

BESPREK

[1631] Jesse van Amelsvoort, *A Europe of Connections. Post-National Worlds in Contemporary Minority Literature*. Ede (2021), GVO printers and designers / Groningen, University of Groningen, xix + 321 pp., no isbn.

Jesse van Amelsvoort defended his PhD at the University of Groningen with the thesis *A Europe of Connections* on 18 November 2021. His tutor was Prof. dr. Goffe Jensma, Full Professor of Frisian Language and Literature at this university. In this thesis, Van Amelsvoort examined the friction between writers belonging to a national or cultural minority and globalisation using the work of six minority authors within their nation-states: the Moroccan-Dutch writer Hafid Bouazza (1970-2021), the Moroccan-Catalan writer Najat El Hachmi (*1979), the Frisian poet Tsjêbbe Hettinga (1949-2013), the Turkish-German writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar (*1946), the British writer Zadie Smith (*1975) and the Swedish-Finnish writer Kjell Westö (*1961). In their work, they question the minority position, their works being in that sense *post-national*, but also *local*. Their literary worlds transcend national spaces and create their own geographies that reflect an individual sense of worldliness. In doing so, they escape the definition as a ‘minority’ imposed by the ‘majority’ nation. Three of the discussed authors are migrants (Bouazza, El Hachmi and Özdamar), two belong to a national minority (Hettinga and Westö) and Smith is a special case, born in Britain to a British father and Jamaican mother.

The work is clearly structured into a theoretical introduction, three parts (seven chapters) and a comprehensive conclusion. The first part *Critique of Concepts* is methodological. Chapter 1, *People, Place, and Politics*, deals with current debates about culture, borders and identity, framing certain authors as ‘minority writers’. Here, Van Amelsvoort outlines the historical and socio-political background of the work of the six selected authors. His main concept is ‘national thinking’, as it emerged in the nineteenth century, conceptualised by philosophers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder and Ernest Renan. As demonstrated by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983), economic and technological progress first evoked nationalism and then nation-states. These states sought to create delimited, homogeneous entities, in which there is no space for diversity and minorities with other languages. These groups then became *minoritized* (which, Van Amelsvoort argues, is different from *marginalised*). In response, minorities developed their own form of ‘minority nationalism’. Migrants form a particular problem, especially if they join a minority group, like El Hachmi did.

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Such minority authors are often given the status of an 'authorised spokesman' of that group, against their will. Globalisation in the late twentieth century is challenging national entities. Multilingualism and translanguaging come with this. Since cosmopolitanism is only for a certain elite, who reap the benefits of globalisation, while 'ordinary' people lose out, Van Amelsvoort (p. 67) calls for a reorientation of cosmopolitanism, seeking the plurality of different coexisting worlds rather than one universal world.

He designates this for Europe with his notions of *A Europe of Connections* and *post-national literary worlds*. In this, the minority author is a central figure because, as a member of a minoritized group, he or she can articulate the tension between minority and nation in the literary world evoked.

The second chapter discusses the methodology, which relies on text analysis and context-oriented literary sociology, the latter based both on Pierre Bourdieu and on interviews conducted by Van Amelsvoort with most of the authors. In selecting the authors, the main criteria were that they had to be European and have published their work after 1990. In addition, a mix of authors with a migration background and authors from an (ethno)linguistic minority was planned and achieved. The selected authors provide insight into dealing with being minoritized in contemporary Europe. Incidentally, as witnessed by international translations and literary awards, the selected authors are by no means *marginalised*.

Van Amelsvoort compares their subject matter. In doing so, he is aware of the different position of someone writing in English like Smith, versus authors from (very) small language areas like Hettinga or Bouazza. For his analysis, he uses the concept of *multilingual local and significant geographies*, as designed by Francesca Orsini at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London (p. 79). Orsini here assumes the local as a point of view, from which the world is seen. Van Amelsvoort uses Bourdieu's field theory, in which artistic literature and commercial art are mutually exclusive. This also involves non-literary players such as bureaucrats and subsidisers. He also refers to the work of Pascale Casanova (2013) who points to the asymmetry between 'central' and 'peripheral' literatures. Through interviewing the selected authors, Van Amelsvoort attempts to find out how the authorial concept was experienced by them. In connection with this, he points to what Hans-Robert Jauss has called the *Erwartungshorizont*, the reader's expectation – an author should not repeat himself too much, or significantly deviate, because the author's name evokes a certain expectation. An author may evoke this through what Jérôme Meizoz (2007) called a *posture*, an autopresentation. Van Amelsvoort points here to the self-presentation of Hafid Bouazza, who put *l'art pour l'art* first, while readers invariably continued to see him as a 'migrant author'.

The second part, *A Politics of Representation*, also consists of two chapters, which proceeds from the second chapter of Part I. In Chapter 3, *Writing is a Way to be Free*, Van Amelsvoort incorporates his analysis of El Hachmi's novel *L'ultim patriarca* (2008), Özdamar's story *Mutterzunge* (1990), Smith's novella *The*

Embassy of Cambodia (2013) and Hettinga's poems *bestean* (1974), *beslút* (1970) and *Lytse jonge* (2000/2017). The title of the chapter is a quote from El Hachmi and succinctly indicates the problem of all writers: it is difficult to write according to one's own wishes as an author from a minority group in a nation-state (p. 92). There is a discrepancy in narratives between the public sphere – traditionally reserved for men and majority groups – and the private sphere – that of women and linguistic minorities. This is in line with Honi Babha's (1990) discourse defining the nation as a narrative.

This discrepancy is thematised in El Hachmi's earlier mentioned novel, in which the patriarch Mimoun Driouch emigrates to Barcelona and his family joins him against his will. When his daughter learns Catalan, the fence is drawn. El Hachmi recounts her problem of being accepted as a *Catalan* author and not a *Moroccan* writing Catalan. In *Mutterzunge*, Özdamar confronts the divided Berlin of the 1970s with Turkey, where an uprising had just been put down. The Turkish woman living in Germany seems to have lost her mother tongue as her Turkish interlocutor does not understand her. Smith's *The Embassy of Cambodia* is about Fatou, a young woman from the Ivory Coast, who works for the Derewal family in London's Willesden district near the Cambodian embassy. Fatou is fired for no apparent reason. She then discusses the Holocaust with her Nigerian friend Andrew, believing that far more people were murdered in the mass killings in Rwanda. This provincialises Europe. Van Amelsvoort quotes Smith seeing herself as part of different communities, she is black, a woman, a mother, British and European, as well as a second-generation Jamaican and more (p. 117). The last author discussed in this chapter is the blind poet Hettinga, whose career was so connected to Friesland that the question is whether he was seen as a *Frisian* writer or a *Frisian writer*. The first two poems are from the collection *Fan lân loft and leafde* (1975), the last was published posthumously in *It faderpaard* (2017). All four authors seek to engage in dialogue with what has already been written, a literary protest that critically examines European practices and traditions.

Chapter 4 *Breaking the Mould* deepens the expectations that minority writers have to meet. The question is to what extent such writers, once they have entered the literary field, have the opportunity to address other themes. For instance, Westö tried to escape the label of being a Swedish-Finnish minority writer with the novellas *Lang* (2002) and *Gå inte ensam ut i natten* (2009) and El Hachmi did the same with *La caçadora de cossos* (2011). Reader's comments, however, caused them to return to the 'minority theme'. Others managed the escape. In Hettinga's case, Van Amelsvoort discussed four poems i.e. *De stêd* (2012) and *Yn Ljouwert* (1995), where Hettinga abandoned the rural theme. In comparison with Westö and El Hachmi, Bouazza was successful in his attempt to leave emigrant themes behind with his novel *Momo* (1998).

The third part of the thesis *Comparisons as Critique* consists of three chapters that each problematise one of the previously discussed central aspects of the socio-cultural and political group formation in order to discover how minority authors

discuss building *A Europe of Connections*. In chapter 5 *Pulling Apart and Bringing Together*, Van Amelsvoort subjects the novels *Där vi en gång gått* (2006) by Westö and *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* (2003) by Özdamar to a close reading. Westö looks at the Swedish-speaking Finnish working class during the Finnish Civil War of 1917/18 and its consequences in the interwar period. Özdamar describes a young Turkish actress living in the divided Berlin of the 1970s when her own country is oppressed by the military dictatorship. While Westö emphasises language and class boundaries, Özdamar's protagonist, in contrast, rejects an identification with national borders. The chapter shows how minority authors question national history from their own minority point of view.

Using Hettinga's poems *De blauwe hauk fan Wales* (1992) and *Gesicht fol seefûgels* (2005/2017) and Bouazza's novel *Spotvogel* (2009) as examples, the next chapter 6 *Minoritized Writers' Space* looks at how minority authors connect their own space with a more worldly perspective, while trying to create a 'home'. He shows how Hettinga connects Friesland with areas like Wales, while for Bouazza it is rather the Dutch language that is his home – his alter ego Hafid in *Spotvogel* writes in Moroccan Oujda to the surprise of his friend Andala in Dutch.

The final chapter 7 *Connecting Across Class*, through a close reading of Smith's *NW* (2012) and Westö's *Hägring 38* (2013), studies how class also influences identity formation. In *NW*, Natalie, of Jamaican descent and married 'upward' to the successful lawyer Frank with whom she has two children but who feels her marriage has stalled, tries to find herself. She runs into her former friend, Irish Leah, also unhappy in her marriage to Michel. Both are convinced that their Caribbean friend Felix was murdered by a former classmate Nathan. Through their investigation, Leah and Natalie reconnect and Natalie comes to terms with her past, expressed through the use of her former name Keisha. Westö's novel is set in the Swedish-Finnish milieu of Helsinki in 1938. Matilda Wiik, secretary to Claes Thune recognises in the psychiatrist Robi Lindemark who falls in love with Thune's wife Gabi, the captain who had raped her 20 years earlier, after she was the daughter of a 'red' mother captured by the Whites. Lindemark does not recognise her, but tries to seduce her. Eventually, Wiik kills him before committing suicide. This story is set against the backdrop of Finland's rapprochement with Nazi Germany. The story problematises Swedish-Finnish self-identification against the backdrop of the former civil war and the looming new war.

The thesis concludes with an extensive conclusion, in which Van Amelsvoort once again summarises the problem of minoritized writing. He touches on four dimensions. First, the minority writer is the product of the nation-state that sees itself as a monolithic entity. Within this nation-state, the minority author is made the mouthpiece of the 'own' group whether the author wants it or not. Third, the minority author is not a passive object of social pressure or expectations, but is himself active by responding to the *Erwartungshorizont*. Finally, the minority author invites the reader to think about a post-national Europe. Van Amelsvoort

sees the European ‘peripheries’ as perfect starting points for thinking about the multilingual Europe of connections.

In the group of authors examined by Van Amelsvoort, Tsjêbbe Hettinga, being the only poet, is a bit of outsider. One wonders whether it would not have been better to compare, say, Hylke Speerstra with the other prose works. His migration novels *It wrede paradys* (2010) or *De treastfugel* (2011), equally question the position of the Frisian minority (both have also been translated into English and *De treastfugel* was presented at the 2016 Frankfurter Buchmesse, where the Netherlands was co-host country). Out of the younger writers, Hein Jaap Hilarides with his *De trekker fan Troje* (2017) or *Beppe Xenia* (2021), in which Frisian identity also plays a role, would qualify.

For a Frisian reader, Hettinga’s comparison with Westö’s romance theme is particularly interesting because, as Van Amelsvoort also points out in his outline on p. 48, his position is similar – that of an ethnic minority author. To be honest, the thesis is not an easy read. This is mainly due to typical features of a PhD dissertation: a great deal of repetition of facts, frequent references to previously mentioned issues, a sometimes stiff style of sentence structure. It would therefore be good if Van Amelsvoort reworked his thesis into a book aimed at a larger scholarly audience. His subject is worthy of this.

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