

Contemporary Dutch literature and nature images: Analyses of nature images in Dutch literature of autochthonous writers and allochthonous writers with a Moroccan background

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Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the role of the ordinary citizen in nature conservation has become more important in The Netherlands. The combination of a new awareness of nature and the environment and the trend of democratization has led to critical individuals wanting to influence decisions in the use and management of nature. Consequently, it is important to understand how citizens perceive, interpret and evaluate nature. Traditionally, research is directed towards native Dutch people. Considering the growing percentage of allochthonous people (immigrants) in The Netherlands – currently around 20%, and it is expected to grow to 29% in 2050 (Garsen & van Duin 2009) – it is important to gain insight into their understanding of nature as well; especially of allochthonous people from the Islamic cultural area, as most non-western immigrants in the Netherlands originate from this region.

Theory

An often used concept to analyze individuals' perceptions, interpretations and evaluation of nature is 'images of nature' (for example Keulartz et al. 2000, Buijs et al. 2009). The 'images of nature' concept emphasizes that there is no singular objective idea of nature (Macnaghten & Urry 1998). As Schouten (2005:9) explains: "Nature does not know itself as nature. We call her as such. In the appointment of nature lies an image: our image of nature". Nature images consist of a cognitive, normative and expressive dimension (Keulartz et al. 2000).

Empirical studies in the Netherlands have shown that cultural background influences nature images (Buijs et al. 2009). However, empirical research incorporating all three dimensions of nature images is scarce and almost all research is done using questionnaires or interviews. Another way to research nature images is by analyzing literature. Literary artefacts emanate from society and are symbolic practices implicitly or explicitly expressing a culture's norms and values (Beheydt 2002). Literary texts are never totally new, but are based on 'cultural materials': values and beliefs in society, such as ideas about nature (Korsten 2002). The analysis of literary texts makes it possible to penetrate cultures and social practices.

Methods

In the presented empirical study, based on Kloek (2008), nature images in contemporary Dutch literature of autochthonous writers and allochthonous writers of Moroccan background are analyzed in three steps. First what is written about nature is analyzed by means of a phenomenological 'close reading'. Hereby the concept of nature is taken very broad, to include as many ideas on nature as possible. Secondly, the function of nature in the text is analyzed, using elements of story analysis. Finally, applying discourse analysis, nature images are derived from the text fragments.

Four novels of autochthonous writers (Weijts, Giphart and Enter) and six novels of allochthonous writers (Benali, Bouazza and Novaire) coming from the Islamic cultural area, namely Morocco, are analyzed. All novels are written between 2003 and 2007 and all authors are nominated for one of the three most well-known Dutch literary awards (AKO literatuurprijs, Libris Literatuur Prijs or NS Publieksprijs).

Results

On the cognitive dimension of nature images, differences between novels of allochthonous and autochthonous writers are found. In novels of allochthonous writers, nature is especially seen as nature-for-use and human beings are part of nature. Natural elements are often given human characteristics (personification).

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Personification of natural elements forms a classical motive in Arabic literature (Schouten 2005). In novels of autochthonous writers wilderness is valued very positive, while in novels of allochthonous writers Arcadian nature is evaluated more positively. The appreciation of wilderness is a rather recent phenomenon in the Netherlands – until Romanticism wilderness was usually depicted as a frightful place (Schouten 2005, Buijs 2009). In the Islamic cultural area, the Romantic body of thought has not been very present.

Regarding the normative dimension, both differences and similarities between novels of allochthonous and autochthonous writers are found. Nature images in analyzed books of allochthonous and autochthonous writers are often moderately anthropocentric or ecocentric. Only in books of allochthonous writers does nature has a religious or ritual function. Explicit ethical conflicts regarding nature are only found in books of autochthonous authors.

The expressive dimension of nature images is the least present dimension in analyzed books. When present, the subjective, affective experience of nature is the most common form of experience. In the analyzed novels the expressive dimension is not closely related to the other two dimensions of nature images.

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