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Mapping the Demographic Landscape of Characters in Recent Dutch Prose: A Quantitative Approach to Literary Representation

Het demografisch landschap van literaire personages in de recente Nederlandse roman: een kwantitatieve benadering van literaire representaties

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Abstract: The lack of ethnic and gender diversity in the Dutch literary domain has recently been subject to discussions in the public debate. In the academic context, questions regarding diversity are studied either on a literary-sociological level (institutional approaches) or on the level of the individual text (close readings). In this article we question the representation of gender, ethnic and class diversity on a larger scale than most qualitative studies address. This type of quantitative analysis of representation is commonly applied in media studies, but has not yet been utilised in literary studies. We provide an exploration of a quantitative approach to the representation of characters within the Dutch novel. Through ‘distant reading’ we collected identifying marks of 1,176 characters (gender, descent, education, profession, age) in 170 novels from the bulk list of the *Libris Literatuurprijs* 2013, a prestigious award for Dutch literature. Thus, we intended to map a ‘demographic landscape’ of characters in recent Dutch literature.

On the basis of our results, we argue (1) that a hierarchy of identities can be discerned in which certain categories dominate others; (2) that the emergence of literary norms becomes most visible through the intersections of different categories; and (3) that within matters of diversity in literature a quantitative approach can complement and enhance qualitative literary analyses.

Keywords: diversity / diversiteit, Dutch literature / Nederlandse literatuur, distant reading, representation / representatie, identity / identiteit

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2015 Surinamese-Dutch writer Karin Amatmoekrim expressed her concerns in an issue of *De Groene Amsterdammer* about the lack of (ethnic) diversity within the current Dutch literary climate.¹ As a descendant of Surinamese parents, she deplored the apparent impossibility for ‘black voices’ to gain a foothold in Dutch literary institutions. In that same issue, sociologist Thomas Franssen and editor Daan Stoffelsen provided a statistical overview of the ethnic diversity in the Dutch literary field.² Based on these numbers they witnessed a discrepancy between the Dutch demography on the one hand, and the relative absence of non-Western writers on the other: among winners of literary prizes, contributors to literary magazines and speakers at literary events, only a relatively small number are writers of non-Western descent. The Dutch literary field suffers from an overall ‘whiteness’, as both Amatmoekrim and Stoffelsen & Franssen contended.³

The public debate prior to these contributions yielded similar arguments regarding the state of diversity in the Dutch literary domain. Author Philip Huff made a case against the dominance of white, middle aged males among Dutch literary critics and in an interview his fellow-author Joost de Vries acknowledged the limited horizon⁴ of the contemporary (white) Dutch author.⁵ A similar opinion was formulated by editor Ebisse Rouw, who in her column in *NRC Handelsblad* pointed to the ‘whiteness’ of the literary establishment.⁶ From a gender perspective, public intellectual Asha ten Broeke argued against the idea that ‘male voices are the paragon of literary quality’ [translated from Dutch].⁷ Additionally, Saskia Pieterse, one of the authors of this article, engaged in the discussion by pointing to the diversity *within* the literary text. In September 2014 she crossed swords with literary critic Carel Peeters in a triptych on the absence of gender and ethnic diversity of characters and narrators in Dutch prose.⁸ Noticeably, several of these pleas contained quantitative test samples. Huff outlined the personal profiles of Dutch critics by providing an overview of their age and ethnic background; Ten Broeke regarded the gender and ethnicity of winners of three national literary prizes; and in a talk at a

¹ Karin Amatmoekrim, ‘Een monoculturele uitwas. De ondraaglijke witheid van de Nederlandse letteren’, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 20 August 2015.

² Thomas Franssen and Daan Stoffelsen, ‘De witte motor. De verblindende blankheid van het boekenvak’, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 20 August 2015.

³ See also Stoffelsen’s reflection on the various reactions elicited by the article: ‘Slachtoffers, een positiebepaling’, <http://www.revisor.nl/entry/2095/slachtoffers-positiebepaling>.

⁴ ‘The topics in literature are perhaps more restricted than we think. Because literature is produced by people like me: white and belonging to a certain social class.’ [translated from Dutch], *Trouw*, 30 January 2015. All translations are by the authors, unless indicated otherwise.

⁵ Philip Huff, ‘Literatuurcriticus in Nederland is een man van middelbare leeftijd’, *de Volkskrant*, 06 November 2014; Joost van Velzen, ‘Iedereen schrijft, maar waarom?’, *Trouw*, 30 January 2015.

⁶ Ebisse Rouw, ‘Literatuur blijft te wit’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 16 May 2015.

⁷ Asha ten Broeke, ‘Literaire bloedarmoede’, *de Volkskrant*, 5 June 2015.

⁸ Whereas Pieterse pleas for dialogical novels in which the engagement of the reader is taken more seriously, Peeters warns against ‘ideological and tendentious novels’ [translated from the Dutch]. For an overview of the polemic, see:

<http://www.deburen.eu/nl/nieuws-opinie/detail/saskia-pieterse-de-buikspreekster-van-de-lezer> .

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literary event,⁹ Pieterse examined references in literary reviews with regard to the ethnic, social and gender backgrounds of characters and narrators.¹⁰

Clearly, in the public debate there is a tendency to question diversity in the Dutch literary world, as well as to ground those arguments on empirical and quantitative evidence. Three dimensions are at play in the debate. (1) An institutional dimension: it is argued that institutions that matter in the Dutch literary domain are conservative when it comes to ethnic and gender diversity (Huff, Franssen & Stoffelsen, Rouw). (2) The dimension of diversity among authors: Dutch authors appear to share a relatively homogeneous (ethnic) background (Ten Broeke, Amatmoekrim, De Vries). (3) A literary-artistic dimension: Pieterse aimed her gaze at the *content* of Dutch literary representations. These dimensions presumably are interrelated, yet it remains difficult to acquire valid proof of the interplay between such institutional norms and literary conventions. In this article we attempt to shed light on this problematic lack of diversity at different levels, by addressing the third dimension specifically: diversity among characters from the Dutch novel.

In an academic context, the interplay between the institutional dimension (1) and the diversity among authors (2) has been studied. Cultural sociologist Pauwke Berkers examined to what extent authors of non-Western or non-Dutch descent are opposed by these alleged homogeneous, ‘white’ and conservative institutions. In his dissertation *Classification into the Literary Mainstream? Ethnic Boundaries in the Literary Fields of the United States, the Netherlands and Germany, 1955-2005* (2009), Berkers diachronically analyses the literary domains of the United States, the Netherlands and Germany on three levels: the processing of ethnic minority authors in newspaper coverage, in national literary policy organisations and in national literary histories. Berkers concludes that in the US the disadvantages for ethnic minority authors in the literary domain are ‘relatively weak’, ‘moderately strong’ in the Netherlands and ‘strong’ in Germany.¹¹

Elaborating on these findings, we raise the question how the alleged ‘whiteness’ and male domination of the literary domain are related to the content of literary products. In other words, we are particularly interested in the relation between the first two dimensions on the one hand and the third on the other. In order to understand this relation, we question the representation of characters in novels. However, a diachronic, longitudinal research – similar to Berkers’ dissertation – is needed to gain a profound insight into the possible correlations between these three factors. As it is beyond the scope of our current research to provide such a definitive overview, we focus on the literary production of one year (2013) and one field of

⁹ On 3 October 2014, ‘Maakt literatuur je een beter mens?’, Poetry Centre Perdu, Amsterdam.

¹⁰ At an international level there have been similar attempts. For example: the American organisation VIDA aims to address gender bias in the American literary system (see: <http://www.vidaweb.org/>); and the Diversity in YA project stimulates diversity in Young Adults novels, ‘from race to sexual orientation to gender identity and disability’ (see: www.diversityiny.com). Ten Broeke also refers to English-American author Nicola Griffith who determined the absence of gender diversity among characters of novels of winners of Anglo-American literary prizes (see: <http://nicolagriffith.com/2015/05/26/books-about-women-tend-not-to-win-awards/>).

¹¹ Pauwke Berkers, *Classification into the Literary Mainstream? Ethnic Boundaries in the Literary Fields of the United States, the Netherlands and Germany, 1955-2005* (Rotterdam: ERMeCC, 2009), p. 123.

language (Dutch). Our hypothesis is that the limited diversity among Dutch or Belgian authors and within literary institutions could lead to a confined ethnic, gender and class diversity within the novel itself. In this article we aim to provide a preliminary answer to this hypothesis by means of data we collected in a collaborative project executed by master students.¹² In order to obtain current insights into the imaginative landscape of characters, we noted the gender, descent, education, profession and age of all characters in 170 novels from the bulk list of the *Libris Literatuurprijs* 2013, one of the most prestigious literary awards in the Netherlands. Our main research question – how diverse is the representation of characters in the recent Dutch novel? – addresses the ‘intersections’ between three categories: (1) gender, (2) descent and (3) social class.¹³ Whereas arguments in the public debate primarily focus on one category (mostly ethnicity), we are particularly interested in the correlations between different forms of marginalisation.

In addition to our main question, we formulated hypotheses that structured our research. We expected that poorly educated and/or non-Western groups would be underrepresented in absolute numbers. We also supposed a correlation between the level of education and the gender of narrators and characters, that is, men having more frequently enjoyed higher education than women. Concerning the professions of the characters we presumed that male and female characters were employed in different fields.

2. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches to Representation

So far, literary scholars of Dutch literature have tried to answer questions on representation and diversity of ethnicity, class and gender broadly speaking by using two kinds of methods: either close reading or institutional analysis. The former approach has been pivotal in the fields of postcolonial literary studies and gender studies from their early beginnings. Scholars examined the representation of gender and ‘the Other’ within a given novel, oeuvre or culture at large. Students of literary studies, gender studies and cultural analysis are trained in close reading novels, films or cultural objects in order to understand the representation at work in those artefacts through all its complexities. Introductions to the use of this method are provided by handbooks as Rosemarie Buikema’s *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture* (2009) and Maaïke Meijer’s *In tekst gevat: inleiding tot een kritiek van representatie* (2005). This approach often results in studies that thoroughly address the problems concerning

¹² We are very grateful for the following students who helped us collecting the required data: Obe Alkema, Nadine van Maanen, Evelyn Reijnders, David van Oeveren, Maria Dijkgraaf, Bram Galenkamp, Carmen Verhoeven and Jetske Steenstra.

¹³ The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991 and has inspired many feminists and scholars of identity politics since. She argues that feminists and gender scholars should account for differences, ‘sections’, among women from different nations and classes rather than transcending those differences in order to establish a shared (political) identity. Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins. Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color’, *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991), 1241-99.

representation in one text or a small number of texts.¹⁴ This method, however, is less suitable for a comparative analysis of representation in a greater number of texts, as this would necessitate abandoning the profound and inclusive approach that features the method by definition.

In the institutional approach to representation and diversity, a corpus of texts is selected, based on text external factors, such as the gender or ethnicity of the author. See for example: Maaïke Meijer's *De lust tot lezen. Nederlandse dichters en het literaire systeem* (1988); Erica van Boven's *Een hoofdstuk apart: 'vrouwenromans' in de literaire kritiek (1898-1930)* (1992); Ton Anbeek's *Fataal succes: Over Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs en hun critici* (1999); Marianne Vogel's *Baard boven baard* (2001); and Yves T'Sjoen's *De zwaartekracht overwonnen: Dossier over 'allochtone' literatuur* (2004). Although these comparative methods are clearly inspired by the assessment that different groups have been neglected in the canon and therefore by literary institutions and scholars, they have not yet been employed to study the diversity and exclusion of different groups *within* novels on a similar scale.¹⁵

This is remarkable, since other disciplines of the humanities, especially media studies, frequently and extensively examine representations of class, gender and ethnicity in cultural products. Media studies explore these depictions using enormous corpora, including studies such as *Women in Popular Culture: Representation and Meaning* (Meyers, 2008), *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the movies* (Benshoff & Griffin, 2008) and *Screening Difference: How Hollywood's Blockbuster Films Imagine Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* (Van Ginneken, 2007) to name just a few. More recently published studies include 'Race/Ethnicity in 500 Popular Films: Is the Key to Diversifying Cinematic Content Held in the Hand of the Black Director?' (Smith, Choueiti & Pieper, 2013) and 'Inequality in 700 Popular Films' (Smith et al., 2015). Both studies analysed an extensive number of films released between respectively 2007 and 2010 and 2007 and 2014 – excluding 2011 – on the representation of gender, race and ethnicity. The results were presented in stats, graphs and tables.¹⁶ Yet this kind of quantitative and comparative research on the representation of gender, race, ethnicity and class in a vast number of artworks remains to be done within literary studies.

In literary studies, a well-known contribution to (non-computational) research using a large corpus of texts was made by literary scholar Franco Moretti, who coined the term 'distant

¹⁴ See for instance: Liesbeth Minnaard, 'The Spectacle of an Intercultural Love Affair. Exoticism in Van Deysse's *Blank en Geel*', *Journal of Dutch Literature* 1.1 (2010), 74-90.

¹⁵ In this article we intend to reflect exclusively on the Dutch literary field. Therefore, we use a corpus consisting only of Dutch novels and have only referred to Dutch studies so far. Our aim with the proposed method, however, does extend beyond the Dutch borders, since we hope that it will be adapted abroad as well to study diversity in prose.

¹⁶ Whereas these studies examine the complete spectrum of representation, others focus on one particular aspect only, such as ethnicity. One of the most well-known examples is the study *Reel Bad Arabs. How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, by Jack Shaheen. Shaheen watched over 900 Hollywood films in order to 'document and discuss virtually every feature that Hollywood has ever made' on Arabs (1). Other examples of these kinds of studies are *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media* (Rodriguez, 1997), *Native Americans on Film: Conversations, Teaching, and Theory* (Marubio & Buffalohead, 2012) and *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film* (Marubio, 2006).

reading' as opposed to close reading. Using close reading, he argues, implies certain underlying assumptions and value judgements about the chosen works, for 'it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon'.¹⁷ Moretti takes it one step further by stating the following:

And if you want to look beyond the canon [...], close reading will not do it. It's not designed to do it, it's designed to do the opposite. [...] Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems. [...] If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something.¹⁸

As opposed to close reading, the purpose of distant reading is not to read the novels extremely precisely and exhaustively, but selectively: including the relevant information and ignoring the irrelevant. Through this method, texts undergo 'a deliberate reduction and abstraction'.¹⁹ By using 'distant reading', one tries to discover underlying patterns in texts.

However, it depends on the particular patterns that are to be discerned how this reduction and abstraction are established. 'Distant reading', therefore, has become an umbrella term covering different kinds of reading strategies.²⁰ Two of Moretti's projects, for example, focus on finding stylistic similarities in a certain era and on the way in which suspense is created in different kinds of detective novels. Those studies evidently do not examine the representation of gender, race/ethnicity, and social class, which is expressed on other levels and through different bits of information within the literary text. As a result, both this study and Moretti's projects use 'distant reading', yet their methods differ and raise their own specific problems.

3. Methodology

To obtain an insight in the representation of gender, class and descent in recent Dutch prose, we chose to (manually) distant read all novels on the bulk list of the *Libris Literatuurprijs* 2013. Consisting of 170 novels, the list offered us both an extensive and reasonably random corpus. Moreover, this selection would provide an approximation of the total amount of novels produced in one year.²¹ We chose the list from 2013 instead of any other year, as it contained the most recent novels that would definitely be available in Dutch libraries.

¹⁷ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 48-9.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 1.

²⁰ One way in which distant reading is already applied is in computational literary studies. See for example Moretti's Stanford Literary Lab, which 'is a research collective that applies computational criticism, in all its forms, to the study of literature', see <https://litlab.stanford.edu/>

²¹ We were later informed that there is a financial threshold for submissions to the *Libris* list: publishers are obliged to pay an amount of money when they send in a novel.

Nevertheless, our corpus selection is not unproblematic. Firstly: because *Libris* nominates publications from both Flanders (29 in total) and the Netherlands (141 in total), the list includes novels written in Dutch from two literary domains. It is arguably misleading to compare novels from two literary fields, both of which function according to their own particular rules and norms. We could object, however, that the very nomination of these novels for the *Libris Literatuurprijs* (by their publishers) subjects them to the rules of a single, shared field. By nominating and accepting novels from different fields, the institutions have agreed to transcend possible differences and qualified novels from both domains to be compared and evaluated as equals, and we will do so as well. Additionally, as yet we do not have reason to believe that representations in Flemish novels would differ significantly from depictions in stories from the Netherlands, although this assumption requires further scrutiny.

Secondly, since the *Libris Literatuurprijs* is one of the most prestigious Dutch literary awards, it is most likely that publishers exclusively submit novels they ascribe literary value to. Although a small variety of genre novels is represented on the list (thrillers, historical novels and detectives), the bulk of genre fiction published in 2012 is not included in our corpus.

Thirdly, the selection is not random as the number of male and female authors is not equal, let alone the proportion of Western and non-Western, highly educated and lowly educated authors, et cetera. For instance: only 4.0% of all authors included are of non-Western descent whereas 11.7% of the Dutch population in 2013 could be identified as such.²² Only 30.34% of the working population in 2012 had enjoyed a higher education, whereas almost all authors did.²³ Also, the gender proportion approximated a 50/50 rate, against an approximate 70/30 male-female proportion among the contributing authors.²⁴ Hence, the bulk list of the *Libris Literatuurprijs* and therefore our corpus is itself a product of the Dutch literary field. As a result, the present study arguably addresses texts that are selected because of their supposed quality. Nevertheless, we considered it a valid object of study, as we aimed to reveal possible literary conventions within the very field that (partly) determined the selection.

We intended to provide a quantitative overview of the ‘demography’ of all literary characters represented in the 170 narratives of our corpus. As Moretti suggested, we distant read the novels; we read the books for specific information which would support or dispute our hypotheses. We established a set of identifying character features, so we could eventually classify each character into a system of social and socio-economic variables. We determined these variables based on qualitative considerations: we chose identifying features that we supposed to be relevant to our research question and that also could be classified in a determined set of categories whilst reading the novels. The variables thus established were: gender, age, level of education, descent and profession.

²² [http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?VW=T&DM=SLNL&PA=37296ned&D1=a&D2=0,10,20,30,40,50,60,\(l-1\),l&HD=130605-0924&HDR=G1&STB=T](http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?VW=T&DM=SLNL&PA=37296ned&D1=a&D2=0,10,20,30,40,50,60,(l-1),l&HD=130605-0924&HDR=G1&STB=T)

²³ The numbers for 2013 are not yet available. See: <http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?VW=T&DM=SLNL&PA=71822NED&D1=0-1&D2=0&D3=0&D4=0-4&D5=a&D6=0&D7=0,4-l&HD=110405-1452&HDR=T,G2,G1,G5,G6&STB=G4,G3>

²⁴ [http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?VW=T&DM=SLNL&PA=37296ned&D1=a&D2=0,10,20,30,40,50,60,\(l-1\),l&HD=130605-0924&HDR=G1&STB=T](http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?VW=T&DM=SLNL&PA=37296ned&D1=a&D2=0,10,20,30,40,50,60,(l-1),l&HD=130605-0924&HDR=G1&STB=T)

Moreover, we distinguished between three different types of characters: narrating main characters, (non-narrating) main characters and side characters. Because third-person and omniscient narrators are not defined in terms of character features, the category 'narrating main character' exclusively referred to first-person narrators. If a main character also appeared as a narrator, we did not count this character twice, but instead marked it as narrating main character exclusively, as we consider narrators to have a greater impact on the way the story is perceived by the reader. The distinction between main characters and side characters was made by taking into account two factors: focalisation and the frequency of their occurrence in the story. That is: side characters do not function as focalisers and only appear in a limited number of the narrative's scenes. However, due to the fact that reading will always be a subjective act, this decision inevitably remained arbitrary to a certain extent. We nevertheless considered the distinction too important to abandon, and we assumed that many readers would intuitively experience similar classifications when reading these books.

We were well aware, when we started to tally features of literary characters, that we also introduced a reductionist view on often complex literary works. Indeed, some authors carefully leave the gender of a character unknown or fluid, some authors thematise the impossibility of conflating a complex individual with restrictive identity-markers such as 'place of birth' etc. In some cases therefore not all features were mentioned or known. When the information we looked for was simply not given and could not be deduced from indirect information, we coded it as 'unknown'. In the 'Results' section we report the 'missing data' for each variable: the share of characters about whom no significant information was given on a particular feature. Accordingly, all proportions provided exclusively refer to the share of characters that could be classified into one of the categories of the variable. Additionally, we mention the numbers of characters our claims are based on (indicated by 'N = xx').

In some cases, interpretation problems arose. A character's age, for example, was not always explicitly mentioned. We therefore classified each character in a certain age group (i.e. 26-35, 65+, etc.), in some cases deduced from indirect information, such as the stage of life the character was in, or the age of his relatives. For example, when a character was a student and still lived with her fifty-year-old mother, we assumed her to be under 25. Furthermore, to tackle the issue of mono- or multi-ethnicity and geographical patterns, we chose to encode only the characters' place of birth or, if relevant, the descent of their parents. A man born in the Netherlands as the son of Turkish immigrants would thus be classified as 'of Turkish descent'. This means that when we use the label 'non-Western' in our results, this label also encompasses characters who live multi-ethnic lives (Turkish parents, born as a Dutch citizen). Here, the limits of this distant reading method are evident: in order to truly understand literary representations of multi-ethnic lives, close readings are required. Our results merely demonstrate that most main characters are mono-ethnically Dutch or Flemish, and those who are not often play the role of a 'minor character'. In order to further interpret the geographical patterns in our data, we then reduced the variation to a set of regions around the globe, such as 'Morocco and North-Africa' or 'Indonesia'.

Finally, we will not substantiate our findings using statistical legitimations. Our aim is to 'map' the complete landscape of characters as we perceived it and therefore include any possible result; not only those findings that are significant according to statistical standards. In our inclusive approach all results are 'significant'. Furthermore, by using statistical legitimisation our method would pretend to a statistical validity that we cannot guarantee at this point. We

will present our results accordingly, providing distributions and proportions, accepting the chance that a few correlations possibly could or should be attributed to coincidence if statistical rules are taken into account. Also, we will not compare the fictional demography delineated by this study with the actual demography of the Netherlands, Flanders or anywhere else, for we do not consider the group of characters from our corpus to be a representative sample of the Dutch or any other society. After all, many characters do not live in or originate from the Netherlands or Flanders. We examine the novel as an expression of representation patterns, not as a meter of the composition of societies outside the literary world.

4. Results

The first purpose of this study was to map the demographic landscape of all characters in 170 novels and to comprehend the diversity of this fictional population. In order to describe this demography, the following section provides percentages and distributions of all character features that we noted and encoded whilst reading the corpus. For our second purpose we did not only intend to determine what kinds of characters would appear in our fictional census, but rather to see what kinds did not; which were absent; or which were structurally restricted to specific roles at the margins of the stage. In order to understand these refined patterns of (non-)representation, we report deviations or relations between character features in the section below, after summarising our most important findings.

A first, general remark that is validated by our results is that the corpus contains in fact a rich variety of characters. The novels yield a wide range of characters of different genders, ages, descents and from different socio-economic backgrounds. Further scrutiny, however, reveals that this variety is not equally represented within the different types of characters. The narrating main characters in particular constitute a relatively homogeneous group: they are predominantly male (69.44%), highly educated (79.81%) and from Western descent (85.62%). If we take into account that the novels in this corpus do not frequently experiment with the narrative form (148 out of 170 novels are narrated by one narrator only, either from an omniscient or a first-person perspective), it is no exaggeration to state that these fictions are often conveyed to the reader through the same socio-economic lens.

Secondly, the novels that were studied also appear to have their blind spots with regard to specific minorities or marginalised groups. Dutch literature seems to have its preferences and its limits, as it stages particular characters and leaves others in the wings. For instance: women are lower educated than men; non-Western characters are more often male than female, they have enjoyed a lower level of education and function more often as non-focalising characters than their Western counterparts; characters are considerably young, especially the female ones; it is less common for female characters to be employed in a position that is held in high esteem – which could be emphasised by the fact that ‘prostitute’ is the third most common profession among them.

In the following section, we will discuss the results in more detail.

Authors

The corpus comprised 170 novels originally written in the Dutch language by 175 authors, among whom 10 writers wrote one novel collaboratively. 122 authors were male (69.7%) against 53 female writers (30.3%). None of them classified her- or himself as transgender and none chose a persona or pseudonym with a gender different from their own. The authors mainly originated from the Netherlands (76.0%) and Flanders (16.6 %). Only 7 authors were of non-Western descent (4.0%).²⁵ Among those whose education was known both the male and female authors predominantly enjoyed a high-level education (96.2% and 100% respectively), although it is noteworthy that their education was unknown in a fair part of both groups (14.8% and 15.1% respectively). The authors preferred Amsterdam as their place of residence (28%), followed by ‘anywhere in the Netherlands but one of the main cities in the *Randstad*’ (17.1%),²⁶ ‘one of the main cities in the *Randstad* except for Amsterdam’ (10.3%) and ‘a large city in Belgium’ (8.0%).²⁷

Characters

Narrative Structure

The corpus yielded a total number of 1,176 characters, of which 146 narrating main characters, 374 non-narrating main characters and 656 side characters. 56 novels were exclusively narrated from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, which means that they contained no narrating main characters. 64 novels enacted only one narrating main character who also functioned as the prevailing focaliser, and 28 novels repeatedly staged different focalisers but nevertheless confined the story to one narrating main character. In the remaining 22 novels multiple narrators appeared, with a maximum of 11 different narrating main characters within one novel. In other words: 148 out of 170 novels were exclusively narrated by one narrator – either a first person narrator or an omniscient one – and among these, 28 novels staged different focalisers providing different points of view to the narrative presented by its sole narrator.

²⁵ According to the definition of the *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* (CBS), except for the fact that we do include Indonesian and Japanese people in this group. The CBS defines non-Western as ‘originating from any country in Africa, Asia, Latin-America and Turkey, except for Indonesia and Japan’, because the social-economical position of Japanese and Indonesian minorities equals the (Western) majority’s. As we are interested in cultural and geographical diversity rather than social-economical diversity only, we decided to exclude Japan and Indonesia from the West. See: <http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/methoden/begrippen/default.htm?ConceptID=1013>

²⁶ The ‘*Randstad*’ refers to a large, urbanised area in the Netherlands, which consists of the four major cities Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht as well as several smaller towns such as Leiden, Delft, Haarlem and Gouda.

²⁷ For this category, we counted Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges, Liège, Louvain and Namur.

Gender

Of all characters whose gender was known (N = 1173), the majority was male (57.12%). A similar rate can be observed within all character types, with a peak among the narrating main characters: 69.44% of all narrating main characters were male (see table 1). Nevertheless, these proportions appeared to depend on the authors' gender: male authors were more likely to create male characters and vice versa (see tables 2 and 3).

Almost all characters could unambiguously be identified within the bodily dichotomy of 'male' and 'female' (often indicated by personal pronouns), unless no indication was given about their gender, which happened in three cases. We did not distinguish between different kinds of sexual orientation, as we considered our method of distant reading too reductive to accurately 'measure' this identity feature.

Table 1. Gender proportions per character type

	Male (N = 670)	Female (N = 503)	Unknown (N = 3)
Narrating main characters (N = 146)	69.44%	30.56%	1.37%
Main characters (N = 374)	54.16%	45.84%	0.27%
Side characters (N = 656)	56.10%	43.90%	0.00%
Total corpus (N = 1176)	57.12%	42.88%	0.26%

Table 2. Gender proportions per character type among characters created by male authors

	Male (N = 512)	Female (N = 319)	Unknown (N = 3)
Narrating main characters (N = 87)	90.80%	9.20%	2.25%
Main characters (N = 276)	58.33%	41.67%	0.36%
Side characters (N = 468)	58.12%	41.88%	0.00%
Total (N = 834)	61.61%	38.39%	0.36%

Table 3. Gender proportions per character type among characters created by female authors

	Male (N = 158)	Female (N = 184)	Unknown (N = 0)
Narrating main characters (N = 57)	36.84%	63.16%	0.00%
Main characters (N = 97)	42.27%	57.73%	0.00%
Side characters (N = 188)	51.06%	48.94%	0.00%
Total (N = 342)	46.20%	53.80%	0.00%

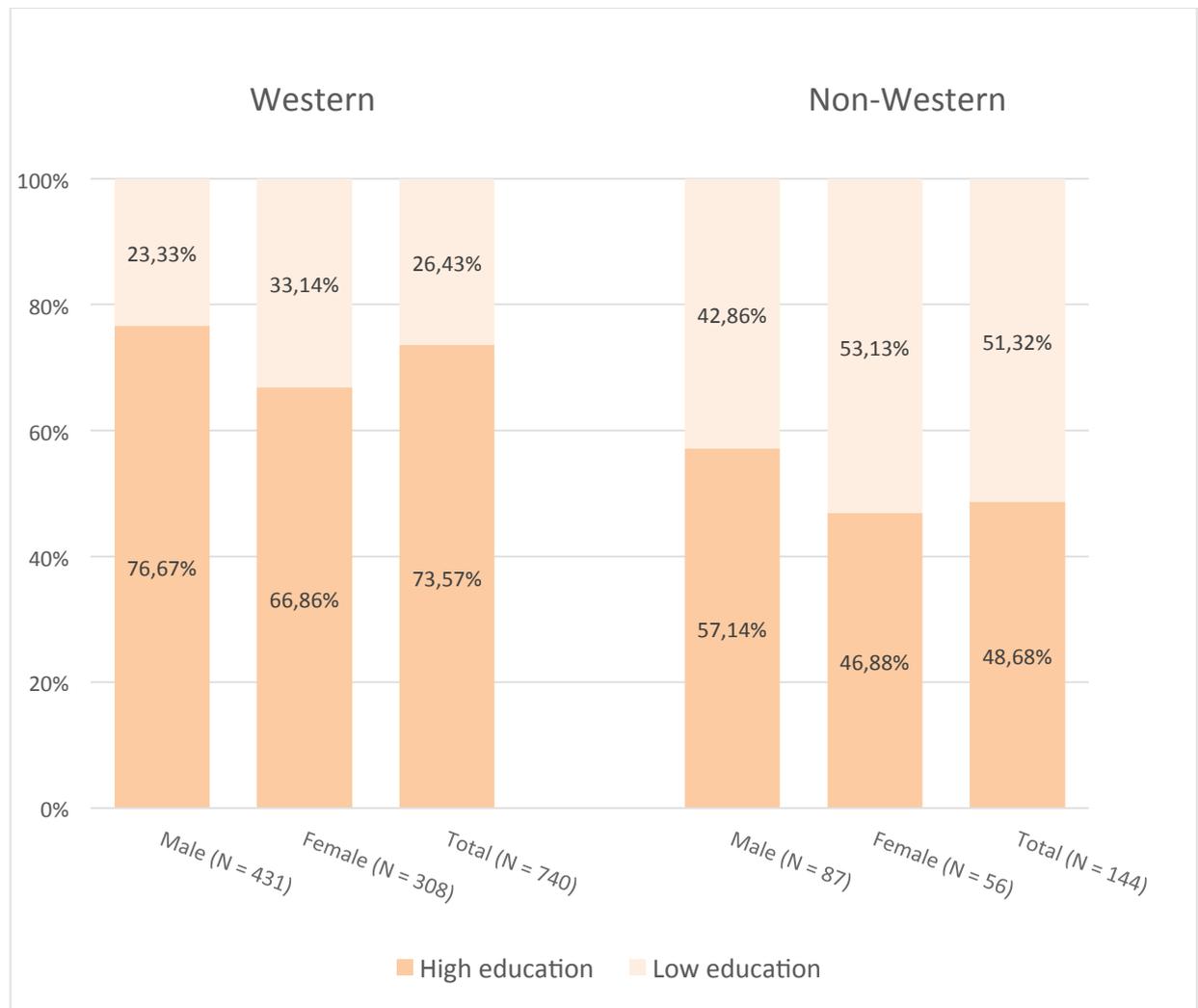
Level of Education

The characters predominantly enjoyed a high education or were employed in a position that requires a degree from a higher education institution. 71.02% of all characters whose position or education was known (N = 766) met this condition, which means that only 28.98% could be identified as 'lowly educated'.²⁸ Within this group of specifically educated or lower-educated characters, the label of 'lowly educated' applied more often to women than to men: 37.17% of all women and 24.55% of all men could be classified as such. Women were conversely slightly less often highly educated than men (62.83% versus 75.45%). Also the proportion of characters whose education was unknown differed in both gender categories. The character feature 'education' was more often unknown for women than for men (46.52%, N = 503 and 28.82%, N = 670 respectively). Finally, we can establish that characters of non-Western descent were more frequently lowly-educated and less often highly-educated than their Western counterparts: 46.32% of all non-Western characters were lowly educated and 53.68% highly educated. Female non-Western characters were even more often lowly educated than highly educated, which is an interesting deviation from the Western female characters. See also graph 1.

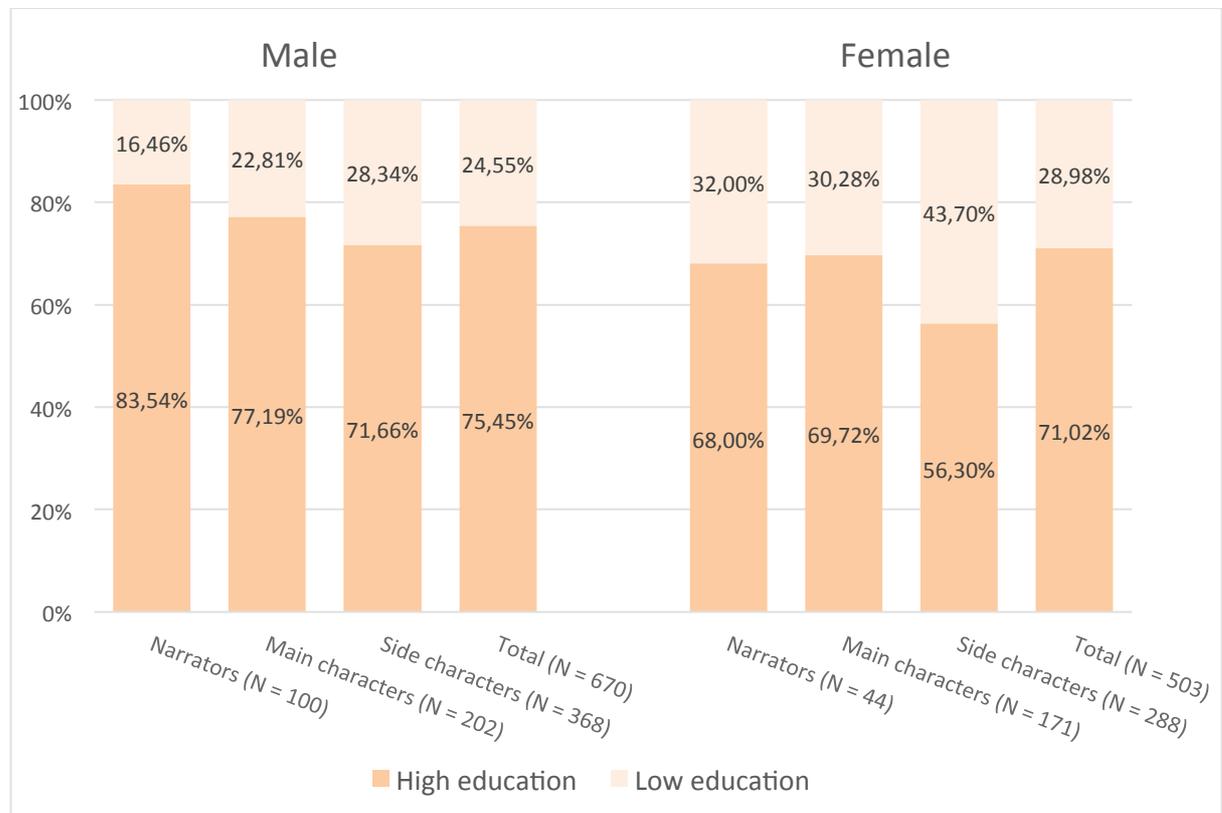
On a different scale, we perceived that the relative dominance of highly educated characters depended on their function in the novel. Narrating main characters were more often highly educated than non-narrating main characters, who obtained slightly higher degrees of education than side characters. The same applies vice versa to the share of lowly educated characters, which grows with each step down the 'focalisation hierarchy'. Additionally, the number of characters whose level of education is unknown was the largest among the side characters. Apparently, the level of education of characters – and possibly therefore their social class – becomes less significant when they are not focalising. See graph 1.

²⁸ This category ranges from illiterate to the completion of professional training after secondary school.

Graph 1. Distribution of highly and lowly educated characters among Western and non-Western character groups per gender category



Graph 2. Distribution of highly and lowly educated characters among different character types per gender category



Profession

A third factor that contributes to the identity of characters is their profession. Characters were employed in numerous ways, from taxi driver to professor. In the case of 807 out of a total of 1,176 characters a profession or main activity was known. This includes characters who could be identified as children attending primary or secondary education, students, explicitly unemployed or retired.

First of all, the largest group within both gender categories were the students. Apart from them, both male and female characters were frequently employed as teachers, writers, doctors, journalists and entrepreneurs. The most significant differences between men and women were the high number of prostitutes (18), housewives (14) and housekeepers (5) among women and the many scholars or professors (14), farmers (9) and criminals (7) among men.

Table 4. Top 15 most common professions for male and female characters

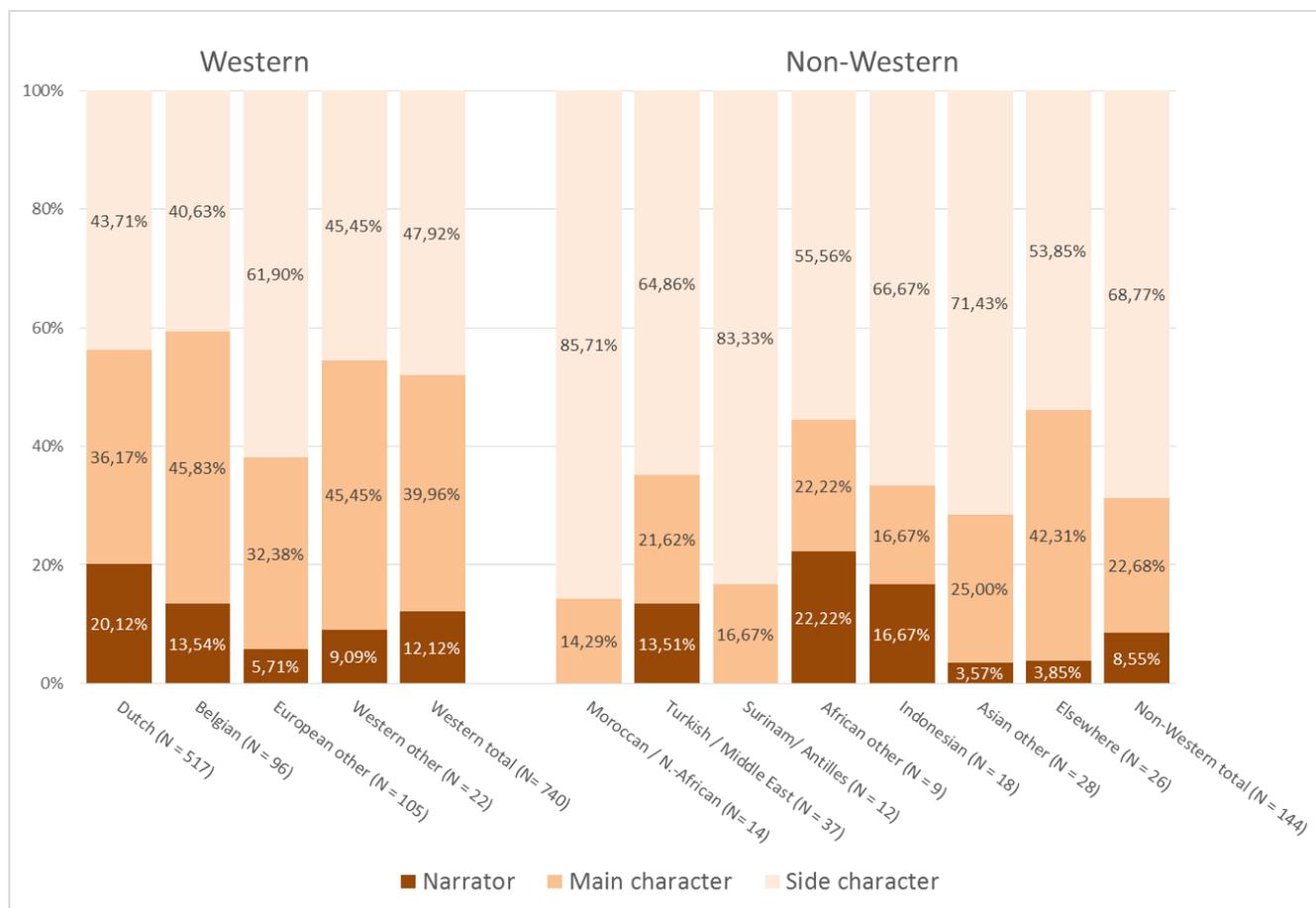
	Male	Frequency	Female	Frequency
1	student (higher education)		36 student (prim. or sec. school)	38
2	student (prim. or sec. school)		32 student (higher education)	31
3	entrepreneur		27 prostitute/ escort	18
4	teacher		25 housewife	14
5	doctor		20 nurse	11
6	journalist		20 teacher	9
7	writer		20 unemployed	7
8	scholar		14 journalist	6
9	farmer		10 secretary	5
10	lawyer		8 actress	5
11	civil servant		8 housekeeper	5
12	architect		8 psychologist	5
13	photographer		7 entrepreneur	5
14	criminal		7 doctor	4
15	unemployed		7 writer	4
	Unknown	17.46%	Unknown	37.38%
	Total (N)	670	Total (N)	503

Descent

Besides gender, level of education and profession, a fourth character feature appears to be meaningful for imagining the characters' identities: descent. Out of all 888 characters whose descent or place of birth was known, 83.71% (N = 740) originated from a Western country, 16.29% (N = 144) were born and/or raised in a so-called non-Western area and in 24.83% of the total 1,176 cases (N = 292) the reader was not informed of the character's descent. After Dutch (58.22%), Belgian (10.81%) and other European characters (11.82%), the largest groups of characters were born and/or raised in 'Turkey or the Middle East' (4.17%), 'Asia outside Indonesia' (3.15%), Indonesia (2.03%) and 'Morocco and North Africa' (1.58%).

Non-Western characters were slightly more often male (61.20%) than Western characters (56.05%), which approximates the share of male characters in the total corpus (56.79%). An interesting peak within the male-female rate can be observed with regard to characters from Turkey and the Middle East (with 78.38% male, N = 37), Morocco and North Africa (with 78.57% male, N = 14) and other African characters (with 88.89% male, N = 9). Moreover, Western characters were more often depicted in focalising roles – consisting of narrating main characters and non-narrating main characters by definition – than non-Western characters (52.08% of all Western characters were provided with a focalising role whereas only 31.23% of all non-Western characters can be classified as focaliser). See graph 4.

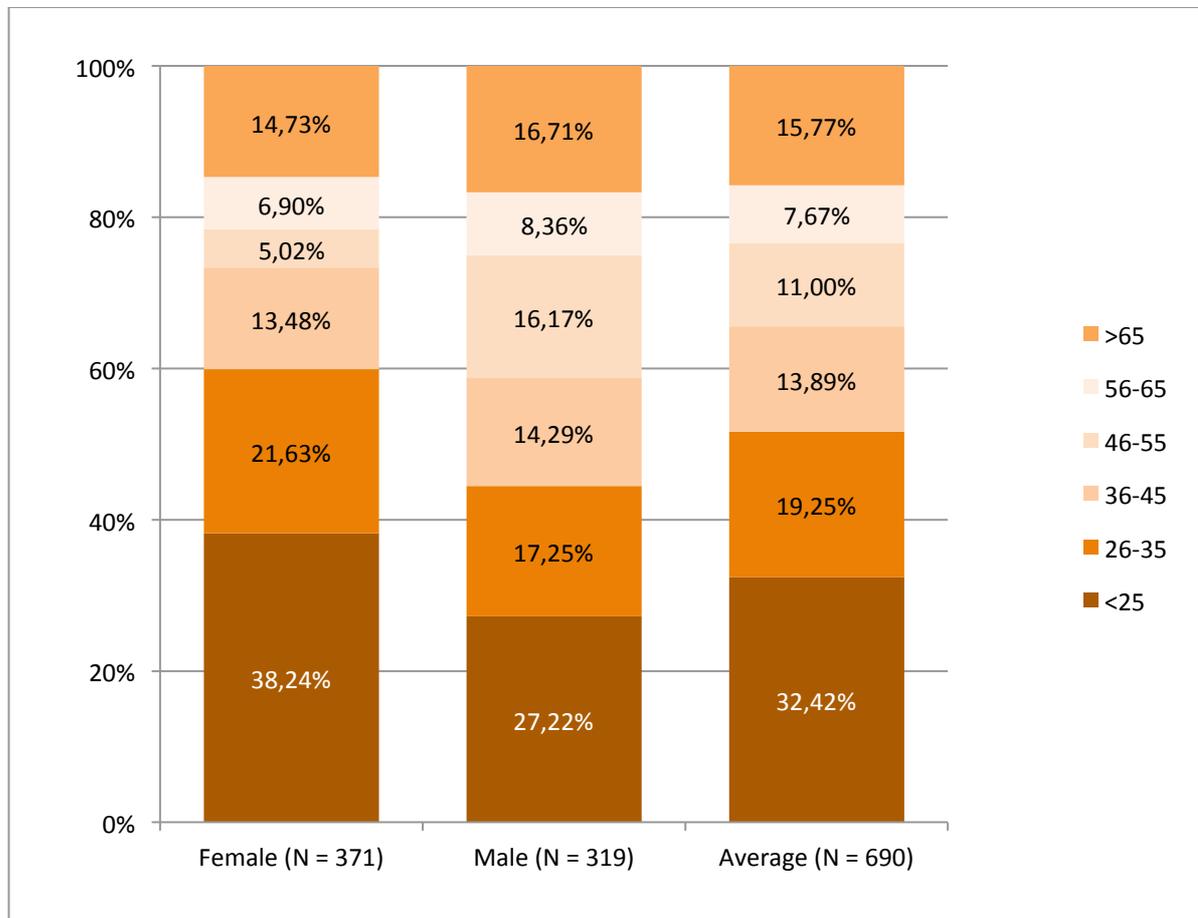
Graph 4. Distribution of characters per character type and descent



Age

Lastly, the distribution of characters from different age categories is not equal: over 50% of all characters whose age is mentioned in the novels (N = 691) were under 36 years. Again, there was a difference between the genders. The age diversity among women was even smaller: 38.24% of all female characters were under 25 and 21.63% between 26 and 35. Furthermore, the feature 'age' was more often unknown for male characters (44.63%) than for female roles (36.58%).

Graph 5. Distribution of characters per age category and gender (N = 690)



5. Interpretation

The demographic landscape of recent Dutch literature, as displayed by our results, leads to at least three different interpretations with regard to the diversity of the characters. First of all, the distinction between narrating main characters, main characters and side characters enables us to consider the dominance of certain categories over others. That is, this distinction contains a hierarchy: narrating main characters shape a novel to a greater extent than non-narrating main characters do, just as non-narrating main characters leave (through focalisation) a greater mark on the story than side characters. Table 1 shows, for instance, that among the total number of narrating main characters there is a considerable majority of male narrating main characters (69.44%) compared to female narrating main characters (30.56%). Clearly, Dutch authors are apt to give a dominant voice to male characters. As a consequence, male characters take up a higher position in what we have called ‘the hierarchy of representation’.

Furthermore, when descent is taken into account, again a hierarchy becomes apparent. Graph 4 shows that Western characters are given a focalising role (i.e. narrating main character or main character) more frequently than non-Western characters (52.08% as opposed to 31.23%). When we differentiate between the representation of certain ethnic minorities in the Netherlands or Belgium, this image becomes even clearer. Characters of Moroccan or North African descent are small players on the Dutch literary stage. Of all fourteen characters who originated from this region, 85% are side characters – they dangle at the bottom of the hierarchy of representation. The same goes for the 12 Surinamese and Antillean characters, and to a lesser extent for the 37 Turkish characters: they are not only representing small minorities within this fictional demography, but they are also confined to minor roles within the narratives. Hence, it seems valid to assert that contemporary Dutch literature is subject to a considerable degree of monoculturalism. This assertion is strengthened by the amount of narrators per novel, which consists predominantly of one narrator (who is often also the only focaliser) per novel: only 22 of the 170 novels contained multiple narrators. Besides the fact that the descent of focalising characters is of a relatively homogeneous nature, there are also few possibilities to provide an alternative and possibly more heterogeneous perspective on the story, simply because in most novels there is only one narrator and consequently one dominant perspective.

A second interpretation of the results hinges on our presumption that the *unknown* attributes are equally significant. For instance, age plays a more important role for female characters: their age is more frequently mentioned than in the case of male characters. In addition, the professions of female characters appear to be of less interest than those of male characters: in 37.38% of all female cases, the reader is not informed of their profession, as opposed to 17.46% for all male characters. The same goes for level of education: this was unknown in 46.52% of the female cases, whereas education did not play a part in the identity of only 28.82% of the male characters. Thus, attributes of certain kinds of characters, which are structurally left out, indicate their relevance for the representation of these groups. The way we imagine female or non-Western characters is not only determined by what is said about them, but also by what is considered unnecessary to mention. By revealing such patterns of (non-) representation, this quantitative study contributes to our understanding of the function of stereotypes in literature.

Thirdly, the formation of literary norms becomes visible through the correlations between different categories. Most striking are the *intersections* between gender, descent and social class (measured in terms of level of education and profession). The relation between the category of gender and the category of profession shows a discrepancy between the representation of men and women: in table 2 we see that the third most popular professional sector for female characters is prostitution, as opposed to entrepreneurship for male characters. Whereas the focus in the public debate lies on one form of marginalisation (in the Dutch case: the institutional ‘whiteness’), this intersectional approach has enabled us to determine more accurately where the frictions in matters of diversity are located within the Dutch literary product itself. Dominant identities are the male, young, highly educated and Western ones. Less prevailing in recent Dutch literature are elder, lowly educated, female and/or non-Western individuals.

Possibly, an explanation for the homogeneity among characters can be traced back to the institutional context from which these novels have arisen. The demographic features of the

respective authors present an equally homogeneous view. Almost 70% of the contributions to the bulk list of the *Libris Literatuurprij*s were written by male authors; there were few authors with a non-Western background (4%); and practically no authors enjoyed a low-level education (3.8% among male authors; 0% among female authors). Hence, the demography of the authors approximates the demography of their characters. Perhaps we can assert that the reason for the characters' homogeneity lies in the impossibility or unwillingness of authors to make *imagination jumps*. That is, Dutch authors appear to create characters who are conceivable within their own environment; who tend to stay close to the people, areas and classes that they experience in their daily lives. The fact that male, highly educated and Western characters dominate the imaginative landscape of recent Dutch prose could thus be explained by the fact that male, highly educated and Western authors dominate the Dutch literary domain. However, at this point this is only speculation as these claims suggest causal relations which are extremely difficult if not impossible to prove and correlations which also require statistical legitimation, if evincible at all. We will probe the relation between contextual and intra-textual diversity in future research, employing different methods and different corpora.

6. Conclusion

It is tempting to argue that quantitative research provides a more valid or scientific ground for the production of knowledge about representation than qualitative kinds of research as close reading. It is, on the contrary, not our aim to present a method that replaces qualitative analyses. After all, our method is qualitative to a high degree. We read novels – not numbers –, we inevitably had to interpret – not calculate – the texts under scrutiny, and we classified and analysed our data using qualitative considerations instead of statistical ones.

The quantitative aspect of this study reveals itself in the scale of the corpus and in the comparison between all characters as if they were interchangeable, and as if they could be reduced to the few variables that we looked for. In doing so, we neglected to analyse various significant motives, ironies or character features that in a qualitative analysis would have been of equal relevance. The nature of our claims thus became more quantitative than qualitative: we did not aspire to analyse the representation of different character groups in one or two particular novels from our corpus. Instead we hoped to find patterns and structural preferences with regard to representation within Dutch prose.

These general findings will hopefully provide new hypotheses that can be tested and contradicted by studying similar corpora from a different period or language area. Furthermore, our findings could be complemented by close reading particular novels that question, oppose or parody the patterns we perceived. For instance, this study elicits a response from qualitative research that through discursive analyses could examine those novels from this corpus that do enact characters who are structurally neglected: if those marginalised groups are given a voice, then how are they represented? Do such novels provide a different view when read with regards to all their complexities? Literary studies could benefit from combining such qualitative questions with quantitative methods, thus doing justice to both patterns and particulars. It is also this integration of methods that is becoming pivotal within the field of

computational literary studies.²⁹ The question then remains: what do the patterns tell us about the state of diversity in Dutch literature? First of all, we believe that this study has shown that diversity in literary representation is not self-evident: the value of our quantitative comparison is that it reveals structural preferences for given groups and blindness for others. We used the term ‘intersectionality’ to indicate that marginalisation becomes visible when different ‘sections’ of group identities are being combined. For instance, non-Western characters do not only constitute a small minority, but they are far more often lowly educated than Western characters. This could mean that highly educated, non-Western characters are less conceivable within the discourse of Dutch fiction.

Our research does not provide answers to the question whether this discourse is a consequence of the ‘whiteness’ of the Dutch literary domain. It does suggest, however, that these two dimensions (institutional and text-internal) relate, and that the literary field produces reader expectations about literature, which are not likely to be contradicted by that very literature. As the group of authors who produced the corpus supposedly bears resemblance to the demography of characters in terms of its homogeneity (male, Western, highly educated), the supposition arises that the lack of diversity among the latter is a product of the former’s uniformity. The interesting yet unproven consequence would be that a greater diversity among literary authors (and accordingly among critics, publishers, editors) would result in a greater diversity within the literature they produce.

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²⁹ See for instance: Mark Algee-Witt & Mark McGurl, ‘Between Canon and Corpus: Six Perspectives on 20th-Century Novels’, *Stanford Literary Lab Pamphlet* 8, January 2015; Larry Stewart, ‘Charles Brockden Brown: Quantitative Analysis and Literary Interpretation’, *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 18.2 (2003), 129-38.

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Primary literature

For a list of all novels used in this study, see: <http://www.librisliteratuurprijs.nl/2013-groslijst>

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