes "They screen society in a way that is out of reach of the 'autochthonous' writer", thus suggesting that this outsider position involves a certain inquiring view of Dutch society.[22] Here van Kempen assumes that literature by the ethnic Other offers a particular outsider perspective on dominant society. He argues that the marginalization of these writers provides them with "privileged knowledge": knowledge that is exclusively connected to their subjugated position.

In the introduction of *Tussenfiguren*, editors Leijnse and van Kempen are much less definite (although not less explicit) about the position of the "migrant writer". They argue, as the title of the volume already indicates, that these writers occupy an intermediary position:

> Ze hangen tussen een definitief verlaten verleden en een slecht omlijnde toekomst. Ze omarmen een nieuwe wereld terwijl ze achterom kijken of ze kijken vóóruit terwijl zij die nieuwe wereld van

[22] Michiel van Kempen, "Vindingrijke zwervers: Een woord vooraf", *Armada: Tijdschrift voor wereldliteratuur*, IV (1999), 6: "Behalve hun verhuizing hebben migrantenschrijvers niet zo veel gemeen, de individuele verbeeldingskracht wint het met afstand van de gedeelde ervaring"; and "Ze lichten de maatschappij door op een wijze die buiten het bereik van de 'autochtone' schrijver ligt."

> zich af slaan. Het zijn nestbevuilers, vervellers, kameleons, ze zijn dit allemaal en niets van dit alles helemáál ....[23]

They believe it is impossible to strictly define the position of the migrant writer, as they are figures of what they call the "polyvalent reality" of a globalizing, transforming world.[24] Studying their work requires multiple perspectives.

The journal *Literatuur* was the first to actually discuss Dutch literature of labour migration, which by that time, in 1999, had achieved an amazing popularity. This popularity – and the questioning thereof – is the subject of several of the contributions to the special issue of *Literatuur*: "Literaturen in het Nederlands" ("Literature in Dutch"), co-edited by Odile Heynders and Bert Paasman. In her preface to this issue, Heynders writes:

> Nederland verandert …. De Nederlandse literatuur verandert .... De contouren van één Nederlandse literaire traditie vervagen en tegelijkertijd wordt de canon omvangrijker en veelkleuriger, omdat allochtone auteurs hun eigen plaats verwerven.[25]

She argues that in these times of globalization and migration, "national definitions of literature" no longer apply, and for this reason she chooses to use the term "multicultural literature".

In the introductory opening article of "Literaturen in het Nederlands", Bert Paasman immediately rejects this term again. He proposes the term "ethnic literature" for a very diverse field of literature by writers who share the fact that "that their roots lie in another country with another culture, that they are to a larger or lesser

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[23] *Tussenfiguren: Schrijvers tussen de culturen*, eds Elisabeth Leijnse and Michiel van Kempen, Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1998, 3: "They waver between a definitely left behind past and a badly demarcated future. They embrace a new world while looking back or they are looking forward while they fend off that new world. They are nest-foulers, peelers, chameleons, they are all of this and none of it completely …"

[24] *Ibid*., 5.

[25] Odile Heynders, "Ten geleide", *Literatuur*, VI (1999), 323: "The Netherlands changes …. Dutch literature changes …. The contours of one Dutch literary tradition fade and at the same time the canon becomes larger and more colourful, because "allochtoon" authors obtain their own place."

degree bi-cultural".[26] He adds that "ethnic literature" often shows signs of political engagement, as it is generally written from a position of social marginalization. Its writers by necessity redefine their identities in a process of negotiating both the country and culture of origin, and their new home. Like van Kempen in *Armada*, Paasman connects the minority position of these writers to expectations of a particularly critical view on Dutch society in their literature.[27]

In his contribution "Fataal succes: Over Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs en hun critici" already mentioned at the opening of this article, Ton Anbeek explicitly discusses literature of Moroccan migration and addresses the hype that encompasses its writers. He decisively rejects the label "allochtoon" writers as concealing and homogenizing in favour of the more specific "Moroccan-Dutch writers". Nevertheless, he also adds a word of doubt to this categorization: "to what extent does it actually make sense to speak about Moroccan-Dutch authors as if it concerns a separate group?"[28] Later in the article, Anbeek suggests that the criterion of thematic commonality – "the scenery of the emigrant life" – in respect to the literary work could be a reason to group these writers, but then, "When the scenery of the emigrant life fails, obviously also the ground for the label 'Moroccan-Dutch' falls away".[29] He undermines this non-essentialist strain of thought, but in his final statement he suggests that "migration" might be Moroccan-Dutch writers' most "fruitful theme".

Anbeek further argues that the literature by these writers generally encountered a "politically hypercorrect reception".[30] In their abundant praise for the Moroccan newcomers, reviewers regularly disregarded the sometimes limited literary qualities of the hyped works

[26] Bert Paasman, "Een klein aardrijkje op zichzelf, de multiculturele samenleving en de etnische literatuur", *Literatuur*, VI (1999), 329: "dat hun roots in een ander land met een andere cultuur liggen, dat ze in meer of mindere mate bi-cultureel zijn."

[27] My main objection to Paasman's terminology is that it ignores the fact that indigenous Dutchness constitutes an ethnic category as well. In his use, the term "ethnic" is problematically reserved for otherness. The structural invisibility of whiteness as an ethnic category is critically discussed within Whiteness Studies.

[28] Anbeek, "Fataal succes", 335: "in hoeverre is het eigenlijk zinvol over Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs te praten alsof het om een afzonderlijke groep gaat?"

[29] *Ibid*., 342: "Wanneer de decorstukken van het emigrantenleven ontbreken, valt uiteraard de basis weg voor het etiket 'Marokkaans-Nederlands'."

[30] *Ibid*., 336.

ofWliterature. He assesses that this initial attitude of "condescending benevolence" solely attached to the writers' Moroccan origin changed after a while.[31] Anbeek recapitulates the growing scepticism among reviewers after the literary multiculturality hype in one confrontational question: "What is being praised now, Bouazza's talent, or the fact that he knows more Dutch words than the average native Dutch person?"[32] He assumed that – anno 1999 – the hype had passed its highest peak, not knowing that there was still the "multicultural" National Book Week of 2001 to come.

A national book event: "Writing between two cultures"

The popular National Book Week is an annual event in the Dutch cultural field organized by the Stichting Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse Boek (Collective Propaganda Foundation for the Dutch Book). Every year a central theme is chosen and in 2001, this theme was "Het land van herkomst: Schrijven tussen twee culturen" ("The Country of Origin: Writing between Two Cultures").[33] The Book Week Gift and the Book Week Essay of that year were both written by writers of migrant backgrounds, and an impressive range of publications by Dutch writers of non-Dutch ethnic origin was presented to the reading public.[34] Multiculturality in Dutch letters was

[31] *Ibid*., 342.

[32] *Ibid*., 341: "Wat wordt er nu geprezen, Bouazza's talent of het feit dat hij meer Nederlandse woorden kent dan de gemiddelde autochtoon?" In his writing Bouazza makes use of archaic Dutch terms and expressions that have been broadly forgotten or have become out-dated. See my previous discussion of Bouazza's re-discovery or even re-invention of the Dutch language as well as Louwerse's contribution to this volume.

[33] The Dutch National Book Week is comparable to the German "Buchmesse" or the French "Le Salon du Livre" in terms of media attention. The 2001 title is again a reference to the Dutch author E. du Perron: *Het land van herkomst* (*The Country of Origin*) is the title of a canonized work of his from 1935.

[34] Every year the CPNB foundation invites two Dutch authors to write the Book Week gift and the Book Week essay. The Book Week gift of 2001, *Woede* (*Anger*), was an exception insofar that a foreign migrant wrote it: Salman Rushdie. It is not surprising that this unexpected choice against an established tradition caused quite some uproar, especially among Dutch writers of migrant backgrounds. The choice of Rushdie seemed to suggest that either there were no Dutch migrant writers available, which appears very unlikely given the rise in migrant writing that I have already described, or that the quality of this Dutch-language writing did not meet the quality standards of the CPNB foundation.

talk of the town for ten days in a row (a long week), and the "migrant writer" featured in numerous events and newspaper publications. This time, however, the overwhelming media attention was legitimate: in its capacity as the commercial peak of the book sellers' year, the Book Week allows for an overdose of attention (and sales) concerning whatever is related to that year's theme.

One example of the 2001 Book Week's ethno-marketing is the publication of a revised version of the *Het land in mij*. This story-collection was now reprinted, in strongly reduced form but with the same title, as a small five-guilder gift book for the "BGN-booksellers". Instead of twelve stories, the reprint contained only five stories, of which two were new. Bouazza exchanged his contribution for another and the popular Abdelkader Benali now joined the happy few. The preface by editor Ergün was replaced by a preface by the much better-known writer Naima El Bezaz. Its message, however, remained very much the same. In an autobiographical mode, El Bezaz relates about her successful transformation from small girl of Moroccan migrant background, without any fluency in the Dutch language at the moment when she started elementary school, to a recognized author in this same Dutch language. Her critical assessment of this process, however, very much resonates with Ergün's 1996 complaint of ethnicization:

> Al snel realiseerde ik me dat alle aandacht niet alleen met mijn schrijftalent te maken had, maar vooral met mijn achtergrond. Marokkaanse en tweede generatie, daar ging het om in interviews. Dat was de reden van de plotselinge hype.[35]

Less a complaint than an eloquent cuff on the ear was brought forward by Bouazza, who had been asked, partly by virtue of his hyphenated identity, to write the Book Week Essay of that year. In this essay, entitled *Een beer in bontjas* (*A Bear in a Fur Coat*, 2001), Bouazza confronts the dominant – ethnicizing and exoticizing – reception of "migrants' literature" in a forcefully ironic way. His

[35] *Het land in mij*, ed. Naima El Bezaz, Amsterdam: Arena, 2001, 11: " Soon I realized that all the attention did not so much concern my talent for writing, but rather my personal background. Moroccan and second generation, that was what the interviews were about. This was the ground for the sudden hype."

essay opens with the retelling of a fable about the titular bear in a fur coat. The first-person author-narrator explains the symbolic meaning of this fable:

> Wat het verhaal zo mooi duidelijk maakt, is dat identiteit geen kwestie van keuze is maar van overheersing. Als ik de meeste critici mag geloven, dan ben ik een Marokkaanse schrijver. Maar ik geloof de meeste critici niet.[36]

Although the author-narrator here immediately positions himself in opposition to the common opinion that defines his authorship as Moroccan, he nevertheless continues with an elaboration on his biographical background in order to satisfy the exoticist desires of his readership. However, the poetical reflections he adds to this quasi-biographical story give the essay its oppositional impact. In a strongly ironic and at times sceptical mode, he argues against too strong beliefs in the social referentiality of literature:

> Achter elke palmboom in hun werk vermoedt men wel een oase van heimwee, elk tapijt wordt ervan verdacht een vliegend vehikel te zijn. En wanneer een schrijver zijn verhaal elders situeert, dan wordt dat gezien als een krampachtige afwijking van de norm en zal er nog krampachtiger gezocht worden naar exotische sporen in deze nieuwe, maar voor de auteur vertrouwde omgeving (Vind Wat De Veertig Rovers Hebben Verborgen) – en uiteraard worden die gevonden, waarbij de krampachtigheid ondertussen in verstijving is overgegaan, een ware rigor mortis. [37]

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[36] Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas*, Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2001, 9: " What the story clarifies in such a beautiful way is that identity is not a question of choice but of dominance. According to the opinion of most critics I am a Moroccan writer. But I do not believe most critics." This quote is taken from the original 2001 edition of *Een beer in bontjas*. In 2004, the publishing house Prometheus published a revised and extended edition of the essay.

[37] *Ibid*., 32-33: "An oasis of homesickness is presumed to be behind every palm tree in their work, every carpet is suspected of being a flying vehicle. And when a writer situates his story somewhere else, then this is seen as a spastic deviation of the norm and people will search even more spastically for exotic traces in this new, but for the author familiar, surroundings (Find What The Forty Robbers Have Hidden) – and of course these are found, and in the meantime the spasm has changed into rigidity, a true rigor mortis."

In this passage, Bouazza addresses the tendency to substitute the general for the particular in a way that is predetermined by an ethnicizing interpretive frame. Readings within this frame take and mistake any sign in the literary text for a reference to an exotic world of origin. He objects that "Cultural identification is not necessarily the motivation for writers of this kind. At least in the best possible situation it is not."[38]

Whereas Bouazza's passionate "plea for the imagination" and against the biographical fallacy of migrant literature clearly testifies to his irritation about the Dutch literary world, another narrative essay by a writer of migrant background published on the occasion of the National Book Week takes a much more positive stance in respect to the Dutch host country. The import of Fouad Laroui's *Vreemdeling: aangenaam* (*Stranger: Pleasure*, 2001) diverges considerably from that of Bouazza's essay in that it propagates the Netherlands as a country that allows people, including strangers, to be themselves.[39] Laroui develops the argument that being a stranger does not necessarily have to be a tragic experience: "all depends on … what kind of stranger one is forced to be."[40] In the fictionalized story of a search for a place where it is pleasant to be strange, Laroui distinguishes five possible varieties of being strange and connects each of these to a particular geographical space. One of the varieties is being strange in Amsterdam: an experience he describes as very pleasant. He contends that thanks to the once famous Dutch tolerance and liberal attitude, the lack of nationalism – "They don't want to impose their 'culture' to anybody, they almost apologize that they have one" – and the open debate in which criticism is also allowed, it is relatively easy for a stranger to feel at home among the Dutch.[41]

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[38] *Ibid*.: "Culturele identificatie hoeft niet de drijfveer te zijn voor dergelijke schrijvers. In het gunstigste geval niet."

[39] The Dutch title of the essay contains a pun: "aangenaam" is not only a term one uses at the first introduction to someone, but as an adjective it also, literally, means "pleasant". In the context of the essay the use of the term suggests that being a stranger is pleasant.

[40] Fouad Laroui, *Vreemdeling: aangenaam*, Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 2001, 4: "Alles hangt af van … wat voor soort vreemdeling je gedwongen wordt te zijn."

[41] *Ibid*., 38: "Hun 'culture' willen ze aan niemand opdringen, ze verontschuldigen zich bijna dat ze er een hebben."

Although the two positions differ in their analysis and estimation of the contemporary Dutch situation, they are univocal in their plea for creative freedom and for the liberty to be who you want to be. Both narrative essays argue in favour of self-determination and the right to be different. And both essays – each in its own way – can be considered final symptoms of and contributions to the heightened positively-tuned discursivity of multiculturality in Dutch letters.

After the extreme visibility effected by the book week, the public interest in "multicultural literature" waned. The reader was overfed with the theme, as always after a Book Week, but also rather in general the positive interest in multiculturality evaporated. Already in the year previous to the "multicultural" Book Week the public attitude towards Dutch multiculturality had changed dramatically: during the "multicultural drama debate" public opinion shifted from optimistic ideas of a successful and tolerant multicultural future to a more sceptical if not downright negative idea of multicultural (dis)illusion and defeat.[42] Half a year after the celebratory multicultural Book Week the terrorist attacks of 9/11 caused a further hardening and polarization of Dutch public discourse. The murder of the populist-right politician Pim Fortuyn (by an animal-rights activist) a year later, in May 2002, brought about a national earthquake. The Netherlands ended up in a state of panic and of profound political and multicultural mistrust. The idea of tolerance as a Dutch virtue was replaced by the idea of tolerance as a naïve form of blindness. A rhetoric of exclusion on ethnic and religious grounds replaced the socio-political project of integration into Dutch society while "retaining their own identity" ("met behoud van eigen identiteit").[43]

[42] The term "multicultural drama debate" derives from the article of that name the Dutch publicist Paul Scheffer published in the *NRC Handelsblad* on 29 January 2000. The provocative title of the by-now notorious article immediately set the terms of the debate: multiculturality and drama were grouped in one semantic field. About two weeks later, on 17 February 2000, the influential intellectual Paul Schnabel published an article in another well-respected Dutch newspaper, *De Volkskrant*, in which he took sides with Scheffer and underlined his warning message. The headline of this article was cast in a similar dramatic vein: "The multicultural society is an illusion." References to failure, drama, and alarm came to determine the national "multicultural drama debate" that evolved after these publications (Paul Schnabel, "De multiculturele samenleving is een illusie", *De Volkskrant*, 17 February 2000).

[43] The roots of the relatively liberal Dutch policy on multiculturality (until that time) can be traced back to 1983. In this year the Dutch Parliament agreed on an inclusive

Seen in this context the "multicultural" Book Week very much figured as the apotheotic *grande finale* of the extraordinary public interest in writing by the ethnic Other. After the Book Week the marked visibility and overwhelming celebration of Dutch multiculturality in Dutch letters was over. In the preface added to the 2001 reprint of the volume *Tussenfiguren*, Gert Oostindie suggests this decline of interest in the literary field is, in the end, when it comes to literary quality and serious attention, a good thing. He believes the theme of "writing between the cultures" had almost become too popular. Now, he suggests, is the time and need to scrutinize critically the various cultural transformations in Dutch society that processes of migration and globalization have brought about, without either hyping or marginalizing these. This is also the reason Oostindie emphasizes the very significant difference, in his eyes, between the subtitle of the volume – "writing between the cultures" – and the Book Week theme – "writing between two cultures". He claims that only the first takes the multiple transformations of several involved cultures into account.[44]

After the Book Week: politicization and normalization

After the Book Week, several of the hyped "ethnic other" writers disappeared silently from the literary scene, while others – Abdelkader Benali, Hafid Bouazza, Naima El Bezaz, Fouad Laroui, and Mustafa Stitou, all of Moroccan origin – continued writing and managed to acquire a certain status as Dutch writers in the course of the following years.[45] The fact that renowned literary publishing houses kept on

"minorities policy" known as the *minderhedennota* that aimed to improve the legal status of ethnic minorities, to diminish their social and economic disadvantage, to fight discrimination and prejudice, and to develop a tolerant multicultural society. A central characteristic of this policy was the idea that ethnic minorities could and should integrate into Dutch society while "retaining their own identity" ("met behoud van eigen identiteit").

[44] Gert Oostindie, "Woord vooraf. Verbannen in de letteren", in *Tussenfiguren. Schrijvers tussen de culturen*, no pagination.

[45] The dominance of writers of Moroccan background within the literary field of that time is striking. As a group, Moroccan-Dutch writers outnumber writers of other migrant backgrounds by far. Laroui and Nijborg propose a combined institutional and linguistic explanation for this Moroccan-Dutch dominance in their contribution to this volume. For a discussion of Dutchophone literature by writers of Turkish origin, see

publishing their titles and that their work was awarded several important general literary prizes can be interpreted as indications of their advancing canonization. This does not mean that ethnicity as an issue of discussion completely disappeared, as the uproar about the award of the important Libris Literature Prize to Benali's novel *De langverwachte* (*The Long-awaited*, 2002) in 2003 made clear. Probably more than any other hyphenated writer, Benali has had to defend himself against insinuations of political correctness as determinant criterion in the positive reception of his work. This discussion already started when his debut novel *Bruiloft aan zee* (*Wedding at the Sea*, 1996) was nominated for this same Libris Literature Prize in 1997 and reached a climax after Benali's unexpected victory in 2003. Several critics publicly wondered about the jury's motives for the selection of Benali's work.[46] They suggested that the selection of "the premature book of an alibi-Abdelkader" had been a socio-political decision: an instance of political correctness in a multicultural society under debate.[47]

It is not unthinkable that this critique is partly connected to Benali's outspoken public positioning in the polarized discourse on Dutch multiculturality of that time. Although, like Bouazza, Benali

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Johan Soenen, "Turkse migrantenauteurs in Nederland en Vlaanderen", *Kunsttijdschrift Vlaanderen*, LVIII (2009), 270-75.

[46] See Max Pam, "Bergen in het vlakke land", *HP/De Tijd*, 25 February 2005; Fleur Speet, "Het wringt en wurgt en dat is zoned", *Het Financieel Dagblad*, 10 May 2003; Bart Vanegeren, "Benali: Alibi-Abdelkader", *Humo*, 20 May 2003.

[47] Vanegeren, "Benali: Alibi-Abdelkader": "het premature boek van een alibi-Abdelkader." The voices in defence of Benali's selection did not always support Benali's literary case. In *De Volkskrant* the successful and respected Persian-Dutch writer Kader Abdolah enthusiastically claimed the prize as an award for all "allochtoons". He argued that Benali's selection implied a general acknowledgement of their presence in Dutch culture. Benali himself responded annoyed to this claim and vehemently resisted its import. Abdolah's statement seemed to confirm the idea that, more than the literary quality of his novel, Benali's other ethnic origin had determined his selection. In an interview with Arjan Peters, Benali rejected Abdolah's assumption by stating that: "Een jury bekroont het beste boek, niet het boek van een prijzenswaardige allochtoon. Mocht die omstandigheid een overweging zijn geweest, dan ben ik alsnog bereid de prijs, inclusief het geld, direct in te leveren" ("A jury awards the best book, not the book of a commendable "allochtoon". If that condition has been deliberate, then I'm still ready to immediately return the prize, the money inclusive"). (Benali quoted in Arjan Peters, "Ik zeg liever op papier dat man en vrouw gelijk zijn: Zoiets roepen in een moskee werkt niet", *De Morgen*, 28 January 2004.)

has also always fought against his marginalization as a "Moroccan migrant writer" in the literary field, he nevertheless maintains that his position of influence as a writer involves a certain responsibility. Initially he located this responsibility in his literary work that offers comments and reflections on socio-political issues in a specifically literary form. However, at a certain point Benali felt that he could not justify this position outside of the hardening public discourse anymore. His literary interventions seemed too marginal in a time in which the Dutch multicultural society was under vehement attack and Benali decided to intervene more directly by way of essayistic contributions to national newspapers and magazines.[48] In this new role, Benali critically strove for mutual understanding and commonality in times of multicultural tension.

Benali was not the only writer of migrant background who felt the urge to intervene into the changed public discourse and to vent publicly their worries about the new socio-political situation. Whereas Benali opted for a role as committed Moroccan-Dutch intermediary in the service of intercultural harmony, Bouazza, however, took an almost contrary position. He claimed that his decision to intervene in the debate resulted from the fact that he could no longer accept what he saw as Dutch blindness to Islamic fundamentalism: "Tolerance has turned into stupidity."[49] He wanted to warn the naïve Dutch population against the extremist ideas among a group of Muslim men that threatened the principle of freedom for all. In a combative mode Bouazza stated that he wants to "stand up for the Netherlands".[50]

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[48] One of Benali's interventions is the article "Waarom zwijgen de Nederlandse schrijvers?" ("Why Do Dutch Writers Keep Silent?", *Vrij Nederland*, 14 September 2002, 76 ff.). In this article, Benali reformulates his personal poetics into a general demand for all Dutch writers and propagates the assumption of a responsible position as an obligation for any writer. He assesses an identity crisis in the Netherlands brought about by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and by the "phenomenon Fortuyn". Benali blames Dutch writers for their indifference towards the question of "who are we?", and he wonders about the fact that Dutch writers do not take this identity crisis as an opportunity to re-imagine Dutch national identity. His intervention resulted in an interesting polemic when three "ethnic Dutch" writers chose to respond.

[49] Bouazza quoted in Pieter Webeling, "Hafid Bouazza: 'Ik leef met grote gulzigheid: En ik flirt met de dood'", *Rails* (2004), 18: "Tolerantie is verworden tot domheid."

[50] *Ibid*.: "opkomen voor Nederland."

It is interesting that both writers, despite their opposite opinions, took a pertinent position in the debate in order to rescue cherished characteristics and estimated achievements of their Dutch society.[51] Both writers performed as Dutch intellectuals who are concerned about the state of their country. As writers, as Dutch writers, they possessed the required cultural capital to be acknowledged by the public as important and legitimate voices within the nationwide debate. At the same time, they both complied with the image of the fully integrated migrant, the "other" that – supposedly – was still welcome in Dutch society. They performed as liberal, emancipated, and secular thinkers, who, moreover, had mastered the Dutch language perfectly. In this sense, they were and are far-removed from the current Dutch "other", stereotypically imagined as a violently anti-democratic Islamist.

This assessment of the increased acceptance of writers of migrant background as Dutch intellectuals corresponds to the findings of recent quantitative research on the significance of ethnicity in literary reviews in the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States. The comparative study concludes – on the basis of the evaluation of 127 reviews – that "Between 1995 and 2009 the use of ethnic minority classifications in reviews of Moroccan-Dutch writers has diminished significantly, irrespective of the number of book publications of these writers".[52] In their article "Assimilation into the literary mainstream?", the researchers Pauwke Berkers, Susanne Janssen, and Marc Verboord describe how in the late 1990s, several writers of a predominantly Moroccan migrant background appeared in the literary field at roughly

[51] Their difference of opinion can in fact be considered as a positive sign in respect to the integration of writers of "other" ethnic background into the mainstream: it testifies of dissonance and diversity within the minority group and thus works to disable homogenizing ethnic group-identifications.

[52] Pauwke Berkers, Susanne Janssen, and Marc Verboord, "Assimilatie in de literaire mainstream: Etnische grenzen in dagbladrecensies van etnische minderheidsauteurs in de Verenigde Staten, Nederland en Duitsland", *Mens en Maatschappij*, LXXXV (2010), 305: "Het gebruik van etnische minderheidslabels in de recensies van Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs neemt tussen 1995 en 2009 significant af, los van het aantal boekpublicaties dat deze auteurs op hun naam hebben staan." The researchers distinguish between the boundary crossing of individual writers throughout their career as a traditional form of assimilation and boundary shifting as a more generally incisive process in which the ethnic boundary itself is negotiated and re-established.

the same time. At that time, these writers were strongly ethnicized and hardly ever considered as members of the literary mainstream. Almost fifteen years later the situation appears to have changed: Berkers, Janssen, and Verboord conclude that professional readers have got used to writers of minority background.[53]

Two recent occurrences seem to support this positive conclusion. At the beginning of 2008 the poet Ramsey Nasr, born in the Netherlands and of mixed Dutch-Palestinian descent, was elected by the Dutch public as "dichter des vaderlands" ("poet of the fatherland"), Dutch National Poet, for a term of four years. The fact that his name sounds exotic to traditional Dutch ears was apparently no obstacle to his election for this representative function. One year later, in 2009, Benali was awarded the twentieth E. du Perron Prize for his novel *De stem van mijn moeder* (*My Mother's Voice*, 2009). This occasion might not strike one as a particular sign of integration into the mainstream, especially since, as I discussed earlier, this prize has an explicitly multicultural focus. However, the remarkable aspect lies in the fact that in the account of this decision, the jury contended that this novel "proves that we are past the 'migrant novel' now. With this book [Benali] did not write a novel of variegated Netherlands, but a variegated Dutch novel."[54]

Whether these two occurrences can really be interpreted as indicative of the full integration of writers of migrant background and

[53] Despite this positive development, the academic interest in literature by writers of migrant background still remains rather limited. Aside from one study by Henriëtte Louwerse (*Homeless Entertainment: On Hafid Bouazza's Literary Writing*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007) and another by Minnaard (*New Germans, New Dutch*), there is little proof of a proportionate representation of literature by writers of migrant backgrounds in academic research of Dutch literature. Also, in volumes on postcolonial Dutch literature, literature of migration generally remains absent. This can be, but is not necessarily linked to a conceptual distinction between literature of migration and postcolonial literature, as the example of the volume *Wandelaar onder de palmen: Opstellen over koloniale en postkoloniale literatuur en cultuur*, Leiden: KITLV Uitgeverij, 2004, eds Michiel van Kempen, Piet Verkruijsse, and Adrienne Zuiderweg, shows. Only one of the volume's 46 contributions deals with literature of migration.

[54] *Jury report E. Du Perronprijs 2009*: "aantoont dat we de "migranten roman" voorbij zijn. Met dit boek heeft [Benali] niet een roman van een rijk geschakeerd Nederland geschreven, maar een rijk geschakeerde Nederlandse roman" (http://www.uvt.nl/faculteiten/fgw/dtc/duperronprijs/juryrapport/; accessed 1 October 2010).

their literary work into the literary mainstream, and whether the research mentioned earlier provides solid ground for optimism, still remains to be seen. History teaches us that ethnicity as a marker of difference often regains significance in times of social insecurity and economical crisis. The stunning rise to political power of Geert Wilders' populist anti-Islam party PVV in the 2010 Elections might well indicate that such times are ahead of us.[55] It seems, however, that ethnicity is no longer destined to play only a passive role in processes of Othering. Writers of non-Dutch ethnic origin might well be able to intervene in future debates in their capacity as Dutch writers of non-Dutch ethnic origin. In this case, ethnic positioning would rather function as an option than as an attribution: a valuable sign of difference from the ethnicization of the late 1990s.

[55] In the current discourse on Dutch multiculturality religion seems to have taken the position of ethnicity as the most influential marker of difference.