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# Oscillating between Margin and Centre: Dutch Literature of Migration

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## Abstract

In the Netherlands, immigrant and ethnic-minority writing generally falls into three overlapping categories: postcolonial literature, Indies writing and what is nowadays mostly called migration literature – the work by writers whose presence in the Netherlands is somehow connected to the labour migration of the 1960s. This contribution describes the appearance of this literature, its initial exoticisation and the celebration of its (and its writers') supposed 'otherness', the growth of a more serious interest in this work within the mainstream literary field as well as within academic circles and, finally, the acceptance of migrant and ethnic-minority writing, on the basis of its literary merits, as Dutch literature.

## Introduction

In the Netherlands, migrant and ethnic-minority writing generally falls into three overlapping categories: postcolonial literature, Indies writing and what is nowadays mostly called migration literature – the work by writers whose presence in the Netherlands is somehow connected to the labour migration of the 1960s. What is specific for the Dutch context is that literature by writers from the former Dutch colonies is not considered as migrant writing (as these authors do not count as immigrants) but as a specific category of Dutch literature by ethnic-minority writers.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Dutchophone literature by writers of Surinamese or Antillean background, whether they have moved to the Netherlands or whether they are located in the former colonial territories,<sup>2</sup> is mostly

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1 It is important to mention here that, except for Surinam, the former Dutch territories in the Caribbean are still part of the Dutch Kingdom. Inhabitants of these overseas parts of the Dutch Kingdom are allowed to relocate to the Netherlands without this being considered migration.

2 Many writers of, especially, Surinamese background have lived and published both in Surinam and the Netherlands interchangeably (e.g. Edgar Cairo, Astrid Roemer). Explanations

discussed as postcolonial Dutch literature, work by writers with a background in the former Dutch East Indies is categorised as 'Indies literature', a distinctive category within Dutch literature that is not so much ethnically defined (as it consists of repatriate writers of Dutch-Dutch, mixed and Moluccan descent) but, rather, determined on the basis of the author's personal link to the former Dutch East Indies.<sup>3</sup> Only since the late 1990s – and very much in connection with a broader interest in and acknowledgement of cultural diversity within Dutch society – has cultural and ethnic diversity within Dutch letters become a topic of mainstream public and academic discussion.

Whereas ethnic-minority writing, in the shape of colonial and postcolonial literature, has a history that dates back to colonial times, it is, according to Dutch terminology, only in the 1980s that the first 'migrant writers' (Papatya Nalbantoglu, Halil Gür) entered the Dutch literary field – writing initially in their native language, their texts then being translated into Dutch for publication. This belated appearance is striking: the first 'migrant texts' appeared as much as three decennia after the first migrant workers settled in the Netherlands and more than ten years after the official ban that terminated foreign recruitment.<sup>4</sup> The liberal Dutch policy towards immigration and integration in the 1980s might help to explain this belated appearance (see Böcker and Groenendijk 2004; Minnaard 2008: 15–50). In 1983 the Dutch government agreed on an inclusive Minorities Policy (*Minderhedenbeleid*) that aimed to improve the legal, economic and social status of ethnic minorities (whether of postcolonial, migrant or refugee background) and to develop a tolerant multicultural society. A central characteristic of this policy was the idea that ethnic minorities could and should integrate best into Dutch society when they 'retained their own identity' (*met behoud van eigen identiteit*). In practice this policy enabled and even encouraged the various minorities to foster their 'own language and culture', as it was thought that maintaining and promoting a

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are the shifting political and economical stability in Surinam before and after independence, as well as the limited possibilities for publishing in Surinam.

- 3 It is important to realise the very different histories of decolonisation in the East and the West. The postcolonial immigrants from the East were mainly refugees: repatriates of Dutch and mixed origin as well as persons associated with the Dutch colonisers and who were now fleeing the new, independent Indonesian rule. Most of the immigrants from the Dutch colonial territories in the West left their country – in the case of Surinam, the majority before independence – to escape political instability and to pursue better educational and economical opportunities.
- 4 Organised labour migration to the Netherlands started in the early 1960s with several bilateral agreements with countries such as Spain, Turkey and Morocco. The 1973 oil crisis brought about the official termination of the phenomenon.

self-confident ethnic identity would, in the end, also further processes of emancipation and integration (see Koopmans and Statham 2001). However, this government support for cultural activities within ethnic groups had striking consequences: retrospectively it appears that, well into the 1990s, mainstream Dutch culture had remained largely unaffected by the growing cultural diversity among the Netherlands' population.<sup>5</sup>

Another important distinction between postcolonial-minority writers and migrant writers concerns language. The first group could choose to use the (colonial) Dutch language for literary works which, in their turn, were reviewed and discussed within a rather separate and specialised postcolonial or Indies frame of reference. Non-Dutch-speaking minorities, however, such as labour migrants from Morocco and Turkey, were not stimulated (or forced) to acquire the Dutch language. Nor were they, as happened in several other European countries, explicitly invited to contribute to the field of Dutchophone literature. It seems that the striking absence of first-generation migrant writing from the Dutch literary field is a direct consequence of the above-mentioned early acknowledgement of cultural pluralism.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1990s migration finally became a topic of interest in the mainstream literary and scholarly fields. As from 1994, a number of writers of labour migration background – mostly the so-called one-and-a-half (those who migrated to the Netherlands before the age of 13) or second generation – as well as some with refugee backgrounds entered Dutch letters. At that time several publishers developed a strong (commercial) interest in the work of migrant and other minority writers; the public media also now rather suddenly embraced the 'exotic' writers in the Dutch literary field. Postcolonial writers, too, although strictly speaking not newcomers to Dutch literature, profited (in terms of media and readers' attention) from this sudden interest in topics such as migration, ethnic diversity and the intercultural encounter. They merged, together with the migrant and refugee writers, into one container category

5 See Christine Delhay (2008) for a discussion of migrant contributions to the fields of visual arts and theatre in the Netherlands. She also points to the impact of the 1980s' cultural 'target-groups' policy on the artistic practices of migrants and ethnic minorities and argues that this policy 'unwittingly promoted cultural segregation' (2008: 1311). As in the literary field, artists of migrant background were relegated to their 'own' ethnic margins rather than admitted to the cultural mainstream (see also Hoving and Mesters 2001).

6 More-general hindrances that might have kept labour migrants from writing and publishing in Dutch, aside from the problem of language, are factors as diverse as a lack of time, energy and education among the workers, very limited opportunities for publication, and the absence of any institutional support for migrant writing *in Dutch* (see Minnaard 2011 for a comparison of the position of first-generation migrant writing in the Netherlands and Germany).

labelled *allochtoon*<sup>7</sup> or cultural 'other'. The particular prominence of writers of Moroccan background in what might be called the Dutch 'spectacle of the other' is striking: Mustafa Stitou, Hafid Bouazza and Abdelkader Benali are just three of the Moroccan-Dutch writers dominating the literary stage (see the next section for a possible explanation of this strong Moroccan presence). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the mediatised obsession with the 'exotic' identities of these writers had mostly died away, and the central focus of attention is now (disputably) directed at the (aesthetic) quality of the literary works again.

Research on work by writers of migrant background was also first developed in the 1990s, more or less parallel to the increasing presence and visibility of these writers in the literary field. What is striking, however, is that the earliest publications on Dutch migration literature were all produced at universities abroad.

### Historical Background and Development of the Field

In the Dutch scholarly field, postwar migration to the Netherlands is roughly divided into three more or less distinctive categories according to the particular kind of newcomer: migrants from the (former) Dutch colonies, labour migrants and, as a third category, refugees from various regions of crisis across the world.<sup>8</sup>

7 'Allochtoon' as opposed to 'autochtoon', from the Greek roots *allos* (other), *authos* (same) and *chtoon* (soil), is the official terminology in the Netherlands for Dutch citizens of migrant background. According to the government's Central Office for Statistics (*Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*) or CBS, an *allochtoon* is a person of whom at least one parent was born abroad. The CBS distinguishes between first-generation *allochtonen* who were born abroad and second-generation *allochtonen* who were born in the Netherlands. Besides which, the CBS makes a distinction between Western and non-Western *allochtoon* on the basis of a long list of 'non-Western' countries. As Anita Böcker and Kees Groenendijk demonstrate, this terminology is not without controversy, as it often works to stigmatise non-indigenous Dutch as 'other' (2004: 306–307). Although the term is still officially in use, it has lost its dominance as an indicator of ethnic difference in Dutch public discourse.

8 This tripartite division is very much the outcome of a scholarly debate that was largely instigated by requests from organisations representing the various minority groups in the Netherlands. These groups felt that they were too often thrown into one basket, that of the '*allochtonen*', while their specific histories of migration as well as their historical relation to Dutch society and culture differed considerably (see Botman *et al.* 2001; Kohlmann 1997). For information on migration to the Netherlands see, for example, Lucassen and Penninx (1985),

The first group of postwar migrants arrived in the Netherlands around the time of Indonesia's Declaration of Independence on 17 August 1945 (though the Netherlands did not recognise Indonesian sovereignty until 1949) and consisted of so-called repatriates – of whom many were of mixed Indonesian-Dutch descent – and of Moluccans. A second wave of (post)colonial migration occurred in the 1970s and was related to Surinamese independence (1975), when over a third of Surinam's population left the country. Another group came from the so-called 'Dutch Antilles', six Caribbean islands that are still – as independent countries or as municipalities – part of the Dutch Kingdom. The majority of these newcomers possessed Dutch citizenship and were already familiar with the Dutch language.

The second category of newcomers concerns labour migrants (initially called guestworkers).<sup>9</sup> As in several other European countries, the Dutch government started the institutionalised recruitment of large numbers of foreign workers from Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain and Greece in the late 1950s in order to meet the demands of the expanding postwar economy. Subsequently, unskilled foreign workers were also recruited from Turkey and Morocco.<sup>10</sup> After the ban on foreign recruitment in 1973, many labour migrants, together with their families, settled in the Netherlands more permanently.

The third category of postwar migrants to the Netherlands is refugees and asylum-seekers: in the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, a considerable number of persons fleeing political or economic instability, persecution and violence in countries as varied as Iran, Somalia and the (former) Yugoslavia requested asylum in the Netherlands. Whereas refugees were initially only admitted on a temporary basis, in the course of time it turned out that many of them would settle in the Netherlands more permanently – out of choice or out of necessity. Admittance policies and terms of residence continue to be contested topics of politics and debate.

As I mentioned in the introduction, traces of this tripartite categorisation can be detected in the literary field as well. Indies and postcolonial Dutch literature by ethnic-minority writers of Surinamese or Caribbean background are

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Lucassen and Lucassen (2011) or the website on five centuries of migration to the Netherlands by CGM, the Centre for the History of Migrants: <http://www.vijfeeuwenmigratie.nl/>.

9 The obscuring labels 'guest labour' and 'guestworkers' have been vehemently discussed in various international contexts, including the Dutch. In the Netherlands the idea of impermanence, suggested by the term, distinguished labour migrants from the first category of (post)colonial migrants.

10 Differences in language, religion (Islam) and appearance played an important role in the public experience of the influx of labour migrants and in the perception of these migrants' Otherness.

traditionally considered separate from writing by migrants from countries that do not share a colonial history with the Netherlands. The first two categories are closely connected to colonial traditions of writing and, in various ways, predate postwar decolonisation and independence. This is not the case for what, in the Dutch context, is labelled 'migrant writing';<sup>11</sup> only in 1977 did the Tropenmuseum (Ethnographic Museum, Amsterdam) publish the children's book *Murat, kind van een 'gastarbeider'* (Murat, Child of a 'Guestworker') by Papatya Nalbantoglu, a female writer of Turkish origin.<sup>12</sup> This publication primarily served informative and educational purposes in relation to migration; this becomes clear not only from the work itself – which offers insight in the trials and tribulations of a Turkish guestworker and his family – but also from the fact that the text was published by NGOs rather than by a publishing house.<sup>13</sup>

When we focus on literature for an adult readership, Gür's *Gekke Mustafa*, published in 1984, can be regarded as the first literary text written by a migrant in the Dutch context. This story-collection, originally written in Turkish and translated into Dutch under supervision of the author, was published by De Geus, a socially committed publishing house specialised in so-called world literature which actively strived to further cross-cultural and gender diversity in the supply of Dutch bookshops.<sup>14</sup> Together with its successor, *De hemel bleek grauw* (Heaven Appeared Grey), published in 1988, it can be seen as the

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- 11 My use of inverted commas here and elsewhere indicates the fact that many of the writers whose work is labelled by the term 'migrant writing' are not migrants *sensu strictu*. Many have protested fiercely against the denominator (see, for example, Bouazza 2001) and now, partly as a result of this protest, the term 'migrant writing' is no longer commonly used in the Dutch context.
- 12 That this work is practically absent from any literary history, including overviews of 'migrant literature', can be explained by the persistently strict boundary between children's and adult literature as well as by the fact that the work was printed in very small editions by fringe publishers. The scholar Johan Soenen (2009), who gives Nalbantoglu the credit for being the first Turkish migrant writer in the Netherlands, is an exception in this respect.
- 13 Nalbantoglu's *Murat* was reprinted twice. In 1978 the 'Nederlands Centrum Buitenlanders NCB' (Dutch Centre for Foreigners) reprinted the 1977 version of *Murat*. In 1983 the Foundation Sjaloom published both a revised and expanded edition of the original Dutch text, and a Turkish translation. The NCB organises educational activities to support the integration of newcomers into Dutch society. The Foundation Sjaloom no longer exist.
- 14 Most of the publications published by De Geus at that time were works of 'world literature', often also called 'third-world literature', in Dutch translation. For a critical exploration of the concept of 'world literature' see Damrosch (2003). See [www.degeus.nl](http://www.degeus.nl) for information about the publisher's history and policy and for an interview with Eric Visser and Annemie Jans, the founders of the publishing house, about their motivations.

exception within the Dutch literary field of the 1980s. This exceptionality is underlined by the fact that, at De Geus, Gür's work was positioned within an international rather than a national literary context and appeared alongside translations of literature by writers of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds such as Andreï Makine, Maya Angelou, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Patrick Chamoiseau, Ha Jin and Assia Djebar. This international positioning did not mean that Gür's debut received no appreciation within the Dutch literary field. On the contrary, in 1986 Halil Gür's *Gekke Mustafa* was the first prize-winner of the E. du Perron Prize.

The E. du Perron Prize is one of the earliest and still most important initiatives in the Dutch literary field to further and award cultural contributions – in the broadest sense of the term – to Dutch multicultural society. The yearly prize was established in 1986 by the municipality of Tilburg in cooperation with the Arts Faculty of Tilburg University. As Piet Mooren describes in his 2007 overview of the history of this prize, written on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary, the instalment of the Du Perron Prize coincided with the attribution of an honorary professorship to Geert van Oorschot, the publisher of the collected work of the influential Indies writer E. du Perron (1899–1940).<sup>15</sup> However, no research agenda was connected to the prize's establishment; the primary gain for Tilburg University as an academic institution was the yearly publicity as organiser and facilitator.

The aim of this prize was defined as follows: 'To reward individuals or groups who, by means of an active contribution to Dutch culture, have helped to advance mutual respect and understanding between the various ethnic groups living in the Netherlands' (cited in Mooren 2007: 19, my translation). It is important to note here that the Du Perron Prize was thus not ethnically defined, nor did it prescribe any formal or generic restrictions. As the Du Perron Foundation emphasises on its website, the prize aims to award persons – irrespective of their ethnic origin – who, like Du Perron, dare to critically question precarious social circumstances and who help to transcend cultural boundaries and divisions. In practice, however, the Du Perron Prize turned out to be a major 'publicity machine' for writers of migrant background in particular. Not only was the prize very regularly awarded to laureates of non-Dutch ethnic origin (among whom, *inter alia*, Gerda Havertong, Marion Bloem, Max Velthuijs,

15 E. du Perron (1899–1940) 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. For information about the E. du Perron Prize see: <http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/nl/over-tilburg-university/schools/geesteswetenschappen/duperronprijs/> (last accessed 12 February 2016).

Hafid Bouazza, Anil Ramdas, Carl Friedman, Nilgün Yerli, Nicolaas Matsier and Abdelkader Benali) but it also seemed that, especially for prize-winning writers, the Du Perron Prize was one of the very few – if, at that time, not the only – ‘serious’ opportunities to gain a name among a mainstream audience.

The Du Perron Prize was the first and most prominent initiative in the Dutch cultural field that acknowledged the multicultural transformations taking place in postwar Dutch society and that promoted critical reflection on this process within the cultural field. The Dunya Poetry Prize, established in 1989 by the Rotterdam Art Foundation and by Poetry International, was another award which aimed to foster cultural diversity in literature. This prize was connected to a poetry contest in which any person living in the Netherlands, with or without a residence permit and independent of language, could participate. A glance at the titles of the prize-winning poems, however, suffices to assert that the Dutch language is the most commonly used. The poetry contest does not set restrictions of theme, only of length (two pages maximum). In the period 1989–2004 the Dunya Poetry Prize – presented during the Dunya Festival, a popular annual cross-cultural music event – was awarded to 74 winners in total, together representing a broad variety of cultural backgrounds. Of these winners, only a few writers such as Salah Hassan or Hanz Mirck have managed to attain a more solid position within the Dutch literary field, but this might also have to do with the fact that poetry in general occupies a very marginal position within Dutch literature.

Other than the general Du Perron and the Dunya Poetry prizes, another influential literary prize that is also connected to an annual writing contest is the El Hizjra Literary Prize initiated by the El Hizjra Foundation in 1992. A cultural initiative within the Moroccan migrant community, providing support and encouragement, the El Hizjra Foundation started organising the writing contest with the aim of stimulating and motivating persons of migrant background to write and also publish their writing. Since 1992, the foundation has allocated a considerable number of El Hizjra Literary Prizes to poetry and short prose written in Dutch, Arabic or the Tamazight language. Each year the awarded works were published in a small anthology (16 were published between 1995 and 2011, first by El Hizjra and then by Van Gennep) and the prize-winners offered a master-class in creative writing. Initially the contest was directed at the foundation’s own minority group, explicitly addressing migrants of Moroccan and Arab background; since then, the criterion of origin has been applied less strictly. The foundation’s website – <http://www.elhizjra.nl/> – now proclaims that the El Hizjra Prize has developed into an important multicultural one, a claim which is true inasmuch as the El Hizjra Prize has certainly gained resonance far beyond the boundaries of its minoritarian margins.

Since its institution in 1992, the El Hizjra Prize has functioned as an important springboard for a literary career in the Dutch cultural field and has contributed in determinant ways to the striking dominance of writers of Moroccan background in the field of 'migrant writing'. Writers such as Mustafa Stitou, Abdelkader Benali, Mohammed Benzakour, Rashid Novaire and Khalid Boudou, all now well known, started their careers within the El Hizjra 'literary school'. An extra-literary factor that might have contributed to the above-average interest in writers of Moroccan background in particular can be found in the more general topicality – often in negative terms, linked to problems such as criminality, unemployment, school drop-out – of the Moroccan minority within public discourse at that time. Willy-nilly, the writers offered a kind of counterweight to the negative representation of 'their' minority group.

No other initiative within the migrant communities can compete with the El Hizjra Foundation's success in increasing the participation and visibility of writers of migrant background in the Dutch literary field. This counts, for example, for the Troya Foundation, established in 1998 to encourage and support cultural activities within the Turkish migrant community (especially in Amsterdam). The Troya Foundation started with the aim of 'building a bridge between people and groups that care for an intercultural society, by promoting activities in the broad field of art and culture' ([www.troya.nl](http://www.troya.nl)).<sup>16</sup> In the initial years of the foundation's existence, however, this aim did not result in an increased presence of writers of Turkish background in Dutch literature, as the inventory study that Elma Nap-Kolhoff (2002) made on commission by the Turkish migrant organisation IOT (*Inspraakorgaan Turken*) demonstrates.<sup>17</sup> This did not change, in fact, in later years. One of the foundation's most visible activities was the organisation of the Turkish-Dutch Poetry Festival in 2001 and 2002 and the award, in 2003, of the Tulpia Literature Prize for poems or prose in Turkish or Dutch, written by writers of Turkish background. One explanation for the limited success of Troya's activities might be that, unlike the professionally and nationally operating El Hizjra Foundation, which broadened its focus to include writers of various backgrounds, the Troya Foundation restricted itself to the Amsterdam-based Turkish migrant community.

16 For more information on the Troya Foundation for Art and Literature see [www.troya.nl](http://www.troya.nl) (last visited 12 February 2016). The Troya Foundation strived to promote cultural encounters between migrant cultures like the Turkish and the dominant Dutch culture which, as the text on the website maintains, appear rather one-sided and closed off to contributions from migrant groups.

17 Nap-Kolhoff (2002) also points out that second-generation writers of Turkish background relatively often choose Turkish as their language of expression. In her opinion, the vital use of the Turkish language in the Dutch context plays an important role in this decision.

Whereas Gür's publications in the 1980s remained somewhat incidental, literary work by writers of migrant and refugee background gained more prominence in the 1990s. In 1993 Kader Abdolah, a political refugee from Iran, published his debut *De adelaars* (The Eagles) which was welcomed in very appreciative terms. Proof of this is the fact that Abdolah's story-collection won the annual 'Gouden Ezelsoor Prijs' (Golden Donkey's Ear Prize), awarded to the debut publication that had been the most successful in terms of sales that year. Several public performances on television, mostly focusing on his refugee biography, importantly added to Abdolah's fame and popularity. One year later it was Mustafa Stitou's poetry performance at the renowned Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam that caught the public attention. The ensuing publication of his poetry collection *Mijn vormen* (1994, My Forms) might be seen as the definite breakthrough, not only of the Moroccan-Dutch Stitou himself but also of 'migrant literature' in general.

The debut works by the mediagenic Abdolah and Stitou triggered a broad public interest in work by authors of various ethnic backgrounds who, at that time, were grouped as '*allochtoon* writers'. Writers sharing a (family) history of labour migration such as Hans Sahar, Naima el Bezaz, Hafid Bouazza and Abdelkader Benali, individual writers of refugee or other migratory backgrounds such as Moses Isegawa, Lulu Wang and Yasmine Allas, and writers of Surinamese, Antillean or Indies backgrounds who, in fact, had been present in Dutch letters for a much longer time, all profited from the rather sudden popularity of 'Dutch multiculturalism'.

The publishing industry played an important, supportive role in the emergence and popularity of writing by authors of migrant background in the 1990s. In the 1980s a few smaller, niche publishing houses such as De Geus and In de Knipscheer had committed themselves to the publication and distribution of what was then called '(third-)world literature', consisting mostly of foreign literature in translation. In de Knipscheer, as well as publishing house Conserve (founded in 1983), had already specialised in Dutchophone literature by writers of Caribbean or Indies background.<sup>18</sup> In the 1990s several mainstream publishing houses such as Prometheus, Arena and Contact also started taking an interest in diversifying their publishing lists. Furthermore, a new player in the field, the publishing house Vassallucci (1995–2006), made a name as a publisher of Dutch literature by writers of migrant background – several writers of Moroccan origin in particular (such as Abdelkader Benali, Mustafa Stitou

18 *In de Knipscheer* published the work of several postcolonial writers such as Astrid Roemer and Edgar Cairo (both of Surinamese background) and Marion Bloem and Frans Lopulalan (both of Indonesian background). Conserve's most popular writer was the Surinamese Cynthia McLeod (see Kuitert 1999).

and Saïd El Haji) started a successful career at this publishing house (Nijborg and Laroui 2013), as well as the Surinam-Dutch Clark Accord and the Chinese-Dutch Lulu Wang.

A number of scholars maintain that, in the late 1990s, all major publishing houses were using the marker '*allochtoon*' (rather than the marker 'literary talent') in their search for new writers to include on their list (see Anbeek 1999; Kuitert 1999; Nijborg 2011). They critique the fact that the interest in bringing these writers into the spotlight mainly stemmed from marketing: they were hyped as 'exotic fruit' on the Dutch literary scene. The literary merits of the work of these new, ethnicised celebrities often appeared to be only of secondary importance, after the 'fascinating otherness' of their literature and, even more so, of themselves.

The publicity event that was undoubtedly the most successful in bringing migration literature into the spotlight was the 2001 Dutch National Book Week – comparable to the German '*Buchmesse*' or the French '*Salon du Livre*' in terms of media attention – a popular annual event in the Dutch cultural field organised by the Stichting Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse Boek (Collective Propaganda Foundation for the Dutch Book). Every year revolves around a different theme and, in 2001, the Book Week was dedicated to '*Het land van herkomst: Schrijven tussen twee culturen*' (*The Country of Origin: Writing between Two Cultures*) – a reference to the Dutch author E. du Perron, whose canonised work from 1993 was entitled *Het land van herkomst* (The Country of Origin). As a result, an impressive range of publications by Dutch writers of migrant background was presented to the reading public.

Traditionally, every year the CPNB Foundation invites two Dutch authors to write the Book Week Gift and the Book Week Essay, both of which, in 2001, were written by writers of migrant background; however, in the case of the Book Week Gift, a remarkable exception to the nationality rule was made: the renowned British migrant writer Salman Rushdie, no less, was elected for the honourable task. Rushdie's 2001 text entitled *Woede* (Anger) was not an original Dutch text but a translation. It comes as no surprise that this deviation from an established tradition caused quite an uproar, especially among Dutch writers of migrant background. The choice of Rushdie seemed to suggest either that there were no Dutch migrant writers available which, given the rise in 'migrant literature' described above, simply was not true, or that the quality of this Dutch-language writing did not meet the standards of the CPNB Foundation. Many writers and critics protested against this last suggestion.<sup>19</sup>

19 See, amongst others, Etty (2000), Fortuin (2000) and Breure and Brouwer (2004) for an overview of the discussion. The publishing houses Vassallucci, De Geus and Van Gennep also expressed their indignation about the choice of the foreigner, Rushdie. Vassallucci

During the Book Week event, multiculturalism in Dutch letters was the talk of the town for ten days in a row (a long week) and the 'migrant writer' featured not only in bookshops and libraries but also at numerous events and in newspapers. This overwhelming media attention for the Book Week's theme, however, is not exceptional in comparison with other Book Weeks: in its capacity as the commercial peak of the booksellers' year, the event traditionally allows for an overdose of attention (and sales) concerning whatever is related to that year's theme.

However, it has to be said that, after the extreme visibility provided by the Book Week, public interest in writers of migrant background waned. Readers seemed overfed with the theme of migration (as is quite usual after a Book Week); however, more generally, positive interest in Dutch multicultural society was evaporating. Already, in the year *before* the 'multicultural' Book Week, public attitude towards multicultural society had changed dramatically: during the so-called 'multicultural drama debate' public opinion shifted from optimistic ideas of a successful and tolerant multicultural future to a more sceptical, if not outright negative, idea of multicultural (dis)illusion and defeat.<sup>20</sup> Six months after the celebratory multicultural Book Week, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 caused a further hardening and polarisation of Dutch public discourse, as did the murder of the populist-right politician Pim Fortuyn (by an animal-rights activist) one year later in May 2002. The Netherlands ended up in a state of panic and profound political and multicultural mistrust, which also had a knock-on effect on the world of letters.

When taking both the changed socio-political climate and the more critical attitude towards commercial processes of writers' ethnification into account, one can assert that the multicultural Book Week very much figured as the

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came up with their own free Book Week gift entitled *schrijventussentweeculturen.nl*, which contained a sample from their 'multicultural' prose by writers such as Benali, Stitou and Wang.

20 The term 'multicultural drama debate' derives from the article of the same name which the Dutch publicist, Paul Scheffer, published in the daily *NRC Handelsblad* of 29 January 2000. The provocative title of the by-now notorious article immediately set the terms of the debate: multiculturalism and drama were made into an inseparable pair. Scheffer warned of the downfall of Dutch multiculturalism and the failing integration of ethnic-minority groups into Dutch society. 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 determined the national 'multicultural drama debate' that evolved following these publications.

apotheotic *grande finale* of the extraordinary interest in writing by authors of non-Dutch ethnic origin. The marked visibility and overwhelming celebration of multiculturalism in Dutch letters was over. Several of the much-hyped 'ethnic other' writers disappeared silently from the literary scene, while others – Kader Abdolah, Lulu Wang, Abdelkader Benali, Hafid Bouazza, Naima El Bezaz, Fouad Laroui and Mustafa Stitou, strikingly mostly male and of Moroccan origin – continued writing and managed to acquire a certain status as Dutch writers in the course of the years that followed. The fact that renowned literary publishing houses kept on publishing their titles and that their work was awarded several important general literary prizes can be interpreted as an indication of their advancing canonisation.

In providing an overview of the *study* of literature by writers of migrant background it is important to once more point out the strict separation between the study of colonial and postcolonial Dutch literature on the one hand, and the study of the more recent phenomenon of Dutch literature by writers of migrant and refugee background on the other. Whereas the first field is mostly part of a longer (colonial) research tradition and often located within specific, historically oriented research institutes or thematic work groups, the second field – of more recent date – concerns more incidental, often non-institutionalised instances of research by individuals based in the field of Dutch or Comparative Literature, mostly working with a cultural studies approach. It is striking that most of the early research in this second field was carried out at universities abroad.

In the 1980s, interest in cultural diversity within research on Dutch society and culture was mainly related to the country's colonial and postcolonial history. Central players in the field were two originally colonial research institutes: the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV, Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde) – founded in 1851 and based at Leiden University – and the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT, Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen) – a much larger, independent institute (combined with an ethnographic museum) founded in 1910 and based in Amsterdam.<sup>21</sup> With their work on issues such as the intercultural encounter, these institutes fulfilled a function as precursors to the study of literature by writers

21 From a colonial institution established in 1851 in order to collect information and produce knowledge on the cultures and people of the Dutch colonies, the KITLV has transformed into an authoritative research institute that focuses, in particular, on the histories, languages and cultures of Indonesia, the Dutch Antilles and Aruba. In 2001 the KITLV was made into an official research institute of the KNAW, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie van Wetenschappen).

of migrant and refugee background which developed in the second half of the 1990s. At that time, more or less parallel to the growing public popularity of 'multicultural literature', the topic of multiculturalism within Dutch literature gradually entered the field of Literary Studies.

In 1997, Henriëtte Louwense published a first analysis of the new migrant phenomenon that she describes in the article's subtitle as 'The emergence of Turkish and Moroccan migrant writers in the Dutch literary landscape'.<sup>22</sup> This article, which appeared in the internationally oriented, English-language, UK-based journal *Dutch Crossing*, was an absolute forerunner in academic circles since, at that time, the public popularity of literature by writers of migrant or refugee background in particular did not yet have an academic counterpart. It would take another decade, until 2007 and 2008, before the first two book-length studies on Dutch literature by writers of non-colonial migrant background were published. Both Henriëtte Louwense's study *Homeless Entertainment. On Hafid Bouazza's Literary Writing* (2007) and Liesbeth Minnaard's *New Germans, New Dutch. Literary Interventions* (2008) are based on PhD research that was again accomplished at universities outside the Netherlands, at those of Sheffield and Trier respectively.

What we see is that issues such as interculturality and migration, and a transnational or comparative perspective, have been of special interest to scholars of Dutch literature abroad much earlier than in the Netherlands. Sheffield University in the United Kingdom, Oldenburg University in Germany, Vienna University in Austria, Wrocław University in Poland and Berkeley University in the USA are not only institutions which offer courses on Dutch multicultural literature but also places where students have produced several Bachelor's and Master's dissertations and PhD theses on literature by writers of migrant background.<sup>23</sup> The fact that PhD research on multicultural issues in Dutch literature in particular is carried out at universities abroad cannot be detached from the apparent lack of funding or institutional frameworks for this kind of research in the Netherlands. In the *Journal of Dutch Literature*, Isabel Hoving – who also points out that both pioneering publications were written by scholars

22 It is striking that research results on literature by writers of migrant or refugee background were mostly published in 'extra muros' journals like *Dutch Crossing* and *Neerlandica extra muros* rather than in more mainstream Netherlands-based academic journals on Dutch literature. Henriëtte Louwense is based at the University of Sheffield.

23 Two other examples of PhD theses, besides those of Louwense and Minnaard, are Leune (2010, published 2013) and Mahmody (2010). In 2010 the Berkeley Dutch Department launched the website 'Multicultural Netherlands' – maintained by students of Dutch – and, in 2011, organised the international conference 'Colonial and Post-colonial Connections in Dutch Literature'.

more or less operating outside Dutch academia – discusses the publications by Louwse and Minnaard as indicative of what she calls ‘the eagerly awaited turn in Dutch literary criticism’ (Hoving 2010: 114; see also the critical review of the lack of an urgently needed outside or multiperspective on Dutch literature by Jeroen Dewulf 2010).

When Netherlands-based scholarly journals such as *Armada. Tijdschrift voor wereldliteratuur* (Armada. Journal for World Literature) address the topic of cultural diversity in literature (e.g. in the issues on ‘Postcolonial literature’ – Van der Poel *et al.* 1996 – and on ‘Migrants’ – Van Kempen *et al.* 1999) their examples remain strikingly restricted to postcolonial Dutch literature, as is also the case in the volume edited by Leijnse and Van Kempen (1998) *Tussenfiguren: Schrijvers tussen de culturen* (Intermediary Figures: Writing Between the Cultures). The publication *Literaturen in het Nederlands* (Literatures in Dutch), a special issue of the popular magazine *Literatuur* which presents scholarly articles to a broader, non-academic readership, is the first to also dedicate some scholarly attention to literature by writers of migrant and refugee background (see the next section for more-detailed discussion). This issue, co-edited by Odile Heynders and Bert Paasman in 1999, contains three contributions analysing the sudden rise and reception of this literature in the Dutch literary field, as well as an interview with the popular Iranian-Dutch writer Kader Abdolah.

In 2001, the Netherlands-based Italian-born literary scholars Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniela Merolla organised a path-breaking international conference titled ‘Writing Europe 2001: Migrant Cartographies, Cultural Travelers, and New Literature’ at the Universities of Leiden and Amsterdam. Despite its strong international focus, this conference surely contributed to putting the topic on the Dutch research agenda, although the conference itself featured only a few lectures which addressed the ‘new literature’ of the Netherlands.<sup>24</sup>

The words of welcome at the ‘Writing Europe’ conference were spoken by Mineke Schipper of Leiden University who, at that time, held the only chair in ‘Intercultural Literary Studies’ in the Netherlands (since 1993).<sup>25</sup> Today interculturality is still one of the two core areas (aside intermediality) in both edu-

24 Literary critic Michael Zeeman spoke on the professional reception of migrant literature in Dutch newspapers, while three scholarly contributions addressed the work by the Antillean-born writer Cola Debrot (Ineke Phaf), the relation between Dutch Moroccan and Dutch East Indies literature (Jacqueline Bel) and the 1996 novel *Bruiloft aan zee* (Wedding at the Sea) by Moroccan-Dutch writer Abdolkader Benali (Rosemarie Buikema 2005). Only the last contribution was included in the conference volume that was published in 2005 (Ponzanesi and Merolla).

25 In 1988 Schipper had already been appointed the first professor in Intercultural Literary Studies at the Free University Amsterdam in 1988 (no thematic chair attached).

cation and research in the Literary Studies Department of Leiden University. In general, research activities exploring topics such as postcolonialism, multiculturalism, migration and globalisation are mostly based at the universities of Amsterdam, Leiden and Utrecht. One example of such activity is the bi-annual gathering of the Dutch-Flemish Platform for Postcolonial Readings, coordinated by Elisabeth Bekers, Isabel Hoving, Liesbeth Minnaard and Sarah De Mul since 2005. Migration and its cultural effects on, *inter alia*, Dutch culture is a recurring topic during these meetings for (young) scholars in the field of postcolonial and globalisation studies in Belgium and the Netherlands. In 2010, Sandra Ponzanesi and Paulo de Medeiros initiated the Postcolonial Studies Initiative (PCI) at Utrecht University, a research network that focuses particularly on the study of postcolonial issues (among them migration) within European contexts. Between 2006 and 2010, Ieme van der Poel directed the research project 'Diasporic Writing: A Comparative History of the New Moroccan Literatures in French, Spanish and Dutch', funded by NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) at the University of Amsterdam. Leiden University (Liesbeth Minnaard) is a partner in the international research project on 'The Construction of Identity in Multilingual Literature: A Comparison of Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands' (2011–2014), funded by the Fonds National de la Recherche Luxembourg, which uses the concepts of multi- and monolingualism to critically examine lingual diversity in Dutch literature as an important (side-)effect of intercultural dynamics and migration.<sup>26</sup>

It is conspicuous that most of these network and research activities have a clearly transnational, boundary-crossing character. Obviously topics such as migration, globalisation and postcolonialism are transnational by nature and indeed demand a multi-faceted and interdisciplinary approach. However, it occasionally seems as though the emphasis on international contextualisation and comparison has begun to overshadow (or even eliminate) research with a focus on national, and specifically Dutch, issues related to migration that, given the backlog in this field, also remains necessary. Although both postcolonial Dutch literature and work by writers of migrant or refugee background are now mostly considered to be part of the literary mainstream, this is not true for academic research on the topic. Despite the fact that work by writers

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At that time Schipper's work mainly focused on intercultural relations between European (French and Dutch) and African literatures.

26 The international symposium 'Challenging the Myth of Monolingualism' (Leiden University, 23–24 May 2012), featuring several papers on Dutchophone literature of migration, as well as the *Thamyris* volume of the same name (Minnaard and Dembeck 2014) are products of this collaboration.

of migrant background undoubtedly contributes to a dynamic and continually transforming Dutch literary tradition, it is still predominantly studied either in isolation, as a marginal phenomenon, or in comparison to work by other writers of 'deviant' background.

### Approaches and Interpretations

Let me start this section with a more general observation regarding Dutch literature of migration. Irrespective of the approaches used, to which I will come in a minute, scholarly work on literature by writers of migrant background has been (and still is) quite limited in its preferred scope of writers. The dominance of male writers of Moroccan background within the literary field of the late 1990s and early 2000s has had clear implications on the level of research. Most studies focus on Moroccan-Dutch writing, with the work of Hafid Bouazza as by far the most popular object of research, followed by that of Abdelkader Benali and Mustafa Stitou. The absence of scholarly work on the literary writing of the female Moroccan-Dutch author Naima El Bezaz, who debuted alongside these male writers and is also still productive as well as popular among contemporary readers, is striking. In the exceptional cases where her work is mentioned, the focus is mainly on her (all-too-) referential way of writing and doubt is cast on the literary quality of her work. However, the issue of gender (i.e. the male dominance among writers of migrant background) has not yet been properly addressed. The fact that most of the original labour migrants were male and that patriarchal structures were dominant in many migrant cultures does not seem to provide a satisfying explanation for the preponderance of work by male writers, within both the literary and the scholarly field, so long after the initial migration.<sup>27</sup>

After this observation, let me now turn to a discussion of the various academic approaches to Dutch literature by writers of migrant background. I examine these approaches in order of appearance, but it is important to realise that they actually often intersect and were (and are) often applied parallel to

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27 An exception is the work by the Moroccan-Flemish writer Rachida Lamrabet, which is also popular and widely read in the Netherlands. As the boundaries between Flemish and Dutch literature are far from clear-cut, this work is often included in the category Dutch literature. In this volume Lamrabet's work is discussed in the section on Belgium. Another striking observation concerns the centrality of women writers within postcolonial Dutch literature; women writers such as Marion Bloem, Ellen Ombre, Cynthia McLeod and Astrid Roemer are among the most popular and most successful writers in this field.

each other. Retrospectively, we can detect a general tendency, within literary research on Dutch literature by writers of migrant background, which can be described as a three-step movement: from a strongly biographical emphasis on the migrant identity of the writers (in a later stage called hyphenated identity) and an exploration of the hybrid and in-between positions that these writers (and their work) occupy in the Dutch literary field, to – in the final stage – the acknowledgement of these writers as *Dutch* writers, contributing to and transforming what we call Dutch literature. Starting out with a strong focus on the writer's persona and on his or her personal experience of migration, this movement has resulted in a situation in which the actual texts produced by these writers, and their literary and aesthetic qualities, take centre stage. Whereas the writing was initially seen as a separate and distinctive category at the margins of Dutch literature, nowadays it is mostly accepted as Dutch literature that can, but does not necessarily, address the theme of migration.

### *Positioning Migrant and Ethnic-Minority Writers*

As mentioned before, considerable time gaps exist between the origination of literature by writers of migrant background, its appearance and reception in the popular literary field and, finally, its acknowledgement as a serious topic of academic research. The earliest scholarly studies date from the second half of the 1990s and examine what, at that time, was mostly called 'migrant writing', as a new phenomenon in Dutch literature. Central to the assessment of this newness is not the character of the writing itself, but the migrant biography of the writer. Just as in the first newspaper reviews of these works, notions such as identity, experience and cultural background take centre stage. However, whereas the popular media exuberantly celebrate the biographical and, at times, strongly ethnicising approach, literary scholars (e.g. Anbeek, Van Kempen), aware of the problematic aspects and implications of such an approach, shift the emphasis from the notion of identity to that of position. The dominant interest in the writers' countries and cultures of origin and their personal experience of migration develops into an interest in the particular positions that these writers now occupy in the country and culture of arrival.

A broad range of theories on the pivotal notions of identity and position were eagerly used and taken up as inspiration for the analysis of Dutch literature by writers of migrant background. Notions developed within the field of (Anglo-dominated) postcolonial studies and cultural analysis, such as hybridity and 'in-betweenness' (Bhabha), the idea of Orientalism (Said) and the concept of 'trans-' (as in transition, transnationalism, transcultural etc.) had a particularly strong impact on the Dutch academic discourse on migration literature.

The introductory articles to the edited volume *Tussenfiguren* (Leijnse and Van Kempen 1998) and the issue on 'Migrants' of the Dutch journal *Armada* (Van Kempen *et al.* 1999) demonstrate this tendency. In *Armada*, Michiel van Kempen maintains in his preface entitled 'Inventive drifters' ('Vindingrijke zwervers') that '[e]xcept for their moving house, migrant writers do not have that much in common; the individual imagination wins by far over the shared experience' (Van Kempen 1999: 6, my translation). Nevertheless, he simultaneously assesses that these writers do share a particular characteristic: in his opinion they all occupy a position of outsider and, from this position, offer an alternative, often particularly critical or refreshing, view of dominant Dutch society and of the Dutch Self. The social marginalisation of these writers indisputably provides them with 'privileged knowledge': knowledge that is exclusively connected to their subjugated position. Van Kempen claims that '[t]hey screen society in a way that is out of reach of the "autochthonous" writer' (1999: 6, my translation).

In the introduction to *Tussenfiguren*, editors Elisabeth Leijnse and, again, Michiel van Kempen (1998) more or less corroborate this idea, but they are much less pertinent (although not less explicit) about the *kind* of position of the 'migrant writer'. They argue, as the title of the volume already indicates, that these writers occupy an intermediary position: 'They waver between a definitely left-behind past and a badly demarcated future. They embrace a new world while looking back, or they look forward while fending off that new world. They are nest-foulers, peelers, chameleons, they are all of this and none of it completely...' (1998: 3, my translation). In their opinion it is impossible to strictly define the position of the migrant writer, as this position is far from stable or uniform. Migrant writers, so the editors argue, are figures of what they call the 'polyvalent reality' of a globalising, transforming world that includes the Netherlands (1998: 5). Studying their work thus requires a flexible approach and the use of multiple perspectives.

Discussions that took place in the fields of sociology, political sciences and migration history about migrant newcomers and their position in Dutch society had a determinant impact on debates within literary research. Scholars in these fields (such as Leo and Jan Lucassen, Han Entzinger and Ruud Koopmans) demonstrated how issues of legislation and citizenship were, in complex ways, interlinked with cultural norms and values, expectations and stereotypes. Their insights intervened in processes of policy-making in important ways and also strongly affected public opinion on migration and migrants. In the literary field they had an influence on discussions about the position and categorisation of 'migrant writers' within the Dutch literary field as well as on the search for the most appropriate terminology to be used for these

newcomers and, even more precarious, for their children and grandchildren.<sup>28</sup> The generally used (and officially established) term '*allochtoon*' is particularly subject to critical contestation in social, political, academic and literary circles. Many scholars reject the term because of its stigmatising, divisive and exclusionary qualities, as do the writers who are categorised as '*allochtoon*'.

In his 1999 article 'Fataal succes: over Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs en hun critici' ('Fatal success: concerning Moroccan-Dutch writers and their critics') Ton Anbeek, for instance, decisively rejects the label '*allochtoon* writers' – which he finds concealing and homogenising – in favour of the more specific indication 'Moroccan-Dutch writers'. Bert Paasman proposes the term 'ethnic literature' as an alternative in his introductory article to the 'Literaturen in het Nederlands (Literatures in Dutch)' special issue of *Literatuur* (1999). He uses this term to refer to what he calls 'a very diverse field of literature by writers who share the fact that their roots lie in another country with another culture, that they are, to a greater or lesser degree, bi-cultural' (Paasman 1999: 329). In his article, Paasman immediately departs from the term 'multicultural literature' that co-editor Odile Heynders (1999) proposes in her preface to the special issue. However, by choosing the term 'ethnic' to indicate a biographical characteristic, namely the cultural otherness of the writer, Paasman seems to fall into the same trap as that constituted by the term '*allochtoon*' or by a term such as 'migrant literature'.<sup>29</sup>

Paasman's particular conceptualisation of the term, however, undoes this autobiographical determination again and testifies to the same scholarly interest in the notion of position that I described above. Paasman argues that 'ethnic literature' often shows signs of political engagement as it is generally written from a position of social marginalisation. In his opinion, its writers of necessity redefine their identities in a process of negotiating both the country and the culture of origin and their new home. Like Van Kempen (1999) in *Armada*, Paasman connects the minority position of these writers with expectations of a particularly critical view of Dutch society in their literature. This also applies to Ieme van der Poel who, in a much later article, entitled 'Literatuur-met-een-accent' ('Accented literature'), claims that 'migrant writers subvert the thinking in stereotypes' (2009: 14, my translation). Referring to theories of hybridity, cultural identity and mimicry, she describes the eccentric position

28 The issue of terminology was discussed within several academic disciplines as well as by governmental institutions. Moreover, minority groups and activists also objected to the often stigmatising and debilitating terms.

29 Paasman's terminology, reserved to indicate otherness, problematically ignores the fact that indigenous Dutchness also constitutes an ethnic category. The structural invisibility of whiteness as an ethnic category is critically discussed within Whiteness Studies.

that these writers occupy in relation to the dominant culture as a marginal position that nevertheless entails a certain form of power, the power to question and criticise problematic aspects of this dominant culture from outside. Their main message, according to Van der Poel, is the idea that there is no such thing as a stable identity, but that identities are always in process. In general, this approach enjoys an enduring popularity among literary scholars, and has been applied to a broad range of publications by writers of migrant background.

Characteristic of this approach, which puts the particular position of the migrant writer to the fore, is the link that it makes between the position of the writer and the content of his or her writing. Not only does it mostly assume that this writing takes a critical stance towards dominant Dutch society as a result of its writers' migrant background but it also seems to expect that this writing *per definition* addresses issues related to migration – such as uprooting, alienation, intercultural encounters, belonging and integration – in its thematic outlook.<sup>30</sup>

In his article on the position of Moroccan-Dutch writers in the literary field, Anbeek offers an interesting reflection in this respect. On the one hand he speaks of his doubt about the grouping of these writers on the basis of their migrant background: 'To what extent does it really make sense to speak of Moroccan-Dutch authors as if it concerns a separate group?' (1999: 340, my translation). He himself suggests that a shared thematic – 'the scenery of the emigrant life' – could be a reason to group these writers together but, he demurs, '[w]hen the scenery of the emigrant life fails, obviously also the grounds for the label 'Moroccan-Dutch' fall away' (1999: 342). In his conclusion, however, Anbeek again undermines his non-essentialist reasoning by suggesting that migration might be Moroccan-Dutch writers' most fruitful theme.<sup>31</sup>

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30 Various writers (Benali, Bouazza) vehemently opposed the idea that the theme and purport of their literary writing was predetermined by their migrant backgrounds and the outsider position appointed to them in Dutch society. Moreover, they felt as if they had been assigned some kind of social responsibility to foster intercultural understanding and even to improve social integration.

31 In his article, Anbeek further argues that the literature by these writers generally encountered a 'politically hypercorrect reception' (1999: 336). In their abundant praise of the Moroccan newcomers, reviewers regularly disregarded the (sometimes limited) literary qualities of the hyped works of literature. He assesses that this initial attitude of 'condescending benevolence' (1999: 342) solely attached to the writers' Moroccan origin changed after a while. Anbeek recapitulates the growing scepticism among reviewers after the literary multiculturalism 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?' (1999: 341, my translations).

In his overview of the development of Turkish-Dutch literature, Graeme Dunphy (2001) indeed combines an analysis of the position of three writers of Turkish background with an analysis of the particular themes addressed in their work. He divides Turkish-Dutch writing between the late 1980s and the late 1990s into three different phases, each represented by a writer – Halil Gür, Sadik Yemni and Sevtap Baycili – whose work he considers exemplary for that particular phase. According to Dunphy, the focus of the writing shifts from the topic of emigration and of immigration to that of arrival: a movement of progressive integration into Dutch society. In his analyses of the various texts, Dunphy pays particular attention to the representation of the migrant experience, linking motifs and concerns directly to the socio-political context of, respectively, the guestworker (Gür), the second-generation migrant (Yemni) and the integrated intellectual (Baycili).

### *Debating Transformations in Dutch Literature*

Whereas the two approaches discussed above focus on the exceptionality of the position that the writer of migrant background and his or her work occupy, another approach that has been gaining more and more ground puts its focus of attention on Dutch literature *as a whole*. Rather than looking at the migrant margin, this approach is interested in the fundamental transformations taking place within the full realm of Dutch literature. It studies the way in which phenomena such as migration and globalisation affect notions of Dutch national identity, culture and canon. In view of its broad scope, it is not surprising that this approach has also affected literary historiography. Recent literary histories testify to the awareness that Dutch literature will never be the same and that, in fact, it has never been a monolithic, ethnically homogenous Dutch whole of texts by indigenous Dutch writers.

This – what one might call ‘integrative’ – approach can already be detected in Odile Heynders’ preface to ‘Literaturen in het Nederlands’ (1999). Here Heynders argues that, in times of migration and globalisation, ‘national definitions of literature’ no longer apply. Ten years later, Jaap Goedegebuure (2009) – taking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Gür’s *Gekke Mustafa* (1984, Mad Mustafa) as the occasion for an assessment of what the work by writers of migrant background has brought to Dutch literary studies – states that ‘such a thing as *one* Dutch migrant literature does not exist’ (2009: 76).<sup>32</sup>

32 The ‘starting date’ mentioned in Goedegebuure’s 2009 retrospective review once again illustrates the dominant tendency in Dutch literary studies to not include postcolonial Dutch literature in the category of ‘migrant writing’.

The conceptualisation of Dutch culture as the dynamic product of processes of cultural encounter, mixing and exchange is central to the two volumes *Kunsten in beweging, 1900–1980* (Arts in Motion, 1900–1980) and *Kunsten in beweging, 1980–2000* (Arts in Motion, 1980–2000) by Buikema and Meijer (2003, 2004 respectively) and published in the series *Cultuur en migratie in Nederland* (Culture and Migration in the Netherlands). These volumes provide a broad range of articles – exceptionally by writers of migrant background from all three ‘Dutch categories’: postcolonial, (labour) migrant and refugee – that discuss the multiple ways in which a wide variety of cultural influences from abroad has mixed and mingled with indigenous Dutch culture and traditions, thus continually transforming the meaning of Dutchness.

This same idea permeates Thomas Vaessens’ *Geschiedenis van de moderne Nederlandse literatuur* (2013, History of Modern Dutch Literature) in which one chapter, dedicated to the intersection of ‘literature, identity and globalisation’, addresses the question of what it means to speak of ‘Dutch’ literature and ‘Dutch’ literary studies. Here Vaessens concludes that both the Dutch canon and the Dutch community are fundamentally ‘unstable, temporary constructions that mutually reinforce, direct and/or nuance each other’ (2013: 67, my translation). It is this *process*, he argues, that should be the object of literary research.

In *Altijd weer vogels die nesten beginnen. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1945–2005* (Birds Always Start Nesting. A History of Dutch Literature 1945–2005) Hugo Brems (2006) interestingly emphasises the parallels between ‘*allochtoon* writers’ (it is striking that Brems chooses to hold on to this controversial term) and other newcomers or innovators in Dutch literature – such as women, new generations or neo-realists/romanticists/etc. He argues that all newcomers use a common denominator as a strategy to gain visibility but, in the case of ‘*allochtoon* writers’, it appears more difficult to leave this label behind once the aim has been achieved (2006: 672). Although starting out with an integrative approach that sees the ‘*allochtoon* writer’ as a ‘participant’ in Dutch multicultural society, Brems seems, in his final conclusion, to return to the biographically determined positional approach by claiming that this literature distinguishes itself from mainstream writing by its setting and theme (the intercultural encounter) and, to a lesser extent, its style (Brems 2006: 683; see also Dewulf 2010; T’Sjoen 2013).

### *Contextualising Literary Representations*

In this section I discuss the final approach to literature by writers of migrant background, which can be located in the realm of cultural studies and draws important, interdisciplinary insights from feminist, race and postcolonial

theory. The approach takes leave of the author's biography or position in favour of the literary text. This does not mean, however, that it preaches the autonomy of the literary art work, disputably the most influential trend in Dutch literary studies of the last decades. On the contrary, this approach puts the so-called politics of representation at the centre of its attention and studies the multiple ways in which texts and contexts interact in the process of the production of meaning. This approach generally refrains from generalising statements about 'migrant literature' as a category or phenomenon but, instead, relies on careful readings of particular texts in close relation to their specific contexts. It combines analyses of textual features – such as the use of narrative strategies – and plays with generic conventions or forms of figurative language, paying attention to the way in which the text functions within the broader processes of cultural signification. Examples of this approach can be found in the work of Henriëtte Louwerse (1997, 2001, 2004a, 2007; De Graef and Louwerse 2000), Isabel Hoving (2005, 2006), Rosemarie Buikema (2005) and Liesbeth Minnaard (2005, 2006, 2008, 2009), four female scholars who share an affinity with the field of Gender Studies.

Initially the awareness of and emphasis on the influence and intersection of various factors of difference was mainly fostered and promoted within the interdisciplinary field of Gender Studies (an academic field that, especially in its early years, was closely linked to activist and feminist movements, including the Dutch black, migrant and refugee women's movement). Eventually this role was increasingly taken up by the newly developing field of Dutch Postcolonial Studies which, in its broad and, again, interdisciplinary self-understanding, also includes issues such as globalisation and migration, which are not always directly linked to the history of colonialism.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century this approach, taking its inspiration from the fields of cultural studies and postcolonial theory, slowly but surely gained terrain in Dutch academia, as can be illustrated by the following incidental but, nevertheless, impactful, interventions.

The one-day conference 'Postcolonial Theory and the Low Countries. Literature, Colonialism and Multiculturality' that took place at Leiden University in 2008 was an occasion that gave an important impetus to the visibility of the new research field. It assembled leading cultural analysts from various universities with the explicit aim of undoing the Anglophone focus of postcolonial studies and to examine postcolonial issues in their specific Dutch and Belgian contexts. The conference resulted in the publication of the volume *The Postcolonial Low Countries. Literature, Colonialism, Multiculturalism* (2012), edited by Elleke Boehmer and Sarah De Mul; aside several contributions on the particularities of Neerlandophone postcolonial studies, the volume also

contained two articles on the work by Hafid Bouazza (Louwerse 2012; Van der Poel 2012).<sup>33</sup>

Another important intervention proclaiming the necessity to study literature by writers of migrant background within a broader (postcolonial) context, appeared in the first issue of the *Journal of Dutch Literature* (2010), an internationally oriented journal that, according to its first editorial, aims to broaden the boundaries of Dutch literary studies by 'adopting an interdisciplinary and transnational perspective' (2010: 4) and to include at least one contribution per issue that addresses an intercultural aspect of or issue in Dutch literature. In a manifesto-like article, entitled 'The postcolonial turn in Dutch literary criticism' (2010), Isabel Hoving takes the publication of Louwerse's (2007) *Homeless Entertainment. On Hafid Bouazza's Literary Writing* and Minnaard's (2008) *New Germans, New Dutch. Literary Interventions* as the occasion for a passionate plea for a literary approach that takes its fundamental complexity into account and that has a nuanced eye for its specific contradictions and incongruities. Hoving states that literature, as these two monographs demonstrate, is 'a realm of ambiguities, subversion, experiment and cultural critique' (2010: 114). This characteristic, however, tends to get obfuscated by the focus on and search for identity that currently dominates Dutch literary studies, in particular where literature by writers of migrant background is concerned. It is for this reason that Hoving criticises what she sees as an all-too-easy conceptualisation of identity in contemporary literary studies. Opposed to a conceptualisation of identity that is postmodern and speaks of identities-in-flux, free-floating and always in the process of becoming, she argues in favour of a postcolonial conceptualisation which examines these dynamic identities as complexly situated and as determined by local particularities.

A similar message is put forward by Wolfgang Behschnitt, Sarah De Mul and Liesbeth Minnaard in their conclusion to the edited volume *Literature, Language and Multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries* (2013), which compares the impact of migration on the literary fields in Sweden, Denmark, Flanders and the Netherlands. They, too, emphasise the necessity of taking specific contexts and language situations into account when studying phenomena that show striking transnational parallels but simultaneously differ in essential, location-specific, aspects. Aside from an elaborate overview of the emergence of literature of migration in the Dutch literary field (Minnaard 2013a),

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33 Two publications worth mentioning from the field of Dutch Postcolonial Studies are Dutch historian Gert Oostindie (2010, 2011) and Van Kempen *et al.* (2004). These publications, however, do not directly address Dutch literature of migration (one contribution in Van Kempen *et al.* by Louwerse 2004b being the exception).

this volume contains contributions on the success of Dutch-Moroccan literature (Nijborg and Laroui 2013) and on the work by Hafid Bouazza (Louwerse 2013) and Mustafa Stitou (T'Sjoen 2013) which also concern the specific Dutch context; however, the volume does not include colonial and postcolonial literature, but focuses on that by writers of predominantly labour-migrant background who stirred the Dutch literary field in the 1990s.

### Impact

It would seem that, meanwhile, literature by writers of migrant background has acquired a solid position within the Dutch literary field in its capacity as *Dutch* literature. It has moved into the mainstream, where individual writers occupy various positions and where their work is studied from diverse perspectives. Appreciation of both these writers and their work depends on a broad range of criteria, rather than only on factors such as cultural background and history of migration. This idea corresponds to the findings of recent quantitative research on the significance of ethnicity in literary reviews in the Netherlands, Germany and the United States. On the basis of the evaluation of 127 reviews, the literary sociologists Pauwke Berkers, Susanne Janssen and Marc Verboord conclude that '[b]etween 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' (2010: 305, my translation). They distinguish between boundary-crossing by individual writers throughout their career, a traditional form of assimilation, and boundary-shifting as a more incisive process in which the ethnic boundary itself is negotiated and re-established. In their 2010 article 'Assimilatie in de literaire mainstream' (Assimilation into the literary mainstream) they describe how, in the late 1990s, debuting writers of predominantly Moroccan background were strongly ethnicised and hardly ever considered as members of the literary mainstream. Their findings demonstrate that the situation almost 15 years later has changed: both critics and readers have become accustomed to writers of minority background. Marjan Nijborg (2011) draws similar conclusions in her article 'A significant paratextual shift: analyzing book covers of Dutch-Moroccan literature, 1994–2008'. Through an analysis of the paratextual features (like book sleeves) of work by writers of migrant background, she argues that the abundant exoticist representations of the early years have, since then, been replaced by more thematically or content-relevant images and references.

Several recent occurrences in the Dutch literary field seem to support this positive conclusion. In 2009 the Palestinian-Dutch poet Ramsey Nasr was appointed as Dutch Poet Laureate for a term of four years. Neither his

name – which, without doubt, sounds exotic to traditional Dutch ears – nor his bicultural background appeared to stand in the way of his election for this representative function. The self-evident way in which Nasr acquitted himself of his task further contributed to his full integration into a Dutch literary mainstream that is no longer seen as ethnically Dutch. This does not mean that Nasr never had to respond to questions about his Palestinian background and to position himself in relation to the label ‘*allochtoon*’. However, unlike earlier, the main focus of readers, reviewers and scholars alike seemed to be on Nasr’s poems and on the other (often provocative) texts that he wrote in his capacity as Dutch Poet Laureate.<sup>34</sup>

In the same year that Nasr was appointed as Dutch Poet Laureate, Abdelkader Benali was awarded the twentieth E. du Perron Prize for his novel *De stem van mijn moeder* (2009, My Mother’s Voice). This occasion might not strike one as a particular sign of integration into the mainstream, especially not since, as I have discussed previously, this prize has an explicitly ‘multicultural’ focus. However, the remarkable aspect lies in the fact that, in their account of this decision, the jury contended that this novel ‘proves that we are beyond the “migrant novel” now, maintaining that ‘[w]ith this book [Benali] did not write a novel of variegated Netherlands, but a variegated Dutch novel’ (see <http://www.eduperrongenootschap.nl>, my translation).

Within Dutch academia, attention accorded to issues such as migration and globalisation, and interest in their significance for the field of Dutch literature generally, have also gained ground. This can be concluded on the basis of the increased presence of these issues in the teaching curricula of Dutch and Literary Studies at Dutch universities, in programmes of workshops and conferences in the field of Dutch literature, and as part of the research agendas of individual scholars and Dutch and Literary Studies departments. While the Leiden University Literary Studies Department continues to offer its by-now-well-established ‘Interculturality track’, which includes several Bachelor’s and Master’s courses on issues of interculturality and globalisation, the Dutch Department of Leiden University, in 2013, established a new chair dedicated to ‘Modern Dutch Literature from a Global Perspective’. In so doing, the department aims to make a comparative and intercultural approach to Dutch literature into its distinctive characteristic and to critically connect

34 See, for example, Ham (2011), Konst and Van Adrichem (2010) and Minnaard (2013b). Minnaard (2014) demonstrates that Nasr’s (2012a, 2012b) provocative positioning in relation to Dutch identity, and especially his radical stance against what he sees as a new Dutch xenophobia, do result in a polarised reception of his work. The group of ‘Dutch citizens’ who do not feel represented by Nasr as Dutch Poet Laureate regularly refer to Nasr’s Palestinian background.

to both its strong colonial tradition and to the important research done by the KITLV, while simultaneously opening the door to innovation and to a truly global, postcolonial perspective on Dutch literature. The Dutch Department of the University of Amsterdam has also broadened its focus in recent years: with courses such as 'Wereldliteratuur: een Nederlands Perspectief' (World Literature: A Dutch Perspective) it has opened up its curriculum to the global dimensions of Dutch literature. Since 2010, the Humanities Faculty of Utrecht University has been offering the interdisciplinary minor Postcolonial Studies.

In recent years the two most important bi-annual conferences in Dutch Literature, 'Achter de verhalen' (Behind the Stories) and 'Cross-Over', have also dedicated several of their panels to topics related to colonialism, migration and globalisation. The central theme of the Cross-Over Conference 2013, organised at Ghent University, was 'Over grenzen' (Across Boundaries), thus putting transnational phenomena and intercultural encounters in Dutch literature at the centre of attention.

In conclusion I would like to point out that, despite all these initiatives and the more prominent position taken by issues such as migration and globalisation, a lot of work in this field still remains to be done. Themes that deserve further scrutiny, to name but a few, are the conceptual division as well as the actual intertwining of postcolonial and migration literature in the Dutch situation, the literary production of first-generation labour migrants, and literary representations of the multicultural society and of intercultural encounters in literature by writers of both migrant and non-migrant background. Moreover, the critical appropriation and adaptation of concepts from postcolonial theory specifically aimed at a Dutch context is a challenge that also needs to be tackled.

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