

# Really Muslim; Really Dutch

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Muslim women constructing a public Dutch Muslim identity

Bachelor Thesis Genderstudies and International Relations

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Identity Politics and Muslim women in Dutch Society

On the 26th of May 2010, the Telegraaf published an article with the title ‘Muslim women defend themselves with ‘Really Dutch’’. (translation: SV) ‘Really Dutch’ is a campaign released by the Muslim women’s organization Al Nisa, through which they want to fight against the prejudices about Muslim women. In the Telegraaf article, Leyla Çakir, the chairperson of the organization, states that the general idea about Muslim women, is that they are suppressed and always in the house. Furthermore, she says, the idea is “ that we are not allowed to be visible and that we have nothing to say. With this poster campaign, we want to show the opposite.” ( Redactie Telegraaf 2010. translation S.V.) With the poster campaign ‘Really Dutch’, Al Nisa wants to create a public identity for Muslim women that moves beyond the prejudices and stereotypes on Muslim women in Dutch society. According to Çakir, the poster campaign wants to make these women visible.

Through the campaign, Muslim women in the Netherlands claim a public identity with the use of identity politics. Identity politics relates to groups who built up public action to show how their identity fits in society and to challenge the way they are made (or not made) visible in society by the normative dominant discourse. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2011) In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many movements emerged that used identity politics as an organizing mode to transform stigmas and stereotypes. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2011) Al Nisa is using the politics of identity to make Muslim women visible in society and to challenge the existing prejudices about Muslim women as suppressed victims.

## 1.2. Identity

Identity politics have caused a lot of debates, mainly on the concept of identity itself. Critics on identity politics claim that its use will easily lead to essentialist notions about identity. They argue that building up political action around one axe of identity, leads to the fixation of the subject in one particular location. Scholars such as Susan Hekman (2004), Judith Butler (1990) and Homi Bhabha (1985, 1994), argue against identity as fixed and static and refer to identity as being fluid, heterogeneous and in a constant mode of change. These scholars, among others, have influenced the debates surrounding identity. During the Enlightenment, the general idea was that the mind functioned independent of the body. As a result, the self, with its mind, was a free and autonomous subject not influenced by its environment. (Stanford Encyclopedia 2011a) Immanuel Kant, an influential philosopher in the days of the Enlightenment, wrote about the autonomous subject and the separation of the body and the mind. In his philosophy, he pleads for a transcendental subject that is unencumbered and unitary. This means that a subject, in Kants vision, is universal and timeless and that it operates independent of its surroundings. (Leezenberg en de Vries 2001: 114-115) Nowadays, in the debates on the mind and the subject, individuals are no longer perceived as having a core essence, but rather as subjects whose identities are a construction influenced by the surrounding environment. (Hekman 2004) My identity, for example, is not a fixed and essential given. It is rather a construct that can be influenced and changed. My identity is not universal or timeless, but influenced by the western culture I grew up in, the education I received and the way my mother raised me. All these aspects are part of my identity construction. The current debates on identity take this non-fixed notion of identity as a point of departure.

### **1.3. Research Question**

Identity politics can easily lead to fixed and essentialist notions of individual and group identities. Therefore, it is important to take individual difference into account when making political claims as a group on the basis of a shared identity. I want to analyze how Muslim women can use identity politics to create an identity in Dutch society that moves beyond stereotypes and essentialist conceptions of who they are. My central question is therefore as follows: How can identity politics be used by Muslim women in order to create a combined Dutch and Muslim identity?

In order to answer this question, I will first elaborate on the debates surrounding identity politics and present the different visions on the topic. Secondly, I will look at the position of Muslim women in Dutch society. The questions I want to deal with in this part are as follows: How are these women perceived in Dutch society? How do they construct their identities? How do they mediate between their Dutch and Muslim identities? How can Muslim women make claims on the basis of their Muslimness without being reduced to a fixed identity? With regard to these questions, I will not only look at identity constructions of individual Muslim women in the Netherlands, but additionally analyze the campaign ‘Really Dutch’ by the Dutch Muslim women’s organization Al Nisa. In this campaign, Muslim women emphasize their hybrid identity by combining Dutch and Muslim customs. Finally, I will propose an identity politics based on hybridity that can be used by Dutch Muslim women to create a public identity that moves beyond stigma’s and stereotypes.

### **1.4. Objective**

Muslim women in the Netherlands are still represented in stereotypical images. With this thesis, my aim is to challenge static and traditional presentations of Muslim women as suppressed objects. Furthermore, I hope to make visible that when making claims on basis of personal identity in the public sphere, it is important not to fall into essentialist notions but to

take difference into account. Therefore, I argue for an identity politics that moves beyond stereotypes. This can be of relevance for Muslim women who construct their identities in the public sphere and who want to challenge existing ideas about Muslim women in Dutch society.

## 1.5. Approach

Literature research on identity politics and identity will be used to introduce and explain the central topics in this thesis. In order to give some insight in the way Muslim women are framed in the media, a media research done by Bart Koenen (2008) will be used. I have deliberately chosen not to focus on Muslims in general, but on Muslim women in particular for two reasons. First of all, this thesis is about identity. As Judith Butler rightly states, there cannot be any discussion about identity without a prior discussion on gender simply because recognizable standards of gender are at the core of an individual's becoming. (Butler 2010: 20) Being either male, female or something in between these categories, is fundamental in the construction of identity. As such, gender needs to be made particular when writing about identity. Secondly, the discourse on migrants has always had a gender aspect. It is the Muslim women that are often used to visualize the differences between western and non-western cultures. Especially in the debate on Muslim culture, it is the women who are victimized and in need of help from western civilization. (Ghorsashi 2006: 48, Essers and Benschop 2009: 404)

In this thesis, I want to show that Muslim women are in practice already constructing their identities. I will make this process of identity construction visible with the use of interviews with Muslim women from Moroccan and Turkish descent.<sup>1</sup> The poster campaign 'Really Dutch' by Al Nisa, will be analyzed to show how Muslim women claim a public identity.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the categories of Muslim, Moroccan and Turkish simultaneously. I am aware of the differences between them, however, in this thesis I will focus on the similarities between these categories. Being Moroccan or Turkish does not necessarily mean religious, but it does refer to being a Muslim. In this thesis, Muslim refers to the intersection of religion, culture and ethnicity. As such, being Turkish or Moroccan is, for the sake of my argument, referring to being Muslim. There are women who explicitly deny their Muslim identity. This will be elaborated on in the paragraphs on the identity constructions of Muslim women.

I will use the methods of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991, Wekker 2001) and hybridity (Bhabha 1994) as a theoretical framework to analyze identity politics and the identity construction of Muslim women in the Netherlands. Intersectionality puts identity on a crossroads of different identity axes such as gender, class, ethnicity and religion. As such, identity is seen as multiple and constructed out of different categories. When an intersectional analysis is done, it is important not to look at a subject as having one fixed identity position, but rather to look at the different categories that construct a subject's identity and position in society. (Knudsen 2006: 61-62) I will use the concept of hybridity by Homi Bhabha (1994) to present an identity politics that does not fall into the trap of essentialism. I will argue that a hybrid vision on identity politics can be useful for Muslim women in the Netherlands to create a Dutch Muslim identity that goes beyond any stereotypical idea on being Muslim, woman and/or Dutch.

## 2. Identity Politics

### 2.1. Identity politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marginalized groups such as women, blacks and gays, pointed towards the injustices that were practiced against them. These groups built political movements on the foundations of their commonalities and shared experiences in order to address the injustices they were facing. They used identity politics as an organizing mode to transform stigma's and to fight for recognition within society. Identity politics aims to reclaim or transform previously stigmatized accounts of group membership. Rather than accepting the negative scripts offered by a dominant culture about marginalized groups, it changes the sense of self and of community. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2011) The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), for example, committed itself to the eradication of racism, sexism and heterosexism. According to the NBFO, there was no space for black women within society, and as a consequence, black women felt the need for self-definition. (Guy-Sheftall 1995: 15)

There is no clear cut definition that encompasses the broad scope that identity politics contains. Neither is it possible to define a straightforward criterion that makes a political struggle an example of identity politics. Rather, the term refers to political projects that represent groups that have been neglected or suppressed in society. The mechanisms of identity politics is about groups who built up public action to make visible how their identity fits in society and to challenge the way they are made (or not made) visible in society by the normative dominant discourse. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2011) Identity politics is about making a personal identity of political concern. Shane Phelan is one of many scholars who argues that identity is not only of personal concern but also of political relevance. According to her, identity politics requires society to have that part of identity legitimated, which is neglected or oppressed. (Phelan 1989: 127) In order to get this oppressed part legitimated, identity has to get out of the personal individual sphere into the public sphere. The importance of the relation between the private and the public sphere was already discussed in Second Wave feminism under de banner of 'the

personal is political'. (Arneil 1999: 74) The debate on the personal is political emerged when second wave feminists started to consider the position of women in the private sphere. They argued that the women's experiences in their private lives should be used for political analysis. As a result, individual experiences were made into public concern and the personal experiences of women within the private sphere became important sources for political activity. (Arneil 1999: 74, 263-264) Identity politics reflects the debate on the personal is political, because people build up social groups and movements based on their individual shared experiences and identities in order to make claims on the basis of this.

Identity politics is of relevance when discussing the position of Muslim women in Dutch society, since it can be used by Muslim women to challenge the image that is created of them. As I mentioned in the introduction, I want to show how Muslim women in the Netherlands can use identity politics to make claims in the public sphere on the basis of their Muslimness and Dutchness. As will become clear in the section on Muslim women in the Netherlands, Dutch society still perceives Muslim women as passive victims, locked in their house and in need of help. Through the politics of identity, Muslim women can build up action in order to make themselves visible within society and to create a public identity that moves beyond the stereotype of the Muslim women as a victim.

## **2.2. Identity Politics and the Trap of Essentialism**

Identity politics as a concept causes to a lot of philosophical debates on the nature of identity itself. When making political claims on an identical basis, there is the danger of seeing the subject as having a single identity. Critics blame identity politics for fixing identities in new locations. Although identity politics emphasizes a plethora of identities in the political sphere, it does not conceptualize these identities as fluid, but as fixed and monolithic. (Hekman 2004: 4-5) Political movements are built around a single axis of identity such as being black or being Muslim. As a result, although marginalized groups get recognition within society, they do not transcend stereotypical notions of their identity but rather reinforce them. (Stanford Encyclopedia of

Philosophy 2011; Crenshaw 1991: 1244) When Muslim women build up public action solely on the basis of being Muslim, they do not challenge the fixed notions about Muslims. Critics have thus stated that when the subject is seen as having a single identity, identity politics leads to the problem of essentialism. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2011) Essentialism, according to the Oxford Dictionary refers to “a belief that things have a set of characteristics which make them what they are, and that the task of science and philosophy is their discovery and expression; the doctrine that essence is prior to existence.” (Oxford Dictionary 2011) Many scholars critique essentialism on the basis that it “is a way of conceiving political identities and that it renders these identities “static”, “absolutist”, “overdetermined” and “universalist”.” (Heyes 2000: 18, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2011) When identity politics becomes essentialist, it is reinforcing stereotypical notions of group identities instead of repudiating them and thus might work against the purpose of identity politics in the first place; the transformation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership.

Since the goal of identity politics is to unite subjects for a common purpose, identity politics has a tendency to subsume different identical aspects of a subject under one banner. (Hekman 2004: 144) Thus, when Muslim women build up public action on their commonalities, they use being Muslim and being woman as premises. The differences between these women are set aside for the purpose of the political movement. As a result, Muslim women could be seen as a homogeneous and monolithic group instead of a heterogeneous group. Furthermore, identity politics suggests that identity is something that is marked by boundaries. Instead of emphasizing its multiplicity, it is fixing identity and makes it static. Through erasing differences, identity politics engenders a notion of an essential identity. I will use a theory by Judith Butler to critique such essentialist ideas on identity and to challenge identity politics.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler problematizes the concept of identity. Instead of approaching identity as fixed and static, she argues for a perception of identity as fluid and in a continuous state of becoming. (Butler 2010) In her book, she introduces the philosophy of *performativity*. Butler argues that gender is performatively produced and constituted by the expressions that are said to be its results. There is no ontological gender reality except for the one that is constituted through its various acts. Furthermore, the interior essence that is fabricated is

an effect of public and social discourse. (Butler 2010: 34, 185) This means that identity has no fixed ontology, but is rather a product of expressions that constitute its reality. Instead of having an essential core, identity is thus perceived as fluid and constantly changing according to the way it is expressed. Butler starts her book by stating that the category of woman is normative, exclusionary and repudiating the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which women are constructed. (Butler 2010 : 19) She stresses that gender is not always constituted coherently in different social contexts but is rather affected by racial, class and ethnic features. When talking about identity, it is impossible to separate gender from political and cultural intersections in which it is produced. (Butler 2010: 4) Hence, cultural influences on the understanding of what it means to identify as a woman, are important to take into consideration when analyzing gender identities. This means that, growing up in a western society, my gender is produced differently from the gender of Muslim women simply because it is produced in a different cultural history. Furthermore, if identities are perceived as being the result of a performative action, then 'being' a Muslim woman entails something different than 'being' a Dutch secular woman because it is performed differently. If acts are a result of social discourse and produce gender identities, then inherently social discourses on what women 'are' produce gender identities. Since Muslim cultures have a different idea of what it is to be a woman than Dutch culture has, Muslim women will perform a different gender identity than Dutch women. In sum, identity is not a fixed, essentialist and static concept, but rather a performed, fluid and ever changing phenomenon, dependent on its context.

Identity politics often fails to address the fluid character of identity as presented by Butler, by portraying identity and social groups as essential and monolithic. How then, can identity politics be used without falling into the trap of essentialism? I want to argue for an identity politics that addresses the fluid character of identity and as a result transgresses static and essential notions of identity. It is not my purpose to do away with identity politics since it is a good tool to unite people for a common purpose and a way to make identities visible in the public sphere. I do, however, want to argue for an identity politics that takes into account the differences between individuals and that takes a non-essentialist approach towards identity as a starting point. In the next chapter, I want to introduce intersectionality as a concept that can be used in order to make the heterogeneous and fluid nature of identity visible. Furthermore, I want

to elaborate on the theory of the hybrid subject. I will put this hybrid subject at the centre of the politics of identity, in order to create an identity politics that leaves room for individual differences and that moves beyond stereotypes and at the same time manages to connect people.

### **3. A new Identity Politics**

#### **3.1. Intersectionality**

The term intersectionality was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 and was based on the position of black women in the United States. Reflecting on their position in society, these women pointed toward the interconnection of gender, ethnicity and class in the construction of their identity. (Buikema and Van der Tuin 2007: 72-73) According to Crenshaw, an individual's identity consists of different categories such as gender, ethnicity, race and class. The crossroad of all these different axes is where a person's identity is constructed. (Crenshaw 1991: 1296-1299) My identity consists for example of categories such as woman, white, middleclass etc. All these axes are noteworthy when analyzing my identity. What is significant about intersectionality, is that the multiple axes are not only existing next to each other, but that they are mutually reinforcing in the construction of identity. Thus, in my case, my gender cannot be seen separate from my culture. My culture subscribes how I am supposed to behave as a female and my womanhood influences the way I live my culture. These two categories, can thus not be seen as separate and on itself existing, but rather as interrelated axes. (Knudsen 2006: 61) Intersectionality should not be used in an additive form, but more as an intra-sectional concept. If it is used additively, it does not take into account the way categories mutually influence each other in the construction of identity. (Knudsen 2006: 63-64) Identical axes, thus, should not be analyzed as separate categories that exist next to each other. Rather, intersectionality should be used in an intra-active way. This means that the different axes that construct identities intertwine and transform each other. (Knudsen 2006: 64) Gloria Wekker refers to this character of intersectionality as an interdependent and interwoven system of ideas and practices. (Wekker and Lutz 2001) According to her, when making an intersectional analysis, it is important to take all the important axes that construct someone's identity into account. (Wekker and Lutz 2001) Thus, ethnicity always has a gender and class component that cannot be neglected when researching ethnic groups and individuals.

An intersectional approach towards identity is very important for Muslim women who try to construct their identities on the notion of being woman, Muslim, as well as being Dutch since all these identity aspects are present in and co-construct these women's identities. Furthermore, although these women have commonalities on the basis of being woman, Muslim and Dutch, they might differ in their approach to religion, their nationality and their age. When intersectionality is used as a starting point in identity construction, there is room for the heterogeneous character of group identities. Furthermore, by addressing the different axes on which identities are constructed, it challenges fixed, essentialist notions of identity, suggesting that every individual's identity is placed on a different intersection.

Although intersectionality poses a challenge to identity politics by addressing the heterogeneity of identity, it does not always elaborate on how these categories have come into existence. I want to use intersectionality not only as a tool to place identity on a crossroad of many identical axes, but I want to go further and also challenge the (essentialist) character of these axes itself. I want to both discuss the content and the boundaries of the categories from an intersectional perspective. For example, when one axis of identity is religion, for example Muslim, I argue for a critical discussion on the content and the boundaries of the category Muslim. Muslimness should not only be seen as one of the many identical axes on which an individual constructs his or her personality. Muslimness should not only be seen as one of the many identical axes on which an individual constructs his or her personality, but it should also be discussed in connection to national identity and gender. In this context, these categories are not just related, but also constantly create new interpretations of Dutchness, Muslimness, or Female. In order to discuss the content and the boundaries of the categories that intersectionality uses, I will use the concept of hybridity.

### 3.2. Hybridity

In chapter 2, I explained that identity politics easily falls into the trap of essentialism. Scholars like Butler have argued for a notion of identity as being fluid and in a constant state of becoming. In order to create an identity politics that moves beyond essentialism, this fluid character of identity has to be taken into account. Intersectionality challenges the static and essentialist notions of individual and group identity by placing identity on the crossroad of different axes.

The question I want to elaborate on in this paragraph, is how Muslim women in the Netherlands can make their identity public without falling in the trap of essentialism. How can they make their Muslim and Dutch identity visible in society and avoid essentialist, static and homogeneous notions of identity? I want to introduce the concept of hybridity as proposed by Bhabha (1994) and show how this can be used by Muslim women in the Netherlands in order to move beyond stereotypes and to mediate their multiple identities in the public sphere.

In his work on hybrid identities and the 'Third Space', Bhabha proposes a social subject that is constituted through cultural hybridization. (Bhabha 1994) In his book *The Location of Culture* he refers to hybridization as a process of "translating and transvaluing cultural difference." (Bhabha 2004: 361) He argues for the prevention of settling identities into primordial polarities. Instead, he supposes an interstitial passage between fixed identifications that opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity. (Bhabha 2004: 5, 361) A hybrid identity is constructed out of elements of the colonizer and colonized and challenges the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity and a conceptualization of original culture. Instead of fixed authentic identities, Bhabha thus argues that all forms of culture are in a constant process of hybridity. (Meredith 1998: 2) The hybrid subject places itself in a so called 'Third Space', a space of new forms of cultural meaning that is blurring existing boundaries and challenging established categories of cultural identities. A hybrid third space is an ambivalent site where cultural meaning and representation have no primordial unity or fixity. (Meredith 1998: 3) What is important, though, is that hybridity is not there to resolve the tension between cultures. (Bhabha 1985: 156) I would rather say that it is complicating the tensions between cultures. Instead of

making a new identity out of already existing identities (in Bhabha's case the colonizer and the colonized) it is challenging the existence of any fixed notion of identity. In my opinion, this is very important with regard to identity politics. By challenging the nature of identity and the existing lines between identity categories, hybridity is subverting essentialist claims on identity. The hybrid subject is transgressing binary thinking and oppositional positioning by providing a politics of inclusion rather than exclusion and "initiates new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration." (Bhabha 1994 in Meredith 1998: 3) The hybrid identity, positioned in the Third Space, is in the conjuncture of cultures where it negotiates and mediates affinity and difference within a dynamic exchange of inclusion. (Meredith 1998: 3) Where intersectionality places identity on a crossroad of many identical axes, hybridity challenges the nature of these axes itself. As stated by Bhabha, although the hybrid subject uses existing categories, it is revaluing and reshaping these categories and turning them into a new identity position.

Although hybridity, as proposed by Bhabha, is very focused on the position of the colonizer and the colonized, the idea of hybrid cultural identities can be applied to (ethnic or religious) minorities as well. Bhabha's anti-essentialist politics and the intermediation between different (seemingly incompatible) cultures and identical categories can well be used to analyze the mediated identities of Muslim women. By positioning themselves as a hybrid subject in the Third Space, these women can mediate between the Dutch and Muslim culture, between religion and secularism and between male and female identities. In this space, they can transgress fixed boundaries of categories and construct a new identity and new positions. As Bhabha (1994) clearly states, the Third Space not a reflective space but a productive one that engenders new possibilities. Hence, when Muslim women construct a hybrid position in the Third Space, they are not reflecting their Muslim background and putting a bit of Dutch flavor in it, but rather creating a whole new cultural identity that mediates between Dutch and Muslim categories. In paragraph 5.3., I further discuss the way Muslim women can use hybridity to create a Dutch Muslim identity.

The first part of this thesis has been about identity politics and identity constructions. In the next part, I will discuss the identity construction of Muslim women in the Netherlands. I will start with elaborating on how Muslim women are framed and presented in Dutch Society. After

that, I will analyze interviews conducted with Muslim women who mediate between their different axes of identity. But first, I will analyze a campaign of Al Nisa, a Muslim women's organization in the Netherlands, and show how they can use identity politics to create a Dutch Muslim identity within the public sphere.

## **4. Muslim Women in the Netherlands**

### **4.1. Muslim women in Dutch society**

In the Dutch debates on integration and multiculturalism, Muslim women are often presented as victims who are suppressed by their culture and their husbands, trapped in their tradition and in desperate need of help to take more part in (Dutch) society. (Ghorashi 2006: 46, 49) In his thesis on Muslim women in the media, Koenen (2008) analyzed how Muslim women are framed in the media. I will use his thesis to show how Muslim women are framed in Dutch media and society and how this image is in many cases incompatible to the individual identity constructions of Muslim women. According to Koenen, the reason that Muslim women are portrayed as victims has a lot to do with the discourse of new realism. (Koenen 2008: 121) In this section, I will explain the meaning of new realism and how it has influenced the way Muslim women are represented in the media.

The new realist discourse in the Netherlands emerged in the early nineties, when the Dutch multicultural society was hotly debated. New realists, such as Bolkestein, critiqued the way in which cultural groups were integrating and stated that minority groups should be handled with guts. (Prins 2002: 367) Three significant features can be distinguished in the discourse of new realism. First of all, the new realist author presents herself or himself as having the guts to speak. That is, having the guts to point towards the difficulties surrounding the integration of immigrants and to stand up and challenge the soft way immigrants are handled. Secondly, they present themselves as the spokespersons of the 'ordinary' people. Thirdly, they refer to new realism as a characteristic of Dutch identity; it is typically Dutch to be frank and straightforward and thus speak up against issues such as the bad integration of immigrants. (Prins 2002: 368) Important is, that the discourse points towards the differences between the immigrants and Dutch culture. Bolkestein, for example, stated that universal values such as freedom of speech and secularization are not present in the world of Islam. (Prins 2002: 4) As a result of such statements about the Islam, Muslim women are seen as being a victim of their conservative and

backwards religion and culture. (Koenen 2008: 122) By constantly framing these women as passive victims, new realists have influenced the way Muslim women are framed in the media. Besides being portrayed as victims, the media presents them as a homogeneous religious group without paying attention to the different identity marks between these women. As a result, Dutch Muslim women are confronted with identity constructions in which they do not recognize themselves. The objectified image that the media presents, leads to the enlargement of the gap that Muslim women experience between their personal identity, and the social identity as presented in the media. (Koenen 2008: 123,124)

The media, influenced by the new realist discourse, gives a very stereotypical image of the Muslim woman as a victim of her own culture. This stereotypical image might create ideas about Muslim women that are not correct. Furthermore, Muslim women themselves can often not identify with the in the media constructed social identity of them as victims. In the next paragraph, I will describe how Muslim women in the Netherlands relate to their personal identity. As will become clear, the personal identity construction of Muslim women is not compatible with the image of the Muslim woman as presented in the media.

#### **4.2. Identity Constructions of Muslim Women in the Netherlands**

In this paragraph, I will elaborate on a research by Caroline Essers and Yvonne Benschop (2009) and a research by Marjo Buitelaar (2008) that are done among Muslim women and how they relate to their different axes of identity. Both researches have used interviews to show how Muslim women mediate between different axes of identity and consequently emphasize the heterogeneous character of their personal identities. These women's identity constructions are contradictory to the static, homogeneous and stereotypical image of the Muslim woman as framed in the media.

The research conducted by Benschop and Essers, elaborates on the identity constructions of Muslim business women and points towards the variation within the group of Muslim women instead of the variance between Muslim women and Dutch identity. (Essers and Benschop 2009:

404) Instead of presenting Muslim women as a fixed and monolithic group, the article focuses on the multiplicity and situational identity of these women. Benschop and Essers chose four stories to show how the women they interviewed, construct their multiple identities. (Essers and Benschop 2009: 409) Herewith, they want to emphasize the importance of including particular social contexts to come to a better understanding of how Muslim women construct their identities. The stories of these women challenge the stereotypical image of the Muslim woman as a passive victim. (Essers and Benschop 2009: 418) It does so by clearly showing that the women interviewed for the research are making their own choices and creating their own identities.

Mouria is 47 and was 17 when she came to the Netherlands and states that religion does not play an important role in her life. She emphasizes on her individual relation to Islam; according to her, Islam is in your heart, and to be a good Muslim does not require official practices. Hence, Mouria separates religion and ethnicity from a personal relation to Islam. (Essers and Benschop 2009: 410) This shows that not all Muslim women conform to the norms set by Islam, even though they refer to themselves as Muslim. For Fatna, separating religion from ethnicity is no option. Fatna is a 25 years old woman from Turkish descent. She came to the Netherlands when she was 11 years old. She equates Turkishness with a Muslim identity; for her, in order to be a good Turkish person she has to be a good Muslim. (Essers and Benschop 2009: 410) Farah is 26 and born in the Netherlands. She distanced herself from her Moroccan ethnicity and from the Moroccan community. She no longer refers to herself as Moroccan, but rather identifies as Muslim. According to Farah, her Muslim identity is expressed by wearing a headscarf. She voluntarily wears it, not feeling that it constrains her in any way. (Essers and Benschop 2009: 416) In the interview, she refers to the headscarf as being part of her identity.

“This is part of my identity, I have chosen it because, yes, I am a Muslim, and it gives me a feeling of being a Muslim. (. . .) Later, I went to live on my own. At a certain moment I was completely gone from the Moroccan circuit in L., and did not know at all what was going on there. It was on purpose that I distanced myself. (. . .) Ahh, culture, yes, umm, I am someone who does not care too much about what others think and what is average, and in that sense, my mother doesn’t either (. . .) she is also more a Muslim than a Moroccan who lives according to culture. (. . .) I had just done an internship at a

consultancy and had been in touch with new soiling policies, and so it seemed nice to do something with it, as it was new. (. . .) Yes, in this way of course, often when I call, they [potential clients] don't know that [about her wearing a headscarf], and when I come in, you get all those looks! You know, really, people who stare! And that is what you use to do your story, because they are totally out of balance.” (Essers and Benschop 2009: 416)

Farah deliberately wears a headscarf. I would argue that this is not because she is oppressed by her culture, or because her husband forces her. Rather, she chooses it herself. For her, it is part of her Muslim identity. As she states in the interview, it gives her a feeling of being a Muslim.

The research done by Buitelaar (2008), with Dutch women from Moroccan descent, points towards the interwoven Dutch and Moroccan identities of these women. In the interview, the women said that, although the basis of their identity had been established in Morocco, they developed their personalities in the Netherlands. Both identity axes thus play a role in their identity construction. The women state that they planted their roots in the Netherlands and that they feel Dutch. However, they also emphasize their connections to their Moroccan background. The women stress that both cultures are interwoven in their identity. One woman compares her identity with Siamese twins with one heart. If one of the two is removed, the other dies. (Buitelaar 2008: 4) For this woman, the two cultures that construct her identity cannot be seen as separate. Neither do they exist next to each other, but they coexist and mutually influence the personality of this woman.

The stories from both the interviews with Muslim women clearly show the heterogeneous character of the often homogeneous depicted group of Muslim women. Although all refer to themselves as Muslims, they give a different meaning to religion, ethnicity and culture. Some, like Farah, are constructing part of their identity on religion. Others, like Mouria, distance themselves from religious practices. Where Farah separates culture and religion, Fatna perceives her Turkishness and Muslimness as intertwined. Furthermore, where Mouria refrains herself from religiously inspired behavioural codes for Muslim women, Farah does commit herself to religious norms and values, but distances herself from culturally inspired rules. In addition to

demonstrating the heterogeneous nature of the identities of Muslim women, their identities have, like all identities, an intersectional character. Their personalities are constructed on the crossroads of gender, religion, culture, ethnicity and nationality. These axes cannot be seen as existing next to each other, on the contrary, they co-construct the identities of these women. First of all, gender and religion play a mutually including role; for some of these women, religion gives them precepts on how to behave according to their gender role. Farah, for instance, expresses her Muslim identity by wearing a headscarf. For others, religion and ethnicity are inseparable. For example, for Fatna, her Muslim religion and her Turkish ethnicity are mutually constructing her each other. Since these women grew up in the Netherlands or lived there for a long time, their Dutchness has become interwoven with their Muslim background. As Samira, a Dutch Moroccan woman explains: “It is not like the loyalty to Dutch culture can be put on top of the loyalty towards the Moroccan culture. Instead of multiplicity, there is the experience of fusion between the cultures.” (Buitelaar 2008: 4, Translation S.V.) The Dutch and Moroccan categories cannot be seen as two aspects that exist next to each other. Rather, from an intersectional point of view, their Dutch and Muslim identity are interwoven axes that co-construct their identity.

As I showed in this section, Muslim women create their identity on many different axes. As such, they are contradicting the homogeneous and static identity as presented in the media in the Netherlands. The new realist discourse places these women in the position of passive objects. The interviews, on the contrary, show that these Muslim women are not victims of their husbands and their culture, but are rather independent subjects who make their own choices. They make the fluid and intersectional character of their identity visible. Instead of having a fixed identity, these women construct their identity on different axes such as religion, ethnicity and nationality. Instead of being the victims they are often accused to be, these women show agency by making their own choices as to whether to conform to religious and cultural prescripts. Another important aspect that comes to the forefront in these interviews, is that the women are not only Muslim, but rather have created an identity that mediates between being Muslim and Dutch. Dutchness and Muslimness are often placed as oppositional binaries, as if these two categories are incompatible. I want to argue that this is not the case, that people can both be Dutch and Muslim. I will show how this can work in the analysis of the poster campaign

held by Al Nisa. For most of the women interviewed, their Turkish or Moroccan background cannot be separated from their Dutchness. Neither can they be Muslim in one setting or Dutch in another. Instead, they constantly reside in a space between Dutchness and Muslimness. Marjo Buitelaars states that the interviewees experience their 'different' identity when they visit family in Morocco. It is then that they realize how they are formed by Dutch values when they go back to Morocco. (Buitelaar 2008: 1) These women cannot leave their Dutch part of identity at home when they go to Morocco, neither can they leave their Moroccan background behind when living their lives in the Netherlands. They are constantly mediating between the two cultures that construct their personalities.

The question I want to deal with in this thesis, is how Muslim women in the Netherlands can use identity politics to create a public identity that reflects their Dutchness and Muslimness without falling into stereotypes about these categories. How can they image the interconnectedness of both these axes? And how can they make claims on their Muslimness without being reduced to a fixed and stereotypical identity? Identity politics can be useful to create a public identity, but has a tendency to fall into the trap of essentialism and fixing identity in a particular location. To avoid this, I want to argue for an identity politics where identity is perceived as fluid and in a constant state of becoming. I want to argue for an identity politics in which hybrid identities take a central place and where the different aspects of identity are not mere reflections of already existing categories but rather produced into a new fluid identity. Still, this identity politics can be used to build up public action to make visible how identity fits in society. But instead of placing this identity in a fixed location, this type of identity politics emphasizes that it is not possible to fix identity in any location but that it is constantly moving between different positions. To give an example of how an identity politics based on hybrid identities can work, I will analyze the poster campaign ECHT NEDERLANDS (translation: really Dutch), by the Muslim women's organization Al Nisa. This poster campaign shows how Muslim women try to make public claims on their Muslimness *and* Dutchness.

### 4.3. Al Nisa

Al Nisa (The Women) is a Dutch Muslim women's organization established in 1982. The main goal of the organization is to inform Muslim women about the Islam without connecting to a specific cultural or religious background. (Al Nisa 2011) In 2002, a new goal was to stimulate Muslim women to engage themselves more with how to create a position for women within Islam, and in Dutch society. The organization has a monthly journal, gives lectures and organizes activities of different kinds. In this way, Al Nisa tries to contribute to the education of Islam to women and to stimulate Muslim women to attain an active position in Dutch society. (Al Nisa 2011)

In May 2010, Al Nisa launched a campaign called Really Dutch. In addition to meetings on the topic of immigration, the organization made posters on which they put forward the Dutch Muslim identity of Muslim women. In the debate on integration, people are often speaking *about* Muslim women, these women themselves are hardly seen or heard. Al Nisa wants to change this by literally making these women visible and giving them a voice through the production and distribution of these posters. On the posters, Muslim women are presented, not only as Muslim, but also as really Dutch. (Al Nisa 2011)

The poster presented below pictures a Muslim woman with a headscarf who is eating herring. The text on the poster states: 'Ik lust ze rauw' (translation: I can eat them raw, S.V.). This is not only referring to the Dutchness of eating raw herring, but also to a statement made by the Dutch politician Geert Wilders about women with headscarves. (Klooster 2010) In an interview in *HP de Tijd*, Geert Wilders pleads for a ban on headscarves. He says that he does not want to see them in public, and that he can eat the headscarves raw. (Deijl 2009) The other poster portrays a Muslim woman who is reading a newspaper article on migration. Besides showing that Muslim women are engaged with Dutch media, the article read by the woman states that Muslim women can take part in the debate on the integration of immigrants.

According to Leyla Çakir, the chair of Al Nisa, the posters have to make clear that these women are Muslim *and* Dutch. She wants to fight the prejudices about Muslim women, such as

the notion that many women are suppressed and cannot speak for themselves. (Klooster 2010)

Leyla Çakir is a woman of Turkish descent. For seven years, she was the chairperson of a mosque in Geleen. Since 2007, she is head of the Muslim women's organization Al Nisa. In an interview for Holland Doc she states: "I am Muslim, but also very Dutch". Al Nisa started the poster campaign in order to make Muslim women more visible in Dutch society. The responses to the campaign were very diverse; some people claimed that 'such women do not exist' or that 'real Dutch Muslims do not wear a headscarf.' (Çakir 2010) However, Çakir wants to emphasize that she is a Muslim, but also really Dutch. "This is how I feel, these are the parts of my identity and nobody can take that away from me" (Çakir 2010, translation: S.V.) According to her, the campaign has a positive result. The posters have given Muslim women a face and a voice in the debate, something that has usually been absent. (Çakir 2010)



IK LUST ZE RAUW



## 5. Dutch Muslim Women as Hybrid Subjects

### 5.1. Muslim Women using Identity Politics

Marginalized groups use identity politics to build up public action in order to challenge the way they are made (or not made) visible society. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2011) This is clearly visible in the campaign of Al Nisa. As the organization states, the debate on integration speaks about Muslim women, but these women themselves are hardly ever heard. Al Nisa wants to change this by making these women visible. In a way, the campaign tries to create a public space for Muslim women to show that they are more than the stereotypical image that is created in the media. In the posters, the seemingly incompatible categories Dutch and Muslim are presented as one. In one poster, the fabric wrapped around the woman's head contains Euro's instead of the traditional golden coins. The woman in the poster eating a herring, wears a headscarf with a Dutch print and in the color of the Dutch flag. The Dutch flag, a symbol of Dutch nationality, and the headscarf, a symbol of Muslim culture, are not only combined but made into one. It presents being Dutch and Muslim as mutually inclusive instead of irreconcilable. As such, Al Nisa tries to create a public identity for Muslim women that moves beyond the stereotypes and that shows the Muslim and Dutch characteristics of their identities. It moves beyond the image of the Muslim woman as passive and suppressed by culture through showing the capability of these women to create their own identity. Furthermore, the poster showing the woman with the newspaper, states that Muslim women are very capable of taking part in the debate on integration. They do not, like Bolkestein argued, need help to emancipate, but are very capable of taking part in the emancipation process themselves. Through the poster campaign, Muslim women have been given a voice. As such, the campaign is challenging the stereotypical notion of the Muslim woman as a passive victim of her own culture.

Butler (2010) states that identity is a product of expressions that constitute its reality. Rather than having an essential core, identity is thus perceived as fluid and constantly changing according to the way it is expressed. The women who were interviewed by Marjo Buitelaar on

the construction of their Dutch Moroccan identity, explain that their identity changed because of Dutch norms and values. They stress that they express themselves differently from their family members who grew up in Morocco because they are used to different values. “Especially in the confrontation with local behavioural norms, these women realize that they are shaped by Dutch values such as individual freedom and privacy.” (Buitelaar 2008: 1) It can thus be stated that these women’s identities changed according to where they grew up. It is their ‘Dutch’ expressions which make their identities different from their Moroccan family members.

The public identity that Al Nisa wants to create has no fixed ontology but rather refers to a fluid and performative identity. Although the poster campaign makes identity claims on the basis of being Muslim, woman and Dutch, they do not fix this identity as a static and an essentialist given but emphasize the fluidity of identity. These women show that wearing a headscarf and having a Muslim appearance, does not mean that they cannot be Dutch simultaneously.

## **5.2. Identity and Intersectionality**

The identities of the women in the campaign and from the interviews, are constructed on the crossroads of gender, religion, culture, ethnicity and nationality. These axes cannot be seen as existing next to each other, on the contrary, they co-construct the identities of these women. First of all, gender and religion play a mutually including role in the identity construction of these women. The Islam, practiced by many Muslims, requires women to wear a headscarf. Besides the headscarf, Islamic religion and Muslim culture have rules according to which women are supposed to behave. As such, just like my gender cannot be seen as separate from my Dutch background, Muslim women cannot be seen as separate from their culture and religion. Furthermore, Dutchness and Muslimness play an interconnecting role. These identical axes are beautifully made visible in the poster campaign with a Muslim woman with a headscarf eating a Dutch herring. This woman is not Muslim in one situation and Dutch in another. She visualizes a Dutch Muslim, positioned between these two cultures. As I will discuss in the paragraph below,

this position in the in-between creates the possibility for these women to create a Dutch Muslim identity.

### **5.3. Muslim Women creating Hybrid Identities**

The poster campaign creates a public identity of Muslim women that shows the heterogeneous character of their identity. They do not constantly switch between different identity axes, but construct their identities on the crossroad of these axes. I want to argue, that identity politics can be a stronger tool when emphasis is not only put on the different axes of identity, but when identity is created by moving beyond these axes. When using the hybrid subject as a position of departure, identity politics can be used to create a new identity that blurs existing cultural boundaries. Although the hybrid subject uses existing identity categories, it is revaluing and reshaping these categories and turning them into a new identity position. Thus instead of making a new identity out of already existing categories it is challenging the nature of identity categories. (Bhabha 1994) Intersectionality is already suggesting that identity axes cannot be seen as separate. However, Bhabha suggests that the hybrid subject should move beyond the existence of categories and create new forms of cultural meaning that are constantly reshaped and recreated. (Bhabha 1994) For Muslim women, this means that to truly move beyond any notion of stereotypes, their Dutch Muslim identity should not merely reflect the combination of a Muslim and Dutch identity, but move beyond these existing cultural categories. When an identity is created between Dutchness and Muslimness, cultural expressions like a headscarf or particular food do not belong to either Dutch or Muslim culture. Rather, these expressions are revalued and belong to the new identity that is created. A headscarf does not refer to being Muslim anymore and the Dutch flag not to being Dutch. Rather, for these women, both the artifacts belong to their Dutch Muslim identity. On one of the posters, a Muslim looking woman is eating herring. This should thus not be seen as representational of her Dutch part of identity, but as a logical consequence of her Dutch Muslim identity since these artifacts that used to refer to either a Dutch or a Muslim identity now refer to the interconnectedness of these two. Being Muslim means being Dutch as well and vice versa.

A Dutch Muslim identity should be created as a new cultural identity that blurs existing categories such as Muslim and Dutch in order to challenge the existing image of the Muslim woman as presented in the media. As the interviews make clear, Muslim women cannot be depicted as a homogeneous group. Furthermore, many Muslim in the Netherlands are more than just Muslim; their identities are also shaped by Dutch culture and society. Muslim women can use identity politics to create a space for a Dutch Muslim identity that moves beyond stereotypes and that establishes their Dutch Muslim identity in the public sphere. However, a 'different' identity politics, one with an intersectional approach to identity, should be used in order to avoid relapsing into essentialist notions about identity. As I have argued, the hybrid subject should be placed central in identity politics in order to emphasize the fluidity of identity. When the politics of identity is used in this way, it not only challenges essentialist notions about Dutchness and Muslimness, but also creates a new identity that is constantly being reshaped. When hybridity is taken as a starting point, identity politics can be used to create a Dutch Muslim identity that moves beyond existing cultural categories. As such, a headscarf, the Dutch flag and herring are revalued and made part of a Dutch Muslim identity. Dutch Muslim women can still make claims on basis of their Muslimness, but this than, does not refer to a fixed and homogeneous Muslim culture. Instead, cultural categories are perceived as fluid and constantly changing. Being a Muslim has, in the context of their identity, the meaning they give to it. The way they practice their religion and culture, is the way it gives meaning to their identity construction. Creating an identity in the 'Third Space' is not about rejecting existing categories, it is about revaluing and reshaping these categories. Dutch Muslim women can revalue categories such as Dutchness and Muslimness and move beyond its boundaries, turning them into new identity positions. With revalue, I mean transforming the meaning of these categories and to merge them to a new identity. As a consequence, the binary opposition between Muslim and Dutch does not exist anymore; being Dutch can include being Muslim, practicing Islam can be an expression of Dutch identity and headscarves are worn in the colors of the Dutch flag.

## 6. Conclusion

The poster campaign 'Really Dutch' that was launched in May 2010 by Al Nisa, portrays Muslim women who embody a Dutch Muslim identity. The campaign was started with the aim to make Muslim women visible in society and to challenge prejudices about Muslim women as being suppressed and unable to speak for themselves. The way these women are portrayed on the posters is in great contrast with the way Muslim women are generally represented in the Dutch media that, influenced by the new realist discourse, often portrays the Muslim woman as a victim that needs to be rescued from her cultural tradition. Since Muslim women often feel that they cannot identify with the image that is created of them in the media, there is the need for a public identity of Muslim women that challenges the stereotypes presented in the media. A way for these women to create a public identity is by the means of identity politics. Identity politics is a tool used by marginalized groups in order to make their identity visible in society and to transform existing stigma's and stereotypes. This does, however, bring forth issues on identity. Critics on the concept of identity politics argue that it fixes identities in a particular location and as such is essentialist. How then can identity politics be used by Muslim women in order to create a Dutch and Muslim identity without being reduced to a fixed identity? For identity politics to avoid essentialism, it is necessary to approach identity as fluid, a construction that is in a constant state of becoming. Therefore, I argue for an identity politics that takes the hybrid subject as a point of departure. Situating themselves as a hybrid subject in the Third Space gives Muslim women the possibility to create a Dutch Muslim identity that moves beyond the existing categories Dutch and Muslim. This women transform these categories and turn them into a new identity position that is fluid and in a constant state of becoming. Hybridity suggests that identity positions are constantly reshaped and repositioned. This gives Muslim women in the Netherlands the capability to create a public identity that challenges their portrayal as victims. Furthermore, it ensures the possibility to create an identity that represents the heterogeneous character of their Dutch Muslim identity.

The poster campaign 'Really Dutch' is a start in the process of creating a public identity to make Muslim women visible and to give them a voice to speak. Furthermore, the campaign

does good work by emphasizing the Dutch and Muslim parts of the identity of Muslim women in the Netherlands. However, as I have made clear in this thesis, in order for Muslim women to completely move beyond stereotypical notions on Muslim women, they not only have to emphasize the Dutch and Muslim parts of their identity, but transform the content of these categories as well. As such, they will be able to create a new public identity that is constantly mediating between and within different categories and reshaping these categories as themselves as well. As a result, a new Dutch Muslim identity can be created for these women, an identity that transgresses stereotypical notions on identity categories.

Further research on the identity constructions of Muslim women, and the tools they can use to make themselves visible in society, can help support these women in the process of creating a public identity that represents them in an accurate way.

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