

# Moroccan Guest Worker Identity in the Dutch Literary Narration A Thematic Analysis

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**Abstract** – This article deals with the issue of migration in relation to identity through the Dutch novel *Ahmed, het verhaal van een gastarbeider, Ahmed, the Story of a Guest Worker* (1984). This narrative is written by the Moroccan-Dutch author and journalist Mohammed Nasr, and it is considered one of the early and rare books written by the first generation of immigrants. This novel approaches the subject of the Moroccan guest workers who have moved from Morocco to the Netherlands since the sixties of the last century. The most important historical and contextual transformations, that took place in the migration landscape in the Netherlands until the mid-eighties, are approached from various angles based on the testimonies of different characters. This article is divided into three parts. Firstly, the written literature by Dutch authors from Moroccan origin is introduced, focusing on some aspects and features of this kind of literature. Secondly, the essential experiences of the protagonist, the main character “Ahmed” is discussed. So, five experiences, that are strongly present in the novel, are examined, namely: immigration, alienation, sickness, religiosity and Christianization. Finally, the last part analyses the most determinants that govern the identity of the first generation of Moroccan guest workers, in which the focus is mainly placed on three determinants: the other, the language and finally that of homeland.

**Keywords** – Dutch Immigration Literature, Guest Workers, Diaspora, The Netherlands, Identity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This study is concerned with the stories of the first Moroccan workers who immigrated, since the Sixties of the last century, to Western European countries generally and to the Netherlands more specifically. Due to the fact that they have left their country, principally to work and return once they have saved enough money, this category is well-known in the Dutch Literature for *Gastarbeiders* (Guest workers). Unfortunately, return remained a dream that was never converted to reality, even after more than half a century of random and unplanned waves of labour immigration.

Indeed, the ramification of this unorganized flow of immigration is still visible in the present as well as it will be part of the future. The second and third generations that were

born and raised in Europe inherited a whole legacy of challenges that negatively influenced their social status, on one hand, and their representation either in politics, media or even in the Dutch street culture on the other.

Actually, written in 1984, the novel entitled *Ahmed: A story of a Guest Worker* is considered among the first literary texts which was able to catch the realistic dimension of the guest workers' early immigration and its roots from Morocco to the Netherlands. Through this historical account narrated in the tongue of the protagonist, Ahmad, and also through different stories of other characters, the writer was able to trace the deep changes that Immigration, in the Dutch context between the Sixties and the Eighties, has undergone. This is what makes this work considered not only as a literary product, but also a historical document that guides us through understanding the different circumstances, in which the first generation of immigrants have built the cornerstone of the prevailing situation of Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands as well as in Europe in general.

While studying this novel, I have mainly focused both on its historical and literary significance. As I already mentioned, this novel is considered a historical document which highlights the journey of Moroccan guest workers from Morocco to the Netherlands. But we should also not forget that it is a work that pioneered Moroccan Diaspora literature in the Netherlands, in the way that it precedes the most significant Moroccan works that were produced only a decade later.

This study will be mainly divided into three parts: The first part is a general overview of the literature produced by Dutch writers from Moroccan origins and some of its aspects. On the other hand, the second part is specified for the most important subjective and realistic experiences in the novel; such as immigration, alienation, sickness, religiosity, and so on. Finally, the third part will be focused on the concept of identity through analysing the different elements that determined the first generation's identity; to point out, the relation with the other, the issue of language and the attachment to the homeland.



## II. MOROCCAN-DUTCH DIASPORA LITERATURE

In her thesis about Moroccan diasporic figures in Dutch and Flemish literature, the Dutch scholar Marjan Nijborg argues that the immigration literature that has been produced by writers and poets from Moroccan origins has been marginalized from the Dutch media and critical scene until the mid-nineties.<sup>1</sup> Although this literary pattern was able to add to Dutch literature an aspect of diversity, it has only emerged on the margins because it was considered a hybrid mixture far from the norms of the centre. The assessment of these works has also turned a blind eye to the literary quality and content of the text and focused solely on the cultural and ethnic origins of the writer. However, many cultural institutions, such as the El-Hijra Association in Amsterdam<sup>2</sup> and the Kif Kif Movement in Antwerp,<sup>3</sup> have played an important role in propagating Diaspora Literature. Similarly, the attitude of Dutch houses of publication, which was initially solely concerned with the origins of the writers and their culture, has undergone a substantial change. In other words, Moroccan writers were no more affiliated with the ethnic and cultural minorities they belong to but they were being considered as Dutch or Flemish writers. In this way, this literature has known a kind of leap from the margins to the centre. It was no more perceived as the literature of immigrants, but it was rather considered as a Diaspora literature which is interested in immigration and its relevant subjective, objective and aesthetic dimensions.<sup>4</sup>

What is worth stopping at is the way in which the mid-nineties of the last century have also witnessed the birth of many narrative and poetic works by writers from Moroccan origins;<sup>5</sup> like the collection of poems by Mustafa Stitou: *Mijn vormen, my forms* (1994), a novel by Naima El Bezaz: *De weg naar het Noorden, the Road to the North* (1995). In the same year, Hans Sahar, the pen-name of Farid Boukaker, published a novel entitled: *Hoezo bloedmooi, Why is it Bloody Beautiful?* In the following was another novel issued by Abdelkader Benali, entitled: *Bruiloft aan zee, A Wedding by the Sea* (1996). Finally, we cannot talk about Moroccan-Dutch literary texts without mentioning the popular novel by the most famous Dutch writer of Moroccan origins Hafid Bouazza, *Abdullah's Feet*. This work has attracted the interest of many critics and was highlighted by different mediums for so long as it also won the most prestigious

literary prize in the Netherlands; known as E. du Perronprijs.<sup>6</sup>

Since then, the Dutch literary scene was enriched by the emergence of many writers who contributed with diverse poetic and prose works that were distinctive either on the level of language, style and of course content. It is important to refer here to a number of narrative works, such as Mohamed Benzakour's works: *Yemma, The King Comes and Ten on One Donkey*, Aziz Aynan's books: *The Battle and Other Memories* and *Lost*, Hassan Bahara's novel: *A Tale from Moscow*, and Khalid Boudou's works: *The President*, and *Pizza Mafia*, that was adopted in cinema and has known a great success in the Dutch media.

All these writers are not only come from Moroccan origins, but also descend from a more marginalized geographical location, specifically Northern and Riffian regions of Morocco such as Nador, Hoceima, Driouch, Oujda, Tetouane, Tangier, etc. What distinguishes them from each other, on the other hand, is the fact that some of them immigrated to the Netherlands in their early childhood stage through the family reunification policy, while others were born in the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup>

Beside these novelists and authors, there are other types of writers that can be divided into three main categories:

1. The first type of writers cannot be considered authors in the critical and literary sense of the word. To say it otherwise, the writers who belong to this first category are not wholly devoted to writing, but they rather work in fields that have completely nothing to do with the world of literature, like politics, media, religion and others. Yet, they have published their autobiographies in which they shared their personal experiences in the Netherlands. As an illustration, some figures are here mentioned such as Ahmed Aboutalib, mayor of Rotterdam, Ali Daoudi, spiritual caregiver at the Ministry of Justice, Ahmed Marcouch,<sup>8</sup> also assigned as a mayor of Arnhem, Samira Bouchtibi, a politician, Salahdine Bouchikhi, a journalist and so many other names.
2. The second type of writers is distinguished from the previous category in the writing language. Although they have settled in the Netherlands for so long, writers like Mustafa El Hamdaoui and Kasim Achahboun

<sup>1</sup> Nijborg, M. (2015). *Literaire grensbewegingen. De weerslag van de Marokkaanse diaspora in de literatuur van Nederland en Vlaanderen 1994-2010*. Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam. 36-40.

<sup>2</sup> See the website of Al-Hijra Association: <https://www.elhizjra.nl/organisatie/>. (Last accessed: 8 September 2021).

<sup>3</sup> See the website of Kif Kif Movement: <https://kifkif.be/over-ons>. (Last accessed: 8 September 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Nijborg, M. (2015). *Literaire grensbewegingen*, 36-40.

<sup>5</sup> Anbeek, T. (1999). 'Over Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs en hun critici' (About Moroccan-Dutch Authors and their Critics). *Literatuur Journal*. 16, 335-342, at 335.

<sup>6</sup> Kuipers, W. (1998). 'Ik ben een Nederlandse schrijver, Hafid Bouazza wil geen model-Marokkaan zijn'. *Volkskrant*, 1 May 1998. See: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/ik-ben-een-nederlandse-schrijver-hafid-bouazza-wil-geen-model-marokkaan-zijn-b4c1d72e/>. (Last accessed: 8 September 2021).

<sup>7</sup> See for example the previous article of Ton Anbeek about the writer Mustafa Stitou.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Ahmed Marcouch who published his autobiography *Mijn Hollandse droom, My Dutch Dream* in 2010, in which narratives his own story of migration en success. According to the writer, this book "is a personal book, focusing on the backgrounds of Marcouch, the opportunities he seized after he came to the Netherlands and how he considers it everyone's responsibility to do the same. A book by and about a role model, a man with a mission." Marcouch, A. (2010). *Mijn Hollandse droom (My Dutch Dream)*. Amsterdam/Antwerp: Contact.

preferred to use Arabic instead of the Dutch in their writings.

3. Finally, the third type of writers has opted to use a variation of languages (Dutch, English, French, Arabic) either in their fictional and narrative writings or even in their academic research. It is worth mentioning here the names: Mustafa Arab, Mohamed Ayoubi and Tijani Boulaouali.<sup>9</sup>

After this global approximative overview of the most important writers of Moroccan origin, who have started publishing their literature since the 1980s, the following question can be asked: Did the Moroccan-Dutch diaspora literature emerge only in the nineties or were there any texts that preceded the publication of the works?

Actually, the first generation of Moroccan immigrants who reached the Netherlands in the early Sixties were all illiterate. These immigrants have not even mastered Arabic, let alone Dutch, which they had never got the chance to properly learn at schools. This historical fact has indeed distracted the attention of many historians who all ignored the possibility of finding a Moroccan-Dutch literary text in the seventies.<sup>10</sup>

Probably, the only exception can be made here is the work of Mohammed Nasr, *Ahmed: The Story of a Guest Worker*.<sup>11</sup> Nijborg use the term “writers of the first generation” who “came from the so-called stream of guest workers, and she mentions the names of two figures: Hassan Bel Ghazi and Mohammed Nasr.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Nasr can be considered as the first Moroccan who published a literary work a decade before the rise of the Dutch literary criticism’s interest in the Moroccan immigration experience in 1984.<sup>13</sup> That means that this work forms the first narrative biography that has been roughly absent from the Dutch critical landscape and media scene. This pioneering narrative work has been chosen for the three following reasons:

Firstly, this biography can be considered as a historical document that catches in a realistic and chronological way the immigration experience of a Moroccan *Guest Workers*, through the lens of Ahmed’s story. The storyline follows him, as the main character, since his departure from his homeland, Morocco until the moment the author finished writing, while the narrative time stopped but the real time has

continued. For this reason, this early work might be considered a substantial document to study the history of labour immigration from Morocco to Western Europe generally and to the Netherlands, more specifically.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, this book is not solely focused on the personal life of the protagonist, Ahmed, but it witnesses all the radical changes that Moroccan immigration in the Dutch context endured throughout the two decades, between the sixties and eighties.

Finally, this narrative can hardly be categorized under any particular literary genre. First, as long as the writer works on the biography of Ahmed, this literary text can be regarded as an autobiography. In fact, Ahmed is both the protagonist and the narrator at the same time. He narrates his story since the day of his birth and early life in the mid-forties in Settat, which was then still a small village, and takes us with him through his continuous physical movement, first in his migration to Casablanca and later in his journey to the Netherlands. Second, this work can also be considered a collection of stories, because the writer does not content himself only with Ahmad’s story, but also sheds light on the stories of different characters such as, Ibrahim, Mustafa, the Nurse, Hasan and Larbi. Yet, Ahmed remains the central character, who controls the threads of narration by leading the reader through the diverse stories of the others characters without breaking with the main story of the self. Thus, this work can be included in the framework of the novel, because it is characterized by a remarkable diversity in the tenses, places, characters, events, and the linguistic and narrative paradigms.<sup>15</sup>

In the next chapters, two essential elements in this novel have been discussed. On the one hand, the experiences of the main character ‘Ahmed’, which put into stage the experiences of all guest workers and immigrants who belong to the first generation. On the other hand, the most important determinants that govern the issue of identity among the first generation immigrants.

### III. THE PROTAGONIST’S EXPERIENCES

In this narrative account, Mohamed Nasr, recounts the various personal, social and professional experiences that Ahmed has gone through during the period of his stay in the Netherlands between 1963 and 1984. Some of those experiences seem ordinary and do not differ much from the daily experiences of other people, but there are other noticeable experiences which deserve more concern. Actually, these personal experiences provide an approximate picture of the history of early Moroccan labourers’ immigration to the Netherlands and the agony, alienation and adventure that came along. In this regard, five experiences, that are strongly present in the novel, are examined, namely:

<sup>9</sup> Some names of these authors are mentioned in the academic thesis: Snepvangers, M. A. J. (2014). *Migrantenliteratuur, oude en nieuwe garde* (Migrant Literature, Old and New Guard). Faculty of Humanities, Tilburg University.

<sup>10</sup> When we studied the written history of the first migration generations in the Western European countries, we noticed the absence of any reference to certain cultural and literary activities of the early immigrants from Maghrebian countries. See for example: Werf (van der), S. (2002). *Alloctonen in de multiculturele samenleving: een inleiding* (Immigrants in a Multicultural Society: An Introduction). Bussum: Coutinho; Rath, J.; Penninx, R.; Groenendijk, K.; Meyer, A. (1996). *Nederland En Zijn Islam* (The Netherlands and its Islam). Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.

<sup>11</sup> Nasr, M. (1984). *Ahmed, het verhaal van een gastarbeider* (Ahmed: The story of a Guest Worker). Amersfoort: De Horstink.

<sup>12</sup> Nijborg, *Literaire grensbewegingen*, 83.

<sup>13</sup> Anbeek, ‘Over Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs en hun critici’, 341-342.

<sup>14</sup> See: Jan Rath (et al.), *Nederland En Zijn Islam*.

<sup>15</sup> In the critical and literally definition of the concept ‘novel’ are all these elements emphasized. See for example: Armentier, L. (1986). *Dictionnaire de la théorie et de l’histoire littéraires*. Paris: Retz.

immigration, alienation, sickness, religiosity and Christianization.

#### A. *The Experience of Immigration*

When Ahmed's father passed away, he left more children to his three wives, than money. All what Ahmed and his little family were left with was a small plot of land that he and his mother tried to cultivate, but the profits were very scanty even to supply their family with their most basic needs.<sup>16</sup> Being the elder son, he had no choice but to migrate from their small village to Casablanca. Yet, his work in Casablanca did not change much. After years of hard work and impoverishment, and after hearing about all the job opportunities available in Europe, he joined a whole generation of Moroccans in their dream to cross the ocean. Thus, he asked one of his friends to help him fill a job application in one of the Dutch factories. A few weeks later, he has actually received an invitation letter but he was absent and his family opened it and tried to read it, but could not figure out a word and then decided to tear it apart.

Once he was back, the only remains were the envelope and some pieces of the torn-up letter that he took to the Dutch consulate, which helped him by mailing the factory for another invitation letter. Weeks later, Ahmed has been sent the work contract and has made the administrative and sanitary procedures and left towards the Netherlands, leaving behind him his mother and siblings. Netherlands for him was the ultimate unknown, as it is mentioned in the book that the only thing, he knew about it was the fact that it was the land of cows.<sup>17</sup> His journey started from Casablanca Port towards The Rotterdam Port and lasted for five days in the rough Pacific which has made everyone on board feel nauseous. The beginning of his journey was marked by the pain of separation, alienation and melancholy, as he mentions: "Adults were consoling children, but it was hard for them to hide their teary eyes. After a few days, I have also given up to my tears. I felt that I was too small in front of the enormity and amplitude of the ocean. A feeling of nostalgia has taken over me. What am I going to do in Europe? We should have stayed in Morocco."<sup>18</sup>

#### B. *The Experience of Alienation*

Alienation can be found in every section, if not every page of the novel, but there are some moments of peak in which the reader feels the heavy presence of this theme, that is characterized by "withdrawal, loss, or derangement of the mental faculties; insanity".<sup>19</sup> At the moment he arrived in Rotterdam Port, Ahmed had to wait for mister De Vries, who showed up late, after that all immigrants were taken by their hosts and he stayed alone. His host, finally, arrived, rushing and carrying Ahmed's picture in his hand. Pictures were the

only effective means of communication between the hosts and the immigrants. Due to the fact that most immigrants were illiterate, carrying their pictures helped them identify who their host was without having to exchange any words.

Ahmed greeted mister De Vries with a sign language and repeated the only French word he knew "*Oui monsieur*". Mister De Vries picked him up from the port to the hotel and left him alone until the day after. At that moment, Ahmed felt extremely alienated as he expresses: "I was left alone. I was left alone in this strange country, strange hotel and only with strangers around me. I couldn't close my eyes. My thoughts sailed me back to my mother and my siblings that I have left behind. But I ended up sleeping. I was exhausted by the pressure and all the troubles I had to bear lately."<sup>20</sup>

In fact, the feeling of alienation has haunted Ahmed all along his stay in the Netherlands. After getting out of the hospital, especially after his second morbid experience which made him feel extremely sorrowful, he said, "When people usually go out of the hospital, they find their family members waiting for them. As for me, I had to go back home, alone without anyone helping me."<sup>21</sup>

#### C. *The Experience of Sickness*

The first experience of sickness Ahmed has endured was a work accident, in the beginning of his stay in the Netherlands, in which a piece of metal has fallen on his leg and broke it. He was instantly taken to the hospital, which he describes as extremely white and clean as he says: "I still remember that a lot of people came to visit me at the hospital and asked me where I was from. They showed a great interest in me."<sup>22</sup> Everyone has visited him at the hospital, including his colleagues and his boss who visited him on a daily basis. In the weekends, this later even came along with his family who always brought him fruits and gifts.

At the hospital, the protagonist experienced his first emotional involvement with a Dutch woman; a nurse who fell crazily in love with him. Their relationship ended up with a cohabitation that lasted for a long period of time.<sup>23</sup>

#### D. *The Experience of Religiosity*

Indeed, such religiously-forbidden relationships with Dutch women were very common among guest workers coming from Morocco. Dutch women were known to have a weakness towards Moroccan workers, that the element of religion was mostly absent among them. Most of the characters in the novel are not religious at all. They do not distinguish between Halal and Haram food, they are addicted to alcohol and drugs, they are adulterers, and they simply do not practice any religious duties at all. More than that, the element of Islam is nearly absent from the whole novel and does not show up until the last pages when Ahmed talks

<sup>16</sup> Nasr, Ahmed, *het verhaal van een gastarbeider*, 9-13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 20-21.

<sup>19</sup> Murray, J. et al. (1913). *Oxford English Dictionary* (Vol. I). Oxford: Clarendon Press. 219.

<sup>20</sup> Nasr, Ahmed, *het verhaal van een gastarbeider*, 21-22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 32-38.

about his religious experience in the mosque. "After all what happened, I wanted to start a new life. But to start over, I had to stop smoking and drinking alcohol!"<sup>24</sup> When he went to the mosque, he was jobless and he was in another city where he hoped to find a job. He was advised by a Moroccan fellow to go to the mosque because he was not able to afford a hotel room. This is how his experience in the mosque has started.

The mosque provided him with all what he needed at that moment; food and shelter, so it made him feel completely comfortable. Yet, he was disturbed by the fact that he needed to pretend that he was a believer and commit to the five prayers. He did not pray during day, but he used to do all his five prayers at once when he came back in the evening. Although he was deprived from smoking and drinking, he was feeling comfortable as people in the mosque were treating him generously. After failing to find a job in that city, Ahmed had to carry his disappointment back with him and return to the city in which he originally resided.<sup>25</sup>

#### **E. The Experience of Christianization**

The repercussions of the economic crisis that struck Europe since the mid-seventies of the last century did not stop at Ahmed's inability to find a job, but even made him accept to live a queer experience. Ahmed was running out of plans to supply himself when one of his Dutch acquaintances suggested to him to go to a monastery outside the city where food and shelter are free. However, he did not know that that monastery was meant to receive new converts in order to teach them the basics of Christianity and baptize them to become new Christians. Beside free food and shelter, living in the monastery for three weeks allowed him to stay away from the bustling noise of the city and the monotonous lifestyle that comes along. For him, the monastery was a serene place where monks devoted themselves entirely to the service of their religion, evangelisation and religious instruction.

The strangeness of this experience is recounted especially when he participates in the baptism ceremonies that took place while he was in the church affiliated with the monastery and the bell rang. The singing took off and people with special clothes entered while chanting religious sermons. When they arrived in the middle of the church, they were divided into two groups, so that one group would stand opposite the other while they continued singing. The people sitting next to him stood up, and he also stood up to join them. Then, someone came carrying a mineral water sprayer and splashed it on him and the other people sitting next to him. Ahmed found it too hard to understand what was happening. In addition to that, everyone carried a booklet, including Ahmed, but someone next to him noticed that he was on the wrong page, so he alerted him to that. Ahmed felt

compelled to follow with the book and moved his lips, pretending he was reading.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps, one of the advantages of this experience is that it provided him with the opportunity to learn the basics of the Dutch language. It happened one day when a monk offered him a book to read, but he replied that he was illiterate and was neither able to read nor to write. From that moment on, the monk devoted himself to teaching Ahmed Dutch alphabet. Hence, during that short period he was able to spell Dutch letters and try to write them. When he left the monastery, and while the train was entering the station, Ahmed spelled for the first time the name of the city written on the platform display, UTRECHT; the city where he spent the following two decades of his life.<sup>27</sup>

#### **IV. THE DETERMINANTS OF IDENTITY**

What attracts attention in this novel *Ahmed: A Story of a Guest Worker* is the way the issue of identity is remarkably present through different linguistic, emotional and narrative patterns. In the shade of debating the determinants that govern the identity of the first generation of Moroccan guest workers, the focus will be mainly laid on three determinants: the other, the language and finally that of homeland.

##### **A. The Determinant of the Other**

In this novel, the Dutch other does not only play a crucial role on the textual and narrative level, but also on the psychological and mental one. Therefore, this document is essential for anyone who wants to study the way the first generation of Moroccan immigrants perceived the Dutch other and vice versa. Perhaps, the first impression that will be left in the mind of any reader, is that Dutch people used to respect Moroccan guest workers. Every reader will notice how they were celebrated by their employees. This literary work also draws our attention to how passionate Dutch women were about Moroccan immigrants and how rapidly they fell in love with them.<sup>28</sup>

The other also happens to appear in a prominent and exotic way, when the writer deals with the hippie phenomenon that invaded the world and Europe in the seventies of the last century.<sup>29</sup> Many young people have adopted its philosophy and have chosen a completely different lifestyle that contradicts that prevalent one in all ways. The hippie culture revolted against the existing traditions and customs and this has been demonstrated through dressing style, drug abuse, absorbed in the Marxist

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 87-88.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 32-38.

<sup>29</sup> In his article: *The Flowering of the Hippie Movement*, John Robert Howard discusses the hippie phenomenon, focusing on three aspects of this movement: Who are the hippies? What are the defining characteristics of their movement? And what impact have they had on the larger society? In addition, he deals with four hippie types, namely: the visionaries, the freaks and heads, the midnight hippies, and the plastic hippies. Howard, J. R. (1969). 'The Flowering of the Hippie Movement', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 382, 43-55, at 43.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 82.

thoughts, and so on. Actually, many children of the first generation have blindly followed this trend. The author illustrates this through the character of Larbi, the son of Ahmed's closest friend, who took part in this revolutionary sociocultural movement because of his love affair with a hippie girl.<sup>30</sup> Larbi's father had originally brought him from Morocco to work in the Netherlands in order to save some money and launch a project back in Morocco, but the young man ended up stealing all the money his father spent many years saving, in order to tour some cities with his hippie friends. Once his father found out about his son's robbery, he suffered a severe psychological crisis and was directly taken to a psychiatric hospital where he stayed only for a few weeks before passing away. Ahmed tried to visit him once, but he recounts that the man had a hysterical crisis once he saw him, thinking that it was him who pushed his son to steal all his money. Fortunately, the nurses could keep the situation under control and tried to calm him down.<sup>31</sup>

As soon as the oil crisis in October 1973 surfaced,<sup>32</sup> the way Dutch people perceive Moroccans and Arabs generally has undergone a radical metamorphosis as Ahmed mentions "Dutch people do not treat us kindly anymore. I noticed this at my workplace where I heard all kinds of comments about Arab foreigners 'what are they doing here?' 'They should have stayed in their countries'."<sup>33</sup> Even the landlady who owns the room he was renting was treating him differently. She used to clean his room, enjoy listening to Moroccan music, eat together with him and invite him to sit with her and her son in front of television. She always told him how proud she was to host a foreigner in her house. However, after the oil crisis everything has changed as he says, "Now she thinks that Moroccan music is boring and the smell of food is disgusting. I am thinking of leaving this house."<sup>34</sup>

### **B. The Determinant of Language**

The element of language has always been an obstacle that stood in the face of dialogue between the immigrants and the new Dutch context in which they have settled. Ahmed refers to language more than once in the novel as he says: "I knew

so many people and when I used to go to coffee-shops, I always had people trying to approach me and talk to me but I was unable to communicate with them or understand what they said. I was not even able to understand a word. Sometimes, when I go to bed, I would weep for so long because I wasn't able to speak their language. I was not able therefore to build any kind of relationships with Dutch people."<sup>35</sup> The controversy of learning Dutch is indeed strongly present in the whole debate over the first generation of immigrants. It was one of the most remarkable obstacles that abstained their integration in the Dutch community and that has resulted to their isolation. This gap in communication, caused by the inability to speak Dutch, resulted in the difficulty to find a job as most of the suitable jobs required a mastery of the language.<sup>36</sup>

Actually, the lack of linguistic skills might be interpreted differently. On one hand, the first generation of guest workers was mostly illiterate and the reason why they immigrated was nothing cultural or scientific, but it was primarily economic; which means that they wanted to save money and go back to their home country. On the other hand, host countries were not interested in investing in the intellectual or cultural side of the workers. However, the remarkable absence of any interest in learning Dutch from the part of these workers can definitely not be skipped as it is one of the fundamental reasons, they did not learn Dutch. Through Ahmed's stay in the church for a very short period and his ability to acquire Dutch, we understand that learning the language is possible even in the case of Ahmed who was illiterate.<sup>37</sup>

### **C. The Determinant of Homeland**

Beyond a shadow of doubt, the theme of homeland takes the lion's share in the novel as it is present throughout all the lines of the novel and even between them. It is also omnipresent through other sub-themes such as nostalgia, alienation, the dream of return, Moroccan cultural forms, and so on. As mentioned above, Ahmed's feelings of alienation have started from the moment he sailed the Pacific Ocean toward Rotterdam port. He was also feeling extremely nostalgic when he was alone in the hotel room. Besides, we have also already noted how the poor Riffian father has spent the spring of his youth working hard to collect enough money and go back home, but his son took on everything and he ended up returning home, but a dead cadaver.<sup>38</sup> Ahmed himself promised his mother that he will return after saving enough money. She was extremely worried so he appeased her worries by giving her false hopes that immigration will be just temporary and he will end up coming back.<sup>39</sup>

The harshness of Diaspora forced immigrants to stay with

<sup>30</sup> Nasr, Ahmed, *het verhaal van een gasterbeider*, 74-77.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>32</sup> The issue of the oil crisis has been discussed in my article: *Islamophobia and the Economic Crisis in the West*, focusing on the relationship of Islamophobia to the economic crisis as promoted by some political discourses rejecting Islam and Muslims. Three aspects are in this article investigated. Firstly, the economic dimension in the relationship of Islam with the West. A number of intellectual opinions (Edward Said, Mahdi Mandjara, Mohamed Romaihi, Ingmar Karlsson) are examined, in particular on the oil crisis in the 1970s. Secondly, the duplication, in which European and Western policies deal with the Muslim workforce, is addressed. When the economy grows and the need for this workforce increases, it has been treated positively by Western politics, but when the economic recession reigns it is seen as a threat. Finally, a set of manifestations of Islamophobia in its economic dimension is discussed, especially at the level of housing and the labor market. Boulaouali, T. (2021). 'Islamophobia and the Economic Crisis in the West'. *Academic Journal of Research and Scientific Publishing (AJRSP)*. 21, 47-58.

<sup>33</sup> Nasr, Ahmed, *het verhaal van een gasterbeider*, 55.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 55-56.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 30-31.

<sup>36</sup> This issue is examined by a number of researchers among which: Rath, J.; Penninx, R.; Groenendijk, K.; Meyer, A. (1996), and others.

<sup>37</sup> Nasr, Ahmed, *het verhaal van een gasterbeider*, 88.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

each other either to live together or just to spend some time together. They smelled in each other the scents of a geographically distant home. Not only metaphorically, but smells of Moroccan food and spices, the vibes of popular music and the news of their families that reached them through tapes and letters, or they picked them up at stations from returning from homeland, all served to decrease the geographical distance with Morocco. In this context, Ahmed recounts the first night he spent with his friend Mustafa in his caravan: “We decided not to go out that evening. We stayed in and we made food that we ate on the vibes of Moroccan music. It was a big celebration for me. Since the day I arrived to the Netherlands I didn’t get the chance to listen to any Moroccan music. We also got to discuss different matters and events that were happening in Morocco. When I went to bed that night I thought of my family and wept like a little child who has missed his mother.”<sup>40</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

Ahmed: The Story of a Guest Worker is considered an important historical document which historicises through narration and literature, the first flow of Moroccan immigrants to the Netherlands in the sixties. This category is known in the Dutch literature as *Gastarbeiders*, guest workers. What triggers our attention in this novel is that the author does not only focus on the details around the lives of his characters, but also catches the deep transformations that Moroccan immigration to the Netherlands has undergone. This element is what distinguishes this early work from other works that were only published later on.

This novel does not only recount the journey of Ahmed from Settat to Casablanca and then to the Netherlands, but it highlights the immigration experience of a whole generation whose main motive was neither political nor intellectual but solely economic. This generation, who has immigrated to the Netherlands when there were still many opportunities to be exploited, did not benefit from anything, including the positive image that Dutch people had about Moroccans. The love of Dutch people is regarded as the most pertinent potential they could have used to better their situations, but immigrants made big mistakes, like disrespecting the labour laws, drug abuse and exploiting the naivety of many Dutch women, and so on. Unfortunately, the backlash of these mistakes is still ongoing up to the present day. Moreover, the first generation was well-known for their torn-up identity and psychological instability, which resulted in controversial behaviour. A number of these early immigrants were additionally famous for their lack of religious faith, their marital infidelity, and their addiction to drugs and alcohol. All these elements can be easily noticed through most of the characters in the novel; like Mustafa, Ibrahim, Hassan and Larbi, and of course the main character, Ahmed.

Finally, it is not impossible today to absorb the present of Moroccan immigration in the Netherlands without going

back to these historical roots, that the author Mohammed Nasr has monitored in his novel. This historical phase has decided on the future of the following immigration generations. The backlash of this phase had to be endured by the new generations who came to find their parents neglected at the bottom of the Dutch social hierarchy, or by the imaging of the Moroccan people, that has been negatively stereotyped both in the media and by the politicians.

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