

Article

The Burka Ban: Islamic Dress, Freedom and Choice in The Netherlands in Light of the 2019 Burka Ban Law

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Abstract: This article, part of an evolving and large project, examines the relationship between clothing, freedom and choice, and specifically Islamic dress in shaping the identity of Dutch Muslim women after the Burka Ban that was voted into law on 1 August 2019 in the Netherlands. It discusses the debates before and after this date, as well as the background to the ban. A veil covering the face is a garment worn by some Muslim women to adhere to an interpretation of *hijab* (modest dress). It can be referred to as a *burqa* or *niqab*. In the aftermath of the Burka Ban that prompted considerable public alarm on the part of Muslim men and women, *niqab*-wearing women, as well as women who do not wear a veil, but are in solidarity with their *niqabi* sisters, raised a number of questions that form the basis for the analysis presented here: how do Dutch Muslim women shape their identity in a way that it is both Dutch and Muslim? Do they incorporate Dutch parameters into their Muslim identity, while at the same time weaving Islamic principles into their Dutch sense of self? The findings show how Islamic clothing can be mobilized by Dutch Muslim women to serve identity formation and personal (religious) choice in the Netherlands, where Islam is largely considered by the non-Muslim population to be a religion that is oppressive and discriminatory towards women. It is argued that in the context of being Dutch and Muslim, these women express their freedom of choice through clothing, thus pushing the limits of the archetypal Dutch identity and criticizing Dutch society while simultaneously stretching the meaning of Islam to craft their own identity.

Keywords: Islam; Dutch Islam; *hijab*; freedom; *burqa*; Islamic dress; choice; identity; modesty; freedom; *niqab*; covering; Burka Ban

1. Introduction

“... Today once again, it’s clear that Muslims are second-class citizens in the Netherlands. How long do we need to stand for this?” (Dutch Muslima of Moroccan descent, August 1st, the Netherlands)

In recent decades, the visible presence of Islamic dress in the streets of the Netherlands, Belgium, the UK, Germany, Scandinavia, Israel, France and the US—the latter two endorsing strict separation between State and Church—has sparked heated debate (Badran 2006; Bartels 2005; Bowen 2010; Bowen 2007; Cesari 2005; Coene and Longman 2008; Elor 2017; Hass and Lutek 2018; Moors 2007; Moors and Tarlo 2013; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Read 2007; Van Nieuwkerk 2004; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). They center on the apparent rights and wrongs of coverings, *hijab* and face veils, and whether their use is forced or chosen, and to what extent they might indicate the spread of Islamic fundamentalism or pose concerns for security (Moors 2007; Moors 2009; Moors 2013; Moors and Tarlo 2013; Read 2007; Tarlo and Moors 2013).

Read, Moors and Tarlo argued that these debates intensified after 9/11. However, scholars have noted that most of these debates ignore the development and proliferation of what is known today in Muslim circles and beyond as Islamic fashion, and how its emergence does not necessarily signal

Muslim alienation from European or American cultural norms, but rather constitute complex forms of critical and creative engagement with them (Cesari 2005; Cesari 2009; Cesari and Casanova 2017; Moors 2010; Moors 2009; Moors 2013).

The current paper contributes to scholarship on a key topic in academia and civil society: the growing interest in Muslim populations in Europe, and the lives of Muslims in a non-Muslim world, whether born Muslim with an immigrant background or those who converted to Islam. It takes an innovative perspective on this topic by examining the lives of Muslim women in the Netherlands as manifested through their daily decisions on religious dress, in light of recent developments in Europe and more specifically in the Netherlands, and in particular the Burka Ban¹ that was voted into law on 1 August 2019 that prompted considerable public alarm on the part of Muslim men and women. *Niqab*-wearing women, as well as women who do not cover their faces or hair but are in solidarity with their *niqabi* sisters, have raised a number of questions that are reflected in this article: how do Dutch Muslim women shape their identity in a way that it is both Dutch and Muslim? Do they incorporate Dutch parameters into their Muslim identity, while weaving Islamic principles into their Dutch sense of self? Their main argument is that the face veil is their identity, their own personal choice in the journey in their faith.

Islamic perceptions and practices related to Islamic dress, head coverings (*hijab*) and the full-face veil (*burqa* and *niqab*) are examined here at three points in time (before, during, and after the Burka Ban). The findings show how the tolerant Netherlands can appear intolerant to certain minority groups and can push them farther into isolation.

1.1. The History of the Burka Ban

“August 1, 2019. The date when Muslims in the Netherlands were denied their freedom . . . Stand up for your rights!” (Dutch Muslima of Moroccan descent August 1st, the Netherlands)

It took the Dutch government approximately fourteen years to implement the Burka Ban. The law was first passed in 2005 by a majority in the Dutch Lower House. However, it then failed to pass constitutional muster. Multiple revisions, multiple governing coalitions later, and more than a decade elapsed before it was finally confirmed by both houses of parliament and came into force on 1 August 2019 (Valenta 2019). During this time, other countries in Western Europe voted for similar prohibitions. Denmark completely banned the Islamic facial veil, as have France, Belgium and Austria. Germany banned the veil for motorists and is moving to abolish it in as many public areas as possible. The Dutch ban applies to some public spaces such as government buildings, schools, hospitals and public transportation but not to others. Many Dutch, however, have the mistaken impression that the law applies to all public spaces. Valenta argued that this repression is part of a European-wide surge in Islamophobic symbolic politics that has had real effects (Valenta 2019), see also (Baldi 2017; Bunzl 2005).

The original proposal was to ban Islamic facial veils in all public areas. Over time, it became clear this would violate Dutch constitutional safeguards against discrimination and the bill was modified. During this process, the Dutch borrowed from their neighbors, the French and the Belgians, who had implemented complete bans as early as 2011. Thus, rather than specifying Islamic facial veiling by name, the law proscribes ‘facial-coverings’, which refers to motorcycle helmets as well as balaclavas and veils. The opponents of the ban argue that the ban is discriminatory in that the government’s own Equal Treatment Commission reviewed and disparaged the bill in 2012, which, as Valenta argued, was: “discriminatory, disproportional, distorting, paternalistic, arbitrary, dissimulating, contradictory and counterproductive” (Valenta 2019). It could create a situation in which a woman wearing a *niqab* (the report uses this term consistently) arrested for another offence could then file a claim of religious and gender discrimination on the basis of that detention.

¹ Throughout this work, I will refer to the ban as the Burka Ban, in Dutch, as used by the participants in this study (in Dutch: *burka verbod*). Burka or Boerka is the Dutch term for *burqa*.

Partially in response to issues raised in the Commission's report, the ban morphed from a comprehensive prohibition to a site-specific one. In the current law, only key public spaces are forbidden, such as government buildings, public transportation, hospitals and schools. In other words, the target is these Muslim women's access to government civil, social and police services, geographic mobility, health care, education and those to whom they entrust the education of their children. Thus, women wearing *niqab* are forced to choose between their religious life and their civic rights, health, security, public parenting, access to schooling, and freedom of movement (Moors 2013; Moors and Tarlo 2013; Tarlo and Moors 2013; Valenta 2019). Valenta argues that this may be the Dutch state's punishment for their refusal to obey and submit to the state by choosing a face veil (Valenta 2019). In order to safeguard non-Muslim Dutch from accidental carry overs, politicians also inserted some exceptions. The most striking are face coverings which, 'consistent with social opinion', correspond to a festive or cultural activity such as St. Nicholas, carnivals or weddings. Likewise, face paint, which is commonplace at sports events, among others, is also exempt. The designers of this law hence incorporated what could be termed a 'white nationalist loophole' that consciously seeks to safeguard Dutch culture even as it strives to eradicate (an element of) Islamic culture (Valenta 2019; Wekker 2016). Wearers of burkas, *niqabs* and facial coverings are in the minority in Dutch society, but the issue is always in the headlines, most likely because of the mismatch between this item of clothing and popular conceptions of Western life in a country like the Netherlands. Baldi analyzed what she called the current European obsession with the practice of veiling as a necessary act of power needed to maintain the unity and homogeneity of the European people (Baldi 2017). Veiled women, especially converts to Islam, pose a challenge to such a notion and thus attract media attention (Hass and Luterk 2019; Vroon 2014; Vroon-Najem 2007). Nevertheless, for the women interviewed, this clothing helps to build identity and is a rational, active choice that is part of their journey into Islam.

1.2. *Niqab, Burka and All That Is in Between*

"My face is my calling card for Allah. My Creator! My Merciful! Not for His Creation. Get rid of your wild ideas!" (Dutch Muslima of Moroccan descent, in her late thirties)

A face-covering veil, also called a ruband, is a garment that covers the face, and is worn by some Muslim women as a part of a specific interpretation of *hijab* (Islamic modest dress). According to the majority of Muslim scholars and Islamic schools of thought, face veiling is not a requirement of Islam; however, other Muslim scholars, particularly in the Salafi movement, have stipulated that women are required to cover their face in public (Brems 2013; Brems 2014; Inge 2016; Moors 2009; Moors and Tarlo 2013; Moors 2013; Valenta 2019). Muslim women who wear the *niqab* do so in places where they may encounter non-*mahram* (non-related) men.

The August 1 Burka Ban is slightly confusing, since it actually refers to a *niqab* rather than a *burqa*. In spite of its name, in the Netherlands, the face-covering veil is not a *burqa*, but a *niqab*. A *niqab* covers the face while leaving the eyes uncovered, while a *burqa* covers the entire body from the top of the head to the ground, with only a mesh screen allowing the wearer to see in front of her. There are few women in the Netherlands known to wear a *burqa*. Thus, what is targeted by the Burka Ban is in fact the wearing of *niqabs*. Politicians and much of the media are finely attuned to these differences. During parliamentary debates, politicians continually referred to '*burqas* and *niqabs*', while the media have taken to ritually flashing a sign visually explaining the differences between the *burqa*, *niqab*, *chador* (full body covering with open face), and *hijab* (literally meaning head scarf and often referred to as Islamic modest dress).

Estimates indicate that there are only approximately 150 women who regularly wear the *niqab* in the Netherlands (and another few hundred who wear one occasionally). This raises the question of why 18 million inhabitants in the Netherlands should be protected from 150 women who have done nothing wrong. These women, mostly Dutch converts to Islam, are accused of not being able to participate in Dutch society. However, this ban is pushing them even further away from the community and can place them in a situation of greater isolation. This ban can make these Dutch Muslim women

feel as though they are no longer part of Dutch society and the Dutch national fold (Hass 2011; Hass and Lutek 2018; Hass and Lutek 2019; Vroon 2014).

1.3. Freedom of Dress

“Inshallah, Muslim women’s right to wear a niqab will not be taken away . . . ” (Dutch converted Muslima, occasional niqab wearer)

Freedom of religion, including the right to wear a religious symbol such as a cross, or a *niqab* is an important value in Dutch society: freedom is freedom. However, some of the arguments in favor of the Burka Ban include claims that this type of clothing does not fit the Western landscape, that this piece of clothing is oppressive to women (including those who claim they chose it), involves safety issues (a person covering their face is considered rude and might be a threat to public security). The opponents of the Ban claim that the tolerant Netherlands has become highly intolerant towards its Muslim population and that the notion of freedom of religion is at risk. There are also those who basically do not support the wearing of face-covering veils, but believe the government should let other people choose for themselves what to wear as long as they do not constitute a threat to society.

The Burka Ban law authorizes a process of denunciation in several stages: (1). In a governmental institution, health care clinic, educational institution or on public transportation, a person can ask a woman to remove her face veil. (2). If she disagrees, the person can call the police. (3). The police will ask the veiled woman (again) to remove the veil or leave the building. (4). Failure to comply incurs a fine of € 150. The Burka ban has sparked public frenzy from Muslim men and women, and *niqab*-wearing women and women who do not cover their faces or hair have voiced their solidarity with their *niqabi* sisters. Numerous organizations, including a few mosques based in Amsterdam, as well as Muslim humanitarian organizations, have announced on their websites, as well as on their social media pages (mostly Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram), that they will pay the fine of every *niqab* woman who refuses to remove her face veil and is punished for her freedom of choice:

“To the Islamic community in the Netherlands: The new law partially prohibiting face-covering clothing is effective as of August 1, 2019. This is a huge blow to the Islamic community in the Netherlands since the niqab (burqa) is included in this ban. The niqab is a form of protection for women, a free choice in our beautiful religion. As a direct consequence of this prohibition many sisters cannot observe this part of our religion. It also alienates us, since this law was voted in a country of freedom and tolerance. This is why the XXX Mosque has decided to make a commitment to niqab (and burqa) wearers in the Netherlands. Were you fined for your freedom of choice? Let us know so we can pay your fine. We can be reached on our Facebook page: <https://m.facebook.com/XXXX/> or via our email address: info@xxxx.nl

May Allah reward us all and make us steadfast in His Faith

(from the Facebook page of a mosque in Amsterdam)

For some, the *burqa* calls to mind a tribal, patriarchal, violent and backward lifestyle where women are thought to live a brutalized, passive, and oppressive existence. In the popular and political imagination, the presence of Islam threatens to infect the beautiful, open, Enlightened, emancipated and secular Dutch society. In this depiction, migrants come to the Netherlands, bringing their traditions, and refuse to adapt and aim to Islamize Dutch society as a whole (see more in (Hass and Lutek 2018; Van der Veer 2006; Van Nieuwkerk 2004). Muslim men repress and dominate their wives and daughters with a heavy hand and want to do the same with everyone else². Women who wear face-covering veils are often characterized as belonging to ISIS, jihadi brides or sympathetic to Islamic State policies. The *burqa* and all it stands for capture this narrative in a nutshell.

² Read argued that although veiling predates Islam, many today in the US context consider it a universal symbol of women’s oppression within a patriarchal religious culture (Read 2002; Read 2007).

However, the reality of Dutch women's facial veiling is strikingly different, which some politicians and media have chosen to ignore. Not only are there no known *burqas* in the Netherlands, but the typical *niqabi* is a young woman, often a Dutch convert, deeply inspired by her religious journey even to the point of embracing Islam. For a number of years—sometimes a few, sometimes many—she takes to wearing the *niqab*—sometimes with great consistency, sometimes intermittently—and experiences religious delight in doing so (Hass and Lutek 2018; Hass and Lutek 2019; Moors 2009; Moors 2013; Valenta 2019; Vroon 2014). All this is well known to politicians; Dutch scholar Moors has written on this topic for many years, including an extensive and publicly available report that she produced for the Dutch government in 2009 based on her study “*The Dutch and the face veil, the politics of discomfort*” (Moors 2009; Valenta 2019). In Moors' study, *niqabis* consistently talk about their immediate families, which more often than not are deeply opposed to their facial veiling. This includes husbands who might find it too dangerous (given public aggression), others in the *niqabis*' intimate circle who find it too extreme and there are stories of mothers who break off relations with their daughters once they take this step. Other mothers, in particular for example if they are Moroccan, are happy to walk beside their veiled daughters when on trips to Morocco but are opposed to having their daughters wear a face-covering veil once they return to the Dutch streets (Moors 2009; Moors 2013; Valenta 2019).

Avishai reports that the women she studied may experience conservative religions as restricting, but they also feel liberated and empowered by their religion (Avishai 2008). Thus, their ‘compliance’ with religion may not be strategic at all, but rather a mode of conduct and being. Expanding on Butler's notion of “doing gender” discussed also by West and Zimmerman (Butler 1990; West and Zimmerman 1987), Avishai constructs religiosity by conceptualizing the agency of the women involved in her research as “doing religion.” Doing religion is in fact a performance of identity, and, insofar as this performativity can be viewed as a strategic undertaking, is possibly undertaken in the pursuit of religious goals (Avishai 2008). Stadler, Elor, Mahmood and Abu Lughod also showed how members of religious communities in Islam, Christianity and Judaism engage in integrating medieval and holy texts and ways of life with modern ideals and practices (Abu-Lughod 1998; Ammerman 1987; Ammerman 2005; El-Or 2006; Elor 2017; Mahmood 2001; Stadler 2009).

To better understand how Muslim groups in the Netherlands are coping with these tensions, this study focused on Dutch Muslimas, i.e., native Dutch women who have chosen to convert to Islam at different levels of observance (often referred to as New Muslims) and born Muslim women who became more observant at a later stage (referred to as Newly Practicing Muslims). According to Rambo's conversion model, both types are considered religious conversion (Rambo 1999). In various ethnographies, these women are presented together, since these women often befriend each other and study together in women-only Quranic classes, workshops, Arabic language classes and many other gatherings (see also in (Hass 2011; Hass and Lutek 2018; Hass and Lutek 2019; Tiilikainen et al. 2019; Vroon 2014).

In what follows, I discuss dress and covering, and specifically face covering as an active, rational choice related to freedom of worship. I draw on a theoretical framework of modesty (Boulanouar 2006; Moors 2013; Siraj 2011; Stephens 1972) to characterize how these women express their (a) choice, which is their ability to choose and act in social action, and (b) their perception of freedom as they push the limits of archetypal Dutch identity, while simultaneously stretching the meaning of Islam to craft their own image influenced by themes of identity, immigration, belongingness, knowledge, ethnicity, religious knowledge, higher education and gender. In so doing, I also refer to the dual consequences of veiling, as did Zine, who argued that the practice of veiling has made Muslim women subject to racism and Islamophobia in society at large but also patriarchal oppression and sexism from within their communities (Zine 2006).

1.4. Islamic Fashion

“O Prophet! Say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments; this will be more proper, that they may be known, and thus

they will not be given trouble; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.” (Quran, chapter 33, verse 59, Shakir translation)

Across Europe, a cohort of young Muslim women is popularizing new styles of modest fashion that combines mainstream trends with inventive forms of *hijab* and Islamic clothing (Lewis 2013; Moors 2009; Moors 2013; Rambo and Bauman 2012; Tarlo 1996; Tarlo and Moors 2013; Van Nieuwkerk 2014). This phenomenon can be seen in the Netherlands (Bartels 2000; Hass and Lutek 2019; Moors 2007; Van Nieuwkerk 2004; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014), Finland (Almila 2016), Sweden (Roald 2004; Roald 2012), Scotland (Boulanouar 2006), Germany (Ozyurek 2010; Özyürek 2014), France (Bowen 2010; Bowen 2007), and Belgium (Coene and Longman 2008); see also in Rosenberger and Sauer 2013 for more about France, Germany, Austria, Greece, Denmark, UK, Bulgaria and the Netherlands as regards the relationship between veiling and narratives of belonging. One main argument of this book is that the discourse of the veil cuts across and critiques interrelated domains, policies, narratives of national belonging and secularism. Rosenberger and Sauer also show that whereas there are many countries where there is a prohibition, there are also many where tolerance towards the veil is the norm (Rosenberger and Sauer 2013). In popular discourse, the *hijab* is often seen as a controversial symbol, rarely as a piece of clothing (Bowen 2010; Bowen 2007; Tarlo and Moors 2013). Face-covering veils such as *niqab* and *burqa* are often even more stereotyped and are seen as the visible symbol of oppression or a forced choice rather than one’s own personal choice that involved weighing all the consequences of opting for face covering while living in a Western country.

Since Islam is a religion but also a way of life (*din*)—one of the main tenets of which is modesty—appropriate dress is an obvious component. The analysis of clothing presented here deals mainly with women’s clothing in the public sphere (i.e., clothing that is worn in the company of strangers,). The public sphere is defined here as ‘in the company of strangers’ rather than ‘outside the home’, although these two situations often overlap. This is also because the definitions of ‘public space’ and ‘private space’ in Islam differ from the Western paradigm (El Guindi 1999; Tavriss 1993). There are several requirements and prohibitions concerning clothing in Islamic teachings. Basically, the *awra* (an Arabic term meaning ‘invulnerable vulnerability’) must be covered, but the method or style of coverage varies greatly from country to country and person to person (Boulanouar 2006; El Guindi 1999). Boulanouar noted that “All efforts at beautification and adornment are undertaken inside the home for the benefit of yourself and your family and loved ones; all efforts at coverage and modesty are for outside the home, and for the unsanctioned gaze of passers-by or anyone who comes into ‘your space’” (Boulanouar 2006) (p. 154). The concept of modesty is addressed in Islamic teachings from many angles. For men, the *awra* is from the navel to the knee (or mid-thigh in some rulings). For women, the *awra* is more extensive and a more complicated matter entirely. A woman’s *awra*, with respect to men outside her close family members and those forever ineligible for marriage to her, and non-Muslim women, consists of her entire body, with the exception of her face and hands (Boulanouar 2006; Kaita 2015).

2. Methods

This paper is part of a larger and evolving research project analyzing religious conversion among Dutch women, and more specifically Dutch women who have embraced Islam. The research project involved a multi-site (Marcus 1995) long-term ethnography conducted in the city of Amsterdam and its suburbs and was conducted at several periods of time over one decade. The first took place in 2009 (focusing on born Muslimas and converted Muslimas) and thereafter once a year in the summers of 2017, 2018 and 2019. The Netherlands was specifically chosen as a function of the lived experience of the author, who was raised in one of Amsterdam’s most vibrant and multicultural neighborhoods. Data were collected and analyzed using various qualitative methods. The author conducted more than 30 in-depth interviews, and participated in Quranic classes, gatherings, lectures and workshops. The larger ethnographic study combines insights from over twenty observations, including participant observations in gatherings for Quranic and religious studies, observations in a Mosque located in a group of neighborhoods with a high percentage of immigrant and Muslim populations, as well

as observations in Islamic dress shops in various neighborhoods in Amsterdam. A third source of information was cultural artifacts such as invitations to events, gatherings, distribution materials, photographs, memes, paintings, posters, exhibitions in museums, websites and material culture (textile and clothing). To gain a better understanding of Islamic dress and culture, the author also conducted museum ethnography in the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam, a museum devoted to global cultures that have ties to the Kingdom of the Netherlands' colonial past, in the Amsterdam Historical Museum, and in the Museum of Islamic Art in Jerusalem. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study and agreed to a taped interview. Interviews were held and transcribed in Dutch and sent to all participants for review. Two participants returned the transcript and asked for corrections and edits. In 2019, another 17 interviews were added: these interviews were conducted in Dutch, transcribed in Dutch and large parts of each interview were translated into English and integrated in the ethnography. Of all the participants, 21 were converted Muslimas and 13 were born Muslimas with ethnic roots (mostly in Turkey and Morocco but also in Suriname, Somalia, Indonesia and elsewhere). Most reside in Amsterdam and in the suburbs of the city and ranged in age from 18 to 45. Seventeen were married or in a committed relationship (leading to marriage) during the ethnography, 3 were divorced and the rest defined themselves as single. The identities of all participants presented in this article were anonymized and their names changed accordingly. Some are presented with their age and ethnic background (for example, Dutch convert to Islam, or Muslima from a Moroccan background). A few participants stated that they would authorize quotes but not any other information (age, ethnic background) to avoid identification, in spite of the name change. In these cases, I use quotes, but eliminate any other identifying information.

For this article, interviews were conducted before, after and during the Burka Ban. Some took place on 1 August 2019 itself (the day the ban came into force) and the days after, which I still consider as “during” the ban. Some interviews took place a few weeks afterwards (with the same and with new participants). Hence, the participants were reflecting on the ban after a certain time has passed. All interviewees were asked the same set of questions dealing with clothing and veiling. Two questions were about wearing a face veil and about the Burka Ban, which was spoken about long before it actually came into force. These questions (do/did you wear a face veil? If yes, what was your parents/friends/coworker's reaction? Would you like to wear a face veil (again)? What do you think about the Burka Ban?) were asked of women who wear a face veil and those who did not (at the time of the interview), since some of the participants are occasionally *niqab* wearers and former *niqabis*, but others, regardless of wearing a veil or not had something to say about the ban, as Muslimas at a time where the ban was experienced (some agreed with, but most disapproved of the ban as shown in the next section). Furthermore, to connect the findings to current affairs, online ethnography was conducted. The days before, during and after the Burka Ban, freedom of choice, pros and cons to the ban were discussed extensively mainly on social media and news sites. Chats and online conversations, memes, pictures, comics, paintings, flyers and banners were sent to me by the participants who wanted them to be incorporated into this study.

The interviews and all other data were coded into themes that were divided into two main sections that arose from the field, according to the principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The two sections are called: The Dutch in the Muslima, and the Muslima in the Dutch, based on the assumption that Dutch and Muslim identities have a mutual influence on each other in the lives of these women. There are situations in which ‘Dutchness’ enters the Muslim identity and modifies it, while in other situations the Muslim identity is emphasized. The three key arguments to emerge in this specific context were identity, freedom and choice.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section explores what is the most Dutch in the Muslim (women) and what is the most Muslim in the Dutch (women) by focusing on some of the themes that emerged most prominently from the

ethnography. The choice of wearing *hijab* or *niqab*, the justifications for wearing it and the debate on the Burka Ban are infused with the discourse on freedom, choice and modesty. Gender roles and agency were major components of these themes, so I will refer to literature about gender roles, gender equality and agency. Analysis of these themes suggests the ways in which these women feel they do not entirely belong to the Netherlands and to the Dutch culture yet are an integral part of it. The findings reveal how these women are crafting hybrid identities by actively looking into their faith and their choice to practice, while interweaving their Dutch heritage into this discourse.

The following sub sections explore the rationales for wearing a *niqab*, and how it could be seen from the outside as a way to reject or modify Western norms. To provide a basis for comparison, this will be contrasted with the decision to wear a headscarf. Both are considered interpretations of the Islamic dress, *hijab*.

"I realize that this type of veil is out of the ordinary but I can't accept having people insult me for wearing one" (Muslim woman, wearing a *niqab*)

The decision to wear a *niqab* is not made lightly or easily sustained. In most cases, both external society and the immediate social environment actively discourage it (Moors 2009; Valenta 2019). The women who do wear the *niqab* despite this compound pressure are more often going against, rather than satisfying, the wishes and norms of their families and are constantly justifying their choices (Hass and Lutek 2019; Moors 2009; Valenta 2019). The reactions by Muslims and non-Muslims have been strong, as the following quote demonstrates:

"... In the Netherlands, aren't we allowed to decide for ourselves what we want to wear? There are plenty of people walking around who look out of the ordinary. Aren't tattoos against the law too? ... that being said, I can imagine people not feeling comfortable when they are talking to someone wearing a (face) veil." (Muslim man, mosque member in Amsterdam)

3.1. Rejecting or Modifying Western Norms?

"... doesn't Allah ask women to cover themselves? So perhaps a hijab, but He said to cover your face ... I get it that some sisters need a hijab to get closer to Allah, but I think some of them are only doing it to show resistance to the West, which I can also understand ... but it's not the right way of course ... in my opinion ... " (Dutch Muslima of Moroccan descent)

In the Netherlands, freedom of worship is considered a private matter, so religious affiliation is not often documented. However, there is a general consensus that in Islam there are more female converts than males (see more in (Vroon 2014)). This incongruity between the larger numbers of female converts in a population that often considers Islam to be particularly 'oppressive' to women makes this topic worthy of further exploration because it conveys something about gender, religion, agency, choice and freedom in conservative religions.

"It doesn't make sense ... how come women can post pictures of themselves half-naked and post them on Facebook and Instagram to see how many likes they get ... or walk down the street half naked ... and call that freedom ... but women who cover their bodies can't? It's so hypocritical ... [rolling her eyes] ... " (Dutch converted Muslima in her mid-twenties)

Which gender norms in Dutch society are these women either rejecting completely or modifying? Specialists in religious piety such as Mahmood and writers who have examined religious conversion to Islam in the West, such as Roald and McGinty and others, have found that women embrace non-liberal religious identities not solely out of piety but also to reject other social models (Avishai 2008; Fader 2009; Mahmood 2001; Marranci 2008; Roald 2004; Roald 2012). One possible rejected social model may be the concept of 'whiteness' in a Christian dominated society. Is the concept of 'whiteness' applicable to the Netherlands and the mainland (Essed and Trienekens 2008; Essed 2001)? Why have these

women chosen a religion that is often portrayed in the media and among their peers as regressive, both politically and philosophically, especially concerning women's rights? Muslim women in the West, including in the Netherlands, are regularly perceived as being oppressed (Abu-Lughod 2002; Vroon 2014). They are often portrayed as objects, rather than as actors capable of drawing on Islam as a source of empowerment and agency (Abu-Lughod 2002; Vroon-Najem 2007).

Following Ortner (Ortner 2006) and Vroon (Vroon-Najem 2007), agency is described here as *"how actors formulate needs and desires, plans and schemes, modes of working in and on the world."* For many women, the choice to embrace a conservative religion is a way of finding peace and coming home. The literature suggests this is true for converts to Islam, and for converts turning to Orthodox models in Judaism (Avishai 2008; Benor 2012; Davidman 1991; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). Alternatively, whereas some women may experience conservative religions as restricting, they also feel liberated and empowered by their religion (Avishai 2008; Mahmood 2001).

The following quote from a participant makes the point that it is sometimes hard for family and peers to comprehend why a Dutch converted Muslima chose to cover her hair or her face. It is often perceived as being an action that her (Muslim) spouse made her do. This example is of a woman who, to the surprise of her family, did not take off her headscarf even after she got divorced, showing how this woman is *"formulating her needs and desires, plans and schemes, modes of working in and on the world"* (Ortner 2006).

"... now that I am divorced, I also hear comments [such as]: 'We were wondering when you would finally take off the headscarf ... Then I think: wow, you really have drastically misunderstood something ... I wear the headscarf for me, not for anyone else. And even if I had been divorced for a hundred years, [the headscarf] would stay on as long as I wanted it to ...'" (Lydia, 36 years old, converted Muslima)

Bartels shows how adopting an Islamic identity, which includes the decision to cover the head, is what helps young women who feel disenfranchised in the Netherlands nonetheless fit in (Bartels 2005). A young woman who wears a headscarf and anchors this act with the words *"this is my own personal choice"* fits into Dutch society as an independent woman, who is free to choose her own way of life, differentiated the group context of the broader ethnic community of which she is a member. Ethnography shows that parents and family members encourage their daughters to continue to study. As long as they are religious and live according to Islam, there is no reason to worry that they will deviate from the right path. They thus get an education and build their (professional) future. Yet at the same time, prominent Muslim women are also not always accepted fully by society: people sometimes distance themselves from them or ask them to make changes. Some Muslim women decide to wear the veil to show society that they are Muslim, and part of the global Muslim *Ummah*.

"In one way, putting on this head covering is a way to identify with the Muslim community, but on the other, it's a statement to society at large telling everyone that I am a Muslim ..." (Yasmin, 25 years old)

In the ethnography, it was evident that the reason that second-generation women and converted Muslimas in the Netherlands wear the *hijab*, beyond the desire to follow Islamic law and discourage undesirable male attention, is also to express themselves and their religious identity. This is suggestive of the dichotomy between Western/Eastern society, where women living in a Western country actively incorporate styles and fashions too often labelled as foreign into their daily lives, as Read also argued (Read 2007). In this way, they integrate Western and Eastern perspectives, and eliminate the often-assumed binary between the two. Vroon notes that for this reason, the *hijab* and other coverings are significant for the agency of women who choose to cover themselves (Vroon 2014). This choice is not easy, because women cannot always wear the *hijab* or the *niqab* in certain places of work. Individuals who wish to show their commitment to their religious community sometimes encounter sanctions, such as being expelled from school (for more details see, Bowen 2007; Scott 2009).

or they may be fired or ostracized because certain religious symbols (such as head covering) highlight the differences between minority groups and the dominant group. Women are assumed to cover themselves as a result of male pressure in their families, which may sometimes be the case, but not always. The fact that many women consciously choose to dress in Islamic style more prominently than their mothers, which is more than their families would like, is a telling feature as regards these women's agency (Hass and Lutek 2019; Moors 2009; Moors 2013; Vroon 2014).

"Until you accept me as I am, I will continue to be myself in all the ways I can. In my opinion, covering up is a very important part of my faith. Look, I do not do everything exactly according to Islamic religious law, but I do try to do it clearly. Unfortunately, this is not always possible in a Western lifestyle." (Miriam, 25 years old)

This quote also shows that viewing freedom as the ability to choose and act through social conduct, and manifest resistance in some cases, depends on the context. The interviewee feels her society limits her ability to be who she is, and therefore her head covering reflects a great deal of identity building that drives her to make a social statement (Ortner 2006). Put differently, the *hijab* and Islamic dress (whether it is a *hijab* alone, or an overcoat with *hijab*, a garment called a *khimar*, or a face veil) are not only alternative fashion statements to what fashion is in the West, but also identity builders themselves (Moors 2007; Moors 2009; Moors 2013; Moors and Tarlo 2013).

3.2. Covering

"Say to the believing women that they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste) ... and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their khumur over their bosoms ... " (Quran, chapter 24, verse 30)

"Tell the believing men that they shall subdue their eyes (and not stare at women), and to maintain their chastity. This is purer for them. GOD is fully cognizant of everything they do" (Quran, Sura 24:30)

To many, the veil symbolizes a patriarchal religious culture that universally oppresses Muslim women (Read 2002), which may explain why this issue is frequently in the headlines, thus creating a 'problem', a phenomenon (Elor 2017). For women who decide to embrace a Muslim lifestyle and identity, the *hijab* is a form of freedom and is not oppressive. As interviewee Fatima explained: *"In my headscarf I have my freedom."* Thus, they argue that through the *hijab* they can feel that they are watching, and not just being watched. Muslim women have the feeling that the *hijab* frees them from fashion fads, and from myths of consumerist conceptions of beauty in Western society. Covering is a means of preventing sexual harassment, allowing women to go outside, work, and even to travel in areas where a woman without a *hijab* would not feel comfortable in public. Covering is a means of gaining respect and elevation. More importantly, covering is also a divine commandment. Therefore, a Muslim woman who has made the choice to wear a head covering does not need to be released, because she is already free. These women perceive the Western perceptions of "liberating women from their headscarves and the depressing patterns of Islam" as insulting. This idea was expressed in interviews with *niqabi* and former *niqabi* Muslims:

"... I walked around here in xxx (a city in the Netherlands) with a friend, we both wore a niqab and there was a little boy walking in front of us and he was really scared and ran crying to his mommy ... so I think to myself, if only that mother would just tell him "these girls are ordinary people, just look, do you want to talk to them? Because we are not that bad ... " (Lola, 22 years old. Converted Muslima, ex niqabi)

A father of an ex *niqabi* said:

“... It took me some time getting used to it, and I expressed it very gently. Her face was completely covered, I found it very difficult to communicate with her, or if I went to see a friend of hers and that girl did not want to shake my hand, I found that very difficult to accept ... really very difficult and I still think it's a bit extreme ... when Lola was still abroad, I told her, the atmosphere in the Netherlands is not very welcoming of Muslim women at the moment, for Muslims in general, and not at all if you are looking the way she did back then, completely in black and completely covered ... people look, people talk ... ” (Father of a converted Muslima, ex niqabi)

The *hijab* clearly singles out Muslim women who wear it, and also places unveiled Muslim women in the position of constantly explaining why they do not (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Mernissi 1987; Mernissi 1991). The practice of veiling identifies a Muslim woman not only in terms of her religious affiliation and gender convictions, but also underscores her distinctive ethnic and national identities (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Essers and Benschop 2009; Vroon 2014). For these women, neither the accessibility nor the availability of dress is a problem, but rather how to conform to the commandment to be modest and avert the male gaze, while simultaneously embodying the Islamic commandments of beauty and order. As Sandiki et al. show that the work of ‘interpretation’ is simultaneously verbal and material. They argue that these women can explain what they are doing and how it relates to their struggle to understand and interpret Quranic demands, but the most eloquent testimony is in their practice, what is termed their ‘beauty work’: the interpretation constructed from the richness of practice that is often much more nuanced than anything they can say about their relationship to religious texts (Sandikci and Ger 2011; Sandikci and Ger 2009). While an outsider might see a contradiction between the assumed materialism of mass consumption and religious spirituality, insiders argue that the provision of new forms and materials is God’s blessing that enables them to resolve contradictions and allows them to act on cosmological imperatives.

“[I was told by a Dutch person:] ‘when you put on a head scarf, you put on a symbol of oppression, and you have no way to express yourself and your opinions.’ When [this same person] saw a Dutch woman in a very Western-style, fashionable dress, she thought she was freer and more individualistic than I was ... ” (Fatima, 23 years old)

Despite these stereotypes, many women feel less objectified and less oppressed when dressing modestly. Dutch Muslims, especially those new to Islam, are convinced that there is an egalitarian relationship between men and women in Islam and society as a whole. Educated in the Netherlands, these young women emphasize the equality of opportunity between men and women, and they accentuate it by giving examples of pure Islam that are not influenced by cultural practices, such as the primary Islam of the Prophet Muhammad. Women do not see themselves as oppressed; on the contrary, they perceive themselves as liberated and equal to their partners and other men in society.

3.3. The Choice of Covering

“No one says to me: ‘You have to take [the headscarf] off.’ My parents asked me to take it off and are afraid that I will not find a boyfriend or a husband when I wear a niqab. But to tell you the truth, I’d rather not find anyone. [I prefer to] be myself, with my niqab ... and if a man cannot handle it, then I’ll be alone until I meet someone who will accept me the way I am ... ” (Asia, 22 years old)

This quote comes from a young woman of Moroccan descent who rediscovered Islam and observes Islam differently than her parents do. She stopped wearing a *niqab* to don a *khimar* (long *hijab* where only the face remains visible) despite her parents’ disapproval. Van der Veer argues that the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women “is regarded as a total rejection of the Dutch way of life” (Van der Veer 1996; Van der Veer 2006). Another angle is the racial, phenotypical question of ‘Europeanness’, as in the case of native Dutch converted Muslimas. What happens if a blonde, blue-eyed Dutch woman decides to wear a headscarf? Does she confuse her peers as she passes through different identities and notions of belonging as Dutch and Muslim, yet not born into Islam? How are women like her

changing the concept of ‘whiteness’ in a Christian-based society? (Essed and Trienekens 2008; Essed 2001; Wekker 2016). Gresch and Sauer discuss the relationship between the choice of veiling and national identity. They show how integration can be achieved through the recognition of difference. They report how different groups in the Netherlands, both Muslims and non-Muslims, have called for the recognition of different stages of emancipation with regard to the veil and other female Islamic clothing (Gresch and Sauer 2012).

One possible theoretical framework to understand women’s choice and freedom to wear headscarves and face veils is the notion of ‘gender roles and gender equality’ (Cesari and Casanova 2017; Read 2003). In the media, women who chose to cover up are often singled out as being a threat to the universal values and principles of gender equality, autonomy, emancipation, secularism and tolerance and as being in need of liberation from the oppression of their religion and men in their society (Andreassen and Lettinga 2012; Rosenberger and Sauer 2013). Furthermore, since Islam is often portrayed by some social actors (far right politicians, certain media platforms) as the Visible Other, veiling becomes a physical marker between “us” and “them”, two cultures that are positioned in a hierarchical manner as each other’s opposite (Andreassen and Lettinga 2012; Baldi 2017; Hass and Lutek 2018).

3.4. Veils and Identities

“My religion is my identity” (Dutch Moroccan woman, 23 years old, occasional niqab wearer)

In the second half of the 20th century, marginalized groups such as women fought the injustices against them, founded political movements emerging from their commonalities and shared experiences to combat injustice. They used identity politics as an organizing mode to transform stigmas and to fight for recognition within society. Here, identity politics aims to reclaim or transform previously stigmatized perceptions on the part of the dominant culture (Crenshaw 1991; Marshall and Read 2003; Vader 2011; Yuval-Davis 2006). Marshall and Read’s work examines the relationships among ethnic and religious identities and feminist orientations in Arab-American women in the US, a group that they argue, bridges multiple cultural identities. Arab political identity is positively associated with feminism, whereas religious and feminist identities are inversely related. The effects of ethnic cultural identity and Muslim affiliation are negligible. This study found a complex pattern of relationships among multiple identities and underscores the underlying political dynamic linking group identities (Marshall and Read 2003). Work by Rea shows the intersection between gender, religion and cultural difference with regards to the practice of veiling (Read and Bartkowski 2000). Identity politics is of relevance when discussing the position of Muslim women in Dutch society, since it can be used by Muslim women to challenge the image manufactured of them. Dutch society still often perceives Muslim women as passive victims in need of rescue. Through the use of identity politics, Muslim women can use action to make themselves visible in society and create a public identity that moves beyond the stereotypes of a Muslim woman in a non-Muslim context (Moors 2009; Moors and Tarlo 2013).

Veiling is a condensed symbol embodying Islam through a visible marker, making it clear for everyone to see that this female is a Muslim, which implies publicly declaring a new identity. For many female converts, the stage of donning the *hijab* is a form of “coming out” (Van Nieuwkerk 2014), that marks them as the ‘other’, who is not completely/no longer Dutch/European, even though such a binary is problematic in the first place (Hass 2011), and is often hard for the family to accept. Some converts find a solution by putting on an African style head covering, instead of the *hijab* (Badran 2006; Badran 2013). After starting to wear the visible marker such as the *hijab*, many female converts sense two major changes in the way they are treated (Van Nieuwkerk 2014). At times, they are considered less intelligent and are perceived to be foreigners (Hass and Lutek 2018; Moors 2009; Vroon 2014); as a result, some have faced discrimination in the job market and in other societal institutions. The *hijab* is perceived as the most visible symbol of female degradation by non-Muslims, a condition that marks the world of Islam, but is problematically perceived as alien to the West (Baldi 2017; Moors and Tarlo 2013; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Read 2007; Van Nieuwkerk 2003; Van Nieuwkerk 2004; Van Nieuwkerk

2014). As Read and Bartkowski show, theological rationales may be a set of motivations for donning the veil, but for many of their veiled respondents *“the scriptural edicts and the religious symbolism surrounding the veil are given palpable force through their everyday gender practices ... ”* (Read and Bartkowski 2000). The following quote from my ethnography is one example of how the *hijab* (first a smaller veil, later a longer and more covering model) is a choice of freedom, in spite of what family and peers may think:

“... at one point I saw a Dutch woman with a headscarf here in my city and I thought that if she can do it, I can do it too ... I started thinking a lot about it and I came to the conclusion that the reason for not doing it had to do with my family and my friends and the neighbours, what they would say about it and their reaction to it ... then I decided that I don't live for what my family thinks and what the neighbours think and well. so, I decided to wear a headscarf. In the beginning a shorter and smaller one, until very gradually I was ready for the one I wear today” (Dutch converted Muslima, 37 years old)

For many converts, becoming Muslim eventually entails changing many aspects of their daily lives and cultural practices that can conflict with their social environment. Furthermore, the veil can function as a hiding place for former identities that the convert has left behind once she embraced Islam. Galonnier shows how ‘white’ converts to Islam are anomalous individuals in a world where race and faith have become closely intertwined. She argues that while they disrupt classic understandings of whiteness and enter the different setting of the Muslim community, where whiteness is neither unmarked nor dominant, white converts to Islam can be characterized as “non-normative whites.”

This is further demonstrated by the fact that just like their non-white sisters, white Muslims wear all Islamic styles, ranging from modest “Western clothing” with a *hijab* or without, to *niqabs* and *burqas*, and everything in between. By altering their whiteness in such a visual manner, white converts to Islam develop a form of reflexivity that sheds light on the underlying assumptions attached to white skin in America and Europe (Galonnier 2015a, 2015b). In this regard, a study showed that in the USA many argue that to understand Muslims, the analysis must be shifted “beyond black and white.” Husain suggested that black and white Muslims are positioned as either black/white or as Muslim. This implies that ‘Muslimness’ and religion more generally, shape the construction of blackness and whiteness (Husain 2017).

Islamic fashion thus constitutes a modification and challenge to ‘whiteness’ (Essed and Trienekens 2008) in majority Christian civil society, as Hass and Lutek have argued (Hass and Lutek 2018).

3.5. The Freedom of Covering

“At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So, they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.” (Genesis 3:7)

It is worth noting that while in the Netherlands (as elsewhere), a shift towards more fashionable Islamic dress has occurred over the course of the last decade, a small number of women have adopted *abayas*, *khimars*, *niqabs* and similar styles of covered dress that are sober and distinctively non-fashionable, and may even be in some cases be considered anti-fashion since these women have distanced themselves from the highly fashionable layered styles of mixing and matching mainstream items, and from the trendy *abayas* so popular in the Gulf States. Labelling their styles simply as anti-fashion does not do justice to the complexities of their position (Moors 2013). They do criticize fashionable Islamic styles with theological reasoning, but in spite of their long, dark-colored covering, they simultaneously talk extensively about the beauty of such forms of covering, that includes the feel of the fabric and the cut and thus not only the visual register. These approaches enable them to wear a broad range of styles underneath, including highly fashionable styles, but they choose who to reveal those styles to (husbands, family and female friends) and some do enjoy the range of possibilities these coverings provide them with. The following participant, a Dutch converted Muslima, wearing a long *hijab* and modest wide clothing, views the *niqab* as specific Islamic clothing that she personally would

not think of wearing. As she sees it, especially for the younger generation of converted Muslimas, a *niqab* is a form of rebellion, like the punks of the former generation:

“... so then you just walk around with a niqab at 16, 17, 18 years old, and say that you are converted ... but actually you are more like the punker from ten years ago ... and some of them have zero knowledge, really nothing at all and they ask me why I don't wear a niqab ... in my head I answer: 'and why do you wear one?' They don't even know how to do Dauwa, as it turned out later. That really shocked me ... I feel that if I dress like that, then I have to live by it. I think that's somehow hypocritical [to do otherwise] ... I have to earn that somehow. If you then suddenly wear a niqab with zero knowledge, but then, for example, sit outside in the dark with your girlfriend in the pitch dark or go and get groceries after nine in the evening, with a niqab, then I think you have not yet fully understood something. I see it quite often. Often it's very young girls who convert and immediately wear a khimar or immediately wear niqab. Personally, I think in this case it's just a piece of clothing” (Lydia, 36. Converted Muslima)

Thus, Western perceptions and representations of veiled Muslim women are not always simply about Muslim women themselves. Rather, these images fulfil a different function by providing a negative mirror in which Western constructions of identity and gender can be positively reflected. This mirroring takes place through the projection of gender oppression onto Islam, and its naturalization to the bodies of veiled women. Al-Saji argues that this constitutes a form of racialization (Al-Saji 2010).

3.6. The Beauty of Modesty

“In the Netherlands before I left for xxx (a Middle Eastern country), I was already wearing a khimar, that is, a long robe ... I really wanted to wear a niqab, but it was difficult to do it alone, just to walk down the street wearing one. For me it was very difficult ... this is it (show the niqab) so I thought if I move to that country, I can wear a niqab ... I really liked the idea ... There it is more accepted (than here in the Netherlands) and people really respect you and they don't give you weird looks ... so it's nice to wear. For me wearing the niqab feels like a bond and the fact that you can cover yourself even more, earns you even more respect, I think ... I have also worn a niqab here in the Netherlands and you still get called ghost, ninja ... I enjoyed wearing it ... I do miss it sometimes ... (Lola, 22 years old, converted Muslima, ex niqabi)

Lola converted to Islam at 22, chose to wear the face veil, subsequently took it off, immigrated to a Muslim-majority country and moved back to the Netherlands. For Lola, the choice to wear a *niqab* entailed numerous repercussions including disparaging comments from both strangers and her fellow students at the university, tensions with her parents, name calling on the street. She wanted to dress as modestly as possible by covering her face, but eventually took it off because she felt isolated and not accepted in Dutch society. For Amber, another young converted Muslima, who is an occasional *niqab* wearer, the choice to wear *niqab* incorporated her own hybrid style of pastel-colored garments (instead of the dark, mostly black veils). She would wear a powder pink headscarf including a face veil over a pink and purple loose-fitting dress with flowers. Madelon, also a converted Muslima in her late thirties who does not wear a *niqab*, but a *khimar* (long veil that leaves only the face uncovered), told me during one of her meetings, that since she discovered online shops and Islamic dress designers, she has started purchasing veils and Islamic clothes in *“vrolijke gezellige kleuren”* (in Dutch, cheerful cozy colors). During our last meeting, she was wearing a turquoise-colored *khimar* that accentuated her blue eyes.

The next quote, by one of the main informants in this study, showcases a situation in which a converted Muslima expresses the desire to wear a hijab, while her spouse at that time, a born Muslim, encourages her to think this decision over and not to make a hasty decision.

“... when I converted, I told my ex-husband, that I would never wear a headscarf, because people would never see my face ... again ... well, I think a few months later, when I had immersed myself

more in my Islamic journey ... I was more open to it, and I started wearing a headscarf. That was very special ... after that I started seeing many more converted women wearing headscarves ... I remember that my husband said, "Are you sure? Just wait a minute, don't do it ... first find out if you are sure about it, so that you won't tell me next week that you want to take it off, because that is not the intention of the headscarf. It's a decision, not a trial period". So, you see ... it is often assumed that women are forced by their husbands ... but no, on the contrary ... in my case he was the one who tried to stop me ... " (Lydia, 36, converted Muslima)

3.7. In favor of the Burka Ban—Mixed Feelings about the Face Veil: Is It Freedom or Is It Oppression?

"On the one hand, I hate to forbid something in this society, on the other hand, I hate the oppression of women ... "

The quote above is from an interview with one of the only non-Muslim participants in this study, a Dutch opinion leader who has never concealed her pro-Burka Ban views. I met her for coffee to understand the position of those in favor of the ban. She put forward her opinions quite gently, since she feels uncomfortable with the fact that the ban forbids something (the wearing of a certain garment), yet she truly believes the *burqas* and *niqabs* are oppressive to women, perhaps because she is not a Muslim herself. For example, one participant, a born Muslima, who now covers her hair, refers to the *hijab* as a religious symbol, whose wearers represent something:

"Covering your head is not just putting on a nice headscarf, it's not a fashion accessory although it's sometimes treated that way. Rather, it's something that defines behavior. When I started wearing a headscarf, I also began to behave differently, I started to dress more modestly, but that does not mean that I really became more modest, and less attention-grabbing. This is my personal feeling. Not everyone will agree with me. But in my view, this covering should symbolize protection and a lack of prominence, but this is not always the case. In the Netherlands, as a Muslima you stand out once you wear it. Everyone now knows you are a Muslim ... "

Nevertheless, she opposes the *niqab*:

"... the idea of the hijab is to protect yourself from men and the evil eye perhaps ... but why cover your face? Here (in the Netherlands) you stand out, so all eyes are upon you ... isn't that the opposite of what you are trying to achieve? I am just wondering and trying to make some sense out of it, but I can't, being a Muslima myself ... it just attracts too much attention ... anyway, I think everyone should be left alone, but a face should be identifiable ... Qadr and Allah know best." (Kadisha, 26 years old)

Other respondents reflected similarly on face-covering veils:

"I am a Muslim and against the *niqab*, because if we consider that the face of women mesmerizes men, men should also wear one because they mesmerize women ... Think rationally, we are all equal in the eyes of God ... " (Dutch converted Muslima)

"I am a Muslim and I wear the *hijab*, but I am against the *niqab*. Safety is definitely a concern when one wears *niqab* and another thing is that when women wear it at night, it scares the shit out of me ... so in my opinion the *niqab* should be banned from modern countries ... In backward or dangerous countries where women's safety is a major issue, the *niqab* should be worn by women, regardless of their religion ... does that make sense?" (Dutch Muslima of Moroccan descent)

A Muslim woman wearing a *hijab* said to her *niqab*-wearing friend during a joint interview:

"... sister, ask yourself ... do you wear *niqab* when you pray? Isn't wearing proper Muslima modest clothing enough? Your country worries that some extremist might use this to their advantage by perhaps having men wearing a *niqab* and having bombs and guns in their clothing ... "

A non-Muslim pro-Burka Ban activist argued that the women who cover their faces are stating that they are participating in a very radical and Salafist form of Islam and accused *niqab*-wearing women of being followers or sympathetic toward the Islamic State, since many women affiliated with IS wear the same veils.

3.8. Opponents to the Burka Ban—“How Can I be Free, If You Don’t Let Me Be?”

“... stop the Burka Ban, stop the oppression of women ... ” (Dutch Muslim woman, 37 years old)

The quote above, by a Dutch Muslim woman in her mid-late thirties, who herself is not a *niqabi*, and is a very active opponent to the Ban on social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and writes blogs and makes short videos (vlogs) on this topic. She claims that to go along with the Ban is to oppress women who have chosen the face veil. Her statement, made during an interview in August 2019, also appeared in a few of her posts online and is in fact a play on words on what some people are claiming (“including Muslims”) that the face veil is an expression of women’s oppression. However, to focus on how few women are targeted by the Burka Ban can be dangerously misleading. Not only are the women themselves impacted, but so too are all those in their immediate circle—children, husbands, parents, friends, neighbors, colleagues—who are witness to the increased aggression, reduced mobility and forced work-arounds that are imposed on the women they love. With the targeting of mosques, schools, politicians, holidays and festivities, leisure, sports, worship, arts, sartorial styles, communal initiations, dietary rules and greeting rituals, all the spaces of European Muslim life today “pulse to the steady drum beat of insult and harassment” (Valenta 2019).

Many surveys and ethnographic studies have revealed the profound prejudice against Muslims (Hass and Lutek 2019; Nicolaas and Sprangers 2007; Valenta 2019; Van der Veer 2006). Many Europeans yearn to eradicate European Muslims from the public domain. This cannot be achieved without resorting to a type of blatant discrimination (Bunzl 2005) and even violence, as Valenta states: “for the moment, the libidinal charge of political Islamophobia is being funneled towards the legislative decimation of the most vulnerable element and population: *niqabi* women” (Valenta 2019). In this way, a law directed at a nearly non-existent, unprotected and unrepresented population—a few hundred women—simultaneously distils and energizes the much more comprehensive Islamophobia that is its origin and its objective (Nicolaas and Sprangers 2007; Valenta 2019).

The first indications that the Ban is in trouble have already emerged. Directors of public transportation companies have made it clear that they will not implement the law. The idea of holding up a tram or train or bus for half an hour while waiting for the police to arrive to fine a *niqabi* is simply untenable. Some female conductors ask the *niqabi* to identify herself to them in private, thus creating a safe environment for women who do not wish to expose themselves to strangers, while others ask the *niqabi* to take off her face veil or to leave the train, thus causing aggravation for these women. Hospitals have agreed: they are not about to refuse health care to anyone since this would violate fundamental principles of medical ethics. Representative bodies of some schools have been resentful. They do not want the government to intrude on their right to decide school dress policies themselves. Universities have taken opposing stances with some cooperating, others actively countering, others non-committal. All have emphasized that they have not had any problems with *niqabis* and have no need for the law. Valenta even argued that this law was embarrassing for the government (Valenta 2019).

The mayors of a number of major cities, and primarily the Green Left Femke Halsema, the current mayor of Amsterdam, have indicated that the law goes profoundly against everything for which their cities stand. In coordination with the police and the public prosecutor, a decision was made that there were much more pressing concerns for the urban police that would take priority. Behind the scenes, the Minister of the Interior Kasja Ollengren sent a directive to the mayors worded in such a way that they just might interpret the implementation of the Burka Ban as a matter of choice rather than obligation. A few politicians stated that this was intolerable, that the law is the law and must be fully enforced. The Party of Freedom leader, Geert Wilders, stated that this was the same as allowing a thief to escape arrest. He and others demanded that Ollengren send a new letter. Clearly, however,

the state's governing apparatus was sensitive to wasting precious resources by carrying out an "absurd bit of symbolic politics" (Valenta 2019). However, all this changed when a newspaper called openly for citizens' arrests.

Citizens' arrest

While similar to existing bans in other countries, the Dutch version includes a critical component: the possibility of fellow citizens to detain Muslim women wearing a face veil. A national newspaper explicitly noted that, 'if you are bothered by a woman wearing a burqa, [you are] allowed ... to carry out a citizen's arrest ... holding the suspect to the ground [until the police arrive].' (Valenta 2019). This possibility of citizen–citizen violence was shocking, because it placed a Muslim woman wearing a facial veil in the same criminal category as an escaped thief or any other type of criminal. The law makes the *niqabi* a stereotyped target, since the state extends its monopoly on violence to citizens. It points to *niqabi* women as an exceptional threat to the collective public body, national hygiene and psychic well-being ("if you are bothered ...") such that any and all citizens have the right to use force to expel them from the public space. This created a paradox: the facial veil is illegal, but violence against women wearing facial veils is also illegal. Along with the Dutch public's complete confusion about locations where the law is actually enforceable (specific public spaces but not others), *niqabis* have to take into account that in any place, at any time, a fellow citizen can detain them and call the police. Given the intensity of anti-Muslim and anti-*niqabi* feelings, this fear is not unrealistic. Within the first ten days after the law was passed, the increase in violence was incremental: a woman rode her moped towards a *niqabi* without stopping, close enough to drive over her daughter's foot; another *niqabi* was harassed in a grocery store by a fellow shopper telling her that she could not shop there (though the law allows this); another was told by personnel to leave a playground with her children (where she is allowed to be, as it is considered a public area like a street); another was accosted on the street by a man walking alongside her growling that she was breaking the law; another was harassed by passing cars, whose passengers yelled at her and her two small children as she biked alongside a busy road. Recently, a *niqabi* woman was forced out of a bookstore and magazine shop because the owners of the shop felt threatened by her (and her one-year-old child in a stroller). The same woman was later followed by a man through the mall and felt very unsafe. These examples show that a citizen's arrest can lead to disorder, since there is no punishment for this behavior. When these attempted citizens' arrests and even citizen violence made the news, the issue of the Burka Ban went viral. Social media, the national news, talk shows, current events shows, women's magazines, politicians and others took renewed interest in the Ban in a dramatic national debate. The debate was all the more remarkable since during the fourteen years leading up to this law, none had taken place. The possibility that women wearing *niqabs* might suddenly, randomly and violently be tackled in public spaces by men and women inclined toward such aggression brought home the inhumanity of the law in a fashion that no reasoned argument had been able to do. At the same time, for *niqabis* it made their vulnerability more intensely tangible than ever before, an inescapable aspect of every step outside their front doors.

The effect of all this was like nothing ever seen before in the Netherlands. In short order, the site 'Boerkabuddies' [in Dutch, *burqa buddies*] was created on Facebook. Here, people could register by city if they were willing to accompany a travelling *niqabi*, to keep her safe in whatever way possible. By the end of the week, the site had more than 10,000 likes and members, with people from all walks of life registering to help: fellow Muslims with very different ways of practicing Islam, people of Jewish descent remembering what it meant to be the target of violence, feminists committed to women's right to self-expression, atheists averse to state dictatorship, queers angered by this denial of a right to public visibility and public safety, a woman from the countryside, unused to public activism, who simply could not tolerate such discrimination, an older Dutch couple who have a *niqabi* friend and many, many more. The testimonies, support and love kept pouring in for days and days. This entailed not just outward expressions but also new public awareness, in that there were extremely patient and polite attempts to understand by non-religious, white Dutch how a piece a clothing could be meaningful, important, even religious. How do you explain religious feeling to someone who has never felt it?

How can it be a rule or obligation to wear a facial veil, if some Muslim women do so and most do not? How does the relationship between absolute obligation, relativizing context, and individual choice work? On all sides, people were touched by this sudden, raw, direct, personal and intimate contact that had breached the barriers between the masses of everyday white Dutch society and Muslim Dutch lives so suddenly. The Facebook page rapidly turned into WhatsApp groups, ‘Niqab Buddies’, one for each province, plus a general chat group sharing experiences, volunteering to help each other, sharing prayers, stories, answering more questions from non-Muslims and new Muslims. In line with orthodox Muslim norms, the groups were gender segregated, only women or only men. It was precisely the orthodox sensibilities of the women that ensured that this massive national support infrastructure was entirely directed, staffed, and organized by women, for women.

Meanwhile, a local progressive, Muslim-inspired political party called the NIDA³ (Rotterdam/The Hague) was the first to dare to loudly decry the Ban. It also offered to pay the fines of any *niqabis* and set up a fund for them. Another local party—an intersectional feminist group from Amsterdam (Bij1)⁴—joined in with ‘Burqa Buddies’ and its leader spoke out critically in the media. The grassroots organization *Meld Islamofobie!* [in Dutch, Report Islamophobia!]⁵—created in 2015 by young Muslim women to compensate for what they felt as a structural lack of interest by the Dutch government—was active on all fora, raising awareness, encouraging women to film, document and formally register all attacks on them, to better challenge the law. The Pride Canal Parade swept through Amsterdam in this same period, and a local Labor politician prominently wore a yellow *burqa* in a rainbow gaggle of *burqas* protesting the ban (see Figure A11, Appendix A). Fellow members of the Labor Party, who were silent about the Ban itself, publicly reprimanded him and his Twitter account exploded in fury. It remains unclear whether the *niqabi* women were happy that the struggle for their freedom to wear a face veil was interwoven with the annual gay pride events in the city.

Some also fear that the Burka buddies who come to the rescue of their sisters might use violence on tram drivers, conductors and others. Valenta argues that notion that it can only be “*others who violate human rights ... makes them blind to the vicious, state-enabled discrimination in our own modern European societies*” (Valenta 2019). The politicians’ abstract image of the repressed and oppressed Muslim woman is more real to them than reality itself. When they have to choose between their fantasies and actual Muslim women, it is their fantasies that win (Valenta 2019, see also Wekker, White Innocence). For the opponents of the law, this law is arbitrary, driven by irrational fears and prejudices of religious and ethnic minorities. The opponents of the Ban state that it fundamentally violates Dutch Muslim women’s freedom of religion, freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination.

One respondent, a converted Muslima, who occasionally wears a *niqab*, and uploads pictures of herself wearing it on her Instagram account said:

“ ... I think it depends where you are at in the Netherlands. I think in some neighborhoods in Amsterdam it’s totally fine (to wear the niqab) ... but do I think wearing it in Voldendam (a fishing village just outside Amsterdam, author’s note) is useful? No, because there you would attract way too much attention with it ... you know that a niqab can be very comforting, protecting and imaan strengthening for sisters ... it is something that is part of our religion ... ” (Converted Muslima, 23 years old)

She adds:

“ ... people (Muslims and non-Muslims) should read more into the niqab ... It’s not just about “not mesmerizing men” ... it is to obey God, serve God, get closer to God ... focus on yourself, feel

³ NIDA is a political party in the municipality of Rotterdam with an Islamic signature. “NIDA” is a concept from the Koran and means “call” and “voice”.

⁴ Bij1 is a political party in the Netherlands formerly known as Artikel 1. The party was founded in 2016 by Sylvana Simons, a television personality who was formerly connected to the political party Denk. Bij1 focuses on fighting racism and discrimination in the Netherlands.

liberated and free and so much more ... to my country (The Netherlands) 'Do you want to take away the right from women to get closer to God?' (Converted Muslima, 23 years old)

Another respondent stated:

"... I have a response to the idea that the niqab might be dangerous ... the argument that a terrorist could do awful things justifies banning 150 women from wearing what makes them happy ... whether or not you think the niqab is obligatory ... isn't the West the epiphany of personal and religious freedom? If [wearing the niqab] makes them a better person, why should someone else's feelings suppress their freedom?" (Dutch Muslim woman of Moroccan descent)

"Wearing a niqab is indeed not obligatory in some people's opinion, but Sunnah prayers aren't obligatory either, but are a good deed for Allah ... whatever sisters' individual reasons are ... let's always assume the best ... " (Dutch Muslim woman of Moroccan descent in her late thirties)

However, even those who voted against the law have remained silent. Unwilling to publicly risk opposing it, they watch what happens as though they were simply bystanders and not the people's representatives tasked with guarding their security and their rights as enshrined in the Constitution i. The collaboration between far-right leaders, leftists and silent political figures reflects the incapability as a whole of the Dutch political establishment at the national level when it comes to protecting Muslim citizens. These are so well documented that the European Commission in its fifth report on the Netherlands 2019 refers to Dutch "mainstream political discourse and media reporting" as "strongly influenced by a xenophobic, fear-fueling rhetoric." Rather than reversing this, Dutch politics instead added one further critical bit of Islamophobic legislation to the pile, as Valenta argues, and then stayed still when it exploded in society (Valenta 2019).

Another respondent who personally does not agree with the *niqab*, but opposes the Ban said:

"People who say that terrorists can use it to their own advantage makes me laugh because when did that ever happen? Even if it did it's very uncommon ... it is like saying terrorists aren't already killing people and sometimes even getting away with it ... they don't need a niqab ... as a Muslim I personally don't agree with the concept of the niqab but I don't think it's our right to decide what women should wear ... whether a woman wants to wear a bikini or a full burqa is none of our business ... Stop trying to control women by telling them what to do ... freedom is freedom ... but many Western countries look for things that correspond to their own narrative as freedom, otherwise it's backwards and so on ... let women live without trying constantly to control them ... " (Dutch converted Muslima)

One of the participants quoted a chat she had with her son the day after the Burka Ban came into force, on August 2nd:

"Son: Mama why do you have to pay money [to cover] your face? It's really mean. They are not the boss. Allah is"

Mother: 😞 (sad emoticon)"

(from the Facebook page of one of the respondents)

When walking down the streets of their cities, face-veiled women are not requested to take their veils off, yet many people, Muslim or otherwise, women and men, are concerned that this could spark violence against Muslim women, and especially those who wear a *niqab*. Others, like the respondent below, feel that the Ban discriminates against all Muslims, especially those who wear Islamic dress:

"... Real Muslims do not want a Burka Ban! We demand that this law be repealed immediately! By enforcing this ban, the Netherlands is supporting the hatred of Muslims ... " (Dutch Muslim woman of Moroccan descent, in her late thirties)

“... people should be allowed to dress any way they want. Dutch women can walk {down the street} in bikinis ...” (Dutch Muslim woman of Moroccan descent)

Another angle is that of isolation. Some respondents were concerned that the Burka Ban would further jeopardize niqab and veiled women. When a woman covers her face in the Netherlands with a long black veil, she stands out in a crowd. This could result in isolation or perhaps make it harder for her to find a job. Others argue that the Ban allows others to use violence against these women but avoid being punished. As one of the opponents to the Burka Ban pointed out:

“... I will stand for anyone’s freedom. If I am witness to the fact that a woman is being targeted because she is wearing a niqab, I will fight for freedom of religion and for her freedom to choose to veil herself. Irrespective of my opinion or judgment, it seems to me especially important that we continue to use our minds and open our hearts to everyone ...”

3.9. The Hague, Protest against the Burka Ban, August 8, 2019

“We believe in a Netherlands where every woman is in charge of her own body, belly and face. Let’s call this beast by its right name: the burqa ban is a modern witch hunt ...” (NRC Dutch opinion paper, August 1, 2019)

When the Ban came into force, a group of *niqabi* women immediately began organizing a silent protest in The Hague, in line with orthodox Muslim sensibilities regarding public activism. Debates about whether this form of protest was consistent with Islam appeared and disappeared in social media exchanges. This crucial, sensitive and complicated discussion included the question of how to travel there, whether or not to bring children, and how to prepare for the dangers they might confront. Men were invited too, but this was first and foremost the *niqabi* women’s protest. Approximately 100 women took part—approximately 30 of whom wore a *niqab*. This was the first time this smallest of minorities had been heard nationally (though *niqabis* have been active and mobilized for more than a decade) publicly asserting their civic right to state recognition, state protection, and equal rights. The *niqabis* were joined by dozens of others including Muslims who had expressed an aversion to the *niqab* until then, non-Muslims long committed to anti-discrimination, and those newly mobilized by the events of the previous week. All recognized that *niqabis’* rights were their rights. The women, whether veiled or not, carried signs with texts in Dutch and in English: “I am being robbed of my freedom”, “Hands off my *niqab*”, “We are the victims of symbolic politics” and “Human rights are being violated” and “How can I be free if you don’t let me be?” during the silent protest (see Appendix A Figures A6 and A7).

Opinion leaders claimed that this law is the result of a perverse obsession with fewer than two hundred women, the 0.001 percent of the population who do not adhere to the rules of the white male elite in the Lower House of both the left and right-leaning parties (see also (Essed and Trienekens 2008; McKinney 2013)). Thus, the law was also seen a warning to (white) feminists who remain deafeningly silent.

“... You can think what you want about the niqab, but it is not up to the state to determine how a woman presents and dresses herself. Women who wear niqab are in charge of their own bodies. They consciously choose the way they want to organize their lives and what it means for them to be women. This prohibition is being used to force it down our throats that Muslim women by definition are oppressed by their family, religion and culture. It reflects the notion of European superiority and is the result of the politicization of politics. Our Belgian sisters from BOEH (In Charge of One’s Own Mind, in Dutch: Baas Over Eigen Hoofd), which is a feminist and anti-racist action platform, expressed it two years ago as follows: ‘In the Netherlands there is still hope for Muslim women’.” (Sarah, converted Muslima, 25 years old)

Sarah 25, one of the initiators of the protest against the Burka Ban, has been wearing the *niqab* for six years now. A few years ago, she lived in Belgium, where the *niqab* laws are much stricter

since the face veil cannot be worn anywhere, even on the street or in shops, which is still allowed in the Netherlands.

“I was surprised how silently one measure after the other could be introduced in this country, without anyone opposing it. When I read that piece in the newspaper about citizen’s arrest, I thought: now it is time for action”. (Sarah, converted Muslima, 25 years old)

Her girlfriend and sister in Islam immediately joined the initiative, even though she does not wear a *niqab* in daily life:

“You have to see it this way: The Muslim community is like a body: if everyone experiences pain, we all feel it.” She went veiled to the protest.

“I have to know what it’s like if I am going to I protest against it. I see that the niqab can play a spiritual role in Islam, who knows, for me even. It’s just like when I converted to Islam two years ago: I didn’t know a single Muslim but I knew it was for me . . . ”

(Converted Muslima in her twenties)

Sarah did not hesitate for a second whether she should take her *niqab* off when the new law came into force.

“As a convert, I chose Islam out of full conviction eight years ago, and the niqab is an essential part of my beliefs. I don’t want to live without it . . . ” (Sarah, converted Muslima, 25 years old)

Sarah immediately realized which legal issues could be associated with the ban as soon as it became law. Then she reported the protest to the police station, which is both a duty if you want to demonstrate, and a violation if you wear a *niqab*.

“Yesterday a man on a scooter stopped me to point out that the niqab is forbidden on the street. But that has always happened. People have been thinking for years that the niqab is forbidden . . .

. . . the Ban applies to the entire society, while the niqab is only prohibited in public transportation, hospitals, schools and government buildings. But people often skip the fine print.” (Sarah, converted Muslima, 25 years old)

Sarah sees also the positive effects of the Burka Ban. One of the outcomes is the bonding between Muslims and Non-Muslims in the Netherlands who are against the ban. These opponents of the ban registered for the protest, and also support organizations such as the Burka Buddies and the Niqab Buddies who escort and guide *niqab*-wearing women, in what Turner would have called an example of ‘*communitas*’ (Turner 1969).

“ . . . But there are also positive effects (of the Burka Ban) Such as the ‘Burqa Buddies’ initiative to guide niqab wearers—that’s really super sweet. Non-Muslims also registered for the protest. The law has shaken people up and as a result ties has been formed. ”

The two initiators of the protest consciously avoided a vocal demonstration.

“We opted for a silent protest. The niqab and the ban on it elicit so much anger that emotions can get out of hand. We want to put out our own message first. ”

“ . . . (our key message is that) dislike should not be the basis for a law. I can also be scared of a skinhead or a goth, but forbidding everything you don’t like is contrary to all fundamental rights: the right to freedom, religion and self-determination. Everyone is concerned about that. ”

On 8 August 2019 in The Hague, approximately five hundred demonstrators took part, including dozens of *niqab*-wearing women. A civilian guard protected the protestors and the police deployed extra manpower. Because the *niqab* is not forbidden in public spaces such as streets and parks, the initiators claimed they had nothing to fear at the protest. One of the strongest messages of this protest was written in English, and was directed to the foreign media: “How can I be free, if you don’t let me be?” (see Appendix A, Figure A6. Photograph by S. Aukema).

4. Conclusions

[shows her niqab after taking it down from one of the uppermost shelves in her closet] “... look, it’s a little wrinkled now. It’s hard when people don’t respect you for what you are wearing ... when they go ahead and wear what they like ... you often get called things like “ghost”, “ninja” you are not supposed to feel hurt, but frankly it hurts when you feel that you are not respected ... ” (Lola, 22 years old, converted Muslima, ex niqabi)

One of the most contentious issues for immigrant women in almost all countries to which Muslims have immigrated is that of Islamic dress and, specifically, the headscarf. Ironically, while Islamic dress (long skirts, long sleeves, headscarf and in this case also the face veil) renders most of the female figure invisible to the eyes of strangers, it also serves to dramatically increase the visibility of women who choose to wear it, although wearing the scarf continues to be a sign of modesty. Other women are choosing new forms of Islamic dress that are often very trendy while appropriately concealing. Many recent immigrants, particularly political refugees and asylum seekers, are from countries that have cracked down on religious practices and banned the veil from the official public space. For these women, the West, at least theoretically, provides the freedom to be Muslim in the way that they choose, with a *hijab* or without, or with a *niqab* if she chooses.

For many non-Muslim Dutch, the week after the Burka Ban came into force was the first time that they had heard a *niqabi* speak for herself. Not all Dutch were happy, not all were touched. Outside Burka Buddies, the usual storms continued to rage on social media, in the populist press, and in the editorial and opinion columns in the news.

As Valenta has shown, in the days following the Ban, the violence hidden in the Burka Ban was exposed (Valenta 2019). Like all Dutch laws, this law will be subject to review to evaluate its enforcement, its effects, and its effectiveness. This should provide the opportunity to reveal its dangerous weaknesses. Notwithstanding all those fiercely committed to keeping the law in place, those ready for the hard work of repealing it are now more numerous and more diverse than ever before.

Nevertheless, there are instances in the Netherlands where institutions have shown tolerance toward its multi-cultural society and *hijab*-wearing Muslim women. Two large supermarket and home appliance chains have designed uniform headscarves for their female Muslim staff (see Appendix B, Figures A8–A12). *Blokker* is one of the best-known home appliance stores in the Netherlands, with a shop in almost every neighborhood in every Dutch city. *Blokker* was a pioneer in designing a rainbow “come join our team” advertisement that showed an employee in a headscarf (see Appendix B, Figure A8). *Albert Heijn* is the largest Dutch supermarket chain, founded in 1887 in Oostzaan, Netherlands. Recently, the chain designed headscarves in light blue, the trademark color of the chain, with the supermarket’s logo as part of the employees’ uniform (see Appendix B, Figures A9 and A10). The supermarket’s website states: “We select our employees based on their qualities. Our policy on, for example, wearing a headscarf is based on our vision that our stores should be a reflection of society. That’s why Albert Heijn allows wearing a headscarf in our stores, provided the hygiene at the service departments is not compromised. The condition is that the headscarf is plain black or dark blue. Albert Heijn considers it of great importance that our employees are able to communicate optimally with both our customers and each other. Because wearing face-covering clothing greatly impedes this communication, wearing face-covering clothing in our stores is not allowed”. However, *Albert Heijn* was not the pioneer in designing uniform headscarves for female Muslim employees; in fact, their competitor *Dirk van den Broek* was the first. Van den Broek, a Dutch businessman, is the founder of one of the largest family-owned businesses in the Netherlands. The company includes grocery stores, travel agencies, drugstores, liquor stores and various other ventures. The supermarket has received considerable attention in the media for accepting headscarves on the work floor (see Appendix B, Figures A11 and A12). The company was able to get its female Islamic staff to link their relationship with Allah to their relationship with Dirk through the red headscarf printed all over with the supermarket chain logo. It is therefore not only a recruitment signal to a group of women who find it difficult to be hired, but above all a brilliant advertising stunt since ‘*Dirk van den Broek*’ comes up in

every debate about headscarves. In addition, the newspapers are teeming with opinion pieces about the store. However, this initiative raises questions about “the political flag of Islamic fundamentalism” and can be interpreted as a symbol of participation and integration. The critics refer to the situation thirty years ago when the headscarf was fiercely combatted by secular Arab women and call on the same group to fight the headscarf today. However, the debate on the headscarf and the face veil is now taking place in the shadow of the integration debate. This makes it impossible for anyone to take a position on headscarves without being immediately categorized which should be addressed in future research.

The core finding of this study is profoundly linked to the concepts of freedom, choice and identity: Islamic dress allows women to acquire an identity that is not entirely Dutch, yet not entirely foreign (Moroccan, Turkish or otherwise). Their identity is not only Dutch-Moroccan or Moroccan-Dutch but simultaneously both and neither. Islam in their lives allows them to be Dutch, to be the daughter of an immigrant, with Moroccan or Turkish roots, to be a Dutch convert to Islam with a mixed ethnic and religious background, to be a Muslima with Christian parents, as seen in the lives of the participants in this study. Islam allows these women to criticize Dutch society, for example, in a way that Dutch society does not always accept or tolerate, and at the same time criticize, for example, Moroccan society, which they argue, is full of traditions that change the face of pure Islam, and works to “corrupt” it with certain practices. These women have the freedom to choose to dress the way they like, whether they chose to cover their faces or not. For many of the participants in this study, veiling means being free to choose, and even if they themselves do not (always) wear a face veil. The question of whether the veil is a sign of oppression and thus conflicts with values of emancipation and autonomy was discussed in Rosenberger and Sauer 2013, who showed in their collective volume *Politics, Religion and Gender Framing and Regulating the Veil* that veiling can indeed mean the right to women’s self-determination and the freedom of choice (Rosenberger and Sauer 2013). Muslim women in the Netherlands cannot be depicted as a homogenous group, since there are variations among Dutch Muslim women and Dutch Muslim identities. Such categories are not natural but rather are social constructs that the women interviewed above challenge every day. In my fieldwork, I encountered Muslim women from different ethnicities and converted Muslimas from a variety of different religious and cultural backgrounds. Many Muslim women in the Netherlands are also much more than just Muslim, as their identities are also shaped by Dutch culture and society. Here, Bhabha’s (Bhabha 2012) notion of a Third Space can be used to revalue and reshape existing categories. ‘Dutchness’ and ‘Muslimness’ thus move beyond their imagined boundaries and are turned into new identity stances. Thus, the binary opposition between Muslim and Dutch can vanish, since being Dutch can include being Muslim, practicing Islam can be an expression of Dutch identity, and headscarves can be worn in the colors of the Dutch flag, as sold by the famous Dutch shop HEMA in 2008–2009 (Badran 2013; Buitelaar 2006; Buitelaar 2014; Hass 2011; Hass and Lutek 2018; Moors 2009; Moors and Tarlo 2013; Van Nieuwkerk 2014). Khimars can be ordered online from Turkey or Saudi Arabia and come in different styles and colors (for example a pink velvet khimar, as well as the more traditional style in dark colors and from more mainstream fabrics). Identity can be built through clothing and style that can be purchased online from Muslim-majority countries, and thus allows these women to introduce new Islamic styles to the Netherlands. Other new Islamic female fashion businesses are opening in the Netherlands and in neighboring countries such as Belgium and France that enable Muslimas to choose their Islamic garment online and order it via the initiative’s Instagram or website and are offering job opportunities for women in Islamic dress. These fashion websites offer powder pink *niqabs*, beige *abayas*, pastel-colored wide skirts and velvet *khimars*. It is indeed no longer about the black or dark blue veils.

The objective of this article was to examine the issue of freedom and choice through a case study of Dutch Muslim women, whether second or third generation in the Netherlands, and converted Muslimas. To answer this question, I focused mainly on how Islamic dress is a main component in identity building as a result of the Burka Ban that has affected not only *niqabis*, but *hijabi* Muslimas, and Muslimas who do not wear a headscarf, as well as non-Muslims. The Dutch case study was

extended to the broader phenomenon of Islamic dress in the West, and the issues surrounding the building of an Islamic identity in the West, through fashion, anti-fashion, the aesthetics of fashion, and the connection of the holy texts to everyday lived experience—some of which is in cyberspace. I have tried to show how different social actors create a multiplicity of meanings related to the veil debate (including the face veil) and how the participants in this study, Muslim women from a range of different stages of (religious) observance, argue for the definition of the boundaries of meaning attributed to a symbol of their religious belonging.

The exploration of this complex dynamic suggests that the expression of agency does not occur in reductionist or stereotyped ways, as the general public often assumes. Rather, it involves a complex interplay of many factors, each deserving of its own story.

This paper is part of a larger ongoing project based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation, titled "Is being Dutch enough? Women's conversion to Islam and the politics of belonging and identity" that involves multi-site and multi-year ethnography.

Ethics:

A concerted effort was made to ensure the ethical integrity of this work. The author specifically took two ethics research courses at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem—one in 2010 and one in 2016. All subjects gave their informed consent before they participated in the study. The first author has their consent on tape/audio files, a requirement before each interview was conducted, which was also approved by the institution the first author is affiliated with (name removed for the double-blind peer review process). The rigorous methodology of the research, which included anonymizing all names to preserve the participants' anonymity and confidentiality during Quranic classes, was also approved by the Hebrew University's Ethics Committee. Each interviewee was also asked to provide her informed consent, thus making it possible to produce a study that complies with the ethical obligations of reporting research which speaks in the words of interviewees, rather than speaking for them. For the first ethnographic study carried out in 2009, in the absence of a formal ethical committee (which did not exist at the Hebrew University during the author's MA), this research was supplemented by the attached ethical declaration, which was formally submitted to the University in 2011. In 2018, the PhD research proposal "Is Being Dutch Enough? Women's conversion to Islam and the politics of belonging and identity, a Dutch case study", submitted by the author, was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The committee found that the ethical standards of the methods and data analysis described in the proposal were acceptable, and the proposal was approved by the Committee.

Author Contributions: The author carried out the study, conducted, interviewed, transcribed and attended all events, and took field notes. The author analyzed the data and translated from Dutch to English and wrote this manuscript. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A



Figure A1. One of the participants in this study posing with her *khimar* and holding it as though it were a niqab. She is preparing herself for her next step in Islam, wearing a niqab.



Figure A2. Poster announcing the demonstration against the Burka Ban on 9 August 2019.



Figure A3. Instagram persona posing with her *niqab*.



Figure A4. Profile pictures used by Muslim women in the Netherlands on social media in the weeks before, during and after the Burka Ban went into effect (from July 2019 to September 2019).



Figure A5. Profile pictures used by Muslim women in the Netherlands on social media in the weeks before, during and after the Burka Ban went into effect (from July 2019 to September 2019).



Figure A6. Picture from the protest on Friday, August 8 against the Burka Ban. Photograph by S. Aukema, all rights reserved.

“Our council member Hendrik Jan Biemond was the yellow *burqa* queen yesterday: “For PvdA Amsterdam, freedom means that you can be who you are and thus also wear what you want”.”



Figure A7. Burka Ban protesters dressed in the colors of the pride flag, during the pride parade on 4 August 2019 (image from the Labor Party Council member Hendrik Jan Biemond’s Twitter account).

Appendix B



Figure A8. “Come join our team” advertisement by the Dutch home appliance store, Blokker.



Figure A9. Uniform including headscarf worn at Albert Heijn, the country's largest super -market chain.



Figure A10. Uniform including headscarf being worn in Albert Heijn, the country's largest supermarket chain.



Figure A11. Uniform including headscarf by Dirk van den Broek, the pioneer designer of the uniform headscarf.



Figure A12. Uniform including headscarf by Dirk van den Broek, the pioneer designer of the uniform headscarf.

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