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Master Thesis

Representing migration:

an analysis of the depiction of migrant characters and their journey in *Exit West* and *Dit zijn de namen.*

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Introduction

Migration has always played a significant role in the history of the world, but never has it been regarded as such an extensive crisis until now. Millions of people are moving; they are fleeing from poverty or war and try to ensure themselves a better place to live. They are rarely welcomed with warmth or hospitality. Borders are closing, anti-migrant laws are drawn up, and natives inhabiting rich(er) countries grow more hostile towards migrants every day. As borders are closing up, many refugees see no other choice than opt for perilous ways to cross these borders: well-known are the small boats in which migrants try to cross seas or oceans and the trucks in or under which they are hidden. The media play an increasing role in the debate on migration; especially through social media pictures of drowned migrants and the hatred of natives against refugees arriving in their country can be dispersed easily and instantaneous.

As on many pressing subjects, much is written on migration, fictional as well as non-fictional work. Studies after literature concerning migration recognize and describe inaccurate patterns and warn against these wrongful portrayals of migrants and the process of migration. Examples hereof we find in studies by Lisa Marchi and Sarah Ahmed. Both in the media and literature on migration, the same image is often depicted: an image that surely is not always true to reality, which in turn creates a framework of erroneous images and incorrect interpretation of the experience of migrants. We recognize in many migration narratives one of Marchi's concerns: the focus on the journey migrants take on. By contrast, there is little or no portrayal of refugee's lives before they decided to move. The notion of migration has become a metaphor for dislocation as a whole while the representation of migrants results in the migrant as a standardized trope. Refugees are depicted either as victims or as people that should be feared, as Ipek A. Celik demonstrates in her work *In Permanent Crisis*.

In this study I will analyze two contemporary novels in which migration functions as a key theme. Both novels describe the life and journey of migrant characters. I want to study these novels closely to find out exactly how they depict the experiences of migrant characters. The narratives present differences between one another regarding the portrayal of the characters and their journey. The role attributed to religion in each work differs notably too. Several

aspects of both these narratives do not align with the dominant discourse on migration, both the discourse in literary and social sciences (on which I will elaborate further in the next chapter). These differences regarding the prevailing rhetoric can be found in the role religion plays in the narrative and the portrayal of borders and ideology. The purpose of this study is to find out how these deviations from the dominant discourse provide the possibility to change or add insights to migrant rhetoric.

First, I will introduce these two novels. *Exit West* is British-Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid's fourth novel, published recently, in 2017. His previous works already show his interest in globalization and its effects on different kinds of people. These novels discuss concepts as urbanization, migration, and radicalization in the lives of the protagonists. Even though Hamid's last work is mainly defined as a love story, the tale of the couple's migration is the setting in which their romance is placed: they meet "in a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not openly at war" (Hamid 1). When the situation in the city is getting worse and the couple feels they have no chance of building a future, they decide to move away. Through magic black doors that start appearing all over the world, the couple moves from an unnamed city in the Middle East to the Greek island Mykonos. Via London they ultimately settle in the newly built city of Marin, situated alongside San Francisco.

Dutch writer Tommy Wieringa had already written several successful novels before *Dit zijn de namen* was published in 2012. This novel depicts a group of migrants struggling to find their way on a deserted steppe. The migrants' narrative is alternated with a narrative that presents Pontus Beg, a chief of police who lives and works in the fictive city of Michailopol. Beg finds out that he might be Jewish and goes on a quest to discover what this entails and how he can insert newly acquired Jewish rules in his life. In the parallel narrative we read how the refugees fight for their lives in a deserted wasteland. They have been walking on the same steppe for months, whilst looking for a city that was promised to be located merely a couple of hours walking from their starting point. When the migrants finally reach the fictional city of Michailopol, this has a huge impact on both them as well as on the inhabitants of the city. The natives have never encountered people that are in such a deplorable state. Therefore, they continuously wonder who they are, where they come from and how they should conduct themselves towards the refugees. While they are in custody, the refugees find out that they in fact never crossed the border they believed to have passed over months ago.

Whereas in Wieringa's work we read about a group of refugees, Hamid's novel portrays the story of just two characters migrating. The journey of the refugees in Wieringa's novel is of utmost importance and is therefore elaborated on extensively. In contrast, the journey from one place to another seems of no importance in *Exit West:* because of the appearance of the black doors people all over the world can move from one place to another by just stepping through one of those doors. Often the focus of the narrative is on this journey, as we recognize in *Dit zijn de namen*, and the difficulties thereof, while life, thoughts, and decisions before the point of leaving home tend to be neglected. Whereas *Exit West* elaborates extensively on the life migrants have before they decide to move, *Dit zijn de namen* only portrays some glimpses of the refugees' roots. What is the significance of this difference in portrayal concerning both these migration narratives *an sich* as well as to the prevailing rhetoric? Religion, an aspect that often plays a role in migrant narratives, is present in both novels, although in different forms and aspects of the migrant's lives. Are these instances of religion comparable and what is their significance for the experience of migration? Lastly, I want to focus on the concept of a border. Inextricably bound to migration, this concept is ascribed an immense amount of power. Migrants' identities are defined through the crossing of a border, but what if, as in *Dit zijn de namen*, a border appears to be staged? And how does the meaning and influence of a border change when it is rendered superfluous, as in Hamid's narrative?

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework: literary narratives on forced migration

Barely any study has been dedicated to these literary works. While this lack of framework is not an easy point to start, by holding on to the dominant discourse on migration as depicted and commented upon by many scholars among whom Sara Ahmed, Ipek A. Celik, Lisa Marchi, and Agnes Woolley, I will put both novels in relation to the portrayal of migration and the migrant character in literature. The use of Bal's *Narratology* will help analyze the two texts while her theories also provide very useful insights into ideological motives in narratives.

In "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement", Sarah Ahmed criticizes the current discourse on migration for generalizing the meaning of migration and allowing for it to become a mere metaphor for dislocation (331-2). In the representation of migration many assume an authentic migrant perspective, which constructs the opposite: an inauthentic migrant, whose experiences become exoticized and idealized (334). Similar to Ahmed's focus on the wrongful representation of the migrant, Bishupal Limbu elaborates on the politics of representation concerning migrants as well. He recognizes how representational conventions in the discourse of migration "have coagulated into a standard discursive mode that one finds routinely in journalistic writing and other news media" (268). Whereas Limbu's research focuses mainly on the portrayal of migrants in non-fiction writing, Ahmed and Marchi put emphasis on the portrayal of migrant characters in literature. In "Ghosts, Guests, Hosts", Marchi adds observations to the discussion that concern the standardized portrayal of female refugees: women play a secondary role, are depicted as caretakers, victims or prostitutes (605). Furthermore, Marchi warns for the danger of constructing migrants as an artefact by leaving out an account of their lives before they moved.

Also investigating the portrayal of migrant characters is Celik. Concluding her *In Permanent Crisis*, she states how the portrayal of a migrant character is always structured along two different tropes: "[t]hey appear either as threats that call for security measures or as victims that call for aid, frequently shifting back and forth between the affective registers of fear and pity" (128). These theories on migration, its narrative, and migrant literature all elaborate on the wrongful portrayal of migrants and migrant characters. It is of utmost importance to realize that these two worlds influence one another greatly: the portrayal of migrant characters shapes the image of migrants depicted in non-fiction work, and vice versa.

That is why both types of theories are productive when applied to works of fiction. In these works is made clear how wrongful or standardized portrayals arise and how these portrayals influence readers and their interpretation of migration, migrants, and migrant characters.

An aspect that is inextricably bound to migration is the concept of a border. Indeed, borders influence the course and outcome of migration. In both novels the existence and effect of borders are of changing nature. Analyzing mobility in a globalized world, both William T. Cavanaugh and Maja Korac-Sanderson elaborate on the changing impact of borders. They discuss the identity borders provide as well as the different levels of influence borders have on migrants compared to tourists. Following this huge contrast between refugees and tourists, migrants are often perceived as public enemy, which creates a discourse of the migrant as a threat to Western civilization, corresponding to Celik's theory as above mentioned.

In both literary works religion is a reoccurring aspect. In order to analyze the influence of religion on migration, Martha Th. Frederiks' work shares some much-needed insight, as the relation between these subjects has not been elaborated on often. Adding onto Smith's older but still relevant theories on religion and ethnicity, Frederiks explains how religion sustains people in difficult times. Religion provides meaning and support while it produces a vocabulary to express the feelings that arise in this process. Religion constructs a home away from home, a safe haven, and a training ground for public participation and integration (188-9), while migrants ensure their relationship with home and their past through religious practices too. Although recognizable in *Exit West*, religion in *Dit zijn de namen* takes on different forms. By using Frederiks' description and interpretation, how can I add to theories on religion in relation to migration with the insights the novels provide?

Above mentioned studies will aid me in analyzing Hamid's and Wieringa's work. They provide me with insight and knowledge to put the big themes related to migration in these narratives in relation to the prevailing rhetoric as described by these scholars. I will be able to locate, define, and analyze the crucial parts of the narratives that provide the reader with new insights regarding the topic of migration. In doing so, I believe with this study I can add a new layer to the discourse on migration through the original insights provided by these two narratives.

Chapter 2: Exit West

Mohsin Hamid's most recent work presents a love story in a time of crisis. In the novel's story-world mysterious doors provide the means for anyone to move away from home to any other place in the world, causing a worldwide change in the general way of life. While depicting hundreds of millions of people moving away from their homes, Exit West tells the story of two lovers, Saeed and Nadia, who do the same. At first glance, several aspects of the narrative seem to diverge from the dominant discourse concerning migration. The text does not portray the exact journey migrants take on; instead, it uses metaphors to address the topic of migration. The narrative presents the characters extensively, including the story of their life before they decided to leave home. Also, religion plays a role in the narrative, albeit only in the male character's view on life. Religion can motivate ideological utterances, as well as other convictions do. Throughout the narrative many ideologically colored statements are present. They concern the difference between East and West and demonstrate an ideology that negates the standardized image of the poor, underdeveloped East in contrast to the rich West. In short, many aspects of the text point to the impression that Exit West is not 'just another migrant narrative'. In this chapter I want to analyze the abovementioned aspects of the narrative to find out how and why this work differs from many other literary migrant narratives. The new insights this question brings to light can be made productive for a critical understanding of the discourse surrounding migration. Nevertheless, as there are many aspects in the narrative that appear ambiguous, I would also like to pose the question in how far Exit West's narrative paves ways towards a new, different portrayal of the concepts 'migrant' and 'migration.

2.1 Ideology in *Exit West*

An important aspect within the discourse of migration is the difference between what we call the East (or Orient) and West. Starting with the general assumption that migration only happens from the East to the West, suppositions like these lay the foundation for a debate that is often ideologically colored. By being aware of assumptions and (hidden) ideologically motivated insertions, the possibility arises to set erroneous, often too binary interpretations straight. The most obstinate contrast is the picture drawn up of the rich West where the quality of life is better in every aspect of civilization and the less developed, grubby, darker-

skinned, barbaric East. Edward Said elaborated on this pattern in his book *Orientalism*: "Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans" (7). The minds of a huge part of the inhabitants of the West are shaped following these fixed modes of thinking. Simultaneously, a rigid perception of the West exists in the East as well. As we read in Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit's *Occidentalism*, Western civilizations miss a spiritual layer, a soul that is present in Eastern thinking. These scholars argue that "modern Western civilization was shallow, rootless, and destructive of creative power" (3).

These ideologically colored modes of thinking can be found in almost every piece of writing. Following Bal's *Narratology*, ideology is most obviously present in argumentative parts of the narrative, which she defines as passages that "do not refer to an element (process or object) of the fabula, but to an external topic" (32). Surely, ideology is always related to the real world and our perception of it, so when a narrative refers to situations (that are also plausible) in the real world, it is almost impossible to do this without ideological charge. However, also descriptive and narrative parts of a text communicate ideology, although the way that happens is divergent: they often distribute ideologically colored viewpoints more subtle and indirect. At first view, *Exit West*'s narrative seems to contain few fragments that can be considered distinctly argumentative; the majority of the text consists of descriptive and narrative parts, often not mutually exclusive, but with both kinds conjugated in one form. Therefore, ideology, wherever integrated into the narrative, is concealed.

This can be seen in the section of the narrative when the couple has just undertaken their move away from home. Alongside the description of the new place they arrive in, the reader encounters some remarks about the doors too:

> Mykonos, a great draw for tourists in the summer, and, it seemed, a great draw for migrants this winter, and that the doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from – although almost no one ever did – or perhaps because there were simply too many doors from too many poorer placed to guard them all. (100-1)

The fact that the doors to poorer destinations are not guarded, while those to richer places are, entails an ideological valuation. It demonstrates the vision of the natives of the island

who would, as their lack of attention to guard doors to poor destinations proves, like to see the migrants 'go back to where they came from'. This descriptive part of the narrative hides an argumentative link to the extratextual reality: it can be defined as common knowledge that not just the inhabitants of areas like this are displeased with the arrival of thousands of migrants. Governments and other large institutions try to prevent this from happening and guard borders that give access to more prosperous places. Therefore, I recognize at the base of this fragment a First World-oriented ideology.

However, this ideology is only partially present, as missing from the segment is the Western fear for radicalized militants. With this, I mean the (over)protectiveness regarding those who move back for religious or ideological reasons. These militants move from West to East to tie in to radicalized groups to take action against the secularized West. Celik defines this fear and its origin as follows: "At the heart of the constellation of these discussions on migrants and minorities of migrants is European identity, conceptualized as at risk, an anxiety that creates an affective economy dictated by a temporality of crisis associated with Europe's Others." (11). As this aspect of Western ideology is left out this fragment is a simplified representation of Western ideology.

Another point of critique on a Western-based ideology we find some chapters further on in the narrative when Saeed and Nadia have moved to London. The dystopic situation that is now depicted shows millions of people moving to this metropole. This sudden change causes riots all over the city, as well as overpopulation and austerity of food and electricity. Many inhabitants of London form groups to fight this change and get back their city. When Nadia and Saeed talk about these developments, we read:

> 'I can understand it,' she said. 'Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived.' 'Millions arrived in our country,' Saeed replied. 'When there were wars nearby.' 'That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose.' (Hamid 162)

In my opinion, this is a very strong notion that provides a mirror for many Western readers of this work. This sequence puts in perspective the attitude of Western people that protest the arrival of migrants in a hostile way, while they live a very comfortable and peaceful life. At the same time, Eastern countries have (had) to deal with migration streams innumerable times bigger, while natives who live in or close to a region at war often have a less luxurious life to

begin with – and thus have much less to give. With this segment of the narrative, the gap between East and West is both enlarged *and* reduced. On the one hand, as the text puts the focus on this difference, the contrariety between East and West seems to become even bigger and even more impossible to overcome. On the other hand, this fragment creates a possibility for any Western reader to empathize with and understand this position that might be unfamiliar. When readers recognize this situation and put it in relation to their own situation, the narrative provides them with an option to move closer towards the 'other' and reduce the gap in between.

While the fragment above is an example of *Exit West*'s narrative handing out a possibility for greater understanding, the text also more explicitly objects to the dominant way of thinking as described earlier. Following the above-quoted segment, the narrative describes how the situation in London is about to escalate. Protesting natives form militant groups to eradicate as many migrants from the city as possible. The inhabitants of the big house where Nadia and Saeed reside discuss their possible reactions to this outbreak of violence, and "[a]ll agreed that the most important thing was to manage the impetuousness of the youngsters, for armed resistance would likely lead to a slaughter, and non-violence was surely their most potent response, shaming their attackers into civility." (Hamid 151) The terms used – barbaric actions and civil responses – are recognizable within the discourse of the antagonism of East and West. However, in this case, the terms refer to the 'opposite' parties. The UK natives are referred to as barbaric, having no shame, and capable of slaughtering other people without feeling any remorse, while the refugees are trying to keep the situation from escalating by posing a civilized conversation as an alternative to barbaric slaughtering.

The portrayal of ideology and the relation between the global East and West in *Exit West* can best be defined as equivocal. Because of this ambivalent character of the narrative, one cannot argue that the work in its entirety takes an active stand against standardized portrayals of migration. But, by inversing the adjectives used to describe East and West and by providing the Western readers with a mirror to rethink their ideological convictions, Hamid's narrative adds a new layer to the prevailing rhetoric on migration.

2.2 Migration, borders, and the fantastic

In migration literature the focus is often on the journey and the 'new home' of a migrant or refugee.[1] Their stories before they came to the point of departure seem, regarding the lack of representation, of low (or even no) interest. Lisa Marchi defines this, referring to Abdelmalek Sayad, as "the mistake of neglecting part of the migratory project and construct[ing] the migrant 'as a pure *artifact*'" (Marchi 606). With this, both Marchi and Sayad urge not to "mutilate the migratory phenomenon by ignoring part of it" (Sayad 178). This will result in the reduction of the migrant as a theoretical construct, an empty shell as it were. Sara Ahmed writes about this phenomenon too. She states that migration is often used as a metaphor. Its meaning is generalized, which eventually results in the celebration of migration "as a transgressive and liberating departure from living-as-usual in which identity (the subject as and at home) is rendered impossible" (331-2). In criticizing Iain Chambers' *Migrancy, Culture and Identity*, Ahmed states that because of this usage of migration, migration itself "becomes a metaphor for the process of dislocation" (333). Thus, the migrant becomes a standardized figure, as Marchi and Sayad observed too. *Exit West* displays at least one aspect that tries to prevent a standardized interpretation of the characters.

Hamid's novel starts in the lives of Saeed and Nadia several months before the point of leaving their home. The narrative slowly unravels both the starting relationship between the two as well as the worsening situation in the city they live in. The extensive 'before'-part is highly uncommon for a literary work on migration. However, this aspect has an important function: it provides the characters with a human face. In doing this, the narrative produces what Bal defines as "character-effects […] when the resemblance between human beings and fabricated figures is so great that we forget the fundamental difference" (113). The character-effect induces the reader to laugh, cry and identify with the characters. At the same time, this effect prevents the reduction of a character to 'yet another migrant' and restrains a character from becoming a stereotyped figure, for which Ahmed, Marchi, and Sayad warn. Ultimately, the character-effect complicates defining a character as a victim or a threat (which aligns with Celik's work).

As mentioned, the most curious part of Hamid's novel is the mysterious, black doors that render every inhabitant of the earth the possibility to move within seconds from one

[1] See: Sara Ahmed (1999), Lutgard Lams (2018), Lisa Marchi (2014), Agnes Woolley (2014).

place to another. It is through one of these doors that Saeed and Nadia leave their city of birth. The traveling from one place to another is described as follows:

> It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it, and she felt cold and bruised and damp as she lay on the floor of the room at the other side, trembling and too spent at first to stand, and she thought, while she strained to fill her lungs, that this dampness must be her own sweat. Saeed was emerging and Nadia crawled forward to give him space, and as she did so she noticed the sinks and mirrors for the first time, the tiles of the floor, the stalls behind her, all the doors of which save one were normal doors, all but the one through which she had come, and through which Saeed was now coming. (98)

From this short passage, only a fourth describes the main characters' journey; the rest of the quotation is both a description of feelings and surroundings and some analogies that relate this special passing to both the process of being born and to a 'normal' journey of migration. Before taking into account these analogies, I want to focus on the usage of time in this fragment. In every story, when a new space is presented, the chronology is disrupted. As Bal argues: spatial indications are always durative (142-3). The same could be said about the depiction of emotions. Because these emotions and spatial indications are described, a slow-down occurs in the story. This makes it seem as if the actual event (in this case, passing through a magic door) takes up more time than it in the context of the narrative does. This is even more precisely demonstrated in the second part of this passage. Starting with "Saeed was emerging" and ending with "through which Saeed was now coming", this fragment starts and ends at the very same point in the fabula, while the story takes up more time.

The journey that already seems to take up so little time in the story, takes up even less time when looking at the level of the fabula. An event that in reality would take up weeks, in *Exit West*'s fabula only takes up some seconds. Where many migrant narratives would portray the journey as a summary, as the story takes less time to portray the event compared to the actual time that passes on the level of the fabula, *Exit West* portrays the journey contrariwise. I have to make just one side note to this statement: the journey as a summary is accurate only if we can let go of the fixed definition of migration and let the magical realism aspect that the black doors bring into the narrative take over. We need to allow the 'passing through a door'

to take over the 'undertaking a long journey'. Consequently, the narrative can be read as a form of criticism on the majority of migrant narratives, as it encourages the reader to understand that the process of migration entails more than leaving home to relocate to a different country.

As stated, the black doors add a touch of magical realism to the novel. According to Stephen Slemon magic realism is not only used as resistance to dominant thinking, but it can also provide a metaphorical representation of many weighty subjects (3). Although Slemon's work is focused on post-colonial discourse, it gives insight into the importance of magic realism in a migrant narrative like *Exit West* too. Slemon explains how the fantastic aspects of magic realistic novels destabilize realism, while these fantastic aspects are always grounded in that same realism: "since the ground rules of these two worlds [the fantastic and realism] are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the 'other'" (11). Nevertheless, the narrative modes of these two worlds "never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy" (Ibid). This dialectic allows for a metaphorical representation of earlier mentioned weighty subjects, as migration, to exist. While the black doors are a fantastic aspect, they are grounded in the narrative of realism, as many of the doors are situated in places that exist extra-textually as well. They destabilize these places through their existence, as many people make use of the doors. This changes the dynamics of these places, as we see happening in the narrative in London. According to Slemon's theory thus, the doors can be seen as a metaphorical representation of the journey migrants take on. Through the earlier mentioned interaction between realism and the fantastic, this metaphorical representation transforms the narrative into a metonymic depiction of the total act of migration. When we zoom out one last time, migration as depicted in *Exit West* can be seen as representative of the effects of globalization. These different levels of meaning of the narrative created by the dialectic between the fantastic and realism render the possibility for the black doors to be the signifier for the journey of migration, the total act of migration, and ultimately migration as an effect of globalization.

Not only do the doors provide a new way to portray and interpret migration, but they also have a huge influence on our understanding of the concept of borders. As a consequence of the appearance of these doors, borders disappear. Surely, at first not literally, as countries keep existing, but borders disappear figuratively. According to many, among whom William

T. Cavanaugh and David Farrier, one of the most important aspects of a border is the power it is ascribed and therefore the power it can execute. The doors in Hamid's narrative render borders powerless, as borders are no longer able to stop or frighten those who want to cross them but are not allowed to do so. In the novel this loss of power results in a mass-migration, and its effects are described as follows: "[t]he news in those days was full of war and migrants and nativists, and it was full of fracturing too […] and it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart. Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory" (Hamid 155). Clearly, with the disappearance of borders, nations can no longer prevail as their power is largely base on their finiteness, which is constituted by borders. The image depicted in the narrative can be related to extra-textually existing conditions: globalization has resulted in a shift in the meaning of borders. In his article "Mobility and Identity in a Global Age", Cavanaugh states that globalization is a process in which the barriers of time and space that once separated people are dissolved (341). This also applies to the effect the doors seem to have in Hamid's novel: the doors present a rigorous and advanced state of globalization, in which borders have become irrelevant. This is contradictory to Farrier's viewpoint, as he states that "[b]orders now have a ubiquity that exceeds the conventional territorial model" (4). He explains that migrants are both included and excluded by nation-states and have become illegal through those states' laws. When borders disappear, nation-states cease to exist too, which would lead to migrants no longer being in legal limbo. Not only does a world without borders sound like peaceful existence, no one would be prevented from moving anymore. But, all of this theoretical and quite utopian reasoning is problematized in *Exit West*'s narrative. The novel demonstrates that while borders may cease to exist, nation-states are frenetically kept together. Their laws are angrily executed and migrants are still being kept from moving and building a life.

This paragraph has made clear that the novel's portrayal of the background of the characters leads to a more complete and less stereotypical figure of the migrant. This also diminishes the borders between the characters and the readers. As the narrative provides the reader with the possibility to identify and empathize with the characters, the figure of the migrant is enriched and brought away from standardized forms. The novel's unique way of depicting the migrant's journey can be interpreted as a comment on the dominant discourse to focus on other parts of the migratory process too. In this portrayal, the magic realism adds

to the possibility of regarding the doors as a metaphor for migration, all the way to interpreting them as an ultimate effect of globalization.

2.3 The portrayal of migrant characters

One of the most important aspects of a narrative are the protagonists. They provide eyes through which the reader observes the unrolling events and they resemble real people with whom the reader can identify. Characters can also be the subject of projections, fallacies, and precipitate conclusions and interpretations. The earlier mentioned character-effect contributes to the reader's identification and empathy with characters, and the projection of traits onto characters coming from the reader's frame of reference. This projection can lead to a false interpretation that provides a flat character. Thereafter a stereotypical perception comes into being, from which certain fixed tropes emanate, as Celik describes in her work. This provides a discourse filled with stereotypical tropes, such as a migrant as either a victim or a threat, or a migrant coming from a mostly Islamic area as a stereotyped Muslim. Inserting a different character-image into this discourse becomes more and more difficult. At first, Hamid's narrative appears to build onto this dominant discourse, as the protagonists appear quite stereotypical at the start of the story.

At the beginning of *Exit West*'s narrative, three aspects of the characters seem to be of utmost importance that they are ascribed to them promptly: their gender, name and one major aspect of their appearance:

> In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her. For many days. His name was Saeed and her name was Nadia and he had a beard, not a full beard, more a studiously maintained stubble, and she was always clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch into a flowing black robe. Back then people continued to enjoy the luxury of wearing more or less what they wanted to wear, clothing and hair wise, within certain bounds of course, and so these choices meant something. (1)

These aspects of the characters together with the statement about the city paint a picture that contains a certain number of stereotypical signs. Bearded men, women in black dresses, a city full of refugees on the verge of war, names like Saeed and Nadia; all these aspects conjure up an image of the Middle East. Also, by stating very early in the narrative that Saeed

and Nadia are living in a city in which conflict is about to evolve to an outbreak of violence, a frame of reference is created in which the reader's interpretation is pushed towards seeing migration as a logical reaction to the situation. Consequently, this first paragraph appears to paint a highly recognizable picture during these first two decades of the twenty-first century. Following this stereotypical beginning of the story, it appears a paved road is laid out for a narrative following the dominant migrant-discourse, which includes characters that are portrayed mostly during their journey, who we will eventually define as victims or possible threats.

These first assumptions are negated when, shortly after their first introduction, the reader gets an elaborate description of Saeed and Nadia. Saeed is a more traditionally wired character: he prays regularly, is hardworking, an "independent-minded, grown man, unmarried, with a decent post and a good education, and as was the case in those days in his city with most independent-minded, grown men, unmarried, with decent posts and good educations, he lived with his parents" (Hamid 8). Although Saeed seems a traditional man, some of his actions and character traits do not fit the stereotype that western readers know. When he speaks to Nadia for the first time, she immediately lets him know that she is not religious at all. Nevertheless, Saeed remains fascinated by her and invites her on a date again. Although Saeed is a religious man, he does not outlive his religion in a legalistic manner. Contrary to the prevailing depiction of religious men from the Middle-East, Saeed does not blindly follow all rules and laws. He quietly observes the world around him and adapts his faith to his insights onto situations he encounters. Against stereotypical expectations, he does engage in sexual acts with Nadia before they are married, and he experiments with drugs (44, 51, 43-4). Nadia's character is more difficult to fathom. She dresses very traditional, even though she is not religious at all; she rides a trail bike and, quite unusual, is single but does not live with her family anymore. She appears a very independent, self-made woman: she wears clothes that many western readers would interpret as confining, but this proves to be misleading. Both characters keep on exuding aspects of themselves that go against readers' expectations, albeit Nadia's character surprises the reader significantly more than Saeed's.

The development of the portrayal of the characters goes hand in hand with the progress of the character's relationship, as well as the advancement of the situation in their city. Already from the start descriptions concerning the characters are intertwined with descriptions of the locations they move in. This coherence is still visible after their move to

Mykonos. In Saeed, a noticeable change appears that could be related to their moving away. Focalized by Nadia, we read: "[…] but she was surprised, because what she thought she had glimpsed in him in that moment was bitterness, and she had never seen bitterness in him before […] but she was a bit unsettled too, for it struck her that a bitter Saeed would not be Saeed at all" (Hamid 102-3). This change in Saeed comes as a surprise for Nadia, while for a reader bitterness does not seems unusual at all in a situation like that – having left a bad situation at home only to end up at an island where circumstances are way worse prerequisites one to feel bitter. Whereas Saeed's character acts according to expectations, the fact that Nadia is surprised by this puts distance between her character and the reader. It is harder to identify with her character, as her action does not match the reader's interpretation of this sequence. When put in perspective of the whole narrative however, this deviation from expectations adds more depth to her character.

Later, when the pair resides in London, we notice other changes in Saeed's character: he is more melancholic, quieter and more devout than ever before (Hamid 193). Whereas Saeed's character shows change caused by their new whereabouts, Nadia at first appears not to be affected at all by their move to Greece. Their situation of endless waiting could easily result in boredom and fear, as the uncertainty of the migrant's position in such a case combined with the absence of a strict routine leaves a lot of room for (over)thinking. However, Nadia "had the idea that they should explore the island as if they were tourists" (Hamid 108). With this utterance she both affirms and denies their status as refugees. Indeed, by strolling around the island, sightseeing, they distance themselves from the image of the refugee created by the dominant discourse. Nevertheless, the statement "as if they were" affirms their precarious situation that could not easily be one of tourists. Surely, where a migrant has enormous difficulties to cross borders, a tourist is unhindered by them. Cavanaugh states about the essence of tourism: "The goal of transcendence of necessity and of the material conditions of life is at the heart of tourism" (346). The tourist wants to encounter the exotic and authenticity of the 'elsewhere', without this exoticism becoming normal. Migrants, on the contrary, do not have a choice to travel or not. Even when they live in a new country, their status and identity can hardly ever be the same as those of natives. *Exit West* protests this discrepancy by presenting migrant characters behaving like tourists, thus providing another aspect that strays away from the prevailing rhetoric of migration.

2.4 Religion in Exit West

Often the role of religion is neglected in migratory discourse, both in research on this subject as well as in the public discourse; "public debates about migration and displacement on the international and national levels have tended to ignore religious issues" (Gózdziak & Shandy 129). This seems highly paradoxical as "religion, in both its social-political and affective sense, crosscuts the experience of refugees at every stage of the refugee journey" (Ibid. 130). Religion manifests itself in Hamid's novel several times, mainly in the form of Saeed's convictions. I want to look closely at the way religion is presented and analyze its role in the narrative in relation to the aspect of migration. Lastly, I will relate this specific portrayal of religion to the representation of religion in the dominant discourse on migration.

Already at the start of the story, just after introducing the characters of Saeed and Nadia, we find out that Saeed's character is religious, and Nadia's most certainly is not:

> Nadia looked him in the eye. 'You don't say your evening prayers?' she asked. Saeed conjured up his most endearing grin. 'Not always. Sadly.' […] 'I think it's personal. Each of us has his own way. Or… her own way. Nobody's perfect. And, in any case –' She interrupted him. 'I don't pray,' she said. (Hamid 2-3)

Two aspects seem of interest: first, the fact that Nadia does not pray seems to come as a surprise for Saeed. Nadia "was always clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch in a flowing black robe" (Ibid. 1), which Saeed connotes to religious convictions. Secondly, what is also interesting is that it appears to be Saeed's character who links the wearing of robes to religious practice, but when taking a closer look, it is not Saeed who focalizes. The initial description of both characters is done by an external narrator. As the term demonstrates, this kind of narrator does not play a role in the narrative. The narrator presents the story to the reader, while allowing the characters to focalize on events and actions. Especially at the beginning of the narrative, the EN seems to tell the story in retrospect and already knows everything that will happen: "a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her. For many days" (1). A little further we read: "Back then people continued to enjoy the luxury of wearing more or less what they wanted to wear" (1). While narrating the event of Saeed noticing Nadia in the present time, the EN shows that they already know that Saeed, after he notices Nadia for the first time, will take quite some time before he speaks to her. The above-mentioned utterances of the EN form the image of

a narrator who is familiar with every single aspect of the narrative. This EN puts the descriptions in a certain frame of reference, by noting that "these choices [of appearance] meant something" (1). Thus, the EN lays down a foundation that steadies the link between the characters' appearance and other aspects, like their religion. Thus, ideology is not transferred by the character's focalization – which would be more innocent, as this ideology would be the conviction of just one character – but by the superordinate position of the EN, which indicates an underlying ideology of the novel.

Nadia's character is, in contrast to Saeed's, a much more progressive character. To Saeed's question on her choice of appearance "[i]f you don't pray […] why do you wear it?", she answers "[s]o men don't fuck with me" (15-6). With this utterance, Nadia changes the expectations readers have created after having obtained the information on Saeed's religion and the black robes Nadia wears. Connoting these robes to religious convictions, Nadia's answer goes against the readers' assumptions. Her explanation puts the robes in a different light and context and gives them a contrasting meaning. As Nadia does not wear the robes for religious reasons, the robes can no longer be interpreted as a symbol of oppression. By using these robes both to empower herself and to take away any power from the gaze of men, these robes become a sign of power and independence.

As stated, religion plays a considerable role in Saeed's life and is of great support to him. Praying reminds him of his childhood home and his mother, and when he tries to build a life on the other side of the globe, people with the same convictions are whom he connects to most. Religious communities like these, as Stephen Warner explains, often have the function of providing a 'home away from home', a safe haven, a secure space (1059-63). We recognize this function when Saeed and Nadia are living in London. Saeed encounters a house full of people from his country: "[o]ne afternoon he was there at prayer time, and he joined his fellow countrymen in prayer in the back garden […] It made him feel part of something, not just something spiritual, but something human, part of this group" (Hamid 148). Saeed asks Nadia to move with him to this house full of their country-people, even while this means losing the luxury of having their own bedroom and relatively substantial privacy (a question that she answers with an apodictic no).

The following segment of *Exit West*'s narrative unveils another relation between migration and religion: "[…] and for a wrenchingly painful second he thought of his father". Having observed this many years ago, Timothy Smith states that migrants often turn to

religion to ensure their continuity with the past, while it also offers a structure, intimacy, and support (1161, 1181-2). In his work, Smith offers an overview of hundreds of years of migration towards the United States, while he paints a picture of the importance of the role of religion in this process: "[m]igration […] altered the relationship between faith and ethnic identity by redefining the boundaries of peoplehood and by intensifying religious reflection and commitment" (183). While Smith's work is based on experiences of migration in the real world, in Hamid's narrative this relation between religion, migrants, and their past is distinguishable too. It is clear that Saeed's religious practices tie him in the process of migration to his family, his heritage, and his motherland. Further on in the story, we read how "[u]ntil the end of his days, prayer sometimes reminded Saeed of his mother, and his parents' bedroom" (200). In Saeed's case, migration intensifies his religious beliefs as they provide him a continuous link with his heritage. Noticeably, Nadia's character is not ascribed that kind of sentiment and nostalgia. When she dreams, her mind is concerned with the girl she met at Mykonos, not with her family or former home. In general, her dreams contain people she met on her journey rather than people she left at home. Following Smith's work, her lack of religious convictions could be the cause for her apparent weaker tie to her homeland.

What to me seems quite remarkable, is that Saeed's religious belief never really gets defined or given a specific name or denomination. Because of this, I expect its role to have a different, possibly less profound influence on this character. Gózdziak and Shandy state, "[f]or most refugees and immigrants, religion helps define their identity" (130). To me, this indicates that as Saeed's religion stays a little vague, so does its influence on his identity. Although Saeed's religion is mentioned frequently, most of the time it is portrayed as him praying, without giving focalization to his character. Thus, for the reader, there is no possibility to learn about this part of the character of Saeed, let alone interpret the influence of religion on his character. Not only is Saeed's religion not specified, named, or assigned to a certain denomination, praying also becomes a metonymic reference to religion. In the course of the novel, we notice every religious aspect of Saeed's life is portrayed as prayer: "and he prayed more regularly" (Hamid 186), "the weekly communal prayer" (200), "and Saeed would pray with his father" (200), and "Saeed prayed even more" (201). Religion should not be perceived as a fixed entity, "but a dynamic web of shared meanings used in different ways in different contexts" (Ryan & Vacchelli 2). However, what does this restrictive focus on the act of praying mean? Following Gózdziak and Shandy's definition (133), religion portrayed as prayer refers

only to the spiritual dimensions of the term and barely to the social-political realm. Saeed's religion is therefore very personal and not easy to share. This becomes clear in the last part of the novel: "[…] for he had never told her to pray nor berated her for not praying" (Hamid 193). As they do not talk about it, it is much harder for Nadia to understand Saeed's view on life and the role religion occupies in it. Towards the end of the narrative their understanding of one another diminishes, which ultimately results in the characters parting ways.

2.5 The function of the parallel narratives

One more striking aspect of Hamid's novel is the insertion of short narratives throughout the text. These short sections are dispersed through the narrative and portray different kinds of protagonists and events. The only thing these stories have in common both reciprocally and in relation to the main narrative is the theme of migration. Because these fragments have barely any connection to the main narrative, I wonder what their function is in regard to the main narrative. All of these separate short stories seemingly tell a different tale. In the first short story we encounter the first indication of the special doors that function as a passage to another location in the world. Not a word has been said yet about these doors in the main narrative, the EN discloses this to the readers long before the protagonists are aware of the doors. This grants the reader a more knowledgeable position compared to the protagonists of the main narrative. In this sequence, we recognize two characters: a woman living in Sydney and a man arriving through her closet doorway. Although not explicitly stated, this man's aim seems to be to leave his home and find another place to build his life. The statements "growing up in the not infrequently perilous circumstances" (Hamid 7) and "he knew how little it took to make a man into meat" (Ibid.) refer to former situations in his life that were not safe. In his aim to migrate, the doors have enormous power: their existence is the means to his goal. The door does not make the passage easy on the man. Descriptions show how it takes "great effort" (6) to get through the door, comparing the passage – as mentioned earlier too – to a birth. As this sequence is placed so close to the beginning of the main narrative, and as this is the first mentioning of magic black doors, for the reader this fragment is rather difficult to interpret.

The second sequence is placed relatively close to the first one in the main narrative. Again, there is mentioning of the black doors, while in the main narrative these have not been introduced yet. In Tokyo, a businessman notices how two Filipina girls appear from a black

door in an alley. The structure of characters is similar to the first sequence: a native inhabitant of a city and one or more migrants who appear in a space unknown to them. In this case, the migrants are noticed by the native. Within the description by the EN, the man focalizes at the second level in a subjective retroversion. This informs the reader that the man strongly dislikes people with a Filipino background. The sequence ends with an aspect of suspense that lets the reader believe the man is about to harm the girls. Whereas in the first sequence it is unknown for the reader whether the native would aid or go against the migrant(s), in this narrative it is very clear, which gives this sequence a different sensation. The role played by the act of migration itself and the door is considerately smaller in this second sequence compared to the first one. This tendency continues in the third sequence, which is still placed in the main narrative before any mentioning of the doors. This fragment does not contain an explicit mentioning of the door, it just encloses the consequences of its existence. No migrant-actors can be defined in the story, there is only the mentioning of their existence, that is so vague that they might be Mexicans or Muslims, as the old man who is focalizing is not sure (Hamid 47). Interestingly, this narrative tries to show the reader that the importance of where a migrant comes from is of diminishing importance. The end of the short narrative implies the consequences of the doors' existence and their ability to let people pass through: the old man cannot live in his own house anymore. The doors are no longer a positive influence, here they are ascribed a negative power. At this point can be stated that these short sequences paint a picture of the state of migration, caused by the existence of the mysterious doors. The fragments are placed synchronously in time, but asynchronous in place, in relation to the main narrative.

When looking at the sequence that follows, a picture is painted of a girl living in Vienna. At this point in the main narrative, Saeed and Nadia have undertaken their first move and are situated at Mykonos. The girl in the side narrative is being harassed by fellow countrymen that intimidate her as she sympathizes with migrants who arrive in Vienna. A bigger picture is painted of the negative power of the doors, in this case it depicts the facility of movement they render. Because of this accessibility not only people with good intentions move. Human beings with anti-West convictions travel towards the West too, as the narrative portrays militants from the East attacking the inhabitants of Vienna. This short narrative manifests the earlier defined fear of the western world for what they believe could be radicalized people. Albeit very short, the sequence manages to depict a situation in which the

dualisms migrant/native, good/bad, violent/peaceful are no longer upheld. Migrants are depicted as both good and peaceful as well as having violent purposes, while natives have mixed attitudes towards migrants. Whilst this complicates the understanding of this sequence and the situation that is depicted in it, this portrayal appears to come closer to the reality of migration in the world nowadays, where dualisms are slowly fading too.

The facility of movement the doors render as depicted in the fourth sequence can be recognized in the fifth segment as well, where a mother comes to pick up her daughter from an orphanage in Tijuana, Mexico. The doors demonstrate a positive power again, as they unite people instead of separating them. The fifth narrative, as well as the sixth, demonstrates how the doors are turning into an accepted, commonplace aspect of life. The sixth narrative shows the reader a love story: two men encounter each other, as they regularly pass from Amsterdam to Rio de Janeiro. Over time, the men fall in love. Passing from one place to another for them is as normal as stepping through the front door. Only in the seventh fragment the doors are not mentioned and do not play a direct role. The story tells the life of an old woman, who lives in the hills close to San Francisco. Although she has lived in the same house all her life, things have not stayed the same for her. Even though she did not migrate spatially, she – as everyone else does too according to the narrative – has migrated through time; time as well as place influences and changes one immensely. The last sequence too shows a woman not moving away, although she is very aware of this possibility and hopes to find the courage to move one day. In her case, the doors function as a potential, albeit they do have the positive power to connect her to her visiting daughter every once in a while.

After analyzing all the side narratives in this work, I can reach only one conclusion. The sequences provide the reader with an extensive context of the world the main characters move in. The fragments show the reader that migration is never as simple as moving away and starting anew. To every story there are different sides; the story of migration is never twice the same. To me the image of a kaleidoscope comes to mind: a device that shows a different picture every time one looks into it. Inside the narrative, the side stories provide the full context and thus allow for the main narrative to exist and to be understood. Outside the narrative, as a reflection on the real world, the fragments offer the reader different possibilities to interpret migration. They warn for what can go wrong but also show the beauty that can come into existence when people from different parts of the world meet.

2.6 Chapter conclusion

Exit West proves to be a multi-layered work of literature. It has many thought-provoking aspects that allow for various interpretations. Showing different sides and viewpoints in the discourse surrounding East and West and the oppositions this discussion entails, as well as incorporating religion into the narrative. Both of these themes provide the reader with aspects that go against the prevailing rhetoric, and therefore enlarges the reader's comprehension of the concept of migration. The striking absence of a portrayal of the journey can be interpreted as a comment on the substantial amount of migration narratives that focus only on this aspect of migration. In portraying the characters as abundantly as this narrative does, the figure of the migrant is put in a different, much brighter light, avoiding the pitfall of portraying migrant characters in a one-sided or stereotyped manner.

As I stated earlier, *Exit West* in its totality could best be interpreted as a migration-kaleidoscope. Every time we look at it, it seems to show us another side of migration. A second meaning of the word kaleidoscope is "a changing mixture or pattern", a description that fits Hamid's work perfectly.[2] While the narrative paints an extensive picture of two people migrating, the short stories in between both depict the overall situation across the world as well as demonstrate all the different reasons for, outcomes of, and experiences of the process of migration. In line with this, the three different places the main characters live in could be interpreted as three different outcomes of migration. Some people get most unlucky and end up being stuck in a place that is worse than the place they were trying to get away from. Some have to wait and work endlessly, fighting against native populations that rather see them leave than stay and bureaucratic systems before they get any access to a home of their own. Others will find a place in a free environment, being relatively poor but happy, as freedom is what they acquired and needed most. All of these experiences can be a part of a migrant narrative and all of these experiences entail so much more than just a journey from the old home to a possible new home.

[2] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/kaleidoscope

Chapter 3: Dit zijn de namen

In this third chapter that focuses on the novel *Dit zijn de namen,* I want to examine how the aspects of migration as described in the previous chapter manifest themselves in this Dutch novel. One of the unique traits of Wieringa's novel is the fact that it is not until far into the narrative that the reader acquires information (names, background, etc.) on the characters; before that point, the reader knows the characters as 'the woman', 'the boy', and 'the man from Ashgabat'. In this chapter I will examine what this means for the interpretation of the narrative. How should the relation between the characters, their traits, and the (in-) predictability of their actions be defined? In the black man's attitude to life, religion seems to play an important role. This is an unusual situation for the rest of the group; the reactions of the others towards the black man's religion are filled with prejudice and racism. Another aspect that seems curious is the fact that the black man never focalizes. The reader only perceives him through the eyes of the other migrants, while his character appears to be an outsider to the group. What does this combination of lack of focalization and being the outsider of the group mean in relation to the rest of the group and their journey together? Finally, the role played by borders in this text deviates from what the reader expects. This role changes halfway through the narrative, as to both the refugees and the reader it becomes clear that what was seen as a border in fact was just a scam. When one can no longer rely on the existence and power of a border – an indispensable aspect for both the act as well as the discourse on migration – how can a migratory journey like the one depicted in *Dit zijn de namen* be related to the prevailing rhetoric of migration literature?

3.1 The function of borders

A border, in its most elementary definition, is "the boundary line which separates one country from another".[3] For many, especially for inhabitants of the Global West, borders are as simple as that, and their existence and meaning do not provide food for extensive thought. Nevertheless, the concept 'border' in relation to migration encompasses much more than just a boundary that separates two spaces. Indeed, these spaces on each side never comprise the same values, rules, and rights, because if they did, a border in between would not be needed. The interpretation of the concept of borders has shifted enormously in the last couple of

[3] Oxford English Dictionary

decades. Many scholars have established this and we notice this shift portrayed in the narrative of *Dit zijn de namen* too:

> Eens stonden landen en continenten open voor hen die het geluk zochten, grenzen waren zacht en doorlaatbaar – nu waren ze in beton gegoten en met prikkeldraad omhangen. Als blinden tastten de reizigers met duizenden tegelijk de muren af, op zoek naar zwakke plekken, een bres, een gaatje waar ze doorheen konden glippen. (104)
> *Once countries and continents were open to those searching for happiness, borders were soft and permissible – now they were poured into concrete and full of barbed wire. Like the blind, travelers grope around the walls, thousands at the same time, looking for any weak spots, gaps, tiny holes through which they could slip.*

Nowadays borders can be massive obstacles, while they also hold a promise, a prospect to a different kind of life. In their existence, borders are ascribed meaning, both to the people who cross them as well as to the land on both sides, often nation-states. This ascribed meaning aids in forming a person's identity but can take this away just as easily – especially for migrants, no security can come from the existence of borders. Even more so when we realize that the ongoing process of globalization renders the existence of nation-states superfluous; with the disappearance of nation-states borders start disappearing too.

In *Dit zijn de namen* we detect all the above-mentioned features ascribed to borders. In the novel, as in many other migrant narratives, the emphasis lies considerably on the crossing of a border. Crossing a border makes or breaks the undertaking that is migration: if a border is not crossed, migration has failed (at least in this and many similar narratives as well as comparable cases in real life). Not only do they render both tourists and migrants the possibility to travel from one country to another; without borders national identities would fade away, national laws can no longer be enforced, and rulers would lose all of their power. Albeit the utopian assumption that a borderless world would equal a world fully at peace, as Cavanaugh notices too (341), in reality chaos would probably rule most, if not all, parts of the world if borders did not exist. However, chaos also rules many places in the world *because* of the existence of borders and the power they exercise. *Dit zijn de namen* shows this two-faced identity of borders.

Halfway through the migrant's narrative, in a chronological deviation, we read how the group has crossed the border, smuggled in the back of a truck. This event is depicted exactly as the dominant discourse on migration dictates: we read how the refugees are tucked away in the back of a truck while they need to keep quiet for at least twelve hours. "Ze zouden niet alleen maar zwijgen, ze zouden hun adem inhouden en niet meer bestaan tot ze de grens over waren" (Wieringa 100) *They would not only keep quiet, but they would also hold their breath and stop existing until they would have past the border*.[4] This fragment is narrated by an EN who overviews the whole story and knows what is transpiring in every one of the characters' heads. Every refugee paid a large amount of money for this ticket to a new life. When the truck stops, the refugees hear the sound of men talking and dogs barking. A boy peeks through the side of the truck and tells the others he has seen soldiers, cars, a fence. Everyone is relieved, "hij had een grens beschreven, geen twijfel mogelijk" (Wieringa 117) *he described a border, no doubt about it*. As they get out of the truck, they "voelden zich alsof ze opnieuw geboren waren" (106) *felt as if they were born again*.

This part of the narrative ascribes the border the power to take life as well as to give life. We read how the refugees are described as 'no longer existing' when crossing the border and how the border can grant new life to the refugees. The border wipes out their 'before' as they cease to exist when passing over it. They re-exist only once they have arrived in their new country, they re-exist as different people with different rights. When they finally arrive in Michailopol their identity and their rights are questioned continuously. First of all, the EN states that "Niemand wist wie ze waren of waar ze vandaan kwamen" (185) *Nobody knew who they were or where they came from.* Police officers do not know what to do with the refugees: "'Ik denk… arresteren,' zei zijn collega. 'Ja, ja,' zei Budnik gedachteloos. Hij keek opzij. 'Waarom eigenlijk?'" (185) *'I think… arrest them,' his colleague said. 'Yes, yes,' Budnik said thoughtlessly. He looked aside. 'Actually, why?'* The mayor of Michailopol underwrites the *identity-less-ness* of the refugees, and emphasizes the need to identify these unknown people in his town: "Wie zijn dat, snap je? Wat doen ze hier? […] We kennen ze niet, dat kan niet." (186) *Who are they, you know? What are they doing here? […] We do not know them, that is not acceptable.*

[4] My own translation.

When focusing on the real world outside of the narrative, we notice how in the current migration- or refugee-crisis, many (European) leaders seem to think that fortifying their borders will stop migrants from coming to their country. We read examples of this too in *Dit zijn de namen*:

> De grens zat potdicht. Elke auto, elke vrachtwagen en elke trein werd een paar keer doorgelicht – eerst aan deze kant en daarna aan de andere. De technologie van de overzijde behoorde tot het domein van sciencefiction. Ze bezaten hartslagdetectoren, kooldioxidemeters die een mens verrieden door zijn adem, infraroodcamera's en nachtkijkers – al hun technologische vernuft werd ingezet om illegale migranten op te sporen. (188-9)
> *The border was sealed shut. Every car, every truck, and every train were searched a couple of times – first on this side, then on the other. The technology on the other side belonged to the domain of science fiction. They possessed hart-beat sensors, carbon dioxide-measurers that betrayed people by their breath, infra-red cameras and night goggles – all their technological ingenuity was being used to track down illegal migrants.*

These measures, both in the real world as well as in Wieringa's narrative, try to close down a border completely. However, I have to side with Cavanaugh who declares: "[b]orders regulate mobility, but they do not prevent it" (344). A bigger difference between the fortunate and the unfortunate is created by these strict border regulations, and so "[…] a limited notion of the right to life is used for illegal cross-border passengers/migrants, compared to those who cross borders by travelling legally" (Korac-Sanderson 29). As Korac-Sanderson mentions in her work on (re)bordering security, stricter regulations do not dishearten migrants from undertaking this journey. Closing up borders just means that refugees will make more use of illegal ways to enter a country. Then, as refugees are not supposed to cross these borders, they are treated with the least hospitable manners possible. "This person without a nation-state is what Agamben calls 'bare life', whose biological needs may be attended to by humanitarian relief efforts, but whose full identity as the bearer of rights is constantly held in question" (Cavanaugh 345). The work of Korac-Sanderson and Cavanaugh, while written on non-fictional migrants and concrete situations, can be applied to migrant narratives too. Indeed, it draws up a framework of the situation worldly, to which the representation of migrants in literature can be compared. Coming back to Cavanaugh's theory on Agamben and applying this to literature, in *Dit zijn de namen*, the endless steppe they find on the other side

of the border renders the refugees *not even* a state of 'bare life'. Indeed, the basic, biological needs of the refugees are not attended to by anyone but by themselves. Both in real life as well as in the representation of migration in literature we recognize that a migrant's life has so little worth that it is not worth saving. Following this observation, Wieringa's text closely resembles the reality in the portrayal of refugees and their journey.

Now all of this can be said about the importance of crossing borders and the power borders can exercise. But how does the interpretation of the narrative change when it becomes clear that the group of refugees never crossed the border they were desperately trying to cross? What does the fact that a border was staged mean for the process and the outcome of the narrative on the level of the story and fabula? The reader finds out the refugees have been set up when Beg is visiting his Rabbi. Answering the Rabbi's questions, Beg declares about the border:

> De grens!? Er was helemaal nooit een grens! Er was alleen maar het product van een boosaardige verbeelding: een kopie van een grens, een nagebootste grens. Een grens door mensenhandelaren nagebouwd. (Wieringa 231-2)
> *A border!? There was never a border! It was just the product of a malicious imagination: a copy of a border, a simulated border. A border build by human traffickers.*

The EN narrates this section of the text and provides the character of Beg with room to speak. The fragment before the part cited above indicates that Beg has gotten this information concerning the border from the refugees earlier that day. Thus, we read the experience of the refugees, as told by the refugees to Beg, as recalled by Beg to the Rabbi. Perhaps the reason for all these layers in the story is the unlikeliness of this trope of a fake border: the narrative requires the reader to fully grasp this point in the story where meaning shifts. Looking at it from a different angle, this part of the story *needs* to be retold and known by all the characters to demonstrate that this is not just a wrong interpretation or sole focalization of one of the characters.

Obviously, the goal of the group of refugees is to move away from home to a different country where they can start anew. In order to move to a different country, one needs to cross a border. Indeed, countries or nation-states are defined and formed by their borders. Following this reasoning, I state that the goal of the group is to cross the border. This means

that the border is both the means to an end as well as a goal in itself. In any way, the border is the power that can provide the refugees with either success or failure. We recognize this importance in the story of the boy. He needs to find Nacer Gül, the smuggler that will take him across the border. The boy's focalizes: "Dat was de naam die hem was ingeprent; hij was verloren als hij die naam zou vergeten" (102) *That was the name that was imprinted in his mind; he would be lost if he had forgotten that name*. If in any way he would not reach the border or fail to cross it, all would be lost, not just for him, but for his family too. In its existence, the border proves to be a positive power, providing the refugees with a means to reach their goal. When the border turns out to be staged, it becomes a negative power:

> Toen ze de rand van de stad bereikten en begrepen waar ze waren, begon de stroper te huilen. […] Alles was voor niets geweest. Alles. Ze waren de woestenij overgestoken naar een nieuw land, om daar te ontdekken dat er geen nieuw land was, alleen de nachtmerrie van een eeuwige wederkeer. (236)
> *When they reached the edge of the city and understood where they were, the poacher started crying. […] Everything had been for nothing. Everything. They crossed the wasteland towards a new country, only to discover that there was no new country, just the nightmare of an eternal recurrence.*

In their minds, the border changes from a friend to a feared enemy. On top of that, if the refugees did not cross a border, they did not succeed (to at least their interpretation of) migration. If the migrants did not migrate, can we even call this work a migrant narrative? If not, what kind of novel is this, when it is no longer a migrant narrative?

In his work, Cavanaugh declares that a border's purpose is to fix identity (344). In a fast-changing world, identity is no longer fixed but becomes a fluid concept. Borders provide stability regarding (national) identity. This identity is hard to recognize in Wieringa's narrative. This particular border, as it turns out to be staged, and precisely *because* it is staged, does not in any way define the identity of the refugees; it provides only the illusion of identity. The fragmented information the reader has about the refugees and their background as well as the difficulty the police of Michailopol has in finding out who they are and where they came from demonstrate that in this case it is not just the (lack of) existence of the border that influences the idea of identity of the refugees. I will elaborate on this process in a close analysis of the characters' narrative construction further on in this chapter.

3.2 The portrayal of the migratory journey

The process and journey of migration in *Dit zijn de namen* are both a very customary as well as an unconventional depiction when compared to the prevailing rhetoric. The fact that the narrative focuses mostly on the actual journey of the refugees aligns with the usual depiction of migration in comparable literary works. Although the narrative focuses on the journey, the departing point of each of the refugees as well as their final destination remain unknown for the reader. This ambiguity surrounding the points of departure and arrival together with the sequences of time add to the narrative a strange aspect regarding the style and genre. Whether it leans on surrealism or towards magic realism is hard to define, but at some points in the journey the narrative seems to stray away from realism as imaginary elements are inserted in the text.

Not only in the portrayal of the journey I recognize an away-from-realism detail (on which I will elaborate further on in this paragraph), also in the portrayal of the man from Ashgabat's background story, and in the way the head of the black man is claimed to guide the rest of the group towards their salvation imaginative elements appear. The EN elaborates on the background of the man of Ashgabat, and states about his country: "Zijn land scheen een duister sprookje, waarin mensen leefden onder het oog van een alziende tovenaar. De naam van de tovenaar was Turkmenbashi." (Wieringa 41) *His country seemed a dark fairytale, in which people lived under the eye of an all-seeing magician. This magician's name was Turkmenbashi.* The choice of words in this segment evokes an association with the imaginative, as words like 'duister sprookje' and 'alziende tovenaar' are usually applied to genres that relate to the fantastic. Through the use of words belonging to the genre of fantasy in a story based on events that happened in reality, realism and imagination are inserted alternately in the story of the man from Ashgabat. Many facts about Turkmenistan and its leader are exaggerated eminently and therefore make the reader both laugh and think. These ridiculously sounding aspects make the reader think precisely because they evoke laughter, as the severe content of the story should not provide any laughter. Here, the EN seems to provide the reader with the only reaction possible to cope with situations as intense as these.

Later on in the narrative, when the refugees have arrived in Michailopol and are being questioned by Beg and his colleagues, the poacher opens up about the mystery surrounding the severed head the group was carrying around:

> ‘Toen we hem gedood hadden,’ zei de man opeens, ‘zijn de dromen van de jongen begonnen. Hij droomde de weg voor ons. De vrouw zei dat ze van hem kwamen. Zij kon ze lezen. […] ‘Van Afrika. Van wie anders. Hij stuurde ze, zodat wij de weg wisten. […] Toen vonden we het dorp. Onze redding.’ (Wieringa 253-4)
> *‘After we killed him,’ the man suddenly said, ‘the dreams of the boy began. He dreamt the way for us. The woman said they were coming from him. She could read them. […] From Africa. Who else. He sent them for us to know the way. […] Then we found the village. Our salvation.’*

The dreams of the boy have a touch of magic realism too. The group believes these dreams contain directions from the black man (derogatory given the name of his continent to address him) that guide them to salvation. After this passage we read in a retroversion how the refugees find the small, deserted village where they encounter the old lady (Wieringa 255-62). Their salvation is described as resembling a fantasy: “In geen van hun voorstellingen had hun redding er uitgezien als een sprookje” (257) *In none of their visualizations their salvation looked like a fairytale*. However, while the same magic realistic touch in *Exit West* seems to soften the extreme circumstances of migration and portrays the traumas of the main characters and their whole journey in a metaphorical way, in *Dit zijn de namen* the going-beyond-realism ensures the portrayal of the journey to come across more traumatic and extreme. The passage through the steppe is portrayed longer than in strict realism would be possible, which makes the horrors and inhumane situations in the narrative seem even worse.

One last aspect of the journey stands out. The course of time – and this is hard to state with certainty, as the story contains many chronological deviations, repetitions, and changes in the rhythm – appears inaccurate. Reconstructing the fabula, it seems the refugees have been walking for four to five months: they arrived on the steppe at the end of the summer and walked through autumn into the beginning of winter. When taking the average of those four to five months, the refugees have walked for roughly a hundred and thirty-seven days. As they were walking from sunrise to sunset (taking into account the days becoming shorter in autumn and winter) in a state of exhaustion, I argue they walked for eight hours every day at a speed of four kilometers per hour. This means that, as the narrative states that they were walking continuously towards the west, the group has traveled approximately four thousand and five hundred kilometers. Neither in Ukraine, where the narrative is situated, nor in the rest of eastern Europe is a totally deserted steppe to be found that is *that* big. This could mean that, when we hold on to realism, the group did not walk to the west all the time but

went around in circles. When we accept a small influence of imaginative aspects, I have to conclude that not only the city of Michailopol is fictional, but also the country in which the narrative is placed is fabricated. Or, when aligning with the use and function of magic realism in *Exit West*, it simply should not matter what exact distance they traveled and whether this could be possible in reality; the journey depicted functions in a way also metaphorically, and points to the horrors of survival and the urge to start a new life in a new place.

3.3 Representation of the migrant characters

The two parallel narratives of *Dit zijn de namen* have different protagonists. At the end of the text the two narratives meet and merge into one. In the narrative situated in Michailopol, the protagonist is chief of police Pontus Beg. This character is a fifty-three-year-old man who has worked as a police officer for many years. Unmarried, no children, only sleeping with his cleaning lady once a month, no family living nearby; his life appears to the reader quite empty and meaningless. In the other narrative, the protagonists are several refugees who are wandering about an endless steppe, looking for civilization. Whereas Beg is introduced first and foremost by his name (Pontus Beg are literally the first two words of the novel) the refugees remain nameless for a very long time. They are introduced as follows: "In de luwte van een lage zandduin lag een kleine groep mensen ineengedoken onder het noodweer. […] Vijf mannen, een vrouw en een kind." (Wieringa, 14) *"In the shelter of a dune a small group of people lay huddled under the bad weather. […] Five men, a woman, and a child."* As they are presented as a group and, especially in the fabula, function as a group, it proves to be difficult to look at the characters individually. Their functioning as a group relates to what Sarah Ahmed writes about the forming of communities of migrants in their country of arrival:

> "Rather, the very experience of leaving home and 'becoming a stranger' leads to the creation of a new 'community of strangers', a common bond with those others who have 'shared' the experience of living overseas. […] The forming of a new community provides a sense of fixity through the language of heritage – a sense of inheriting a collective past *by sharing the lack of a home rather than sharing a home*." (Ahmed 336-7, original emphasis)

All members of the group have become a stranger in the place they arrived in and they share the lack of a home. Based on their shared lack they become a group with one goal: turning

their shared lack of home into sharing a new home. In pursuing this goal, their own identity seems to become less important than the group's identity. But, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that sharing a lack of a home is not all it takes to be part of the group, or better, that such common ground can be forgotten easily.

Wieringa's characters seem harder to identify with compared to similar characters in other migrant novels. It takes the whole length of the text to get to know the protagonists, if the reader even gets to know them at all. This difficulty to fathom the characters originates in several aspects of the narrative. Firstly, the names of the characters are mentioned only in the second half of the text. Secondly, the text provides little background or information about the characters, and thirdly, some of them hardly focalize, which creates distance between the reader and the protagonists. The effect of this distance can go in two ways. The first possibility results in the readers filling in the gaps themselves by inserting their expectations according to their frame of reference. This creates a character that often does not match the actual character. The other consequence of this distance is the fact that readers are not able to identify themselves with these protagonists. Both options result in a lesser understanding of the narrative and the role of the characters herein, which often creates troublesome or unsatisfactory interpretations. Wrong interpretations can lead to flawed theories on the matter. These theories create an inaccurate discourse, in which a way is paved towards augmentation of incorrect interpretation and representation.

At this point, I have to conclude that the characters in *Dit zijn de namen* are difficult to fathom and thus hard to identify with. As readers do not acquire much information about the protagonists, and as the little information that is presented most of the time follows the expectations laid down in the narrative, the text encourages an interpretation of the migrant characters that corresponds to the dominant migrant discourse. Just one aspect remains curious. While a group of refugees on a journey towards a new life is an image very much present in the prevailing rhetoric, almost without exception this group is portrayed as a joint entity functioning as one. Groups like these are repeatedly described as a faceless mask or a wave of people. The group portrayed in Wieringa's narrative does not match this image. Despite the absence of the characters' names, the narrative presents the members of this group as distinctive individuals with reciprocal differences, opinions, and desires.

These individual characters are defined by one trait of either their appearance or their heritage: the tall man, the man from Ashgabat, the woman, the boy, the poacher, the black

man. The only exception is “Vitaly” (Wieringa 28); this character’s name is provided at the beginning of the narrative. For Western readers this might at first sound like a nickname or a fake name. However, the name Vitaly provides the reader with the information that this man is likely to originate from Russia, where this is quite a common name that signifies ‘lively’. The black man and the tall man die on the steppe; by then it has become clear the long man’s name is Micha (57) (Hebrew, ‘who is similar’), while the black man’s name remains unknown for the reader. Even though throughout the novel the names of the other protagonists are revealed one by one, they are never used to refer to them. The characteristic of their appearance functions as their signifier from the beginning of the text on and renders their names fully obsolete. These traits are blown-up; one peculiarity determines much of their thoughts and actions. The poacher behaves as one would expect: he catches animals, he knows how to survive, and he takes on the role of the lonely cowboy in the group. The boy acts like a youngster: he runs around when he gets excited and he daydreams wildly and fantastically of salvation from the situation he finds himself in. The EN, who provides the boy focalization, narrates these daydreams. It is clear that the boy focalizes as he dreams of “koekjes” and “slingers” (Wieringa 162) which both in choice of language as well as in idea appear childish images. Each of the roles the reader assumes following the characters’ names is confirmed in the narrative:

> Het gaat bijna altijd tussen Vitaly en de man uit Asjchabad. Dat is vanaf het begin zo geweest […] De stroper is een eenzaat, hij mengt zich niet in de koningsstrijd. De lange man is alleen maar een vazal, hij volgt de sterkste. De vrouw, de jongen en de neger hebben een andere rol. Prooi. Slachtoffer. Toeschouwer. Zij doen er het beste aan zich onzichtbaar te maken. (Wieringa 31)
> *It almost always goes between Vitaly and the man from Ashgabat. It has been like that from the beginning […] The poacher is a solitary man, he does not interfere in this war of kings. The tall man is only a liege, he follows the strongest. The woman, the boy, and the nigger have a different role. Prey. Victim. Spectator. They best keep themselves invisible.*

Stereotypically the characters are ascribed their own role in the group: the men in charge, children and women of less importance and strength. While especially the two dominant men – Vitaly and the man from Ashgabat – try to keep this clear division of roles, they are the ones who slowly lose grip. The poacher becomes the one making the decisions on where and when

to go, while the rest follows. Ultimately the role of the black man changes most: from unwanted and avoided member of the group to the one who points the group towards salvation. This change and the difficulty of understanding it as a reader (as the lack of focalization does not provide much information) results in alienation. The character of the black man cannot be understood and empathized with on the same level as other characters in this narrative.

At first sight the portrayal of the woman undoubtedly adheres to the dominant discourse as best described by Lisa Marchi: "Women, by contrast, play a secondary role and are almost uniformly represented as caretakers, victims of physical and mental abuses, prostitutes, and passive subjectivities who do not follow an independent and personal migratory plan but move in the train of the protagonists" (605). The woman in Wieringa's narrative is raped repeatedly by different men in the group. Even though she is treated terribly, she persists with the group. In the woman's position in the group we recognize several of Marchi's established characteristics. The fact that the narrative does not provide the reader with any retroversion of her life or any information on who she is outside of the group, only pressures the interpretation of the woman towards a standardized portrayal. This shows that lack of information or background will tempt the readers to fill in any gaps according to their frame of reference, which is often formed according to the prevailing rhetoric. Nevertheless, there is one ambiguous aspect to this character: her pregnancy. I would like to argue that the fact that she is pregnant both attributes to as well as undermines her position as a secondary, victimized character. Surely, an unwanted pregnancy is an ultimate proof and one of the worst possible results of sexual violence. It puts her character in a victimized position and in a situation over which she has no control whatsoever. On the other hand, this female character can be ascribed almost superhuman powers. She is described traveling through the same desolated steppe in the same circumstances as all the male characters, while she had a baby growing inside of her. Chief of police Beg focalizes: "Ze is tot het uiterste gegaan voor het kind dat ze droeg" (Wieringa 268) *She did the utmost possible for the child she was bearing.* When the woman has died, Beg tells his rabbi:

> […] een schim van een mens. Maar haar kind lijkt gezond. Zijn moeder heeft geleefd van lucht en aarde, ze heeft het allemaal *verdragen*… Ik kan daar niet bij, het lijkt te veel voor één mens" (275)
> *[…] the shadow of a human being. But her child appears healthy. His mother lived*

> *of air and soil, she* endured *it all… I cannot understand this, it seems too much for one human being.*

Following this, the female character's strength and perseverance are superior to the male characters'. This attributes to her character being less passive and much stronger than in the first half of the narrative appeared. Ultimately, this female character does not entirely conform to the prevailing rhetoric and provides the reader with a less dualistic portrayal of a female migrant character.

Even harder to fathom than the female character (even though he takes up more space in the narrative) is the black man. The EN provides more information about this character compared to many of the others, but this is never presented through focalization of the character himself. The reader acquires knowledge about the black man only through focalization of the other characters; this information is presented mostly through the eyes of the tall man and the man from Ashgabat. This lack of point of view frustrates the reader, as all the other characters *do* focalize. Also, for the reader it leads to questions that the black man is not wanted and not understood by the rest of the group. Logically, one wants to be informed of this character's reaction to the position he is put in. Finally, the black man not focalizing is even more frustrating for the reader as this character appears to go through so many difficulties: not only does his journey appear the longest and furthest of all, he is also not able to communicate with the others, which exacerbates the relationship with the other refugees. The black man's position in the group only changes when one of the others kills him. The one who killed him is at first admired by the rest as the one who saves the group from the dark magic the black man is thought to bestow upon them. This all changes when the boy's dreams appear to guide them the way to their salvation. The group ascribes these dreams to the black man, turning him from their most unwanted member into their liberator. In life the black man used to be the last, after his death he becomes the first.[5] It is striking that his character refers not only to the book of Matthew but also to the figure of Moses as portrayed in Exodus. We recognize the crossing of a deserted place through which both characters lead a group of migrants to the promised land that they themselves will never enter. The character of the black man appears by far the most fascinating even though, or precisely because, he is so hard to fathom due to the lack of focalization. On top of that, his

[5] Mathew 19:30

character seems to be related most to Biblical passages and characters, on which I will elaborate in the following paragraph.

3.4 Religion in *Dit zijn de namen*

As already discussed in the second chapter, religion is of great importance in the discourse on migration. The few studies on the role of religion in the process of migration explain how religion provides refugees with a home away from home, how it forms a bond between refugees and their heritage, and how religion aids in the forming of one's identity. Surely, it is to be expected that the narrative of *Dit zijn de namen* is characterized by a close link to religion. Indeed, "And these are the names" are the first words of the second book of the Old Testament, Exodus. This part of the Bible depicts the migration of the Jews from Egypt, through the desert, to the promised land Israel. However, I want to examine through close analysis if the portrayal of religion in relation to the concept of migration is comparable to the portrayal in *Exit West.* If not so, how is religion inserted differently, and how does it offer a new interpretation of the connection to migration?

Religion manifests itself first of all in the parallel narrative of Beg. We read how the chief of police finds out his grandmother might have been Jewish, which would make him Jewish too. He goes on a quest to not only find out whether or not his grandmother was Jewish but also to find out what it means to be Jewish and how he would be able to implement these religious rules into his own life. Secondly, the narrative of the refugees presents the reader with several mentions of God, as well as biblical references: "De goede God gaf ons een dorp […] maar we hebben het niet verstaan" (Wieringa 31) *The good Lord gave us a village […] but we did not understand it*; "'Laat me maar,' zei ze. 'Het komt goed. Als God het wil.'" (163) *'Let me be,' she said. It will be all right. The Lord willing.'* When the boy fantasizes about finding civilization, he imagines himself riding into the city on a cow, while people come out of their houses, jubilating, throwing cookies and money at him – a scene that resonates the story of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem.[6] At this point in the narrative it remains unclear what the exact function of this reference is, but with information the reader gets later in the story this reference can be understood and put into perspective.

[6] Matthew 21:1-9.

Thirdly, religion manifests itself mostly in regard to the black man. The man from Ashgabat notices that the black man appears to be a Christian when he sees him kissing a small cross that he wears around his neck:

> Het was de eerste keer dat de man uit Asjchabad zag dat een Afrikaan een canoniek geloof kon aanhangen. In zijn voorstelling van Afrika dansten zwarten voor regen. Ze aanbaden vreemde voorwerpen. De Koran, de Bijbel, het boek van de Joden – daar hadden negers geen deel aan. En daar kuste die zwartkop zomaar een kruis. (Wieringa 40)
> *It was the first time the man from Ashgabat had seen that a person from Africa could adhere to a canonical religion. In his idea of Africa blacks danced for rain. They worshipped strange objects. The Qur'an, The Bible, the book of Jews – niggers did not have any part in that. And out of the blue that blackface just kissed a cross.*

We recognize an aged worldview filled with assumptions and prejudice in the man from Ashgabat's thinking. Unfamiliar with the continent of Africa, his only knowledge appears to be based on outdated, standardized images in which people from Africa are assumed to be uncivilized wildlings. The man from Ashgabat seems to wonder: if he is unfamiliar with religions like Christianity and Islam, how could the black man know anything at all of this, let alone adhere to one of those religions? This instant is, thanks to the religious convictions of the black man, a turning point in how the man from Ashgabat perceives people from Africa and their relation to religion, when he admits to the fact that he and the black man are not so different after all. The rest of the group also has a very strong, inimical reaction to the black man's convictions, especially because they do not know for sure what he believes exactly.

We read how the man from Ashgabat comes to an important realization. "Nu moest hij de man uit Ethiopië als *mens* beschouwen, terwijl hij hem eerder had gezien als een onschadelijk dier" (Wieringa 41) *Now he had to regard the man from Ethiopia as a* human *while he used to see him as a harmless animal*. In this utterance several ideological blind spots come to light. First of all, allegedly he did not see the black man as human at all, merely as an animal. As animals are not capable of worshipping any kind of god, the black man, who *does* believe in a god, against the judgment of the man from Ashgabat *has* to be human. After the black man dies, the man from Ashgabat seems to soften the rigid ways in which he spoke and thought about the dead man:

> Hij had een godsdienstige aap gezien. Hij was erdoor beledigd. God was er niet voor ezels en honden en apen. […] Wat waren ook alweer de verschillen tussen hen? […] Nu de waanvoorstellingen waren opgetrokken, zag hij alleen nog maar hoe gelijk ze waren geweest in hun lijden en hun wanhoop. (Wieringa 179)
> *He had seen a pious monkey. He was offended by it. God did not exist for donkeys, dogs, and monkeys. […] What again were the differences between them? […] Now that the delusions were gone, he only saw how much they were alike in their agony and desperation.*

After his death, the black man, through his religious convictions, changed the man from Ashgabat's ideological convictions. This part of the narrative provides the reader with an unusual image: it portrays different kinds and different sides of refugees. Not only does racism exist between refugees and natives, but also among refugees or migrants themselves prejudice and discrimination prevail and are carried out. This picture is scarcely ever painted and therefore of huge importance as it provides a new, barely known image that is part of the concept of migration too.

As the story of *Dit zijn de namen* develops, the relationship between the group and the black man changes. Already during his life, the other migrants ascribe the black man magical powers. After he touched Vitaly's arm, a giant ulcer appears on the exact spot where he was touched. The rest of the group grows even more scared of the black man, and a very Old-Testamentical scene of blaming one another for the presence of the black man unfolds.[7] After he dies, his magical powers appear to have grown, and the refugees assert that the head of the black man provides the boy with the dreams that tell them in which direction to walk. The group exclaims: "Wat een geluk dat ze hem hebben gedood! Wat een wijsheid! Bij leven had hij ze te gronde gericht, in de dood heeft hij ze verlost." (Wieringa 262) *How lucky that they killed him! What wisdom! By life he destroyed them, in death he released them.* One man sacrificing himself to save the lives of many others, others who never asked him to do that and who never treated him pleasantly to begin with; this resonates an eminent story. The black man's position is the same as Jesus Christ's position in his narrative: during his life barely anyone saw him for who he truly was and through his death he saved all of them.

Somehow the group accepted the idea that the black man could be linked to something supernatural. But, from their point of view, this supernatural power could never

[7] Wieringa, p. 132

be a God. According to the refugees, African people are not familiar with and not capable of experiencing this kind of religion. As they are not able to communicate with the black man about the matter, the others filled in his convictions with their interpretation of religion in an African framework: the black man must have magical powers. They believe that through these magical powers the black man wounded Vitaly, all the while knowing that Vitaly would kill him so that he could in his death appear in the dreams of the boy and guide the group towards salvation. In this far-fetched theory that the refugees come up with, I read their longing to be saved. A consequence of this desperation is their longing for a God-like figure with supernatural powers that could be the last imaginable hope for salvation. They projected their longing onto the character of the black man, possibly also to justify their brutal act of killing him. In this projection, the black man is put into the position of a savior, closely resembling Jesus Christ himself, the one only *he* believed would save them from the endless steppe. There surely is irony in this: the black man resembles the one figure that he had put all his hopes in. Not only is he not saved, he even gave up his life in order to save others. But, according to Christian faith, is the black man not saved in death, as his soul will end up in heaven and will know no fear, evil, or death anymore?

Ultimately, the reader gets more insight into how the story of the refugees unfolds only in the case of the boy. The last chapter of the narrative depicts a scene in which Beg and the boy find themselves on a hill and are looking across the border. While the boy fantasizes about the other side of the border, Beg shares a plan with him that will finally get him what he wants: a new life. Beg suggests that the boy should become Jewish and move to Israel, to the promised land. The reader does not know whether or not this plan will be carried out, but this last chapter follows earlier mentioning in the book concerning the boy and how he thinks he might be the chosen one. It starts with him mentioning how not his older brother, but he "was geschikt bevonden voor de oversteek" (Wieringa 16) *was deemed capable to cross.* Further along, the narrative depicts how the boy deemed himself so lucky that he was the first to find the body of the black man (to steal his shoes): "Weer die geheimzinnige uitverkorenheid!" (177) *It appears he is the chosen one again!"* These fragments paint a picture of the boy (at least according to his own beliefs) being the chosen one, the only one amidst countless others who achieves the goal. This resonates with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, who often is described as God's chosen people. The above-mentioned reference to Jesus arriving in Jerusalem appears to be a remark to the boy's chosen-ness too.

Thus, not only the character of the black man closely resembles the figure of Jesus; the character of the boy has similarities with the son of Christ too. Not only do we recognize the importance of religion in the process of migration – one needs to believe in a higher power in order to keep hope and to keep going – we also notice that when against all odds a refugee does arrive at the destined country, this provides feelings as powerful as a god-like figure is ascribed to have.

The role of religion in *Dit zijn de namen* differs immensely from the role that religion is attributed in *Exit West*. When realizing "these are the names" are the first words of Exodus, this creates expectancies that are met – many similarities between the book and this narrative are visible as well as other references to parts of the Bible. Not only the title of this work provides a religious frame of reference for the reader: the parallel narrative does so too. Indeed, it is because of Beg's newly acquired interest in religion, that he interprets the refugees' journey in a very biblical way:

> Was het niet ironisch, zei hij, dat hem juist nu, nu hij zijn eerste schreden richting de Eeuwige had gezet, zoiets overkwam: een groep mensen die in zekere zin de reis van de woestijngeneratie had herbeleefd met niets boven zich dan de lege hemel. (Wieringa 276)
> *Was it not ironic, he said, that to him happened, just now as he took his first foot-steps towards the Eternal One, something like this: a group of people who in a way relived the journey of the desert generation with nothing but an empty sky above them.*
> Als de Joden hadden ze door de woestijn gereisd, en als de Joden hadden ook zij het gebeente van een van hen meegedragen op hun reis. (248)
> *Like the Jews they had travelled through the desert, and like the Jews they had carried with them the bones of one of them.*

Whereas the narrative of the refugees provides the reader with a literal tale of survival, the narrative of Beg presents the same survival in a spiritual form. The refugees travel thousands of kilometers to find a new life, while Beg embarks on a journey to find salvation of his own, be it spiritual salvation. I wonder how this migratory journey can be interpreted when we leave Beg's relation to Judaism aside. Would it not be just another migrant narrative, just another refugee journey? Whereas in *Exit West* religion is related to the migrant character, in *Dit zijn de namen* religion encompasses the whole narrative. The parallel narrative provides the reader with religion-colored glasses through which the whole text can be interpreted and

understood. Following these findings, it is impossible to either state that the narrative goes against the prevailing rhetoric nor that it conforms to it. This narrative adds a whole new representation of religion and its role in migration to the discourse of migration in literature.

3.5 Chapter conclusion

What firstly stands out in Wieringa's narrative, is the quite unusual portrayal both of the group migrants as well as the migrant characters individually. Not often do prominent characters in a novel appear as flat characters. Contrary to expectations, the so-called underdogs go through a process of redefinition and surprise the reader: the black man goes from scapegoat to the source of salvation. The female character, at first portrayed as powerless, changes into a vigorous character as she bears new life after their journey through the steppe. The boy transforms from youngest, at times weakest part of the group to the chosen one, the only character the reader knows to have found a new life. What can also be concluded from this chapter is that the role of religion in this text is unusually large compared to other migrant narratives. Many aspects link to religion: the black man's role in the group and the boy's dreams as well as the journey through the deserted steppe.

Whereas *Exit West* turned out to be a kaleidoscopic view on the process and undertaking of migration, *Dit zijn de namen* puts the focus on the aspect of religion in relation to migration. In doing this, Wieringa provides the reader with a rarely depicted angle from which to look at migration. This departing has been awarded a high level of importance as it is overlooked so often. *Dit zijn de namen* is as much about survival as it is about religion, as much about spiritual salvation as literal salvation. Wieringa's work proves to be more the modern version of Exodus than a migrant narrative *pur sang*. However, noticing the fact that the exodus of the Israelites as depicted in the eponymous book is one of the most ancient tales of mass migration, it is self-evident that Wieringa's narrative aligns in certain aspects with the prevailing rhetoric surrounding migration. After all, his text appears to be modeled after one of the first accounts of migration, a tale that can be seen as the basis for the portrayal of migration ever since.

Conclusion

At the end of this study, I want to conclude by relating the two novels to one another and by putting them in relation to the dominant discourse. Starting with *Exit West*, the first aspect of the novel that provides an addition to the discussion is the contrast that is lined out between East and West. In Hamid's narrative I recognize a retrenchment of much-used dualisms as well as the oppositional use of adjectives: it is the West instead of the East that is described as barbaric, shameless, and violent, while the East is portrayed as civilized and peaceful. In a different fragment, the novel provides Western readers with a mirror and reminds them that the surplus of refugees finds shelter in their own or neighbor countries. The last part of the main narrative – as well as the sixth parallel narrative in which two men fall in love – breaks down another dualism when the character of Nadia falls in love with another woman. This adds a rare LHBTQI+ aspect to this migration narrative. While this division between East and West is not at all prominent in *Dit zijn de namen,* the novel shows a rarely depicted trait concerning the relationship between different people too. The narrative demonstrates how racism and prejudice is not something that exists solely between native and migrant, but *among* migrants as well.

It is the appearance of the magic doors that distinguishes Hamid's work from other migrant narratives. By leaving out the journey and replacing this dangerous and traumatic event with the passage through a door, a metaphor for migration arises. In doing this, the narrative unequivocally distinguishes itself from the prevailing rhetoric in which usually the *migrant* is portrayed as a metaphor for migration. Not only do the doors comment on this, they are also a representation of globalization, a world-sized process that is often seen as both the cause and effect of migration. The aspect of *Dit zijn de namen* that stands out most is the image of the fake border. This aspect of the novel questions the power borders have; in not existing the border has the power to fully change the course of the story, leaving the reader to doubt whether we should interpret this narrative as a migration narrative at all.

Both novels innovatively portray migrant characters. *Exit West* elaborates on their story before the characters became migrants. This extensive background information not only prevents the characters from being portrayed as standardized tropes, but it also leaves room for the reader to emphasize and identify with the characters. Thus, not only borders between land are disappearing in Hamid's novel, but also the border between the reader and the

characters is slowly dissolving. Almost the opposite could be said about Wieringa's characters and the reader's relation to them. By not using the names of the migrants and not allowing some of them focalize, the narrative creates a distance between the reader and the characters that seems impossible to bridge. A curious aspect of this group of refugees is the fact that they are both portrayed as a group as well as totally different individuals. Whereas in many texts migrants are referred to as a faceless mask, in this case the narrative portrays the group as a composition of unique characters. They stick together as they do not have any other choice. Aside from that, every member of the group has its own function and value in the group and acts accordingly.

Both works do not consist of only one narrative. In both cases the parallel narrative forms a frame in which the main narrative can be placed. In Hamid's work the aligned narratives function two ways: they provide a context for the main narrative and thus equip the reader with information to interpret the main story. Furthermore, they comment on migration as a real phenomenon by offering a diverse image of it instead of a one-sided process. In the case of Wieringa's novel, the parallel narrative provides the glasses through which the migrant narrative can be read and interpreted. The chief of police embodies the religious interpretation of the migrant narrative; this provides the text with a unique representation of migration. The link between the characters and biblical figures as well as the image drawn between the other side of the border and the promised land are strong images granting the novel its apt title.

As I stated before, religion, as well as the intertwining of religious convictions and the act of migration, is largely overlooked in the dominant discourse (Frederiks, 182). *Exit West* recognizes this and offers a narrative in which religion does play an important role for a migrant. Wieringa's novel can be read as a more active reaction to this. *Dit zijn de namen* not only adapts a role for religion but also adds new insights into this role. Wieringa's narrative attributes significant importance to religion, but it functions differently in several aspects of this text. Even though it crosscuts the experiences of the migrant characters, this is not because of their own convictions. Albeit religion sustains the refugees in times of difficulty, it does not in the same capacity, neither mutually nor compared to other migrant discourses like *Exit West.* Indeed, the convictions that sustain the black man are largely different from the convictions the rest of the group shares. When the refugees adapt the black man's convictions after he dies, the reader knows this to be a very different set of convictions. To

conclude, whereas *Exit West* portrays religion mainly in the form of praying, a very personal relation to a godlike figure, *Dit zijn de namen* manifests different forms of religion that change when examined through different eyes.

Ultimately, these novels as a whole offer a completely different representation of migration. Whereas *Exit West* successfully portrays migration as a multitude of events, processes, feelings, and different people, *Dit zijn de namen* goes back to one of the oldest migrant narratives known: the book of Exodus. Although these two concepts could not differ more from one another, both novels succeed in providing the reader with a unique image of the process of migration. They demonstrate how migration is a course so diverse that for everyone a different story could be written. A migratory text can either portray one's own experiences or offer an insight into a complex mechanism that many others have not personally experienced. However, it is never just the aspect of place that can change the course of a story, time can exert this power too. This aligns with one of the most imposing fragments of Hamid's novel: "We are all migrants through time" (209).

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