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## A Poetics of Home: On Narrative Voice and the Deconstruction of Home in Migrant Literature

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Experience which is passed from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among the writers who have set down the tales, the great ones are those whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers. (Walter Benjamin)

Talking about the specific position of the migrant writer, Salman Rushdie claims that “if literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles” (Rushdie 1991, 15). According to Rosemary Marangoly George’s (1996) definition, migrant literature is indeed the contemporary literary writing in which the politics of location and/or dislocation is central to the narrative. More particularly, in line with postmodern transnational thinking, migrant literature has a specific way of thematizing and deconstructing the traditional meaning of the private and the public, the near and the far, the past and the future. Contemporary migrant literature, therefore, is best read as a sub-genre within postmodern writing and postmodern times in which the theme of dislocation and homelessness is prevalent in a variety of forms. In order to map out these themes of location and dislocation, however, post-colonial criticism has tended to limit its focus only to the metaphor of the journey and the diaspora. Yet within the diaspora, new connections are made between places, so that the relationship between center and periphery as it exists, for instance, between the colonial power and the former colonies, is changed. In my essay, I illustrate the fruitfulness of thinking about the effects of the diaspora by focusing on the concepts at the other extreme. This broader approach centralizes the poetics of place, metaphorically summarized as the poetics of home.

The approach to the representation of home as both a narratological and a political issue is indebted to feminist studies. From the outset, the feminist critique not only problematized the opposition between the private and the public through the well-known adage that the personal is political, but also analyzed and commented on the home as a symbol of stability and safety. Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” (1986) is an example of the way feminist critics questioned the fixed relationship between the concepts of home, identity, and narrative competence. This is encapsulated in their reading of Minnie Bruce Pratt’s autobiographical narrative “Identity: Skin Blood Heart”: “not being home is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on

the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself" (96). Home, as experienced by Pratt, is tied up with dominant discourses at the cost of marginalized discourses. The concepts of home and identity are thus strongly related to discursive space, to the possibility and the ability to share experiences through storytelling. In that sense it's difficult to distinguish home from community. Pratt no longer belongs to the white heterosexual community of her childhood nor does she share, as the partner of a white Jewish lesbian, the experiences of the people in the black neighborhood where she currently lives. She struggles with herself and the world she was born into, including all the restrictions on and separations between sexualities, classes, and races. Because there's no public story for her private situation yet, both her sense of subjecthood and her ability to feel at home are under scrutiny. Her narrative has a necessarily open end. There's no fixed form. There's still a desire to feel at home, but home can no longer be what it was. Here Pratt shares the concern of all minority writers: the desire for a place that doesn't exist, yet which is linked to an attempt to deploy alternative narrative techniques.

Building on the work of Martin and Mohanty, George's provocative claim is that all fiction is homesickness. By this she means that twentieth-century fiction, the great literary works of the human quest, embodies the desire to come home, to be at home, to be recognized and to be protected by boundaries and a sense of sameness. "As postmodern post-colonial subjects however we surprise ourselves with our detachment to the things we were taught to be attached to," George adds (1996, 200). She demonstrates in her analysis of a corpus of transnational migrant literature that the twentieth-century association between an adequate self and a place or a site to call home is examined by migrant authors, only to be put aside. In these texts identity is linked only hypothetically to a specific geographical space. Migrant literature claims, she concludes, that all homesickness is fiction. She proposes the possibility of distinguishing a genre of migrant literature based on its common theme, in this case the scrutiny of the politics of location. In my contribution to the view of migrant writing as a deconstruction of the concept of home, that is, as the deployment of a particular poetics of home, I intend to expand these prior thematic insights into an analysis of the migrant novel's narratological technique and its language usage.<sup>1</sup>

## AWARENESS OF THE WORLD

In order to demonstrate the use of post-colonial narratology for the categorization of migrant literature within the corpus of postmodern literary writing, I will analyze Moroccan-Dutch Abdelkader Benali's debut novel *Wedding by the Sea*. I have chosen this novel because it deals with the representation of the experience of home in both linguistically and sociologically interesting ways. Abdelkader Benali's background is not that of the average Dutch author; he grew up in a migrant family that had not intended to remain in the Netherlands. His parents came to make money and return home one day with better prospects. This biographical background makes geographical spaces and places, and also languages, somehow serial. The author's use of the Dutch language is unorthodox and the novel's narrative style is complex and puzzling as well. Nevertheless it won the author prestigious literary prizes.<sup>2</sup> My essay is therefore a contribution to a post-colonial narratology that is interested in the cultural contexts and political scope of narrativity. Its objective is the unfolding of the semiotic mechanisms involved in the production of meaning, that is, experience or contact with the surrounding world. My proposal for a

specific semiotic approach of the object of post-colonial literary studies is less concerned with the study of a text corpus, and rather more with a discursive practice in which, by definition, we are forced to participate. Post-colonial semioticians should focus on matters where there is something at stake, where a difference is being made. In my view post-colonial studies, before evolving into a sociology of knowledge, should come to grips with the signifying process and by what is set in motion or constituted by it. I think that before actually projecting migrant literature as a field, we should be able to at least suggest what its specific literariness is. Literariness in general manifests itself where there is experience and awareness of the Real through the use of language. Admittedly, this description is somewhat vague; however, in the past few decades literary semioticians have succeeded in developing a theoretical conception of what consciousness is and how it relates to signification. Consciousness or awareness of the Real emanates from difference and divergence. Human beings become aware of the Real the moment the world does not present itself as expected. The literary or artistic moment then is the imitation of this process; in linguistic terms it “mimes” the unexpected that arouses consciousness and awareness. So, paradoxically, through deviant, diverging linguistic forms we become aware of our deeply conventional, script- and frame-driven ways of dealing with the world. The specific form of human semiosis, and its imitation in and through the artistic, does seem to set the literary and the artistic apart from other social or cultural systems. It also accounts for the simple observation that literature (and art) can be about anything. But whatever it is about at the referent level, its essence is always the production of consciousness or awareness. Literariness then would be a language-driven collision with the Real. The sole concern of post-colonial analysis should be this specific post-colonial awareness of the Real.<sup>3</sup>

As language is the most intricate means of storing experience, the author cannot discard the social and historical reality of language and has to take in, displace, and transform the discourses that make up our social world. This makes contemporary literature, and narratives in particular, polylogous, intertextual, and transformational. Any attempt to restrict intertextuality to an acknowledged literary corpus, which was the preferred solution in traditional academic literary studies, is a destruction of literariness; literature then becomes a game in which only its syntax and semantics matter. Post-colonial post-classical narratology could be the approach that acknowledges the intrinsic transformational quality of language.

My analysis of Abdelkader Benali's novel *Wedding by the Sea* shows that this text itself reflects its content and so creates awareness: this novel cannot be read without recourse to what is already known about the experience of living a life in different cultural contexts, but it also simultaneously shows that this is not the case at all, and so it transforms our knowledge about the world. The experience mediated by this text deconstructs our expectations. It is this deconstruction that makes the novel both more common, because this migrant's text is actually not about something dramatically different, and more special, because it expresses the deeply human insight that whatever the conditions we live in, we have to cope with them, and no symbolic inversion will alter this situation.

## *WEDDING BY THE SEA*

Abdelkader Benali's debut novel as a young writer, *Wedding by the Sea*, went relatively unnoticed when it appeared in 1996. In 1997, to the surprise of many, it was nominated for the prestigious Dutch Libris Prize for Fiction. “A novel scintillating

with the desire to narrate. Benali narrates on the dividing line of two cultures, enriching the Dutch language with humorous inventions,” runs the eulogy of this “memorable first novel” in the jury’s report. In *Wedding by the Sea*, indeed, language becomes the vehicle that brings together two different cultures, the culture of origin and the culture of present-day life, resulting in a bubbling, mercurial, new representation of self. Benali takes his inspiration from Rushdie, whose grotesque language play succeeds in putting into words the sense of biculturalism as an excess rather than a lack of meaning. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie makes a similar claim: “Language needs remaking for our own purposes. . . . Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained” (Rushdie 1991, 17). Benali uses the Dutch language in an original and florid way, endowing traditional Dutch expressions and maxims with new and fresh meanings by injecting them into unusual contexts. Benali is an example of a new generation of migrant authors, who, unlike many older African-American and Caribbean authors, do not feel burdened with the colonial heritage of an imposed standard language that never really becomes their native language.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, reading Benali’s novel is not a question of simply applying postmodern and/or post-colonial linguistic insights in order to understand the significance of a text which at first appears breathtakingly grotesque and incoherent. It’s not only the way Benali uses the Dutch language, it’s also his use of narrative techniques that might have this effect on the reader. One of the most striking narratological characteristics of *Wedding by the Sea* is the narrative voice, which continually problematizes the distinction between extradiegesis and intradiegesis, as well as that between auctorial and actorial narration. That unsettling process is embodied in the use of two central topoi in the text, the taxi and the dollhouse. In the dollhouse, time is at a standstill and events are directed by a master hand, that of tradition and/or that of an authorial voice. In the taxi, where all stories of the region find their proper niche, time and place are flexible, and the narrative voice becomes a character in the making of the story.

That story can be summarized in a simple plot: the Dutch-Moroccan family Minar has just arrived in Morocco to marry daughter Rebecca to her uncle Mosa. However, on the wedding day the groom disappears. The main character, Lamarat Minar, Rebecca’s brother, is to bring Mosa back. Lamarat gets into the taxi of Chalid, the man who is familiar with all the stories of the region and passes them on. It is this taxi driver’s stories that set Lamarat on his uncle’s track and slowly he discovers the underlying, tacit structure of marriage and kinship in Morocco. In the penultimate chapter Lamarat gets off the taxi in the company of his dead-drunk uncle Mosa. His mission has not been accomplished in time, for the assignment given him by his father had been to escort his Uncle Mosa home, so that the wedding could take place properly. This simple plot takes the shape of as a sort of road movie; the story unfolds as it is told, and like a TV report the story is told on the spot. While the reader is waiting for Lamarat to find his uncle, he is shown around the region in Chalid’s taxi, where the various histories about the inhabitants of Touarirt, the seaside village where the father comes from, are recalled as “true lies.” Among them is the story of Lamarat, Mosa, and Rebecca, which the narrator relinquishes to the reader with the reservation, “I was told this story in some café, by word of mouth; it went from ear to ear, and it is questionable if ever anything like Touarirt existed in the first place” (11). Although the narrator initially seems to be a heterodiegetic narrator presenting a story to us, the readers, he appears to have no control over the events at all. Lamarat runs his race against the clock in a labyrinth of truth and lies, facts and fiction scarcely held together by a narrative voice. Time

and space, truth and lies are all interwoven in *Wedding by the Sea*. Throughout the novel it becomes clear that the narrator draws from a storehouse of experiences—experiences that are still in the process of being articulated and passed on while he is trying to tell his story to us. This incessant recounting underlines the narratological axiom that memory is the epic resource par excellence and those memories handed down from generation to generation create the chain of tradition. That is why the narrator is such a prominent character in *Wedding by the Sea*: precisely because it is he who presents the story to us while it is going off the rails. He definitely is not the authoritative narrator; he does not know where the story will end, nor when and where it actually began. The narrator repeatedly uses comments and asides such as “if the story were to be told correctly” and “if the story ran as it was supposed to” (24), thus referring to the illusion of the consistency of metaphor and logic within the monocultures both of the country of origin and of the country of the future—monisms and traditions founded on stories, on fictions. The narrator functions as the mediator between those two monisms. This navigating between two aspects of Moroccan culture, the modern and the traditional, the home culture and the hybrid migrant version, reveals the inherently paradoxical position of the narrator who is both in and outside the diegesis, and thus is not able to be a fully reliable director of the events.

True or not, all the little histories Chalid’s taxi nurtures eventually converge in the book’s culminating point, the moment when the bride and groom are finally united. The taxi has taken us through the story; in the taxi we have traveled book-lengths in the stories about both the region and its inhabitants. At the same time the taxi has brought Uncle Mosa to his bride. The unity is brief indeed, for even the traditional love plot is subverted in *Wedding by the Sea*. Nothing is what it seems in *Wedding*, as the narrator well knows, not only at the plot level but also at the stylistic and metaphorical level. The narrator perceives the Moroccan family and the village in which they live as a dollhouse, that one can only look at, but not act upon. “This tale should be set in a house, really. A house stuffed with puppets from top to bottom. That would be more convenient to me (and to my father): allows one to keep the story simple. Men puppets and women puppets, each with their own color and each with their own strict, well-demarcated symbolism” (34). The house as a symbol of a clear-cut structure, of an authoritative author, of stability and predestination, in fact exists only as a fiction, as make-believe, as a dollhouse. Only in a dollhouse can the repetition of the same take place, can time be stopped and manipulated; only in a dollhouse is there, literally, an oversized hand able to direct what happens, to control meaning, to guard over the inside and the outside, over the strange and the private, to determine how girls are to become women and how boys become men. Paradoxically, the narrator gets entangled in the metaphor of the dollhouse, that is to say, he gets entangled in tradition, in the reference to the illusory character of consistency and closure. He abides by the simile of narration as a structure consisting of building blocks, of materials asking for the direction of the master’s hand: “So in lieu of the puppet show we have one youngish young man with a hideous name who hops into a taxi cab –for our purposes a kind of miniature dollhouse- to carry out a mission, a search mission, and with any luck at all this will clear up a lot of things” (34). The comparison of the taxi with the dollhouse problematizes yet another opposition: departure versus arrival, being home versus being on a journey, tradition versus modernity, tangibility versus contingency. “Go and find your uncle,” the father had ordered Lamarat, “bring your uncle back home” (36). And that is tantamount to: restore order, prevent *haram*, avert familial shame and scandal, ward off the bankruptcy of our culture, our morals

and our traditions. Words of similar purport are used by the father in his Dutch home at the dining table. He never tires of repeating that not only has he permanently restored his family to the land of plenty, but he will, equally heroically, lead them back. On such occasions, Lamarat always asks: “how back, back where?” There is no place to return to.

The story inevitably demonstrates that the big stories have lost their sway and that the old tradition is in decay. In the Netherlands Lamarat’s father endeavors to rehabilitate the Moroccan, or at least the Islamic, tradition, when his children show too much interest in “other people’s faith”: “Ladies and gentlemen, it is darn well time for a darn bit of Islam in this house” (64) are the grotesque words that the author has the father utter, and in doing so he portrays this attempt as ridiculous and superficial, as a transparent displacement of the inability to become new, to become renewed, in a new context. In fact, the father does not succeed in constructing a narrative that complements the new situation, but he tries to cling to an outdated and unsuitable fiction.

At the same time, the desire for a home, for stability and immobility, only gains real plot significance when Grandma and Granddad Minar move into the new house that Lamarat’s father is having built in Morocco. Although this house begins crumbling while still in its scaffolding, that is not the reason why Grandma “nags about homesickness”.

Homesickness, the desire for a home, in Benali’s text, is a longing to come home to the magic of stories, a longing for the feeling of community that emerges through the actual telling. The telling, in the sense of dwelling in the same discourse, in the same linguistic house, ceases. It ceases because the craft of narration is strongly dependent on the extent to which the experience may be reported and thus shared.

If anything is lost in postmodern, post-colonial society, it is not so much home as such but the ability to tell a good old story that is true for everybody. The very act of leaving has deconstructed the home as a home bound to old stories and fixed traditions. In Chalid’s taxi, we travel through these stories, castles in the air and dollhouses, and discover the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion concomitant with these discursive structures, the roles meted out to the puppets, the compulsion the stories apply to reality.

The major story from the strongly Islamic and folk tradition-imbued region where Lamarat hails from is, of course, the myth of the hymen. While on his wedding day Uncle Mosa finds it hard to let go of his favorite hooker, Rebecca worries about the success of her first wedding night. According to the region’s tradition, it is essential that blood should flow during the deed, and a rocket is let off when “the job is done.” Although everybody knows that a blood stain can always be obtained somehow, the myth of the hymen continues to function as an imperative to the bride. In a monologue, Rebecca tells Lamarat that she will follow her mother’s advice and enter her wedding night armed with a safety pin and a tiny pair of scissors. When finally Lamarat takes a dead-drunk Mosa to his bride, the guests have already departed and Rebecca is in a graveyard, grieving over the failure of her wedding day. She takes the plastered Mosa in tow, not home, as was her assignment, but to the seaside. The narrator wonders how this derailment of the plot is to be explained, and he once more remarks that logic can only be found in a dollhouse. The assignment for the narrative’s hero had been to restore order, to bring home the prodigal son, and there, by the seaside, Rebecca and Mosa’s first night of matrimony eventually unfolds and blood does flow—profusely. It is true that to accomplish this, Rebecca has needed her scissors: she cuts off the tip of Mosa’s powerless penis, thus forever relegating his activities with other women to the past, to the old tradition. Even though the big stories have evaporated, all that we are left with is story, a mishmash of stories. Although they don’t adequately represent our current experiences anymore, we as

narrative characters and as living subjects are all constructed in and through those stories and narratives. Consequently, the displacing effect of postmodern, post-colonial times is that these narratives from afar mingle and interpenetrate with those from nearby.

If the wedding feast, which should have been a celebration of machismo, now ends in a celebration of female agency, this also has the effect of subsequently silencing the story. The story ends with a blank page; that much is certain. In the epilogue, the narrator only tells us about the various ways in which the protagonists keep silent to prevent further *haram*.

## POST-COLONIAL NARRATOLOGY

My choice to read and analyze the first novel of a young Moroccan-Dutch writer has been inspired by both literary and non-literary motives. The fact that this debut was nominated for the prestigious Dutch Libris award shifted the work immediately from the margins to the center of attention. A lot of work was put into the marketing of the novel as an example of a wholly new niche in Dutch literature: migrant literature. However, the novel's distinctive quality should not be sought in the way it is mediated by literary and societal institutions and circumstances, but in its ability to arouse the senses of the reader and hence become an experience. The novel leaves the reader with a host of impressions of modern pluriform society that include speed, movement, heat, chaos, and disorder, impressions caused not only by the novel's plot—a Dutch Moroccan boy who views contemporary Moroccan culture and traditions with Western eyes and in turn also views the West, that is, Dutch contemporary culture and traditions, with the eyes of an outsider—but also by the way the story is told, its narrative perspective, its language, and its style. Content and form once again prove to be intrinsically bound; the signifying process is realized with a complex set of rhetorical and literary instruments writers and readers have at their disposal or master in the process.

A post-colonial narratological analysis of this text means relating to the narrated events, becoming a part of them and experiencing the disorganization resulting from the clash of norms, expectations, and actual behavior of all the parties concerned. It is only after assigning this story a meaning and determining its position in an intertextual nebula that thinking about its mediation can become interesting. As far as I am concerned, the novel's determining characteristic is not the fact that the novel is written by a Dutch-speaking author whose parents happen to come from Morocco, but rather the not unsuccessful evocation of the at once painful and hilarious process of realizing that there is no place where one belongs, although politicians, the media, etc. would have you believe otherwise. Sharing the narrator's difficulties to get his story on track, witnessing the encounter of a young man with an environment and a culture that should endow him with a feeling of belonging and of home but which only serve to alienate him more, is what makes this novel worth reading and categorizing. One

could call this chaotic freedom the postmodern, post-colonial experience par excellence: in terms of the sociology of knowledge it seems crucial to inquire into the types of discursive play that express transformations within modern society in the conceptions of self and others. As Paul Gilroy has pointed out, global movements have bearings on local cultures, which in turn imbue the global with a shape that leaves the specific local influence visible. Post-colonial narratology should be judged on its sensitivity to and articulation of such transformations; if they perform their task well they might contribute to a less extrinsic and more intricate and finely woven analysis of modern global society.

## NOTES

1. I am alluding to David Herman's (1999) analysis of the emergence of a post-classical narratology. Indeed both women's and migrant literature are examples of contemporary writing that is felt by many to make a difference. It has prompted new perspectives in narrative theory summarized by David Herman (1999) as the practice of post-classical narratology. In particular the feminist work of Susan Lanser (1991) is considered to be a significant impulse for changes within classical narrative theory: "Lanser refuses to separate questions about narrative grammar from questions about the contexts in which narratives are designed and interpreted. Her remarks reflect the move toward integration and synthesis that is one of the hallmarks of post-classical narratology" (Herman 1999, 11). In this sense post-classical narratology is an effect of the study of texts and narrative voices that were somehow considered as marginal. Post-colonial narratological analysis should be seen as part of that development.
2. The novel has been translated into seven foreign languages, including French, German, and English. It received the French Prix du meilleur premier roman étranger (best translated foreign novel of the year).
3. I want to thank Elizabeth J. Brouwer for the helpful discussions on the meaning of the literary.
4. For the colonial language paradox, see, among many others, Boyce Davies 1994, Buikema 1999, Gates 1986, Hoving, 1999.

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