Good Girls & Rebels

In a Dutch-Moroccan community which often casts music as immoral, illicit, or inappropriate, female musicians in particular struggle to legitimize their morality and authenticity as Muslims. This article explores the divergent strategies through which two female Dutch-Moroccan artists negotiate their identities as Moroccan, Muslim artists, whether by seeking acceptance or by flagrantly transgressing norms. Whatever the case, the private and public lives of the artists are best understood in light of a normative public discourse which disapproves of their work.

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Whether music and performance are permissible in Islam remains a legally and theoretically controversial topic. Many Islamic scholars do not claim that music, singing, and performance are forbidden per se, but put restrictions on the kind of music, its lyrics, the audience, and the social environment. These restrictions often stem from associations that are envisioned between music and all kinds of immoral, un-Islamic qualities, such as infidelity, adultery, and idolatry. Additionally, social contexts in which music is performed are often associated with gender mixing, flirtatious behaviour between the sexes, alcohol, and drug abuse. What determines if music and performance are to be considered haram or halal is whether there is a tangible danger of Islamic norms – regarding gender segregation, the respectability of the performers and their audience, and the occurrence of illicit activities – being transgressed.

The position of female artists in many Muslim communities is ambivalent and often controversial. Whereas male performers are considered to make a living for their family, women performers are often put in the same category as prostitutes because they use their sexual bodies to seduce audiences and make money. My fieldwork research shows the prevalence of these ideas among the Dutch-Moroccan community and that even parents do not approve of such career choices for their daughters. The stories of two female Dutch-Moroccan performers, Chadia and Farida, demonstrate that the discourse that considers female performers as immoral and un-Islamic greatly impacts the way they present themselves to their audiences.

Coping strategies

Chadia and Farida manage their female, Muslim, Moroccan, and artistic identities each in her own specific way. They adopt different strategies to harmonize these identities and their, sometimes, contradictory significances. Both strive for acceptance by the Dutch Moroccan community and their social environment and to gain respectability as female artists.

Chadia, born in the Netherlands, has been performing since the age of twelve. Her music is a mix of Arab and western styles, which she herself calls “oriental R&B.” Farida, a youth worker in her thirties, was born in a small town in Morocco but has lived in the Netherlands since age three. She is a semi-professional lead vocalist in an ethnically mixed band. Both Chadia and Farida do not wear headscarves.

Both of these talented artists have to find ways, albeit different, to cope with the negative image of female singers among the Dutch-Moroccan community: their morality and authenticity as Muslims is put to question in discussion forums on the Internet or in random conversations and rumours.

Chadia, bint el-bled

Chadia is pre-occupied with her own self-portrayal as a decent, proper, and respectable artist. She tries to carry over as a “nice girl,” i.e. does not drink alcohol, wear revealing clothes, or socialize with men and people who are associated with alcohol or drugs. Chadia refers to this image as being a bint el-bled, literally “country girl.”

Chadia: “I hear it a lot, people telling me that I am normal and that I’ve just got what Morocco needs. They often say: bint el-bled, that’s what they always say. And that is really nice to hear. And it doesn’t have to be all revealing and open, for all to see [i.e. sexy clothes].”

The expression bint el-bled is commonly used in North Africa. In the

Maghreb, when a girl is called bint el-bled, it is a compliment. The term stands for a female who does not forget her roots, people, and homeland and who shows respect for and conforms to her origins, culture, and traditions, through a particular way of talking, dressing, acting, and behaving. The concept of bint el-bled is often used in opposition to the stereotypical concept of the “westernized, immoral woman.”

Chadia reaffirms her image as bint el-bled through her dress style. She dresses “nearly” (not too revealing or sexy) and wears little make-up. She is nevertheless dressed in the latest fashion, often wearing jeans and tops revealing her neck, shoulders, and part of her chest. Her preferences for artists like Alicia Keys and Asala, a contemporary female pop singer from Syria, stem not only from their musical qualities, but also, or even more so, from their images as decent artists.

“Alicia Keys is really one of my great idols. And Asala as well, because I like simplicity … it doesn’t have to be all glamorous and open and revealing [the clothes]. I don’t like that at all and Keys is a great example of that. For her it is all about the voice and the music. A nice look is great, but in the end it is the music that counts. With Asala it is the same thing …”

Keeping up appearances and maintaining a good reputation is equally important for Chadia as the suitability of her song lyrics. In response to whether she would perform to, or sing, rai music, she says: “… rai, I would never sing rai. Every music genre has its own label, its own reputation. People who sing rai, they are in a totally different world than the world I live in. Such people are totally different from me.”

So, singing rai is out of the question because of the bad reputation of the genre and its association with alcohol (ab)use. Not surprisingly, she considers her nice-girl image a sufficient compensation for her being a singer:

“You know what it is? I don’t spread any negative vibes. And I don’t say that I will be singing the rest of my life. It is so diverse, I don’t do anything bad … I mean, I don’t drink, I am not performing on stage half naked, I try to portray a positive image of us, so then they have to understand it a little bit, actually, I think.”

Significantly, Chadia does not intend to go on singing for the rest of her life. Dutch-Moroccan youth, when justifying their visits to dance parties, often talk about “becoming serious when they are older.” This notion of “becoming serious” refers to the idea that, even though one might not perform all Islamic duties when one is still young, but one is
Farida, the rebel

Farida is not afraid to be different from other Dutch Moroccans and cross boundaries. Her story shows how she tries to maintain her Moroccan and Islamic identities, while at the same time putting forward a very strong individual, artistic, female identity disconnected from societal, cultural, and religious boundaries. Farida deals with issues of social control, maintaining a good reputation, and gender ideology in a very different way from Chadia. Farida is not at all concerned with the kind of reputation she has among the Dutch-Moroccan community: “The Moroccans over here, in the Netherlands, really, I find them so strange. In Morocco, it is just normal, much more relaxed; the whole family asking me when the CD will be finished and when I will be performing again…” MG: “What about the reactions you get here in the Netherlands?” Farida: “Oh, we’ve got so many reactions: one of them was that people said that we were possessed [by demons]. Yes, really! So many gossip stories, yeah, the rumour mill … I am just infamous here in my town … But I have always done what I wanted to do, and you guys, you just do what you wanna do.”

Accordingly, Farida is not bothered by other people’s opinions and does not succumb to the pressure to measure up to Dutch-Moroccan cultural norms. Her family’s non-involvement in her musical career also enables Farida to maintain this individual approach. One that becomes particularly clear when she speaks about the future plans of the band: “Well, I would like to do this for the rest of my life. When I talk about this to my mother she says: ‘Well you cannot do this your whole life, because then you will never find a partner.’ Then I say: ‘Well, then that is just bad luck!’ … I would never stop [singing] because of a man! My mom says that I pay the price for that now, because I am still by myself … But she is just concerned for me … I mean, you should just have the freedom, also within a relationship, to do what you like, to be creative.”

Evidently, Farida’s mother prefers her daughter to get married and end her musical career. However, by saying that Farida will not get married as long as she makes music, her mother is not judging the religious permissibility of her status as an artist, but is simply acknowledging that female artists are looked down upon. Her mother fears that the Dutch-Moroccan community would consider Farida a “bad Moroccan and a bad Muslima.” Nevertheless, Farida is not planning to comply with her mother’s expectations. Thus, like Chadia, Farida has to deal with the bad reputation of female performers. Whereas Chadia tries to keep these associations away from her by literally distancing herself from people and spaces linked to these associations (alcohol, drugs, and sex), Farida is not afraid to confront these issues.

“People can get the wrong impression when they see you perform. It is my passion [performing], but in real life I don’t like the nightlife at all. I’d rather go to the theatre or to the movies, instead of spending an evening in a sweaty, smoky space, with people bumping into you, throwing beer over you, and making stupid remarks: ‘Wesh inti maghribiyaa? [Are you Moroccan?].’ In the beginning, I used to answer them politely, but after a while it really started to get on my nerves … I used to go to rai parties, but once you’ve been there, then you immediately get labelled ‘a whore.’ It gave boys the right to come up to you and talk to you, while I just wanted to enjoy the artist’s performance …” Farida is not afraid to attend these socially reprehensible occasions, even though she has been through some bad experiences. Although Farida totally rejects the dominant discourse that frowns upon female performers and all of its negative associations, she cannot escape being confronted by it or dealing with it.

Dutch-Moroccan female singers are constantly subjected to a discourse stating or at least suggesting their low status and questioning their integrity as Muslims. This discourse is based on religious image-ry, which is in turn intrinsically linked to socio-cultural norms of the Dutch-Moroccan community that brackets “Moroccaness” together with “Muslimness.” This leads to alternative ways to achieve legitimacy and respectability by Dutch-Moroccan female singers. They use strategies such as conformity or individualism in order to overcome the obstacles and ambivalences with which they are confronted. The choices they make in their professional and private lives in order to justify their career and to strive for acceptance as singers need to be understood within the context of the normative discourse that disapproves of female singers.

Notes
1. These are fictive names.
2. Quotations are taken from my interview with Chadia, 23 November 2004.
3. The expression Bint el-bled has a prominent place in the rai music subculture and its song lyric repertoire as well. In many songs the male rai singer expresses his preference for a bint el-bled over a gaouria (female foreigner), because of her “authenticity and respectfulness.”
5. Quotations are taken from my interview with Farida, 7 June 2005.