

BOOK REVIEW

van Dijk, T. A. (2003). *De Rasoeel-Komrij Affaire: Een geval van elite-racism*. Amsterdam: Critics. ISBN 90-9016997-0, 252 pp.

As an example of critical discourse analysis in action, Teun van Dijk's book *De Rasoeel-Komrij Affaire: Een geval van elite-racism* (*The Rasoeel-Komrij Affair: A case of elite racism*) is unrivalled. It tells the story of how van Dijk exposed a case of elite racism in his own country and was crucified for it in the Dutch press, and even dragged to court for daring to suggest that a celebrated Dutch writer, winner of the country's highest literary awards, had expressed racist views. Even after being cleared in court, and despite the fact that his book reads like a detective novel, Van Dijk did not find a single Dutch publisher willing to publish it, and so he eventually decided to publish it himself – his 'last book in the Dutch language', as he writes in the Introduction, 'a critical farewell to the Netherlands' (p. 13).

The murders of politician Pim Fortuyn and film director Theo van Gogh reached the world press and dented the image of the Netherlands as the world's most tolerant nation. Both Fortuyn and van Gogh had come out with undeniably racist anti-Islamic statements. But they were not the usual kinds of racist – the racists everyone loves to hate, the ultra rightwing nationalists, skinheads and so on. Fortuyn was a stylish, flamboyant, and openly gay man, and van Gogh was something of an *enfant terrible*, yet very much an accepted part of the artistic and intellectual elite of the country. Both had argued, often in inflammatory language, that it was time to have an 'honest' debate about Islam and to stop being 'intimidated' by the 'taboo that nothing negative can be said about foreigners'.

Van Dijk's book shows that the story had begun much earlier. In 1989, after the *fatwah* of Ayatollah Khomeiny against Salman Rushdie, the reputable Dutch daily *NRC-Handelsblad* published an article purportedly written by an Iranian who had immigrated to the Netherlands at the age of 20. Written in a sophisticated literary style which even then made some people wonder whether a Dutch writer, rather than an Iranian immigrant, was hiding behind the pseudonym 'Mohamed Rasoeel', the article argued that the Dutch were a naïve and credulous people whose multi-cultural policies would lead to a total power take-over by Muslims. The article was a pre-publication of a book which appeared in print a year later, under the title *The Downfall of the Netherlands*.

After its publication, the NCB ('Dutch Centre for Foreigners') contacted van Dijk, already well-known for his work on racist discourse, asking him whether he agreed that the book was racist. Van Dijk replied, in a confidential letter, that he thought it was. And not only that, he also thought that its literary style made it

highly unlikely that the book could have been written by an Iranian who had immigrated at the age of 20, and that the book's arguments and style were highly reminiscent of the celebrated writer Gerrit Komrij's newspaper columns on the same subject. His letter was leaked to the press, and almost immediately Dutch journalists, literary figures, and other opinion-makers closed ranks in condemning van Dijk for his 'accusation' of Komrij. In his own newspaper column, Komrij challenged the University of Amsterdam to accept responsibility for the credibility of its teaching and not allow this 'learned charlatan and liar' (p. 158) to 'poison the minds of the younger generation' (p. 158).

Eventually someone came forward as 'Rasoel', the writer of the book. He turned out to be not Iranian, but of Pakistani descent, a variety artist performing as 'The Son of Tarzan' who, by his own admission, never read any books, and for this and many other reasons could not possibly have been the author of the stylishly written *Downfall of the Netherlands*. Nevertheless, after the Anne Frank Foundation lodged a complaint about the book, 'Rasoel', whose real name was Zoka Fatah, was condemned for 'racist utterances' and fined 2000 guilders by the Amsterdam District Court. The question of the book's actual authorship was never investigated.

In the first part of the book van Dijk sets out his analysis of the correspondences between *The Downfall of the Netherlands* and Komrij's anti-Islamic columns. The similarities are striking. Both repeatedly assert that Muslims are fanatical and aggressive. Komrij: 'Thousands of Muslims are taking to the streets, ranting and raving'; Rasoel: 'They (the Muslims) protested not because of principles, or even from anger, but from pure aggression. Aggression for the sake of aggression.' (p. 56) Both view the idea of a multicultural society as a naïve illusion. Komrij: 'One thing is clear . . . the complete failure of the multi-racial, multi-cultural politics favoured by our politicians' (p. 56); Rasoel: 'There is now undeniable proof that the attempt to combine the two cultures has failed entirely.' (p. 38) Both forecast complete Muslim domination. Komrij: 'One morning we will wake up and all be called Ali' (p. 52); Rasoel: 'The Muslims will gradually overpower and dominate the Dutch.' (p. 53) Additionally, similarities between Komrij and Rasoel in stylistic and punctuation habits, and in motifs that have no direct bearing on Muslims or multiculturalism, are unlikely to have occurred by chance. Both use the image of a *zwerfhond* (stray dog), a word that is not even listed in the most well-known Dutch dictionary, both use apes as a symbol for people's stupidity and aggression, and both repeatedly call the Dutch dry and boring, to mention just some examples of co-occurring features.

In the second part of the book, van Dijk gradually unravels the hoax, and there are more twists and turns in this story than it is possible to explain in a short review such as this. It ends with van Dijk finally meeting Zoka Fatah, who as much as admits having played the role of Rasoel for money, but without disclosing the identity of the conspirators that paid him to be their front.

The final part of the book is an essay about elite racism. Rasoel was condemned for racist language. Komrij was not: even though he had said exactly the same kinds of thing under his own name. Clearly, elite racism, perpetrated by celebrated writers such as Komrij and prominent politicians such as Frits Bolkestein, goes unpunished, even though it is much more influential, and therefore much more damaging, than the racism of rabid right-wingers and low-life characters such as Rasoel. Precisely

because it comes from the elite it acquires a legitimacy which the racisms of the street and the pub do not have. Politicians and journalists may protest that their pronouncements only reflect what the people think, but, van Dijk argues forcefully, the reverse is true. The persuasive and powerful pronouncements of politicians, journalists, and other members of the political and cultural elite create an environment where it is legitimate for lesser mortals to follow suit, to say openly what they might formerly have kept to themselves or not allowed themselves to think. Against this, the remaining anti-racists, increasingly marginalized and ridiculed, have little redress.

The Rasool-Komrij Affair is a remarkable and quite gripping blend of text analysis, detective story, and anti-racist essay, and it sustains both its exceptional clarity of argumentation and its tone of indignation right to the very end. It is to be hoped that this unique document of critical discourse analysis will be translated into English, and find the much wider readership it so well deserves.

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