Review: The Postcolonial Turn in Dutch Literary Criticism

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In 2007 and 2008, two studies on Moroccan-Dutch writing saw the light. Both were carried out by young scholars slightly removed from Dutch academia: Henriette Louwerse works at the University of Sheffield, and Liesbeth Minnaard wrote her book during academic stays in Berlin, Frankfurt (Oder), Trier, and at Cornell University. This distance may partly account for the innovative perspective offered by both books. In this review, I will defend the bold statement that they herald an eagerly-awaited turn in Dutch literary criticism.

Scholars of Dutch literature have been referring to postcolonial theory for quite a while. Researchers of 'Indische' literature especially, but also of the literature of the Dutch Caribbean, who study postcolonial literature in the strict sense of the term, use productive concepts and insights from, say, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha ('in-betweenness', 'orientalism', 'hybridity'). Those who study the writings of Dutch authors with a migrant background often adopt the concept of the fluid constructed identity that is also discussed within a postcolonial context. However, such debates about identity may relate less to a postcolonial than to a much broader postmodern concern. Although they have close affinities, postcolonial literature and the literature of migration are not the same thing as postmodern literature, and postcolonial theory differs from its postmodern counterpart. The two studies under scrutiny here offer a clear insight into the subtle but fundamental distinctions between these approaches. As such, they not only build on the work of their predecessors but, by engaging with the far-reaching fundamental debates on the nature of identity, literature and power, they introduce a new perspective in this field.

Louwerse and Minnaard are well aware of the innovative power of their work. They confidently offer a well-argued critical evaluation of the dominant ways in which the Dutch literatures of migration are read and propose convincing alternatives. In *Homeless Entertainment*, Louwerse focuses on the literary work by Hafid Bouazza, a Dutch writer of Moroccan extraction. Her main point is that, while most Dutch critics aim at *solving* the tensions and paradoxes in a literary text, [115] Bouazza's work is marked by an intense resistance to closure. It passionately conveys a sense of the world as irretrievably plural, hybrid and always in a state of transformation. The dominant Dutch reading strategy that is intent on closure quite misses his point. Minnaard's study, *New Germans, New Dutch*, compares the Dutch literature of migration (by Moroccan authors) to its German counterpart (by Turkish authors). Minnaard's main point is that there is an intense but complex interaction between migrant writing and its national context, i.e. its legal and discursive construction of national identity. This statement counters the widespread Dutch assumption that the literature of migration would primarily be shaped by its ethnic 'origins'. Minnaard argues that this

assumption leads to a reductive, biographical and often 'exoticist' reading. But Minnaard's study also refutes two other popular approaches: the first one, a transnational approach that radically denies the continued relevance of national identities in the age of globalization; and the second one, an approach that insists on literature's autonomy. Like Louwerse, Minnaard accounts for literature's complexity, by approaching literature as *both* an aesthetic and a social practice; this social practice is informed by *both* a national and a transnational dynamic.

In their quest for a subtle and nuanced understanding of this literary complexity, both scholars conscientiously return to a reconsideration of the phenomenon of literature itself. This interest in the fundamental questions in this field is refreshing and very fruitful.

What is Literature? Twenty-first Century Answers to an Old Question

One of the most enlightening arguments the two studies have to offer relates to their critique of the opinion that literature by migrants would primarily be a form of identity construction. At first sight, this focus on identity seems an obvious point of departure and it can be found in most Dutch criticism in the field. Louwerse quotes postcolonial scholar Sneja Gunew to explain why this view seems obvious: (1) identity would be linked to one's home, (2) migrant writers have lost their home, as a result (3) they have identity problems, and (4) they will therefore necessarily write about their identity with the purpose of healing or re-creating it.[1] Further scrutiny shows that this strand of reasoning is not that obvious at all. Louwerse refers to important postcolonial thinkers such as Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha to refute it, and I will come back to her critique below. Most important for me now is Louwerse's argument that Bhabha's notions of 'hybridity' and 'inbetweenness', when combined with anthropologist Victor Turner's work on the condition of 'in-betweenness' that is related to rites of passage and to art, lead to the perception of literature as a realm of ambiguities, subversion, experiment and cultural critique.[2] For Bouazza, this means that his work is an ongoing experiment in boundary-crossing, an experiment that resists closure: 'His writing destabilises [116] through an engagement with flux and hybridity'.[3] This literature does not construct – least of all an individual identity – but it keeps deconstructing, until 'the fixed has come unhinged'.[4] In Bouazza's literary work, there is never an unambiguous happy ending in which a stable identity is finally obtained.

Instead of a search for identity, Louwerse argues that we find the opposite: a quest for a liberated consciousness of life's irresolvable plurality. Bouazza's celebration of flux and hybridity is not without its problems, however. The discourse on hybridity as a productive force and deconstruction as the preferred way of reading moved centre stage in the United States of the 1980s; it became the most important postcolonial theory of that period (Homi Bhabha and, to a lesser extent, Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said), and has since shaped a large body of academic work in the field of postcoloniality, migration and globalization. A little later, the most radical work in this vein was criticized on the grounds that a one-sided celebration of hybridity and in-betweenness does not necessarily help to understand the dynamics of postcolonial globalization or the strategies to counter its problems. Both Louwerse and Minnaard have taken those critiques to heart. Far from jumping into a celebration of hybridity as the solution to the problems of migration and multiculturalization, they keep track of the exact social conditions of the literature of migration, and analyze the specific relations between certain literary experiments with hybridity and the social events to which these writers respond.

Instead of reducing literature to identity politics or, in contrast, to a playing field for ambiguities, Minnaard proposes a three-fold description of literature. Following cultural theorist Ernst van Alphen, she sees literature as an (aesthetic) mode of thought; in the footsteps of Bhabha, she sees literature as a subversive counter-discourse; and, like narratologist David Herman and literary theorist Jonathan Culler, she sees literature as a productive, performative work with boundaries.[5] This means that novels react to the social debates that rage around them; they actively intervene in these debates, thematically and/or in their choice of words, style, narrative structure, etc. Minnaard's painstaking analysis of a series of Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-German literary works shows that these novels are indeed closely responding to the public debates about who belongs to the nation and who doesn't. The quick changes in the terms and tones of these social debates have a visible effect on writers. Abdelkader Benali's first novel, Bruiloft aan zee (1996), was published 'at the height of the happy multicultural mood' in the Netherlands,[6] when the public debate focused on the need to understand and respect cultural differences – an attitude that, according to Minnaard, has since been 'fiercely criticised as naïve and culturalist'.[7] In her analysis, Minnaard shows how the novel plays a confusing and confrontational game with white Dutch readers' cultural relativism: the readers are seduced into hoping that the arranged marriage within a family is carried out successfully, until they are suddenly made aware that their sympathy should not have laid with the patriarch who is willing [117] to sacrifice his daughter but with the resisting daughter. Seven years later, when the public debate has radically changed and multiculturalism has given way to a discourse of ethnic polarization, Benali publishes a theatre play (Onrein) with a completely different character. Its sad plot centres around a general failure of communication: between different generations in a migrated family, and between migrants and native Dutch. Minnaard sees this change of tone as Benali's response to the disillusioned polarization in the Netherlands since the beginning of the century. Benali's comment, however, fell on deaf ears.

Minnaard concludes her study by showing that Dutch writers with a migrant background tend to work within a *national* context, by criticizing the exclusionist dynamics of the prevailing Dutch definition of national identity and trying to make it more inclusive. German writers with a migrant background, however, often adopt a *trans*national perspective. Both groups respond to their specific legal and discursive context; the fact that, until recently, it has been very difficult to obtain German citizenship has lead hyphenated German writers to imagine transnational identities and communities, rather than focusing on national ones. But this literary orientation can change easily as it responds to changes in the national debates and institutions.

The insightful analysis of the subtle interaction between literature and society shows the shortcomings of an approach that reduces this complex aesthetic social critique to a quest for identity or to a narrative inspired by its ethnic origins alone. Sadly, it also shows that the general public is not very much interested in this form of literary social critique – at least not when it fails to coincide with the accepted opinions of the day. It seems to me that both academic and public debate might benefit immensely if we were to take the potential of literature as a *counter-discourse* seriously. Benali's work is interesting not because it gives white Dutch readers a taste of an authentically exotic view, or because it represents the pathetic struggle with a personal identity problem, but because it is a highly intelligent, aesthetic intervention in a complex social debate. However, to see that, we need to break with the dominant sociological and biographical approaches of literature.

Self-Other: How to Get Beyond that Damned Dualism

One of the other key concepts in the Dutch criticism of the literature of migration is the concept of identity. As I indicated above, Louwerse is very critical of the definition of migrant writing as a form of identity construction. Apart from the fact that this approach is reductive, she points out (with reference to Sneja Gunew and philosopher Charles Taylor) that

> [t]he expectation that migrant authors focus on identity as the main concern of their writing is [...] a paradoxical demand. It requires both that migrant [118] authors engage with their position in the world (often in relation to their own cultural community) and, simultaneously, that they give expression to an individuality that rises *above* cultural, ethnic and gender concerns.[8]

After this sharp statement, she proceeds to discuss different concepts that postcolonial theory has developed to open a more productive view of the condition of migration: Homi Bhabha's in-betweenness and hybridity, and Stuart Hall's notion of identity as *position* instead of essence. Louwerse remarks that Bhabha's concepts of in-betweenness and hybridity have been adopted by Dutch literary scholars, but often not in the sense that Bhabha intended: they understand in-betweenness as a disadvantage, instead of a tremendous potential. Louwerse shows another way in which these postcolonial notions can be made productive, by using the positive evaluation of in-betweenness and homelessness as a framework to Bouazza's work.

Minnaard follows up with the helpful reminder that literary theoriser Leslie Adelson has criticized the notion of in-betweenness because it places migrants in a space outside society; in contrast, she sees migrant writers relating to the same historical narratives as their native colleagues, from within society, but from another perspective. Minnaard's analysis of the Turkish-German writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar, who traces the effects of 'die Wende' on German society, is a good example. For Minnaard, therefore, the concept of 'in-betweenness' is much more problematic than for Louwerse. In her search for a viable alternative, Minnaard turns to recent social and political developments. For her, the drawbacks of essentialist views of identity come most visibly to the fore in the radical polarization in the public debate.

One possible way out of this ethnic dualism is the acknowledgement that self and other are interrelated, to the point that the self projects its own otherness on the other. This is the illuminating point made by Louwerse. In her reading of Bouazza's *Salomon* and *Momo* (a novel which is set entirely in the Netherlands and highlights the utter strangeness at the heart of the nation and its language), Louwerse refers to psychoanalysis (e.g. Jacques Lacan) to argue that self and other are inextricably linked. *Momo* shows that 'the strangeness of the other cannot serve to replace the strangeness in ourselves, the strangeness in the familiar';[9] *Salomon* shows that – to borrow from Lacan – we are inescapably alienated from our own image of ourselves.[10]

Another even more intriguing way out of this dualism can be found in the concept of triangulation, which Minnaard took from literary theorist Andreas Huyssen. Huyssen postulates that the German hostility against migrants in the early nineties did not emerge on its own, but as part of a broader problem. The new xenophobia might well be the expression of an *internal* German hostility, i.e. the resentment Germans in the west felt for the Germans in the east. He points out that it is difficult to explain the sheer intensity of the violence against foreigners [119] unless we understand it as 'the displacement onto the non-Germans of forty years of an inner-German hostility where another kind of foreign body was identified as the source of most problems: the other Germany'.[11] Minnaard comments that Huyssen's

assumption (which is supported, I would add, by the British sociologist Paul Gilroy) invites us to understand the relation between self and other within a complex web of relations. For example, it suggests that, to understand the German hostility towards Turks, we should analyze the relation between Germans, Turks and *Jews*. For the Netherlands as well, it would be extremely useful to reflect on the triangular relations between anti-Semitic, racist and xenophobic forms of 'othering' – and I suppose that Minnaard includes islamophobia in the term xenophobia.[12] This triangular approach makes us aware of the multiplicity of positions that are addressed in the literature of migration. This is especially useful for a reading of Özdamar's work, as Minnaard shows, but it also leads to recognizing the transnational elements in, for example, Bouazza's work.[13]

This elegant proposal might bring about an important change in the Dutch academic analysis of migrant writing and also in the study of the urgent issues of multiculturalism, racism, 'islamophobia' and anti-Semitism. Can we speak of such triangular patterns in the Netherlands and, if so, what is the pattern within which the rather sudden and violent hatred of Muslims emerged? What earlier historical hostility or guilt is replaced? Is there a link with the national unease about the relative lack of resistance during the Holocaust? Is there a link with the Dutch inability to work through its own colonial past, as Paul Gilroy suggests (in relation to England)? Minnaard's study opens a new perspective in the study of the literature of migration and it promises real insights that might even lead to a new perception of Dutch national history and identity.

As a last alternative to a dualist approach to self and other, Minnaard succinctly evokes the famous concept of Relation, by a theorist from Martinique, Edouard Glissant.[14] A relational view of identity sees identity as shaped by a transnational multitude of fluid relationships with others, which is why no single identity can ever be completely grasped, as they are produced by countless interactions. Identity is opaque and blurred, which makes it impossible to simply 'recognize' others, identify with them or appropriate them. Communication is always hampered but that does not mean that emotional relations are ruled out. Minnaard develops this point in relation to Özdamar's work but Louwerse shows how much the view that the world is opaque and difficult to understand is also at the heart of Bouazza's work: 'certainties are always suspect', and 'the representation of the "real" has [...] become unhinged'[15] – Bouazza's work, in Louwerse's last sentence, 'demands the freedom [...] to go out and embrace what will always exceed our grasp'.[16]

The acknowledgement of the plurality and opacity of all identities sits uneasily with the Dutch neo-realist discourse (Prins) that defines public debate today. The postcolonial and other theorists evoked by Louwerse and Minnaard argue that [120] realism, and its associated belief that identities and cultures are fixed and transparent, has not much to offer to those who want to understand the literature of today's global world.

What is Good Literature? What is Good Criticism?

Apart from focusing on the literary critique of the essentialist notion of identity, both Louwerse and Minnaard discuss a completely opposed literary strategy: the sarcastic adoption of ethnic stereotypes (notably by Feridun Zaimoglu and Hafid Bouazza). Louwerse, who focuses on Bouazza, reads against the grain and discerns splits, gaps and complexities within apparent stereotypes. Minnaard, who studies the angrily provocative writings of Turkish-German writer Zaimoglu, does not have that option. She acknowledges that some of Zaimoglu's writings

expose the utter violence of ethnic stereotypes, but she also wonders whether ordinary readers will draw the same conclusion. Like Judith Butler, she sees the risk of repeating stereotypes: 'it is only a thin line that distinguishes the effective use of the [stereotype] as a subversive transgression from [...] its affirmative repetition'.[17]

This problem permeates both studies. Louwerse refuses a compliant reading to trace the textual complexities in Bouazza's Momo, but she has to make a conscious effort to retrieve those hidden layers and refuse easy closure,[18] inspired by the insight that the condition of the migrant does not know any closure either. Minnaard agrees with Louwerse that Bouazza, through his subtly subversive appropriation of the abhorred 'exoticist' Dutch stereotype of the migrant, 'achieves a critical dislocation of the discourse he is otherwise defined by',[19] but she then wonders with mild despair who will notice this dislocation. She argues that such a sophisticated reading is made even more difficult because of Bouazza's completely different and outspoken public performances in which he criticizes Islam in highly unsubtle polarizing terms.[20] An unschooled reader will all too easily overlook the subtle critique of Dutch exoticism and feel instead supported by Bouazza's frank criticism of those he represents as backward, sexist and exotic Muslim men.

At moments like these, one might lament that there is a need for more sophisticated readers to grasp the subtleties of these writers – and perhaps also more sophisticated critics who could act as mediators. Such critics should also enter the debate on the quality of literature. Minnaard dissects the reasons why certain literary texts have been so passionately embraced by the general public. These have little to do with aesthetic quality or productivity as cultural critique. Instead of merely refuting the audience's supposedly superficial lust for the exotic, Minnaard, however, points out that there is a genuine need to hear the voice of the cultural other that is so often suppressed.[21] Readers will eagerly buy novels that promise them to reveal these suppressed voices. Nonetheless, Minnaard soberingly [121] admits that the voice of the other is only heard when it coincides with the accepted Dutch discourse on migration. Thus, Bouazza's warning that the Dutch are inadequate defenders of their own cultural heritage is hardly heard, whereas his criticism of Moroccan men's sexism is eagerly lapped up.[22] At this point, literary critics should take the responsibility to unravel these tensions and propose a broader evaluation of the literary work's quality.

The problem here may be that most (non-academic) critics in the Netherlands prefer a national over a transnational context for such evaluations. Even though Abdelkader Benali names postcolonial writer Salman Rushdie as his great example, no Dutch critical reviewer has adopted a postcolonial frame for their reading of Benali's work – Dutch critics insist on a biographical reading.[23] Fortunately, the two studies I have discussed here are different. Their approach is fruitful because they let themselves be inspired by a range of international – often Anglo-American – studies in postcolonial theory and criticism. Minnaard's transnational orientation may have been encouraged by her affiliation to German academic institutions; she suggests that, while Dutch literary studies failed to profit from international (especially US) scholarship, German scholars did adopt a more open, international theoretical approach which allowed them to learn from their US colleagues.[24] Louwerse, who works in England, may therefore see herself as a member of a transnational intellectual community. Their outstanding work convincingly shows the great potential offered by at least three decades of transnational theoretical work on postcoloniality and migration.

Notes

1. Henriëtte Louwerse, Homeless Entertainment: On Hafid Bouazza's Literary Writing (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 61.
2. Louwerse, pp. 74-76.
3. Louwerse, p. 76.
4. Ibid.
5. Liesbeth Minnaard, New Germans, New Dutch: Literary Interventions (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), p. 57.
6. Minnaard, p. 180.
7. Minnaard, p. 199.
8. Louwerse, p. 62.
9. Louwerse, p. 141.
10. Louwerse, p. 153.
11. Huyssen quoted in Minnaard, p. 41.
12. Minnaard, p. 49.
13. Minnaard, p. 122.
14. Minnaard, pp. 91-99.
15. Minnaard, p. 233. [122]
16. Minnaard, p. 235. Both studies also argue for a complex plural concept of identity by bringing in gender and sexuality. They even suggest that cultural (ethnic) difference often boils down to a difference in opinions on gender roles and sexuality.
17. Louwerse, p. 154. See also p. 132 and p. 146.
18. Louwerse, p. 135.
19. Louwerse, p. 177 and Minnaard, p. 125.
20. Minnaard, p. 125. Minnaard is very careful in analysing the huge gap between Bouazza's subtle literary work and his provocative simplified public performances which makes it difficult to understand why Professor van der Poel, in her review of the studies by Louwerse and Minnaard in the Academische boekengids 77 (November 2009), accuses Minnaard of neglecting this gap.
21. Minnaard, p. 149.
22. Minnaard, p. 125.
23. Minnaard, p. 83.
24. Minnaard, p. 63.

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