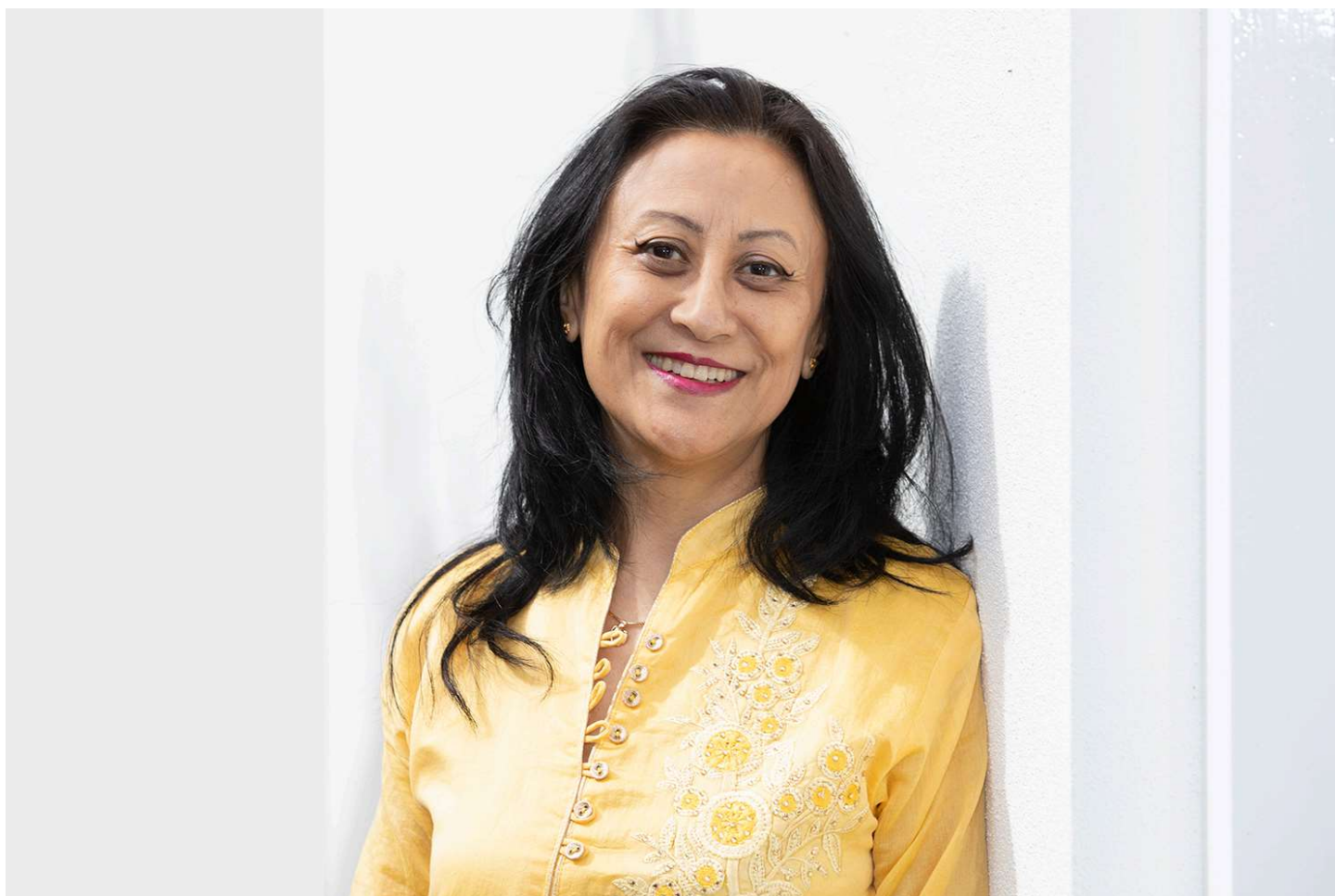


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# “Why do the Dutch use ‘little poop’ to describe a cute baby?”

June 22, 2024 [Brandon Hartley](#)



Kirtika van Hunen-Malla grew up in Nepal and India. After exchanging hundreds of letters with her future husband, she moved to the Netherlands. She now works as a cross-cultural consultant, trainer, and author in Den Bosch, loves *beschuit met muisjes* and is puzzled by *poepje* as a term of endearment.

## **How did you end up in the Netherlands?**

I got a scholarship and came here to study at the University of Twente where I met another Nepali student there who was a colleague of my future husband. I was homesick and I was invited along

on a weekend with them in The Hague. We had a Nepali dinner with my future husband and his family and we met a few times after that.

But I had a job in Nepal and went back for it. He came over a year later and we fell in love, but he had booked a vacation afterwards in Thailand. The first thing he did when he got there was call me and say he was buying a return ticket to Nepal. When he got back, he proposed, but I didn't jump to the challenge. I hardly knew him and was a bit scared, but he said we could break it off later if I wanted. I thought it was a good deal, so I agreed and he returned to the Netherlands.

We wrote hundreds of letters because we didn't have Zoom or email in those days and phone calls were too expensive. I was very introverted back then so this gave me the opportunity to learn more about him with my writing. I would ask him questions in the letters and sometimes wouldn't get answers until many weeks later. We still have all those letters.

When we finally decided to get married, there was also a discussion of where we were going to live. I assumed he would move to Nepal and he assumed I would move to the Netherlands. There's more to say, but I moved here.

### **How do you describe yourself – an expat, lovepat, immigrant, international?**

I usually say I'm an emotional asylum seeker in the sense that I was in love when I moved to the Netherlands, but it could be lovepat. I also see myself as an international and a world citizen. I was born in two cultures and grew up in two countries, India and Nepal. I also attended an international school with expats and the children of diplomats, all with diverse nationalities. The school was run by Irish nuns, so I even have a bit of an Irish upbringing.

### **How long do you plan to stay?**

In the beginning after I got married, I thought I would go back to Nepal if anything happened to my husband. Now that I have children and have lived here for more than 29 years, I have the feeling I'll be living here until the end, at least that's the plan.

### **Do you speak Dutch and how did you learn?**

I was very ambitious. I was working for the government in Nepal and had a good position. I wanted to continue at that same level when I came to the Netherlands. To do that, I knew I needed to speak Dutch at a professional level. I went straight to a language school in The Hague near where my husband and I first lived. I was there for four full days a week learning Dutch.

They taught me geography in Dutch, history in Dutch, and biology in Dutch. I knew about these subjects already, but I didn't know the Dutch words and terminology. It was a two-year course, but I finished it in 18 months. I passed the exam, was rated as speaking Dutch as a second language fluently, and started looking for a job.

### **What's your favourite Dutch thing?**

I like a lot of Dutch things, but I will choose *beschuit met muisjes*. When a baby is born and you visit the parents, they serve a round biscuit like hard toast with butter on it and sprinkled with *muisjes* – tiny sweets made of anise seed coated with sugar. You buy them in the supermarkets – blue ones for boys and pink ones for girls. I love them and the tradition around them.

Blue for a boy. Photo: Depositphotos.com

Having lived with the Dutch for all these years, there are some core values that I really find very positive. I like the honesty, being down to earth, and the dignity of labour. It doesn't matter if you're garbage man or a business tycoon, there's always respect for every level of work a person does. That is something I really cherish because I come from a culture where there are taboos surrounding certain types of labour.

### **How Dutch have you become?**

I consider myself a world citizen so I cannot really say 50% or 30%, but I have taken up a lot of Dutch traits. Sometimes I do things the Nepali way, sometimes I do them the Dutch way. One of the Dutch traits that has made my life easier is always being on time. Another one is planning. In my culture, we don't plan. In Dutch culture, we plan things sometimes three months in advance. That's something I use but not always 100%. Sometimes I like to get up in the morning and ask, "What am I going to do today?" instead of planning my day yesterday.

I have a love for this country and its culture so, in that way, I feel Dutch. In my trainings, people have asked me, "Do you use 'they' or 'we' when you talk about the Dutch?" I always say 'we'. I don't say 'the Dutch do this', I say 'we do this'. But when I work with Indian clients, I also say 'we'. It may sound weird, but that's how I feel.

### **Which three Dutch people (dead or alive) would you most like to meet?**

**Aletta Jacobs.** She was involved with women's emancipation in the Netherlands and she was the first woman to attend a Dutch university. Strangely enough, the same thing happened in my family. I had an auntie, the eldest sister of my father, who was the first Nepali lady to take a school leaving exam in India. The newspaper came to the exam hall to interview her and take photos. That really speaks to me; how women in those days took a path to show others this was possible. Aletta became a doctor and met a lot of resistance. People thought she should charge less than male doctors, which she didn't, of course.

Aletta Jacobs. Photo: Spaarnestad Photo/Het Leven via Nationaal Archief

It's all coming back again, the discussion of diversity and inclusion. History is repeating itself. We're still talking about this even in a country as advanced as the Netherlands where there still aren't many women in top positions at companies. As a woman who comes from a country where women are still treated like second class citizens, I would love to be able to ask Aletta about her feelings and how she did all of this. She's a hero.

**Annie M. G. Schmidt.** She was the writer of *Jip and Janneke*, a series of children's books. I started with those when I began reading and writing in Dutch. I loved the way her imagination ran. The books are about the son of one family and the daughter of another. The things they do together really resonated with me. As a kid, I did those same sort of things and played similar games. The books really take you back to a very innocent world for children.

**Queen Maxima.** Because I'm a intercultural trainer and I live between two cultures, I would like to know more about her journey. She's also living in two cultures. I wonder how she raised her children. I have two daughters I raised between two cultures and I wonder what she felt was important to give to her children.

### **What's your top tourist tip?**

Visit the [Kilsdonkse Molen](#). It's a unique windmill, powered by a combination of wind and water, and the only one of its kind in the world that's still working.

The Kilsdonkse mill. Photo: Quistnix at Dutch Wikipedia

I used to work with the council and I was involved with its reconstruction – it had been half destroyed during World War 2. You can also take a [boat tour](#) from Heeswijk Castle that goes to the windmill and back. I consider it one of the pearls of the Netherlands that not too many people have discovered.

### **Tell us something surprising you've found out about the Netherlands.**

Sometimes, when Dutch people see something or someone cute, like a baby, they describe them in words that mean 'poop' or 'fart'. It's very strange. I don't know why they do this. I've asked a lot of Dutch people and they don't know either.

They'll say things like *poepje* [little poop], *scheetje* [little fart], or *drolletje* [little turd]. Even after all these years of living here, I don't understand the metaphor, where it comes from, or how those Dutch words have anything to do with something that is cute. Is it because poops and farts are something intimate that comes out of your body? No one seems to know.

**If you had just 24 hours left in the Netherlands, what would you do?**

I love the outdoors, but of course they don't have natural nature here. So much of it is man-made, but I love the [Kampina](#). It's beautiful and green and the lake is so transparent.

I would also visit the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam to see [De Nachtwacht](#) again. When I first stood in front of it, I was amazed with how he worked with the shadow and the light in the painting. There's someone holding a lamp and it shines on the people nearby and creates a shadow behind them. How did Rembrandt do it and so perfectly? If I only had 24 hours left I would want to see it again and take a picture of the painting in my mind.

***Kirtika was speaking to Brandon Hartley.***

*You can learn more about Kirtika and her work on her website, [Between-2-Cultures](#). Her latest book, *When Cultures Meet: The key to working successfully with other cultures*, is available [on Amazon](#).*

10 Questions

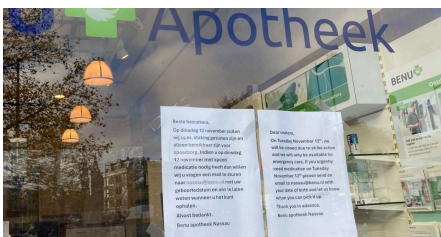
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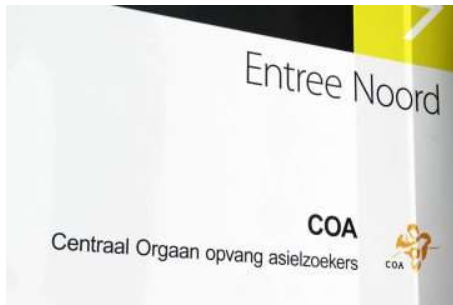
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