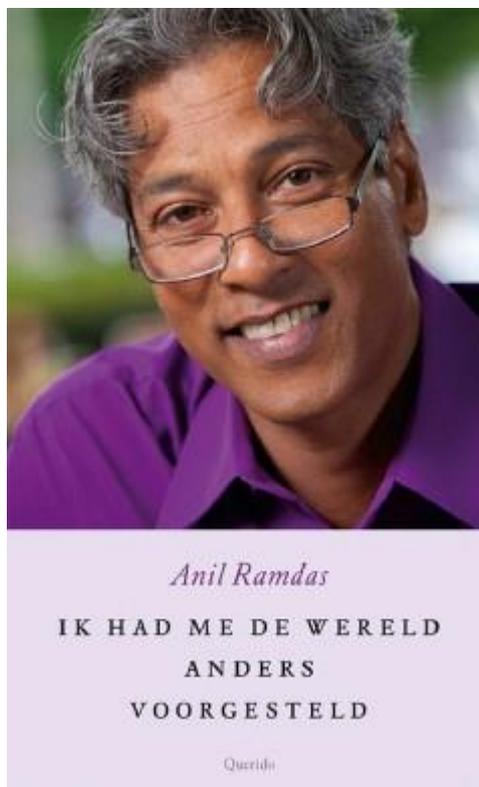


## Anil Ramdas – I Imagined the World Differently



English Dossier

Sample translated by Scott Rollins, 2021

**Querido**

**Foreign rights:**

Jolijn Spooren ([j.spooren@singeluitgeverijen.nl](mailto:j.spooren@singeluitgeverijen.nl))

Martijn Prins ([m.prins@singeluitgeverijen.nl](mailto:m.prins@singeluitgeverijen.nl)).

### **About the book**

Urgent, discerning, and challenging essays that take up arms against the rise of populism. Anil Ramdas was a cosmopolitan intellectual, an essayist and above all a storyteller. He wrote about subjects such as identity, decolonization, and civilization, in personal stories full of colourful details, always reserving roles for his intellectual heroes: V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Stuart Hall.

“I didn’t have to be who I already was; I could become what I wanted to be. A cosmopolitan if you please, and might I toss in a bit more for good measure: Brahman, Hindu, Surinamer, migrant, Dutchman, Indian, devotee of Flaubert, Naipaul, and Saul Bellow, of film and Indian music, of French wine and Italian pasta”.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Ramdas realized that there was an increasing desire for a fixed identity in Europe - among Muslim fundamentalists- but also among those who yearned for a sense of nationhood. It suddenly placed him in ‘the camp of the outsiders’, despite the praise he had always expressed for civilization and the Western tradition of self-criticism.

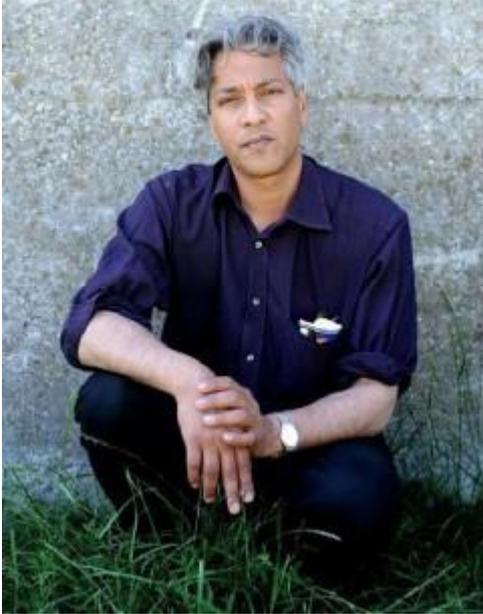
Ramdas found the loss of the traditionally so tolerant Netherlands almost impossible to bear. In his work he tried to make clear how hard we need to fight for freedom in a society that cultivates stereotypes and sticks such labels on people as “of non-Western extraction”.

Ramdas explored the subtle ways in which people make differences tangible, but he also exposed harsh exclusion. He wrote about the migrant experience, about his childhood in Suriname, about the misplaced nostalgia of the emigrant and his own love of the Bollywood films that he watched as a boy. In the current political and social climate his work is more topical than ever.

***Ik heb de wereld anders voorgesteld / Non-fiction / 319 pages / First published February 2017***

Anil Ramdas was undoubtedly one of Holland’s most original voices in journalism: fresh, stylish, provocative. And the subjects he tackled — race, multiculturalism, religion, national belonging — have only grown in importance since his untimely death in 2012.

Ian Buruma



Writer, journalist, and programme maker Anil Ramdas (1958-2012) was Surinamese by birth and spent most of his life in the Netherlands. He was a correspondent in India for *NRC Handelsblad* for several years. In 1994 he was awarded the E. du Perron Prize for his work. His only novel was published in 2011, the autobiographical *Badal*.

Sample translation p. 11-20

[Introduction]

## **Mister Bovary**

“Style is the answer to everything”. Anil Ramdas loved reciting Charles Bukowski’s poem Style. Especially in the wee hours. “It is better to do something tedious with style, than something dangerous without it. Doing something dangerous with style is what I call art.” That is what the writer Anil Ramdas wanted: do something dangerous with style. He was not only concerned with what you had to say, but just as much with how you said it. Ramdas’ approach led to a very personal political course. He opposed populism and minority organizations with equal measure. He was averse to thinking in terms of essential identities. He considered racism to be a lack of good manners and making freedom of expression into an absolute truth as an alibi for rudeness. Five years on from Ramdas’ death I will try to discover what made him so special and why the world needs thinkers such as Anil Ramdas.

Ramdas was versatile and productive. He wrote essays, travel pieces and columns, made documentaries and interviewed such personal favorites as British sociologist Stuart Hall, Egyptian novelist Nawal el Sadaawi and the Palestinian literary scholar Edward Said. He was a newspaper correspondent in India for three years. He was director of the Amsterdam cultural center De Balie and lived in Suriname for a year in order to write a portrait of Paramaribo, the capital city.

Because Ramdas chose to take his own life the temptation is great to describe his life in psychological terms with his end in the back of your mind. He had an alcohol problem. He suffered from depression and was sometimes in the grip of existential phobias. Later in life, it was difficult to still remain friends with him, because he gradually withdrew from life. However, this story is not about loneliness, but about the dissolution of his voice in the current public debate. What was the strength of his work and what still makes his ideas relevant to this very day? Two concepts in the work of Anil Ramdas are central to this: identity and civilization.

Anil Ramdas always resisted the idea of there being any kind of unequivocal identity. “A fixed, stable identity is a pleasant fantasy, yet it remains a fantasy. In my college days I always found this a revolutionary and liberating insight: I didn’t have to be who I already was, I could become what I wanted to be. A cosmopolitan if you please, and might I toss in a bit

more for good measure: Brahman, Hindu, Surinamer, migrant, Dutchman, Indian, devotee of Flaubert, Naipaul, and Saul Bellow, of film and Indian music, of French wine and Italian pasta". If there are many sides to identity, then everyone can compile his own identity. Ramdas refers often to Stuart Hall. There are several different stories possible, various images pass in review, until you say: "Look, that is me."

In various stories he wrote Ramdas pokes fun with mild sarcasm at those people who wish to cling to the idea of a 'fixed, stable identity.' He describes how migrants are nostalgic for a world that never actually existed. They have need of that image of the past in order to tell who they are now, but more often than not that sketch of their past is less than truthful. Nietzsche had already written that. When it comes to memories people have to choose between their memory and their sense of honor. Honor usually wins. What Anil Ramdas finds even more complicated are those who base their identity on the collective history of slavery. "Collective memory is transformed into personal memory; memories of earlier generations are expropriated and that can never result in anything other than banal lies."

There is every reason for an indictment of European history for oppression and colonial violence. In 1993 he writes ruthlessly about Dutch colonial history and demonstrates that the independence of Suriname was more of a deed for the Netherlands to free itself of Suriname than vice versa. However, he wants to guard against this history of oppression and exclusion from becoming the primary source of identity of those people who were bowed down by it, since group identity is always accompanied by prescriptions about how group members ought to behave. It is precisely for this reason that Ramdas adopts a literary, rather than political style. He does not want to speak in the plural, we versus them.

Who you are is a personal story that everyone must write for himself, with all the contradictions that go with it. As a child Ramdas could quite easily identify with Pieng Pieng, a Bush Negro girl from a children's book, then have a Creole as his best friend at age seventeen, and just prior to Surinamese independence come under the spell of Hindustani nationalism and as a college student become a passionate cosmopolitan. Which identity label belongs to such a life story? It all becomes even more complicated when identity not only looks back, but forward as well. If an identity not only describes who you are and were, but also who you want to become. "I am Madame Bovary," he wrote in a gorgeous essay about his preference for a literary style of writing about multicultural questions. Just like the heroine in Flaubert's novel he is tossed back and forth between boredom and disappointment. Just like Emma Bovary loses herself in romance novels and wants her life to become equally as exciting, Anil Ramdas devoured Dutch literature and dreamt about participating in Culture

with a capital C. “I belonged to the generation that compulsively wanted to commit adultery, we possessed the same depravation as Emma Bovary, we were so obsessed by the world of literature that the only thing that remained in the colony was gnawing, taunting, infuriating Flaubertian boredom.” And just like Emma he is disappointed if the dreamed life did not turn out to be what he expected. In his case: Dutch culture was much more narrow-minded, than he had imagined.

In Ramdas’ vision, the question of identity is linked to modernity. No one’s identity is a matter of course. In the modern world you don’t have to become who your parents were. Even if you weren’t an emigrant, you still have the task of writing your own story. That task is in essence not any different for newcomers as it is for those who have long since established themselves. It demands more creativity. Since identity is not a matter-of-course for anyone, the difference between newcomers and the well-established is not a matter of principle, but of degree.

For Ramdas it was a liberating idea that you didn’t have to be who you were but can become who you want to be. But unfortunately, that does not mean that others see you in the way you would like. When Ramdas returned to the Netherlands in 2003 after three years in India, he noticed that after the attacks on 9/11/2001, the mood had changed: “When I came back, I suddenly got the feeling everything had been divided into camps, a big camp for the establishment and a tiny one for the outsiders. And I ended up in that tiny camp, without me having any say in the matter.”

In Ramdas’ vision, identity is a personal matter. No one else determines who you are, but you yourself. He therefore finds it offensive that the government has determined that he is a ‘non-western migrant’. “How to become a westerner in a land that because of my country of origin has labeled me a non-westerner. And my children, and even my grandchildren. Because that is what is now being proposed, to also keep on calling the third generation ‘immigrants’ immigrants. My children have only been in Suriname once, for two weeks. They only moderately enjoyed themselves.” The label immigrant is only one way of making him feel like he is the Other. A multiple identity on the other hand brings with it that you never know beforehand whether a difference in background is relevant. The writer Stephan Sanders once attached a nice double order to this: “Forget that I am different, never forget that I am different.”

After his return from India Ramdas is shocked to observe there is an increase rather than a decrease in the desire for a fixed, stable identity. First and foremost, with Muslim

fundamentalists. They want one aspect of their identity, their faith, to determine everything. To them, the active game of identity which Ramdas enjoyed playing, is nothing but decadence. There is only one true faith and one collective identity, the true Muslim. The dominant reaction to the threat of Muslim fundamentalism was not one of celebrating the bastardization of the world, of celebrating individual, multiple identities, as befits Ramdas' vision, but precisely a quest for a collective Dutch identity.

Ramdas not only doubts the possibility of creating a genuine image of Dutch identity, but he also criticizes the very idea that such a shared identity is necessary for social cohesion. He finds it a provincial idea. In India, countrymen differ in the faith they observe, in the language they speak (there are more than 200 languages and over 1000 dialects) and in the customs they practice (one is not allowed to eat beef, the other pork, one urinates standing up, the other sits). Social peace does not stem from emphasizing a shared identity, but in putting cultural differences into perspective. In India they are viewed as trivial idiosyncrasies.

Whereas Ramdas loved putting customs and cultural differences into perspective he was also fond of using big words like civilization and universal values. Even though horrible crimes had been committed in the name of civilization, he did not want to discard ideals. His attitude is reminiscent of the answer Gandhi gave when asked what he thought of western civilization: "I think it would be a good idea."

In one of his essays, following the example of Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, he puts forward that the power of western philosophy lies precisely in its capacity for self-criticism. Nothing is sacred. Nothing is beyond criticism. If there is something that is a credit to western tradition, then it is this openness to (self) criticism.

Ramdas observes, however, under of the influence of the currently held idea that Western and Islamic civilization are on a collision course, has actually resulted in cutting down on this openness to self-criticism. Even more dangerous is when under the guise of defending universal western civilization, crucial elements of that civilization are put out with the garbage. According to Ramdas, that is exactly what happens with the liberal jihad. In their militant reaction to the threat of Islam they are prepared to sacrifice freedom of religion, tolerance, and the ban on discrimination.

Ramdas wants to save the ideal of civilization from those who in the name of civilization are uncivilized. That is also the premise of his 1997 Socrates lecture on multiculturalism; he begins by recognizing the tension between civility and honesty. The danger of political correctness is that civility prevails over honesty. But now things have swung completely around. Freedom of speech is used on a massive scale to tell people the

unvarnished truth. “The intellectuals and the odd politician have actually only used the dogma of honesty over politeness to publicly vent their rudeness: Muslims come from a backward culture and must blindly adapt to our higher civilization and otherwise go back to where they came from. That is honest, but also crude and blunt.”

Ramdas defends being civil as opposed to being rude. Civilization is also the ability to show restraint. V.S. Naipaul writes about a drinking establishment where whites indulge in singing racist songs. Until he enters. They then stop. Only to pick up where they left off when he leaves. “Sometimes civility is the maximum achievable, but also enough.” Racism is actually a lack of being civil. A lack of empathetic ability to understand what an action or remark means to someone else.

Friendship between people of varying backgrounds is, according to Ramdas, the best remedy to promote the capacity for empathy: “Friendship increases the ability of friendliness and the capacity for identification. A straight person becoming friends with a gay person, will never look the same at homosexuals ever again. If this straight person happens to see an instance of gay bashing, the chance is greater he will identify with the victim as his friend and therefore stand up for him.”

Ramdas experienced that himself. His best friend from childhood was Emile, the Creole boy who stood up for him when he was attacked on the way home from school by other Creole children. Later, in his nationalist period, right before Surinamese independence, while sitting in a car intent on committing arson, when one of his comrades suggested they ought to torch the home of a ‘kafrie’ (Hindustani term of abuse for Creole), since there were hardly any buildings that were not being guarded, he saw his friend Emile in his mind’s eye and got out of the car feeling sick to his stomach.

Civility is a minimal form of courtesy. Ramdas’ call for civility must not be taken as such, let alone for keeping silent about multicultural issues. Where rudeness is the order of the day, he calls for civility. But even more preferable is for people to be prepared to put themselves into one other man’s position. Following the example of American philosopher Richard Rorty, he believes that empathy forms the basis of solidarity. The fact that you can understand another man’s pain, can imagine his dreams, is the basis of fellowship. It begins with showing interest in the other.

To increase empathy, it also helps if the media also employs people of diverse backgrounds. When Anil Ramdas became a columnist for the daily NRC Handelsblad a journalist asked him whether he thought he had got the job because he was an immigrant. To which Ramdas replied: “I hope so.” The journalist wrote: “I think so.” A salient difference. In

another lecture he explains why he hoped it was the case: “You don’t need any migrant journalists to report about migrants. In principle, everyone should be able to. But only in principle.”

In practice it helps to be able to see things, to be able to observe things and be better able to play with the expectations people have of you. Ramdas’ idea that everyman writes the story of his own identity is a serum against peer pressure applied on any religious or political grounds whatsoever. His comparison with India puts the fear of too much cultural diversity into perspective. As long as people obey the law. We do not have to all look alike and have the same customs to be able to live together in peace. And Ramdas’ warning that some people are busy causing irreparable damage to civilization in the name of civilization is more topical than ever.

Sample translation p. 78-88

## Madame Bovary

In the filming of Charles Bukowski's *Tales of Ordinary Madness* Ben Gazzara says on the stage: everything you do, you can also do with style. Even if you open a can of sardines, do it with style. In the end it's style that separates man from animals. A tiger walks like a tiger, he cannot walk like an elephant. Only people can walk like tigers or like elephants.

Creoles have style, we Hindustanis in Suriname always thought, that shuffle, that spring in their left leg and that languid swinging of the arms. We practiced those moves diligently when we thought no one was looking. But we never managed more than some lame kind of limp.

Culture in its broadest sense is nothing more than a collection of styles, from the tiniest mannerisms to the grandest ways of life. Culture is an aggregate of knowledge; consequently, a *lived* culture, as the British researchers Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson suggest, and so a practical impossibility. When you live inside it you do not see a culture, but only a chaotic mixture of styles. The distinction between the short-lived, superficial style we call fashion and the long-lasting, deeply rooted style that we call, yes, why not, "national character", is by no means a simple matter. Culture by definition is the observation by an outsider.

The person being observed only notices the little ways of doing things around him: Hindustani children rubbed in with coconut oil until they look like glowworms in the sunlight. Hindustani teenagers trying to dress just as hip as the Paramaribo Creoles, but seeing it fail, since the size and cut are wrong and their build is too small for western ready-made clothing while being dependent on tailors, who do give them discounts, but have no feel for fashion. Hindustani families who often eat curry, but on Sunday prefer fried sardines in tomato sauce. I remember a national uproar in the neighboring country of Guyana, when due to a currency shortage the government decided to prohibit the importation of canned sardines. The Hindustani's Sundays had been ruined. On that same Sunday Hindustanis faithfully went to movie theaters that showed Indian films: to dream of India without slums, beggars, injustice, or stench. They enjoy the homesickness for the country of their forebears, they feast on the deception dished up for them, precisely because they know it is nothing more than an illusion.

Cherishing the homesickness, however artificial, is part of your upbringing as a Hindu. That is why you learn to speak an Indian dialect, to recognize movie stars and singers, to love the music and practice the religion. You must be aware of your origin, as long as you do not make it your future, no Hindustani wants to go back to India.

They say the national character of the Hindustani is characterized by tolerance and marital fidelity. I would prefer to speak of resilience. Mahatma Gandhi gave nonviolence the status of a fundamental moral principle, but the average Hindustani takes his beating in the hope that his opponent will one day get tired and stop of his own accord. And of course, Hindustani women would not dream of leaving their husbands no matter how badly they are treated, because they know that a single mother will be isolated, harassed and cursed throughout the Hindustani community. She uses her common sense and stays with the brute she knows.

Hindustanis respect the elderly, start drinking at eight in the morning, hoard their money, cheat their customers, laugh at corny jokes, are prone to melodrama and have an unconditional aversion to black people. The mildest term for a black Creole in the Hindustani language is, “Kaffrie”,<sup>1</sup> and that says it all.

These are just a few of the hundreds of stylistic traits and identifying features, you never experience them as culture. In the colony we reserved the word culture for the other country, the far-off Netherlands. That was where culture was, there they drank proper coffee, there every store had an escalator – we in Suriname only had one store with this modern convenience. In the mother country everything was well-organized, everyone had a war trauma, as we learned from reading *Safe House* and *The Dark Room of Damocles*.<sup>2</sup> People there were wonderfully uninhibited, a quick nod of the head was all it took to end up in bed with one another, because we also read *Turkish Delight*.<sup>3</sup> When we were high school students in Paramaribo, we did not think Dutch people had little ways about them or stylistic traits, they had Culture.

This meant for us that the migrant experience started much earlier, long before our departure, already at the time we went on to high school and wanting to further our education meant we would eventually leave our country. Our daily lives were so permeated by this drive to leave, that you might rather speak of a stylistic problem. More of a mannerism than a way of life, a trivial, marginal, and personal habit.

Maybe that’s why I have the feeling that what I have to say about the immigrant experience here in the Netherlands lacks dignity and weight. That the feeling that whatever I have been going through my entire life is too banal to talk about. For what is the immigrant experience other than a greased pig let loose in a banquet hall: a slippery and farcical phenomenon, to

which we cannot attach any dignified meaning. A silly anomaly, a skin condition, as Stephan Sanders says in *Ai Jamaica*, an anomaly more likely to elicit tender and paternalistic sentiments rather than genuine and serious empathy.

The immigrant experience is a stylistic problem and there are several styles of dealing with it. There is, for instance, the academic style, as suggested by Stuart Hall in his book *The Minimal Self*. The modern identity of the Westerner has been shattered, fragmented into a large number of subjectivities each of which is addressed by a separate discourse. This accounts for the cultural disorientation of our times, and we immigrants, without having to lift a finger, have been promoted to the most contemporary creatures of the postmodern condition, for who besides ourselves has undergone a more radical experience of fragmentation?

The academic style makes a pleasant virtue of a necessity, although you wonder if a reed shield wouldn't be handier, when some disoriented skinhead attacks you with a baseball bat. You also wonder whether that superior feeling of being a postmodern hero is only a thin veneer, making you shine on the outside, but that leaves you trembling within. The academic style is a bit shaky, since it is based on a world without skinheads and baseball bats.

There is also a political style that transforms the immigrant experience into antiracism. It is an angry, aggressive style both powerful and powerless, like a boa constrictor than can strangle a manatee but cannot stand a pin prick. An example of this is the protest levelled at the poster used in the Benetton ad, showing a white girl with angel's hair, next to a black girl with two upright braids, like the horns of the devil. The political style demands the ruthless condemnation of this image in which the black girl is the symbol of evil. But there is also an authentic Surinamese style, of that very fat Creole woman on the subway carefully examining the poster and saying pensively to her girlfriend: "What I don't get is how they got those braids to stand up so straight like that."

This simple folk style has effectively neutralized the potential malice of the ad, turning it into a technical feat with frizzy hair. The political style of antiracism wants to put an end to this kind of naiveté. It has a sense of drama, but not of play, the immigrant experience is given class by presenting it as a great social problem. The trivial feeling of a person of color has become a racial experience, an ethnic consciousness, a basis of mutual solidarity against the hostility that surrounds us.

There is something to be said for this. It comes in handy at least when you're lying on the ground and see a baseball bat swinging towards you. The only problem is that mutual solidarity only seems to thrive on feelings of hate. Those people advocating the political style of antiracism have converted themselves into a brigade. A kind of rational hate is deployed against the irrational hate of racism. Antiracism, the "counter-hatred", is based on history, on the past where black ethnic groups suffered innumerable wrongs. They are unrecognized crimes, the hushed-up or trivialized black holocaust; racism is part of the heritage of Western civilization. Of course, it should be remembered that as late as 1908, some Dutch biologists proposed crossing a negro with a gorilla in order to track down the missing link in Darwin's theory. Of course, they should be reminded of the fact that rebellious slaves on the British islands in the Caribbean were sent to Suriname as punishment, because the Dutch had developed such refined techniques for torture. A person does not know his past, does not know himself.

But why should it be *my* responsibility to help Westerners better understand their past? Why do I have to contribute to the self-knowledge of Europeans? Surely, I have enough problems of my own, with my own past, with my own style.

No matter how right it is to make white people aware of their guilt, it must not lead to the insensitivity which the political style exhibits towards *all* white people, regardless of the amount of the *white man's burden* they are willing to bear. A black antiracist once confided to me in a hushed tone of voice that every white antiracist was a by definition a member of the fifth column. If push came to shove, he whispered, the whites would stick together. It is an extreme case, I admit, he could have been the village idiot, but also the tip of the iceberg.

Oddly enough, this insensitivity that borders on sadism is curiously coupled with hypersensitivity in the political processing of the migrant experiences. The Benetton poster, the controversy stirred up by Thea Beekman's children's book *The Miracle of Frieswijk*<sup>4</sup> about the white girl Alijt who frees the young black slave Danga: the boa constrictor felt the sharp prick of the pin.

Proponents of the political style are important to me, for opportunistic reasons of the reed shield against the baseball bats, but also for simpler reasons of friendship. Together we lived and dreamed in the colony, together we crossed the ocean, asked each other what 'crumbly' potatoes were and what to do against cold feet. In the colony, we belonged to the middle class, we were children of teachers and civil servants, destined to write hefty theses about slavery and indentured labor. We had read the two translated works of Frantz Fanon, a pamphlet by Malcolm X, the diary of Che Guevara, *Open Veins of Latin America* by Eduardo

Galeano, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* by Walter Rodney, at least two paperbacks by James Baldwin and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

The political style simply presupposes an overdeveloped awareness of history. But why is that associated with an underdeveloped social consciousness? The vehemence, the anger and the bitterness are more apt to lead to indifference than solidarity. In their trench warfare the antiracists inflict casualties on all sides, except on the side of the real enemy. Ten years from now it will turn out that not a single antiracist has read *The Miracle of Frieswijk*. And fortunately, those that did read it had also read other books.

Am I denying the necessity of a political style to combat prejudice and negative stereotypes? No. But I do doubt the effectiveness of the method. Is it only a question of style? Yes, it is only a question of style, like Bukowski said.

Another, less bitter style for processing and articulating the immigrant experience is the literary style. And to avoid the banality of the problem, I want to approach it as dignified as possible and seek help from the greatest stylist in the world, who created a fictional character in a novel with whom we immigrants can completely identify. The writer's name is Gustav Flaubert, and the fictional character is of course Madame Bovary.

It sounds a bit farfetched, to have an immigrant cry out: Madame Bovary, that's me. But the idea just would not let go of me, ever since I read the book in Suriname, in a temperature that was just as wrong as the translation. Not that I understood why the book appealed to me so much. Might this have been what Flaubert intended? It is not very likely that he could have envisaged me as a reader. At the time when he wrote the book, there was still slavery in Suriname and my forebears were still slogging through their rice paddies in Uttar Pradesh. What did Flaubert know about the Third World? That you could catch syphilis there? At the age of twenty-nine he traveled to Cairo where he promptly lost his European purity to an Egyptian courtesan. Four years earlier he had even talked of becoming a Brahman, and that's getting pretty close, if you ask me. But shortly before that he also claimed he wanted to be a pig, or a mule driver. So, we don't have to take Flaubert's ambitions too seriously.

Flaubert was already thirty-two when he first saw real black people for the first time. In a letter from 1853 he writes: "There are negroes on display in the Grand Rue for the sum of twenty-five cents. Wild beasts with tiger skins on their backs, uttering inarticulate cries and squatting like monkeys around a pot of glowing coals. There were four of them and they were hideous, covered with glittering amulets and tattoos, thin as skeletons. They had the color of well-smoked pipes, a flat face, white teeth and enormous eyes, their dazed eyes expressed

sorrow, amazement and numbness and they swarmed around those glowing coals like a nest of rabbits. [...] It seemed as if I was looking at the first people on earth. They had just been born and they were still crawling around with the toads and crocodiles.”

One of those savages, a woman around fifty, fell in love with Flaubert at first sight. “She approached me in lewd manner,” Flaubert writes, “she wanted to embrace me, the other spectators were dismayed. I was there for fifteen minutes, and it was one long declaration of love this crude woman directed at me.”

Was Flaubert a racist? That would be jumping to conclusions, because in the same letter he writes: “What is it about me, that makes all that is feeble-minded, crazy, idiotic, and savage, become inflamed with love for me at first sight? Do those poor creatures perhaps realize that I am one of them? Do they feel there is some sort of bond between us? That must be it.”

Flaubert promised he would get to the bottom of this ethnic question. In *Madame Bovary*, we don’t notice that much yet, except maybe for the dialogue between the pharmacist and Léon, in which the latter wonders what it would be like to go to bed with a black woman. Oh, says the pharmacist, that’s more something for artists.

But I still maintain that *Madame Bovary* can be read as an early allegory for what later became known as the immigrant experience. People who have seen the movie version by Chabrol and have superficially read the book, think that *Madame Bovary* is about love. Not at all, said Jonathan Culler in 1974: love is a metaphor for desire, and *Madame Bovary* is about the duality of “boredom” and “disappointment”. Once you have been clued in you find evidence for it on every page. The young Emma goes to a convent out of boredom, she is looking for God, about whom she has read so much. This is our first hint of the recurring theme: reading is gaining experiences in the imagination. And anyone who actually wants to live the imaginary experience is in for a disappointment. Emma becomes disenchanted and leaves. At home she is bored; it’s a Flaubertian boredom that has nothing to do with idleness or laziness, but with unfulfilled expectations, about yearnings aroused by literature.

When will she experience the things she has read so much about? When she meets the village doctor Charles Bovary, Emma thinks that her desires will finally be fulfilled. Now she will finally be able to find out what *bliss, passion and intoxication* mean, words that she had found so beautiful in books. But as we know Emma already finds after a few days, that conversations with her husband “are a flat as the sidewalk in the street, over which everyone’s ideas stroll in everyday clothes, incapable of arousing any laughter, any emotion, any fantasy.”

Emma begins to hate Charles, but she hates her own passivity and aimlessness even more. Once again, she takes to that fatal activity: reading. She reads about the other world, about Paris, the aristocracy, city fashions, she reads about style, music, and dance, about celebrities and their pastimes. That only leads to a frantic yearning.

She meets the handsome, rich, and debonair Rodolphe; but the question is whether this Rodolphe really exists or is only a character from the pulp literature that Emma has devoured during her life. I follow Woody Allen's interpretation regarding this point, who has a story in his book *Side Effects* about a certain Professor Kugelmass; which is later reworked in the movie *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. Emma commits adultery with someone who actually belongs in a book, Allen suggests. So Emma has already been committing adultery for quite a while, every time she reads a book she is cheating on her husband. Naturally that is not something Emma is aware of; Emma does not realize that adultery through literature is infinitely more delicious than adultery in the grass with a man of flesh and blood.

Emma turns dream and reality around, she wants to become a fictional character herself, just like Rodolphe, she wants to run away with him and live in a low house with a flat roof, in the shade of a palm tree – a house in the tropics? No, that would be going too far. No matter how much a person loves literature, he can never become literature. Those who confuse dream and reality, those who are intensely absorbed in the world of literature, commit a foolish act. They will become confused, or at the very least, unhappy. Flaubert had a weakness for foolishness, and Emma Bovary is actually the perfect creation of the foolish personality. Happiness stems from innocence, from a lack of self-consciousness, from ignorance. People who love to read are unhappy by definition. They experience a reality that does not exist, they get a taste of the pudding but do not take a bite.

So why do I say that immigrants are perfect Emmas? It's so obvious: in the colony we devoured the books by Hermans, Reve, Wolkers, Arthur van Schendel, Bordewijk, Slauerhoff, Bomans and Carmiggelt.<sup>5</sup> We experienced a world that was not our own, a dream world which we could sample as often as we went to the library. The stories from the mother country helped us escape from that confusing mass of mannerisms that held us captive; we dreamed of a life without coconut oil on our bodies, of tailormade clothing, of steak instead of sardines, of movies that did not give a false image of the past, but a true image of the present, a world without violence and racial hatred. In high school we were literally prepped for this journey to the other world. It did not occur to us to stay with our Charles, our fatherland Suriname. I admit that we were briefly quite proud and happy when the country gained its

independence, but the conversations quickly became as flat as the sidewalk in the street. The country was a negligible quantity, weak, banal.

I belonged to the generation with a compulsive desire to commit adultery, we possessed the same perversity as Emma Bovary, we were so obsessed by the world of literature that in the colony nothing else remained than gnawing, excruciating, infuriating Flaubertian boredom. Every honest immigrant knows exactly what that means: the life of unfulfilled expectations, with desires becoming increasingly cherished. We yearned and craved for our Rodolphe; carry me off, we cried collectively, and we made the big crossing. We left for a world where “a being strong and beautiful, a valiant nature, passionate yet refined, a poet’s soul existed in form of an angel, a lyre with bronze strings, playing nuptial odes to the heavens.” Flaubert was a great stylist and no slouch at exaggerating, either. But you see where this is heading: it wasn’t worth looking for that being, just as Emma Bovary understands all too well when considering her life: “Everything is a lie. A yawning boredom lurks behind every smile, a curse behind every joy, a feeling of disgust behind every pleasure, and the sweetest kiss only leaves an insatiable desire on the lips for a higher sensuality.”

In the adultery, then, we found all the mundaneness of the marriage with Charles, life in the Netherlands was not what the books told us, the inhabitants of the mother country turned out not to be broad-minded, bright, open, and friendly. Instead, they were rather stiff, suspicious, cold, businesslike, snappy, biased and so lonely they had long conversations with their pets. Moreover, the mother country made it painfully clear that it was not overjoyed to see us, and we would never rise above our insignificance.

From Flaubertian boredom we landed in Flaubertian disappointment. Is this what Hermans, Reve, Slauerhoff and all those other writers had promised? We have been deceived, the immigrant realizes, but in the first place by our own expectations. Those heavenly expectations that had been awakened in the colony, when we were still ignorant, when we still believed in dreams. Now we see the reality: the cool manners, the colorless way of life. Culture, what culture: the mother country turned out to be a chaos of styles, a Dutch stew of confusing mannerisms. And in reaction, we perceive there, in our pitiful, forsaken fatherland, not styles anymore, but a genuine Culture.

The life between two cultures is a life between dream and reality and therefore between boredom and disappointment: the immigrant experience seems to have finally turned sour. But why, I ask myself, shouldn’t it be possible for us to go back from disappointment to boredom? Surely the realization that dreams do not come true need not keep us from

dreaming? According to Julian Barnes (in *Flaubert's Parrot*), Flaubert masterfully showed us the most reliable form of enjoyment is in the anticipation of enjoyment itself. What good does it do to rush into the dreary attic of gratification, Barnes asks, alluding to the passage in *Madame Bovary*, in which Emma casts her tearful eyes to the ceiling and exclaims: "If you only knew of all the things I have dreamed!"

But has Emma gotten any wiser in the past hundred years? Is there no way back once you have made the step from illusion to reality? I think so. We immigrants who admit we are Emma Bovarys, do not really need to become foolish dreamers again – even though there's nothing against that. We can learn to live in that dreary attic, with style, like Rushdie, Naipaul, Ghosh, Okri and many others have shown us. Maybe this is the fate of people who live in two cultures: that they have to be carried off twice.

1992

## Notes

1. From the Dutch kaffer, used for the indigenous people of South Africa as well as the general derogatory sense of "boor" or "clod".
2. Two novels by the postwar Dutch writer Willem Frederik Hermans (1921-1995).
3. The most famous novel by the Dutch writer Jan Wolkers (1925-2007).
4. This book came under attack for the racial stereotypes the author had portrayed as part of the historical context.
5. Leading 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch authors.

Sample translation p. 109-124

## The Nervous Society

When I think back on my childhood, I am always sitting in a movie theater. It was an overwhelming experience. It already began when I polished my shoes, that were only worn in movie theaters and at weddings. We always went to school in cheap sneakers we called *patta's* and for the rest we went around barefoot. The refreshing bath, the synthetic odor of the *Lifebuoy* bar of soap, that stung your eyes fiercely, putting on the freshly ironed short trousers, the nylon shirt, a big dab of Brylcreem in your hair, the sharp parting with a fine-toothed comb, the sock, the other one of which you invariably could not find, waiting on the bridge for father, mother, brothers, and sisters. Sometimes also for Emile, my Creole friend, when his parents said he could come with us. They were easy about it, they would rather he went with me to see Hindi movies than hang around in the street. And my parents were secretly proud that a little Creole boy cared about Hindi films.

Back in the day Creoles and Hindustanis lived separate lives side by side. They lived in the same country and shared more or less the same fate, but apart from that they lived in their own worlds. We had devout prayer services, they had spectacular birthday parties. We listened to the Hindustani radio, they to the Creole one. We went to the movies in the afternoon, they went to the soccer stadium. They danced to American soul music and spoke Sranan Tongo, we went to wedding receptions where only Hindi could be heard.

But unlike my parents, Emile's parents had no desire whatsoever to share their lifestyle with me – the Creole way of life must have been self-evident and not very special in their eyes. Hindustanis on the other hand had the feeling that had to something to convey, something that was more coherent than a bunch of casual habits, something valuable, characteristic, something that provided identity, something you might also call culture. On the one hand people didn't talk much about it, because in modern Paramaribo, it was known as old-fashioned and traditional. On the other hand, people were proud of having a real system of actions, explanations, ideas, and rituals, a system that Creoles lacked, or so the Hindustanis thought.

Hence the good time my parents had when Emile went with us to see a Hindustani movie. Tenderly, they heard how he sang the songs in a pure voice, they didn't even mind if he took

part in our religious ceremonies. If there were any relatives angrily asking who that “kafri” was that was sitting there with folded hands muttering prayers along with us, my mother called him her third son. Emile belonged to our family, more than I ever would with his.

And so there Emile and I sat in the movie theater on Sunday afternoons. Beams of sunlight falling through the large, hinged windows on the dark red chairs, the wooden walls weather-beaten, the fans on the ceiling circulate the warm air through the immense screening room. Warm air, mixed with the odor of cigarettes, sweat and cheap *eau de colognes*. Mothers trying to cool off their crying children with fans, men noisily meeting up with their friends, kids bouncing up and down in their seats, peering over the balcony, whining for pretzels and cola. At four o’clock a man walks to the first hinged window. He slowly and gravely unties the cords with a short tug. The window shuts sluggishly, the floodlights grow dimmer with each little tug. The music everybody has been shouting over, is faded away. The heavy red curtain opens with difficulty, an exhilarating silence in the room, the first short previews and the sensational trailers. And then, after a short prayer – all films from Bollywood begin with a prayer – the feature film starts, in which you can lose yourself for three hours.

I can especially remember the film *Haqeeqat*. How old was I at the time, seven or so? A war movie, about the fighting between India and China in 1962, shot in black and white, but with breathtaking landscapes: colossal rock formations near the Himalayas, alternated with vast arid plateaus where you could see the Chinese coming from a great distance, hundreds of thousands of them, like ants. Indian films are melodramas, also in a literal sense, which means that melodies emphasize the drama, and even outshine it.

The songs in *Haqeeqat* were plain, but also so poignant you never forgot them. Sad and foreboding, but in a peculiar way also uplifting. The movie’s most important soldier’s song was playing on the radio so often, that Emile and I could easily sing along: “*Kar chale ham fidaa, jaan-o-tan saathiyon, ab tumhare hawale watan saathiyon.*” The meaning of the lyrics eluded us, as more of the film eluded us, why, for example, a soldier with tears in his eyes put a bayonet through a little red book, or why there were documentary images in which a prominent Chinese leader was warmly received in Delhi and embraced by Nehru. It was not until much later that I found out the filmmakers were communists who exposed the treachery of their Chinese comrades and criticized Nehru’s pursuit of cooperation between peoples of color. A new nationalism was ushered in by *Haqeeqat*, the Indian insight that no one could be trusted, and that Hindus had to defend themselves against the world.

But at the time I did not know as much when I followed the story of an Indian army unit that had been surrounded. The hero, played by the superstar Dharmendra, together with a peasant

girl from Kashmir, had to divert the Chinese, so the rest of the unit could escape. Dharmendra succeeds, but he does not make it out alive, which only adds to the typical Indian heroism in which you win by dying. It says something about the enigmatic Hindu sense of tragedy: human will cannot avert predestination. The only thing our decisiveness can do is bring fate closer.

At home Emile and I re-enacted the movie. With small wooden rifles we crawled in the sand and mud and because I was Hindu, I played Dharmendra, which automatically made my Creole buddy the Chinese who shot me down and therefore lost the game. It sounds totally absurd, but I cannot remember us ever having problems with it. We didn't know the concept of culture as a sharply delineated and inward-looking phenomenon. Suriname was the most multiracial, multiethnic, and multireligious society in the world, with Jews, Frisians, Brabanders, Zealander, Limburgers, Lebanese, Hindustani, Javanese, Africans, Chinese, Amerindians, Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, Protestants, Confucians, and Buddhists and the only thing we noticed was that some people were different from others, and different from ourselves. Emile was a black person, but he could play like he was Chinese and sing Hindi songs. Everyone seemed to have a natural self-confidence. No one consciously strove for recognition; the ethnic difference was a given to which no one had to pay any attention.

But don't let me make it any prettier here than it was: of course, there were tensions, for instance when one group encroached on another's economic terrain, or when there were elections. Children were bullied, teased, and beaten, which was the reason why my parents sent me to a Hindu school. But they were relatively minor hostilities where one tried to secure one's own world and did not want to be bothered by others. It was a little like the wildlife films on television: zebras, giraffes and elephants grazing in the same area and for the rest ignoring one another.

The pursuit of recognition points to something else: one wants to be respected in a well-defined capacity, which must of course be formulated as such. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor points out in his now famous essay "The Politics of Recognition" that something strange is going on here. There must be a sense of self, but that only happens in relation to another. Recognition presupposes an opponent, recognition is based on a certain degree of antagonism, rivalry, the feeling of being intimidated or held in contempt. That opponent must therefore appear overbearing and oppressive and otherwise be presented as such. The need for recognition arises in victimhood and the feeling of being misunderstood. The zebras will only demand recognition for their being zebra, if they think the elephants despise them based on their own status as elephants.

My claim that this pursuit of recognition was missing for a long time in Suriname, is not motivated by the innocence of my childhood. It was in actual fact permeated with racial hostilities. Since my Hindu school happened to be in a creole working-class neighborhood, the way to and from school was sheer torture. Our bags were tossed in the ditch water, sand was strewn in our hair, since it stuck so well to the coconut oil, I was pinched, spat on, and taunted, unless Emile was walking with me. His school was a few kilometers away, but he walked the whole way for an hour in the hot sun to protect me. When he was with me, nothing happened to me, even though he was half a head smaller than me. He looked tough and one time he kicked a Creole boy who was pulling at the dress of a Hindustani girl we didn't even know.

That was pretty much what the co-existence of the various population groups in Suriname looked like. There was no mutual passion to convert one another, no noticeable display of arrogance and superiority, and there wasn't even mutual interest. Emile's parents could not care less how Hindustanis like us lived, just as little as my parents bothered about what made Creoles really tick. But that changed when independence came into view. It is said about independence that the Netherlands threatened to impose it and that the Surinamese people then asked for it to save face. That is true, but there is another reason, an internal reason that has to do with structure of the Creole community. In that community one could distinguish a light-skinned, elite, a middle class, and a so-called working class. The elite were well-developed and had ruled the country for a long time. The middle class consisted of honorable and respectable churchgoers, civil servants, teachers, people like Emile's parents who adhere to a bourgeois morality. And then there were the working-class black creoles: dark, deprived, embittered and aggressive.

The light-skinned elite had been sidelined in the 1960s because the Creole middle class formed a coalition with the Hindustanis thereby gaining them power in the country. This Hindustani-Creole coalition introduced the term 'brotherhood', and this was the period in which I grew up. There may have been more brotherhood in the respectable suburbs than in the working-class neighborhoods, but that is another question. The sidelined elite naturally wanted to regain power and therefore developed the concept of being "the boss in your own home". The light-skinned Creoles traditionally regarded Suriname as their own home, they saw themselves as the legal heirs of the Dutch who had deserted them. This gave rise to a strong anti-colonial sentiment among the Creole elite.

At the same time the embittered working-class Creoles were addressed by equally embittered black leaders who had undergone unpleasant experiences in Europe and were

greatly inspired by the emerging black movements in America and Africa. *Black power* and *Negritude* in Suriname were summarized in an easy-to-handle idea: hate against whites. It did not take long for anti-white sentiment of the working-class Creoles to joined forces with the anticolonialism of the elite: independence resulted from this convergence.

The new creole alliance not only wanted to assert itself in politics but culturally as well, by which the need of “recognition” arose for the first time. They wanted to be respected in the capacity of being black and they saw this new sense of self threatened by the largest, most close-knit, and conservative population group in Suriname: the Hindustanis. And as always in ethnic relations the other side also began to feel threatened. The Hindustani also wanted recognition as Hindustani, and they feared the domination of self-assured Creoles once independence was a fact. Children would probably have to speak the creole language at school, African dances would be performed in theaters and on television, Hindustani girls would have to consort with black men. They are well-known ethnic fears, just as universal as paranoid, but strongly felt and at moments, terrifying.

Emile and I had not been going to the movies together for quite some time. I had other friends and he now preferred to go and see karate films. We saw each other every now and then, sometimes reminiscing on the bridge about old times, but those times had changed, since I was seven. My new friends talked about India as the real fatherland, and we read books about Gandhi and Nehru, and the struggle for independence. No one in our circle dared to eat beef or pork, because that was a creole custom and if I admired the beauty of a creole girl I was chastised by my peers. We went to cultural evenings that were organized by one of the many recently founded Hindustani youth clubs. They were a kind of mixed bag evenings, with a band imitating Bollywood songs, a woman dancer giving a Bharata Natyam demonstration, someone else gave us a talk about the religious background of the Hindu festivals and finally a traditional costume show. We liked this last bit best of all, since then we could shamelessly leer at the young girls in elegant saris, that covered the shoulders, but left the navel tantalizingly exposed.

One such evening the reading was devoted to the Holi festival of love, the Hindu New Year’s Day. According to the speaker successive creole governments had failed to declare it a national holiday for racial reasons, while everyone had a day off at Christmas, Easter, and July 1<sup>st</sup>, the day marking the abolition of slavery. It was not until the advent of the then current Hindustani government that Holi became an official national holiday, which had to be seen as a fundamental victory for Hindus. To my surprise one of my friends protested vociferously that it was really a mistake to declare Holi a national holiday. Because now the

“kafri’s” also celebrated Holi, which was an insult to Hindu gods. My friend was greeted by a generous round of applause. Then someone asked why he had used the word “kafri” instead of “Creole”. “Because they keep on calling us coolies instead of Hindustanis,” he hysterically cried, followed by another round of applause.

A year later, the atmosphere was grimmer and more oppressive. During the election, the Hindu party was defeated by the coalition of the light-skinned elite and working-class Creoles and independence was promised. Creole nationalists claimed that Dutch would be abolished, and that Sranan Tongo would be declared the official language of the Republic. The divide and conquer politics of the Dutch colonizers was over: a conscious effort would now be made to further assimilation. That specter had already been raised by the black poet Dobru, who in a novella, had told the story of a Hindustani girl having sex with a black man behind the outhouse in her backyard.

Fires were now being started in Paramaribo in reply to these threats and my friends were discussing what kind of contribution we could make to defend our people. Some of them thought the city should be reduced to ashes, so the Dutch would see the Hindus were against independence. And otherwise rioting, insurrection and maybe even civil war, to demand a piece of Suriname where Hindus could live in freedom. Calls were made in veiled terms on the Hindustani radio to act, to send a message, to prove that we were no cowards. The calls were usually followed by songs about fighting spirit and patriotism, like those in *Haqeeqat*: “Kar chale ham fidaa, jaan-o-tan saathiyon, ab tumhare hawale watan saathiyon.”

As a seven-year-old, I did not know what the words meant, but now, ten years later, I knew what was being sung. “Come comrades, let us go, the honor of the people is entrusted to us. We shall gasp for breath, our pulse stilled, but the Himalayas, o mighty frontier, shall never bow its head to thee. Life is still possible, but death only happens once, today this soil is a bride, her forehead dotted with our blood. Shrouded in burial cloths, we stand our ground, comrades, for we have been entrusted with the honor of the people.” The song sent shivers down my spine. I was entranced by the singer’s voice, the robust male choir, the religious rhythm of bell and drum, and I told my friends I wanted in.

I had described this temptation to Hindu extremism before, but then in a laconic, more detached manner of someone trying to gloss over how serious it was. But of course, it was serious, if not downright dangerous, in any case, alarming. Not that it would have resulted in a bloodbath like in Rwanda or Bosnia, but on a similar scale to our own British Guiana, where in 1964 violent race riots broke out between Creoles and Hindus.

But why this sudden outpouring? Why only now come with this reflection? Because I think the fledgling multicultural societies in Europe could learn something from it. Europeans are amateurs when it comes to multiculturalism. For the past five centuries it has been the whites who have gone out into the world. They intruded into the regions of peoples of color, they settled in the New World, in Australia, in some cities in Asia and later in parts of Africa. For centuries, it appeared immigrant status was exclusively reserved for Europeans. Hence the bewilderment after World War II when the roles had suddenly been reversed. Now people of color are coming to the white world, and few can get used to it. Moreover, in many European countries the strange situation now occurs that political policy makers seem to be better attuned to the responsibilities, problems, and possible dangers of the multicultural society than those entrusted with culture: the intellectuals, the writers, the artists, and the journalists.

Ever since the train hijacking by the Moluccans (in 1977, trans.), civil servants and politicians in the Netherlands realize the country cannot do without a minority policy. The politics of recognition about which Charles Taylor writes, has been a fact in the Netherlands since the outset of the 1970s. Early on with the accent on the preservation of cultural identity and later, say since the appearance of a 1989 report of the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy, with the emphasis on labor and schooling. But there had been a realization at least that a multicultural society, by definition, was always a nervous, restless society. That restlessness begins as soon as the first group demands recognition, after which all the others are swept up in its wake: first women, then gays, then foreigners, and the process does not stop there.

In America we see that even whites start to behave ethnically and conduct the politics of recognition, with all the consequences that Arthur Schlesinger Jr. summarized in his provocative book *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. Schlesinger is clearly not much of a fan of a multicultural society and according to him we must go back to a liberal state, which in accordance with the French Revolution only recognized individuals and honored personal identities. To which Charles Taylor replied that circumstances had changed considerably since the beginning of the liberal state. In the first democracies there was generally one dominant group that defined the memories, way of life, preferences, and achievements of all citizens. That has changed since groups have arisen that realize they deviated from some “majority” and sought a new self-definition. Blacks deviated from the whites concerning their memories and achievements, women deviated from men when it came to aspirations and social opportunities, gays deviated from straights concerning

way of life and preferences and so on. These differences are empirically verifiable, says Charles Taylor; therefore, there is no point in denying them.

And the politicians do not deny them, at least not in The Netherlands. Sometimes it is a little forced with integration schemes, government funded jobs, migrant worker regulations, but at least there is a realization you cannot let a multicultural society just run its course. The nervousness of such a society can quietly turn into panic, tension, and fear, without anyone noticing which events or which sentiments were the direct causes. As far as Suriname goes, I am, after nearly thirty years, still trying to sort out the causes that could tempt me to extremism. And I still don't know why the atmosphere suddenly changed, the mood, the tone, the language, the aspirations, the commandments and prohibitions. I suddenly found myself in another world and I was a different person. And those who think that it, in any case, could never happen to them, have no idea how sadly wrong they are. But precisely because it has to do with such great questions, as to how and why a society stays united or breaks apart, you would think that the intellectuals and poets in The Netherlands would enthusiastically deal with them. The opposite is true. Immigrants, asylum seekers, Muslims, ah, are either not worth the effort for intellectuals or arouse resentment. They are not worth bothering with because politicians and journalists present them as depressing and miserable creatures. All they have are problems, they are all jobless, they live in old housing, they are discriminated against. But most of all they are just plain boring. They lack any semblance of flamboyance, glamor, chicness, they are just pathetic and pitiful and who can come up with anything exciting or original about them? They are good cooks, as some sympathetic writers have discovered, and the colored girls are sometimes really feisty, others have found, but that is where the interest ends.

I admit that immigrants lack any semblance of glamor, but that may be just as well due to the writers as the immigrants themselves. All I have to do is give the example of the "Jazz Age", when such white writers as Carl Van Vechten and F. Scott Fitzgerald and black writers like Claude McKay and Zora Neale Hurston depicted those living in New York City's Harlem as belonging to the avant-garde that everyone wanted to be a part of. But I have yet to meet the Dutch Fitzgerald or McKay. Apart from the fact Dutch intellectuals deem immigrants not worth the effort, they also arouse fierce resentment, which arises from confusion. That is, immigrants, asylum seekers and Muslims, turn out not to be sweethearts. There was a time when they seemed endearing and pitiful enough to lend them a helping hand, but they made a poor showing. The immigrants did not assimilate or learn Dutch, the asylum seekers concocted their tales of escape and the Muslims screaming for respect for their religion

themselves turned out to be the most intolerant fundamentalists imaginable. They only had themselves to blame for their victimhood, and no one wants to help such victims. Those seeking help must be worthy of help, that is the general moral law. Those to whom injustice had been done, must always respect justice themselves; those who are persecuted should always be innocent. And woe unto the angels who lose their wings because they are all too human, for then all compassion melts like snow in the sun.

And there is an even more compelling reason for the resentment Dutch intellectuals have towards multiculturalism and that is the curse of political correctness. It is anathema because anyone accused of it loses any right to clear thinking. A politically correct person in the Netherlands is presented as well behaved and naïve, because he has pity on those poor souls and is blind to their flaws and evils. A politically correct person is good-natured and one-sided, because he automatically stands up for a certain group without being open for counter arguments. A politically correct person is predictable, obnoxious, dogmatically right, a know-it-all, shortsighted, petty-minded, and over-simplified. A politically correct person is never naughty, ironic, audacious, challenging, playful or surprising.

Political correctness is much more than a landmark, a stain – like someone used to be made out for reactionary or bourgeois – than a useful term, and yet it makes sense to have a closer look. The term comes from the United States, where it originally was intended to replace ugly words and names for more decent designations: *nigger* first became *black*, then *Afro-American* and now *African American*. It was purely a question of politeness, but anyone who feels insulted by the designation has the right to suggest another term. Then they went a step further: not only words, but also statements, positions, historical views, and visions had to be replaced. America was no longer discovered by Columbus; he was merely the first white European to reach the land of the Indians. And then one step further still: membership to the literary canon was no longer the sole province of whites, but also the likes of Claude McKay, Zora Neale Thurston and Chinua Achebe must be mentioned in the same breath as Joseph Conrad and Dostoevsky; thus, the cleansing of the language gradually turned into the perversion of the truth.

The notion of political correctness therefore hides the tension between politeness and honesty. In The Netherlands this tension, among other things, was outlined by Abram de Swaan in the essays he collected in *The Song of the Cosmopolitan*. He discussed the prevailing cultural relativism, that one cannot pass judgment on another culture from the perspective of one culture, because it has its own values and norms. Therefore, it is difficult for a Westerner to criticize the regime in Iran, because Iranian standards for good and evil and

law and duty differ from those of the West. But, says De Swaan, a cosmopolitan standpoint is also possible. A cosmopolitan who pursues universal values of human rights and freedom, is quite capable of passing judgment on all civilizations, including the western one. And the cosmopolitan's failure to do so, indicates politeness rather than honesty. It is now time, says De Swaan in 1985, to jettison that politeness and be honest with one another: "So start shaking your boots, Khomeini," he concludes in his essay.

This ranking of honesty above politeness has subsequently been applied to the phenomenon of political correctness by countless journalists, columnists, and the odd politician: since the late 1980s collective decisions were made to break through taboos and honestly tell minorities the hard truth. Politeness was equated with cuddling immigrants to death. Civility and manners were out of fashion. Honesty, transparency, truth; and nothing but the truth!

Now, seven years later, we can take stock of what the "honesty" of the intellectuals has yielded. Is there a genuine and honest debate about the legitimacy of group recognition in a modern democracy, about the relationship between collective identity and personal character, about the transition from tradition to modernity, about the usefulness of colonial history, about the effect of memory, homesickness, regret and hope and other confusing feelings? Has any discussion taken place at all? I hardly noticed. The intellectuals and the odd politician have actually only used the dogma of honesty over politeness to publicly vent their rudeness: Muslims come from a backward culture and must blindly adapt to our higher civilization and otherwise go back to where they came from. That is honest, but also crude and blunt. Asylum seekers must understand that this country is overcrowded and has already endured enough with those foreigners who have already been admitted. That is honest, but also harsh and heartless. The blacks must stop whining about discrimination and get on with the task of proving their worth in honest competition with the whites. That is honest, but also nasty and hypocritical.

These past few years all that honesty has mainly been used as an excuse to be rude. The immigrants did not hear anything from the anti-correct intellectuals they had not already known from the smudgy pamphlets in the mailboxes, the slogans painted on the walls and the commentary in bars and old neighborhoods. In the end it turned out these anti-correct intellectuals had nothing to say, and anyone who has nothing to say, does not have to be honest, but must remain civil.

It is, by the way, a misunderstanding that civility is meaningless and unimportant. Civility is the cornerstone of civilization. It is not enough by itself, but a necessary beginning. I am even prepared to accept civility if genuine respect or sincere sympathy are impossible. For

example, the writer V.S. Naipaul once told that he stepped into a drinking establishment in the southern United States where whites were singing racist songs about negroes. It turned quiet when he came in, it stayed quiet the whole time he was there, and they started singing again the moment he left. In these parts, the author mused, civility is the maximum achievable, but also enough. Civility is more than outward appearance, more than decoration, more than a gratuitous ceremony. It is a means to prevent injury, to exorcise an offense, a technique to avoid humiliation.

If the impression has been created that I would prefer the Dutch intelligentsia to remain politely silent about the multicultural society, then that is a great mistake. Of course: he who has nothing to say would do better to remain silent out of politeness, but I would much prefer that people do have something to say. The multicultural society just happens to be a society with an almost tangible nervousness, a palpable inner tension that can go in all directions, and as I have shown with Suriname, also down the road to cruelty and fascism. For this reason alone, the big questions such a society raises, cannot be left to politicians and government officials. Multiculturalism is, as the word itself already says, a cultural question that requires the involvement of intellectuals and cultural practitioners.

But how should intellectuals address the phenomenon? What stance should they take towards multiculturalism? The worst thing that can happen to immigrants is when intellectuals embrace them out of blind love. That danger sometimes lurks, when you hear such general statements about the so-called “enrichment” immigrants are for Dutch culture, or that they at least have an “authentic” identity that the Dutch themselves have lost. A position like that differs very little from those of missionaries and aid workers who consider it their duty to help people of color or assume these people have the right to “our” civilization. Both points of view put immigrants in the position of the absolute Other: the perfect Other and the better Other, or just the deprived Other and the defenseless Other. In both cases the own superiority is the rancid undertone and the exoticization of immigrants the ultimate result.

Sweet platitudes are as suspicious as evil clichés, but what is left then? A personal involvement, I would think. A personal involvement that is necessarily based on personal experiences. Europeans used to have to go overseas to meet foreigners. Now there are over a million people of color in the Netherlands, and one would expect friendships to arise, relations, connections, relationships, romances, liaisons and who knows what else. Apparently, they hardly take place, judging by the work of most cultural practitioners and that is, to put it mildly, astonishing.

But without friendship, no nuance, no connection, no solidarity. And then I do not mean the mechanical solidarity that is the result of a political or religious institution, but the solidarity coming from compassion, identification, empathy. Solidarity based on friendship and friendship as a way out between total egoism and comprehensive altruism.

A great deal of serious consideration has been given to friendship down the centuries, among others by the namesake of this lecture, Socrates. Friendship, says Socrates, is based on reciprocity, heterogeneity, and selflessness. The middle one is especially interesting, among the same sort of people competition is more likely than friendship, because they have the same things to offer and same things to say. Naturally, Socrates immediately reasons to the extreme to arrive at the question of whether totally disparate people can also become friends: can a person who is bad to the core become friends with someone who is good to the core? He doesn't arrive at a conclusion and fortunately that isn't necessary. We have come a long way with the mere suggestion that difference contributes to friendship. Friendship does have one great drawback, as nearly all great thinkers, from Aristotle to Montaigne, Bacon, Kant, and Kierkegaard attest, that it bears a strongly private character. You can only become friends with a very limited amount of people, and the rest of mankind is then promptly excluded. Besides, friends are given preference, which in itself is unjust. The mistakes friends make are more easily forgiven, which indeed promotes mutual fidelity, but also exacerbates partisanship. But friendship derives its most wonderful power precisely from that partisanship: because what could be more beautiful, noble, and more characterful than taking sides with someone who is not akin to yourself? Standing up for the stranger if push comes to shove, is that not the moral core of multiculturalism?

Friendship increases the ability of friendliness and the capacity for identification. A straight person becoming friends with a gay person, will never look the same at homosexuals ever again. If this straight person happens to see an instance of gay bashing, the chance is greater he will identify with the victim as his friend and therefore stand up for him. Something similar happened to me in Suriname, after I had said I was prepared to take part in the rebellion of Hindustanis in 1974. They were dark days, as I recall, because of the clouds of smoke that hung above the city and the fear people harbored. The police had declared they would fire with live ammunition at troublemakers and arsonists, fighting was going on at the marketplace, schools in some neighborhoods were closed, people were fleeing to the Netherlands, those who stayed behind, holed up behind bars in front of the windows. And on a Sunday afternoon I was sitting in a car, with four other Hindustani youth.

The windows are closed so that no one on the street will smell the odor of gasoline. It is hot in the cramped space, sweat is dripping from my upper body, my hands are clammy and restless, my feet wedged between jerrycans. One boy tries to talk some courage into us, he had already started a fire in a government building on Gravenstraat and says with pride how easy it had been. Yeah, but the cops weren't on the alert then, says the boy sitting next to the driver. His hair sticks to his head thanks to the coconut oil, he comes from a neighborhood where practically no Creoles live and scarcely has any idea of the hate inside the car. Ah, says the arsonist showing off, you just have to know how to handle it. 15 seconds tops, before you're out of there. And for the hundredth time he explains how his incendiary mechanism works. Works every time, he says, cigarette without filter, matchstick in the middle... Hush up, says the driver. We turn into the street where the building is located, but three policemen are standing guard. The driver is fanatical, but at the same time, cautious. Slowly, just under the speed limit the car growls past and when we turn the corner, we breathe a sigh of relief. Except for the showoff. When a black boy passes, he says: You see that kafri? Let's pour gas on him and light him up. It makes me think of Emile, sitting next to me in the movies, singing songs, "kar chale ham fidaa, jaan-o-tan saathiyon, ab tumhare hawale watan saathiyon." I long for the innocence of that time, the open-mindedness, the brotherly friendship, and suddenly realize that I am in the process of denying a friend who had always stuck up for me. I say that I am sick to my stomach and get out of the car.

1997