

EXAMEN DE LIBROS

THE BIRTHCOUNTRY AND THE NETHERLANDS IN SURINAMESE LITERATURE

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- Ombre, Ellen, *Vrouwvreemd*, Uitgeverij, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam, 1994.
Ramdas, Anil, *De Papagaai, de stier en de klimmende bougainvillea*, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 1992.
Ramdas, Anil, *De beroepsherinneraar en andere verhalen*, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 1996.
Roemer, Astrid H., *Over de gekte van een vrouw*, in the edition Maar ik blijf, Ooievaar, Amsterdam, 1996.
Roemer, Astrid H., *Nergens Ergens*, in the edition Maar ik blijf, Ooievaar, Amsterdam, 1996.
Roemer Astrid H., *De naam voor een liefde*, in the edition Maar ik blijf, Ooievaar, Amsterdam, 1996.
Roemer, Astrid H., *Gewaagd Leven*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam, 1996.
Roemer, Astrid H., *Lijken op Liefde*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam, 1997.

Images

We enter the *Schelde*- on both sides a strip of earth, artificially controlled, wrought of the elements of nature by human hands and placed in unmoving water. The canals are set at straight angles to the riverbed, as if drawn with mathematical precision on a imaginary ruler. Cows wander with calmness through the fields, soft and green from the rain. A bird rises in a straight line into the heavy sky and hangs there unmoving as if tied by invisible forces.¹

This description by an Antillian author of the arrival on the continent poetically captures the beauty, as well as the manmade facet of nature in

¹ All translation made by the author of this article. Van Leeuwen, Boelie, *De rots der struikeling*, In de Knipscheer, 1962.

the lower countries. These and many more images can come to the minds of people who have visited or have lived in the Netherlands. They are based upon personal experience. But what kind of visions do people have of countries they haven't seen with their own eyes, that they have only heard about? When asked how they imagine the Netherlands some people mention the tulips and the windmills. But tulips and windmills only form a small part of reality, just as the above passage gives only a fragmented picture, which is altered upon entering the inhabited world. Others might think in more abstract terms about modernization, material culture and the social welfare system. Since countries are too complex to describe easily, the elements highlighted by a particular person tell us much about that individual.

Over the decades the oceans have become smaller and more people move to other countries and exchange their visions for direct experiences. Not only can we see this through the continuing flow of migrants into Europe, but also in the ever more frequent holidays of the inhabitants of wealthy countries. The new experiences cause one to adapt ones thoughts and expectations about previous unvisited countries, and moreover, they change perceptions of the country that one has left behind.

In the case of inhabitants of the former Dutch colonies we have to consider images of the Netherlands as both colonizing and mother-country. The Netherlands often have a presence in literature written in Dutch from both inside and outside of the birthcountry, owing to the historical experiences of these countries.

Images of the Netherlands are also present in literature that uses Sranan as the main language. (Sranan is one of the creole languages spoken in Surinam). Such is the case of Aleks de Drie; his stories are based upon oral tradition.

The only Dutch people represented are the slavekeepers and Dutch colonizers. The author describes their cruelty very explicitly —Surinam is known to have been one of the most cruel colonies — and how the slaves tried to escape into the jungle. The history of the colonies and the slaves have been described in various academic studies, but the stories from Aleks de Drie add an extra dimension to the facts. The personification and the emphasis on the fact that these stories were handed down generation by generation forms a special source of information from the inside².

² Hereby I do not necessarily mean extra factual information, because of the fact of the way information can change in a more variable genre. See De Drie, Aleks, *Sye Arki Tori*, Aktua Print, 1982.

Inside out

In many of these novels we can at least find a passing reference to the Netherlands, as in Albert Helman's fascinating autobiographical novel about a journey by boat, made in the year 1955, deep into the jungles of Surinam. The book is accurately called *The End of the Map*, since the author goes down rivers which are not completely known.³ Helman mentions the habit of giving Dutch or German names to islands, mountains and rivers, such as the "Eilerts de Haan ridge." Besides the geographical names, the presence of the Dutch culture can only be found in the opposition of so called civilized culture with the indigenous way of live. Helman describes with open admiration the visual aspect of the different indigenous people, their languages and the hardship they suffer. He criticizes the urge to "convert" the Indians to the modern way of life in such a way that their own culture is not taken into account, and he anticipates the difficulties of the direct contact with the so-called civilized world. The journey in itself is almost "the end of the map" for Albert Helman, who suffers from swollen or infected legs to such an extent that he can hardly walk. In one of the most impressive parts of the novel, the Indians understand his problem when he is lying alone in his hammock, give him an a herbal dressing and leave, all with minimum verbal communication.

Many novels from the Antilles and Surinam contain images of the former colonizer. This can partly be explained by the presence of the Netherlands in the media, education and politics in the Dutch Caribbean and above all by the fact that the Netherlands is the country where many members of the family began another life.

Anil Ramdas, a writer of Hindustani-Surinamese background living in the Netherlands, expresses his thoughts about the Netherlands at the time when he was attending secondary school:

We had experiences in a world that was not our own, a dreamworld we could enter as often as we went to the library. The stories from the mothercountry helped us to escape the confusing world with the particular habits in which we were trapped; we dreamed of a world in which our bodies wouldn't be covered with coconut-oil, where our clothes would fit perfectly, with steak instead of fried fish, and movies that wouldn't misrepresent the past but

³ Helman, Albert, *Het einde van de kaart*, De Arbeiderspers, 1980.

represent the reality, a world without violence or racism. At school we were mainly being prepared for the journey into the other world.

In the compilation of essays by Anil Ramdas (Paramaribo, Surinam, 1958) *De Papagaai, de stier en de klimmende bougainvillea* (*The parrot, the bull and the climbing bugainville*) and in his collection of stories *De beroepsherinneraar en andere verhalen* (*The professional rememberer and other stories*) the author reflects on his past as a young Hindustani in Surinam, on India, the mothercountry as perceived by the Hindustani population, and the Netherlands, the final destination of many migrants from Surinam. The ways in which the migrant has to deal with his feelings, his memories and his identity are humorously and articulately described by the author. In his work he shows the capacity to build up images about other cultures, and to relate these to his central themes, such as stories about mixed marriages in Zimbabwe (former Rhodesia), or about the expression of free love in a Muslim country like Turkey. In his work the line between fiction and essay is crossed, especially when he describes his own memories about life in Surinam.

Ramdas describes his thoughts on India, still considered the mothercountry by many people from a Hindustani background. On several occasions he travels to India where he tries to describe the Western way of life as lived out in Delhi. He discovers that he can pass for an middle-class Indian, but that the local people soon figure out that he comes from the West. Through his eyes we receive a critical analysis of Surinam and India, and he doesn't spare the Netherlands:

[...] life in the Netherlands wasn't like it was represented in literature, the inhabitants of the mothercountry weren't broad-minded, quick of wit, accessible or friendly. They were rather difficult, mistrusting, cool, businesslike, short-tempered, prejudiced and lonely to such an extent that they used to speak with their pets.

Defining himself as an academic researcher, he states that his country lacks a literary tradition, because of the fact that all the inhabitants are merely "temporary migrants" in the country, even though they might never leave. He states that there is more written about Surinam scientifically than we know through the literature. He seems to be very fond of Naipaul, with whom he shares a background as son of an Indian migrant born in the Caribbean. He does not mention Surinamese authors, like

Astrid Roemer, who have earned their place in the Dutch literature, maybe because they write from the outside. He prefers Naipaul, *Madame Bovary* and *Wuthering Heights*, even though his themes come back to the mixture of cultures, and to migrant identity in the Netherlands. Naipaul has also moved away from his birthcountry and describes Caribbean culture in a very cynical if not undermining manner. I consider Ramdas' statement about the inexistence of Surinamese literature more as a challenge than an actual fact. Even though there is not a great volume of Surinamese literature (also partly explained by a relatively low population), there are high quality works.

A mixed vision

The work of Astrid Roemer (Paramaribo, Surinam, 1947) deals with the lives of the main characters in a fragmented, sometimes confusing but appealing way, using thoughts, songs, poems, description and dialogue in several languages, though the novels are basically written in Dutch. Often she does not directly mention the character represented which heightens the sense of confusion. As with Anil Ramdas, even though two of the novels are placed mainly within the Netherlands, the world represented is that of migrants, not the Dutch themselves. In one of her earliest novels *Nergens ergens* (Nowhere Somewhere, 1983) she describes the life of a young Surinamese man who moves to the Netherlands to study and to overcome a broken heart. He has difficulties adapting to his new way of life and is tossed between memory and expectation.

Through the literature we get a very mixed vision of the home-country and also of what the Netherlands represent. The latter has been and will be the country of the colonizer, but also the country in which you can find a more modernized way of life. In spite of a love-hate relationship with this country, many people have migrated there in order to find a better life or because they couldn't continue in their own country. In comparison to other ethnic minorities such as the migrants from Turkey or Morocco, the Surinamese and the Antillians have previous knowledge and the whole country has been affected by the former relationship with this country. In *Nergens Ergens* the sentiments of Britta are expressed clearly:

I have a love-hate relationship with Surinam. Hate because of the fact that history shows me how I got there. My ancestors were dragged into the country

by force or migrated because of false promises. They suffered and never donated the country to their offspring as a home-country. The grass stayed green in Africa. In India. In Indonesia. In China. Green and even juicy in Europe. Nevertheless, I love Suriname because I was born there. It gives me natural feelings of belonging and safety. Moreover, I still have friends and family there and memories of my childhood and our dead. Holland hurts. Everywhere we are they see us as aliens, or worse, as opportunists. Even my closest friends keep asking me: How long have you been here? When are you going back? Aggressions willfully mixed with plain ignorance: The welfare has been obtained partly from my birthcountry. After five generations of legitimized suppression I should be allowed to choose my own mothercountry. I chose Holland, Benito, even though the Dutch don't choose me.

One must also consider the fact that most people already speak Dutch (or a local variety of Dutch), and all the authors have written their thoughts in Dutch rather than Sranan, Sarnami or Papiamentu. Boelieven Leeuwen and Astrid Roemer do use other languages as fragments in their work. Astrid Roemer mixes description with thoughts, songs and poems in Sranan, Saramacca and English. Linguistic research has described the use of code-switching and borrowing within groups of migrants from the former colonies.⁴ Here we can see how language strategies are used to represent and shape the (mixed) identities of groups of speakers. Boelie van Leeuwen gives other examples of the use and mixture of several languages by the characters in his novels.

Her last two novels *Gewaagd Leven* (A Daring Way of Life, 1996) and *Lijken op Liefde* (Looks Like Love, 1997) by Astrid Roemer take place in Surinam. In the former, she uses the events in the lives of a family living near Paramaribo to describe the political, economic and social life in the eighties. The main character in the end wants to escape and is planning to study in the Netherlands. In her last novel however, she speculates about future events of the country at the end of the century. The title can also be translated as "Corpse of Love" since the story deals with two (political) murders related to a well-known (albeit fictitious) politician. The main character of *Gewaagd Leven* lives in the Netherlands and doesn't want to hear about what is going on. He actually has chosen not to hear anymore and refuses to speak until the situation has changed.

⁴ See for example Jette Bolle, *Sranan Tongo and Dutch Code-switching and borrowing*, MA Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1994.

Outside in

After having lived in the Netherlands many people go back for a visit or a holiday. This generates a change in the way they see the home-country, because the country has changed, the people have grown and certain things might have been forgotten. *I've stayed away too long*, is the main thought of a character the first night back with her family in Curaçao, in the short story *De langste maand* (The Longest Month, 1994) written by Diane Lebacs. The daughter who has stayed away longer as planned, after getting her university degree, she doesn't feel ready to go back but realizes that nobody has been waiting for her and passes through a period of confusion. She is angry about all the changes she hasn't lived through but which now show their effects. Her family does not understand her new looks nor the anger in her eyes. She recognizes and sympathizes with the way of life, even defending it among her Dutch colleagues, but no longer forms an active part of the culture.

Anil Ramdas describes how he felt offended when he went back to Surinam and they treated him as a foreigner in his own country. In the meantime he admits that his way of life has changed and that he is in Surinam as a visitor. He explains what he used to buy with a quarter before independence: a small loaf of bread filled with sardines and a soft drink. Now you can only buy things like a safety pin or a single chili pepper. Ramdas realizes that the main difference is that he can leave whenever he wants to, whilst the people in Surinam are "trapped" in a country with economic and political problems.

In *Vrouwvreemd* Ellen Ombre has collected 8 stories, in which she analyzes the life and thoughts of people whom Ramdas has described as "temporary migrants." Her main characters are people who have moved to another country but who think more about the past. It is through these memories that we can form a complete picture of what a person has gone through. In one of the stories by Ellen Ombre, *Grieven* ("Grief") there is an encounter between girls who were closest friends in childhood. Lize comes back to Surinam and finds her friend in a poor and desperate situation. The encounter triggers many childhood memories. Many of the people she knew as a child have died and the others have changed completely and do not act or look as she remembered them. Ellen Ombre manages the feeling of nostalgia with a sense of scepticism, which comes clearly through in *Verbinding*. She had received the (misplaced) criticism for writing a too-polished version of Dutch and

explains how her grandmother evoked and nursed a love for Dutch literature. This part of the collection is more an essay in which she analyzes Dutch paternalism throughout history and gives examples of the "life" exhibitions of diverse Surinamese groups in 1972.

Through the discussion of the novels I have tried to give an impression of the relationships between the former colonies and the Netherlands as represented in the Surinamese and Antillian literature. In these novels we get an idea of the feeling of wanting to exchange one country for another one. Sometimes this experience is positive, sometimes negative. But always it forces the migrant into reconsidering his position in relation to the country he has chosen to live in, which could never completely be conceived of beforehand, and to unravel thoughts about what he has left behind. The authors mix past and present, historical past with personal experiences, and in some cases even involve the future.

In the case of the Netherlands these themes are more than welcome due to the "blindfold" many people have put on when looking into the attitudes towards the former colonies and the current discussions about the social position of ethnic minorities. The authors do not stay at the level where one group or the other is "guilty" of causing all problems and in this sense the literature and the essays form a contribution to the sometimes one sided dialogue on social issues. Hope that the place for the above-mentioned authors of the former colonies (and many more not mentioned) will not be limited to Dutch literature, where it is very much alive, but that it will also be translated and transported to other parts of the world, not only because of the quality of their work, but also because of their insight into the confrontation and blending of cultures.