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Transcultural Reflections on Identity, Memory and Gender in Naima El Bezaz's *Vinexvrouwen*

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Abstract

The Moroccan-Dutch author, Naima El Bezaz's *Vinexvrouwen* (Suburban women, 2011) is a productive literary form of self-representation, of writing real-life experiences, stories and memories in the Dutch multicultural milieu. Engaged in an intercultural debate, the author questions the tolerance border of patriarchal (Islamic) culture, as well as the intolerance of Dutch liberal society. Through my close-reading as a method of analysis, I probe how the novel translates the experience of a Moroccan migrant woman and which negotiations take place in this translation. The significance of my reading unfolds, in particular, the text's intervention in negotiating cultures and identities, drawing upon the polarization between Moroccan patriarchal culture and Dutch liberal culture. Approaching literature of (Moroccan) migration as a historical "cultural archive" as well as a performative counter-discourse, I analyse how the text rethinks the issues of identity, memory and gender in an attempt to destabilize patriarchal gender construction and sexuality norms. Finally, with a focus on rhetorical devices in form and language, this article illustrates how El Bezaz's novel narrates reflections on transcultural dynamics of identity, memory and gender, inscribing thereby transculturing autobiography in times of globalization.¹

Keywords: literature of migration, *Vinexvrouwen*, autobiography, (post-) migration, migrant woman's experience, transculturality, identity, memory and gender

¹ This article is only one section in a chapter in which I analysed Naima El Bezaz's autobiographical novel *Vinexvrouwen* (Suburban Women).



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Introduction:

The Moroccan-Dutch author Naima El Bezaz was the most well-known female writer of migration background, who is successfully well-read in the Netherlands. She was born in 1974 in Meknes, Morocco, and moved with her family to the Netherlands when she was four years old. Suffering from depression, El Bezaz, alas, committed suicide in 2020 to leave behind her family and literary legacy. She entered Dutch literary scene in 1995 with her debut novel *De weg naar het noorden* (The way to the North), for which she won the 1996 Jenny Smelik IBBY Prize.² Between 2002 and 2006, El Bezaz published a collection of short stories *De Minnares van de duivel* (The Devil's Mistress) and the novel *De Verstotene* (The Outcast), in which she expressed her daring criticism of sensitive issues related to gender and sexuality. Breaking taboos in Islamic culture, the writer attracted great attention from Dutch readers, as a courageous liberal Muslim writer. Yet, the protestant and Muslim part of the Dutch society felt offended by the author's reading of an erotic passage out of the novel *De Verstotene* on a TV show *Kopspijkers*. As a result, the author claimed that she had received death threats from her Moroccan-Dutch community, seen as someone who hijacks her religion to serve Western audiences.

Nevertheless, El Bezaz seems to enjoy the turmoil that she and her work cause in the Moroccan-Dutch community, as she finds it a thrilling experience since “[she] touch[es] something sensible” (“Profile Video: Naima El Bezaz,” 2015).³ This desire to touch people with her sensible writing is what makes her a well-selling and popular writer in the Netherlands. In 2008, she published the novel *Het gelukssyndroom* (The Happiness Syndrome), narrating her sufferance from deep depression as a result of the death threats she received. Regardless of her psychological crisis, the author continues publishing more works, but with different themes. If in the previous works she considered taboos within the Moroccan-Dutch community, in the two following novels *Vinexvrouwen* 2011 (Suburban Women) and its sequel *Méér Vinexvrouwen* 2012 (More Suburban Women), El Bezaz takes a critical look at her life as a migrant woman in

² The prize was awarded to books of young people that give a picture of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands.

³ In a profile video on Youtube, El Bezaz complains as follows: “I don't even know how many times I have already been threatened, but on the other hand I also find it somehow cool, it's not because I would enjoy offending people, but because I can touch people with my writing, that I touch something sensible. And that is kind of thrilling.” (My translation) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PwmO_KXtuc>



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Dutch liberal culture and society. Dutch intolerance towards migrants, taboos in Islamic culture, the (re-)construction of identity, memory and gender are themes El Bezaz dealt with in her autobiographical novel *Vinexvrouwen*.

It is important to note that this new trend of Dutch literature was claimed not only to engage in the discussions on Dutch multiculturalism, but also to give the Western reader an insight into the world of the non-native Dutch person, of an ‘exotic’ world. The assumption is that the literature produced by these migrant authors is different from home-grown literature in the sense that it offers stories across different cultures and nations. Being familiar with Morocco as a homeland and being brought up in Dutch society, El Bezaz has indeed engaged in this intercultural debate, questioning the limits of tolerance in both cultures. Living up to the Western readers’ expectations, the author makes her own background the driving force behind her writing. Moroccan-Dutch authors Abdelkader Benali and Hafid Bouazza write on the theme of migration, too, but they stand against the ethnicization of their literature in Dutch as an “allochthon literature,” a literature written by an author of another ethnic origin. Similarly, El Bezaz rejects her texts to be called “immigrant literature,” as she defended her stance: “There is no immigrant literature. It’s nonsense. I come from Morocco and my book is about a Moroccan, but I’m a Dutch writer, I write in Dutch. I represent the peak of integration and so don’t want to be pushed back into the immigrant corner” (Louwerse, 2010, p. 242). Nevertheless, El Bezaz’s cultural background, her (post-)migration experience as well as the polarizing Dutch political climate are the raw materials for her writing, and this is the main reason behind selecting *Vinexvrouwen* to be a subject of analysis in this article.

From her Moroccan-Dutch position, El Bezaz believes that her literary works offer critical interventions about diverse issues in Dutch society, among which intolerance towards migrants, but also intolerance of patriarchal Islamic culture. In an interview with Liddie Austin in the Dutch magazine *OPZIJ*, El Bezaz states: “Just as in the traditional Arabic oral tradition, also my stories always carry a deeper message, something moralistic, or criticism of the society. In this way, for example, I show how unfair some Moroccan traditions are for women, hoping that women will rise up against them.” (Net als in de traditionele Arabische vertelcultuur hebben mijn verhalen altijd een onderliggende boodschap, iets moralistische, of kritiek op de samenleving. Zo laat ik bijvoorbeeld zien hoe onrechtvaardig sommige Marokkaanse tradities



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voor vrouwen zijn. In de hoop dat vrouwen ertegen in opstand komen” [Austin, 2002]). As a result of writing about the question of gender in Islamic or rather patriarchal culture, El Bezaz received wide attention from Dutch media. This attention is not just due to the literariness of her works, but also owing to her ethnic background and her dare criticism of sensitive issues of gender and sexuality in Islamic culture. Her writing is closer to Bouazza’s, in which the issues of gender, sexuality and religion are criticized and sometimes even hijacked for wide recognition as an “accepted” Dutch writer.

Another essential reason behind examining this literary work is the fact that El Bezaz’s novel is marked by cynical critique of the construction of identity, memory and gender while reflecting on a migrant woman’s experience in Dutch liberal culture and society. Therefore, in this article I will focus on how the novel “translates” the experience of (post-)migration and which negotiations take place in this “translation.” In particular, I will delve into the way El Bezaz’s autobiographical novel *Vinexvrouwen* reflects on contemporary Dutch society, where political discourses of inclusion and exclusion brought about the controversy of a re-definition of Dutch national and cultural identity. In the framework of such exclusionary discourses of migrants’ cultural difference, El Bezaz’s novel narrates how migrants’ positions of articulation and identities are *diffracted*. They are dispersed and transcultural because they exceed any limited national or cultural framing, as they draw on a variety of imaginations that pertain to different locations and different personal inflections. Acknowledging this, I will examine the diffraction of identity and memory in El Bezaz’s novel as part of a transnational literature, while looking at how does her autobiographical writing experiment with transcultural forms of identity and memory. In other words, as a case study of migrant authors’ autobiographies, I will analyse how a migrant woman’s identity and memory are redefined from a transcultural perspective. I will explore, then, how the protagonist attempts to destabilize traditional gender construction norms in the Moroccan-Dutch community, as well as in the homeland patriarchal and Islamic traditions.

Literature Review

The concept of transculturality describes the diverse and productive reality of identity-formation processes that takes place at cross-cultural contacts. In this regard, the term



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transcultural accommodates a series of multiple interrelated dynamics of the negotiation of cultural perspectives. In literature, as Rosalina Baena argues in her essay “Transculturating Auto/Biography: Forms of Life Writing” (2007): “The term thus applies itself to the renewed manner of engagement that arises from new forms of perceiving experience, and to the dynamic nature of the resulting narratives stemming from the contact zones produced in the cross-cultural encounters” (p. viii).⁴ Thus, the analysis of transculturality is understood as the formation of multifaceted, fluid identities resulting from diverse cultural encounters. Intriguingly, this concept of “transculturality” is analyzed on two levels: the level of multicultural writing as an intersection between cultural articulations and the processes of self-representation; and the level of form in the sense that multicultural life writing “transculturally” challenges traditional ways of inscribing autobiography (ibid).

This process of “transculturating” may be understood within the context of how migrants’ autobiography is moving away from traditional patterns of inscribing autobiography: that is, the manner in which transcultural writers appropriate and subvert traditional literary genres in order to attend to particular subjectivities. As Janet Gunn has noted in *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience* (1982), autobiography is not conceived as “the private act of self-writing,” but as “the cultural act of the self-reading” (p. 8). Viewed in this sense, the question in “migrants”’ autobiographical discourse is not of the subject’s authentic “I,” but a question of the subject’s location in the world through an active interpretation of experiences that one calls one’s own in particular “worldly” contexts (p. 23). In terms of form, the transcultural engagement with, and revision of traditional literary genres strategically rearticulate subject positionalities. Susanna Egan has pointed out in *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (1999) that many contemporary writing practices in autobiography represent

⁴ As a concept, transculturality has been central to various fields of knowledge, such as the studies of migration, multiculturalism and postcolonialism. As Rosalina Baena argues the term “transculturation” was used first by Fernando Ortiz and Mary Louis Pratt to refer loosely to transnational or cross-cultural encounters (viii). Thereafter, the term “transcultural” was used by the Canadian novelist and poet Janice Kulyk Keefer to refer to the manner in which the dominant culture becomes part of a larger structure within which literary texts which foreground the experience of ‘minority’ both present themselves and are received as representative for an entire social formation (Keefer, 1993: 265). For Keefer what is important in transcultural writing is the circulation and exchange of ideas and visions between different ethnocultural groups as well as between ‘dominant’ and ‘minority’ groups” (265).



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what she calls “genres in crisis.” According to Egan, we need thereby to address the question: “How do auto biographers co-opt and adapt the genres that express this fraught moment of in-between?” (p. 13). As one of the most dynamic and productive literary forms of self-representation, transcultural life writing challenges dominant ideologies and rearticulates subject positionalities.

Significantly, it is through our understanding of autobiographical practices as conscious artistic and literary exercises that we fully grasp the extent to which autobiographical narrative is such “a powerful symbolic form and a genre of identity construction,” in Baena’s words (p. vii). The migrant’s autobiography is viewed as a self-representational practice complexly located between the constructed references of artistic and literary contexts. This autobiographical self-representation attests to the significant amount of genre crossing in postmodern literary life. As Baena puts it, “[i]n their diversity and complexity, such autobiographical acts call for a nuanced theorizing of the autobiographical” (p. ix). In other words, we are at a point in the development of the autobiography where the hybrid possibilities of life writing can and should be explored. Migrant authors and their autobiographical selves inhabit different cultures, and as such they are influencing and being influenced by a process of transculturation. Scholars have indeed attempted to theorize the new form of autobiographical writings by migrants as a genre of identity construction.

Located within specific historical and social contexts, migrant writers are usually perceived as living a shift from past cultural contours to the present art of life. They are undergoing a process of translation and transformation in the new culture and space they inhabit. About migrant writers, Azade Seyhan writes in her essay “Ethnic Selves/Ethnic Signs: Invention of Self, Space and Genealogy in Immigrant Writing” (1996) “The [immigrant] writer salvages from a lost time, space and culture symbolic fragments and reconfigures these as markers of a recharged personal and collective history” (p. 185). The process of translation and transculturation is essential in migrant’s representation of a new reality, marked by a new space and culture. The past definition of collective and individual identity as essentially monocultural is inadequate to describe the way migrant people perceive their identity and their belonging. They concentrate on the agency or performative power through which they connect the past, present and future for identity (re)construction. In other words, transculturality is a common



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theme in migrants' autobiographies, among which El Bezaz's *Vinexvrouwen*, as a preferable form of life writing in cross-cultural places. In my analysis of the novel, I will look into the way in which *Vinexvrouwen* represents transcultural formation of a migrant woman's identity, memory and gender in Dutch society.

Approaching Literature of Migration

Before embarking on my analysis of El Bezaz's novel, let me briefly discuss how to approach literature of migration and which method of analysis I adopt in my reading of this literary text. I base my reading of migrant literary texts, generally, and of El Bezaz's novel, particularly, on these approaches: literature as a historical "cultural archive" (Adelson, 2005, p. 14) that inscribes and re-writes cultural aspects and historical moments of globalized transformation; literature as "performative" (Culler, 2000, p. 506), "boundary work" (Herman, 2002, p. 336) that highlights the importance of context and the process of reshaping it; and literature as "counter-narratives of the nation" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 300), that is, the possibility of literature's resisting or subversive character as counter-discourse. The combination of these approaches enables the multidimensional interpretation of literature of migration in its context, while considering its aesthetic effects. If this literature intervenes in reshaping its context, it can think historical and cultural formations otherwise. By approaching literature as both an aesthetic and a counter-social discourse, I account for literature's complexity; for instance, migrant novels react to, and actively intervene in these social debates thematically and/or in their choice of words, style, narrative structure, etc, and thus reshape their contexts. As such, my article aims at unfolding how El Bezaz's novel, as a case study of literature of Moroccan migration, proves to be promising as a counter-discourse from within the centre as a "social labor of imagination" in Arjun Appadurai's terms (1996, p. 31). It will look into the way El Bezaz' labor of imagination, her autobiographical novel, narrates cultural archive, offering critical reflections on both Moroccan patriarchal culture and Dutch multicultural society.

Through my close-reading as a method of analysis, I discuss the text's intersectionality of memory, identity and gender which manifests in several aspects of the autobiographical protagonist as a migrant woman, who aspires emancipation from homeland patriarchal culture as well as from the Dutch "ethnicized representation" of migrants. The novel accounts for



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cultural heterogeneity by a focus on contextualized literary practices, which are embedded in social networks of relations and at the same time exceed these relations by way of memories (of the past) and imagination (of the future). This article examines, thus, how the author's imaginative narrative resists patterns of cultural exclusions and rewrites new forms of transcultural belongings and post-national identities. Quite intriguingly, El Bezaz's novel, written by, and about a migrant woman, can be considered as a case of the "feminization" of migration. I contend, then, that both gender and migration have an ambivalent impact on women's experiences in a multicultural society. In the following analysis, along with the juxtaposition of memory and identity, I will investigate how the issue of gender is rigorously dealt with in El Bezaz's narrative, as a new trend of literature, offering a migrant woman's critical reading of her positionality and subjectivity in Dutch multicultural society.

Analysis and Discussion: *Vinexvrouwen* as a Resisting Trend of Literature

a- Beyond "In-Between" Paradigm: Constructing Transcultural Identity

In her essay "Against Between: A Manifesto," Leslie Adelson (2001) emphasizes the effects of the often-accepted cultural fable of migrants' position 'between' two worlds. She argues that the space 'between' reserved for migrants is inexorably suspended on a bridge leading nowhere. She also highlights the way in which this paradigm of being between two worlds operates through a rhetoric that approximates what Samuel Huntington has called a "clash of civilizations," that of opposing worlds understood as originary and mutually exclusive. In her view, the between two worlds paradigm entails more than a metaphor that suspends migrants within a position of in-betweenness; it implies also the notion of separation between migrants and natives through an absolute cultural divide (p. 244). In the context of Turkish migrants in Germany, Adelson contends that this divide operates with the supposition that Turkish and German cultures are respectively homogeneous worlds, and that the boundaries between them are absolute (p. 245). She claims thereby: "we do not need more understanding of different cultures if understanding only fixes them as utterly different. We need to understand culture itself differently" (p. 249). The implication of her statement is a new conceptualisation of cultures that avoids fixing them as distinct, spatial entities that are incompatible to each other.



If the paradigm of between two worlds is a cultural fable that shadows much of the literature born of migration, *Vinexvrouwen* is particularly significant to examine the ways in which this paradigm is problematized and its dichotomized thinking is questioned. El Bezaz does not express cultural belonging to an in-between location, but insists on positioning the self in her new cultural space. The protagonist's identity is represented as hybrid, relational, transnational and transcultural. Her identity adapts to the role she plays and represents in a new cultural space. Dependent on the different (national, familial and lingual) contexts presented in the narrative, El Bezaz's autobiographical self consists of multiple personae in a complex web of relations. In the beginning of the novel, Naima defines her ethnic and national identity associated with a particular Dutch space: "I'm a Moroccan in a Vinex-district." (Ik ben een Marokkaan in een vinexwijk [p. 7]).⁵ This statement stresses a particular relationship between a person and a place, not a nostalgic relationship with regards to homeland. She defines herself further as an 'allochton' writer, woman, wife and mother. She is aware of her multiple identities as she identifies herself when she expresses her lack of desire to appear on media: "I am just me: a writer, wife, mother and a Prozac-swallower in a suburb" (Ik ben gewoon ik: een schrijver, echtgenote, moeder en een Prozac-slikker in een vinexwijk [p. 11]). The identification of herself is always associated with this particular Dutch place/space, in which she inscribes both good and bad memories.

The narrated Dutch location and its adopted culture give significance to El Bezaz's identity (re-)construction. El Bezaz writes her ethnic and national identity, as well as her cultural difference: she is represented simultaneously as Moroccan, Dutch, Muslim and liberal. In this regard, it is right when Seyhan writes in her aforementioned article "Ethnic Selves/Ethnic Signs" (1996) that "the autobiographical writings of first- and second-generation immigrants of post-industrial societies suggest multi-perspectival ways of understanding cultural identity and difference" (p. 177). Naima's migration functions as an enabling movement for differentiation in several selves, opening up the possibility of "nomadic subjectivity." In the following passage, the protagonist writes how she is hybrid, perceiving herself as both Moroccan and Dutch:

⁵ All translations from Dutch to English are mine.



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I had also in former times a dream, but obviously not the same as my parents'. My dream was much nicer: I wanted to write a novel. In the early nineties there were very few Moroccans who published. I was lucky that I was and I am a Moroccan, and indeed also Dutch. So, before the publishing house, to which I had sent my story, read my script, they let me first to come over. They looked at how I looked, whether I was dark enough and whether I speak broken Dutch. The latter was not the case, unfortunately for them, because I was a close friend with a girl who originally came from a neat village, and who had very intellectual parents, professors and so. That's why I speak with 'Gooise r'.

Ook ik had vroeger een droom, maar natuurlijk niet dezelfde als mijn ouders. De mijne was veel mooier: ik wilde een roman schrijven. Begin jaren negentig waren er nog heel weinig Marokkanen die publiceerden. Ik had het geluk dat ik een Marokkaan was en ben, en overigens ook Nederlander. Dus voordat de uitgeverij waar ik mijn manuscript naartoe had gestuurd mijn verhaal las, lieten ze me eerst langskomen. Ze keken hoe ik eruitzag, of ik donker genoeg was en of ik wel gebrekkig Nederlands sprak. Helaas voor hen was dat laatste niet het geval want ik was bevriend geraakt met een meisje dat oorspronkelijk uit een keurig dorp kwam, en heel intellectuele ouders had. Hoogleraren en zo. Daarom sprak ik met een Gooise r. (p. 10-11)

Being a writer is at first step a liberating act, an act of expressing one's self as well as of constructing one's identity. The protagonist appropriates the act of writing to express her dual identity as a Moroccan but also as a Dutch citizen. Acknowledging being Moroccan by ethnic origin and Dutch by adoption, Naima reconciles the identity the cultural heritage bestows on her, as well as endorses the identity of the host society. To put it differently, Naima is not fragmented, but over-determined as both Moroccan and Dutch. Her hybridity counts as a creative force in shaping her identity, a force that enables her to interrogate all categorizations that attempt to fix migrants within one homogeneous culture and identity. In her interview with



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Liddie Austin, El Bezaz expresses this reconciliation in her identity construction: “*I am a Dutch person of Moroccan origin. I love Holland; I love Morocco too, but I am at home here.*” (“Ik ben Nederlander, van Marokkaanse afkomst. Ik houd van Nederland. Ik houd van Marokko, maar thuis is hier”)(OPZIJ, 2002). If the concept of “home” signals a sense of belonging, Naima then, feels belonging to Dutch liberal culture and society.

In this autobiographical novel, the issue of identity is represented with its complexity, its practices of inclusion and exclusion. Skin colour and language are also used in the above quote as essential elements in determining one’s belonging and identity. Significantly, the emphasis on appearance seems of paramount importance for the publishing house, as it tells about cultural differences and ethnic origin. The ‘darkness’ of Naima’s skin colour defines her hybrid identity, making it different from the feature of whiteness of a native’s Dutchness. With regards to language, Naima makes clear how she speaks Dutch with what she calls “gooise r,” as a sign of mastering the Dutch language very well, which gives her a sort of agency as a writer in this new culture and society. The mastery of a new language is, then, a way of not only writing the self, but of reinventing it in a new space. In *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985), Paul John Eakin points out that “the writing of autobiography emerges as the second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self-conscious self-consciousness” (p. 9). El Bezaz’s mastery of a new language is itself a construction of a new self in a new cultural space. As Seyhan highlighted: “it is about the constitution of selfhood as the interlinkage of personal experience and historical process and about the coextensivity between language and cultural space” (1996: p. 177).

El Bezaz’s autobiography is written in the form of a reflection of language as the construct of mediation between the lost culture and the found one. Naima defends her mastery of language as a defense against her marginalized status in the new culture and society. By mastering language, the protagonist creates a new identity that transcends the culture of the homeland. However, her “spoken r” is not perceived as quite Dutch, but quite strange and exotic. At Carola’s birthday party, Naima attracted attention among the native Dutch attendees, while Carola’s aunt comments in a sarcastic way on her spoken language as follows:

‘And I find it so smart that you speak so good Dutch, even though there is still something allochton to discover.’



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She saw my uncomprehending gaze and said: ‘you speak the r strangely. Relax then, also that will be okay’

‘Where I come from, everyone speaks with such an r; ‘I tried to defend myself.’

She patted my shoulders. ‘It’s so nice and cosy. Just look at us, all white-noses.

En ik vind het zo knap dat je zo goed Nederlands spreekt, hoewel er toch iets allochtoons aan te ontdekken is.’

Ze zag mijn niet-begrijpende blik en zei: ‘Die r spreek je raar uit. Ontspan je, dan komt het daar ook wel goed mee.’

‘Waar ik vandaan kom, praat iedereen met zo’n r,’ probeerde ik me te verdedigen.

Ze klopte op mijn schouders. ‘Het is zo leuk en gezellig. Kijk ons nou eens, allemaal witneuzen.’ (104)

The mastery of language means that Naima could well integrate in Dutch society and culture since language is part and parcel of culture. The protagonist resists such strategy of ‘strangering’ her by Carola’s aunt by defending that in her surroundings everybody speaks with such an ‘r’. She relates the distinctness of such an ‘r’ to location, rather than to her ethnic origin. Naima shows further resistance as she juxtaposes different views on the way she speaks Dutch: “Giphart called it at the time even an allochton-r. I asked other writers if that was the case. They found it wild nonsense.” (Giphart noemde het in die tijd overigens wel een allochtonen-r. Ik vroeg andere schrijvers of dat zo was. Die vonden het klinkklare onzin [p. 11]). In other words, Naima defends her spoken accent in a way that seems to give her power and agency in the new cultural and national space that she inhabits. This insistence on the importance of mastering language suggests that language is an agency that defines one’s public identity and cultural belonging. The mastery of language empowers one in this new cultural space to be a fully integrated citizen, as it allows for a reconstruction of identity in a new cultural space.

By defending her mastery of the Dutch language, Naima aspires for agency and authority as a writer who belongs to both cultures. Unlike those who are voiceless, Naima’s



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acquired language makes her fully aware of her privileged status of being ‘heard’ in society. Seyhen claims in her aforementioned article “Ethnic Selves/Ethnic Signs” (1996) that the acquisition of:

The new language is the most distinct marker of the cherished public identity in the new culture. For all these writers it is also a compensation for the loss or absence of a supporting native culture, a very concrete experience of the acquisition of power and of the resolution of the outsider’s resentment and rage. The possession of this acquired language makes them often aware of their privileged status with regard to those who are voiceless in their own language. (p. 185)

Relating this issue of language to her act of writing, Naima aims at inscribing and empowering herself in the new culture and space. Her translation of her everyday experiences and memories into written stories is an attempt at resituating them in her hybrid culture. Naima feels proud since she and her children speak the Dutch language without an accent. While commenting on her daughter, Naima states: “She spoke Dutch clearly without an accent. For the first time I smiled proudly. I don’t like accents. And maybe she was gifted.” (Ze sprak duidelijk en accentloos Nederlands. Voor het eerst glimlachte ik van trots. Ik heb het niet zo op accenten. En misschien was ze wel hoogbegaafd [p. 53]). This shows how the mastery of language is an essential component in one’s national and cultural identity. In Seyhan’s words, “[t]hus, mastery of the language of the “native speaker” reclaims with a healthy vengeance the social and cultural space from which the immigrant subject was banned as a result of exclusionary discursive practices. The pride of mastering the second language better than the native speaker is its own utmost reward” (p. 185). Definitively, the mastery of language fortifies the migrant against a hostile multicultural society. Language is not only an empowering but also a redeeming practice for migrants for full integration in the host culture and society. This emphasis on language learning is indeed one of the paramount measures in the Dutch Integration Policy (the Policy



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New Style in 2003), assigning “civic integration courses” to both new and old immigrants who do have a sufficient command of Dutch language.⁶

It is usually taken for granted that migrants’ children speak two languages, that of the homeland and that of the host society. Nevertheless, Naima expressed how the family doctor was shocked by the fact that her daughter speaks only Dutch and does not speak Arabic. In his words: “This is really unacceptable. A Moroccan child that speaks only Dutch.” (‘Dit is echt onacceptabel. Een Marokkaans kindje dat alleen maar Nederlands spreekt’ [p. 54]). The doctor’s emphasis on the homeland language means that the past and the present languages of the migrant parents remain essential in the construction of their children’s identity. Yet Naima justifies this by stating: “We had a problem and that we as Moroccan-Dutch are living in a white suburb where practically nobody speaks Arabic; so, there is no practice.” (We hadden een probleem en dat was dat wij als Marokkaanse Nederlanders in een blanke wijk wonen waar praktisch niemand Arabisch spreekt, dus oefenen is er niet bij [p. 55]). Thus, Naima’s translation is the literal metaphor for the experience of re-creating self in a new cultural environment. Acquiring a new language means that Naima has passed through a process of translation in a new cultural space; El Bezaz’s autobiography is a kind of writing where language mediates between the dichotomies of loss and gain: a loss of the homeland language and a gain of the new language. As Seyhan writes: “[t]he labors of memory transcribed in language reclaim the lost experience of another time and place” (1996, p. 175). It is about the reinvention of the displaced subject in language and memory.

Nevertheless, Naima’s process of translation is best summed up in the title of the Polish-Canadian migrant Eva Hoffman’s novel *Lost in Translation: A Life in A New Language*. This process of translation is related to the new location/space, which is the white suburb where Naima lives a life in a new language, new cultural contours. Not only do Naima and her children master the Dutch language, but they are also culturally well integrated. Naima expresses that she and her children are rather assimilating into the Dutch culture, as she narrates how her two

⁶Before entering the Netherlands, newcomers are obliged to pass an exam that proves their language skills and knowledge about Dutch culture and society. Once admitted, they have to follow civic integration courses in the Netherlands. Beginning in 2007, newcomers have been expected to finance the civic integration courses themselves, and only if they pass the exam successfully, are they entitled to a refund of up to 70 per cent of their training expenses.



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daughters who go to a Christian school perform Christian cultural practices perfectly well. She comments on this scene as follows: *“The result is that my daughter the whole day sings Jesus songs and forces us to sing with her. We must also pray with folded hands before eating, and we just do that too. Also my youngest daughter of two years old does it with us, and she loves it. I think we are not integrating but assimilating.”* [Het gevolg is wel dat mijn dochter de hele dag Jezusliedjes zingt en ons dwingt mee te zingen. Ook moeten we voor het eten met gevouwen handen bidden, en dat doen we dan ook maar. Mijn jongste van twee doet ook mee en ze vindt het fantastisch. Volgens mij zijn we niet aan het integreren maar aan het assimileren (p. 12-13)]. Their practices of singing Jesus songs and praying with folded hands illustrate their assimilation into a different culture, different from their parents’ homeland culture. This assimilation is seen as leading to a different trajectory of identity, the roots of which are Moroccan, but its cultural formation is Dutch.

The autobiographical narrative reveals that identities cannot be taken wholesale; they are neither whole nor unified for migrants. It draws on the protagonist’s identity construction shuttling between processes of inclusion and exclusion in a hostile multicultural society. Naima’s new language, skin colour, and different culture identify her as an exotic Dutch, not quite ‘normal’ as a native Dutch. In the following scene at her friend’s birthday party, Naima narrates how Carola’s aunt perceives her identity:

‘A little colour here works well,’ said the aunt.

‘Colour?’

I do love exotic; my father too. In former times he almost came home with an Indonesian girl.

The father nodded. His wife frowned.

‘Our family has always been very tolerant to allochthons.’

‘Tolerant.’

‘But you do need to fit in, right?’ the father said friendly and he winked at me.

The others nodded in agreement.

‘Dad, once she gets rid of that strange r, she is almost like us. But that brown colour is very nice indeed. I will always sit in the garden. All that I want is to have a brown colour. And when it is winter, I will go to a solarium. But you have just inherited it. You are such a lucky child: you have a brown skin and you live in the Netherlands.

‘Een beetje kleur hier doet goed,’ zei de tante.

‘Kleur?’

‘Ik houd wel van exotisch. Mijn vader ook. Hij was vroeger bijna met een Indisch meisje thuisgekomen.’

De vader knikte. Zijn vrouw fronste haar wenkbrauwen.

‘Onze familie is altijd heel tolerant tegenover allochtonen.’

‘Tolerant.’

‘Maar je moet je wel aanpassen, hè?’ zei de vader vriendelijk en hij knipoogde naar me.

De anderen knikten instemmend.

‘Pap, zodra ze van die rare r af is, is ze bijna zoals wij. Maar dat bruine kleurtje is wel erg mooi. Ik ga altijd in de tuin zitten. Alles wil ik bruin hebben, en als het winter is, ga ik onder de zonnebank. Maar jij hebt het zomaar meegekregen. Wat ben je toch een gelukskind: je hebt een bruine huid en je woont in Nederland.’ (p. 104)

The passage emphasizes here the exotic aspect of Naima’s identity, which can be defined in the way Homi Bhabha (1994) defines the colonized subject as “*almost the same but not quite*” (p. 86); if her skin color makes her a Moroccan “but not quite,” her mastery of language makes her Dutch “but not quite.” This was also the case when the protagonist was a member of the Dutch party CDA, which found her too *different*, not really Dutch, as she narrates in an episode in this autobiography. Thereafter, Naima starts to rethink her skin colour, her ethnic difference as determinant factors in her perceived otherness and her identity construction. She becomes conscious that the host society is hostile and intolerant to her ethnic identity and her different



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appearance on which the parameters of inclusion and exclusion are operated. Her color-difference is one term in a complex ideology defining belonging and foreignness or non-Dutchness. This is well captured when Naima claims “*I am afraid that I will always have the feeling of being an ‘allochthon,’ a Dutch person of another ethnic origin.*” (Ik ben bang dat ik me altijd allochtoon zal blijven voelen” [p. 39]). This statement implies that the protagonist becomes conscious that identity is defined on the basis of difference, and that the past culture and ethnic belonging remain part and parcel of one’s identity.

El Bezaz’s narrative evokes, then, the conceptual juxtaposition of “autochthons versus allochthons” in Dutch socio-political rhetoric which divides the society into two extremities: the White Dutch as the “true nationals” versus migrants and their descendants as “second-class citizens”. Along with this conceptual dichotomy, the negotiation of the protagonist’s different appearance is a way of reinforcing her self-representation and self-consciousness. Rethinking her color-difference, Naima now considers the color of her skin as a marker of difference and non-Dutchness. This constant negotiation of identity politics in El Bezaz’s text is reminiscent of Seyhan’s claim: “This (immigrant) writing is often informed by critical vigilance, for it constantly negotiates between its conflicting impulses of (past) genealogy and (present) geography and memory and invention” (1996, p. 180). These conflicting impulses of past and present represent Naima’s identity as hybrid and transcultural that rejects to be bound to national and cultural borders.

b. Between Remembering and Forgetting: Performing Transcultural Memory

In her introduction to the edited book *Acts of Memory: Cultural recall in the present* (1999), the cultural theorist Mieke Bal argues that “[c]ultural memory has become an important topic in the emergent field of cultural studies, where it has displaced the discourses of individual (psychological) memory and of social memory. In other words, the term *cultural memory* signifies that “memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon, as well as an individual or social one” (p. vii). Bal points out that “cultural memorization is an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and re-described even as it continues to shape the future” (p. vii). This articulates that the interaction between present and past is the source of cultural memory. In this sense, Bal discusses memory as an action, essentially as the



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action of telling a story (p. ix). While considering the concept of dispersed memories in Crewe's "Recalling Adamastor: Literature as Cultural Memory in 'White' South Africa," Bal foregrounds that Crewe's essay shifts from the relation between memory and history to the functions of memory in literature. She reflects thereby as follows:

Because memory is made up of socially constituted forms, narratives, and relations, but also amenable to individual acts of intervention in it, memory is always open to social revision and manipulation. This makes it an instance of fiction rather than imprint, often of social forgetting rather than remembering. Cultural memory can be located in literary texts because the latter are continuous with the communal fictionalizing, idealizing, monumentalizing impulses thriving in a conflicted culture. The analysis offers a new approach to cultural memory, emphasizing its fictional and distorting aspects, which monumentalize "mistaken identities." (p. xiii)

Thus, creative forms of remembering and forgetting, of looking backwards and forwards, constitute the vibrancy of cultural memory. This concept also refers to the generational transfers over time through which cultural memories of the past are fictionalized to shape the present and future identity. The fictionalization of cultural memory inscribes the processes of memorialisation and self-historicization that reflect the continuous dialogue between past and present. To express it differently, the fictionalization of cultural memory is a way of re-inscribing and re-arranging memories in a manner that de-constructs and re-constructs identity. We can infer here that the persistence of the cultural past and the embodiment of the culture of the present construct transcultural dynamics of memory and identity.

El Bezaz's autobiography traces the protagonist's memories which she had at different stages of her life and in different cultural and social spaces. Memory works as a repressive or progressive force of reference that influences the Moroccan-Dutch woman's experience of post-migration. The narrativization/storytelling of Naima's memories is a process of "rememory" that is constructed as narrative stories across different places and cultures. Her autobiographical memories are constantly marked sometimes by feelings of nostalgia and melancholy, and other



times by feeling of uncertainty, discomfort and depression. In this sense, by remembering her negative as well as positive memories, Naima attempts to rearrange them for the aspiration of identity (re-)construction. El Bezaz's novel produces, re-presents and transforms mediated memories across different spaces and cultures. In my analysis I pay as much attention to how and what the autobiographical self remembers, as to how and what she forgets. Cultural memory in that sense represents a "performance of memory," to borrow Bal's concept, which enables an analysis of remembering as an active process and dynamic practice (p. vii). El Bezaz's narrative unfolds the performative interpretation of the past in a way that (de-)reconstructs identity borders.

As a transcultural writer, El Bezaz reflects on a new form of transcultural memory that exceeds any national or cultural framing. Even though Naima is well integrated as she feels at home in Dutch society, the cultural heritage of the past is still alive and intriguing in her memory. The recall of homeland culture is represented in both material and immaterial things, which the protagonist remembers emotionally. While explaining to her best friend Maartje the Moroccan traditional soup *Harira*, Naima expresses with warm emotions: "I almost screamed: 'Harira is not just a soup; it is a symbol, a mystery, something special. If you make it, you feel all sorts of wonderful emotions flowing through you. Your soul, your heart, and your love are involved in it. Harira! Do you understand me?'" ("Ik schreeuwde bijna: 'Harira is niet zomaar een soep, het is een symbool, een mysterie, iets bijzonders. Als je het maakt, voel je allerlei wonderlijke emoties door je heen stromen. Je ziel, je hart, je liefde gaat erin zitten. Harira! Begrijp je me?' [p. 25]). *Harira* is represented here not only as a special symbol of Moroccan traditional food, but also as a symbol of emotions and belonging to Moroccan culture. Naima makes *Harira* interconnected with soul, heart and love in a way that signifies its involvement in one's feelings and emotions. Similarly, while she was helping her neighbour Sigrid for a party, the protagonist-narrator claims: "*I thought she wanted couscous and tagine or pasta from my part.*" (Ik dacht dat ze couscous en tajine wilde, of pasta voor mijn part [p. 153]). Naima's expectation from Sigrid illustrates how Moroccan food, inherited from her mother, is part and parcel of her homeland community's collective cultural memory.

El Bezaz's narrative shows how the protagonist's memory is sometimes nostalgic and at other times involuntary. This demonstrates that her cultural memory articulates a double



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process of embodiment and rejection: on the one hand Naima embodies Moroccan culture, and on the other hand she expresses its rejection. In a flashback scene, the protagonist reflects back as follows: “The night fell. My brothers and sisters fell asleep, but it took me a little longer. Because I had lived until my fourth year in Morocco, I had to handle one memory after another. Lots of fun, but also images which I tried to push away firmly.” [De avond viel. Mijn broertjes en zusjes vielen als een blok in slaap, maar bij mij duurde het wat langer. Omdat ik tot mijn vierde in Marokko had gewoond, kreeg ik de ene herinnering na de andere te verwerken. Veel leuke, maar ook beelden die ik met alle macht probeerde weg te drukken (p. 58)]. Remembering home serves here as a “cultural recall,” which revolves around the culture of that environment and which serves as a bond between the present and the past. As Bal explains, “performativity of memory” is undertaken through the act of recalling and “cultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something that you actually *perform*, even if, in many instances, such acts are not consciously and willfully contrived” (p. vii). This performativity of memory conforms to Naima’s act of recalling both good and bad memories, both funny and sad images of her past life. Her act of recalling is both voluntary and involuntary in the sense that she attempts to remember some images but also tries to forget others. Through flashback images of homeland, the subject attempts to locate the self in a transcultural context that shuttles between the homeland and the new country, between the lost culture and the found one.

This performativity of cultural memory of the past signifies a process of re-writing the past for the construction of transcultural identity: one that transcends special or cultural borders. The autobiographical self performs cultural recalls to give meaning to her identity in the new cultural space. This reminds us of Seyhan’s statement that: “In language, the immigrant subject experiences passages and re-members fragments of past lives. This remembrance may not correspond to the actual voyage, but it is the only available evidence for self-representation” (1996, p. 177). She suggests that writing past images in language engages meaning with indeterminacy and leads to displacement of the self in a new cultural context. The subject reaches beyond the cultural context of parents and looks for ruptures in the dominant context to inscribe itself. Indeed, El Bezaz’s story-telling and interweaving of memory becomes a blueprint for a reinvented self in a new context. In *Fictions in Autobiography*, Eakin writes that



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a reinvented self cannot “offer a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past; instead, it expresses the play of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness” (p. 5). El Bezaz’s autobiographical self reclaims in memory and imagination a lost culture, identity and community. By doing so, the subject can represent cultural differences in a critical light by reflecting on one’s past and culture. In this sense, the relation between memory and identity is invigorating in the sense that Naima’s (in) voluntary recalling of past memories is an attempt at self-representation and self-identification. In other words, past memories serve the needs of the protagonist’s present consciousness in an attempt to define her future identity.

Cultural remembrance in El Bezaz’s narrative manifests in memorial dynamics outside and across national and cultural frameworks, as well as in conflicts and transfers at the interfaces between generations. Diffraction of memories illustrates Naima’s cultural translation and identity transformation. Even though she expresses her admiration of Moroccan food, the protagonist finds Moroccan hospitality extravagant. About the breakfast her mother prepared for her grandmother and her aunt who came from Morocco to Holland, Naima comments as follows: “The breakfast was a Moroccan’s: plentiful and exaggerated. When I looked at the table, I got nausea. I just wanted a cup of coffee and go to my room, but that was not accepted. Sometimes I wish they were still in Meknes instead of being here, because I felt like a branded animal.” [Het ontbijt was op z’n Marokkaans: copieus en overdreven. Toen ik naar de tafel keek, kreeg ik braakneigingen. Ik wilde alleen maar een kop koffie en naar mijn kamer verdwijnen, maar dat werd niet geaccepteerd. Ergens wenste ik dat ze nog in Meknes waren in plaats van hier, want ik voelde me als een getekend dier (p. 59)]. The protagonist’s memory is, thus, caught in a contradictory process, as she is selective in dealing with Moroccan culture. The Moroccan generosity in serving guests is a sign of good hospitality for their guests, which Naima comprehends as an exaggeration. Throughout the novel, she criticizes the Dutch’s coldness and lack of hospitality, but now she criticizes also Moroccans’ exaggerated hospitality. At this stage, Naima is no longer a passive recipient of homeland culture, but she actively engages in, and critically reflects on it. Along with her critique of Moroccan hospitality, the protagonist



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criticized Dutch coldness, too, and this juxtaposed critique of both Moroccan and Dutch cultures serves as the negotiation of her cultural specificities and transformations.

The process of rejection and embodiment of cultural memory demonstrates that Naima's identity is neither whole nor unified. The autobiographical narrator resists adherence to the homeland's cultural heritage and its conservative identity. Instead, she adopts a different attitude towards the cultural past, that of indifference, and opts for liberal Dutch culture. This process of rejection of Moroccan culture is also manifest in the way the protagonist rejects her curly hair, as a metaphor of rejecting her homeland identity. While she was at the hairdressing salon, Naima urges the hairdresser to straight her hair very well. In contrast, the hairdresser expresses her preference for curly hair which in her view is more fashionable and attractive for Dutch people:

'I hate straight hair. All Dutch who have straight hair hate that. When was your integration course? We Dutch people love curls, which is sexy and beautiful.

'I don't want curls, please, straight hair.'

'Ik haat steil haar. AlleNederlanders met steil haar haten dat. Wanneer was jouw inburgeringscursus? Wij Nederlanders houden van krullen, dat is sexy en mooi.'

'Ik wil geen krullen, alsjeblijft, steil haar.' (169)

Naima's curly hair signifies a Moroccan feature of her ethnic identity, but rejecting her curly hair appears to signify rejecting her identity as a migrant woman of Moroccan origin. This rejection articulates how her identity is undergoing a process of cultural translation and transformation. The operation of straightening hair might be read as a metaphor of transforming her identity to be immersed in transcultural forms of belonging. The protagonist becomes aware of her ethnic background through her awareness of her type of hair which is a sign of her Moroccan ethnicity and identity. Naima's act of straightening hair signifies her aspiration of self-becoming and self-representation in a different manner. For throughout the novel Naima expresses her disagreement and resistance of her family's traditional culture and patriarchal



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heritage, and she expresses instead her aspiration for emancipation as a migrant woman in a liberal society. We can infer here that the intersectionality of memory and identity manifests in several aspects of the autobiographical protagonist as a migrant woman, who aspires emancipation from homeland patriarchal culture as well as from the Dutch “ethnicized representation” of “allochthons”.

c. Negotiating the Border-Poetics of Gender and Sexuality

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler argues that gender, as a social and cultural construction, is performative. By gender performativity, she means that gender is not something *one is*, it is something *one does*, a sequence of acts, a “doing” rather than a “being” (p. 25). Butler does not suggest that the subject is free to choose which gender she or he is going to enact, but that the subject has a limited number of “costumes” from which to make a constrained choice of gender style. That is, gender is an act that brings into being what it names: in this context, a “masculine” man or a “feminine” woman. Butler contends that gender identities are constructed by language which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language.⁷ She states *that* “within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (p. 24-5). The idea here is that all bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence, by being named in a rigid regulatory frame either a “girl” or a “boy.”

Along with the interrelated issues of identity and memory, the question of gender and sexuality occupies a great deal of El Bezaz’s autobiographical narrative. The author, as a liberal Muslim woman, negotiates the issue of gender and sexuality in a multicultural and liberal context. It is, then, important to relate Butler’s theory of gender performativity to El Bezaz’s negotiation of gender identity. Her narrative seems to account for Butler’s idea that gender is performative in the sense that a body/person can act differently according to social and cultural contours. In her narrative, the question of gender brings to the fore different identities of being a man, woman, lesbian and gay. Within Butler’s theory of performativity, El Bezaz’s narrative seems to suggest that it is possible to designate one’s gender identity on an alternative set of

⁷ It is not that identity “does” discourse or language, but the other way around—language and discourse “do” gender. For more analysis, see Sara Salih’s “On Butler and Performativity”.



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constituted attributes, to step outside what Butler calls the *rigid regulatory social frame*. El Bezaz supports the idea that gender style is a matter of “doing” instead of “being” within the social and cultural construction of the person’s gender identity.

In this respect, El Bezaz’s autobiography is a critique of the traditional, patriarchal norms and religious instructions that restrict women’s sexual freedom based on their gender identity. Her writing is a critical contribution to the issue of gender identity and sexuality within the patriarchal Moroccan-Dutch community. Naima aspires for breaking the rules in which she was brought up which control gender identity within her traditional community. She voices out her liberal thinking not only towards the question of gender and sexuality within patriarchal culture, but within “Islamic” culture, too. While probing the question of freedom, she recognizes different gender identities: heterosexuality and homosexuality (lesbian and gay) as the following quote illustrates:

Since I failed to be free, because things bring with it that you are stuck with it, I try to tell my kids that they should do especially what they want, what makes them happy. Travels, picking strawberries in Australia or something like that, sex before marriage. From my part, they are allowed to come home with somebody of the same sex. You want to bet that they will not do that? No, I must get decent and sensible children. I have always wanted a gay son. But Allah was unwilling.

Omdat het mij niet lukt om vrij te zijn, want dingen bezitten zorgt ervoor dat je eraan vastzit, probeer ik mijn kinderen te vertellen dat ze vooral datgene moeten doen wat zij willen, wat hen gelukkig maakt. Reizen, aardbeien plukken in Australië of zoiets. Seks voor het huwelijk. Voor mijn part mogen ze met iemand van hetzelfde geslacht thuis-komen. Wedden dat ze dat dus niet doen? Nee, ik moet zo nodig fatsoenlijke en verstandige kinderen krijgen. Ik heb altijd een homoseksuele zoon gewild. Maar Allah was me ongewillig. (p. 17-18)



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The autobiographical Self represents a desire both for liberation from traditional culture and transgression of it as a way of resistance towards religious norms of controlling sexuality. The issue of freedom in her narrative is always interlinked with the question of sexual liberation. Naima negotiates the structures that confine women's sexual freedom and stigmatize them. For instance, in her narrative premarital sex is seen as an act of freedom from traditional as well as religious restrictions manifested in the marriage institution. Further, according to her, being lesbian or gay is not a matter of gender trouble or distortion of one's gender identity, but a matter of sexual emancipation. It is a matter of gender performativity, in Butler's terms, of free acts within a regulatory social frame. Throughout the narrative, Naima insists on the issue of freedom in her life without any cultural or gendered constrictions as she aspires: "And I am dreaming of a future full of hope and freedom". (En ik maar dromen van een toekomst vol hoop en vrijheid[p. 24]). As a manifestation of her liberal thinking, she presents herself as an advocate of free sexuality, outspoken against the taboo of sex in her patriarchal community and "Islamic" culture.

Unlike her mother who has strong feelings for her cultural-gendered background, Naima instead questions the strict social rules which determine gender lives in her Muslim Moroccan-Dutch community. As a writer in the contact zone, Naima feels free to express her opinions and establish her critique of the cultural heritage of her homeland, as well as the social position of the Muslim woman in a liberal Dutch society. She adopts the act of writing as a reflective repositioning of the Self. This idea is expressed when she claims: "I write because I wanted to escape, because I wanted to know what life is, because I wanted to be free." (Ik schreef omdat ik wilde ontsnappen, omdat ik wilde weten wat leven is, omdat ik vrij wilde zijn. [p. 14]). Her writing entails rethinking her own life, as well as resisting her inherited cultural heritage. It appears as a psychological means for struggling against her depression, and as an expression to new meanings in her socio-cultural life as a migrant woman. The issue of freedom and liberation of migrant-Muslim women is a constant theme in her narrative: liberation from taboos in their traditional culture and also from the religion of Islam, which in her view tightens the freedom of women's sexuality.

El Bezaz's analysis of the social construction of gender and sexuality reveals how Muslim women are living under the stigmatization of male domination of their community and



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their everyday social control. She contends that women's sexuality is seen as problematic due to the social construction of gender in their traditional culture. In the following quote, the protagonist expresses her preoccupation with freedom as an essential principal in her life: "I'm very fond of my freedom. I would love to do anything I want. Totally irrational things [...]. They think that I will really get into a psychosis. As if my life is not already a lengthy psychosis." [Ik ben erg gesteld op mijn vrijheid. Het liefst zou ik alles doen wat ik wil. Totaal irrationele dingen [...]. Ze denken dat ik dan echt in een psychose zal raken. Alsof mijn leven niet al één ellenlange psychose is. (p. 17)] Naima's act of writing about the issue of gender and sexuality in the Moroccan-Dutch community is an act that aims at liberating her thinking, as well as raising questions about the stigmatization of Muslim women in her community. In her words: "Muslim women are under constant social control of the community and that has a suffocating effect." (Moslimvrouwen staan voortdurend onder de sociale controle door de gemeenschap. Die controle werkt verstikkend" [Verhofstad, 2006, p. 91]). The point that is much emphasized in the novel is the defense of liberal individualism that El Bezaz believes is the principle that Muslim women should adhere to. Her narrative brings to the fore the patriarchal Muslim world and the liberal Western world as conflicting, irreconcilable worlds, the borders of which she attempts to negotiate.

In fact, El Bezaz's writing about the issue of sexuality in her books has been controversial in the Moroccan-Dutch community. She is perceived as a writer who hijacks her religion and culture to serve Western audiences by catering to their needs. The autobiographical narrator reflects on these social discourses in a critical way as follows: "A couple of years ago after my first book had been published *Minnares of the devil* come out, on television in the program of Jack Spijkerman, I read an erotic piece from that book and then all Muslims and Protestants were angry." (Enkele jaren nadat mijn eerste boek was verschenen kwam *Minnares van de duivel* uit. Op de televisie las ik in het programma van Jack Spijkerman een erotisch stuk uit dat boek voor en toen had je alle moslims en gereformeerden aan het dansen [p. 11]). In this novel *De Minnares van de duivel* (*The Devil's Mistress*), El Bezaz criticized openly the issue of sexuality as a taboo in Muslim culture, and also the issue of female virginity before marriage. As a reaction, the protestant and Muslim part of the Dutch society felt offended by the explicit erotic scenes she read on the TV show *Kopspijkers*. Touching upon taboos in Islamic culture is



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a typical aspect of her writing, which represented her as a courageous, liberal Muslim writer in the eyes of Dutch readers. For her fellow Muslim migrants, she is seen as a zealous person aspiring to be accepted as a Dutch writer and citizen at a time of extreme polarizing socio-political discourses with regards to the inclusion and exclusion of migrants.

The autobiographical self seems to call for sexual freedom for Moroccan migrant women, for whom sex is a taboo that should not be spoken about. El Bezaz describes the issue of sex in her inherited traditional culture as a matter which one should not speak about, especially by women. She claims: “the only thing you hear about it, is that you, are not supposed to do that.” (Het enige wat je hoort is dat je het vooral niet moet doen (...) » (Verhofstad, 2006, p. 97). The narrator of El Bezaz’s novel *De Verstotene*, Mina has appropriated the author’s experience, as she admits: “Sex was taboo, love was taboo, and the female body was the greatest taboo of them all.” (Seks was taboe, liefde was taboe en het vrouwelijk lichaam was een nog groter taboe [173]). In this novel, El Bezaz makes clear that women and men have an equal right to sexual freedom. Yet, El Bezaz’s liberal thinking is at odds with basic Islamic teachings, especially her call for free sexual relations before marriage. Like in other religions—Christianity and Judaism—the question of sex is organised within marriage institution. As such, El Bezaz seems to write her liberalized vision of “Islam,” one that is at odds with basic principles in Islamic culture.

Through touching sensible issues in her writing, El Bezaz challenges and resists the “taboo” of sexuality in traditional Moroccan culture. The protagonist expresses how her name gets down in the Moroccan-Dutch community as a result of the books she has written dealing with the issue of sex. In a discussion with her husband, she screams as follows: “*Oh, my name is already tarnished by the books I’ve written. They expect nothing else from me.*” (‘Ach, mijn naam is toch al besmeurd door de boeken die ik heb geschreven. Ze verwachten niet anders van me.’ [p. 159]. Naima becomes a well-known writer in Dutch society through her open writing about sexuality and her critique of Islam, which she considers as restricting women’s sexual freedom. This is well reflected in a comment voiced out by one of Naima’s neighbours: “What a drama is your life anyway. But you are so brave by writing explicitly about sex and Islam.” (Wat een drama is jouw leven toch. Maar je bent wel moedig door zo open over seks en de islam te schrijven.’ [p. 43-44]). Even though El Bezaz received death threats, she continued



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touching upon the undesired taboo of sex. She even believes that her narrative holds a message for Moroccan-Dutch women to free themselves from patriarchal standards, which restrict their sexuality. In an interview with Austin, she stated: “I show how unfair some Moroccan traditions are for women, hoping that women will rise up against them.” (Zo laat ik bijvoorbeeld zien hoe onrechtvaardig sommige Marokaanse tradities voor vrouwen zijn. In de hoop dat vrouwen ertegen in opstand komen” [Austin, 2002]).

This message is clearly expressed in her autobiography as a plea for liberation from cultural and religious restrictions. To free herself from the traditional Moroccan-Dutch community, Naima seeks full assimilation into a liberal culture and society. She narrates how she was very careful in her choice of her husband who is quite a different Moroccan, whose way of thinking is very liberal. He is not one who keeps hold of the Moroccan culture and identity, but somebody whom she describes as an ‘Amsterdammer.’ Naima tells further how she used to meet him secretly in Paris before marrying him in a way that transgresses her cultural traditions:

The most difficult part still has to come. Because as a good Muslim I shouldn't have a boyfriend, and that is why I kept him secret. Apparently, my parents thought it was in the Netherlands the same as in Morocco, where a mother drags her son to the house of a marriageable daughter to ask for her hand. Yes Mom, you can wait for that a long time.

Het moeilijkste gedeelte kwam nog. Want als goede moslima mocht ik geen vriend hebben, en daarom had ik hem geheimgehouden. Blijkbaar dachten mijn ouders dat het er in Nederland net zo aan toegaat als in Marokko, waar een moeder haar zoon meesleept naar het huis van een huwbare dochter om haar hand te vragen. Ja mam, kun je lang op wachten. (p. 20-21)

Even though she defends herself as liberal, El Bezaz's protagonist could not get out of the confines of her cultural heritage, as she decided to get married in order to satisfy her parents'



wish.⁸ Her aspiration for complete freedom remains, then, unachievable in the sense that she is still abided by the patriarchal authority of her parents. Further, even though she does not like the various dresses the bride should wear, she did not reject wearing them herself in her wedding ceremony in Morocco. Another paradox manifests in the scene in which she describes her wedding ceremony in an orientalist way, but she chose to celebrate her marriage in this same ‘orientalist’ way. This suggests that even if she sees her homeland culture with exoticizing eyes, she still opts for this ‘exotic’ way of life, at least in her wedding celebration. In this sense, the narrative gives expression to the autobiographical self’s transformation of cultural subjectivity in a challenging and limited manner. Furthermore, Naima addresses a severe critique of the issue of female virginity before marriage. Against her family’s expectations, she narrates that her ‘wedding night’ was quite a normal day, as she tells: “In the hotel we had the perfect ‘wedding night’: we jumped into bed and immediately fell into a deep sleep. That was our wedding.” (In het hotel hadden we de ideale ‘huwelijksnacht’: we sprongen in bed en vielen meteen in een diepe slaap. Dat was onze bruiloft [p. 24]). Through this ironic statement she addresses a critique of the issue of virginity as a sign of chastity before marriage in Muslim culture and traditions.

Even though Naima does not reject her Muslimness, she feels that she is excluded from the harmony of belonging to the Moroccan-Dutch community. As she writes: “in the Moroccan-Dutch community I am not considered as one of them, because I speak and write about things around which hangs an atmosphere of a taboo. Shame is an important part of the Muslim culture, but it’s the ONE thing I don’t feel and don’t have. I don’t feel ashamed and I am actually against it.” (“word ik door de Marokkaanse gemeenschap niet als een van hen gezien, omdat ik over dingen praat en schrijf waar een taboesfeer omheen hangt. Schaamte is een belangrijk inderdeel in de islamistische cultuur, en laat dat nou net datgene zijn wat ik niet voel en heb. Ik voel geen schaamte en ben er zelfs tegen” [Verhofstad, 2006, p. 106]). In this respect, El Bezaz’s autobiography is a critique of the traditional culture that restricts women’s sexual freedom, as well as against taboos and shame which do injustice towards women. With regards

⁸“We decided to get married soon. First for the Dutch law and then for the Moroccan one, to satisfy our parents.” (We besloten om snel te trouwen. Eerst voor de Nederlandse wet en daarna voor de Marokkaanse, om onze ouders tevreden te stellen [p. 21]).



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to her religiosity, unlike her protagonist Naima who does not believe in the existence of God, ⁹El Bezaz considers herself a liberal Muslim who has no taboo in life (Louwerse, 2010, p. 242). Thus, it seems she has not turned against Islam, but against interpretations which fail to do justice to the basic rights laid down in Islamic teaching. Yet her liberal thinking is at odds with basic Islamic teachings, like sex before marriage and non-existence of God, which makes her thinking close to atheism than to Islam.

Therefore, even though El Bezaz seems to stand up for the case of Moroccan-Dutch women, she is convinced that these women should speak up for themselves about the issues that concern them. As she states in an interview with Austin: “But Moroccan and Turkish women should be themselves willing to do something about it. To take a step out of their own safe community” (Maar in eerste instantie moeten de Marokkaanse en Turkse vrouwen zelf bereid zijn iets te doen. Om een stap buiten de veilige eigen gemeenschap te zetten [p. 13]. That is, if migrant Muslim women want to be free, to be the agents of themselves, they need to rebel against patriarchal constraints that restrict their (sexual) freedom. The author makes her background the driving force behind her writing, as she is convinced that she could make a difference. Therefore, as Seyhan writes, “[t]he dialogic and self-reflexive tone of immigrant writing marks a space of intervention in the cultural context in which it moves. This writing registers its distance from social and cultural norms by questioning the logic of the traditions it has inherited as well as those it is subjected to in the new world” (1996, p. 186). El Bezaz’s liberal thinking seems to cater to Western liberalism in offering a liberalized vision of “Islam” that she would prefer, regardless of whether this vision respects the basic principles of this religion. In a word, the author seems to be lost between liberalism and traditional Islamic culture; even more, she often conflates patriarchal culture with Islamic religion, which is an erroneous conflation in her writings. As a case of the “feminization” of migration, I arrive at

⁹ With regards to her religiosity, the protagonist Naima claims: “I believe that humankind was created by accident and that God is a laboratory with people in white coats who inspect the world globes on which we are laboratory animals. Yes, God is for sure that. I hope that when I die there's nothing left of me. I do not go to hell, not to heaven, but simply to nothing. That would make me intensely happy.” (Ik denk namelijk dat de mens per ongeluk is ontstaan en dat God een laboratorium is met allemaal mensen in witte jassen die de onstane aardbollen inspecteren waarop wij proefkonijnen zijn. Ja, dat is zeker God. Ik hoop dat als ik sterf er niks van me overblijft. Ik wil niet naar de hel, niet naar de hemel, maar gewoon naar een niets. Dat zou me intens gelukkig maken [p. 26]).



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the idea that El Bezaz's novel illustrates how gender and migration have an ambivalent impact on women's experiences in a multicultural society.

Conclusion

Vinexvrouwen narrates a migrant woman's story of cultural translation and identity transformation in a polarizing multicultural environment. The protagonist's representation of her cultural identity brings to the fore the rhetorical discourse of embodiment and strangering, of inclusion and exclusion. The interplay between past and present cultures constitutes the different aspects of Naima's hybrid identity, staged in a continuous process of formation. Even though the protagonist opts for Dutch liberal culture, she refutes discourses of strangering that exclude migrants from the homogenous national belonging. She explores how ethnic difference is one of the paramount factors in the ideology of belonging and identity politics. The imagination of identity in El Bezaz's story-world of globalisation testifies, then, to the ongoing influence of the "national" as a divisive construct. The novel unfolds national identity taking shape through the marking out of difference with others. It (re)negotiates the various (symbolic) boundaries that divide the Dutch Selves from their exotic others in nationally and culturally specific ways. Therefore, even if the writer defines her identity in opposition to the homeland culture, she calls for a redefinition of Dutch national identity, too. Through her narrative imagination, El Bezaz pleads for a dynamic Dutch national and cultural identity that acknowledges its exotic, ethnic groups, particularly those who present themselves as liberals.

Further, El Bezaz's autobiography is an ambitious artistic work that brings into play the interrelated issues of memory and gender, which are vigorously dealt with, reflected upon and openly criticized. Throughout the narrative, the protagonist-narrator recalls voluntary and involuntary memories, sometimes with melancholy and other times with nostalgia. Importantly, the connection between culturally inherited memories and individual memories shapes a memory disruption across various spaces and cultures. The role of cultural memory influences the relationship between one's past, culture and identity. Even though the narrator-protagonist is well immersed in cultural transformation, the cultural heritage of her homeland remains alive and intriguing in her memory. The memory of the homeland culture is represented in both material and immaterial things. Cultural memory is represented as a vibrant process of active remembering and forgetting, and of looking backwards and forwards. The persistence of the



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cultural past of the homeland and the presence of the culture of the host society construct, then, transcultural dynamics of memory. Cultural memory is redefined from a transcultural perspective, which thereby opens up possibilities for a different future of subjectivity and identity. Therefore, El Bezaz's narrative represents migrants' cultural memory as part and parcel of the transcultural construction of identity and belonging.

Intriguingly, both memory and identity are bound to gender, as a primary aspect of self-identification and self-representation. The novel tells the story of Naima as a Moroccan-Dutch woman caught between her strictly patriarchal family and her struggle for freedom and emancipation. The narrative gives expression to the autobiographical self's transforming cultural subjectivity in a challenging manner, expressing her liberal thinking and resisting her family's patriarchal culture. The narrator's critique of the issue of gender and sexuality brings into view the patriarchal Muslim world and the liberal Western world, represented as conflicting, irreconcilable worlds, the cultural borders of which are too rigid. Naima's act of writing about gender and sexuality issues attempts to liberate her thinking, as well as to raise questions about the stigmatization of Muslim women in her Moroccan-Dutch community. Nevertheless, through constantly touching upon sensible issues and taboos in her works, El Bezaz aims at reaching a broader public in order to stimulate more discussion with regards to the questions of gender and sexuality. Her narrative appears to cater to the Western reader and craving for popularity through appropriating an orientalist strategy of writing, which reinforces the image of the other as strange, barbaric and backward. Still, through its aesthetic representation of (post)migration and transculturality, the novel makes a significant contribution to the repertoire of transnational autobiographical fictions.

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