Summary

In this article-based thesis I address the position of Muslim women as debated in social sciences and in political and public debates, a position which is most frequently debated these days through marriage. Within the contexts of Morocco and the Netherlands, where the issues surrounding marriage are highly debated, I describe how individual women navigate marriage. The chapters in this thesis address a variety of topics related to these two central themes: Muslim women and marriage.

The omnipresent political and public discussions about the relationship between Islam and the West frequently take place in terms of gender and gender relations. Muslim women, the first theme, is one which is hotly debated in both public and political spheres, spheres in which these women are often portrayed as homogenous, unchanging entities and mere passive victims of their culture and religion. Discussions on Muslim women are often positioned in the everlasting (and complex) structure versus agency debate. In the views on the position of Muslim women, there are roughly two stances which can be distinguished: secular feminists argue that the confining structures of religion and culture (patriarchal society) make it difficult for women to make choices on their own accord and they question the extent to which feminism can be reconciled with Islam in practice. Others, acknowledge the confining structures but also stress and position Muslim women as active agents. The stereotype representation however, is deeply pervasive in both public and political debates, which makes it ever more relevant today.

The topic of discussion in which the position of Muslim women is subsumed (sometimes concealed) changes over time, at the moment it seems to be marriage. Therefore, marriage is the second theme of this thesis. In primarily Muslim majority countries – such as Morocco – the position of women is discussed in terms of the extent to which Islamic Law can provide for equal rights between women and men. In Europe, and specifically in the Netherlands, the marriage patterns of Muslim minorities have been on the political agenda since their arrival in the sixties. First in relation to migration marriages and integration, i.e. family reunification of the first generation. Later the preference of the second generation for a partner from the country of origin of the parents. Nowadays in the Netherlands, discussions on the position of Muslim women are especially about marriage and are central in debates and policies about women’s rights such as migration, citizenship and transnationalism. As well as it being the focus in discussions on immigration, the position of (especially) Muslim women is echoed in current discussions on partner choice, arranged and forced marriages, consanguineous marriage, forced abandonment of primarily women and children in the country of origin (of the parents), polygamy, religious marriage, marital captivity and child marriage.

In this thesis I pose the following central question:

How do Muslim women in Northeast Morocco and Dutch Turkish and Moroccan women in the Netherlands navigate marriage?

The organization of this thesis is geographic. Part One is set in Morocco as a primarily Muslim country. Part Two is set in the Netherlands, as a multicultural country where Dutch Moroccans and Turks form large minority populations. Parts one and two are sub-divided thematically in sections that more or less represent the chronology of marriage: (1) women and partner choice, (2) women and the longing for, or having, children within marriage. Part
one, set in Morocco also addresses (3) women and divorce, as a way that some marriages can end.

The chapters in this thesis address the narratives of Muslim women and describe and examine the changing contexts in which they exist; it is the interrelation between these two that specifically interested me. The overarching concept which binds the studies in this thesis together is social navigation, a concept which underlines movement: the movement of social environments and the movement of people. More specifically, it points to how these two interact. The use of this concept to look at the themes in this thesis is new, as it is usually applied to situations of volatile change such as (post) war countries. However, it is more broadly applicable. As the discussions on the relationship between agency and structure continue, this concept adds different perspectives to the discussion, questions which themselves stimulate more discussion. By zooming in on the interactivity, both agency and structure are a given, and it goes beyond any simple dichotomy.

I typify Morocco and the Netherlands as societies on the move. It is not so much that the societies as a whole are in flux, but that aspects regarding marriage, the position of women and for the Netherlands, the position of Muslims in a multicultural society, are in perpetual movement. Institutional changes have an impact on marriage practices and these are in constant movement. The women in this thesis can be confronted with constraints or social forces at an individual level, whether this is on an institutional level (who you can/cannot marry, immigration laws), or on a symbolic level (ideas within society and family about how women should behave). As such, the concept does not only refer to the movement of social environments, it importantly also relates to the social position of women and the degree of control over the social forces that they experience. Thus, it also refers to the agency that women have and experience, which differs greatly per individual, regardless of the context.

Part One of the thesis, is set in Morocco and addresses the following aspects surrounding marriage: consanguineous marriage, forced abandonment of women and children and divorce.

Chapter 2, “Notre huile est dans notre farine. An exploration into the meaning of consanguinity in Northern Morocco against the backdrop of the medical risk of having disabled offspring” (Storms, Bartels, 2013), shows how women navigate medical risk within the ideal of marriage. Being married is an aspiration held by the women themselves and, at the same time, is an expectation of society. Marrying a cousin has been a common practice (although it seems to decrease among the younger generation) and the medical risk attached to this practice is now in discussion. Within the complex of expectations, personal aspirations and medical risks, women face a risk which is experienced broadly: not just as a medical risk, but a social risk too: the risk of not marrying or the risk of marrying without the support of relatives. In this article different discourses are explored on the perception of risk and what risk prevails, depending on the individual and the community.

The children of (Dutch) Moroccan women are central in Chapter 3: “In between the Netherlands and Morocco: ‘Home’ and ‘belonging’ of Dutch Moroccan return migrants and abandoned children in Northeast Morocco” (De Bree, Storms, Bartels 2011). This chapter elaborates on children’s agency by discussing how Dutch Moroccan return migrants and children abandoned (by their fathers) express, and reflect on, feelings of belonging and
home in Morocco. The mothers, often situated in socially and economically difficult situations seek ways of escape. Not so much for themselves, but to secure a better future for their children. It is demonstrated how, for the children, these feelings of home and belonging are strongly shaped by their mothers. The predominantly young abandoned children are raised in Morocco from a young age. Meanwhile mothers transmit feelings of not belonging in Morocco and longing for the Netherlands. In what we call the creation of “imaginary belonging” in the Netherlands, the mothers create a “socially imagined” future for their children in the Netherlands.

Chapter 4 “The reform of Moroccan Family Law and women’s daily lives: Navigating between structural constraints and personal agency” (Storms, Bartels forthcoming), focusses on the reform of the Moroccan Family Law in 2004, a law which gives them more rights on paper, and how women in daily life navigate in divorce proceedings. Although the revisions of the Family Law accomplished the goal of greater legal equity between men and women in several areas of civil society, many Moroccans harbour serious reservations about the legal changes. In daily life the access to, and use of, the new rights differ for women. On an institutional level there are notions of femininity, to which some women want or need to act. There are also constraints at an economic level. The way they defend their interests does not necessarily have to relate to the rights given. According to their own social position, they choose ways of dealing with the current situation and try to secure a (future) position in society that is in their best interests.

Part Two, situated in the Netherlands, discusses cousin marriage among Dutch Moroccan and Dutch Turkish women. In the Netherlands, the majority population regards marriage between cousins as incestuous and a practice which invites the risk of having disabled offspring; it is, therefore, taboo.

Chapter 5, “Cousin marriage among Dutch Turks and Moroccans: Debates on medical risk and forced marriage” (Storms, Bartels forthcoming) zooms in on the debates about medical risk and forced marriage in relation to cousin marriage and shows how women navigate partner choice and medical risk within these debates. In the early 2000s the debates were centred on medical risks. From 2009 onward cousin marriage was discussed in the framework of forced marriage. The thread that links these political debates is what we call concealed transcripts. We use the term concealed to refer to the frame in which cousin marriage is always discussed: immigration and integration policy, especially regarding Muslim communities. Although cousin marriage has a long history and is well known in The Netherlands, this frame takes attention away from the population in general, directing it to a special group, Muslims. We argue that political transcripts on migration policy result in the creation of further boundary markers between who We are and who They are, in other words defining Them as not being ‘moral citizens’. When hearing the stories related by the women themselves, they however show how marriage practices are changing, and how ideals of love and traditional marriage customs can be combined. In their stories it becomes clear that they feel to belong to several social environments through which they navigate: both Dutch society and their family network, ethnic group (Dutch Turks and Moroccans) etc., often talking in terms of religious identity.

The following chapter, Chapter 6, “Changing patterns of partner choice? Cousin marriage among Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands” (Storms, Bartels 2015), discusses the focus on risk in the political debate (medical risk and forced marriages) and the perceptions
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of risk – medical, religious and social – and the navigations made by Dutch Moroccan and Turkish women. A group for which, especially among the first generation, a consanguineous marriage is regarded ‘safe’ rather than ‘risky’. Safe for women, children and the family as a whole. Our respondents navigate within this complex mix of the personal risks on medical, religious and social levels and the perceived dominant risks on societal level. At the same time, the second (younger) generation, in particular, navigates in a migratory context, where patterns of partner choice are shifting among the first, second (and ‘third’) generation. Thus, the practice and preference of marrying a member of one’s kin is not a static or fixed phenomenon but a social construct that is transformed by interaction, time and context.

Cousin marriage among Dutch Moroccan and Turkish women is discussed again in the Chapter 7: “Dutch Moroccan and Turkish consanguineously married women and their perspectives on preconception carrier screening and reproductive choices” (Verdonk, Metselaar, Bartels, Storms, forthcoming). The chapter zooms in on medical risk and specifically addresses the way that women navigate choices related to the medical risk regarding preconception carrier screening and reproductive options. The current technology and preconception care cannot describe the risks facing consanguineous couples with any certainty, even if they have genetic counselling. This provides a very uncertain situation. Although, given the fast pace of the developments in genetic technology, more technologies are going to be available in the near future for estimating risk. Not much is known about the perspectives of consanguineously married Turkish and Moroccan women on screening, counselling and reproductive options. We describe how Dutch Moroccan and Turkish women view these issues and for some, how they navigate to have a child and, moreover, to have a healthy child via reproductive options.

Navigating marriage, beyond dichotomies

The stories recounted in this thesis show the heterogeneity and dynamics that exist among the women themselves: the differences in different contexts (Morocco and the Netherlands), the differences between generations and the differences within generations, the differences between women. As the central question of this thesis implies, it is not so much a question as to if Muslim women navigate, but how they navigate. In responding to this question I seek to avoid the general homogenization of these women. In debates in social sciences I have, therefore, positioned myself alongside feminists who portray Muslim women as being active agents in their daily lives. Not denying the influence that social forces can pose, but at the same time emphasizing the women’s agency and questioning the way this agency is often merely seen as resistance to men, culture and religion, I argue that the way we could perceive women as active agents should be seen as much more than that.

Furthermore I argue that popular portrayal of Muslim women is based on recurring ideas of what I’d like to refer to as non-existing and counterproductive dichotomies that run parallel to each other: agency versus structure, us versus them, autonomy versus culture and modernity versus tradition. In these dichotomies, homogenous entities are created and placed in opposition to each other. In this way, an Other is created, which places the women in this thesis on the same side: confined by structures, defined by culture and tradition. It is the accumulation of the places Muslim women are ascribed to in the dichotomies that weighs heavily. These dichotomies do not do justice to the unstable, constantly shifting and fragmenting social reality. In other words, they restrict our understanding of social reality.
To return to navigation, the question is: in what direction do women navigate? I argue that this is not fixed, like terms such as ‘modernity’ suggest. Navigating is inherent in being human, it is something that has always been done, by everyone, and it underlies cultural change. So first, we have a homogeneous portrayal which diverts our eyes from change and diversity. Second, by thinking in oppositions, we think in differences rather than similarities.

The way cousin marriage is addressed in the Netherlands is a prime example of this: by ascribing cousin marriage to Others (Muslims), cousin marriages among native Dutch are ignored, as are similar issues such as medical risks. The dichotomies are therefore counterproductive because, when important issues are addressed like women’s rights in general, forced marriage, abandoned children and mothers, medical risk in case of consanguinity (and they should be addressed), these labels do not do justice to social reality as well.