Staging Muslim identities in theater: An investigation of the roles of artists with a Muslim background

Auteur : Gouppy, Shannon
Promoteur(s) : Martiniello, Marco
Faculté : Faculté des Sciences Sociales
Diplôme : Master en sociologie, à finalité spécialisée en Immigration Studies
Année académique : 2020-2021
URI/URL : http://hdl.handle.net/2268.2/11022

NOM :

Prénom :

Matricule :

Filière d'études :

Staging Muslim identities in theater:

An investigation of the roles of artists with a Muslim background

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank Mister Marco Martiniello for having supervised my master thesis. His unfailing availability and advice were precious to me. I would also like to thank my readers, Mrs Elsa Mescoli and Mr Juan Carlos Triviño for accepting to dedicate their time for my work.

This work would not have been possible without the people who accepted to meet me. I would like to thank Salim, Nadia, Souhaïla, Ismael and Sam for their time and their enthusiasm.

I would like to dedicate a special thanks to my parents. They are the reason of my presence at university and have always provided me with endless love and support. I will never thank them enough for that.

Finally, I could not forget my friends who have always believed in me throughout my years at university and brought me joy and comfort whenever I needed it. I would like to thank Merlin, who always believed in me more than myself, and for his precious friendship. I would also like to thank Emma, Fanny, and Cody who especially supported me for this master thesis. I am so grateful for having them by my sides.

Contents

1. Introduction

Muslims constitute one of the minorities currently living in Europe. The Muslim presence in Western Europe dates back mainly to the beginning of the 1960's. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Second World War (1939-1945), Europe needed to be reconstructed; consequently, the regime of cheap labor migrations took place between 1950-1970. During that time, waves of immigrants from "Muslim countries" such as North Africa, the Balkans, and Turkey arrived in Europe. Muslim workers settled in and then established their families. From temporary migrant workers, they rather became permanent residents in European societies (Rudnicka-Kassem, 2016; Dassetto, 1996). This Muslim presence, which can mainly be explained by migrations or conversions to Islam, was visible in Europe through their religious practices, institutions and representations but also through their cultural and artistic expressions (El Asri, 2011). Moreover, the movements of islamization and re-islamization that has occurred in the Muslim world since 1970's and in the European context led to an individualization of the religious practices and a new relationship with the Islamic religion, notably through artistic expressions (Dassetto, 2006; Rudnicka-Kassem, 2016; Amghar, 2003).

Hence, Muslim minorities have occupied the European artistic scene from the 1980's and especially from the 1990's, as the music, among other cultural and artistic practices, has been a means to display and explore their Muslim identity in a non-Muslim society (El Asri, 2011). Presently, artists with a Muslim background are mainly the offspring of Muslim immigrants. Their relation to Islam is completely different, as they have weaker ties with their culture of origin and traditions, and they have enriched their Muslim identities with their European background (Rudnicka-Kassem, 2016). This Muslim youth does not reproduce the religion of their parents but rather reappropriate Islam through their European context and their social reality, which is often the reality of the suburbs (Amghar, 2003). This migration history, the relationship to Islam and Muslim identities of "new" generations of Muslims born and raised in Europe transpire in their artistic expressions. Their context is also totally different.

Currently, in European countries, Islam is approached in a post 9/11 context, in a context of fear which can be referred as Islamophobia. Thus, Muslims evolve in a hostile media and even political environment, as anti-Muslim rhetoric and attitudes are widespread. Public controversies (e.g. issues about the veil) stigmatize this religion, which is often depicted as archaic and violent (Boubekeur, 2007). Muslims have been historically perceived within a power relationship, in which they have been the disempowered minority, the "others" (Garner & Selod, 2015). Belgium is no exception. Islam is an immigrant religion in a Belgian state which is in a post-Catholic and post-colonialist era and which is characterized by secularity (Torrekens, 2015).

In this context, cultural and artistic expressions enable new generations of Muslim minorities to reclaim the narratives on Muslims and Islam, among other ways of mobilization. As youth from

second and subsequent generations of migrants, they express publicly their wish to be visible and exist politically (Sayad, 2006). As for Muslim identities, Muslim artists "explore new ways of thinking about being Muslim" (Jiwa, 2010) and display a plurality of negotiated Muslim identities (El Asri, 2011) through arts. The assumption underlying this research is that theater consists of a site in which the expression and exploration of individual as well as collective identities occur and in which alternative narratives on Muslims are put forward, similarly to other artistic forms such as music, as studied in Belgium by El Asri (2011). It will focus on French-speaking artists with a Muslim background currently (2014-2020) performing in Belgium.

Hence, the present research aims to explore the social, political, and even pedagogical relevance of staging Muslim identities in theater by artists with a Muslim background, currently in Belgium. In order to do so, it will investigate the roles of artists with a Muslim background when staging Muslim identities through theater. The questions at the heart of this research are the following: How do artists with a Muslim background stage Muslim identities in theater? How do women artists stage Muslim women identities? How do these artists contribute to current public debates regarding to Muslims?

Overall, this research emphasizes the relevance of arts for the Muslim minority currently in Belgium. Indeed, arts enable those who are marginalized, invisibilized, in short disempowered in debates regarding Muslims, the Muslim community and Islam, to speak up about themselves as individuals and as a collective. Additionally, this research takes part in the academic studies on arts and minorities, which is quite recent and still underdeveloped and neglected (Dimaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2015; Martiniello, 2015).

The present research is divided in three main sections. In the theoretical section, a state of arts on "Muslim artists" will be presented. To conclude this section, the research questions will be formulated regarding what has previously been done. The second section consists of the description of the methodological approach. First, the positionality of the researcher will be clarified. Also, the evolution of the problematization will enable the readers to understand the development of the research. Then, the methodology, methods, and the collection and analysis of the data will be explained. The methodological limitations will be the subject of the last part of this section. Eventually, there will be the empirical section: the results based on the fieldwork. To begin with, the presence of Muslims in Belgium will be contextualized, along with the case of Brussels. After that come the findings.

At first, the concept of "Muslim artists" will be interrogated regarding the narratives of the artists met and how they define themselves. Ultimately, the term "artists with a Muslim background" will be preferred for the sake of this research. It will also be shown that these artists are seen as being part of a separate group of "diversity artists". The ultimate point of this chapter will examine the sense given by artists to their art and in particular to theater.

Secondly, in order to study the Muslim identities staged through theater, Muslim identities in five theater plays will be analyzed. Artists stage "Culturally European Muslims" and according to the situations and their goals, they stage either "Neighborly Muslims", "Scarred Muslims" or "A free thinker born Muslim". This typology is based on the theater plays analyzed and what has been said on them by the authors. Of course, it is non-exhaustive. While studying the staged Muslim identities, a special attention will be paid to specificities of staging "Muslim women" with the analysis of a female-only theater play, as women artists are less visible on stage and in the literature.

Finally, the last part of this study concerns the roles artists with a Muslim background play when staging Muslim identities. Indeed, through theater, artists speak out on themselves. It will specifically emphasize how they take part in public debates on Muslims through their theater plays.

2. Theoretical approach

This first section consists of an exploration dedicated to the existing literature on Muslim artists. It will be useful in order to build the present research regarding to what has already been done and in order to open a theoretical dialogue with the empirical findings. First, a short part will be dedicated to the literature on arts and minorities. It will then focus on the main concept of this research, the "Muslim artists". Eventually, it will shed light on Muslim identities and Islam in the arts. Building on this state of arts, the research questions will be formulated.

2.1. Arts and minorities

The relationship between migrant minorities and the arts in the literature is quite recent, despite the fact that issues about immigration, and in particular about incorporation, have grown since the 1980's in the European and American literatures (Martiniello, 2015). Social sciences addressed the issue of arts and migrants when second-generation and then subsequent generations of migrants began to show up in the public space and consequently raised questions about their influence on the mainstream culture within multicultural societies (Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008; Martiniello, 2015). Indeed, migrants as cultural producers have been reframing the mainstream culture in diverse cities and have been influencing cultural policies in the western societies. Their arts have also been shaped by this mainstream culture, as institutions and economic changes have a shaping influence on artistic expressions of migrant minorities (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2015).

2.1.1. Arts, minorities, and hybridity

DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly (2010) proposed to understand the influence of migrations on culture "in such terms as hybridity, multivocality, and translation" (p.2), rather than adopting an assimilationist point of view. Migrant minorities do not abandon their old cultures but rather produce cultural forms in which both influences of their origin society and their settling one blend together. This tendency to hybridity and adoption of artistic expressions of the host society becomes stronger with second and subsequent generations of migrants, as it enables them to "keep identities fluid, open, and a little ambiguous, preserving many opportunities and foreclosing none" (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2010: 17). Hence, along with traditional and cultural artistic influences, the experience of being part of a migrant minority in Europe, from the origins of the process of migration to the present condition of living including various forms of discrimination, are current themes for artists and even for those who were born and who live in European context (El Asri, 2011). Such

artists from migration minorities display hybrid identities that have the power to challenge the euro-centric universalism, as these identities enable them to tell alternative stories, to explore new artistic propositions and to propose innovative *bricolages* (Bachelot Nguyen, in "décolonisons les arts!", 2018). Through arts and the reappropriation of their cultural legacies, second and subsequent generations make sense of their existence in their host society (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2010).

2.1.2. Recognizing the power of arts for minorities

Arts are comparable to a "Swiss army knife of immigrant culture" (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2010: 8) as they serve many purposes in the lives of immigrants. Indeed, arts can serve as source of comfort for migrant minorities, a way to interpret their new situation in a new society, as an incentive for mobility to purchase a career, as a mode of political action, as a counter-narrative against misunderstandings and stereotypes, and as a means of incorporation for minorities. Especially, arts are closely linked to individual and collective identities (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2010).

Arts may consist of a means for marginalized minorities to be politically and socially mobilized. According to Sayad (2006), the youth with an immigration background uses arts as a resource in order to exist in the public space and to "take over the stigma associated with them in order to convert it into an emblem of a group in a process of redefinition"[1] (p.11). Art gives the possibility to invisibilized ones, such as migrant minorities, to exist socially and claim rights and statuses (Martiniello & Mescoli, 2018). Hence, arts enable marginalized populations to become visible and to make other populations aware of their presence and situations. They are also a vehicle for social change as disempowered actors can be "actively engaged in (co)constructing, contesting and transforming the lifeworlds they inhabit" (Ali, 2017: 364).

Boubekeur (2007) insisted on the political militancy through arts, which allow rethinking systems of reference depending on the access to the political. Surely, the structure of political opportunities of a specific society at a given time influences greatly all forms of migrants' political participation (Martiniello, 2006), including political engagement through artistic forms. Minorities with a limited access to mainstream institutions can produce political critiques through artistic expressions. Mainly, these critiques target dominant discourses which propagate racial and ethnic essentialist views and the limitations of access to mainstream institutions. Therefore, politically engaged artists, through the images and discourses they display, act as representative of a group and relay groups concerns, display self-identities, and publicly make political comments (Mahon, 2000). To sum up, some scholars consider "cultural productions as sites through which debates about identity, power, meaning, and resistance occur" (Mahon, 2000: 478).

---

[1] Personal translation of: "reprendre à leur compte le stigmate qui leur est associé pour le convertir en emblème d'un groupe en voie de redéfinition" (Sayad, 2006: 11)

Arts have the power to strengthen individual and collective identities, private and public ones. According to DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly (2010), "the arts also enable immigrants to *represent themselves* to the host country, affirming public as well as private identities, for purposes both commercial and political" (p.2). These identities are multiple and intersecting, but art making and art exhibition lead to choose a specific identity over another that is tied to "larger fields of power" which constrain artists but also allow them to explore their identity by taking a stance about the normative representations (Jiwa, 2010: 78). As for the sense of belonging that may take root through artistic expressions and the construction and expression of collective identities, they may lead to social and political mobilizations for specific groups (Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008). Additionally, artistic expressions enable individuals to build a sense of belonging to a given society and build bridges between different populations by participating in the local socio-cultural life (Damery & Mescoli, 2019). Arts help constructing and claiming group belonging and thus feeling part of a community.

Through arts, artists may seek to re-appropriate their identities and use arts for self-determination, namely by proposing counter-narratives to dominant ones and to normative identities which constrain minorities. By presenting their own stories and experiences to contemporary audiences, artists manage to shift power from such dominant voices which tend to render minorities invisible and provide a critique of the hegemonic discourses (Leake, 2018). It is a way for artists to decolonize imaginaries and reinvent new perspectives from their cultural background (Attia, in "décolonisons les arts!", 2018) as they (re)construct and propose their own meanings about the multiple facets of their identities regarding class, gender, ethnicity, religious, and national origins (Mahon, 2000). In that sense, such alternative narratives repair the negative stereotypes spread by mainstream media or public discourses (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2010). According to Ali (2017), arts consist of "a creative endeavour and a vehicle for 'powerfully, radically re-imagining the world'" (p.354).

Also, cultural and artistic expressions foster social cohesion. Artists have the ability to put forward common values and create spaces where people meet and share experiences (Gruson, 2017). Arts have the power to blur social boundaries and give way to the co-construction of identities by "making the stranger familiar" (Ali, 2017: 355). According to a recent opinion survey, the "Ana Lindh report on Intercultural Trends and Social Change in the Euro-Mediterranean region" (2018), a large majority of people give importance to art and creativity and consider them "as the universal language capable of transcending cultural, religious and language barriers." (Moschis-Gauguet, 2018: 49). About eighty percent of the respondents think that multicultural events help people to live peacefully in a multicultural environment. Art is a way to understand each other, which is important for a peaceful coexistence in a diverse environment. Art is thus a major tool for intercultural dialogue in the public space (Moschis-Gauguet, 2018).

However, even though artistic expressions can serve social and political purposes, among others, one shouldn't forget the aesthetic and entertainment aspects. According to Mahon (2000), one shouldn't forget to pay attention to the aesthetic dimension of arts by focusing too much on other dimensions, such as the political one. Indeed, forgetting the aesthetic dimension could lead to a systematic and one-sided view on complex artistic productions, as this dimension is highly important for leisure but also for the attractiveness of the artists.

In other words, arts enable minority artists to establish a space for the self-representation of a group they identify with, to publicly discuss the representation of social identities and constructing new ones often by contesting dominant images, and to introduce social and political claims (Mahon, 2000). In that sense, artists can intervene into public debates through the visibilization of critiques of "the social terrain they inhabit and the social verities they inherit" (Mahon, 2000: 474).

2.2. Muslim artists

Why is it important to speak about "Muslim artists" rather than "Muslim art"? Jiwa (2010) claimed that "Muslim art" is not a label applicable to one kind of art or one aesthetic unity. It consists of a choice of displaying a certain specific identity in arts within "larger fields of forces" which embeds specific national politics and normative representations including mass media representations. Thus, Muslim art cannot be seen as one cultural form. Rather, artistic productions made by Muslim artists should be interpreted as socio-political productions made by artists that identify themselves as a minority in the West, with diverse backgrounds in terms of religious influence, ethnicity, culture, nationality or language.

2.2.1. What does "being Muslim" mean in Europe?

According to Rudnicka-Kassem (2016), around the world and so in European societies as well, Muslims identities can be conceptualized through three categories: "'Being Muslim' can be manifested in three ways, namely ethnic, cultural and religious." (p. 255). So-called "Ethnic" Muslims are more attached to their ethnic traditions than the Muslim traditions even though they come from Muslim families, bear Muslim names and know the main elements of Islam as religion and culture. The groups of "Cultural" Muslims take more into consideration the cultural and universal dimension of Islam (Rudnicka-Kassem, 2016). This Muslim identity derives from a larger historical "Muslim culture" (El Asri, 2011). Finally, the "Religious" Muslims have a strong feeling of belonging to the community of Muslims, the *ummah*. So, they follow the religious requirement and duties, such as the fives prayers per day (Rudnicka-Kassem, 2016).

Following Conti (2012), "Muslim" can be considered as a neo-ethnic category. The term "Muslim" encompasses those who actively follow the religious requirements and duties, the practitioners, and those for whom Islam is part of their identity references in a conscious way or are identified as such. Thus, Conti (2012) considers "Muslim" as referring both to a claimed identity and an assigned identity.

Kirmani (2009) put to the fore that identities are relational. The Muslim identity cannot be divorced from all the other identifications and social positions such as class, race, age, education, nationality, the regional identification or from other religious communities. One cannot assume that "religious identity is experienced in the same way at all times for all people." (Kirmani, 2009: 59). Jiwa (2010) emphasized this relational characteristic of identities when he wrote that the Muslim identity is related to other identifications such as gender, sex, race, ethnicity, nationality, region, etc. as Muslim artists do not display their work only as Muslims.

Muslim identities in Europe are complex and shaped through diverse references. Following El Asri (2011), in the European context, the Muslim identity takes roots in a cultural heritage which is subjectively appropriated through the experiences and transformations specific to "European Muslim". This Muslim identity encounters at the same time aspects related to a culture or a civilization and to the religious dimension. It is through these distinct spheres, in a process or reinvention and appropriation, that Muslims construct their identity as European Muslims in the context of modernity. This Muslim identity is thus a multiple identity mixing the far and near in space and time: it entails imported cultural and ethno-cultural traditions from abroad, namely ethnical, national, and local traditions, inherited from migration memory and which are perpetuated and transformed during celebrations (El Asri, 2011). Hence, the Muslim identity is not static. The Islamic sources and codes are in constant interaction with their environment which makes the Muslim identities open and dynamic (Rudnicka-Kassem, 2016). The identity issues of young European Muslims who were born and raised in European societies are even more complex as the ties with their country of origin are weaker. They do not necessarily speak fluently the language of their parents and so do not have a great knowledge about their native traditions and even the religion of Islam. However, even though they do not practice the Islamic religion, they do not forget their Islamic identity (Rudnicka-Kassem, 2016).

2.2.2. Who are the "Muslim artists"?

El Asri (2011) distinguished two main profiles of Muslim artists. First, Muslim artists can be defined as artists who take Islam as a main reference for their texts and/or visual productions. This category encompasses cultural and artistic expressions anchored in Islamic cultures or religion as well as all the artistic forms in which Islam is put forward: how the artists present themselves to the

audience and/or Islamic references in their artistic productions. In the second profile, Islam is rather secondary in the artistic expressions, or even absent. For these artists, Islam transpires "naturally" in their artistic productions, for example, through religious formulations, as it consists of a daily reality for them. Thus, these artists do not make use of Islam for militancy, religious or strategic purposes.

However, El Asri (2011) warned his readers against the essentialization of Muslim artists' religious identity in their artistic productions. Indeed, even though some artists mobilize their religious identity in their art, it does not mean they only produce religious or sacred artistic productions. El Asri (2011) also insisted on the distinctions between artist's productions and daily life, and principles of Islam and the practices of Muslims. What the artists evoke in their artistic expressions and how they act on stage do not necessarily reflect their private and daily lives. There is a distinction between the artist and his/her art, his/her presentation of Muslims and Islam and how he/she is as a Muslim. In addition, McMurray (2008) emphasized the role of the audience perception to give meaning to artists' productions and artists' identifications as well. Some people may identify artists as Muslims even though the artists are not clear about their own Muslim identity. She argued as well that some non-Muslims might even not identify some artists as Muslims or recognize references to Islam.

In the academic literature, different facets of Muslim artists are put forward. Jiwa (2010) considered Muslim artists as "cultural brokers", in-between artists, in the sense that they identify themselves as a minority in "the West" and blur the boundaries of arts and Islam by working against artistic norms and an essentialization of Muslim identity. El Asri (2009; 2011) depicted these artists in terms of representatives of the views of contemporary European forms of Islam and Islamic identities. He characterized Muslim artists in terms of religious interlocutors, "social and religious mediators" (p.414), and "interfaces of an intra-European identity dialogue" (p.523). Boubekeur (2007) embedded Muslim artists in a more general framework of "Islamic Society of the spectacle" in which artists represent an ethical Islamic authority in the public sphere through their notoriety.

Hence, the designation "Muslim artists" embeds a large number of profiles and artistic practices. However, some traits seem to be shared among the artists who identify as Muslim and display Islam in their productions. First, they display multiple facets of Muslim identities and of current forms of Islam through their artistic expressions (El Asri, 2011). In addition, following El Asri (2011)'s claim, the transversal characteristic of the productions of European Muslim artists could almost be the "fusion, even 'confusion'" of artistic genres (p.81) thus, hybridity.

2.2.3. In which structural frames do "Muslim artists" have to position themselves?

Artistic productions are anchored in social, cultural, political and economic realities, in a specific historical and social context. The identities the artists display in their art depend on where they display

their art but also on the political and historical context more generally (Jiwa, 2010). Studying Muslim artists requires to analyze the global context in which they perform.

Currently, Muslim artists have to position themselves within and against normative frames and images linking Islam and Muslims with terrorism, violence, the region of Middle East, veiling, and patriarchy (Jiwa, 2010). Indeed, ideas of Muslims as stuck in the past, bearing anti-democratic values and not respecting women rights as opposition to the West symbolized by modernity, secularity and democracy characterize the Orientalist ideology that have transpired historically in general culture, artistic works, academic literature, societal institutions, etc. (Saïd, postface of 2003), which have led to processes of inferiorization, essentialization and otherization of the Muslim communities in the European and US contexts. More specifically, in these contexts, the headscarf some Muslim women may wear has been the object of many social and political debates. Since the colonial period, the headscarf has been depicted as a sign of submission of Muslim woman, and a proof of the backwardness of Islam and its incompatibility with western values (Behiery, 2017). Some authors refer to these social constructions as a phenomenon of racialization of Muslims and even a racialization of their religion which has led to a form of racism referred to as Islamophobia (Garner & Selod, 2015). Throughout history, Islam and the Muslims have been constructed as "the others" in a way that have brought reject and fear. As a reaction, some minorities chose to claim politically their racialization in order to reappropriate their identity and being defined by themselves (Garner & Selod, 2015). Therefore, the question of who has the power to define who is at stake.

Moreover, authors agree to take 9/11 as a determinant marker of time in the Euro-American context. It opened a new era of negative stereotypes against Muslims and Islam, the belief and political use of the image of Muslims as a threat (Khabeer, 2016), and have consequently brought public controversies. Therefore, this date is a determining factor to consider issues related to Muslim identity, belonging, and representations (Jiwa, 2010). Indeed, according to Jiwa (2010), in the post 9/11 context emerged a stronger identification as "Muslim" among artists, as a "discriminated-against minority identity in the West" (p.79). Consequently, after 9/11, confronted to stereotypes and prejudice, Muslims have been reclaiming their self-definition through internet and artistic practices such as music (Poutiainen & Rantakallio, 2016).

2.2.4. Which roles do Muslim artists play?

Muslim artists stand out for their claimed adherence to Islam. Some Muslim artists show a "reassuring" Islam and consequently may have an influence in the public space in different ways: they are a Muslim interface with a special insight on the realities of Muslims, they present a model of Islam to follow for the youth, and they appease negative public opinions (El Asri, 2011). Hence, they

display "another Islam" and in that sense, they contest negative and/or dominant ideas in order to reappropriate the Islamic discourse. Some artists even intend to bond people together and contribute to the development of a feeling of belonging to the Muslim community, the *ummah* (El Asri, 2011). Moreover, they may take on the roles of pedagogical figures.

Muslim artists as claimants for social justice

In artistic expressions, and in particular in rap music, according to Amghar (2003), "Islam is a means for endorsing a social discourse based on a religious logic" (p.82). Indeed, scholars (Amghar, 2003; El Asri, 2011; Aidi, 2014; Poutiainen & Rantakallio, 2016; Ali, 2017) showed the importance of artistic media to engage in a fight for social justice for marginalized populations, and especially the Muslim youth in need to express themselves. Aidi (2014) studied the activism of the Muslim youth through music, a "rebel music", in order to protest against western policies and frames in the context of war on terror. Poutiainen & Rantakallio (2016) showed that through Muslim hip-hop, artists discuss socio-economic issues by contesting, for example, racism, violence, power structures and denouncing poor conditions. El Asri (2011) also claimed that Muslim hip-hop artists denounce social, but also political and religious situations, such as the maintenance of ghettos, the structural discrimination, the controversy about the headscarves, feeling of Islamophobia, the Israel-Palestine conflict, etc.. Through rap music, namely, Muslim artists try to give another view of Islam and of the youth from the suburbs than the one in dominant media. Especially, some artists make explicitly reference to 9/11 and react to how Islam and Muslims, along with the youth from the ghettos and minorities with an immigration background, are negatively depicted after that event and propose an engaged, more conscious and protest music (El Asri, 2011). According to Ali (2017), arts are not (only) entertainment, but an inspiration for people to re-imagine their world in a social justice fight.

Through arts, Islam is not anymore confined within mosques or places only for the affiliated, but is also presented on stage, on Internet, etc., in short, in the public sphere (Boubekeur, 2007). Global cities represent strategic spaces for artistic actions. Disempowered actors engage in new political processes at the sub-national level through arts and militancy inspired by their faith. Such new modes of politics link together local and transnational communities in sub-national spaces and thus create a "new geography of politics" (Ali, 2017: 355) in a context of globalization and social segmentations. Together, Muslim artists re-imagine the public space by making it theirs. Art and religion have a transformative power and allow connections between the local and the global (Ali, 2017).

Muslim artists as reformers and representatives of current Muslim subjectivities and Islam

Through their notoriety, especially among the youngsters, Muslim artists may have become a new "Muslim leadership" in Europe, i.e. a voice for a European Islam, and have proposed "identity models" to their audience (El Asri, 2011: 370-371). According to El Asri (2011), artists need to express their identities through music for different reasons: "The need to express identity through music is as much a personal need, a collective representation, as a media opportunity of the European models of Islam"[2] (p.38). Indeed, Muslim artists reappropriate Islamic precepts and traditions through the current reality of the youth and hence display in their arts their personal trajectories as well as new Islamic models. As all artists have a unique Muslim experience and thus construct their identities in different ways, they display a plurality of belongings to Islam in the European context (El Asri, 2011). In their arts, Muslim artists tend to address societal issues about Islam, immigration, life in suburbs, etc. and comment or even criticize issues related to international but also Islam-related news such as conflicts in Muslim countries and particularly the Israel-Palestinian one, the condition of women, relations between Muslim countries and "the West", etc.. For these reasons, the youth consider these artists as alternative media with which they can identify. The more engaged artists even take on the role of opinion leaders for public debates (El Asri, 2011).

After 9/11, confronted by stereotypes and prejudice, Muslims have been reclaiming their self-definition through internet and artistic practices such as music (Poutiainen & Rantakallio, 2016: 197). Some artists feel a form of "moral duty" that leads them to unveil their Muslim identities and contesting negative images of Islam (El Asri, 2011). Moreover, according to Boubekeur (2007), a major challenge consisted in the redefinition of the Muslim identity after Islamism and getting along with the Muslim multicultural heritage. In France, young politically engaged Muslims have tried to construct their identity against stigmas of "old Islamist rhetorics" and rather prefer a "cool Islam" (pp. 75-76). This notion of "coolness" also appeared in Khabeer (2016)'s study. He named "Muslim Cool" the group of US Muslims resisting and contesting through hip hop and their Blackness the hegemonic ethno-religious norms of south Asian and Arab Muslim communities and the White American normativity. Through hip-hop, the "Cool Muslims" (Khabeer, 2016) aim to transcend the binary and racial vision between White and Black and contest current racism in the US. In order to rethink and construct their Islamic identity, artists enter in the process of destroying *clichés* with which Muslims are stuck and they review how Islamic identity has been confiscated by a number of actors such as opinion leaders, researchers and journalists (Boubekeur, 2007). By doing so, Muslim artists provide "alternative ways of thinking about identity, belonging and representation" but also "question the dominant post 9/11 US discourse of 'us and them'" (Jiwa, 2010: 83). They try to subvert hegemonic

---

2 Personal translation of : "le besoin de dire de l'identitaire par la musique est autant un besoin personnel, une représentation collective, qu'une opportunité médiatique des modèles européens de l'islam" (El Asri, 2011: 38)

narratives about Muslims as "foreign, violent and national threat" that circulate in both popular and political discourses and in the media, but instead, they propose new subjectivities through their experiences, they construct new social identities (Ali, 2017: 364). By expressing themselves, Muslim artists fight against negative frames in which Islam is stuck and binary visions.

Muslim artists as creators of links between people

According to Poutiainen & Rantakallio (2016), Muslim artists help people, in particular Muslims with similar experiences, to feel understood and no longer feel like "outsiders". In particular, the youth find in music and other visual performances a way to identify and make up with Islam and their Muslim identities. In that sense, Muslim artists have also a role of transmission of religion, along with the promotion of a better and appeased Islam (El Asri, 2011). Muslim artists also may try to restore a feeling of belonging to a Muslim community, the *ummah* (Poutiainen & Rantakallio, 2016).

Moreover, Muslim engagement and cultural productions lead to a co-construction of identities of Muslims and non-Muslims, thanks to the sharing of personal stories and creating new visions of the self and of the world, in other words, by reshaping subjectivities. Thereby, Muslims are not seen more as the uncivilized and dangerous Others (Ali, 2017). Eventually, as Muslim artists assemble different repertoires and come from different group identifications, they promote a large sense of belonging (Boubekeur, 2007).

Muslim artists as educational figures

Arts making and arts displaying can take the form of an educating process, therefore it is important for some Muslim artists to not spread bad interpretations of Islam but represent it well (Ali, 2017). Due to a sense of responsibility towards the young audience and the urge to present publicly an "ethical" Islam, a positive Islam, some artists particularly pay attention to their production and the reception of their music (El Asri, 2011). In that sense, Muslim artists become "mediators between the society and religion" who fight against what they find to be distorting images of Islam (El Asri, 2011: 414). Rap music can be an educational tool, relaying pedagogical discourses and civic actions (El Asri, 2011). According to Amghar (2003), Muslim rappers carry a pedagogical mission as they urge the youth, especially the youth from the suburbs, to do positive actions. As they know the youth reality in the suburbs and all of their codes, these rappers take the place of imams and make Islam understandable and reachable for the youngsters. These Muslim rappers expose their own translations and experiences with the Islamic religion to bring Islam closer to populations such as the youth from the suburbs and non-Muslims: "rap makes it possible to renew a religious discourse by making it

accessible to Muslim and non-Muslim populations alike"[3] (Amghar, 2003: 86). Even though rappers are sometimes accused of the promotion of radicalization and violence, some Muslim rappers do quite the contrary. Indeed, rappers like Medine or Soprano draw a distinction between Islam and terrorism and condemn the misconceptions about Islam Hence, Muslim artists propose ethical models for being Muslim (El Asri, 2011). Poutiainen & Rantakallio (2016) claimed that Muslim hip-hop, when it is used wisely, is a means for educating Muslim youth by promoting ethics, morality and by helping the youth to construct their identity and self-awareness. *Halal* music is helpful in cultivating a share identity of Muslims and a certain pride of being Muslim.

In addition, in Belgium, different theater plays have been created and presented as counter-radicalization tools. Among these plays, there are "Djihad" produced by Ismael Saïdi, "Nour, pourquoi je n'ai rien vu venir" created by Rachid Benzine, and "Nadia", which has the particularity to be an initiative of the European Theater Convention with the collaboration of several European countries (Glowacz & Collard, 2019).

2.2.5. What about women Muslim artists?

In the academic literature, there are very few studies on women Muslim artists, and on women in the artistic fields more generally. Hence, this chapter is only based on the presence of Muslim women in music (El Asri, 2011; McMurray, 2008) and in contemporary visual arts (Behiery, 2017).

 In the music world, Muslim women are quite discreet on stage, even though there are more and more numerous. They began to appear on stage in the 1980-1990's and even more in the 2000-2010's. Sometimes, only their veil uncovers their practice of Islam. In France, and corollary in Belgium, most of female Muslim artists are R&B vocalists who do not show their belonging to Islam in their productions, or pop music singers. They are under-represented in rap music, as hip-hop culture is very macho. Generally, female rappers are quite inexperienced and young, even teenagers. They either tend to introduce a new vision of suburbs and speak about issues such as rape, the place of the women in the suburbs, domestic abuses, etc. or they tend to masculinize their attitudes and conform to their male peers in order to be granted legitimate access (El Asri, 2011). Two reasons why Muslim women are marginalized are the popular images of the Muslim women and the gender roles promoted by the music industry. For example, it is acceptable for men to act in an "un-Islamic" way in hip-hop culture, which means to display ideas about consumption of alcohol or drugs and the presence of highly sexualized women near them. Women have rather conflicting roles, both the role of the Muslim "good

---

[3] Personal translation of : le rap permet de "renouveler un discours religieux en le rendant accessible à des populations musulmanes ou non" (Amghar, 2003 : 86).

girl" and, especially for Black Muslim women, of a hyper-sexualized figure in videos (McMurray, 2008).

Additionally, symbolically, in Islam world, there is a structural separation between the public and private spheres: male voices are more heard in the public sphere while female voices stay in the private sphere. Nowadays, this separation is no longer relevant, as female singers are seen everywhere in the Muslim world. However, women artists have to fight more than men for their legitimacy as artists, as their public appearances lead to moral considerations. Consequently, women artists have to seek legitimization not only as an artist, but also as a female artist. They suffer even more from a social pressure due to the Islamic moral and Muslim collective unconsciousness that condemn such a visibility of Muslim women, especially among Maghrebi customs, and the machismo of their male peers. In addition, there are more controversies about Muslim female artists than male artists, as they make even more visible their religious practice especially by wearing the headscarf, and because of the ideas they convey (El Asri, 2011).

Some women artists claim the recognition of their Muslim identity even though they do not wear the veil, as in the case of McMurray (2008), researcher and artist, who even denounced the representation of the Muslim woman as a veiled Middle-Eastern woman. On the contrary, other women artists put forward their veil in their arts especially after 9/11. Some women may display their veil as a reply to orientalist and colonialist representations, following a strategy of provocation and protestation. The veil claimed in that way become a sign of artists' plural identities, cultural backgrounds or even the will to counter negative stereotypes and the reappropriation of the objectified image of the Muslim woman by claiming their agency (Behiery, 2017).

To conclude, the (even discreet) presence of Muslim women on stage is evidence of a "gradual reduction in moral and ethical brakes and religious norms, but also the impact of social constraints which are indirectly or directly applied to women and which define a new relation to gender."[4] (El Asri, 2011 : 236).

2.3.   Muslim identities and Islam in contemporary forms of arts

2.3.1.   Artistic forms in which Muslim artists invest themselves

The academic literature on Muslim artist is mainly based on music, in particular on hip-hop culture. The musical forms European Muslim artists have especially expressed themselves through traditional Islamic music, along with urban music, such as rap and slam, R&B, pop and reggae. Especially, urban music leaves more place for life stories (El Asri, 2011), and rap is a privileged

---

[4] Personal translation of : "Ces présences témoignent d'une réduction progressive des freins moraux et normatifs religieux, mais aussi de l'impact des contraintes sociales qui sont indirectement ou directement appliquées à la femme et qui définissent un nouveau rapport aux genres. " (El Asri, 2011: 236)

vector of social protest for Muslim minorities' artists (Amghar, 2003). According to Aidi (2014), the encounter between Islam and hip-hop is a powerful force for the current youth culture. Indeed, hip-hop culture enables artists to create alternative spaces to express their resistance and to access capital (McMurray, 2008). Second and subsequent generations of migrants have a special affinity with hip hop culture as it is a way to feel symbolically connected and to identify with the marginalized of a given society. It enables the youth to assert a rebellious identity. Hip-hop culture, and corollary rap music, is closely linked to the identity claims of minorities, popular claims, and is anchored in racial debates (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2010). This artistic form takes roots within US African-American urban communities and has been a means for black African-American minorities to resist to dominant culture and norms, and to claim their identity. Rap music has spread quickly to the entire US society, and then around the world (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2010).

Even though the literature is not very dense, theatrical performances can also be vectors for social transformations as they have the potential to display social problems to the audience and to raise awareness about them. On stage, artists can also deal with issues of identities, belongings and bond themselves with their audience (Glowacz & Collard, 2019).

Some Muslim artists may use theater as a counter-radicalization tool: they bring awareness of their audience to social problems, such as radicalization, through an entertaining setting. Indeed, by depicting realistically on stage processes of radicalization, these artists bring knowledge to their audience, lead the youth to question and think about this issue and to stand back from that situation. Through such preventive and awareness-raising theater along with emotional and cognitive connections with their audience, artists might contribute to a change in attitudes and behaviors of some target populations. Sometimes, debates are even organized after the theatrical performances (Glowacz & Collard, 2019).

Some postcolonial artists' productions consist of a critique of the western norms and western art history and question in that sense the power in the fields of arts (Jiwa, 2010). The artistic form of theater is recognized as taking roots in the Greek Antiquity performances. Thus, in Europe, it is seen within a western-centric history of arts and migrant minorities have to conform with the dominant western codes and aesthetics (Kouyaté, in "décolonisons les arts!", 2018). These minorities have to evolve in an "Orientalist theatrical modernity" (Hinda, 2018). The norms define the practices, the organization of the space, the aesthetics, what makes sense and what is relevant (Gay, in "décolonisons les arts!", 2018). Even the language obeys to norms (Doumbia, in "décolonisons les arts!, 2018).

Therefore, some artists might take the floor and challenge the western theatrical norms and critique the elitism that is too often present in the theatrical world. Some are involved in "action theater" groups. This inclusive, participative and political theatrical form is made for "socially or

culturally disadvantaged people", thus, enabling minorities to express themselves. Indeed, this theatrical form put to the fore social and cultural diversity, and not the dominant culture and privileged actors anymore. It allows marginalized and non-professional people to express themselves and look for social transformation, or at least, to provoke thoughts about their reality (Brahy, 2009, 2014).

2.3.2. Muslim identities in arts

"Being European Muslim": negotiated identities through arts

In recent years, the Muslim youth have expressed and constructed their Muslim identity through their music in particular, but also through other artistic expressions. Their artistic expressions reveal how they experience being Muslim currently in Europe. Also, their migration history constitutes a *social ethos* and an important thematic for the artistic productions of Muslim artists (El Asri, 2011).

Through their arts, Muslim artists illustrate different realities of "European Muslims" (El Asri, 2011). First, they unveil the current Islamic *way-of-life* that characterizes the daily life of Muslims in European countries. Also, they uncover the transformations of Muslim cultural aspects as well as the relation with Islamic sources such as Islamic normativity and moral. Indeed, artists experience and appropriate the different approaches of Islam mainly through their own subjectivities and daily realities. Muslim artists display ways of presenting oneself as Muslim in Europe as they mobilize multiple Islamic principles and practices that merge in complex ways with personal trajectories, personal experiences of being Muslim in Europe, traditional as well as contemporary artistic forms and the cultural context of production (El Asri, 2011). Hence, Muslim artists "participate in highlighting and even building a way of being a European Muslim"[5] (El Asri, 2011: 409).

This Muslim identity claimed in arts can be a part of the Muslim artists' identity exploration, and can also be seen as a way for Muslim artists to distance themselves from dominant religious norms and to stand out in society and from other artists. Aidi (2014) explained that Islam in music can serve as an "anti-imperial idiom". Amghar (2003) drew these conclusions in his study on rappers' identity quest in France. Their Muslim claims stand as a strategy to distance themselves from the majority of rappers. Also, Islam is presented as a voice of a minority and particularly, as a religion greatly practiced in the suburbs, which ultimately transpires in rap music, as this genre takes historical roots in suburbs among racialized populations. In the same vein, El Asri (2011) emphasized the link since the origins between Islam and rap as a religious identification but also as a political conviction, as a way to distance oneself from the religion of the "dominant White" (p. 184). Thus, the Muslim identity can be considered as a rebellious identity which "is above all an uncertain, fragile identity, which is said to

---

[5] Personal translation of : "qui participe à mettre en évidence, voire à construire une manière d'être musulman européen." (El Asri, 2011: 409)

build itself, to reassure itself and to interact with the world."[6] (El Asri, 2011: 39). Additionally, Muslim artists may put forward their Muslim identity with the aim to defend Islam in front of the host society, which might be reluctant to see Islam in the public sphere (El Asri, 2011). Thus, putting forward their hybrid Muslim identity enable Muslim artists to stand out from normative frameworks and dominant religious and secular ideas, and to promote alternative stories on Islam. .

2.3.3. Islam in arts

The individualization of Islamic practice, especially among the youth, has led to new forms of religiosity and new relationships between art and religion. Indeed, this new way to practice Islam can occur through artistic expressions and give way to a "pietization of art" (Nieuwkerk, 2008). For example, rap music has consisted in a way for the youth to reappropriate their faith through music and through the reality of the European context and suburbs. In that way, the youth do not reproduce the religiosity of their parents but rather musicalize their Islam (Amghar, 2003). What roles does Islam play in contemporary forms of arts?

Islam as unifier of identities

Islam can be seen as a "unifying force for good that transcends ethno-racial boundaries" (Ali, 2017: 361). Islam displayed in the arts enable the youth from different backgrounds to feel part of the same community and to practice the Islamic religion. Indeed, Amghar (2003) illustrated in his study on Muslim rappers in France how Islamic rap is a means to help the youth with an immigration background and consequently with a fragmented cultural identity to reconnect with Islam and to find a united identity through the symbolic unity of the Muslim community. Islamic rap helps the youth to feel a sense of belonging with the *ummah* and thus, to constitute a collective and united Islamic identity. Aidi (2014) came to the same conclusion while studying Muslim urban youth culture in the US. He claimed that Islam provides a sense of belonging for the marginalized youth in the western context.

Islam in all its multiplicity

Muslim artists mobilize Islam in their artistic productions in different ways. The presence of Islam can take different forms –visual or textual, in the lyrics and texts, in the composition of music, in the

---

[6] Personal translation of : "L'identitaire musulman européen se construit au travers du filtre musical par bricolage, dans un climat tendu entre la société d'accueil et les prestataires de musique, mais aussi par une volonté de défense inconditionnelle de l'islam. L'identité rebelle est avant tout une identité incertaine, fragile et qui se dit pour se construire, se rassurer et interagir avec le monde." (El Asri, 2011 : 39)

setting, etc. – Islam can be interpreted through different approaches, and can be mobilized for the formation of identities within specific context and personal trajectories (El Asri, 2011). In arts, Islam is shown in all its multiplicity and fluidity.

El Asri (2011) found out five ways in which Islam is mobilized through the arts : as a direct reference to the Islamic faith of the artist, as a goal to be achieved or an invitation to access it, the use of a "Islam of proximity" to speak about a more "general" and traditional Islam, as a rebellious Islam in front of a feeling of oppression and an essentialization of Muslims as violent or threats and even discriminations, and finally, in a civilization approach and through references to history and great figures of Islam.

In addition, Muslim artists mobilize a variety of themes related to Islam. They can speak about their own experience with Islam and about their Islamic faith, explain and denounce the reality of Muslims in local and European context such as the discriminations they face or Islamophobia, or even about more global events and in that case, some artists criticize certain images covered by dominant media (television, newspapers, Internet, etc.) about global news related to the Muslim world and take political stances (El Asri, 2011).

In her study on Black Muslim women and hip-hop, McMurray (2008) insisted on the fluidity of Islam. Indeed, depending on the context, Islam "is malleable enough to hold multiple meanings in various contexts, while still having some coherence or recognizable structures across communities" (p.75). Thus, this fluidity of Islam shows that artists are able to shape their faith within a particular cultural context and a particular form of art (McMurray, 2008).

Islam as contribution of new artistic forms in interaction with global culture

Islam can be a norm setter for artworks. Indeed, El Asri (2009; 2011) studied the religious norms that influence Muslim artists' music. He pointed out three major attitudes regarding the Islamic norms in classical and contemporary music, according to how artists position themselves towards Islamic normativity and their religious exploration through music. These three positions are the following: a prohibition and systematic reject towards the practice and consumption of music; restrictive and selective consumptions of music due mainly to moral issues; and the perspective of music as a beautiful and sensitive means of expression, not necessarily following the religious normativity. However, even though some European Muslim artists do not claim an explicit religious attachment in their music, they are influenced by the historical and conceptual Islamic backgrounds, the religious normativity and morality, or by the pressure of the Muslim community throughout the processes of creation, production, display, and promotion of their music. Thus, El Asri (2011) noted that "European Muslims are uncomfortable with their relationship to music" because of the attempts to comply with

the religious norms which seems impossible (El Asri, 2011: 16). As a result, Muslim artists produce new forms of music, through religious *bricolages* within their art (El Asri, 2011). In the US context, Khabeer (2016) demonstrated that some Muslims, the ones he called "Cool Muslims" deny the *haram* character of hip hop as they place hip hop in a historical Islamic Afro-American tradition. Often, what make the music seen as *haram* are the content of the lyrics and the presence of sexual suggestiveness (Nieuwkerk, 2008).

In that sense, European Muslim artists contribute to the construction of new forms of music which are shaped by Islamic norms and codes, and while these new musical forms are culturally hybrid, they are globalized as well (El Asri, 2009; 2011) and thus contribute to global culture. Indeed, migrants as cultural producers reframe the mainstream culture in diverse cities and influence cultural policies. Their art is also shaped by this mainstream culture (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2015). Islamic artistic productions are no exception, as they are shaped by the global context but also become part of the global culture in a given society. Boubekeur (2007) stated that Muslim artists' cultural and artistic productions become a contribution to global culture as they become an asset for Muslims to engage politically in the public sphere, and to make connections with non-Muslims and professional partners. Islam in cultural and artistic productions "aligns itself with the dominant values and frameworks in order to compete with them from within" (Boubekeur, 2007: 94). Artists propose a new ethical Islam in the public sphere as a contribution to the global culture (Boubekeur, 2007).

2.4.   Concluding remarks and research questions

To conclude this theoretical section, here are some considerations. The literature about minorities and arts is quite recent and still underdeveloped and neglected (Dimaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2015; Martiniello, 2015). As for Muslim artists, music and in particular rap music have been studied the most in the US and in Europe. As for Belgium, El Asri is the main reference. He occupies thus a great place in this theoretical section, as the literature on Muslim artists is not very dense. Few authors also studied visual arts, but the relationship between theatrical performances and Muslim artists seems to be less –if it already has been-, discussed. However, artists made theirs theatrical scenes to talk about Islam and Muslim identities in Belgium. As for the gender perspective, few studies shed light on female Muslim artists, and more globally on women artists. This research will thus focus on theater performances and pay attention to gender specificities regarding the Muslim identities displayed on stage.

El Asri (2011) only studied musical expressions but claimed that even though Muslims have expressed themselves particularly through music, they did so through different cultural and artistic forms as well, which uncovers a Muslim presence in the European culture. Hence, for the sake of my

study, I am assuming that theater performances can be studied as relevant sites of expression and exploration of Muslim identities, as it is the case for music, and as sites in which artists propose their own narratives differing from the dominant ones.

With this research, the initial and global purpose is to understand the roles of French-speaking "Muslim artists" when staging Muslim identities through theater currently in Belgium. It will explore how these artists stage Muslim identities in theater. A special attention will be paid to how women Muslim artists stage Muslim women identities. More specifically, this research aims to shed light on how these artists contribute in current public debates on Muslims through theater.

3. Methodological approach

In this section, my subjectivity as researcher will be taken into consideration. Indeed, I will first explore my position towards the subject of this study as I will always interpret what I see and what I read according to my specific point of view, which is anchored in a specific context, at a certain time, in a certain place, product of a personal experience intertwined with consolidated frames. I will also present the progress of the problematization in which my subjectivity also plays a role. In a second step, the methodology, methods, collection and analysis of the data, and a presentation of the artists met for the sake of this research will be at the center. To conclude, the methodological limitations will be explored.

3.1. Position towards the study

It was during the first information session about a theater project on Muslims in Ras-el-Hanout, a theater association situated in Brussels, when I fully realized how challenging my positionality was. I was the only White, blond, non-Muslim girl standing among veiled women, most of them Maghrebi. When I asked if it wasn't a problem if I took part in the project, one of the moderators responded to me it was not, they rather promoted diversity in their association. For the first time of my life, I was the representative of diversity.

I was born and raised in the French-speaking part of Belgium, in a Judeo-Christian culture, and I grew up without Muslims among my family, close friends or neighbors. Actually, I got to know Islam through images I first watched on TV and from what I read in dominant media and later through the academic literature. I grew up in a climate of war on terror, in the 2000's. When I was a teenager, terrorism and jihadism were some of the favorite subjects of the media and political discourses. When I entered at the university in 2015, debates about Islam and radicalization were at their paroxysm and I began to make the link between what was claimed as jihadism in media and the Islamic religion practiced by millions of Muslims around the world. Why do we have to see *all* Muslims as such terrorists? Why do we have to demonize an entire religion? Why are there such misconceptions? It seemed so unfair to me. These naïve considerations marked the beginning of my deeper researches about Islam, Muslims in Europe, and anti-Muslim attitudes. For my master thesis, I switched from how Muslims are constructed as "the Others" to how Muslim artists display and define their identities on stage.

For the sake of this master thesis, the biggest challenge was that I am an outsider. I only knew Islam and Muslims' experiences indirectly through texts, mainly written by western scholars as I've been mainly exposed to western production of knowledge but not through experience. My fieldwork

took place in unfamiliar sites for me and I had to gain the trust of the artists so that they could talk to me freely. Meeting these artists was thus a challenge to me for several reasons. First, I have the phenotype of a northern European woman and I am not Muslim. It had an influence on how I have been perceived by my interlocutors and my introduction to them. Secondly, I studied unfamiliar sites and had to cope with unfamiliar codes. Most of all, I had to remind myself during every step of my research the influences of my positionality, my western frames and western academic education based mainly on the knowledge produced by western White men on my way to collect data, to understand it, to analyze it, to write analyses, and present my work to my readers.

Surprisingly, who I am and how I look like had some positive aspects for the sake of the collection of my material. First, talking with Muslim women artists was quite easy, as they could feel comfortable with me. I noticed that through the wearing of the headscarf. One of the female artists decided not to wear it while she was talking only with me. Also, my interest towards Muslim identities on stage aroused some curiosity, which led some of the artists to offer their help for my study and even to accept to discuss with me because of that. Of course, I suspect some artists I tried to reach may have rejected my interview request for that reason, among many others.

I wondered if I was in the right position to write "about" Muslim artists. I came to the conclusion that I have the methodological, critical and reflexive skills as a student in sociology to take part in the visibilization of these artists through an academic study, as long as I take into account my positionality and systematically reflect on it. So, I intended to recall as much as possible my position as researcher but also my will to co-construct knowledge *along with* the artists I met for the sake of this study and not placing myself in a superior position. The method I chose allowed me to do that.

3.2.   Progress of the problematization

The starting point of this master thesis was the concept of "Muslim artists". My way on finding a proper problematization was quite messy, as my first error was to wait too long before beginning my fieldwork. Everything was clearer once I started a proper fieldwork.

First, I was willing to study the social and political roles of French-speaking Muslim artists who speak about Islam and Muslim identities through music and theater, in Belgium and base my research on interviews. Then, the coronavirus pandemic disrupted all my plans related to my fieldwork. I decided to focus on what I could find online and what the artists and cultural institutions were willing to send me. Hence, I focused on the analysis of artistic performances. Later, I was able to meet some artists, and could discuss with them my interpretations and also more general subjects.

Major milestones occurred after the review of the existing literature. I chose to focus on theater only for several reasons. First, this artistic form has not been studied regarding Muslim identities, contrary to music. In-depth analysis is thus needed; therefore I preferred to focus only on theater. Secondly, artists with a Muslim background largely expressed themselves through theater in Belgium, and some of the artists have known a huge success that goes beyond the borders of Belgium, such as Ismael Saidi with his theater play "Djihad". Thirdly, my subjectivity intervened to make the choice to focus only on theater as I am familiar with this artistic form. The last reason is practical: I was willing to add stand-ups and slam to my research but I focused on theater because of the material available and on the artists with whom I could conduct an interview. Moreover, I found absolutely striking how poor the studies about women in the fields of arts and the almost inexistence of studies on Women Muslim artists. Consequently, I decided to pay a special attention to women Muslim artists.

While doing my fieldwork, I focused only on the visions of Muslim identities and not anymore on presentations of Islam as the artists claimed to talk about their own experiences and were not willing to be seen as expert or representative of Islams. So, I conducted my fieldwork by focusing on the visions of Muslim identities displayed in theater performances. The general question of the roles of the artists guided my fieldwork. Later, I decided to focus more specifically on how artists with a Muslim background take part in public debates on Muslims. Moreover, throughout my fieldwork and analysis, I paid attention to the positions of the artists with regard to dominant media and political discourses and their relation with the context, and at the same time I focused on the sense they gave to the identities they stage, their own identities, and their commitment as artists.

3.3. Methodological process

For this study, I chose a qualitative and inductive methodology, following a parallel design. According to Corbin & Strauss (2008), a qualitative analysis consists of "a process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (p.11). With this research, my aim was to understand what meanings artists attribute to their artistic productions while taking into account the structural aspects in which they evolve and how the artists position themselves. The methods used are the Grounded Theory Method combined with a particular attention to the visual aspects of the theater plays and videos related to the artists and their artworks. For the sake of the fieldwork, I conducted four virtual and one face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews between August and October 2020 and realized a participant observation from September 2020 in a theater association called Ras-el-Hanout based in Molenbeek, Brussels.

3.3.1. Methods used

I followed the Grounded Theory Method as I studied it with Mister Lejeune and took as reference his book "Manuel d'analyse qualitative" (2014). This method allows a lot of space for the reflexivity of the researcher at each step of the study and places the actors met in the center of the process. Indeed, this method aims to "understand the actors from the way they live and understand what is happening to them"[7] (Lejeune, 2014: 20) without any intention to count or classify. The most important characteristic of this method is to take how actors make sense of their experience and/or lives seriously. The researcher digs into what they live, feel and experience as the basis of the theorization process. Hence, the study follows a parallel design: the empirical analysis drives the research. The researcher simultaneously collects their empirical material, analyzes it and produces their conceptualizations (Lejeune, 2014). Additionally, a special attention must be paid to external events as, following Strauss & Corbin (2008), "to understand experience, that experience must be located within and can't be divorced from the larger events in a social, political, cultural, racial, gender-related, informational, and technological framework" (p.17).

Furthermore, I studied Muslim identities displayed by the artists through their discourses, when artists directly refer to the Islamic religion or through historical and contemporary Muslim experiences, but also through the bodies and musical, decorative, clothing, and interpretative choices, through how the artists present themselves to their audience. Thus, I paid a special attention to the visual aspects.

3.3.2. Fieldwork and conceptualization

To begin with, I collected written documents produced by the artists themselves, namely some theater scripts and the educational/press dossiers linked to the theater performances. I also contacted theaters and associations in order to get the video recordings of the theater plays I intended to study. Furthermore, I conducted virtual semi-structured interviews with four artists between August and October 2020 and one interview face-to-face (see the interview guides in Appendix 1). The goal was to talk with the artists about the content and the visual aspects of their theater play, the sense they give to their art, how they define themselves, and their position towards the Muslim community. As I aimed to study both men and women artists, I paid attention to reach both genders. To conclude my interviews, I asked the artists what they thought about the concept "Muslim artist" in an attempt of co-deconstruction and co-construction of this conceptualization together. Indeed, I wanted to challenge this academic concept by taking into account the narratives of the artists I met and emphasize the dynamic nature of Muslim definitions. I intended to focus on the artists only and not on their audience

---

[7] Personal translation of "comprendre les acteurs en partant de la façon dont ils vivent et appréhendent ce qui leur arrive " (Lejeune, 2014 : 20).

for several reasons. First, I chose to study how they stage Muslim identities and their relation to Islams and the Muslim community. Also, I explored how they intended or not to contribute to the public debates linked to Muslims. Second, I couldn't reach the audience as I didn't manage to attend the theatrical performances for two reasons: (I) I studied and lived in Barcelona when the theater plays were presented in Belgium and (II) When I had the time to conduct my fieldwork, due to the sanitary situation, theater plays couldn't take place.

As for ethical issues, I paid attention to inform the artists I met that I was going to record them for the sake of my study. I first informed them while I was getting in touch with them and reiterated it before each interview. I also asked if they preferred being anonymous or not and let them know they could change their mind and inform me about their choice at any time before I submit my master thesis.

For the sake of my fieldwork, I also joined a theater project in the association Ras-el-Hanout. This project consists of the translation of academic knowledge on Muslim Critical Studies into theater plays and began at the end of September. I consider my implication in this project as participant observation. Indeed, I met and worked with a few artists who identify themselves as Muslims and who are willing to work on Muslim issues within the theater association Ras-el-Hanout. Also, it familiarizes me with the process of the collective creation of a theater play, and with action-theater.

As for my analysis, I studied the theater plays, namely the script, the visual aspects and the educational/press dossier. In total, I studied six theater plays. My criteria for the choice of these theater plays were the following: first, it had to be theater plays in which Muslim identities or Islam were explicitly staged, secondly it had to be theater plays written by French-speaking artists with a Muslim background, and finally, it had to be recent -approximately in the last five years- theater plays performed in Belgium. Hence, I studied "Djihad" of Ismael Saidi, written in 2014, two theater plays created by members of Ras-el Hanout, namely "De Bruxelles à La Mecque" collectively written and played in 2019 and "Chuut" collectively written and played in 2020, and "Cerise sur le ghetto" written in 2019-2020 and currently played by Sam Touzani. I also chose to study "Lettres à Nour" and "Pour en finir avec la question musulmane" written by Rachid Benzine, a French-Moroccan Islamic scholar, and played in Belgian theaters respectively in 2017 and 2018 (see the Appendix 2 for a presentation of the theater plays). What's more, I talked about the theater plays, among other subjects, with Salim Haouach, Souhaïla Amri, Ismael Saidi, and Sam Touzani. Rachid Benzine replied negatively when I tried to reach him for an interview. I also conducted an interview with Nadia, a woman artist who identify herself as Muslim but who has never taken part in a theater play in which Muslim identities are the main subjects on stage. I completed my study with online interviews, information about the theater plays or documents produced by the artists. Indeed, nowadays, internet is largely used to share

videos and images of artistic performances. It is thus an interesting source for collecting information and data.

It has to be noted that working with artists was not an easy undertaking, especially because I wasn't able to physically meet them and go to see them on stage. First, artists have a busy agenda and meeting a sociology student might not be one of their priorities, especially in time of the covid pandemic. Secondly, speaking about their faith and religious identities they display may be seen as too personal for some of them. Also, some artists I got in touch with were not available or not interested in my study.

3.3.3. Presentation of the artists met

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with five artists during the fieldwork, from August to October 2020. Of course, the choice was left to each artist to choose if they preferred to stay anonymous or not during the interview. Four of these interviews were conducted virtually and one of them took place in Brussels. Here is a presentation of the artists met:

- Salim Haouach, virtually met on the 13.08.2020: artistic director and actor at "Ras-el-Hanout asbl" and one of the founders of "Ras-el-Hanout asbl" in 2010; began to play theater at university; in his 30's; lives in Brussels (comes from Molenbeek-Saint-Jean).

- Nadia, virtually met on the 19.08.2020: actor and theater coach; began to play theater when she was in comprehensive school, studied theater in L'Académie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels; 31 years old; of Moroccan origin; lives in Brussels.

- Souhaïla Amri, virtually met on the 07.09.2020: actor at "Ras-el-Hanout asbl" since 2017 and student in History; began to play theater when she was in comprehensive school; 24 years old; of Moroccan origin; lives in Brussels.

- Ismael Saidi, virtually met on the 08.10.2020: screenwriter, director, playwright, actor (cinema and theater); began to write texts at university; 44 years old; of Moroccan origin; lives in Brussels (comes from Saint-Josse-ten-Noode and Schaerbeek).

- Sam Touzani, met on the 15.10.2020 at Espace Magh: actor, author, director, dancer and choreographer; began to play theater when he was in comprehensive school; 51 years old; of Moroccan origin; lives in Brussels.

3.4. Shortcomings due to coronavirus

The cultural and artistic world has been set to pause since the beginning of the crisis caused by the Covid pandemic and the sanitary measures. Hence, most of the artists' activities have been canceled. No public performances allowed before September, no festivals during summer, the closing and then very discrete reopening of cultural and artistic associations and cultural centers, etc. hampered my fieldwork as it was planned.

I first planned to attend theater plays, try to reach in person the artists in order to ask them to meet them at one point, and then take part in cultural and artistic festivals and activities during summer. Unfortunately, as one might expect, I wasn't able to do it that way. Consequently, I had to reorganize my fieldwork. Thanks to the help of Belgian theaters and some artists, I managed to watch some theater plays on my computer screen. I focused on their in-depth analyses as revealing of the expressions and explorations of Muslim identities; additionally, I had to conduct my semi-structured interviews virtually. It has not been without difficulty, but at least I managed to speak with the artists. Thanks to the benevolence of the artists I spoke with, the results were satisfying despite the technical problems we faced.

I think the most difficult part was to get in touch with the artists. Indeed, I had to get in touch through emails or messages sent on social media. It was thus made in a very impersonal way. I would have preferred meeting these artists and introduce myself properly and explain the subject of my thesis even more clearly. It limited greatly the number of interviews.

3.5. Further methodological limitations

Even though a qualitative methodology requires no counting, this study is not based on many interviews. I think meeting artists from another origin than the Moroccan one, from other cities than Brussels, women not wearing the veil, etc. might have enriched the analysis. However, I do not think the number of interviews hampers the quality of the conclusions or the scientific value of this work, as my analyses are based only on the experience and the meaning given to them by the artists I met and the analyses of specific theater plays.

Another element to take into consideration when working with artists is the social desirability bias. Indeed, when artists chose not to be anonymous for the sake of my study, it may have an influence on their freedom of speech or at least, on their awareness of their reputation.

4. Empirical approach

This section is dedicated to the analysis of the data collected during the empirical fieldwork. First, the presence of Muslims in Belgium and in particular in Brussels will be contextualized. Secondly, it be will taken into considerations the self-definitions of artists regarding their Muslim identity, proposed the term "artists with a Muslim background" rather than "Muslim artists", and explored the sense given by these artists to their art. Thirdly, it will focus on how the Muslim identities are staged through theater, and a fourth chapter will focus on the identities of Muslim women put forward by women artists. Eventually, building on the previous analyses on Muslim identities, it will emphasize the roles of artists with a Muslim background when staging Muslim identities in theater, and specifically look at how they contribute to public debates related to Muslims.

4.1. Contextualization

Before presenting an in-depth analysis of my empirical fieldwork, the presence of Muslims in Belgium will be contextualized, as the fieldwork took place in Belgium, and especially the presence of Muslims in the cultural sphere of the diverse city of Brussels. By doing so, the aim is to understand the more general context and structures in which artists have to position themselves.

4.1.1. Muslims in Belgium

Belgium can be described as a "multination state" as it is constituted of different national subgroups with their own cultural entities, namely the Dutch- , French-, and German-speaking communities and the three regions of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital. Not only these sub-national entities make Belgium a diverse state, but also the different immigrant minorities, and among others, the religious minorities like the Muslim population. Because of a lack of data on religious affiliations in Belgium, estimates of the Muslim population are based on an extrapolation of several elements: the amount of people having migrated, their descendants, and the conversions (Torrekens, 2015). In 2015, Torrekens (2015) estimated that between 350 000 and 400 000 persons were Muslims, which corresponded to 4-5% of the national population. Belgium has been historically a Catholic-majority country. Consequently, presently, a majority in Belgium sees itself as culturally Catholic even through most of people do not practice the religion anymore (Torrekens, 2015; Burchardt & Michalowski, 2015). In this context, Islam is an immigrant religion in a state which is in a post-Catholic era and which is characterized by secularity, i.e. the state has no competence in religious matters, following the concept of separation of state and religion (Torrekens, 2015). This

secularization process led to a limitation of the religion, the faith and the religious practice to the private sphere (Rudnicka-Kassem, 2016).

The matter of integration is at stake when it comes to Muslim communities. As previously mentioned, Muslims arrived in Europe, including in Belgium, through economic migrations and later family reunifications, mainly from Maghreb countries. The number of Muslims growingly increased as Muslim migrations subsisted, second and subsequent generations were born and raised in Belgium, and conversions took place as well. Populations with a migration background have been asked since the end of the twentieth century, even for those who were born and raised in Belgium, to assimilate in the public order, and adapt to social and cultural principles of the host country. However, discrimination and economic marginalization have constituted a day-to-day reality for migrant populations and in particular for Moroccans. The ideas of failure of integration flourished in the political spectrum, and this was believed to be caused by Islam's resistance to modernity (Zemni, 2011). According to Zemni (2011), "the management of Islam is still characterised by a focus on integration amidst a growing feeling of fear and Islamophobic prejudice" (p.41). Indeed, Islam has growingly been framed as socioeconomic and cultural "problem", Muslims and Islam have been casted as threats to Belgium, and in particular in Flanders, and anti-Islamic as well as Islamophobic discourses are widespread (Zemni, 2011).

Belgian political concerns and public debates regarding to Islam and Muslims took off with the rise of the Flemish nationalist far-right wing and their racist attitudes towards non-EU foreigners, a decade before 9/11. As one might expect, this problematization of Islam has gone further since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Islam has been at the heart of media frenzy and this problematization has been spread not only in the political realm but also in popular culture. Consequently, heated debates occurred on the place and the role of religion in a secularized democratic order, and the numerous debates about the headscarf are an illustration of this (Zemni, 2011). It is within these structural aspects, which create a growing visibility and politicization of Islam, that Muslims still have to position themselves in the Belgian public space. Zemni (2011) summarized them when he claimed:

> Muslims, as we have seen, are put on the defensive as they are defined in a public debate in which they are only marginally participating. Muslims have been represented as a distinct and homogeneous community that can be separated from a broader public. The problems they confront have been reframed as inherent deficiencies within their own community, tied to Islam. Islam itself has been portrayed as external to European society and its values. This representation of Islam as something foreign to Europe, an external threat to distinctly European norms and societies, coupled with a highly tendentious and reductionist representation of Islam in European public life, have together normalised Islamophobic attitudes. (Zemni, 2011: 41).

Furthermore, in the 2010s, a new phenomenon of radicalized Belgian youngsters going to Syria led to another media frenzy and atmosphere of fear. Terrorist incidents such as in the Jewish Museum in Brussels in 2014 and in Charlie Hebdo's offices in 2015 marked the beginning of police raids throughout Belgium and a series of threats and attacks perpetrated by IS-linked terrorists during 2015. Brussels was depicted as a jihadi capital by international media after the identification of a French-Belgian IS-linked network there. As a consequence, all levels of Belgian governments reacted with deradicalization programmes (Coolsaet, 2016).

As for the cultural and artistic realm, one particularity in Belgium is the tendency to silence when it comes to the Muslim identifications in artistic expressions compared to other European countries like France or Great-Britain. Rather than the religious dimensions, the social dimensions are put forward. Moreover, Belgium is highly culturally dependent on the French cultural context. A large part of "Muslim artists" in Belgium originally comes from Morocco, as it is one of the main communities with an immigration background in Belgium (El Asri, 2011).

Hence, the story of current Muslim artists in Belgium consists of a story of migrant communities arriving in Europe, who came to work or to reunite with their family, and settle in poor urban areas. It is the story of a Muslim youth who experiences the pressure to integrate while they were born in Europe, facing discrimination and anti-Muslim rhetoric in dominant media and political discourses.

4.1.2. The case of Brussels

Brussels can be characterized by its institutional complexity due to its particular division between Flemish and Francophone bodies, and by the cosmopolitanism of its population. Indeed, Brussels can be described as a global city as more than half of the population is of foreign origin. The largest community of non-European origin is the Moroccans who mainly live in working-class neighborhoods of the city, as Brussels' residents with an immigration background are mostly from working classes. These artists with an immigration background are visible in the Brussels cultural sphere and despite the fact that they do not necessarily benefit from a broad audience, from public funding or institutional recognition, they do have some success. Indeed, they take part as individual or institutional actors in the cultural and artistic life of the capital and have been able to build an important cultural capital. However, they are still defined as "migrant artists" staging "migrant stories" (Costanzo & Zibouh, 2014).

The artists met and authors of the artistic productions studied in this research come from Brussels, and mostly from working-class neighborhoods such as Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, Schaerbeek or Saint-Josse. They put forward their Brussels reality and/or belonging, and the diversity of the city.

4.2. Being an "artist with a Muslim background" in theater

Through this study, one of the aims was to deconstruct the concept "Muslim artist" and reconstruct it regarding to the narratives of the artists met on how they define themselves and are defined. Indeed, the identification "Muslim" attached to the term "artist" uncovers social, political, cultural dimensions and does not only inform on a claimed religious affiliation. It will also investigate why some artists put forward their Muslim identifications. Also, this chapter explores the sense given by the artists to their art.

4.2.1. Recognizing one's Muslim background as an artist

To begin with, "Muslim" consists of one identification among others. The artists met insist they do not want to be reduced to their Muslim identity even though they claim their belonging to the community of Muslims and may even display it on stage. Salim explicitly insisted on that point when he said:

> *"Islam is only one of the components of the identity of many people, and so we used to present ourselves as 'Young Muslim from Brussels' and think, well, there's one of the three words that often raises questions. When we say that we are young, everyone understands that we are not old, we are from Brussels does not mean that we are against the rest of the world, and when we say we are Muslim, all of a sudden, it is about community withdrawal etc.. (...) I do not mind seeing this Muslim qualifier, it's part of my identity, but it's not only that."*[8]

Even though artists identify as Muslims, this identity trait is in interaction with their other identity traits. Their Muslim identity is situated. Ismael emphasized his different layers of identities while calling himself an "identity lasagna", and showed how his Muslim identity is situated:

> *"If you have to define me, I will tell you that I am Belgian, of Moroccan origin, of Muslim faith, of Judeo-Christian culture and that I live in a secular environment. I am a lasagna, as I told you. (...) The Muslim from Indonesia, I have nothing to say to him, I do not know who he is."*[9]

Moreover, "Muslim" is neither necessarily a religious identification nor a chosen one. Sam Touzani illustrates these facts when emphasizing he was born in a Moroccan-Muslim family and consequently was part of the Muslim community without choosing it : *"But I didn't choose. You were born a Muslim and you remain a Muslim all your life?"*[10]. However, he recognizes his Muslim identification as part of his identity even though he claims to be atheist, and shows how identity might evolve. Artists can choose to distance themselves from the religious Muslim identification while still recognizing it as a trait among others.

---

[8] See appendix 3.1.
[9] See appendix 3.2.
[10] See appendix 3.3.

In the same vein, being Muslim may go further than the religious, ethnical, or cultural dimensions as highlighted by Rudnicka-Kassem (2016). In Belgium, and more generally in the European context, being Muslim has social implications, among others. The reality of being a Muslim in the European context transpires in the subjects of theater plays, such as racism, discrimination, being target of stereotypes, etc.. In short, the reality of Muslims as a minority with ethnic-religious identifications different from the White majority and as a discriminated-against population can be a subject. Hence, bearing a Muslim identity in the European context may also inform on a social reality of the Muslim minority, which is a "discriminated-against minority in the West" (Jiwa, 2010).Therefore, one may consider the social aspect of Muslim identities along with the ethnic, cultural, and religious aspects in order to fully understand the meaning of being a "Muslim artist" in the European context, as "Muslim" may also be a social category.

Hence, "Muslim" is one identity trait among others for the artists. For the sake of this research, rather than "Muslim artist", the term "artist with a Muslim background" will be preferred, taking into account that the designation "Muslim" could include religious, cultural, ethnical (see Rudnicka-Kassem, 2016) and social dimensions (see Jiwa, 2010). Identifying an artist as "artist with a Muslim background" seems more open to self definitions from the artists, while "Muslim artist" seem too essentializing and focused on the religious affiliation.

"Artists with a Muslim background" may refer both to artists who identify as Muslims and artists who are identified as Muslims. This observation joins Conti (2012)'s definition of "Muslim" as both a claimed and assigned identification. Among the artists who identify as Muslims, or who at least recognize their Muslim background, there are different profiles. The first profile encompasses artists who publicly identify as Muslims and put forward Muslim identities or themes related to Islam on stage. The second profile comprises artists who publicly assume their Muslim background but do not necessarily stage the religious dimension of this identification. The Muslim identification rather transpires through the social, ethnical and cultural dimensions and/or through the migration remembrance. Faith may seem too personal to be displayed on stage and so, the religious dimension is confined in the private sphere. Another reason would be the non-adherence to Islam but the recognition of Muslim codes as part of a cultural identity, as it is the case for Sam Touzani. A third profile would include artists who identify as Muslims but do not display it on stage, but this option has not been explored. These findings are not different from El Asri (2011)'s definitions of Muslim artists. However, the case of Sam Touzani adds a nuance. Indeed, he recognizes coming from a family with a Muslim culture but clearly distances himself from the religion and even denounces some aspects about the Muslim community among which he grew up. Hence, Islam is clearly present in his art and he clearly takes position while El Asri (2011) declared that for the second profile of Muslim artists, Islam is not purposely used.

It is to be noted that, of course, not only artists with a Muslim background stage Islam or Muslim identities. For example, for the sake of a counter-radicalization project dedicated for the youth in particular, the European Theater Convention in collaboration with several European theaters from Parma (Italy), Amsterdam (Netherlands), Oslo (Norway), Braunschweig (Germany), and Liège (Belgium) created the project "Nadia".

4.2.2. Identifying as Muslim

Displaying a Muslim identity as an artist may be challenging because of the connotation this religious identification has. In Belgium, and more generally in the European context, "Muslim" can have a negative connotation. Hence, in an identity affirmation, the term "Muslim" could be seen as a major identity trait and could be reductive.

> Salim, on the 13.08.2020: *"Some artists find it difficult to see this word, Muslim, placed behind it [the word artist], because it can be essentializing and reductive, because you could interpret everything through it.(…) I have the impression that there are not so many artists who are willing to display that identity, I would say display it explicitly … Afterwards, it has a stigma, it's a weight to carry."* [11]

Another weight to carry when presenting oneself as Muslim is the risk to seem to take the floor as an expert of Islam. Artists who identify as Muslims stage their reality as Muslims. They avoid the theological aspect of Islam in order not to be perceived and to take the position of expert of Islam, but rather tend to talk about Islam and ways of being Muslims from their perception and realities, according to how they live Islam in the European context and with a certain ethnic-cultural background, and not as experts or theologists except in the cases when they wish to put into narration results from a research, such as Rachid Benzine did with "Lettres à Nour".

> Souhaïla, on the 07.09.2020: *"People tend to think that when you're a Muslim you're talking about Islam. You tend to talk about how you live it, what you know, what you've learned, how you deconstruct it as a Muslim person etc. and we're all far from being experts in everything, and sometimes you have this feeling that you have to be. And I think that's also the risk with Muslim artists."* [12]

So, why identify oneself as Muslim? When artists do identify as Muslims, it could be to put forward their belonging to the community of Muslim, to be connected to a whole community. Hence, it is the collective aspect of this identity which is salient.

---

[11] See appendix 3.4.
[12] See appendix 3.5.

Nadia on the 19.08.2020: *"Christianity, Judaism and Islam are not the same... Well, it's not that it's not the same, but basically 'Muslim artist' means that Muslims see themselves as a community, just as Jews see themselves as a community."* [13]

Also, it is to be noted that the Muslim identification as part of a community is different from the Christian identification. Indeed, in Belgium, Christianity is the norm as Belgium has a Jewish-Christian culture. Hence, identifying as Muslim in Belgium goes further than identifying oneself to a religion, it means identifying oneself to an "immigrant religion", and belonging to an immigrant minority.

What's more, identifying as Muslim emphasizes the positionality of the artist who stages Muslim identities or Islam as she/he is concerned by the reality she/he exposes on stage.

Souhaïla on the 07.09.2020: *"Personally, I think we have to say all the words because otherwise we deny a certain reality. Saying that an artist has presented a theater play on Muslim women for example, has less impact than saying that a Muslim woman artist has presented a theater play on Muslim women, because the message that is sent is that the person is concerned and has written a theater play about herself, about what she knows. If you say 'artist', well, you do not know the viewpoint that is adopted."* [14]

Of course, staging Islam or Muslim identities is not a prerequisite to identify oneself as a Muslim artist. Identifying as Muslim and as artist doesn't mean to systematically bring Islam or Muslim identities on stage or to produce Islamic artistic productions. As Nadia stated: *"A Muslim artist, he is Muslim, but that's not why in his art he will read suras, read the Quran,..."* [15]

Hence, putting forward the Muslim identification along with the term artist may be challenging due to the negative stigma often associated with Islam and Muslims or due to the pressure to be seen as an expert of Islam. However, the Muslim identification can be a means to connect with a wider community or to emphasize the relevance of the positionality of the artist who speaks as Muslim about being Muslim.

4.2.3. Being part of "diversity artists"

In Belgium, artists with a Muslim background are part of a larger group of "diversity artists" or "color artists", of racialized artists. These artists are seen as a separate group of artists in a cultural and artistic world which is mainly White. Salim referred to that as "the problematic of the skin color in culture". Consequently, Muslim artists may face difficulties as artists but even more as racialized

---

[13] See appendix 3.6.
[14] See appendix 3.7.
[15] See appendix 3.8.

artists. Finding a place in conventional theaters, feeling mistrust, and not feeling welcome everywhere in the world of culture because of their "differences" may be some of the challenges they may face.

> Salim, on the 13.08.2020: *"The racialized artists, they have the same difficulties as the others, plus a few extra ones. They are also concerned by the access to funding from the cultural sector for example."*[16]

The designation "racialized artists" for artists with a Muslim background show how Muslim minorities can be perceived as "racialized minorities" in the western context (Garner & Selod, 2015) and enable to label and make visible the realities of minorities (Gay in "décolonisons les arts", 2018) more specifically in the artistic and cultural world.

Another challenge for artists identified as "diversity artists" may be not being perceived as a "Belgian" on stage or at least not corresponding to the image of a "Belgian" even though the artist identifies her/himself as such.

> Nadia, on the 19.08.2020: *"For example, if you ask for a Belgian girl who knows how to do the accent, well, I'm totally into it. I'm a Belgian by birth, I grew up here and I'm a girl, and I know how to do the Belgian accent, brusseleer, the Brussels accent, there's no problem, I can do it. But in my case, if I introduce myself as Belgian, no, in people's heads it's a white girl. That's how it is. We're in a society that taught us to think that way."*[17]

Hence, Muslim artists may face difficulties to reach conventional theater scenes as the Belgian cultural realm is mainly White, and Muslim artists are part of the wider and separate group of racialized artists. However, when their artistic productions are considered as "useful" in order to promote interculturality or to serve as counter-radicalization tool for example they are welcome, or when they have managed to forge ties and find a place in the world of culture. Still, some artists denounce a lack of representation of minority populations on stage. Can a parallel be drawn between the place of Muslim artists in culture, as part of the group of racialized artists, and the place of Muslims in Belgian society?

4.2.4. Making theater not only for entertainment

The theater plays studied for the sake of this research share a common feature: the authors' positions and messages towards Muslims, and even Islam sometimes, transpire on stage. Theater is an artistic site where fiction, humor, self-deprecating and as many ingredients as the artists choose are mixed together. It is also a way to connect with people. As Sam Touzani expressed at the end of his

---

[16] See appendix 3.9.
[17] See appendix 3.10.

show the 1st of October, *"The scene is a temple of reflection and art"*[18]. Theater in that sense is not only for entertainment, even when the author's aim is to tell a story.

> Ismael, on the 08.10.2020: *"I see myself as a storyteller. When you tell a story, it's not just for entertainment. When you tell a story, of course there is the narration, there is the entertainment dimension which allows people to do something else for an hour, an hour and a half, two hours, but there is also something to tell with a message to keep in mind."*[19]

Sam Touzani even defines himself as artist-citizen, as he tries to de-center his audience's ideas and to bring them to question their reality. Theater enables artists to take a critical look on reality, to question it, transgress it, desacralize it. Theater becomes a site where the artist looks for producing meaning while going through the intimate and raising emotions. By doing so, artists raise questions rather than bringing responses.

> Sam, on the 15.10.2020 : *"Of course, the artists question our reality, they transpose it, they transgress it especially, and desecralize it. (...) The artist, he is there to bring emotions, while telling a story, stories, narratives, which are particular, which are singular, which are deeply intimate, something that is underneath the shell, which is sometimes of the order of a child, and which tend to touch the universal. In the theater, the more it is false, the more it is true. The theater does not provide a solution. But it does ask the right questions. In theater, we are not here to tell you how to think. We're here to tell you that you have to think."*[20]

Some theater groups even claim to produce committed theater made by committed artists, as it is the case for the association Ras-el-Hanout. In that sense, theater may be a tool for commitment. One of the committed theatrical forms in which artists with a Muslim background express themselves may be the "action theater". It enables people to reflect on their own experiences and realities. Everybody can take part in the theater projects with no distinctions of class, social or cultural background, nationality or ethnicity, etc. and non-professionals as well. One of the main characteristics is that it makes the audience take part in the show and react to what is displaying on stage. It helps to grow ideas in people's heads and give them food for thought, as it is originally a theatrical form aimed at waking up the people by showing them their reality, but in a fun way. As Brahy (2009, 2014) claimed, with action theater, actors with a diversified social and cultural background stage their daily lives and reflect on it. In that sense, they look for social transformations and question their realities. Hence, action-theater enables artists and their audience to connect and to deal with societal issues, with committed topics.

In conclusion, rather than "Muslim artists", the term "artist with a Muslim background" is preferred. "Muslim" comprehends religious, cultural, ethnical and/or even social dimensions, designates an assigned or claimed identity, and when artists do identify as Muslims, they put forward the collective aspect of the Muslim identity or refers to their positionality while speaking about issues

---

[18] Personal translation of Sam Touzani after his show at the CCLJ: "La scène est un temple de réflexion et artistique"
[19] See appendix 3.11.
[20] See appendix 3.12.

related to Muslims. Also, artists with a Muslim background are categorized as "diversity artists" and seen as a separate group in the cultural realm. Finally, artists do not make art only for entertainment, but also to reflect on their reality and make their audience think.

4.3. Staging Muslim identities

This chapter will consist of an investigation on how artists with a Muslim background stage Muslim identities in theater. A non-exhaustive typology built on how artists themselves define the Muslim identities they stage and the analyses of five theater plays will be presented. Artists stage "Culturally European Muslims" based on their own experience as Muslims in the European context. When they put forward "ordinary" Muslims one may encounter in the daily life, it will be referred as staging "Neighborly Muslims". When artists explore the fragile identity belongings of the youth with a migration background who felt under the influence of radical Islam, it will be called staging "Scarred Muslims". With regard to "A free thinker born Muslim", the critical view and identity quest put forward by Sam Touzani on stage will be studied. Eventually, the analyses will show that artists stage their own identity explorations and rethink their Muslim identities through theater.

4.3.1. Staging "Culturally European Muslims"

When artists with a Muslim background stage Muslim identities, they do so as lived in the context in which they evolve and play: Belgium and more specifically in this case, Brussels. Indeed, they take as reference their own experiences, realities, and identifications in their local context in order to shape and play their characters. These considerations follow El Asri (2011)'s conclusion on how artists' artworks reveal their own experience of being Muslim in the European context, their daily Islamic way-of-life as European Muslim, and their relationship with their ethno-cultural background and Islamic sources shaped along with their personal trajectories and experiences. However, the artists met do not claim their wish to embody a model of "European Muslim". When staging Muslim identities in theater, artists do display their own local and cultural identifications, among others. One of the most important aspects to the character's identity is their sense of belonging to one or more different locations, groups, cultures, etc. which can be referred in French as *appartenances identitaires*: their "identity belongings". Europe, Belgium, Brussels, and even specific areas of Brussels are part of the character's identity belongings, among others, such as their country of origin.

Thus, artists with a Muslim background stage "Culturally European Muslims" who deal with Islamic codes, the codes of their ethno-cultural background of origin along with European, Belgian, and even Brussels codes. They display hybrid identities. As examples of this mixing of codes, in the theater plays analyzed, one can discern expressions in Arabic such as "Hamdoullilah", "Inch'Allah"

and many more that punctuate the discourses of the characters along with references to verses of the Quran; Islamic prayers are visible or heard; the characters make references multiple times to their "bled" i.e. country or villages where ancestors come from; characters wear "European clothes" like jeans, sweatshirts with occidental brands and not "traditional" clothes from their country of origin; youngsters refer to video games or series and are consumers of fast food; characters make references to their *brusseleer* side -the artists referred to it as a Brussels-based identification- or to Brussels events such as the fair "La Foire du midi"; etc.

"Culturally European Muslims" are presented as struggling with their different identity belongings. They struggle with injunctions of the society they live in, of their religion, of their cultural traditions, of the Muslim community. They may even struggle with their faith and belief or with their practice of Islam. As Rudnicka-Kassem (2016) claimed, the identity issue of Europeans with a Muslim background who were born and raised in Europe is even more complex because of the weak ties they have with their country and culture of origin, but they do not forget their Islamic identity. When staging "Culturally European Muslims", artists stage imperfect Muslims, Muslims engaging in an identity quest and facing identity contradictions.

> Souhaïla, on the 07.09.2020 : *"We present totally imperfect characters with this idea that we have real characters. (...) In fact more than contradictions, we wanted to talk about nuances and imperfections."[21]*

To put it another way, by staging "Culturally European Muslims", artists with a Muslim background explore and display what it means to be Muslim in the European context, to be a Belgian Muslim or even Brussels-based Muslims. Overall, they stage hybrid identities.

4.3.2.   Staging "Neighborly Muslims"

Staging "Neighborly Muslims" is understood here as staging the daily life of "Culturally European Muslims", of ordinary Muslims and their religious practices. The realism becomes the subject of the theater play, and the Muslim characters are imperfect humans, struggling with their religious ideas and practices, torn between their local, cultural, and religious identities, in a quest to be better Muslims and to understand their own religion. In order to illustrate this conception of "Neighborly Muslims" on stage, here are the analyses of the visions of Muslims of two theater plays: "De Bruxelles à la Mecque" and "Pour en finir avec la question musulmane".

In "De Bruxelles à la Mecque", three Muslims from Brussels decide to undertake an *Umrah*, a pilgrimage to Mecca. Throughout their spiritual journey, they undertake an identity quest and discover the realities of this pilgrimage along with truths about themselves. The artists chose to share with their

---

[21] See appendix 3.13.

audience a memorable journey to Mecca, through the story of these three characters and the projections of images of the different sceneries in which they evolve and the sounds along with the translations of prayers. The artists share a mystical, secret experience in order to overcome preconceived ideas and show the raw realities and experiences of being Belgian Muslims in their journey to Mecca. They tell the story of pitfalls, meetings, moments of irritation and of tiredness, joy, and evolution of the spiritual mindset of their characters they composed along with autobiographical elements. Thus, the audience follows imperfect Muslims and imperfect practitioners, when they do practice the Islamic religion, in their identity and religious quest to Mecca.

> Salim, on the 13.08.2020 : *It shows that no one is perfect. (...) It also shows that there are people who practice Islam, we can see that there can be very different practices or no practice at all and how it dialogues. What's going on behind it, why this path ... Is what they have in mind exactly what they are? Why is that?*[22]

In the theater play, the Brussels anchorage of Islam is highlighted as the artists stage Muslims from Brussels. They play with different codes from Brussels along with Islamic codes, which enables the audience to find itself in the characters, as Muslims, as "Brusseleer" (understood here as sharing Brussels' cultural codes) or as Belgians, or all at the same time.

> Salim, on the 13.08.2020: *There were evenings where we had, we knew that we had even more non-Muslims than Muslims [in the theater] and they laughed at different moments because we installed codes, like with the "chef un petit verre on a soif", it showed the zinneke side of Islam, the Brusseleer side.*[23]

Moreover, by staging imperfect Brussels-based Muslims in Mecca, the artists show the identity contradictions between different identity traits. For example, the characters are torn between religious ethics and occidental consumption when they want to eat at MacDonald's: "Is MacDonald's halal?"; their Brussels identity is overriding when they sing songs like "chef un petit verre on a soif" in Mecca, etc.

In "Pour en finir avec la question musulmane", Rachid Benzine tells a story about rumors between neighbors with various ideological and political profiles within a building in a French city and in a climate of fear toward the radicalization of Muslims. Everybody has something to say about Islam and Muslims: *clichés* and fears punctuate the speeches of the various characters. As for Muslim identities, Rachid Benzine stage a multiplicity of ways of being Muslims: the liberal and intellectual Muslim, the young and well-educated lady newly converted, the woman still attached to cultural traditions from Morocco, etc. The character Benazzouz, an Islamic scholar, as a reaction to fear and Islamophobic context, emphasized the historical plurality of Islam and put forward how it is relational to the context in where it is anchored:

---

[22] See appendix 3.14.
[23] See appendix 3.15.

"To those who denounce the violence inherent to Islam, I would say that Islam is not a timeless reality. It is what the believers of every age make of it. In fifteen centuries of history, Islam has been everything and its opposite, in the most varied situations, going through moments of great intercultural openness, moments of closure, and then opening up again. It is obvious that a culture and a religion could never have lasted so long if they were based on an identity of violence."[24]

All characters are presented with their inner conflicts and all their identity contradictions. Especially, Benazzouz embodies a European Muslim identity malaise. He criticizes some aspects of Islam and wishes Islam would be more open but he still wants to be faithful to his mother's Moroccan traditions, her religion, and principles. For example, he publicly defends his freedom of celibacy but still sets up a scene for his mother to make her believe he is in a relationship with a Muslim woman from a Muslim "bled". Even though this character publicly promotes an open Islam, he is still suspected to be part of violent Islam and is never fully accepted. He embodies a fragile position of the "Neighborly Muslim" which is placed in the margin by the society. For her part, the character of Ludivine Khadija de Charterolles, a highly-educated lady from a wealthy family newly converted to Islam and a sex-addict, breaks the identity malaise with her astonishing positions. She seems to find ways to pursue her objectives while being in accordance with Islamic principles and is a very open-minded character. For instance, she doesn't hesitate to accumulate marriages to satisfy her desire for sex.

Thus, artists with a Muslim background stage "Neighborly Muslims" when they stage "ordinary Muslims", one may encounter in the daily life. By doing so, they show that Muslims are not different from the rest of the Belgian population, or more globally the European population. The local identification of their identity is salient. The characters are imperfect, and in that sense, "real" humans: not super-heroes, engaged in identity quests, in search of a better understanding of their religion or faith, evolving in a climate of fear, full of fragilities and identity contradictions, and who can even be tormented by an identity malaise. They are most of all humans with all the imperfections and complexities this term engenders, before being Muslims, which is one identification among others and can be translated in myriad ways.

4.3.3. Staging "Scarred Muslims" and radicalization

Radicalization might be a topic in theater plays. This undertaking of staging characters engaged in radical Islam consists of knowing who are the youngsters who engage in radical Islam and are ready

---

[24] Personal translation of the theater play "Pour en finir avec la question musulmane" : "A ceux qui dénoncent les violences inhérentes à l'Islam, je dirais que l'Islam n'est pas une réalité intemporelle. Il est ce que les croyants de chaque époque en font. En quinze siècles d'Histoire, l'islam a été tout et son contraire, dans les situations les plus variées, traversant des moments de grande ouvertures interculturelles, des moments de fermeture, puis d'ouverture à nouveau. Il est évident qu'une culture et une religion n'auraient jamais pu avoir une telle durée si elles s'appuyaient sur une identité de la violence."

to go to Syria. Specifically, it raises the question "why them and not me?" and makes the artists think back on their own belongings and trajectories. Ismael Saidi and Rachid Benzine explore this issue with, respectively, "Djihad" and "Lettres à Nour".

"Djihad" tells the story of "Scarred Muslims", lost and torn apart "Culturally European Muslims", youngsters with an immigration and a Muslim background who are part of a "lost generation" living in popular urban areas. Throughout their lives, they have been lost, torn, broken, and underwent deep identity tensions under the pressures of the expectations of their family, their will to be part of modernity, the Islamic principles and prohibitions. At one point, they fell under the influence of preachers of radical Islam, and decided to go to Syria in order to fight "miscreants". By staging "Scarred Muslims", Ismael Saidi displays in all its splendor what he called "the problem of identity among immigrant communities in Belgium". He explores the societal pressures to integrate, the problematization of Islam by politics, anti-Muslims discourses, and especially the pressures from the Muslim community to follow principles and prohibitions of Islam, without necessarily adapting their inherited Islam in the Belgian environment or giving a proper education about Islam.

> Ismael, on the 08.10.2020: "*They[the characters] are the sons of immigrants, who were born in Belgium, who have never managed to deal with the pressures the Muslim communities exert on them, at the same time the look that society has on them, and at the same time the modernity that they want to share. They have never managed to deal with that in fact, when they fell into disarray, we have what we call preachers of hate who came to get them back, in 'Djihad' that's the problematic, that's really it, it's guys with a scarred identity*"[25].

These "Scarred Muslims" who embark on the path of radical Islam send back the author to his own identity belongings, to his own history and identity quest. These youngsters come from the same Muslim community of Belgium, the same urban areas in Brussels, and may have the same trajectory. They share the same local codes, religious codes, and even cultural codes. By reflecting on these Muslims who decide to fight in the name of Islam, the artist reflects on himself: "*What makes a 15-16 years old guy decide to go out and kill somewhere else and what makes ME not do it?*"[26]. It is like a mirror game, in which artists may see a distorted version of themselves in these young people who get involved in radical Islam. Eventually, Ismael Saidi decided to tell the story of "Scarred Muslims" to invite people to speak about it: "one had to tell their story, one had to know who they are, who they could have been, who they've become... " (Saidi, in the preface of "Djihad", 2015: 7)[27].

Throughout this identity questioning and storytelling, the artist instilled part of himself in his characters, and told a story he thought he knew. So, it consisted in writing a fiction, of course, but with the artist's own identity questioning and rethinking in the background. Artists with a Muslim

---

[25] See appendix 3.16.
[26] Personal translation of Ismael: "Qu'est-ce qui fait qu'un mec de 15-16 ans décide de partir tuer ailleurs et en miroir, qu'est ce qui fait que MOI je ne l'ai pas fait ?"
[27] Personal translation of : "il fallait raconter leur histoire, il faut qu'on sache qui ils sont, qui ils auraient pu être, qui ils sont devenus…" (Saidi dans le préface de "Djihad", 2015: 7)

background dig into themselves, explore their identity, and question it in order to tell story of "Scarred Muslims" as they can relate to their realities and identity tensions. Of course, these stories are fictional and go further than the reality of the artists. Still, artists write stories while taking into account what they feel and what come to their minds, what is awakened in themselves when they see people falling under the influence of radical Islam and write their story with their own resources, their own understanding of who they are and who these people might be at a certain point of time.

> Ismael, on the 08.10.2020: *"I wrote 'Djihad' because I saw on Facebook a guy who was with me in class who went to Syria, I saw pictures of this guy with a kalashnikov and the Belgian flag behind him, and actually I wondered about it and this image awakened a lot of things: it awakened things that I had experienced when I was a teenager, this relationship to religion, this relationship to dogmatism and all that and I started writing the play but without asking myself any questions, I had no goal in fact. Of course when you write as an author there's a purpose, it's to transmit a message to people, so the message was to tell a story that I thought I knew because what my characters have experienced are parts of me, let's say".[28]*

Still, the youngsters who engaged in radical Islam are not innocent. They do engage in a violent path they knew nothing about but still, they may kill and recruit other people to their heinous fight. Therefore, the author decided to write a sequel to "Djihad" and go further in the consequences and in the horrors of radical Islam and a possible evolution of these "Scarred Muslims".

In "Djihad", ignorance is at the center of the play as the author wishes to provoke thought about it. The aim was rather to make their audience reflect on the issue of the youth with an immigrant background and their identity tensions, the issue of radical Islam, the role of society and of the Muslim community. The author wishes to have a lucid look at the prejudices, taboos, prohibitions and discriminations of the Muslim community along with the discrimination of the Belgian society towards those who are perceived as "the Others". He also denounces the perception of Islam of radicalized youngsters which is not based on a reading of the Quran, and the ignorance of these youngsters on their own religion. The problem is not Islam but how Islam was transmitted to the characters. Overall, the artist's aims are to give some complexity to an already complex problem and reflect about it. Indeed, radical Islam is often presented in a simplistic way and following a Manichean scheme, without taking into account all the factors and actors influencing this phenomenon.

> S: *"So what was the main message? What did you want to reflect on in particular?"*
>
> I: *"The ignorance that we have of each other, the ignorance that my characters have of their own religion after all, the ignorance of those who do not look like them, how those who do not look like them ignore them, an ignorance in every sense in fact. Because discrimination is not in one sense either. It's not just white to black, it can be black to white too. Ignorance. Giving a little more complexity to things, it's not as simple as that, it's not black or white. And so, to condemn the ignorance we all have towards others."[29]*

---

[28] See appendix 3.17.
[29] See appendix 3.18.

In the same vein, Rachid Benzine, with "Lettres à Nour", also aims at opening a dialogue on radicalization of youngsters. In his book transformed in a theater play, he imagines a dialogue between a father, who is an Islamic scholar and tenet of a liberal Islam, and his daughter, gone to Syria in order to fight for radical Islam, who embodies the identity doubts of a youth with a Muslim background in search for meaning in religion and a certain perception of Islam, which is radical Islam. By doing so, Rachid Benzine aims at setting up "a place to talk, to confide one's fears and worries, to propose solutions and actions, to confront and listen to each other. And above all, to find oneself" (Benzine, in the posface of "Lettres à Nour", 2016: 91)[30]. As already mentioned, this dialogue could also take place in the author's inner self as their stories might help them to rethink their identity belongings along with their religious ideas. They might feel threatened by hatred and violence, and it might lead them to undertake a deconstruction of their religious beliefs and dogmas.

Of course, these theater plays took place during the time of the rise of political Islam and terrorist attacks in Europe, and Belgium was at the center of the world's attention in the news. It greatly influenced the destiny of Djihad as it was played three weeks before the Charlie Hebdo attacks. Consequently, the public attendance exploded and the relevance of the play along with the distress of public authorities encouraged the Ministry of Culture to transform it into a counter-radicalization tool for the youth. It also influenced the sequel as the radicalization phenomenon gained in importance and the world discovered these youngsters who went to Syria to become fighter and murderers. "Lettres à Nour" shows the result of a study conducted by Rachid Benzine on this phenomenon. Thus, the global context of political Islam, the geopolitical context and the relations between "the West" and the Middle-East, and specific events such as Charlie Hebdo in Paris influenced the stories and the public reception of these theater plays.

Artists with a Muslim background stage "Scarred Muslims" when they explore the fragile identity belongings of the youth, of a generation of migrants in search of meanings and identity anchorages, in the grip of deep identity torments. By doing so, they reflect on their own belongings and religious ideas. They wish to open a dialogue on a serious phenomenon in order to look for solutions all together.

4.3.4. Staging a "free thinker born Muslim"

In "Cerise sur le ghetto", Sam Touzani stages his multiple and moving identities through his story, through the story of a little Sam born in Molenbeek (Brussels) whose family migrated from Morocco. It's the story of a self-defined free thinker, feminist, secular, atheist with a Muslim background who questions his history, his reality, and his identity, and put into dialogue his different

---

[30] Personal translation of : "un lieu pour parler, confier ses craintes et ses inquiétudes, proposer des solutions et des actions, se confronter et s'écouter. Et surtout, se retrouver" (Benzine, dans le postface de "Lettres à Nour", 2016 : 91)

cultures and convictions. He defines himself as a citizen-artist: he takes the stage to tell stories, his story in this case, and connect with his audience. His citizen side shines through his character, his convictions, his aspiration to universalism and *metissages* in order to construct a *vivre-ensemble*, a way to live together.

While staging his distancing from Islam and the Muslim community, Sam Touzani doesn't deny his Muslim background. Rather, he demonstrates how his Muslim background feed his multiple identity, and how he refused to make the Muslim identity a unique vision of who he is. He puts forward how identities are moving, plural, ever-evolving while denouncing the dangers of the promotion of a unique identity, a one-sided identity, as it is the case for communities he condemns that perceive themselves only under an ethnic-religious prism and shift toward communitarianism. He was born Muslim; he was assigned this identity but he also constructed his plural identity. Rather, the theater play is an ode to see identity in all its nuances and as moving:

> Sam, on the 15.10.2020: "*The Muslim identity is one among others. Amin Maalouf wrote "Les identités meurtrières", I have no problem with that, identity is moving, it evolves. A bit like the truth, it is always plural and it changes according to the social, economic, political, cultural contexts, it changes according to the context, the environment, which influences us. And we are not the only masters of this, we determine what we want to be, we try, it is not always obvious, because the imprint of others has both influenced you and sometimes kills you in your personal emancipation.*"[31]

Identity tensions between Brussels-based identity and Moroccan background are also explored. The artist presents himself as half Brussels-based, "half 'zinneke', 'echte brusseleer'" and half-Moroccan. Hence, through theater, the artist explores his sufferings and contradictions. Even more, the artist extracts himself from his socio-cultural reality through theater and dance, and explores who he is, while gaining perspective on his cultures, religion, and anguishes. While staging his own identity, Sam Touzani displays through theater his understanding at the moment of who he is, and most of all, he shows how identity is in constant evolution and is relational, and how the perceptions of others also influence it:

> Sam, on the 15.10.2020 : "*I say it in the show. I am Muslim by birth. Atheist by conviction. Belgian by nationality. I could say Jewish at heart. Of Berber origin. That my country is secularism, feminism. That is precisely this multi-dimensional side of identity. I am not just this or that. I am sometimes this and sometimes that. And so there is a fragility in all this. Nothing, no identity is deeply inscribed in marble. And to talk like Hanna Arendt, I can say that I'm not sure of my identity or my history, I'm not fundamentally sure of thinking what I think until I've made it think to someone else. That's why I'm interested in autobiography.*"[32]

---

[31] See appendix 3.19.
[32] See appendix 3.20.

Thus, the artist puts forward that he is a free-thinker and his secular visions but do not deny his Muslim side, which is neither religious-oriented nor the main identity that defines him. His story is rather an ode to his plural and moving identity, and how he negotiated his identity (see El Asri, 2011) between his cultural heritage and his migration memory reappropriated through his experience in the European environment.

4.3.5. Staging artists' identity traits

Artists with a Muslim background stage in theater a plurality of Muslim identities through their characters, and a plurality of positions towards Islam and the Muslim community. These findings follow El Asri (2011)'s ones regarding to Muslim artists and music: they display multiple facets of Muslim identities and Islam and are characterized by the hybridity of their arts and identities. These artists write at a certain point of time, from a certain place. Artists' own realities and experiences consist of a resource to produce and play theater performances. The Muslim identities that are staged are based and refer on their own lives. Some of their theater plays may even contain autobiographical facts or are based on their life. At least, they start from what they know, the context they know, their own trajectories, and according to their point of view on themselves, on the topic they address, on their identity and on their relationship with Islam.

Artists express multiple identities on stage, as mirrors of their own hybrid identities in which their local identifications, their migration background, their religious beliefs, their position regarding the Muslim community, and the cultural backgrounds are crystallized at a certain point of time, with a certain understanding on themselves, and according to a certain mindset. They do not display their art only as Muslims (Jiwa, 2010) but all their identity traits are in interaction as their Muslim identification cannot be separate from all their identifications and social positions (Kirmani, 2009). Through their characters, they tell their own stories, their own struggles; they stage parts of themselves by digging in their inner selves in order to shape their characters. Artists make heard their particular voice and their viewpoint on a subject they decide to stage or they feel the urge to speak about for some reason, with a particular understanding of their own History and own identity belongings.

> Ismael, on the 08.10.2020: *So "Djihad" chose me, I had to write it at that time, it was a need, I do not think I could have written it earlier, I was 38 years old when I released "Djihad", I think you had to have a few years behind you, I had a certain relationship with the religious, a certain relationship to my neighborhood, a certain relationship to timmigration, all these relationships you end up starting to understand them when you're approaching 40 and that's why that's when "Djihad" arrived."[33]*

---

[33] See appendix 3.21.

Of course, the context influences the writing and which identity traits will be more salient in characters, at which point the artists' own identity traits will be salient, or which stories to tell. Consequently, the national and global contexts influence which identity belongings artists explore, and which emotions are infused in the story. Indeed, as Jiwa (2010) emphasized, choosing an identity over another depends on the "larger fields of power" in which artists are situated. Of course, the context has an influence but it depends greatly on what the artists want to write about. They do not necessarily respond to a certain context.

> Souhaïla, on the 07.09.2020: *"Our play is a product of society so there are things that can be read as answers to society and rightly so. But we do not want the play to be just an answer, we want the play to exist no matter what the debates around it."[34]*

Even though artists start from their own trajectories and introspection, their stories stay fictional, except of course when artists purposely stage an autobiography. Artists may even do some research to fuel their story, as it is the case for plays about the radicalization of the youth. They can be inspired by autobiographical elements, or go meet people to enrich their characters with their testimonies. Still, the stories of the characters overcome the artists' own stories. At this point, it is necessary to reiterate what El Asri (2011) emphasized on the distinction between artists and their art, how they stage Muslim identities and Islam and how they are as Muslims. Fiction enables artists to revisit their own experiences, to question them, to take their audience on a journey, to add twists and turns to their stories, to provoke feelings, but also to go beyond the limits of reality.

When artists such as Sam Touzani decide to stage their autobiography, theater becomes a site in which the artist explores his identity, questions it, and rethinks it. It is a site which enables the artist to grow up, to blossom, and most of all to reflect on who he is and on his reality. Artists question who they are and their reality in order to put it on stage:

> Sam, on the 15.10.2020 : *"To talk about things, you have to talk about what you know. So I use everyday life or my life to transform it into an artistic object. I question the real to make a show out of it."[35]*

Moreover, more than displaying a plurality of identities, artists display a plurality of Islams, in terms of branches, practices, profiles of Muslims, cultural traditions, and according to the environment within which one believes in Islam and/or practices it. Hence, displaying such a plurality of Islams is to show the fluidity of Islam and how Muslim identities are multiple, as the Islamic identification is combined with a wide range of other identifications. This conclusion joins McMurray (2008) and her statement about Islam as "malleable enough to hold multiple meanings in various contexts, while still

---

[34] See appendix 3.22.

[35] See appendix 3.23.

having some coherence or recognizable structures across communities" (p.75). Ismael Saidi even refers to Islam as a "religion play-dough". As an illustration of this fluidity of Islam depending on the context and the multiple Muslim identities, in "Pour en finir avec la question musulmane", the character Benazzouz says at one point *"Sometimes, I think that a number of Muslims and myself do not have the same religion.".* Artists mobilize Islam in different situations: to tell their story with Islam and the Muslim community within which they grew up; to show the reality of Muslims who have to live within a context of fear and suspicions towards them as Islamophobia is rampant; to tell the story of radicalization of youngsters or the story of a pilgrimage to Mecca; etc. These findings join El Asri (2011)'s ones when he demonstrated the multiple ways in which Islam can be mobilized, for instance, to speak about artists' experience, denounce the reality of Muslims at a national or international scale, or even distance themselves from dominant ideas. Through theater, one aspect of Islam can also be the subject of the play, such as radical Islam or a pilgrimage.

To conclude, through their arts, artists display a wide range of European/Belgian/Brussels-based Muslim identities and a plurality of positions towards Islam. To do so, they reflect on who they are, as individuals but also as a collectivity, and on their religious ideas. They shape their characters and stories in a certain context which influences them even though their art is not necessarily a response to it, and speak out from a certain position, a certain understanding on themselves, of Islam and of their relation to the Muslim community. They show the plurality of Muslim identities and the infinite possibilities of their nuances, how Islam can be molded with other traits of identities, and display imperfect Muslims who practice their religion, a little bit, or not at all, who are in search of meaning, or in search of themselves. Overall, artists display the plurality of Muslim identities and in particular from what they know, themselves, and the context they know.

4.4. "We exist": Women artists with a Muslim background

By staging Muslim women identities, women artists with a Muslim background put forward two minority identity traits whose bearers are victims of oppressions. Women artists, as part of a minority gender, publicly assert their gender identity on stage contrary to male artists. Through theater, they assert their identity of Muslim women, two traits that cannot be separate in the artists' view as they cover a specific social reality, in order to embrace all the complexity of the reality underlying this identity. In the theater play "Chuuut", women artists display stories and daily life experiences of five Muslim women.

For Souhaïla, co-writer, co-director and comedian in the theater play "Chuuut", staging Muslim women identities can be part of a more general desire to defend one's identities and denounce pervasive stereotypes and judgments on Muslim women: *"As a woman and a Muslim woman, these*

are two identities that are often attacked in society, two identities that I want to put forward and defend through different stories that are told on stage, different things."[36]

In "Chuuut", staging Muslim women is also a way to denounce a certain ignorance towards them which leads to a homogenous vision of a "female Muslim community" and judgments along with stereotypes on the part of a "privileged majority".

> In the last scene of the play, a character claims: *"They [Muslim women] are all different, unique and rooted in a history, with ups and downs, strengths and weaknesses. Women above all. Sometimes they share common traits, yes, but even these common traits are loaded with nuances. This seems so logical, so obvious, so why did it take me so long to realize this? Whose fault was it? Ignorance. I didn't know, so I created. I created ideas in my head, trying to make them fit, to harmonize them with reality. But I still didn't understand. Rooted in a privileged majority, blinkers set up in front of my eyes."[37]*

Indeed, with this theater play, Muslim women from different backgrounds decide to show the plurality of profiles of young Belgian Muslim women. Inès Bouzid, the second co-director, and also co-writer and comedian is quoted in the pedagogical dossier : *"there are as many ways to be Muslim as there are Muslim women"* [38]. Hence, artists display a tiny palette of possibilities of "being a Muslim woman".

> Souhaïla, on the 07.09.2020: *"We were playing on realism, what we're talking about are discussions that we could have in everyday life and it's really this idea ... to show a small palette of what exists, maybe it even goes beyond self-definition because we're not looking for a definition, since if we are asked tomorrow what a Muslim woman is, we will not be able to answer, I would answer with a background of a Maghrebian girl, with parents from immigrant backgrounds, I would really answer according to what I know, as a Muslim woman who does not necessarily speak Arabic."[39]*

Through theater, women artists with a Muslim background speak about their own realities that others are not necessarily aware of through their characters. This "other" may signify men, non-Muslims, etc.; in short, non-Muslim women. They made an effort to put on stage the reality with imperfect and real characters, and confront different visions of what it is to be a "Muslim woman" and how to conduct their lives. The artists who contributed to the theater play intended to make heard Muslim women speaking about themselves and give a testimony about what it is to be a Muslim

---

[36] See appendix 3.24.
[37] Personal translation of the theater play "Chuuut": "Elles sont toutes différentes, singulières et enracinées dans une histoire, avec des hauts, des bas, des forces et des faiblesses. Des femmes avant tout. Parfois des traits communs, oui, mais même ces traits communs sont chargés de nuances. Ce constat paraît si logique, si évident, alors pourquoi ai-je mis tant de temps à le réaliser ? La faute à qui ? A l'ignorance. Je ne connaissais pas, alors j'ai créé. J'ai créé des idées dans ma tête en essayant de les faire concorder, de les harmoniser à la réalité. Mais je ne comprenais toujours pas. Enracinée dans une majorité privilégiée, des oeillières se sont installées devant mes yeux. "
[38] Personal translation of Inès Bouzid from the "Chuuut" pedagogical dossier: " Il y a autant de façons d'être musulmane qu'il y a de femmes musulmanes. "
[39] See appendix 3.25.

woman by displaying their daily realities. Indeed, the artists fed their characters with their own realities.

> Souhaïla, on the 07.09.2020: "*We wanted to make something fun and we wanted to talk about ourselves. We thought 'well we're tired of hearing about us all the time, without ever really speaking up so well we're going to take it and make something cool'. (…) We tend to hear about Muslim women through the mouths of others, whether non-Muslims or men, it depends on where we are, but it's this idea that we exist and we speak, we do not ask for it, and we're there.*"[40]

However, when Muslim women take the floor to take back the narratives about them, of course, they explore specific themes related to their gender but also to their collective identification as "Muslim women". In "Chuuut", they dealt with several themes. First, they dealt with the transversal topic of physical and psychological violences women undergo in their daily life. The gender identity prevails and all women can relate to these realities. This feminist position statement from the author-comedians towards women is a way to connect with a larger group than Muslim women. It also shows that Muslim women, even when they wear their headscarf, may take feminist position and/or define themselves as feminists, as it is the case for Souhaïla for example. A second topic concerned the ways to live their religion and spirituality as women along with more general questions on Islam. In that sense, they took on a pedagogical role as novices can familiarize themselves with and discover elements related to the Islamic religion. Also, they dealt with the topic of the headscarf, which is an subject of debates in the Belgian society. The wearing of the headscarf is presented as a personal choice. They intended to distance themselves from the image of the Muslim woman submitted and beaten by her husband. Rather, they intended to banalize the veil, making it neither a non-political issue nor a submission object, but instead a choice to wear it or not depending on how women live their spirituality. It is not a sign of provocation or protestation against orientalist and colonial representations, as suggested by Behiery (2017), but one can agree with her when interpreting the wearing of the headscarf as a sign of a plural identity and the choice to wear it or not as the agency of Muslim women, which go against their dobjectified image. Still, the headscarf is one topic among others, but it is not the central issue for Muslim women. Finally, they touched on the subjects of marriage and divorce and gender relations.

Staging only Muslim women and their stories enables also the artists to bring something new in the Belgian cultural realm. They show a woman with a headscarf can also be part of and the subject of a theater play. They propose profiles totally different from the White majority and bring Muslim women on stage along with their daily experiences. In that sense, they aim to represent on stage Muslim women who are usually excluded from the cultural sphere, because they are part of a gender

---

[40] See appendix 3.26.

minority and of a racialized minority. They aim to open the discussion about what is it to be a Muslim woman in order to connect and represent Muslim women but also to connect with people who can't relate to their reality and do not know it.

> Souhaïla, on the 07.09.2020: *"when we started the project, it was also to bring to the Brussels scene what we do not necessarily have ... Generally speaking, in the world of culture, when you look at the series or others, there is not necessarily a Muslim woman. The few series in which you can find Muslim women, they are not representative of a reality. (...) We wanted to talk first to women who didn't feel represented, to really create something that resembles us a little bit and then also to be able to open the discussion with other people who do not really know our daily lives."[41]*

To sum up, with "Chuuut", the artists were willing to explore Muslim women identities from the viewpoint of the personal choices made by the characters, and their identity quest. As mentioned before, they display a plurality of identities, all in nuances, and go against a homogenizing and essentializing identity. In that sense, they claim their own multiple identities while putting forward their agency, contrary to the assigned unique identity given by the society. On stage, Muslim women talk about themselves in different ways and most of all show there is no static or simple definition for "Muslim women". There is a common identification as Muslim women but that doesn't mean "Muslim women" is a homogeneous group at all. Of course, one should not forget that the identification as "Muslim women" is relevant for these women only in specific discursive contexts (Kirmani, 2009). In that case, Muslim women chose to speak up about their reality as Muslim women in Belgium and show they are also empowered subjects. Most of all, with "Chuuut", some Brussels-based Muslim women signal their presence and their willing to be heard in the society as well as in the cultural sphere. They showcase their identities, they display them shamelessly. To conclude the theater play, all characters claimed: "We exist (…) We are Belgians (…) We are women and thank God we are Muslims"[42].

4.5.   Speaking out on oneself through theater

Through theater, artists with a Muslim background take the floor to talk about themselves, about the Muslim identities in the European/Belgian/Brussels context. In this final section, the roles of the artists, when they take the floor to speak out on themselves through theater, will be investigated in light of the analyses of the previous section. It will thus be presented the main conclusions of the fieldwork regarding the main research question. Indeed, artists question Islam, Muslim identities and their relationship to the Muslim community; they open a dialogue on Muslims and Islam; they give a

---

[41] See appendix 3.27.

[42] Personal translation of the theater play "Chuuut": "Nous existons. (…) Nous sommes belges (…). Nous sommes femmes et grâce à Dieu nous sommes musulmanes".

voice to invisibilized and marginalized populations from the cultural sphere; they bring to the fore the realities of Muslims and the different forms of discrimination and racism they endure; they challenge dominant narratives about Muslims and propose their own narratives; and they become public interlocutors on Muslims. Eventually, this section emphasizes how artists with a Muslim background contribute to current public debates on Muslims, but also on Islam and on the Belgian Muslim community through theater. The starting point was this consideration: "Muslims, as we have seen, are put on the defensive as they are defined in a public debate in which they are only marginally participating." (Zemni, 2011: 41).

4.5.1. Questioning Muslim identities, Islam, and the Muslim community

Through theater, artists with a Muslim background discuss issues not necessarily openly discussed elsewhere such as issues related to Muslim identities, Islam and the Muslim community. More than discussing them, they do question them. Artists shake up ideas and preconceptions of their audience, provoke thought on what they stage and plant ideas in people's heads. Through arts, they open a debate. Actually, a common pattern to open debates is to function in two times: first presenting the theater play, then organizing a discussion with the audience, and especially with school classes. By doing so, the debate of ideas takes shape on stage, as the artists plant seeds in the heads of audience while displaying their story and their own inner questionings through their characters. Then, after the play, a discussion can take place with all the persons in presence. Also, by staging identity contradictions of Culturally European Muslims, artists question the situation of second and subsequent generations of Muslim migrants and their struggle with their multiple identity traits. Muslim identities, Islam, and the Muslim community become a subject of debate by the main concerned people.

The context in which artists write, act and produce make them question themselves, as individuals, as part of a larger community, their religion and relationship to it, and also their commitment in theater. As for the case of Salim, and more generally the association Ras-el-Hanout, the general context in the beginning of the 2000's of the war on terror and debates on the clash of civilizations influenced its willingness to take the floor as Muslims in theater in order to share his stories, speak out about his realities and to bring the audience to question themselves. Eventually, in 2010, he founded the association Ras-el-Hanout with some friends. As for Rachid Benzine, the context of writing also becomes the contexts of his stories. In "pour en finir avec la question musulmane", played in 2018, the characters evolve in a context of terrorist attacks and emergency state, of the rise of populisms, a fear of a "great replacement", of Islamophobia, in which fear is widespread. This context of fear pushes the Muslim characters to feel an identity malaise. In "Lettres à Nour", the author makes reference to historical events such as the undertaking of Pan-Arabism or geopolitics such as the current situation in the Middle-East and the relations with "the West" which he puts in dialogue

with current social realities of Muslims. He places radical Islam and the story of his characters in a more global context on which he reflects. Ismael Saidi felt the urge to tell the story of his characters as a reaction to what he felt in front of current events related to political Islam. He wrote "Djihad" in 2014, guided by his own questioning about his identities and trajectory, his religion, the Muslim community, the societal injunctions to migrant minorities. As for women artists, they are stuck in orientalist and anti-Muslim frames depicting the wearing of the headscarf as an evidence of the submission of Muslim women, the backwardness of Islam, and its incompatibility with western values (Behiery, 2017). Through theater, they signal their presence and agency, and talk about what it is to be a Muslim woman. Thus, artists with a Muslim background question the structural frames and the global context in which they write and play. They evolve within global structures in which social, political, and religious aspects constrain their productions and influence their choice of displayed identities (Jiwa, 2010), but also of narratives, and productions even though they are actors able to question these structural aspects and to dialogue with them.

Through their stories, artists show different facets of Islam while questioning them along with the Muslim community in Brussels. Some artists might be willing to show a "reassuring" Islam, another Islam (El Asri, 2011), as it is claimed by the association Ras-el-Hanout, which aims to build bridges between different populations and deconstruct stereotypes related to Muslims. They make their audience with a same life trajectory as the artists feel understood. As Poutiainen & Rantakallio (2016) found out, through identification with what is staged, people with similar experiences make up with Islam and their Muslim identities as they feel understood and not anymore as "outsiders". Hence they reinforce a sense of belonging to the Brussels-based community of Muslims. On the contrary, when artists such as Rachid Benzine or Ismael Saïdi stage young Muslims engaging in a war in Syria in the name of Islam, this Islam is not reassuring at all. They show the awfulness of the radicalization and the violent political Islam. They do not totally try to subvert hegemonic discourses about Islam as a threat and violent religion (Jiwa, 2010), but they nuance this dominant discourse by showing this violent Islam as one ideological vision and in doing so, differentiate Islam from radical Islam. Their sense of responsibility is not to show a positive and "ethical Islam" to the youth (El Asri, 2011) but rather to keep an intellectual integrity.. Indeed, Ismael Saidi takes the responsibility to tell the unsaid about the Belgian Muslim community and to publicly display a self-criticism. He denounces the problem of transmission of Islam which is not reappropriated to the Belgian context as it is based on intolerance, anti-Semitism and prohibitions linked to de-humanizations to those who do not respect them, on discrimination and even "racism towards the Whites". Ismael Saidi points out the pressure of the Muslim community on the youth and the need to adapt Islam to its environment. He summed up his self-criticisms by writing:

> *"This play [Djihad] is obviously a self-criticism of the community I am part of. Who are these young people who get involved? Before stigmatizing them, I would like to first analyze the symptoms, so that one can treat the disease beforehand. The problem of identity is very important*

in immigrant communities, whether in Belgium or anywhere else in Europe. There is excessive victimization, hypocritical, when those who say they are not tolerated are not themselves tolerant of others. The problem comes from us, so it is our role to be the link between the Islam of the Middle East and the children of immigrants from here. Islam is a "religion play-dough" that has always been able to adapt to a particular environment, so we must do the same here before we have to face radicalization. I refuse to let my children grow up in a "white racism". The children of immigrants are a mixture of Islam and Judeo-Christianity, we must accept this and move forward." (Saidi in the pedagogical dossier of the play "Djihad", 2014: 3)[43]

In the same vein, in his theater play "Cerise sur le ghetto", Sam Touzani puts forward criticisms towards the Brussels-based Arabic-Muslim community from which he comes, but contrary to Ismael Saidi, he clearly distances himself from it and denounces their "cultural ghettoïzation", their community withdrawal. By doing so, he condemns what he sees as their intolerance and their ethno-religious vision of the society which may become for some people a breeding ground of a deadly Islamist ideology. Most of all, he condemns their one-sided vision of the identity.

Sam, on the 15.10.2020: *"I'm even the antithesis and the opposite of someone who see himself through the prism of ethnic-religious, I'm quite the opposite, I'm aiming for universalism. Ethnico-religious, looking at society through the prism of ethnico-religious is dangerous because it encloses society in an identity that is reduced to one, it is not multi-dimensional, it is not plural, it cannot project itself, it is excluding, it does not include anything at all except its own functioning, its own culture, its own dogmas somewhere, which are often irreducible, it is the very definition of dogma, which says that one cannot question."*[44]

4.5.2. Embodying "the Other" on stage

Embodying the "Other" on stage, being an "alien" in the world of culture, can have two opposite outcomes. On the one hand, the artist might be categorized as "diversity artist", as good to embody exoticism on stage or to fulfill a "diversity quota". Artists have to deal with an assigned identity on stage. This is what happened to Nadia, when she was studying at a drama school in Brussels. She claimed: *"I took the place of exoticism. The exotic in service was me."*[45]

On the other hand, artists can choose to stage otherness in order to bring novelty concerning themes or actors' profiles. They bring populations who are marginalized from the cultural sphere on stage. For example, through arts, women artists take the floor in order to make their voices heard, as Muslim women are even more invisibilized in the cultural sphere and more generally in the public

---

[43] Personal translation of : "Cette pièce est évidemment une auto-critique de la communauté dont je fais partie. Qui sont ces jeunes qui s'engagent ? Avant de les stigmatiser, je voudrais qu'on analyse d'abord les symptômes, pour pouvoir soigner le mal en amont. La problématique de l'empreinte identitaire est très importante chez les communautés immigrées, que ce soit en Belgique ou partout ailleurs en Europe. Il y a une victimisation à outrance, hypocrite en somme, lorsque ceux qui disent ne pas être tolérés, ne sont pas eux-mêmes tolérants envers les autres. Le problème vient de nous, alors c'est notre rôle de faire le trait d'union entre l'Islam du Moyen- Orient, et les enfants d'immigrés d'ici. L'Islam est une religion «pâte à modeler»qui a toujours su s'adapter à un milieu, il faut donc en faire de même ici avant de devoir faire face à une radicalisation. Je refuse que mes enfants grandissent dans un 'racisme des blancs'. Les enfants d'immigrés sont un mélange d'Islam et de judéo-chrétienneté, il faut l'assumer et avancer". (Saidi, dossier pédagogique de "Djihad", p.3)
[44] See appendix 3.28.
[45] See appendix 3.29.

sphere. It enables their "community audience" which is usually not present in the cultural realm to identify with them, to feel represented and understood. They send the message "you're not alone".

> Salim, on the 13.08.2020: *"There was a connection with the audience, with an audience that wasn't necessarily represented in the theatrical institutions in Brussels, and so there's a resonance that's taking place, and there's really also this 'it's not just happening to me' effect. 'I see people who look like me. I see stories that look like mine'."*[46]

To sum up, artists with a Muslim background bring new profiles and themes on stage, and enable populations who are usually marginalized from the cultural realm, and more generally from the public sphere, to identify with their characters in a cultural realm which is mainly White. By doing so, artists question by their presence on stage in a White cultural world and by the topics of their theater plays.

4.5.3. Opening a dialogue

Artists with a Muslim background bring together different populations in terms of ethnicity, nationality, social category, gender, etc. with whom they share their realities and stories. Indeed, their art is accessible to a large audience. Especially, they bring new populations, such as their "community audience" in theater, they attract populations who are not used to go to theaters in order to attend their plays. Also, it enables people who do not know the realities of the Muslim community, the Islamic history, customs, etc., to learn more about it, to understand it, to generate empathy towards Muslims' realities. This openness and attraction of all populations provoke encounters with the "Other", which may result, through empathy and sharing, on an overcoming of the vision of Muslims as uncivilized and dangerous "Others" as mentioned by Ali (2017).

As Moschis-Gauguet (2018) highlighted, through this understanding of each other and boundary blurring, arts help to open intercultural dialogues in the public sphere. Humor and self-deprecating also help people to connect and as they spend a pleasant time together, as they share the same moment and the same emotions, and help to deconstruct negative images of Muslims. Hence, artists open intercultural dialogues with their diverse audience and between the different populations comprising the audience. As they display a multitude of identifications through their characters, a large population can relate to what is staged. As Boubekeur (2007) emphasized, artists promote a large sense of belonging. Artists show through the plural ways of being Muslims embodied through their characters that there is more "us" than "them" in Muslims. Therefore, through their stories and their exchanges with the various populations that make up their public, artists promote a peaceful *vivre-ensemble* when they reflect on how to live-together in a cohesive way, and even invite to a *faire-ensemble,* a do-together, a reflection on how to build a common perspective together.

---

[46] See appendix 3.30.

4.5.4. Bringing to the fore realities of "being Muslim"

Artists with a Muslim background speak out on Muslim identities, Islam, and the Muslim community from their own positions; they show the realities of being Muslim in Belgium. Also, they show through their narratives and the migration remembrance that the reality of Moroccan Muslims is also the reality of migrants. Indeed, these artists come from the urban and diversified areas, they are children or grandchildren of immigrants that came for labor, and they are targets of stereotypes and multiple forms of discrimination. Hence, Islam is staged as part of a social, religious, and ethnical-cultural reality of Muslims. Through their arts, they bring to the fore realities of Muslims who they present as a discriminated-against minority with a migration background. Indeed, through their arts, they explore "being Muslims" as a "discriminated-against minority in the West" as Jiwa (2010) claimed. More than witnesses, they try to raise awareness on their social realities through their theater plays when staging situations or narratives of discrimination and injunctions to integrate. Women artists emphasize the atypical situation of Muslim women, who are even more discriminated-against as they have to face gender violences and anti-Muslim attitudes. Indeed, when Muslim women wear a headscarf, they may face even more forms of discrimination in the job market for example or they may be target of Islamophobic attitudes. Also, artists tend to explore solutions to racism and discrimination through role-plays. Action-theater consists of one theatrical form which enables everyone to explore their own social condition and reflect on it.

However, artists didn't mention their will to use theater as political activism to engage in a social justice fight. Still, they do bring the realities of Muslims on stage and contest discrimination, racism, stereotypes and prejudices, and even the marginalization from the cultural sphere and more generally from the public sphere due to their Muslim identity. By doing so, according to Mahon (2000), they intervene in the public debates by openly criticizing "the social terrain they inhabit and the social verities they inherit" (p.474). Artists also make a distinction between Islam and Islamism, between Muslim and terrorist, and try to "de-demonize" Muslims by contesting negative stereotypes. In that sense, one can make a parallel with the role of Muslim hip-hop to discuss social issues (see Aidi, 2014; Poutiainen and Rantakallio, 2016; El Asri, 2011; Amghar, 2003; Ali, 2017).

4.5.5. Being recognized as a public interlocutor on Islam

Some theater plays received rewards from the French-speaking cultural public institutions. It was the case for the theater play "Djihad" who received in 2014 the label of public utility by the Ministry of Culture and Education, and "De Bruxelles à la Mecque" is currently nominated for a reward for the recognition of public utility at the COCOF (French Community Commission for the area of Brussels)

for 2021. This means that these theater plays are considered as bringing something to the public debate and mediation tools. Moreover, "Lettres à Nour" was part of the measures within the framework of the fight against radicalism of the cultural French-speaking community. Hence, these theater plays are considered as part of "public utility theater". What's more, "Djihad" and "Lettres à Nour" have been re-appropriated as counter-radicalization tools and given a pedagogical role by Belgian and French institutions, as part of the fight against the youth radicalization and consequently, these plays are studied in schools. Through these recognitions, the authors are seen as public interlocutors, as taking on a pedagogical role, and also as contributors to global culture.

Hence, artists with a Muslim background are seen as pedagogical models, even though it wasn't their aim. Indeed, Ismael Saidi confides that he didn't think his theater play was useful as a de-radicalization tool. His only aim was to tell a story. So, artists may take on roles they didn't intend to in certain situations. However, some artists assume their pedagogical roles. In "De Bruxelles à la Mecque", artists explain how is the pilgrimage to Mecca, elements of Islamic History such as the construction of the Great Mosque, or explanations of religious customs. The theater play was accessible to everybody, and presented as a way to familiarize oneself with an Islamic practice or to re-discover the pilgrimage for those who already did it, through a cultural and religious immersion. In "Pour en finir avec la question musulmane", the character Benazzouz, an Islamic scholar, gives a pedagogical turn to the theater play as he explains on stage issues related to Islam such as elements of History, gender relationships in Islam, contextualization of the Quran for interpretation, difference between moderate Islam and violent Islamism, etc.

4.5.6. Taking back the narrative on Muslims

By staging Muslim identities, artists play with stereotypes, use humor and self-deprecating as tools to deconstruct stereotypes and mock them, and they also discuss prejudices. Indeed, in popular and even in some political discourses, Muslim identities are defined in a homogenizing and essentializing way, and they may be depicted as threats and/or problems in a climate of fear and a perception of Muslim as "others" opposed to an "us". By doing so, they challenge the dominant narratives while distancing themselves from the identities they are assigned with. They rather assert multiple and dynamic identities, and in that sense, they take back the narratives on themselves:

Salim, the 13.08.2020: "*The idea is to talk about Islam and rather about Muslims as a subject of debate and not as an object. And so we take back control of the narrative*»[47].

It is particularly striking for women artists, as they tend to be seen even more as disempowered individuals, victims of their religion and Muslim men. When women artists choose to speak out about

---

[47] See appendix 3.31.

their realities as Muslim women, they do so to defend their identities and denounce pervasive stereotypes and judgments on them. They take back the narratives on themselves by going against a homogenizing and essentializing identity while displaying a plurality of Muslim women identities.

Through theater, artists with a Muslim background present their own stories and experiences, put forward Muslim identities according to their perspective, and deconstruct essentializing ideas about themselves. In that sense they shift power from dominant voices which have the hegemony of producing discourses on Muslims and invisibilize them (Leake, 2018). They rethink their identities as they enter in a process of revisiting dominant ideas that constrain them, and they propose their own vision on themselves. They do provide "alternative ways of thinking about identity" as claimed by Jiwa (2010). As Boubekeur (2007) mentioned, they revisit how their own identities have been confiscated by other actors than themselves such as opinion and political leaders, researchers and journalists. Artists from Ras-el-Hanout tend to distance themselves from what they perceive as homogenizing, essentializing, and orientalist ideas of popular and even political discourses on Muslims and take back the narrative on Muslims while staging plural Muslim identities. They subvert the images of the violent threat, of the "other" that circulate in popular and political discourses by proposing new subjectivities through their own realities as Ali (2017) concluded.

Sam Touzani takes back the control of the narrative on Muslims but from another viewpoint. He distances himself from an essentializing vision of Muslims promoted by the Arabic-Muslim community itself, which he sees as promoting a one-sided ethnical-religious Muslim vision. As opposition, he stages a plural and moving identity in which the Muslim identity is one among many others, and is an identity he was assigned with when he was born. Thus, artists with a Muslim background take back the narrative from what they perceive as essentializing discourses and assignment of identities and rather claim a plural vision of identities. However, it depends on the source.

Hence, through theater, artists with a Muslim background speak out on themselves and thus re-appropriate their own identities, their own narratives on themselves. They propose new perspectives, in which their cultural background play a role to decolonize dominant euro-centered imaginaries about them (Attia, in "décolonisons les arts!", 2018) and they propose their own meanings about their various identity traits (Mahon, 2000), their moving identities, what is it to be Muslim in the Belgian context.

To conclude this section, staging Muslim identities through theater is a way for artists with a Muslim background to speak out about Muslims, and corollary on Islam and the Muslim community. By doing so, artists question Islam, Muslim identities and their relationship to the Muslim community; they open a dialogue on Muslims and Islam; they give a voice to invisibilized and marginalized populations from the cultural sphere; they bring to the fore the realities of Muslims and the discriminations and racism they endure; they become public interlocutors on subjects related to Muslims; and they challenge dominant narratives about Muslims and propose their own narratives.

5. Conclusion

This research consisted in an investigation of the roles taken on by artists with a Muslim background when staging Muslim identities. Throughout this research, it was explored how the Muslim identities are presented in theater and a particular attention was paid to Muslim women identities. Specifically, the contribution of the artists in public debates on Muslims was examined. In order to do so, the study was based on the analyses of six theater plays, five semi-structured interviews, and a participant observation.

This research showed that through theater, artists with a Muslim background explore and assert multiple Muslim identities and propose alternative narratives to the dominant ones. Theater, as demonstrated by El Asri (2011) with music, enables in a similar way the artists to put forward their hybrid and negotiated identities and current European Muslim subjectivities. However, the artists met talked about their experience of being Muslim especially in the Brussels context. Of course, they present on stage "Culturally European Muslims" through their characters but stick with their Brussels-based reality. The empirical findings also join Jiwa (2010)'s claim that Muslim artists rethink the ways of being Muslim through their arts, as they explore and question their own identities regarding their local context, their different cultural backgrounds, and global events such as radical Islam.

However, although these conclusions are in the same line than pervious findings on other artistic forms, this research does not go on with the concept of "Muslim artists" but rather, the term "artists with a Muslim background" is preferred. This term emphasizes even more the plural and relational aspects of identities. Indeed, "Muslim" may refer to ethnic, cultural, social, or religious identity (see Rudnicka-Kassem, 2016; Jiwa, 2010), which can either be assigned at birth or not (see Conti, 2012), and even though artists distance themselves from the religious dimension, it can still be a facet of their plural identities. "Muslims" consists of one identity trait among others, in interaction with all the other identifications (see Kirmani, 2009) and also with the global context (see Jiwa, 2010) as some identity traits might be more salient in certain situations.

Through theater, artists with a Muslim background propose critical, fun, innovative, and original views on Muslims. They stage their characters in diverse situations, with all their imperfections and complexities, their identity contradictions and their multiple identity belongings. By doing so, they display a plurality of Muslim identities and show the infinite possibilities of their nuances. They put forward a wide range of ways of being European/Belgian/Brussels-based Muslim and different positions towards Islam and the Muslim community. They do so from their position, with a certain understanding of themselves, at a particular time. Women artists, in particular, put forward their gender identity contrary to men. By showcasing the realities of being a Muslim woman, they show

they are empowered subjects with their own agency. In addition, they propose novelty in the cultural realm.

More than staging fictional characters, artists with a Muslim background speak out on themselves and on their own hybrid and dynamic identities. By doing so, they put into question Islam, Muslim identities, and the Muslim community and therefore question what is it to be Muslim in Belgium/Brussels/a specific part of Brussels at a certain time; they open a dialogue on Muslims, Islams, and on how to build a *vivre-ensemble* and a *faire-ensemble* while putting people from various backgrounds together; by embodying otherness, they may give a voice to invisibilized and marginalized populations from the cultural sphere; they bring to the fore the realities of Muslims and the discrimination and racism they endure; they become public interlocutors on subjects related to Muslims and some of their theater plays are considered as pedagogical tools; and they challenge dominant narratives about Muslims, they even propose their own narratives.

Thus, by staging Muslim identities through theater, artists with a Muslim background take on political, social, and even pedagogical roles. They take the floor and express who they are, as individuals, as a community, in a European context, in the national context of Belgium and more specifically in the context of Brussels. Contrary to the essentializing identities they are assigned with, they rather claim their hybrid, nuanced, and moving identities. They propose alternative narratives on Muslims which go against what they perceive as simplistic and homogenizing visions of Muslims, either the homogenizing narratives promoted by dominant popular and even political discourses or the ethnic-religious visions of the Brussels-based Arabic-Muslim community. Artists with a Muslim background take the floor as subjects of the debates on Muslim, Islam, and the Muslim community rather than being disempowered objects.

This study only focused on artists with a Muslim background, not on the reception of their productions. Maybe, in order to go further with the issue of the contribution of artists in the public sphere, conducting interviews with their audience, theater professionals and authorities in the field of Culture and Education would be interesting. Also, further researches on the subject would benefit to go deeper in aspects raised in this master thesis and thinking even more in terms of nuances and variations. For instance, studying women Muslim artists could participate to the scarce studies regarding women artists. Additionally, further research in this field could be an exploration of action-theater as a political tool for people with a Muslim background or the use of arts as a counter-radicalization tool.

References

–   Aidi, H. (2014). *Rebel music : Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture*. Pantheon books New-York.

–   Ali, M. (2017). "Art is not just about entertainment": the social activism and cultural production of Chicago's Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN). *Culture and Religion*,18:4, 353-370, DOI: 10.1080/14755610.2017.1377982

–   Amghar, S. (2003). Rap et islam : quand le rappeur devient imam. *Hommes & Migrations*, *1243*(1), 78–86. https://doi.org/10.3406/homig.2003.4008

–   Behiery, V. (2017). Of Veils, Feminisms, and Contemporary Art. *Esse*, *90*, 16–27.

–   Boubekeur, A. (2017). Post-Islamist Culture: A New Form of Mobilization?. History of Religions, Vol.47(1), pp.75-94**. DOI:** 10.1086/522854

–   Brahy, R. (2009). *Le théâtre-action, expression des minorités...* in Culture, le Magazine Culturel de l'Université de Liège (2009).

–   Brahy, R. (2014). L'engagement en présence : l'atelier de théâtre-action comme support à une participation sociale et politique ? *Lien social et Politiques*, *71*, 31–49. https://doi.org/10.7202/1024737ar

–   Burchardt M., Michalowski I. (2015). "After Integration: Islam, Conviviality and Contentious Politics in Europe". In: Burchardt M., Michalowski I. (eds) After Integration. Islam und Politik. Springer VS, Wiesbaden Cambridge: Polity Press.

–   Conti, B. (2012). L'émergence de l'islam dans l'espace public. *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 119–136. https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.23885

–   Coolsaet, R. (2016). *Facing the fourth foreign fighters wave: what drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian case*. Egmont-Royal Institute for International Relations.

–   Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research : techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

–   Costanzo, F. & Zibouh, F. (2014). Mobilisation strategies of individual and institutional actors in Brussels' artistic and cultural scenes, *Identities*, 21:1, 42-59. DOI:10.1080/1070289X.2013.828620

–   Cukierman, L., Dambury, G., & Vergès, F. (2018). *Décolonisons les arts !* l'Arche.

– Damery, S., & Mescoli, E. (2019). Harnessing Visibility and Invisibility through Arts Practices: Ethnographic Case Studies with Migrant Performers in Belgium. *Arts (Basel)*, *8*(2). https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8020049

– Dassetto, F. (1996). *La construction de l'islam européen : approche socio-anthropologique*. L'Harmattan.

– Dassetto, F. (2006). Islams locaux et globalisation islamique : éléments pour un questionnement théorique. *Recherches Sociologiques et Anthropologiques : RS&A*, *37*(2), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.4000/rsa.559

– DiMaggio, P., & Fernández-Kelly, M. (2010). *Art in the lives of immigrant communities in the United States*. Rutgers University Press.

– DiMaggio, P., & Fernández-Kelly, P. (2015). Immigration and the arts: a theoretical inquiry. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *38*(8), 1236–1244. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1016081

– El Asri, F. (2009). L'expression musicale des musulmans européens. Création de sonorités et normativité religieuse. *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* (25), pp.35-50.

– El Asri, F. (2011). *Islam en musiques constructions identitaires et champ musical européen* (doctoral thesis).

– Garner, S., & Selod, S. (2015). The Racialization of Muslims: Empirical Studies of Islamophobia. *Critical Sociology*, *41*(1), 9–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514531606

– Glowacz, F., & Collard, I. (2019). *Le théâtre comme média de prévention de la radicalisation: évaluation du projet «Nadia»*.

– Gruson, L. (2017). Comment mettre la culture au service de l'accueil des migrants ? *Hommes & Migrations*, *1316*(1), 170–179.

– Hinda, A. (2018). Arab-Muslim theatre defended. *Sinestesieonline*, *22*, 25–64. https://doi.org/10.14273/unisa-1056

– Jiwa, M. (2010). Imaging, imagining and representation: Muslim visual artists in NYC. *Contemporary Islam*, *4*(1), 77–90. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-009-0102-2

– Khabeer, S. (2016). *Muslim cool : race, religion, and hip hop in the United States*. New York University Press.

– Kirmani, N. (2009). Deconstructing and reconstructing "Muslim women" through women's narratives. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *18*(1), 47–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230802584253

– Leake, M. (2018). The Politics of Representation: Reconstructing Power and Privilege Through Art. The Palgrave Handbook of Race and the Arts in Education, 347-372.

– Lejeune, C. (2014). *Manuel d'analyse qualitative : analyser sans compter ni classer*. De Boeck.

– Mahon, M. (2000). The visible evidence of cultural producers. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *29*(1), 467–492. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.29.1.467

– Martiniello, M. (2006). Political participation, mobilisation and representation of immigrants and their offspring in Europe. In *Migration and Citizenship* (p. 83–). Amsterdam University Press.

– Martiniello, M. (2015). Immigrants, ethnicized minorities and the arts: a relatively neglected research area. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. DOI:10.1080/01419870.2015.998694

– Martiniello, M., & Lafleur, J. (2008). Ethnic Minorities' Cultural and Artistic Practices as Forms of Political Expression: A Review of the Literature and a Theoretical Discussion on Music. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *34*(8), 1191–1215. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830802364809

– Martiniello, M., & Mescoli, E. (2018). L'art pour exister, l'art d'exister : l'engagement artistique des nouveaux migrants, published by Universud, June 2018.

– McMurray, A. (2008). Hotep and Hip-Hop: Can Black Muslim Women Be Down with Hip-Hop? *Meridians*, *8*(1), 74–92. https://doi.org/10.2979/MER.2008.8.1.74

– Moschis-Gauguet, A. (2018). The city of the 21st century will be intercultural or it will not be. Ana Lindh report on Intercultural Trends and Social Change in the Euro-Mediterranean region, Euromed intercultural Trend Analysis, 48-51.

– Nieuwkerk, K. (2008). Creating an Islamic cultural sphere: contested notions of art, leisure and entertainment. An Introduction. *Contemporary Islam*, *2*(3), 169–176. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-008-0059-6

– Poutiainen, A. & Rantakallio, I. (2016). Discursive Construction of African-American Identities and Spirituality: A Comparison of Muslim Hip Hop and 1960s Jazz Avant Garde, *Popular Music and Society*, 39:2, 186-201. DOI: 10.1080/03007766.2015.1048063

- Rudnicka-Kassem, D. (2016). Searching for a New Identity: Muslims in Western Europe. *Politeja - Pismo Wydziału Studiów Międzynarodowych i Politycznych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego*, *13*(44), 251–263. https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.13.2016.44.16

- Saïd, E. (1978). Orientalism. Use of a French version : Said, E., Malamoud, C., Meininger, S., Todorov, T., & Wauthier, C. (1980). "L'orientalisme : l'Orient créé par l'Occident". Editions du Seuil, Paris, 2005.

- Sayad, A. (2006). *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité. Les enfants illégitimes*. Raisons d'agir éditions.

- Torrekens, C. (2015). Islam in Belgium: From Formal Recognition to Public Contestation. In: Burchardt M., Michalowski I. (eds) After Integration. Islam und Politik. Springer VS, Wiesbaden.

- Zemni, S. (2011). The shaping of Islam and Islamophobia in Belgium. *Race & Class*, *53*(1), 28–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396811406781

Primary sources :

- Benzine, R. (2016). *Lettres à Nour*. Editions du Seuil. Postface de 2019.
- Cahier pédagogique de "Lettres à Nour", saison 2016-2017, Théâtre de Liège
- Dossier de diffusion de "De Bruxelles à la Mecque", 2019, Ras-el-Hanout asbl
- Dossier de presse de "Pour en finir avec la question musulmane", Mars Mons Arts de la Scène
- Dossier pédagogique de "Djihad"
- Dossier pédagogique de "Chuuut …", 2020, Ras-el-Hanout asbl
- Saidi, I. (2015). *Djihad : la pièce*. Librio, Création Studio J'ai Lu.
- Theater plays : recordings of "De Bruxelles à la Mecque", "Chuuut …", "Djihad", "Pour en finir avec la question musulmane" ; attended at the Centre Communautaire Laïc Juif David Susskind (CCLJ) in Brussels, on the 1st October of 2020 : "Cerise sur le ghetto"

Appendix 1: Interview guides

As mentioned in the methodology approach, the interview guide was different for each of the artists I met as I focused on the theater play I previously analyzed. The interviews were conducted in an informal way, in a form of a discussion, and loosely structured in order to give place to spontaneous questions and interjections. The main goals were to explore the positions of the artists through theater and to discuss their artwork I had previously analyzed.

Interview guide with Salim Haouach

- Personal presentation and presentation of the artistic trajectory

- The theater company "Ras-el-Hanout":

Why is it presented as "committed theater"?

Why did you choose the artistic form of theater?

- The theater play "De Bruxelles à la Mecque" :

Which messages did you want to transmit?

Which audience did you target?

Do you identify yourself with the characters?

The theater play is candidate for the label of public utility by the COCOF 2021. Could you talk about that?

- What do you think about the conception "Muslim artist"? Do you feel concerned? Do you think it is appropriate?

Interview guide with Nadia

- Personal presentation and presentation of the artistic trajectory

- For your artistic trajectory, were you influenced by the global context?

- Why did you choose the artistic form of theater?

- Could you tell me more about "action-theater"? Why using this theatrical form?

- How is it to be a Muslim woman in the artistic world?

- Did you ever stage Islam or Muslim identities in your art? Why not?

- What do you think about the conception "Muslim artist"? Do you feel concerned? Do you think it is appropriate ?

Interview guide with Souhaïla

- Personal presentation and presentation of the artistic trajectory

- Did your position as Muslim woman influence your commitment in theater?

- The theater play "Chuuut":

Which messages did you want to transmit?

Which audience did you target?

Was it a way to make Muslim women heard (reference to my own perception of the theater play)?

In the end of the play, the characters claim "We exist". Could you tell me more about that?

Do you think male artists would have presented Muslim women in the same way?

- What do you think about the conception "Muslim artist"? Do you feel concerned? Do you think it is appropriate?

Interview guide with Ismaël Saidi

- Personal presentation and presentation of the artistic trajectory

- Following the media, with "Djihad", you proposed a criticism on the radicalization process and a self-criticism on the problem of the transmission of Islam?

- Do you consider your theater plays as "theater for public utility"? Did you intend to take part to public debates while speaking about radicalization?

- The theater play "Djihad":

Which messages did you want to transmit?

Which audience did you target?

You wrote about "the problem of identity among immigrant communities in Belgium" in the pedagogical dossier, could you talk to me about that? Why did you want to stage these identities?

Was it an answer to current events?

- Why did you write a sequel to "Djihad"?

- What do you think about the conception "Muslim artist"? Do you feel concerned? Do you think it is appropriate?

<u>Interview with Sam Touzani</u>

- Personal presentation and presentation of the artistic trajectory

- What ideas do you defend on stage?

- You called yourself "maroxellois", could you tell me more about that?

- What is your relationship to Islam?

- You denounce a "cultural ghettoization" from the Muslim community, could you tell me more about that ?

Do you think it is important that you, as a Belgian-Moroccan artist, denounce that?

- The theater play "Cerise sur le ghetto":

Which messages did you want to transmit?

Which audience did you target?

Why did you stage your autobiography?

Appendix 2: Presentation of the theater plays

<u>"De Bruxelles à la Mecque "/ " From Brussels to Mecca"</u>

With Abdelhak Chenouili, Adnane El Haruati, and Salim Haouach

Collectively written

Played in October 2019

" Trois jeunes bruxellois, trois personnalités différentes, une seule destination. Rassemblés par choix, par envie, par obligation, voilà nos trois amis partis en pèlerinage à la Mecque.

'Le pèlerinage c'est que quand on est vieux ?' Que nenni répondent nos amis, à l'unisson, mais chacun avec sa propre motivation : partir pour retrouver la foi, en soi, en les autres, pour le Très-Haut.

Un voyage humoristique et nostalgique pour certain.e.s, une découverte et une immersion culturelles pour d'autres, ce road trip de la capitale de l'Europe à la "capitale" de l'islam offre dans tous les cas une fenêtre inédite sur le pèlerinage à La Mecque. "[48]

Personal translation: "Three youngsters from Brussels, three different personalities, one destination. Gathered by choice, by desire, by obligation, here are our three friends gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

'The pilgrimage is only for old ones?' No is what our friends answer in unison, but each one with his own motivation: to leave to find faith, in oneself, in others, for the Most Holy.

A humorous and nostalgic journey for some, a cultural discovery and immersion for others, this road trip from the capital of Europe to the "capital" of Islam offers in all cases a new window on the pilgrimage to Mecca."

© Ras-el-Hanout asbl, from "Dossier de diffusion 'De Bruxelles à la Mecque'"

---

[48] Source : https://ras-el-hanout.be/spectacle/de-bruxelles-a-la-mecque/

<u>“Chuuut…”/”Shhht…”</u>

With Souhaila Amri, Hafsa Aqqal, Inès Bouzid, Serenay Gazaçeşme, Chiraz Graja, and Takwa Soliman

Collectively written

Played in March 2020 and will be played in December 2020

“Le Congrès International du Vivre-Ensemble s’est réuni concernant son objectif de faire régner la paix dans le monde. Pour cela, il leur faut obtenir un prototype à partir de chaque communauté. Les membres du Congrès décident alors d’envoyer l’une de leurs espionnes au sein de la communauté musulmane de Bruxelles afin qu’elle établisse le portrait type de “la femme musulmane”. La voilà donc équipée puis infiltrée au milieu de ces femmes pendant un an ; elle prend part à leurs conversations et réflexions, écoute leurs témoignages, apprend à les connaître et tente de mener sa mission à bien… ”[49]

Personal translation: “The International Congress of Living Together met regarding its goal of bringing peace to the world. To do this, they need to obtain a prototype from each community. The members of the Congress then decided to send one of their spies within the Muslim community in Brussels to draw up the typical portrait of "the Muslim woman". She takes part in their conversations and reflections, listens to their testimonies, gets to know them and tries to carry out her mission...”

© Ras-el-Hanout asbl

---

[49] Source : https://ras-el-hanout.be/spectacle/chuuut/

<u>"Djihad"</u>

With Ben Hamidou, Ismael Saïdi, James Deano, Reda Chebchoubi, and Shark Carrera

Written by Ismael saïdi

Played from December 2014

"Ben, Reda et Ismaël sont trois jeunes Bruxellois qui font face à l'oisiveté de leur vie. Ils décident de partir au nom de leur religion en Syrie pour combattre aux côtés des autres djihadistes.

Le long de cette odyssée tragi-comique qui les mènera de Schaerbeek à Homs, en passant par Istanbul, ils découvriront les raisons qui les ont chacun poussé à partir et devront faire face à une situation beaucoup moins idyllique que prévue.Avant tout une comédie, Djihad fait rire des clichés de toutes les religions, en levant le silence sur les tabous de chacun. Réelle catharsis, la pièce révèle sur scène nos angoisses les plus profondes, la peur de l'autre et ce qu'elle engendre. "[50]
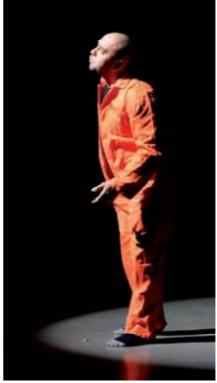
Personal translation: "Ben, Reda and Ismaël are three youngsters from Brussels who are facing the idleness of their lives. They decide to leave in the name of their religion to Syria to fight alongside other jihadists.

Along this tragic-comic odyssey that will take them from Schaerbeek to Homs, via Istanbul, they will discover the reasons that pushed them to leave and they will have to face a situation much less idyllic than expected. Above all a comedy, Djihad makes people laugh at the clichés of all religions, lifting the silence on everyone's taboos. A real catharsis, the play reveals on stage our deepest anxieties, the fear of the other and what it engenders. "

© Elias Devil, from "Le dossier pédagogique 'Djihad'"

---

[50] Summahry from the pedagogical dossier "Djihad"

With Sam Touzani and Mathieu Gabriel

Written by Sam Touzani

Played from March 2020

"L'histoire d'une vie aux accents de vérité grinçants racontée par Sam Touzani, qui nous invite à repenser le réel à partir de son histoire familiale. Le récit traverse trois générations, des montagnes du Rif marocain, où la misère est si écrasante que même les enfants rêvent de partir, jusqu'au bitume de Molenbeek où le petit Sam verra le jour dans un deux-pièces chauffé au charbon. Plus tard, afin d'échapper au danger du communautarisme, c'est de lui-même qu'il s'exile. Le fils d'immigrés peut enfin commencer son dialogue intérieur, entre sa culture d'origine et sa culture d'adoption, relier les rives souterraines de ses multiples identités sans les réduire à une seule...

Mais, tout cela suffira-t-il à le sortir du cercle infernal de la culpabilité ? Celle qui ronge tous ceux qui quittent leurs terres, leurs parents, leur langue pour partir loin, très loin, là où il n'y a plus de soleil ? "[51]

Personal translation: "The story of a life with creaking accents of truth told by Sam Touzani, who invites us to rethink reality from his family history. The story spans three generations, from the mountains of the Moroccan Rif, where the misery is so overwhelming that even the children dream of leaving, to the bitumen of Molenbeek where little Sam will be born in a two-room coal-fired house. Later, in order to escape the danger of communitarianism, he exiled from himself. The son of immigrants can finally begin his inner dialogue, between his culture of origin and his culture of adoption, linking the underground shores of his multiple identities without reducing them to a single one...

But will all this be enough to get him out of the infernal circle of guilt? The one that gnaws at all those who leave their lands, their parents, their language to go far away, very far away, where there is no more sun? "

© Maïté Renson

---

[51] Source : http://samtouzani.com/

With Camille Voglaire, Ana Rodriguez, Jean-Claude Derudder, Jean-Luc Piraux, Vincent Sornaga, Hassiba Halabi, and Fabien Magry

Written by Rachid Benzine

Played in April 2018

"Dans un immeuble parisien, un nouveau locataire s'installe, mais celui-ci possède un statut particulier, il vient d'être placé en résidence surveillée. Une nouvelle qui n'est pas passée inaperçue auprès des autres habitants. Entre un concierge juif fils de déportés, un syndicaliste communiste, une bourgeoise récemment convertie à l'islam, un militant du Front National, un islamologue émérite et une sociologue féministe homosexuelle, les réactions fusent. "[52]

Personal translation: "In a Parisian building, a new tenant moves in, but this one has a special status, he has just been placed under house arrest. A news that did not go unnoticed by the other inhabitants. Reactions ranged from a Jewish janitor, son of deportees, a communist trade unionist, a welthy woman recently converted to Islam, a Front National activist, an emeritus Islamic scholar, and a gay feminist sociologist."

© Théâtre de Liège

---

[52] From the press file « Pour en finir avec la question musulmane »

<u>"Lettres à Nour "</u>/ « Letters to Nour "

Written by Rachid Benzine

"Islamologue et chercheur franco-marocain, Rachid Benzine fait partie de la nouvelle génération d'intellectuels qui prône un travail critique et ouvert sur le Coran. Son texte *Lettres à Nour* raconte sous forme de théâtre épistolaire, les échanges entre un père, intellectuel musulman pratiquant – vivant sa religion comme un message de paix et d'amour –, et sa fille partie en Irak rejoindre l'homme qu'elle a épousé en secret et qui est un lieutenant de Daesh."[53]

Personal translation: "Islamic scholar and Franco-Moroccan researcher, Rachid Benzine is part of the new generation of intellectuals who advocate a critical and open work on the Quran. His text *Letters to Nour* tells the story, in the form of epistolary theater, of the exchanges between a father, a practicing Muslim intellectual - living his religion as a message of peace and love -, and his daughter who has left for Iraq to join the man she married in secret and who is a lieutenant of Daesh."

© Théâtre de Liège

---

[53] Source : https://theatredeliege.be/evenement/lettres-a-nour/

Appendix 3: Original extracts of interviews

<u>Appendix 3.1.</u>

Salim, le 13.08.2020 : " l'Islam n'est qu'une des composantes de l'identitaire de plein de personnes et donc nous on avait l'habitude de se présenter comme 'Jeune bruxellois musulman' et se dire, voilà, il y a un des trois mots qui pose souvent question. Quand on dit qu'on est jeune, tout le monde comprend qu'on n'est pas vieux, Bruxellois ce n'est pas qu'on est contre le reste du monde et quand on dit musulman, tout d'un coup, c'est repli communautaire etc. (…) Moi je n'ai pas de souci à voir ce qualificatif musulman, ça fait partie de mon identité, mais ça ne se résume pas à ça.*"*

<u>Appendix 3.2.</u>

 Ismael, le 08.10.2020 : "Moi si vous devez me définir, je vais vous dire que je suis belge, d'origine marocaine, de confession musulmane, de culture judéo-chrétienne et que je vis dans un environnement laïc. Je suis une lasagne, je vous l'ai dit. (…) Moi le musulman d'Indonésie, j'ai rien à lui dire, je ne sais pas qui c'est. "

<u>Appendix 3.3.</u>

Sam, le 15.10.2020 : "Mais moi je n'ai pas choisi. T'es né musulman et tu restes musulman toute ta vie ? "

<u>Appendix 3.4.</u>

Salim, le 13.08.2020 : "Certains artistes ont du mal à voir ce mot-là, musulman, accolé derrière, parce qu'il peut être essentialisant, et réducteur c'est-à-dire on voit tout à travers ça. (…) J'ai l'impression qu'il n'y a pas beaucoup d'artistes qui vont avoir cette identité là, je dirais portée de manière explicite … Après, effectivement, ça a un stigmate, c'est un poids à porter.*"*

<u>Appendix 3.5.</u>

Souhaila, le 07.19.2020 : "On a tendance à se dire que quand t'es musulman tu traites de l'Islam. Tu as tendance à traiter comment toi tu le vis, ce que tu connais, ce que t'as appris, comment tu le déconstruis en tant que personne musulmane etc. et on est tous loin d'être des experts en tout, et parfois tu as cette impression que tu dois l'être. Et je pense que c'est aussi le risque avec les artistes musulmans.*"*

Appendix 3.6.

Nadia, le 19.08.2020 : "La chrétienté, le judaïsme et l'Islam c'est pas pareil… Enfin, ce n'est pas que c'est pas pareil, en gros 'artiste musulman', les musulmans se considèrent comme une communauté, tout comme les juifs se considèrent comme une communauté. "

Appendix 3.7.

Souhaila, le 07.09.2020 : "A titre personnel, je pense qu'il faut dire les termes parce que sinon on nie une certaine réalité. Dire un artiste a présenté une pièce sur les femmes musulmanes par exemple, ça a moins d'impact que dire une artiste musulmane a présenté une pièce sur les femmes musulmanes, parce que le message qui est renvoyé est qu'une concernée a écrit une pièce sur elle-même, sur ce qu'elle connait. Si tu dis « artiste », tu ne sais pas le point de vue qui est adopté."

Appendix 3.8.

Nadia, le 19.08.2020 : "un artiste musulman, il est musulman mais c'est pas pour ça que dans son art il va lire des sourates, lire le Coran, …"

Appendix 3.9.

Salim, le 13.08.2020 : "Les artistes racisés, ils ont les mêmes difficultés que les autres, plus quelques unes supplémentaires. L'accès aux financements par exemple de la culture, ça les concerne aussi."

Appendix 3.10.

Nadia, le 19.08.2020 "Par exemple, si on demande une belge qui sait faire l'accent, ben je suis totalement là-dedans. Je suis une belge de naissance, j'ai grandi ici et voila, je suis une fille, et je sais faire l'accent belge, brusseleer, tu vois l'accent bruxellois, il y a pas de problème, je peux le faire. Mais, dans mon cas, si j'arrive et que je me présente en tant que belge, non, dans la tête des gens c'est une blanche. Tu vois ce que je veux dire ? On a … C'est comme ça. On est dans une société qui nous a appris à réfléchir de cette façon."

Appendix 3.11

Ismael, le 08.10.2020 : "Moi je me vois comme un raconteur d'histoire. Quand vous racontez une histoire, ce n'est pas que du divertissement. Quand vous racontez une histoire, bien entendu il y avec la narration, il y atout le coté divertir l'esprit, c'est-à-dire permettre aux gens de faire autre chose pendant une heure, une heure et demi, deux heures, mais il y a aussi un truc a raconter avec un message à en garder. "

Appendix 3.12.

Sam, le 15.10.2020 : "Les artistes ils interrogent bien sur notre réalité, ils la transposent, ils la transgressent surtout, et la désacralisent. (…) L'artiste, il est là pour amener des émotions, tout en racontant une histoire, des histoires, des récits, qui sont particuliers, qui sont singuliers, qui sont profondément intimes, quelque chose qui est en-dessous de la carapace, qui est parfois de l'ordre de l'enfant, et qui tendent de toucher l'universel. Au théâtre, plus c'est faux, plus c'est vrai. Parce que le théâtre n'apporte pas de solution. Mais il pose les bonnes questions. Au théâtre, nous ne sommes pas là pour vous dire comment il faut penser. On est là pour vous dire qu'il faut penser"

Appendix 3.13.

Souhaïla, le 07.09.2020 : "on présente des personnages totalement imparfaits avec cette idée qu'on a des personnages réels. (…) En fait plus que des contradictions, on voulait parler des nuances et imperfections. "

Appendix 3.14.

Salim, le 13.08.2020 : "Ca montre qu'il n'y a personne qui est parfait. (…) Ca montre aussi qu'il y a des gens qui pratiquent l'Islam, on voit qu'il peut y avoir des pratiques très différentes ou pas de pratique d'ailleurs et comment ça dialogue. Qu'est ce qui se passe derrière, pourquoi ce chemin-là … Est-ce que ce qu'ils ont en tête c'est exactement ce qu'ils sont ? Pourquoi ? "

Appendix 3.15.

Salim, le 13.08.2020 : "Il y avait des soirées ou on avait, on savait qu'on avait même plus de personnes pas musulmanes que musulmanes et ça riait tout à fait différemment parce qu'on a installé des codes, comme avec le 'chef un petit verre on a soif', ça montrait le coté zinneke de l'Islam, le coté Brusseleer"

Appendix 3.16.

Ismael, le 08.10.2020 : "C'est des fils d'immigrés, qui sont nés en Belgique, qui n'ont jamais réussi à gérer les pressions les communautés musulmanes exercent sur eux, en même temps le regard que la société porte sur eux, et en même temps la modernité dont ils veulent faire part. Ils n'ont jamais réussi à gérer ça en fait, quand ils sont tombés dans le désarroi, on a ce qu'on appelle des prêcheurs de haine qui sont venus les récupérer, dans Djihad c'est ça la problématique, c'est vraiment ça, c'est des gars à l'identité cabossée. "

Appendix 3.17.

Ismael, le 08.10.2020 : "J'ai écrit Djihad parce que j'ai vu sur Facebook un gars qui était avec moi en classe qui est parti en Syrie, je voyais des photos de ce gars avec une kalachnikov et le drapeau belge

derrière lui, et en fait je me suis posée des questions et cette image a réveille plein de choses : elle a réveillé des choses vécues quand j'étais ado, ce rapport au religieux, ce rapport au dogmatisme et tout ça et je me suis mis à écrire la pièce mais sans me poser de question, j'avais aucun but en fait. Bien sur quand on écrit en tant qu'auteur il y a un but c'est de faire passer un message aux gens, donc le message c'était raconter une histoire que je pensais connaitre parce que ce que mes personnages ont vécu, ce sont des parties de moi on va dire"

Appendix 3.18.

Echange avec Ismael, le 08.10.2020

" S : Ok. Donc quel était le message principal ? Sur quoi vouliez-vous amener une réflexion en particulier ?
I : l'ignorance qu'on a les uns des autres, l'ignorance que mes personnages ont de leur propre religion finalement, l'ignorance de ceux qui ne leur ressemble pas, comment ceux qui ne leur ressemble pas les ignore, une ignorance dans tous les sens en fait. Parce que la discrimination c'est pas non plus dans un sens. Ce n'est pas que du blanc vers le noir, ça peut être du noir vers le blanc aussi. L'ignorance. Donner un peu plus de complexité aux choses, c'est pas aussi simple que ça, c'est pas noir ou blanc. Et donc condamner l'ignorance qu'on a tous et toutes envers les autres. "

Appendix 3.19.

Sam, le 15.10.2020 : " L'identité musulmane est une parmi d'autres. Et d'ailleurs elle coule en moi depuis … Amin Maalouf a écrit les identités meurtrières, j'ai pas de soucis avec ça, en me disant que l'identité elle est mouvante, elle évolue. Un peu comme la vérité, elle est toujours plurielle et elle change en fonction des contextes sociaux, économique, politique, culturel, elle change en fonction du contexte, de l'environnement, qui nous influence. Et puis nous ne sommes pas les seuls maitres de ça, on détermine nous ce qu'on a envie d'être, enfin on essaye, c'est pas toujours évident, parce que l'empreinte des autres a la fois vous influence et parfois vous tue dans votre émancipation personnelle."

Appendix 3.20.

Sam, le 15.10.2020 : "Je le dis dans le spectacle. Je suis musulman par naissance. Athée par conviction. Belge de nationalité. Je pourrais dire juif de cœur. D'origine berbère. Que mon pays c'est la laïcité, le féminisme. C'est précisément ce coté multidimensionnel de l'identité. Je ne suis pas que ceci ou que cela. Je suis tantôt ceci et parfois cela. Et donc il y a une fragilité dans tout ça. Rien, aucune identité n'est profondément inscrite dans le marbre. Et pour parler comme Hanna Arendt, je peux dire que je ne suis sure de mon identité ou de mon histoire, je ne suis fondamentalement sur de penser ce que je pense que lorsque je l'ai fait pensé à quelqu'un d'autre. C'est en ça que l'autobiographie m'intéresse. "

Appendix 3.21.

Ismael, le 08.10.2020 : "Donc Djihad m'a choisi, il fallait que je l'écrive à ce moment là, c'était un besoin, je pense que je n'aurais pas pu l'écrire plus tôt, j'avais 38 ans quand j'ai sorti Djihad, je pense qu'il fallait avoir quelques années derrière soi, j'avais un rapport au religieux, un rapport à mon quartier, un rapport à l'immigration, tous ces rapports-là vous finissez par commencer à les comprendre on va dire quand vous approchez de la quarantaine et c'est pour ça que c'est à ce moment là que Djihad est arrivé. "

Appendix 3.22.

Souhaila, le 07.09.2020 : "Notre pièce c'est un produit de la société donc il y a des choses qui peuvent être lues comme des réponses à la société et a raison. Mais on n'a pas envie que la pièce ne soit qu'une réponse, on a envie que la pièce puisse exister peu importe les débats qu'il y a autour. "

Appendix 3.23.

Sam, le 15.10.2020 : "Pour parler des choses, il faut parler de ce que l'on connait. Donc je me sers du quotidien ou de ma vie pour le transformer en objet artistique. Je questionne le réel pour en faire un spectacle."

Appendix 3.24.

Souhaïla, le 07.09.2020 : "En tant que femme et musulmane c'est deux identités qui sont souvent attaquées dans la société, c'est deux identités que j'ai un peu envie de mettre en avant et de défendre à travers différentes histoires qu'on raconte sur scène, différentes choses. "

Appendix 3.25.

Souhaïla, le 07.09.2020 : "On jouait sur le réalisme, vraiment les propos qui sont tenus, c'est des discussions qu'on pourrait avoir dans la vie de tous les jours et c'est vraiment cette idée … montrer une petite palette de ce qui existe, ça va même peut-être au-delà de l'autodéfinition parce que on n'est pas à la recherche d'une définition, puisque nous-mêmes si on nous demande demain ce qu'est une femme musulmane, on ne pourra pas répondre, je répondrais avec un background de fille maghrébine, avec des parents issus de l'immigration, je répondrais vraiment en fonction de ce que moi je connais, en tant que musulmane qui ne parle pas forcément arabe. "

Appendix 3.26.

Souhaïla, le 07.09.2020 : "On avait envie de faire quelque chose de sympa et on avait envie de prendre la parole sur nous-mêmes en fait. On s'est dit 'bon on en a marre d'entendre parler de nous tout le temps tout le temps tout le temps, sans jamais vraiment prendre la parole donc ben on va la prendre et faire quelque chose de cool'. (…) On a tendance à entendre parler des femmes musulmanes à travers

la bouche d'autres et que ce soit des non-musulmans ou des hommes, ça dépend ou on est, mais c'est cette idée ouais on existe et qu'on prend la parole, on ne la demande pas, et on est là. ”

Appendix 3.27.

Souhaïla, le 07.09.2020 : "Quand on s'est lancé dans le projet, c'est aussi d'amener sur la scène bruxelloise ce qu'on n'a pas forcément … Enfin ça c'est d'une manière générale dans le monde de la culture, quand tu regardes les séries ou autres, il n'y a pas de femme forcément musulmane. Le peu de séries dans lesquelles tu peux trouver des femmes musulmanes ben elles sont pas représentatives d'une réalité. (…) On avait envie de parler d'abord aux femmes qui ne se sentaient pas représentées, vraiment créer quelque chose qui nous ressemble un peu et puis aussi pouvoir ouvrir la discussion avec d'autres personnes qui ne connaissent pas vraiment nos quotidiens. ”

Appendix 3.28.

Sam, le 15.10.2020 : "Je suis même l'antithèse et l'opposé de quelqu'un qui se revendique à travers le prisme de l'ethnico-religieux, moi c'est tout le contraire, moi je vise l'universalisme. Ethnico-religieux, regarder la société par le prisme de l'ethnico-religieux est dangereux parce qu'elle enferme dans une identité qui est réduite à une seule, elle n'est pas multidimensionnelle, elle n'est pas plurielle, elle ne peut pas se projeter, elle est excluante, elle n'inclut rien du tout si ce n'est son propre fonctionnement, sa propre culture, ses propres dogmes quelque part, qui sont irréductibles souvent, c'est la définition même du dogme, qui dit qu'on ne peut pas remettre en question."

Appendix 3.29.

Nadia, le 18.08.2020 : "Du coup, moi j'ai pris la place de l'exotisme. L'exotique de service, c'était moi."

Appendix 3.30.

Salim, le 13.08.2020 : "Il y a eu une accroche avec le public, avec un public qui ne se trouvait pas forcément représenté dans les institutions théâtrales à Bruxelles, et donc la il y a une résonance qui se met en place et il y a vraiment aussi cet effet « ça n'arrive pas qu'à moi. Je vois des gens qui me ressemblent. Je vois des histoires qui me ressemblent. ”

Appendix 3.31.

Salim, le 13.08.2020 : "C'est l'idée c'est de parler de l'Islam et plutôt des Musulmans en tant que sujet du débat et pas en tant qu'objet. Et donc on reprend le contrôle du narratif."