At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, after a decade in which harsh indictments of the supposedly failed multiculturalism of the Netherlands have become mainstream, and, in their wake, xenophobia and racism, the times when the Netherlands defined itself as a tolerant, multicultural nation seem almost forgotten. This past, however, is still very recent. A closer look at the days before the shift helps to understand the complex history of the Dutch negotiations of race and ethnicity.

In the time span between 1996—the year in which several writers of migrant background published their first writings—and 2001—the year of the National Book Week on “Writing between Two Cultures”—the Dutch literary field went through a phase of extraordinary openness: it celebrated a “happy multiculturality.” In these years the interest among publishers, reviewers and readers alike in what was called multicultural or ethnic literature was not only of considerable intensity, but also remarkably positive-tuned. Dutch literature seemed to embrace its multicultural richness in a similar way as Dutch society of that time boasted its (self-acclaimed) multiculturality and tolerance. This chapter takes one of the celebrated specimens of this multicultural literature, the novel Bruiloft aan zee (1996) by the Moroccan-Dutch writer Abdelkader Benali, as its central object of research. It offers a critical reading of this novel in the light of the broader “happy multiculturality” discourse and demonstrates how this novel critically confronts the idea of an all too happy, all too tolerant Dutch self-image. In the time before the murders of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, when tolerance was still considered a Dutch virtue, this novel’s representation of cultural transgression explores and challenges the racist nature of the Dutch boundaries of
tolerance. Dutch norms and a very particular, stereotyped idea of “Moroccan normality” are questioned and negotiated to make a plea for cultural criticism rather than for cultural tolerance. A close analysis of the novel’s narrative structure will show how Bruiloft aan zee works to manipulate and disrupt stereotypical and racist patterns of readers’ expectations. It demonstrates how the novel both subtly and abruptly moves away from the well-meaning (“tolerant”), but deeply problematic (“essentialist”) acceptance of “cultural customs” in the name of a racist multiculturality. It argues that instead the novel points towards a more gender-sensitive, critical assessment of family and cultural traditions after migration.

About the Boundaries of “Normal” Behavior

To analyze the discursive strategies that underlie the eye-opening, anti-racist disruption of multicultural tolerance that Bruiloft aan zee brings about, I make use of Jürgen Link’s fascinating theory on “normalism” as laid out in his study Versuch über den Normalismus. Wie Normalität produziert wird (Exertion on normalism. How normality is produced). Before turning to Benali’s writing, I will first elaborate on this theory on normalism as well as on its usefulness for a critical discussion of the Dutch discourse of tolerance and multiculturality of the 1990’s. In the introduction to his study Link decisively distinguishes between “normality” and “normativity,” two categories that in his opinion are often mistaken for one and the same. His interest concerns normality, or what he calls the categorical normalist imperative: the imperative to be like other people, the imperative not to deviate too much from the dominant group in society. Normality in this sense plays an important cultural role; as a discursive practice it sustains the injunction to conform to and to incorporate oneself into the field of the normal. Normality, according to Link, is not a set norm, but more something like an unspoken rule based on general consensus. It is a culture- and subject-constitutive category that propagates “common sense” and that takes homogeneity as its basic condition. In the everyday, the normal is the situation in which there is no need for intervention, in which everything remains more or less within the boundaries of the acceptable.

Normality can be seen as a gradual continuum between the normal and the abnormal, a continuum that is only susceptible to gradual change. Its actualization depends on as well as prescribes what Link calls “boundaries of behavior” (“Verhaltens-Grenzen”) (21). The negotiation of these boundaries of behavior—and thus the determination of normality—moves between attitudes of tolerance on the one hand and the experienced necessity to intervene on the other. Normality does not result from the application of a particular norm, but from behavior that is considered average, that is in tune with the behavior of others and with what these others consider normal. It justifies itself with the pragmatic assumption of a lack of alternatives: “What else? What should be when not normality?” (“Was sonst? Was soll...”

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