Muslim Female/Feminist Subjectivities: A Framework

AN ANALYSIS OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S SUBJECT POSITIONING IN FACEBOOK DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE BURKINI BAN

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I have aimed to understand different constructions of Muslim female and/or feminist subjectivities in online discussions on Dutch Facebook pages about the burkini ban imposed in France. Based on the comments I have gathered I applied a grounded theory methodology and chose to work with different theories and insights provided by Saba Mahmood, Alia Al-Saji and Rosi Braidotti. Mahmood elaborates on the conception of the self and moral agency among pious women; Al-Saji offers a unique philosophical analysis on the phenomenology of vision and the racialisation of the Muslim veil in Western representation; Braidotti expands on the relation and tension between female identity and feminist subjectivity, but also on the nature of political subjectivity. By bringing the perspectives of these three distinct feminist authors together I have aimed to provide a framework to analyze and understand female and feminist subjectivities, how they relate to each other and how we can think differently about subjectivity and identity on SNS. I hope that this analytical framework enables researchers to provide a more embodied and intersectional analysis of the experiences of Muslim women. Furthermore I hope that this framework offers a different perspective on the relationship between feminism and religious traditions. Finally by applying this framework on a dataset retrieved from discussions on SNS, I have aimed to understand how the digital sphere influences subject formation. This research provides new insights on the different ways in which gender, race and religion are present in the digital sphere and how Muslim women negotiate these spaces.

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My body is not your battleground

My breasts are neither wells nor mountians,
neither Badr nor Uhud

My breasts do not want to lead revolutions
nor to become prisoners of war
My breasts seek amnesty: release them
so I can glory in their milktipped fullness,
so I can offer them to my sweet love
without your flags and banners on them

My body is not your battleground
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,
neither the cause of your disarray
nor the path to your liberation
My hair will not bring progress and clean water
if it flies unbraided in the breeze
It will not save us from our attackers
if it is wrapped and shielded from the sun
Untangle your hands from my hair
so I can comb and delight in it,
so I can honor and annoint it,
so I can spill it over the chest of my sweet love

My body is not your battleground
My private garden is not your tillage
My thighs are not highway lanes to your Golden City
My belly is not the store of your bushels of wheat
My womb is not the cradle of your soldiers,
not the ship of your journey to the homeland
Leave me to discover the lakes
that glisten in my green forests
and to understand the power of their waters
Leave me to fill or not fill my chalice
with the wine or honey of my sweet love

Is it your skin that will tear when the head of the new world emerges?

My body is not your battleground
How dare you put your hand
where I have not given permission
Has God, then, given you permission
to put your hand there?

My body is not your battle ground
Withdraw from the eastern fronts and the western
Withdraw these armaments and this siege
so that I may prepare the earth
for the new age of lilac and clover,
so that I may celebrate this spring
the pageant of beauty with my sweet love.

- Mohja Kahf, 1998

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Dystopian fiction or real life?

Imagine a world order where women's bathing suits become defined as "a militant and political act", as an item of clothing "which refers to an allegiance to terrorist movements" and as something which "makes people feel unsafe". Take a few seconds to imagine how that would impact your life. What would that society look like? What would it mean to be a woman in such a society? It might remind you of dystopian fiction like George Orwell's novel *1984,* about a state at perpetual war that controls its population by propaganda, or of Margret Atwood's novel *The Handmaids Tale*, which describes a future United States governed by a totalitarian theocracy where women have no rights. However, this situation is far from fiction for Muslim women in France. It is with those exact words that the mayor of Cannes justified the installment of the burkini ban on August 11th, 2016 (Agerholm, 2016; Agence-France Presse, 2016). In the press release it was stated that this ban was a reaction against the terrorist attacks France had suffered in the previous month. On July 14th Islamic State (ISIS) claimed an attack where a truck ploughed into seafront crowds celebrating the French national holiday in Nice, killing 85 people. A few weeks later, on July 26th, a priest was killed in his church in north western France by two attackers who had proclaimed their allegiance to ISIS. In this context of heated debates on Islamic extremism, the swimwear of innocent Muslim women became targeted as a "provocative, militant and political act" (Agerholm, 2016; Agence-France Presse, 2016). Soon other mayors followed, reaching a total of 32 municipalities installing the ban which banned Muslim women from wearing burkinis on the beaches of the French Riviera. In the following weeks stories emerged from several women who were fined by police officers for €38, - and asked to undress or leave the beaches. The only thing that they were guilty of was wearing the "wrong" kind of swimsuit while enjoying the beach with their families and children.

The ban resulted in an international debate and news cycle. Hundreds of different opinion pieces and newspaper articles were written about it. It was a discussion topic ~~to be discussed~~ in several ~~different~~ talk shows on TV. On many different Social

Networking Sites people expressed their outrage with the hashtag #WTFF (What the Fuck France). As a Muslim woman myself, who has been wearing the headscarf for almost 15 years, it keeps amazing me how this piece of clothing can cause so much panic and commotion. It isn't something new. For the past 20 years veiling practices of Muslim women have been scrutinized in most of the Western world. Several governments (i.e. The Netherlands, France, Belgium and Austria) even pursued installing different bans on veiling in public places, schools and workplaces. What strikes me most are the discussions about these different bans: who gets to talk? While several studies show that there is a lot of talk about Muslim women in the Western media and in politics, there is not much room for talking with or talking done by Muslim women themselves (Al-Hejin, 2015; Al-Saji, 2010; van Es, 2016; Ghorashi, 2010). So when the burkini ban was installed, and exploded in international media, I was very curious about what Muslim women themselves had to say. How did they present themselves when engaging in these discussions? What were the different kinds of Muslim female subjectivities that emerged in and from these discussions? Therefore, the burkini ban served as the backdrop of this thesis, while Muslim women themselves are the protagonists.

1.2 Muslim women in the Netherlands

As my research focuses on Dutch Muslim women it is important to draw on previous research to understand the specificity of their position in society. In 2005 a report on women's emancipation in European countries was presented and one of the conclusions of this comparative study was that the Netherlands was the only country in which they observed the culturalization of emancipation (Ghorashi, 2010). In order to understand this culturalization of emancipation, we need to understand the ways in which culture has been defined. The Dutch self-image is defined through Enlightenment ideals and a laid-back, live-and-let-live mentality constructed around tolerance (El-Tayeb, 2011). In fact, this image has been crucial to the government's policy dealing with so-called 'guest workers', who were recruited between 1950 and 1970 from Spain, Italy, Turkey and Morocco to facilitate the post-war economic growth (Ghorashi, 2010). The focus of the government policy at that time was on "the preservation of migrants' cultures as separate elements tolerated within Dutch

society" (Ghorashi, 2010, p. 79). By the 1980's it became evident that these 'guest workers' were in fact not temporary, but permanent migrants. So the Dutch policy shifted towards "integration into Dutch society while simultaneously preserving the migrants' own culture" (Ghorashi, 2010, p. 80). These policies show the strong essentialist conviction that the culture of these migrants is totally different than that of the Dutch, marking them and their grandchildren (who are born and raised here) as the absolute other as well as eternal newcomers (El-Tayeb, 2011; Ghorashi, 2010).

By the turn of the century the discourse on integration and migration heavily focused on Islam and specifically on the incompatibility of Islam with European and Dutch values (Ghorashi, 2010). The cultures of migrants were no longer perceived as only essentially different, but also as more backward and inferior than the Dutch culture (Ghorashi, 2010; El-Tayeb, 2011). The focus of Dutch policy therefore shifted to one based on assimilation and the belief that in order to become 'Dutch' one needs to distance oneself from one's own cultural background (Ghorashi, 2010; El-Tayeb, 2011). While migrant women had been invisible within dominant Dutch discourse, this shift in discourse changed this invisibility into extreme visibility (Ghorashi, 2010). But this visibility came with strings attached: migrant women were only acknowledged in order to define against it a unified Dutch self-image characterized by enlightenment, emancipation and tolerance (Ghorashi, 2010; El-Tayeb, 2011). Within this framework the headscarf in particular "serves as the key symbol of Muslim difference, representing silenced, oppressed women living in parallel societies that are shaped by ancient and primitive, rather than modern Western, structures" (El-Tayeb, 2011). After the turn of the century we can therefore speak of a culturalization of emancipation in the Netherlands, which means that emancipation issues are often related to cultural/ethnic groups (Ghorashi, 2010). This is also prevalent in media coverage on Muslim women in particular and Islam in general. Earlier studies show that news coverage on Muslims, focuses significantly more on Muslim women then man, with a tendency to focus on the way Muslim women dress and a prevalence of negative predictions surrounding Muslim women's veiling practices (Al-Hejin, 2015). In Western mainstream media, Muslim women are often portrayed as victims (Al-Hejin, 2015; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Al-Saji, 2010; Ghorashi, 2010).

1.3 Muslim women and digital media

So how do Dutch Muslim women negotiate these narratives about them? Due to negative and one-sided coverage in the media, Muslim youth in the Netherlands prefer to engage in online discussion sites (Leurs, Midden & Ponzanesi, 2012). Leurs, Midden and Ponzanesi (2012) use the digital sphere as an entry point to discern various intersecting issues of religiosity, ethnicity and gender as well as their implications on thinking about multiculturalism. They found that a wide variety of message boards have been set up and are frequented by second-generation Moroccan-Dutch youth. They discovered that these sites are appreciated by their users because of the alternative voices that can be found and are being articulated there. Such pages are used by, for instance, Moroccan-Dutch youth to discuss and reframe dominant images circulating in news media. They noted that "young Dutch Moroccans are more likely to discuss and dispute Moroccan and Dutch traditions in the safe encounter of quasi-anonymous forums than in face-to-face contacts with relatives, peers or teachers" (Leurs, Midden & Ponzanesi, 2012; Mamadouh, 2001, p. 271). The research of Leurs, Midden and Ponzanesi (2012) shows that Muslim youth have three main purposes with engaging in online discussion boards: gender performativity, safe zones and voicing in-betweenness. This shows that "neither religion, ethnicity, nor gender cease to exist in the digital realm" (Leurs, Midden & Ponzanesi, 2012, p. 171). In another research on Dutch Muslim women's use of digital media to negotiate their religious affiliations and multiple belongings, Midden and Ponzanesi (2013) found that faith and religious practices are important markers of Muslim women's agency, both emancipatory and submissive. They recognized at least four forms of subjectivity or agency in the analysis of the online representations of Muslim women in the Netherlands: 'rethinking emancipation', 'multiple critique', 'fighting sexualisation' and 'living according to strict rules' (Midden & Ponzanesi, 2013).

These analysis have focused on discussion boards and digital media as they provide new insights on the possibilities for agency and subjectivity in the digital sphere. I will expand on their research by explicitly focusing on Social Network Sites (SNS) like Facebook. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define SNS as: "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3)

view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). These online spaces are not neutral and value-free spaces. As SNS have become an important part of our daily lives it is important to understand the cultures of these spaces as well. Leurs, Midden and Ponzanesi (2012) have shown that "neither religion, ethnicity, nor gender cease to exist in the digital realm". In order to understand how these configurations function on SNS, it is important to consider the techno cultures of Dutch SNS. My research expands on the insights about the possibilities for agency and subjectivity in the digital sphere by doing a dual analysis of online discussions in three different Facebook pages, each with their own techno culture. I have looked at the way Muslim women present themselves on Facebook pages and I have analyzed how this differs, based on the assumed culture of a specific Facebook page.

In my attempt to unpack these techno cultures and understand how Muslim women in The Netherlands negotiate these spaces, I have brought together the works of three distinct scholars: Saba Mahmood, Alia Al-Saji and Rosi Braidotti. Engaging with these three scholars has provided interesting entry points to understand the possibilities for agency and subjectivity in the digital sphere. Saba Mahmood (2011) has contributed with challenging feminists to separate their analytical and prescriptive work regarding theories of agency. She argues that there are different ways to change the world depending on social, political and historical context. The meaning of agency therefore cannot be fixed in advance. Mahmood continues to argue that in order to understand the different experiences and strategies of women, we cannot reduce their activities and ways of being to subversion and subordination. Rosi Braidotti (2016) has contributed by proposing that subjectivity can be described in a 'political' way without being negative or fixed. She argues that subjectivity is not about producing radical counter-subjectivities, but about daily practices and negotiations within dominant norms: "Political subjectivity or agency therefore consists of multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit for ourselves and our future generations" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 16). In her book *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Braidotti (2011) expands on the relation between identity and subjectivity. She distinguishes three levels of thinking about sexual differences which helps to

understand how the “woman-in-me” relates to the “feminist-in-me”. Alia Al-Saji (2010) added a unique perspective on understanding the subject-position available for Muslim women in western representation by offering a phenomenological analysis of the racializing vision and how this intersects with the phallocentric gaze. These authors helped me to theorize and unpack how Muslim women in the Netherlands present themselves on SNS and how they negotiate the different techno cultures of these online spaces.

In this chapter I have aimed to introduce my research question and provide some background information about my field of research. In the following chapter I will expand further on the methods that I have used in order to answer my research question. I will elaborate on the specific Facebook pages I have gathered my data from and reflect on the challenges of analyzing data from SNS. Furthermore, I will continue to expand on the different theories proposed by Saba Mahmood, Alia Al-Saji and Rosi Braidotti which have helped me to analyze the insight that have emerged from my data. In the following chapter I will elaborate on specific examples from my data and highlight the insights offered by Muslim women’s participation in online discussions. Finally I will wrap this thesis up with some concluding remarks about my research topic and method of analysis.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research question of this thesis is: 'how are different Muslim female and/or feminist subjectivities constructed in Facebook discussions regarding the burkini-ban in France?'. To answer this question I will look at the different ways Muslim women present themselves online, how they interact in online discussions and what kind of knowledge they produce. I have adopted a qualitative approach as my main goal with this thesis is to explore different constructions of Muslim female subjectivities. I have used a grounded theory methodology based on the data I have retrieved from Facebook discussions to inform the analytical and theoretical framework of this thesis. In this chapter I will explain how I selected and analyzed my data to answer my research question. First I will motivate why I chose to collect data from Facebook and how I selected my data. Then I will continue to explain the methods of analysis I have used to interpret my data. Finally I will reflect on the challenges and limitations of my research methods.

2.1 Facebook pages

I have gathered my data from three different Facebook pages: *NRC Handelsblad*, WOMEN Inc. and *Meld Islamofobie*. A Facebook page is: "a public profile created by businesses, organizations, celebrities and anyone seeking to promote themselves publicly through social media" ("Facebook page", n.d.). These pages are similar to personal profile pages, but instead of "friends" these pages have "fans". Users can "like" pages to become a "fan" and receive updates from these pages on their personal "news feed". Every user can specify how frequently they want to see updates on their personal "news feed" from a page they like. Facebook pages are publicly visible online and often post status updates, links, events, photos and video's to their fans' news feeds and walls. These pages provide a way for businesses and organizations to interact with their audience.

I chose to look at pages because I consider them as online social spaces where different people meet and interact with each other. Facebook users can pick and choose which personal profile pages to "befriend" and engage with. This provide

users with a great level of control when deciding who they want to engage with. However, by liking a Facebook page users can engage in discussions with complete strangers. The common denominator is that they all like a certain page and receive updates from this page. As Social Networking Sites (SNS) like Facebook have become daily technology and a relatively new way of engaging with people, I find it interesting to understand how these pages function as platforms for political and public discussions for regular citizens. I am also interested in the different socio-cultural implications of each page, specifically how these implications influence the production of subjectivities on SNS, like Facebook.

However, this approach does have its challenges because it was very difficult to get a full understanding of the Facebook users. Analyzing comments on Facebook pages proved to have its limitations, as the comments are only short snapshots and reactions to a specific issue. Most users engaged only once or on a single post from just one page. As I did not befriend any of the users, I was given limited access to their personal profile pages. This made it difficult to understand how these users identified and presented themselves, beyond the scope of a single comment. But also the comments themselves were very short, like someone "tagging" another friend. By the process of tagging one can bring a certain post or discussion under the attention of a Facebook-friend by mentioning their name in the thread. Facebook notifies the person that they have been tagged in a specific post by a Facebook-friend. Because of these described limitations I had to exclude a great deal of the data from my research since it did not provide enough information.

2.1.1 NRC Handelsblad

I wanted to look into the page of a quality newspaper because they cover the news, speak to a large audience and are generally considered to be 'objective'. A quality newspaper strives for a versatile, neutral and nuanced news coverage with a high degree of in-depth analysis and qualitative knowledge dissemination. I am interested in the different ways Muslim women interact on these platforms and how this influences their subjectivity. What kind of discussions and conversations occur between Muslim women and others on these pages? And how do they present

themselves on these pages? In The Netherlands there are three newspapers which are described as quality newspapers: *NRC Handelsblad*, *Trouw* and *de Volkskrant. Trouw* distinguishes itself because of its attention to religion and philosophy in its coverage of news. *De Volkskrant* is more opinionated in their news coverage. *NRC Handelsblad* distinguishes itself as a newspaper with a liberal signature and is considered to be a 'newspaper of record'. Wikipedia defines this as a newspaper "that has a large circulation and whose editorial and news-gathering functions are considered professional and typically authoritative" ("Newspaper of record", n.d.). Due to limited time I could only consider one newspaper page and I chose to include the page of *NRC Handelsblad* because of its status as a newspaper of record.

NRC Handelsblad is a daily evening newspaper published in the Netherlands by *NRC Media.* They have different platforms for a more general audience and for younger audiences. The printed *NRC Handelsblad* and the online newspaper nrc.nl are for a more general audience. The printed nrc.next and their online website is for a younger audience. The paper's motto is Lux ET Libertas, which means Light and Freedom (referring to the Age of Enlightenment). It is the fifth bestselling newspaper in the Netherlands. The newspaper defines itself as a quality newspaper rather than a popular newspaper. In 2017 they printed 202.097 copies. Their audience mostly votes for Democrats 66 (D66: 23%, center), People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD: 20%, center-right) and the Dutch Labor Party (PvdA: 14%, center-left). In May 2017 the Facebook page was liked by 158.345 Facebook users. On their Facebook page NRC posts selected articles from their different platforms such as nrc.nl, nrc.next and the printed *NRC Handelsblad.* The articles posted on this page have been optimized for online reading and engaging. The page does not have any house rules or guidelines, nor are there any community moderators who regulate or react on the comments posted by the different Facebook users.

On the page of *NRC Handelsblad* seven articles about the burkini were published. The first post was published on August 17, 2016 and the last post was published on August 29, 2016. A total of 939 comments were posted on these seven articles, I could only identify 29 (3%) of these comments as reactions from Muslim women. In

Appendix A I have added the screenshots of the different posts published by this page. I have chosen not to include in my research an analysis of the content posted by the page itself, because I believe there have been many similar studies doing a content or discourse analysis on a form of restriction on Muslim women's clothing. I find it more interesting to bring attention to Muslim women themselves and analyze how they present themselves in online conversations and discussions about this topic. Therefore, in the next section I will give a short description about the content of each post before analyzing the comments, in order to provide the context.

2.1.2 WOMEN Inc.

I also wanted to include in my analysis a Dutch page that is concerned with women's rights because discussions about veiling practices are very much linked to gender. In my theoretical framework I have included Al-Saji (2010) who argues that "the projection of gender oppression onto the veil is the means by which racialization takes place" (p. 888). But also Mahmood (2011) and Braidotti (2016) both argue that feminism and Islam have a vexed relationship. I am interested in understanding what kind of discussions and conversations occur between Muslim women and other women in an online environment that promotes gender equality. Of course there are many different Facebook pages promoting gender equality. I chose to include the page of WOMEN Inc. into my research because I have been working there for more than two years and my experience as part of the webcare team has inspired the topic of my thesis. Before I continue I would like to expand on this experience.

I started working at WOMEN Inc. as a junior editor in October 2015 and part of my job description was to monitor the news and select relevant articles and topics to share with our online community. When the burkini ban was passed in France I thought this was relevant news to share with our online community. However the management team, with whom we discuss the news, did not agree because: (1) it was not directly related to the issues WOMEN Inc. advocated for; (2) it wasn't a ban in the Netherlands (3) it was considered to be too much of a political and controversial debate. I found this very interesting because this would not be the first time that WOMEN Inc. shared an article about other issues than what they advocate for as an

organization. It would also not be the first time WOMEN Inc. shared news about international developments. Neither would it be the first time WOMEN Inc. shared an article about a political and controversial debate. This editorial occurrence turned out to be an important experience: it showed me how boundaries were set and it showed me the importance of positionality in this process. The reason the news on the burkini ban was considered too political and controversial was because the burkini ban was not only a women's rights issue, it was also linked to discussions on secularism and religious freedom. This complexity was difficult to relate to for my (mostly white) colleagues. I continued to explain that if WOMEN Inc. wanted to be an organization for all women, it should take into consideration these complex experiences. By ignoring this development the organization implicitly ignored the specific experiences of Muslim women. However, by bringing this development under attention the organization showed awareness of the complexity of women's experiences and became a more inclusive online community. These conversations eventually helped me to introduce the concept of intersectionality.

After unanimously agreeing that WOMEN Inc. should pay attention to this development, I set out to select the right article. This process also proved to be very interesting. The team did not want to share a strong opinionated piece, but rather a 'light' and objective news article. After presenting different options, the team chose to share an article by NOS: one of the broadcasting organizations making up the Netherlands Public Broadcasting system. It has a special statutory obligation to make news and sports programs for the three Dutch public television channels and the Dutch public radio services. It was explicitly mentioned that this would the best medium since it was considered to be the most objective. Another reason why the team wanted to share this article was because it narrated the experience of a converted white Muslim woman. It was argued that this would be more relatable for the online community of WOMEN Inc., because it centered the experiences of a white Dutch woman. I chose to not question this decision any further because I felt I had to pick my battles if I didn't want to become a nag. But I would argue that these offline and behind the scene conversations are an example of the vexed relationship between feminism and Muslim women. I was interested to see if these conversations would also be reproduced in online environments.

The final aspect of this experience was the aftermath. After we had shared the article, some of the comments were Islamophobic and racist. This was something new and we continued to discuss how to react to these comments. Were we going to ignore these reactions? Was it our responsibility to intervene when things became ugly? We ended up deciding that unless the comment was directly addressed to WOMEN Inc. we would not intervene in the comment section of our posts. However the most interesting part was that these online conversations helped raise awareness within the organization about the experiences of Muslim women. It created a sense of urgency. After several other similar experiences like this, my colleagues really became aware of the importance of an intersectional approach and also about the specific experiences of Muslim and Black women. In 2018 the webcare team decided to set up house rules for our page and to intervene when someone posted a racist comment. We wanted our Facebook page to be a more inclusive online platform and in order to achieve this we all understood that we needed to take action. This whole process inspired me to delve into the online presence of Muslim women and how they negotiate different online social spaces.

WOMEN Inc. is the largest NGO operating on empowering women in the Netherlands and they receive a substantial amount of funding from the government to realize this task. They operate on both an individual level by empowering women and a systematic level by advocating for policy changes. Their main topics include gender sensitive health care, equal pay, financial position of women and representation of women in the media. In May 2017 their Facebook page was liked by 33.741 Facebook users. They posted one article about the burkini ban that had 59 comments. Seven (11%) of these comments were posted by Muslim women.

2.1.3 Meld Islamofobie

Finally I wanted to include a Facebook page advocating against Islamophobia as I believe more Muslims should engage on this page. I chose the page of an NGO called *Meld Islamofobie*. They share, document and analyze Islamophobic incidents in the Netherlands. This NGO is founded by four young Muslim professionals, academics and activists, all of whom are women. It was founded in 2015 as a result of the rise in

violent attacks against Muslims and mosques in the Netherlands during the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the headquarters of the weekly satirical paper Charlie Hebdo in Paris. The founders recognized that there was a lack of sustainable registration methods for Islamophobic incidents. They observed that Muslims share their experiences of Islamophobia through social media platforms and with their peers, but fail to file a report with the police or the anti-discrimination bureaus. Because of this, Islamophobia as a structural problem is underestimated. In May 2017 their Facebook page was liked by 11.565 Facebook users. They posted four articles about the burkini ban in august 2016. A total of 98 comments were posted on these four articles. Of these comments 28 (28%) were posted by Muslim women.

2.2 Data selection

After identifying the different pages I wanted to include in my research, I had to gather my data. On every Facebook page it is possible to search through the posts published by the page. I searched for posts containing the word “boerkini” and selected posts published after the 12th of August 2016, when the burkini ban was installed by the mayor of Cannes. In order to extract all the comments from these pages I used the Facebook application Netvizz. I had to extract the data from the Facebook page of NRC manually because the application did not work on that page. Therefore I could not collect all the data, simply because it was too time consuming. I only collected the main comments and not the replies on the comments. The app extracted all the relevant data from the posts: the date and time of a post or comment, how many likes a post or comment had, what link was shared in the post and the comments that people had posted. However it did not provide information about Facebook users themselves. This proved to be a limitation of the application as it did not provide demographic information like, for instance, the age and gender of people who commented. Therefore I couldn’t identify which comments were posted by Muslim women. It would have been interesting to look at different ways men and women engaged in these discussions or to get insight on how people presented themselves on Facebook.

This brings us to the next challenge: how to identify whether a Facebook user is a Muslim woman or not? I had to go through the comments posted on each post in order to identify which comments were made by Muslim women. The only information available to me with the interface of Facebook were the name of a person and their profile picture. If I clicked further I had limited access to the information on their Facebook profile. I used several different strategies to determine if the Facebook user identified as a Muslim woman:

1. Sometimes in the comment itself a Facebook user would refer to herself as a Muslim woman or identify as part of the Muslim community.
2. Some women use a picture of themselves as a profile picture. I identified all pictures featuring a woman wearing a veil as a Muslim woman. Sometimes their picture would be an inspirational quote or reference to Islam. Then I would examine their Facebook profile to understand if this person presents themselves as a woman on Facebook. As a user you have to select a gender and Facebook makes this information public.
3. However not all Muslim women wear a headscarf. A next step I took was to look at names. I selected Islamic names and further examined their profile page. As I was not befriended with them on Facebook I had very limited access to their information. But I could see their profile pictures, their cover image, some public posts and whether they identified as a woman or not. In almost all cases there would be some reference to Islam which helped me to identify a user as a Muslim woman or not.

This is of course not a fool proof way of including all the comments made by Muslim women. I might have missed some comments made by Muslim women because they do not present themselves so clearly as a Muslim or as a woman. I had hoped that the Facebook application would provide me more detailed information about the Facebook users, but because the privacy laws are rapidly changing the application no longer provided this information. However, because the data retrieved from the comments was very limited, I also added the articles posted on these pages which either interviewed Muslim women or were written by Muslim women.

2.3 Methods of analysis

My research uses grounded theory methodology and is inspired by Donna Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledges' and Kimberley Crenshaw's concept of 'intersectionality'. In her article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", Haraway (1988) critically reflects on the production of knowledge and what is considered as 'objective' knowledge and science. She argues for "a feminist objectivity which means quite simply situated knowledges" (p. 581). According to Haraway all knowledge is partial and therefore she argues that knowledge produced "from the point of view of the unmarked is truly fantastic, distorted, and irrational" (p. 587). She continues to explain that situated knowledges are embodied, particular, local and partial perspectives. In order to escape the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere, Haraway (1988) emphasizes the importance of positioning "as a key practice in grounding knowledge" (p. 587). In the introduction and throughout this thesis I have aimed to position both myself and my the reactions I have studies as clearly as possible. Because location and positionality, even if it is online, matters for the kinds of knowledge produced but also to understand the different webs of connections and shared conversations. Her essay also inspired me not only to include the way Muslim women present themselves in my research but also to analyze which arguments they use and what kind of knowledge they bring to the discussions.

As I have already discussed in the previous paragraphs, my experiences at WOMEN Inc. inspired me to write this thesis. Those conversations proved the importance of intersectionality for me. Because identities and subjectivities are complex and quite some very interesting knowledge can be gained from taking these complexities seriously. While many feminists have written about this, it was Kimberley Crenshaw who coined the term intersectionality in 1989. Intersectionality basically means that, for instance, the experience of being a Muslim woman cannot be understood in terms of being Muslim and of being a woman considered independently, nor is it a summation of these separate identity markers. It must include the interactions, which frequently reinforce each other. In my research I have specifically tried to understand

how religion, race and gender inform the experiences of Muslim women, how these categories interact and reinforce each other, and finally how Muslim women negotiate this complexity in online discussions and conversations.

These insights led me to adopt a grounded theory methodology because I wanted to take the comments of these Muslim women seriously and theorize the different kinds of knowledge they produced. There has been a lot of talking about Muslim women, but not so much talking with them. Both in public discussions as in academic research, Muslim women have been treated as an object to be scrutinized, studied and interpreted. I wanted to center them in my research not as mere objects to be analyzed, but as knowledge producers. After extracting the comments from the different Facebook pages and identifying which comments were from Muslim women, I started coding my data using Nvivo Pro 11. First I coded the entire data set by selecting which comments supported the burkini ban and which comments were against the burkini ban. I excluded the comments from my analysis that supported the burkini ban altogether because it became very daunting to work with those comments as they felt very personal. As a Muslim woman myself, I am already aware and have been engaging with islamophobic narratives about Muslims and Muslim women. My aim with this thesis is to write affirmatively about the knowledge the Muslim women help to produce. Therefore I positioned my thesis within the tradition of affirmative critique as explained by Braidotti (2016) and choose to focus on comments against the ban.

Within the comments that opposed the ban, certain themes emerged which were discussed and questioned by Muslim women. These themes were generally about gender, race and religion. Examples of the most occurring themes were discussion about whether the burkini was a sign of emancipation or not, whether burkini ban was a sexist or racist intervention and whether the burkini was Islamic or not. By coding the data it also became clear that certain themes emerged more on specific pages. For instance the discussion whether the burkini was Islamic or not occurred mostly on the page of Meld Islamofobie. These insights helped me to select appropriate theories that captured the experiences of these women. I chose to work with Mahmood (2011) because she reflects on subjectivity and agency, but also how different Muslim

women define, inhabit and perform modesty. Al-Saji (2010) reflects on the racialization of the Muslim veil and discusses the dilemma between race and gender when it comes to the experiences of Muslim women. Braidotti (2016, 2011) adds to the analysis the importance of affirmative critique and reflects on the complexity between being a woman and being a feminist.

2.4 Challenges and limitations

Throughout this chapter I have briefly reflected on different challenges and limitations of my research. I would like to further expand on these notes. First I want to reflect on the challenges of working with data gathered from SNS. Even though I gathered more than a 1000 comments I could not use more than 50 comments for my research. I still managed to get interesting insights by using a grounded theory method. Although my data would have been richer if there were more comments, it did help me to do qualitative research. My aim was not to make general claims and do a representative research. This is also why I decided to include the articles which featured or were written by Muslim women to my data set. However it is important to note that even though these articles did help with the research, they are not the same as comments. Facebook comments are short reactions on a specific issue or article. People do not spend a lot of time writing these reactions. This also became apparent in the structure of sentences and amount of mistakes in the spelling of certain comments. There is no editing process to Facebook comments. Whereas an article which has been published has been carefully structured and edited. These are different types of texts. However I do not want to conclude that either one is better or more meaningful then the other. They both produce knowledge and therefore I have treated them as equals when analyzing them.

Facebook users can change the information on their personal pages, their names and profile pictures for instance. As I have gathered my data in May 2017 it is impossible for me to know if the data about their profiles is the same as when they engaged in these discussions in August 2016. Facebook users can also delete their own pages from Facebook and as a result their comments are also deleted. Sometimes they do leave a trace when they were in conversation with others but other times it is

impossible to know if a comment was deleted. From my data I could recognize that in some discussions certain comments were deleted. A final point of attention is the Facebook pages themselves. Some pages had a much larger amount of followers and posted more frequently than other pages. But because I was specifically interested in comparing how Muslim women present themselves on these platforms this was something I could afford to dismiss.

I also experienced some challenges with my own position as a researcher. As an activist I am already involved in discussions about Islamophobia, racism and sexism. From time to time I am invited to give speeches about my activism as a Muslim feminist, sometimes I am asked to join a panel to discuss these topics and other times I am involved in organizing meetings or actions. But also as a Muslim woman myself Islamophobia, racism and sexism are part of my lived reality. Therefore especially the first stages of research proved to be difficult as I had to read through dozens of racist and Islamophobic comments. However with the guidance of my thesis supervisor Berteke Waaldijk I managed to stay focused on my goal of centering the experiences of Muslim women in my research. Another challenge was finding a balance between academic writing and writing as an activist. I acknowledge that academic writing can also be a form of activism, however because I was so personally involved with my thesis topic, I would sometimes slip into the position of an advocator rather than a researcher. Working with grounded theory methodology therefore proved to be extra challenging at times. In the end however, it was my activist hart which inspired me to take each comment written by Muslim women on these platforms, and the knowledge they produce, seriously. Finding the right tone of voice, writing style and research method helped me to present these insights.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this thesis I have aimed to research different constructions of Muslim female and/or feminist subjectivities in online discussions on Facebook about the burkini ban imposed in France. Saba Mahmood (2011), Alia Al-Saji (2010) and Rosi Braidotti (2008, 2011) have written extensively on the question of Muslim women's subjectivity and feminist subjectivity. Therefore the analytical framework of this research is informed by their work. This framework has helped me to analyze and understand female and feminist subjectivities, how they relate to each other and how we can think differently about subjectivity and identity in the digital sphere. I will use this analytical framework to do an analysis on two levels: first on the level of subject formation and secondly on the knowledge these women bring to the discussions, in other words this framework has helped me to understand how Muslim women present themselves online and which arguments they use in these discussions.

Combining the three authors as mentioned above allowed me to capture and theorize the experiences of Muslim women voiced in online discussions on SNS. They complement each other and provide interesting entry points to analyze and understand subjectivity. Mahmood argues that our conception of subjectivity and agency cannot be fixed in advance and that subject formation does not always fit in the logic of repression and resistance. To expand on this I refer to Braidotti (2011) who reflects on female identity and feminist subjectivity. They complement each other because they both offer different entry-points in understanding subject formation. The research of Mahmood is mainly concerned with understanding the work norms do in the process of subject formation beyond the register of suppression and subversion. Braidotti (2011) on the other hand reflects specifically on the links and tensions between identity (marked by desire) and subjectivity (marked by willful self-regulations).

In order to understand Muslim women's subject formation in discussions on Dutch SNS it is important to do an intersectional analysis. Therefore I have expanded this theoretical framework with Braidotti's (2008) work "The Post-secular Turn in Feminism" and Al-Saji's work on the racialization of the Muslim veil. Braidotti

(2016) problematizes the concept of secularism and its implication on European feminism. She challenges the tradition of European feminism, which does not recognize that political subjectivity can be conveyed through religious piety. She argues that it can be, and also that political subjectivity doesn't always have to be critical in the negative sense. This reminds me of Mahmood who also argues that agency is more than resistance only and that they complement each other because the research of Mahmood is positioned within an Egyptian context, while Braidotti (2016) positions her work in the context of European feminism. I believe this is relevant as my research is concerned with the experiences and subject-formation of Dutch Muslim women in online discussions. Al-Saji also positions her work in the European context. She reflects on the position of Muslim women in Western representation and their de-subjectification. She specifically problematizes the racialized nature of gender within Western representation. European feminism is not only implicated by secularism but also by race. By adding Al-Saji's work to this framework it is possible for me to address this point of view as well.

3.1 The politics of piety

When I first read Saba Mahmood's (2011) book *The Politics of Piety* I felt a sense of recognition because I had also been part of a similar movement, as the Women's Mosque movement Mahmood describes, when growing up in the Netherlands. I remember the weekends I would spend with my mother and my aunt who would teach in the Madrasas throughout the country - some of which had previously been churches - and witness a group of women come together for a whole weekend to reflect on their religion and practice the art of *taqwa* (being close to Allah) through piety. There is something powerful about reading and engaging with texts that bring back memories and acknowledges those experiences without necessarily judging them.

I was inspired by the way Mahmood (2011) engaged with these women and how she acknowledged their experiences and knowledge. She didn't just describe and analyze what these women were doing, but actually used their experiences and knowledges to "speak back to normative liberal assumptions about freedom and agency against which such a movement is held accountable" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 5). That was the

first time in my academic adventure within Dutch universities that I actually felt recognition for myself, my experiences and the knowledge I brought to the table. Therefore I am delighted to engage with her work in my endeavor in understanding Muslim Female/Feminist subjectivity.

Saba Mahmood was an American anthropologist who was professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her work focuses on the relationship between religious and secular politics in postcolonial societies with special attention to issues of sovereignty, subject formation, law, and gender/sexuality. She has made an important contribution to our understanding of freedom, the religious and the secular, agency and submission from a non-liberal perspective. While I was writing this thesis she died from pancreatic cancer at the age of 56.

إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّـا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un - We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return

In this thesis I will be using her book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* where she explores "some of the conceptual challenges that women's involvement in the Islamist movement poses to feminist theory in particular, and to secular-liberal thought in general, through an ethnographic account of an urban women's mosque movement that is part of the larger Islamic Revival in Cairo, Egypt" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 2). First I will reflect on the position of pious subjects in feminist scholarship and the subject of freedom, then I will continue to unpack Mahmood's notion of agency as more then only resistance and finally I will reflect how Muslim women relate differently to the concept of modesty and how this is employed as a means of self-actualization by Muslim women.

3.1.1 Feminism and religious traditions

Mahmood (2011) argues that the vexed relationship between feminism and religious traditions is perhaps most manifest in discussions about Islam. She gives two reasons

for this tension: the historically contentious relationship that Islamic societies have had with what has come to be called "the West" and the challenges contemporary Islamic movements pose to secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral (if not critical) part (Mahmood, 2011). Thus, more specifically, Mahmood concludes that the pious subject occupies an uncomfortable place in feminist scholarship because "they pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status" (p. 4). She continues to explain that in the 1960's it would have been possible to explain the participation of women in such movements in terms of false consciousness or the internalization of patriarchal norms through socialization. However since the 1970's the focus in feminist scholarship has shifted to understanding the operations of human agency, as Mahmood explains. She acknowledges the importance of this shift as it restores the absent voice of women and analysis of Middle Eastern societies, portraying women as active agents whose lives are far richer than past narratives had suggested (Mahmood, 2011), portraying Arab and Muslim women as passive and submissive beings shackled by structures of male authority.

While acknowledging the important contribution such a shift has made in understanding agency and subjectivity of women in non-Western context, Mahmood (2011) aims to critically reflect on the assumptions and oversights in the manner that agency is most invoked by feminist scholars and how this constitutes a barrier to explore and understand subject formation in non-liberal movements. Mahmood argues that the notion of human agency most applied by feminist scholars is "understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles" (p. 8). According to Mahmood this notion results in a tendency among scholars to look for expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male dominance, even if there is no explicit feminist agency (Mahmood, 2011). Mahmood argues that this form of analysis fails to "problematize the universality of the desire to be free from relations of subordination, and for women, from structures of male domination" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 10). Mahmood wants to detach the feminist notion of agency from progression in order to be able to understand and, more importantly, learn from subjectivities that do not depart from such a desire. As a feminist researcher myself I recognize this tendency

and it has proved to be a valuable recommendation in the process of my research. Based on my dataset, the notion of agency Mahmood proposed has been fruitful in understanding and learning from the subjectivities in SNS discussions on the burkini ban.

Mahmood (2011) argues that this assumption of women's agency with resistance to relations of dominance and the naturalization of freedom as a social ideal, are not mere analytical oversights but actually a result of feminisms "dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project" (p. 10). Despite differences within feminism, Mahmood argues that all feminist traditions share a common ground in that they base their theories on the conviction that "where society is structured to serve male interests, the result will be either neglect, or direct suppression, of women's concerns" (p. 10). Mahmood concludes: "feminism, therefore, offers both a *diagnosis* of women's status across cultures and a *prescription* for changing the situation of women who are understood to be marginalized, subordinated, or oppressed" (p. 10). This makes freedom, according to Mahmood, normative to feminism as it is to liberalism. Mahmood continues to ask and critically reflect on the notion of freedom by which feminist scholarship is informed and thinks through a key distinction that liberal theorists often make between negative and positive freedom. I will use this concept of freedom proposed in liberal tradition and in Mahmood's work to analyze how these are adopted by Muslim women in discussions on SNS to create space for their subjectivities in a society that does not acknowledge them.

3.1.2 Freedom, autonomy and agency

In short Mahmood (2011) describes positive freedom as "the capacity for self-mastery and self-government" and negative freedom as "the absence of restraints of various kinds on one's ability to act as one wants" (p. 11). She notes that the idea of self-realization itself has existed historically in different forms and is not merely an invention of liberal tradition, but that the unique contribution of this tradition is "to link the notion of self-realization with individual autonomy" (p. 11). In other words Mahmood explains that "in order for an individual to be free, her action *must* be the consequence of her "own will" rather than of custom, traditions, or social coercion"

(p.11). She elaborates that this would mean that even illiberal actions, such as a slave *choosing* to be enslaved, could arguably be tolerated. Referring to this interesting example discussed by political theorist John Christman, Mahmood concludes that, for a person to be considered free, it doesn't matter if the content or substance of a desire is liberal or not, as long as one has the ability to choose their desire autonomously. This limitation for the enactment of the ethics of freedom is, according to her, a result of autonomy being a *procedural* principle in this tradition of liberal political theory, rather than an ontological or substantive feature of the subject.

While both positive and negative notions of freedom have been used productively by feminist scholars, these notions have also provided the ground on which much of feminist debates unfold, according to Mahmood (2011). As an example she refers to the call by white feminists in the 1970's to dismantle the institution of the nuclear family, which they believed to be a key source of women's oppression. As a response Native- and African American feminists argued that freedom for them meant the ability to form families since the long history of slavery, genocide and racism had undermined this ability. Mahmood concludes that this forced feminist to rethink the concept of individual autonomy in light of other issues such as race, class and ethnicity, and expand their understanding of self-realization in relation to different localities. As a result of these debates there have been various attempts to redefine autonomy. Mahmood draws on the poststructuralist critique of the transcendental subject, voluntarism and representative models of power which have excluded all that is bodily, feminine, emotional, nonrational and intersubjective. Following in the footsteps of poststructuralist feminist thinkers, she argues for the uncoupling of the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will. I have used this idea of self-realization and autonomous will to analyze how Muslim women in discussions on SNS relate to the burkini as a means of their becoming.

Even though Mahmood (2011) draws on poststructuralist feminist thinkers in her research, she also points out that her analysis departs from these frameworks as she argues that "the normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, which agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion" (p. 14). As a result Mahmood argues that this notion of

the political subject and agency fails to recognize human action that does not fit in this logic of repression and resistance. As an example she refers to the numerous studies on the resurgent popularity of the veil in urban Egypt since 1970's. Mahmood notes that 'while these studies have made important contributions, it is surprising that their authors have paid so little attention to Islamic virtues of female modesty or piety, especially given that many of the women who have taken up the veil frame their decision precisely in these terms" (p. 16). Instead, she argues, analysts often explain the motivations of veiled women within the restricted binary terms of resistance and subordination, while terms like morality, divinity, and virtue are accorded the status of the phantom imaginings of the hegemonized. This is an interesting point I have taken into consideration when analyzing how Muslim women relate to the burkini and the burkini-ban imposed in France. Therefore I have not only paid attention to motivations of Muslim women voiced in terms of resistance or subordination, but also taken into consideration the Islamic virtues of female modesty expressed by Muslim women in the discussions on SNS.

In conclusion Mahmood's (2011) main point about agency is that if we consider the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself as historically and culturally specific, than our conception of agency "cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and affectivity" (p. 14). In this sense, she argues that agentival capacity is not only constituted when a person resists norms but also in the multiple ways these norms are inhabited by a person. As a result, Mahmood explains that "what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency - but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment" (p. 15). This point of view recognizes that the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not a universal and natural desire that motivates all human beings and that it is unfair to only treat those desires as natural and imitable that ensure the emergence of feminist politics. When analyzing the comments of Muslim women on SNS regarding the burkini and the burkini-ban imposed in France, I have used this concept of agency proposed by Mahmood. By adding the works of Al-Saji (2010) on the racialization of the Muslim veil and of Braidotti on the post-structuralist

turn in European feminism, I have aimed to explain the different discourses and structures of subordination surrounding Muslim women in the Netherlands. When analyzing the comments I have also paid attention to the specific concepts used by Muslim women which enable their modes of being. This helped me to analyze the agentival capacity that emerges, rather than to work with a fixed notion of what agency entails.

3.1.3 Agency as more then only resistance

In trying to move beyond the teleology of emancipation underwriting the many accounts of women's agency, Mahmood (2011) builds on the arguments provided by the poststructuralist feminist thinker Judith Butler. Mahmood finds Butler's use of the concept of agency useful because in her conceptualization of agency Butler departs on several points from the concept of agency Mahmood has criticized. The first departure according to Mahmood is Butler's critique of the "emancipatory model of agency", one that assumes that all humans have a free and intentional will which is hindered by relations of power that are considered to be external to the subject. Instead Mahmood explains that Butler "locates the possibility of agency within structures of power (rather than outside of it)" and more importantly to Mahmood, Butler argues that "there is no possibility of "undoing" social norms that is independent of the "doing" of norms" (p. 20). She explains that, for Butler, agency "resides within this productive reiterability of norms" (p. 20). Another point of departure Mahmood recognizes, is that in Butler's framework "the logic of subversion and resignification cannot be predetermined" (p. 20) because Butler argues that acts of resignification/subversion are unpredictable and behave in ways that surprise us.

Mahmood (2011) finds the critique that Butler is giving of a humanist conception of agency and subject useful, but she also finds it productive to work through certain tensions in Butler's work in order to expand her analytics to a somewhat different set of problematics. One key tension Mahmood elaborates on is the fact that "the concept of agency in Butler's work is developed primarily in contexts where norms are thrown into question or are subject to resignification" (p. 21). Mahmood explains that this is due to the specific context of political interventions in which Butler's work has been

inserted, mostly one concerned with the violence enacted by heterosexual normativity. Mahmood therefore argues that Butler's theorization of agency "must be understood in its performative dimension: as a political praxis aimed at unsettling dominant discourses of gender and sexuality" (p. 21). Another key tension Mahmood elaborates on is the fact that Butler has positioned her work in relation to the project of creating a radical democratic politics and has emphasized counter-hegemonic modalities of agency. Mahmood argues that as a result of this positioning and the reception of Butler's work her analysis of the power of norms remains grounded in a polemic debate and "one gets little sense of the work norms perform beyond the register of suppression and subversion within the constitution of the subject" (p. 22). This is something I have taken to heart when analyzing the different comments made by Muslim women in discussions on SNS. I have specifically paid attention to the different ways in which Muslim women relate to norms as a means to constitute their subjectivity.

In order to deepen our understanding of subject formation, Mahmood (2011) wants to expand Butler's insight that norms do not only secure a subject's subordination, but are also a means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent. In doing so Mahmood wants to move past the dualistic conceptualization of norms as consolidated and/or subverted, done and/or undone, and instead to think of different ways in which these norms are inhabited, experienced, performed and aspired to. Mahmood elaborates on these point by tracing the multiple modalities of agency that informed the practices of the women participating in the mosque movement. I will expand on one of these ethnographic vignettes as I have found it useful for my research purpose.

3.1.4 Performativity, religious embodiment and pious subjectivity

In *The Politics of Piety* Mahmood (2011) analyses the conversations she has had with Muslim women. As discussed in the chapter on methodology, I will also be analyzing the conversations of Muslim women. However, the conversations I will look at are distinct in the sense that they are online conversations. The vignette I want to

elaborate on focuses on, according to Mahmood, “the most feminine of Islamic virtues” (p. 155): *al-haya* (shyness, diffidence, modesty). Mahmood elaborates on this example because she wants us to rethink the place accorded to religious embodiment and moral virtues in contemporary feminist debates, with particular attention to the notion of performativity discussed by Butler. She describes how a group of women were reflecting on verse 25 of the Quranic chapter *The Story* (Surat al-Qasas) which is about a woman walking shyly - with *al-haya* - toward Moses to ask him to approach her father for her hand in marriage. Amal, one of the mosque participants, explains how she relates to the concept of *al-haya*:

> I used to think that even though shyness (*al-haya*) was required of us by God, if I acted shyly it would be hypocritical (*nifaq*) because I didn't actually feel it inside of me. Then one day, in reading verse 25 in *Surat al-Qasas* (The Story) I realized that *al- haya* was among the good deeds (*huwwa min al-a’mal al-saliha*), and given my natural lack of shyness (*al-haya*), I had to make or create it first. *I realized that making (sana) it in yourself is not hypocrisy, and that eventually your inside learns to have al- haya too. And finally I understood that once you do this, the sense of shyness (al-haya) eventually imprints itself on your inside (as-shu’ur yitba’ ‘ala guwwaki)* [emphasis added]. (Mahmood, 2011, p. 156)

Her friend Nama added:

> It's just like the veil (*hijab*). In the beginning when you wear it, you're embarrassed (*maksufa*) and don't want to wear it because people say that you look older and unattractive, that you won't get married, and will never find a husband. *But you must wear the veil, first because it is God's command (hukm allah), and then, with time, because your inside learns to feel shy without the veil, and if you take it off, your entire being feels uncomfortable (mish radi) about it* [emphasis added]. (Mahmood, 2011, p. 157)

Mahmood (2011) argues that, if we understand agency “not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action” (p. 157), this conversation

raises interesting questions about the kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm, between performative behavior and inward disposition. First, Mahmood explains, it shows that action does not always emerge from natural feelings but *creates* them. In both Amal and Nama's quotes it becomes apparent that there is no innate desire that results in specific outward behavior, but it is through repeated bodily acts that one "trains one's memory, desire, and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct" (p. 157). Mahmood argues that this is an example of "a mutually constitutive relationship between body learning and body sense" (p. 157). Secondly she argues that the significance of this program of self-cultivation lies in the fact that these bodily acts are not detachable from an essential interiorized self. She explains that bodily acts, like wearing the veil, are "the *critical markers* of piety as well as the *ineluctable means* by which one trains oneself to be pious" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 158). Mahmood argues that understanding the veil only in terms of its symbolic value as a marker of women's subordination or Islamic identity, neglects this critical aspect of the technology of the self-pursued by the participants of the mosque movement. The veil as understood by Amal and Nama shows that it can be both a means of *being* and *becoming* a certain kind of person. By taking the accounts of these women seriously Mahmood refers to these women not only as objects, but as speaking and analyzing subjects. This knowledge about body learning and body sense as a mutually constitutive relationship has emerged in the conversation between Nama and Amal. When analyzing the comments of Muslim women on SNS I have adopted a similar approach.

In positioning this interpretation within feminist theory Mahmood (2011) refers to two different perspectives within the feminist tradition. According to Mahmood one perspective argues that "patriarchal ideologies work by objectifying women's bodies and subjecting them to masculinist systems of representation, thereby negating and distorting women's own experience of their corporeality and subjectivity" (p. 158). From this perspective Mahmood explains that the virtue of *al-haya* can be understood as yet another example of this masculinist representational logic. However she further elaborates that even though the concept of *al-haya* is embedded in a masculinist understanding of gendered bodies, what is at stake here is "the entire conceptualization of the role the body plays in the making of the self, one in which the

outward behavior of the body constitutes both the potentiality and the means through which interiority is realized" (p. 158). According to Mahmood a feminist strategy merely focused on the system of representation, fails to recognize that there are many other issues concerning the ethical relationship of the body to the self and others that determine the form this relationship takes.

The second perspective in feminist theory Mahmood (2011) refers to, is the one which regards the recovery of "women's experience" an impossible task since, within this theory, subjectivity is considered as "a sign of the abject materiality that discourse cannot articulate" (p. 159). Within this framework, according to her, the concept of *al-haya* can be read as an example of "the control a masculinist imaginary must assert over the dangerous supplement femininity signifies in Islamic thought" (p. 159). However Mahmood finds this reading dissatisfying as it doesn't acknowledge the imaginary of the mosque movement where the relationship between the body and discourse is not merely one that is modeled on a linguistic theory of signification. Rather Mahmood argues that "the mosque women's practices of modesty and femininity do not signify the abjectness of the feminine within Islamic discourse, but articulate a positive and immanent discourse of being in the world" (p. 160). In order to understand the creation of a subject that is pious in its formation, Mahmood argues, that it is necessary to actually examine the *work that bodily practices perform*.

In my analysis I have reflected on the various ways in which Muslim women in discussions on SNS about the burkini-ban adopted different notions of freedom. I have specifically looked at how the burkini related to their self-realization and to what extend this is connected to the concept of autonomous will. By using the notion of agency proposed by Mahmood as something that does not only emerge when norms are subverted, but also emerges when a person inhabits a certain norm, I have aimed to understand the different forms of agency that emerged in these discussions. Drawing on the vignette about *al-haya* (shyness, diffidence, modesty), I have aimed to take into consideration the Islamic virtues of female modesty expressed by women who adopt the burkini and how this relates to the role of the body in the making of the self.

3.2 Muslim women as female feminist subjects

Mahmood (2011) addresses feminist researchers about their tendency to look for expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male dominance even if there is no explicit feminist agency. I agree with her that this form of analysis might miss out other interesting insights about female subjectivities. However I believe it still remains important to critically examine what feminism entails and how feminist agency is constructed, especially considering the vexed relationship between feminism and religious traditions such as Islam. In Mahmood's analysis so far, feminist agency has been conceptualized as challenging male dominance. I want to elaborate further on the question of female identity and feminist subjectivity by drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti (2011). Just like Mahmood she also reflects on the conceptualization of subjectivity and agency, however she uses a different entry-point. As I have discussed earlier, Mahmood argues that it is important to analyze the work norms perform beyond the register of suppression and subversion to understand the different processes of subject formation. Braidotti, on the other hand, specifically reflects on female identity and feminist subjectivity, and argues that in order to understand different processes of subject formation one also needs to consider the links and tensions between identity (marked by desire) and subjectivity (marked by willful self-regulations).

In the following sections I will show how Braidotti's (2011) scheme of feminist nomadic thinking is an interesting tool to use in order to understand what it means to be a female feminist. I believe that this is an interesting question to elaborate on in order to understand Muslim female and feminist subjectivities. While it is true that not all Muslim women identify as feminist, my dataset shows that some do. But as I will discuss further on, this is not a subject position which is acknowledged as possible within Western representation. My aim in this thesis is not only to explore how Muslim female identities are constructed, but also how Muslim female feminist subjectivities emerge in discussions on SNS. This endeavor raises some interesting questions on the relationship between being-a-woman and being-a-feminist: How is a female identity and/or subjectivity constructed? What does it mean to be a feminist? When can someone claim to be speaking from a feminist subject position? In her book

Nomadic Subjects: embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory Braidotti elaborates on these questions.

Rosi Braidotti was born in Italy, raised in Australia, graduated from the Sorbonne in Paris, and became the founding professor of the women's studies program in Utrecht. She is a distinguished University Professor at Utrecht University and founding director of its Centre for the Humanities. I have actually had the privilege of attending some of her courses as I was a student in the Gender studies program at Utrecht University. In her book on Nomadic Subjects (2011) she makes an important contribution to understand the constitution of contemporary subjectivity and the concept of difference in European philosophy and political theory. In her article on the Post-Secular Turn in Feminism (2008) she specifically focuses on the challenges of post-secularism to European feminism and how we can think differently about subjectivity and religious agency. As a religious and politically active person myself, I found Braidotti's work compelling because she recognizes that political subjectivity can be conveyed through religious piety and spirituality. Her work on the Post-Secular Turn (2008) helped me to find the words to express my experiences and the knowledge I derived from them. Her work on Nomadic Subjects (2011) has inspired me to think differently and reflect on my position as a female feminist.

3.2.1 Feminist subjectivity and female identity

According to Braidotti (2011) feminism as critical thought is: "a self-reflexive mode of analysis aimed at articulating the critique of power in discourse with the affirmation of an alternative vision of the female feminist subject" (p. 122). She argues that "feminist theory expresses women's situated structural need to position themselves as female subjects, that is to say, not as disembodied entities but rather as situated beings" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 124). For Braidotti the feminist project is about change, rather than feminine sexuality or desire. It is an attempt to redefine differences in an ethical way, "as it stresses the primacy of the bond, the presence of the other, of the community as a vital step in the redefinition of the self" (p. 132). In conclusion Braidotti calls feminism "the movement that struggles to change the values attributed to and the representation made of women in the longer historical time of

patriarchal history (Woman) as well as in the deeper time of one's own identity" (p. 155). Based on these definitions I have aimed to analyze how Muslim women in the discussions on SNS redefine differences and attempt to change the values attributed to them and the representations made of them as Muslim women.

Braidotti (2011) raises some interesting questions about what it means to think as a female feminist, how the "woman-in-me" relates to the "feminist-in-me" and what the possible links or tensions are between subjectivity and identity. To understand these different layers of experience, she makes a distinction between identity and subjectivity. For Braidotti identity is "marked by desire, and therefore the unconscious", while subjectivity is marked by "willful self-regulation" (p. 124). She argues that "identity and subjectivity are different but interrelated moments in the process of defining a subject position" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 124). The idea of subjectivity as a process, according to Braidotti, means that subjectivity cannot only be seen as marked by consciousness but rather must be thought of as "complex and multiple identities, as the site of dynamic interaction of desire with will, of subjectivity with the unconscious" (p. 124). Braidotti recognizes this interface of will with desire in the vision of the subject as a first step in the process of rethinking the foundations of subjectivity. She concludes that it is "the will to know, the desire to say, the desire to speak, to think and to represent" that sustains the entire process of becoming-subject (p. 126). She defines the female feminist subject therefore as: "the site of intersection of subjective desire with willful social transformation – the assertion that women are something more and other than nonmen" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 132). In my attempt to understand Muslim Female/Feminist subjectivities I have not only considered the work norms perform as suggested by Mahmood (2011), but also looked at the interaction between will and desire.

3.2.2 Feminist nomadic thinking

Let me now return to the questions raised in the beginning of the previous paragraph: what does it mean to think and speak as a female feminist? How does the "woman-in-me" relate to the "feminist-in-me"? Braidotti (2011) argues that "there can be no

subjectivity outside sexuation, or language; the subject is always gendered: it is a "she-I" or "he-I"" (p. 128). She explains that "in feminist theory, one speaks as a woman", however she adds that the subject "woman" is not a static and uniform essence, but rather "the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experience, defined by overlapping variables" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 128). Braidotti recognizes that desire is at stake in the theoretical project of redefining female subjectivity. She explains that the aim of this project is the empowerment of "women's desire to become, not a specific model of their becoming" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 133). "Speaking as", for Braidotti, therefore refers to Adrienne Rich's politics of location. In her defense against critiques of essentialism Braidotti argues that "the best way to escape the dichotomous logic in which Western culture has captured sexed identities is by working through them" (p. 130). She proposes a scheme for feminist nomadic thinking, to work through subjects' false universalism, in which she aims to both critique the existing definitions and representations of woman as well as to create new images of female subjectivity. In my analysis I have stayed away from proposing a specific model for women's becoming, but have analyzed the desires of Muslim women to become.

In her scheme of feminist nomadic thinking Braidotti (2011) distinguishes three levels linked to sexual difference: (1) difference between men and women, (2) differences among women, (3) differences within each woman. The central issue at stake in the first level of analysis is "the critique of universalism as being male-identified and of masculinity as projecting itself as a pseudo universal" (p. 152). According to Braidotti the starting point is "the will to reconnect the whole debate on difference to the bodily existence and experience of women" (p. 152), while rejecting the assimilation of women into masculine modes of thought, practice and values. The central issue at stake in the second level of analysis is "how to create, legitimate, and represent a multiplicity of alternative forms of feminist subjectivity without falling into relativism" (p. 154). In order to do this she calls for a political distinction between "woman" and "feminist". Referring to Teresa de Lauretis, Braidotti defines "woman" as a certain image of a culturally dominated female identity, "codified in a long history of binary opposition" (p. 156). The subject position as feminist, according to Braidotti, requires "the recognition of a distance between "woman" and real women"

(p. 156). While this recognition can be considered as a bond of commonality among women and "a starting point for a feminist consciousness in that it seals a pact among women" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 155), Braidotti argues that this recognition cannot be the final goal: "women may have common situations and experiences, but they are not, in any way, the same" (p. 156). Therefore she concludes that the idea of the politics of location is very important. The third level of analysis highlights "the complexity of the embodied structure of the subject" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 158). In this level she draws attention to the distinction and interrelation of identity and subjectivity, emphasizing that "unconscious desire and willful choice do not always coincide" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 158). According to Braidotti this leaves room for contradictory moment, differences within each subject and ultimately the position of feminist subjectivity as an object of desire for women.

In my analysis of subject formation of Muslim women in discussions on SNS about the burkini ban, I have not only considered how certain norms are inhabited by these women, but I have also looked at the interface between desire and will. This entry-point to understand subjectivity is, in my opinion, valuable to understand the different ways Muslim women position themselves as female and feminist. By adopting the scheme of feminist nomadic thinking proposed by Braidotti (2011) I have been able to analyze the different ways in which Muslim women create and legitimate alternative forms of feminist subjectivity, but also to take into consideration the complexity of the embodied structure of the subject.

3.3 Muslim women in Europe

As I have mentioned before I believe it is important to adopt an intersectional analysis when trying to understand the different subject positions adopted by Muslim women in discussions on SNS about the burkini ban. Mahmood (2011) has argued that the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific and that in order to understand different forms of agency it is important to analyze human actions from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In the following sections I will elaborate on the specific structures and discourses concerning Muslim women in a European context.

If we are to understand the modes of subjectivity and citizenship supported by Muslim women in the Netherlands it is important to understand the relationship between European feminism and religion, but also the relationship between European feminism and race. Therefore I will, firstly, elaborate on secularism as a structure and how this has informed European feminism and the notion of agency using Braidotti's (2008) article "The Post-Secular Turn in Feminism". Secondly I will elaborate on gender as a racialized concept within Western representation by using Al-Saji's (2010) article on the racialization of the Muslim veil in which she analyzes and problematizes the racialized nature of gender within Western representation.

3.3.1 The post-secular turn in feminism

Braidotti's (2008) starting point is that "the postsecular turn challenges European feminism because it makes manifest the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, can be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality" (p. 2). According to Braidotti this would also mean that "political agency need not be critical in the negative sense of oppositional and thus may not be aimed solely or primarily at the production of counter-subjectivities" (p. 2). She continues to define subjectivity as: "a process ontology of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values, and hence also multiple forms of accountability" (p. 2). Thus following from this it is interesting to ask how religious or secular the European feminist project is and what modes of subjectivity and political citizenship are supported by it?

Braidotti (2016) recognizes two key ideas at work in the feminist legacy which inform the mode of subjectivity and citizenship supported by European feminism. The first concerns secularism as "a historically consolidated social consensus about the necessity of separating church from state in matters of religious faith, moral values, and spiritual norms and practices" (p. 3). According to her, this idea of secularism creates a dichotomy between religion and political citizenship as polar oppositions, where religion is positioned as a private belief system and political citizenship as public domain. She continues to argue that this results in the exclusion of religious

subjects from the social practice of agency or political subjectivity as these are situated in the latter of the polar opposition religion/political citizenship. According to Braidotti this gendered distinction between private-public does not only mean that woman have a higher entitlement to religious activity than to participation in public affairs, but that they are also excluded from active participation in the running of church matters, or in the case of Muslim women, in the running of mosque matters because of the sexism of monotheistic religions. The second idea at work in the European feminist legacy, according to Braidotti, is that "anti-clericalism and the critique towards the Christian church, especially the dogmatic and patriarchal attitude of the Catholic Church, is an integral element of feminist secularism in Continental Europe" (p. 4). This results, according to her, in a serious misreading by some feminists: "as if they were reliving the memories of their struggles against the Christian and mostly Catholic Church on the back of the Muslim headscarves debate, or the never-ending discussions about the veil" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 5).

Braidotti's (2008) main argument is that even though "the feminist struggle for women's rights in Europe has historically produced an agnostic, if not downright atheist position" (p. 3), its values are still implicitly religious, albeit by negation. According to her "negation is still a powerful mode of relation" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 9), because the way secularism is defined and understood in Europe is a result of a secular distillation of Judeo-Christian precepts: "without the Judeo-Christian tradition there is no progressive emancipation and therefore no secularism and hence no post secular condition" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 9). She adds that this line of reasoning leaves Islam "in the singular position of being the one monotheistic religion positing subjectivity without the need for secularist distinctions" and that this would mean that Islam "can have no claim to modernity, emancipation or human rights" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 9), even though this has been proven as historically false. Braidotti recognizes this view on secularism as the underlying cause for the dominant discourse that "'our women' (Western, Christian, white or 'whitened' and raised in the tradition of secular Enlightenment) are already liberated and thus do not need any more social incentives or emancipatory policies. 'Their women' (non Western, non-Christian, mostly not white and not whitened, as well as alien to the Enlightenment tradition), however, are still backward and need to be targeted for special emancipatory social

actions, or even more belligerent forms of enforced 'liberation'" (p. 6). However, she points out that this view overlooks the fact that even though the process of secularization prompted by the Enlightenment liberated public spaces for women to participate as active citizens, this participation was never granted willingly and is still an ongoing struggle among mainstream Europeans. This shows to Braidotti that feminists and queer activists cannot simply be secular and calls for "more complexity in the debate about women's self-determination and feminist agency" (p. 4).

To illustrate the post-secular turn in feminist theory and how this informs our understanding of political subjectivity Braidotti (2016) turns to the contemporary rise of neo-vitalist feminist thought "which stresses the creative potential of social phenomena that may appear negative at first" (p. 13). According to her this trend discusses subjectivity in a more holistic and integrated way as flows of inter-relationality and therefore she concludes that "the residual spirituality of much contemporary feminist theory demonstrates the compatibility of political subjectivity with issues that do not fall easily within the boundaries of the secular tradition in feminism" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 14). She recognizes this thought as post-secular because it has "the faith in potential transformation of the negative and hence in the future" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 13), which illustrates her theoretical argument about the post secular predicament as a practice of affirmation instead of negativity. Braidotti proposes that while "oppositional consciousness is central to political subjectivity, it is not the same as negativity and that as a consequence critical theory is about strategies of affirmation" (p. 16). According to her this shift of perspective means that a subject's ethical core is "a process of engendering empowering modes of becoming" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 15) and aims "to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 16). From this perspective Braidotti concludes that "political subjectivity or agency therefore consists of multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit for ourselves and for future generations" (p. 16).

This framework has allowed me to analyze how and to what extend Muslim women convey and support their political subject position through piety and spirituality. The data I have retrieved consists mainly of comments made by Muslim women who

oppose the burkini-ban imposed by the French government. Therefore I recognize them as political subjects. By drawing on Braidotti's (2008) conception of political subjectivity in the post secular predicament, I have analyzed and engaged with the different strategies of affirmation Muslim women adopt in discussions on SNS about the burkini ban.

3.3.2 Cultural racism

In her book *Nomadic Subjectivity* Braidotti (2011) argues that the subject is always gendered. I would add that the subject is also always racialized. This is something Al-Saji (2010) elaborates on as she unpacks the invisibilization of Muslim female subjectivities in western representation of veiled women. By drawing on the work of Fanon, Marleau-Ponty and Alcoff she offers a phenomenological analysis of the racializing vision within the representational structure of the West, which not only genders but also racializes the Muslim veil. I believe this focus on the phenomenology of vision helps us to understand the embodied dimensions of our visual habits and acknowledge the aversion of Muslim veils in Western context as a form of cultural racism. In the following sections I will elaborate on the construction of veiling as an obstacle for Muslim women's subjectivities and the different dilemmas this creates for feminists in Europe.

Alia Al-Saji has a PhD in Philosophy from Emory University (2002), following an MA in Philosophy from K. U. Leuven (1995) and a Bachelor of Arts & Science (McMaster University, 1993). She has taught at McGill since 2002. Her work traces two interrelated trajectories. The first trajectory explores questions of embodiment, memory and intersubjectivity in terms both of affectivity and perception. She aims to think intersubjective relations in temporal terms, drawing on the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In the second trajectory, Al-Saji develops a phenomenology of what has been called "cultural racism". She offers a feminist analysis of representations of Muslim women in contemporary Western contexts by questioning the ways in which race and gender are at play in attitudes toward the Muslim headscarf or "veil". I have used her work to analyze how Muslim women in

online discussions experience this racialization and unpack the means by which they make visible the patriarchal structures within Western society

Al-Saji (2010) argues that as a result of a racist vision the veiled body is over-determined as an 'oppressed' body in western representations of veiled women. Drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty and Alcoff, Al-Saji explains that this vision is structured in such a way that it cannot see otherwise, making Islamic gender oppression the sole dimension through which veiled women are seen. She continues to explain that from this perspective "the veil is not merely perceived as a mode of gender oppression in Islam, one that could be reconfigured, re-appropriated, or subverted; rather oppression is taken to belong to the materiality of the veil itself, molding the veiled body in ways that exclude its subjectivity or agency" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 891). Al-Saji concludes that this results in the *hypervisibility* of Muslim veils in western perception and at the same time the assumed *invisibility* of veiled women. She calls this process the de-subjectification of Muslim women: "it is by means of the naturalization of oppression to the veil that the veiled woman is at once *hypervisible* as oppressed and *invisible* as subject" (p. 891). In this sense, the subject positions available to Muslim women in western representation are, according to Al-Saji, circumscribed in advance as passive victims and this representation "also enforces a space that imaginatively and often practically excludes their multiple subjectivities" (p. 891). Drawing attention to the multiple bans in France which exclude veiled women from public space and public schools, Al-Saji argues that while in each of these instances the veil, in its multiple forms, was represented as immobilizing it was actually the reaction to the veil that immobilized Muslim women and excluded them from attending public schools and other public spaces. She concludes that veiling in a sense was *made* into an obstacle for veiled women's subjectification.

3.3.2.1 Veiling as an obstacle for women's subjectification

Before I move on to the question of visibility and vision I would like to understand how the practice of veiling is *made* into an obstacle for veiled women's subjectification. Al-Saji (2010) recognizes at least two historical moments when Muslim veils have become major focal points: the colonial project to unveil Algerian

women and the debate in 2004 around Muslim girls wearing the veil in schools. In each of these cases Al-Saji asks what the Muslim veil came to mean so that a law was called for to exclude veiling practices from the French context. To understand what the veil had come to mean in the context of colonialism, Al-Saji refers to Fanon's essay "Algeria Unveiled" (1965) where he argues that different types of society become known by their apparel and that "belonging to a given cultural group is usually revealed by clothing traditions" (p. 35). Al-Saji concludes that the veil, for the French colonizer, thus became identified "not only with Algerian women but with Algerian culture as a whole" (p. 882). She explains that from the colonizers perspective the veil represented the barbaric and oppressive nature of Algerian men in particular and Algerian culture in general - a tradition from which these women had to be saved. Thus, she concludes, the representation of veiled Muslim women came to play a pivotal role in justifying the colonial project and destruction of Algerian culture. I would argue that the burkini-ban is another example of this construction of veiling as an obstacle for veiled women's subjectfication.

The second historical moment in the French context, according to Al-Saji (2010), is the debate in 2004 around Muslim girls wearing the veil in schools. In March 2004 France passed a law that banned wearing 'conspicuous religious signs' in public schools. Even though the law was interpreted as an extension of French secularism, Al-Saji argues that the passage of the law only became possible when the meaning of the headscarf became inextricably tied to gender oppression. She explains how the contemporary discourse on the headscarf dates back to 1989 when three girls wearing the headscarf were suspended from school and to 1994 when the then Minister of Education issued a general ban on the headscarf in schools. In both cases the Conseil d'Etat ruled against these bans by referring to the 1905 law on laïcité. Al-Saji concludes that other arguments were needed in order to pass a law banning the veil from public schools. So when the debates about veiling were revived again in 2004, Al-Saji argues, that it was not only debated as a sign of France's commitment to secularity (laïcité) but also to its commitment to gender equality. She explains that this commitment to gender equality soon became continuous with laïcité and naturalized as a French value. As a result, Al-Saji explains, the veil becomes seen as more than just a religious sign: "It metonymically stands in not only for Islam but for

the putative gender oppression of that religion – allowing a continual slippage in pro-law arguments between Islam as religion and Islam as essentially oppressive and hence problematic" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 880). The construction of gender equality as a French value has been questioned numerous times in the comments made by Muslim women on SNS about the burkini-ban.

3.3.2.2 Vision and the racialization of the veil

Let me now return to the question of visibility and vision. Al-Saji (2010) argues that "in the cases of both skin color and veiling, racialization functions largely through a visual register" (p. 884). Building on Fanon's work on othering and racialization, Al-Saji adds that "the process by which the veiled Muslim woman is 'othered' in western and colonial perception is double – her racialization being inseparably intertwined with gender" (p. 884). By referring to the work of Alcoff and Merleau-Ponty on the phenomenology of vision Al-Saji argues that the naturalization of 'race' to the body is made possible by the intentional structure of vision and its reliance on habit. She explains that vision is not a neutral recording of the visible, but it is intentional in that "we learn to see" (p. 884). Vision, according to Al-Saji "not only makes visible, but does so differently according to sedimented habits of seeing" (p. 884). However referring to Alcoff, she adds that "even though we see through our habits, we do not see them" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 885). Al-Saji explains that as a result the object appears visible in itself, as a contextual and absolute, while "the relational and perspectival conditions of that visibility are elided" (p. 884). She concludes that it is in this way that "visual qualities are naturalized to the visible body, attributed to it alone" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 885). However this does not automatically mean that all vision is racist. Al-Saji distinguishes two specific processes that explain the de-humanization of the racializing vision. First, she argues that the dynamic ability of vision to change is partially closed down: "racialized bodies are not only seen as naturally inferior, they *cannot be seen otherwise*" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 885). Referring to the current example of veiled Muslim women she explains that "the veiled body is not merely seen as oppressed, but cannot be seen as a subject who takes up and constitutes itself through that oppression" (AL-Saji, 2010, p. 885). Furthermore, she argues that racist vision

makes the racialized body hypervisible, while positioning the seeing/looking body as neutral and objective.

Following this line of thought it is important to ask what kind of gaze makes the veil visible and renders Muslim women 'behind the veil' invisible? Al-Saji (2010) argues that the generalized perceptions of Muslim women as oppressed is a product of a phallocentric gaze which "institutes (western, white) 'woman' as object of male desire, defining her subject-position and the means of recognition available to her relative to that gaze" (p. 886). She continues to explain that it is through this gaze, which desires possession of women's bodies and 'wants to see', that the representation of veiled women as oppressed or sexually repressed is generated. She argues that veiling constitutes an obstacle or barrier to this desire to see and possess women's bodies. However, Al-Saji adds, that positing the veil as an obstacle to vision already assumes a particular way of looking as norm. Her point is that "the image of the veiled woman is not merely a product of such vision, but at once serves to ground and sustain it" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 886). By being posed as a limit, the image of the veil also constitutes the possibility of transgression and allows the general desirability of unveiling to be posited. She concludes that while colonizing vision takes veiling as other, it is also constitutive of this vision, "serving both as a concrete point of application for this vision and as a negative mirror for the norms of womanhood and gender that this vision assumes" (p. 886). Visibility and vision are concepts which have been referred to by women in online discussions, I will draw on the work of Al-Saji to further unpack these comments and understand how Muslim women relate to this concept of vision.

3.3.2.3 Feminist dilemma: gender oppression and cultural racism

Al-Saji (2010) aims to complicate the structure of racialization presented by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* and try to understand how two dimensions of identity, gender and race, rely on and function through one another. She argues that "the projection of gender oppression onto the veil is the means by which racialization takes place" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 888). However this doesn't mean that this racializing vision only uses the concept of gender to justify itself, "as if 'gender' were a neutral given

that could be abstracted from contextual operations of power" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 889). Rather she emphasized that "what we recognize as gender is already racialized" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 889). Al-Saji continues to explain that "the abjection of the 'veiled woman' permits the identity of 'western woman' to be constituted as a desirable ideal" (p. 888). However, she explains that this ideal still represents the feminine 'other' within a patriarchal system of gender relations. So, according to Al-Saji, there are two constructions projected onto the 'veiled woman': (1) qualities that are excluded from the western norm of femininity and (2) the mechanism of gender oppression of that patriarchal system itself. As a result of this construction and the hypervisibility of the veil, Al-Saji argues that "attention is deflected away from the patriarchal structures of western or colonial society itself, which become invisible in contrast" (p. 888). She explains that this places Muslim and western woman in "opposed and non-reciprocal subject-positions" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 889). According to Al-Saji this means that "hybrid forms of feminine subjectivity that blur the boundaries of Muslim and western become unimaginable" (p. 889) and that it permits "the exclusion of voices of Muslim women from feminist debate and from being recognized as genuine expressions of female subjectivity" (p. 889). She therefore concludes that discourses on the veil and the politics they inscribe are not only racist but also anti-feminist. In my analysis of the comments made by Muslim women about the burkini ban on SNS I have aimed to analyze how they make visible the patriarchal structures of western or colonial society itself.

The dominant understanding of racism is very much linked to skin color. However, Al-Saji (2010) argues that cultural racism she describes is "continuous with color racism; it is neither new, nor exceptional" (p. 889). While differences may exist in how race is understood, either as biological determinism or as cultural genealogy and belonging, Al-Saji explains that "bodily difference plays a role in both forms of racism" (p. 889). But she notes that it is sometimes claimed that unveiling practices are not really racist. Al-Saji argues that this claim is problematic for two reasons: "(1) it overlooks the way in which clothing forms an integrated part of one's bodily sense of self, and (2) it misconceives the kind of racism involved" (p. 890). While clothing is often considered as "an artificial envelope that can be removed to reveal a 'natural', biological body", Al-Saji argues that "clothing also constitutes a bodily extension that

cannot be removed without transforming one's bodily sense of self" (p. 890). Al-Saji's point is that veiling can be formative of the subject in such a way that unveiling can be experienced as bodily disintegration, instead of liberation. When looking at the type of racism involved, Al-Saji argues that "in cultural racism, culture becomes nature" (p. 890). Meaning that "bodies are not only perceived as belonging to a different culture, they are also seen to be culturally determined and inferior as a result" (p. 890). Thus, Al-Saji concludes that veiling becomes visible as 'religious' or 'cultural', while clothing that is part of the mainstream practice in western society is taken to express fluid and heterogeneous individual choice. In my dataset some Muslim women refer to the burkini-ban as racist and the concept of cultural racism enabled me to unpack these comments.

4. MUSLIM WOMEN SPEAKING BACK

In this chapter I will discuss certain examples of comments made by Muslim women on Facebook about the burkini-ban imposed by France in order to understand different constructions of Muslim female and/or feminist subjectivities in online discussions. I will be using Mahmood's (2011) notion of agency as something which is not only constituted when a person resist norms, but also in the different ways these norms are inhabited by a person. By doing so I aim to understand how Muslim women relate to certain norms about femininity and piety, and how these norms are also means by which they become a self-conscious identity and agent. Imminent to the process of self-realization is the concept of freedom. In the liberal tradition this is linked to individual autonomy, however based on the conversations Mahmood has had with women from the Mosque Movement in Egypt, she argues for the uncoupling of the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will. To fully understand how Muslim women in the Netherlands become self-conscious identities, I am interested in analyzing how they use and define the concept of freedom in online discussions.

Some Muslim women refer to themselves as feminists and in order to understand the process of becoming a Muslim female feminist subject I will work with Braidotti's (2011) scheme of Feminist Nomadic Thinking. In this scheme Braidotti argues that the subject is always gendered, however I would argue that the subject is also always racialized. In order to capture and understand the intersectional experiences of Muslim women I will also be working with Braidotti's (2008) article on the post-secular turn in feminism in which she argues that political subjectivity can also be conveyed and supported by religious piety and that it doesn't need to be critical in the negative sense of oppositional, but could also be a practice of affirmation. This would mean that political subjectivity or agency consists of multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit for ourselves and for future generations. I will be using this framework in order to understand to what extend and in what manner Muslim women become political subjects in online discussions. Finally I will be using the concept of vision and cultural racism as explained by Al-Saji (2010) to unpack how Muslim women experience the racialization of their veils.

I have retrieved the comments of Muslim women from three different Facebook pages: *NRC Handelsblad,* WOMEN Inc. *and Meld Islamofobie.* Each of these pages has a distinct techno culture. *NRC Handelsblad* is a newspaper and as a news source their page is considered to be more objective. WOMEN Inc. is an NGO which promotes gender equality and *Meld Islamofobie* is an NGO which aims to raise awareness about Islamophobic attacks.

When analyzing the comments I have taken these techno cultures in consideration, as context is crucial to our understanding of agency and subjectivity. The pages also differ in size. In May 2017 the page of *NRC Handelsblad* was liked by 158.345 Facebook users, the page of WOMEN Inc. by 33.741 Facebook users and the page of *Meld Islamofobie* by 11.565 Facebook users. The page of *NRC Handelsblad* posted seven articles about the burkini-ban and there was a total of 939 comments, 3% (n= 29) of them I could identify as posted by Muslim women. The page of WOMEN Inc. posted one article and there was a total of 59 comments, 11% (n=7) of these I could identify as posted by Muslim women. The page of *Meld Islamofobie* posted four articles and there was a total of 98 comments, 28% (n=28) of these I could identify as posted by Muslim women. Because the number of comments were so little, I also added three articles which featured a Muslim woman and which were posted in the pages. I selected the data from the pages by using the search term “boerkini” and I extracted the comments from the pages either manually or by using the application Netvizz. Then I scanned the discussions of the Facebook pages to be able to identify which comments were made by Muslim women. In the chapter on methodology I have elaborated which criteria I used to make this selection. Finally I coded the data to be able to recognize certain themes and patterns. In order to analyze my data I used an intersectional approach and a grounded theory methodology. The insights I retrieved from my data helped me to select the three authors for my theoretical and analytical framework.

4.1 Agency

In order to understand how Muslim women become a self-conscious identity and agent in a Western context I want to elaborate on an essay written by Aheda Zanetti, an Australian Muslim woman, about her motivation to design the burkini and the start of selling it in 2004. Her essay was published in August 2016 on the website of NRC.nl, a Dutch quality newspaper with a liberal signature, and shared on their Facebook page.

> When I invented the burkini in early 2004, it was to give women freedom, not to take it away. My niece wanted to play netball but it was a bit of a struggle to get her in the team – she was wearing a hijab. My sister had to fight for her daughter to play, had to debate the issue and ask, why is this girl prevented from playing netball because of her modesty?
>
> When she was finally allowed to play we all went to watch her to support her and what she was wearing was totally inappropriate for a sports uniform – a skivvy, tracksuit pants, and her hijab, totally unsuitable for any type of sport. She looked like a tomato she was so red and hot!
>
> So I went home and went looking for something that might be better for her to wear, sportswear for Muslim girls, and I couldn't find anything, I knew there was nothing in Australia. It got me thinking because when I was a girl I missed out on sport – we didn't participate in anything because we chose to be modest, but for my niece I wanted to find something that would adapt to the Australian lifestyle and western clothing but at the same time fulfil the needs of a Muslim girl. So I sat down on my lounge room floor and designed something.

Zanetti explains that inhabiting the norm of modesty is the means by which she became a self-conscious identity and agent. This account reminded me of Mahmood (2011) because she argues that agentival capacity is not only constituted when a person resists norms but also in the multiple ways these norms are inhabited by a person. Zanetti does not explain her motivation for designing the burkini in terms of

freedom from, or subversion of norms. Nor does she describe it in terms of submission to norms. Rather she explains that she was motivated by a desire to become. She explains that she was motivated by the desire to inhabit a certain norm of modest femininity, without having to give up her freedom to exercise or swim. By doing so I would argue that she inevitably changes the way we think about veiling and modesty. In her account she explains that when she was growing up modesty was not considered compatible with exercise. However by creating suitable sportswear she challenged this binary opposition, without necessarily framing her actions within the logic of repression and resistance.

Her account can be read as a case of docility and a desperate attempt to secure women's subordination. But designing and wearing the burkini might very well be considered a form of agency, but only one that can be understood from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment (Mahmood, 2011). Zanetti is a Muslim woman living in Australia. She explains that she could not find suitable sportswear for her niece and how her sister had to argue in order for her niece to be able to participate in netball. In the same essay she also reflects on the position of Muslims after 9/11: "It was difficult for us at the time, the Muslim community, they had a fear of stepping out. They had fear of going to public pools and beaches and so forth, and I wanted girls to have the confidence to continue a good life". On the other hand she explains that she was also receiving backlash from the Muslim community: "A lot of people in my community didn't know how to accept this, but I developed it commercially and made a good business". When these conditions are taken into consideration it becomes apparent that by designing the burkini, Zanetti aimed to bridge the constructed gap between the Islamic community and Australians, but also to give Muslim girls ownership of their bodies: "I wanted to find something that would adapt to the Australian lifestyle and western clothing but at the same time would fulfil the needs of a Muslim girl….It was about integration and acceptance and being equal and about not being judged".

Apart from illustrating how agency is not always constructed when norms are subverted and resisted, this account also supports Braidotti's (2008) argument about political subjectivity as something that can be conveyed through religious piety and

that it doesn't need to be critical in the negative sense of oppositional, but could also be a practice of affirmation. In Zanetti's words I do not recognize a desire to produce counter-subjectivities. However she is motivated by a desire to generate "empowering modes of becoming" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 15) and increase Muslim women's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others:

> I wanted girls to have the confidence to continue a good life. Sport is so important, and we are Australian! I wanted to do something positive – and anyone can wear this, Christian, Jewish, Hindus. It's just a garment to suit a modest person, or someone who has skin cancer, or a new mother who doesn't want to wear a bikini, it's not symbolizing Islam.

4.2 Freedom

Imminent to the question of self-realization is the question of freedom. Based on the analysis of the conversations between Muslim women from the Women's Mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood (2011) has argued for the uncoupling of the notion of the autonomous will from that of self-realization. When looking at the online conversations of Muslim women in the Netherlands about the burkini-ban, I have noticed that different women adopt the concept of freedom. I want to elaborate on some examples to understand how they relate to this concept.

> This has given women freedom, and they want to take that freedom away? So who is better, the Taliban or French politicians? They are as bad as each other. I don't think any man should worry about how women are dressing – no one is forcing us, it's a woman's choice. What you see is our choice.

This is another excerpt from the essay written by Aheda Zanetti. She refers to the burkini as something that gives women freedom and explains that the burkini ban is taking this freedom away. Here, I would argue, Zanetti is using the notion of negative freedom which Mahmood (2011) has described as "the absence of restraints of various kinds on one's ability to act as one wants" (p. 11). According to Zanetti the burkini ban is taking away the ability of Muslim women to act as they want by

restricting the freedom for Muslim women to choose how they want to dress. The ability to choose is central in Zanetti's account of freedom. By emphasizing that "what you see is our choice", I would argue that, Zanetti adopts a liberal understanding of freedom where the possibility for freedom is linked to an autonomous will. It could be said that submitting to Allah's will and wear the hijab as a form of modesty is another understanding of self-realization which is specific to the locality of Muslim women. There is a long standing tradition among white feminists to advocate for women to have ownership of their bodies without the interference of men. Examples of this is the movement in de 60's and 70's of the last century for abortion rights centralizing the words "My body, my choice". It calls for the recognition of an individual's, and specifically women's, right to choose what they want to do with their body. Feminists have advocated and still are advocating the fundamental right for every woman to live safe and secure in her body and to make her own choices regarding her body. Zanetti is appealing to the same right, but in her case it is for a modest/ pious embodiment, which entails the veiling of her body.

Zanetti explicitly mentions that "no one is forcing us", I would argue that with these words she is speaking back to the general assumption that the only subject position available for veiled Muslim women is that of the oppressed, which Al-Saji (2010) has elaborated on. With these words she is speaking back to the assumption within Western representation about veiled Muslim women that veiling can only be adopted because one is forced to, neglecting the possibility of veiling adopted by Muslim women as a means of self-realization. Veiling is thus not considered as something that can be adopted by an autonomous will or desire. It is interesting to question what this reveals about the Western interpretation about the conditions of an autonomous will. This reminds me of Mahmood's (2011) conversation with Amal and Nama about veiling where they explain that action does not always emerge from natural feelings but creates them and that bodily acts are not always detachable from an essential interiorized self. Through the act of veiling they explain that they train their "memory, desire, and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 157). Veiling for them is "the critical markers of piety as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 158). This excerpt from Zanetti shows that in order to recognize that Muslim women

do not only wear the veil by force, but also by choice it is important to recognize that agency sometimes is best understood by analyzing how norms about modesty are inhabited, experienced, performed and aspired by Muslim women.

Another interesting observation and analysis Zanetti is expressing, is comparing the Taliban and French politicians. The Taliban is a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist political movement in Afghanistan and has been condemned internationally for the harsh enforcement of their interpretation of Islamic Sharia law, which has resulted in the brutal treatment of many Afghans, especially women. Their politics have been used by the Bush administration to justify the US military invasion in Afghanistan in 2001, similar to how the representation of veiled Muslim women came to play a pivotal role in justifying the colonial project and destruction of Algerian culture, as explained by Al-Saji (2010). By making this comparison, I would argue that, Zanetti is criticizing the patriarchal structures of France itself as a western or colonial society. She is aware that the Taliban is condemned for their treatment of women. By drawing on the analysis Al-Saji has made about the colonial vision and phallocentric gaze in the racialization of the Muslim veil, it is possible to argue that the condemning of the Taliban as a sexist society has served as a negative mirror to portray against it a Western identity as an emancipated and gender equal society. This condemning is another way in which "attention is deflected away from the patriarchal structures of western or colonial society itself, which become invisible in contrast" (p. 888), as explained by Al-Saji. I believe that the subject position of Zanetti as a Muslim woman enables her to not only criticize patriarchal structures within Muslim communities, but also reveal the patriarchal structures within Western societies such as France as she concludes, "they are as bad as each other".

Another example of Muslim women adopting the notion of freedom can be undertsood bu analyzing the conversation of two Muslim women, Hajar and Asmaa, with Margreet.

> Margreet: Ik vind een boerkini echt zo vrouw onterend [sic] en vernederend. Een vrouw mag gezien worden! Ook al heb je 3 rollen en striae, iedere vrouw heeft recht op een bikini!! [I believe the burkini is really disgraceful and

> humiliating for women. A woman is allowed to be seen! Even if you have 3 rolls and striae, every woman has the right to a bikini!!]
> Hajar: Als ze daar zelf voor kiest inderdaad helemaal mee eens om gezien te worden. Maar kiest ze ipv een bikini voor een boerkini dan moet dat ook kunnen. Leef en laat leven! [If she chooses that herself of course I agree completely to be seen. But if she chooses a burkini instead of a bikini then that should also be possible. Live and let live!
> Asmaa: Een bikini en half naakt [sic] erbij lopen, dat noem ik pas onterend. Het is maar hoe je het bekijkt. Ik zou never nooit in een bikini lopen, puur, omdat ik niet bekeken wil worden van top tot teen hoe ik er halfnaakt uitzie [sic]. Het is maar net waar jij je fijn en prettig bij voelt. [A bikini and walking around half naked, I would call that disgraceful. It depends on how you look at it. I would never ever walk in a bikini, purely, because I do not want to be looked at from head to toe how I look half naked. It depends on what feels nice and pleasant for you.]

In this conversation there are two Muslim women: Hajar and Asmaa who react the a comment by a Non-Muslim woman, Margreet. Both of them do not explicitly present themselves as Muslim, but based on their names and comments I believe it is possible to conclude that they identify as Muslim. Hajar presents herself on her profile picture as a woman who does not wear a headscarf. Asmaa does not have a picture of herself as a profile picture but uses an image of a phrase: “It's the little things in life”. However from her comment I draw the conclusion that she prefers the burkini to the bikini. This conversation was posted on the Facebook page of WOMEN Inc. and it was a reaction to an article that featured an interview with Jorien, a converted Dutch Muslim woman, about the burkini and the burkini-ban.

In this conversation there are two concepts I would like to unpack: freedom and vision. First I would like to elaborate on the question of freedom. In her comment Margreet defends every woman’s right to wear a bikini. Hajar however defends every woman’s right to choose what is best herself. She explains that just as every woman should be able to wear a bikini if she want to, every woman should also be able to wear a burkini if she wants to. She points out that for her both choices are equal and

should therefore both be accepted. This argumentation is in line with the liberal discourse of freedom, which Mahmood (2011) elaborates on, where the notion of self-realization is linked to individual autonomy. Hajar emphasizes the right to choose what is best for you, this means that for her the notion of self-realization and freedom are linked to individual autonomy. I would argue that this is an example of negative freedom because she argues that there should not be any obstacles for any woman to realize her own will. For Hajar women should be able to autonomously choose whether she wants to wear a bikini or burkini without external restraints. This example shows that this liberal notion of freedom is not only naturalized in feminist scholarship and research, as Mahmood argues, but is also adopted by Dutch Muslim women engaging in online discussions to create space for their choices. While Mahmood problematizes the naturalization of this conception of freedom and wants to uncouple the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will, I believe it could also be interesting to understand how this liberal discourse is adopted by Muslim women to create space for their subjectivities in a society that does not acknowledge them.

Let me now turn to the question of vision and visibility in this conversation. In her comment Margreet explains that she considers the burkini to be "disgraceful and humiliating for women" because "a woman is allowed to be seen". Al-Saji (2010) has explained that positing the burkini as an obstacle to vision already assumes a particular way of looking as norm. A woman in a burkini is also visible, thus able to be seen. According to Al-Saji the bodies of veiled Muslim women are actually hypervisible, while the women behind the veil remain invisible as subjects. This account of Margreet supports this argument made by Al-Saji. Asmaa reacts to Margreet by explaining that she considers the bikini to be disgraceful because it allows people to see you while you are half-naked. According to her wearing a bikini equates to walking around half-naked, something she experiences as disgraceful. I understand from her account that grace for Asmaa is linked to showing nakedness in public. Deriving from this, one could argue that the burkini is not only worn out of devotion to Allah, but is also a way of presenting yourself and your body in a graceful manner.

In this account Asmaa also refers to the experience of being looked at. This reminds me of Al-Saji's (2010) analysis of the phallocentric gaze. I interpret the fact that Asmaa explains that she doesn't want her nakedness to be viewed in public and exposed to the vision of others, as an awareness of the phallocentric gaze. She knows that as a woman she is looked at and that this looking is not an innocent one. It is through this 'being looked at' that she experiences her nakedness as disgraceful. This account can be read as a testimony of having experienced this gaze as a woman and that she uses the knowledge derived from this experience to present herself in a certain manner. This is another example of a form of agency which cannot be analyzed within the restricted binary terms of resistance and subordination, as Mahmood argues. Hajar is neither moved by the desire to resist a certain norm or subordinate herself to it, she is moved by her desire to be graceful. For her that means to take control over who gets to see her nakedness.

4.3 Piety

The question of piety and modesty is important to Muslim women's subjectivity and their self-realization. The comments in my data show that there is not a consensus among Muslim women about how this should be embodied and performed. The burkini is a contemporary invention and a new manner in which modesty and veiling can be adopted and performed. In the following sections I will draw on specific examples to understand how different Muslim women relate to the burkini as a product of Islamic modesty.

> Daar gaat het mis Richard, er staan genoeg verzen in de Qur'an die laten zien hoe een zuster zich moet bedekken, nergens is een Burkini [sic] genoemd als legitieme kleding en sws mengen op een strand is Haram, er loopt van alles rond wat Islamitisch gezien zeer incorrect is [That's where you are wrong Richard van der Kolk, there are enough verses in the Qur'an which show how a sister should cover herself, nowhere is the Burkini mentioned as a legitimate clothing item and nevertheless mingling on a beach is Haram, there are all kinds of people and things around which are Islamically incorrect]

> Lieverd tis [sic] geen bedekkende kleding en dat toelaatbaar is in een gemixte situatie, als het tussen vrouwen is dan is het een ander verhaal, iedereen moet ook zn [sic] eigen leven invullen mr [sic] we zijn wel verplicht om de nasiha (Islamitische advies) te geven, daarna is het eigen verantwoordelijkheid wnt [sic] dan leef je niet meer in onwetendheid mr [sic] dan negeer je de plichten van Islam. [Honey, it's not covering clothing which is permissible in a mixed situation, if it were among women then it would be a different story, everyone should fill in their own life but we are obligated to give nasiha (Islamic advice), after that it's one's own responsibility because then you do not live in ignorance anymore but then you ignore the duties of Islam.

These are examples of two comments posted by a Muslim woman in discussion on the page of *Meld Islamofobie*, a page monitoring Islamophobic incidents. It was a reaction to an article published by Joop.nl covering an incident where a woman with a headscarf (not a burkini) was fined while on the beach in Cannes. The article was posted on August 26, 2016. I will refer to her as Raziye because her username is anonymized by using an Arabic phrase *Yawm Al Qiyama Haqq* [Resurrection day is the truth]. She uses an image saying "I love Allah" in Arabic instead of her own picture.

Raziye explains that she does not recognize the burkini as Islamic because it is not mentioned in the Qur'an. She doesn't consider it an appropriate dress form to enter spaces where there is no gender segregation. According to her, beaches where men and women are not segregated are Haram, thus not an appropriate place for pious Muslim women. From this perspective the main issue, for Raziye, is not only whether Muslim women are appropriately veiled or not, but it is also about the kind of social spaces they engage with. According to Raziye the concept of modesty does not only refer to clothing, but also to social spaces. This comment shows that for her modesty is not only expressed by the way one dresses, but also by the spaces one interacts with. This reminds me of Mahmood's (2011) conversation with Amal and Nama about piety where they reflect on the constitutive relationship between body learning

and body sense. I would argue that the way in which Raziye considers modesty as a spatial concept is another way in which one conditions her body and motivations. While Amal and Nama explains veiling as “the critical markers of piety as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious” (Mahmood, 2011, p. 158), Raziye considers the spaces where one interacts with others also a critical marker and a means to train oneself to be pious. It would be interesting to unpack modesty as a spatial concept even further. The only criteria Raziye has mentioned is that there should be gender segregation, are public spaces such as schools and libraries thus also considered as Haram spaces by Raziye? What are the other criteria for a space to be considered modest? How do Muslims relate differently to this modesty as a spatial concept? I recognize modesty as a spatial concept as well. In my family the elders avoid restaurants that sell alcoholic beverages as they consider these as Haram spaces. But the younger generation who was born and raised in The Netherlands see no harm in eating out in any restaurant as long as they can eat vegetarian meals and drink non-alcoholic beverages.

Raziye also reflects on the reason behind her desire to speak up. While she acknowledges that everyone has the right to fill in their own lives, she explains that it is her duty as a Muslim to give nasiha (Islamic advice). It is interesting to consider what this tells us about how she relates to (Muslim) others. I would argue that this implies that the community is entangled with each other and that one has the responsibility to remind each other of Islamic values, but leaves the choice on how to act with the individuals themselves. This is a way of being in the world that acknowledges an individual's ‘entangledness’ with others and the accountability that comes with it, while respecting the others autonomy to make choices for themselves. Inhabiting and performing this norm also becomes the means by which Raziye can express herself and engage with others. It is through the act of nasiha that she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent. Social media become yet another platform where Muslims can interact with each other and perform nasiha. For further research it would be interesting to understand different ways nasiha is performed online, and how this technological development has influenced the act of nasiha.

In her essay Zanetti reflects on whether or not the burkini would be accepted by her Islamic community:

> I looked at the veil and took away a lot of the excess fabric, which made me nervous - would my Islamic community accept this? The veil is supposed to cover your hair and your shape, you just don't shape anything around your body. But this was shaped around the neck. I thought, it's only the shape of a neck, it doesn't really matter…...Anyone can wear this, Christian, Jewish, Hindus. It's just a garment to suit a modest person, or someone who has skin cancer, or a new mother who doesn't want to wear a bikini, it's not symbolizing Islam

She explains that veiling means that you are "supposed to cover your hair and your shape". However she explains that because the burkini is showing the shape of the neck she was concerned. However she was able to wave this concern away. This is a completely different way of adopting modesty and veiling than Raziye is explaining. For Raziye the fact that the burkini is not mentioned in the Qur'an means that it is not an adequate manner to embody modesty and piety. The Qur'an is for her an important source of information about the criteria for embodying piety and modesty. Zanetti on the other hand does not refer to the Qur'an necessary, but to the criteria of veiling as a practice of modesty: "you just don't shape anything around your body". Her relation to modesty is less rigid and more flexible with room for her own interpretations and adaptations. They both do not consider the burkini to be strictly Islamic. Raziye doesn't consider the burkini to be Islamic because it is not mentioned in the Qur'an, Zanetti however explains that it is "a garment to suit a modest person, or someone who has skin cancer, or a new mother who doesn't want to wear a bikini". She acknowledged the needs for modest people, but also sees the potential for other uses of the burkini. It can be adopted by Muslim women for Islamic reasons, but it can also be adapted by people from other religions who want to embody modesty through clothing.

In an interview about the burkini ban Jorien, a converted Dutch Muslim woman, explains how wearing a headscarf in daily life influences the way she presents herself

on beaches and swimming pools. This article was published on the page of WOMEN Inc. on the 18th of August, 2016.

> In het dagelijks leven draag ik een hoofddoek, en dan is het niet logisch om te gaan zwemmen zonder bedekking…. Een boerkini is zeker geen teken van extremisme. Als je een hoofddoek draagt, pas je daar je kleding ook op aan - geen korte rokjes bijvoorbeeld. En dat geldt dus ook voor je zwemkleding. Je doet dan niet opeens een bikini aan, natuurlijk [In daily life I wear a headscarf, so then it is not logical to swim without coverage….. A burkini is definitely not a symbol of extremism. If you are wearing a headscarf, then you adjust your clothing to it as well - no short skirts for example. And that also applies to swimwear. You wouldn't wear a bikini then, of course.]

According to her it is not logical to wear a bikini and go for a swim without coverage because she wears a headscarf in daily life. Here Jorien explains that her self-realization is achieved through inhabiting and performing a certain norm: according to her you have to adjust the way you clothe yourself if you wear a headscarf. She is becoming subject through inhabiting and performing this norm. Furthermore she adds that it is only logical for her to wear a burkini when swimming, if she wears a headscarf in daily life. This reminds me of Mahmood (2011) and her conversation with Amal and Nama about the mutually constitutive relationship between body learning and body sense. That wearing the burkini is only logical for Jorien because she also wears a headscarf in daily life shows that this bodily act and performance of modesty is not detachable from an essential interiorized self. She could still have worn the headscarf in daily life but taken off her headscarf when going for a swim because it might seem more practical. But she explains that when you wear a headscarf you adopt your clothing habits, these habits and this performance of modesty through veiling shows that the headscarf is not just a piece of clothing for her, it is a way of being and becoming. This account is another example of how veiling is "the critical marker of piety as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 158).

In this account Jorien is not referring to subverting this norm or being subordinated to this norm. She explains that this is a logical consequence when one chooses to wear a headscarf. I see some links with Mahmoods conversations with the women from the Mosque movement, where Mahmood explains that these bodily acts, like wearing the headscarf, are not detachable from an essential interiorized self. She explains that bodily acts, like wearing the veil, are "the critical markers of piety as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious" (p. 158). Jorien does not only refer to swimwear. She explains how for example you wouldn't wear a short skirt when wearing a headscarf. This shows that the headscarf is not just a piece of clothing for her, it is a way of being and becoming. According to her it is something that influences the way you present yourself to the outside world.

4.4 The Muslim female feminist subject

Considering the de-subjectification of Muslim women Al-Saji (2010) has described, where the subject positions available to Muslim women in western representation are circumscribed in advance as passive victims, and this representation "also enforces a space that imaginatively and often practically excludes their multiple subjectivities" (p. 891). The gendered nature of the cultural racism Muslim women face means, according to Al-Saji, that "hybrid forms of feminine subjectivity that blur the boundaries of Muslim and western become unimaginable" (p. 889) and that it permits "the exclusion of voices of Muslim women from feminist debate and from being recognized as genuine expressions of female subjectivity" (p. 889). As a feminist researcher I take to heart the lesson of Mahmood (2011) that merely focusing on expressions of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male dominance, fails to "problematize the universality of the desire to be free from relations of subordination, and for women, from structures of male domination" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 10). However considering the de-subjectification of Muslim women Al-Saji has described, it remains particularly important to understand the expressions of Muslim women who identify as feminist. By using Braidotti's (2011) scheme of Feminist Nomadic Thinking I aim to unpack and understand how this subject position is constructed by Muslim women in online discussions.

> Do I call myself a feminist? Yes, maybe. I like to stand behind my man, but I am the engine, and I choose to be. I want him to take all the credit, but I am the quiet achiever.

This example is from Zanetti's essay and in this quote she presents herself as a hesitant feminist. According to her, women should be able to make their own choices about how they dress themselves and men should not worry about how women dress themselves. This reminds me of Braidotti (2011) where she explains that the aim of the feminist project is the empowerment of women's desire to become, not a specific model of their becoming. Zanetti wants to be a certain kind of woman: a pious woman who can participate in sports while wearing her headscarf. She experienced the lack of appropriate sportswear as an obstacle to fulfill this desire, so this moved her to create a solution. In this way she recognizes that her desire is a feminist desire. But she adds a 'maybe' after her affirmation of being a feminist and continues to explain that she is the kind of woman who likes to stand behind her man. However according to her this does not mean being passive, as she refers to herself as the engine. She also acknowledges that this is what she chooses to be. On this level it could be argued that although Zanetti presents herself as a feminist because she is empowering pious women's desire to become, she is willfully accepting the patriarchal condition by choosing to stand behind her man and let him take all the credit. However the third level of analysis of Braidotti's Sexual Difference Theory highlights the complexity of the embodied structure of the subject and emphasizes that "unconscious desire and willful choice do not always coincide" (p. 158). According to Braidotti (2011) this leaves room for contradictory moment and differences within each subject.

Zanetti explains that she was driven by a desire to become: she wanted to be able to enjoy the beach and participate in sports without compromising her piety and veiling practice. However she recognized that there were no means yet for her becoming. She explains that from a Western perspective she was perceived as oppressed and her veiling an obstacle to bodily activities, and from an Islamic perspective her veiling practices should adhere to traditional standards and she shouldn't enter mixed places. Her identity and subjectivity were not captured by the existing images of 'Woman': neither in the image of the 'Western Woman' (should be unveiled) nor in the image of

the ‘Muslim Woman’ (is oppressed and shouldn’t enter mixed spaces). She recognized that there is a difference between these concepts and real women like herself and her cousins. This recognition and her desire to become, to speak and to represent, eventually moved her to willful action so as to create the burkini as a means for her becoming. While one could say a lot about the specific model of her becoming, it is important to remember that the project of feminism is “the empowerment of women’s desire, not a specific model of their becoming” (Braidotti, 2011, p. 133).

Zanetti’s account does not only provide interesting insights about the complexity of female/feminist subjectivity but also about agency. Even though Zanetti’s account might appear as a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, it may actually be a form of agency. Mahmood (2011) explains that agency does not always mean the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms. In this account Zanetti explains that her self-determination is realized by supporting her husband in a certain way, allowing him to “take all the credit” while she is the “quiet achiever” and “the engine”. This might be seen as passive and docile, but actually according to Zanetti this is an active choice, this is the kind of woman she wants to be. However, this position does not stop her from asserting feminist politics to empower her own and others pious women’s becoming by developing the burkini. I would argue that Zanetti’s account illustrates that there is more complexity and sometimes even room for contradictory moments in understanding women’s self-determination and feminist agency.

In an article written by Nadia Benaissa, a Dutch Muslim woman who is a lawyer, I did also recognize feminist discourses. Her article was published online by the website *wijblijvenhier.nl* [we will stay here] on August 25th and was shared on the Facebook page of Meld Islamofobie. The website *wijblijvenhier.nl* is an online platform created by Dutch Muslims and features opinion pieces by a variety of Dutch Muslims on different topics. On this website Nadia presents herself as a lawyer, a world citizen and a freedom fighter with a headscarf. She refers to herself as someone who is committed to women’s rights, human rights in general, rights of minorities and civil rights. In this article she questions the legality of the burkini-ban in France and

its implications for the democratic rule of law. She questions how the ban can be justified under the French national laws and specifically refers to the UN Women's Treaty (CEDAW). She explains that she considers the abuse of power by police officers to force Muslim women to undress on the beach as sexual intimidation and defines the burkini-ban as a racist, islamophobic and sexist violence towards women. She continues to question the justification presented by the mayor of Cannes to ban the burkini:

> De aanslagen die er zijn gepleegd zijn steeds door mannen gepleegd, hoe kan het dan zijn dat vrouwen die een dagje op het strand willen vertoeven worden gezien als dreiging?.....Dit heeft alles te maken met het feit dat er nog altijd nogal wat mannen — zoals de stoere gasten die verantwoordelijk zijn voor het verbod — een stelletje onzekere angsthazen zijn wiens eigenbeeld [sic] afhangt van de mate waarin ze een ander kunnen onderdrukken. [The attacks that have been perpetrated have always been committed by men, how can it be that women who want to spend a day at the beach are seen as a threat?..... This has everything to do with the fact that there are still quite a few men - such as the tough guys who are responsible for the ban - who are a bunch of insecure cowards whose self-image depends on the extent to which they can oppress another.]

In this excerpt Nadia shows that she is aware of the concept of toxic masculinity. She employs this concept in her analysis of the burkini ban to reveal the patriarchal structures in France. I find her argument about the fact that women were not involved in any of the attacks, but are still considered as a threat by the French government, to be on-point. By explicitly calling the unveiling of Muslim women on the beaches of Cannes sexual intimidation, Nadia reminded me of Al-Saji's (2010) argument that clothing is not only "an artificial envelope that can be removed to reveal a 'natural', biological body" but that it "also constitutes a bodily extension that cannot be removed without transforming one's bodily sense of self" (p. 890). She also reminded me of Mahmood's (2011) analysis of veiling as a technology of the self. Veiling is not only a detachable bodily act, Mahmood explains, it is a critical marker of piety and undetachable from an essential interiorized self. An image of this incident, where

police forced a woman to undress, had gone viral and the incident Nadia is referring to, reminds me of Al-Saji's elaboration on the phallocentric gaze. Such incidents reveal that the presence of a veiled female body is not accepted. The unveiled body of women must be made visible, if needed by force, to the male eyes of the police officers. This means that only unveiled female bodies that are available for male eyes are accepted on the beach. I would argue that this is another explanation why Nadia defines the forced unveiling of a pious female body as sexual intimidation.

In some of the comments Muslim women also refer to the burkini-ban as gender oppression. One such example is a comment made by Juf Tangaouia, a Muslim woman who is an elementary school teacher. She commented on an article about a woman who was fined on the beach in Cannes, posted on the page of Meld Islamofobie. She does not use her full name on her Facebook profile, rather she presents herself by referring to her profession. This indicates that she takes her profession seriously and identifies by it. She doesn't use a picture of herself as a profile image, instead she uses an image of an inspiring quote: "Never stop asking Allah for what you want". The image clearly indicates that she identifies as Muslim. Based on her profile information I cannot determine whether she wears a veil or not, but based on her comment I would argue that she does.

> En dan maar blijven zeggen dat we onderdrukt worden. Wie onderdrukt nu wie. Helaas word [sic] het alleen naar [sic] erger.... niemand die mij gaat vertellen wat ik wel of niet aan mag trekken. Dat is iets tussen mij en Allah. Moge Allah ons standvastig maken en leiden ok [sic] zijn pad en weg..... [And then they keep saying that we are being oppressed. Who is oppressing who right now? Unfortunately it is only getting worse…. Nobody will tell me what I can or cannot wear. That is something between me and Allah. May Allah make us steadfast and lead us on his path and road….]

In this example Juf Tangaouia identifies with a group that is perceived or judged as being oppressed. This reminds me of Al-Saji's (2010) analysis of the Western representation of veiled women where she explains that "it is by means of the naturalization of oppression to the veil that the veiled woman is at once hypervisible

as oppressed and invisible as subject" (p. 891). Al-Saji (2010) explains that, because of the racializing vision in the Western representation of veiled Muslim women, ~~that~~ they cannot be seen otherwise. By expressing that "they keep saying we are oppressed", Juf Tangaouia brings to word how she experiences this vision and the cultural racism it entails. However she uses this experience to reveal the patriarchal structures of French society by turning the tables around and questioning "who is oppressing who right now?". By doing so she expresses that she experiences the burkini ban as a form of oppression. While Juf Tangaouia doesn't necessarily present herself as a feminist, I would argue that she does take a feminist subject position by calling the burkini-ban a form of oppression. She is asserting that "women are something more and other than nonmen" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 132) and connecting this debate based on difference to her own experiences and bodily existence as a woman. By doing so she is rejecting the masculine and colonial modes of thought. The choice to wear a veil is, as she explains, between her and Allah and nobody else can tell her what to wear. I would argue that this is a direct challenge of masculine and colonial modes of thought which "institutes 'woman' as object of male desire, defining her subject-position and the means of recognition available to her relative to that gaze" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 886) and only recognized veiled women as victims of oppression.

4.5 Vision and hypervisibility

Vision and visibility are two concepts which are referred to a couple of times in the comments I have gathered. Al-Saji (2010) argues that in Westerns representations "the veil is not merely perceived as a mode of gender oppression in Islam, one that could be reconfigured, re-appropriated, or subverted; rather oppression is taken to belong to the materiality of the veil itself, molding the veiled body in ways that exclude its subjectivity or agency" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 891). She continues to explain that "the projection of gender oppression onto the veil is the means by which racialization takes place" (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 888). In the following sections I will unpack comments where women expressed how they experience this vision.

Apart from Nadia there were no other references to the phallocentric gaze by Muslim women. However, there was one non-Muslim woman whose words I would like to unpack as they capture experiencing the phallocentric gaze.

> Ik vind het schandalig wat er in Frankrijk gebeurt. Het gaat toch niemand iets aan hoe iemand zich om te zwemmen wil kleden. Ik zag vorige week beelden uit Corsica waar een groep mannen in draf naar het strand toe rende [sic] om zich te beklagen/te protesteren over iemand in Boerkini. Het deed mij denken aan bezorgde vieze mannetjes die in paniek raakten om dat [sic] er dan voor hen geen bloot meer was om te gluren. Het was net of ze persoonlijk iets afgepakt werd. Wat een idioten. [I think what is happening in France is outrageous. It isn't anybody's business how someone want to dress for swimming. Last week I saw images from Corsica where a group of men ran to the beach in trot to complain/protest about someone in a burkini. It reminded me of worried dirty men who panicked because there was no nudity for them to stare at. It was like something was taken away from them personally. What a bunch of idiots.]

This comment was written by Anneke, a non-Muslim woman, on the page of Meld Islamofobie. It was a reaction to a post about a governor in Nice who claimed that it was illegal to share pictures on the internet of police officers who arrest and fine Muslim women wearing a burkini. In this comment, I would argue that, she has captured Al-Saji's (2010) argument about the phallocentric gaze and its desire to possess and see women's bodies. She expresses that she experienced the reaction of a group of men on the beach in Corsica to a woman in a burkini "as if something was taken away from them personally". From her words it can be understood that this reaction gave her the impression that these men, who desire the possession of women's bodies and wants to see her nudity, in fact are even convinced that it is their right to be able to look at every woman's naked body. While not bringing to words their experience of the phallocentric gaze as explicitly as Anneke has done, Muslim women do show that they are aware of this gaze. Earlier I have elaborated on Asmaa and how she prefers to wear the burkini because she doesn't like to be looked at when

she is half-naked. This shows awareness of the phallocentric gaze and the burkini thus serves as a means to protect herself from this gaze.

Al-Saji (2010) has explained that the racializing vision results in the *hypervisiblity* of Muslim veils in western perception and at the same time the assumed *invisibility* of veiled women. An excerpt from an interview with Jorien, a converted Dutch Muslim woman, illustrates how Muslim women experience this hypervisibility and how this can even be an obstacle for their actions. This article was published on the page of WOMEN Inc. on the 18th of August, 2016.

> Niemand hier [in Italië] zegt er iets [over de boerkini] van, ik kan zijn wie ik wil zijn. In Nederland mag je in sommige zwembaden niet eens zwemmen. Dus ga ik niet naar drukke zwembaden toe, of naar het strand bij 30 graden. Dan voel ik me toch wel erg bekeken en krijg je allemaal reacties. Daar heb ik geen zin in. [Nobody here [in Italy] says anything about it [the burkini], I can be who I want to be. In the Netherlands you can't even swim in certain swimming pools. So I don't go to crowded pools or to the beach when it's 30 degrees. I feel like I am being looked at very much and I get all sorts of reactions. I don't feel like dealing with that.]

Jorien explains that, because nobody says anything about her burkini, she feels like she can be who she wants to be. She can be her full self because of the absence of a certain vision. In the Netherlands she experiences this vision, she feels "being looked at", which even results in certain reactions that she doesn't want to deal with. From her words it could be understood that the hypervisibility she experiences on the beaches and pools in the Netherlands, enables unwanted attention and reactions. She explains that these reactions become an obstacle to be her full self in the Netherlands and enjoy swimming wherever she wants. This reminds me of Al-Saji (2010) who explained that it isn't necessarily the veil itself that immobilizes women, but the reactions to the veil. With the development of the burkini, Jorien can still wear her veil and go to beaches and swimming pools. However the reactions she gets in the pools and beaches in the Netherlands make her uncomfortable and prevent her from going to those places.

4.5 Cultural racism

In another excerpt Jorien expresses how she experiences the racialization of the Muslim veil.

> Het is raar dat mensen zeggen dat 'we' moeten integreren (wat voor mij heel raar is, want ik ben Nederlands), maar als ik dan vervolgens met mijn kinderen gezellig bij een meer wil gaan zwemmen, dat ik dan geen boerkini aan zou mogen. Als ik dat niet mag, dan blijf ik thuis en dat komt de integratie ook niet ten goede. [It's weird that people say that 'we' should integrate (which is very weird for me, because I am Dutch), but subsequently tell me that I am not allowed to wear a burkini if I would like to go for a swim at a lake with my children. If I cannot do that, then I would stay at home and that doesn't benefit integration either.]

Jorien is a white woman who has converted to Islam. She presents herself as Dutch and as part of the Muslim community. By placing the word *we* in quotation marks however, she shows that she is aware that this is not a homogeneous group. Apart from being Dutch and Muslim, she presents herself as a mother who would like to go for a swim with her children. She explains how the burkini enables her to fulfill this desire. She continues to explain that banning the burkini would result in her staying at home and being unable to fulfill this desire. The burkini ban would force her to choose between her desire to live modestly and her desire to go swimming with her children. This is yet another example of the different ways in which veiling is *made* into an obstacle.

Jorien also shows that she experiences the racialization of the veil. She presents herself as part of a group that "should integrate". This insinuates that this group is inherently other to Dutch culture and Dutch citizenship. However she notes that this is odd since she is a white Dutch citizen herself. Her excerpt reveals two things: (1) implicitly she doesn't find it very odd that other Muslims are expected to integrate more. The Muslim community in the Netherlands has a great ethnic diversity, but this

does not mean that the Muslim people of color are less Dutch than Jorien. By explaining that this is weird because she is Dutch, she implicates that she considers other Muslims as less Dutch; (2) however the quote also reveals that she experiences being othered since she started wearing the headscarf. In other words, this quote reveals the complex position of white women within Islam who end up experiencing cultural racism and with it the loss of whiteness. In this excerpt Jorien shows that she is aware of cultural racism and by using her own experience she explains the flawed logic behind the racialization of the veil.

Jorien explains that for her the burkini is a sign of integration because it allows her to participate fully in society. She explains that without the burkini she would stay home, which, according to her, would not help with integration. According to her, being able to go swimming with her children and not staying home all the time is an example of an integrated woman, it indicates that a person is participating in society. In another quote she elaborates a bit more on the burkini as a sign of integration: “Een boerkini is juist een teken dat je niet alleen thuis zit, dat je wil meedraaien in de maatschappij, met je kinderen naar zwemles wil bijvoorbeeld.” [A burkini is a sure sign that you don’t only want to sit home, but that you want to participate in society, by going to swimming lessons with your children for instance.] In both quotes integration is implicitly explained as a gendered concept. It reveals that in the Western imagination veiling means that you mostly sit at home and do not participate. This reminds me of Al-Saji (2010) who explains that the subject positions available to Muslim women in western representation are circumscribed in advance as passive victims. In other words, only the veil is visible, but not the person and subject behind it. By positing the burkini as a sign of integration, I believe Jorien speaks back to these assumptions.

When we take this in consideration, I believe it would be possible to posit the act of wearing a burkini, in a society which fails to recognize women behind their veils as subjects and continues to construct the veil as an obstacle by its rules and regulations, as a micro-political practice of daily activism and interventions on the beaches in France. Braidotti (2016) argued that it is important that in this post-secular age feminists should consider and take seriously that “agency, or political subjectivity, can be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve

significant amounts of spirituality" (p. 2). I would argue that wearing the burkini is an example of taking up a political subject position which is supported by religious piety. Braidotti also argues that the post-secular predicament is a practice of affirmation instead of negativity. Earlier, when discussing Aheda's account, I have also discussed the burkini as a strategy of affirmation. I would argue that the account of Jorien, where she is defending the burkini as a sign of integration, is another example how wearing the burkini can actually be considered a strategy of affirmation. It is something that creates empowering modes of becoming and it increases one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others.

To understand how Muslim women engage with racializing comments on Facebook, I will highlight a specific conversation from the Facebook page of *NRC Handelsblad*. This conversation was posted as a reaction to an article written by religious scholar Margreet van Schie, in which she criticizes the burkini ban. In the excerpt below Hind, a Muslim woman, is conversing with Eveline, a non-Muslim woman, who claims that the burkini can be banned because people need to dress according to "their norms and values":

> Eveline: Waarom niet…? Gewoon kleden volgens onze waarden… Net zoals wij de waarden van bv. Saoedie Arabia [sic] moeten accepteren. [Why not..? Just dress accordingly to our values… Just like we have to accept the values of for instance Saudi Arabia.]
> Hind: Eveline waarom zouden mijn waarden het zelfde [sic] als jou moeten zijn? Gaat het niet om accepteren van elkaars waarden. Dat jij halfnaakt op het strand wilt liggen moet jij weten maar ik respecteer dat. [Eveline why would my norms and values have to be the same as yours? Isn't it about accepting each other's values. Whether you would like to lie on the beach half naked is something you decide, but I respect that.]
> Eveline: Wat is er mis met je aanpassen aan het land waar je verblijft? Net zoals ik doe wanneer ik naar bv. Saoedie Arabië [sic] ga. Vertel me dat eens, misschien kan ik het dan begrijpen. [What is wrong with adjusting to the country you stay in? Just like I do when I visit Saudi Arabia for instance. Explain that to me, maybe I can understand it then]

> Hind: Nou Eveline dit heeft niets te maken met aanpassen aan het land waar jij verblijft. Als jij naar het midden oosten [sic] gaat ga je ook niet in een niqaab lopen, maar je trekt een broek aan of een jurk en je bedekt je schouders. Je past je aan tot jou [sic] eigen waarden. Dit geldt ook voor de boerkini. Ik vind het niet prettig om halfnaakt [sic] rond te lopen daarom ga ik ook niet naar een spa of sauna. [Well Eveline this has nothing to do with adjusting to the country you stay in. If you visit the Middle East you also wouldn't walk around in a niqaab, but you would wear pants or a dress and cover your shoulders. You adjust according to your own values. The same goes for the burkini. I don't like to walk around half naked that's why I also don't go to a spa or sauna.]

Hind uses her first name on Facebook and has a picture of a quote as her profile picture. The quote says: "Behind every successful woman is herself". Hind has also popped up in discussions on the Facebook page of WOMEN Inc. This shows that she actively engages about this topic on different Facebook pages. This conversation also shows that Hind doesn't shy away from difficult conversations. Eveline has posted several reactions which were quite hostile. Instead of attacking her, Hind chose to converse with her and tried to explain why the burkini has nothing to do with the values of a country. She questioned Eveline's assumptions that everyone should share the same values. This conversation reminded me of Al-Saji's (2010) discussion of Fanon's essay "Algeria Unveiled" (1965) where he reflects on the relation between culture and clothing. Fanon argues that different types of society become known by their apparel and that "belonging to a given cultural group is usually revealed by clothing traditions" (p. 35). By drawing on the work of Fanon, Al-Saji explains that the veil in western representation has come to represent the cultural other. In this conversation Eveline explained how the burkini is not just a symbol of a different culture, but according to her it is something that is in opposition with European values which she is referring to as "our values". Hind explained that the burkini to her is not related to opposing European values. She argued that she prefers the burkini because she doesn't like to show nudity. She also explained that her actions are informed by this desire as she doesn't go to a spa or sauna because of this. By engaging in this conversation Hind is actually showing that she has agency, even if she and Eveline do not share the same values. She is also speaking back to normative assumptions about

Muslims not being able to adjust to European countries. Hind explained that avoiding nudity is an integral part of her self-realization. She explained to Eveline that that is who she is and how she prefers to live her live.

4.6 Modern Muslims and veiling as a security

In the following section I want to elaborate on two new insights I gained from the data I have studied. There was a small discussion on the question of modern and unmodern Muslims and I recognized a shift in the way the veil is racialized. Let me elaborate on these two points with examples from my data. Sannae, a Muslim woman, reacted on the Facebook page of NRC Handelsblad to an article which was written by religious scholar Margreet van Schie, in which she criticizes the burkini ban. Part of the article says:

> Alleen de meest moderne, 'aangepaste' moslima's zullen zich in een boerkini tussen de vreemde mannen wagen om een stukje te gaan zwemmen. Dit bedekkende badpak is daarom geen lange neus tegen de 'onzedelijkheid' van de Fransen, maar een lange neus tegen de traditie die vrouwen thuis wil houden en al zeker niet wil laten sporten of zwemmen. [Only the most modern, adapted Muslima's will wear a burkini in the presence of strange men when going for a swim. This swimsuit therefore is not thumbing its nose at the immorality of the French beaches, but rather against the tradition that wants to keep women in their houses and certainly doesn't want them to exercise or swim.]

To which Sannae reacted as follows:

> Moderne moslimas? [sic] Dat woord alleen al. Als je moslim bent, ben je moslim, niet modern of a-modern. Gewoon moslim. Ik ben namelijk ook gewoon moslima. [Modern muslim women? That word alone. If you are a Muslim, you are a Muslim, not modern or a-modern. Just muslim. I am also just a muslim woman]

Sannae uses her full name on Facebook and she uses a picture of herself as a profile picture. In this picture she is not wearing a headscarf. In her comment Sannae presents herself as an ordinary Muslim. She expresses that she does not believe in the dichotomy of modern vs a-modern Muslims. She expresses that she does not identify herself according to the discourse of modernity. According to her the religious identity of being Muslim in general is not something which can be understood along the lines of modernity. She places the Muslim identity outside the discourse of modernity. Sannae's comment reminded me of Braidotti's (2008) critique of secularism which is prompted by the Enlightenment. Braidotti (2016) argues that the way secularism is defined and understood in Europe, is a result of a secular distillation of Judeo-Christian precepts: "without the Judeo-Christian tradition there is no progressive emancipation and therefore no secularism and hence no post-secular condition" (p. 9). She adds that this line of reasoning leaves Islam "in the singular position of being the one monotheistic religion positing subjectivity without the need for secularist distinctions" and that this would mean that Islam "can have no claim to modernity, emancipation or human rights" (p. 9), even though this has been proven as historically false. This shows that within the European context modernity and Islam are constructed as opposites. By criticizing the use of modernity in the article on the burkini ban, Sannae shows that she has knowledge about this construction. However I find it interesting that she doesn't engage with it affirmatively. After all, the article speaks of modern Muslim women and by doing so challenges the dichotomy between Islam and modernity. But Sannea is rejecting engaging with this concept all together. She places herself outside of the discourse of modernity. Even though Sannea doesn't engage with the concept of "modern Muslim women" positively, I think that her rejection of the concept of modernity can still be read as a strategy of affirmation. She envisions a mode of becoming as a Muslim woman which doesn't place itself within the problematic discourse of modernity. I would therefore argue that her critical reflection in the comment is a micro-political practice of daily (online) activism or intervention and is therefore a form of political subjectivity.

I would also like to draw attention to the shift in the manner by which the veil is problematized and racialized. Earlier in one of Jorien's quotes, she expresses that the

burkini is not a sign of extremism. In her article on the legality of the burkini-ban Nadia writes the following:

> De burkini [sic] zou kleding zijn dat geassocieerd kan worden met terroristische groeperingen met wie 'zij' [de Fransen] in oorlog zijn. En dus is een verbod op een burkini [sic] op het strand een noodzakelijk, geschikt en proportioneel middel. Really? [The burkini would [according to the French government] be clothing which can be associated with terrorist groups which whom 'they' [the French] are at war. And because of this a ban on the burkini on the beach is a necessary, suitable and proportional means [for them]. Really?]

Al-Saji (2010) has shown how cultural racism occurs by the naturalization and projection of gender oppression to the veil. In her article she discusses how gender has been a critical tool to position veiling as an obstacle for women's subjectivity. Up until the burkini ban, playing the gender card has been the only successful strategy to ban veiling from public spaces. However, when analyzing these examples it becomes apparent that in case of the burkini-ban, a whole other discourse was applied. One that did not rely heavily on the gender card. Veiling in this instance is portrayed as an allegiance to terrorist groups. While the concept of gender is still heavily represented in discussions among Dutch people on Facebook, the French government did not rely on this concept to justify the ban. This is a relatively new discourse on veiling. For further research it would be interesting to understand how the public reacts to this discourse. Is it as easily adopted as the gender card? What are other instances where a form of veiling is constructed as a security threat? These are important questions to research an understand.

4.7 Engagement in Facebook discussions

I have also looked at the way in which Muslim women engaged in these discussions. In this section I would like to elaborate on some interesting dynamics. On the page of *Meld Islamofobie* for instance only one article was published which was written by a Muslim woman; the article written by Nadia Benaissa. However there were no

comments posted under this post, it was in fact the only post about the burkini ban on this page which had 0 comments. This indicates a low engagement with this content. I would have expected that Muslim women would engage more with content written by a Muslim women, especially on a page for Muslims in the Netherlands. Of course there could be many reasons to explain the lack of interaction on this specific article. The article contains a lot of legal jargon and is written from this specific perspective, while the other articles that were posted were more general news articles. This complexity might make it less accessible for people who are not familiar with the legal language. Another explanation might be related to the algorithm of Facebook. I was also surprised by the amount of engagement from Muslim women on the post featuring the essay written by Aheda Zanetti. There were no comments posted by Muslim women under this post. This was also the only article written by a Muslim woman posted on the page of *NRC Handelsblad.* There could be different reasons to explain this. One insight which might provide an explanation is that both Aheda and Nadia wrote about the burkini-ban not only as a racist act, but also as a form of gender oppression. Al-Saji (2010) argued that gender is already racialized and that the projection of gender oppression onto the veil is the means by which it is racialized. This creates an uncomfortable position for Muslim women within debates about gender oppression. I think that, because gender is already racialized, it is more difficult for Muslim women to engage with a gender discourse. For so long the gender narrative has been, and is still being, used effectively to justify their marginalization. The strength of Muslim women in online discussions might be the fact that they produce knowledge and raise awareness about the manner in which gender is used to justify cultural racism. The page of WOMEN Inc. also posted an article featuring a Muslim woman, but since this was the only post about the burkini ban there was no engagement with this post. There were not many differences in discussions between the three pages. The only page that popped up as offering significantly different insights was the page of *Meld Islamofobie*. This was the only page where there were conversations about the nature of modesty and whether the burkini supported piety.

5. CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have aimed to understand different constructions of Muslim female and/or feminist subjectivities in online discussions on Dutch Facebook pages about the burkini ban imposed in France. Based on the comments I gathered, I chose to work with different theories and insights provided by Saba Mahmood, Alia Al-Saji and Rosi Braidotti. Mahmood elaborates on the conception of the self and moral agency among pious women; Al-Saji offers a unique philosophical analysis on the phenomenology of vision and the racialization of the Muslim veil in Western representation; Braidotti expands on the relation and tension between female identity and feminist subjectivity, but also on the nature of political subjectivity. By bringing the perspectives of these three distinct feminist authors together, I have aimed to provide a framework to analyze and understand female and feminist subjectivities, how they relate to each other and how we can think differently about subjectivity and identity on SNS.

The comments I have analyzed show that there is a variety in the ways Muslim women present themselves online, what kind of knowledge they bring to discussions on SNS and how they engage with these discussions. I have noticed that they do not always use photographs of themselves as profile pictures, but rather use images of inspirational quotes when presenting themselves on Facebook. This might be understood as a way of performing modesty in the digital sphere. For further research it would be interesting to interview modest Muslim women about their motivations behind the way they present themselves online. In some of these quotes there would be a direct reference to Islam, examples are images featuring statements like: “I love Allah” or “Never stop asking Allah for what you want”. There were some interesting dynamics in the way Muslim women engaged in online discussions which I would like to highlight in this conclusion. There were not so many differences in discussions between the three pages. The only page that popped up as offering significantly different insights was the page of *Meld Islamofobie*. This was the only page where there were conversations about the nature of modesty and whether the burkini supported piety. I was surprised that Muslim women did not engage with the posts which featured articles written by Muslim women.

In the discussions certain themes emerged which I have analyzed in the previous chapters. A topic of discussion both among Muslims and non-Muslims was whether the burkini was Islamic or not. This brought some interesting perspectives to my attention on how subject formation and piety is not only related to what people wear, but also to the kind of spaces one chooses to interact in. Thus, showing that piety might also be considered as a spatial concept. One topic which resonated a lot among Muslim women was the concept of racialization. The burkini-ban was referred to as a racist ban by some Muslim women. Some Muslim women also referred to visibility. Both in the sense that they felt hypervisible when wearing a burkini, as in the sense that the burkini was covering up their nakedness. Vision seems to have an important role in the self-actualization of Muslim women. A final topic which emerged from the data was the oppression of Muslim women. In some comments Muslim women called out the double standard for emancipation by asking questions such as "who is oppressing whom right now?". When considering the engagement of Muslim women with these discussions it is notable that they did not engage as much with articles written by other Muslim women. However, significantly more Muslim women engaged in discussions of the Facebook page of Meld Islamofobie then on the pages of NRC and WOMEN Inc.

There are three main conclusions I would like to draw from my research and the subsequent findings. The different Facebook pages show that gender, race and religion are part of the digital sphere. They shape the identities of pages and the communities of these pages. Meld Islamofobie, for instance, is a page created by Muslims and there are more Muslims within the community of this page then in the communities of the pages of WOMEN Inc. and NRC. Gender, race and religion do not only influence the identity and community of the online pages but, as a result, also shape the kinds of discussions on each page. My data shows that the page of Meld Islamofobie, for instance, lends itself to have theological discussions on the construction of piety within Islam. The page of NRC, which has significantly more followers, lends itself for a variety of different perspectives. It has a less homogenized community of followers resulting in all kinds of different discussions, some which are even very racist. Apart from how they shape the specific online pages, communities

and discussions, they are also important identity markers for how people present themselves on their online Facebook page.

As a result I would argue that these online pages are also social spheres which are political and lend themselves for resistance and activism. While it is much more difficult for Muslim women to be heard and seen in mainstream media and politics, these SNS provide more accessible platforms for them to voice their opinions and express counter-narratives. If there is a racist or sexist comment, these online platforms make it possible for Muslim women to react directly and question the comment and the person who wrote it. It is another form of 'talking back', but this time in the digital sphere. I would argue that the interactions and discussions on these pages can be recognized as micro-political practices of daily online activism or intervention and are therefore a form of political subjectivity.

Finally the narratives of Muslim women show a complexity of the embodied structure of the subject and that within each subject there are contradictory moments and differences. The different comments of Muslim women illustrate the tensions between the female identity and feminist subjectivity. Their accounts highlight the importance of intersectionality as they experience exclusion based on different identity markers For instance how they experience gender as an already racialized category. The fact that Muslim women are more inclined to engage with topics on the racialization of the veil shows that feminist discourse in the Dutch context needs to critically examine how gender is racialized. The feminist movement in the Netherlands can benefit by taking the narratives and experiences of Muslim women seriously as they can bring attention to the patriarchal structures of western or colonial societies.

Recent developments show that veiled Muslim women do not have equal opportunities in the Netherlands. Research by Platform Integration & Society (2016) shows that students who wear a headscarf are less likely to find an internship because "wearing a headscarf does not match the appearance the company wants to present to their customers" (Klooster, Kocak & Day, 2016, p. 3). Some companies even explicitly mention in their advertisement that they do not accept students who wear a

headscarf, but this is not recognized as discriminatory by the teachers, schools and companies involved (Klooster, Kocak & Day, 2016). More recently on March 14th, 2017 the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) ruled that internal company rules banning the wearing of visible religious, political or philosophical symbols do not constitute direct discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2017). This judgement sets a dangerous precedent by accepting neutrality claims as a justification to bar the manifestation of religion and thereby racialized and gendered others. Even though the ruling does not explicitly mention Muslim women, so far they have been the most impacted by this ruling. This thesis offers an important contribution as it centers the voices of Muslim women and takes them seriously. This remains an important task for researchers, as the exclusion of veiled Muslim women becomes more and more justified with recent developments.

The unique analytical framework I have offered by building on the perspectives of Mahmood, Al-Saji and Braidotti provides an interesting tool to understand the different ways in which Muslim women identify themselves and the different subject positions available for these women. While there have been several studies on Muslim women and their position, it has not always been easy to maneuver the vexed relationship between feminism and religious traditions. However I hope that this analytical framework enables researchers to provide a more embodied and intersectional analysis of the experiences of Muslim women. Furthermore I hope that this framework offers a different perspective on the relationship between feminism and religious traditions. Finally by applying this framework on a dataset retrieved from discussions on SNS, I have aimed to understand how the digital sphere influences subject formation. This research provides new insights on the different ways in which gender, race and religion are present in the digital sphere and how Muslim women negotiate these spaces. It is important to understand how the digital sphere and specifically SNS influence everyday life and politics as they have the potential to make a real difference, both in the positive and in the negative sense. Recent examples are the reactions of consumers on racist advertisements by companies such as H&M, Heineken, Nivea and Pepsi, who as a result were pressured to make a public apology and take necessary measures. Another example however is how Muslim beauty blogger Amena Khan was forced to end a collaboration with

L'Oreal Paris when her presence in a shampoo advertisement created a lot of backlash when people retrieved old Tweets from her criticizing Israel for the human rights violations during the attack on Gaza in 2014. These incidents show that SNS can have real influence in the offline world and can effect change.

These examples and the insights from this research show that it is also important to consider the offline impact of online conversations. Based on the conclusions of this research I would recommend doing further research on how offline practices are translated as online practices. One example for instance was the use of *nasiha*. How do Muslim women participate in the practice of *nasiha* on SNS? This was something mentioned by Muslim women as a reason for their engagement in online discussions. Another point that emerged from the data and would be interesting to research further is the construction of piety as a spatial concept. Often times piety is related to clothing practices but from the data I have researched it emerged that for some this is also related to the kind of spaces they engage in.

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