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# ‘I Am the Ultimate Challenge’

## Accounts of Intersectionality in the Life-Story of a Well-Known Daughter of Moroccan Migrant Workers in the Netherlands

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**ABSTRACT** This article aims to demonstrate that the concept of the ‘dialogical self’ is an identity theory that provides useful tools for studying intersectionality. In terms of the dialogical self, the formation of identity is a process of orchestrating voices within the self that speak from different I-positions. Such voices are embedded in field-specific repertoires of practices, characters, discourses and power relations specific to the various groups to which individuals simultaneously belong. By telling one’s life-story, the individual intones these voices and combines them in new ways, thus reshaping them as they use them. The article applies the theoretical concept of the dialogical self to the analysis of the life-story of a relatively well-known female Dutch politician of Moroccan background whose explanation of why she wears a headscarf allows her to combine the religious and political voices in her story with her more hesitant female voice. The words, images and self-evaluations used in her self-narratives demonstrate the ways in which her religious, ethnic and gender identifications are formed and are in dialogue.

**KEY WORDS** dialogical self ♦ Islam ♦ life-story ♦ Moroccan migrants in the Netherlands ♦ narrative identity

### INTRODUCTION

Since the arrival of Turks and Moroccans in the 1960s, and especially since the 9/11 attacks, Islam has become the dominant marker of the ‘otherness’

of migrant groups in the Netherlands. In this essentialist discourse, images of women wearing headscarves and, of late, bearded men function as symbols of the anti-modernity of Islam (see Lutz, 1991). To be sure, not only non-Muslims appeal to essentialist conceptions of Islam. Muslim fundamentalists try to impose essentialist alternatives on fellow believers when, for instance, they call for a universal *jihād* against the West. These essentialist discourses are not unique to fundamentalists in that non-militant voices within European Muslim communities also sometimes express an essentialist view of Islam. It is, for example, argued by some that Islam is entirely incompatible with 'typical' western life-styles.

Self-essentializing as a rhetorical performance to invoke a positive 'imagined community' (see Anderson, 1983) may serve the group interests of collectivities that are caught in asymmetrical societal power relations (see Werbner, 1997: 230). It does not, however, allow space for internal power conflicts along the lines of class and gender, for instance, nor for differences between individual group members (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 200). In practice, what Islam or 'being Muslim' means varies for different individuals, categories and groups of actors. Moreover, as actors change contexts and take a different evaluative stance towards their actions, shifts occur in their accounts. Like other cultural phenomena, then, Islam is constituted through contested accounts by various actors about their actions and interactions, which together form a 'web of narratives' (see Benhabib, 2002: 7).

Having to respond to essentialist images of 'the Muslim' in the Netherlands has a strong impact on how intersectionality is experienced by those who, among other identifications, perceive themselves as Muslims. They are left with few generally accepted narratives to communicate the ways in which their various identifications are simultaneously (in)formed by prevailing conceptions about gender, ethnicity, religion, class, nationality, etc. (see Crenshaw, 1992). This is particularly so for the daughters and sons of Mediterranean Muslims who came to the Netherlands as economic migrants in the 1960s and 1970s. Within the dominant discourses of the groups with which they identify, their experiences of intersectionality have been marginalized, as illustrated by the claim that Muslim youth live 'between two cultures'.

Although this phrase also features in self-descriptions, the self-expressions of Muslim youth sometimes demonstrate that there is no inherent cognitive dissonance in participating in a range of different social and cultural groups. Depending on context and purpose, they either affirm the dominant discourses of specific groups or engage in alternative ones. In doing so, they defy reification in terms of views on (religious) culture and community as well as the conflation of the two, redefining what 'community' might mean in any single context of identification (see Baumann, 1996: 34; Buitelaar, 2002). Contrary to claims that Islam is the

dominant marker of identity, many Dutch citizens from Muslim backgrounds refuse to define themselves first and foremost as Muslims.

In my present research project I have collected the life-stories of adult daughters of Moroccan migrants and analysed their accounts of intersecting identifications. In this article, I demonstrate how I do so using the concept of the 'dialogical self'. According to this view of identity, the self is dialogically constructed because we can act as if we were the other who addresses us or to whom we respond. Thus viewed, identity is the temporary outcome of our responses to the various ways in which we are addressed on the basis of our positions in the power relations in and between the different social and cultural fields in which we participate (Hermans and Kempen, 1993: 119–20).

At slight variance with Mead's concept of the 'generalized other', Hermans emphasizes the importance of 'collective voices' in the construction of identity (Hermans, 2001). When individuals speak, they use the words of the groups to which they belong. These words, in turn, represent the rules, conventions and established worldviews of those groups. The dialogical self is developed by 'orchestrating' the 'voices' within ourselves that speak from the different I-positions between which we shift (Bell and Gardiner, 1998). These voices, in other words, represent our different 'sites of self' (see Holland et al., 1998: 29–30).

In narratives about intersecting identifications, we cannot but make use of the ways in which the meaning of words is embedded in field-specific repertoires of practices, social capital, characters and discourses that characterize the various modalities of the identity categories through which we are constituted. All words have the 'flavour' of a specific profession, for example, or a specific genre or generation, etc. (Bakhtin, 1981: 293–4). When we speak, however, we actively co-construct these collective voices. We innovate rules and conventions as we apply them. By using words within our own specific contexts, we intone them and place them in relation to other words, thus reshaping them as we use them (Shotter and Billig, 1998: 24).

There are, however, restrictions on the freedom to improvise upon discourses and add new flavours to the already existing 'flavours' of words. If our self-representations are to be understood by others, they must be oriented towards the specific conceptual horizon of our listeners. In turn, their anticipated 'answers' are significant to our experience of the self (Bakhtin, 1981: 280). Identity is therefore dialogically constructed in both listening to discourses and using them to construct our own narratives. Some voices that address the 'dialogical self' are more penetrating than others. Our social positions, for instance, create dispositions to voice opinions or to silence oneself, to enter into activities or to refrain from doing so (Holland et al., 1998: 136).

What makes the concept of the dialogical self so interesting in the study

of intersectionality is that it provides tools to analyse how individuals speak from different I-positions within the self, switching between various collective voices and sometimes mixing them as they take different positions. It also draws attention to the ways in which different collective voices may or may not conflict, and to what contexts result in one or several voices becoming more dominant or organizing than others in self-narratives.

Since people always belong to several groups and categories at the same time, they construct a series of alternative and often inconsistent self-representations. These self-representations are based on different chains of selected personal memories and may be organized in terms of quite different cultural schemata (Ewing, 1990: 253). Depending on the actual or imagined positions from which self-narrations are told, people tell different stories about their past, present and future. Through self-reflection and telling, a person is able to bring different experiences and views together in a composite whole. Some parts become more influential than others, and as the self shifts between I-positions, emotions are organized differently. Also, the basic narrative themes of agency and communion may receive differential attention in stories told from different I-positions (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen, 2001: 128).

One strategy to create a sense of wholeness in the face of these multiple self-representations is to construct a self-narrative in which they are integrated (McAdams, 1993). If our life-story is to make sense, it should cohere in ways appropriate to the standards made available to a person of our identity in the groups in which we participate (Appiah, 1994: 160). Life-stories are therefore highly informative about the organization of intersecting identifications. Narratives about key events such as high, low and turning points in particular are pre-eminent dialogical moments in the construction of identity (see Josselson, 1995: 42). McAdams (1993) refers to life-stories as 'personal myths' to point to the fact that identity is created by organizing stories about multiple identifications into continually revised biographical narratives that form answers to the question 'Who am I?'

Rather than proposing specific topics, for this research project the metaphor of the life-story as a book containing different 'life chapters', 'characters' and 'story lines' was used to invite the interviewees to produce self-narratives. In this way, they themselves could select the topics that they judged to be of interest. Since narratives are always shaped by the audiences that each participant in the interview situation has in mind, to a large extent this 'freedom' was, of course, illusory (see Olson and Shopes, 1991: 193). For one thing, the responses of the interviewees were influenced by the fact that I had contacted them because of their Moroccan background. Also, precisely because Islam has become such a dominant identity-marker in the Netherlands, much of what the

interviewees told me was organized for the purpose of challenging assumed misconceptions of presumed readers. Either tacitly or explicitly, then, the women who participated in the project had their own agenda when agreeing to participate (see Berger Gluck, 1991).<sup>1</sup>

This was particularly true in the case of Tahara, the woman whose life-story I focus on here. Tahara is a very well-known political figure in Dutch society. I was elated when she agreed to be interviewed, but the interview itself initially disappointed me. Tahara poured out a deluge of words that allowed for no interruption. Rather than contemplating my questions, she used them as a springboard to tell a story that she had obviously prepared beforehand. The narrative she presented was a kind of press release.<sup>2</sup> Differing from most interviewees, Tahara saw no purpose in reading the interview transcript and marking passages that should not be used.<sup>3</sup> 'You can use it all', she assured me, 'Do with it what you think is right.' Also, she would have had no objections to my revealing her identity. In fact, she was slightly disappointed to learn that pseudonyms would be used.

At first sight, Tahara's carefully constructed and oft-repeated public success story appears to consist of little more than a recital of achieved goals and ideological viewpoints. It is, however, exactly this *public* character that makes Tahara's story so interesting. Public stories depend heavily on the narrator's skilful use of local rules of discourse to make their stories intelligible to their audiences. In turn, the response of the audience determines not only the success of the story but also influences the identity of the narrator (Ochberg, 1994: 114). Fascinating questions are, therefore, what is it that makes Tahara's story so effective in the Dutch media and in what ways does this public story allow for expressions of her intersecting identifications?

I try to answer these questions by analysing what language or 'voices' Tahara employs as she speaks from different I-positions in her life-story and who constitute the *audiences* she addresses.

## ARTICULATIONS OF I-POSITIONS

Tahara's self-narrative contains numerous self-descriptions. In the case of some it is immediately apparent to which I-positions they refer: 'I am Moroccan and Dutch in Westerdam' points to Tahara's social position in Dutch society and refers to her multiple ethnic identification. 'I am not all there is' is about her position in the universe and expresses her religious identification. 'I am the daughter of a guestworker' refers to her position as a lower-class migrant child. It is predominantly a statement about class identification. The related 'I am a social democrat' points to her political identification. 'I am not the norm of this society' again refers to her

migratory background and illustrates her identification as a member of a minority group in the Netherlands.

When cited out of the context in which they were uttered, some statements, such as 'I am a tough female', 'I am critical' and 'I am flexible', are more difficult to relate to I-positions. One would be tempted to view such statements as expressions of Tahara's personal temperament, as references to her ego-identity that have no relation to the different I-positions in her story. Such 'personal traits', however, do not exist in a vacuum. They should be interpreted against the background of the social and cultural contexts in which they were developed in dialogue with others.

Tahara's story is the product of a skilful orchestration of the voices in which the characters representing her various I-positions speak. She gives the floor to different speakers. At times they speak in monologue, while at other times they are engaged in dialogue with each other. Some voices are allowed more room in her story than others, and sometimes the volume of a particular voice is alternately turned up and down again. As a first answer to the question why Tahara's story goes down so well in the Dutch media, I would argue that this is due to her understanding of the importance of addressing her audiences in voices that are familiar to them. What makes her story truly interesting is her talent in reshaping the words these voices speak in ways that allow her audiences to catch a glimpse of other perspectives.

This is no small achievement. Since collective voices are associated with socially marked and ranked groups, orchestrating voices is much more than sorting out neutral perspectives (Holland et al., 1998: 182–3). What Tahara has to deal with, for instance, is that the different audiences she addresses occupy different positions in Dutch power relations. In general, the Moroccan and wider migrant audiences she hopes to address are lower in rank than her Dutch audiences. Appealing too explicitly to the cultural capital of one audience may discredit her in the eyes of others.

To complicate matters, the characters that inhabit Tahara's life-story do not have the same shapes or 'tastes' in the different perspectives of her various audiences. Representations of the character of 'the Muslim' in Islamic discourses, for example, are very different from those in the discourses of Dutch policy-makers and the popular media. These discourses do, however, share one characteristic: they are all strongly gendered. For Tahara, as for me, this makes it difficult if not impossible to untangle her religious and gender identifications. Addressing her different audiences in the voice of 'the politician' demands even more skilful orchestration. Although certainly not gender-neutral, representations of 'the politician' in a Dutch discourse are less strongly gendered than those in the dominant Moroccan discourse, where the character of 'the politician' is almost invariably a man.

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 TAHARA'S MUSLIM VOICE

In Tahara's narrative of her life-story 'the Muslim' becomes 'a Muslim girl with a headscarf, brains and a big mouth'. Her self-representation as a self-confident and independent Muslim girl is Tahara's 'answer' to being addressed in terms of the dominant image in Dutch discourse of the oppressed, unintegrated, ignorant foreign Muslim woman who speaks no Dutch. At the same time, she responds to being addressed in terms of the dominant image in Dutch Islamic discourse of the obedient, caring and modest Muslim woman who guards her reputation by not calling attention to herself and who protects her Islamic way of life against bad Dutch influences by avoiding participation in the public sphere.

In one passage in her story, we can even witness how Tahara enters into a dialogue with several collective voices that represent restrictive cultural conceptions of 'the Muslim woman':

You can find me engaged in a debate with three men at 11 o'clock at night. Does that look like I'm being oppressed? Well no, actually it doesn't. I am the living proof – not only I but all those girls are the living proof – that all those ideas that we used to have in the past about women and headscarves were just a lot of nonsense. . . . What I do is challenge society. If you ask me, I am the ultimate challenge.

Voices representing Tahara's I-position as a Muslim predominate in her story. When the first interview session is only five minutes underway, they already announce themselves as Tahara elaborates extensively on how much she benefited from her parents' decision to send her to the mosque for Islamic education at the age of four. Her narrative also contains numerous evaluative statements in which she puts her experiences in the context of an Islamic discourse of Providence, e.g. 'God has made all these things possible for me', 'I can feel God's hand in my life', 'God did not choose this path for me without reason'. Furthermore, the spiritual dimension of her religious identity is the subject of one of the two most important episodes in Tahara's life-story: an anecdote about her decision to begin to wear a headscarf.

## THE HEADSCARF ANECDOTE

'Key' or 'nuclear episodes' refer to the subjective memories of events that have assumed especially prominent positions in our understanding of ourselves (McAdams, 1993: 296). They represent nodes of change in which a person becomes other than, or more clearly, what he or she was. At such moments the relations between the planes of self are being reorganized (Josselson, 1995: 37).



The anecdote about Tahara's decision to begin wearing a headscarf is both the first and the most elaborate anecdote in her story and parts of it are repeated several times throughout the interview. Her life-story is organized around the episode both in content and in form. This depiction of her life preceding it is constructed as leading up to the moment she decides to cover her head, while nearly everything that she describes after it is presented as resulting either directly or indirectly from this decision.

One of the interesting aspects of this anecdote is that in the vocabulary and images that Tahara uses, parallels can be found with the life-story of the Prophet Mohammed. In the second sentence, for instance, she states, 'I am here with a message'. In Dutch, Tahara uses the word *boodschap*. The Arabic *rasûl Allah* is usually translated by Dutch-speaking Muslims as *de Boodschapper van God*, the Messenger of God. In several instances elsewhere in her life-story this statement is repeated, as is the statement that she has a 'mission'.

A second parallel with the life of the Prophet Mohammed in the headscarf anecdote is when Tahara gives a description of her ancestral village in Morocco where she decided to start covering her head. The village she describes reminds one of the highly idealized way in which the *Ummah Muhammadiya*, the first or 'original' community of Muslims led by the Prophet Mohammed is depicted in Islamic historiography. As in such hagiographic descriptions, Tahara presents the life in the 'very basic' village of her parents as extremely harmonious and she states that its inhabitants are 'one with nature', 'one with the origin' and 'live in peace with what they feel and what they have'.

The strongest parallel with the life-story of the Prophet Mohammed is when Tahara describes how she withdraws into the mountains 'to philosophize'. This is what the Prophet is also said to have done often. In fact, it is believed to have been on one of these retreats that God sent the first revelation to him through the angel Gabriel. Tahara does not speak about revelations, but she does mention that her retreats made her feel very close to God and led to the insight that putting on a headscarf was the right step to take.

The parallel between certain elements in the anecdote about Tahara's decision to cover her head and elements from the life-story of the Prophet Mohammed occurred to me only when analysing the material, so I did not discuss them with Tahara. That she herself was at least aware of the prophetic 'flavour' of her words is illustrated by how she comments on the anecdote itself. After concluding her narration, she states: 'It is not because I – . . . I have a message, I have something to tell.' She then repeats the sentence she had left unfinished to conclude it: 'It is not that I am a prophet or anything like that, but I do have something to tell.'

This should not be interpreted to mean that Tahara deliberately adapted the headscarf episode to make it resemble the life-story of the Prophet

Mohammed. The anecdote merely illustrates that people tend to coordinate their self-accounts with those of others by drawing on shared collective stories (see McAdams, 1993; Peacock, 1984). The main characters that people use to represent themselves in self-narratives may assume prototypical 'guises' such as the warrior, the sage, the caregiver, the survivor, etc. McAdams calls such characters 'imagoes'. Imagoes express our most cherished desires and goals in life and give voice to both individual and cultural values. They refer to personified and idealized concepts of the self.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of the dialogical self, one could say that an imago represents an aspect of the self that is applicable to several I-positions at the same time. An imago influences the ways in which several of the voices representing I-positions speak, and it plays a dominant role in how different voices may be orchestrated. In this way, imagoes provide a narrative tool for organizing intersectionality. Central dynamics and conflicts in one's life may be represented by interacting imagoes. The multitude of voices can thus be reduced to a manageable cast of characters who are engaged in dialogue, combat or peace making.

Because imagoes are modelled on prototypical characters from collective stories but shaped by personal experiences, they are both common and unique. Together with the fact that imagoes do not refer to specific I-positions but are idealized concepts of the self, this explains why Tahara may be drawing on the role model of the Prophet Mohammed in her story.

It is often at a high, low or turning point that an imago comes onto the stage of a life-story, which is one more reason why the analysis of nuclear episodes is crucial to the study of the dialogical self. Once the imago of the Prophet has entered the narrative in the headscarf anecdote, for example, it becomes easier to recognize his voice in later episodes of Tahara's story. Also, reading backwards, it can be seen how, in earlier episodes, the stage was prepared for his arrival.

## THE ORCHESTRATION OF RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL VOICES

By improvising on elements from the life-story of the Prophet Mohammed, Tahara appeals to a highly valued story that she shares with her Muslim audiences. It is precisely this prophetic voice that allows her to translate her Islamic discourse in terms of a social democratic discourse that sounds more familiar (and less threatening) to her Dutch audience:

I am here with a message, because why has God bestowed all those blessings on me? I was raised in a European country. I have had all the chances that one could wish for: good parents, a good upbringing and a good

education. I have to do something with that. I can't just keep it to myself. Because, as you can tell, I am a social democrat by origin: share fairly!

It is, however, not always easy to translate the vocabulary of voices representing different I-positions into other positions. The most explicit dialogical moment in the headscarf anecdote is where Tahara, the daughter of migrants who romanticizes traditional Moroccan village life, enters into a dialogue with Tahara the social democrat and emancipated world citizen who frowns upon hierarchies and strict role patterns:<sup>5</sup>

Although there are clearly role patterns, you could see that everyone was enjoying themselves, that those roles were accepted. Because, well, these people do not know better, so then you accept your roles. But if you can tell that people live in peace with what they feel and what they have, that's when I think: that's a pretty good life. If you compare that to what we fuss about in the West!

In contrast to the Moroccan villagers whose lives she idealizes, Tahara 'knows better' than to accept the roles that society has assigned her. In the text following the headscarf anecdote the tone of her narrative changes. She describes how the negative reactions of her schoolmates and other Dutch people to her headscarf are a 'wake up call': they rouse her political awareness. This gives the initial impetus to a political career in which she strives to improve both the social-economic situation and the image of Muslims and migrants in Dutch society.

McAdams distinguishes between 'agentic' and 'communal' imagoes, representing the often opposing desires for power and intimacy. Before the headscarf anecdote, Tahara's narrative is told by both agentic and communal voices. The prophetic voice in the anecdote, for example, talks about self-realization and changing the world as well as about sharing and caring. In the text following the anecdote Tahara represents herself as a Muslim and a politician by beginning to speak in more agentic and univocal voices. These voices speak a militant language when they counter the depreciatory image of, and discrimination against, Muslim migrants in Dutch society: 'I'll give them something to think about', 'I fight back just as hard'.

The words 'struggle' and 'fighting' are used repeatedly throughout the narrative. Tahara speaks about 'fighting on the barricades', 'fighting the battle with others' and 'fighting for the underdog'. These statements can be recognized by her Dutch audiences as familiar albeit somewhat dated socialist slogans. Indeed, Tahara emphasizes that her fight for justice not only concerns the Moroccan community in the Netherlands but also other disadvantaged people 'who go unnoticed'.

The phrase 'who go unnoticed' is linked to a recurrent theme in the narrative: to be or not to be seen. Referring to the situation of Moroccans

in the Netherlands 15 years earlier, for instance, she states: 'They didn't know us. We were just another group. You knew they were there, but nobody spoke about them.'<sup>6</sup> The wish that she and people with whom she identifies should be seen and heard motivates Tahara to choose a political career. Talking about her breakthrough in the media, she proudly speaks of 'the launching on TV of Moroccan girls who not only wear a headscarf but even have an outspoken view on matters'. Equally triumphantly, she states: 'I got into the picture. I had a view that you were not able to get round'.

The importance to Tahara of being 'seen' is reminiscent of discussions on the politics of recognition in multicultural societies (see Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Taylor, 1994). The struggle for recognition consists of two mutually interconnected but distinct and irreducible dimensions of justice (Fraser, 2000). Both dimensions can be recognized in Tahara's 'mission'. The first concerns a struggle for redistribution, and focuses on the equalization of rights, e.g. civil and voting rights on the one hand, and redistribution in the economic sphere on the other. The second dimension concerns the struggle for the recognition of difference, focusing on the right to a distinct identity. The underlying demand is that of participation and representation: the right not to be ignored, glossed over or assimilated to a dominant identity but to 'get into the picture' as full participants in Dutch society. Tahara's mission is not to acquire the right to be a full participant in Dutch society *despite* the fact that she is a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf, but the right to be respected participating *as* a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf (see Appiah, 1994: 161).

One of the difficulties with the politics of recognition in terms of a collective identity is that people always belong to several groups at the same time. Campaigning for the recognition of a particular dimension of identity could entail the neglect or suppression of other dimensions. Also, individual claims to self-expressions may divert from collective aspirations to cultural recognition (Benhabib, 2002: 53). What makes Tahara's life-story so fascinating is that oneness is carefully avoided and that she demands recognition as an individual. She does so by positioning herself in relation to the different groups she identifies with by using familiar words in unfamiliar contexts or vice versa, now claiming equality, then difference. It is against this background that her statement 'I am the ultimate challenge' should be interpreted. Tahara challenges the groups she identifies with by both appealing to, and defying, dominant social categorizations. The ultimate aim of her politics of recognition is to create a new niche in Dutch society for women like herself. To 'launch', to repeat her words, 'Moroccan girls who not only wear a headscarf but even have an outspoken view on matters'.

## THE HESITANT FEMALE VOICE

In the construction of identity, however, nothing comes for free. Orchestrating different voices of the self can be an arduous task (see Bakhtin, 1981: 293–4). Indeed, towards the end of her narrative there comes a moment when Tahara deplores her lack of privacy and sighs: 'Sometimes . . . I wish I were invisible.' Looking at the context in which she expresses her wish for temporary invisibility, I believe that lack of privacy is not the only reason why she may feel ambivalent about being a public figure. The comment is made in conclusion to a narrative on the second main nuclear episode in her life. This time it concerns a crisis in her gender identity. It is caused by the breakup of a love relationship and having a serious illness seven months before the interview took place, which for a while looked as though it might threaten her fertility.

It is in relation to the end of her love affair that Tahara expresses insecurity about her feminine qualities. She explains why the relationship failed:

He has this feminine side to him, see, so very sweet and all that. While I am always a tough female. . . . I always have to play that male role, because I work in a man's world. . . . That masculine streak is very strongly developed in me. . . . So he took the feminine role while I became the man, I was always the one . . . taking decisions.

This quotation bespeaks the influence of the specific gendered 'flavour' of the voices that populate Tahara's story about her self-image as a woman. She links agentic voices with masculinity and communal voices with femininity. Since she is the one 'always taking decisions' she 'became the man' in her relation with her boyfriend, while he 'took the feminine role'.

Furthermore, she links 'outside' to masculinity and 'inside' to femininity. The phrase 'I work in a man's world', for example, is stated repeatedly throughout her story. It is striking how often she underlines her working with men. How should this be interpreted? Part of the answer to this question can be found in the following remark: 'You can find me engaged in a debate with three men at 11 o'clock at night. Does that look like I'm being oppressed? Well, no, actually it doesn't.' Part of Tahara's emphasis on working in a man's world is a narrative device to show how emancipated she is.

But it also reminds me of a Moroccan joke about a 'guestworker' in Amsterdam in the early days of migration. Returning to his home village in the Rif mountains for the summer, he was asked what Amsterdam was like. 'Brother', he replied, 'You wouldn't believe your eyes. In the whole city of Amsterdam, there is not a man to be found. All you see in the street is women!' The inhabitants of the Rif mountains in the north of Morocco are known for very strict adherence to regulations of sex-segregation.

Unaccustomed to seeing women in the street, let alone unveiled women, the guestworker had been so overwhelmed by the sight of Amsterdam women that they were all he noticed.

Tahara, of course, is not as naive as the man in the joke. I surmise, however, that her consistent emphasis on mingling with men in the public domain does indicate that she is not left untouched by the fact that according to traditional Moroccan standards of the sexual division of space, she is trespassing. Moroccans tend to feel more at ease in same-sex situations. Sex-segregation is one of the main principles of Moroccan social organization and corresponds with conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Because women spend much of their time at home, they are said to develop the 'feminine' quality of *sabr*, patience or endurance. Men who spend much of their time at home are ridiculed as effeminate since they are expected to spend most of their time in public domains where they develop the more 'masculine' quality of *'aql*, reason, the adroitness to negotiate successful transactions and communicate with strangers (see Buitelaar, 1998).

As a result of power shifts in gender relations, the observance of sex-segregation rules is diminishing both in Moroccan cities and in most Moroccan families in the Netherlands. Tahara's narrative recognizes that she is transgressing these rules by operating in a 'man's world'. Since their presence in her professional life is inconsistent with the traditional Moroccan practice of sex-segregation, she may, therefore, be more conscious of their presence than of women's presence.

The difficulty of shaking off the influence of cultural patterns of sex-segregation affects her self-image as a woman. This came to the fore in the quotation that 'because I work in a man's world. . . . that masculine streak is very strongly developed in me'. It is also expressed in less positive self-evaluations such as 'I am a tough battle-axe'; 'I am a difficult woman' and the even more negative 'I am an ogress'. These are all statements in which Tahara comments on herself from the perspective of traditional Moroccan representations of women. These representations are inconsistent with her wish to be publicly recognized and they affect her self-image as a woman.

It would not be correct, however, to refer only to Tahara's Moroccan background to explain her difficulty in reconciling her self-representations as Tahara the public figure with those of Tahara the woman. A similar tendency to link agentic voices more to public spheres and masculine qualities and communal voices more to private spheres and feminine qualities is present in the self-narratives of people from western backgrounds (see McAdams, 1993). Women in general appear to have more difficulty reconciling the two than men do (Lieblich et al., 1998).

It is therefore more correct to argue that although Tahara defines herself first and foremost in terms that challenge restrictive Dutch and Moroccan representations of women, she has not been able to free herself completely

from the specific cultural schemata on which these are based. The words that voice her wish for recognition in the public sphere 'as a Muslim girl with a headscarf, brains and a big mouth' appear to have a masculine 'flavour' that is difficult to harmonize with words that taste more feminine to Tahara. As a result, there is a tension in her self-image that leaves her searching for words.

There is, however, a hint in her story as to where this search might lead her. In one instance, Tahara does make a positive self-evaluative statement in terms of femininity. This is when she remarks how 'elegant' and 'beautiful' the headscarf makes her look. At this particular moment during the interview, she jumps up to fetch a stack of photographs.<sup>7</sup> The photographs show her variously in casual wear, professional suits and party dress. In different photographs, the headscarves she wears vary in colour, texture and shape, each time matching her various styles of clothing and make-up.

Like her use of familiar words in unfamiliar contexts, in donning the headscarf in these different and often novel ways Tahara uses a familiar symbol in unfamiliar contexts. The way Moroccan women from Tahara's mother's generation tend to cover their heads both indicates their religiosity and symbolizes adherence to the rules of sex-segregation by protecting them from the gaze of outsiders in the public sphere. In this context, it does not make sense to put on a headscarf without also wearing a 'djellaba' – a loose cloak with a hood worn when leaving the house in the Middle East and North Africa. Also, in the view of traditionally inclined women wearing a headscarf and make-up simultaneously is transgressive.

In experimenting with different ways of covering herself, Tahara consciously attempts 'to give new connotations to it [the headscarf]'. Fashioning the headscarf in new ways enables her to demonstrate to Dutch and Moroccan audiences alike that she participates in public spheres in the Netherlands without renouncing either her religion or femininity.<sup>8</sup> The 'new' headscarf provides her with a means to create an 'illusion of wholeness' in the face of the multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are related to her various I-positions in Dutch society. Parallel to use of familiar words in unfamiliar ways, it allows her to organize her experiences of intersectionality. Pointing to her headscarf helps her to declare with self-confidence: 'I am who I am. This is who I am. This is Tahara.'

#### ARTICULATIONS OF INTERSECTIONALITY: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Analysing Tahara's life-story as an act of orchestrating the different 'voices' related to her positions in various social and cultural contexts illustrates the analytical purchase of the concept of the dialogical self for

studying intersectionality. This approach runs counter to notions that multiple identity is the product of summing up a person's different identifications. Instead, analysis is done in terms of dialogues between various voices within the self, each one embedded in field-specific repertoires of practices, characters and discourses informed by specific power relations. It allows the exploration of how particular identifications are always co-constructed with other categories of identity. The words, images and self-evaluations that Tahara uses in her self-narratives point to the ways in which her religious, ethnic and gender identifications are formed through 'webs of interlocution' constituted by her socialization into different communities of discourse (Benhabib, 2003: 56). The 'prophetic' Muslim voice is dominant in her life-story. This voice allows her both to express her religious identification and to translate the Islamic discourse in which she frames it into a Dutch political discourse. It is more particularly her 'mission' to explain her use of headscarves that allows her to combine the religious and political voices in her story with the as yet hesitant female voice.

## NOTES

1. Towards the end of the interview, all participants were asked for their reasons for taking part in the study. The most commonly given reason was the importance of 'positive stories' to counterbalance misconceptions about Islam and the wish to provide Moroccan youth with positive role models.
2. My initial disappointment about the interview itself has, of course, no bearing on my appreciation of Tahara's cordiality. I have very warm memories of the two long afternoons we worked on the interview: she invited me to her home, offered me lots of tea and sweets, and even taught me how to dress up like a Berber woman.
3. As part of the conditions under which the women participated in the project it was agreed that they would receive the full transcripts. Using different coloured pens, they could mark passages which they did not want me to publish, and passages that should not be used when sketching their individual portraits. They also agreed that subsequently, on the condition that all interviews were anonymized, I was free to interpret the material as I considered best. Only five of the 27 women interviewed returned the marked transcripts of their interviews.
4. How idealized personifications of the self express what we want most in life is also illustrated by the fact that when I asked the woman whose life-story is analysed in this article what pseudonym she would like me to use, she came up with Tahara. 'This means "the pure one"', she explained.
5. The voice of the 'world citizen' manifests itself in Tahara's narrative mostly by punctuating her Dutch account with English phrases, such as in: 'If you like it, *leuk* [ok by me]. If you don't like it, *ook leuk* [ok by me as well]'; '*ik ben altijd de brenger van bad news* [I am always the messenger of bad news]'; '*Ik ben de dochter van een gastarbeider* [I am the daughter of a guestworker] and I'm damn proud of it.'



6. Note how in this statement Tahara switches between perspectives.
7. See Ganzevoort (1994: 308), who draws attention to the fact that a life-story is not only told by the words used, but that other ingredients may be used, such as the way a person dresses, the furnishings of his or her house or, as in this case, photographs.
8. For comparable arguments about present-day Muslim women using the headscarf to reconcile multiple identities in the Middle East, see, for example, El-Guindi (1999), Jansen (1998) and MacLeod (1991).

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