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Panel: Loyalty and Betrayal

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Being an emigrant

By Franca Treur (Netherlands)

Who you are is, for a writer more than for anyone else, mainly determined by who you don't want to be. What you don't want to be is what you were first forced to follow as a model. In my case it was: a housewife who comes running with the coffee pot whenever her husband rings with the spoon in his cup, the mother of a big family in a small strict calvinist and rural community; good, obedient and ordinary. I would not have become a writer if I had not been possessed by the urge to escape from a proscribed life and the wish to reach higher achievements in life.

It took me some time to do this. First, I moved from the countryside, and although it raised a few eyebrows in my community, I was able to attend university in a city. The next step was getting rid of my calvinist beliefs. But still my life was 'ordinary': I was a teacher until I was 28, and I taught Dutch to immigrants.

Emigrants in particular are escaping something. They leave family and country and language to become who they want to be. As their teacher, I admired their courage, their perseverance and I thought that I understood their difficulties. They did not feel Dutch, but on the other hand, they had left everything that was dear to them. I understood their difficulties as an issue of loyalty. They felt (in my opinion) they were betraying what was dear to them to improve their own situations. Most of them dreamed of sending heaps of money back home.

In a way, I could connect to these kinds of feelings. The act of leaving my place of birth and cultural and religious background also contains an unintended judgement towards those who stayed behind and became calvinist housewives. I betrayed them.

The next question is: what do new loyalties look like? Do they have the same strength as the old ones? Is it true that "the first betrayal is irreparable," as Milan Kundera has asserted? He said: "It calls forth a chain reaction of further betrayals, each of which takes us further and further away from the point of our original betrayal."

Since I became a writer (the last step of escaping from the ordinary) these words from Kundera have hanged above my head like the sword of Damocles. I thought of them a few months ago, when I was in the car with my parents, sitting in the back seat. They were talking, saying typical things people say where I grew up. I took out my laptop and typed their words. Was that right? Did I betray them again?

That I use these concepts, "loyalty" and "betrayal" is something I keep thinking about too. Obviously, they are not facts. In the world there is no loyalty and betrayal independent of a viewpoint. As Thomas Mann said "We think we act, we think we think, but it's another or others who think and act in us: that is to say, timeless habits, archetypes, which – having become myths passed on from one generation to the next – carry an enormous seductive power and control us from the well of the past."

But I don't just hear my community's voice in my parents' speech; I also hear it in my own.

As a writer, I've emigrated from the story of the Bible, and it's very possible that I took with me the biblical concept of betrayal as portrayed by the story of Judas, who betrayed Jesus with a kiss.

The concept of betrayal is of course not unique to Christianity. It is also very attractive to writers. For example. The line 'The general died', is not a story. But 'The general was betrayed and killed'. There, the story starts.

Thinking about my writing, I'm very interested in the way we treat immigrants in the Netherlands and how they feel about that. I want to examine their loyalties and their supposed loyalties. We actually ask them to become as Dutch as the Dutch, or even more Dutch. Well-known first, second or even third generation immigrants will only be invited to discussion programs on the radio or TV when there's a social problem

concerning immigration. Rarely do they appear for more common topics, and only if they share mainstream opinions.

Since the rise of ISIS in the Middle-East, the situation is even worse. We ask Muslim immigrants to be extremely loyal to 'Dutch values' and they have to openly condemn the acts of ISIS, even if it's perfectly clear that they have nothing to do with that. Is it because we keep thinking that, deep down, Muslims will always be loyal to all other Muslims, including ISIS, or at least to their religion?

Uniqueness is reserved for the native Dutchman; Muslims only exist as a group. These developments are threatening diversity and a just and open society, which is a shame. On top of that they are feeding nationalistic sentiments which are already widespread in Europe. All in all, this is a topic that writers in the Netherlands cannot ignore.

But a writer needs to examine his own loyalties (as he needs to examine his concepts) before he writes about other peoples' loyalties. That's why I brought up this topic.