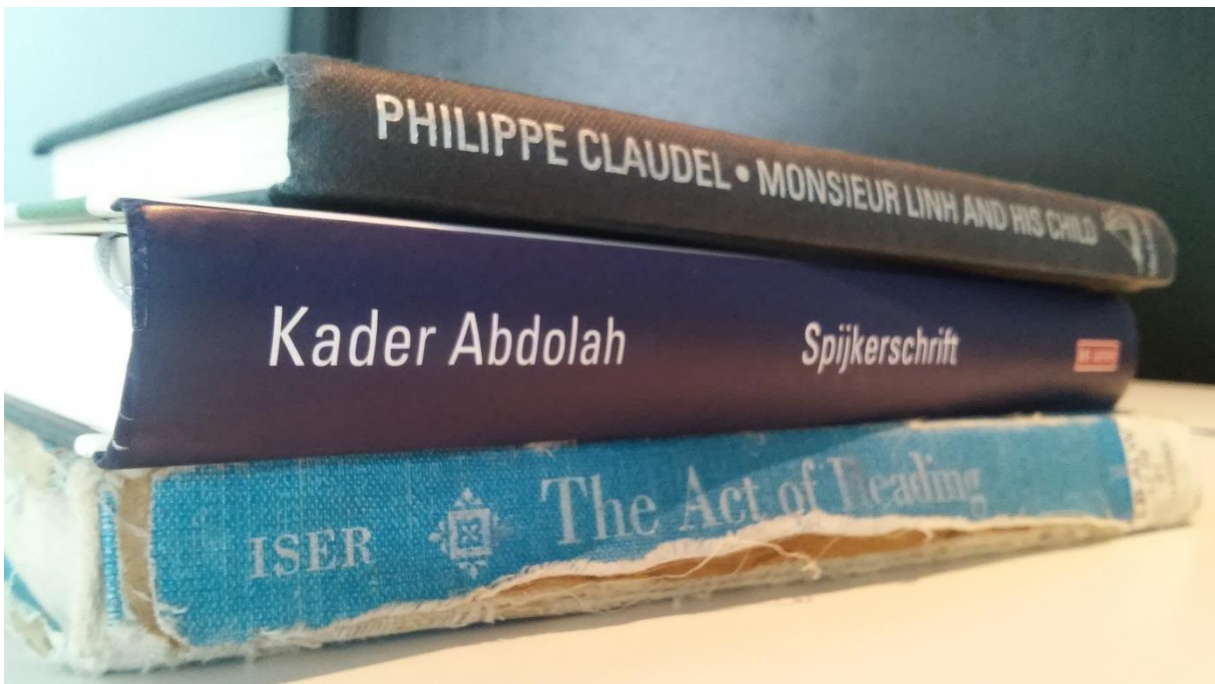


Involvement of the reader with refugee literature

Through the novels Spijkerschrift and Monsieur Linh and His Child



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Abstract

More and more stories about refugees are shared through (social) media, with the intent to get the audience involved with those refugees and their stories. The purpose of this thesis is to find out how involvement of the reader with the refugee is achieved. In order to answer this question, two novels containing stories about a refugee have been analysed. In these analyses, I looked for indeterminacies. These are the parts of the novel that have not been described by the author. Wolfgang Iser states that “the indeterminate elements of literary prose – perhaps even of all literature – represent a vital link between text and reader. They are the switch that activates the reader into using his own ideas in order to fulfil the intention of the text” (Iser, *Prospecting* 28). In this process, the reader becomes involved with the story as it now contains parts of him/herself. The analysed novels, Kader Abdolah’s *Spijkerschrift* and Philippe Claudel’s *Monsieur Linh and His Child*, contain indeterminacies for which reader-involvement with the refugee is necessary to give meaning to the text. After an introduction to the subject, Wolfgang Iser’s theory will be thoroughly discussed in the theoretical framework. Then follow two chapters which discuss analysed parts of the novels about refugees and how indeterminacies bring about involvement of the reader with aspects of being a refugee. In the conclusion, the answer as to how reader-involvement with the refugee is established, is given.

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Introduction

Almost every day news items are made concerning them, articles written, discussions conducted: refugees. Though refugees are not a new phenomenon, they nowadays are a constant source of commotion around the world. In Europe, discussions are heated between those who want to welcome refugees and those who want to keep refugees out. Through a better access to (social) media, more and more is heard from and about refugees. It probably will not take very long before new books and films are made relating the stories of refugees. Already a number of books written by or about refugees exist. Two of these are Philippe Claudel's *Monsieur Linh and His Child* and Kader Abdolah's *Spijkerschrift*. By analysing parts of these two novels, I want to determine how a reader is able to become involved with (the stories of) refugees. The protagonists from these novel can be seen as representative for groups of refugees. Involvement of the reader in their stories can be seen as involvement with the story of more refugees. In order to explain how involvement of the reader comes about, I will be using Wolfgang Iser's transactional model of the reader-response theory. In this model, Iser claims that both reader and text are equally important in creating meaning for the text. The reader becomes involved with the text as (s)he has to fill the parts of the text that are unwritten, these parts Iser calls indeterminacies. This theory will be elaborately explained in the theoretical framework. After the theoretical framework follows the chapter in which I analyse the novel *Spijkerschrift* and explain how the involvement of the reader comes to be for this novel. Thereafter, I will do the same for *Monsieur Linh and His Child*. I will return to the main question in the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

In order to answer my research question I will be using the reader-response theory, also known as reader-response criticism. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, reader response criticism is described as “a literary criticism that focuses primarily on the reader’s reaction to a text.” (Merriam-Webster). The reader is one of the most important aspects in the comprehension of the text. There are roughly five different approaches within reader-response criticism: transactional reader-response theory, affective stylistics, subjective reader-response theory, psychological reader-response theory, and social reader-response theory. I will be using the transactional model, which is heavily influenced by Wolfgang Iser. In this chapter I will first of all give a short introduction to reader-response criticism and its history. I will then move on to explain the different approaches; after which I will zoom in on Wolfgang Iser’s transactional model.

A Short History of Reader-response Criticism

Reader-response criticism began in the 1960s and ‘70s as a reaction to New Criticism, which in turn was a reaction to Old Criticism. The latter was concerned with matters outside of the text, such as moral criticism or literary biography and history. New Criticism reacted to this movement by turning exclusively to the text. They dismissed any influence by either author or reader on the text and tried to extract meaning by doing a very close reading of the text itself. Reader-response theorists thought that the New Critics failed “to consider the role of the reader in constituting meaning.” (Beach 16) They therefore developed a theory which gave more attention to the reader and his/her reaction to the text. Within the reader-response theory, there are different critics who all have their own ideas as to which extent the reader influences the interpretation of a text.

Five Approaches of Reader-response Criticism

In “Critical Theory Today: A User-friendly Guide,” Lois Tyson provides us with an overview of the five different approaches of reader-response criticism. She does emphasise that “the dividing lines are often fluid and indistinct.” (Tyson 164) The first category described is the transactional reader-response theory. This is the approach I will be using for my research. I will briefly describe it here and later on come back to it and give a more elaborate explanation of this approach. In the transactional reader-response theory, reader and text are equally important. Wolfgang Iser states that there exists interplay between the text and the reader. The text provides facts in the form of plots or descriptions, Iser calls this *determinate meaning*. But the text also provides the reader with gaps, for example, actions that are not fully described or have multiple explanations. These gaps are titled *indeterminacies*. In order to understand the text, the reader has to interpret these unwritten parts him/herself and thus creates an interpretation of the text that is as much their own as it is of the text.

The second approach is termed ‘affective stylistics.’ The reader plays a very important role within this approach, as it is that within the reader, the results or meanings of the text are produced. Tyson explains how the text is approached: “the text is examined closely, often line by line or even word by word, in order to understand *how* (stylistics) it *affects* (affective) the reader in the process of reading.” (167) The reading of a text is an experience that occurs within the reader.

The next theory is the subjective reader-response theory. A literary work is not an objective text, but becomes something, acquires meaning, through the subjective interpretations of readers. “Readers’ responses are the text,” (Tyson 169) because the meanings that the readers create in their interpretations are what make the text a text. Through reading, an experience is created which makes the text, a real object, into a symbolic object. The reader creates a world in his mind as a response to the text and is interpreting his/her own symbolization as the reader is interpreting the text, because text and reader are one.

The fourth category is the psychological reader-response theory, which is heavily influenced by literary critic Norman Holland. “Holland focuses on what readers’ interpretations reveal about themselves, not about the text.” (Tyson 174) For Holland, the interpretation a reader gives to a text is the way in which the reader copes with the things that the text arouses in the reader. An interpretation may or may not give the meaning of a text, but it always tells us something about the psychology of the reader.

The last category is the social reader-response theory to which Stanley Fish contributed. Fish claims that we may have our individual interpretations of a text, but we are not standing alone. We are part of an *interpretive community*. This community consists of people “who share the interpretive strategies we bring to texts when we read, whether or not we realize we’re using them.” (Tyson 176) A reader can belong to more than one community and the communities also evolve over time, just like the reader, so that the reader changes communities throughout his/her life. The meaning of a text is not hidden in the text itself, but in the interpretive strategies that are (un)consciously used.

Iser’s Transactional Reader-response Theory

In my research, I will be using the transactional reader-response theory. I have chosen this specific approach, because of the interplay between text and reader. Both reader and text are equally important. The reader is influenced by the text, but still brings in his/her own ideology, which brings about communication between text and reader. In my analysis I will focus on a close reading of the text, as this side of the communication is easier to research. I will also provide some examples of reader-responses. I will now elaborate on the short introduction to this theory which is given above. According to Wolfgang Iser, a text consists of *determinacies*: the givens of a text, for instance facts about a character or the description of an event. But the author is not able to describe everything in a story, sometimes descriptions are incomplete or the connection between two determinacies (for instance between events or

characters) is ambiguous. These omissions are gaps in the story which Iser calls *indeterminacies*. Indeterminacies are what brings about the interaction between text and reader. I will explain how this interaction arises further on. First, I will elaborate on the different types of indeterminacy. The first type is the *gap*. The gap consists of a gap in the determinacies of a story and calls for completion by the reader. "These gaps give the reader a chance to build his own bridges, relating the different aspects of the object which have thus far been revealed to him" (Iser, *Indeterminacy* 11). The second type of indeterminacy is the *blank*: "Blanks indicate that the different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so" (Iser, *Prospecting* 34). The blank is concerned with the connection of (in)determinacies. It is not a gap that needs to be filled, the blank needs to be combined in order to generate meaning. A third form of indeterminacy is *negation*. The negation invokes and then deletes determinate elements, but the deleted elements remain in the back of the reader's mind. This influences the way the reader thinks about the text. The reader is then "guided to adopt a position *in relation* to the text" (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 169, emphasis original). The negation does not need combining or completion, but it influences the reader's position in relation to the text. In order to give meaning to the text, the reader has to fill the indeterminacies. By filling them with his/her own ideas and preconceptions, while being partly led by the text, the reader becomes more involved with the text. This is how the interaction between reader and text comes about. The more indeterminacies, the more active the reader has to be in order to grasp at the meaning, thus the more involved with the story the reader becomes. Iser states that "it is only when the reader is given the chance to participate actively that he will regard the text, whose intention he himself has helped to compose, as real. For we generally tend to regard things that we have made ourselves as being real. And so it can be said that indeterminacy is the fundamental precondition for reader participation" (Iser, *Prospecting* 10). Thus, the involvement of the

reader with the text also influences the degree in to which the reader regards the story as 'real.' By filling or completing indeterminacies, the reader shares part of the story, but without consequences, as the story is not real life for the reader. The reader is able to experience a different world or different feelings without consequences. "And precisely because the literary text makes no objectively real demand on its readers, it opens up a freedom that everyone can interpret in his own way" (Iser, *Prospecting* 29). Thus, the reader shares in the story through indeterminacies, as (s)he uses own experiences or ideas to complete these indeterminacies. By sharing a bit of their own lives with the story, it becomes real, but the experience remains without consequences for the reader, making interpretation more accessible.

The Reader

So far, I have been talking about THE reader, but there is no such thing as the perfect reader. Everybody reacts differently to a text; everybody fills the indeterminacies in a different way. If two readers read the exact same text, they will probably not interpret it in the exact same way. In order to use his transactional reader-response theory, Wolfgang Iser uses the so-called 'Implied Reader.' The implied reader is based on "a stance or set of behaviours and attitudes presupposed by the text." (Beach 25) The reader is not a person of flesh and blood, "maar het geheel van culturele normen, waarden, achtergronden en attitudes dat nodig is om de verhaalwereld te kunnen begrijpen." (Wurth & Rigney 212) The implied reader is a construct of the text, (s)he is created through both determinacies and indeterminacies, the text leads a reader into an attitude towards the text.

Kader Abdolah's *Spijkerschrift*

One of the most popular authors in the Netherlands is Kader Abdolah. Originating from Iran, Abdolah has come to the Netherlands in order to escape prosecution. In one of his first novels, *Spijkerschrift*, Abdolah relates some of his personal experiences about being part of the resistance and his flight from Iran. The novel tells of the deaf-mute Aga Akbar and his son Ismaiel, who, just like Kader Abdolah, was part of the resistance in Iran and who eventually had to flee from his country. This novel illustrates the way a reader can get involved with the stories of refugees. The method I will be using to demonstrate how this involvement arises is Wolfgang Iser's transactional reader-response theory. Iser claims that through indeterminacies, the unwritten parts of the novel, the reader is activated. Indeterminacies stimulate the reader to create the meaning that is missing, the reader becomes part author of the novel, which also brings about more involvement of the reader with the story. Because *Spijkerschrift* is the story of a refugee, Ismaiel, and because the reader becomes involved with his story through indeterminacies, the reader becomes involved with a refugee. In this chapter, I will illustrate how *Spijkerschrift* brings about involvement of the reader with a refugee. I will do this by citing passages which contain an indeterminacy that is concerned with the refugee. I will commence this chapter with a summary of the novel, so the reader is able to place the examples within their contexts. In this first paragraph, I will also state my reasons for choosing this particular novel. I will then continue presenting, analysing and explaining the passages I have chosen. Using these examples, I will explain how the reader becomes more involved with the story of a refugee through indeterminacies, as stated by Iser. In the end, I will return to the main question and briefly recount what I discussed in this chapter.

Before I begin analysing passages from *Spijkerschrift*, I will provide the reader with a synopsis of the story. An aspect that is of importance for this novel, are the narrators. Some information on these narrators is included in the synopsis. I will then list the reasons for

choosing this novel. *Spijkerschrift* consists of three parts. In the first part, an omniscient narrator introduces us to Aga Akbar, a deaf-mute Iranian. Aga Akbar cannot write, but his uncle shows him some cuneiform writing in a grotto and tells him to write using a self-invented cuneiform. Aga Akbar uses the cuneiform to tell his story. Nobody is able to read his writing, not even the omniscient narrator. He states: “Hoewel ik alwetend ben, kan ik Aga Akbars notities helaas niet lezen” (Abdolah 10). In this paradoxical statement the narrator claims to be both able, through his omniscience, and not able to read the notes by Aga Akbar. It is up to the reader to decide whether to accept the narrator as omniscient or to take his narration with a grain of salt. This paradox does not influence my analysis of the story in a significant way, therefore it will not reappear in this chapter. But because this anomaly does influence the overall perception of the story, I incorporate it here in the synopsis of the story. In the first part, the narrator narrates the story of Aga Akbar until the birth of Ismaiel, Aga Akbar’s son. He tells about Aga Akbar’s life in his village, his growing up and his marriages. In the second part, Ismaiel takes over from the narrator. The narration turns from an omniscient narrator to a first-person narrative. Ismaiel tells us that he is writing while in the Netherlands and is looking back at his own life. He describes his childhood, his growing up, his relation with his father and about resisting the Khomeini regime and eventually fleeing. In the third part, the omniscient narrator returns because “Ismaiel kan het laatste deel van zijn vaders notities niet ontcijferen” (Abdolah 10). This narrator describes the final years of Aga Akbar’s life in Teheran until his death, where the novel ends. One of the reasons for choosing *Spijkerschrift* are the different aspects of the life of a refugee it depicts. Different aspects in the novel are the land of refuge, from which Ismaiel writes his part, the country of origin, where most of the events occur, and the search for identity in a new country. The aspects highlighted in this chapter are about the life before any opposition, a reason for fleeing: prosecution for being part of the resistance, and the mystery of where refugees will end up.

These specific aspects are highlighted because the passages in which they can be found contain an indeterminacy. These indeterminacies activate the reader, which gets this reader more involved with those aspects. This will be explained extensively in the following paragraphs. All of these aspects are portrayed by Ismaiel and his family, but can be applied to a multitude of (Iranian) refugees. Jeroen Dewulf writes that “he [Ismaiel] narrates his father’s story, his own story, and the story of twentieth-century Iran” (22-3). *Spijkerschrift* relates the story of the refugee Ismaiel, as well as the story of Iran and its many refugees. The novel is in many ways exemplary for refugees during the Khomeini regime in Iran. This is also a reason for choosing this novel; the events depicted are not limited to the experiences of one refugee, the experiences are applicable to more than one refugee. Some of the elements mentioned earlier are not imagined, but have been experienced by the author, Kader Abdolah, himself. The autobiographical elements of the novel are another reason for choosing *Spijkerschrift*. Ries Agterberg classifies Kader Abdolah as a refugee-author: “Kader Abdolah is een vluchtelingauteur. Dat betekent dat zijn status als vluchteling voor een deel de ontwikkeling van zijn literatuur heeft bepaald. ... De romans kennen vaak een autobiografisch karakter” (290). Abdolah’s being a refugee has influenced his writing. In *Spijkerschrift* this is perceptible in the autobiographical elements. The fact that the novel contains autobiographical elements, causes the novel to be closer to reality than the reader might have thought in the first place. The reality of this novel is another argument for choosing *Spijkerschrift*. For now, a final reason for choosing this novel: the fact that the novel contains many indeterminacies which activate the reader. These indeterminacies are necessary in my analysis of how the reader becomes involved with the story of a refugee.

The following passage contains an indeterminacy which activates the reader to consider the daily life of a refugee before his/her flight: “Het leven in het Saffraandorp ging zijn gewone gangetje” (Abdolah 97). This short sentence does not contain a lot of

information, but the indeterminacy has the potential to involve the reader with the life of a refugee in a simplistic way. This is the main reason for choosing this passage. The passage tells of the lives of Ismaiel and his family, who live in Saffraandorp, a small village at the foot of a mountain. The continuation of their lives is what contains the indeterminacy. What this continuation entails remains unwritten, as the narrator does not elaborate on the daily lives of the family members. The narrator does not expand on jobs, household chores, schooling, or any such things that can be associated with the daily life of a family. This indeterminacy is a gap, as it needs to be completed by the reader. It does not negate any information, nor does it need combining with another part of the novel, as the novel does not provide more information on the daily life of this family. This indeterminacy can thus not be regarded a negation or a blank. In case of a gap, it is up to the reader to fill it in order to understand what the gap, in this case, the “gewone gangetje” (Abdolah 97) comprises. There are approximately two ways for filling in this gap. The first approach is a personal filling of the gap. The reader considers his/her own life and fills the gap with their own actions: their getting up, working, studying, eating, housekeeping, and so forth. For the reader, this is an easy approach, as it does not stray far from what is familiar for the reader. With this approach, the reader uses their own everyday life to fill the gap, making his/her daily life similar to the daily life of Ismaiel and his family. As a consequence of filling in this gap with the reader’s own daily activities, the reader and Ismaiel now share daily habits. Because of this, the reader becomes more involved with Ismaiel, or the other way around, Ismaiel becomes more involved with the reader. The second approach to filling in this gap is with consideration for the place and time in which the story occurs, the place being Iran and the time being the eighties. The reader might not know much about daily lives in the Iran of the eighties, but (s)he does have presumptions with which the gap can be filled. This approach does take more effort than the filling in of the reader’s daily activities. But because the reader has to make more of an effort

in order to grasp at the daily life of Ismaiel, the reader becomes involved as (s)he has to dig deep and thus be more active in order to fill this gap. Granted that the reader finds a way to fill this indeterminacy, the reader will have a more profound understanding of the daily routine of Ismaiel, as a refugee before he fled. This might then lead to an understanding that refugees also once had their daily lives, their households, their jobs, their children, that the daily life of a refugee might once have been more like the reader's life than the reader could imagine.

The indeterminacy in the next passage occurs because of a sudden introduction of a character. As the reader is confused about who this character is, the reader has to come up with a way to uncover this character. "Een van de belangrijkste opdrachten die ik van de partij kreeg, was Djamila onderdak te geven" (Abdolah 177). Ismaiel takes part in the leftist resistance party against the shah and later against Khomeini. During his partaking, Ismaiel has gotten different assignments (in which he also made use of his deaf-mute father.) One of the assignments Ismaiel gets, is to provide shelter for one Djamila. Enter the indeterminacy. The sudden introduction of a new character creates a gap, as the reader remains in the dark about who this Djamila is and starts guessing. The reader inherently wants to know who this Djamila is and starts try and fill the gap with the help of the context. This Djamila must be of value to the party, otherwise Ismaiel would not have gotten the assignment. The reader might also assume that Djamila is a member of the party, because they take care of her. She does not have a place to stay, otherwise Ismaiel would not have to provide her with shelter. This is about all the information the reader is able to extract from the text. The reader still does not now who Djamila is. She remains a mystery. Some more information on Djamila is provided a few lines further in the text: "Djamila, de legendarische strijdster over wie veel heldenverhalen bekend waren, was goud waard" (Abdolah 177). Apparently, Djamila is a legendary warrior, and worth a lot to the party. The reader now knows a little more about

Djamila, but the gap remains. The mystery around her even becomes a little more extensive, as she is described as legendary. It is said that there are many stories known about her, but these stories remain unwritten in this novel. These stories are another mystery, another indeterminacy concerning Djamila. The reader was already activated by the sudden introduction. Because a proper introduction is missing, immediately questions arise: who is she? Why does she need shelter? The reader gets to know a little bit more about Djamila, but the gap remains. The reader still does not completely know who Djamila is and what is told about her. The reader has to activate his own mind in order to fill the gap that is Djamila. The reader could think of other (female) freedom fighters and link known parts of their lives to Djamila or the reader could imagine some stories. In order to give meaning to Djamila, to be able to identify her, the reader needs to be activated, the reader needs to think of possibilities to fill the gap. By filling the gap with own ideas, the reader becomes involved with the story, as it now contains part of the reader himself. I chose this example, because the indeterminacy in this passage includes part of the life of refugees. Djamila, like Ismaiel, is part of the resistance and has to flee, just like Ismaiel has to leave later on in the novel. The parts that the reader has to imagine are the stories about Djamila. These stories are probably related to her part played for the resistance. This being part of the resistance is the reason both Djamila and Ismaiel eventually have to flee. As the reader imagines Djamila's stories, (s)he is imagining the reasons she has to flee. Through the reader's imagination, the reader becomes involved with Djamila, the refugee, because the reader is imagining the reasons for her flight.

The final example which demonstrates how involvement of the reader is brought about describes the moment Ismaiel leaves his fatherland:

“Ismaiel ging weg. Hij nam de route naar de Saffraanberg en zijn vader Aga Akbar bleef net zo lang bij het hek van de begraafplaats staan totdat hij Ismaiel niet meer van de rotsen kon onderscheiden. Uit ervaring wist Akbar dat wie achter de Saffraanberg verdween, nooit meer

terug zou komen. Maar waar gingen al die mannen, die vrouwen en Ismaïel naartoe?”

(Abdolah 245)

This passage tells of the parting of Ismaïel and his father. Ismaïel flees over the mountain to an unknown refuge. His father and the rest of his family remain behind. As Ismaïel goes further away, his father is watching him until he is no longer able to see him. It says that Aga Akbar knows from experience that Ismaïel will not return. Aga Akbar must have seen more people disappear behind this mountain in order to gain this experience. The question then disclosed describes the indeterminacy of this passage: Where do all those people go? The question is a blank regarding Ismaïel. A blank is an indeterminacy in a text which calls for the combination of different parts of the text. The reader knows from previous chapters that Ismaïel will settle in the Netherlands. As the reader is reading this passage, (s)he automatically connects the questions Aga Akbar asks to previously read parts of the novel. The reader thus answers Aga Akbar's question. It is not explicitly stated in the novel that Ismaïel fled to the Netherlands, it is just stated that he lives there, but the reader makes that connection. Aga Akbar not only wonders where Ismaïel is going, he also wonders about where “al die mannen” and “die vrouwen” (Abdolah 245) will end up. The reader is not able to answer this question with an answer which is stated in the novel, this part of the question is not a blank, but a gap. In order to fill this gap, the reader has to address his/her own presumptions about where these refugees might end up. The reader might know of Iranian refugees in their own country, thus might fill the gap with the name of his/her own country. One person with whom this gap could be filled is the author, Kader Abdolah, who is a refugee from Iran. The reader could also take a look at The Refugee Project. This project consists of a website which has processed UN data into a map which shows where refugees come from and where they go. The top three countries to which Iranian refugees have fled are Germany, the United Kingdom and Iraq. For a statistically correct filling of the gap, the reader might think of these countries.

With an analysis of passages from Kader Abdolah's *Spijkerschrift* containing indeterminacies, I have tried to show that through these indeterminacies, the reader is activated to participate in the creation of meaning. Involvement of the reader occurs as the reader becomes more and more active in filling indeterminacies with his/her own thoughts. In the specific indeterminacies I discussed, the reader has to get involved with the story of Ismaiel, a refugee, in order to complete his story. The reader gets involved with Ismaiel, and through Ismaiel with other refugees, who have lived through similar experiences. The aspects in which the reader becomes involved are, for *Spijkerschrift*, the daily life of a refugee before his becoming a refugee, the reason for leaving, in this case because of prosecution, and the uncertainty refugees leave behind.

Philippe Claudel's *Monsieur Linh and His Child*

Though simplistically written, Philippe Claudel's novel *Monsieur Linh and His Child* covers intricate matters. It relates the story of Monsieur Linh, a traumatised refugee who travelled to an unfamiliar country by boat. Though Monsieur Linh's situation is hard to understand for readers, the reader is able to become involved with Monsieur Linh, who serves as an illustration for many refugees who are, ironically speaking, in the same boat. In this chapter, I will search for the answer to the question of how a reader becomes involved with refugees through *Monsieur Linh and His Child*. I will do this by analysing passages and searching for indeterminacies. According to Wolfgang Iser "it is the elements of indeterminacy that enable the text to 'communicate' with the reader, in the sense that they induce him to participate both in the production and the comprehension of the work's intention" (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 24). Indeterminacies are unwritten parts of the novel, which the reader has to complete. Through this completion, the reader becomes involved with the story and its characters. Because the novel, and the specific passages concern Monsieur Linh, a refugee, the reader becomes involved with this refugee. The analysis of the different passages will take place after I have introduced the reader to the plot of the novel and to the reasons for choosing *Monsieur Linh and His Child*.

I shall now provide a short introduction to the author and a summary of the novel. Philippe Claudel is a French author and film director. One of his most famous works is the award-winning film *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime* (*I've loved you so long*). In an interview with Boyd Tonkin he said that working as a teacher in a prison inspired him to write novels and make films where themes of memory or guilt surfaced. For *Monsieur Linh and his Child*, which was first published in 2005, he won the Euregio Literaturpreis in 2007. *Monsieur Linh and His Child* opens on a boat. Together with his six-week old grandchild, Monsieur Linh has fled his country because of a war. They are heading to an unknown country, where they hope

to build up a new life. The child's parents have died through an explosion. Monsieur Linh found his granddaughter lying unharmed next to her beheaded doll, which was the same size as the child. He has taken her to this new country in order to save her life. The country to which they fled remains unnamed throughout the novel, though it can be assumed that it is France, as the people in it speak French. In this new country, Monsieur Linh is brought to a dormitory that he has to share with two families. They laugh at the way he takes care of his grandchild, but furthermore ignore them. After staying inside for some time, Monsieur Linh is urged by people from the Refugee Bureau to go outside for a walk. After a long walk with his grandchild, they sit down on a bench in order to rest. After a while a man sits down with them and they start to have a bit of a conversation. The man, Monsieur Bark, and Monsieur Linh do not speak each other's languages, but they try to understand each other through signs and the tones of their voices. It is the start of a special friendship. The man talks about his life and his recently deceased wife, and although Monsieur Linh does not understand what Monsieur Bark is saying, he understands the tone of his voice and sympathises with him. They start to meet regularly on that bench and talk and listen to each other. Monsieur Linh, who is very protective of his grandchild, even lets her sit on Monsieur Bark's lap. As they visit the harbour one day, Monsieur Linh points across the water and names his homeland (the name is not in the book). Memories suddenly arise for Monsieur Bark at the mention of this name. He starts to cry and tell that he used to fight a war in that beautiful country. A few days later, Monsieur Linh gets the message that he is going to another home. He is scared that he will not be able to meet with Monsieur Bark anymore, but they tell him that he will remain in this city. The next day, he is brought to a home for the elderly. After some time in the retirement home, Monsieur Linh decides to go out to see Monsieur Bark. As he tries to leave he is deterred by some nurses. He is not allowed to leave the place. Monsieur Linh plans an escape in order to see Monsieur Bark. Very early one day, he climbs over a wall with his granddaughter in

search for the bench. But the city is a big one, and Monsieur Linh walks around the entire day without finding the bench and he becomes very tired. Suddenly he recognises the entrance of a park. This park is just across the bench where the friends used to meet, and sitting on this bench is Monsieur Bark. Monsieur Linh starts to shout at Monsieur Bark and in his enthusiasm he starts to cross the busy road dividing the park and the bench without looking. Monsieur Bark hears his friend calling him and turns to see Monsieur Linh and his child getting hit by a car. Monsieur Bark rushes to his friend. Monsieur Linh lies motionless on the street. A little further lies the doll which Monsieur Linh always carried with him: his granddaughter. It is at this moment that the reader finds out that Monsieur Linh's child is a doll. The reader might have seen the clues: the strange reactions towards the child, the fact that she never cried nor uttered a sound and the soup which kept trickling down her chin. But there are also reasons to believe the doll was a real child. Her eyes were able to open and close, making it seem like she was reacting to Monsieur Linh and making her look alive. Monsieur Linh treated her like a real child, as he was convinced she was, and the reader might not question this conviction. For Monsieur Linh, the mix up happened when he found his family on a field, killed by a bomb: "There was also his son's body, and his son's wife's body, and further away, the little girl, her eyes wide open, unharmed and wrapped in a blanket, and beside the child a doll, her own doll, the same size as her, which had had its head blown off by the blast of the bomb" (Claudel 4). Monsieur Linh is blinded by the atrocities he sees and confuses the doll with the child. He thinks that it is the doll which had her head blown off, while in fact it was his actual granddaughter who was torn apart. For Monsieur Linh, his granddaughter is his reason to flee, she keeps him alive. After the accident Monsieur Bark lies the doll on Monsieur Linh's chest. Monsieur Linh comes to life at the touch of this doll: "He hugs the pretty doll in his scrawny arms, he hugs her as if his life depended on her; he hugs her as he would hug a real child, quiet, calm and eternal" (Claudel 130). I chose this

novel because it is not the story of one refugee, but of a lot of them. Monsieur Linh flees his country because of a war, he travels to a strange new land by boat and feels lost in this new country. These are circumstances which can be applied to many more refugees who also fled because of a war, who travelled dangerous journeys by boat and who find themselves lost in a new world. Another reason for choosing *Monsieur Linh and His Child* is that it highlights different aspects of the life of a refugee. These aspects can be applied to a multitude of refugees. This novel addresses different issues than those addressed in *Spijkerschrift*. For *Spijkerschrift*, the highlighted aspects were about the daily life of a refugee before his flight, about being part of the resistance and about the refugee's departure. For *Monsieur Linh and His Child*, the aspects I will highlight are about the refugee's mixed feelings about his homeland after arrival in a new country and the suffering from a trauma. In these passage, the reader encounters indeterminacies, which get him/her involved with the refugee and their vicissitudes.

As Monsieur Linh and his granddaughter arrive in a strange new country, they are met by a woman, but the way she reacts to his granddaughter is quite strange: "He shows the child to the woman. She looks at it, appears to hesitate, and eventually smiles" (Clandel 4). Monsieur Linh has just landed at his country of refuge and a woman of the refugee bureau picks him up. As he is showing her his granddaughter, whom he brought with him, the woman's first reaction is one of hesitation. Eventually, she does show her goodwill to the man by smiling. The woman brings Monsieur Linh and the child to a dormitory, where he shall reside for a while. Here, his granddaughter is also met with some strange reactions: "They [the two families living in the dormitory with Monsieur Linh] all look at the old man as if he is a nuisance, and they stare in astonishment, and with slight hostility, at the baby he is carrying" (Clandel 6). Monsieur Linh has just arrived in his new residence. It is a dormitory in which two more refugee families live. They are annoyed, as they have to share their living

place with one more refugee. But their reaction to Monsieur Linh's granddaughter is more hostile, they stare at her with surprise and bewilderment. The reactions of these people to Monsieur Linh's granddaughter stand out, as it probably not the way people would normally react to a baby. They react this way because the child is a doll, but the reader does not yet know this. It is in the end, when Monsieur Linh has an accident, that the reader finds out that the child is a doll. At this moment of the story, the reader might be surprised by the way these people react. The reader then has to find a way to make sense of their reactions. These reactions are an indeterminacy, a blank, to be more precise. The blank can be combined with the revelation that the child is a doll, thus filling that indeterminacy. With the fulfilment of this blank, the reader comes to the conclusion that Monsieur Linh must not have been right in his head, as he does not see that the doll is not his granddaughter. A possible explanation for this mental illness could be that Monsieur Linh is traumatised by the war. If Monsieur Linh is traumatised, he is not the only one. The Bundes Psychoterapeuten Kammer revealed that at least half of the refugees who came to Germany were psychologically ill. Some research on the internet shows that trauma and PTSD are serious issues for refugees. The reader might not be able to understand the trauma, but (s)he might understand that traumata occur and are not unfamiliar to refugees.

One day, Monsieur Bark brings his friend to the harbour, where they sit and look out over the sea. The sight of the sea brings up the following memories for Monsieur Linh: "He can see himself on the ship once more, and images suddenly come back to him – terrible, loathsome and wonderful – and jostle about inside him. It is as if he were being pummelled with blows, striking at his heart, his soul, his belly and all his limbs. Yes, beyond the sea, far beyond it, days and days away, there is all that. There *had been* all that" (Claudel 61-2, emphasis original). Monsieur Linh remembers the ship on which he travelled to this new land. As Monsieur Linh looks back on his journey, he is suddenly overcome with images from his

past, from his homeland. The images move him, physically. Monsieur Linh feels like he is being hit with memories. He recollects events from his homeland, which is far away from where he is sitting. In his homeland “there *had been* all that” (Claudel 62). “All that” refers back to the images at the beginning of the passage, these images are part of the “all that.” What stands out in this sentence is the emphasis on “had been.” The tense of this clause is the past perfect, which implies that whatever happened has already been completed in the past. The images Monsieur Linh relives are images of the past, the events that have happened have ended at the moment of thinking. An indeterminacy is captured in these images and “all that.” This indeterminacy is a blank, which means that incomplete information can be completed through combination with other parts from the novel. The blank is indeed partially filled later on in the novel with some images about Monsieur Linh’s village and the war which made him leave. There is a description of the explosion which killed his son, his daughter-in-law, and their little daughter, although Monsieur Linh thinks she survived. Parts of his village are described, his bamboo hut, the rice fields, the mountains, and the fact that everyone knew one another, which is in sharp contrast to the big city Monsieur Linh fled to. A story is related of how a young Monsieur Linh went in search of a crazy aunt, who went wandering around the fields and woods and who went a little crazy. Another image of war in Monsieur Linh’s country comes from Monsieur Bark, who, while sitting there in the harbour, admits to Monsieur Linh that he has fought a war in that country. He cries while he describes the beautiful villages which he had to destroy. Monsieur Bark did not fight in the war which made Monsieur Linh leave, but it was a war nevertheless, one of the many which tore apart Monsieur Linh’s country. In the citation above, the images are described as “terrible, loathsome and wonderful” (Claudel 61). Terrible describes the war and the deadly explosion. Loathsome might describe the images Monsieur Linh must have seen when he went looking for his family and found them blown apart. Wonderful is filled with stories of the beautiful

villages Monsieur Bark describes. This last adjective is, in comparison to the first two, surprisingly positive. Even though Monsieur Linh has been through terrible events in his homeland, he still thinks of it as a wonderful country. The images described fill part of the blank, but as Monsieur Linh is already very old, the reader could presume that there are more stories to be told about this country. A gap thus remains after the partial filling of the indeterminacy. This gap has to be filled by the reader. As the name of the country is not stated in the novel, the reader first has to think about the country from which Monsieur Linh fled. The reader could deduce, from the names of the man, Linh, and his granddaughter, Sang Diû, that it is an (southeast) Asian country. The reader could then fill in what (s)he knows about these countries and use their own images of the nature, of wars, of bamboo huts, to fill in the gaps. The reader has to consider both the terrible and the wonderful about Monsieur Linh's country, just like he does, in order to fill the gaps. By considering both sides, the reader becomes involved with the feelings of the old man about his homeland. These dubious feelings about a country of origin might be familiar for more refugees. Refugees might have wonderful memories about the country in which they grew up, but they also had to flee this country, which could not have been for wonderful reasons. As the reader thinks about Monsieur Linh's complex connection with his country, the reader might grasp at the feelings refugees have about their homelands.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that through the filling of indeterminacies, the reader becomes involved with the story. *Monsieur Linh and His Child* relates the story of a refugee and through its indeterminacies, the reader is able to become involved with the story of this refugee. The passages I have analysed discussed themes which will not be unfamiliar for many refugees. These passages discussed the mixed feelings a refugee can have about his homeland, both loving and hating it, and the traumas a lot of refugees suffer from. Through

indeterminacies in these passages, the reader becomes a little bit more involved with the hardships refugees go through.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have researched the question of how a reader is able to become involved with (the stories of) refugees. It has become clear that a reader can get involved with refugees. Simply by reading stories about them. Since an author is not able to describe every single detail in a story, indeterminacies are inevitable. These unwritten parts are what constitute involvement of the reader. Wolfgang Iser claims in his transactional reader-response theory, that both text and reader are equally important in creating meaning. The texts of both Kader Abdolah's *Spijkerschrift* and Philippe Claudel's *Monsieur Linh and His Child* have led the reader in filling indeterminacies, but could not always satisfactorily 'write' the unwritten. In order to completely fill the indeterminacies, the reader has to come into play. The activation of the reader leads to more involvement of the reader with the story. The novels in this thesis have activated the reader in passages that concerned refugee-related issues. As the reader had to work in order to create meaning in these passages, (s)he became involved with the refugee in this passage. The protagonists of the stories can be taken as representatives of whole groups of refugees. Ismaïel, the protagonist of *Spijkerschrift*, is representative for those that have fled for political reasons while Monsieur Linh, the protagonist of *Monsieur Linh and His Child*, fled because of a war, which is also a frequently occurring reason for flight. As the reader becomes involved with the stories of Ismaïel and Monsieur Linh by filling in the indeterminacies, thereby completing the stories, the reader is able to grasp a little bit of the life of a refugee.

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