

Migrational and Gender Roles in Rachida Lamrabet's 'Vrouwland' and Naima El Bezaz' 'De verstotene' – Jossfinn Bohn

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Abstract

This working paper presents an overview and some first results of the doctoral project titled The Drive Towards Literary Categorisation: Blessing or Curse? An Analytic Evaluation and a Study of the Reception of the Literary Production of Female Writers of So-called 'Immigrant Background' with the goal of offering an extensive analysis of the literary production of contemporary immigrant female authors. This analysis is then used to investigate the concept of literary categorisation and its advantages as well as disadvantages. The first results of the study centre around the manipulation of traditional gender and migrational roles in the novels *Vrouwland* by Rachida Lamrabet and *De verstotene* by Naima El Bezaz. The paper examines the way the authors handle the swings between the Western world their female protagonists choose and their original Muslim setting. By analysing literary examples of interpersonal relations, this paper demonstrates the complexity of gender and migrational roles, and how they can be essentialised into binary systems and categories.

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The following working paper is developed from a presentation made during the colloquium “Gender Studies in Belgium.A State of the Art”, organised by SOPHIA on the 19th and 20th October 2017 in Brussels. The paper presents a brief overview of a doctoral project underway in the field of Dutch-speaking literature and offers a summary of some first results.

The project in question carries the title *De drang naar literaire categorisering: vloek of zegen? Een receptie- en analytisch onderzoek naar de literaire productie van zogenaamde ‘migrantenschrijfsters’* (and translates into English as *The Drive Towards Literary Categorisation: Blessing or Curse? An Analytic Evaluation and a Study of the Reception of the Literary Production of Female Writers of So-called ‘Immigrant Background’*). As the title suggests, the study is centred around the literary category feminine literature of immigration. This category is represented by a corpus of contemporary literary works written in Dutch by female authors with an immigration background and which deal in a direct or indirect way with the topic of immigration – in this paper specifically *Vrouwland* by Rachida Lamrabet and *De verstotene* by Naima El Bezaz.

The first part of the study is devoted to methodological and terminological contextualisation: the general concept of categorisation as well as literary categorisation specifically. “Categorisation” can be approached from multiple angles. Its philosophical root can be traced back to Plato, who recognises the existences of hierarchies within the subdivision of reality into categories. Aristotle also pursues these ontological ideas lying at the basis of the structuring of reality., The concept has not lost its significance today, as can be seen for example when twentieth century philosopher Nicolai Hartmann puts forward a doctrine of categories. The philosophical base of the concept is linked to socio-cultural issues, which are very important for the project in question, with its issues of migration, multiculturalism and gender – with feminine literature of immigration as a part of these issues.

Categorisation is a way of structuring and conceiving the multicultural society of which we are part. On the one hand, this mechanism allows human beings to more easily orient themselves socially and psychologically in a complex world. On the other hand, there are significant downsides to subdividing

categories, as for example when they exclude and make invisible certain elements that do not easily fit. A focus on a specific form of categorisation – namely the literary one – highlights other impacts of the mechanism. The literary canon – one of the results of literary categorisation – is hierarchical and exclusive, literary works are handled unequally, depending on whether they are or are not considered part of the canon. Works outside of this prestigious group have an outsider status, which can be interpreted as positive or negative. On the positive side, non-canonical works may receive special attention thanks to their outsider status, which tends to aid in the work's success. On the other hand, the situation of not fitting neatly in standard categories can be seen in a far more negative light. The outsider position of the works places them in a sort of literary ghetto.

The second and most substantial part of the doctoral study consists of a comparative literary analysis of works from the following authors: Yasmine Allas, Mani Amiri, Khadija Arib, Najoua Bijjir, Semira Dallali, Naima El Bezaz, Rachida Lamrabet, Naema Tahir and Chika Unigwe. The chosen literary works share several characteristics: They are written in Dutch; they were published after 2000; they deal to some extent with the topic of immigration; they are written by female authors with an immigrant background and who reside or have resided in Belgium or the Netherlands.

In order to determine the pertinence – or lack of pertinence – of the literary category of feminine literature of immigration, the works in the corpus are analysed along two main lines: The first investigates the handling of 'typical' concepts of immigration literature, such as Heimat, uprooting, identity quest, and in-betweenness. The second analytical thrust concerns the handling of gender concepts usually tackled in works of so-called feminine literature, namely views of patriarchal society, subject-object relationships between men and women, as well as marriage and maternity. The literary study of these interrelated concepts helps to shed light on the category of feminine literature of immigration.

The third part of the research focuses on the reception of these works to show that the division into literary categories – as literature of immigration or feminine literature – may affect the public as well

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as the authors. To this end – to include all types of readers and audiences – papers, literary editions, reviews in online forums, as well as interviews by the authors in question are thoroughly analysed along the same two axes as the literary analysis, namely migration and gender. This analysis will reveal if the results of the literary study correspond with the materials reflecting the public reception, or not.

With the help of these different procedures, the study hopes to reach its main objective: answer the question about the pertinence – or lack of pertinence – of a literary category of feminine literature of immigration and the related advantages and disadvantages of literary categorisation in general. Linked to this goal is the wish to offer a critical and complete evaluation of the main characteristics of the literary category of feminine literature of immigration. It should be added that the evaluation has potential beyond its academic scope by providing a useful guide for publishing strategies: the study's results could help publishing houses to advertise their books better, using literary categories such as literature of immigration and so-called feminine literature.

The first results of this study include an analysis of the manipulation of traditional gender and migrational roles in Rachida Lamrabet's *Vrouwland*, published in 2007, and Naima El Bezaz' *De verstopene*, published in 2006. The goal of this first comparative literary analysis is to observe how the authors use gender- and migration-related categories to present the in-betweenness that characterises their female protagonists' lives, namely their wish to become part of the Western world after they grew up in a sealed immigrant Muslim community in Europe. In addition, the analysis uncovers the strong impacts that lie inside migrational and gender roles that are embedded in society and constructed by it. In the following, the focus will mainly lie on interpersonal relationships within the novels – the given roles for the characters and corresponding expectations. The binary and categorical nature of these assigned roles is problematic for the protagonists as they deal with their sense of in-betweenness.

The female protagonists' relationships inside Western society are revealing. Contrary to their hopes, this Western world does not guarantee a less static image of gender or migration than the original Moroccan family community they are trying to escape. This is clear in terms of gender roles when observing Mina – the protagonist in *De verstotene* – and her love life. In the beginning of the novel, she lives together with a Dutch man, Mart, whose expectations concerning love relationships reflect a stereotypical gender image. For instance, he perceives Mina as too dominant and expresses this thought as following:

Jij geeft me geen ruimte. Ik ben alleen een figurant in de film waarin jij de hoofdrol speelt. (El Bezaz 2007: 26)

(You don't give me any space. I'm only a minor character in the film where you play the leading part.)

This statement reflects the wish for more conservative gender roles, hinting of a division into passive female behaviour and active male behaviour, in other words an object-subject relationship. This claim is supported by the fact that, later in the novel, Mart chooses another woman as a partner who presumably better corresponds with his idea of the workings of a heterosexual relationship. One indication for this is the following excerpt that shows an act of social courtesy associated with binary gender roles, with the man acting while the woman reacts and, accepts:

Hij schoof haar stoel naar achteren en zij ging zitten. (El Bezaz 2007: 100)

(He moved her chair backwards and she sat down.)

It is surprising that Mina – who is trying to escape an environment that seems suffocating to her in terms of gender related normative expectations – craves in fact for classical masculinity in her Western partners: She despises Mart's vanity and longs to be sexually dominated, something he is not able to give her (see El Bezaz 2007: 13-14). This one aspect of his sexuality, which indeed offers the possibility of a less static gender image, does not fulfil its potential in helping Mina out of her in-betweenness. Instead, she has internalised the normative gender relations herself and is subconsciously drawn into

their direction. It is noteworthy in that context that Mina's later one-night stand with a man named Simon, who can be perceived as the opposite of Mart, neither fulfils her expectations. Mina finds herself instrumentalised by a man who only recognises her as a sexual being meant to fulfil his needs and who claims the dominant role exclusively for himself.

Even this initial comparison of Mina's two male sexual partners reveals some of the workings of binary gender roles and their ability to trigger a feeling of in-betweenness and entrapment for individuals, who do not adhere to those roles: On the one hand, Mart longs for a normative heterosexual relationship, which Mina is not able – or not willing – to give him due to her 'dominant' personality that does not fit the female role for such a relationship. On the other hand, she sees Mart as feminised and unconsciously craves a more normative masculine partner. When she encounters Simon, her later one-night stand, she is immediately drawn to him due to his 'classic' manliness. This second relationship however, is also unsatisfactory for Mina, as she finds herself reduced to an object that fulfils her male partner's sexual needs. Mina's heterosexual relationships in the Western world makes it clear that the inherent binary gender roles – even if appearing in different disguises – do not offer her the possibility to escape the in-betweenness she feels in her life. On the contrary, they even strengthen it.

But it is not only gender image that appears more static in Western society than expected by the protagonists. The two women's main wish, namely to escape from their original environment and to 'pass as white', appears to be more challenging than expected. Instead of their utopian wish of finding in Western society an unbiased and blank space concerning ethnicity, Mina and Mara – the female protagonist in *Vrouwland* – see themselves stigmatised as 'the other' in their daily lives. One episode in *Vrouwland* is especially telling, as it combines rigid migrational as well as gender images. Like Mina, Mara is in a relationship with a Western man at the beginning of the novel – in this case a Belgian. He wants her to meet his parents. During this visit, Mara gets questioned by her boyfriend's mother about

eating pork, revenge due to honour, and the beauty of Moroccan female hair. This reduction to the cliché figure of the exotic woman and Muslim immigrant as well as the realisation that she is unable to escape her cultural background leads an outburst by Mara:

Ik ben het kotsbeu telkens aan die afkomst herinnerd te worden, ik haat het herleid te worden tot een etnie, een godsdienst of een kleur! Ik ben meer dan dat! (Lamrabet 2012: 120)

(I'm sick and tired of constantly being reminded of this origin. I hate to be reduced to an ethnicity, a religion or a colour! I'm more than that!)

With these words she clearly states that she has not arrived in a place where stereotypes of race and religion no longer operate. Instead she finds herself forced into the role of the immigrant that she tried to escape.

These brief examples of interpersonal relationships and the corresponding characteristics of migrational and gender roles – in this case in the setting of Western society – allow a glimpse of the complexity inherent to these roles. Another example of the complex handling of migrational roles and gender roles lies in the interpersonal relationships between the female protagonists and other female characters from their original surroundings such as the younger sister Salaa in *De verstotene* and the former best friend Najla in *Vrouwland*. Mina and Salaa and respectively Mara and Najla contrast sharply in terms of gender as well as migrational roles. Whereas Salaa and Najla follow their Muslim communities' expectations related to religion and the corresponding gender norms, in that they marry the right man, live a strictly religious life, and mother children, Mina and Mara break loose from these constraints in search of a better life in the outside world and consequently position themselves against those traditional gender and migrational roles.

These opposing behaviours result in classifying the characters into traditional female categories, which themselves also have a strongly binary character. As such, Mina and Mara receive the label of 'whores' and outlaws – in Dutch *verstotenen*, and thus the title of Naima El Bezaz' novel – whereas Najla and

Sanaa are viewed by their communities as 'angels'. This binary picture is strongly supported when linked to strict migrational categories. On one hand, Najla and Sanaa remain faithful to their environment of origin and act as functional members of an exclusively autochthonous community. By doing so, they strengthen the idea of a hermetically sealed community that does not take part in the society surrounding them but leads towards the concept of a ghetto. On the other hand, Mina and Mara opt for the extreme opposite lifestyle. They try to cut all ties with their former lives and use the strategy of cultural assimilation in order to merge into Western society.

The strong opposition between these two lifestyles reinforces the binary character of the gendered categorisation into whore and angel. From their community's point of view, Sanaa and Najla act as the perfect immigrants who uphold the community's values – including in terms of gender expectations – and do not succumb to the temptations of the host country. By contrast, Mina and Mara are perceived to betray their community's values by offering themselves and their bodies to a society of vices.

The judgement according to these strict gender roles stands in contrast to the complex world in which Mina and Mara try to navigate. Whereas they are perceived as deviant women in their former home community, they fall into the category of the immigrant when entering Western society. Their strategy of complete denial of their original background and the associated norms, and values does not provide them with the basis for a life of freedom and choice. Instead, they must realise that a paradise-like Western world without boundaries only exists in their minds. As they see themselves fall from one binary gendered category – angel versus whore – into another binary ethnic category – the allochthon versus the autochthon, it becomes obvious that neither of these categories can offer them the freedom they desperately crave. It can be argued that it is in fact the classification into categories that keeps the protagonists from outpacing the feeling of in-betweenness and entrapment that haunt them in their home community as well as in their chosen Western setting. Both female protagonists realise in the end that all their efforts to 'pass as white' cannot conceal that they have only changed the setting but were not able to escape categorisation. Mina and Mara are still seen as women and immigrants.

In conclusion, neither Mina nor Mara are able to escape the in-betweenness that shapes their lives nor fulfil the unrealistic expectations regarding binary gender and migrational roles; an observation that leaves the reader with a sense of entrapment or as Mina says towards the end of *De verstotene*:

Ik wilde gelukkig zijn, bij de andere groep horen, [...] omdat zij konden doen wat ze wilden, want zij waren niet afhankelijk, zij waren echt vrij. Maar wat ik ook deed, ik bleef gevangen. (El Bezaz 2007: 237)

(I wanted to be happy, to be part of the other group, [...] because they did whatever they wanted, because they were not dependent, they were truly free. But whatever I did, I remained captive.)

With this excerpt, the author draws the reader's attention to the utopian character that binary categories can hold. While Mina believes that happiness is only achievable for her when belonging to a concise group – young, white, successful and attractive Western people – and realises that she failed in her efforts to become part of this category, the reader is well aware of the abstract and categorical character of such a group. Secondly, this excerpt encapsulates the struggle both novels' protagonists deal with: El Bezaz and Lamrabet surround their characters with rigid gender and migrational roles that trigger a feeling of in-betweenness and thereby unmask the binary forms that these categories can take. One might wonder if this critical handling of ethnic and gender categorisation by the authors leads to a deconstruction of the concept of categorisation in general. Could the path leading to freedom and happiness for the protagonists lie in embracing and accepting their in-betweenness instead of rejecting it, thereby going beyond binary categorisation?

Notes

1. Lamrabet, Rachida (2012). *Vrouwland*. Wommelgem: Van In.
2. El Bezaz, Naima (2007). *De verstotene*. Malmberg: Den Bosch.
3. See for a critical approach: Neuhaus, Stefan (2002). *Revision des literarischen Kanons*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht.
4. A first literary analysis of the concept of Heimat based on the novels *Vrouwland* and *De verstotene* can be found in: Bohn, Jossfinn (2018). 'A Place Where Nobody Has Ever Been. In Search of Heimat in Lamrabet's *Vrouwland* and El Bezaz' *De verstotene*.' *Sextant* 2018-35 *Striges en tous genres*.
5. Own translation Dutch – English.

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6. Own translation Dutch – English.
7. I would like to add that this first analysis does not claim to be exhaustive in terms of analyzing romantic relations inside the two novels as the protagonist's homosexual experiences will be analyzed at a later point in the study.
8. Own translation Dutch – English.
9. See for an overview of images of women: Stephan, Inge (1997). *Musen & Medusen, Mythos und Geschlecht in der Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau.
10. Assimilation is understood in this context as the renunciation of one's own cultural identity with the goal to become undistinguishable from members of a majority culture.
11. Own translation Dutch – English.

Bibliography

El Bezaz, Naima (2007): *De verstopene*. Malmberg: Den Bosch.

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