**5. 'Every morning I scrutinize myself. I have four problems. Am I French or Algerian? Am I a girl or a boy?' Discuss this quotation from Nina Bouraoui's Tomboy in light of your reflections on narrative identities.**

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The question of whether Bouraoui identifies more as French or as Algerian, and a boy or as a girl, is key to the exploration of her identity in *Tomboy.* The concept of ‘identity’ has provided much ground for progressive discussion and questioning of gender and cultural norms. Judith Butler for example used the notion of performativity to question how gender is defined; and Martin introduced the idea that queer, mixed-race people feel as if they are an outsider in terms of both gender and nationality. “We are anomalies among anomalies, able to enter multiple worlds at multiple times, as both insiders and outsiders”. [1] With these ideas in mind, questions still remain over *what* *exactly* identifies someone as being a certain gender or nationality, and it is this theme that this essay will examine. I will explore the dual themes of gender and national identity, and how Nina’s sense of fractured identity is presented in the novel. By analysing what it means to identify with a certain group, I will question the legitimacy of the boundaries of identity, that we as a society are often constrained to. This approach will allow me to put across the view that boundaries are in fact the opposite of what they seem- they are fluid and not boundaries at all, and therefore is it possible to identify with more than one of these identities, ultimately arguing that it is not only possible for Nina to be between identities, but that this is a valid identity in itself.

Before analysing the key themes that affect Nina’s exploration of identity, it is important that we understand exactly *how* Nina seeks to explore her identity. The key to *Tomboy* is the author/narrator divide. That is, the author being the person writing the book and the narrator being the person telling the story within the book, or the ‘speaker’. This space between the two figures, and their two purposes, means that the author is able to write about themselves and also not about themselves at the same time. In the case of bicultural authors like Bouraoui, this ‘space’ can serve as a very effective tool in exploring identity, possibly because (as I will explore later in the essay) bicultural people are used to living in these ‘spaces’ or ‘gaps’ in society.

Firstly, in order to understand Nina’s gender identity, it is important to explore what qualifies certain traits as being masculine, and others as feminine. Certainly there are different viewpoints on this matter. For example one on hand the conventions Nina grew up with represent a view that gender is binary and certain behaviours are exclusive to certain genders. It is evident that these restrictive ideas have left a lasting impact on the narrator’s gender identity. Recounting the influence of her father, Nina tells the reader « Mon père m'initie à l'enfance. Il m’élève comme un garçon. Sa fierté. La grâce d'une fille. L’agilité d'un garçon. J’ai sa volonté, dit-il. Il m’apprend le foot, le volley, le crawl. Il m’apprend à plonger des rochers bruns et luisants. Comme les voyous. Il transmet la force. Il forge mon corps » [2]. At such a young age the idea that a woman can only be quiet and elegant, and that it is not ‘ladylike’ for someone to want to be strong and sporty is being drilled into Nina’s brain. By having these gender roles enforced onto her, Nina is made to feel as if she has to identify as a boy to perform certain behaviours.

In contrast to the binary ideas of identity represented by Nina’s father and the wider society of the time, Butler argues for a much more fluid gender spectrum, and questions the origins of gender. In this argument it is claimed that gender is a product of regulatory norms and discourses, [3] and there aren’t actually any behaviours that can be exclusively defined as ‘male’ or as ‘female’. From this, one can argue that ‘performing’ a gender shouldn’t be seen as a conscious choice of an individual, but instead a result of the conventions and discourse surrounding gender roles in society. Therefore in this view it can be deduced that gender is an act rather than a set of rules on how each gender is. It is not fact that certain things are masculine or feminine, but rather they are a conventional way for men and women to act. Therefore Nina’s behaviour is labelled as ‘tomboy’ because society before her has already established these behaviours as masculine.

Given that the predominant view of gender is that genders are stable categories, but also due to the hierarchy which profits from the enforcing of these binaries, Butler notes that gender is ‘violently policed’ and that deviation from these binaries is linked to ‘punitive consequences’. [4] In Nina’s case, not identifying with either gender and refusing to conform to society’s gender binaries makes her appear problematic to others because she is challenging the long-upheld norms that are seen as ‘correct’. Therefore it is important to raise the question of whether Nina actually has a problem with her identity, or whether it’s society itself that has a problem with Nina’s identity, and theymake Nina feel as if she *should* have a problem with her identity.

Not only is split gender identity key to Bouraoui’s narrative identity, but also split nationality. A key element to Nina’s struggles with her national identity is the historical trauma between France and Algeria. She recounts “I don’t know who I am. One and multiple. Lying and truthful. Strong and weak. Girl and boy. My body will betray me one day. It will develop into a female body and turn against me. It will resist. I will hold onto Nina forcefully like a wild animal. We find champagne glasses wrapped in newspaper from 1962. My sister is born at the time of the crime: the year of the massacre of the Algerian women from La Résidence, the year of the OAS massacre. It was their last massacre. Their revenge. The curse is everywhere. In my room, all over the apartment walls, on the tile floor, and in the laundry room”. [2] Nina lives among this heavily emotional historical context, which contributes to her feelings of being distraught.

Nina is tormented by her split identity, and we see in the novel that she is left feeling as if she doesn’t belong anywhere. : “Who will I be in France? Where will I go? How will the French see me? To be French means being without my father, without his strength, his eyes, his guiding hands. To be Algerian means being without my mother, without her face, her voice, her protective hands”. [2] We see here that even though labels of gender and nationality aren’t binary-in fact it is questionable they even exist at all-they still have effects on the people that feel outside of these labels. Like gender, Nina’s anxieties surrounding nationality are heavily influenced by the opinions of those around her, rather than her being free to decide for herself how she identifies. It is evident that she feels a sense of guilt towards one culture if she chooses to identify with the other and feels compelled to act a certain way in order to avoid criticism or prejudice from others.

Here, Nina is portraying Sara Ahmed’s definition of disidentification as a desire to abandon sticking to such labels of nationality, and instead to identify freely, away from identity-based definitions. [5]. With the concept of disidentification Nina rejects the idea that certain cultures, beliefs, or practices are confined to one nationality, which is evidenced in the proclamation “I am everything. I am nothing”.

It is important to note that these two issues of gender and nationality are not completely separate for Bouraoui. From the quotation, we see that Nina’s struggle with her gender identity and nationality are not two separate issues plaguing *Tomboy*, but rather they are undoubtedly intertwined. Therefore I argue sex and gender cannot be separated from nationality when narrating one’s identity. We see on many occasions that when Nina is living in Algeria, the extent to which she can fully identify as Algerian is limited by her gender identity. Nina’s desire to engage in what is seen as typically male behaviour can be seen as being linked with the structure of the Algerian society she grew up in. « Être un homme en Algérie c’est devenir invisible. Je quitterai mes corps … L’Algérie est un fôret d’homme » [2] Here it is evident that Nina’s perception of identifying as male is that they have more freedom and are less constrained by how society expects them to act. By describing men as invisible she is suggesting that their gender is not what society sees as their defining quality. Whereas for women in society, your gender can negatively affect the way you experience life.

Another instance where Nina’s gender and national identity come together is with her desire to play with the Algerian boys. She admits “I don’t understand all their words. ‘Yahya Algeria’ is repeated. I repeat it in front of the mirror…I’m as one with those children’. [2] This particular longing for acceptance by the Algerian boys is repeated many times in *Tomboy,* showing how the confluence of Nina’s nationality and gender is at the forefront of Nina’s overall identity. Even if Nina’s identity was not split between French and Algerian, she would still not be able to play with the boys because she is (biologically) female. [6] The same principle applies to her gender-even if her gender identity was not split between the labels of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, Nina would still not fit in because she is not ‘French enough’ to fit in with the French, or’ Algerian enough’ to fit in with the Algerians.

As stipulated in my introduction, gender and nationality are identities that cannot be exactly defined. The blurring of two genders or two national identities requires a sacrifice from an individual to be marked out as different by society because they don’t fit in with the norms. Relating to *Tomboy,* Nina’s split identity is the result of feeling the need to conform to labels based on societies’ expectations of what gender and nationality should be. Yet Nina rejects the fact she has to choose between the two labels given to her, instead identifying with aspects from both, without ever fully becoming one or the other. By constantly shifting between two identities, Bouraoui is simultaneously exposing the fragility of the borders of identity, as well as destructing societies’ expectations of how she should define herself. To summarise, the very key to Nina’s narrative identity is that she is in-between identities. Like how through her writing she occupies the space between author and narrator, in terms of both gender and nationality Nina occupies the. space between two labels. Therefore I would argue that Nina’s in-between identity is a valid identity in itself.

# Bibliography

1) Martin cited in Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*

2) Bouraoui, *Tomboy*

3)Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter, 2–3*

4) Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*

5)Ahmed, Sarah. *Mixed Orientations*

6) Barthel, Danielle. *Seeing the Self in the Mirror: Shifting Identity in Bouraoui’s Tomboy*