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Nieuwe Moslima's: Gender Discourse, Identity, and Conversion in the Netherlands

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*Nieuwe Moslima's: Gender discourse, Identity, and
Conversion in the Netherlands*

**Jenna Henderson
Spring 2006**

Key words: conversion, ethnicity, gender, identity, Islam, language, religion, women

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Abstract

My research looks at the discourses on gender in Islam and in Dutch culture as developed by female converts to Islam in the Netherlands. The goal of this research is to view the issue of conversion to Islam from the perspective of Dutch Muslim women, and to include them within the field of feminist research. In five informal interviews conducted with female converts, four Dutch and one Welsh, I discussed gender issues in Islam and in the Netherlands. I approached the data from two perspectives: Foucauldian postmodern theory and realist feminist theory on identity. I found that female converts critique Dutch society and cultural Islamic practices when speaking about issues of gender. My conclusion is that since the converts are both insiders and outsiders in Dutch society and in Muslim communities, they are in distinct position to make a critique that exposes the inconsistencies between theory and practice. They do this by appropriating the discursive tools that are meant to oppress them, and using them to empower themselves. The discourse on gender also serves to redefine the convert's identity as a Dutch/Western Muslim woman.

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Introduction¹

“You became Muslim, and becoming Muslim is part of your emancipation.” (paraphrased quote of a born Muslim woman from Pakistan to Cloé, one of the women I interviewed)

My research focuses on the way Dutch women who have converted to Islam speak about gender issues in Islam and in Dutch culture. In particular, I look at the way their social position allows them to critique issues of gender in both Dutch society and cultural Islamic practices². I set out to answer the questions: how do Dutch women who have converted to Islam use gender discourse to speak about Islam and Dutch culture? How do their concepts of “emancipation,” “equality,” proper gender roles and femininity differ from their perceptions of mainstream Dutch society? While addressing these questions, I also kept in mind how this gender discourse affected the formation of their identities. Ultimately, I will show how these women express agency through gender discourse. As the quote above suggests, “emancipation” is not an objective term: it only makes sense in context.

During one of my many conversations about Islam in the Netherlands, I was confronted with the belief that women convert to Islam as a reaction to the social pressures. For example, the pressure that Western culture puts on women to conform to a narrow definition of beauty. Though I could understand the feminist tendency to believe this, I was unconvinced that social pressure would be the sole factor in religious conversion. It caused me to realize the limitations of secular feminism in analyzing this situation. The situation called for a broader definition of feminism and agency, and a

¹ A brief note on the title: the word “*moslima*” derives from the Arabic word that means Muslim woman. The term “*nieuwe moslima*” is often used to refer to women who have converted to Islam.

² “Cultural Islamic practices” refer to traditions and rituals that are associated with Islam, but do not directly derive from the Qur’an or other accepted Islamic texts.

better understanding of the Islamic religion. This problem I faced reminded me of a feminist ethnography I read last semester called Politics of Piety, by Saba Mahmood. Mahmood critiques Western secular feminism and its attack on the Islamic religion. She also critiques the concept of agency that is so central to Western feminism (Mahmood 2005). Like Mahmood, I set out to expand the boundaries of feminism and to challenge theories that may marginalize certain groups of women.

My focus on gender discourse developed after I read Karin van Nieuwkerk's chapter 3 in the book Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West (forthcoming August 2006). As part of this chapter, she discusses the type of gender discourse that new Muslims used. She found that they criticize Western culture for exaggerating the emancipated status of women. They speak of men and women in Islam as "equal but different," and note the value that Islam places on motherhood. Nieuwkerk explains that "the new Muslimas felt obliged to defend themselves against Dutch perception of Islam as an oppressive religion towards women" (van Nieuwkerk 83-87). My study expands on the research that she conducted focuses further on gender discourse. For example, how do these women make a distinction between Islamic religion and culture? How do these women critique Dutch culture? How do they speak about Islam? How do they make a distinction between themselves and born Muslim women? How do they integrate their Dutch background and their religion into their identity as a woman? In what ways is their thinking Dutch? In what ways is it Muslim?

It is absolutely essential to conduct such research in a multi-religious society. As long as Islam is perceived by many feminists as inherently oppressive for women, work must be done to contextualize this perception and to understand Islam from a more open

perspective. I hope this research will lift some of the stigmas placed upon these women. It is therefore important not only to the group of women I hope to conduct research with, but also non-Muslim Western people of all nationalities. My goal is to create understanding and tolerance, if not acceptance, of the choices that these women have made. Unfortunately, because my study is small scale, so too may the effect be small. However, I hope it will benefit others in the future by creating a stepping stone for further research.

Literature Review

The field of study on conversion to Islam in Europe is currently quite limited. Yet in the studies that do exist, gender discourse tends to be an important focus. This is because the researchers found that gender roles, specifically the position of women, are often used to mark the difference between Islam and the secular. In the West, Islam is often labeled “backwards,” and the example usually provided is the “oppression” of Muslim women (Nieuwkerk 2004). Thus, the conversion of Western women to Islam is seen as paradoxical. In order to contextualize my research, I will discuss how the following studies address gender discourse in their papers. The studies establish that gender is a significant factor in how female converts experience the process of “embracing” Islam. This is because there are different gender roles in Islam and because the Western perception is that Muslim women are oppressed. Yet since these studies tend to be more generally focused on religious conversion, the discussion of gender discourse is lacking. I will summarize the issues that prior research has covered, and in that context explain why my research project is a necessary contribution to this field.

Ali Köse’s article “The Journey from the Secular to the Sacred: Experiences of Native British Converts to Islam” is based upon research that he conducted for a doctoral thesis. His participants are British, and mainly of Christian background. He posits that “oversecularization” of the Christian church caused the converts to reject Christianity and to embrace Islam. Islam provided the daily contact with religion and morally strict guidelines that the converts desired. Köse speaks very little about gender roles in this

paper, but does note that “Islam offers different ideas regarding the roles of men and women, contact between men and women, and certain moral principles required in everyday life” (309). The majority of the examples that he gives are of male converts, and the female converts that he discusses divulge little about gender roles. Thus there is a major gap in his research: the specific experience of female converts is not represented. My research fills this gap by acknowledging that gender issues play a significant role in the conversion process for women. I do not conflate the experiences of male and female converts, but rather elaborate upon the way Islam is experienced specifically by women.

Monika Wohlrab-Sahr’s article “Conversion to Islam: Between Syncretism and Symbolic Battle” is based on interviews with converts to Islam in the USA and Germany. She describes the concept of conversion as a symbolic conflict where a radical change in identity and world view occurs. Since Islam has been constructed as the “Other” for Western secular societies, conversion to Islam can express the problems and conflicts the convert has with her social environment, and to ultimately allow her to maintain a distance from it (352). The examples Wohlrab-Sahr uses relate to gender and sexuality, but do not address such issues as separate concerns. For example, she discusses the case of a 14 year old female African American convert that live in a poor black neighborhood in the US. Wohlrab-Sahr says that taking on a Muslim identity allows the convert to distance herself from the stereotype that young black girls are promiscuous and become single mothers. Islam’s strict guidelines and prohibitions regarding to gender roles and relations between men and women allow her to do this (357). This illustrates her thesis that “through the adoption of the “other” ... the problem of disintegration within one’s own context can be articulated” (361).

Wohlrab-Sahr addresses issues of gender and sexuality rather obliquely. She uses gender issues as examples for her thesis of symbolic conflict and social distancing. For her, gender issues are not separate, but rather parts of this larger theme. In my research, I will show that it is very important to discuss issues of gender as distinct. Gender issues are, as Köse also mentioned, what marks Islam as the “Other,” as different from Western secular culture. This imbues gender with a great influence in determining how female converts experience life with their new religion. Though studies that discuss how gender plays a role in symbolic conflict are important, research like mine that addresses them as separate is also necessary.

Madeleine Sultán’s article “Choosing Islam: a Study of Swedish Converts” is based upon field research that she conducted for her doctoral thesis. She begins the paper by noting that gender roles, specifically the role of women, mark the difference between Islam and the secular world (325). She uses two female examples to illustrate her thesis that religious conversion is a “complex process” (326). The reasons that these women converted mainly have to do with gender roles and spirituality. They were attracted to idea that women and men have different but equally valuable social positions, that gender roles are strictly defined, and that motherhood and the family is highly valued. Both women tended to be critical of the role of women in Western cultures, which Sultán calls “contrasting rhetoric” (333). She also describes some conflicts that the women have faced since they converted. One woman has trouble dealing with letting her husband making all of the important decisions in the household. Both make the distinction between “pure Islam” and “Islam mixed with culture,” and are critical of cultural Islamic practices that do not relate directly to the religion (334). Thus, this paper is useful in

showing possible gendered reasons why women would want to convert to Islam. It also shows how these women use gender discourse to criticize Western cultures, as well as cultural Islamic practices.

The biggest problem with Sultán's study is that she makes value judgments. Sultán clearly comes from a Western feminist background, and at some points is openly biased. For example, in speaking about the convert Jenny, Sultán says that "she has changed a non-religious to a religious patriarchal system of rules. One difference is that one system was exercised by a single man, whereas the other is a well-established world religion" (333). She has made the judgment that Islam is "patriarchal," which in feminist discourse is often synonymous with oppressive. It is important when discussing other religions and cultures that one does not assign value according to one's own beliefs. Because of this bias, further research must be conducted that is less ethnocentric. The goal of my research is to understand "emancipation" and "equality" as new Muslims themselves perceive the concepts. Despite this drawback, Sultán's concept of "contrasting rhetoric" and the discussion of the distinction between religion and culture will be very important starting points for my research.

Margot Badran's chapter on "Feminism and Conversion: Comparing British, Dutch, and South African Life Stories" in the forthcoming book Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West is based on interviews she conducted with female converts to Islam that either considered themselves to be feminists or were sympathetic to feminist goals. She discusses how converts are adding to the growing international movement of "Islamic feminism." Islamic feminism is distinct from secular feminism in that it takes the Qur'an to be the main focus in the struggle to attain gender

equality. The movement is justified by the Islamic concept of *ijtihad*, or “independent rational search for meanings in Islam’s sacred texts.” Women articulate the idea of *insan*, equality of all human beings, to fight for their rights (Badran forthcoming 2006). Badran found that converts have been actively contributing to the field of Islamic feminist discourse through a critique of traditional patriarchal Islamic practices and by reinterpreting religious texts from a woman’s perspective. I hope to use Badran’s study as a stepping stone for my research. Though my study does not focus on Islamic feminism in particular, I found it to be a popular topic among the converts I interviewed. I will discuss why converts may be inclined towards Islamic feminist discourse, and will branch off to how they critique Dutch culture as well.

Karin van Nieuwkerk’s article “‘Veils and wooden clogs don’t go together’: Female converts and the construction of Dutch national identity” is based upon ethnographic field research that she conducted with female converts to Islam in the Netherlands. She elaborates upon the concept of Islam as the “Other,” like Wohlrab-Sahr, but within the context of constructing a Dutch national identity. She found that when female converts don the headscarf or veil, Dutch people begin to perceive them as foreigners. For many Dutch people, Muslims are seen as a homogenous, naturalized category that is associated with foreign immigrants (5). This is because “‘gender’ is used as a marker in the ‘Dutch progressive’ versus the ‘Muslim backward’ discourse” (2). Dutch national and cultural identity is constructed around the concept of Islam as the “Other,” and female converts to Islam expose this process. For example, the headscarf goes against the Dutch concept of beauty as something that should be shown in public

(14). This perception of converts as foreigners leads them to defend their choice of religion in terms of gender discourse.

In the third chapter of her forthcoming book Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West., van Nieuwkerk follows up on this study. This time she focuses on “Gender, Conversion, and Islam: A Comparison of Online and Off-line Conversion Narratives.” Though a major part of this chapter is dedicated to comparing online and offline narratives, it also addresses gender discourses in conversion narratives. Van Nieuwkerk identifies four main discourses in conversion narratives: biographical, gender, ethnic/national and religious (75). She explains that converts develop gender discourses to defend themselves against the belief that Muslim women are oppressed. They also create these discourses to critique Dutch constructions of gender. First, they say that the “emancipation” of Dutch women is exaggerated, and that they felt like sex objects before they converted. Second, in a move surprisingly similar to cultural feminism, they say that when Dutch women try to be equal to men in everything, they end up acting the same as men. In Islam, men and women have different but equally valued roles. For example, motherhood is highly valued and respected (83-87). Thus, these converts use gender discourses of “emancipation” and “equality” to defend their religious choices.

These articles by van Nieuwkerk and Badran are the starting points for my research. They deal with female converts to Islam in the Netherlands and speak directly about gender discourse in conversion narratives. However since the discussion of gender discourse is not the main focus of the articles, there is room to expand upon their studies. For example, how does the convert’s social location as Dutch Muslim women affect how

they speak about gender issues in both Dutch culture and in Islamic practices? I will also closely analyze the critique that the converts make on gender issues in Dutch culture.

My research is both a synthesis and an expansion of the studies that I have described. I will directly address the concept of Islam as the “Other,” the distinction between religion and culture in Islam, discourses of gender, and identity construction that these researchers have discussed. However, my research focuses specifically on gender discourse rather than other aspects in the process of conversion. I have shown that there is a gap in research that needs to be filled, and that I have new insights to add to this field of study.

Theoretical Framework

When female converts to Islam speak about gender issues in Islam and in mainstream Dutch culture, they do so from the critical standpoint of one that is simultaneously an insider and an outsider in both communities. “When European women, say Dutch or British women, convert to Islam they enter a new and unfamiliar public space within their own society. Moreover, they enter a new space without leaving the old space and now must straddle the two while adjusting to life inside the new space” (Badran forthcoming 2006). Indeed, the women I spoke with tended to be critical of the belief that Dutch women are emancipated, but at the same time felt their concepts of emancipation and equality were congruent with that of their Dutch/Western upbringing. They were outspoken about the oppression that born Muslim women endure because of cultural Islamic practices, yet they believe Islam is not oppressive to women. Quite the contrary, they say Islam gives women an equal and respected status. In both situations, the distinction is between theory and practice. Concepts of equality and emancipation rarely translate into real life practices, and converts are in a special position to expose this truth. They are Dutch, but since Islam is seen as inherently foreign, they are often pushed into a position of the “Other” in their own culture (Wolhrab-Sahr; van Nieuwkerk). They are Muslim, but they lack the life experiences of born Muslim women. Thus they are at the same time keenly aware of the distinction between Islam as a religion and as a culture, and insecure about doing something wrong in their new religion. My research looks at what discourse these women use in their critique of Dutch culture and of cultural Islamic practices. Throughout my analysis, I will focus on the ways that gender discourse allows these women to construct their identities as simultaneously Dutch

Muslim and female. To analyze what the gender discourse they use is and how it is employed, I will utilize the postmodern theory of Michel Foucault. However, to think about identity in this context, I will borrow the 'realist feminist' concept of identity from Paula Moya's essay.

Female converts to Islam often find themselves in a difficult position. They must defend their faith from Dutch/Western people who claim no well-educated Dutch woman in her right mind could choose Islam or wear a headscarf. Yet at the same time they defend Islam, they are aware of the social reality that many Muslim women are in fact oppressed. Michel Foucault's theory of power as exercised through discourse is useful in analyzing this situation. Foucault described power as relational, meaning that it is not an entity that can be held or obtained, but rather a constantly moving system of unequal force relations (93). Power "comes from everywhere:" it is not controlled by a ruling party or institution. Furthermore, discourse is the medium through which power relations can be understood: "...discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (101). When I speak of discourse, I mean both speech and written texts. In other words, the language used to express a thought or opinion. In this case, the critique that female converts to Islam make on Dutch and Islamic cultures simultaneously fulfills all of these roles of discourse. For example, since power is exercised over them when they are labeled as oppressed, the critique serves as a "point of resistance" for them. Thus, throughout my paper I will show how the discourse these women use is an exercise of power.

Though Foucault's theory of power relations is useful in analyzing discourse, it provides few tools for understanding identity. In my research, I will explore how gender discourse contributes in the construction of a Dutch/Muslim/woman identity. As Nieuwkerk explains, since Islam is largely perceived in the Netherlands as a marker of foreignness, conversion means being seen as non-Dutch. Yet as these women are proof, these identities need not be contradictory or restricting at all. I posit that their critique of Dutch and Islamic culture through discourse on gender is a way for them to define their position within Dutch society and the Muslim community. Paula Moya's realist feminist concept of identity is useful in understanding this method. First, she critiques the postmodern concept of conflicting, multiple identities for being overly reductive, to the point where "it [is] difficult to figure out who is 'us' and who is 'them'" (134). She says that postmodern theories ignore social location and the realities of bodily experience. (132) Yet instead of falling back on essentialist notions of identity, Moya explains that social location influences what kind of experiences a person will have, and that these experiences "influence, but do not entirely determine, the formation of her cultural identity" (137). Rather, there is a cognitive element to identity formation that allows individuals to analyze experiences differently from each other.

In this case, 'Dutch Muslim woman' is a specific social location that has an affect of the experiences these women have had. For example, they are well educated because of the numerous opportunities for education in the Netherlands. As Muslims, they experience discrimination from mainstream Dutch society. As women, they feel pressure to conform to traditional Islamic cultural norms. Of course, each social identity cannot be wholly separated from the other: Dutch Muslim woman is a specific social location,

not the sum of three identities. Furthermore, despite having certain experiences because of social location, each woman independently reaches her own cognitive evaluation of the event. Thus, identity is neither meaningless nor essential. Gender discourse can be seen as a manifestation of this cognitive component of identity formation. The goal of my paper will be to articulate how this discourse factors in constructing and defining personal identity.

I have identified two major theories that I will use to analyze the data from my field research. Foucault's theory of power relations and discourse will be useful for me in understanding how gender discourse is used. Moya's realist feminist concept of identity will be my starting point in understanding how this gender discourse is used by these women to construct their individual identities of these women. Though these two theories as wholes conflict, I have chosen to utilize the parts of each theory that fit most closely with my current understanding of gender discourse as used by Dutch female converts to Islam.

Methodology and Assumptions

I chose to study Dutch women who have converted to Islam because I believe their personal choice of religion and lifestyle has been misunderstood by Western feminism. My hope was to add to the growing field of feminist literature and research that does not marginalize Muslim women. Several of the women I spoke with were very active in this process as well.³ I presumed that their social identities would be Muslim women. To my participants I was an observer and an interviewer, since I am neither Muslim nor Dutch, and cannot speak Dutch well enough to participate.

The method of my study was informal interviews with Dutch⁴ women who have chosen to convert to Islam. I started by asking the participants to describe their process of conversion. This allowed me to get a general background of their conversion process: their social and religious pasts, the internal and outside influences that lead to their conversion, and their actual experience of converting. This is important because their past factors greatly into how they currently experience their religion and culture. Furthermore, they told me what events they felt were important in their life and I was able to understand how they spoke about them. For example, since the majority of the women were married to Muslim men, hearing the conversion narrative first allowed me to ascertain what role they believe their husbands played in the process. Then I asked various questions regarding their opinions on “emancipation” and “equality,” and of post-conversion experiences. I also tried to get them to talk about real life examples, and how

³ The three women associated with Al Nisa: Cloé, Sandie and Priscilla.

⁴ One of the women I interviewed, Adeeva, is Welsh but has been living in the Netherlands for the past 25 years.

their beliefs and experiences have affected how they perceive themselves. I chose this method because I wanted the women to speak freely about topics that are of concern to them, while still answering my basic research question. It brought up issues that I had not yet considered, and allowed me to explore them further. It also allowed me to understand better which issues they felt were significant, and how they related one topic to another. For example, nearly all of the women brought up the issue of the headscarf before I asked about it, indicating that this is a very important topic of discussion when dealing with gender issues in Islam. As J. Bell explains, using a formal interview or a questionnaire risks not asking the right questions (Bell 1987). I also chose this method to allow the women I study to have a voice in my research. According to Jennifer Brayton, feminist research views the interviewee as “the experts and authorities on their own experiences” and is actively critical about the position of the interviewer (Brayton 1997). I tried to keep this in mind during the process of my research. I hope that this feminist research method allowed me to represent the participants the way they wanted to be represented.

The women that I interviewed were fairly liberal. None of them wore a veil, and only three out of five wore a headscarf. Most of them held a critical view towards Muslims who are fully covered. In the process of her fieldwork, van Nieuwkerk found that very conservative converts were often unwilling to speak about their personal lives. This is because they viewed their personal lives, as well as anthropological inquiry in general, as unimportant: their lives were dedicated to their religion. Thus, the women I spoke to, as they themselves can attest, are not representative of all female converts to Islam. Furthermore, I came into contact with them through more liberal Muslim

organizations. One I contacted through the Dutch Muslim women's organization Dar al-Arqam in Rotterdam⁵, that welcomes both Muslim and non-Muslim women. Another was contacted through Stichting Ahmadiyya Isha'at-I-Islam⁶, an organization dedicated to presenting Islam as peaceful, tolerant, rational and inspiring. The other three women were members of Al Nisa⁷ (one was the chairwoman, the other a board member and the third a participant), a Dutch Muslim women's organization that helps women to learn about their rights in Islam, creates a dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims, and that conducts a variety of related activities.

Several of my social identities that may have caused bias in my research are: American, female, Western feminist, and non-religious. Being an American means that I may misunderstand Dutch culture. As a woman my participants may perceive me differently than they would if I were male. As a Western feminist, I have to try to avoid privileging Western modes of thought and concepts of agency. As a non-religious person, I must avoid being judgmental of spiritual choices. Also, since I am not Muslim I cannot provide an analysis from an Islamic perspective. Prior to meeting me, my participants may have viewed me in a suspicious light because of my social identities. It may cause have caused them to feel the need to defend their religious choices, at least in the beginning. I believe I was able to overcome these obstacles for the most part. One way I tried to do this is by explaining the goals of my research. I have discovered that a good explanation of my background, my project, and my goals puts the interviewee more

⁵ For more information about Dar al-Arqam, see their website, www.moslimainrotterdam.nl.

⁶ The Lahore Ahmadiyya movement was founded in Pakistan, and "exists for the purpose of presenting the religion of Islam, *in its pure and original form*, to the whole world." It also aims to correct the "distorted image of Islam" and to present the religion as a "*tolerant, rational, progressive, compassionate, peace-loving and highly spiritual* religion" (www.muslim.org).

⁷ For more information about Al Nisa, see their website, www.alnisa.nl.

at ease. My participants may have been more willing to talk with me after they understood that I am trying to represent them in my research the way they want to be represented.

Before beginning my interviews, I made several assumptions about the data I would collect based upon prior studies I read about. For example, in data that van Nieuwkerk collected for her research (van Nieuwkerk forthcoming 2006), converts to Islam seemed to have adopted an Islamic way of thinking about equality and emancipation. However I found that this was not true for all converts. I was also expecting the critique to focus mainly on Dutch culture, but found rather that they critiqued cultural Islamic practices as well. Despite these limitations, I hope my research shows a relatively accurate representation of the beliefs and opinions of the women I interviewed.

Analysis

Background: The Conversion Narrative

The women who participated in my research were all converts to Islam and are currently practicing Muslims. I interviewed five women: four Dutch women and one Welsh woman who has been living in the Netherlands for 25 years. Their conversion stories were rather distinct, exhibiting the variety of ways in which one might experience the process of embracing Islam. All were well-educated, and were able to speak with me about gender issues articulately and thoroughly. They were open and self-reflexive in their answers, and it is to their credit that I am able to write this paper now. In order to better understand the perspective from which they speak, and to give them a more individual voice in my research, I will provide a short summary of their conversion narratives.⁸

Kalima is 29 years old, and has been a Muslim for six years. She is Dutch and grew up in a small village in the Netherlands. As a teenager, she began to question the existence of God “because a lot of bad things happen in the world.” When she came into contact with refugee children during a *stageloper* (training period), she was inspired by their faith despite traumatic pasts. After meeting her husband, a practicing Muslim, at age 23, she became convinced that it is normal to believe. She decided that she did indeed believe in God and converted to Islam. She now has a young daughter, and continues to work outside the home.

⁸ The transcribed narratives are included in Appendix III.

Cloé converted to Islam in 1989, after leaving the Catholic Church and going through a long period of religious searching. She came into contact with Islam when she met her husband, a Kurdish Turk, at age 26. Her husband's family spoke about Islam with her, and she began to study it for herself. She was inspired by the beauty of the stories in the Qur'an, and felt immediately drawn to the religion. Years after converting, she went on to become the chairwoman of Al Nisa, a Dutch Muslim women's organization.

Though Adeeva is of Welsh origin, she was born in America and raised Catholic by adoptive parents. While she was still young a marriage with man 40 years her senior was arranged for her. She bore 10 children with him before he died. After being a widow for a long time, she came into contact with a Muslim man in her work. She began to study the Qur'an to prove his faith wrong, but quickly found herself drawn to Islam. Disillusioned with the changes that had occurred in the Catholic Church, and taken by the beauty of the Qur'an, she converted to Islam around the age of 50 in 1979. She remarried to another convert to Islam, a man from Friesland, with whom she has a loving relationship. She has been living with him in the Netherlands for approximately 25 years.

Sandie grew up in south Netherlands in a Catholic town. She was active in Catholic youth groups in high school, but found their traditionalist attitude restraining. She moved to Utrecht where she began her spiritual search. Though she had, and still has, a strong connection with Judaism, the reclusive nature of the post-WWII Jewish community in the Netherlands and the strict requirements laid out for prospective Jews convinced her not to convert. Instead, after a period of studying Islam, she converted at a

conference for young Muslims in London. She is currently in a relationship with a woman, her girlfriend of 14 years, and lives with her in Utrecht.

Pricilla grew up Catholic in Limburg, a province in south Netherlands. She lost her faith around age 17, after a period of asking spiritual questions but receiving no answers. When she was 23 she met her husband, an Egyptian Muslim man, at a disco. Their relationship had some problems, namely that they both wanted children but she was not Muslim. Because of these problems, and the growing feeling that something was missing in her life, she decided in 1998 to study Islam and Arabic. After a while she opened up to the religion, and converted in 1999. She is now a board member of Al Nisa.

Even in summarized form, it is clear that each narrative is rather distinct. In the course of her research, van Nieuwkerk too found converts to be a “heterogeneous group,” stating that it “is difficult to assume any typicality among converts” (van Nieuwkerk forthcoming 2006). Perhaps the only notable similarity among the women is their Catholic religious backgrounds, but since my sample is so limited this may be entirely coincidental. Yet despite different life situations, the narratives themselves contain some common strains. After a period of being active in the Catholic Church, all became disillusioned and began to question their faiths. They all either felt that spirituality was missing in their lives, or were actively engaging in a search for a new religion. When they came into contact with Islam, they studied the Qur’an and other Islamic texts thoroughly before deciding to embrace the religion⁹.

These similarities speak for the nature of the women that I interviewed. When asked to speak about their conversion process, they spoke mainly about their religious

⁹ Though Kalima did not mention this explicitly, she spoke a lot about reading the texts and using it in her everyday life to define what is and is not Islam. I therefore am assuming that she has at least studied the Qur’an.

pasts, indicating that they consider Islam to be an issue of faith. They did not mention social factors, such as the widespread belief that Muslim women are oppressed, in their narratives. Yet when I asked how their family reacted to their conversion, most said that they faced conflict due to the perceived oppressed status of Muslim women. Thus, though it is likely that they were influenced by culture that feels negatively towards Islam, they did not mention it in their conversion narrative, suggesting that they view the process as an entirely spiritual one. This indicates how they view Islam: it is a religion, not a culture or a society. Their focus on studying the Qur'an and Islamic texts prior to conversion shows that they approached the religion from a well informed perspective. It shows that they feel embracing Islam was a rational choice based upon first hand information.¹⁰ This also sets up their ability to distinguish between what is pure religion in Islam and what is derived from cultural traditions and rituals. Later I will elaborate upon how this knowledge not only provides them with bargaining power within their relationships and communities, but also how it helps to define their own identities.

Now with a more general background of the women I interviewed, and a general overview of how they see their conversion process and Islam in general, I will go on to analyze the way they spoke about gender issues in Islam and in Dutch society. I break the discussion of discourse down into two main subsections: discourse relating to Dutch society, and discourse about Islam and cultural Islamic practices. I will then tie these two sections together, and explain how they work together to help define these women's identities.

¹⁰ Researchers distinguish between "rational" conversion and "relational" conversion to Islam. Relational refers to converting because of relations with Muslims (husbands, for example) and the Muslim community. Rational conversions are a result of an "intellectual search" (Allievi in van Nieuwkerk forthcoming 2006).

“I just feel Dutch. I’m Dutch, I’m Dutch. And, yea, I’m Muslim also.” –Kalima

Dutch society has been on the path of secularization for the past half century. It went from a state of “pillarization¹²,” namely a society divided according to religious affiliation, to one of the most liberal and secularly oriented countries in the world. The women’s movement was extraordinarily successful, to the point of instating a governmental form of feminism¹³ (Outshoorn 1997). Changes such as its legalization of gay marriage and the leniency of its drug policies have ingrained the image of the tolerant Netherlands in international popular thought. The Dutch have internalized this image, and take their tolerance as a point of pride. Yet as the international political climate has changed, the tolerance and modernity of Dutch society is being put to the test.

The Netherlands in the 60’s and 70’s saw a great influx of immigrants from Turkey and Morocco. This was mostly encouraged by the Dutch government as a solution to the labor shortage, but was naïvely assumed to be temporary. Not surprisingly, but to the shock of much of Dutch society, these migrant workers chose to stay in the Netherlands even after the labor shortage was remedied (Shadid 1991). In addition to this, immigration from countries such as Turkey, Morocco, Indonesia, Surinam, Somalia etc. is on the rise. Now second and third generation, residents use their

¹¹ Though Adeeva is not Dutch, her thoughts and opinions are included within this section. Her Welsh/American background should be kept in mind.

¹² According to Shadid, “the Dutch pillarization system, which gives religious groups the right to establish their own infrastructures on the basis of their ideologies and to be subsidized by the government, was founded at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of an ideological struggle initiated by Catholic and Protestant groups” (Shadid 1991).

¹³ The DCE (Directie Coördinatie Emancipatiebeleid) was formed in 1978 and “is still the major agency in The Dutch government bureaucracy for public policy on women” (Outshoorn 1997).

status to bring in their families from their countries of ethnic origin. To the Dutch, these people are *allochtoon*, or foreign, even if they were born in the Netherlands and speak Dutch perfectly. Furthermore, since many of the aforementioned countries have predominantly Muslim populations, immigrants are invariably associated with Islam, despite what their religious affiliation may be. Muslim, in turn, has come to be synonymous with “foreign” within mainstream Dutch culture. Islam has become the “Other” in Dutch society against which Dutch national identity is constructed (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999; van Nieuwkerk 2004). Furthermore, Islam has become the symbolic benchmark by which Dutch mainstream culture measures modernity. Islam is seen as backwards in terms of women’s issues and gay rights. The examples most commonly given are the headscarf and the supposed violence against gays perpetrated by Moroccan boys (Lunsing 2003). The recent attacks on September 11th as well as the murder of Theo van Gogh have only served to increase, and for some Dutch people justify, this discourse on Islam.

As can be expected, this popular view of Islam as backwards, as the “Other,” and as oppressive of women has affected how Dutch female converts to Islam experience being Dutch and Muslim. When I asked the women whether or not Dutch people find being both Dutch and Muslim contradictory, they responded uniformly in the affirmative. The consensus was the Dutch people find it to be “strange,” almost unimaginable. Kalima described this sense of contradiction well, saying that “they just think that no well-educated Dutch woman will choose for Islam. They cannot imagine it.” That the contradiction is focused around being well-educated is not a coincidence. Education is a marker of modernity, and the right for women to have an education was a major part of

the women's movement (Outshoorn 1997). Thus, a sane, well-educated woman choosing Islam, the symbolic anachronism, is unfathomable. For this reason the interviewees, especially the four who currently wear or used to wear the headscarf, have been mistaken for immigrants. Priscilla has experienced this contradiction: "they ask me 'hey, you're Dutch?' I say 'yes! I'm Dutch!'" Sandie explicitly tied this sense of contradiction in with the concept of Islam the foreign "Other":

"Racists think it is not Dutch, it's not Western it's not modern, for my part. Nationalists think you don't like your own country anymore, so they regard you as someone who has left his own country. And a lot of moderate people think that your religion is not very mainstream. "But why Islam? Be Jewish, for my part, but not *Muslim!*" (Sandie)

Despite being Dutch/Western, they are perceived by many Dutch people as foreign: the "Other" in their own land. Thus, they experience what it feels like to be both an insider and an outsider in the Netherlands. Other researchers such as van Nieuwkerk and Badran have also noted this contradiction.¹⁴

Since Adeeva almost never wears the headscarf for religious purposes, people are often surprised to find she is Muslim.¹⁵ "I do get 'you're Muslim? You don't look like a Muslim.' And then I say 'what does a Muslim look like? Describe a Muslim to me.'"

Once again, this encounter exemplifies the belief that Islam is foreign and non-white.

However, in contrast with the experiences of the other four women with headscarves, it is strikingly different. Whereas she was perceived as non-Muslim, the others were

¹⁴ In Karin van Nieuwkerk's paper " 'Veils and wooden clogs don't go together.' Female converts and the construction of Dutch national identity," she explains that Dutch national identity is constructed through Muslims being the "Other." Dutch society's discourse on female converts to Islam shows that they are perceived to be "cultural 'Others.'"

¹⁵ She wears a hood to keep her head warm. She also covers her head in the mosque.

perceived as non-Dutch. Thus the headscarf plays an important role in how female converts experience being both Dutch and Muslim. This is not surprising considering the widespread discussion of the headscarf within Dutch media.¹⁶

When I asked how she thought Dutch people viewed women who wear a headscarf, Cloé responded, “well I think the major part of the Dutch society sees me as an obedient subjected woman.” Others said that people think they are stupid. As Sandie put it: “There are still brains here you know! I hide my hair not my brains!” This is unsurprising considering the common belief that one cannot be well-educated and Dutch yet Muslim at the same time. Extrapolating from the experiences that these women had, it seems that the headscarf has become the marker of Islam. For Dutch people, it embodies the image of the oppressed, foreign, uneducated Muslim woman.

Despite this, it seems that visibility as a Muslim is one of the major reasons why female converts wear the headscarf.¹⁷ When people ask Priscilla why she wants to hide her hair, she responds “I’m not hiding anything. I’m not hiding my hair. I’m showing ... I’m showing that I am Muslim. If I want to hide it, I don’t wear a scarf.” Priscilla is very explicit about the fact that she wears the headscarf to show that not all Muslim women are oppressed. She allows herself to be an example. Kalima echoed this sentiment, explaining that when she is confronted with the belief that Muslim women are oppressed, she simply lets people see that she is not. Thus, some converts actively use the headscarf as a form of symbolic discourse. They fight against discourse that uses the headscarf as a symbol of oppression in Islam by wearing one as a Dutch well-educated woman. Badran

¹⁶ There have been many recent attempts to deal with the issue of the headscarf. The Amsterdam Historical Museum has an exhibit called *Mijn Hoofddoek* (My Headscarf) from February 16, 2006 until May 14, 2006 that includes real life stories about the headscarf from women who wear them. *Opzij*, a Dutch feminist magazine, ran an article including stories from Muslim women about the headscarf in February 2006.

¹⁷ Kalima, Sandie and Priscilla all mentioned this as major reasons why they chose to wear the headscarf.

found that the covered women she interviewed actively did this as well. “Through the public display of a religious marker Western convert women are not just identifying with a group but they are also assertively putting religion back into the public space” (Badran forthcoming 2006). This is a fantastic example of how the women use the same discourse meant to exercise power over them as a form of resistance. Dutch mainstream society uses the headscarf as symbolic discourse to justify the belief that Muslim women are oppressed, so Muslim women like Priscilla use the symbol of the headscarf to prove the exactly opposite.

The women I spoke with do more than allow themselves to serve as examples: they actively critique the belief that Dutch women are emancipated and have achieved equal status to men. The critique they made on the status of women in Dutch society focused upon two topics: the position of women within relationships, and in the workplace. Regarding relationships, the women pointed out that though men and women are expected to have equal responsibility within the household, in reality it does not play out that way. As Kalima explains:

“I think most girls in this country they are raised with the idea that they are going to marry, and the husband will be very emancipated, and they don’t have to, the husband will clean the toilet, and they don’t have to cook. But if you look at real life, it’s maybe like 2% of the men who do it. In real life, it’s not working like that.” (Kalima)

This is particularly interesting because though the Dutch critique Muslims for relegating the woman to the household, they are essentially doing the very same thing. The other critique has to do with wages and career choice. Cloé, Sandie and Priscilla specifically

mentioned that in the Netherlands men have higher wages than women, and that women tend to work part-time. Thus, they are able to use their position as both Dutch and outsider to point out what they believe to be blatant hypocrisy. In response to the belief that they are oppressed, they turn the discourse around and expose the ways in which many non-Muslim Dutch women themselves are not fully emancipated.

Though they may critique what they see as the reality of Dutch society, they believe their ideas about emancipation and equality to be fairly in line with that of mainstream Dutch thought. This is made most clear in their positions regarding about feminism. Cloé, Sandie and Priscilla¹⁸ identified as feminists, and Kalima and Adeeva were sympathetic towards the movement. They believe that feminism is necessary because it provides a woman's perspective and allows women to fight for the rights that they deserved. Considering the success of the women's movement in the Netherlands, this position on feminism is rather Dutch, or at least Western. Their definition of emancipation was also consistent with Western thinking. The majority defined emancipation in terms of having agency, autonomy, equal opportunities and rights, and freedom from oppressive structures. The similarity between their concepts and those secular feminism shows their thinking to be congruent with typical liberal Dutch ideas of emancipation and feminism.

The discourse that these women used to speak about Dutch society was a critique of real life practices. Though their ideas about emancipation and feminism were quite

¹⁸ Cloé, Sandie and Priscilla were also the three women involved in Al Nisa, a group that often has explicitly feminist ideas. These women were probably both attracted to the organization because of its feminist inclinations and influenced by its ideas. Thus, having three female converts to Islam from the same organization that consider themselves to be feminists means that my sample is very much not representative of the general population of converts. This must be kept in mind when applying my analysis to other situations. More information about Al Nisa can be found at www.alnisa.nl.

Dutch, they were quick to point out the inconsistencies between what is said and what is actually done. This discourse is important in that it serves as a response to the popular idea in mainstream Dutch culture that Islam is oppressive to women. Thus, they turn around the discourse of oppression and emancipation that Dutch society uses against them. They must do so in order to defend themselves, and to show that they have modern thinking. By showing that a well-educated Dutch woman can choose Islam, they redefine what it means to be Muslim in Dutch society. At the same time, they point out real gender inequalities in the Netherlands. Consistent with the Foucauldian concept of power, they use their discourse to resist being labeled, and to exercise power to change how the public perceives them.

Religion versus culture: Gender discourse relating to Islam

“I’m proud to say I’m the inventor of the term ‘real existing Islam.’ Perhaps you know about communism before, and socialism. The situation in Eastern Europe was always described by leftists as ‘real existing socialism.’ It was a communist jargon for the situation. Of course, the situation there, sometimes had nothing to do with what socialism or communism was about. Nevertheless, the expression to describe it remained ‘real existing socialism.’ Get the irony. So, I think I’m the inventor of the term ‘real existing Islam,’ and ‘real existing Islam’ is what you see around us.” (Sandie)

When Cloé converted to Islam, she thought she had found a religion that allowed men and women to live as equals.

“And when I became a Muslim, I really was convinced that I wouldn’t need feminism anymore because reading into the books, reading about Islam in books, I was convinced that Islam gives men and women equal rights and gives women every possibility to develop themselves as they like.” (Cloé)

Yet when she began her job as a social worker, she realized that though Islam gives women full rights in theory, this does not always translate to practice. All of the women I interviewed at some point faced situations where this inconsistency was made clear to them. This is quite similar to the situation they face in Dutch society, that theory and practice are often two very different things. Regardless of what the Qur’an might say, they must contend with the “real existing Islam” that Sandie speaks of in the quote above. I will argue that critiquing this hypocrisy does more than to point out real social injustices in cultural Islamic practices: it allows converts to defend their religious choice by redefining what being Muslim means to them.

The women I spoke to chose Islam because they found it spiritually fulfilling. Adeeva described her experience of converting to Islam as finding peace, security and truth. Other appealing characteristics that attracted the women to Islam include the absence of religious mediators such as priests, the logical nature of Islam, the way of praying, and the just and merciful nature of Allah. None of the women felt that they had been attracted to Islam because the religion offered them something specifically as women. Their attraction to the rational nature of Islam shows that they have a good understanding of what the religion is in its purest essence. Indeed, all of the women have studied the Qur’an and other Islamic texts. Because of this knowledge, and since they

did not grow up Muslim, they are in an excellent position to distinguish between what is the religion and what is culture.

In many ways, the women I spoke with found Islam to be empowering. Since they know the Qur'an well, they advocate for their rights exactly how it is written. Of the women who are married to Muslim men told me that they challenge their husbands when they feel their rights are being violated. For example, when Kalima's husband told her that she could not go to the cinema with her daughter, she challenged this decision by asking him to find proof in the Qur'an that she could not. In the end they discussed the matter and she went to the cinema. This is just one example of how the women use their knowledge of the Islamic texts to empower themselves and to advocate for the rights they deserve. For this reason the women I spoke to felt that reading and studying the Islamic texts is extremely important. While speaking about extremism within Islam, namely wearing the veil and fully covering, Adeeva explained to me that reading and understanding the Islamic texts prevents this kind of behavior. "Everybody I can tell, I say 'read, understand what you're reading. If you don't understand the Arabic, read it in the language you do understand, then you won't become a fanatic.'" Thus, the women I spoke to have found fulfillment and empowerment within the Islamic religion through a thorough understanding of the Islamic texts.

As Kalima and Adeeva's comments suggest, not all Muslim women are able to use Islamic texts to empower themselves. The general consensus among the women I interviewed was that Muslim women from Islamic societies face oppression. They attribute this not to Islam, but rather to cultural traditions and rituals that have become mixed with the religion. Some types of oppression that the women mentioned included

not questioning their husbands' decisions, wearing the full veil, domestic violence, poor healthcare, low literacy rates, being forced into motherhood and other positions, and only being respected in certain roles (e.g. the housewife). A few of the women attributed this directly to patriarchy and blamed it on the men in Muslim societies. This is spoken about in the context of problems that *other* Muslim women face. Thus, the sort of speech serves to distinguish between the convert and the rhetorical oppressed Muslim woman in Islamic societies.

The "Othering" of the oppressed born Muslim woman by female converts makes clear and important social fact. Especially since September 11th, Muslims have been viewed as a homogenous group. Van Nieuwkerk explains that "Islam and *phenomena islamica* are represented as homogenous forces of radical otherness" (van Nieuwkerk 2004). Sandie has noticed this change: "Before 9/11 we were Turkish, Moroccan, Somali, Pakistani, and afterwards we were Muslims. No division, Muslim. Others. Not like us." Yet as the women I interviewed pointed out to me, there is a huge difference between how they practice Islamic and how Muslim women in Islamic societies experience the religion. Indeed, there is a huge range of beliefs and practices that have been attributed to Islam. Thus, the discourse of critique that these women use nuances the vague and over generalized term "Muslim women." It shows that women can experience Islam as either empowering and emancipating or oppressive depending on their social situation. In this way, the women use gender discourse to exercise the power of redefinition: they reject way Muslim women are expected to behave in terms of cultural Islamic practices and delineate for themselves what it means to be a Muslim woman.

The three women from Al Nisa also critiqued the way in which traditional interpretations of the Qur'an exclude women. They believed that Islamic feminism¹⁹, namely reinterpreting texts from a woman's perspective, could be empowering for Muslim women. As Cloé explains: "The traditional readings were made by men, from patriarchal cultures, so also those first readings are very unkind towards women. But the texts themselves leave much space and room for women to reread those texts, which we are doing also right now, and I think they are open." Texts are very important in Islam, and these women believe that a women's perspective in religious interpretations can give Muslim women the full rights that they believe Islam provides. Not all women feel the same way about this critique of Qur'anic interpretations. Adeeva believes that the Qur'an cannot be reinterpreted, nor does it particularly need to be. Yet it is interesting to note that some converts to Islam, women who are generally more aware of the religion and culture dichotomy, are extending their critique to the traditional readings of the Qur'an. It shows another way in which women are using knowledge of Islam and Qur'anic texts to empower themselves.

Indeed, the women found many of the Islamic beliefs regarding equality and gender to be empowering. When I asked the women to define what equality between

¹⁹ Margot Badran defines Islamic feminism as "grounded exclusively, or primarily, in Islamic discourse taking the Qur'an as its central text. The fundamental methodological tool of Islamic feminism is *ijtihad*, independent rational search for meanings in Islam's sacred texts (Qur'an and Sunna or the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad), and more specifically, *tafsir*, interpretation of the Qur'an. Muslim women as exegetes draw upon core Qur'anic principles to articulate an unequivocal theory of equality of all human beings (*insan*). This equality cannot be qualified by gender, race, or ethnicity and cannot be a 'situated equality' operative only in the public sphere but by definition transcends constructions of a public/private divide. Only equality is equality; equity is not equality" (Badran forthcoming 2006).

men and women means, Kalima and Adeeva described it in terms of being equal but different²⁰.

“...because if you think that all roles, all acts you do are for Allah, you want to do it with the intention for your God, I don't think that there will be any, that Allah will make a difference for changing the diapers or for reading one's *Sura*²¹”(Kalima)

This is a traditional Islamic concept of equality, and Kalima is able to find it empowering because it means that her and her husband are seen as equals before Allah. Though not all of the women described equality in this way, it is important to note the various ways in which Muslim women experience equality. Whereas some of the women found power in the reinterpretation of Islamic texts, others find it in the Islamic definition of equality between men and women. Once again, the range of ways in which Islam can be experienced as empowering for women is expanded.

Thus, the female converts to Islam that I spoke with experienced life as an Islamic woman in a variety of different ways. Yet despite this variability, they found the religion to be spiritually fulfilling and social empowering in their own lives. They juxtapose this emancipated experience with the oppression that many born Muslim women face because of Islamic cultural practices. By doing this, they not only expose the important distinction between Islam and the cultural practices attributed to Islam, they also prove that the over generalized category of “Muslim woman” does not predict how one experiences the religion. Since they are relatively new to Islam, and lack the history of

²⁰ Karin van Nieuwkerk found that many converts to Islam viewed equality in this traditionally Islamic way (van Nieuwkerk forthcoming 2006).

²¹ *Sura* is the Arabic word for a chapter in the Qur'an.

cultural traditions and rituals that born Muslims have, they are able to make this distinction. In this way, their gender discourse of critique is made possible because of their position within the Muslim community. These women turn around the common discourse on the role of Muslim women as defined by men and as derived from cultural Islamic practices. They use their extensive knowledge of the Qur'an to define for themselves the role that gender will play in their lives as Muslims. Thus, they use the same discursive tools as Muslim men to redefine their position as Muslim women.

Gender discourse and the formation of Identity

“I like being *moslima* because... the word in Arabic in means literally “female Muslim.” And I am very aware of the fact that I have several identities, but I think that being a woman and being Muslim I always feel this. You know, 24 hours a day I feel this and that I am a Muslim and that I am a woman. And other identities, or parts of my identities, it's not 24 hours. Because... as I said I feel very Dutch when I'm in Egypt, and here it's normal to be Dutch. I don't think that all day “oh, well I'm Dutch.” And other roles also because I'm also a wife and a daughter and a sister and a friend and a colleague. That's all part of my identity, but it's not all the time, not every minute of the day. Those other identities I feel that it's always in relation to other people. For me, being a woman and being a Muslim it's not just in relation to other people, actually being Muslim it's my relationship with God, you know. And being a woman, almost the same because that's how he created me. So that's who I am, really.” (Priscilla)

In the course of my interviews, the women shared with me not only their opinions on gender issues but also their personal journey towards conversion and the life experiences that have served to shape their beliefs. For this reason, it is important to talk not only about critique and discourse, but also about personal identity. As explained in

the theoretical framework, realist feminism allows a meaningful but not essential concept of identity based upon experience to exist. It is apparent in the stories the women have told me that being both Dutch (or Western), Muslim and female has affected their lived experiences. Thus, the specific social location of 'Dutch Muslim woman' plays a role in identity formation. Of course, since experiences are not essential, the cognitive element of experience will cause each person to interpret life events in different ways. Keeping this in mind, I posit that the gender discourse the women utilize to critique Dutch society and cultural Islamic practices allows them to articulate exactly what kind of Dutch/Muslim/woman they are. They redefine the social locations that Dutch society and Muslim communities have placed them in, and in doing so construct more nuanced identities for themselves.

The women defined themselves as Dutch (Welsh in Adeeva's case), as Kalima's quote in the beginning of the first subsection suggests. They reject the definition of Islam as the symbolic foreign "Other" and therefore not only contribute to the range of variety within Dutch society but also within the Muslim community. Yet this does not stop other Dutch people from labeling them as foreign. Those women wearing the headscarf have been mistaken for Turkish and Moroccan before, and the one who does not is perceived as non-Muslim. Thus, the women juxtapose themselves with other Muslims in order to define their identities. They do this through outlining the differences between the empowering way they experience Islam and how born Muslim women often are oppressed by cultural traditions. After Cloé converted to Islam, she went through what she calls "the period of the rules" where she followed the rules and traditions of her husband's Turkish family. In describing the conservative way she dressed at that time,

she said “I almost became a Turkish woman.” This statement makes the “Turkish woman” the symbolic “Other” that she defines herself against. Cloé is not a Turkish woman that follows rules without question because she is unable to distinguish between religion and culture. She is a Dutch woman who is educated and who claims her rights within Islam. In this way, she defines for herself what it means to be a Dutch Muslim rather than a Turkish Muslim.

The women did not only define themselves in terms of Dutch and non-Dutch: they indicated exactly what kind of convert they are.

“There are some Dutch Muslim women who converted to Islam, if I look at them, it seems like they took the culture of their husband. So they seem Moroccan, or they seem Turkish. And I don’t want to be like that, so I always felt very strong for the Dutch identity. (Later on...) I am always surprised... if I see them change and they behave like a Moroccan woman I say “huh?” I cannot imagine. Because you are not Moroccan. For what reason you want to go do that kind of things?” (Kalima)

Not only does Kalima feel she is strongly Dutch, she is not the kind of convert that changes her behavior to seem more Turkish or Moroccan. In other words, she is not the kind of convert that confuses religion and culture. Therefore it is not necessarily the nature of being a convert to Islam that allows one to distinguish between religion and culture: it is a specific characteristic of the women that I interviewed. Each one of the women in some way compared themselves with converts that became extremist, or who becomes more like foreign woman. In this way, the discourse that critiques the inability to distinguish between religion and culture is also a way for these women to define themselves.

All of the women believed that there were biological differences between men and women. Their descriptions of men ranged from more focused on one goal, driven by direct instincts, and simply selfish. For women, some descriptions included being more caring, sensitive, better with children, and more social, showing more restraint, and thinking of many things at the same time. Some of these beliefs are likely to be influenced by Islamic thinking, though many are also familiar to mainstream Western thought. Regardless, this discourse on the difference between men and women defines what being a woman means to them. Though there was a great deal of variability even among the women I interviewed, that they believe there are differences between men and women, both inherent and learned, indicates that the way they experience their lives differs from how they think men experience life. This is central to realist feminist theory, which allows for a category of “woman” to exist since being a woman will affect which life experiences a person has. In this case, since my interviewees were women and identified as such, they are acknowledging that their social location has affected their identity formation.

When discussing identity, one must be careful to avoid oversimplification of categories. One cannot view these women and separate “woman” from “Muslim” from “Dutch.” These categories do not function separately to influence experience, but instead constitute a distinct social location. This is apparent when looking at the life experiences of the women I interviewed. The gender discourse they have developed is a response to an attempt by outsiders, Dutch and Muslims alike, to constrain and simplify their identities. They juxtapose themselves with others, with Dutch people, Muslims, men, foreigners, etc., to indicate exactly who they are. These rhetorical opposing figures are

the “Other” against whom these women define themselves. They may indeed identify as Dutch Muslim women, but they will make clear through their discourse and actions exactly what kind of Dutch Muslim woman they are. Thus, in the process of redefinition, these women have agency.

From a realist feminist perspective, these women have had certain experiences because of their social location as Dutch Muslim women. They have then cognitively processed how these experiences relate to their identity. The trend among the women I interviewed seemed to be a rejection of the overly simplified categories of ‘Dutch,’ ‘Muslim’ and ‘woman.’ This rejection then leads to a redefinition of these categories, which are then incorporated into their identities. This is not necessarily the conclusion that all female converts to Islam reach. Many may become extreme, or adopt the cultures of their husbands, or reach any number of such conclusions. Furthermore, the nuanced identities of the women I interviewed are surely far more complicated and specific than I am able to represent in this paper. It is the agency in the process of redefining identity through gender discourse that is important.

Conclusion²²

Now, at the conclusion, I would like to ask the reader to turn to the first page of the introduction. Considering the context of my research, reread the quote about conversion to Islam and emancipation. It should now be fairly clear why I chose to open my paper with that statement. The women I spoke went through a major life change when they decided to convert to Islam. Yet it does not stop there: their position with Dutch society and the Muslim community continues to be renegotiated through their gender discourse. Since female converts to Islam are simultaneously insiders and outsiders in Dutch society and in Islam, they are in the distinct position to make a critique on both. They critique the Dutch for labeling them as subjugated women, while many non-Muslim Dutch women are themselves oppressed. They critique Muslims for confusing cultural Islamic practices with pure religion. The effect of this critique is to expose the inconsistencies between theory and practice in Dutch culture and in Islam. By doing this, they turn around the discourse that oppresses them and use it to liberate themselves. They also use gender discourse based on their lived experiences as Dutch/Western Muslim women to redefine what those categories mean to them. In this way, they exercise power through discourse as Foucault suggested, and they form their non-essential identities in the way realist feminism describes.

²² Suggestions for further research can be found in Appendix I.

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Appendix

I. Suggestions for further research:

- The most important suggestion that I can make is that this research be repeated with more participants who have a greater range of beliefs. The women I interviewed were all liberal, and three came from the same organization. It would be interesting to see what more conservative converts think about gender issues in Islam and in Dutch society.
- It would be interesting to compare how born Muslim women speak about Islam and Dutch society with how converts speak about it. A comparison of the gender discourse could lead to a better understanding of the different experiences Muslim women have with Islam.
- A study that focuses more closely on identity should be performed, as that I had to work sometimes indirect information. This would be much easier to do if the researcher speaks Dutch.

II. Interview Questions

A note regarding the interview questions:

- Since the format of my interviews was fairly informal, I did not necessary ask all of these questions during each interview. If I felt that a point had already been made, I would leave a question out and further explore other topics that the interviewee broached. Question #10 in particular was often

left out because it seemed awkward to ask in the context of the interview.

The order in which the questions were asked was often changed as well.

1. Tell me about your process of embracing Islam, beginning from time you first learned about Islam.

- What attracted you to Islam?
- What age were you when you decided to convert?
- Where were you religious before you embraced Islam?
- Was there someone who influenced your decision to embrace Islam, or helped you in the process?
- How did your friends and family react?
- What does Islam have to offer you as a woman?

2. How would you compare what it means to be a woman in Dutch society with what it means to be a woman in Islam?

- Have you experienced being a woman differently since you decided to embrace Islam?

3. How do you respond to the belief in mainstream Dutch culture that Muslim women are oppressed?

4. How do you respond to the idea that Dutch women are very emancipated, and that they have achieved equal rights as men?

5. What is your concept of “emancipation of women”?

- Has it changed since you converted to Islam? If so, in what ways?
- Is the Dutch concept of “emancipation” different from the Islamic concept?

6. How would you define “equality” between men and women?

- How do you experience this in your own life?

- How would you compare this concept of equality to that of mainstream Dutch society?

7. Are there ways in which men and women are different? (gender roles)

- How do you experience this in your own life?

8. How do you understand what “feminism” means?

- Do you consider yourself to be a feminist? Why or why not?

9. Do you know anything about Islamic feminism? (ex. Reinterpreting texts from feminist perspective)

- If so, what do you think about it?

10. In what ways are women who are born Muslim different from those who have converted? (clarify: be able to answer “what do you mean?”)

- Clarification: Do you have different ideas about Islam, for example about the roles of men and women in a household.

11. As a woman, do you feel that being both Dutch and Muslim is conflicting or contradictory?

12. Do you feel that Dutch society/family thinks that being Muslim and Dutch is conflicting?

13. How do you describe your identity? What parts of your identity are most important to you?

14. If she is not wearing a headscarf:

- Do you ever wear a headscarf?
- Tell me about your decision to not wear a headscarf.
- What does the headscarf mean for Muslim women?

- How do you think Dutch society perceives the headscarf?

If she is wearing a headscarf:

- Tell me about your decision to wear a headscarf.
- As a woman, what does the headscarf mean to you?
- How do you think Dutch society perceives the headscarf?
- I have heard before that some people believe wearing the headscarf is hiding one's beauty. How would you respond to this sort of belief?
- I have also read that wearing the headscarf lets you feel less like a sexual object in your everyday life. Does this have anything to do with how you experience wearing the headscarf?

II. Conversion Narratives

I have chosen to include the conversion narratives (response to the first question) of each of the interviews in order to give a better sense of the individuality of each woman. This shows their style of speaking, their word choice, and the points they find most important. This should be considered a supplement to the brief background summary included in the analysis. Words or phrases that I was unable to accurately transcribe will be indicated as "...” or in **bold**.

Interview #1 (K):

Interviewer: Well the first question is, fairly general, just tell me about your process of embracing Islam, beginning from the first time you learned about it.

K: To become Muslim. I grew up in a very small village in the Netherlands, so I didn't know any Muslims. There were no Muslim families or anything. And I grew up in a Catholic family so, we went to Church until I was, I think like 16 and my father said it's all, how do you say, 'bullshit, we're not going to go again.' So we stopped going, maybe on Christmas or with Easter we went to Church, but on other days we didn't went again. So, at that time, I was like, 16-17 years, so I started to think if God really exist and things like this. But I thought 'I don't think he exists because a lot of bad things happens in the world, so there is no god.' So that was the way I was thinking. Then I start to do my social studies and I, how you say, *stageloper*, I don't know the word. You go to school then you have to do practice for one year. You have to do work.

Interviewer: Sort of like an internship, you would say.

K: Yes. So I went to do that in a refugees center for children. So there were children from I think like 6 years to 18 years, who came to the Netherlands without their parents. So they were all alone. And, I was thinking they saw all the bad things in the world, and they lost their parents, and they were still believing in God. 'Cos I saw them, they were Christians and Muslims the children, and they were really practicing their religion. So I was surprised, I say "how is this possible?" 'Cos I, I don't believe in God because all the bad things happens in the world, and they believe in God but they experienced the bad things. So I say 'wow, this is...' I just start to think so maybe it's possible to believe in a god even when bad things happen to you. So I start to think about that, then I think a few months later I met my husband. I didn't marry him immediately but...

Interviewer: Of course.

K: I met him in the streets, and he was Muslim but I just met him and we talked then I start to know him and then I saw he was a Muslim. But even he didn't tell me much things about Islam. It was just the same with the children I was working with. For him it was normal to believe. So I would just start to think it's just normal to believe it not normal to not believe. See the norm here is to not believe so. So I just start to change my mind. And I say "I think yes I think I believe in God." It was like that. And I start to think, which religion do I have to choose? Then I was thinking, yes, nothing is wrong with Islam. So yes, I can choose for Islam also. So that is why I choose to.

Interview #2 (C):

C: Well I converted in 1989. I was born in a Catholic family. My father and mother both were Catholics. My father came of the higher middle class, socio-economic class, and my mother she came from a labor family... no not labor, how do you say... (working class) working class yes. A very poor family. But they were both Catholics, and until I was 8 years old they went to church every Sunday. My first communion, yes, I did my first communion. But after that they stopped going to church, Christian church, and I was the only one in our family who went to church still after that. I went together with the neighbor, the girl from out neighbors and I like to go to church. I think I was searching for God, much more than I was searching for a church to go to or people to spend it with. And when I was maybe 13, 14 years old I stopped going to church every week. Horses became more important, and boys maybe (laughs), and school, other things. Normal puberty girl things. But I went to church every Christmas and Easter and so, you know, high days. And when I was 21 yea, on Christmas when I was 21 years old, I went to the mass of Christmas and leaving the church I felt not to belong there anymore. It felt cold, the church was beautiful, flowers everywhere, and the texts were very beautiful, but it felt cold. And nobody leaving the church saluted each other or wished each other merry Christmas or something like that so, it felt cold. I was lonely in that time of my life, but I felt even more lonely that night. So that was more or less the end of my Catholic background. And I started to search for other religions because not very consciously, but I think I knew there was a religion where I belong, or something like that. I was searching for it. I've spoken with Protestants, I've been to Protestant churches, I've spoken to, how are they... Jehovah's Witnesses, but I also have looked in the direction of New Age and all kinds of esoteric movements. I've the "... " if you know what it is. So I've tried everything, almost. And, but I didn't find what I was searching for. Then I was 26 years old and it was in 1988 and I then I met my partner, my husband, he is a Turk, a Kurdish Turk, from middle Anatolia. And he's a Muslim. And he came to my door and just, he came with a friend to my door, and we met, and it was love at first sight I think, and in the same week his family, more than he did because he didn't speak Dutch very well. So his family started to talk with me about Islam and maybe it was love at first sight two times in the same week, seems to be the way. Because I immediately felt this is what I was looking for, and that was because one of the most important things was that they told me that between men, one person and God, there is no mediator, there is nobody in between, so you have a direct relationship with God. And that is what I liked very much because I didn't understand the principle in the Catholic Church with the priests, and people who know when you are forgiven something, and I didn't understand very well so maybe it was... I think, looking backward, I had a childish view on Christian beliefs. But things go like that in real life.

Interviewer: How old were you again?

C: When I became a Muslim?

Interviewer: Yes.

C: 26. And yes it was half a year later. So we met in March '89, I think, and I became Muslim in October '89. After I had bought the Qur'an and I had read the Qur'an and I liked it very much, although the language was drawn and heavy, but it felt like home or it felt good. So, and I read it nice a lot, from Catholic beliefs because, yea, it's not so so different. So we talked a lot about Islam and he told me many beautiful stories that really made me cry sometimes. I remember one story he told me about, it was called the "... " it was called the (you sow with a needle and... me: thread) thread. Well it was the mosque of threads. And he told me a story about a very poor lady and in her neighborhood they were building a mosque and she had nothing to give to build the mosque with. At least she threw some of the thread into the cement for the mosque, so she gave something. And later, well the imam dreamt about this and so... beautiful story. So it was a romantic entrance to Islam, maybe also... in love with the man and beautiful stories and a new culture. If you open for other cultures that's... I see with other Muslim women converts as well that new culture is attractive as well at the beginning, in the beginning maybe, later the culture becomes more difficult I think. So that was my entrance. And the second thing that is important to say, the second thing that I liked very much was the fact that in Islam daily life and high values come together very often, and they are mixed, and you can be watering your plants or smiling to somebody in the street or... is as much valuable as reading the Qur'an or praying or something. So I liked that as well very much. So in '89 I became a Muslim and in the first maybe 5 years, well I thought I was one of the few converted Muslims in the Netherlands, in that time I felt lonely, I asked many questions to the family of my husband and to my husband about Islam, and they respected my questions very much. But they didn't always understand my questions. Sometimes they told me "well we are not used to ask these questions, and maybe some of them are forbidden even." So the Islam that I knew in that period was Islam of rituals and practices of my family in law, but it was not very deep and there weren't much books in the Dutch language about Islam. I remember there was a Qur'an and one book from imam "... " about how to pray, and maybe one book about the position of women in Islam, which actually was published by the organization which I now am the chairwoman of. But that was it. And I think in '96 I learned about Al Nisa, this organization, by Muslim broadcasting, there was a program and they were mentioned, so I contacted them and it was a kind of "hooray" feeling so, there were many many more women like myself in the Netherlands and they held meetings. And, well within a short period I started a group in Utrecht myself with another women and that was in '97, and after that everything developed very quickly. First I had a group here in Utrecht for women to meet each other once a month, then a few years later I became a board member, then maybe two years later I became the chairwoman. So since 2001 I am the chairwoman. And, yea, and in the first years I was a Muslim it was that Islam for me was a religion of rules, and to dos and don'ts, you know, just like everybody who is looking from the outside now to Islam. For me it was the same. You may not eat pork meat, and you may not drink wine, and you must pray. So I spent a lot of time feeling guilty about everything I didn't do or didn't do as good as I could do. Until maybe in the same time '96 a Turkish friend who started Islam deeply told me that every moment, yes it's very logical but you have to heard it sometimes, that every moment you feel guilty is lost time

because you can't put your energy in doing something positive for the next moment. So that was the moment, I think, that I really understood that I had to get loose of these rules and to get rid of all these rules and to be myself also within Islam. And from that time on I was able to find the really the deep values behind all of the rules. And now I find, for example, the prayer, now is supporting me in my experience of the religion or the beliefs, and it's not the other way around. I'm not praying because I have to do, because the rules says I have to pray, but I pray because it helps me to feel better or to live my life more true or something like that. So that was a very important moment in my belief, yea.

Interview #3 (A):

Interviewer: Do you mind telling me more about your process of converting to Islam, beginning from when you first learned about Islam.

A: I did free will work with an organization that helped immigrants, because I had to bring my children in and I got to know these. And this one man was... he knew everything, he was perfect. And we were talking one day and I said "oh, you're a Mohammad" and he said "no, I'm a Muslim." Oh, alright fine. And we got to talking about it. And a good Roman Catholic, I knew what heathens the Muslims were. And I thought, "now I'm going to prove him wrong." And I began to *lees* (read). (me: you did what?) I began to read. And the more I read I thought now, without the holy Qur'an I can't understand everything so I brought a penguin paperback. And I memorized the "...", the first chapter is so beautiful. And I memorized it, and I couldn't put the Qur'an down. I read the whole thing, through. And all the things that I had spent hours on my knees in the chapel saying 'forgive me for even thinking this' were in there. And the Catholic Church was changing so much. My children came home and they were talking about the brother and sisters of Jesus. So I said "what? How durfed you!" and he said "well, the teacher at school." So I called Mon Senior and I said "do you know what they're teaching my children?" "Well, you know things are changing..." And then when I went back to England, I was secretary of the Church and I did the flowers and I cleaned, because I'm a person that has to have a mainstay, otherwise I can't live. And I saw things changing so much. And when Mother Superior got pregnant, that was the thing that really got at me. This *kan niet meer*. But I needed my religion. And as I said I got to studying Islam, and the more I studied, the more I thought "oh... this, I *begrip* this." So there was a bookmark in one of the books, and I wrote to Pakistan and told them that I was interested, and if they'd send me literature. Within five days I had a stack of books arrive at London! So they must have called from Pakistan into London and said "look, here you've got a Western woman, she wants to know." And Islam said will you come up and talk with us, so I went up and we talked. And I studied for a long time. Because I knew my family would not accept it. But it was the one thing I found "yes I can believe in this." Because as I say, everything that I had said "look, is this possible? How dare you think such a thing. On your knees." And my knees are calloused. And

they were here. Not to step on anyone's toes, but I never thought that a well-nourished young man could die after 3 hours on the cross. I could not see how that could happen, when malnourished people would hang for two and three days before they went to. And it was always there, and Mary Magdalene was always there. And I even wrote an article that I thought Jesus had married Mary Magdalene and... I was about killed for it! But, everything that I believed, well perhaps not believed but thought of, Islam said yes, we have proof. There is a city in Pakistan called **Murree Hills** and the Pakistanis have ... it's called Mary's hills. Because Jesus, after he was taken down from his cross, and left, went into Pakistan. And there is proof that he died in the Cashmere, and there's a grave. And there is ... *klein klein klein klein* son. So, I think this is probably true. You can go into Calcutta and there is a Catholic church there where Jesus was supposed to have gone. And I thought "now, all of this can't be a lie." And the more you study, for me, the more I studied the more I thought "yes." So finally in 1979 I made my "... I entered into Islam. And to be honest, in South Hampton, I tried study in South Hampton, but at the *moskee* there the men blocked the door. And if you tried, if a woman tried to go in she got hit! (me: really?) Oh yea, really strict, whatever. But the holy Qur'an says there should be *geen*, there should be no sex in Islam. There should be one Islam. But as you look there are the Shiites, there are the Wapiti's, Ahmadiyya "... is outside of Islam because they believe that their head of their organization is the prophet, is a prophet. And that *kan niet*. But the Ahmadiyya Lahore is very modern. It is a missionary. And I went there, on the congress, and I met my husband. But I thought he was married, I mean a man at his life *tijd*. And we spoke for a few minutes and I realized that we were alone, all the women had gone away. They were apparently trying to push us together. But there was another woman out of England that was quite... she came from the islands from Jamaica and she was... she said to the imam in the bus "oh you get up, I'll keep your seat warm for you..." Well you don't say that to a Pakistani man. And one of the men came to me and he said "she's a bad woman." And I didn't want them to think I was, because I came from England that I was that time. So when I realized we were alone I actually ran over to the women. At my life time but still, you don't want a bad reputation. And then, 23 years ago, *Koninginnedag*, I came over her on vacation and the following Sunday we met. Well on Thursday we had tea together at a friend's house, and they brought the tea to us and they sat back there as chaperones, but they let us alone. I could see it with children, but old people, but anyway it was lovely. And we went into the mosque and we were early so they said "oh well will you sit here in on the Qur'an class." And of course the Qur'an class is all out loud. And we sat that and he said "you know, we've known each other for years." And I said "yes." And he said "we're brother and sister in Islam." And I said "yes," and I thought "what now!" And he said, "well do you think we could get married?" And I said "yes." It was no question, yes. And he came over to England in July. Well to finish the story I was supposed to give a *lezing* (reading) at this meeting in Den Haag, and I was so nervous, I got up I said "I want to thank you all for everything you've done. Goodbye." And I went and sat down. And people were rather *vreemd* because when I got up to have something to say I said it. And it was usually reasonable. And I didn't that time. A half hour later he was supposed to give a *lezing*, he stood up and he said "I only have five minutes. So I will tell you in that five minutes I've asked Attiya to (marry), she has said yes, so we're going to have our marriage in London." You could have heard a pin drop, it was so silent. It was absolutely stone still. He had been

alone for 50 years. And finally someone said “is that you? How did you do it!” And I said “well I really didn’t do anything.” He took me to the boat to go back and this man said “you can kiss her.” And my husband said “no, fries don’t kiss.” My husband is a Fries, he’s from Leeuwarden, and everyone thought “my oh my what have we got her into!” But in public he was never like that. We came home from England and we’d had a discussion. But I had no *Nederlands*, and his English is... So of course you, little things. I called him “dear,” well of course “*dier*” here is an animal. And he thought I was calling him something nasty. And I went over and I kissed him. And he said “Fries don’t kiss” and I said “well I do. And the best way to change an argument is to have a little kiss and cuddle.” Now, I never leave the house without a kiss. We went out, we said out by the lake Sunday and he put his arm around me and he kissed me and everybody was sitting watching these two old people. But he is a man... if he had had the opportunity to study, he would be world wide known. He is world wide known in the *Amadiyya* group, and most Islamic groups. He’s a brilliant man. And what there is to know about Islam, he knows. He’s very marvelous. But he’s old.

Interviewer: How old were you again when you decided to convert?

A: I was about 50.

Interview #4 (S):

Can you tell me about your conversion beginning when you first learned about Islam?

Oh well when I first learned about Islam. I first learned about Islam when I had been in school, it was some knowledge about the five pillars of Islam but not much more. I was raised in the south of this country squeezed between Germany and Belgium. (Me: In Maastricht? Her: No in “...”. Half an hour by train earlier than Maastricht). But I lived in a very white more or less Catholic environment, of course the village was Catholic but it was secularizing. Even the DOC, the bishops is the head of it I don’t know what it is in English, we say *bisdom* what is it in English I don’t know. (Me: The clergy?) Nevertheless we entered the... the part of the Catholic Church where I lived was very conservative at the time so our bishop was a very conservative bishop so it caused a lot of polarization.

It was secularizing though?

It was secularizing but at a lower pace than in the rest of the country. And my parents were both Catholics, but in their youth they were very much forced to go to church, so

they end up more or less anti-clerical. My mother is very anti-clerical, my father is less. My father is from a very Catholic family, we have two uncles that are priests. But apart from that my upbringing was Catholic because that was what the surrounding was like, quite middle of the road, you know, nothing special. When I was in secondary school I was looking for a religious community too that I liked and I was for a time a member of Popular, Popular is a quite traditional Catholic movement with a quite strong youth section they are there in the US as well. And, I like the community feeling because of secularization and other things that was lacking in the village where I was, but on the whole they were so very conservative and so automatically conservative, if you understand what I mean. So it was so obvious when there were two choices they would choose for the traditional way. And in the end I thought: Community yes, but this traditionalism is really squeezing me. So I left them, and when I came to Utrecht, of course a few years after this, I went to the student's church to see if I liked it there and I liked it much more than I like Popular it was opener it was on a (economical? Equal??) basis so but, I had the growing feeling that Christianity didn't fit me. So I more or less went to look for another religious alternative. And, for very long I studied about Judaism and I think if I met people who be more stimulating perhaps I would have converted to Judaism. But one of the things that kept me from doing so was that Jewish community in this country is still very much strong about "...” what happened during the war. And there's another thing, that if you want to convert to Judaism you have to prove to the Rabbi that you want to live according to all the 613 commandments. And you really want to take them all. And of course the vast majority of Jews in this country, and in the US and everywhere else, is not that strict. But if you want to convert, you have to show. You have to show off. So that means keeping strictly kosher, and more or less being obliged to live in Amsterdam because Amsterdam is the only city in this country where facilities are all there.

I don't even see a lot of facilities for Jews.

No but nevertheless if you want to buy kosher meat for example. There are two Jewish butchers in Amsterdam, as far as I know, they used to be delicatessen shops with an annex in The Hague. But the annex didn't always sell fresh meat so you would have to order in Amsterdam and get it delivered. So, that was a big problem. And, you would have thought now that is a problem, if you want prove that you want to live strict.

You have to move to Amsterdam.

Yes, you have to move to Amsterdam. Now, I worked in Amsterdam for quite some time but I never lived there. Nevertheless, a lot of my Jewish contacts are really in Amsterdam. But because of that combination, not very open to strangers on one hand because of the trauma and because Judaism is not a missionary religion, of course. They don't invite people to convert, not at all. They rather discourage. But nevertheless. And,

I tried to explain some time before to a friend of mine, that for me, after leaving home, Judaism was there as my first love. And, if you marry your first love or not you never forget it. So, I have not converted to Judaism but it is still there. And a lot of my thinking, especially my thinking on a deeper level, is strongly influenced by it. So if you ask me about more complicated things than just this interview only, and you want to be friends with me which of course I do admire, then you will notice that a lot of my thinking (me: has to do with Judaism) has to do with Judaism. Of course not always with the stamp “Jewish” to it, but for example, how does one see God. One can see God in the faces of other people. Doing what one has to do and leaving behind what one shouldn’t do is one thing. But behaving towards other people is really what you will be judged about. And, I think most Muslims will put more stress on keeping the commandments, thou shouldn’t do this and this, than they will be talking to you about behavior towards other people. Perhaps, I don’t know. So, I think that is something very typical about me. And I found out that many Muslims, people born into the faith and people not born into the faith, don’t really like Jews too much. Partly this has to do with Israel I think, but partly this has to do with sheer anti-Semitism I think. And, that is one of the reasons I think apart from the fact that I am not married to a Muslim husband, that makes me stay apart from other Muslims. What do you want to know more?

How did you decide to convert to Islam?

Umm, by reading about it. By reading about it and talking to people but first by reading about it. So, the result of that was that my view about Islam and other Muslims was far too optimistic. So, at a certain time I went to a young Muslims conference in England together with a Muslim woman, also she was converted to Islam. And we came at the conference, and, yes it was a very nice atmosphere it was a conference with a lot of young people so that was nice. And, when we went there I was having my period so I couldn’t join in the prayers. So at the day before the last day I told one of the other Dutch woman that was there that my period had ended. And she said “come on lets find an imam then!” So, partly because I couldn’t stop her from running, physically running, that choose my moment. So I didn’t covert by incidence but the moment was not my choice. Tell this as an anecdote because people will like it. I know it’s awful. She really did. It was so silly. Okay.

How old were you?

I’m 42 years old now and I converted to Islam about 15 years ago. So, but then there was another thing. She said it would be nice if you convert before the conference, you’ve got a lot of witnesses, a lot of blessings will be upon us, and we will all say “Allah ...” and praise God for you. I said “No I won’t.” She said “why?” I said “I’m afraid of people shouting ‘Allah “...”’ in such masses.” I don’t like the masses, at least I don’t like them to say ‘Allah “...”’ in one tone, and not even before me. “But how do you want it

then?” I said there “there must be an imam around here who like to take my *shahadah*²³ with less witnesses.” So in the end I took my *shahadah* with 12 women, women witnesses really 12, believe it or not, and one imam. Thank god the imam was really a nice man, he is well known really you can look him up on Google. His name is Jamal Badawi. He teaches in “...” college, and he’s really a nice and moderate man, and he told us all that the conversion to Islam is not a real conversion, but it is something one can do in line of other prophets and other books.

Interview #5 (P)

Interviewer: It’s easier to just start with how you converted to Islam, generally beginning from when you first learned about Islam.

P: Okay, it’s about 18 years ago, that’s when I met him, my husband Omar. And, we met in the disco. (laughs) And the first years of our relationship Islam wasn’t very important, in the relationship. Because he was a Muslim, but he didn’t practice at the time. But gradually, it became more and more important for him. I think the Gulf War in 1991, yea, it played a role in this. It made more conscious about who he was and what he was doing here. And gradually Islam became more important for him. And we always spoke about it. He told me about the religion and many stories, which I didn’t realize at the time but now I realize that the stories are from the Qur’an, but I didn’t realize then.

Interviewer: Were you religious growing up?

P: I grew up as a Catholic in a Catholic family in the south of Holland. And at the time, in the province of Limburg, there were many Catholics there and my parents both came from big Catholic families. Like Irish people you know, twelve children. Or Italians, yea.

Interviewer: Well, I’m half Irish and half Italian. (laughs)

P: So you know about it (laughs). And I grew up as a Catholic child in Catholic village in a Catholic community. But there was not religious education at the time, you know. We had to go to church every week, I did my communion, and at school we has some... one lesson in a week I think about religion, by the priest of the village. But we didn’t listen really to what he said, he was very boring. (laughs) But I believed in God at the time and I prayed when I was in church. But when... at the age of 11, 12 you know, I

²³ *Shahadah* is the Islamic creed, declaring belief in the oneness of Allah. By stating this out loud, one is considered to be a convert to Islam.

started raising questions about it, asking my mom “how do you see God? What does he mean to you? How do you see Jesus, and is Jesus the son of God?” you know. Some critical questions for her. And the only thing she said was “oh, don’t drive me crazy with your questions!” Because she couldn’t answer them, you know? Because she didn’t have any religious education herself. And my father, I think he was traumatized by the Catholic Church because his parents had a very bad marriage. I don’t know if you know it about Catholic priests, also maybe in Ireland and Italy, but here in Holland the priests they visited all the families in the village to tell them to have more children. Yea, because the Catholics they wanted to have more children, that’s why they had this big families. They had a bad marriage but the priest he came to visit them every year to ask “why are you not pregnant?” to have more children, really. And she had 12, she had 12 my grandmother. And after she died, I think my father he, he was traumatized I think by this. So in the same time that I started raising these questions about the religion he was very much against the Church. So I didn’t want to go to church anymore because I felt, well, when I as 15, 16 you know, it was stupiiiiid. And he supported this. And I think last time I went to church at the age of 17, I think. And I completely lost my faith at that time. So when I met Omar, I was 23 then, I wasn’t religious at all. And after maybe 8 years with him... no we had some discussions, because I wanted to have children and he also wanted to have children, but he was afraid to have them with me because I was not a Muslim, so we had a lot of discussions about this. And at the same period, I thought I missed something in my life, you know? I started raising questions, yea... “what’s life about? Why do we live?” you know this kind of questions. And in 1989 (she meant 1998), at the age of 34 almost, I thought I should do something about this missing link in my life, you know. Because we had, in the relationship it was getting more and more difficult between us, and I felt I should do something about it if we wanted to continue together, especially I felt I missed something. So I decided I had to... trying to find the words in English... to really think about Islam and to read about it.

Interviewer: To consider it.

P: Yea, yea. So I started reading the Qur’an, which I had for a long time because he gave it to me for my birthday once. But I never really read it. It’s just him who read it. And that’s not reading Qur’an. And I went to Al Nisa, because they had some meetings here in Utrecht and there I met (C). At it was, actually, it was (S) who gave me the phone number. I met (S) in the library, yes I remember, because I was looking for some books about Islam and I met (S) there, I don’t think she remembers it but I remember. Because she spoke to me about Islam then, and “oh this is a good book, and this is a good book.” And “maybe you want to speak about it...” But I was too emotional at the time to speak about it, so I said “no no...” but she gave me (C)’s phone number to call her and to go to Al Nisa. Well, I went to Al Nisa and I also started studying Arabic, and I had a teacher, he knew a lot about Islam and I liked the way he spoke about this. And I think, well that was a process a half year I think, that I felt like you know, opening up a little bit. And then in December 1998, Ramadan started and Omar he was in Egypt. And don’t know if

you ever saw on television the special prayer in Ramadan. It's from Mecca. They have a special prayer, it's called *Tarawih*.

Interviewer: I may have seen it when I was younger, I don't remember.

P: Yea, but we had in on television at the time. Not anymore, but at the time we had it on television. So Ramadan started, and the day before it started this special prayer started also, and I decided I wanted to fast also. And I watched this program on television and I started to cry because in the prayer they recite Qur'an a lot, it's only Qur'an all the time. And it really touched me. It's the first time I really felt touched by it, you know. Not just reading or speaking about it or thinking about it, but in my heart I felt like opening up, you know?

Interviewer: What was it about the program that made you open up more?

P: Yea, it's difficult to say. I think it's a combination of things. Beauty of the recitation. Because in Mecca they have two imams, and they are very famous, so it's very beautiful how they recite the Qur'an, so the beauty of it. But also, because it's very crowded there. I think also the devotion of the believers I saw there. Because at the end of the prayer they also, make what we call in Islam a **doe'a**. A **doe'a** means... you ask God for something, you know Muslims they pray like this (holds palms up).

Interviewer: Yea, I know.

P: A lot of people cry, you know? So that's what touched me at the moment. In the same period, when Omar he returned from Egypt and was very sick at the time. And he prayed a lot, and after some months I started praying with him. And the same way as I said **doe'a**, ask God to cure him. Then I really I said "oh, I'm asking God to help him" or "I'm asking him something, so that means I believe in him! Because why do I ask him if I don't believe in him?" (laughs) And when I realized that I said okay, then I want to be Muslim. That's how, that's my story. And then after some months, I think in April 1999, I went to mosque here in Utrecht to do the *shahadah*.

Interviewer: What in particular attracted you to Islam, apart from the praying?

P: Several things. I think it's a very simple religion in its essence. You believe in one God. The unity of God is very important. And there are no priests, you pray to God and not to some saint, you know? Yea, this God he is, merciful, yea, that's his central

character. He has many capacities but this one is very important, and that idea attracts me. And in combination with the belief in life after death, you know, in the hereafter. It all sounded very logic to me. Because if you just consider life as it is here on Earth, it's very unfair. Many poor people and some rich, and many catastrophes and many sickness and you know. And I thought "if this is it, then it's very unjust and unfair and unequal." So in Islam, you think that everybody will be judged by God. And I think that's a very reassuring thought, yea I like it very much. And also because this comforts me because when you still all these bad things in this life, how many times we ask why is this happening why is that happening, so it's reassuring to think it all has some goal, because everybody will be judged according to his competence, you know? And everybody... in Islam for example, if you are rich, this is seen as a test. Not as something you achieve, but something God has given you as a test, to test you what you do with your wealth. And if you're intelligent, it's also a test. If you are poor, it's a test. If you are sick, it's a test. And each human being has its own test, what fits him and what suits him. So maybe somebody greedy, God will make him rich, you know, to test his greediness or his greed. This way each human being has his own test, and in the end God he will judge us all, and in the end there will be justification or something (me: justice), yea there will be justice for everybody, yea.