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**South African Muslim Women's Experiences:  
Sexuality and Religious Discourses**

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*Dedication*

*This dissertation is dedicated to the respondents who participated in this research project.  
Thank you for generously sharing your thoughts and life experiences with me.*

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# **South African Muslim Women's Experiences: Sexuality and Religious Discourses**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation seeks to investigate the experiences of South African Muslim women in relation to sexual dynamics and marital relationships. By using in-depth interviews as the main empirical research method, this feminist study foregrounds women's voices in the production of religious meaning.

I explore dominant religious discourses that influence women's conceptualisations of sexuality and the related implications for sexual praxis in contemporary Muslim communities that are also characterised by living conditions of poverty and violence. Focusing on women's engagements with religious meaning as it relates to their intimate relationships, the dissertation engages these findings with relevant literature and theory proposed by Islamic feminists on issues of morality, ethics and agency.

This study finds that while patriarchal religious norms powerfully influence and give meaning to the lives of many Muslim women, these same women also contest, subvert and reconstitute these norms in varying ways. The diversity and richness of women's narratives illustrate the multifaceted, paradoxical and ambivalent nature of religious discourses as it is embodied in everyday life. I conclude that religious systems of meaning as they are lived in this local context are marked by tensions between patriarchal and egalitarian perspectives that are imbricated and interwoven in a variety of ways. The dissertation contends that the inclusion of women's narratives is imperative in order to highlight the dynamic nature of religion as well as to challenge patriarchal legacies that still impact many local contexts

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## Abbreviations

CC	Constitutional Court
FPDA	Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis
GLBT	Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered
ISWA	Islamic Social Welfare Association
IUC	Islamic Unity Convention
MJC	Muslim Judicial Council
MPL	Muslim Personal Law
MPLB	Muslim Personal Law Board
MYM	Muslim Youth Movement
NUC	National Ulama Council
POWA	People Opposing Women Abuse
SADHS	South Africa Demographic and Health Survey
SAPS	South African Police Service
SSDI	Semi-Structured in-Depth Interviews
WLCT	Women's Legal Centre Trust

## **Introduction:**

# **South African Muslim Women's Experiences: Sexuality and Religious Discourses**

This dissertation explores South African Muslim women's experiences in intimate, especially conjugal, relationships. I investigate some of the dominant discourses on sexuality, particularly as these relate to understandings of Islam that inform and are reflected in women's lives. I critically use analytical categories developed in feminist scholarship on the gendered nature of power relations, and examine the intersecting production of religious subjectivities in a South African context.

Firstly, my research is informed by the feminist commitment of recognising and utilising women's experiences as a crucial component in contemporary knowledge production. Secondly, through extensive inclusion of women's narratives, I am responding to debates on the diversity of women's experiences in feminism. This includes the critique of early Western feminist anthropological scholarship as well as contemporary representations of Muslim women in popular media. Thirdly, I am engaging with a body of literature that is increasingly being called Islamic feminism, in order to highlight the nascent ways in which particular scholarly and activist endeavours resourcefully create empowering and egalitarian possibilities for many contemporary Muslim women. My research is particularly framed in relation to central questions emerging from this latter body of scholarship.

Islamic feminist initiatives are mainly driven by Muslim women's active participation in meaning-making, often elaborating on women's subjective experiences when engaging with religious ideology and norms. The context in which Islamic feminism is played out, and its impact on societal norms and individual mindsets, varies depending on factors such as political milieu, geographical location, cultural heritage and also whether Muslims constitute a minority or a majority population in a particular context. Islamic feminism is not an insular or isolated establishment; quite the contrary; Islamic feminism positions itself as an international phenomenon that continues to grow in countries such as Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran, USA, Turkey,

Morocco, Egypt and South Africa, to name a few. Thus, the articulation of multiple Islamic feminisms, in which heterogeneous groups of women interact and generate alternative modes of engaging with the Islamic tradition in relation to their lived realities, is salient within an Islamic feminist discourse.

Within the particular context of South Africa, the emergence of Islamic feminism was set against the backdrop of the apartheid regime and the participation of Muslims in the anti-apartheid struggle. In the context of these Muslims engaging in political activism, ethical principles such as justice and equality, transcending racial and ethnic categories, formed an integral part of a shared human rights discourse. For them, it seemed futile to fight for a free South Africa, in which freedom from oppressive structures took centre stage, and at the same time not to engage in transforming sexist societal norms. The time was ripe for an Islamic feminist project to flourish.

Islamic feminism in South Africa was also influenced by broader international trends, particularly the fecund production of literature in which re-readings of key Islamic texts were elaborated from a gender-sensitive perspective. These readings often emphasised the Qur'an as a source of egalitarianism and gender equality. This more scholarly endeavour influenced the development of an academic milieu in which issues pertaining to gender and sexuality became fervently debated against the contextual realities of Muslim women in South Africa.

It is imperative to note at the outset that religious discourses do not singularly determine Muslim women's experiences. Religion engages with a number of other contextual social forces which impact the broader South African population that includes Muslims amongst others. The prevalence of gender-based violence, including wife battery, is compounded by complex socio-political dynamics of poverty, lack of education, and economic instability that affect a large segment of South Africans. Muslim women are not isolated from these broader social and gender demographics. In addition, their lives are impacted by a variety of cultural and religious norms that might reinforce gender power hierarchies. Feminist scholars seek to explore the varied, complex and multiple ways in which gender relations are configured in particular local contexts.

My empirical research based in Cape Town, seeks to examine the lives and experiences of local Muslim women. In particular, I explore the ways in which their understandings of Islam and responses to dominant religious norms might speak to some of the debates raised in Islamic feminism, and feminism more broadly. I am interested in the ways women embody specific religious systems of meaning and the manner in which they might contest, comply with, negotiate and/or reconstitute dominant norms through their lived experiences. The findings of this research contribute to the developing field of feminist empirical research in South Africa. Through the inclusion of contemporary Muslim women's narratives, women's voices and experiences are epistemologically prioritized, and brought into the mainstream for scholarly reflection on the dynamic nature of religious tradition.

This thesis is organised around nine chapters:

Chapter One critically engages with the notion of 'women's experience', a central concept foregrounded in feminist theory. Furthermore, this chapter includes some of the ways in which feminist scholars have responded to and contested the notion of 'women's experience' as it has been presented by Western feminist endeavours. The critique, offered by a number of feminist scholars, illuminates the importance of recognising women's diverse and multifaceted experiences, often stressing the salience of religious and cultural specificity. I highlight some of the Western assumptions that continue to contribute to the 'othering' of Muslim women in particular. In the last section of this chapter I outline some of the key principles of feminist poststructuralism, a rich and resourceful intellectual framework that lends helpful insights to the analysis of contemporary empirical research.

Chapter Two explores the emergence and progress of an Islamic feminist discourse. I pay particular attention to the multiple ways in which Muslim scholars employ and develop a variety of methodological and epistemological frameworks in order to advocate gender-inclusive and egalitarian Islamic perspectives that prioritise gender justice. Through examining the work of a few influential Muslim female scholars, I highlight key ideological constructs and hermeneutical approaches that are extremely valuable when analysing contemporary normative religious meaning systems that inform women's lives.

Chapter Three examines a number of empirical studies undertaken in a South African Muslim context that focus on gender relationships, marital dynamics, and sexual intimacy. In particular, I explore research findings that foreground Muslim women's experiences with divorce, polygyny and HIV/AIDS. I also present a number of surveys undertaken in South Africa on gender-based violence in order to illuminate some of the unique challenges encountered by my respondents. This chapter highlights specific social dynamics and normative religious perceptions that operate in local contexts, sometimes in very problematic ways.

Chapter Four outlines the research methodology that I employed when conducting empirical research. I bring to light my own research positioning and discuss some of the scholarly debates on location and positionality in empirical research. I also describe some of the factors that might have influenced my research encounters and contributed to the dynamics of the many relationships formed with respondents during the course of the research. In addition, this chapter discusses the process of developing the interview guide, the ways in which the empirical data were analysed, and the socio-demographic profiles of the respondents participating in this study.

Chapters Five to Eight constitute the central empirical component of this dissertation and foreground South African Muslim women's experiences in intimate relationships, and their understandings of sexuality and particular religious discourses that in varying ways inform marital and sexual dynamics. I made a deliberate choice in this dissertation to include fairly extensive excerpts from my respondents' narratives. This decision is informed by Clifford Geertz's ethnographical method of 'thick description' (1973) that makes salient not only human behaviour or understanding, but also contextual factors and discursive frameworks through which individuals make sense of their own subjectivity and social relationships. By employing the notion of 'thick description', Muslim women's voices come to the fore in their full richness in ways that include nuances, complexities, and ambiguities – illustrating the diverse and multiple dimensions of human experience.

Chapter Five entitled "On Being a Muslim Woman in South Africa" explores respondents' reflections on issues of religious identity. This chapter also examines particular dominant social dynamics that influence self-understandings and the expression of a distinct Muslim identity in a

South African context. Here I explore the salience of particular religious practices and beliefs that open up spaces for diverse ways of asserting a Muslim identity.

Chapters Six to Eight form a conceptual unit. In the chapter entitled “Islam and Sexuality: Understandings and Experiences” I focus on respondents’ understandings of Islam as one of the primary ways in which they engaged with questions around sexuality. This chapter includes debates on Islamic ethical ideals related to sexual dynamics, particular parameters of sexual behaviour, as well as sexual taboos. I explore some of the ways in which specific conceptualisations of sexuality present salient ambiguities, particularly between religious ideals and lived experience.

In the next chapter entitled “A Good Muslim Woman should not refuse her Husband Sex” I examine the dominant discourse concerning a wife’s sexual availability and its implications for women’s experiences in marital relationships. In this chapter I also focus on the various and contesting ways that one particular *hadith* was referred to by many of the respondents.<sup>1</sup> What becomes clear in this chapter is the ways in which particular patriarchal understandings of religion remain a powerful influence on relationship dynamics in contemporary contexts. I also investigate particular ways in which some respondents creatively contest these dominant views on sexuality through employing alternative modes of understanding sexual praxis.

In the last chapter of this unit, entitled “Understandings of Gender and Polygyny”, I explore how respondents’ intimate relationships are informed by their perceptions of human nature, sexuality and assumptions on gender. I also explore the topical subject of polygyny among my respondents. In particular, I examine respondents’ diverse views of and experiences with polygynous marriages, and the varying ways in which social norms and behaviours significantly impact upon women’s experiences in polygynous unions.

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<sup>1</sup> *Hadith*, plural, *ahadith*: detailed narratives reporting on the life and praxis of the Prophet, i.e. sayings and doings of the Prophet. Among other things, the *ahadith* have informed Muslim positions and opinions on issues of leadership, gender relations and sexual dynamics.

These three chapters, outlined above, incorporate themes that imbricate on various levels and present fluid and multifaceted dimensions of human experience. In all these chapters I pay particular attention to the multiple discourses that inform understandings and contribute to the construction of various subjectivities. I explore how dominant conceptualisations on sexuality might guide sexual praxis in intimate relationships and influence broader marital dynamics. I also investigate possible resonances between my respondents' narratives and the theoretical constructs on morality, ethics, and agency articulated by Islamic feminists.

In the final chapter of this dissertation I reflect on some of my empirical findings. In particular I examine the multifaceted and sometimes ambiguous discourses that operate in local contexts. I explore some of the factors that contribute to a contemporary Islamic sexual ethics for the respondents participating in this study. I also investigate the varying ways Islamic feminist methodologies and central concepts can provide useful means through which to engage some of the inegalitarian relations of power that influence South African Muslim women's experiences and understandings of Islam.

## Chapter 1:

# Situating Islamic Feminism/s: Broader Feminist Theoretical Mappings

Feminism, in its broadest sense, introduced gender as a key analytical concept.<sup>2</sup> The increasing awareness of patriarchal discourses that undermine and limit women's capacities and humanity, led to the emergence of feminist activist initiatives and the development of feminist theory. Feminism as a social vision emerged as a socio-political movement that has largely been concerned with gender equality (Gross, 1996:21).<sup>3</sup> The ways in which 'normative practices' are constituted in political, economic, religious and social spheres have been challenged and contested and more gender-inclusive possibilities envisioned. The aim of social protest has been to transform androcentric structures and prioritise gender justice and equality as the guiding principles informing all dominant discourses.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Simone de Beauvoir's seminal book, *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, she introduced the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' through her renowned phrase: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1993:281). Within various strands of feminist theory, 'sex' is prediscursive and used to refer to biologically distinct features, whereas 'gender' is used to refer to social and cultural constructions of femininities and masculinities.

<sup>3</sup> Many feminist theorists divide the history of feminist movements into three waves (see for example Maggie Humm's *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, 1995). First wave feminism emerged around the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and foregrounded the right of women's suffrage. Second wave feminism emerged around the 1960s and 1970s and was primarily involved with questions of gender equality. 'The personal is political', a term coined by Carol Hanisch (1969), is reflective of the feminist struggles and initiatives during this period and continues to be important for many contemporary feminist movements. Third wave feminism, from the 1990s to the present, is characterised by a diversity of feminist expressions including critical responses to second wave feminist engagements.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that feminism *introduced* an awareness of gender imbalance or gendered practices. Historically, there have been different contestations of gender within various social discourses. See for example Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (1993), in which she documents more than 700 years of women's engagement with Biblical criticism.

Feminist theorists have thoroughly analysed and critiqued the androcentrism underlying historical and contemporary understandings of what it means to be a human being. The conflation of maleness with humanness, an ontological marriage that permeates traditional knowledge systems, discursive practices and socio-religious consciousness, has been singled out as the key entry point for feminist intervention.<sup>5</sup> The assertion of women's humanness has been vital in light of prevalent understandings of maleness as the yardstick through which humanness is measured. Feminist theorists have directed their focus towards assumptions about universal human normativity. In essence, what is understood to be the human norm in any given society is situated in male experience, language and understandings of social reality. This androcentric model of humanity and reality excludes women from the locus of formal knowledge production.

One of the major conceptual and analytical interventions of feminist theory is the focus on women's *experiences* as a salient category of contemporary knowledge production. Women's experiences have become vital in the development of feminist epistemologies and methodological strategies for feminist empirical research.<sup>6</sup> Rita Gross argues that "feminism begin[s] with experience...and move[s] from experience to theory, which becomes the expression of experience" (1993:130). The importance of uncovering or discovering women's realities and their experiences derives from the understanding that traditional paradigms of knowledge are in fact premised on and situated in *male experiences* and understandings of reality. Judith Grant outlines in the *Encyclopaedia of Feminist Theories* (2000:189) that:

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough engagement on particular constructs of sex and gender that espouses relationships of dominance and gender polarisations, see for example Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (1993).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Gayle Letherby, *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice* (2003); Nancy A. Naples, *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis and Activist Research* (2003); Helen Roberts (ed.), *Doing Feminist Research* (1981); Liz Stanley (ed.), *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology* (1990).

...all institutions, theories and political perspectives, indeed, reality itself...were reality and truth only as told from the male perspective. In order to get a more 'objective' truth...a truth that incorporated the full range of human perspectives, women's point of view had to be represented.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, dominant discourses represent partial gendered experiences that are often understood to be universal accounts of human experiences. Feminist theorists argue that all experiences inform knowledge, however, thus far women's experiences have largely been marginalised in formal operational and acknowledged discourses. Letherby distinguishes between "authorized knowledge" and "experiential knowledge" in which authorised knowledge is equated with true knowledge and represents male-defined systems of knowledge (2003:20-24). Experiential knowledge, on the other hand, is only deemed true knowledge if it is situated in male experience (24). Thus, Letherby argues, "...ways of knowing have been made *for* women, not *by* women" (30). Consequently, one of the objectives of feminist qualitative research is to redress the gender imbalance created by patriarchal frameworks and male-defined epistemologies by focusing on women's experiential realities.

## **1.1 A Critical View of Western Feminism as a Dominant Feminist Discourse**

A number of feminist scholars have critiqued the imperial and insular nature of Western feminist discourses.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the various ways in which Western feminists have often ignored broader questions of pluralism, context-specificity, and distinct embodied realities have become

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<sup>7</sup> For similar understandings of the importance of women's experiences in light of patriarchal epistemological dominance, see for example, Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (1995:84-85); Kramarae and Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary* (1985:146).

<sup>8</sup> In this section I draw extensively on Shaikh's article "Transforming Feminisms: Islam, Women and Gender Justice" (2003a) as it addresses particular contested understandings that are embedded within Western feminist discourses. Shaikh's article also provides useful insights in light of the development of an Islamic feminist discourse.

increasingly challenged by a growing body of feminist literature in which the diversity of women's experiences has been emphasised.<sup>9</sup>

The publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a book that universalised sexist oppression as *the* major mode of oppression for *all* women, reflected broader Western feminist trends of generating theories that assumed universal truths with regard to women's experiences, bodies and sexualities. *The Feminine Mystique* created a backdrop for multifarious feminist theories that contested Friedan's unilateral presentation of an ethnocentric 'woman' and by extension a monolithic homogenous 'women's plight'.

The highlighting of sexism as women's 'common oppression' largely overshadowed other forms of oppressive structures that women experience, such as racism and classism, and thus revealed the biased nature of the producers of a Western feminist discourse (read: college-educated, married white, middle- and upper-class women). The Western feminist discourse became the self-proclaimed (enforced) yardstick through which women's liberation should emerge and, by extension, took it upon itself to speak for all women regardless of their particular contextual and embodied realities.

African-American scholar bell hooks, whose main critique of the Western feminist movement concerns its overriding ignorance of suppressive discourses like racism and classism, agrees with the initial goal of feminism: to eliminate sexist oppression. However, she argues that for this to happen, we must engage in "a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels" (1984:24). Thus, the inclusion of issues pertaining to race and class is of utmost importance in combating discourses of domination in order to acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences. Audre Lorde argues in her open letter to Mary Daly that

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, A. Lorde, *Sisters, Outsiders: Essays and Speeches* (1984); Kemp and Squires, *Feminisms* (1997); Stanley and Wise, *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology* (1993); Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988); Mohanty, Russo, and Torres (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991); Moraga and Anzaldúa (eds.), *The Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* (1983). For a discussion related to a critique of the Western feminist discourse from a South African context, see Desiree Lewis, "Feminisms in South Africa" (1993).

“oppression of women knows no ethnic or racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences” (1984:70). The universal and reductionist way in which early feminist anthropological scholarship represented and categorised women’s experiences, and ‘woman’ as an analytical category, received similar critique to that of male heteronormativity. Elizabeth Spelman argues that “the phrase ‘as a woman’ is the Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism” (1988:13).

The development of feminist theories from the ‘Third World’, in which particular context-specific experiential realities were emphasised, e.g. religious expressions, local customs and practices, surfaced as a response to the debilitating despotism and extensive generalisations produced by Western feminism.<sup>10</sup> Chandra Mohanty offers an elaborate critique of the ways in which the Western feminist discourse have generated theories and stereotypes of ‘Third World women’. In her luminary essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1991b) she undertakes a critical analysis of Western feminist writings on Third World women. Mohanty argues that the goal of these writings has not been to provide empirical research on Third World women’s experiences, but rather to “colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular ‘third world woman’” (1991b:53).

In particular, Mohanty highlights the ways in which Western feminist writings on Third World women are premised on the assumption that all women are the same. This illusion of sameness relates to the understanding that women share a common oppression that characterises our social relationships with men. This means that ‘women’ as a group are *a priori* victims of misogyny. It is this assumption that precedes Western feminists’ approach to the analysis of Third World women’s realities. The case studies analysed by Mohanty bear testimony to unrepresentative and

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Third World’ and ‘Third World feminism’ exist as analytical categories and must not be seen as homogenous constructs. ‘Third World feminism’ is often used to describe a common context of struggle, such as racism, classism, colonialism and sexism, while acknowledging the particularities and diversity of ‘Third World women’ and their lived realities. For a more elaborate discussion with regard to defining ‘Third World’, ‘Third World Women’, and ‘Third World Feminism’, see Chandra Mohanty, “Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism” (1991a).

reductionist approaches, as well as a methodology filled with sweeping generalisations.<sup>11</sup> The ways in which these Western scholars engage with religio-political contexts and cultural norms are not grounded in meticulous investigation to highlight various underlying structures of power that can influence women's experiences. Quite the contrary, the 'scholarly analysis' undertaken by these Westerners centres on providing illustrations of women that are passive, subservient, without agency or voice, in order to confirm their (Western) preconceived premise – that all women are oppressed (1991b:55-74).

In addition, Mohanty argues that the underlying objective that derives from universal assumptions about 'women' and the corrupt methodology utilised to prove these generalisations can be seen as expressions of communicating a 'new' Western dominance. Mohanty asserts:

[by] contrasting the representation of women in the Third World with...Western feminisms' self-representation in the same context, we see how Western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counterhistory. Third World women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of their 'object' status. (71)

Thus, on the one hand, the colonial mission of the Western feminist discourse is shaped by elucidating the common theme of sexist oppression, reflecting a shared female identity and context, and on the other hand, emphasising the unbridgeable chasm between Western women (read: liberated and in control) and 'Third World women' who are without agency and trapped in traditional patriarchal dogmas.

Within the context of Western (mis)representations of Muslim women, I argue that Western dominant discourses continue to impose universalised 'normative' standards within which Muslim women are portrayed as victims of patriarchal oppression. The contemporary political reductionist discussions concerning the status of Muslim women and the assumed misogyny espoused by the Islamic legacy are at the epicentre of this debate. However, this debate is also interlinked with broader geo-political forces within which the Islamic ideology often is presented

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<sup>11</sup> The work of, for example, Fran Hosken, "Female Genital Mutilation and Human Rights" (1981), Beverly Lindsay, (ed.) *Comparative Perspectives of Third World Women: The Impact of Race, Sex and Class* (1983), and Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, *Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression* (1983), can be seen as illustrative with regard to derogatory preconceived assumptions and particular reductionist methodological approaches applied in analysis.

in opposition to a Western discourse, and where the latter is understood to be the apex of civilisational progress.<sup>12</sup>

Sa'diyya Shaikh argues that “current debates on feminism, gender, and women’s rights in Islam are ideologically charged, since they are embedded in a history of larger civilizational polemics between the Islamic world and the West” (2003a:148).<sup>13a</sup> In essence, colonial encounters, the history of orientalist scholarship<sup>13b</sup>, and the more recent post-9/11 Islamophobia<sup>13c</sup>, are all realities that have contributed to the incessant ‘othering’ of Muslim women.

One of the main symbols utilised by Western discourses to assert the misogynist and suppressive nature of the Islamic ideology is the *hijab*.<sup>14</sup> The *hijab*, often translated in popular literature to mean a head-scarf or veil that some Muslim women wear, has become epitomised as *the* symbol of oppression. The neo-colonial mission of liberating Muslim women, residing both in Western secular contexts as well as outside of these Western cartographies, has been partly premised on this visual symbol that largely diverges from the normative Western appearance in public space. Thus, the parameters of liberation *per se* have firstly been measured against broader Western discourses, within which the *hijab* is understood to be a suppressive symbol, and by extension a symbol that represents the Islamic structures of oppression. Secondly, the Western way of life,

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<sup>12</sup> An excellent example of this type of political polemic was articulated by former US President George W. Bush when in relation to the London bombing on July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005, he stated that: “These attacks were barbaric, and they provide a clear window into the evil we face...The attack in London was an attack on the civilised world” (Pious, 2006:22-23). These dichotomous constructions have larger implications for essentialist understandings of Islam as uncivilised, pro-violence as well as savage.

<sup>13a</sup> In the context of this section, where issues pertaining to representations of Islam and Muslim women by Western discourses are investigated, I will employ the terminology ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ as descriptive categories to highlight common understandings and assumptions of shared identities. Clearly, neither ‘Islam’, nor ‘the West’ exists as a homogenous or monolithic entity. For a more thorough analysis pertaining to these categories, see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978.

<sup>13b</sup> Orientalist scholarship refers to a field of scholarship that emerged in the eighteenth century, when European scholars carefully studied Asian and Islamic cultures. This scholarly endeavour was arguably underpinned by European imperialist attitudes and aimed at maintaining Western dominance over non-Europeans. For a more elaborate critique pertaining to orientalist scholarship and its origins, see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978.

<sup>13c</sup> Islamophobia is a neologism that refers to prejudice or discrimination against Islam or Muslims. The term seems to date back to the late 1980s, but came into common usage after September 11, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> For an extensive discussion related to dominant discourses around *hijab*, particularly in light of Western representations of Muslim women, see Hoel, *Contemporary Discourses on Muslim Women and Veiling: A Critical Analysis* (2005), MA thesis, University of Cape Town.

including how to dress in public, has been the normative referent by which levels of liberation can be determined. Hence, a Muslim woman wearing the *hijab* expresses inferiority and subjugation as opposed to emancipation. Thirdly, the project of ‘liberating Muslim women’ has been undertaken without any real wide-ranging conversations with Muslim women.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, opportunities for self-identification and self-representation have been eclipsed in favour of Western ethnocentricity.

Furthermore, representations of Muslim women in popular media create a supportive backdrop to this enterprise. Portrayals of ‘Muslim practices’ such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages, honour killings, spousal abuse and rape, as well as newly liberated unveiled Muslim women, who testify to these misogynist practices in Western media, are all narratives that contribute to the legitimisation of ‘free the Muslim women’ campaigns. I am not arguing against the sad fact that some Muslim women experience these kinds of atrocities, be it in the name of Islam or under the guise of cultural conventions. However, I am disputing the universality of these experiences, the underlying methodology that leads to the construction of these stereotypes and the reductionist and negative ways in which Muslim women are represented in the popular media more broadly.<sup>16</sup>

I argue that secularism and secular ideals, like the laicisation of public space, underpin much of Western dominant discourses. Thus, secularity is the yardstick by which ‘the other’ (read: Muslim women) is being measured. Through this ‘ideology of domination’, to apply hooks’s terminology (1984), Western discourses that advocate the feminist project of liberating Muslim

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<sup>15</sup> The phrase “white men saving brown women from brown men”, coined by Gayatri C. Spivak (1985), is illustrative of this ‘liberation project’. For example, in the wake of the American invasion of Afghanistan, the ‘saving’ of *burqa*-clad Afghan women was a key component in generating support for the so-called ‘War on Terror’. For further discussions on this type of polemic, see for example, Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others” (2002) and miriam cooke, “Saving Brown Women” (2002).

<sup>16</sup> A good example of an ‘anthropological’ study that presents Muslim women as a homogenous oppressed group is *The House of Obedience: Women in Arab Society*, by Juliette Minces (1980). See also Linda Lindsey’s *Gender Roles: A Sociological Approach* (1997), as an example of contemporary scholarly work that depicts Muslim women as oppressed and *a priori* victims. For a critical engagement with Muslim women and misrepresentations, see Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled, the Hijab in Modern Culture* (2001). Examples of popular media that contribute to the negative stereotyping of Muslim women, and the continuing dichotomisation between Islam and the West, are fictional books and autobiographies, often referred to as “airport literature” (Clyne, 2003). See for example, Betty Mahmoody’s book *Not Without My Daughter* (1987), and *Saudi* (1985) by Laurie Devine.

women not only assist in the marginalisation of Muslim women through aborted dialogues, but also explicitly partake in religious intolerance and discrimination. Coercive prohibition of religious symbols, such as the *hijab*, is sometimes justified under the guise of integration and of the preferred projection of a unified secular majority.<sup>17</sup> The ‘ideology of domination’ that saturates Western geo-political discourses must be critically contested in favour of self-representations that can be expressed through alternative discourses within which plurality of religious identities and subjectivities are encouraged.

The homogenised feminism initially presented by the West has since the late 1980s incorporated some of the critiques related to questions of diversity and multiple subjectivities.<sup>18</sup> Underlying reasons for this shift, and the expanded development of feminist theories that mirror diverse female experiences, can possibly be found in the critique from feminists that have previously been marginalised by Eurocentric attitudes. Secondly, the increasingly pluralistic religious and cultural landscapes growing within Western contexts open up possibilities for diverse feminist expressions and fruitful interactions between women from various backgrounds. In addition the development of new interpretive frameworks, such as feminist poststructuralism with its emphasis on self-reflexivity, plurality and multivocality, presents valuable resources for scholars engaging in empirical research. In the following section I will outline some of the principles of feminist poststructuralism, as it highlights useful methodological keys that I employ in the analysis of the empirical component of this dissertation.

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<sup>17</sup> In France, all religious symbols, including the *hijab* (head-scarf), were prohibited in public schools by law on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2004. For thorough discussions regarding the French *hijab*-debate, see Robert Carle, “*Hijab* and the Limits of French Secular Republicanism” (2004), Michela Ardizzoni, “Unveiling the Veil: Gendered Discourses and the (In)Visibility of the Female Body in France” (2004), Chouki El Hamel, “Muslim Diaspora in Western Europe: The Islamic Headscarf (*Hijab*), the Media and Muslims’ integration in France” (2002), and Lyon and Spini, “Unveiling the Headscarf Debate” (2004).

<sup>18</sup> For excellent Western feminist work that deals with issues around diversity and representation, see Anne Russo “We Cannot Live without Our Lives: White Women, Antiracism, and Feminism” (1991).

## 1.2 Feminist Post-Structuralism as a Methodological Lens

Feminist poststructuralism, with its emphasis on complexity, plurality, ambiguity and fluidity, offers a theoretical framework for understanding various relations of power that are produced through and within discourses. As such, feminist poststructuralism presents valuable epistemological principles for feminist research and practice. According to Chris Weedon:

Feminist poststructuralism...is a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change. (1987:40-41)

As opposed to liberal-humanist assumptions regarding subjective experiences as reflecting some kind of untainted and essential reality, feminist poststructuralism is premised on the assumption that there is no such thing as absolute truth or subjective authenticity. This is due to the understanding that “all meaning and knowledge is discursively constituted through language” (Gavey, 1997:53). For Weedon, it is “language in the form of *conflicting discourses* which constitutes us as conscious thinking subjects and enables us to give meaning to the world and to act to transform it” (1987:32, my emphasis). This means that subjective experiences are never produced or understood in isolation but always constituted *in relation* and are thus inherently dependent on being expressed through a particular language which is part of a broader discursive paradigm. Hence, subjectivity, subjective experiences and subject positions are understood to be produced and constructed through language and are therefore always situated within particular discourses that operate within and through changing social relations (Baxter, 2007:25-28).

Since current social meanings can be seen as temporary and continuously changing, as is the social landscape, subjectivity is also fluid and relational. Amina Mama (1995), through investigating the construction of subjectivity among black women in Britain, developed a theory of subjectivity that elucidates fluid and often ambiguous subject positions that are continuously produced and in process. Mama found that her research participants occupied subject positions within various discourses. The participants’ multiple positioning depended on varying social contexts, backgrounds and interpersonal relationships (Mama, 1995:99). Hence, the participants

were often moving between different available discourses and asserted various subjectivities that were informed by social relations and varying relations of power. Due to the processual nature of interpersonal relationships and broader contextual surroundings, subject positions were continuously changing and sometimes incongruous. This reflects feminist poststructuralist understandings of subjectivity as manifested through plurality and as dependent on/relational to the multiple discourses available to individuals.

According to Baxter (2007:10), one of the aims of feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) is to reveal the multiple subject positions taken up by women, and to analyse the various workings of power that exist within these positions. As subjectivity is understood to be multiply positioned, and since individuals often move between discourses and participate in various discursive practices, the quest of the FPDA approach is to highlight the discourses in which women have been structurally marginalised and provide a space in which transformative social change can take place.

Similarly, miriam cooke (2001) employs the concept of ‘multiple critique’ to illustrate the varying ways in which Islamic feminists move between various subject positions. The existence of dominant patriarchal religious discourses that inform gendered practices, Western neo-colonial discourses that espouse particular derogatory representations of Muslim women, as well as a number of local contextual discourses that convey specific assumptions related to gender and sexuality, creates possibilities for resistance and various forms of *subjectivation*.<sup>19</sup> Islamic feminists position themselves within and through these operating discourses, often in ways that reveal ambiguity and ambivalence through these multiple positionings. However, cook stresses the assumption that Islamic feminists are subject to a “difficult double commitment”, pointing to the difficulty of embodying a feminist identity while simultaneously being religiously committed (2001:59). Sa’diyya Shaikh (2003a) further explores this concept of ‘multiple critique’ and suggests that there might be limitations with cook’s binary distinction between feminist commitment on the one hand, and religious identity on the other. Shaikh argues that “many Muslim feminists...see their feminism as emerging organically out of their faith commitment”

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler’s theory of *subjectivation* implies that agency is not inherent to the subject, but is rather constituted and produced within discourses in which relations of power operate (1997a).

(2003a:155). Thus, in light of Shaikh's argument, while coining a concept within which plurality and diverse speaking positions are available for the individual subject, cook fails to acknowledge the possibility of women's liberatory discourses as intrinsically embedded within broader discursive religious frameworks.

The feminist poststructuralist emphasis on the existence of plurality of discourses, within which subjectivities are produced, is also intimately linked to relations of power. Michel Foucault's analysis of discourse and power is influential in how feminist poststructuralists conceptualise and analyse the relationships between subjectivities, discourses and possibilities for resistance. Foucault's *The History of Sexuality Volume One* (1981) in particular elucidates on the "polymorphous techniques of power" that operate within and through discourse (1981:11). In the work of Foucault, discourse refers to institutions and social practices that together with knowledge systems, inform and create subjectivities. Discourses can be seen as overarching networks in which knowledge is constituted and produced through relations of power.

The notion that power is relational means, among other things, that power arises and is constituted within and through interpersonal relationships, social institutions, and in contexts where social interaction among various groups of people takes place. In addition, power is understood to be nonsubjective. This does not mean, however, that individuals cannot exercise power, but rather that individuals do not have ownership over power or intrinsic power. Rather, individuals *partake* in power and in the construction of relationships of power (McLaren, 2002:37-41). According to Foucault, power is understood to have both negative and positive aspects. Power as negative is in Foucauldian terms referred to as "the juridico-discursive model" (McLaren, 2002:37), which implies applying authoritarian measures like rules and regulations (often enforced by the state) to prohibit, punish, restrict and control behaviour and alternative/opposing ideas/views. Power understood in the positive sense often implies resistance to oppressive dominant discourses and various forms of alternative empowerment. What these positive aspects of power often have in common is their noncoercive and plural nature, as opposed to negative power which is more likely to manifest unilateral and often forced relations of power.

Drawing on Foucauldian understandings of power and discourse as primary in structuring societal mechanisms and subjectivities, feminist poststructuralism seeks to develop comprehensive studies with regard to the functions of power, particularly with regard to changing oppressive gender relations. Coming back to the question of subjectivity and subjective experiences, much critique has been directed towards the feminist poststructuralist proclivity to decentring the individual and the absence of an intentional subject (e.g. Barbara Epstein, 1995). Particularly in liberal humanism and radical feminism, in which a unified subject together with subjective experiences is given priority and autonomy, there is suspicion of the perceived anti-humanism of feminist poststructuralism (Gavey, 1997:61).<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, although feminist poststructuralism sees subjectivity as an effect of discourse, this does not necessarily mean that subjective experiences are devalued or that individual subjects are without agency. McLaren (2002) argues that Foucault's analysis of subjectivity, knowledge and power is extremely beneficial to feminist theory and practice, and that Foucault does provide useful ways in which to think about agency and resistance.

According to Foucault, discourses are not only apparatuses of power but also sites for contestation and resistance:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are... discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Quoted in McLaren, 2002:90)

Hence, within feminist poststructuralism much attention is given to the particular discourses in which subjective experiences are constructed in order to contextualise and analyse the existence

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<sup>20</sup> See the work of Martha Nussbaum (1999); Toril Moi (1985); Seyla Benhabib (1995), and Nancy Hartsock (1990, 1996 and 1998), within which scepticism towards the use of a Foucauldian framework to advance feminist projects is emphasised. In particular, it is Foucault's conceptualisations of subjectivity and knowledge as produced within discourse and power as permeating all relationships, that many feminists perceive as limiting for the possibilities of feminist resistance to dominant discourses that marginalise and oppress women.

of power relations. Hence, it is only through “a contextualization of experience and an analysis of its constitution and ideological power” that the ‘agent of change’ can successfully transform or resist patriarchal dominating discursive systems (Weedon, 1987:125).

Weedon, drawing on Louis Althusser’s theory of *interpellation* (1971), which suggests that an individual is born into an already existing ideological framework which then becomes internalised by the individual, argues that individuals can be understood to be “agents of change, rather than its authors” (Weedon, 1987:25). Consequently, she partly agrees with Althusser in that subjectivity is constituted through discourse or particular ideologies. It is within this paradigm that an individual can mistakenly conflate her subjectivity with authorship of the ideology which generates her subjectivity and as such create an imaginary autonomy and sense of self. However, Weedon does not claim that the individual is a passive recipient of this ideology, but rather an ‘agent of change’.

The decentring of the autonomous liberal-humanist self/rational self generates possibilities for the individual to occupy *several* subject positions, which means that change, ambiguity and contradictions are all potential elements of the fluid, relational and ever-changing subject. The belief that subjectivity is constituted through multiple cultural and societal discourses is related to the understanding that subjectivity is produced in history and is therefore also subject to continuous change. Consequently, feminist poststructuralism argues that “the individual is always *the site* of conflicting forms of subjectivity” (Weedon, 1987:33, my emphasis). Thus, feminist poststructuralist theory places particular emphasis on the deconstruction of the subject as constant and coherent, and opens itself up to new ways of understanding that acknowledge multiplicity, contradictions, fluidity and ambiguity.

With regard to individual agency, or being an ‘agent of change’, possibilities of resistance and/or rejection of particular subjectivities produced by dominant discourses can take place when the individual becomes conscious of the sometimes-conflicting subject positions she possesses and expresses within varying social contexts. Hence, it is the existence of multiple discourses, and in effect multiple subjectivities, that provides opportunities for social transformation.

For instance, I would argue (as does Weedon, 1987:110-111) that many feminist discourses, although marginal, can represent discourses of resistance in light of the production and manufacturing by dominating discourses of culturally ‘sanctioned’ gender relations and/or constructions of femininity. Although institutional transformation or social impact can be limited, these discourses of resistance still provide alternative discursive spaces within which women (and men) can defy governing hegemonic discourses that subjugate or are non-accepting of other subjectivities. Drawing on Foucault’s principle of *reverse discourse*, Weedon argues that it is through a continual resistance to dominant discourses that the emergence of new discourses can take shape. Through developing novel epistemologies that facilitate alternative subjectivities, new discourses can blossom and gain social power depending on broader relations of power within which these discourses of resistance are being constructed (110-111).

Sherry Ortner (1996), drawing on practice theory as developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Anthony Giddens (1979), and Marshall Sahlins (1981), questions and critiques the ‘limited’ understanding of agency in both feminist poststructuralism as well as in liberal humanism. She offers a ‘middle way’ through retaining a notion of an *intentional* subject/agent. Ortner argues that practice theory, in which agency is understood to be “both a product and a producer of society and history”, provides a more useful framework to analyse subjectivity (Ortner, 1996:11).<sup>21</sup>

Ortner develops and applies the term “serious games” to exemplify her position. The presence of discursively produced subjectivities, following the rules of particular games, can be seen as similar to the feminist poststructuralist understanding of the construction/production of subjectivity within various discourses. However, Ortner also argues that the agents are not passive recipients of discourse, but rather perform agency with “skill, intention, wit, knowledge, [and] intelligence” (12). Thus, although agents are not seen as autonomous, they do indeed perform (conscious) agency within particular games that can affect change.

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<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that Bourdieu’s understanding of agency differs from that of Giddens (1979) and Sahlins (1981). For Bourdieu, the agent does not possess intentionality but expresses agency through an embedded *habitus* that is a reflection of broader discursive limitations and possibilities for change (Ortner, 1996:11).

Ortner's elucidation on the *seriousness* of the games can be understood as the relations of power and the ways in which power is structured within the various games. Hence, the existence of oppression, exploitation, and inequality amongst actors participating in a game is a significant feature of the power dynamics in a game (12). In a study of the development of a Sherpa nunnery, Ortner investigates how subaltern agency can be constituted in already existing games as well as developing alternative games with new rules and goals. Of particular importance to Ortner, in light of her critique of feminist poststructuralism and liberal humanism, is to "retain an active intentional subject without falling into some form of free agency and voluntarism" (19).

I would argue that Weedon's concept of 'agents of change' in feminist poststructuralism and Ortner's practice theory model 'serious games', which outlines the positioning and workings of a subject within broader ideological frameworks, are not completely dissimilar. Both scholars reject the existence of an autonomous subject, hence, it is the discursive practices/rules of the games and the power relations permeating all social interactions that generate available subjectivities to be performed by individuals. In addition, both scholars argue that the agent is not a passive recipient of subjectivity. For Weedon, it is the existence of multiple discourses and a plurality of available subjectivities that produces conflicting discourses and fragmented/contradictory subjectivities that create the 'agents of change' who can resist and facilitate change and social transformation. Hence, it is subjectivity as a contested *site* within multiple discourses that separates feminist poststructuralism from other feminist projects. In addition, I would argue that contrary to feminist critiques of Foucault's notion of subjectivity as reflecting deterministic characteristics due to its produced nature, Foucault's fecund understandings of subjectivity as interdependent and relational offer feminist poststructuralism valuable ways in which to analyse subjectivity without falling into the trap of determinism/free will dualisms.

For Ortner, although acknowledging the structuring influence of discourses in constructing subjectivities, it is the *intentional* subject that is manifested through the ways in which the agent plays the game that creates potential subaltern agents – not the existence of conflicting discourses and in effect, conflicting subjectivities. I will argue that Ortner's insistence on retaining the intentional subject is premised on the understanding that there is an explicit

relationship between intentionality and action, and that the removal of this intentionality (by making subjectivity a product of discourse) is seen as limiting to the possibility of change. However, as McLaren argues in her thorough analysis of Foucault's conceptualisation of subjectivity:

...Foucault's genealogical writings offer a powerful account of the process of how norms constitute subjectivity. But feminist critics worry that a subject thoroughly constituted through social norms lacks a basis for resistance to those norms. Foucault's later work offers a view of the self that is socially constituted and capable of autonomy and engaging in practices of freedom...[Foucault] offers an account of subjectivity that is both socially constituted and capable of resistance. (McLaren, 2002:54)

In conclusion, feminist poststructuralism, largely inspired by Foucauldian analysis of the ways in which the human subject is constituted, facilitates valuable epistemological keys for ways of thinking about subjectivity, power and discourse. For Weedon, the key to change/resistance lies within the critical analysis of the subject's experiences in light of the operating discourses. It is this exploration that can create space for and generate reverse discourses, however, it is also important to keep in mind that the development of alternative discourses and subjectivities of resistance too are permeated with relations of power. Consequently, it is a salient aim for many feminist poststructuralist theorists not to reproduce the relations of domination that they are trying to resist.<sup>22</sup>

With regard to religious and cultural specificity, Saba Mahmood (2001) has offered an important critique of feminist poststructuralist discourse regarding the ways in which agency is defined singularly in terms of resistance. Saba Mahmood explores the concept of agency within the context of Islam through investigating the women's mosque movement in Egypt. The mosque movement has empowered Muslim women in Egypt by way of increased access to mosques and the emergence of newly established mosques, as well as to the field of Islamic pedagogy, an area previously dominated by men. However, the mosque movement is situated within a traditional Islamic framework in which particular pietistic ideals such as subservience and patience (*sabr*) are being reiterated (Mahmood, 2001:203-204). Within this context, Mahmood investigates the concept of agency and challenges the underlying assumptions regarding the liberal humanist

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<sup>22</sup> This particular point is stressed in the work of Amina Mama (1995) and Judith Baxter (2007).

subject presented by (Western) feminist scholarship as well as the ways in which agency is defined in feminist poststructuralist discourse. Mahmood argues that cultural and religious specificity must be thoroughly engaged with in any feminist project in order to more accurately represent women's diverse and multilayered realities. Mahmood expounds that agency as presented by feminist scholarship, with its roots in liberalist traditions, "sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions" (Mahmood, 2001:203). Thus, agency as presented by liberalist feminist scholarship is simply seen as *one* particular conceptualisation of agency, and Mahmood argues that other forms of agency exist within particular Islamic discourses.

Mahmood argues that the liberalist notion of agency as *active resistance* is too narrow and suggests that we should rather think of agency as "a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2001:203). Mahmood particularly draws on the work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 1997a, 1997b and 1997c) to provide a critique of the autonomous subject of liberal feminism, but also disputes Butler's notion of agency as resistance.

According to Butler's theory of *subjectivation*, relations of power within discourses do not only subject and dominate the individual according to norms and regulations particular to a discourse, but these self-same relations of power provide the capacity for agency and by extension *resistance* to discourse (Butler, 1997a; Foucault 1980, 1983). Mahmood agrees with Butler in that the capacity or possibility of resistance is produced *within* discourses, and not by an autonomous subject. However, she argues that this particular understanding of agency, agency as active resistance, is still intimately linked to liberatory politics and is thus related to the liberalist notion of freedom from oppressive discourses as the ideal for every female subject (Mahmood, 2001:208-212).

Through investigating the discourse of piety present within women's mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood argues that:

if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific...then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori, but allowed to emerge through an analysis of the particular networks of concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. (Mahmood, 2001:212)

Providing there is no such thing as a universal truth or definite reality, the meaning of particular concepts and ways of engaging the world is always dependent on context in which religious and cultural specificity can present salient forces for the construction of the subject. Consequently, concepts can take on multiple meanings that are contingent on religious particularity, which is what Mahmood explores in the context of an Egyptian Islamic resurgence movement that upholds traditional Islamic ideals of religious piety.

The particular Islamic discourse of piety that is embraced by women who participate in the Cairene mosque movement holds specific religious ideals that might possibly not be palatable to many feminist scholars. Ideals such as modesty, shyness, perseverance, patience and docility are all behavioural traits that can be seen as going against (Western) feminist ideals, and particularly against assumptions underlying the 'active' concept of agency advocated in much Western feminist scholarship (Mahmood, 2001:205). Mahmood asserts that it is the cultivation of these religio-specific normative female characteristics that underlie the Islamist discourse of piety. By extension, by embracing these ideals as ways of engaging 'agentival capacity', the parochial definition of agency as proposed by much feminist scholarship is subverted and indeed expanded in ways that also encourage and appreciate "continuity, stasis, and stability" as opposed to resistance and change (212).

For example, a social practice such as *hijab*, which normally in Western feminism is touted as a patriarchal practice, is constructed in very different modes by Egyptian women in this piety movement. One of the respondents in Mahmood's empirical study, reflecting on the importance of shyness, asserts that veiling is integral to the cultivation of this religious virtue. Hence, veiling (an outward bodily practice) is used as a means by which a particular interior virtue can be

realised. Once inner shyness is attained, the veil is intricately linked to the sustenance of this “modest deportment” (Mahmood, 2001:214). In this way, the veil means “both *being* and *becoming* a certain kind of person” (215). Through viewing the self as continuously *in process* and *produced* through particular bodily practices, Mahmood departs from Butler’s conceptualisation of agency as singularly outward resistance. Rather, agency in the context of an Islamic discourse of piety is *inward* action that highlights cultivation and embodiment of particular religious ideals. Hence, agency as illustrated by the disciplinary practice of veiling contributes to the *making* of the *pious* female self, which is a process of *becoming* and a way of *being*. The cultivation of the pious self can be seen as a continuous trajectory within which the preservation and strengthening of achieved levels of modest deportments is the main aspiration for practitioners involved in this piety movement. Consequently, it is continuity and stability, as opposed to resistance, that motivates agentival capacity.

Furthermore, Mahmood expands the notion of agency to include “the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist” (217). As opposed to much feminist scholarship that argues that these concepts might signify female passivity and submission to male authority, Mahmood argues that these qualities, within the framework of traditional Islam, signify living out the virtue of *sabr*. *Sabr* can be understood to mean “to persevere in the face of difficulty without complaint”, and is conceived of by many Muslims as one of the ideals of the virtuous self (220). One of Mahmood’s respondents asserted that “*sabr* allows one to bear and live hardship *correctly* as prescribed by one tradition of Islamic self-cultivation” (221). Hence, by embracing *sabr* as a way of living one does not necessarily reduce pain or injustices inflicted upon one’s person, nonetheless, *sabr* engenders the ability to endure difficult circumstances and painful experiences. Living with *sabr* illustrates one way of asserting agentival capacity that foregrounds a religious identity and commitment, and simultaneously, presents a notion of a virtuous self that creatively wields a certain consistency in social interactions regardless of situation or circumstance.

Nonetheless, another respondent in Mahmood’s study, who was not involved in the Cairene mosque movement, employed a very different mode of engagement in order to deal with personal challenges. Although she acknowledged *sabr* as a central religious principle, for her *sabr* constituted passivity and the acceptance of potentially unsympathetic and damaging

relations of power. By contrast, she expressed agentival capacity through foregrounding the importance of cultivating self-confidence that in effect allows for making empowering individual decisions (221-222).

Mahmood's expanded analysis of agency allows for very interesting ways of thinking through different notions of human self and particular subject positions that are relational to religious and cultural context-specific discourses. The conceptualisation of agency as a way of cultivating individual virtues that are concomitant with religious beliefs is particularly interesting. At the same time, the Egyptian mosque movement described by Mahmood represents a specific kind of formation that does not necessarily reflect the aspirations of piety movements across the world. Also, the conflicting voices included in her study illustrate the particularity of this piety movement and show that also within the Egyptian context these religious discourses are quite specifically structured.

One of the main critiques of this notion of agency, provided by Egyptian secularists as well as in feminist scholarship, is the potential reinscription of patriarchal norms and privilege. In other words, women reproduce their own subordination through, for example, the cultivation of religious ideals such as perseverance, patience and docility. In this way, women believe in and accept relations of inequality and structural oppression under, for example, the guise of religious persuasions. Nonetheless, Mahmood argues that the cultivation of virtues, understood to have religious legitimacy, is an *active* engagement and "it is integral to a constructive project, a site of considerable investment, struggle and achievement" (222). The women Mahmood are engaging with are not the passive recipients of a patriarchal religious discourse, but rather express agentival capacity through embracing and cultivating what they believe to be religious ideals that contribute to living with God-consciousness (*taqwa*). Emphasising the salience of religious and cultural specificity, Mahmood argues that,

the liberatory goals of feminism should be rethought in light of the fact that the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject. (223)

In other words, the ways in which women who participate in the mosque movement in Egypt engage with particular ideals of being, testify to alternative modes of living, ways of living that do not necessarily correlate with emancipatory feminist ideals. These alternative modes of living are situated within particular religious constructs and persuasions that give meaning to individuals who hold the cultivation of piety as fundamental to their existence in the world. This embodied existence is driven by a commitment to a faith tradition and illustrates, through the examples provided by Mahmood, the multiple meanings inherent in the concept of agency.

Nonetheless, I argue that Mahmood's scholarly intervention, within which she provides an alternative and useful conceptualisation of self and agency as intrinsically related to and realised through religious discourses, must be increasingly problematised in light of women's broader experiential realities. Clearly, women are situated in various social contexts within which experiences of different forms of marital abuse, sexual violence, and infidelity inform their agentival capacities. Thus, although for example the virtue of *sabr* is regarded as a highly esteemed religious quality, often providing women with the strength to endure and indeed survive difficult situations and experiences, *sabr* is also relational to context. Within the context of the Egyptian piety movement *sabr* is conceptualised as a religious ideal that women strive to cultivate. In other contexts, the very concept of *sabr* is utilised to maintain particular precarious relations of power and domination that effectively and perniciously curb agentival capacity and render the virtue of *sabr* ambiguous. Thus, *sabr* can be seen as a site of diverse meanings that is reflective of the discursive nuances present within social realities. In addition, by foregrounding a particular religious subjectivity, Mahmood does not address the possible multiple and sometimes ambivalent subjectivities that can operate simultaneously within any one social context.

During the process of empirical analysis I will draw on feminist poststructuralist approaches to knowledge. In particular the methodological framework, within which subjectivity, positionality, discourse and power function as key concepts, will be utilised in making sense of competing subject positions within the course of various research encounters. According to Weedon (1987:33), subjectivity is seen as "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak". Consequently, the manifestations of

various subject positions will be analysed with particular attention to existing webs of social power relations, real and perceived. In this way, the existence of subject positions enacted by the respondents together with subjective experiences, will serve as a way of analysing the ways in which relations of power are produced/reproduced, the possibilities for change/resistance, and the existence of reverse discourses.

In addition, I will employ Mahmood's broadened understanding of agency to my analysis of women's narratives. Hence, agency is not only perceived as active resistance to particular discourses, but is also the embodiment of a religiously and culturally specific moral praxis. Consequently, the exploration of Muslim women's *ways of living* and responses to relations of power in intimate relationships is guided by an awareness of the multiple operations of agency.

The next chapter of this dissertation places emphasis on the development of an Islamic feminist discourse and the ways in which scholars highlight particular key concepts, deriving from religious textual sources, in order to address issues of gender and relations of power from within an Islamic framework.

## Chapter 2:

### Defining Islamic Feminism/s and the Production of an Islamic Feminist Discourse

What is Islamic feminism? Scholar-activist Margot Badran is one of the key commentators on Islamic feminism documenting its emergence and development. She has published numerous articles that highlight the complexities of the term itself as well as the underlying methodology of this particular feminist project. According to Margot Badran (2007:51), “Islamic feminism...is a particular form of feminism that locates itself, as both discourse and as a mode of activism, within the Islamic framework”. As such, Islamic feminism can be distinguished from other forms of feminisms by positioning itself within the context of a specific religious ideology. Islamic feminism incorporates both theoretical and methodological debates that challenge existing patriarchal understandings of Islamic ideology, and creates space for the development of a more gender-sensitive discourse. The emergence of an Islamic feminist discourse fosters nascent expressions of gender consciousness and influences various activist approaches. Activist initiatives address questions around equality and gender justice in contemporary contexts and contest the existence of patriarchal discourses that inform women’s lived realities in a number of ways.

Numerous critical debates have surfaced as a consequence of the application of the term ‘Islamic feminism’. Mahnaz Afkhami, a self-proclaimed Muslim feminist, asserts that “The epistemology of Islam is contrary to women’s rights...I call myself a Muslim and a feminist. I am not an Islamic feminist – that’s a contradiction in terms” (in Moghadam, 2002:1152). Afkhami’s position expounds the belief that ‘Islamic feminism’ is an oxymoron. This understanding is supported by other scholars like Valentine Moghadam (2001) and Haideh Moghissi (1999). Moghissi argues in her book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism* (1999:140) that “...no amount of twisting and bending can reconcile the Qur’anic injunctions and instructions about women’s rights and obligations with the idea of gender equality”. She continues by stating that “she [an Islamic feminist] cannot believe in both the Islamic and feminist concepts of equality. The two notions of equality are not compatible” (142). Moghissi mirrors Afkhami’s position by

emphasising the antagonistic nature of the concept ‘Islamic feminism’. This position also echoes cooke’s (2001) notion of having a “difficult double commitment”, discussed in the previous chapter, in which a religious identity is understood to be problematic for feminist commitments. Concentrating on Islamic feminism in Iran, Moghadam argues that the development of policies and regulations pertaining to, among other things, family laws, should not gain its momentum from a religious framework (2001:43).<sup>23</sup> She asserts:

I fear that as long as they [Islamic feminists] remain focussed on theological arguments rather than socioeconomic and political questions, and their point of reference remains the Quran rather than universal standards, their impact will be limited. Their strategy might even reinforce the legitimacy of the Islamic system and undermine secular alternatives. (44-45)

Through critically analysing the growing body of literature that is increasingly being called Islamic feminism, the arguments raised by Afkhami, Moghissi and Moghadam can be contested on at least two accounts. Firstly, part of the way in which Afkhami, Moghissi and Moghadam seem to conceive of religion, as a closed and singular homogenous discourse, ironically strengthens and perpetuates the very traditional and patriarchal formulations of religion that Islamic feminists are contesting. This static understanding of religion is problematic in that it marginalises the dynamic ways with which believers inform and impact upon religious traditions. Hence, the various ways in which religion is continuously co-created in specific historical, political and geographical contexts by believers, a view highlighted by Islamic feminists, is absent in Afkhami, Moghissi and Moghadam’s conceptualisation of religious discourse.

In addition, the underlying assumption permeating their arguments is that the religion of Islam is *in essence* patriarchal. This understanding points to a monolithic understanding of Islam as fundamentally built on androcentric and gender hierarchical principles that have little to offer

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<sup>23</sup> For extensive discussions on the development and propagation of Islamic feminism in Iran, see Mir-Hosseini (2000, 1999, 1996a and 1996b), Najmabadi (1998, 1997, 1994 and 1991), and Tohidi (1994 and 1991). For discussions related to secular responses, including the critique of Islamic feminism in Iran, see Moghissi (1999 and 1993), and Shahidian (1994). For a comparative analysis of gender politics in Iran and France respectively, see Hoel and Shaikh (2007).

Muslim women in the quest for equality. Many prominent Islamic feminists acknowledge the traditional (and patriarchal) heritage of the Islamic religious discourse. However, they critically engage with Islamic history, textual sources, and normative practices that reflect male privilege. Simultaneously, they creatively draw on egalitarian ethics also found within the Islamic tradition in order to provide liberatory alternatives. In this way, they take seriously their role as co-constructors of religious meaning, providing Muslim women with empowering religious identities and constructs of self.

Secondly, the postulation that Islamic feminism cannot denote a principle of equality that can match the understanding of equality in 'feminism' is problematic. First of all, whose feminism are we talking about here? The way in which the concept of feminism is presented and understood by Afkhami, Moghissi and Moghadam can be viewed as narrow and limited. By subscribing to essentialist definitions of what feminism means, where it comes from, and how it is played out in society, Afkhami, Moghissi and Moghadam's engagement with feminism mirrors their conceptualisation of Islam in that feminism is viewed as an already constituted unchanging corpus of meaning.

By making the assumption that feminism is intrinsically distinct from Islam, Afkhami, Moghissi and Moghadam are paying homage to a particular universalised conceptualisation of feminism, more particularly, the prioritisation of secular feminism as the normative and determining discourse which is fundamentally incompatible with Islam. However, the mere existence and the increasingly transnational character of the Islamic feminist discourse should be 'proof' enough to contest assumptions related to a 'universal feminism' that often espouse reductionist biases.

Despite these contestations, increasing numbers of Muslim scholars are recognising the existence of an Islamic feminist discourse. The need for a holistic approach that incorporates religion as an integral part of the overall struggle for gender justice might be an underlying reason for why many scholars accept 'Islamic feminism' as a descriptive term. Thus, the distinction between Islamic feminism as a discourse being produced, rather than 'feminist' as an intrinsic aspect of one's identity might be useful, particularly with regard to the many scholars who adamantly

refuse the feminist label.<sup>24</sup> Examples of Islamic feminist endeavours where an Islamic feminist identity is explicitly asserted can be found in the women's journal *Zanan* in Iran (founded by Shahla Sherkat in 1992), "Sisters in Islam" in Malaysia, and (scholarship) activism in South Africa (Badran, 2009:244).

It is important to note that what is increasingly being called Islamic feminism is not a static analytical category, nor is it the sum of literature produced by Muslim women. Islamic feminism incorporates a variety of subject positions in particular contexts and is also continuously developing and manifesting itself in a range of ways which cannot be captured by reductionist understandings. Islamic feminism as a discourse cannot be pinned down to represent specific geographical areas or particular political agendas, nor does it singularly embody truths that are meaningful for all 'producers' of this discourse at any one given time. As a consequence we might speak of multiple feminisms. Shaikh (2003a) applies the term "Islamic feminisms" in the plural to elucidate the diverse ways in which different groups of Muslim women engage and interact with their religious tradition.

I define Islamic feminism/s as an emerging epistemology that speaks to Muslim women as subjects and prioritises gender justice as a central ontological concept in Islam. The emergence of various expressions of Islamic feminism/s is in part a critique of patriarchal understandings, norms, and constructions of Islam. Islamic feminism/s more generally also contests neo-colonial definitions of women. Bearing these definitions in mind for the rest of this chapter, I would like to point out that I do not intrinsically link the producers of an Islamic feminist discourse with the assertion of an Islamic feminist identity. I agree with Badran (2009:244) who argues that: "The producers and users of Islamic feminist discourse include those who may or may not accept the Islamic feminist label or identity. They also include religious Muslims (by which is typically meant the religiously observant), secular Muslims (whose ways of being Muslim may be less publicly evident), and non-Muslims."

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Asma Barlas, whose work I present later in this chapter, calls herself a "believing woman" and "a seeker of God's grace" (2007). She employs these self-definitions as part of a broader critique towards feminism and the inherent endemic politics of naming.

## 2.1 The Emergence of an Islamic Feminist Discourse

There are a number of approaches and trends that form part of the Islamic feminist discourse. From the beginning of the 1980s much of the scholarly work centred on the Qur'anic text as *the* source of equality. Gender equality was understood to be an axiomatic principle embedded within the revealed text. Many Islamic feminist scholars elucidate that current dominating interpretations and understandings of the Qur'anic text have been elicited through male lenses. Androcentric understandings of ontology and epistemology, together with the development of patriarchal norms, emerged as a result of these male endeavours (Hassan, 1996:382-383).<sup>25</sup> This unassailably influenced, and continues to influence, the way in which women experience the sacred and articulate their identity as Muslims. Riffat Hassan argues that women's involvement in intellectual scholarship, particularly in the sphere of the sacred, was traditionally and historically non-existent due to the lack of (or prohibition of) female participation in what was viewed as male matters.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, she argues, the classical exegetic canon was largely developed through an aborted dialogue between the sexes (1990:95-96).

The belief that gender equality is intrinsic to the Qur'an was expressed by scholars through contextual gender-sensitive and liberatory re-readings of the Qur'an. By using, among other approaches, classical Islamic interpretive methodologies and holistic hermeneutical principles, many scholars developed various frameworks for the recuperation of what they believed to be the egalitarian Qur'anic message. These endeavours communicate understandings that are situated in contemporary women's experiences and needs. Examples of work of this nature are: *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Wadud, 1999, originally published in 1992), Riffat Hassan's "An Islamic Perspective" (1990) and "Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam" (1991), *The Rights of Women in Islam* (Engineer, 1992), and "*Believing Women*" in *Islam, Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Barlas,

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<sup>25</sup> For a discussion on particular male interpretive trends that effectively developed rigid gender hierarchies, seen as contrary to Qur'anic instructions, see Hassan, "Feminism in Islam" (1999) and "An Islamic perspective" (1990).

<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, more recent scholarship has challenged this notion. For example, Oaima Abou-Bakr presents, in her article "Teaching the Words of the Prophet: Women Instructors of the Hadith" (2003), a number of female scholars who were leading experts and teachers of *hadith (muhaddithat)* in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

2002). Although Barlas's book came out in 2002, she follows the trend of focusing on the Qur'an as the primary source of gender justice. However, her approach is more nuanced in that she acknowledges other possible readings that can be derived from the Qur'anic text. This engagement differs slightly from the other works published in the 1990s, when scholars were more likely to place emphasis on their reading as *the* reading.

From the late 1990s and onwards, scholars offered a more nuanced approach to interpretations of the Qur'an in particular, and to textual hermeneutics more broadly. Though ethical ideals such as gender justice and social equality remained paramount, the writings of these scholar-activists both challenged and questioned the underlying egalitarianism of the Qur'an itself. Most will agree that the Qur'an contains some significant egalitarian teachings; however, this does not mean that the Qur'anic text *per se* brings about equality and preaches equality in contemporary terms. Thus, much scholarship tended to include a critique of earlier scholarly writings, particularly related to the latter's more apologetic approach to Qur'anic text and contending that the sole problem is with the misogynist interpretive tradition.

Some scholars, such as Kecia Ali (2006) and Sa'diyya Shaikh (2007), note the ambivalences and potential contradictions embedded within the Qur'anic text. In addition, the various ways in which individuals approach the text, for instance with individual levels of human critical awareness, self-reflexivity, attentiveness to positionality, etc., are stressed as a key factor that intricately relates to the possible religious meanings that can be produced in interaction with the religious canon. Furthermore, the question has been asked whether we can overlook or discard certain passages or verses that, depending on the reader, *can* convey unjust meanings that will transcend the world of the text and be implemented in society in very real ways. Scholars like Amina Wadud (2006) and Khaled Abou El Fadl (2001) have presented some very creative responses on how to contest unjust meanings embedded in religious texts, which I discuss in more detail in the next section. Esack argues that:

I believe that it is justified to utilize a host of hermeneutical devices ranging from contextualization and reinterpretation to abrogation in order to arrive at an interpretation that serves the ends of justice...if a choice has to be made between violence toward the

text and textual legitimization of violence against real people, then I would be comfortable to plead guilty in the former. (2001:191-192)

Examples of scholars who engage with the ambiguity and ambivalences implicit in the Qur'an and the potential influences that patriarchal readings can have on women's experiences are Kecia Ali (2006), Farid Esack (2001), Laury Silvers (2007), Amina Wadud (2006) and Sa'diyya Shaikh (2007). It is interesting to note the shift that has taken place in Amina Wadud's scholarly approach by which her previous assertion regarding the gender egalitarian basis of the Qur'an is moderated through her acknowledgment of potentially harmful verses that necessitate a more active engagement with the text.

Thus far I have dealt with various approaches to the Qur'an as a source of liberation and as a catalyst in the quest for gender justice. However, the Islamic feminist discourse also incorporates other important sources of engagement. The *hadith* literature has undergone close scrutiny by scholars like Fatima Mernissi (1991), Khaled Abou El Fadl (2001) and Sa'diyya Shaikh (2004). While some scholars historicise and contextualise the existing authoritative *ahadith*, others challenge and question the authenticity of particular *ahadith* and offer counter-narratives that form the backdrop for more expedient narratives in the pursuit of gender justice.

Islamic law, the *Shari'a* (revealed law), as well as the *fiqh* tradition (Islamic jurisprudence), are increasingly becoming major areas of examination with regard to gender rights. The underlying philosophical assumptions embedded in Islamic jurisprudence particularly regarding women's ontology and sexuality are critically examined in order to make way for the construction of a new gender-egalitarian jurisprudence. Examples of scholars who have undertaken the enormous task of re-interpreting the law in favour of more gender-sensitive understandings are Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2007a and b, 2006, and 2003), Kecia Ali (2006 and 2003), and Azizah al-Hibri (2000).

The emphasis on questioning and re-reading the Islamic textual canon as a medium for promoting gender justice is a highly fertile endeavour. However, there are also other strategies that can illustrate the richness of religious expressions and contribute to the decentralisation of male scriptural history and dominance. The inclusion of women's *lived Islam* as a source of knowledge, espousing particular beliefs and practices, as well as multifarious ways of embracing

and connecting with the sacred, is an important dimension of rethinking tradition. The privileging of the textual corpus as the principal source of religious knowledge and consequently largely ignoring the influence of oral and experiential Islamic discourses on women's identities is dealt with by Leila Ahmed (2000). Other scholars that engage in the production of empirical studies and analysis in order to highlight women's lived Islam in a South African context are Sa'diyya Shaikh (1996 and 2007), Sindre Bangstad (2007, 2004a and 2004b), and Abdul Kayum Ahmed (2003).

The scholarly initiatives presented above incorporate a host of methodological, strategic and activist approaches that nurture the development of an Islamic feminist discourse. The main commonality that can be derived from these scholarly initiatives is that Muslim women's experiences and subjectivities are seen as an essential part of knowledge production. The Islamic feminist discourse can as such be seen as a movement that places women's understandings and realities on the agenda. In the book *Windows of Faith* (2000), Gisela Webb refers to this type of scholarly engagement as "scholarship activism."

In the next section I present a selected review of central theoretical debates and key concepts that are conveyed through an Islamic feminist discourse. This is done through presenting selected work of particular scholars that largely contributes to the production of an Islamic feminist discourse. Particular attention is paid to analytical practice, application of key concepts and broader hermeneutical strategies that in various ways provide socially relevant responses and important tools in the quest for gender justice.

## **2.2 Engaging with Islamic Feminism/s: Key Analytical Concepts and Debates**

Mohammed Arkoun, one of the foremost influential contemporary scholars within the field of Islamic studies, has developed an analytical strategy that he calls a “progressive-regressive method” (2002:218). In essence, this method elaborates on the valuable knowledge attained by reverting to the past (regressive method) in order to understand the historical underpinnings of particular discourses and epistemologies that paved the way for various genealogies of the sacred. The creative engagements with the past can be used in the present to break away from current monolithic constructions of meaning-making and develop more flexible ways of dealing with contemporary issues. The progressive-regressive method can be seen as one of the ways in which an Islamic feminist hermeneutics operates. An Islamic feminist hermeneutics is critical of rigid ideological constructions and often combs the historical legacy to open up multivocal and alternative strategies.

The re-reading and contextualisation of core texts and interpretations that guide Muslim thought and practice are important hermeneutical strategies in order to understand various subject positions of the past that still shape the present. Islamic feminist hermeneutics interrogates male interpretations of Islamic texts – particularly those focusing on gender power relations – that have been used to justify male superiority.

Furthermore, many Islamic feminist scholars often make a distinction between universal or eternal teachings/commands and teachings/commands that are understood to be subject to a particular historical context. The texts espousing clear historical specificity are questioned as to their validity for contemporary societies. Islamic feminist hermeneutics also deals with foregrounding Islamic texts that address notions of equality and reciprocity between women and men, thereby challenging misrepresentations of women as inferior beings. Texts that specifically point to inherent differences between women and men, and foster understandings of gender hierarchy, are deconstructed and measured against broader Qur’anic principles of justice (Badran, 2006 and 2002). The aim of Islamic feminist hermeneutics is thus to develop and employ a discourse of gender that reflects the Qur’anic ethics of justice.

The work of the following scholars illustrates central debates within an Islamic feminist discourse. Contentious issues, particularly related to constructions of sex/uality, complexities in dealing with authoritative sources, and the importance of lived experiences will be highlighted.

### 2.2.1 Amina Wadud and Gender Jihad

African-American Muslim theologian, Professor Amina Wadud, has devoted her scholarly life to the reading of the Qur'an. Her 'gender-jihad' was inspired by the commitment to recuperate the egalitarian spirit of the Qur'an.<sup>27</sup> In her book *Qur'an and Woman* (1999), she explores the various constructions of gender and gender-relationships found in the Qur'an. She arrives at the conclusion that the Qur'an is the primary source of gender equality but that the problem lies with traditional *tafsir* (interpretations of the Qur'an), which were historically exclusively a male privilege. Including women's perspectives and experiences in the process of interpretation is crucial in order to challenge androcentric interpretations and forms part of Professor Wadud's gender-jihad.

Amina Wadud utilises a holistic approach when engaging with Qur'anic meaning. She incorporates classical Islamic methodologies, a greater emphasis on the context of Qur'anic revelation and the broader moral guidelines outlined in the Qur'an, as well as the grammatical and semantic composition of the text. In attempting to develop a more gender-inclusive interpretation of the Qur'an, the underlying questions driving Wadud's book *Qur'an and Woman* are: "what the Qur'an says, how it says it, what is said about the Qur'an, and who is doing the saying...[as well as]...what is left *unsaid*: the ellipses and silences" (1999:xiii).

In her critically astute study, Wadud also stresses the importance of self-reflexivity. Hence, the various ways in which the subject interacts with the text, the experience of the text, as well as the understanding of the text are all influenced by a range of different subject positions and are contingent on each reader's social reality. For this reason, Wadud points out that one must be

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<sup>27</sup> The term 'gender-jihad' was coined by South African *imam* Rashied Omar in the wake of Amina Wadud's visit to South Africa in 1994. In its basic denotation, the Arabic word *jihad* means 'exertion,' or 'effort in the direction of a certain goal.' There is a basic distinction between two forms of *jihad*: the 'great' *jihad* and the 'small' *jihad*. The 'great' *jihad* denotes an effort imposed upon oneself to achieve moral and religious perfection, whereas the 'small' *jihad* refers to the duty to do battle against an outside enemy.

attentive to the impact of a reader's prior text, i.e. that the socio-cultural imprinting carried by each reader influences how one may understand a text. No interpretation occurs in a historical vacuum where the reader is removed from social and political realities.

In *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006), Wadud continues her journey to demonstrate that Islam embraces principles of gender-justice. However, she moves slightly away from her previous assertion that the Qur'an advocates gender equality. Wadud explains: "Personally, I have come to places where how the text says what it says is just plain inadequate or unacceptable, however much interpretation is enacted upon it" (2006:192).

Wadud argues that the re-reading of the Qur'an from a woman's perspective is not enough to adequately challenge patriarchal structures embedded within various societies that negatively impact upon the lives and experiences of Muslim women (2006:188). In a chapter on the interpretive possibilities of the Qur'an, she critically engages with one of the verses in the Qur'an that has caused a lot of debate and controversy among classical Muslim scholars and contemporary Islamic feminists. Verse 4:34 can be, and has been, understood to condone the physical chastisement of wives by their husband. It reads:

Husbands should take full care of their wives, with [the bounties] God has given to some more than others and with what they spend out of their own money. Righteous wives are devout and guard what God would have them guard in their husband's absence. If you fear high-handedness [nushuz] from your wives, remind them [of the teachings of God], then ignore them when you go to bed, then hit them. If they obey you, you have no right to act against them: God is most high and great. (Haleem, 2004)

Amina Wadud has suggested, with regard to this particular verse, that it is possible to say "no" to its literal application. Firstly, she supports her argument through illustrating various forms of "textual intervention" that can be, and have been, employed to restrict the potential violence that this verse seems to suggest (2006:192). Wadud argues that some of the pre-modern scholars of Islam opened up a range of ways to interpret *away* the possibility for violence seemingly condoned by this verse. For example, some classical jurists specified that if a husband needed to strike his wife (seen as the last resort in the three-step conflict resolution outlined in verse 4:34), he should do this without hurting her or causing her any injury. Other jurists suggested that striking is only allowed by using a *miswak* (twig used as a toothbrush) or a folded handkerchief.

Yet others advocated that it is *better not to hit* women and interpreted the sanctioning of violence against women in purely symbolic terms.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Wadud shows that her more recent assertion of saying “no” to this particular verse in contemporary exegetical projects in fact follows a long tradition of scholarship that has provided interpretive responses that mitigate and indeed restrict some of the potential violence legitimised by verse 4:34. Thus, the possibility of saying “no” to a particular verse in contemporary societies is not different from some of the interpretive approaches exercised by classical exegetes (2006:192).

Secondly, Wadud states that a Muslim’s responsibility to act as a moral agent, *khalifah*, is intrinsically linked to the ways in which she/he engages in interpretations and the application of textual commands. This argument is also mirrored in the work of another contemporary scholar, Khaled Abou El Fadl. In his book *Speaking in God’s name* (2001), he also opens up for critical interaction and intervention with a text. He uses the concept of a ‘conscientious-pause’ to refer to moments where a Muslim feels the “unsettling or disturbing of the conscience” when engaging with normative traditions. In dealing with misogynist *ahadith*, e.g. *ahadith* regarding a wife’s sexual availability and complete obedience to her husband even if he is in the wrong, and *ahadith* portraying women as inferior to men in reason and faith, Abou El Fadl argues that:

...if a Muslim’s conscience is disturbed, the least that would be theologically expected from thinking beings who carry the burden of free will, accountability and God’s trust, is to take a reflective pause, and ask: to what extent did the Prophet really play a role in the authorial enterprise that produced this tradition? Can I, consistently with my faith and understanding of God and God’s message, believe that God’s Prophet is primarily responsible for this tradition? (2001:213)

Hence, the human ability to reflect, challenge and ask questions when engaging with *ahadith* is deemed absolutely essential in relation to the human quest for religious meaning. The possibility of saying “no” to a religious text or to take a ‘conscientious-pause’ advocates the unassailable connection between human critical awareness and our interaction with a religious canon.

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<sup>28</sup> See Shaikh’s MA thesis *Battered Women in Muslim Communities in the Western Cape: Religious Constructions of Gender, Marriage, Sexuality and Violence* (1996), for a thorough analysis of classical jurists’ views and interpretations of verse 4:34.

Wadud engages with the textual core of Islam to reform attitudes towards Muslim women, as well as advocating the inclusion of Muslim women's experiences to transform patriarchal understandings of human nature in Islam. She embraces the ideal of being God's *khalifah*, a title that reflects divinely delegated moral agency given all humans, which further entail the human responsibility to act in accordance with the Qur'anic principles of justice and equality. According to Wadud, "One cannot stand on the sidelines in the face of injustice and still be recognized as fully Muslim, fully *khalifah*" (1999:xix).

In the empirical component of this dissertation I focus specifically on the ways in which the Islamic feminist notion of being *khalifah* might engage with some of the realities that define South African Muslim women's intimate relationships.

### **2.2.2 Asma Barlas and Egalitarian Qur'anic Ethics**

Asma Barlas, another Muslim scholar committed to the recuperation of gender justice in Islam, looks at the broader gender politics in the Qur'an. In her book *Believing Women in Islam* (2002:1) she starts her enquiry by posing two key questions: "does Islam's Scripture, the Qur'an, teach or condone sexual inequality or oppression? ... Does the Qur'an permit and encourage liberation for women?" Barlas presents her reading of the central hermeneutical principles of the Qur'an, and through these various interpretive strategies she focuses specifically on a liberatory reading of the Qur'an to answer the questions outlined above (13-21).

Barlas contests the patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an, and aims at promoting an ethical awareness required by both men and women that reflects the Qur'anic principles of justice and equality (2-3). In line with this, Barlas advocates gender-sensitive readings of the Qur'an that promote *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources). While her interpretive strategies and methodologies resonate with the approaches employed by Riffat Hassan (1990) and Amina Wadud (1999), she further develops and refines these approaches. By focusing on particular ethical principles in the Qur'an, Barlas argues that the singular criterion for distinguishing between human beings is "ethical-moral" (2002:130).

Of particular interest is Barlas's investigation and systematic analysis of gender, sexuality, and morality in the Qur'an. She argues that the ways in which the Qur'an depicts sex/uality, renders both men and women equally 'sexualized'. Thus, she advocates the idea of a 'sexual sameness' as a key concept to promote an egalitarian reading of the Qur'an, as well as to refute the derogatory ways in which women's natures have been understood (152). Barlas challenges the traditional exegetical construction of gender binaries and hierarchy in which women's sexuality is seen as 'dangerous' and needs to be controlled. By elucidating the egalitarian underpinnings of a Qur'anic sexual ethos, Barlas contests conservative views that proclaim women's bodies as both *awrah* and sources of *fitna*.<sup>29</sup>

Barlas also argues in relation to the Qur'anic prescription of bodily modesty, that the Qur'an understands the body for men and women alike as fundamentally erotic. Subsequently, the implementation of a modesty ideal does not mean that the Qur'an "de-eroticizes or de-sexualizes the body" (159). Rather, the Qur'an introduces the principle of modesty to regulate sexual desires, hence establishing a mode of correct behaviour. From this analysis the Qur'an does not measure the body in relation to pure/impure dualities but in terms of decency and dignified behaviour (159). The Qur'an encourages sexual activity, not only as a means of procreation, but as a pleasant and enjoyable encounter between men and women within the boundaries of a religiously sanctioned union. Barlas argues that the moral-social principles of sexual sameness, sexual modesty, and the insistence of sexual morality for both men and women, embedded within the Qur'an, are compatible with feminist commitments of gender equality.

Barlas's book, *Believing Women in Islam* (2002) opens up for alternative understandings of embodiment, sexuality and gender in Islam. In the empirical component of this study I investigate the ways in which South African Muslim women understand Islamic views on

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<sup>29</sup> *Awrah* – lit. nakedness, referring to aspects of the self that should be publicly concealed. It includes a range of referents from the 'genitals' or 'pudendum' for men and women alike in some perspectives; to women's hands, face, and voice in the view of others.

*Fitna* – lit. 'temptation,' 'trial'; commonly used to indicate chaos. Fatima Mernissi (2003) also suggests that *fitna* might signify the idea of a *femme fatale*, an attractive woman who can bring about potential sexual havoc.

sex/uality, ethics of sexual behaviour, and broader understandings of being a gendered and sexual human being.

### 2.2.3 Fatima Mernissi and Women's History

Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi is particularly interested in challenging the authenticity of authoritative *ahadith* that support rigid constructions of gender roles. In her book *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), she utilises traditional ways of authenticating *ahadith* to delegitimise *ahadith* that claim to be *sahih* (sound, authentic). She applies critical methods developed in the 'science of hadith' by pioneers such as al-Bukhari (b. 810CE) and Imam Malik Ibn Anas (b. 8<sup>th</sup> century CE) in her deconstructive project (1991:42-61). Through her critical engagement with *ahadith*, Mernissi unveils the various constellations of power that were at play at the time of the Prophet to illuminate the impact of context on the production of *ahadith*. In so doing, she renders *hadith* a site for the contestation of power, to be creatively engaged within contemporary contexts.

In *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993), Mernissi presents examples of women that historically held important political positions in countries like Turkey, Mongolia and Indonesia. These women represent counter-narratives in the myriad of recorded androcentric leadership-narratives in the history of Islam. She argues that the lack of narratives recording women that held powerful political positions reflects the biased documentation of history in the hands of patriarchy (1993:110-111).

Mernissi's scholarship offers contemporary Muslim women powerful female role models that can influence alternative modes of feminisms. Through the representation of women's marginalised history in Islam, Mernissi challenges assumptions of religiously sanctioned societal gender roles and norms and attempts to resuscitate the lost gender egalitarian spirit of Islam.

In Mernissi's earlier work she is critical of traditional constructions of male-female sexuality. In *Beyond the Veil, Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (2003:8), first published in 1975, she argues that sexual inequality is a prominent feature of both Western and Islamic societies. As opposed to Western societies in which sexual desires and lust have been effectively downplayed

due to the influence of dominant Christian dogmas, Mernissi claims that Islam is a religion in which sex is encouraged, and the spiritual value of sex is seen as an important part of human existence. Nonetheless, despite this view many prominent Muslim male scholars have presented women's sexuality as a "symbol of disorder" (44). Mernissi asserts that this patriarchal position on female sexuality (as dangerous) is reflected in various established social practices, like polygyny and a husband's easy access to divorce, that were largely aimed at regulating women's sexuality (46-50). Although these practices are contested in a range of ways, and the exercise of these male 'rights' are contingent upon various factors, the social currency of classical views on sexuality has led to acceptance of pejorative gendered power relations.

In *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (1996), Mernissi continues to investigate understandings of women's sexuality, and women's ownership over their own bodies in relation to conceptions of virginity (and the emergence of the surgical replacement of the hymen), family planning, and family honour. Mernissi argues that within dominant Muslim discourses "the concepts of honour and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman" (34). Thus, the levels of a woman's pure and controlled sexuality can be seen as the yardstick by which male status is measured. Mernissi also refers to the sexual division of labour as a crucial component of the woman's role "as a sexual agent and man as provider..." (69). The social construction of gender roles, while believed to be divinely ordained, reflects particular skewed male assumptions about the nature of women.

Mernissi's scholarship is important in relation to the exploration of Muslim women's subjectivities and their understandings of sex/uality and 'ascribed' gender roles. Muslim women's understandings of Islamic perspectives on sexuality and sexual culture are important sources of knowledge that speak to the ways in which relations of power are mediated. The empirical component in this dissertation highlights these aspects and explores the ways in which traditional epistemologies find currency in contemporary understandings of sex and gender.

#### 2.2.4 Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Islamic Jurisprudence

Ziba Mir-Hosseini, an Iranian Islamic feminist scholar, investigates gender rights as outlined in classical *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). She explores the underlying philosophical assumptions and patriarchal epistemologies embedded in the *fiqh* canon that espouse particular conceptualisations of women's sexuality. Mir-Hosseini stresses the importance of developing a new egalitarian jurisprudence that is based on the principles of justice and equality embedded within the *Shari'a* (revealed law).

In her article "Classical Fiqh, Contemporary Ethics and Gender Justice" (2007b), Mir-Hosseini explores the legal rulings in relation to marriage and *hijab*.<sup>30</sup> I concentrate on her analysis of the underlying philosophical underpinnings related to the legal rulings on marriage to show how the jurists rationalised particular views on women's sexuality. Mir-Hosseini explains that the principal idea of "ownership and sale" is central to the jurists' understandings of marital relationships (2007b:7). Many Islamic feminist scholars have argued that slavery and concubinage arrangements chiefly influenced classical jurists' conceptualisations of women's sexuality, marital relations and relations between the sexes more broadly.<sup>31</sup> Within the *fiqh* literature, mimicking the principles of ownership and sale, women's sexuality became an article for sale in which *mahr* (dower) is the price to be paid for a woman's expected sexual favours. Consequently, men are in control over, and own, women's sexuality. Mir-Hosseini argues that it is this logic that further guides broader marital dynamics within the classical *fiqh* works (7).

In addition, Mir-Hosseini argues that the central gender assumptions underlying this "marriage of dominion" are the following: "women are created of and for men, God made men superior to women, [and] women are defective in reason and faith" (13). These clearly patriarchal assumptions have been dealt with by numerous other feminist scholars who embrace principles of equality and justice, and who include in their scholarship various hermeneutical principles to delegitimise these misogynistic assumptions.<sup>32</sup> Mir-Hosseini argues that despite absolutely no

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<sup>30</sup> See also Mir-Hosseini, "Islam and Gender Justice", 2007a (in *Voices of Islam*, edited by Vincent Cornell and Omid Safi) for a more elaborate discussion around gender inequalities embedded within the *fiqh* canon.

<sup>31</sup> See for example, Leila Ahmed (1992) and Kecia Ali (2006 and 2003).

<sup>32</sup> See for example, Barlas (2002), Hassan (1990), Mernissi (1991), Shaikh (1996), and Wadud (1999, 2006).

Qur'anic material that enshrines these phallogocentric perspectives, the classical jurists embraced these assumptions in ways that elevated men as the sole sacrosanct custodians of God's intentions and God's will. And, as Mir-Hosseini argues "they [these assumptions] became the main implicit theological assumptions determining how jurists discerned legal rules from the sacred texts" (13).

The nature of woman's sexuality, and how a woman's sexuality differed from man's sexuality, was also widely debated by the classical jurists. The understandings deriving from these discussions further justified women's inferiority, and consequently, a woman's duty to obey the superior species – man. Mir-Hosseini argues that women's subjugation was a natural consequence of the belief that "God gave women greater sexual desire than men" (13). The necessity of taming and thus controlling women's sexuality became concomitant with the sustenance of Islamic society. In fact, she illustrates how classical jurists' arguments were underpinned by the view that a woman's obedience to her husband is not only emblematic of the power relations in the domestic sphere, but is an important signifier of the harmonised sacred balance of the universe. This implies that women must embrace their predetermined role as passive and subservient members of the Muslim community. If women rebel against this sacrosanct feminine ideal, the Islamic world order will be in danger, and disorder will triumph.

The rulings on marital law are informed by these particular phallogocentric interpretations of the *Shari'a* view on women's sexuality and constructions of gender more broadly. Thus, *fiqh* rulings, through claiming support from sacrosanct sources, justify a divinely sanctioned patriarchy. However, as mentioned above, Mir-Hosseini argues that these conceptualisations of women's sexuality do not correlate with a Qur'anic ethos. Her methodological approach to *fiqh* is based on challenging the patriarchal bias of *fiqh* through unveiling the egalitarian nature of *Shari'a* as it incorporates the "spirit of the Qur'anic revelations" (4). In her work, Mir-Hosseini makes a clear distinction between *Shari'a* and *fiqh*. She claims that *Shari'a* is the revealed law that is reflected in the Qur'an, whereas *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) is human interpretation of these divinely revealed sources. However, within various political contexts *fiqh* has sometimes been confused

with *Shari'a*. Consequently, *fiqh*, which is a result of human fallible understandings of Qur'an and *Sunna*, has been conveyed as God's divine will (3-5).<sup>33</sup>

So what is the way forward? Firstly, Mir-Hosseini suggests that the emerging "Feminist voices in Islam herald the coming of an egalitarian legal paradigm that is still in the making" (16). The emergence of gender-sensitive readings of divine scripture, the critique of Islamic jurisprudence and the inclusion of Muslim women's narratives reflect a challenge towards the unsatisfying status quo. These initiatives can contribute to a paradigm shift within the legal tradition. Mir-Hosseini's valuable contributions to Islamic scholarship in Iran have made transparent some of the various ways in which women actively and creatively confront religious authoritative courts in matters of divorce as well as in husbands' failings to fulfil marital obligations (see Mir-Hosseini, 2000, 1999, 1996a, 1996b, 1994). By including women's lived experiences and realities as a basis for her endeavour, Mir-Hosseini has paved the way for establishing the Islamic feminist discourse as a salient force in the Iranian context.

The new paradigm shift, advocated by Mir-Hosseini, should incorporate the egalitarian ethics embedded in *Shari'a* in ways that speak to Muslim women's realities in contemporary societies. Mir-Hosseini argues that "when social reality changes, then social practice will effect a change in the law" (2007b:16). The influence of Islamic feminism in women's realities, for instance in Iran, brings about new, arguably more egalitarian ways of engaging with the Islamic textual legacy. This will influence the current articulations of Islamic jurisprudence and bring about a more gender-sensitive legal discourse.

Of particular interest to the empirical component of this study are the ways in which South African Muslim women speak about sexual dynamics and the various relations of power that might inform their sexual relationships.

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<sup>33</sup> *Sunna* – customary practices; when capitalised refers to the Prophet's practices.

### 2.2.5 Kecia Ali and Laury Silvers: Questioning the Egalitarian Nature of the Qur'an

Kecia Ali has also explored the roots of Islamic jurisprudence, especially related to marriage and divorce law. In *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (2003), her chapter on "Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence" elucidates the crucial aspect of a critical engagement with Islamic jurisprudence and also the need for a contextual understanding of current and past interpretations. Ali argues that our contemporary context is in need of a new jurisprudence (2003:166). The patriarchal bias underlying the Islamic laws of marriage and divorce must be rejected altogether to make way for a jurisprudence based on justice. She explains that a new judicial discourse cannot be developed through a patchwork methodology, in essence, applying "acceptable rules from different schools", nor can it be developed by solely elucidating on the divine scripture (166).

Ali critiques scholars like Riffat Hassan, Asma Barlas, and Amina Wadud for their exclusive focus on a Qur'anic gender-sensitive re-interpretation. Ali argues that the Qur'an, as a single authoritative scripture, does not "provide explicit regulations covering all possible circumstances" (2003:181-182). In this context, this means that the fight for egalitarianism and gender justice cannot be based solely on the Qur'an. Islamic jurisprudence constitutes one important corpus of text that must be critically engaged with by Islamic feminists in order to achieve human equality.

In her latest book *Sexual Ethics & Islam* (2006), Kecia Ali engages with Qur'an, *hadith* and jurisprudence when exploring conceptions of various sexual expressions related to gender power relations. She writes that "an egalitarian sexual ethics cannot be constructed through pastiche...We need, instead, a serious consideration of what makes sex lawful in the sight of God" (2006:151). As such, Ali continues her critique concerning the patchwork methodology, and as an alternative solution emphasises the importance of holistic hermeneutics.

Ali echoes arguments raised by Leila Ahmed (1992) and Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2007b) regarding the influence of slavery and concubinage as key components in the ways that medieval jurists conceptualised women's sexuality and the nature of sexuality more broadly. She argues that the implications these ethical guidelines have in our contemporary society "no longer [make] sense

to a significant number of Muslims” (2006:xvi-xvii). The continuing validations of certain sexual mores, through various understandings of Islamic scriptures, have detrimental consequences for Muslim women. As a matter of fact, Ali argues, sexual ethics based on principles of justice is *a priori* unattainable if one engages with the ways in which Muslim scholars conceptualised sexuality in the legal canon (151).

Consequently, Ali asks the question: “If I do not accept the sole interpretive authority of the juristic and exegetical heritage – which is strongly patriarchal and sometimes misogynist – why not bypass it entirely, and turn to the Qur’an alone as a guide?” (xix-xx). However, Ali recognises the importance of the Muslim scholarly contributions, especially in relation to the standards of their methodological meticulousness, the recognition of a range of – sometimes conflicting – views, and, most importantly, the ways in which their assumptions directly influence today’s ethical environment (xx). This latter point is salient as it speaks to the various ways in which contemporary Muslim women are informed by particular Islamic discourses (of the past) within which suppositions regarding sexual natures and marital sexual dynamics are pronounced. Arguably, these discourses contribute to the formation of particular subjectivities and ways of embodying a lived reality in contemporary contexts. Hence, Ali continues her insistence on the inclusion of several scriptural sources that must be engaged with in order to debate and inspire developments of new discourses around ethics, and especially, a just ethics of sexuality.

Many feminist scholars of Islam, e.g. Asma Barlas, foreground the egalitarian basis of revelation. Kecia Ali distinguishes herself more radically from this view by subtly suggesting that the Qur’an is not *only* egalitarian. Through her detailed engagement with slave concubinage (“what your right hand possesses”), Ali posits the question: “where is God’s justice in permitting slavery in the first place, if slavery constituted an injustice and wrong in the seventh century, just as it would and does in the twenty-first century?” (2006:54). If the core foundational principles in the Qur’an are justice and equality, divinely justified slavery and slave concubinage present us with axiomatic conflicting ideals. This indicates that there are underlying meaning systems in the Qur’an that potentially reiterate a hierarchical echelon between human beings, given the precondition that slaves and concubines were understood to be human beings. If they were seen

as human beings, then the fact that they were not individuals in their own right but were always bound within a relationship of power where they were *owned* by another human being, might justifiably be understood to be an injustice condoned by the Qur'an.

Ali further argues that “if it [slavery] did not constitute an injustice and a wrong in the seventh century in God’s eyes, then on what basis may anyone subsequently declare it unjust without rendering divine justice subordinate to the vagaries of human, and therefore inherently flawed, moral sensibilities?” (54). Ali’s question reflects that any form of human apologetic reasoning for why slavery is unjust and thus must be outlawed, is, according to the superiority of the divine intent, equal to acting against the will of God. If God understood slavery to be just, then we, as human beings, cannot transgress the power of the divine will. According to Islamic sources, God is omnipotent as well as omniscient. This implies that all meanings conveyed through human interactions with the divine text are *intended* by God. However, the ontological nature of human beings, and the embedded assumption that they act as God’s *khalifas* on earth, presents moral dilemmas that have to do with the nature of free will. This suggests that even though the Qur’an, and as such, divine will, present to us various articulations that potentially can convey unjust meanings, the nature of free will leaves the decision of whether or not to act upon these articulations up to us. The plethora of meanings subtly embedded within the Qur’an itself leaves the responsibility of moral decision-making to human beings who are, by nature, morally fallible. This also implies that not all meanings potentially conveyed in the interaction with the Qur’an are equally just, or equally good.

Laury Silvers’s unpublished paper “In the Book We have left out Nothing” (2007) deals with the complexities and difficulties confronting believing women when having to deal with the existence of verse 4:34.<sup>34</sup> Silvers engages with the nature of free will and human responsibility in light of the possible interpretations and understandings of this verse. The fact that this verse *can* legitimise wife-battery raises questions with regard to gendered power relations and (divinely) constructed gender roles. Given that the Prophet is understood to be the ultimate source and purveyor of Qur’anic ethics, Silvers argues that “because the Prophet rejected violence against women, we would be justified in accepting the reading of non-violent separation as that which

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<sup>34</sup> See the section on Amina Wadud, page 40-41, for further critical engagement with verse 4:34.

was intended by God and be done with it” (2007:2). Nonetheless, the verse exists, which means that all possible meanings are *intended* by God.

Consequently, Silvers engages in an ethical analysis where she employs traditional theological methodologies to shed some light on the purpose of this particular revelation. Drawing extensively on the work of Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 1240), she argues that although all potential meanings are intended by God, “the purpose of the existence of the verse would be to remind human beings of the extraordinary burden of freedom” (2007:3). Thus, if we did not have a plethora of possible understandings at hand, we would not be able to exercise our responsibility as *khalifah*, moral agents, and challenge our own ethical consciousness when making challenging decisions.

In line with Kecia Ali’s arguments regarding moral decision-making and the possibility for unjust or unethical understandings (and applications) of divine text, Silvers argues that although the text can be used to legitimise abuse towards women, this does not imply that we should prefer this understanding. She includes El Fadl’s ‘conscientious-pause’ and Wadud’s ‘saying no’ as possible methodological options when dealing with difficult verses in the Qur’an. The human ethical responsibilities that came with the acceptance of God’s ‘Trust’ and consequently our primary function as God’s *khalifah*, *requires* critical awareness when engaging with the Qur’an. Our responsibility as *khalifah* means that we have the right to say “no” to Qur’anic verses and to critically engage with various religious meanings that make us uncomfortable. Thus, one can argue that the Qur’an conveys a variety of meanings, ranging from the most morally flawed to ethical perfection, patriarchal expressions as well as egalitarian constructions; nevertheless, depending on the moral capacity or the ethical lenses through which the human subject interacts with the divine, these meanings become realised in various human interactions reflecting justice as well as injustices.

Silvers explicates the distress that the Prophet reportedly experienced when he received the revelation of verse 4:34. According to classical sources, the Prophet never acted out the permission to beat any of his wives after the revelation of this verse and he reportedly said: “God

wanted one thing, I wanted something else” (2007:11).<sup>35</sup> Thus, if we follow the Prophet’s example we must accept the existence of verse 4:34, however, we can choose *not* to act upon this divinely given permission. Silvers argues that “the purpose of its [Q4:34] existence is to inspire the crisis of conscience that would lead us to prohibit beating” (2007:12). In conclusion, we cannot change what is revealed, nevertheless, our human responsibility to be fully *khalifah* compels us to speak up against societal injustices, emulate the example of the Prophet, utilise the methodologies applied by classical scholars, who largely subverted the meaning of ‘beat’, in support of our decision not to act upon the permission given in verse 4:34, and apply our consciousness in ways that correlate with broader Qur’anic ethical principles and moral guidance.

The discussion above indicates alternative ways of social engagement with divine text that elucidate our capacity as *thinking* and *responsible* human beings. In the empirical component of this study I investigate the ways in which South African Muslim women can suffer from unjust understandings of divine text that bear direct relevance on their lived realities. I explore the respondents’ understandings of moral responsibility and the ways in which they contest, mitigate and subvert unjust meanings that are rooted in religious scriptures and employed in lived reality.

#### **2.2.6 Sa’diyya Shaikh and “tafsir of praxis”**

South African scholar Sa’diyya Shaikh foregrounds Muslim women’s experiences in order to make sense of Islamic ethics, as well as the human responsibility and obligation to act as moral agents (*khalifah*). She is also deeply committed to the recovery of the full humanity of women and conducts empirical research in order to enshrine women’s polymorphous narratives in ways that specifically inform discourses on gender relations and sexuality. Shaikh advocates a theory of gender-justice, which she understands to be inherently intrinsic to Islam. In her article “Knowledge, Women and Gender in the Hadith: a Feminist Interpretation” (2004), she employs

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<sup>35</sup> Although most classical scholars agree as to the Prophet’s treatment of his wives, asserting that he never beat his wives prior to nor after the revelation of this verse, it is reported in Muslim that the Prophet slapped or pushed his favourite wife Aisha due to her behaviour (spying on him) while he was with one of his other wives (Silvers, 2007:9-10). This incident was reported to have taken place *before* the revelation of Q4:34, and can hence be seen as an influencing factor in the distress felt by the Prophet when receiving this revelation.

feminist hermeneutics to critique traditional views that espouse divisions between body and mind. She examines the ways in which these understandings have associated men with rationality and spirituality while linking women's natures with the sphere of sexuality and emotions. By stereotyping gender according to this 'logic', Shaikh argues that the traditional understandings of gender explicate a divided human self and dualistic notions of human experience. She contests this split between sexuality and spirituality, body and intellect, and argues that distorted assumption like these imply that knowledge is man's prerogative. As such, women, who make up half of the population, are often excluded from the realm of knowledge production. Shaikh advocates for the inclusion of Muslim women's experiences, realities, and understandings into the realm of "authorized knowledge", to apply Letherby's terminology (2003), in order to complete human experience.

In her chapter on "Family planning, Contraception and Abortion in Islam: Undertaking *Khilafah*" (2003b), Shaikh investigates the diverse Islamic legal texts on family planning, contraception, and abortion. Despite the resistance amongst some traditional *ulama* (religious scholars), she claims that "family planning is in fact a legitimate and Islamic priority" (113). In particular Shaikh highlights the importance of women's moral agency (*khalifah*) in decisions concerning their sexuality, bodies and fertility management. Shaikh argues that "Family planning, including contraceptive usage, may be seen as extension of the human capacity to plan, to respond to, and to actively make choices in terms of contextual needs and emerging realities" (114). Shaikh interrogates structures of social and economic injustices that restrict women's *khalifah* in various contemporary contexts.

In her groundbreaking article "A *Tafsir* of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community" (2007), Shaikh presents women's experiences as a way of engaging the lived meaning and interpretation of Qur'anic teachings, what she calls an "embodied tafsir" or a "tafsir of praxis". Interviewing Muslim women in South Africa, who have all been victims of violent physical abuse, Shaikh takes the application of feminist hermeneutics to a new level. The inclusion of women's real-life experiences, and their embodied understandings related to Qur'anic revelation and Islamic ethics illuminate and challenge the limitations of dominant patriarchal exegesis. This notion of an "embodied tafsir" also raises

questions about a purely textual approach to gender ethics as represented in much of the contemporary Islamic feminist scholarship. Hence, women's experiences become the epicentre of engagement and reflect a *social world of the text* as an important site of knowledge production. This notion of a 'social world of the text' means that religious texts have a 'life' in social contexts. Religious texts are being recited and enacted and significantly influence women's lives to varying degrees. A 'social world of the text' also includes the manner in which women reiterate, perpetuate, contest and challenge texts through their lives. In this way, Shaikh challenges traditional as well as contemporary ways of defining and engaging *tafsir* through opening up alternative ways of addressing Islamic ethics in light of women's experiential realities.

In her most recent article "In Search of al-Insan" (2009), Shaikh presents a mapping of the ideal human self as reflected in Sufi discourse, particularly drawing on the works of the 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic Ibn al-Arabi. In her article she foregrounds a gender-inclusive ethical ideal for men and women alike and prioritises certain forms of individual characteristics and social interactions. Particular individual virtues that should be cultivated and embodied so as to guide and nurture interpersonal relationships and social networks are love, compassion and mercy. One of the central issues that Shaikh critiques are patriarchal power relationships, which she argues are disempowering for men and women alike, both spiritually and in social terms.

In the empirical component of this dissertation, Shaikh's notion of a different ethics of engagement – within which particular virtues are refined and lived out – is of significance in regard to the various ways in which South African Muslim women might draw strength from religious ideals of self in empowering ways in order to deal with difficult marital relationships and other social conditions.

This chapter has dealt extensively with existing debates in Islamic feminism/s and highlighted key concepts. Clearly, Islamic feminists' work is both deconstructive and reconstructive. They re-read foundational texts and challenge negative representations of women that have been used to justify male superiority. They also retrieve marginalised teachings and legacies of power for women. Nevertheless, when liberatory readings do not adequately challenge patriarchal

constructs and social injustices, the recent developments in Islamic feminism that suggest textual intervention in the form of saying “no” or taking a ‘conscientious-pause’ are noteworthy. This creative approach allows for alternative interpretive possibilities that are informed by human critical awareness when engaging with religious meaning.

The dominant politics of gender and sexuality within the Islamic framework bear witness to various patriarchal assumptions guiding sexual behaviour. Androcentric constructions of women’s natures, illustrated by authoritative regulations of female sexuality, undermine women’s sexual autonomy and embodiment of moral agency. The importance of empirical research to place women’s experiences in a more prominent position is salient in order to redress Islamic ethics and reinforce discourses that embrace the principle of gender-justice in a social reality.

The empirical component of this study is largely framed through the debates outlined above. Of particular relevance to my research are the various ways in which relations of power are negotiated within sexual relationships. Secondly, the discursive shift from textual engagement to the social world of the text is emphasised. I pay particular attention to the various ways in which some South African social structures might facilitate or inhibit women’s agential capacities and also what types of “embodied tafsir” might be reflected in my respondents’ narratives. Lastly, the experiences articulated by Muslim women represent counter-narratives to the dominant discourses that prevail in male-privileged social, cultural and political structures. As such, contemporary women’s lived Islam contributes to the recovery of women’s histories.

In the next chapter of this dissertation I explore empirical studies that have been conducted in a South African Muslim context. Of particular interest are studies that highlight gender relations, specifically related to sexual relationships and marital dynamics. The research findings that emerge from these studies inform the empirical component of my study and assist in delineating broader trends within the Muslim community with regard to questions around sexuality and various constellations of power within marital relationships.

## **Chapter 3:**

# **Exploring Muslim Women's Realities in South Africa: Empirical Mapping**

This chapter explores a number of empirical studies relating to Muslim women's realities and experiences in South Africa.<sup>36</sup> I present some of the main findings emerging from these studies as they relate to key issue arising in my own research project. Firstly, I investigate the existence of Islamic feminism/s in South Africa in order to illustrate the ways in which some Muslim women have actively engaged with local contexts in order to work towards a more gender-inclusive and egalitarian society. Secondly, I examine research reports focussed on empirical data concerning Muslim marital and sexual dynamics within the South African context. These studies are intrinsically related to the empirical component of this dissertation in two major ways.

Firstly, Na'eem Jeenah's study (2001) outlines the emergence of Islamic feminism/s in South Africa. Through his exploration of the development of Islamic feminism/s, Jeenah highlights dominant debates and struggles that are particular to the South African Muslim context. I include Jeenah's investigation of a few grassroots initiatives to show the ways in which some Muslim women have participated in the construction of a South African Islamic feminist discourse. The empirical component of this dissertation, within which Muslim women speak

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<sup>36</sup> There are very few empirical studies that examine Muslim women's experiences in a South African context. The scarcity of empirical studies pertaining to this area of research is also emphasised by Na'eem Jeenah (2001) and Sindre Bangstad (2007). Thus, the continuing contribution of empirical research is salient in order to address, amongst others, dominant discourses on sexuality that espouse particular hierarchical relations of power, discourses that guide broader marital dynamics, the existence of spousal abuse, drug/alcohol abuse, marital infidelity, and the influence of HIV/AIDS in Muslim communities. The existing literature on Islam and Muslims in South Africa is largely related to the history of Islam in South Africa, Islam and questions of identity in post-apartheid South Africa, and reinterpretations of texts embedded within the Islamic canon (e.g. Esack, 2001, 1997 and 1993; Mukadam, 1990; Vahed, 2000; Tayob, 1999). There are also a number of studies dealing with specific topics within a Muslim South African context, such as the development of Muslim Personal Law and Civil rights discourses (Badat, 2000; Hamza, 2002; E. Moosa, 1992 and 1988; N. Moosa, 1991 and 1996).

about issues on gender and sexuality as it relates to their lived experiences, is thus situated against a broader historical context in which initiatives related to gender justice advocacy have been proclaimed. I pay particular attention to the possible resonances between the respondents' narratives with the varying intersections of gender power relations debated amongst Muslim activists and the theoretical constructs proposed by Islamic feminists on issues of morality, ethics and agency.

Secondly, I examine some of the results emerging from three empirical studies that focus on divorce, polygyny and HIV/AIDS respectively. I have chosen these empirical studies due to the fact that they interlink with my own empirical research in a number of ways. In particular, women's experiential realities are highlighted. The studies presented reflect women's actual experiences with regard to sexual relationships and marital dynamics more broadly. The studies illustrate particular constructions of gender and sexual norms that exist within Muslim communities. Moreover, the studies demonstrate the complexities of existent gendered practices that can influence women's intimate relationships in various ways.

(1) Mogamat Yoesrie Toefy (2001) investigates divorce in the Muslim communities of the Western Cape. Of particular interest are his findings concerning the underlying reasons related to the instigation of divorce. The empirical data emerging from his findings highlight spousal infidelity, drug abuse and spousal abuse as major causes for women seeking divorce. Thus, Toefy's study indicates particular problematic contextual realities that form part of a South African Muslim context.

(2) Sindre Bangstad (2007) explores the occurrences of Muslim polygynous marriages in the Cape Flats. Bangstad's study examines the various complexities related to the ways in which a polygynous union is brought about, and ambiguous discursive trends related to the acceptability of polygyny in local communities. I include some of the research findings in Bangstad's study in order to illustrate some of the existing discourses and contextual factors that contribute to Muslim women's broader marital experiences.

(3) Abdul Kayum Ahmed (1999 and 2003) examines the impact of HIV/AIDS on Muslim communities in the Western Cape as well as women's lived experiences with the disease in Cape Town. Among his findings I find particularly alarming the fact that Muslim women *in* marital relationships are increasingly prone to HIV-infection due to spousal infidelity. I explore Ahmed's research findings as they relate to broader narratives on infidelity in my research sample, as well as the lack of preventative measures taken by respondents who are exposed to their husband's adultery in their marital relationships.

The research findings revealed through these three empirical studies reflect particular existing discourses on gender and sexuality that inform Muslim women's lives in a number of ways. The focus in the empirical component of this dissertation is placed on, amongst other things, discourses involving particular religious understandings that can regulate and influence sexual and marital relationships. The research findings emerging from the three abovementioned studies provide a complex background against which the empirical component of this dissertation can be analysed. Before I go on to explore these abovementioned studies in greater detail, I will briefly outline the status of Muslim Personal Law (MPL) in South Africa in order to familiarise the reader with the local context pertaining to Muslim legal discourses on the family.

### **3.1 Muslim Personal Law in South Africa**

According to Na'eem Jeenah, "Muslim Personal Law has been a term given to a package of provisions within Islamic law (or Shari'ah) that relate to family law" (2001:37). Thus, rules and regulations pertaining to matters of divorce, marital unions, custody of children and inheritance are articulated through MPL. MPL was not officially recognised during the apartheid regime in South Africa. Consequently, after 1994 the Muslim Personal Law Board (MPLB) was established in order to review the possible integration of MPL in light of the new South African Constitution of 1996 (Jeenah, 2001:37-38; Bangstad, 2007:57-58).

However, the establishment of the MPLB (dismantled as early as 1995) as well as the subsequent committees created in order to develop a South African MPL, have up until today not been successful in establishing Muslim Personal Law that can be approved by South African

authorities (Jeenah, 2001:38). This is due to various points of disagreement within Muslim communities in South Africa, as well as specific aspects of the proposed MPL that do not necessarily correlate with the South African Bill of Rights. In particular, issues related to Muslim women's rights as well as polygynous marriages have been hotly debated.

Nevertheless, particular aspects regarding Muslim marriages have been recognised, as seen through court decisions related to dissolving Muslim marital unions. The infamous case of *Ryland v Edros*, 1997, in which "the contractual consequences" of a Muslim marital contract were recognised, was seen as a milestone with regard to the protection of Muslim wives in the case of marital dissolution (Rautenbach, 2004:10). Despite this victory, Muslim marriages are still not officially recognised by South African Law. Nonetheless, Christa Rautenbach explains (1999:15) that "The 1996 *Constitution* makes provisions for the recognition of traditional and religious marriages and traditional and religious personal law systems by means of legislation". Consequently, the existence and authority of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), the largest body of religious authority in the Cape, cater to the needs of the Muslim population with regard to contracting marriages (including polygynous unions), matters of divorce, and inheritance (Abdullah, 2002:159).

Although many Muslim women get married according to South African Law as well as through Muslim Rights, difficulties arise for women who become part of a polygynous marital union – due both to its lack of validity in light of South African Law, as well as to the complex process of obtaining divorce solely through Muslim authorities. In my empirical research, several respondents (some of whom were married according to Muslim Rights only) experienced great difficulty with regard to obtaining divorce as well as with the lack of aid offered by Muslim juridical authorities when initiating divorce procedures. Complicating factors that can influence women's experiences with regard to divorce are men's unilateral right to divorce through the application of *talaq* (a divorce formula that can only be pronounced by a husband and will have immediate effect for the dissolution of the marital union if pronounced three times), and the resistance of religious authorities to granting women *fasakh* (a divorce granted the wife by a judge). These problematic issues are dealt with in more detail when I examine the research

findings of Toefy's study (2001) on matters of divorce in Muslim communities. I now turn to Na'eem Jeenah's exploration of Islamic feminism/s in South Africa.

### **3.2 The Emergence of Islamic Feminism in South Africa**

Na'eem Jeenah (2001) investigates the various articulations of Islamic feminism/s in South Africa in the 1990s. The roots of Islamic feminism can be traced back to a few salient key organisations that largely contributed to the existence and the development of a South African Islamic feminist discourse. The Muslim Youth Movement (established 1970) and the Call of Islam (established 1983) played formative roles in emphasising women's rights and gender equality, as well as in pursuing and outlining women-inclusive agendas (Jeenah, 2001:13-30).<sup>37</sup>

I examine two central developments that advanced an Islamic feminist agenda in the 1990s. Firstly, the 'women in mosques' campaign, launched by the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM), was directed at increasing Muslim women's involvement and participation in mosques. This campaign sparked activist initiatives and debates and became a contested issue within the South African *ulama* (13-14). Secondly, the emergence of Muslim media, *Al-Qalam* (newspaper acting as the mouthpiece of the MYM) and *The Voice* (radio station set up by the MYM), became important sites for debating gender issues and served as channels to increase gender-sensitivity (43-47).

The 'women in mosques' campaign was particularly significant in the Northern provinces where women's access to mosques was more restricted than in the Western Cape. Jeenah argues that this distinction derives from the differing practices of gender-mixing in the Indian and Malay culture respectively (30). One of the activist initiatives took place in 1993 when a group of MYM members, led by feminist-activist Shamima Shaikh, decided to enter 23<sup>rd</sup> Street mosque in

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<sup>37</sup> However, according to Sa'diyya Shaikh, the Muslim Youth Movement did not engage issues of gender equality in ways that fully embraced women as equal subjects to men. She argues, among other things, that gender issues were predominantly articulated "in fairly conservative terms by men" (1996:30).

Johannesburg to take part in the *Tarawih*.<sup>38</sup> Their ‘intrusion’ was met with resistance and ended in expulsion by means of accommodating these women under a marquee *behind* the mosque. Later that year, MYM established a Gender Desk in which the claim for women’s “space in mosques” became replaced by the slogan “equal access to mosques” (30-32). The Gender Desk proclaimed the importance of an equally shared space *in* the mosques, as opposed to access to mosques where women were relegated to basements, mezzanines and backyards.

The right to “equal access to mosques” was obtained in Claremont Main Road Mosque (Cape Town) in 1994 when the Friday sermon was delivered by Amina Wadud. During this occasion the normative ‘male space’ was divided by a rope into two parallel parts. Women occupied the one side of this space. The incident received national and international media attention with regard to two issues. Firstly, the fact that a pre-*khutba* talk was given by a Muslim *woman*, and secondly, that shared gendered space was given to the mixed congregation. This is the way it has remained ever since (33-34).

The second feminist development relates to Muslim women’s involvement in Muslim media such as the MYM’s newspaper *Al-Qalam* and the radio station *The Voice*. These were important channels through which women’s issues found a voice and a forum in which this voice could be expressed. *Al-Qalam* provided space for women to discuss and challenge normative patriarchal customs and understandings of foundational sources (e.g. exclusively male leadership). In particular, debates were raised around the development of Muslim Personal Law (MPL) in which women’s involvement was seen as vital in bringing about an MPL that incorporated gender equality as a guiding principle. The pre-*khutba* delivered by Amina Wadud also received much coverage and sparked debates related to women’s religious leadership. Consequently, *Al-Qalam* became a platform for women to articulate thoughts and opinions reflecting issues relevant to their lived realities (44-45).

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<sup>38</sup> During Ramadan the *Tarawih* prayer proceeds after the *Isha* prayer, which is the last prayer to be recited before the sun ascends again. Traditionally, *Tarawih* is to be performed in a mosque as it is used to conclude a complete recitation of the Qur’an (Jeenah, 2001:31).

*The Voice* challenged the more traditional Muslim radio station *Radio Islam* by employing a female anchor as well as female radio presenters. The position taken by *Radio Islam* was that a woman's voice was *awrah*, thus female presenters were prohibited. *The Voice*, on the other hand, encouraged the participation of women and broadcast shows entitled 'Saut al-Nisa' (Women's Voice), 'Lifting the Veil' (re-readings of foundational scriptures from a gender-sensitive perspective), 'Breaking the Silence' (a program focusing particularly on spousal abuse) and 'Women Today' (interviews with contemporary South African women often perceived to be powerful female role models) (45-46). The inclusion of the abovementioned programmes introduced new ways of engaging with foundational scriptures and an increased awareness of gender issues. Through the existence of these programmes Muslim women were able to participate in live discussions and bring their own experiences to the public.

Through looking at the 'women in mosques' campaign and Muslim media, I have shown examples of particular grassroots initiatives that contributed to the development of an Islamic feminist discourse in the 1990s. Jeenah argues that the existence of Islamic feminism in South Africa was most vibrant between 1990 and 1998; from 1998, however, he asserts that feminism has been decreasing and that it is currently in need of a revival (102). He bases his argument on several facets within the South African context. Firstly, organisations like the Muslim Youth Movement and the Call of Islam have not asserted themselves as dominant actors in relation to women's empowerment, as they did in the beginning of the 1990s. Thus, on an organisational level there is currently a lack of initiatives that advocate an Islamic feminist agenda (105-106). Secondly, there has been a drastic decrease in women's involvement in Muslim media such as *Al-Qalam* and *The Voice*. *Al-Qalam*'s silence on feminist issues seems to reflect the broader trends within the MYM, whereas *The Voice* has closed down some of the programmes that largely centred on Muslim women's experiences. Jeenah argues that "Saut al-Nisa...seems to deliberately evade feminist issues" (107-108).

With regard to the 'women in mosques' campaign, the Claremont Main Road Mosque is still active in challenging normative patriarchal customs by letting women speak from the pulpit and allowing 'equal access' to the mosque. Nonetheless, on a national level, the 'women in mosques' campaign has not reached the objectives outlined and fought for by its predecessors (108-109).

From my understanding, Jeenah seems to provide an implicit critique of the Claremont Mosque for not going far enough in encouraging the formal establishment of women's religious leadership.

Lastly, Jeenah critically assesses what he calls the academicisation of Islamic feminism in South Africa. He argues that "the pulse of Muslim women by Islamic feminists has been missing..." (114). This assertion assumes a growing gap between what is happening on the ground and what is being produced in academic circles. Thus, the focus of Islamic feminism has arguably shifted from activist initiatives, reflecting the needs and wants of women, to an academicisation of Islamic feminism that relocates Muslim women's experiences to a theoretical, rather than a practical sphere and hence being sidelined to the peripheral outskirts. In particular, Jeenah highlights the need for empirical studies within Islamic feminist scholarship in order to more realistically and accurately reflect Muslim women's lived realities. Thus the need to *speak to* Muslim women, *not about* Muslim women will relocate women's lived experiences to the centre (113-124).

The challenge of bringing Islamic feminism back to women's lived realities, as posed by Jeenah, is a requirement for the revival of a pulsating feminist discourse. Engaging with women at a grassroots level and developing new strategies that promote gender equality are salient prerequisites for advancing an Islamic feminist agenda. I argue that the current empirical research undertaken is conducive to shifting the focus from the academicisation of Islamic feminism to situating Muslim women's experiences at the centre of knowledge production. This endeavour will by extension subtly unfold as a way to develop various strategies that can assist in the empowerment of Muslim women from within their local communities and from within a gender-sensitive Islamic framework. As such, the Islamic feminist discourse can find its way back to the local communities and become an embodied discourse that reflects Muslim women's experiential realities.

In the next sections I explore the abovementioned empirical studies that foreground the lived experiences of South African Muslim women. I look at the underlying reasons for which Muslim

women instigate divorce, women's experiences with polygynous marriages, and the complexities faced by Muslim women living with HIV/AIDS.

### **3.3 Divorce in Muslim Communities in the Western Cape**

M. Y. Toefy (2001) investigates the issue of divorce in the Muslim communities of the Western Cape. He examines the reasons for marital dissolution in a sample of 600 divorce records filed between 1994 and 1999. Toefy's main sources of information are the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) in Athlone and the National Ulama Council (NUC) in Grassy Park. Of particular interest are the underlying reasons for initiating divorce, which reflect salient gendered differences.

Toefy's research shows that the majority of applicants filing for divorce are female (76.2%, N=457). This percentage, however, is comparable to other international studies related to the gender of the divorce applicant (2001:41). Women's primary reasons for initiating divorce were: infidelity of spouse (20.8%), drug abuse of spouse (17.7%), and thirdly, physical abuse (12.3%). For men, the primary reasons were: incompatibility (21.5%), and wife's infidelity (17.5%) (Toefy, 2001:130). The secondary reasons for women were: basic unhappiness (21.7%), financial support difficulties (15.0%), incompatibility (12.0%), and physical abuse (10.3%). For men, the secondary reasons were: basic unhappiness (32.9%) and incompatibility (20.3%) (Toefy, 2001:131).

Similarly, Ashraf Mohammed's study (1997) within which he examines 3 959 client counselling sessions at the MJC, between 1 January and 31 December 1993, reveals related findings. The primary reasons for which Muslims approached the MJC for counselling reflect the following: "297 (8%) cases of alcohol abuse, 569 (14%) cases of drug abuse, 25 (1%) cases of incest, 412 (10%) cases of physical abuse, 371 (9%) cases of verbal abuse, 781 (20%) cases of lack of maintenance, 216 (5%) cases of desertion and 441 (11%) cases of illicit sexual activity" (1997:36). These research findings broadly reflect Toefy's data in relation to primary causes for initiating divorce for women. However, Mohammed's study does not distinguish the percentage male to female ratio. Nevertheless, in a later report (2003), he argues that the illicit sex cases (referring to the 1997 study) were predominantly involving men, whereas the cases entailing

physical abuse, verbal abuse, incest, desertion, drug and alcohol abuse, as well as lack of financial maintenance, were *all* perpetrated by men.

Correspondingly, Somayya Abdullah (1998 and 2002) explores the role of Islamic counselling in South Africa and clients' experiences of Islamic counselling. She reports that 80% of the caseload at the Islamic Social Welfare Association (ISWA) reflects marital problems.<sup>39</sup> Of these, 90% are cases of physical, sexual and psychological abuse of women. The caseload related to cases of marital problems is increasing and the majority of clients seeking counselling at ISWA are women (Abdullah, 2002:162). Abdullah also reports that at the MJC, experiences of spousal extra-marital affairs is the main reason for seeking counselling, and women primarily initiate these consultations (163). Abdullah's findings also broadly reflect the data reported by Toefy (2001) and A. Mohammed (1997 and 2003).

If we take the statistical data revealed in the studies conducted by Mohammed (1997 and 2003) and Toefy (2001) into consideration, the high frequency of spousal infidelity coupled with physical abuse among Muslims in the Western Cape are areas of particular concern. In Toefy (2001), infidelity of spouse made up 20.8% of women's primary reason for initiating divorce, whereas 12.3% of women seeking divorce stated physical abuse as the primary reason. In addition, 10.3% stated physical abuse as the secondary reason for initiating divorce (2001:130). This means that 22.6% (N=103) of all women who instigated divorce had experience with physical abuse and as such, physical abuse is a key contributing factor for women seeking divorce.

While the link between gender violence (including sexual violence) and religious beliefs cannot be inferred from these statistical data,<sup>40</sup> Abdul Kayum Ahmed (2003) refers to a few books in

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<sup>39</sup> The Islamic Social Welfare Association is the only registered Islamic Welfare organisation in the Cape (Abdullah, 2002:159).

<sup>40</sup> However, the possible intersections of spousal abuse with particular religious convictions or norms have been problematised by a few scholars and researchers within the field of Islamic studies. For example, in a study on domestic violence conducted in 1993, Maha B. Alkhateeb found that 10% of American Muslims had experience with domestic violence (Alkhateeb and Abugideiri, 2007:15). Keilani Abdullah (2007:70) argues that the known cases of spousal abuse reported in Alkhateeb's study (10%) are likely to be an underestimation due to a range of

which the author supports the view that violence against women is permitted by the Qur'an in the context of wifely disobedience.<sup>41</sup>

The findings in Toefy's research sample (2001), in particular, illustrate that women's primary reasons for initiating divorce are mainly linked to spousal behaviour. However, for men, the primary and secondary reasons for initiating divorce (with the exception of spousal infidelity) can be traced to intrinsically self-perceived states of consciousness, i.e. the feeling of unhappiness, the feeling of irreconcilable differences, and subsequently, the impossibility of a continued coexistence due to these understandings of status quo.

Toefy argues that these apparent gendered differences underlying the instigation of divorce, as revealed by the data, can be understood by looking at the ways in which Muslim men and women traditionally can obtain divorce. *Talaq*, the divorce formula that can be pronounced by a husband, will have immediate effect for the dissolution of the marital union. Hence, *talaq* will conclusively end in a divorce decree; however, it is unilaterally a man's privilege. For a Muslim woman, on the other hand, the process towards obtaining a divorce decree is longer and more complicated. When initiating a divorce a Muslim woman can apply for a *fasakh*. However, the process of divorce resulting in a *fasakh* is often time-consuming and prolonged, particularly if

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cultural and religious persuasions, such as the importance of family honour, socially accepted practices of wife beating, patriarchal interpretations of certain segments of religious scripture used to justify wife beating, and the social stigma of divorce experienced by many Muslim women. Correspondingly, a study conducted by Abugideiri (2007) on domestic violence among Muslims seeking mental health counselling in the U.S, shows that religion plays a significant and decisive role in the various ways in which Muslim women deal with domestic violence. The ideal of remaining in a marital relationship interrelated with the unacceptability of divorce in various social and religious contexts, leads to prolonged suffering for many women. In particular, Islamic ideals such as patience and perseverance are advocated by religious leaders and may influence many women's decisions to stay in abusive marriages. Similarly, the qualitative study conducted by Sa'diyya Shaikh (1996) among South African Muslim women who had experienced spousal abuse, showed that the broader Muslim community as well as religious leaders, to a large extent, did not actively support these women in resisting their husbands' violence or in being explicitly critical of such behaviour. Furthermore, existing discourses that express particular religio-cultural ideals of a 'good Muslim woman' are sometimes perpetuated by religious leaders, who emphasise female virtues of patience and perseverance. This contributed to women staying in violent marriages.

<sup>41</sup> Amongst these are *Sheikh Abdurraghiem Sallie* (1988), F. U. Naseef (1999), and N. H. M. Keller (1994).

based on the primary and secondary reasons given by men. Divorce initiatives that are based on grounds of marital abuse or lack of financial support, on the other hand, reasons perceived to be more 'legitimate' by religious authorities, are more likely to result in an immediate *fasakh* (2001:145).

These structural dynamics reflect particular gendered discourses that are legitimised through an Islamic legal framework. The fact that men have absolute right of repudiation eclipses notions of mutual decision-making and consent within the marital union, principles elaborated by Islamic feminist discourses through focusing on broader Qur'anic ethics (e.g. Wadud, 2006; Barlas, 2002). In addition, as argued by Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2007b), the differentiated spousal rights and obligations within Islamic jurisprudence also mirror the gendered differences entrenched within Islamic society and culture.

Toefy further argues that Islamic divorce courts favour *talaq* divorces, rather than granting women a *fasakh*. His data reveals that 47% of women's divorce initiatives were granted *talaq* instead of *fasakh*. This means that despite the fact that women were the instigators of these divorces (applying for *fasakh*), their husbands were still responsible, or maybe persuaded into taking the final decision by pronouncing the *talaq* formula and thus dissolving the marital union (2001:146).

These realities challenge constructs of moral agency, championed in Islamic feminist discourses, as women's moral responsibility is restricted through the favouring of men as the final decision-makers when it comes to the dissolution of a marital union. On the one hand, the data show that it is predominantly women who initiate divorce. This can result from a variety of factors, e.g. unsuccessful marriages, abusive marital situations, as well as broader social tendencies like the quest for self-realisation. Nonetheless, religious authorities are still retaining the symbolic power of male authority through giving these women a *talaq* instead of a *fasakh*. Even so, ultimately the women who instigate divorce do obtain a divorce decree, so whether it is by *talaq* or *fasakh* might not even matter that much as long as they get what they set out to achieve – divorce. Interestingly, Toefy found in his pilot study (1999) that the reversal from *fasakh* to *talaq* is decreasing. This can imply that divorce proceedings, legal regulations, and attitudes, embedded

within Islamic counselling services and divorce authorities, are being renegotiated and transformed. Hopefully, these changes are taking place through an increased awareness and recognition of complex contextual realities affecting Muslim women in potentially harmful ways.

Toefy elucidates that the occurrences of pre-marital pregnancies within Muslim communities are intricately related to high divorce frequency. I explore some of the underlying reasons for the practice of pregnancy marriages as well as the possible causes for the dissolution of these marriages.

In the case of pre-marital pregnancies, in essence, if a couple fell pregnant before marriage, the couple was often forced to get married; or marriage was seen as the most logical consequence of the pregnancy. This practice might reflect worries with regard to Islamic juridical implications that affect the rights of a child born out of wedlock as well as social stigma attached to giving birth to illegitimate children. Out of Toefy's sample of 600 divorce records, there were 342 incidents (57%) that could be defined as pregnancy marriages (2001:122). He argues that Muslim communities play key roles in determining socially accepted norms in particular with regard to marital praxis. The belief that if the couple gets married it will "make things right" or the marriage will "save the family's reputation" are widespread assumptions that largely influence the couple's (or the family's) decision to contract a marriage (158).

Toefy's research results show that pre-marital pregnancies are closely affiliated with divorce. One of the main underlying reasons for this concomitant relationship can be traced to the high number of relatively young couples entering a marital union. Consequently, age plays a significant role in the frequency of pre-marital pregnancies and the dissolution of these marriages within a short period of time. The young age of the couple arguably mirrors their possible unstable financial situation (due to their age), the lack of future planning, as well as the limited time this couple has spent together (151). The influence of the community with regard to societal norms becomes an added factor with respect to the practice of pregnancy marriages. The importance of contracting a marriage, because this is the 'correct' community practice (which

according to the data seems to be a short-term solution), appears to be more important than ensuring proactive strategies that can benefit the couple in the long run.

With regard to women's participation in making decisions related to contracting these types of marriages, it is not her future husband that forces her into marriage, but rather community pressure that removes the decision-making powers from both the male and female ambit. Thus, levels of acceptance regarding normative sexual practices are guided by broader community 'standards' that determine correct behaviour in given situations.

Another possible underlying reason was brought to my attention by *Sheikh* Nurghaan Singh, who previously served as *imam* (prayer leader) in one of the local Muslim communities of the Western Cape.<sup>42</sup> From his experience of counselling young couples regarding consummation of marriages as well as incidents of pre-marital pregnancies, he argues that, in fact, there exists a widespread tendency in which young couples *deliberately* become pregnant before they are married. He asserts that these incidents are caused by the families' resistance to the couple's wish to get married at a young age. His experiences with couples that 'force' their will upon their families through a pre-marital pregnancy as the most efficient way into a marital union, is a frequent factor that situates pre-marital pregnancies within a different context from the one outlined by Toefy's data.<sup>43</sup>

The prevalence of pregnancy-marriages points towards the commonality of sexual encounters that take place before a marital union is entered into. These findings might reflect broader South African demographics rather than specific Muslim practices with regard to sex and sexuality. These findings are of particular interest to my own study, where I investigate Muslim women's experiences of sexual debut and sexual relationships both prior to, and within marital unions.

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<sup>42</sup> *Sheikh* – an elder, teacher, a learned, pious man, master of an order, title of scholar

<sup>43</sup> Personal conversation with *Sheikh* Nurghaan Singh (09.10.2007). In addition to his previous role of acting *imam* in a local community of the Western Cape, *Sheikh* Singh is also a member of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC). He confirms the findings in Toefy's research with regard to women's primary reasons for instigating divorce. He highlights that the majority of Muslim women approach the MJC for divorce decrees because of their experiences with spousal abuse, spousal drug/alcohol addictions, or spousal infidelity.

Overall, Toefy's data reveal salient challenges within communities in the Western Cape. The underlying reasons for women's divorce initiatives must be properly addressed on the level of inter-relational acceptability, marital behaviour, as well as social and legal attitudes towards the applicant instigating divorce. Toefy's findings relate to my study in two dominant ways. Firstly, I investigate Muslim women's experiences in sexual relationships within which spousal behaviour pertaining to sexual abuse, infidelity, and attitudes regarding sexual dynamics are explored. As outlined above, the major trends emerging from Toefy's study regarding divorce initiatives resonate with my respondents' experiences of marital infidelity, drug abuse and physical abuse. Hence, these realities form part of the lived experiences of the particular groups of Muslim women I have interviewed. Secondly, Toefy's data and analysis concerning pre-marital pregnancies are interesting in relation to respondents' understandings of sexual norms and broader discourses on sex/uality and relations of power. These discourses will be explored more extensively in the analysis part of this dissertation.

In the following section I explore the existence of polygynous marriages in the Cape Flats. In particular, the underlying reasons for contracting polygynous unions as well as discourses pertaining to local acceptability of this practice will be highlighted. Of particular interest to the empirical component in this dissertation is the existence of ambiguous discourses on polygyny that might affect the number of ways in which women engage with this practice in their local communities.

### **3.4 Polygynous Marriages in the Cape Flats**

Sindre Bangstad's Ph.D. thesis (2007) explores, among other things, the occurrences of polygynous marriages in the Cape Flats. These communities are predominantly inhabited by people from lower socio-economic groupings. Bangstad interviewed thirteen (13) Muslim women who had experiences of being in a polygynous marital union (2007:104). On a methodological level he encountered a high percentage of unwillingness to participate in the research due to the fact that many women had experience of high levels of ostracism from the Muslim community. Secondly, some women asserted that their husband would not approve of

such an undertaking. In addition, a few women mentioned negative prior experiences with similar research initiatives (104-105).

Out of the sample of thirteen (13) women, Bangstad reports that “[s]even (7) out of thirteen (13) interviewees had been in polygynous marriages in which the marriage had been dissolved, ten (10) out of thirteen (13) reported experiences with polygyny that could be characterised as negative, and ten (10) out of thirteen (13) interviewees were or had been second wives” (105). One of Bangstad’s respondents explained that:

...the stigma faced by a second wife in a polygynous marriage is often greater [than the stigma faced by the first wife], as she is often perceived to be “*die slegte ene*” (“the bad one”) by other people who tend to assume that she has at the outset “interfered in” another woman’s marriage, or even that she has “stolen” the first wife’s husband (“*dat ek haar man gesteel [het]*”) (116).

Bangstad argues that these attitudes are dominant within Cape Muslim communities. These understandings also correlate with the assumptions that “the first wife is often perceived to be the victim of her husband’s “lust” [for another woman]” (116). The husband on the other hand, is on the hedonic prowl for sexual satisfaction by women other than his first wife. The discourse around polygyny in a Cape Muslim context is greatly influenced and challenged by the community’s stereotyping of the social agents involved in a polygynous marital union. The derogatory representations of the underlying reasons for why such a relationship is formed are particularly prevalent. Consequently, Bangstad observes that the level of secrecy is high in relation to the existence of polygynous marriages. Muslim men do not want to make their polygynous marital situations a public matter due to the fact that it might become exposed to soaring levels of social criticism (116).

In relation to Bangstad’s research sample, the majority of women interviewed foreground their experiences with polygynous marriages as situated within difficult and complicated interpersonal relationships. The majority of respondents also explain that they would not advocate this type of marriage for their peers, nor their children (116).

Bangstad argues that the most common underlying reason for contracting a polygynous marriage in the Cape Flats is the husband's involvement in extra-marital affairs (117). On some occasions sexual infidelity leads to pregnancy; however, by contracting a marital union the moral integrity and reputation of the husband (and the families involved) often remain intact. This correlates with the arguments outlined by Toefy (2001) of "making things right" or "saving the family's reputation". Thus, the natural consequence of the discovery of illegitimate sexual relationship, or infidelity resulting in pregnancy, is to transform the relationship into a legitimate marital union.

However, as opposed to the case of pre-marital pregnancies investigated by Toefy (2001), the marital status of the man (the fact that he is already married) poses other challenges to the contraction of marriage. Bangstad argues that the incidence of marital consensus, in essence, that the husband's first wife becomes part of the decision-making process in which she exercises a certain level of agency related to the husband's inclusion of a second wife in their marriage, is rarely on the agenda (2007:117). Bangstad points towards particular instances where "first wives protesting against the fact that consent was never requested have been dragged out of mosques in communities on the Cape Flats when trying to interrupt their husband's nikahs [marriage]" (117). In other instances, second wives are being led to believe by their husbands-to-be that they (husband) are single at the time of marital union, when the husbands actually have been married for several years prior to this new marital engagement; or, second wives are being led to believe that their husbands-to-be are divorced or currently undergoing divorce procedures (117). Bangstad's research also reveals the brutal fact that Muslim girls below the age of sexual consent were joined in matrimony with much older Muslim men (117).

It is noteworthy that Bangstad's empirical research highlights the social unacceptability of polygynous marital unions. This finding points towards the existence of discursive ambivalences regarding polygyny. On the one hand, social attitudes in a particular community render this Muslim practice unacceptable despite the fact that it is legally allowed according to an Islamic discourse. On the other hand, explicit contestations of polygynous marriages (e.g. Bangstad's example of wives trying to hinder their husband from contracting additional marriages) are subject to the precedence of Islamic discourses that allow husbands to take more than one wife. Hence, there exist a number of ambiguous and contradictory discourses that function in various

ways within a particular social reality. Often, seemingly contrary views of a gendered practice such as polygyny are expressed within the same societal context.

Throughout 2009 there has been much focus and heated debates pertaining to the question of South African Governmental recognition of Muslim marriages. On 20 May 2009, the Women's Legal Centre Trust (WLCT) was heard by the Constitutional Court (CC) on the matter of Parliament enacting a law that recognises Muslim marriages. The WLCT's support of the Muslim Marriages Draft Bill is set against the background of the perceived need to protect the rights of women in polygynous unions, regulate the contractions of these unions, as well as to alleviate the process of attaining divorce for women. However, the WLCT's application was denied on the grounds of preliminary procedural issues. The Constitutional Court has directed WLTC to apply to the High Court as the court of first instance.

Particular Muslim organisations, such as the Islamic Unity Convention (IUC), were pleased with the Constitutional Court's decision regarding the Muslim Marriages Draft Bill. In a press release following the Constitutional Court's decision to decline the Muslim Marriages Draft Bill, the IUC stated: "It is not appropriate that other institutions takes charge and dictate to Muslims how they should conduct their affairs" (IUC, 22 July 2009). Ideally, the IUC dreams of establishing Muslim Courts in South Africa that deal singularly with legal issues in ways that reflect a *Shari'a* legacy. These Muslim courts will by extension become the sole authority regulating the lives of all Muslims in South Africa. This view mirrors IUC's position on MPL, in which they argue "the Quran and Sunnah are supreme" (IUC, 2009). Thus, organisations (like the WLCT) that develop initiatives that give increased power to secular authoritative institutions in matters of religious beliefs are viewed as intrusively undermining an Islamic belief system.

The approach taken by the IUC reflects the need to advocate Muslim rights simply because these rights are embedded within a religious discourse that is seen as authoritative for the ways in which one embodies a lived reality. Hence, advocacy is framed within an Islamic rights discourse that might not necessarily reflect social acceptance of the practice of polygyny. Consequently, various contestations regarding the ways in which polygynous unions are

contracted in Muslim communities might still be prevalent among Muslims who promote the recognition of Muslim marriages, within which the right to polygyny is embedded.

The ways in which local communities perceive polygynous marriages can also influence the ways in which some Muslim women perceive the acceptability and embodiment of this discourse. By stigmatising women in polygynous marriages, through reducing them into commodities for their husbands, victims of spousal behaviour and husband-stealers, communities convey strong sanctions against polygynous unions. Thus, polygyny is neither encouraged nor seen as part of normative Muslim behaviour. This dynamic raises important questions with regard to censoring behaviour, community norms and public debates on MPL.

Particular communities develop yardsticks through which acceptable and appropriate behaviour is measured against the broader consensus of the community. The research findings revealed in Bangstad's study illustrate that polygyny is contested and disputed through intense social stigma and debilitating stereotypes. Interestingly, polygyny in this social context is being harnessed by a form of communal agency. In this way, broader discourses of power and sexuality are continuously being constructed through specific understandings of sexual norms and accepted behaviour in local communities. Sa'diyya Shaikh's notion of a "tafsir of praxis" (2007) is useful when examining the various ways in which individuals and communities engage in particular contestations of religious teachings through their embodied realities.

Bangstad (2007) highlights spousal infidelity as a major factor underlying the contraction of polygynous marriages and Toefy's research (2001) reveals the high frequency of divorce initiatives that are rooted in women's experiences with spousal infidelity. It might be inferred from the data provided in these studies that there exist dominant discourses through which sexual norms are articulated. Often these norms are contested and subverted, however, the influence of specific social practices on women's experiential realities are interlinked with structural dynamics that can regulate the ways in which women are able to deal with particular experiences.

In the next section I explore the various ways in which Muslim sexual relationships are related to the risk of HIV/AIDS. Muslim responses to the challenge of HIV/AIDS are varied. However, discourses that centre on women's vulnerability in light of the AIDS pandemic, and hence the need to re-negotiate religious and cultural practices that make women more susceptible to HIV infection, are slowly emerging.

### **3.5 Muslim Women and the Challenge of HIV/AIDS**

Abdul Kayum Ahmed (1999 and 2003) investigates the challenge of HIV/AIDS in Muslim communities. Of particular importance is his claim that women in marital relationships are increasingly prone to HIV-transmission. In this section I explore Ahmed's research findings in light of issues pertaining to the contestation of the marital union as a safe zone, the importance of a dialogical relationship with regard to contraceptive usage, and the social stigma experienced by many Muslim women living with HIV/AIDS.

Ahmed argues that orthodox Islamic discourses on HIV/AIDS predominantly centre on the belief that "Aids is a curse from God to punish those who have engaged in immoral sexual behaviour... the only way to effectively deal with the Aids epidemic is to return to the moral way of life prescribed in religious texts such as the Qur'an" (2003:iii-iv).<sup>44</sup> Statements like this have enormous influence on the ways in which Muslims understand the challenge of HIV/AIDS. In addition, these kinds of statements perpetuates particular beliefs as to why it affects some people and not others. Ahmed asserts that these particular beliefs have leaked into the consciousness of Muslims in Cape Town. These views and attitudes have detrimental consequences for those who are affected by and living with HIV. The fear of isolation and excommunication, as well as threats of physical abuse, are but some of the effects that emerge alongside these religious persuasions (Ahmed, 2003:iv). Arguably, negative representations and debilitating attitudes advocated by particular groups of Muslims situate Islamic moral action as contrary to immoral sexual behaviour, as a template for a HIV-free individual existence.

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<sup>44</sup> See also the study by Ashraf Mohammed (1999), in which his research findings reveal that more than two-thirds of the religious leaders in fifty-three (53) mosques understood AIDS to be a curse from God.

If we explore the realities in which Muslim men and women interact, the results of Tofey's study (2001), A. Mohammed (1997 and 2003), and Bangstad (2007) shed some light in relation to *actual* practices among Muslims. The high frequency of spousal infidelity, various forms of marital abuse, and pre-marital pregnancies among Muslims in the Western Cape are areas of particular concern. On the basis of these research findings, I argue that that Muslims, particularly Muslim women, in the Cape are increasingly at risk and vulnerable to HIV infection. I base this argument on the assumption that there is a concomitant relationship between sex with multiple partners and susceptibility to HIV/AIDS.

Furthermore, the high frequency of pregnancy marriages, which indicates sexual activity before entering into a marital union, as shown by Tofey's data, is also confirmed by Mohammed's data (1999). Mohammed's study also highlights that the majority of religious leaders in the Western Cape (88.4%) had performed pregnancy marriage ceremonies. Hence, these findings also reflect lack of contraceptive usage, borne out by the number of pregnancy marriage ceremonies carried out by Muslim authorities. Based on the findings of these studies, Ahmed argues that:

...Muslim women in marital relationships appear to be particularly vulnerable to HIV infection due to their husbands engaging in sexual activity outside marriage. In cases where women are unaware of their husband's extra-marital sexual behaviour, these women are put at risk of contracting HIV since married couples would most likely engage in sexual activity without the use of condoms. Even in cases where women are aware of their husband's sexual affairs outside marriage, they have little control over sexual relations and may be forced into having sex against their will. (2003:29-30)

This excerpt directly addresses the complexities with regard to dominant discourses that influence sexual dynamics in marital relationships. The high percentages of spousal infidelity, revealed by the abovementioned studies, become areas of particular concern when coupled with particular constellations of power that operate in intimate relationships. Sexual norms regarding the lack of contraceptive usage in marital relationships as well as discourses that emphasise a husband's Islamic right to have sex with his wife are explored in greater detail in Chapter Seven of this dissertation.

In Ahmed's MA thesis (2003), the narratives of five Muslim women living with HIV/AIDS are presented. Ahmed narrates the story of Faghmeda Miller, who contracted HIV from her husband, and who was the first Muslim woman who overtly exposed her HIV status publicly in Cape Town. Her openness regarding her experiences was met with sharp criticism from, among others, the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), which clearly expressed the view that AIDS is a curse from God. Secondly, her outspokenness also caused great distress among the MJC. Faghmeda Miller argues that "certain religious leaders affiliated to the MJC believe that women are supposed to keep quiet" (Ahmed, 2003:v).

On an organisational level, MJC's position reflects highly problematic constructions of proper female behaviour. The idea that Muslim women should 'keep quiet' is particularly alarming. On the one hand, this understanding can derive from misogynistic understandings of religious sources that convey women's voices as *awrah*, presented earlier in this chapter in the case of *Radio Islam*. Obviously, women can contest these constructions and *speak* out. Nevertheless, the fact that these problematic assumptions exist within authoritative Muslim organisations presents challenges for women when having to engage with Muslim leaders (e.g. during marital consultation, divorce instigation, and seeking advice more broadly).

On the other hand, the need for women to 'keep quiet' can also point towards the embedded resistance of the MJC to dealing with the fact that HIV/AIDS is a challenge facing Muslim communities. In this sense, it is not so much women but the issue itself that should be kept underground. The fact that Faghmeda Miller made her HIV-status public forced the MJC to take a position regarding the issue of Muslims and HIV/AIDS.

On a community level, the attitudes of Muslim governing bodies might influence the levels of acceptance/rejection of the broader community. Debilitating aphorisms, stereotyping and stigma are but a few of the negative societal expressions that prosper in light of the HIV pandemic. The ways in which various communities tackle the challenge of HIV/AIDS are dependent on broader social constructions of normative sexual behaviour, awareness of the ways in which HIV is transmitted, levels of social engagement with the disease and dialogical relationships with people affected.

Muslim women's experiences of living with HIV can be exacerbated by existing understandings and stereotypes attached to the disease. The lack of support from community networks and individuals affects the ways in which HIV-positive women (and men) face their daily battles. The lack of engagement with these issues within Muslim communities, and other communities for that matter, arguably derives from the unproductive and damaging belief (or wish) that 'if we don't see it, it doesn't exist'. However, when the community is challenged or confronted with people's 'hidden' experiences – it becomes an issue that must be dealt with. Thus Ahmed argues, "It is important to note though, that Muslims who have sex before marriage are only stigmatized when their actions lead to consequences that cannot be hidden such as pregnancy or HIV infection" (Ahmed, 2003:146). Ahmed also explains that the implications of seemingly immoral actions affect women more than men. He asserts that:

While women must not get caught *and* ensure that they marry their boyfriend, men must simply make sure that they are not caught. For men, the obligation to marry the woman that you are sleeping with is not as strong as the unmarried pregnant woman's obligation to marry the man. (147)

Ahmed's empirical research reveals that four out of the five women he interviewed contracted HIV in their marital or pre-marital relationships. Two of his respondents were infected by their husbands, two by their boyfriends, and one through blood transfusion (140-163). Ahmed also asserts that two of the interviewees had experienced physical abuse in their relationships (140). Due to the small number of interviewees it is not possible to make any generalised statements. However, the fact that women within marital relationships, which is the only religiously permissible union in which sexual activity is allowed, get infected *by their husbands* challenges the idea that marriage is a sacred union that protects a couple from sexually transmitted infections existing outside of their matrimonial circle.<sup>45</sup>

The circumstances in which women are infected are essentially problematic and point towards women's vulnerability within sexual relationships and marital relationships more broadly. The high level of secrecy surrounding infidelity, coupled with abusive spousal behaviour, poses

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<sup>45</sup> Another study conducted in Nairobi shows that 80% of the Muslim women in the research sample, who were HIV positive, contracted the virus through sexual encounters with their husbands (Wadud,2003).

challenges for the ways in which women can negotiate sexual dynamics within their marital relationships. Women's experiences bear witness to unacceptable sexual mores produced through dominant discourses on sexuality, in which the construction of women as sexual beings serving the needs of men becomes an important site of contestation.

Dominant discourses that embrace cultural and religious persuasions elaborating on a woman's sexual availability to her husband might increase women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Thus, particular articulations of accepted sexual dynamics (i.e. that sex on demand is a man's privilege within the marital union) must be increasingly contested in light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In the empirical component of this dissertation I explore the ways in which narratives on infidelity intersect with dominant discourses on women's sexual availability.

The studies surveyed thus far suggest serious social challenges reflecting asymmetrical and androcentric gender relations within the South African Muslim community. However these dynamics are not exclusive to Muslims but form part of a broader configuration of gender within the South African socio-political landscape. In order to illuminate the latter point, I present in the next section, a brief survey of local data on gender-based violence. This information also provides the reader with some background and context within which to situate my respondents. These mappings of context again alert us that religion is never the singular and determining factor shaping gender relations.

### **3.6 Gender-based violence in South Africa**

In the South African context, the first South African Demographic Health Survey (SADHS) was conducted in 1998. Issues of violence against women were included in this survey.<sup>46</sup> The results showed that of the 11 735 women taking part in the survey, the prevalence of physical abuse by an intimate partner ranged from 8.7% to 17.8%. On average, for the whole country, 12.5% of the South African women who took part in the survey reported being physically assaulted by their

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<sup>46</sup> Until 1997 no reliable empirical research had been conducted to investigate the prevalence of violence against women in a South African context. It has been argued that the lack of reliable research was partly due to the existence of the apartheid system (Vogelman and Eagle, 1991).

male partner. In addition, 6.3% (half of the national average) reported experiencing abuse within the last year. The highest percentages of experiencing violence by an intimate partner were found in Gauteng (17.8%) and the Western Cape (16.9%) (Department of Health, 1998:90-95).

South African non-governmental organisations which work with battered women have provided estimates of wife-battery based on their experience of caseloads and surveys.<sup>47</sup> In 1992 Rape Crisis in South Africa estimated that one in every three women was assaulted by her male partner (Hansson and Hofmeyer, n.d.). The organisations People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) and Coordinated Action for Battered Women both estimate that one in six women is abused by her partner (Human Rights Watch, 1995). In a survey sample of 1306 women in three South African provinces, research findings show that 26.8% of women in the Eastern Cape, 28.4% in Mpumalanga, and 19.1% in the Northern Province had experienced violence by a male partner (Jewkes *et.al.*, 2001). The *Three Province study* (Jewkes *et.al.*, 2001) reported higher frequencies of violence against women than the SADHS survey conducted in 1998. In a more recent study of women attending antenatal clinics (N=1395), 55% (N=765) of the participants reported having experienced physical violence and/or sexual assault (Dunkle *et.al.*, 2004a). Another survey conducted by Abrahams (2002) includes 1414 working men in three municipalities in Cape Town. Of the 1414 male participants in the study, 46% reported using physical violence against their partners, 15% reported using sexual violence, 55% verbal abuse, 42.2% emotional abuse and 13.5% reported using economic abuse. The prevalence of hitting a woman in the preceding year was 8.8%. Amongst the factors associated with the use of physical violence against wife/partner were: alcohol abuse, verbal abuse, involvement in religious activities and infidelity (Abrahams, 2002).

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<sup>47</sup> These non-governmental organisations include among others, the Advice Desk for Abused Women, Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT), Bait-ul-nur, Black Sash, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Crisis Line, End Racism and Sexism Through Education (ERASE), 702 Helpline, Ilitha Albantu, Ikinross Women's League, Lawyers for Human Rights, Lifeline, National Institute for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICRO), NISAA, Institute for Women's Development, People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA), Rape Crisis, Salvation Army, Women Against Women Abuse, Women and Child Project, Women's Health Project and Yohuselo Haven for Battered Women.

Wood and Jewkes (2001) argue that sexual infidelity is widely prevalent in adolescent relationships where violence surfaces as a key feature. In addition, high rates of infidelity coupled with hierarchical marital relationships are intimately connected with the increasing rates of HIV infection amongst South African women (Dunkle *et.al.*, 2004b).

With regard to sexual violence, a study on teenage pregnancies in a Cape Town township shows that nearly a third (31.9%) of the pregnant teenagers and nearly 18.1% of the non-pregnant teenagers reported having experienced forced sex or rape as their initial sexual intercourse (Vundule *et.al.*, 2001). The SADHS survey shows that 7% of women reported having experienced sexual coercion, whereas the antenatal study reports that one in five women experienced lifetime prevalence of sexual violence by their intimate partner (Dunkle *et.al.*, 2004a).

Statistical data from the South African Police Service (SAPS) showed that 71500 cases of sexual offences (i.e. rape and indecent assault) were reported in the period April 2008 – March 2009. This represents 146.9 incidents of sexual offences per 100 000 of the population (SAPS, 2009:5). Statistical data from community-based survey found 2070 such incidents per 100 000 women per annum among women from the age of 17 to 48 (Jewkes and Abrahams, 2002). Hence, the prevalence of rape in South Africa is clearly very high; however, the rape statistics for the country is currently elusive. The above data, albeit limited, suggest that violence against women in South Africa is an area of grave concern, and they impact women from different religious and cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, the empirical studies surveyed in this chapter suggests some of the ways that South African Muslim women are vulnerable, particularly in relation to gendered differences underlying divorce initiatives, the prevalence of spousal abuse and infidelity, and women's increased risk of HIV/AIDS due to the sexual behaviour of their spouse. The studies also present, in varying ways, broader societal discourses underpinning sexual and marital dynamics. Dominant religious norms and expressions of male privilege (e.g. with regard to divorce and polygyny) purportedly illustrate gender biases. Nonetheless, particular community dynamics and

individual initiatives also provide possibilities for contestations that can render certain social practices and norms fragile and permeable.

The challenges of gender justice raised within the South African context provide local Islamic feminists with a material base for theoretical and theological reflections on the development of an egalitarian Muslim ethics. The importance of engaging the pressing social realities of Muslim women and men increasingly forms part of an Islamic feminist agenda. The ways in which this can be made possible is through expanding the field of empirical studies, so that theories can be informed by women's experiences and not by what some academics believe to be women's experiences.

In the next chapter of this dissertation I examine some of the existing debates around positionality, through which my own research positioning is made transparent. I also outline the research method applied in this study, the process of analysing the empirical data, the research setting, as well as the socio-demographic background of the respondents participating in this study.

## Chapter 4:

### Research Methodology and Research Methods

#### 4.1 Background

The empirical component of this thesis forms part of a larger research project entitled: “South African Muslim Women: Sexuality, Marriage and Reproductive Choices”. The overarching aim of this project is to develop a knowledge base of the experiences of South African Muslim women with regard to marital and sexual relationships. While Muslim women’s rights are vociferously debated in the public sphere, empirical research that examines these issues among South African Muslim women is scarce. By engaging with Muslim women and listening to their opinions and perspectives, one aim of this study is to contribute to a study of gender in Islam grounded in Muslim women’s lived realities and experiences. As such, this research will provide narratives that derive from Muslim women’s subjective experiences, as opposed to the dominant discourses that largely *speak about* and *of* Muslim women but seldom consult them. The findings of this study will be used to develop various strategies that can contribute to the empowerment of Muslim women from within their local communities and from within a gender-sensitive Islamic framework.

The larger research project comprises two empirical components, one quantitative and one qualitative. The quantitative component consists of a questionnaire to be completed by a minimum of 250 Muslim women.<sup>48</sup> The principal investigators of this study are Dr. Sa’diyya Shaikh of the University of Cape Town and Professor Ashraf Kagee of the University of Stellenbosch. I am involved as the research manager in the quantitative research component.

The qualitative research component forms the core part of my doctoral dissertation and includes Semi-Structured in-Depth Interviews (SSDIs). As argued by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998), the advantages of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches is that our

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<sup>48</sup> A copy of the questionnaire and the information sheet (including consent form) is found in Appendices I and II, respectively.

understanding of the proposed subject matter is deepened by utilising several research methods. The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, often referred to as a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003), allows the researcher to explore complexities deriving from rich and detailed narratives as well as to investigate a larger research sample in a systematic way so as to detect broader meaning patterns. Many scholars have addressed the various strengths of mixed-method research, which include among other things, (1) the possibility of triangulation in which corroboration between quantitative and qualitative data is emphasised, (2) complementarity of research approaches, facilitating clarification and elaboration of results emerging from applying the quantitative and the qualitative research methods, and (3) enhanced credibility/integrity/academic rigour when utilising both quantitative and qualitative research methods (Greene and Caracelli, 1997; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003; Maxwell and Loomis, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Reichardt & Rallis, 1994).

Thus, the use of a mixed-methods approach can add insights and understandings that could otherwise have been concealed or obscured if only one research approach were applied. By paying particular attention to the ways in which specific research findings are generated from different methods, the process of analysis also elucidates the contextualisation of findings, contradictions and ambiguities, and diversity in research. Consequently, the combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches is employed to highlight a more holistic engagement with regard to the research project outlined above.

While the data collection process of the quantitative study has been finalised, the analysis of the qualitative research in light of the findings of the quantitative component, and vice versa, will only take place after the completion of this thesis.

## 4.2 The Insider/Outsider Debate

Location and positionality should not be conceived as one-dimensional or static but as multiple and with varying degrees of mobility. (Alcoff, 1995:106)

I am a non-Muslim Norwegian woman, whose research journey into the lives and realities of Muslim women living in Cape Town was quite coincidental. I came to Cape Town as a religious studies student in 2004, with the aim of completing a Master's degree in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. I became interested in gender and Islam after participating in a course on gender and religion as part of my Master's coursework. My development as a scholar of religious studies is influenced by a secular humanist background peppered with strong feminist proclivities.

Due to the marked differences between myself as the researcher and that of the researched in this study (e.g. race, nationality and religion), I find it essential to reflect on the construction of the insider/outsider binary and the possible power dynamics present within the interview encounters. Research relationships are situated and mediated along a range of symbolic and actual constellations of power. Particularly among committed feminists, in the social sciences, debates around sameness and difference with regard to gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, class and age are central to analysing the nature of the research relationship (e.g. Arendell, 1997; Boonzaier, 2008; Roberts, 1981; Stanley, 1990; D. Wolf, 1996). Particular attention must be given to how the researcher's positioning in relation to intersecting locations of power impact upon her research findings (e.g. DeVault, 1999; Bhavnani, 1988 and 1994; Harding, 1987; Minh-ha, 1989; Oakley, 1981; Williams, 1996).

I find the research methodology developed by Donna Haraway (1988) particularly useful with regard to examining the potential operations of power that can function in various research relationships. Haraway outlines three key concepts that the researcher should take account of in any feminist project: accountability, positioning and partiality. Accountability refers to the feminist researcher's commitment to not reproducing the divisions of gender expressed within the dominant paradigms, consequently reinforcing stereotypes about a particular group of women. This does not mean, however, that the researcher should avoid writing about experiences

of marginalisation or experienced power imbalances that the respondents express. Rather, accountability refers to the researcher's commitment *as a feminist* to *reflect* on these matters in her research report, so as to make explicit the contextual relations of power operating when producing situated knowledges.<sup>49</sup>

Positionality refers to the varying levels of micro-politics that occur during research encounters. Haraway argues that the research report should include a discussion of or at least make reference to the relationship between the researcher and the researched, that forefronts how various constellations of power might have influenced the research interaction. Lastly, partiality refers to questions of difference. It is salient that the researcher reflects on the possibility of multiple subjectivities present within a research encounter and also the plurality of views expressed in the total research sample so as to avoid generalisations and monolithic representations (Haraway, 1988).<sup>50</sup> These three key concepts, accountability, positionality and partiality, provide important epistemological keys for ways in which to think about the research material and the process of analysis.

Many contemporary social science researchers acknowledge the fluidity of positions that often shapes research encounters (e.g. Alcoff, 1995; Best, 2003; Hellawell, 2006; Jaschok and Jingjun, 2000; Naples, 2003; Sherif, 2001). Hence, the rigid construction of the insider/outsider binary, where the researcher occupies a position of 'either/or', is losing currency within certain segments of social science research. Historically, ethnographic accounts were driven by an 'outsider-perspective', which was believed to be more objective/neutral accounts of people's realities. Much criticism has been directed towards this historical legacy due to the underlying ideological elements of ethnocentrism, misrepresentations and cultural hegemony characterising many of these studies.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Haraway's approach is premised on the notion that all knowledge production is *situated* in particular historical processes. She argues that "Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*" (Haraway, 1988:581). Consequently, knowledge production is always embodied and partial.

<sup>50</sup> See also Kum Kum Bhavnani's article "Tracing the Contours: Feminist Research and Feminist Objectivity" (1994) to see one way in which the principles of Haraway's feminist objectivity are being applied.

<sup>51</sup> See for example the critique offered by Mohanty, 1991b; Fine & Weis, 1998; Oakley, 1981; Patai, 1991; Visweswaran, 1994.

The lack of reflexivity coupled with religio-political agendas, present within the outsider-approach, led to the emergence of counter-narratives in which the ‘insider-perspective’ was emphasised. Some scholars argue that empirical research should only be conducted by members of the groups researched, as the proper communication of particular experiences can only be conveyed by someone who is within a particular social setting (e.g. Charlton, 1998). Hence, they emphasised the insider position as crucial in order to ‘correctly’ represent the experiences of particular groups of people. This view is premised on the assumption that an insider perspective allows for some kind of shared understanding of cultural and religious values, gender relations, world view, normative practices etc., between the researcher and the researched. In addition, for some scholars advocating this view, having ‘outside-researchers’ articulate your views or experiences can be seen as disempowering. According to Edwards (1996), resistance to participating in research conducted by people perceived to be outsiders can be an empowering act in some communities. From that perspective, the act of opposition represents the desire to exercise autonomy and protect oneself from potentially oppressive and exploitative research relationships.

However, a number of research articles produced among social scientists suggest that there are other complicating factors in research relationships where researcher and research subject might share particular identity groupings. In the context of racial identity, Hurd and McIntyre (quoted in Erasmus, 2000:74) argue that “sameness distances the participants (researcher and researched [...]) from the critical reflexive research process and privileges one point of view over another”. In research encounters where assumptions of sameness exist, there is a danger of imposing views onto individuals due to preconceived notions of sameness. In addition, assumptions of sameness can also lead to a negligence of reflexivity in the research process.

Amy Best (2003:906), conducting ethnographic research with particular attention to the notion of ‘doing race’ in feminist interviewing, reports that “I had assumed an easy rapport with this White woman, and because of this, I quickly and mistakenly moved into direct questions about race, assuming she would identify with our shared whiteness”. When asking the respondent a direct question about whether race was an indicator of who visited her store to shop for prom dresses, the respondent replied that she did not want to participate in “racial stereotyping”. Best, who sees

herself as a researcher who pays particular attention to ‘racial stereotyping’, experienced in this interview that her question about race was perceived by the respondent as “racial stereotyping” (905). Erasmus (2000:74) found in her interview conversation that “problems of power in the research encounter do not disappear when the researcher and informant share certain aspects of identities and histories”. Particular attention must be paid to the various ways in which both the respondent and the researcher assert power within a research encounter, as well as the shifting dynamics of power in the research process (75).

With regard to sexual orientation, Pitman (2002:283), a lesbian researcher conducting research among GLBT students (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered), found that the power relationships between herself and that of the researched “intensified and became even more complicated”. She experienced, on the one hand, having to confront her own assumptions of heterosexism, while on the other hand, paying particular attention to the existing power imbalances hidden within illusions of sameness. Similarly, Kreiger (1982:108) asserts that:

As an insider, the lesbian has an important sensitivity to offer, yet she is also more vulnerable than the non-lesbian researcher...to pressure from the inside, from within the lesbian community itself – that her studies mirror not the reality of that community but its self-protective ideology.

This statement reflects the difficulties embedded within the process of representation. As an insider-researcher, dilemmas arise when having to confront realities of particular communities and at the same time wanting to offer protection to these self-same communities, particularly if there is a strong sense of marginalisation or structural oppression.

From the above excerpts it becomes clear that a shared identity between researcher and research subject does not automatically remove relationships of power. The advantages that might come with shared identity traits, for example, the possibility of enhanced rapport and understanding, must not be confused with *shared experiences*. Hence, it becomes important that the researcher, with an insider positioning, acknowledges the various subject positions that exist and the importance of self-reflexivity in the interview process in order to avoid superimposing views and understandings due to an illusion of sameness.

In the study of religion, the insider/outsider debate developed alongside the emergence of the phenomenological approach within which the increased attention to one's presuppositions coupled with the value of empathy and sympathetic understanding is elaborated.<sup>52</sup> Discussions included whether an outsider, who does not share religious affiliation with the research subject, can adequately understand, present and convey information about the respondent's understandings/experiences of a particular faith tradition (e.g. MacIntyre, 1999, originally published in 1964), the favouring of the religious insider, and the autonomy of religious experience (e.g. Eliade, 1999, originally published in 1968; Otto, 1999, originally published in 1950), and the advantages of being an outsider researcher when studying religious experience and norms/behaviour (e.g. Segal, 1983). In addition, the case has been made for a neutral position, sometimes referred to as methodological agnosticism (Smart, 1973). Through utilising the methodological agnosticism approach, the scholar of religion is not attempting to determine whether particular religious traditions and/or individual utterances rooted in belief systems are true or false, but rather to investigate, analyse and compare narratives from various subject positions. However, this approach also underwent scholarly critique and the question was posed whether neutrality and complete detachment on behalf of the researcher was indeed attainable (e.g. Donovan, 1990; Hufford, 1995).

Other scholars place more emphasis on the researcher's *appropriation* of knowledge and the potential insider/outsider binaries that can be (re)produced through this process. For instance, Ryba (2007:278-279) argues that:

...religious meaning does not automatically entail a distinction between insider and outsider on the basis of either *what* is understood or *how* it is understood. That distinction is created by other considerations outside of the problem of accessibility of knowledge. The insider/outsider distinction emerges at the level of *how and to what ends* that knowledge *is used*.

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<sup>52</sup> The phenomenological approach within the study of religion has a long and complex history. While there are a number of ways in which contemporary scholars of religion apply elements of the phenomenological approach in their academic work, the approach has been increasingly criticised by, for example, feminist, deconstructionist and post-structuralist theories in particular. For an overview of the key concepts, main theorists and points of contemporary critique of the phenomenological approach, see Douglas Allen, "Phenomenology of Religion" in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2005:7086-7101).

Thus, the researcher's application of the knowledge produced within a research encounter can reflect the rigid insider/outsider binary or fluidity between shifting subject positions. More recent developments in the study of religion show that researchers have turned their focus more towards constructing methodologies that pay more attention to self-reflexivity, subjectivity, lived experience and constellations of power (e.g. Brown, 1992; Jackson, 1989; M. Wolf, 1992).

Sherif (2001:446), grappling with the ambivalence of being a 'partial insider' when conducting fieldwork in Egypt, concludes that a partial insider status, in her case, gave her "access to and enhanced rapport with individuals in the society under study". On the other hand, she experienced various levels of outsidership with regard to respondents' understandings and expectations of language proficiency, gender norms and definitions of religious piety. Although initial rapport was established, due to a preconceived understanding of insidership, the depth of the various interview encounters with regard to openness and sharing of intimate details might be implicated in various ways. For example, respondents might decide not to go into too much detail because they are under the assumption that the researcher is already familiar with their context, hence certain aspects of religious practice or gender relations, for instance, can be left unsaid. Or, respondents might choose not to share particular experiences due to fear of being judged, since it is assumed that the researcher shares, for example, a religious worldview. There are obviously other possible outcomes; however, these accounts exemplify the fluidity of multiple subject positions within research encounters.

Along with the multiple locations of sameness and difference that a researcher can possess, I agree with Razavi (1992:161) who argues that "By virtue of being a researcher, one is rarely a complete insider anywhere". By extension, I argue that a researcher is never fully an insider, nor, never fully an outsider. By moving like a pendulum along the insider/outsider continuum, a shifting interactional process in which the relationship between the researcher and the respondent is formed, there is an opportunity to explore the multiple subjectivities of both researcher and respondent. Consequently, by exploring what is unfamiliar to us, in the words of Julia Kristeva (1991), we also encounter the 'stranger within'. Hence, research encounters have the potential to be co-constructions in which redefinitions of the insider/outsider binary can take place in ways that are more meaningful and inclusive than an 'either/or' paradigm.

In addition, for me, the cultivation of self-reflexivity throughout the research process creates a greater awareness of the ethics of engagement and representation in the research relationship. This is less likely to propose monolithic and ethnocentric accounts of plural subjectivities that exist in lived realities. The cultivation of self-reflexivity throughout the research process is significant as it calls into question assumptions around objectivity and detachment. It also enables one to pay more attention to fluid identities, contradictions, positionality, multiple subjectivities and ambivalence.<sup>53</sup> It is within this framework that I identify my own positioning and also recognise the multiple subject positions that I myself move between.

In my interview encounters I am aware that Muslim women's experiences are dependent on, shaped by and produced through a multiplicity of locations, including geographical context, political landscape, religious persuasion, upbringing, education, experiences of marginalisation, etc. Consequently, the experience of being a South African Muslim woman can never be identical for any two women. In addition, as Moore (1994:3) argues, experiences can also be understood as "embodied intersubjectivity" and are "irredeemably social and processual". This means that the particular experiences that are being communicated in the interview process are first of all embodied interactions situated in a particular space and time. Hence, the coming together of embodied subjects (respondent and researcher) structures the ways in which particular experiences are being conveyed.

Moore asserts that the feminist and anthropological proclivities to fix experience as ontological (e.g. experiences are understood as authentic and unchanging and reflect a singular autonomous subject) are unfortunate due to the fact that most experiences are *re-produced* in dialogical relationships and are therefore dependent on the context in which these narratives are transmitted, as well as the various subject positions taken up by the individuals involved in this interaction (Moore, 1994:2-3). Thus, experiences are always processual and open to multiple appropriations that are contingent on societal contexts and relationship dynamics.

I view the traditional juxtaposition of the insider/outsider status as limiting since perceptions of researcher/respondents can change multiple times within one particular research setting. Factors

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<sup>53</sup> See for example the work of Mama (1995), Callaway (1992) and Hastrup (1992).

that might influence these shifting relationships are, among others, time spent with respondent, the contexts in which the interviews take place, the various ways in which the different respondents situate themselves within their local communities, and respondent/researcher experiences. I agree with Naples (2003) who elucidates the fluidity and interaction of insider/outsider dimensions:

Outsiderness and insiderness are not fixed or static positions. Rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed by community members. By recognizing the fluidity of outsidership/insiderness, we also acknowledge...[that] as ethnographers we are never fully outside or inside the “community”; our relationship to the community is never expressed in general terms but is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated in particular, everyday interactions; and these interactions are themselves enacted in shifting relationships among community residents. These negotiations are manifest in local processes that reposition gender, class, and racial-ethnic relations among other socially constructed distinctions. (49)

While being cognisant of these aforementioned theoretical and methodological insights, I was nonetheless curious as to how I would be received by the potential respondents. I anticipated that both access to the respondents as well as subsequently building rapport with the respondents would present a challenge. Not only was I, as a Norwegian, secular, white woman, so obviously different to my respondents but I was also researching the intimate and sensitive topic of sexuality and marriage. To my surprise, however, during a presentation of this current study to a local Muslim NGO, it was suggested to me by the Muslim participants that my Western background could in fact be an advantage when discussing these sensitive topics. This reasoning was premised on the understanding that a non-Muslim Western researcher might be perceived as less likely to impose value judgement on the women’s experiences and the various decisions that they made within intimate relationships.

When I commenced the networking process it became clear that Muslim women actually were interested in talking to me about these personal topics. Some women noted that “it is about time that someone do this type of research”, others responded by saying “I would very much like to share my story, it might be of benefit to other women”, yet others remarked “we are not really supposed to talk about things like that, but I feel that it is important, so ja...I’m all up for it”. The last comment resonates with particular understandings of the public unacceptability of talking

about issues like sex and intimate relationships. It was brought up in several interviews that speaking about sex normally is viewed as taboo in the community, and the respondents often used aphorisms like “what happens in the bedroom stays in the bedroom” and “do not air your dirty laundry to strangers”. These understandings were often situated in what the respondent felt their religion required from them, namely, gossiping and talking about their intimate relationships with their husbands was seen as contrary to an Islamic ethic of appropriate behaviour.

However, it appeared to me that the majority of the respondents felt comfortable with sharing intimate, difficult, traumatic and often previously untold stories with me. This openness can perhaps be explained through the anonymity and confidentiality assured the participants of this research. Hence, the understanding that no one can ever identify the respondent by name became a catalyst for the willingness to share personal experiences. Another reason for this openness can be that the respondents felt that they were contributing to important research, in which the overarching aim is to positively impact upon local Muslim communities and develop strategies to empower Muslim women. Hence, some women might see their input as being of benefit to other women. The benefit-justification was articulated by a few participants and resonated with their understandings of a religious ethical responsibility and obligation to do what can be of benefit to other people.

Other participants might have felt comfortable sharing their experiences with me because of the fact that they perceived me as an outsider. It was noteworthy that respondents generally shared very intimate details about their sexual private life. For instance, a few women clearly expressed that they never talked about these things (the topics of the research) with anybody. This was a quite common assertion particular when it came to taboo topics like orgasm and self-stimulation. For example, one woman told me: “even up to now, do you know that I...I’ve never told anyone this before, I don’t think I’ve ever had a proper orgasm because do you know what I do [when I feel it coming], I totally freeze until it goes away, not so that my husband picks it up”. In the process of this interview the respondent made several references to never having told anyone about particular topics, not even her own husband.

So the question arises about why she would choose to share these personal experiences with me. This might be rooted in the fact that some respondents saw me as an outsider and that the likelihood of my imposing value judgements, both regarding their openness about these topics as well as the experience itself, was seen as miniscule. However, their openness can also be linked to specific perceptions about my outsidership – perhaps that of the white female European who is sometimes seen as sexually ‘free’ or ‘liberal’ and therefore is open to having conversations of this nature, a point made by participants in a seminar where I presented this study. Although none of the respondents in my study made explicit comments related to my ‘Western’ descent with regard to sharing these intimate experiences, it is my perception that in some of the research encounters respondents might have felt a certain level of comfort with addressing particular issues related to sexual experiences due to their pre-conceived associations about my outsidership. In particular, perceptions related to Western women’s sexual openness and liberalism (although not always rendering positive connotations) might have been a catalyst for the varying ways in which matters of sexual intimacy were engaged.

Thus, the openness when discussing sexuality and sexual experiences might have come about as a result of particular perceptions in which our differing cultural/religious levels of acceptability/taboo became evident. Some respondents clearly hinted in the direction that I might be able to offer them some advice with their sexual relationship. With regard to self-stimulation one respondent said: “I can’t do that with my husband, he will think there is something wrong with me, but I think I must try...maybe it is gonna feel strange for me, but now I must learn how to do it”. This statement was made in the context of the respondent’s emphasis on the lack of sexual fulfilment in her marital relationship. When I asked the respondent about self-stimulation her first reaction was to state that her husband would not agree with this. However, it became clear as the interview progressed that the respondent wanted to learn more about how to practise self-stimulation. The openness about this intimate topic is truly admirable and I see it as concomitant with the ways in which the respondents perceived me as the researcher. I would argue that the link between perceived outsidership and the lesser likelihood of imposition of value judgements, bearing in mind the ‘taboo’ nature of this topic, is of significance to the level of openness in the interview process. I would also argue that a combination of many of these

abovementioned factors were of importance when a potential respondent decided whether or not to participate in this study.

In addition, I would like to mention that on many occasions I experienced that the willingness to talk about personal issues also derived from the respondents' *need* to share particular, often difficult, experiences with me. I would like to alert the reader to the fact that a significant number of my respondents had experienced quite problematic and often painful marital relationships. These include, amongst other things, experiences with various forms of marital violence and sexual abuse, infidelity, and husband's abuse of drugs and alcohol. It is noteworthy that respondents who were currently in or had been in marital relationships that they characterised as positive, also tended to foreground their negative experiences. Even respondents who described their marital relationships as fairly satisfactory and enjoyable, often elaborated on particular marital and pre-marital experiences that were problematic for them. Thus, in many interviews it was difficult to explore what specifically was positive in their sexual and marital relationships.

Hence, for some respondents, the interview provided an opportunity to share previously untold stories. For example, as mentioned above, respondents often expressed during the interview, "I have never told anyone about this before" or, "it is not acceptable in our community to talk about these things". These responses were often situated within narratives dealing with the experience of child sexual abuse, rape, polygynous marital relationships, and forced sexual intercourse with their intimate partner. Many respondents had not previously shared these difficult experiences with anyone due to the perceived social taboo around these issues. The respondents also referred to the lack of existing channels within their local communities in which their stories would be taken seriously and dealt with appropriately. In addition, the unacceptability of sharing experiences of this nature was felt by many respondents who had in the past told close relatives or friends about their experience, as a result of which the latter's response was one of avoidance or denial. Thus, the *need* to talk about particular experiences, due to local context and inaccessibility of proper channels, came across as a strong catalyst in the respondents' willingness to share personal narratives. This notion of *needing to speak* forms a very important part of my empirical findings and is reflected in some of the narratives presented in the following

chapters of this dissertation. This need is also reflected in the duration of particular interviews and time spent with respondents.

One of the anxieties that I had as an outsider researcher was that I did not want to reiterate stereotypes of Muslim women as abused, oppressed and mute victims. The fact that many of my respondents were exposed to various forms of marital violence determined some of the responses that I received in the interviews and subsequently impacted upon the structure and content of this dissertation. The narratives presented in the empirical component of this dissertation are reflective of the experiences of these particular respondents and are not representative of all Muslim women in South Africa.

### **4.3 Developing the Interview-guide and Pilot studies**

As the empirical component of this study focuses on Muslim women's experiences, in which biographical narratives will form a major part, I decided to utilise semi-structured in-depth interviews (SSDIs) as the main research method when conducting the interviews. This qualitative approach seeks to avoid overwriting internally structured subjectivities by imposing external "objective" systems of meaning (Mishler, 1986). The semi-structured in-depth interview is designed in such a way that the researcher has prepared a number of open-ended interview questions in advance in order to elicit comprehensive and detailed narratives that can be analysed qualitatively (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The researcher will ask the prepared questions in order to learn participants' perspectives and opinions; in extension, the questions also serve as a catalyst for further discussions. SSDIs were utilised to foreground women's narratives and to better capture the intricacy and richness of South African Muslim women's realities and experiences.

The semi-structured, open-ended interview guide to be utilised in the interview process was developed while participating in a postgraduate course at the University of Cape Town (2006) that dealt with qualitative research interviewing. The course specifically focused on in-depth interviewing and analysis. After developing the conceptual framework and the preliminary semi-structured interview guide, a presentation of the study was held for a local Muslim NGO. The debates transpiring from this presentation provided helpful feed-back on the study as a whole as

well as valuable insight with regard to the preliminary semi-structured interview guide. Following the submission of the Ph.D. thesis proposal, the proposed qualitative study was approved by University of Cape Town's *Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Humanities*.

One focus-group interview with seven Muslim female participants was conducted to pilot the interview guide. The respondents were assured of confidentiality, asked to sign an informed consent form, and asked to complete a demographic questionnaire prior to the commencement of the focus group interview. The clarity of questions posed by the researcher, continuity of interview guide, flexibility and flow were explored in this focus group session. The participants responded to the open-ended questions in the interview guide as well as providing feed-back throughout the interview process. Hence, the aim of the focus group interview was twofold. Firstly, the semi-structured interview guide was piloted, and secondly, respondents were given the opportunity to critique, question and provide insights into the further improvement of the interview guide.

This interview/feed-back process attempts to forge dialogical and non-hierarchical research relationships. The respondents actively contribute to the research process and are not 'objectified' as passive recipients. Reciprocity and interaction in the interview process is highlighted by some scholars as one way of empowering respondents through research interviews by means of engaging in a participatory model (e.g. Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992; Letherby, 2003; Mishler, 1986). The duration of this focus group interview was two hours. The data that emerged from this focus group as well as the commentaries provided were transcribed verbatim for analysis using *Atlas.ti* and used to further modify the content of the semi-structured interview guide, and to inform and strengthen the connections between the interview questions and the conceptual framework of the study.

Two semi-structured in-depth interviews (SSDIs) were piloted after the modification of the interview guide. These one-on-one interviews lasted approximately two hours each. These two SSDIs were also transcribed verbatim for analysis using *Atlas.ti*. The information that emerged from these SSDIs was used to further improve the semi-structured interview guide and to develop a timeframe with regard to the SSDI process.

#### **4.4 Research setting**

The qualitative component of this study was conducted between November 2007 and March 2009 among Muslim women residing in Cape Town. The majority of the fieldwork took place between February 2008 and November 2008. Due to the apartheid history of South Africa, most of the Muslim women who participated in this research project reside in areas that were formerly designated to Coloured, Indian, and Black South Africans in terms of apartheid law. Although a transition to democracy has taken place, economic and other structural barriers have influenced many Muslim families' lack of opportunities to move into previously white areas.

According to the 2001 population census, the number of Muslims in South Africa is approximately 654 064 (1.5% of the South African population). The largest number of Muslims are found in the Western Cape (292 908), making up 6.5% of the total provincial population. Cape Town, with an estimated 2.8 million inhabitants, had an estimated number of 281 507 Muslims in 2001. This means that in 2001, Muslims made up approximately 10% of the total population in Cape Town (Statistics South Africa, 2001). According to Aslam Fataar (2006), Cape Town is home to 46% of South Africa's Muslim population.

#### **4.5 Socio-Demographic Profiles of Participants**

The sample consisted of 33 Muslim women between the ages of 20 and 69 (median age: 44). All participants had been historically disadvantaged under the apartheid system. The only eligibility criterion for being a respondent in this study was that the participant self-identified as a South African Muslim woman. All participants were English and Afrikaans-speaking and 26 of the 33 respondents stated that English was their first language. Due to the interviewer's mediocre knowledge of Afrikaans as well as the fact that the majority of the respondents preferred English, all interviews were conducted in English. The seven respondents who stated that Afrikaans was their first language did not have a problem with communicating in English. However, in many of the interviews a non-standard English dialect reflecting a combination of English and Afrikaans, often called 'mengels', was utilised by the respondents. As I have become more familiar with

‘mengels’ during my past six years in Cape Town I could pick up most of the nuances, nevertheless, the respondents who communicated in ‘mengels’ or uttered particular sayings/aphorisms during the interview session would make sure to always translate the phrase into English to ensure that I understood the full picture.

#### **4.5.1 Racial/cultural grouping**

15 respondents self-identified as Malay, seven as Coloured, five as Indian, and three as African. Although I informed the respondents that the only eligibility criterion for being a respondent in this study was that the participant self-identified as a South African Muslim woman, three respondents chose to self-identify as “Other” in the category of “race/cultural grouping” and then wrote “Muslim” in the space provided in the demographics questionnaire.

#### **4.5.2 Educational level**

All respondents reported having some education (see Table 1). Differences in educational levels were evident. However, inferences cannot be drawn between levels of education and racial/cultural grouping as educational differences do not necessarily reflect racial/cultural self-identification. Naeemah Abrahams (2002:102-105) argues that race and educational levels in South Africa are closely interlinked. She supports her argument by referring to findings in her own empirical study in which racial profile correlates with educational differences. This argument is also supported by information provided by Statistics South Africa (1996). However, in Abraham’s research sample, racial category was determined by the researcher’s observation of respondent, not on the basis of the respondent’s self-identification.

**Table 1: Level of Education**

<b>Level of Education</b>	
Completed primary school	<b>1</b>
Attended high school but did not complete Matric	<b>9</b>
Completed Matric	<b>5</b>
Attended university, college or technikon but did not graduate	<b>6</b>
Graduated from university, college or technikon	<b>8</b>
Completed postgraduate degree	<b>4</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>

#### **4.5.3 Socio-economic status**

Table 2 shows socio-economic status of respondents. I have utilised a number of established indicators to describe the socio-economic status of respondents, as there is no single variable that can best capture this intricacy. The indicators included are annual family income before taxes, employment situation, means of transport, living situation and ownership of household items. A number of these variables, plus others, are frequently used in studies conducted in South Africa (e.g. Abrahams, 2002; Jewkes *et al.* 2001).

**Table 2: Socio-economic status**

<b>Socio-economic Status</b>	
<b>Annual family income before taxes</b>	
Less than R10 000	7 (21.2)
R10 001-R40 000	3 (9.1)
R40 001-R80 000	2 (6.1)
R80 001-R110 000	1 (3.0)
R110 001-R170 000	2 (6.1)
R170 001-R240 000	3 (9.1)
R240 001 and above	5 (15.2)
Don't know	10 (30.3)
<b>Total</b>	<b>33 (100)</b>
<b>Current employment situation</b>	
Employment full-time	12 (36.4)
Employment part-time	6 (18.2)
Student	4 (12.1)
Unemployed	2 (6.1)
Housewife	6 (18.2)
Volunteer work	2 (6.1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>32 (97.0)</b>
<b>How do you get around?</b>	
I get around mostly with my own car	17 (51.5)
I get around mostly with someone else's car	7 (21.2)
I get around mostly by taxi	5 (15.2)
I get around mostly by bus	1 (3.0)
I get around mostly by walking	1 (3.0)
Other (please specify): "All public transport"	2 (6.1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>33 (100)</b>

<b>Living situation</b>	
Live alone	1 (3.0)
Live with other adult(s), no children	4 (12.1)
Live with other adult(s) and children	23 (69.7)
Live with children	5 (15.2)
Total	33 (100)
<b>Ownership of household items:</b>	Yes
TV	32 (97%)
Radio	31 (93.9)
Car	28 (84.8)
Microwave-oven	30 (90.9)
DSTV	10 (30.3)
DVD player	24 (72.7)
VHS player	22 (66.7)

#### 4.5.4 Marital status

22 of the 33 respondents were currently married. Of the 22 women who were currently married, five were remarried. The reasons stated for dissolution of first marriage were infidelity of spouse, spousal abuse, incompatibility, death of husband and husband wanting a second wife. None of the respondents were currently in a polygynous union. However, six of the respondents had previously been in a polygynous marriage. Seven of the respondents were currently divorced; of which infidelity of spouse and spousal abuse were the most common reasons for initiating divorce. Two respondents were widowed and two respondents stated that they were single.

## 4.6 Procedure

The respondents were identified and recruited through networking at various community events. For example, I spent hours in various social settings such as mosques, workshops conducted by local Muslim NGOs, unofficial social gatherings during Ramadan and other religious holidays, seminars hosted by Muslim activist groups, annual fairs that conveyed religious and cultural themes, informal Muslim women's groups, Muslim women's empowerment workshops, and public lectures related to Muslim interests in South Africa. These social encounters resulted in informal lengthy conversations with a variety of Muslim women. I informed the potential respondents about my current study, and invited them to participate if they were interested. Some of these encounters transpired into invitations to other social gatherings and some resulted in women wanting to participate in this study. When women indicated their interest in participating, the researcher made an appointment to conduct an interview. A few of the participants in this study were referrals from those interviewed. Other women initiated contact with me after hearing about this study from other women. No one who was approached declined to participate.

No financial remuneration was offered to the respondents. However, some exceptions to this rule were made in particular situations. For example, in the interview sessions where I spent the whole day in the respondent's house, we would often go to the local tuck-shop or supermarket to get lunch/refreshments. In these circumstances I would offer to pay for the food. Other times, the respondent had cooked a meal that we shared during the interview session. In cases where I visited respondents more than once, I took savouries/drinks with me on subsequent visits.

Given the levels of violent crime in Cape Town, and the prevalence of gang violence and drugs in some of the communities I visited, most of the interviews were conducted during day-time. I was also restricted in that I do not possess a driver's licence, consequently, in most of the interviews conducted in local communities I utilised public transport. For those familiar with the public transport system in Cape Town, it is not easy to get around after dark – along with obvious safety issues. Nevertheless, on some occasions when interviews lasted well into the evening, I was able to organise a lift home with close friends familiar with the Cape Flats. However, on other occasions, when there were no lifts available, I had to cut off the interview

session, get myself into one of the local taxis before dark, and return to the respondent another day to finalise the interview.

#### **4.7 The interview process**

Most interviews were conducted at the respondents' homes. At the time of the interview, the respondents were explained the details of the study, assured of confidentiality, asked to sign an informed consent form, and asked to complete a demographic questionnaire.<sup>54</sup> The respondents were informed about their right to withdraw their consent from participating in the study at any time during the interview process. The respondents were also informed of the opportunity to know the results of the study when these were available. The semi-structured interview guide was used as a basis for the interview session. All questions were open-ended and designed to elicit from the respondents comprehensive and detailed narratives that could subsequently be analysed qualitatively.

All interviews were audio-taped so that respondents' narratives could be illustrated with verbatim quotations in this thesis; also, the audio-taping of interview sessions also allows for accuracy when re-presenting individual narratives. Based on the experiences of the pilot studies, one focus group and two SSDIs, the length of the interview was planned to be approximately two hours. However, the majority of the interviews I conducted lasted more than two hours. On most occasions I spent the whole day with the respondent, with four hours being the longest audio-taped interview. It is salient to mention that the informal talk both before and after the 'official' audio-taped interview also contributes to the ways in which the research process is constructed and perceived by both the researcher and the respondent. At the end of each interview, the interviewer initiated a session in which the respondent could express her feelings about the interview process and questions she had regarding the aims and objectives of this research project in general. These conversations were useful in terms of addressing potential anxieties the respondent might have with regard to the use of research material emerging from the interview.

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<sup>54</sup> A copy of the consent form and demographics questionnaire is found in Appendices III and IV, respectively.

## 4.8 Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and entered into *Atlas.ti*, a computer programme that assists in the analysis of textual data by enabling the researcher to manage large amounts of text with the use of linking and search functions. *Atlas.ti* thus facilitates textual analysis and interpretation by means of various coding procedures described below.

The first phase of analysis consisted of reading through the transcripts searching for natural meaning units that emerged from text. The holistic-content approach outlined by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) was utilised as the main analytical approach, as its starting point is the whole narrative of the respondent in which “sections of the text are interpreted in the context of other parts of the narrative” (12).

A sample of five transcribed interviews served as a preliminary guide to outline key themes and preliminary codes. The selection of a subset of the research data is informed by Miles and Huberman’s “inter-subjective consensus” (1994:11) and Morse *et.al*’s (2002:9) concept of “an active analytical stance”. This technique is applied in order to test the analytical tools developed so that modification and refinement can take place before engaging with the rest of the research material.

While reading through the transcripts I wrote comments in a separate column to clarify respondents’ answers, highlight essential elements of narratives, noting particular concerns related to interview process and other observations that were seen as influential with regard to the process of analysis. The approach outlined by Coffey & Atkinson (1996) has been influential in how I think about the relationships between a study’s conceptual framework, the data that emerges from a study and how to apply and formulate these realities into a broader social context. The idea of thinking beyond the data itself, as well as being able to establish a dialogical relationship with the data, is important in all phases of the research process. Coffey & Atkinson’s concept of “abductive reasoning” (1996:156) is especially useful when it comes to the thinking and theorising around the particularities of emerging data. Abductive reasoning guides the

researcher to cognitively relate the particularities of the data to the broader social context, and to actively utilise these particularities to inform new theories about social constructs.

After having gone through the five first transcripts, a codebook was developed. The codebook was based on the content of the respondents' narratives and emerging themes. As such, the codes were developed *ad hoc* during the analysis of the transcripts and were not stated *a priori*. This approach is open-ended and highlights the respondents' narratives. The process of coding continued as I started engaging with the rest of the interview transcripts. As the transcripts were read and re-read, excerpts were coded as they related to the preliminary codebook. The codebook was revised and modified several times during this process as new codes emerged and/or recoding was necessary.

The next phase of analysis was to group the developed codes into broader categories. Codes were defined, similarities/differences were identified according to the content, and themes were labelled. The approach of Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes the comparison of data with data, category with category and concept with concept (three-level analysis), with strategies for ensuring analytical rigour (Morse *et.al*, 2002:9) such as “investigator responsiveness”, “methodological coherence”, “theoretical sampling and sampling adequacy”, “an active analytic stance” and “saturation”, was utilised in this process. Finally, I listened to the original audio-taped interviews in light of the codes and categories developed as well as the study's conceptual framework. This was done in order to modify codes and categories as well as interrogate coded units of meaning as they related to the initial conceptual research framework.

*Atlas.ti* was used to call up all the categories and codes developed and visual networks were created in order to outline potential relationships between codes and categories. This enabled an overview of the data and also provided a final examination of the model developed through the process of analysis. The visual networks also facilitated an identification of overarching themes that represented the main topics that emerged in the interview process.

In order to respect participants' anonymity and confidentiality, identifying details and signifiers are omitted from this study. In addition, only pseudonyms are used in reporting the findings from this study.

## **4.9 Research Ethics**

The "University of Cape Town Code for Research Involving Human Subjects" was applied as a guideline for conducting this research.<sup>55</sup> I conducted the research in a responsible and respectful manner in accordance with these ethical principles. I have tried my best throughout this research to ensure scholarly integrity and accountability. With emphasis on informed consent and anonymity, I assure that truthful and respectful exchanges between the respondents and the researcher (author) have taken place. All documents related to this research endeavour have been stored in an appropriate manner.<sup>56</sup>

In the following chapters of this dissertation I illustrate, through the use of quotations from the conducted interviews, Muslim women's understandings and experiences of sexual realities. I highlight the varying ways in which dominant discourses can influence intimate relationship dynamics and marital relationships more broadly. I pay particular attention to the weight of religious epistemologies and the ways in which they inform dominant discourses on sexuality. By extension, I investigate Muslim women's perceptions and embodiment of some of these dominant discourses and the ways in which particular understandings are mitigated, subverted and contested through women's experiential and lived realities.

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<sup>55</sup> See Appendix V, "University of Cape Town Code for Research Involving Human Subjects".

<sup>56</sup> The research data (consent forms, demographic questionnaire, audio-recordings and field notes) have been stored in a filing cabinet in my research office, to which only I have access as I am the only holder of the key. Dr. Sa'diyya Shaikh and I are the only two people that have reviewed and processed the data obtained through the research. In addition, all data on my computer pertaining to the research are password-protected.

## Chapter 5:

### On Being a Muslim Woman in South Africa

In this chapter I explore the various ways in which the respondents in this research project spoke about the role of religion in their lives and the ways in which they reflected on being a Muslim woman in South Africa. There were a number of ways in which the respondents thought about religiosity in relation to self-definition, ranging from those who expressed the salience of various established religious practices to those who highlighted a more individual form of religiosity within which internal modes of being were emphasised.

On the one end of the continuum, several respondents articulated a very distinctive religious identity, often expressing the notion that ‘Islam is a complete way of life’. It is noteworthy that for many of these respondents, particular external markers of religious identity were seen as fundamental for the ways in which religiosity and a Muslim identity was expressed. For example, many respondents said that traditional dress and covering of their hair was essential to the way in which they identified as a Muslim woman. Also, many respondents were foregrounding the importance of observing particular aspects of religious praxis, such as performing the five daily prayers and going on *hajj*, as central to the ways in which they embodied a religious identity.<sup>57</sup> On the other end of the continuum, many respondents, while expressing the importance of religion in their lives, seemed to be less concerned with some of the external markers of religious identity. For example, for some of these respondents various forms of Islamic dress were not salient for the ways in which they conceptualised and asserted their identity as Muslim women. Many of these respondents focused on broader religio-ethical principles and the importance of being conscious of God as central to the ways in which a religious identity was expressed in social contexts. For some respondents, cultivating particular personal moral qualities in and through human interactions and broader social relationships was an important means of conceptualising a religious identity. This understanding also mirrored articulations made by respondents for whom particular external markers of religion were

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<sup>57</sup> *Hajj* – pilgrimage to Mecca, held annually and prescribed for all Muslims at least once in a lifetime.

significant. A few respondents also seemed to be quite critical of Muslim communities, highlighting the ways in which seemingly normative practices, such as wearing a scarf, have been equated with expressing a 'correct' kind of religious identity. For these women, the importance of opening up to different ways of being Muslim and consequently various ways of expressing a Muslim identity was seen as salient.

When my respondents reflected on what it meant to be a Muslim woman in South Africa, there were a number of influential discourses that emerged as significant for the ways in which they spoke about their identity as Muslim women. For many respondents, a sense of privilege and deep appreciation was expressed with regard to the freedom of religious practice present in the South African context. There was a common perception that South Africa allowed for a diversity of religious expression and provided many respondents with a sense of safety and confidence to assert a distinct and integrous religious identity as Muslim women. This perception was often contrasted with existing dominant popular discourses in Western contexts where Muslim women were seen to be represented as oppressed or mute victims in ways that effectively limited their religious identity in those contexts. A few women who had travelled to various European countries noted their own experiences of being subject to such stereotypes. The following narratives illustrate some of the ways in which respondents referred to these various discourses in speaking about being a Muslim woman in South Africa:

The fact that we have freedom of religion is extremely important. You hear constantly how people are being harassed in other countries where they don't have freedom of religion, so I appreciate that fact [that in South Africa] I can wear my *hijab* as prescribed by the Qur'an, so the freedom to do that, I can attend the mosque, I can walk down the street [with *hijab*] I'm not being harassed, so I can practise my religion freely. (Saba)

I feel very proud and very privileged to be a Muslim South African woman because we are free to practise our religion at any time [whenever you want], you can dress as a Muslim and we're proud of it, whereas in other countries people are restricted and even locked up, so I'm very proud to be a South African Muslim. (Shirin)

I feel quite proud, it has been a long process for me in terms of thinking about my identity as a Muslim woman and what that means. I think that I have realised just in terms of my exposure to people from outside of South Africa how fortunate and privileged I am to be a Muslim woman in this country. It certainly seems that it is a lot harder for Muslim

women in other countries, and I think I've maybe taken for granted the freedom with which I can practise my religion. (Zaida)

Hence, a common theme that featured in many respondents' narratives was the profound gratitude expressed concerning the realities of religious pluralism and freedom in South Africa. Although a few respondents had travelled to various European countries, it is significant that respondents who never had travelled outside South Africa also pointed to these dominant Western discourses as a contrast to the ways in which South Africa provides a safe space for expressing a distinct Muslim identity. In particular, the issue of freedom to don Muslim dress and not being subject to harassment was highlighted by many of the respondents.

One of the respondents who had travelled to a few European countries experienced some of the dynamics operating in countries where Muslim minorities live in a different secular landscape. In our interview she explained that she felt unwelcome in these secular contexts, a sentiment largely generated through being subjected to looks of suspicion and pity. Conversely, another respondent who had travelled as a single woman to the Netherlands experienced being harassed by some of the Muslim men residing there. She explains: "I don't think I want to do it again because of how I was perceived in a strange country by Muslim men. It was terrible! I think they saw me as available, and I got stalked". Thus, experiences of harassment were articulated both in relation to discourses that stereotype Muslim women, as well as through particular expectations in Muslim communities in the Netherlands that a 'good' Muslim woman does not travel alone. This latter point suggests salient differences between Muslim minority populations situated in different national and geopolitical landscapes. Also, it raises some interesting questions regarding broader global Islamic discourses on gender, within which conservative articulations on gender dynamics sometimes are retained within particular segments of Muslims minorities living in Western contexts.<sup>58</sup> In my perception, the ways in which many of the respondents spoke about being part

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<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, a current debate in Norway with regard to Muslim minorities is the presence of a 'Muslim moral police', trying to enforce 'correct' religious Muslim behaviour/dress particularly in the Norwegian capital of Oslo. On 9<sup>th</sup> January 2010, the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* printed the headline: "Grønland is more Muslim than Morocco" [my trans, original Norwegian headline: "Grønland er mer muslimsk enn Marokko"]. Many Muslim women who reside in Grønland, a central part of Oslo with a large Muslim population, report experiences of harassment by some Muslim men. Pinching of nipples, touching and slapping, and name-calling such as 'prostitute'

of the South African context suggested high levels of comfort, integration and identification with the broader South African environment. For example, Waheeda asserted that:

In other countries, a lot of the Muslim immigrants seem to be an appendage to the rest of the population, whether it is in the US or Europe. I think because of the history of slavery from Indonesia and Malaysia, Muslims has come a long way with the history of this country, so in that sense being Muslim here you feel part of the tapestry of the country, and it is very easy and normal to see people wearing traditional gear [Muslim dress].

In comparison with the South African context, migration of Muslims from predominantly Muslim countries to European countries is a more recent historical occurrence, and these contexts are often characterised by increasing polarisations.<sup>59</sup> Anti-immigration political parties advocate assimilation for minorities and negative media portrayals of abused and victimised Muslim women reiterate particular stereotypes of uncivilised and cruel Muslims. Thus, the secular landscapes in European contexts are dominated by binary representations that place Muslims outside the parameters of normative European citizenry.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, South Africa

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and 'slut', are the most common types of harassment. In particular, harassment is reported to have taken place when a so-called Western dress or non-Muslim dress is adopted by Muslim women, which for some Muslim men means that women are fair game. Some women stated that they tried to avoid going into this area as far as possible, whereas others said that they dressed traditionally in order to avoid harassment. This form of religious conservatism is also experienced by homosexuals entering or residing in this area. Late last year (2009), a gay couple were physically attacked while walking in Grønmland because they were holding hands. The man who attacked them had reportedly said that they were walking in a Muslim neighbourhood and that this kind of behaviour was prohibited there. A direct consequence of this incident is that the annual Norwegian gay and lesbian parade has been moved (from the centre of town, where it is traditionally held), and is now planned to start from Grønmland. This decision is a critical response to the incident that took place in Grønmland and can be seen as a form of social protest (Lundgaard and Stokke, 2010:16-18).

<sup>59</sup> Muslims originally arrived at the Cape in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as Indonesian slaves, workers, and political exiles imprisoned by the Dutch colonialists. The history of Muslims in South Africa has been shaped by the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. For work dealing more thoroughly with the history of Muslim arrival and presence in South Africa, see for example, Mukadam, 1990; Vahed, 2000; and Tayob, 1999.

<sup>60</sup> The continuous *hijab* debate in many European countries is a good example of a particular discourse that primarily depicts Muslim women as 'other', and the practice of regulating as well as prohibiting the wearing of *hijab* in various social settings (e.g. public schools and the workplace) enhances the disparities between the us/them binary. Another recent controversy placing restrictions on particular forms of religious expression is the banning of

appears to present an easier and more welcome home to its Muslim citizens. These dynamics reflect some of the diverse and multiple ways in which Muslim subjectivities are produced in relation to broader contextual and global realities. Thus, the relational nature of particular subjectivities to their specific social contexts illustrates the complex relationship between discursive production of meaning and the formation of the Muslim subject.

The notions of freedom expressed by some of the respondents resonate with liberal theorists' engagement with the concept of negative freedom. Liberal theorists often distinguish between positive and negative freedom, where negative freedom is conceived of as the "absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, whether imposed by the state, corporations, or private individuals" (Mahmood, 2001:207). Arguably, the notions of freedom articulated in some of the excerpts above are expressed through elaborating aspects of the South African context *vis-à-vis* Western contexts, within which the *absence* of particular structures of oppression in the South African context represents freedom, e.g. freedom from discourses that regulate dress/religious expressions, freedom from harassment, etc. In addition, several respondents placed emphasis on Islam as a guiding framework for correct actions, behaviour and dress. In this particular context it would seem that liberal assumptions about autonomy and self-expression enable South African Muslim women to live their lives in ways that do not limit their religious expressions. There was one notable exception. Nazreen, who spent several years in Saudi Arabia, had a different experience. She explains:

I think for me it is more about being a Muslim woman because I see myself as Muslim first and South African second. Being Muslim really shapes my identity completely, but I think the difficulty of being Muslim in South Africa is the fact that we are a minority. The fact that most people don't understand anything about Islam and the new so-called

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erecting *minarets* (tower of a mosque) in Switzerland, an initiative launched by the Swiss People's Party and the Federal Democratic Union. As of November 2009, the constitutional amendment banning the construction of new *minarets* was approved. Following this decision, an appeal has been submitted to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg where it is pending further examination. For work dealing more extensively with questions of minorities in a European context as well as representations of 'otherness', see for example, Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith (eds.), 2002; Shanaz Khan, 2002; Hoel and Shaikh, 2007; Michela Ardizzoni, 2004; Kylie Baxter, 2006; Stacey Burlet and Helen Reid, 1998; Chouki El Hamel, 2002; and Adrien Katherine Wing and Monica Nigh Smith, 2006.

war on terror has added another dimension to being Muslim. The other thing that I struggle with is that I find that people assume certain things. They assume that I am oppressed or that I always wear a scarf. People ask questions like “isn’t it hot?” or “is it your choice?” and there is this assumption there. This I struggle with [...] having lived in a Muslim country, there is an acceptance [there] in a way that I don’t find here. So there is a sense that people are somewhat intolerant [in South Africa] and that for me is difficult.

Nazreen stresses the importance of a Muslim identity as salient to the way in which she sees herself. Arguably, Nazreen’s experience of living for so many years in Saudi Arabia, where her identity as a Muslim woman could be more comfortably expressed, influences her understanding of what it means for her to be Muslim in South Africa. For her, to be a Muslim woman is on the one hand a continuous identity. However, on the other hand, Nazreen’s Muslim identity also becomes mitigated through changing contextual circumstances. She perceives being a Muslim woman in a majority context as different from being a Muslim woman in a minority context. Thus, various discourses holding particular notions about what it means to be a Muslim woman influence self-understandings and expressions of religious identity *in relation* to contextual realities. Often, religious identities are constituted through fluid and ambiguous components, reflecting continuity and change. Thus, the ways in which a Muslim identity is maintained and articulated in a South African context possibly reflect the shifting assumptions and perceptions embedded within dominant discourses of what it means to be a Muslim woman in a broader secular context, which are dissimilar to discourses of what it means to be a Muslim woman in a predominantly Muslim society.

It is notable that Nazreen does not raise any particular problematic issues concerning being a Muslim woman in Saudi Arabia. For other Muslim women situated in contexts in which women’s rights discourses and gender justice form a natural part of their social contexts, Saudi Arabia and other Muslim majority countries like Afghanistan are often portrayed as quite conservative and restrictive with regard to their treatment of women. The fact that Nazreen is markedly silent about the functioning of gender dynamics in Saudi Arabia might imply that for her gender issues are less significant in terms of self-definition.

Nazreen places emphasis on people's lack of knowledge about Islam in South Africa as one of the primary reasons intolerance and prejudice exist. As opposed to some of the views articulated by other respondents, Nazreen's narrative reflects experiences of embodying the stereotypes often attributed to Muslim women in Western contexts, e.g. the oppressed, voiceless and subservient Muslim woman.

The excerpts above illustrate that South African Muslim women make sense of their identities in relation to a number of contexts. For some respondents, being a Muslim woman in South Africa is both empowering and positive with regard to the perceived freedom of religious expression and they often identified as part of the South African 'tapestry'. For other respondents, Muslim minority contexts are more challenging due to the dominant discourses that espouse particular depictions of Muslim women as 'other'. Also, popular media discourses portraying Muslim women as victims of religious patriarchy have increasingly seeped into the public South African imaginary, particularly after 9/11, and might shape perceptions of women embodying a Muslim identity also in a South African context. Seemingly, South African Muslim women often draw on Muslim women's experiences elsewhere, real and perceived, when engaging with issues of religious identity and self-definitions. This shows that Islam is part of a global landscape within which a number of discourses inform Muslim women's subjectivities and experiences.

In addition, a few respondents more explicitly articulated that their Muslim identity was more significant for self-definition than a South African identity. These narratives suggested that binaries between religious and secular identities exist. For example, Hamedah asserts:

You are not part of society first and then a Muslim, you are first a Muslim and then you are part of society. And as a Muslim person in South Africa I feel that I got all my rights, I can do anything I want but my parameters are my religion, that is what I do my things within. I do have a problem with them [secular society] telling you what to eat and what to drink, you [as a Muslim are] already divorcing yourself from the society by not drinking what they drink and not eating what they eat, or by dressing differently, so you already have made your distinction.

For Hamedah, a Muslim identity is navigated through rigidly contrasting secular and Islamic conventions. She expresses ambiguity towards powerful secular norms, symbolised in this

narrative through dietary praxis. Here, distinct dietary regulations form a clear boundary of religious identity. Parameters of inclusivity/exclusivity are embodied through practices related to dress and food, which foreground a Muslim identity as different from a non-Muslim identity. For Hamedah, distinctive external markers of identity provide her with a Muslim space within the South African landscape.

Whilst Hamedah appreciates the freedom to practise her religion within the South African social landscape, her conceptualisation of freedom is related to her ability to adhere to a particular religious worldview that provides guidance and structure, through religious norms, for correct action, behaviour, lifestyle, personal relationships, etc. Thus, for her, her perception of freedom is articulated through the capacity to practise Islam. If no restrictions are placed on religious agency within the secular context of South Africa, then freedom of religion is experienced to the extent that believing individuals have the capability to act in accordance with religious prescriptions.

Hamedah's phrase "parameters [of] my religion" introduces an important construct that I explore in greater depth in the following chapters of this dissertation. How are these parameters of religion formulated in a South African context within which poverty, unemployment and violence are salient manifestations? What are the sources of authority that define and produce the parameters of religion? What constitutes the parameters of religion for Muslim women in South Africa? How do certain parameters of religion lend themselves to being negotiated, subverted and challenged in social contexts? And, what are the ways in which particular parameters of religion inform Muslim women's lives? The notion of 'parameters of religion' opens itself up for critical engagement with the ways in which religious norms and construction of the religious subject are articulated in contemporary local contexts.

## **5.1 Islam is a Way of Life**

When asked the question of the significance of religion in their lives, it was noteworthy that many respondents expressed the notion of Islam as a complete way of life, permeating relationships, behaviour and actions. Moreover, respondents often articulated understandings of

religiosity through reflecting on their past experiences in which particular impoverished social conditions became transparent. Seemingly, for some respondents, experiences of financial constraints and challenging, sometimes brutal, marital relationships can be seen as salient for the ways in which religiosity was cultivated and embraced *in relation* to experiential realities. Also, some respondents elaborated on a personal process of transformation to illustrate their current religious connectedness. Often, the phrase “Islam is a way of life” encompassed a large range of experiences and interpersonal interactions. For example, Leila explains:

He [husband] started to have this extra-marital affair [and] I was diagnosed with cancer, and then my breast was removed and I went for chemo and I didn't have the support of my husband. At least you got a God, you got something to believe in, and then you cling to that God that can really lead you out of your misery. He gives you comfort and he nurtures your soul, and yes the body is already so full of scars that the soul is already aching, so you seek that spirit, and you seek that guidance from him. If you are just yourself and do righteous things then Allah will open so many doors for you, and you know so many doors has been opened [for me] it has been proven, God has proved to me Nina that he is there, so he takes care of me. I believe that Islam is a way of life, [it is] how you do things, it is the choices that you make, that is my Islam. God has chosen you and you [need to] accept your responsibility [with regard] to the choices that you make, and what you do, [you must] not blame somebody else. You must first sweep in front of your own door and the path will become clearer. I did a lot of injustice to myself, because I had long hair, and I loved my make-up and I loved my style of dressing, I just loved it. But that is an injustice to yourself, you don't see it [then], but now you are older, you got more matured and then you feel like... something is missing in your life. Allah put that in your mind, make your prayers on time, you must pray, I must pray, then you feel so nice, because all the Muslims pray on one time [at the same time] and they are connected....

Similarly, Shafieka asserts:

If you have your creator within here [points to her heart], everything falls into place. I can say it because I know where I came from, what I became when I was married to my first husband. When I divorced him [I became...] they will say reborn, that is when I started to spiritually uplift myself. And today I won't say that I regret leaving my first husband, I am sad about it. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing, but then I thought to myself that I have been living in hell all these years and my decision was a good one. As I said I have gone through a lot. It was just with the help of Allah that brought me here otherwise I would have never... if I was weak I would maybe [have] been on the streets selling my body for my children. It is just because that I had Allah in the back of my mind, always asking for guidance, always being satisfied with what little I have, and I said *al-hamdullillah shukran* Allah. I was very naughty I never used to wear a scarf. That was my lifestyle until I decided that I am missing something, and that was my creator, the one

I had to be thankful for, that was who I was missing. So all those years I had everything but really nothing because the thing you needed was Allah in your life, and then my life changed. So I changed and now I can say that religion is like everything for me.

Leila and Shafieka have been through different cycles and experiences in their lives. As a result they both seem to have undergone a number of personal transformations, including leaving extremely challenging and painful marital relationships. They each also adopted different ways of dressing which seems to be connected to an increased spiritual awareness. Their religiosity is first and foremost articulated through their feeling that God sustained them in very difficult times. For both Leila and Shafieka, religion appears to be a tremendous source of strength. In particular, at the times in their lives when there was clearly no social support, nor support from their husbands, be it financial or emotional, their understandings of and belief in God provided them with a sense of security. Arguably, their belief in God allowed for particular understandings of being protected and being taken care of in a social context of scarcity and threat. Thus, profound experiences of God's presence in their lives kept them centred and enabled them to continue surviving through conditions of poverty, violence, drugs, and disempowering marital dynamics.

Both Leila and Shafieka are divorced due to having experienced various forms of abuse in their marriage as well as spousal infidelity. Shafieka also speaks about her ex-husband's drug addiction and points out that this had a severely damaging effect on their marital relationship. Her husband spent all the money that he made on drugs like *mandrax* and *dagga* and did not care about whether the children had something to eat for supper. Shafieka explains that she can see the scars left by her ex-husband's drug abuse and explicit violence, in the behaviour manifesting in her children. She explains that one of her sons is currently using a drug called *tik*, and another son is violent and abusive towards his own children.

After leaving her husband, one of the primary reasons Shafieka was able to carry on with her life was her belief in the power and the spiritual sustenance she received from God. Her financial difficulty, due to her husband's lack of financial contribution to her and their four children, was so severe that she could envisage herself on the streets. In our interview, Shafieka told me mesmerising stories about how she and her children used to sit around their kitchen table

imagining eating delicious feasts. Shafieka explains: “Ashraf [her son] does not eat chicken so he imagines that it is steak...and he takes the bread and he says: ‘mmm...nice steak’...you can see the joy in the child’s face when he is eating dry bread”.

Poverty and dire economic constraints govern Shafieka’s life. However, although her situation is difficult due to the scarcity of resources, the way in which she deals with her reality is admirable. Shafieka’s creativity in this excerpt shown through interaction with her children in matters of food illuminates her unique sense of resourcefulness in very challenging times. I would like to evoke Fiona Ross’s concept of *con-viviality* to further reflect on these creative responses to impoverishment and the dynamics of ‘lack’. For Ross, con-viviality is:

an ethic that seeks to secure life, both life itself and ‘good’ life as it is made through relationships. Con-viviality used in this sense anticipates that life itself, being alive, is at stake in social worlds, and that it is accomplished alongside and through others. It does not necessarily anticipate peaceableness in everyday relations but extends a notion of alertness and liveliness to life’s contingency. Con-viviality thus includes awareness of the limits of life-making, including violences of many kinds – interpersonal, symbolic and structural. (2009, draft paper for discussion)

Despite the continuous presence of these dire conditions of lack, Shafieka finds new and constructive ways of living with joyfulness. Shafieka secures the continuation of life for herself and for her children by employing a particular ethics of survival in interaction with her children. The way in which she engages with her children when having supper shows that con-vivial relationships can be cultivated through performative acts of playfulness. Shafieka transforms the dynamics of ‘lack’ into imaginary ways of ‘having’. At the same time, an awareness of harsh social conditions is manifested through these very acts of playfulness where the imagined becomes real, and the real becomes imagined.

For Leila as well, the presence of God in her life empowered her to go through chemotherapy while simultaneously trying to cope with the fact that her husband was being unsupportive *and* sleeping with another woman. Shafieka’s and Leila’s narratives point towards broader social conditions within which poverty, spousal abuse and drugs are among some of the difficult factors influencing the lives of many of the respondents in this dissertation. These specific social

dynamics are salient with regard to how Muslim identity and personhood are negotiated and formulated.

It is noteworthy that both Leila and Shafieka stress the significance of dress in order to illustrate a process of personal transformation. *Hijab* is seen as part of an embodied religiosity that not only expresses a Muslim identity but a spiritual connectedness to God. Both Leila and Shafieka recount a past life where they used make-up and did not wear a scarf. Part of their respective personal transformations is symbolised through adopting an external marker of religious identity that seemingly strengthened an inner connectedness to God and allowed for the cultivation of the spiritual self and an increased awareness of a religious identity. For both Leila and Shafieka, their subjective process of transformation becomes pronounced through their shifting social relationships and contextual circumstances, and their new sense of self is intimately interlinked with increased levels of religiosity. In some sense, wearing the *hijab* symbolises this personal transformation.

The religiosity expressed by Leila and Shafieka is related to making particular choices in their lives, and a religious worldview has in a sense empowered them to make these choices. Thus, religion is not something that has been imposed. Rather, religion has enabled Leila and Shafieka to exercise particular forms of agency in very trying and unmerciful social conditions. By extension, their religious worldview foreground certain kinds of responsibilities for the ways in which they lead their lives. Part of this decision-making process has involved cultivating a sense of God-consciousness through expressing devotion and piety. This is contrasted with an articulated awareness that previously, they made other choices. However, these other choices made transparent feelings of ‘missing something’, which highlighted the need to be spiritually connected with God.

In addition, Leila elaborates that regular ritual prayer is empowering, bringing about not only a deepening spiritual connection with God but also a sense of connectedness, community and belonging with fellow Muslims. As such, prayer in light of the notion of con-viviality can be seen as an empowering response to a disempowering context. By making prayer an integral component of religious life, con-vivial relationships are formed, both real and imagined, in the

midst of challenging, sometimes life-threatening social realities. The significance of prayer (*salah*) was emphasised by many respondents, highlighting a spiritual component that can be part of everyday life.

## 5.2 The Value of Prayer for Religious Identity and Social Development

One of the main pillars of Islam, the *salah*, to be performed five times per day, constitutes a salient part of many women's religiosity and identity as Muslims. For my respondents, the integrating function of *salah*, where body, soul and spirit can be united, establishes a sense of interconnectedness with God. In addition, a central theme that emerged in their narratives was the relationship between prayer and ethical behaviour. Many respondents perceived prayer and ethics to be intertwined in an organic relationship, informing behaviour and attitudes. For example, a number of respondents spoke about cultivating humility through the act of prayer. Some respondents placed emphasis on the harmonising function of prayer. And yet others highlighted the social responsibilities that often come to the fore through the performance of prayer. For many respondents, prayer functioned at multidimensional levels, within which various combinations of subjectivation and moral agency were entwined. In the following narrative Shamielah elaborates on particular advantageous aspects regarding prayer, illustrating the various ways in which prayer as a form of religious expression can be embedded in daily life:

I look at the *salah*, the five *salah*, as your reminders throughout the day that there is a God, and this God has placed us here for a reason. If you keep that in mind it doesn't give you that big-headed feeling that I am in charge, because you need humility to be able to deal with people. What happens is that the actual physical way of making *salah* humbles you, because you are taking your intellect [ego] and putting it on the ground. That physical movement humbles you, and humility is necessary to deal with other people and to deal with your children. Also it is what you say in your *salah*, [it] is [the] message that God keeps giving you: "Be kind to people, educate people". So you are getting the message that you need to go out there and educate people, you need to understand the message. Also *salah* puts discipline into your life, you need to get up early in the morning, and that already brings discipline to you. *Salah* teaches you punctuality. A punctual person is a reliable person. Who is the one who is going to get the job? The guy who is punctual, the man who is there with a smile, the humble man. Also *salah* is your time-out, it is actually a meditation. So there you got five times a day where you are meditating where nobody is going to disturb you. Your kids are going to say 'mommy is praying so I won't talk to her now', so you have your time-out. As long as you are sitting

on that *musalla* [prayer mat] they [children and people in general] will leave you alone. So a busy mother gets her time out, a busy worker can get his time out, and if you look at studies that have been done, they will tell you that certain times of the day a human being actually needs that rest. So if you look at *salah* in all those various levels that I have just mentioned, it is enough for me to know why I am making *salah*. It is something I need.

Similarly, Azizah explains:

For me Islam is mostly a way of life, praying is important, you got to do the rituals because in Islam there are reasons why you got to pray five times a day. You got to balance the cycles, [and] you got to implement what you are praying and put it into action. And accordingly, scientifically there is a lot of benefits for the body. The implementation of meditation brings your body alignment in tune with the magnetic forces around. That is why it has been made compulsory [and] why those rituals [*salah*] are important, from that time [you pray] to the next time [you pray] you got to see that you don't create any sins, so powerful is your intention when you sit and pray. I just feel personally that Islam is more a humanitarian way of living you know, and it is more [about] giving and serving and sharing...

Shamielah and Azizah stress the significance of prayer as it purportedly functions as a means through which the individual can attain internal harmony and foster individual moral and social responsibility. The performance of *salah* reflects the ways in which religious identity is embodied through ritual practice on a daily basis. Thus, if subscribing to the religious guidance within which compulsory prayer is to be undertaken five times per day, the embodiment of a Muslim identity permeates everyday life through the regular moments of prayer as well as particular social actions prompted by these ritual engagements.

In Shamielah's narrative, the interconnectedness of internal and external aspects of prayer is particularly noteworthy. The humbleness and humility with which the believer approaches God, symbolised through various body postures among other things, mirrors the ways in which the believer should approach and interact with fellow human beings. Similarly, as also emphasised by Azizah, the essence of the meaning systems embedded in the Qur'anic verses recited during prayer should be applied in a social reality.

Shamielah's and Azizah's emphasis on social responsibility and action resonates with understandings of what it means to be a moral agent, elaborately discussed in the works of

Sa'diyya Shaikh (2003b) and Amina Wadud (2006). Consequently, a Muslim identity, expressed in the above narratives through ritual prayer, should ideally affect how you live your life, employing your responsibility as an engaged Muslim, through embodying particular moral and ethical principles that direct your actions and behaviour.

The perception of being able to cultivate general ethics and action through various modes of prayer speaks to notions of different ways of being Muslim. It foregrounds moral agency as an ideal principle, nonetheless, the parameters through which moral agency can be asserted are guided by an ethical framework that opens up to diverse enactments of being moral in the world. It also brings about an understanding of being Muslim *in interaction* with other people. Thus, social relationships can define and reflect the ways in which Muslims live Islam and the manner in which ethical principles can be borne out in interpersonal relationships.

It is noteworthy that both Shamielah and Azizah convey particular notions of Islam's rational character through articulating the 'scientific' rationale for why prayer is important. Through utilising a more popular and even New Age discourse on the value of meditative prayer for our physical body, they provide another significant dimension that makes the ritual practice of prayer more 'logical' for someone like me (non-Muslim and not overtly religious). Possibly, the detail with which many respondents explained the ritual practice of *salah* and its various functions in a social context might be related to the fact that they perceived me as an outsider and tried to make prayer understandable to me. Often I was invited to observe or participate in performing *salah* whilst the interview took place.<sup>61</sup> On two occasions respondents gave me a *salah*-top with matching scarves. These occurrences solicited particular interview-dynamics in which I felt as though the invitation of an identity was extended to me, symbolised through the wearing of an Islamic dress.

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<sup>61</sup> This tended to happen with respondents that I met on more than one occasion, or where interaction with respondent exceeded five hours (hence we were bound to encounter *salah*-time at some point).

### 5.3 Muslimness and God-Consciousness

Many respondents placed emphasis on ‘living with God-consciousness’ (*taqwa*), as central to their idea of being Muslim. Living with God-consciousness suggested a religious identity where internal modes of being were more salient than external markers of religiosity. In addition, some respondents pointed out that external markers of religious identities do not always correctly reflect proper behaviour or ethical interpersonal interactions. They highlighted discrepancies and ambiguities that exist within Muslim communities, often concealed through ‘correct’ external religious symbols. A few respondents also provided what seems to be a social critique of Muslim communities. For example, Faiza explains:

A lot of my cousins they cover themselves modestly and some wear *hijab*, I don't, so I don't quite fit in. The most important thing for me is just to try and be as good a human being as you possibly can and I don't care if you are wearing a scarf or you have this long black robe on. None of that interests me. If you ask me what is my Islam what do I believe in, without an absolute shred of doubt I believe in God. I believe in Allah and I believe in the Prophet. Do I pray regularly? No. Do I pray in my head every day? Yes, from the time I wake up in the morning I will say prayers in my head, I have conversations with God all the time. For me it is important to be God-conscious. Look, ideally yes, I should be praying five times a day, and yes I wish I would and I wish I wasn't so bloody lazy. I am lazy and I have no excuse and I will have to answer for that. From the moment I wake up until I go to sleep [my aim is] to relate well to other human beings, that is far more important to me than the garment and all the right Arabic words. I listen to my cousins and their conversations are peppered with *inshallahs* and *mashallas*. They seem to be filled with this religiosity...the more Arabic words that they say the more they think they are better than everybody else. The biggest problem that I have with Muslims is their narrow-mindedness, they are super judgemental and they are assuming that once you wear this black garb you are ‘holier-than-thou’. I often go to family functions and I am not wearing a scarf and I know what they are saying about me. I am this person out there because I don't wear the garb and I don't sit and gossip with them about whether the chips is *halal* [permitted]. When I think of myself as a Muslim, and I think of my purpose on this earth, is it simply to get along with my fellow human beings... to try... and it is not easy keeping your heart clean and your thoughts clean, and your deeds clean. To try to just to be a decent human being, that is a struggle on its own. To me it is a huge struggle every day to go out there and really treat people [with kindness]...and be kind and be conscious of God all the time...that is what it is about.

Faiza acknowledges that there are a number of ways to be Muslim, however, her perceptions of ‘normative’ ways of expressing a religious identity do not provide her with a meaningful context

within which to be a Muslim. She articulates ambiguous feelings towards other Muslims whose emphasis on particular dress and practice, *halal/haram* (permitted/prohibited) regulations and Arabic is definitive of what constitutes a Muslim identity. Faiza points to existing discrepancies between what Muslims wear, what they say and what they do. Seemingly, Faiza holds a very individual notion of her own Muslim identity and way of being Muslim.

Faiza's Muslim identity focuses on a constant awareness of God that inspires and guides the way in which she lives her life. She especially strives to exercise actions of kindness, respect, and responsibility towards other fellow human beings. As such, she draws on a broader socially engaged framework of morality and sociality to express a religious identity. Her particular response resonates with the importance of living with *taqwa* (God-consciousness) highlighted in the work of Islamic feminists. For example, Amina Wadud (2006), amongst others, emphasises the salience of embodying *taqwa* in contemporary societies. Wadud argues that "Taqwa is essential to the moral attitude of the agent as an individual as well as a member of society since it assists in activating the *tawhidic* principle..." (Wadud, 2006:42).<sup>62</sup> Thus, by recognising the emergent and relational nature of human beings, living with *taqwa* highlights the salience of employing ethical principles and moral sensibilities in a manner that can reflect the *tawhidic* reality (i.e. mirroring the oneness of God).

Faiza's emphasis on being constantly conscious of God might relate to underlying influences of a Sufi discourse, which seems to be percolating through the ways in which she defines herself. The importance of self-vigilance and cultivation of kindness, love and compassion as significant markers of ethical social interactions, are significant within a Sufi discourse. Spiritual refinement involves the development of an ethics of care in interpersonal relationships.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Tawhid* – the doctrine of Allah's oneness, uniqueness

<sup>63</sup> For a more thorough engagement with Sufism and social ethics see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promises of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (2007), *The Heart of Islam* (2002) and *Islamic Spirituality* (1990). See also William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, 2000 and Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, 1984.

Faiza's conceptualisation of her Muslimness both differs from and overlaps with many other respondents' self-identifications as Muslims. Although Faiza seems less occupied with external markers of religious identity, she also critiques herself as lazy with regard to her lack of performance of the ritual prayers. She does believe that the ritual prayers are important and form a salient part of being Muslim, which is why she interestingly states: "I will have to answer for that [not praying regularly]". Nevertheless, she notes that the ritual prayer is not the only form of prayer that is available to her and introduces the notion that her prayer is also a kind of continuous communication with God throughout the day. So, while Faiza feels conflicted with regard to the fact that she does not always perform her ritual prayers, she stresses the notion that she is communicating with God "all the time".

Faiza's religious subjectivity is articulated through an overarching Islamic framework within which foundational principles, such as the belief in God and the Prophet and the importance of living with God-consciousness, comes to the fore. Yet, her Muslim identity is not rigidly attached to distinct religious practices that singularly shape her self-identification. Another respondent, Leila, having previously described her process of self-transformation and increased connectedness with God, expressed similar sentiments to Faiza's, stating:

Everything start with intention, you ask the question about Muslims, yes we are born with that, being a Muslim. I think all of us are Muslims, you as well are a Muslim [referring to me]. You don't judge a person by what you wear, your God-consciousness is a better garment [i.e. to be God-conscious is more important than wearing a Muslim dress]. Allah says drinking, drugs, smuggling, and alcohol...if you do [use] that, I am not going to say that you are not a Muslim, but Allah has abandoned that, taken it away [made it unlawful]. So you see some people got the name Mohammad and they are *lekker* drunk. They go in the shop and they say 'I don't want that pie because it is not *halal*' ...

Leila elaborates on the notion of God-consciousness as being more important than particular forms of Islamic dress. However, previously Leila spoke about a personal transformation in which the adoption of appropriate Islamic dress was significant for her newfound sense of self and her Muslim identity. While donning Islamic clothing helped to cultivate a stronger sense of God-consciousness in her life, she emphasises God-consciousness as the overarching principle. She prioritises a non-judgemental attitude towards other Muslims while reiterating the

importance of maintaining boundaries set by God, for example in relation to questions of drugs, alcohol, etc.

For Faiza and Leila, religiosity includes, amongst other things, the cultivation and refinement of the spiritual self through living with God-consciousness. Thus, external markers of religiosity or religious identity are seemingly not as salient to the ways in which they perceive potential expressions of religiosity. In addition, they are providing a social critique through pointing out how external markers of religious identity, like having a Muslim name or wearing an Islamic dress code, do not always correlate with internal states of what one would perceive to be religious. Hence, these discrepancies and inconsistencies exist within the broader Muslim community and illustrate the influence of difficult social contexts within which alcohol and drug abuse forms part of Muslim realities.

The excerpts included in this chapter illustrate some of the ways in which the respondents participating in this project articulated experiences of being a South African Muslim woman as well as particular understandings of religious identity. Firstly, one of the major themes that emerged in my interviews was the salience of particular notions of nationhood that allow for and facilitate certain expressions of religious identity. In addition, it is noteworthy that what it means to be a Muslim woman in South Africa is interlinked with discourses operating in Western countries, Muslim majority environments and local contexts, which influence to varying degrees how one thinks about and asserts a Muslim identity.

Secondly, although the majority of the respondents expressed a profound appreciation of being Muslim in South Africa, many of the respondents' experiential realities were subject to conditions that were in essence disempowering. It is significant that religion served as a source of power, enabling many respondents to overcome and deal with their various life situations. Throughout this chapter we have also seen that notions of God-consciousness (*taqwa*) are particularly salient for Muslim women's identity. For some respondents, living with God-consciousness facilitated creative ways of confronting and navigating unsympathetic marital relationships. For other respondents, God-consciousness was prioritised in ways that effectively

challenged dominant normative constructs of religious behaviour, opening up to other ways of being Muslim.

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## **Chapter 6:**

### **Islam and Sexuality: Understandings and Experiences**

**“Sex plays an important role in marriage and in our religion that is what I believe” – Ghameeda**

A major overarching theme that emerged from my interviews was the importance of dominant Islamic discourses for the conceptualisation of sexuality. In my interviews it became apparent that the textual foundations of Islam, the scholarly and legal traditions as well as current religious authorities, informed some of the ways in which my respondents spoke about, understood and engaged with sexuality. While admittedly my study holds some level of ascertainment bias due to the fact that respondents were solicited on the basis that they are Muslim women, it was particularly salient how central Islamic discourses on sexuality featured in their narratives.

In this chapter I highlight particular views that formed part of respondents’ perceptions of Islamic norms. These include notions of Islam being a sex-positive religion, ethical ideals for intimate relationships and sexual praxis, the various parameters of sexual behaviour, the importance of virginity before marriage, and specific sexual taboos that respondents spoke about in our interviews. I also explore the view of sex as a spiritual experience or a form of worship, a view that many respondents foregrounded. Even so, I found that respondents’ understandings and views on sexuality often represented ideals that did not necessarily mirror their lived experiences, as we will discover in the following chapter.

#### **6.1 Sex is a Gift Given**

One of the dominant understandings of sex in Islam, as articulated by the majority of the respondents, is that Islam is a religion that embraces and values sex. For many respondents their understandings included the view that Islam is a sex-positive religion and sex is seen as a natural aspect of our humanness. For example, Saba who has been married for 21 years stated:

If people really cared to read up about it [sex] you will find that Islam basically promotes sexual intercourse, obviously in a legal and lawful manner. It [sex] is beautiful; it is for your pleasure [and] enjoyment.

Another respondent, Rashieda, married for 32 years, now divorced, said:

As I grew older and with my own experiences and going out to find knowledge, I became more aware of what *din* is about, it sanctions sex. It is a pleasurable experience and there is nothing from the religion side that gives it a bad connotation.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, Nuriyya, married for three years, explained:

It [sex] is the most beautiful thing and it is a gift given, sex is this gift and Islam gives this beautiful gift to people to enjoy.

It is noteworthy that many respondents spoke about sex as a ‘gift from Allah’, which suggests that there exists an implicit notion about the goodness of sex because it is seen as ‘given’ to human beings from God. The excerpts above indicate that sex is seen as ‘pleasurable’ and ‘enjoyable’ for men and women and is not restricted to the sphere of procreation.

Interestingly, many respondents consistently used phrases such as ‘Islam promotes’ and ‘Islam says’ to support their views. Thus, respondents’ understandings were often situated within discourses on what constitutes normative Islam. Nonetheless, as a non-Muslim researcher, I sometimes felt as if some of the respondents were trying to convey the authoritative position on Islam and sexuality to an outsider. Hence, on a few occasions it was difficult to ascertain whether respondents’ frequent use of ‘Islam says’ in fact corresponded with their own understandings and opinions.

The positive ways in which some of the respondents spoke about sex resonate with dominant positions held within the textual canon of Islam. For example, B. F. Musallam illustrates how traditional pre-modern Muslim jurists conceived of sexual activity as a way to assure sexual fulfilment regardless of procreative purpose (1983:35). In addition, Islamic history gives

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<sup>64</sup> *Din* – religion, faith

evidence of the accepted practice of coitus interruptus, as well as the use of various herbs and other ingredients to prevent pregnancy. This bears testimony to the religious understandings of sex as lawful and positive and not purely for procreation.<sup>65</sup> The influential eleventh-century scholar Imam al-Ghazali strongly encouraged sexual activity and fulfilment due to its spiritual connection to the hereafter:

God created pleasure of the world with this object: that if the people have pleasure, they will be eager to have lasting pleasure in the next world. To get this pleasure divine service is necessary. (Al-Ghazali, quoted in Anwar, 2006:134)

In this sense, another dimension is added to the importance of sexual satisfaction in this world. Sexual gratification gives a foretaste of paradise. Arguably, Al-Ghazali believed that people, through the pleasure of sexual intimacy, would long for the hereafter. Consequently, people would need to direct their behaviour in this world towards reaching this potential through “divine service”.

Similarly, in a contemporary period, Asma Barlas (2002) highlights views on sexuality in light of Qur’anic teachings. She argues that “the Qur’an also affirms that sex is not primarily for procreative purposes; it is a joyful and purposive activity in itself which is conducive to *sukun*” (153).<sup>66</sup> Seemingly, the respondents’ views and perception on sex are echoed in both the classical discursive tradition as well as in contemporary readings of different Islamic texts.

## 6.2 Sexual Reciprocity

Although a number of respondents elaborated on the importance of a woman’s sexual availability and duty to satisfy her husband, to be discussed in the next chapter, many of the respondents placed emphasis on the ideal of reciprocity during sexual intimacy. For some

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<sup>65</sup> For example, in his book *Sex and Society in Islam* (1983), Musallam explores a number of birth control and abortifacients that were sanctioned by Islamic law. He also foregrounds that the right to sexual fulfilment formed part of the classical Islamic discursive tradition.

<sup>66</sup> *Sukun*: “often rendered as love, implies a deeper intimacy ensuing from sexual gratification and mental peace” (Barlas, 2002:153).

respondents, this ideal is realised in their sexual relationships, whereas for others, reciprocity and mutuality is an idyllic vision. Nonetheless, real and/or ideal, reciprocity emerged as a salient theme when discussing perceptions of ‘proper’ sexual dynamics. For example, Aisha, married for 15 years and mother of three, explained:

You have to set down the proper conditions for both to enjoy sex, because [in Islam] it is conjugal rights for both, both must be pleased.

Another respondent, Khadija, previously divorced due to various forms of spousal abuse and infidelity but now happily remarried, said:

Sex is so much more different now because I have a husband [who] is very conscious about the fact that according to Islam there should be mutual satisfaction.

Again, an Islamic discourse is evoked as a supportive framework to highlight ethical ideals that should guide sexual praxis. For Aisha, sexual pleasure is perceived as a right. This understanding also espouses a certain kind of responsibility, on behalf of the spouses, to ensure each other’s sexual fulfilment. When I inquired about her sexual relationship with her husband, Aisha simply confirmed that they have a good sexual relationship and that her husband is sensitive to the stimulation that she desires. Aisha did not seem willing to go into too much detail regarding this aspect of her marital relationship. Instead she reiterated the importance of privacy through explaining what she called the ‘philosophy of the garment’. According to Aisha, a husband and a wife are garments unto each other.<sup>67</sup> For her, the ‘philosophy of the garment’ not only represents the ideal of mutuality in sexual relationships, but also the protective fabric guarding intimate dynamics in marital relationships.

In my interview with another respondent, Khadija, a range of sexual experiences came to the fore. On the one hand, Khadija has experiences from her first marriage that were extremely

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<sup>67</sup> Aisha’s reference to a husband and a wife as garments unto each other is reflective of a particular verse in the Qur’an. Q2:187: “You [believers] are permitted to lie with your wives during the night of the fast: they are as garments to you, as you are to them...” (Haleem, 2004). Within the Islamic feminist discourse, this verse is often employed to illustrate the ethical ideals of harmony and reciprocity that should guide broader marital dynamics. See for example, Wadud (1999) and Barlas (2002).

painful and primarily negative. On the other hand, she defined her sexual experiences in her current marriage as strongly satisfactory and enjoyable. For Khadija, her experiences with sexual abuse and other forms of violence in her previous marriage seem to inform a profound appreciation of her current marriage and a husband who honours an Islamic sexual ethics of mutuality. In her first marriage, Khadija experienced sex more as a duty and believed that it was her responsibility, as a good Muslim woman, to assure her husband's sexual gratification. Her husband's repeated adultery also influenced the ways in which she perceived sexuality. She did not see her own sexual fulfilment as a right, and nor did her ex-husband. Khadija's understandings of sex in her first marriage seemed to be premised on particular and essentialised understandings of male and female sexuality respectively. Her current and changed understandings of sexuality resonate more strongly with a more egalitarian understanding of Islam.

For Khadija, shifting personal experiences facilitated alternative discourses that mirrored her changing relationship dynamics. Arguably, the currency of dominant discourses in women's lives is *dependent* and *relational* to the social actors involved in producing intimate experiences. Sometimes, respondents embrace seemingly conflicting discourses that speak to their various experiences in different ways. It should be noted that the ideals of reciprocity and mutuality do not necessarily negate understandings of a wife's sexual availability. For example, as discussed in more detail in the next chapter, many respondents stressed the importance of being sexually available to their husbands irrespective of their personal desire to have sex. However, this understanding does not mean that they do not take the ideal of reciprocity seriously in their marital relationships.

Although there seems to be a tension between sexual availability and reciprocity, many respondents were subscribing to these discourses simultaneously. For some respondents, the ideal of reciprocity is realised in various dimensions in their marital relationships. The fact that this ideal does not necessarily permeate all of their experiences in their marriage does not mean that the importance of the ideal as such should be mitigated. Similarly, the ideal of sexual availability was negotiated and contested through particular experiences in marital relationships. For example, respondents' experiences of husband's infidelity coupled with an acute awareness

of the prevalence of HIV in South Africa formed part of dominant contestations of the sexual availability discourse. Nonetheless, many respondents still reiterated this ideal as it often correlated with their understanding of what it means to be a good Muslim woman.

Some respondents emphasised the notion that marriage is also about ‘making sacrifices’ and this included sexual dynamics. For example, several respondents asserted that when their husband expressed the need for sexual fulfilment, or made sexual advances, they forfeited other chores in order to make sure that he was satisfied. For some women, the ideal of a wife’s sexual availability formed a significant component of how sexual relationships were navigated. For other women, caring about their husband’s needs formed an integral part of what constitutes marriage, together with the expectancy among some of them that this ‘sexual care’ was reciprocated. However, sexuality is but one of the components within which reciprocity in marriage can be expressed. Also, that women responded to sexual advances initiated by their husband obviously does not preclude them from experiencing sexual pleasure, or necessarily suggest a lack of mutuality in the interaction.

Arguably, the ideal of sexual availability can coexist with the ideal of reciprocity in sexual relationships. Nevertheless, the varying ways in which this combination is manifested in reality are deeply dependent on the nature of the marital relationship. Clearly, the discourse of sexual availability can sometimes perpetuate various inegalitarian power relations. For women who experience sexual coercion and violence, the existence of this discourse generates a variety of possible responses, ranging from acceptance to subversion. Both the ideal and reality of sexual reciprocity inform the manner in which the sexual availability discourse is negotiated.

Even for women who did not experience sexual satisfaction in their marriages, the ideal of sexual reciprocity was reiterated. For example, Shafieka, a re-married mother of four, stated the following about her sexual relationship with her current husband:

He don’t have a problem, he is satisfied. I am the one [who is not satisfied]. This give and take thing...it was just finish *klaar*. It is a totally different thing for him and for me. We are different people with different feelings. But I want to have my things working out properly in a religious way.

Shafieka's inclusion of "a religious way", as the proper way in which she wants her sexual relationship to function, gestures to perceptions about particular Islamic ethical ideals that she sees lacking in her sexual relationship. It became clear in the continuation of our conversation that she strongly felt robbed of her religious *right* to sexual pleasure:

I should have told my husband to leave because he doesn't satisfy me the way he should satisfy me, [but] I accept it the way it is. I accept to live like this, because it was my decision to make, there are two ways now. I could easily leave him and say: "I can find somebody else that is sexually satisfying", because that is my right.

Interestingly, Shafieka points out another dimension of how one might think about sexual dynamics. Not only does mutual sexual fulfilment represent an ideal, but it is also perceived to be a religious right that should be realised within intimate relationships. Nevertheless, Shafieka has made a conscious decision to stay with her husband despite the fact that he does not satisfy her sexually. However, Shafieka is clearly flirting with the idea that it is within her rights to leave her husband due to his sexual 'shortcomings' in this particular area of their relationship.

It is noteworthy that for many respondents the ideals of reciprocity and mutuality were evoked through employing particular perceptions of Islamic sexual ethics, notions also reflected in the works of some contemporary Islamic feminist scholars. For example, Barlas suggests in her reading of the Qur'an that mutual satisfaction should be seen as legitimised and encouraged by Islam due to the fact that the Qur'an conveys notions related to the "sexual sameness" of human beings (2002:152). Thus, women's and men's natures are equally driven by needs and desires and consequently, women and men need to be equally fulfilled. Similarly, Shaikh argues in light of her discussion on contraceptive techniques, such as coitus interruptus, that Islam prioritises "mutual sexual fulfilment as well as consultative decision making between a married couple in terms of family planning" (2003:115). Shaikh's emphasis on mutuality is informed by the view held amongst traditional Muslim scholars, that coitus interruptus might "diminish [a woman's] pleasure" (115). Although these understandings are articulated by stressing the ways in which Qur'anic and Islamic legal frameworks embrace these ethical principles, the existence of textual sources that affirm mutuality can be empowering resources for contemporary Muslim women.

Nonetheless, as shown through some of the quotations in this section, the fact that these ideals are embedded within the religious tradition does not necessarily mean that they are realised in a social reality. For example, financial constraints and unemployment which form part of many respondents' marital dynamics, and respondents' experiences with various forms of marital abuse and violence, constitute significant factors within which these ideals are to be realised. Also, the ideals of reciprocity and mutuality exist simultaneously with other religious discourses that in various ways inform marital dynamics and sexual relationships.

### **6.3 Religious Parameters for Sexual Behaviour**

The positive ways in which my respondents viewed sex in Islam often led to discussions on what constitute legitimate sexual interactions. Many of the narratives indicated that the pleasures experienced when engaging in sexual intercourse should only be thoroughly enjoyed if situated within a marital union. This understanding was unequivocally asserted by most of the respondents who took part in this study. The following excerpt is reflective of this dominant view. Hamedah, married with four children, asserts:

Sex is a beautiful thing [that] men and women can have if they are married. [Then] they can have it as often as they want, wherever they want [but] not flaunt it and not speak about it, like outside of your marriage, don't talk about it to others. So in Islam sex is a beautiful thing, it is a right given to men and women by Allah.

This excerpt points towards a few salient factors that form the basis of *how* to engage with sex/uality within the parameters of Islam. Firstly, sexual relations can only occur within a marital union. And secondly, an ethics of modesty that guides sexual behaviour is required. The principle of modesty includes behavioural discourses (what is understood to be acceptable public behaviour), and the etiquette of privacy surrounding sexuality (don't talk about it outside of your marriage). However, as I indicated in the methodology chapter, exceptions to this 'rule' of 'what happens in the bedroom stays in the bedroom' were clearly made by some of the respondents participating in this research project for a variety of reasons.

Nevertheless, this religious ideal was not always reflected in respondents' realities. A number of women had engaged in sexual encounters outside of/before marriage. I include a few of these quotations in this section to illustrate how these experiences are interlinked with powerful perceptions of what constitutes the parameters of Islam. Shirin, married for 23 years and mother of two, explains:

If I look back at it now and really think about it [having sex before marriage], we knew we did wrong [but] it happened so fast. When I look at it now, you cannot repent. There is not enough repentance to make up for that wrong that you done then. In Islam for every action there is a reaction, you will be punished for it, you got to repent and ask God's forgiveness. For me, I cannot repent enough over that, although I was in Mecca and I asked God's forgiveness. They say once you stay on the plains of Arafat and God has forgiven you then you mustn't doubt it because God has forgiven you, but I still feel that that is a repentance that I have to take with me to my grave.

Another respondent, Fayrooz, now divorced, asserted:

I was very scared and I didn't want anyone to find out. It [adultery] is like a major secret because that is the ultimate sin... adultery and sex and all this before marriage. So it was a whole hush hush between me and him, and yes, I did have a major guilty conscience, even the day I had a white dress on.

These two excerpts highlight the difficult nature of transgressing what is perceived to be normative sexual boundaries. For Shirin, although she recognises that forgiveness is one of the attributes of God, she views her transgression as so severe that it is almost beyond forgiveness. Clearly, Shirin's experience is given meaning as a transgression through particular perceptions about what constitutes the parameters of Islam.

Fayrooz's response does not focus on divine punishment or issues of repentance or forgiveness. Noting that premarital sex is the "ultimate sin", she is primarily concerned with keeping this sexual experience a secret. She appears to be particularly worried about reactions from the community if this indiscretion were to become known. Hence, Fayrooz acknowledges that there are strong ethical ideals related to acceptable sexual behaviour operating in the community. Although these ideals are held in high esteem, it does not mean that people do not engage in illicit sexual behaviour. Nonetheless, the ethical standards expressed, implicitly or explicitly, by

the community are enough to make Fayrooz feel that she has done something wrong. Thus, “the major guilty conscience” can reflect, as in Shirin’s narrative, a type of community consensus of what constitutes acceptable Muslim sexual behaviour, which unmistakably influences the way in which Fayrooz feels and thinks about her experience.

In the conversations I had with respondents who had engaged in pre-marital or extra-marital sex, their narratives focused predominantly on their own subjectivity in light of these experiences. Hence, no particular reference was made to the men involved in these sexual relationships. It is noteworthy that respondents who had experienced spousal infidelity in their marriages did not seem to evoke the religious discourse of sin when speaking about these experiences. Rather, in some cases, spousal infidelity was spoken about as being part of a normative social context, a view that often was premised on respondents’ assumptions related to men’s stronger sexual needs. Although some respondents contested the acceptability of men’s adultery, it is significant that seemingly distinct standards for sexual behaviour were reflected in many respondents’ narratives, in which particular religious discourses on sexual behaviour were applied differently to men and women.

## **6.4 Virginty**

A dominant theme that emerged in my interviews was the importance of virginty. It was noteworthy that for many respondents this chastity ideal was intricately entwined with their religious identities. For some respondents, having gone through particular problematic sexual experiences, virginty remained salient for self-definitions. Often, the ideal of virginty was brought up when respondents spoke about their upbringing. Some respondents emphasised that the virginty ideal was one of the main religious ideals that was strongly stressed by family members. For example, Waheeda explains:

Virginty is a big thing, like with my mom especially [she says] “don’t have pre-marital sex”, [this] speaks to the image of a woman and the honour of a woman.

Another respondent, Somayya asserts:

[Virginity] is what your religion preaches for you and that is what you try to practise as long as you can. It is taboo if somebody is not a pure woman.

Similarly, Faiza narrates:

I remember growing up and thinking that if I lost my virginity before I got married I would not be able to look at myself in the mirror the next day. That [feeling] was very strong. I don't know who put it there, probably my mother with all her preaching and whatever else, and that is the way I was brought up.

For many of the respondents, conceptions of virginity were often associated with the purity and honour of a woman. It is noteworthy that when discussing virginity, most of the respondents appeared to singularly prioritise chastity for women. Even so, it might be that their silence regarding the importance of men's chastity was unintentionally eclipsed due to the fact that I was inquiring about *their* experiences and understandings. Or, their narratives could mirror dominant trends in the community where particular attention to women's virginity is highlighted. Shaikh, having conducted empirical research amongst Muslim women in Cape Town, argues that women's perceptions of virginity espoused quite "different standards of sexual ethics" (2007:76). In her research sample, particular assumptions related to men's predatory nature necessitated the importance for women to safeguard their chastity.

These conceptualisations of virginity within Muslim communities have been analysed by many scholars in a number of different ways. For example, Mernissi (1996 and 1982) argues that the emphasis placed on women's virginity in many Muslim cultures is part of a patriarchal symbolic order that primarily informs discourses of sexual inequality. On the other hand, Barlas (2002) discusses virginity in relation to broader sexual ethics. According to her reading of the Qur'an, both men and women alike have the virtue of chastity. Barlas employs Q24:26 to illustrate the corresponding ways in which both men and women should guard their behaviour.<sup>68</sup> Arguably, part of the normative tradition seems to embrace chastity for both men and women. Nonetheless,

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<sup>68</sup> Q24:26: "Women impure are for men impure, and men impure for women impure; and women of purity are for men of purity, and men of purity are for women of purity".

the priority given to women's virginity in particular has prevailed in various parts of the Muslim world and indeed other parts of the world.<sup>69</sup> Munira's narrative reflects this ambiguity when she asserts:

Why is it that men when they want to get married they want to get married to a virgin, because in Islam it says: if you're not a virgin you need to marry a non-virgin, and if you are a virgin you need to marry a virgin.

It is interesting to note that Munira singles out men as the ones who want to get married to virgin women. This mirrors some of the existing cultural stereotypes regarding marital expectations that elegantly eclipse the salience of men's virginity. Munira implicitly offers a critique of male sexual expectations and suggests that there is a double standard present in Muslim communities where non-virgin men want to get married to women who are virgins. For her, this particular sexual dynamic represents a problem as it does not correspond with Islamic guidelines. The importance of identifying with the virgin image was espoused by some of the respondents who had experiences with sexual abuse or rape while growing up.<sup>70</sup> The following rather powerful narrative illustrates the way in which Rashieda thinks about her experience in relation to questions of self-definitions:

I was raped when I was a teenager. I came from work and myself and a helper of my mom went walking in the evening. We were walking towards the shopping centre and three or four guys got hold of us, both of us, and we were raped by all of them. I still regarded myself as a virgin because it is not something I asked for you know. What I couldn't understand at the time, and it is something that I have thought about, I was fully dressed [in *hijab*] as I am now and I wanted to know what made these guys come after us. We weren't in a place where it was quiet. We were just grabbed and pushed into the field.

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<sup>69</sup> See for example Mernissi's discussion on the emergence and popularity of the surgical replacement of the hymen in Morocco (1996). For scholarly work that problematises the importance of virginity for women, as well as virginity testing, in various parts of the world, see for example, Xiao Zhou, "Virginity and Premarital Sex in Contemporary China" (1989); Dilek Cindoglu, "Virginity tests and Artificial Virginity in Modern Turkish Medicine" (1997); Ana Amuchástegui, "Dialogue and the negotiation of meaning: Constructions of Virginity in Mexico" (1999); Amalia Sa'ar, "Many ways of becoming a woman: the case of unmarried Israeli-Palestinian "Girls""(2004); Louise Vincent, "Virginity testing in South Africa: Re-traditioning the postcolony" (2006).

<sup>70</sup> Overall, the data emerging from my interviews reveals that eight women had experienced sexual abuse and/or rape prior to, or during their marriage, by someone other than their husband.

Rashieda's narrative illuminates the reality of extreme sexual violence prevalent in local contexts. Many of my respondents lived in areas where going out after dark, or even going into particular areas in daylight, was perceived to be extremely dangerous. This point was also reiterated by respondents in relation to my safety. As I often travelled by public transport to visit my respondents, they made an effort to 'see me off', ensuring that I got into a taxi before dark and that the driver looked trustworthy and seemingly sober. Reports of sexual violence were common in particular areas that I visited. Sometimes, I got the sense that for many of my respondents, sexual violence as a constant threat was almost normalised and formed part of the challenges characterising their social fabric.

To return to Rashieda's narrative, for her to be a virgin constitutes an essential part of how she sees herself as a woman. Rashieda's sense of self is articulated through a discourse within which the virginity ideal is stressed as an important component of a woman's pre-marital identity. It is noteworthy that these ethical ideals regarding chastity continue to hold social currency amidst violent contexts that do not always allow for the realisation of these particular sexual norms. Rashieda presents a remarkable way of navigating the ideal of virginity in light of a particular horrific experience. Her conceptualisation of virginity confirms the notion that virginity is an ideal. Simultaneously, her narrative reflects that virginity is not necessarily related to a physical or biological condition. Rather her conception of virginity is intricately connected to questions of choice and consent. Arguably, for Rashieda, only consensual sexual relationships can result in 'losing' your virginity.

Rashieda's reference to what she was wearing when this occurrence happened conveys notions regarding the centrality of a woman's dress when exposed to the experience of rape. The idea that a woman's dress or behaviour is the cause for rape has been problematised in a great deal of feminist literature on rape. Feminist critique has astutely pointed out that seeing women's particular way of dressing as the cause for male sexual attack is highly problematic. Feminist critique also points out that this view is premised on patriarchal ideas of embodiment and dressing. In particular, sexist attitudes and norms regarding the acceptance of violence, deeply

ingrained in patriarchal ideologies, are unravelled in order to identify rape myths that effectively misrepresent and objectify female sexuality.<sup>71</sup>

Rashieda believes that the *hijab*, as symbolic of a particular form of female representation, should signal sexual unavailability. In some sense, her *hijab* also stands for protection against indecent assault. Her reference to her way of dress, when narrating this painful experience, is particularly significant with regard to contemporary debates on Muslim women's dress, that often pay less attention to the reality of violence in broader social landscapes within which many women are situated.

The topical subject of *hijab*, Muslim women's sexuality and moral agency has been dealt with extensively by Mernissi (2003 and 1991), Barlas (2009 and 2002) and Hoel (2005). Barlas stresses the Qur'anic verses, often interpreted by conservatives to refer to the compulsory donning of *hijab*, which she argues conveys both general and specific prescriptions.<sup>72</sup> The

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<sup>71</sup> For feminist work that deals with women's experiences of rape and the problematic ways in which particular constructs of victimhood are produced, see for example, Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975); Susan Estrich, *Real Rape* (1987); Colleen A. Ward, *Attitudes toward Rape: Feminist and Social Psychological Perspectives* (1995); Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" (1993); Nancy A. Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State* (1994); Nicola Gavey "I Wasn't Raped, but...": Revisiting Definitional Problems in Sexual Victimization" (1999); Christine Helliwell, "'It's Only a Penis': Rape, Feminism, and Difference" (2000); Laura Hengehold, "Remapping the Event: Institutional Discourses and the Trauma of Rape" (2000); Sharon Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention" (2002); Donat and D'Emilio, "Feminist Redefinition of Rape and Sexual Assault: Historical Foundations and Change" (1992); Sharon Lamb (ed.) *New Versions of Victims: Feminists Struggle with the Concept* (1999).

<sup>72</sup> The two verses in the Qur'an that many conservatives use to legitimise the compulsory wearing of *hijab* for women are Q33:59-60 and Q24:30-31:

Q33:59-60: "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their [jilbab] over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested...Truly, if the hypocrites, and those in whose hearts is a disease...Desist not, We shall certainly stir thee up against them."

Q24:30-31: "Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them:...and say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty;

specific prescriptions involve, among other things, Muslim women's wearing of *hijab* in *Jahili* society in order to protect themselves from sexual harassment by hypocrites at the time of the Prophet.<sup>73</sup> Through wearing the *hijab*, Muslim women were recognised as pious women, as opposed to prostitutes or slaves who were open to public scrutiny (2002:53-58). It is noteworthy that many respondents participating in this study, who reside in areas in which gangsterism, drugs/alcoholism and sexual abuse/rape of women form part of their local context, used this specific prescription of *hijab* as one of the underlying reasons for which they chose to wear *niqab/hijab*.<sup>74</sup> Thus, *hijab* for protection from sexual harassment as well as the religiosity expressed through this dress code were believed by some women to have an ameliorative impact on potential sexual attack. Rashieda did not allude to this particular reasoning during our interview; however, it is possible that her social reality has influenced the way in which she thinks around safety.

For some of the respondents participating in this study, wearing *hijab* can be seen as a particular social response to a violent context. The fact that some respondents pointed out the *hijab*'s protective function significantly speaks to the social conditions and structures within which they are situated. By extension, various local contexts bear resemblance to the *Jahili* society where women risked being sexually violated unless they took preventative measures. Arguably, local South African contexts necessitate similar preventative measures.

In Shaikh's (2003) analysis of the multiple reasons (and defences) for which Muslim women wear *hijab*, the importance of engaging Muslim women as subjects comes to the fore. By taking seriously women's self-understandings, monolithic representations and objectification can be increasingly prevented. For the respondents participating in this study, religious identity, obedience to God and keeping with the Islamic ideal of modesty were amongst the most

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that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their [khumur] over their bosoms and not display their beauty..."

<sup>73</sup> *Jahiliyyah* – time of ignorance, a Qur'anic term, applied by Muslim theologians to the period of paganism prior to the advent of Islam

<sup>74</sup> *Niqab* – a face veil covering the lower part of the face (up to the eyes) worn by some Muslim women

common reasons for wearing *hijab*. Nonetheless, it was noteworthy that particular perceptions about social contexts also significantly impacted upon their rationale and *need* for *hijab*.

## 6.5 Sexual Taboos

Besides pointing out that marriage is *the* condition that legitimises sexual interaction, some women also mentioned particular taboos that regulate sexual dynamics within marital relationships. Among the most prominent themes emerging from women's narratives were anal and/or oral sex, sex during menstruation and masturbation. There was a range of ways in which the respondents engaged with these topics. For some women, sexual practices like anal and oral sex were forbidden (*haram*) due to religious persuasions that were rooted in pure/impure dualities. For others, however, understandings and interpretations of what the text says, among other sources of information, do not necessarily determine how sexuality is played out or literally played with in reality. Particularly the issue of masturbation and oral sex reflected a diversity of opinions and respondents often articulated ambivalent subjectivities with regard to these sexual practices. Respondents often acknowledged dominant religious discourses mapping out guidelines for sexual praxis, while concurrently discounting these very structures in their intimate relationships. Some of the following narratives illustrate the complex relationship between understandings and social realities. For example, Nuriyya explained to me that:

Islam has set criteria of how you live your life [and] it also extends to the sexual life as well. There are certain things that are prohibited like masturbation, anal sex, and oral sex, and for me it [is] according to that set criteria.

In the above excerpt Nuriyya outlines the sexual practices she understands to be prohibited in Islam. It is also clear from this excerpt that she tries to live according to these regulations. However, further on in our conversation she asserts:

...unless my husband really really wants me to have oral sex with him I will think about it or consider it but I won't go near any of those, like anal sex. If he wants me to have it I will be like hell no!

Interestingly, Nuriyya is willing to make an exception (or at least think about it) in order to satisfy her husband's desires, despite the fact that she believes that oral sex is prohibited in Islam. In our interview, she did not mention the possibility of her own sexual satisfaction through any of the means she considers prohibited. However, Nuriyya clearly distinguishes between the possibility of partaking in oral sex and the total rejection of anal sex. Thus, from a perspective of acceptable sexual praxis, oral sex is seemingly viewed to be more acceptable on a personal level than anal sex.

Aisha explained her perception of the prohibition of oral sex through highlighting the underlying reasons for why she understands this sexual practice to be taboo:

[It is] because you recite the Qur'an with your mouth, you must make *dhikr* and praise Allah.<sup>75</sup>

Shanaaz articulated a similar understanding for why oral sex is prohibited:

If you think about it logically your mouth is the organ that you use to consume food which is *ni'ma*, something that God gives you to nourish your body. Number two is that your mouth is the organ you [use to] worship God, so if you are a Godly creature then how can you do something which is related to the carnal self, from a spiritual organ?<sup>76</sup>

In addition to perceiving the mouth as an organ for worship, utilising your mouth to give oral sex was associated, by some respondents, with succumbing to the desires of the carnal self. It is interesting to note that although many respondents view sex predominantly as a gift from God to be enjoyed, there are particular sexual practices, like oral sex, that revealed certain ambivalences relating to body/spirit dualisms. In addition to being a physical act, sex was sometimes conceived of as a spiritual engagement that intricately connected intimate spouses with God. However, the practice of oral sex was often spoken about in terms of carnal desires that should be subdued. The mouth should rather be cultivated as a spiritual organ whose sole mission is to worship God. Thus, for some respondents, it was inconceivable to perform oral sex on one's spouse with the

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<sup>75</sup> *Dhikr*, plural, *adhkar*: Lit remembrance (of God). Might refer to recitation of religious texts, repetition of certain words or formulas in praise of Allah

<sup>76</sup> *Ni'ma* – blessing

same mouth that is used for spiritual invocation. To a certain extent, there seems to be a dichotomy between the spiritual nature of sex and the carnal body, at least with regard to particular sexual practices. On the other hand, different respondents also had different conceptualisations regarding sexuality. A number of respondents emphasised the spiritual value of sex in general. Several respondents elucidated intercourse as the primary sexual union that potentially can bring about a spiritual experience. Some spoke about sex as a purely physical reality. Yet others expressed ambiguity and ambivalence related to particular accepted sexual norms when articulating views, understandings and experiences related to sexual practice.

With regard to masturbation/self-stimulation, women took part in a variety of discourses in which they made sense of particular understandings and/or practices related to this topic. The respondents articulated a number of positions regarding masturbation, ranging from expressing disgust to embracing it. However, a distinction was often made between performing masturbation alone and with spouse. Many women advocated that masturbation is not acceptable if it is performed alone, for example:

We as women can't have your [our] own satisfaction where you are meant to have your husband. [That] is wrong. Allah *Ta'ala* actually says that he frowns upon that person that performs masturbation. (Mansura)

I feel if you are doing it on yourself you are doing a sin and you will get punished for it. But if you are with your husband [and] you two are trying to [please each other] then... (Shanaaz)

I feel that it is permissible with regards to the wife giving pleasure to the husband especially when she is in a state where they cannot have intercourse, like maybe when she is menstruating. (Farhana)

The two first excerpts indicate, through the phrases “it is wrong”, “Allah *Ta'ala*...frowns”, “doing a sin”, and “you will get punished,” that a woman performing self-stimulation is understood to act contrary to constructions of normative accepted sexual behaviour. These two narratives clearly invoke religion to express the negative associations linked with this sexual practice. In the second and third excerpts, acceptability of masturbation is acknowledged if it is done *with* your husband. The third quotation places emphasis on the acceptability of

masturbation if it is performed by a wife on her husband, particularly if she is menstruating – when the couple is not allowed to have sexual intercourse. However, the second quotation can indicate that both husband and wife can masturbate each other/together. Due to the fact that the second quotation articulates religious consequences (punishment) if masturbation is done alone, masturbation as a *mutual* sexual praxis can be understood to form part of an accepted sexual praxis within an Islamic framework. This conveys an understanding of sex, when practised, as always being partnered.

It was noteworthy that when discussing sexuality, respondents often evoked what they perceived to be the parameters of Islam. This is significant because it indicates that part of the way in which many of the respondents conceptualise broader aspects of being sexual is informed by dominant discourses of normative religious behaviour. Part of what emerged from many narratives was the relational aspect of being sexual. In a way, many respondents' conceptualisations of their own sexuality were interlinked with and generated through intimate interaction with a partner. For some women, their sexual self-representations were reliant on a significant other to be sexual with. Within this conceptualisation of sexuality, particular sexual proclivities and fantasies might not be lived out through an individual capacity to be sexual with oneself, but rather through spousal sexual dynamics. Arguably, the importance given to mutuality and reciprocity in sexual relationships might influence perceptions specifically regarding self-stimulation.

Nonetheless, other respondents asserted that they do self-stimulate, for example Shafieka, having already expressed her dissatisfaction with regard to her current sexual relationship, said:

Because I have not been in any relationships that could get me [to] the point where I am stimulated enough... there wasn't someone to do that. I would imagine that if the need should arise again there shouldn't be a problem with that [self-stimulation] because I am not doing anyone harm.

Although Shafieka explained earlier that she sees attaining sexual pleasure as her right, she does not invoke religious justifications for why self-stimulation is acceptable. She does, however, justify her self-stimulation through explaining that neither her ex-husband, nor her current

husband, has been able to fully satisfy her sexually. Other women emphasised egalitarianism as grounds for the right to masturbate. Nurunisa explained:

Because a man can do it [masturbate], so why can't I do it? They talk about equality...what is equality in that. It is only the *imam* part, [that a] woman can't be a leader in a mosque, that is the only part... If he can stimulate himself then why can't I stimulate myself, I will go for it and I will do it.

From this excerpt it seems that Nurunisa believes that the only sphere in which a man and a woman have different capacities relates to the leadership of ritual prayer. Masturbation is understood by her to be equally allowed for men and women. She elucidates the unfairness in that men clearly do masturbate, and questions the underlying assumptions for why a woman cannot do it. Nurunisa's argument with regard to masturbation is interconnected with her understandings of gender equality within an Islamic framework. Hence, for Nurunisa, an Islamic sexual praxis can include the practice of self-stimulation. In addition, she challenges the notion outlined by quite a few other respondents – that it is not allowed for women to self-stimulate – by stating that “I will do it”. Through this statement Nurunisa rejects an apparently normative female subjectivity that forms part of a dominant Muslim discourse, in which self-stimulation is seen as contrary to Islamic acceptable sexual behaviour, and she presents an alternative subjectivity which she sees as concomitant with, and indeed supporting, her broader understandings of gender equality in Islam.

In the context of having gone through a divorce or experienced the death of a husband, and consequently having experienced being single for quite a number of years, many respondents explained how they dealt with the lack of sexual contact. For example, Khadija, reminiscing about the time before she re-married, explains:

I went the route of fasting, the first few years of my divorce. I fasted a lot, because for 14 years you're used to sexual activity. I'm not that highly sexed but I like having sex, and then all of a sudden you're in a situation where you don't have access to sex. [And] because of your religion and your morals and values, you're not gonna look for [go and have sex outside of marriage], and then I went the route of fasting because that is what religion taught me.

Khadija, although having experienced a difficult first marriage in which sex was something that was demanded of her, argues that it was difficult getting used to not being sexually active after 14 years of marriage. She chose fasting as a mechanism to keep her own desires under control.<sup>77</sup> Her statement “you’re not gonna look for” can refer to the unacceptability within an Islamic framework of having sexual interactions outside of marriage. Khadija does not engage with the issue of self-stimulation, but it can be inferred from the context that her practice of fasting includes avoiding self-stimulation as well. Her understanding of Islam informs her decision to fast, as reflected by her statement: “that is what religion taught me”.

From these excerpts it becomes clear that respondents had varying understandings of particular sexual practices, as well as different ways of dealing with sexual desire. Often, respondents spoke about sexuality within what they perceived to be the parameters of Islam. Sometimes, this framework informed how sexuality was played out in their intimate relationships. Other times, respondents mitigated and navigated through these discourses by performing sexual practices that could be seen to be opposing religious norms. Even so, some respondents still retained particular religious guidelines as ideal mappings for sexual praxis.

## 6.6 Spiritual Sex

It was noteworthy that the understanding of sex as a sacred and spiritual union was articulated by many of the respondents. This perspective conveys nascent ideas about the interconnectedness of embodied experiences and engaged spirituality. By viewing sexual intimacy as a way of potentially connecting to divinity, or the spiritual realm, many Muslim women challenge patriarchal notions of body/spirit dichotomies. For example, Somayya explains:

You just don’t go for the pleasure of it, because if you are going to cohabit then he prays his *niyat* and you say your own *niyat*. It is a *niyat* for the male and a *niyat* for the female, so God is involved on all levels. What you actually are saying [when evoking this *niyat*]

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<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, fasting as a way of regulating sexual desires and urges form part of a normative Islamic discourse. See for example Al-Hujwiri (1999).

is: take the male *shaitan* [Satan], the male devils and the female devils away from this union and if there is offspring then let this offspring be pious.<sup>78</sup>

Somayya points out that there is a particular prayer that should be recited before having sexual intercourse. In this way, she argues, “God is involved on all levels”. Consequently, for Somayya, sex is more than a physically pleasurable and enjoyable experience. Sex is about being conscious of God and by employing this particular prayer prior to the sexual act, one might suggest that for this couple, God is involved as part of a spiritual foreplay. Somayya places emphasis on God’s protection from the devils that might be present during this act of unification, as well as the yearning for piousness in offspring that can blossom from this sexual union.

Hence, sexual encounters are open to both positive (God) and negative (*shaitan*) spiritual forces. In this way sexual intimacy could be seen as a spiritually charged realm that is vulnerable and potentially ambiguous. Arguably, then, the spiritual realm is also generally susceptible to good and evil. By invoking God in this union, to protect the sexual act from negative influences (and by extension, to protect the spiritual sphere from evil manipulation), piety is also expressed in a way that places emphasis on the sacrality of the sexual act. For Somayya, this prayer can be understood to form part of an Islamic sexual praxis in which the pleasurable experience of the physical act of sex is only made meaningful through divine invocation and commemoration. Consequently, spirituality and sexuality are interwoven and are integral categories that reflect the fundamental nature of a complete human experience and at the same time challenge normative patriarchal dichotomies between the body and the spirit. Another respondent, Zaida asserts:

It [sex] is a form of worship and it is a form of connectedness with the Creator as well. I feel it is quite intimate the act of sex. It is so sacred in a sense. I’m talking about for me in marriage, it is the one time that you’re in a completely different space in terms of what happens between two people and it is almost like a third space in a way. [Sex] feels so spiritual, it feels so God-given and special and nothing actually compares with it in the rest of your life. I think it is quite a gift to be able to experience [sex] the way I’m thinking about it, which I don’t think I have experienced, where it can be two people really wanting to be in completely being. Maybe I’m being a bit romantic and idealistic, but being together and doing it [having sex] because [of] the care that they [spouses] have for each other, and the deep love and the authenticity with which they kind of living their lives together, that feels quite sacred with me.

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<sup>78</sup> *Niyat* – the intention one evokes in ones heart to do an act for the sake of Allah

In comparison with Somayya's narrative, it seems that Zaida places more emphasis on the act of sex itself as a form of worship. Her view of sexual interaction is intimately linked with understandings of sex being "sacred" and a "form of connectedness with the Creator". Zaida's narrative also elucidates sex as a God-given gift and the non-duality of a spiritual and embodied sexual experience. Her allusion to the creation of a "third space" highlights the divine element potentially present among and between two people, and indeed binding the two people together through the sexual act.<sup>79</sup>

However, Zaida's narrative reveals some marked paradoxes and ambiguity related to ideal conceptualisations regarding sexual intimacy and actual lived experiences. There are a number of elements in her response that are worth commenting on. Her reference to "a third space", a spiritual space that coalesces intimate spouses with the divine, is *not* borne out in her own experiences with sexual intimacy. Arguably, Zaida holds out this ideal conceptualisation of sexual encounters, lacking in her reality, as a way in which she one day hopes to experience sexual dynamics.

Zaida believes that there is such a thing as being "in completely being". In the context of our conversation I understood her notion of being "in completely being" to refer to an experience of oneness, unification, and interconnection with divinity that can permeate and infuse sexual relationships. For Zaida, on a conceptual level, Islam offers a symbolic space for this particular kind of intense spiritual/sexual intimacy, which she yearns for. Zaida is in fact currently divorced, due to her husband's repeated infidelity throughout their marriage. Speaking about her ex-husband, Zaida referred to her own feelings of emotional disconnectedness and distance as characterising features of how she experienced their marital relationship. She asserts: "I was feeling quite removed, so it was very unpleasant in that sense because I didn't feel like I was really connected at any kind of real level with him." Arguably, Zaida's need to feel a sense of interconnectedness through sexual intimacy, contrasts starkly with her actual experiences that are coloured by noted emotional and sexual distance. Her experiences and treasured ideals point to

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<sup>79</sup> Zaida's view of sexuality resonates with some of the dominant Sufi discourses on sexuality. See for example Valerie Hoffman's *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt*, 1995.

the tensions and ambiguities often embedded in respondents' narratives. Seemingly, this was a recurring motif where some women projected particular ideals as a way of coping with unmerciful, disappointing and at times even dysfunctional marital relationships. The following narrative also elucidates the sacredness of sex and is articulated by Waheeda. She explains:

We don't really talk about it [sex], [as] something that is really celebrated. We have sex everywhere but it's not celebrated, not the spirit of sex. The vile stuff and the titillating stuff is celebrated, but not the real joy. It [sex] is completely away [removed] from spirituality. You don't really see it [sex] as wow this is an experience and a union of souls and stuff. It [sex] is usually something dirty or cheap.

In this excerpt Waheeda highlights the paradox or lack in public discourses on sexuality. She argues that public discourses portray sex as completely stripped of sacredness. In our current society there is nothing sacred about sex; sex is celebrated, although only in a way that reinforces its profane nature. Sex, even in its most profane form, has become polluted through discourses of exploitation, materialisation and capitalism. The nature of these discourses is reflected in Waheeda's concluding comment in which she uses the words "dirty" and "cheap" to describe current public portrayals of sex. Waheeda provides a salient critique of the dominant mores on sexuality existing in contemporary culture. It can seem that Waheeda yearns for a sexual discourse in which the interconnectedness of souls and the sacrality of the sexual act can be restored and rejuvenated.

It is noteworthy that for many of the respondents that participated in this study, the explicit articulation of the interconnectedness of sexuality and spirituality was salient. This interconnectedness also mirrors the powerful human bond to God. These views are also expressed by some thinkers in the Muslim scholarly tradition within which spirituality and sexuality were seen as interdependent categories intrinsic to human nature. For example in the Islamic mystical tradition, writers like Ibn al-Arabi suggest that sexual intimacy not only creates the potential for procreation, but the potential for divine remembrance and service. He notes how loving spouses can through the act of sexual intercourse experience a sense of oneness with each other that mirrors the unicity of the divine. Thus, sexual activity can cultivate and nurture the spiritual essence shared by human beings, a bond that establishes a notion of spiritual sameness. In the *Fusus al-hikam*, Ibn al-Arabi argues:

When a person loves women within these bounds [the ability to witness God through loving women], that is a divine love. But when someone loves them [women] only out of natural appetite [sexuality that is driven by animal instincts], then he falls short of the knowledge of this appetite. For him the marriage act [sexual relationship] becomes a form without a spirit. Though in actual fact that form possesses a spirit, it is not witnessed by the one who comes to his wife, or to whatever female it may be, strictly for taking pleasure, but not knowing in whom. He remains ignorant of his own soul just as someone else remains ignorant of him as long as he does not name himself with his tongue so that he might be known...Such a person loves the taking of pleasure, so he loves the locus within which it is found, that is, the woman. However, the spirit of the question has remained hidden from him. Were he to know it, he would know in whom he takes pleasure and who it is that takes pleasure. Then he would be perfect. (Ibn al-Arabi, quoted in Murata, 1992:195; comments in square brackets are mine)

Despite Ibn al-Arabi's explicit emphasis on the divine potential of *male* sexual experiences through the relationship with women's bodies, the interconnectedness of sexual intimacy and pleasure with the divine is salient in the above narrative. Through reconnecting with the source of our being when engaging in sexual activity, the sexual encounter becomes infused with divine love that we experience through our physical body and unites us, in the spiritual sense, with the divine. By witnessing the divine in this intimate way, sexual relationships can be seen as a form of worship, *ibadat*, as well as an acknowledgment of spirituality as an essential aspect of human experience that can be present in bodily and sexual experiences.

Seeing spirituality and sexuality as integral categories that reflect the fundamental nature of a complete human experience, challenges particular normative patriarchal structures. Often, patriarchal religious discourses create dichotomies that separate the body and the spirit, soliciting gender hierarchies and dualisms. The excerpts included in this section reflect the various ways in which women's narratives challenge the very core of these patriarchal epistemologies through elucidating the intimate relationship between spirituality and sexuality that exists within all human beings. These engagements, embracing the possibility of spiritual sex, provide an alternative rationale through which a lived reality is experienced.

In the next chapter I explore the dominant discourse of a wife's sexual availability in light of respondents' experiential realities. This dominant discourse makes an interesting comparison with some of the religious ideals that have been articulated by the respondents in this chapter. The existence of seemingly ambiguous discourses is problematised through investigating the

various ways in which the respondents engage with, hold together, and navigate through these discursive fields.

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## Chapter 7:

### “A Good Muslim Woman should not refuse her Husband Sex”

**“I’m not going to be cursed on the day of *Qiyamat* [Day of Judgment] because I refused to give my husband sex.” – Khadija**

In several interviews, assumptions about women’s sexual availability to men emerged as a salient theme. The notion that it is unacceptable for a Muslim woman to refuse her husband sex formed part of a dominant and powerful religious discourse on sexuality that was recognised and accepted amongst many of the respondents. In this chapter I explore how some of the respondents engaged with the notion of sexual availability in light of their experiences in intimate relationships and marriage.

There were a number of ways in which the respondents spoke about sexual dynamics. On the one hand, for some respondents, the religious perspectives that suggest male sexual privilege informed sexual praxis in very real ways. A few respondents who were subject to violence more broadly in their marital relationships were also subject to the potent discourse of a wife’s sexual availability. The coupling of hierarchical gender relations with this religious norm placed some respondents in very vulnerable situations. On the other hand, several women also challenged and contested this dominant norm through elaborating alternative theological perspectives, including highlighting qualities such as God’s mercy and compassion. The discourse of Muslim women’s sexual availability was often countered or tempered through employing an Islamic ethic of mutual consideration and care. Yet, other women deeply internalised particular religious understandings of sexuality that prioritised their sexual availability to their husband.

Often, this notion of being sexually available was coupled with other religious discourses that interlinked sexual dynamics with religious responsibilities and the notion of God’s satisfaction. For example, many respondents believed that sex is a form of worship (*ibadat*). Since worship is a religious obligation, seeing sex as a potential expression of worship further informed various intimate relationships. Similarly, a number of respondents were subject to husbands’ invocation

of a particular *hadith* that entwine a husband's sexual satisfaction with God's satisfaction. The *hadith* reads as follows:

If a man invites his wife to sleep with him and she refuses to come to him, then the angels send their curses on her till morning.<sup>80</sup>

Women who refuse to sleep with their husbands will, according to this *hadith*, be cursed by the angels until the following morning. For some respondents, having sex with their husbands is better than being cursed by the angels and by extension provoking God's displeasure. Nonetheless, several respondents also negotiated this *hadith*, which featured to different degrees in their marital relationships, with a number of other existing religious discourses that espouse different ideals regarding spousal dynamics.

## 7.1 The God-Human Relationship in Sexual Interaction

As outlined in the previous chapter, many respondents understood sex to be intimately interlinked with a sense of spiritual connectedness. Although for many respondents this conceptualisation of sex was merely a symbolic ideal, often not reflected in actual experience, seeing sex in this way provides alternative views on the purpose and potential of sexual interaction. Nonetheless, these idyllic beliefs can also be combined with the discourse of a wife's sexual availability. For example, Aisha explained to me that:

You can't really say no, but I am now speaking of considerateness also, so if she is not feeling well, then maybe he can exercise a little bit of patience. You got to consider each other as well, but you mustn't refuse because the union is also the practising of an *ibadat* [worship].

Interestingly, within the context of this narrative, sex as a form of worship is not solely reflective of an unambiguous spiritual engagement. Rather, the coupling of sex as *ibadat* with the powerful

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<sup>80</sup> This *hadith* is included in *Sahih al-Bukhari* as well as in *Sahih Muslim*. *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, 810-870 A.D.) and *Sahih Muslim* (Muslim bin al-Hallaj, 817 or 821-875 A.D.), which are perceived to be the two most authoritative *hadith* collections by most Muslims (Hassan, 1990:103).

discourse of sexual availability generates potential problematic relations of power within a sexual relationship. Although Aisha asserts that “considerateness” and “patience” should inform sexual relationships, Aisha believes that a woman cannot say ‘no’ to sex *because* it is an act of *ibadat*. Thus, Aisha is not primarily making the case for mutual considerateness, although her understanding of sexual dynamics is nuanced through balancing broader ethical principles with a notion that demands her perpetual sexual readiness. While the spiritual dimension of sex is expressed in Aisha’s narrative, there is a stronger sense of *not refusing sex* because of its religious dimension, than of *having sex* as a way of expressing religiosity and connectedness to God.

The construct of ‘sex as a form of *ibadat*’ establishes a distinct and paired human relationship with God. Nonetheless, understanding sex as an act of *ibadat* is not removed from social contexts in which sexual relationships are lived out. Sex as a form of *ibadat* for many of my respondents involves heterosexual sex within the legal framework of marriage, thus always also influenced by broader marital dynamics. Sexual relationships encompass interpersonal gender dynamics, subjective expressions of religiosity, broader experiences in marriage, particular conceptualisations of sexuality, and the interrelation between these various levels of human experience and understandings.

Arguably, Aisha is holding together seemingly ambivalent understandings of sexual intimacy. On the one hand, her subjectivity is expressed through a particular conception of sex as part of religious worship together with an ethics of mutual consideration. And, simultaneously, she expresses that you should not refuse an opportunity to perform worship. The interconnectedness of these ambiguous discourses raises important questions on the nature of worship within a social context. What does it mean to be in a God/believer relationship? What are the ways in which various human relationships can mediate the relationship between the believer and God? What are the potential implications of intimate relationships in forming particular God/believer relationships? What if sex is perceived by the husband as a right he has over his wife? What if sex takes place through coercion? Can sexual interaction acted out through inegalitarian relations of power still be perceived as an act of *ibadat*? Is sex an act of *ibadat* if pleasure and enjoyment are absent for one of the spouses involved, or is sex *as* an act of *ibadat* contingent upon mutual

satisfaction? These are some of the questions that I address in the last chapter of this dissertation where I discuss some of the principles promoted by the Islamic feminist discourse together with the dominant themes that emerged in my empirical research.

A few respondents also expressed another dimension of sexual interaction that involves the God-human relationship. Here, a wife's sexual availability is interlinked with acting according to the will of God. For example, Hamedah explains:

When your husband asks you to have sex, you have to because you don't want [to] disobey God. The only time when you can say 'no' is when you're not feeling well, [and] that is only when you have your menstruation, [then] you're not allowed to have sex with your husband.

In this excerpt, Hamedah, like Aisha, invokes a particular understanding on the nature of sexual intimacy for why saying 'no' to your husband is problematic within an Islamic framework. However, instead of elaborating on the 'positive' aspect of sex as a form of *ibadat*, Hamedah places emphasis on the fact that you are disobeying the will of God if you refuse to have sex. Within this understanding, the pleasure/will of God becomes intimately connected to the pleasure/will of the husband. Correspondingly, obedience to God is shown through having sex with your husband when he makes sexual advances. Interestingly, the boundary between what is God's pleasure and what is a husband's pleasure appears to be permeable. The dominant discourse of a wife's sexual availability to her husband is here entwined with fulfilling the will of God, achieved through complying with the will of her husband. To the extent that this particular understanding of sexual dynamics forms part of marital relationships, the locus of power rests with the husband who can invoke religious justification, i.e. divine punishment, as the primary reason for why his wife should not refuse sex.

Although a few respondents challenge and mitigate these understandings, which I deal with later in this chapter, it is noteworthy that these perspectives form part of normative discourses on sexuality that largely inform respondents' conceptualisations of sexual dynamics. In the next section I highlight the existence of *one* particular *hadith* to illustrate the influence of the religious canon on contemporary sexual praxis. The social currency of this *hadith* might impact upon some of the various ways in which some respondents conceive of the God-human relationship.

## 7.2 Invoking *Hadith* in the Bedroom

The *hadith* that we encountered in the beginning of this chapter is explored in this section. What is the social world of this *hadith*? In many interviews, respondents expressed that this *hadith* is ‘common knowledge’ in Muslim circles.<sup>81</sup> The significant number of respondents who were subject to their husband’s invocation of this *hadith* in their marital relationship clearly underscores its significance in influencing contemporary Muslim sexual dynamics. Nonetheless, respondents who experienced the invocation of this *hadith* responded to its implicit directives in a number of different ways. For some women, this *hadith* has become part of an accepted jargon in the sense that it forms part of sexual praxis. One respondent mentioned that this *hadith* is a viable antecedent for sexual interaction and is sometimes entwined with sexual foreplay in her marriage. For other women, this *hadith* informed sexual praxis and particular understandings of sexual dynamics, often legitimising a husband’s purportedly religious right to demand sex whenever he wishes. Yet, other women challenged and contested the legitimacy and justification for the invocation of this *hadith* in their intimate relationships. The following excerpt is from a conversation I had with Somayya:

Somayya: If you have refused your husband [sex] then you will be cursed by those angels from that time [that you refuse] until the next dawn, and then I don’t see any reason why you should actually refuse.

Nina: Have you ever experienced your husband saying that *hadith* to you?

Somayya: Yes, many times, and women sleep with their husbands even though they hate them because of that.

Somayya’s acceptance of this *hadith* is strongly linked to the ‘punishment’ it invokes. It is the possibility of being cursed by the angels that removes any doubt as to whether one should question the underlying reasons for why a woman should not refuse her husband. The authority

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<sup>81</sup> There were two other concomitant *ahadith*, articulated by the respondents, reflecting similar sexual dynamics:

Firstly, “No woman fulfils all her duties towards Allah until she fulfils all her duties towards her husband. If he asks her [for his conjugal rights] even when she is on the back of a camel, she should respond to him”; and secondly, “Allah’s Messenger said: ‘When a man calls his wife to satisfy his desire she must go to him even if she is occupied at the oven’”. These two *hadith* are cited in the canonical *hadith* collections of al-Bukhari and Tirmidhi, respectively.

inherent in this *hadith* is illuminated through her statement: “women sleep with their husbands even though they hate them because of that”. Although Somayya expressed in our interview that she is in a loving marriage and has a “good sexual life” with her husband, intimate relationships still become potentially ambiguous by acknowledging the authority of the religious prescriptions implicit in this *hadith*. Similarly Nurunisa explains:

Nurunisa: I was raised to never say ‘no’ to your husband, even if you are making a pot of food. If I make a pot of food and he decides that he wants to [have sex], then I have to put off [stop cooking] and you have to go [to have sex], you can’t say ‘no’, then the angels will curse you from the morning to the night.

Nina: Did he say that to you?

Nurunisa: Yes he always says it [recites this *hadith*], even now he will say it. Maybe Allah is going to punish me, I must pray a lot.

Nurunisa’s conceptualisation of sexual dynamics is partly informed by her upbringing where the powerful discourse of a wife’s sexual availability was emphasised. For Nurunisa, this *hadith* (although a different version of it) forms an intricate part of her intimate relationship and effectively guides sexual praxis. Nonetheless, in her marriage, Nurunisa has been exposed to her husband’s infidelity and various forms of abuse. As a result of these experiences Nurunisa challenges the legitimacy of these religious prescriptions for her marital relationship. She explains:

Nurunisa: I decided I am not going to sleep with him anymore, now it is enough. I am tired of all the funny smell, or lying in bed and the blankets don’t smell nice. He [husband] is the one who makes me sick like that, sweat and smell and wine.

Nina: Does he respect that?

Nurunisa: No, he is cross!

Nina: So does he try to have sex with you?

Nurunisa: No, he just says, this isn’t me speaking I am just repeating, [husband says:] ‘I am not going to come after you for pussy’, and ‘I don’t beg you for your pussy’, that is what he says. That is fine, I want it like that because I am tired.

Nurunisa’s reference in the first excerpt to God’s punishment, “Maybe Allah is going to punish me, I must pray a lot”, can be linked to the fact that she recently told her husband that there will be no more sex in their marriage. Her belief in the potential punishment from God as a consequence for refusing sexual interaction is a view mirrored by many of the respondents. In

our interview, Nurunisa explained that her experiences with her husband's abuse of alcohol and drugs and the occasional extra-marital affair strongly contributed to her decision not to have sex with him. Interestingly for Nurunisa, although a wife's sexual availability still holds currency on the level of religious persuasions, the nature of her particular marital relationship opens up a space for contestation. Her engagement evokes Shaikh's (2007) discussion of a *tafsir* of praxis as Nurunisa's social reality undoubtedly influences the ways in which she makes sense of religious meaning. Consequently, the authority of particular religious constructs of sexual dynamics is mitigated through Nurunisa's own sensibilities coupled with her experiences in her marital relationship. Although Nurunisa elucidates praying as a means by which she can compensate for her decision, she does not go back on her decision or regret it.

Many respondents who were confronted with this *hadith* evoked the notion of a merciful and compassionate God as a way of contesting and challenging the currency of this *hadith* in their marital relationship as well as in broader social contexts. The following excerpt is from a conversation between Saba and me:

Saba: My husband is a very vocal person, I mean you should meet him, he is very vocal, and you know he likes that one about the angels.

Nina: Would he say it to you?

Saba: He did, he doesn't know *hadith*, he can't quote *hadith*, but who doesn't know that one, so he knows that one but... if you choose to say that [recite this *hadith*] to me I first and foremost would take a step back and look at what you did that brought us to this place [of having to use coercive *hadith* to obtain sex]. So he can say it all he wants, he did, but I didn't take it to mind.

Arguably, for Saba, one does not need to be a religious expert in order to be aware of the existence of this *hadith*. This indicates that this particular *hadith* has a powerful social acceptance among the broader population of the Muslim community and is being *kept alive* through being articulated in various social interactions and within marital relationships. Although she is confronted with this *hadith* in her marital relationship, Saba responds to her husband in a way that actually interrogates the utility of the *hadith*.

Saba's narrative revolves around the underlying reasons for *why* it is necessary for her husband to recite this *hadith* to her. Thus, her question directed to her husband of, "what you [he] did", is

salient in the context of finding out what factors and relationship dynamics prompted him to recite this *hadith*. In effect, Saba is suggesting that there is a problem or a moment of crisis in their relationship that precipitates her husband's use of this *hadith* as a way to deflect the problem at hand. Thus, Saba implies that this *hadith* is in fact symptomatic of a problem, and that she prefers to deal with the problem. She is not rejecting the *hadith*, nonetheless, she is significantly reinterpreting this *hadith* in a way that marks it as a signal of a problem in her marital relationship. It is interesting that her focus is solely on her husband's actions, and not whether it was something that she did that could potentially provoke him to recite the *hadith*. Saba is contesting the very premise of their sexual engagement when this *hadith* forms part of their sexual dynamics. Thus, the justification of sexual intercourse through the invocation of religious text is not taken at face value, but rather, must be understood in light of broader relationship dynamics. Saba includes the importance of reflection in this situation as a way through which she responds to her husband's sexual 'invitation'.

Furthermore, Saba states that it does not matter how many times her husband invokes this *hadith*, her response would still be the same – she would not take it to mind. Thus, Saba implicitly delegitimises the religious and sexual authority embedded in this *hadith* through firstly, not complying with her husband's request, and by extension rejecting the structure of sexual dynamics it creates. Farhana, who earlier in our interview expressed that a husband has a 'religious' right to sexual intercourse, asserts the following in relation to this *hadith*:

You know the story where you need to sleep with your husband and if you don't then the angels will curse you until the morning...I understand that part, but I think the interpretation is sometimes not taken the way it should. Take the situation and look at it, if your husband is sleeping around and there is AIDS everywhere, whether religion says it or not I am not going to sleep with that man. I always then think about that God is merciful.

In this narrative Farhana highlights that the directives implicit in this *hadith* should be contingent on the social context in which we live. Thus, although she acknowledges particular religious ideals related to a wife's sexual availability to her husband, she balances this view by pointing out particular circumstances in which religious 'commands' can be abrogated. For example, Farhana's narrative is informed by her awareness of spousal infidelity forming part of the social

fabric in which she situates herself, as well as the reality of HIV/AIDS in her community. Similarly, Saba argues,

Say for example that a man slaps his wife around and then he says to her you know here I am [indicating with gestures that they shall have sex], how can she possibly want to sleep with that man? So how can the angels be angry at that woman for not [having sex with her husband]? It's inhuman for a man to have ill-treated the woman and then she must be ready to share her body which is a very private part. I can't believe that Allah would be so unfair.

By constantly invoking a merciful God as a counterpoint, Farhana and Saba provide an implicit critique of the lack of mercifulness and humanness embedded within this *hadith*. The notion of God as merciful was a constant refrain amongst respondents who were confronted with hierarchical sexual power dynamics in their marital relationships. Although some respondents employed this notion of a merciful God as a form of resistance, for other respondents, believing that God is merciful also functioned as a coping mechanism in brutal and unmerciful marital relationships. Nonetheless, for many women the belief that God is merciful trumps the religious legitimacy of this *hadith* in complex contemporary contexts within which life-threatening illnesses, infidelity and woman abuse exist. The need to contextualise particular religious prescriptions guiding sexual praxis, in light of current contexts, becomes salient. Thus, for both Farhana and Saba, a contemporary Islamic sexual ethics must include principles such as mercy and fairness, as divine pillars guiding sexual praxis in a contemporary challenging environment. This way of engaging with religious texts resonates with Islamic feminist endeavours in which emphasis is placed on the questionable eternity of particular textual sources and their *validity for contemporary societies*.

In the excerpts above, Farhana and Saba engage in particular contestations of dominant views regarding women's permanent sexual availability to their husbands and the possibility of receiving the curse of the angels if they refuse to have sex. This engagement evokes Amina Wadud's (2006) discussion on *khalifah* (moral agency) in which individuals' moral responsibilities are stressed in order to work towards ideals of social justice. Farhana and Saba effectively challenge the existence of patriarchal norms as they relate to social contexts in ways that seek to address and reformulate particular expressions of inegalitarian gender dynamics.

Farhana and Saba are employing their ethical responsibilities in ways that advocate religious meaning systems that they see as more in accordance with Divine attributes of justice and mercy. Abou El Fadl's (2001) notion of taking a "conscientious-pause" echoes Farhana and Saba's engagement, as their resistance can be seen as interlinked with a form of internal unsettling of consciousness within which lack of acceptable and humane interactions evokes the need to redress the dominant discourses shaping contemporary Islamic sexual ethics. By extension, it can be inferred from the quotations above that Farhana and Saba utilise the methodological option outlined by Amina Wadud (2006) to 'say no' to particular religious texts/teachings that cause us discomfort in our social context.

The abovementioned *hadith*, with its prominent historical residues, is relevant for the understanding of contemporary sexual dynamics. As shown through the excerpts outlined above, the implications of the commonality and acceptance of this *hadith* with its particular androcentric proclivities are influential, to various degrees, in women's lives. Patriarchal epistemologies revived and reproduced through articulating this *hadith* in various social contexts and in intimate relationships express an Islamic sexual ethics that is rooted in inegalitarian understandings of gender dynamics. The invocation of this *hadith* can as such inform women's sexual experiences and perceptions of what it means to be an embodied human being, and can also influence the ways in which sexual relationships in marital unions are structured and lived out. Within this context, the construction of women as sexual beings serving the needs of men becomes an important site of contestation.

### **7.3 Sexual Availability and Broader Marital Dynamics**

For some respondents, religious discourses that assert male sexual privilege were intertwined with experiences of sexual abuse, marital infidelity, and domestic violence.<sup>82</sup> The following

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<sup>82</sup> Amongst my respondents, fourteen women had experiences with spousal infidelity. A significant number also had experienced physical abuse within the marital union, and a combination of verbal, financial and emotional abuse. Also, a substantial number of my respondents said that they experienced sexual abuse/marital rape in their marital relationships. The prevalence of marital infidelity, marital abuse and sexual violence are reflective of broader trends within the South African landscape; in other words, these dynamics are in no way unique to the Muslim community.

narratives illustrate various marital dynamics that are subject to the influence of these normative views on sexuality that further complicate intimate relationships and make salient broader relations of power. Khadija's previous marriage was characterised by various forms of abuse that permeated sexual dynamics and marital relations more broadly.<sup>83</sup> Khadija explains:

I'm a Muslim woman and I should be obedient towards my husband, my brain told me that he has a right to have access to my vagina. I didn't think of it as violation at that time. Now, I can say yes [it was a violation], but that time it was just what I have to do because I'm a good Muslim woman and good Muslim women satisfy their husbands.

For Khadija, wifely obedience and sexual availability are behavioural components that make up a good Muslim woman.<sup>84</sup> Although Khadija explained in the interview that she often did not want to have sex with her husband, she believed, at the time, that her husband's unrestricted access to her vagina was part of what constitutes marriage.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, Khadija also believed that it was her duty as a good Muslim woman to make sure that her husband was sexually satisfied. Thus, the concept of being a good Muslim woman contains both personal characteristics that can be cultivated *within* and lived out in intimate relationships (e.g. obedience), and qualities realised *through* engaging with one's husband (e.g. sexual availability and ensuring husband's satisfaction).

The understanding of having a responsibility/duty to satisfy your husband sexually was highlighted by a few other respondents as well. Shafieka, having experienced adultery in her first marriage as well as in her current marriage, linked this 'duty' to the belief that "if you are not available, he can go out and give it [sex] to somebody else, that is where you as a woman make your mistake". By implication, according to this excerpt, it is a woman's responsibility to keep

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My empirical findings related to these issues broadly reflect the data reported in Toefy (2001) and A. Mohammed (1997 and 2003).

<sup>83</sup> Khadija's understandings of sexual dynamics was also dealt with in Chapter 6, page 131-132.

<sup>84</sup> Shaikh (2007) found in her study on battered women that her respondents predominantly connected the ideal of a good Muslim woman with wearing modest dress and remaining chaste. Shaikh argues that respondents' understandings of religious identities were "significantly related to sexual propriety" (2007:76).

<sup>85</sup> According to Kecia Ali (2006), the classical legal tradition primarily conceived of men's unrestricted sexual access to their wives as part of what constitutes marriage.

her husband sexually satisfied so that he does not go out and commit adultery. In this construction, a good Muslim woman ensures a sexually satisfied husband thereby becoming partially responsible for male sexual behaviour. This understanding poses great challenges with regard to developing an egalitarian sexual ethics. It also questions the essence of each believer's individual responsibility for sexual behaviour and ability to monitor their own sexual boundaries. Rendering men unaccountable for their sexual transgressions, justified by lack of sexual satisfaction within the marital union, also creates very problematic notions of male agency in relation to sexual ethics. It begs the question of what is ethical sexual behaviour for a Muslim man. I will draw this point into a discussion on notions of moral agency as it relates to sexual behaviour, in the last chapter of this dissertation.

Many respondents seemed to be interrogating or resisting some of these norms of sexual behaviour. Some respondents challenged the inegalitarianism implicit in this construct by foregrounding equal responsibilities and sensibilities. Other respondents stated that their husband's infidelity was one of the main reasons for why they initiated divorce or marital counselling. For other respondents, the discourse of a wife's sexual availability became increasingly contested when exposed to a husband's infidelity. For example, Khadija started to challenge her husband's right to have sex with her:

He [husband] said that you are going to be punished if you don't [have sex with him], so I said I won't, because then I started challenging him and [I] said, God is not unmerciful. Every day I tell myself that we have a merciful God, and God will not put anyone through this, I'm not listening to you [husband] using religion for your own benefits, I'm into using this [pointing to her head], my logic, my brain that Allah has given me in order to defend myself against people like you. I doubt whether you are clean, I don't know with which diseases you're coming home. I refuse to accept the facts [that she must sleep with her husband despite his sexual infidelity], and you're a practising Muslim woman [referring to herself]. I said that I refused to accept the fact that Allah will punish me because I say 'no' to you [husband]. I don't know what the man is coming home with [referring to potential diseases]. I refuse to accept the fact that I don't have a say in whether I want to have sex or not.

Khadija's husband is fully aware of her commitment to being a good Muslim woman, and is able to take advantage of her assiduous effort to live up to this ideal. He justifies his right to sexual intercourse by articulating the possibility of the divine punishment that awaits her if she refuses.

Khadija's decision to contest the discourse of a wife's sexual availability is deeply informed by her own situation. There are aspects of her sexual relationship with her husband that she finds unacceptable. She does not believe that God demands of her to have sexual intimacy with a man who can expose her to diseases and illness due to his adulterous behaviour. Khadija enacts her right to say 'no' to sex partly due to her understanding of particular qualities of God that inform her religious worldview. It is noteworthy that Khadija's resistance is predominantly enacted by utilising religion as a supportive framework. Arguably, the existence of ambiguous Islamic discourses can be employed to suppress as well as to empower. This reflects, amongst other things, the multifaceted dimensions of Islam as well as the relational nature of various discourses with social realities.

The ways in which many of the respondents in this study engage with the ambiguous nature of religious heritage are also highlighted by Shaikh (2007). She found in her study on marital violence in Muslim communities that when women were confronted with fundamentally harmful experiences, they often engaged with religion in ways that challenged patriarchal ideologies. Simultaneously, they employed other religious discourses that allowed for empowerment and rebuilding of alternative individual religious selves. Similarly, Abdulkader Tayob (2003) found in his interviews with women who experience a crisis in difficult marital relationships, varying modes of negotiating relationship dynamics and religious identities. Often, the existence of ambiguous religious beliefs provided novel ways to engage with problematic marriages.

Khadija's assertion that God is merciful can be seen as a form of resistance to a dominant patriarchal narrative that has influenced the sexual dynamics in her marital relationship. Through elaborating on God's mercy, Khadija also presents an ethical ideal that empowers her in what is patently an unmerciful social reality. In addition, the belief in a merciful God challenges her husband's more instrumentalised use of religion in matters of sexual dynamics. Furthermore, through this engagement with religious values and ethics, Khadija asserts her right to utilise what she considers as her God-given logic. Khadija's response to her husband is fundamentally premised on moral reasoning that is intricately linked with her social context. Her moral reasoning also projects particular understandings of Islamic ethics that should guide interpersonal relationships.

Khadija asserts and emphasises her right to sexual autonomy in light of her husband's behaviour of seeking pleasure elsewhere. Khadija *refuses* to accept that she will be punished if she says 'no' to her husband. First of all, her husband is the one engaging in extramarital sexual intercourse. Secondly, by being aware of her husband's infidelity, Khadija believes she has the right to protect herself from possible life-threatening diseases. Thus, the contextual engagement with religious norms in light of the real threat of becoming infected with HIV, as outlined by Saba and Farhana in the previous section, renders particular accepted religious discourses obsolete. In Khadija's case, dominant male-favourable assumptions and discourses that guide sexual praxis are replaced by an Islamic ethics that is grounded in Khadija's life experiences and need for alternative understandings of religious discourses shaping sexual praxis.

For one respondent who experienced spousal infidelity in her marriage, speaking to a religious leader in her local community formed part of the way in which she approached the situation. Shafieka explains:

When I first found out that my husband did this [extra-marital affair] I said "*sheikh*, I know a woman is not allowed to say no to her husband for sex, any sex, any time, in my case do I have the right?", I needed his [approval], he knows a little bit more [about Islamic rights] and I went to him and I said to him "*sheikh* this is it..." [informing the *sheikh* about husband's adultery], I have never spoken to him like this before ever. I was too shy to talk about sex like that. I would never mention it.

Seemingly, Shafieka gathers the courage to ask the local *sheikh* for advice. The very act itself of asking the *sheikh's* advice on this sensitive and personal matter was for Shafieka extremely challenging. It became apparent from other narratives as well that there are particular areas specifically related to issues around sexuality, which are considered socially unacceptable to speak about to people outside of the bedroom. However, Shafieka felt that this issue was so important to her that she defied normative standards of acceptable dialogical relationships.

Although Shafieka believes that a woman is not allowed to refuse her husband sex, in this particular situation she wanted to know whether it was within her rights to refuse. It can also be inferred from Shafieka's narrative that to have the *sheikh's* permission and support to say 'no' to her husband carries significant weight and authority due to his knowledge and position of power.

The *sheikh* did tell Shafieka that she had the right to refuse her husband sex, and he also said that she had the right to tell him to “get out”.

It is noteworthy that Shafieka appears to genuinely need this kind of support and advice from the local *sheikh*. Throughout our conversation it became apparent that the *sheikh* was very accessible to the local community with regard to marital problems, amongst other issues, and that many women in the vicinity had established a close and personal relationship with him. It is significant to note that this *sheikh* engaged with Shafieka in a way that was empowering. He also advocated an ethics based on justice, in which sexual transgressions are unacceptable behaviour for men and women alike. Shafieka’s narrative stands out as one of the few narratives amongst my respondents where religious authorities are seemingly helpful with giving advice to women who experience difficult marital relationships.

Nonetheless, Shafieka’s narrative also raises some critical questions regarding her own capacity to act and make decisions in her own right. Why does Shafieka need pre-approval to say ‘no’ to having sex with her husband? Although the *sheikh* does not restrict Shafieka’s range of potential responses to her husband’s infidelity – rather, he says that she has the right to leave him – the *sheikh*’s potential influence over Shafieka’s decision-making can represent women’s dependency on a symbolic (male) authority. Thus, the locus of control regarding decision-making related to subjective experiences is placed outside of the female individual who is living this experience. This resonates with Wadud’s (2006) and Shaikh’s (2003b) engagement with women’s limited potential to act as moral agents in their own right, due to structures of male power. Even on a symbolic level, the authority of male leadership has become so deeply ingrained that many women hesitate to employ their capacity for individual responses and actions in situations that are profoundly unjust.

Shafieka is allowing her experiences to inform the way in which she makes sense of and applies religious teachings. In this context, Shafieka’s capacity for agency is intricately linked to a particular subjective experience that acquires alternative or expanded readings of accepted normative female behaviour rooted in religious discourse. Shafieka’s active engagement with religious authority (the local *imam*) on this matter is salient in that firstly, it challenges the notion

of the 'don't ask, don't tell'-mentality. And secondly, her engagement provides her with an authoritative opinion that supports her decision to refuse her husband sex, while at the same time being situated within an Islamic discourse of acceptable female behaviour.

For respondents who had experienced sexual abuse prior to their marriage, the dominant discourse of a wife's sexual availability presented problematic implications with regard to their intimate experiences. For some respondents, conceptualisations of sexuality as well as their lived sexual relationships were intimately connected with their traumatic experiences of abuse. Often their lack of sexual enjoyment and feelings of sexual disassociation in their intimate relationships came to the fore. Mariam outlines the dynamics of her sexual relationship:

I know that it is not allowed for you to say no to your husband if you don't have a valid reason, so right now basically I don't have any valid reasons. I think it is because my emotions are not involved when I'm having sex, it is almost an act outside [of] who I am, seriously, as long as he is satisfied then ja then it's fine...

Mariam conveys feelings of alienation and even dissociation when explaining the nature of her sexual relationship with her husband. It appears as though one of the underlying reasons for why she is able to have sex is the fact that her "emotions are not involved" during sexual intercourse. Earlier in our conversation Mariam explained to me that she was sexually abused throughout her formative years and teens, and as a result of this experience she feels that she is unable to experience sexual pleasure. She stated several times in our conversations that "I'm happy when he [husband] gets it over and done with." This notion is also reflected in the above excerpt in which she states that the satisfaction of her husband is basically the main purpose of the sexual engagement.

For Mariam, understandings of religious views on sexual dynamics and lived sexual praxis are intricately connected, despite her particular (sexual) experiences. Her experiences with sexual abuse do not seem to influence the currency of particular sexual norms in her marriage.

Mariam explained to me that she had told her husband about the sexual abuse she experienced in her youth. Hence, it can be implied that there was enough comfort in the marital relationship to

share this experience with her husband. However, from Mariam's account, it appeared that neither possessed sufficient skills in dealing with this situation. Mariam narrates:

When I saw that we were going to be serious [going to get married] I told him [husband] about it [the sexual abuse]. He didn't react in the way that I thought he would. He just brushed over it, because I think it is something that he doesn't know how to deal with. The worst thing in my marriage is that we never talk about things. I am never allowed to talk about it [sexual abuse]. My husband is a very good man and all that, but he doesn't allow me to express myself. Sometimes I feel that I can't stand it, I am silenced by that [lack of acceptance with regard to speaking about particular issues]... [but] this world is temporal, our true lives are going to begin in the hereafter. That gives me a lot of strength for my day-to-day challenges, [and] I can overlook a lot of things of what my husband does.

What we are seeing here is an inability on the part of spouses to engage with issues, but in different ways: on the one hand, male spouses refuses to engage, while on the other hand, female spouses are unable to induce the other party, or other family members, to engage. Many respondents pointed out that there is a lack of existing channels within their local community through which their stories could be taken seriously and dealt with appropriately. Arguably, the 'don't ask, don't tell'-mentality and the perceived social taboo around having a public discourse on this issue, influence women's (and men's) opportunities to share these often-traumatic experiences. The presence of these social dynamics might render a couple incapable of dealing with these very painful and sensitive issues when raised in the context of marriage. It also impacts upon the intimate and sexual dynamics within marital relationships.

Mariam's husband's reaction alludes to feelings of discomfort and lack of competence. As reflected in other respondents' narratives, it is often easier for the intimate partner to avoid the issue by rendering it a topic that is unacceptable to speak about. The fact that she complies with her husband's wish of not speaking about this particular issue can be understood through Mariam's elucidation on the hereafter within which "our true lives [will] begin". It is essential to note that her strong belief in the reality of the hereafter gives her a sense of profound strength in this physical (present) reality. Some of the respondents, particularly women who had gone through various traumatic experiences, expressed similar views. Arguably, the emphasis placed on the reality of the hereafter can function as a coping mechanism that in fact perpetuates social

conditions of violence and sexual abuse because it induces women to accept present negative circumstances, instead of attempting to change them for the better.

Often, dominant religious norms and community opinions influence the ways in which individuals choose to deal with particular experiences, both within a public discourse as well as within interpersonal relationships. Mariam's capacity for action and dialogue is clearly tempered by the existence of these dynamics. Furthermore, Mariam expressed the existence of other religious discourses that influence her understanding of sexual dynamics:

Even when you are having relations [sexual intercourse] with your husband it is a charity, you are being blessed for it. Allah blesses you for every act of kindness you do towards your spouse.<sup>86</sup>

Although Mariam expresses feelings of alienation and estrangement when having sex with her husband, due to her experiences of sexual abuse, she simultaneously believes that sex is an act of charity and that Allah will bestow blessings upon her for her sexual engagement with her husband. Her multiple and ambivalent conceptualisation of sexuality is noteworthy in that she holds a seemingly larger notion of an individual generous self together with a bereft and pained self that has experienced abuse. Seeing sex as an act of charity, arguably presupposes a self that has abundance and plenitude. Sex as charity assumes a generous self. A self that has been violated and abused is conceivably a wounded self.

It can be inferred from Mariam's narrative that her conceptualisation of sex is informed by normative religious ideals that espouse generosity. Nonetheless, these discursive traditions do not take into account that believers also experience trauma and torment in their lives, sometimes rendering individual selves vulnerable and damaged. Difficult experiences influence believers'

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<sup>86</sup> The understanding of sex as a way of expressing charity also forms part of the *hadith* tradition. For example in the canonical *hadith* collection of Muslim, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Has not Allah made things for you to give away in charity? ...to enjoin a good action is a charity, to forbid an evil action is a charity, and in the sexual act of each of you there is a charity". They [the companions of the Prophet] said: "O Messenger of Allah, when one of us fulfils his sexual desire will he have some reward for that?" He [the Prophet] said: "Do you not think that were he to act upon it unlawfully he would be sinning? Likewise, if he has acted upon it lawfully he will have a reward".

capacity to subsume or live out these religious ideals in their embodied realities. Often, wounded selves need healing before generosity can be expressed. It seems that Mariam's sense of self, as expressed in her narratives above, is still deeply wounded, being "outside" of who she is when having sex with her husband. Nonetheless, perceiving sex as an act of charity might underpin her ability to endure sexual intercourse, in particular, through highlighting the blessings that can transpire from this union. Arguably, Mariam's conceptualisation of sex as charity might function as a form of escapism from having to deal with her ambivalent emotions that might emerge if she were to be *fully present* in sexual interaction with her husband.

A few respondents had experiences with violence and sexual abuse in their marital relationships. Although some respondents spoke about their experiences in light of religious norms, such as wifely obedience and particular conceptions of sexual dynamics, other respondents situated their experiences within the ambit of broader cultural constructs. Rashieda, currently divorced, having lived through a marriage within which violence and infidelity were characterising features, explains:

He [husband] would just rip my clothes off, he did say "it is my right" [as a husband], he did say that. He would lie next to me in bed and he would masturbate next to me and he would have sex with me every day. Then he would get out of the bed and go out [to see other women] in the early hours of the morning.

As Rashieda continued her narrative it became clear that her husband sought sexual satisfaction from a variety of women, including prostitutes. I asked Rashieda whether she ever asked her husband to use a condom in order to protect herself from possible diseases, she replied:

No, I never, do you know... I didn't want him to have sex with me. It was a one-sided thing. I often told him "just do whatever you want". I wasn't a participant. I allowed him to appease himself just to keep the peace.

As opposed to Khadija, Rashieda does not talk about her experiences by drawing on understandings about what it means to be a good Muslim woman. Rather, she states that it was her husband that was under the impression that it was his right as the husband to have sex with her whenever he pleased. Rashieda does not relate her husband's assumption of this 'right' to

understandings of Muslim sexual dynamics. Hence, in her case, her husband might have thought that it was his right to have sex with her simply because he was the man and she was his wife. Within the broader context of South Africa, a variety of understandings of male-female dynamics and gender hierarchies pervade a number of societies and cultures. Religion is one particular social factor that influences and informs contemporary notions of gender norms and behaviour. It became clear in my interview with Rashieda that particular cultural perceptions regarding marital dynamics and women's roles were salient and impacted significantly upon her marital relationship I allude to these beliefs later in this section.

In the second quotation, Rashieda makes it clear that she did not want to have sex with her husband, however, she "allowed him" to have sex with her in order to avoid other conflicts and violent abuse. With regard to negotiating condom use, Rashieda explained that she never asked her husband to use a condom. It is unclear what her underlying reason for this was as she moved on to saying that she did not want him to have sex with her at all. From her narrative, however, it can be inferred that her increased vulnerability to STIs or HIV due to her husband's adulterous escapades was not salient for her. Rather, her main concern was to keep the peace in the home. Thus, the discomfort of having sex with her husband (and the possibility of getting infected with STIs/HIV) was measured against other likely scenarios that were seen as more disconcerting and disturbing for the broader well-being of her family.

With regard to negotiating condom use due to knowledge about a husband's infidelity, Khadija explained to me that:

He [husband] didn't want to use a condom [when having sex with her] and that time it was difficult to refuse him any sex because I thought a good Muslim woman does not refuse her husband sex.

Again, the constant refrain of a good Muslim woman that does not refuse her husband sex is being invoked. This time, however, it is in a situation in which the risk of contracting STIs or HIV is a real possibility. Consequently, for Khadija, her understanding of what it meant to be a good Muslim woman increased her vulnerability to STIs/HIV as her husband's refusal to wear a condom did *not*, at the time, influence Khadija's sense of obligation to have sex with him

whenever he wanted to (despite having knowledge about his infidelity). Nonetheless, as outlined previously in this chapter, later on in her marriage Khadija did start to challenge her husband's right to have sex with her and asserted her right to protect herself from potential life-threatening diseases.

Both Rashieda's and Khadija's narratives illustrate how particular structures of sexual dynamics might affect women's sexual health. It is significant that women are increasingly vulnerable to STIs/HIV due to specific norms and ideals that clearly inform intimate relationships and male sexual behaviour and expectations, by removing agency from women over their own bodies. Also, both Rashieda and Khadija are *aware* that their husbands are engaging in extra-marital sex. Consequently, the discourses in which they are situated guide their sexual praxis and in various ways limit their bodily autonomy in ways that potentially can threaten their lives.

Rashieda and Khadija are trying to negotiate a space at home within which pragmatic and short-term solutions are being employed to avoid marital abuse and violence. The fact that they are sleeping with their husbands, despite their husbands' adultery and lack of condom use, can be seen as a form of self-preservation in light of what they perceive as a greater immediate threat – to be exposed to physical violence. On the other hand, by succeeding in avoiding imminent violence, essentially by engaging in sexual interaction, they also expose themselves to a greater violence, that of a life-threatening illness. Through many years of experiencing marital abuse, the relations of power that shape and permeate their marital relationships allow only for pragmatic decision-making and self-preservation.

Reflecting upon the reasons for which Rashieda chose to continue in an abusive marriage, she notes the impact of culture and socialisation in her upbringing:

...because I was brought up by Indian parents who had the belief that 'if you make your bed – lie in it' and I have always told myself... well you made your choice. I married him; I just have to endure it [the marital abuse].<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> The notion of 'you made your bed, now you must lie in it' simply means that you need to stay in the marriage. Sometimes, this saying also refers to the unacceptability of pursuing divorce in communities where particular expressions of cultural and religious discourses are part of broader community dynamics.

Rashieda's upbringing has undoubtedly influenced the ways in which she conceived of her marital relationship more broadly. Despite experiencing various forms of abuse, including physical and sexual abuse that commenced the first week of her marriage, Rashieda remained married to her husband for more than 30 years. Her capacity to stay in the marriage mirrors that of her mother, who also endured many years of physical abuse. Rashieda explains that she "grew up with that [and] I thought it was the norm, a woman has to be beaten up by her man, I saw these things [witnessing the abuse of her mother by her father while growing up], so to me it was the norm". Rashieda's acceptance of marital violence is situated within a particular understanding of what constitutes a normative marital relationship coupled with the perspective of having a sense of duty to endure whatever comes your way due to cultural and family norms.

In the narratives of Mariam, Khadija and Rashieda, the concept of sexual autonomy is not included as inherent to a sexual praxis. Mariam's participation in a sexual relationship is premised on the assumption that she cannot say 'no' to her husband as well as on seeing the act of sex itself as an act of charity on her part. Khadija's narrative elucidates the embodiment of the ideal Muslim woman whose responsibility it is to be sexually available to her husband. Rashieda's story illustrates the impact of particular experiences during her upbringing within which inegalitarian relations of power were seen as the norm. This background hampers Rashieda's agentival capacity in her own marital relationship, and has consequences for the way in which she engages with sexual dynamics. Consequently, sexual autonomy is not pertinent in the existing discourses within which these three respondents function. Bearing in mind the various contexts in which these three women situate themselves, Mariam within a sexual relationship in which her emotions are divorced from the physical practice of sex due to her experience of sexual abuse, and Khadija and Rashieda within marital abusive relationships, the incapacity to assert sexual autonomy is interconnected with these lived realities. The enactment of particular subject positions coupled with subjective experience denotes that sexual autonomy, within the discourses that these women are situated, is excluded as part of an overarching discursive network that guides sexual praxis.

Some of these narratives illustrate that women are sometimes caught between various structures of violence within which they make pragmatic short-term decisions in order to protect

themselves and their children from being exposed to what they perceive to be increased forms of violence. The violent marital structures within which several of the respondents are situated do not allow much manoeuvring space with regard to sexual relationships. Hence, there is little room for these women to consider their own well-being. Simultaneously, powerful discourses that shape Muslim women's understandings of self are intricately interlinked with Islamic behavioural ideals such as docility, patience and endurance. These aspects of female identity are sometimes endorsed and lived out in intimate relationships in ways that limit women's capacity for health and well-being.

Contrary to Saba Mahmood's (2001) positive engagement with the cultivation of various forms of religious ideals, such as *sabr*, as an alternative way of asserting agency, Rashieda has been living with *sabr* for more than 30 years in an abusive marriage. In Rashieda's context, *sabr* is a symbolic instrument that has acted as a debilitating factor, *hindering* her agentival capacity. Mahmood, who sophisticatedly deconstructs the underlying assumptions regarding the liberal humanist subject of the West, does not engage with the possibility of misusing the concept of *sabr* within an Islamic discourse in ways that reinforce inegalitarian gender dynamics. In many ways, Mahmood's engagement with the women's mosque movement in Egypt does not capture the nuances present within the lived realities of other Muslim women who also employ or are influenced by the concept of *sabr* in their lives. The singular focus on cultivating religious ideals as a positive endeavour eclipses the existence of lived realities within which inegalitarian relations of power and structures of violence operate.

For a number of the respondents participating in this study, the underlying reasons for having sex with their husbands are embedded within discourses of worship, cultivating a sense of connectedness with God, the receiving of blessings/act of charity, avoiding invoking punishment from God, the belief that one cannot say 'no' to sex, as well as seeing sexual participation as part of being a good Muslim woman. These reasons, amongst others, point to a great diversity of sexual expressions that is reflective of an ambiguous religious framework in which these understandings are articulated and made meaningful. At the same time, many respondents are subject to relationships of power that place them in extremely vulnerable positions. Sometimes,

the coupling of some of the religious norms with the constraints of structural violence generates little manoeuvring space for women who are confined within these relationship dynamics.

But what about discourses of sexual enjoyment and pleasure? Amongst my respondents there were a number of women who mentioned that they had/were having good sexual relationships. Nonetheless, they rarely felt the need to go into greater detail or expand on their satisfactory experiences. It might well be that the taboo on speaking outside of the bedroom informed some respondents' choice of not sharing intimate details.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, respondents who had difficult marriages and problematic sexual experiences often elaborated greatly on their experiences. In this case, the interview situation might have provided a space within which respondents could express these experiences. In addition, the sexual taboos surrounding the expression or discussion of issues of sexual abuse and marital violence in Muslim communities might have prompted some respondents to use this opportunity to share these difficult experiences. As expressed by one respondent who had experienced a lot of trauma in her marriage: "maybe it will help me in the end, I got it off my chest you know". So while my data might seem biased in terms of giving full expression to respondents who had problematic sexual experiences, this is not to say that stimulating sexual relationships and discourses of sexual pleasure are absent from women's lives.

#### **7.4 Resisting Sexual Religious Norms**

Several respondents also contested and resisted the dominant discourse of a wife's sexual availability by employing alternative modes of understanding sexual praxis. Often, an Islamic ethics that foregrounds mutuality, reciprocity and care was utilised to make sense of sexual dynamics. The following are examples of narratives that challenge the notion of not being allowed to say 'no'. They highlight understandings of broader gender dynamics that promote an egalitarian ethics for sexual praxis. For example, Azizah asserts:

I don't know why you cannot say 'no' [to sex], because what is written [is that] Islam is based upon broadmindedness, the man and the woman should both be broadminded, it is

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<sup>88</sup> See for example the section on Aisha in Chapter 6, page 131.

not just grab and go... then you don't enjoy the sexual pleasures. It is written that a man must respect the woman and the woman must respect the man.

In Azizah's understanding, "what is written" suggests the textual sources of Islam, on the basis of which she presupposes that the notion of "broadmindedness" is a fundamental principle. For Azizah there are broader ethical principles embedded in Islamic texts that should encapsulate the way in which one engages and lives out sexual relationships. Azizah also highlights mutual respect as an underlying premise for the way in which sexual dynamics should be embodied by both spouses. It can be inferred from this quotation that Azizah links the saying that a woman cannot say 'no' to the praxis of sexual inequality ("grab and go") and lack of mutual enjoyment of the potential sexual pleasures produced in sexual encounters. Thus, for Azizah, an inequalitarian sexual relationship not only contradicts broader Islamic ethics, but also deprives the spouses of enjoying the pleasures of a sexual union. Another respondent, Leila, currently divorced, focuses on the importance of knowing what your rights are in her narrative:

It is very important for a woman to go and learn her rights if she is not happy about something [in her marital relationship], she has got the right to say no [to sex]. Some women say that even if your husband treats you like a dirt bag, [or] a floor [mat], you don't say no. That doesn't work for me because I know that I have rights too. It doesn't mean that if your husband makes sexual advances that you must retaliate [meaning: respond negatively to husband's sexual advances], that doesn't come into the equation; [when] I say no [to sex], I say no for a good reason.

Leila's narrative is clearly an expression of resistance to the dominant discourse regarding a wife's sexual availability. Her narrative points towards the existence of rights for women, embedded within an Islamic discourse, which give women bodily autonomy and the capacity to negotiate consent in their marital relationships. In effect, Leila challenges the notion that a woman cannot refuse her husband sex, and asserts that she can "say no" to her husband (now ex-husband). Thus, for Leila, an Islamic discourse of sexual praxis consists of women's right to say 'no' to sex if they are not "happy about something". Leila uses the example of women who are being ill-treated in their marital relationships as illustrative of a particular marital dynamic in which a woman has the right to refuse sexual interaction. Zaida, also divorced, reflects on her marriage and how she might have done things differently today:

If I think about myself in my marriage... if my husband wanted to be with me and I wasn't in the mood or didn't want to [have sex] then I would kind of put myself second and put him first because that isn't the right thing to do to say no. I think about it very differently now. Now I think that I have as much right as him to say 'now' [let us have sex] whether you like it or not. I think it [sex] would be more negotiated, I would engage with the person because I feel more empowered now. I feel like actually I am important and what my needs are, are just as important as yours, and if I'm going to compromise then he must compromise too.

Zaida acknowledges that she did put her needs and wants, with regard to sexual encounters, second in her marriage. Nonetheless, now, feeling "more empowered", she emphasises the reciprocity that should guide sexual praxis. Zaida's narrative reflects a process of personal transformation with regard to acceptable sexual dynamics. She started off in a position in which her subjectivity was formulated in a particular kind of way in her marriage, and where she thought of herself as having to be constantly sexually available to her husband. However, as she has become older and has gone through various life experiences, she has developed a very different attitude to the same issue. Her transforming personality might mirror her newfound sense of self after having gone through a divorce. Her personal growth and sense of empowerment as an individual are intricately related to her varied life experiences.<sup>89</sup>

Zaida also mentions that she has just as much right to demand sex, "to say 'now' whether you like it or not". Although this assertion might reflect coercive language, my sense in the interview was that she was rather making a case for the *equal* opportunity to make such a statement. Furthermore, Zaida highlights negotiation, engagement and mutuality as key ethical components guiding a proper sexual praxis.

The existence of ambiguous discourses brings about possibilities for individuals to employ shifting and fluid subjectivities that are related to and rooted in broader contexts of marital experiences, societal norms and particular understandings of religious traditions. Azizah stated the following related to sexual relationship dynamics:

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<sup>89</sup> See the section on Zaida in Chapter 6, page 150-151, for further background related to her previous marriage.

Where sex is concerned if a woman wants to initiate it, then by all means, if a man wants to... it does not mean that he is the man, you know, and he hasn't got the right to withhold sex from you and discard you, that is not allowed in Islam. So we are equal partners.

The principle of equality includes, according to Azizah, that a woman can initiate sex as well, and that a husband should be sexually available to satisfy his *wife's* needs. Through this statement Azizah turns the discourse of women's sexual availability on its head in arguing that the same is expected from a husband. Thus, Azizah challenges the authority of an Islamic sexual praxis in which a woman cannot refuse her husband, by employing a discourse in which sexual readiness seems to apply to both spouses. Since Azizah elaborates on the husband's and the wife's status as equal partners in a marital relationship, it can be assumed that the dynamics ideally guiding a discourse of sexual praxis should be based on reciprocity, mutuality and fairness.

This chapter has dealt with some of the respondents' understandings of sexual dynamics, and highlighted a few dominant religious discourses on sexuality that inform women's realities in various ways. The influence of religious teachings for sexual praxis has been shown by including narratives that espouse particular notions of gender and sexual dynamics within marital relationships.

The understanding that it is not right for a Muslim woman to refuse her husband sex formed part of a dominant discourse that many women abided by. However, as the excerpts show, there was a range of ways in which respondents engaged with this normative view on sexual dynamics. Women who were subjected to violence in their marital relationships were also influenced by particular understandings of sexual behaviour in ways that made them increasingly vulnerable to STIs and HIV. However, many respondents also contested and resisted the dominant discourse of a wife's sexual availability by employing ethical principles that place emphasis on reciprocity and mutual consideration.

Some of the respondents' narratives illustrate the structures of power that operate between intimate partners, and also particular constructs of the God/believer relationship. Often, the decision to challenge religious norms that espouse male privilege was situated in women's

experiences with various forms of marital abuse and feelings of injustice. This construction mirrors the ways in which feminist poststructuralists have theorised the notion of subjectivity as always being constituted in relation to influential discourses, and by extension the capacity of the subject to engage in alternative existing discourses. The existence of ambiguous and fluid discourses is also reflected in the ways in which many respondents hold together seemingly ambiguous discourses simultaneously. It is noteworthy that for many respondents it is religious constructs and norms, in particular, that generate various parameters for sexual interaction and praxis.

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## Chapter 8:

### Understandings of Gender and Polygyny

**“I am someone who believes in that saying that men need to have sex in order to feel good, but women need to feel good in order to have sex, I am a firm believer in that.” – Saba**

In the first part of this chapter I explore some of my respondents’ understandings of male and female nature. I particularly look at the ways in which respondents’ assumptions on gender might influence sexual behaviour and conceptualisations of sexual ethics more broadly. It was noteworthy that many respondents highlighted fundamental differences between men and women when speaking about sexual dynamics. Predictably, a common perception was that men are more sexual than women, while women were often perceived to be more emotional than men, with ramifications for particular social practices. In the second part of this chapter I foreground the practice of polygyny as one example of a social practice that espouses clear gender differences and which is subject to potentially intricate marital dynamics. I present some of the main views on polygyny as expressed by my respondents and illustrate through quotations respondents’ experiences of being in polygynous unions.

#### 8.1 Sexual Men and Emotional Women

Traditional gender roles seemed quite pertinent for many respondents when describing the nature of their marital relationship. Some of my respondents defined themselves as housewives or ‘homemakers’, and foregrounded that being a wife and a mother were central to their identity as Muslim women. Often, these gender identities were intricately linked with assumptions about female nature. In particular, women’s emotional nature was often illustrated by highlighting women’s capacity for affection and nurturing, which rendered them more competent for childrearing and domestic responsibilities. By contrast, men’s natures were often characterised as overtly sexual, highlighting men’s need for sexual stimulation. These views were often mirrored in respondents’ descriptions of sexual dynamics in their intimate relationships. Also, for some

respondents for whom specific gender roles were less pronounced, views of particular gender differences were significant for the ways in which they spoke about the nature of their sexual relationship. The following narratives are reflective of complementary gender roles, seen as essential for the ways in which marital dynamics are conceptualised by some of my respondents.

Aisha explains:

It is the obligation of the husband to take care of the woman, to maintain and protect [and] she must also give him his rights, his conjugal rights as well. [A man] is more muscular and strong in a physical sense, whereas women are strong in an emotional sense, in raising children and bearing children, caring and nurturing. [So] his obligations and rights are based on his true nature, whereas women's rights and obligations are based on her true nature.

Another respondent, Shamielah said:

I know I am the more emotional person, and I know my husband is more logical. I can see that I can deal better with the kids. There is just so much difference between a man and a woman, and I know what a man's sexual needs are. My husband is very sexually orientated, and sometimes women don't feel like it [having sex] because you are so busy and you got children, [so sex] is the last thing on your mind. [For] men it works the other way around, it is the first thing on their mind. So you can see the difference between the man and the woman. It is blatant, though Islamically, morally we are equal in the sense that equal expectations are [demanded] from us. But sexually we are on different levels, it is just a need, a man has a need.

Here, Aisha's and Shamielah's assumptions on gender difference are central in demonstrating their perceptions of men and women's natures as inherently different. For Aisha, a man's nature is arguably a sexual nature since his "right" to have sex originates in his "true nature". This view resonates with the ways in which many respondents in the previous chapter conceived of sex as primarily a male privilege. In contrast, a woman's obligations, for example to care for children, are contingent on her nature, which is perceived to be more- emotional. Although Aisha states that women have rights, she does not clarify what these rights entail. Perhaps women's rights can be seen as relational to men's obligations to provide maintenance and protection for women.

Similarly, Shamielah maintains that men are by nature more sexual than women, and their need for sexual fulfilment is qualitatively different from women's need for sexual satisfaction. The binaries expressed through these two excerpts strongly associate gendered features with

biological sex. Nonetheless, as highlighted by Shamielah, men and women have an equal moral capacity. Thus, the expectation for the ways in which morality is employed is equal for men and women. Paradoxically however, as touched on briefly in the previous chapter, some respondents argued that a wife needs to make sure that her husband is sexually fulfilled so that he does not go out and commit adultery, a view that is premised on the notion that a man is morally inept when it comes to policing his own sexual behaviour. I problematise this position again later in this chapter.

Particular conceptions on the nature of sexual interaction came to the fore when I asked the respondents to describe their sexual relationship. On the one end of the continuum, some respondents expressed shifting levels of sexual needs in their relationships. Often, a certain ethics of mutual consideration was applied to meet the sexual needs expressed by the intimate partner. On the other end of the continuum, some respondents experienced that their husbands were more insatiable where sex was concerned. Sometimes, a husband's stronger sexual urges caused conflict in the marriage, and effectively opened up debates within the marriage regarding the ethics of sexual interaction. The following narratives show how particular understandings of sexual difference are performed in intimate relationships. Shanaaz explains:

I was more interested in affection, I was more interested in just being close and sharing intimacy than I was with sex. He [husband] sometimes accused me of being selfish [because she didn't want to have sex as much as him] but I am not an animal. I can't just go to bed now and have sex, for me it is important for us to have spent time together. For me sex is a combination of things that we do together that brings us close together. [Now] all of a sudden you want to just come down on me, it doesn't work that way. So for me it [sex] was disappointing because for him [husband] it was all about that it is so important to get as much [sex] as you can. I think most women prefer just being affectionate than actually doing the act. You are not an animal; God created you a man, a human being, not an animal.

Similarly, Saba stated:

I always told my husband that you can't expect [to have sex whenever]. For men it is different. For a man you don't need to be emotionally connected, because men aren't created like that, but for me, I have to be emotionally connected. I wouldn't be able to jump into bed with anybody, besides the fact that it is wrong. If you [husband] said a bad word to me now, you can't expect me to be all loveydovey and jump into bed with you, it

doesn't work like that. For me it had to do with respect. I am not going to share my body with you if you don't treat me with respect. So because our marriage has been up and down and it [their problems] was related to issues of respect, because he spoke to me sometimes in a derogatory manner and I always felt that he treated me with disrespect. So for me, the lack of sex [in their marriage] was a result [of] your [husband's] [dis]respect. It is the other way around for him, he believes that the lack of sex leads to that kind of behaviour [lack of respect in their marriage], because he becomes frustrated. So sex wasn't good, it was a struggle, because you [husband] want sex from me but I want respect [from husband]. It is a given – you treat me with respect, I mean there is no negotiation on that, so I was now holding back until you treat me with respect and dignity. For me it was connected to the whole emotional aspect, for him it has always been a physical thing, so sex wasn't exactly the best experience for me, although then when our relationship was better sex obviously was better.

For both Shanaaz and Saba, a certain level of emotional connectedness should frame sexual encounters. Simultaneously, they make a clear distinction between what they perceive to be the inherent sexual natures of males and the more emotional dispositions of females. Arguably, male sexuality is perceived as active, energetic and demanding. By contrast, female sexuality and a woman's ability to experience sexual pleasure are contingent on her emotional state before and during sexual interaction. For Shanaaz and Saba, sex is a relational behaviour that is not divorced or sheltered from various relationship dynamics that operate in their marriages. Seemingly, their husbands are not attending sufficiently to particular aspects of their relationship, since for them (their husbands) sex is something that can happen irrespective of varying levels of broader relationship satisfaction and stability. This notion of different expectations and conceptualisations of sexual interaction for men and women significantly impacted upon Shanaaz's and Saba's sexual experiences.

It is clear that Shanaaz and her husband did not share similar expectations regarding sexual interaction in their marital relationship. Shanaaz's emphasis on her husband's desire to "get as much as you can", conceived of by Shanaaz as "animal-like" sexual behaviour, was not compatible with her idea of a good sexual relationship. Shanaaz is clearly not experiencing the level of relationality and connectedness that she needs in order to fully appreciate sex.

For Saba, the issue of respect is elaborated as a salient component in her marital relationship, a component that she ideally conceives of as essential in order to maintain a healthy relationship.

This relationship dynamic, where Saba refuses her husband sex due to his disrespectful attitude and behaviour, presents a stark contrast to the dominant discourse of a wife's sexual availability outlined in the previous chapter. In Saba's narrative, sexual interaction is subject to negotiation; respect and dignified behaviour form part of her sexual ethics, and should also guide marital dynamics more broadly.

From the issues raised and sentiments expressed by many of my respondents, we could ask the following questions: Are women truly more emotional than men, and if so, is this more emotional nature a natural barrier against seeking sexual relationships based purely on the physical aspect of sex? Similarly, are men by nature more sexual than women, and if so, is there a connection between this sexual nature and a greater proclivity towards seeking casual sex? Men's proclivity for sexual transgressions, as emphasised and experienced by some respondents, was sometimes justified by elaborating on the wife's responsibility to keep her husband sexually satisfied. Arguably, the understanding that it is more in men's nature to commit adultery is related to some respondents' perceptions regarding men's potent sexual nature coupled with men's lack of need to be emotionally connected to a sexual partner. In the previous chapter, Shafieka stressed men's lack of sexual satisfaction as conducive to their potential for committing adultery. Similarly, Saba explains:

My husband could easily have gone astray. He had lots of opportunities because I gave him a hectic time and he is a man.

Another respondent, Shirin asserts:

We had a good sexual life over the years, I always say...I will not be the cause that my husband must go outside and find himself involved with another female.

These respondents' assumptions regarding men's sexual natures create particular conceptions of sexual ethics and dynamics in intimate relationships. The performance of these perceptions are expressed by respondents through elaborating on women's need to contain men's sexuality, by keeping men sexually satisfied within the legal boundaries of marriage, so as to prevent adultery. Arguably, this conceptualisation of sexual dynamics renders a wife somewhat accountable for

men's sexual behaviour, and makes even more transparent a wife's duty to remain sexually available to her husband. Dominant understandings of normative sexual behaviour, clearly distinguishing between male and female acceptable behaviour, sometimes informed respondents' experiences with spousal infidelity. A few respondents were exposed to behavioural justifications from their husband's family when his infidelity became known to them. For example, Khadija explained:

He [husband] started having affairs and things like that, and his aunts were like: "why are you making a fuss, a man is a man and a good Muslim woman would sit and make *du'a* and wait for her husband to come home, not make a fuss"...<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, Zaida said:

His [husband's] mom said to me that in their family there is lots of infidelity that goes down and she also said to me that: "men do this so why should you think of yourself as so special that you want to divorce him [because of his infidelity]". She said to me that basically I'd be stupid to not forgive him. The fact that she can say that men do that [have affairs] is quite a disempowering feeling for a woman. She said that I should just accept it, it was offensive. I wonder how many other women are hearing that and accepting that, it is almost like you should be grateful and feel honoured that he wants you, he doesn't actually want a lifetime with some other woman.

Arguably, the opinions held by Khadija's aunts and Zaida's mother in-law reflect some of the social consequences of particular conceptualisations regarding sexual differences. The notion that men's sexual behaviour (and transgressions) can be excused, as well as accepted, is subject to these perceptions of innate gendered difference. In my interview with Khadija, she explained that she endured her husband's extra-marital affairs for a few years. It can perhaps be inferred from this excerpt, as well as from Khadija's narratives outlined in previous chapters, that one of the underlying reasons for her endurance was her perception of what it meant to be a good Muslim woman, and by extension, her persistence in trying to embody this ideal. In addition, from the excerpt above, it becomes clear that her husband's aunts were also partly influencing and informing Khadija's erstwhile 'acceptance' of her marital situation.

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<sup>90</sup> *du'a* – plural, *ad'iyah*: invocation of God, supplication, prayer asking God for something (e.g. asking God for forgiveness, cure you from disease, or to grant you children)

Unlike Khadija, Zaida did not tolerate her husband's infidelity and initiated divorce despite her mother in law's advice to forgive him or 'just' accept his infidelity. Zaida's reflection at the end of this quotation regarding women's acceptance of spousal infidelity due to powerful social norms, echoes some of the underlying reasons for why Khadija chose to remain in her marital relationship for a few more years. Zaida's narrative presents an explicit contestation of this normalisation of male sexual behaviour. In addition, her reflection also brings to light a particular social discourse within which women perpetuate particular assumptions on gender. The social currency of this discourse effectively questions the possibility for an egalitarian sexual ethics where men and women are equally responsible for sexual behaviour, and where men's infidelity is not normalised nor accepted.

Amongst my respondents, 14 out of 33 women had experienced spousal infidelity in their marital relationships. Arguably, dominant discourses that espouse particular understandings related to the social acceptability of infidelity, religious persuasions on sexual natures and gender difference, and preconceived notions of normative male and female sexual behaviour must be critically explored, as some of these 'norms' inform the various ways in which women understand and deal with the experience of infidelity in their marriage. The gendered differences reflected through some of these excerpts become important sites of contestation, particularly in light of the inherently inegalitarian power relations embedded in this matrix.

Some of the repercussions of essentialised gender categories, within which men and women are viewed to be fundamentally different, have resolved in various social practices that inform marital relationships and gender dynamics more broadly. For example, the practice of polygyny, easy male access to divorce, and women's limited witnessing and inheritance capacities are some of the practices that espouse clear gender differences. These practices have been contested in the contemporary period by many Islamic feminists. For instance, Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2007a and b) engages in a critical analysis of the philosophical roots of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in order to unravel some of the constructions of gender that contributed greatly to inegalitarian legal formulations. She illustrates that the classical male jurists held particular understandings of women's sexuality (ironically, as active and uncontrollable), and by extension, assumptions regarding their gender, are reflected in the male-favourable rulings related to laws pertaining to

marriage and divorce (2007b). Other Islamic feminists, like Etin Anwar who critically examine the Islamic tradition to identify conceptualisations on gender and self, draw on thinkers such as the classical philosopher Ibn Sina (d. 1037), who argued that woman's emotional disposition was intricately linked to her lack of ability to control her sexual energy. In contrast, men were associated with rationality and reason, which meant that they were able to manage, in a controllable manner, more than one sexual partner (Anwar, 2006:118-122). Thus, the association of biological sex with feminine or masculine characteristics respectively reinforced gender hierarchies resulting in various social practices in previous eras, many of which still hold social currency in contemporary social contexts.

Interestingly, this notion of women's active sexuality presents a contrasting discourse to the conceptualisations of sexual natures expressed by many of my respondents where it is in fact men's sexual natures that my respondents view as active and to a certain extent uncontrollable. This ambiguity is highlighted by Fatna Sabbah (1984), who argues that seemingly contradictory messages are espoused by Islamic legal codes and erotic discourses respectively. In her book *Women in the Muslim Unconscious*, Sabbah illustrates the varying and different historical understandings of female sexuality that exist within the Islamic legacy.

Conceptualisations on gender that are premised on notions of natural difference have also been contested in the contemporary period by Asma Barlas (2002). She argues that these views are in fact inconsistent with her reading of the Qur'an. Barlas suggests that the Qur'an does not link gender with sex (2002:130). In other words, the Qur'an does not ascribe particular characteristics perceived to be either masculine or feminine as a property of the sexed body. On the other hand, Kecia Ali (2006) suggests that the Qur'an is more ambiguous. She problematises the continued legal existence of slavery and the gendered regulations pertaining to women's limited capacity for witnessing and inheritance to exemplify that hierarchical structures espousing notions of difference are in fact inherent to the Qur'anic text. Thus, she argues, "Male-female relations embody both norms of ultimate sameness and earthly differentiation" (Ali, 2006:116).

This ambiguity is briefly dealt with by Barlas when she asserts that earthly differentiation "does not necessarily privilege males" (Barlas, 2002:197-198). Barlas exemplifies her argument

through highlighting the social practice of polygyny. She makes a historical contextual argument which implies that polygyny serves a particular social function. In her reading of the Qur'an, the Qur'anic provision that allows men to take up to four wives is conducive to the understanding that men should take care of and/or protect women. Thus, Barlas suggests that the institution of polygyny was *not* linked to male sexual needs (and the understanding that a male is more sexual than a female), necessitating more than one sexual partner. Rather, what could be perceived to be a practice favouring men is an extended responsibility placed on men to see to the well-being and safety of women. Furthermore, Barlas argues that strict regulation regarding just treatment of wives is stressed in the Qur'anic text (2002:197-200).

On the other hand, Ali argues that Qur'anic differential treatment of human beings, man and woman, slave and master, still speaks to the acceptance of particular hierarchies. She asserts, "If someone insists that polygamy is valid for all times and in all places because the Qur'an authorizes it, one can inquire whether the same holds true for slavery" (Ali, 2006:156). Arguably, although the Qur'an accepts particular social practices, this does not necessarily mean that individuals who are embodying these practices in a lived reality experience these practices as just or equitable. In the following section I explore respondents' views on polygyny and their experiences of being in a polygynous marriage.

## **8.2 Polygyny: Understandings and Experiences**

Polygyny is a social practice that forms part of the South African landscape. In 2009 polygyny in Islam has been a topical subject in local media as various groups have tried to obtain recognition of Muslim polygynous unions by the Constitutional Court.<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, when I asked my respondents for their perspectives on polygyny I received a range of responses ranging from "I'm dead against it" to "polygyny is the answer". The variety of responses show that women perceive marital unions in different ways, often challenging particular assumptions related to the nature of marriage in very interesting ways.

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<sup>91</sup> I have briefly dealt with this issue in Chapter Three, page 74-75.

One of the most common views amongst my respondents was that they accepted the practice of polygyny due to the fact that it is allowed by Islam. Nonetheless, many respondents expressed that if their husband wanted to take a second wife he would have to divorce them first. Many respondents said that they had discussed polygyny with their husband due to the fact that all Muslim marriages are potentially polygynous. However, none of my respondents who had marital contracts mentioned that they had included particular clauses related to the dissolution of marriage if their husband took a second wife. Even so, many respondents were quite clear on the fact that their husbands were aware of their position on polygyny, and the related consequences if their husband were to enter into such a union. For example, Rabeah said:

I know it is allowed according to Islam, however, I do believe that a human being cannot treat two other human beings exactly the same. I have told my husband that if he wishes to have another wife, he will only still have one wife. I won't be there then, it won't be for me, although it is allowed, he is free to go.

Similarly, Saba explained:

I most probably don't have the most popular opinion, but I cannot [be in a polygynous union] and my husband knows. You [husband] want to get married then let me go, there is no two ways about that. I have a right to that as well, so I am not open to that [polygyny]. Obviously [it] is good for specific situations like for example women who perhaps have children and they don't have somebody to take care of them, things like that. So it works, but I think most importantly that people involved in it, if their mindset is right then I think it is a very good thing [but] sometimes the man goes behind the first wife's back.

Another respondent, Shirin stated:

He [husband] will always tell me if I make him mad or cross that I [he] will take another wife, and I said to him if you feel you want to have another wife, I won't stand in your way to get married. Get married, and you divorce me. Because the punishment for a husband that is unfair towards any of his wives is too severe and I won't put that punishment on you [husband], you can rather divorce me, and then I know that I freed you from the punishment [in] all of the hereafter.

It was pertinent for many respondents that a notion of equitable and just treatment was required of a husband who took another wife. Seemingly, perceptions regarding the impossibility of this

task made divorce the only option for many respondents. Hence, many respondents would not want to be subject to differential treatment in their marital relationships. In addition, particular personal dispositions were foregrounded to explain why a polygynous union was not desirable. For example, feelings of inadequacy, jealousy and unwillingness to share a husband were amongst the most common reasons for why some respondents would prefer getting divorced.

Nonetheless, for many respondents, there appears to be no explicit contestation regarding the fact that Islam as a religion allows the phenomenon of polygyny. Hence, the acceptability of the practice itself is not questioned due to the power of religious authority and tradition that effectively legitimises this norm. Even so, for most of these respondents, their acceptance of polygyny remains a purely theoretical constructed acceptance. In practice many of my respondents, through their social engagements and enactments, e.g. by evoking their right to divorce if their husband takes a second wife or explicitly stating that “polygyny is not for me”, fundamentally contest the acceptance of polygyny by refusing it as a possibility for themselves. Often, while many respondents pay lip-service to the tradition of accepting polygyny, their lives embody a rejection of this norm. This is a very interesting and fascinating contemporary negotiation of the notion of polygyny. This also suggests that the social world of the text in which my respondents are situated is created through and reflective of ambivalences, paradoxes and contradictions. What this dynamic also shows is that in contemporary contexts, Islamic norms are not fixed, but rather, continuously co-created and thwarted through women’s experiences and personal relationships.

Often, polygyny was justified and promoted by my respondents when serving particular needs. For example, in Saba’s narrative, she articulates that polygyny could potentially function to ensure the protection of single mothers. This justification was employed by many respondents who viewed polygyny as a beneficial solution to particular social problems. In particular, some respondents highlighted the fact that in their community many women lose their husbands to drugs or gang activity. Many of these women do not have the means to take care of themselves or their children. This benefit-justification was seen as one of the ‘correct’ ways in which a polygynous union is entered into. Nonetheless, for many respondents, although underlying reasons of protection and financial stability were used to justify polygyny, their own ability to

remain in a potential polygynous union that was subject to these reasons was still perceived to be minimal. For other respondents, polygyny was not perceived to be an acceptable social practice. Often, assumptions regarding the manner in which men contract these unions, coupled with the underlying reasons for why polygyny is used in contemporary contexts, were used to negate the acceptability of this practice. In particular, men's sexual motives as well as the use of polygyny to legitimise an already existing sexual relationship were highlighted. For example, Faiza explains:

If you want to look after women nowadays, financially, you can look after her without marrying her, so what sort of nonsense is that. Even though it [polygyny] is done [in the community] it is highly frowned upon and it is not welcomed in [my] family. I don't condone such things, I am dead against it. [The] reasons are normally lust, horniness, although men like to say there is another reason. To me that is just bollocks, it is rubbish, they are just plain flipping horny, and they use Islam [as a justification].

Clearly, the social benefit-justification is not acknowledged by Faiza as she suggests that there are other ways of supporting and protecting women who are in difficult situations in a contemporary context. Interestingly, Faiza mentions that polygyny is "highly frowned upon". Although a diversity of opinions was expressed by the respondents with regard to the levels of acceptance in their local communities, many pointed out that stigma and particular stereotypes do exist. For example, the assumption that the first wife is a victim of her husband's lust, and that the second wife is a "dirty rag" who "steals" other women's husbands were some of the depictions highlighted by some of my respondents. These perceptions echo some of the social attitudes on polygyny found in Bangstad's study (2007). These attitudes also illuminate some of the underlying reasons as to why a polygynous union is entered. Many respondents foregrounded lust and sexual desire as the main reasons men take additional wives. For example, Leila explained:

Now men are lusting after [a new wife]. She [their current wife] is not nice anymore and she has a fat ass, and they go for a younger figure.

It was a common perception amongst many respondents that the notion of lust was a major catalyst for men who entered into polygynous unions. In addition, and as articulated by Faiza,

many respondents expressed that men often use Islam to justify their decision to take another wife – even if it is purely for sexual purposes. Nonetheless, for some women, for whom polygyny was seen as “the answer”, this justification was also acceptable. For instance, Mariam said:

I actually allowed my husband [to take a second wife]. In fact I said get married for lust also. Polygamy is a beautiful answer. Say you share your husband and your husband is a slave of Allah just like you, there is such a lot of women out there that need men, and they don't have the support of the man, so you can actually share your life with another woman. For instance, say that a woman is ill and her kids need looking after, I can take care of the kids [and] it can be one big happy family. I told [my] children also, I said “I gave daddy permission, so I don't want anybody to say anything”. I think it [polygyny] is there [for people] to be in a *halal* relationship and Allah knows that men are desirous, they just love women. A lot of the youngsters they are very perturbed that it is allowed. I say Allah would never allow anything that is detrimental. The *mawlana* told the young men in class “please, you are allowed by Allah, you people are the future, prepare your girls for that already”, he says, “you know in African countries it is the norm” but here we make a very big thing of it, it is almost like it is death or something.<sup>92</sup>

Another respondent, Mansura explained:

If it is a woman that needs a husband in order for her to not go astray and do the wrong thing, maybe I would like it to be somebody I know, rather than somebody I don't know. I wouldn't mind, he [husband] often talks about it, jokes about it. [So] if the need should arise, say for example I should be very sick and he needs to fulfil you know [his sexual needs], I would [agree] if it makes him happy.

Mariam seems to suggest that women actually need men to provide (financial) stability and protection. Hence, the benefit-justification is employed as one of the important social functions of polygyny. At the same time, polygyny opens up possibilities for women to share domestic responsibilities, like taking care of their children. Interestingly, in a focus group that I arranged, some respondents also mentioned that they wished that their husband *would* take a second wife as they preferred to have more ‘me-time’. For some of these respondents, who were in (or had been in) polygynous unions, the fact that their husband only spent fifty percent of his time with

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<sup>92</sup> *Mawlana* – form of address to a religious leader. Here: religious scholar with training from institutes of higher religious education in India or Pakistan, or from institutes of Indo-Pak provenance in South Africa.

them opened up potential avenues for engaging in activities that they would otherwise not have had time for due to their full-time wifely responsibilities.

Although some of these respondents acknowledge and accept certain wifely responsibilities as a dominant norm, they are negotiating and manoeuvring this traditional structure by utilising another patriarchal norm, polygyny, in order to wedge open spaces for themselves *within the norms* that enable them to explore other possibilities for self-fulfilment. The kinds of contestations represented by these conceptualisations of relationship dynamics might be thought of as fairly problematic and conservative by many contemporary feminists. Nonetheless, we cannot make assumptions about what these forms of negotiations mean for women whose lives intersect with a number of religious discourses that they regard in varying degrees as authoritative.

In both of the excerpts above, sexual need or lust is perceived as a justifiable reason for a husband to take another wife. Arguably, particular assumptions related to men's sexual nature and consequently, their need to be satisfied, are employed to support the practice of polygyny. Although none of the respondents explicitly articulated the relationship between men's sexual natures with the benefits of polygynous sexual satisfaction, it can be inferred from some of the narratives that men's sexual needs might necessitate having more than one wife. Nonetheless, in Mansura's narrative, she suggests that hypothetically, her incapacity to sexually satisfy her husband due to illness would be a valid reason for her husband's polygyny. This conceptualisation of the importance of sexual satisfaction in a marriage was stressed by a few respondents who argued that their level of sexual activity negated their husbands' need to take a second wife. For example, Bahira explained:

I always said that I would never tolerate having a second wife in my life because there are very strict circumstances... and I had children, I was fit, I was sexually very very active, so you [husband] don't have to go sleep around.

According to Bahira, particular conceptions of a wife's obligations in a marriage, and her ability to fulfil these obligations, determine whether it is acceptable for a husband to take a second wife. Arguably, a wife's responsibility to ensure her husband's satisfaction – referred to previously in

light of men's proclivities to commit adultery due to their active sexual natures – can also be employed within the context of polygyny. Nonetheless, in Mariam and Mansura's narratives, polygyny can also be seen as a deterrent for potential adulterous behaviour, both for men and women. Having outlined some background on the nature of Mariam's sexual relationship previously, her encouraging tone regarding her husband's potential polygyny might be related to her lack of sexual enjoyment in her marriage.<sup>93</sup>

Interestingly, Mariam is seemingly conscious of some of the stereotypes on polygyny operating in the community. Her decision to speak to her children, as well as particular normative perceptions on polygyny reflected in her account on the *mawlana's* speech to some of the youngsters in the community, highlight that social levels of acceptance of polygyny are often ambiguous. In particular, it seems that it is the younger generation which is more critical of the social justification of this practice. This noted ambivalence is in many ways brought up and foregrounded by the religious authority figure in Mariam's narrative, who is in some sense making a case for the need to increase the acceptance of polygyny in local Muslim communities. This *mawlana* seems to hold fairly conservative and patriarchal understanding of gender relationships, it is significant to note the potential influence this particular social engagement can have on generating tolerance for specific religious norms.

Nonetheless, Mariam's most authoritative argument used to justify the acceptance of polygyny is undoubtedly the notion that God would not allow something that is potentially harmful. Respondents who had experiences with polygynous unions did not primarily characterise their experiences as positive. Arguably, this does not mean that polygyny was outright harmful to some of the women who articulated particularly negative experiences. Even so, harmfulness is a potentially ambiguous notion that lends itself to various understandings and interpretations.

At the time of my interviews none of the respondents was in a polygynous union. However, six of the respondents had previously been in a polygynous marriage (see Table 3), in which three had become a second wife. Two of the three respondents who had entered into a polygynous union had done so with the consent of the first wife, whereas one respondent married without

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<sup>93</sup> See Chapter 7, page 169-172, for Mariam's narratives on sexual dynamics and experiences.

knowing that her husband was already married. When the husband's first marriage became known to the respondent, she continued to stay in the polygynous union as the second wife. The other three respondents who had previously been in a polygynous marriage, were all first wives. In two of these three cases the respondent's husband divorced the second wife within less than three years, and in one instance the respondent divorced her husband. However, polygyny was not given as the main reason for why this respondent dissolved the marriage. One respondent is still married to her husband, and one respondent is widowed.

**Table 3: Polygynous unions among my respondents**

<b>Polygynous unions among my respondents</b>					
	First Wife	Husband took second wife without the knowledge of the first wife	Second Wife	Entered the marriage with the consent of the first wife	Current marital status
<b>Nurunisa</b>	Yes	Yes	-	-	Husband divorced the second wife: Nurunisa is still married
<b>Najla</b>	Yes	Yes	-	-	Husband divorced the second wife: Najla is widowed
<b>Rashieda</b>	Yes	Yes	-	-	Divorced her husband (not on the grounds of polygyny)
<b>Ghameeda</b>	-	-	Yes	No*	Husband deceased: Ghameeda is remarried
<b>Somayya</b>	-	-	Yes	Yes	Husband deceased: Somayya is currently single
<b>Fayrooz</b>	-	-	Yes	Yes	Divorced, currently single

\*Ghameeda did not know that her husband was already married

The majority of the women who had previously been in a polygynous union often characterised their experience as challenging and complex. However, the three women who became second wives did not express their experiences solely in negative terms. All three women who were first wives in the polygynous union stated that their husband had been involved in an affair with the woman who later came to be the second wife. In addition, in all of these three instances the respondent was unaware that her husband had taken a second wife until after the union was formally established. Similarly, two out of the three respondents who became second wives started their sexual relationship prior to getting married. However, as previously mentioned, one of the respondents did so without knowing that her intimate partner was already married. This resonates with Bangstad's (2007) findings and also echoes his argument that it is common that polygynous unions often are a result of a husband's extra-marital affairs.

The three first wives were all situated in local contexts that could be characterised by poverty, drug abuse and alcoholism, violence and high levels of unemployment. These social dynamics influenced these three respondents in various ways. In addition to experiencing spousal infidelity in their marriages, two out of the three respondents also experienced sexual abuse and various forms of violence in their relationships. Also, for one of these respondents, the husband's drug abuse was a characterising feature of their marital relationship. Nurunisa explains:

I was about 3 months pregnant, [and] he had a [sexual] fling the whole year before that, [because] I was pregnant I wasn't working, [and] I couldn't support him. Every time I don't support him he performs [has sexual liaisons and drugs]. So he got married to her because the drugs was free, she supported him in that, because now he can lie in bed and do the drugs, she don't mind. I felt less than a woman. I thought I gave him my all, that I was good in bed, very good in bed. But he took another wife, and I didn't know about it. It is the first time he does it, then ok, you know don't do it again. [You] don't just take another woman because that is when all these diseases come in, AIDS and all this. I did it [HIV-test] afterwards at work, because now sometimes...he stays away...if he can cheat on you once, he can cheat on you again, you know what I mean, and what do you do? Now I must go for a test, I did twice a test, because I had to protect myself.

Another respondent, Najla said:

She [mistress] became pregnant and then she converted [to Islam] and they got married without my permission. I didn't even know, a neighbour told me that he got married. I

went to her place one day because I didn't get support from him, she was in charge [now], and she said to me "I will show you what I can do, because I am in charge, if I want to give you support or not, that is entirely up to me, because I am in charge, he is my husband". I said "excuse me, he is your husband but I am his first wife", [then she said:] "I don't want you here" and then she locked me in the house and she left my child outside, and she made a whole commotion.

These two narratives highlight particular dramatic and dysfunctional marital dynamics. Firstly, the secrecy with which husbands contract an additional marriage exposes first wives to potential life-threatening illnesses. In all three cases the husband did not use any kind of prophylactic to protect the first wife when engaging in sexual activity with another woman. In the case of Nurunisa, her increased awareness of HIV, and her decision to take HIV-tests, might be influenced by the fact that her husband also used drugs. Nonetheless, the actual taking of the first test took place *after* she found out about her husband's sexual transgression. However, the second time she got tested, it was in order to take preventative measures because she did not fully trust her husband's ability to remain faithful. It is noteworthy that Nurunisa did not once mention the possibility of using condoms in order to protect herself from potential diseases. When I raised the issue of whether she had ever asked her husband to use a condom in their intimate relationship she replied: "He don't believe in things like that, I did ask him and he said 'no'". Nurunisa continued to explain that the principal reason for why her husband did not want to use condoms was because he thought that it was wrong and not allowed by Islam. Nurunisa's narrative forcefully illustrates particular normative beliefs regarding prophylactic usage that significantly makes salient women's vulnerability as well as men's powerful positions regarding intimate decision-making.

Secondly, the level of secrecy surrounding polygynous unions also illustrates the ambiguity of the practice itself. The fact that none of the men involved in these three unions made their marriages public, speaks to varying levels of acceptance within the community and the potential of being exposed to unwanted criticism and stigmatisation from community members. Also, the fact that none of the men informed their current wives about their second marriage, and that the respondents had to find out for themselves, can indicate that some men see it as their right to take additional wives without having to inform their first wife. However, it can also imply that their wives were critical about being in a polygynous union in the first place, thus, it was easier for the

men to keep the marriage a secret and rather deal with the consequences of their actions, and potential marital conflicts later, when the marriage became known.

Thirdly, the manner in which a polygynous union is entered and the underlying reasons for why a husband takes a second wife, also places in question the role of the *imams* who seem to marry couples without much interrogation. In Najla's narrative, her husband's marriage to the second wife took place in order to legitimise the sexual union, as well as to ensure that the baby was not born out of wedlock. As Toefy suggests in his study (2001), the high levels of stigma related to illegitimate offspring, and the need to 'make things right', are influential factors with regard to pregnancy-marriages. Although Toefy does not investigate the occurrences of shot-gun weddings in the context of polygyny, similar communal norms might be influential in motivating a couple to get married.

Regarding the contexts of Nurunisa's and Najla's polygynous marriages, "lust" (as well as easy access to drugs) seem to be the underlying reasons for why these husbands wanted to take another wife. Since the sexual nature of their extramarital relationship was already taking place, the need to legitimise this union due to an awareness of the social 'public' unacceptability of marital infidelity, or the fear of getting caught, might be a catalyst when making the decision to get married. Although the nature of the conversations that took place between husbands and *imams* remains unknown, it would appear that the *imams* sanctioning these polygynous unions blindly imbibe a particular traditional norm without any kind of critical reflexivity and consideration as to their contribution to potentially painful relationships for women affected by these decisions.

In addition to these problematical marital dynamics, Nurunisa's description of being sexually active in her marriage – explicitly stating that she tried her best to sexually satisfy her husband – reflects some of the issues brought up previously. Her assertion "I felt less than a woman", makes transparent her feelings of inadequacy and incompetence. Her statement might also suggest feelings of failure to fulfil her responsibilities as a wife, in particular related to sexual stimulation.

For the three women who became second wives, slightly different issues emerged with regard to their polygynous experiences. Although for one respondent the union was perceived as successful, judging by her description of the manner in which she entered the union as well as the involvement of the first wife in this decision-making process, the two other respondents described having quite difficult relationships with the first wife. It became clear in my interviews that quite different dynamics were at play amongst respondents who entered an already existing marriage, as opposed to being in a marriage and having to deal with the existence of a second wife. The two respondents who described their relationship with the first wife as difficult highlighted issues of jealousy, the strain experienced due to their limited time shared with their husband, and experiences of unjust treatment. Often, these issues came about as a result of the first wife's influence on the husband's time-management as well as particular privileges endowed upon the first wife in terms of financial support. In addition, the two respondents who became second wives were also exposed to stigma and various levels of verbal abuse from family members as well as from the broader community. For example, Ghameeda explained:

When we got married none of his family was there... because do you know what, they blamed me. I was the dirty rag, I was stealing him away from his wife, and in the meantime I didn't even know [that he was already married]. I was very scared of her [first wife]. After he admitted to me he was married, she came one day to point a finger in my face and said to me that I was really the bad one because I stole him away and I messed up his life.

Ghameeda's narrative describes some of the dynamics that can take place when entering a marriage – also for women who are unaware that their husband is already married. For many women, the stigma experienced is primarily directed at them, rendering the husband less accountable for the situation that he partially created. This dynamic reinforces the notion that it is women who are responsible, and morally accountable, for men's involvement with other women.

The one respondent who described her polygynous marital relationship mainly in positive terms seems to be an exceptional case when contrasted with the experiences of other respondents. In Somayya's case, the polygynous union was negotiated to meet the needs of all three people that were involved in the relationship. For Somayya, the main reason for entering the marriage was that the first wife and her husband were unable to have a child together. Consequently, in

Somayya's narrative there is a sense of a family union being built, and she was serving the need for family for the first wife and her husband. Somayya explains:

He [husband] was currently married, and the reason for wanting to take another wife was the fact that there were no children in the marriage. [So] the union wasn't for lust or something else, it was mainly because he needed children in his life and that is why he pursued another marriage. It was with the full consent of the first wife, because she also wanted him to be a father and if she cannot give that to him then maybe there will be another person. [So] we were now two wives with one husband, but we just like had this mutual respect, so I would respect her and she would respect me, and then we will have harmony in both relationships. Equality was paramount, because although he had me, he still had to be responsible for both and keep both happy. It was one night, and one night [one night with first wife and one night with second wife], she made food on her days and I made food on my days. We are now his women so he will say 'it is prayer time', and we will do the prayer together, and it will always be in her quarters, because of the fact that she is much older and you have to have a certain respect.

Arguably, this narrative espouses a different kind of meaning system from what has been seen through the previous excerpts. The nature of this polygynous union seems to be qualitatively different from other respondents' experiences in that there is no secrecy involved, polygyny is not used in a duplicitous way so as to legitimise an already existing sexual relationship, consent from the first wife has been granted, and seemingly, the two wives have managed to develop a relationship based on mutual respect. Somayya also highlights the salience of fair treatment as a contributing factor for the success of this marriage.

In our interview, Somayya stressed that the ability to share domestic responsibilities, such as preparing food and caring for the children (she conceived two boys from this marriage) was definitely one of the main advantages of being in a polygynous marriage. When her husband died, Somayya continued to live in the same house as the first wife, and she emphasised the benefits of having another caretaker for her children as she herself was employed full-time. Interestingly, Somayya does not mention whether the first wife actually wanted to have children. Rather, the first wife's need for children is mainly conceptualised through highlighting the fact that she was unable to give her husband children and that she would very much like for him to experience what it is like to be a father. Nonetheless, Somayya's narrative suggests that the first wife wholeheartedly embraced the mothering role. In our interview Somayya often referred to

the two of them, the two wives, as the two mothers. Due to the fact that their husband passed away when the children were still young, the assistance she received from the first wife was essential in enabling her to manage her situation. In addition, it seemed that the wives gathered strength from each other when it came to dealing with the loss of their husband.

The narratives included in this section illustrate some of the dynamics that operate in intimate relationships. Constructions of gender, as they relate to respondents' understandings of sexual nature and sexual behaviour in particular, were highlighted to address some of the dominant norms that influence relationship dynamics. In particular, assumptions related to sexual difference, in which men's higher levels of sexual needs/desires were intimately connected to their biology as males, were prevalent in some respondents' narratives. This view was also contrasted with respondents' perceptions of women's more emotional nature.

The notion of sexual difference was also reflected in some of the respondents' perceptions of polygyny, as well as in some of the narratives where respondents described their experiences of being in a polygynous union. Clearly, some of the respondents' perceptions of polygyny as well as the manner in which polygynous unions were entered into, as experienced by a few respondents, have implications for the conceptualisation of contemporary sexual ethics. Nonetheless, a few of the narratives also show that there are many ways in which a polygynous union can function – ideally. Although only one respondent spoke about polygyny primarily in the positive, highlighting particular benefits of being in such a union, her experience does illuminate the potential of polygyny to be successful if based on particular relationship dynamics. Arguably, a process of consultation and negotiation with all partners concerned emerges as a significant factor. Also, the ethical principles that must be cultivated in this union, such as respect and tolerance, are salient for the success of this kind of marriage. Seemingly, polygyny serves many purposes. Nonetheless, the nature of the relationship is intrinsically dependent on the social actors and the relationship dynamics involved in creating this union.

While many Islamic feminists highlight mutual ethics of consideration as a foundational principle that should guide the nature of marital dynamics, a number of dominant norms, beliefs and behaviours expressed and performed in social contexts significantly influence and imbricate

with the ways in which my respondents negotiate sexual relationships. A salient tendency that emerged in many of my respondents' narratives is the multifaceted dimensions of religious norms when embodied in a social reality. Interestingly, many respondents create space for contestations within the boundaries of traditional discourses in ways that allow them to question particular forms of marital dynamics. Nonetheless, the existence of dominant assumptions conveying specific normative standards for male and female sexual behaviour also restricts in powerful ways some women's possibilities for intervention. Also, the manner in which some men utilise religiously sanctioned norms effectively masks other religious ideals such as mutuality and reciprocity. Nonetheless, as shown through some of the narratives in this section, women partake in the continuous construction of religious norms, by means of resisting, subverting and reiterating particular forms of acceptable sexual behaviour.

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## Chapter 9:

### Conclusion: Contemporary Islamic Sexual Ethics

In the previous chapters I have presented a range of narratives that illustrate Muslim women's experiences in intimate relationships and the impact of broader social realities on self-definitions and relationship dynamics. I have paid particular attention to the various ways in which women think about the nature of sexual dynamics and the dominant discourses that inform their understandings and praxis. The narratives presented reveal that a number of prevalent perceptions and norms influence and give meaning to women's religious commitments, motivations and aspirations. Respondents' narratives also show that specific religious normative ideals are embodied in intimate relationships. In this final chapter I reflect on the ways in which diverse religious meaning systems and practices present a multifaceted and ambivalent contemporary Islamic sexual ethics. I also explore the notion of moral agency (*khalifah*), a theological construct advocated and embraced by many Islamic feminists, and examine possible resonances with forms of agency transpiring in my respondents' narratives.

Respondents' conceptualisations of sexuality and sexual dynamics demonstrate a range of religious repertoires. On the one end of the continuum, respondents highlighted Islam as a sex-positive religion and indicated the salience of religious ideals such as sexual reciprocity and mutuality, viewing sex as a form of spiritual connectedness and as an act of worship (*ibadat*). On the other end of the continuum, respondents spoke about the entrenched belief that a Muslim woman should be sexually available to her husband, the importance of satisfying one's husband sexually, and the possibility of receiving punishment from God if refusing to have sex.

The ambiguous nature of these dominant constructs generates possibilities for Muslim women to occupy several and diverse subject positions within a religious framework. Many of the respondents' conceptions of sexuality and the relevant norms reveal a contemporary Islamic sexual ethics that is marked by tensions between patriarchal and egalitarian components. It is noteworthy that similar tensions are pointed out by some Islamic feminists with regard to the

nature of Islamic texts and the related complications in terms of developing a contemporary *egalitarian* sexual ethics.<sup>94</sup>

## 9.1 Islam is a ‘Sex-Positive’ Religion

The notion that Islam is a sex-positive religion, a view held by many of my respondents, is reflected in Islamic feminist literature as well as in classical Islamic scholarship. This conceptualisation of sexuality appears at the outset to be a good thing; also, for my own feminist sensibilities this affirmative view of sexuality suggests constructive ways to engage questions of male and female sexuality within the Islamic framework. Similarly, perceiving sex as a form of religious worship (*ibadat*), a view also echoed by my respondents, stands out as an approach to sexuality that challenges body/spirit dualisms and generates fascinating and novel ways to conceive of sexual interaction. Nonetheless, what becomes clear through some of my respondents’ narratives is the ways in which these positive notions of sexuality seamlessly interweave with more patriarchal ideas to produce very hierarchical religious conceptions of gender, which in fact collectively render such affirming notions of sexuality quite problematic.

Positive and affirming views on the nature of heterosexual sexuality do not exist independently or in isolation. Rather, they function as particular threads in a complex web of intersecting and ambivalent narratives. To exemplify, one of the most dominant themes that came up in my interviews was the importance of a wife’s sexual availability. Ideal notions of sex as positive, sexual reciprocity and the potential for spiritual connectedness in sexual encounters were often retained simultaneously with conceptions of sacralised male sexual access to their spouses. While these conceptualisations do not necessarily represent contrasting or opposing views on sexuality, in that a respondent’s emphasis on her sexual availability does not revoke or negate the significance of sexual reciprocity in her marital relationship, what becomes quite transparent in many of my respondents’ narratives is that patriarchal understandings of sexuality often are *in relationship* with positive religious ideals and that patriarchal norms sometimes gain impetus and potency from these positive notions of sexuality.

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<sup>94</sup> See for example, the section on the Kecia Ali, Chapter Two, page 49-51.

For example, for some respondents, the belief that you cannot say ‘no’ to having sex with your husband is interconnected with the belief that sex is likened to the spiritually meritorious act of charity and that God will bless you for it. Hence, although sex potentially can take place regardless of whether you want to have sex or not, or whether the sexual interaction is experienced as pleasurable, it is believed that the act itself engenders blessings. Being available to one’s husband (never saying ‘no’ to sex) enables women (and men) to establish a distinct God/believer relationship that brings about blessings, a relationship that only can be realised (in the context of sex as charity) through sexual interaction. For some respondents, seeing sex as the performance of *ibadat* reinforced the belief of not being able to refuse one’s husband sex. In other words, not being able to say no to sex is premised on the belief that one cannot say no to an act of *ibadat*. Likewise, many respondents who held the belief that sex is a gift given to believers by God also believed that they would be cursed by angels if they refused their husband sex. Seemingly, the strong emphasis on positive conceptions of sex tends to obscure important underlying gendered power dynamics: they *mask* male sexual privilege, while objectifying the woman’s body.

Consequently, many of these seemingly positive conceptions of sex mentioned above are significantly influenced by and interact with other dominant constructs of sexuality and sexual dynamics that are undoubtedly androcentric. Sometimes, these celebratory notions of sex subtly yet persuasively reinforce inegalitarian sexual dynamics. Notions of sex being pleasing in the eye of God and seeing sex as establishing a unique spiritual connection between the believer and God, might mask some of the patriarchal assumptions represented by the attendant discourse on women’s sexual availability. Also, the fact that God is involved in sexual relationships presents interesting but problematic ways to think about the nature of the God/believer relationship.

I contend that it is important to interrogate the aphorism that Islam is a ‘sex-positive’ religion. It is not enough to accept that Islam is a sex-positive religion just because of the fact that my respondents, or that the literature on Islam and sexuality foregrounds Islam as a religion that celebrates sexuality. What are the Islamic discourses on sexuality, other than the affirmative view on sex, that generate the construct of Islam as ‘sex-positive’? What are the powerful discourses on gender that underlie such construction of Islam as a ‘sex-positive’ religion? I

suggest that the notion of Islam as ‘sex-positive’ must more critically engage other, at times gender-biased, Islamic discourses on sexuality that collectively inform Muslim understandings and sexual praxis.

Consequently, if in fact we accept the notion of Islam as a sex-positive religion, we must also acknowledge that all the discourses on sexuality presented in the previous chapters constitute some of the components that make up this ‘sex-positive religion’. Thus, ‘sex-positive’ also includes male sexual privilege, a profoundly inegalitarian construct that clearly does not resonate with Islamic feminists, or other feminists’ sensibilities when championing the notion of Islam as a sex-positive religion. Although male sexual privilege does not inevitably mean that sex is negative for women, it is still a construct that prioritises and give licence to male sexual needs and desires, sometimes at the expense of women’s health and well-being – as clearly shown through some of my respondents’ narratives.

Despite these points of ambiguity raised in relation to viewing Islam as a ‘sex-positive’ religion, the noted positive conceptions and ideals on sexuality also influenced and impacted upon some respondents in favourable and beneficial ways. For example, for a few respondents, these positive notions of sex embedded within Islamic discourses encouraged them to give full expression to their sexuality in their marital relationship. Also, for some respondents, positive constructs of sex featured in their marital relationships in ways that provided them the space to negotiate sexual reciprocity and mutuality.

For other respondents, ideals such as sexual reciprocity and the spiritual potential of sexuality were rarely realised in their own intimate experiences. Nonetheless, these notions were often retained at the level of religious ideals. Furthermore, it was often respondents whose marital relationships were characterised by spousal abuse and infidelity that upheld these ideals. Arguably, for some of these respondents, positive imaginings on sexual dynamics were retained because they enabled respondents to cope with unmerciful marital relationships. Thus, particular religious ideals might operate as powerful resources, empowering women to persevere and survive destructive relationships. While this might be helpful in the short term, it can also be quite injurious since such imaginings facilitates the continued abuse of women by not generating

effective challenges to injustices. Although many of these respondents are now divorced and some have remarried, the considerable amount of years they remained married to abusive spouses might reflect the powerful influence of religious ideals.

Positive ideals concerning sexuality might be helpful and empowering for some women. Even so, I contend that there is another layer of meaning regarding positive imaginings of sex that needs to be more thoroughly interrogated. For many of my respondents, the construct of sex as positive, and the promotion by Islam of this view, seemed to exert a certain form of authority. In other words, the fact that Islam tells women that sex is good might make it increasingly difficult for women to say 'no' to sex or try to navigate their sexual relationship with their husband in egalitarian ways. Also, the existence of a number of seemingly positive discourses on sexuality generates particular expectations as to the ways in which sexual intimacy can be experienced. These positive preconceived notions of sex and sexual dynamics might translate into giving women very little space for sexual choices that allow them a level of personal fulfilment.

For example, positive understandings of sex might imply that some women compel themselves to have sex with their husband because their religion conveys to them that sex is positive. Also, the perceptions of sex as an act of *ibadat* and charity might function in ways that take precedence over and suppress women's own expressions of sexuality and pleasure. The strong belief in sex as positive can obfuscate women's need to attend to the fact that they are being abused or that their marital relationship on the whole is not providing a space for mutuality or a space to negotiate mutuality. In addition, the notion that Islam 'says' that sex is positive does not take cognisance of the fact that patriarchal ideals regarding women's sexual availability strongly function alongside with, or are imbricated with these sex-'positive' normative views.

My respondents seldom spoke about personal sexual fulfilment. Rather, sex was often discussed in terms of satisfying husband's needs, being available, sex as *ibadat* and charity. Hence, sex was regularly spoken about *in relation* to something else, and in relation to someone other than oneself – mainly husband or God. The conception of Islam as a sex-positive religion begs the question of who is the centre, or the subject, of this discourse. I argue that the saying 'Islam is a sex-positive religion' is not a neutral comment. In fact, I contend that this construct of sex is *not*

positive for men and women alike because the primary subject underlying this notion of a sex-positive religion is profoundly gendered. Due to the fact that particular forms of male sexuality and discourses foregrounding women's availability intersect and intertwine with this notion of a sex-positive religion, the concept of a sex-positive religion ultimately ends up restricting spaces for women's sexual agency.

The abovementioned religious meaning systems on sex and sexual dynamics provoke quite a few salient questions around conceptualisations of human nature and the God/believer relationship that Islamic feminists place at the centre of their discussions.

## **9.2 Muslim Subjectivities: *'abd-Allah* and *Khalifah***

One of the ways in which Islamic feminists debunk patriarchy is by foregrounding the God/believer relationship in a particular way. Within the Islamic tradition, two distinctive but interrelated subjectivities are offered to believers: *'abd-Allah* (servant of God) and *khalifah* (moral agent). Both subjectivities illustrate a distinct human relationship with God. They are equally important, constituting two parts of one whole, and function at the level of religious ideals. Hence, as a Muslim you should try your best to cultivate, embody and refine these religious ideals so as to fulfil your responsibilities and obligations to God.

The *'abd* is a specific kind of posture and is always in a relationship to God. The *'abd* is receptive and obedient to God's commands through acts of worship and is completely beholden to God. Islamic feminists, as well as other Muslim thinkers reflecting on questions of ethics, believe that the implications of being *'abd-Allah* free people from other kinds of hierarchies. Nonetheless, one finds that particular worldly hierarchies that position men as intermediaries between women and God have existed in previous historical periods and continue to exist to various degrees in contemporary Muslim societies. It is the intertwining of *'abd-Allah* with patriarchy that might create potentially problematic interpersonal relationship dynamics that ultimately influence women's lived experiences.

For example, *ibadat* (worship) constitutes a central part of being Muslim. In other words, the worship of God is contingent on and interrelated with fulfilling one's role and responsibility as '*abd-Allah*. By perceiving sexual interaction as a form of *ibadat*, a view that was expounded in many of my respondents' narratives, saying 'yes' to sex can be understood to be a religious responsibility. Similarly, for respondents who believed that they would invoke God's punishment by refusing to have sex with their husbands, sexual encounters are arguably framed through the need to maintain a good relationship with God.

It is noteworthy that many of my respondents seemed to assert a strong '*abd*-like subjectivity when presenting their views on sexual dynamics. Not only did their views reflect subservience to God, but in fact, the notion of being an '*abd* was also manifested through particular spousal dynamics – within which subservience to God can be expressed through one's willingness to have sex with one's husband. For example, when being exposed to husbands' invocation of the *hadith* that intimately links women's sexual readiness with God's satisfaction or dissatisfaction, many respondents asserted that they would rather have sex with their husband than be subjected to the curse of the angels, invoked if they refused to have sex.

If sexual interaction is supposed to be something that is pleasing in the eyes of God, an act of *ibadat* as mentioned by some respondents, or a unique spiritual connectedness as mentioned by others, it is quite the paradox that men singularly have monopoly, in the context of this *hadith* for example, on limitless sexual access. Thus, the need for women to please God also translates into pleasing one's husband. The concomitant view that a husband who pleased his wife was also thereby pleasing God did not appear to have a powerful presence in their narratives. For many of my respondents, the construction of a distinct God/believer relationship was mediated through a sexual relationship with one's husband. This is one example of a distinct sexual dynamics within which an '*abd*-like subjectivity becomes imbricated and imbibed in male sexual privilege. This renders a gender-biased ethics of sexual engagement premised on a husband's sexual need and a wife's readiness, espousing particular parameters for when and where *ibadat* can take place, regardless of personal preference.

Consequently, these views of *ibadat* operate within certain kinds of social relationships and are influenced by particular relationship dynamics. The questions outlined in Chapter Seven of this dissertation raised a few central concerns regarding seeing sex as *ibadat* if simultaneously coupled with difficult experiences, like sexual coercion or various forms of abuse in one's marital relationship.<sup>95</sup> The possibilities for contesting these inegalitarian marital dynamics are dependent on the various subject positions available to women within the discursive field of Muslim sexualities.

Islamic feminists have provided a stringent critique regarding the various social constructions, religious norms, and relations of power that limit women's potential for the full expression of the God/believer relationship, a relationship that also should reflect women's *khalifah*.<sup>96</sup> For example, the various ways in which men, even if only symbolically, exercise a certain form of control over women's sexuality, bodies and fertility management, as well as the economic injustices and the lack of educational opportunities that many Muslim women experience in different parts of the world, impinge on women's abilities to fulfil their religious responsibility of moral agency. Seemingly, some of my respondents' clear emphasis on '*abd-Allah* (servant of God) at the level of normative perceptions on sexual dynamics might echo some of the tensions regarding women's opportunities to express and enact the religious subjectivity of *khalifah* (moral agent), pointed out by Islamic feminists.

For many Islamic feminist scholars, the notion of *khalifah* incorporates an individual spiritual responsibility to work towards social justice, including gender justice. The ideal moral agent should aim at employing her/his moral responsibility in a way that mirrors the Qur'anic principles of social justice. By extension, the importance of asserting and embracing this particular subjectivity is supported by and arguably harmonised through the notion of *mu'amalat*, social relations. It is salient that individuals work towards cultivating moral values in interpersonal relationships so that principles of social justice can flow from the personal into the communal. These types of moral capacities are highlighted by Islamic feminists, Sadiyya Shaikh and Amina Wadud. Shaikh (2009) suggests the integral relationship between spiritual refinement

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<sup>95</sup> See Chapter 7, page 156-157.

<sup>96</sup> See for example Shaikh, 2003b and Wadud, 2006.

and justice-based relationships, while Wadud asserts that “personal spiritual development forms the cornerstone of one’s activities in both the public and the private realm of society” (Wadud, 2006:36).

The salience for women to assert moral agency, as advocated by Islamic feminists, can be seen as one way of *being* in this world; more so, it is one way of *being Muslim*. Nonetheless, there is not just *one* way of being a *khalifah* – just as there is not just one way in which one can work towards social justice. For many Islamic feminists, the responsibility of *khalifah* might be reflected through their scholarly endeavours. As we have seen previously, Islamic feminists’ critical and creative engagements with reinterpreting religious texts can provide women with empowering egalitarian textual legacies that emerge organically from the religious canon. Particularly scholars like Wadud (2006) and Khaled Abou El Fadl (2001) have introduced powerful responses on how to engage with potentially unjust meanings embedded in religious texts. The earlier discussed notion of Wadud’s suggestion of saying ‘no’ to the application of the literal meaning of verse 4:34, can be seen as one way of negotiating scriptural authority and constitutes one way of employing one’s responsibility as God’s *khalifah*. Likewise, Abou El Fadl’s concept of a “conscientious-pause” illustrates a creative and self-reflective engagement with texts such that human capacities for critical awareness and ethical consciousness are foregrounded, thus taking seriously the dynamic responsibility of *khalifah* in changing social contexts.

While these scholars engage with religious texts and provide alternative responses to the difficulties that believers might encounter when reading religious texts, these kinds of contestations of religious meanings are also found in the lives of everyday lay people. I contend that many of my respondents *embody* a conscientious-pause and *enact* their right to say ‘no’ when experiencing the invocation of Qur’anic verses and *ahadith* in their intimate relationships or in other situations that engender a sense of discomfort or disturb their sensibilities and moral compass. Although women’s choices for moral agency might be limited since the fulfilment of *khalifah* is dependent on a number of social relationships, women’s moral interventions are expressed within the constraints of their lives.

The excerpts presented in the previous chapters illustrate that my respondents function within various social structures in ways that are creative and that resist particular religious norms. Moreover, the tensions and ambiguities embedded within prevalent frameworks of understanding create possibilities for working the system in constructive ways. Nonetheless, distinctive relations of power, for example, women's experiences with spousal abuse and sexual violence, sometimes limit their potential for negotiation. In these situations, women often make pragmatic decisions in order to maintain peace in the home and enable some degree of self-preservation.

As I have noted earlier, for many of my respondents, religion is a source of strength and empowerment. In particular, belief in a merciful and compassionate God was expressed by many respondents and often seemed to inform their agentival capacity, to use Mahmood's (2001) terminology. Often, the strong invocation of God's mercy seemed to realign and dislodge normative constructs espousing male sexual privilege. For example, some respondents' engagements illustrate that they enacted their right to say 'no' to sex through utilising alternative narratives of God as primary in their lives, effectively thwarting the powerful discourse of a wife's sexual availability. Also, the belief in the mercy of God provided many respondents with a profound sense of endurance and perseverance in difficult times. Simultaneously, their strong religious commitment enabled ingenuity and resourcefulness when having to deal actively with brutal relationships and unmerciful social conditions. Respondents also employed the notion of God's mercy as a way of challenging and resisting abusive spousal behaviour and inequalitarian sexual dynamics. Consequently, by employing empowering characteristics of God, a few respondents in fact shifted the balance of power in their relationships by locating religious authority at the centre of their embodied experiences.

In addition, some respondents, although not contesting the legitimacy of discourses that demanded their sexual availability, enacted their right to refuse their husband sex due to the nature of their marital relationship. Thus, even if this particular 'wifely ideal' of sexual availability is rhetorically retained, the construct itself might be precarious in a lived social context. These particular engagements clearly demonstrate the different ways in which certain kinds of agency get enacted in society, and echo some of the forms of contestations theorised by Islamic feminists.

Within the context of being exposed to their husbands' invocation of the *hadith* that suggests that a woman will be cursed by the angels if she refuses to have sex with her husband, participants' responses ranged from resistance and abrogation to acceptance and reiteration. For example, as noted earlier, for some respondents the possibility of being cursed clearly provided a sufficient motivation for having sex with their husband whenever he requested it. By contrast, many respondents' active and critical engagement with this *hadith* is reflective of a *need* to make sense of its religious meaning in ways that pertain to contemporary context and experiences. For example, the reality of HIV/AIDS in South Africa coupled with personal experiences of infidelity generated various levels of discomfort for some respondents when being confronted with the patriarchal meaning systems embedded within this *hadith*. The various responses articulated by my respondents demonstrate how this *hadith* constitutes a site for the contestation of power, also in a contemporary society – and also by women whose lives are being adversely affected by the directives implicit in this *hadith*.

My respondents' narratives suggest that religious meaning systems concerning sexuality clearly form part of a contemporary social text. In other words, particular dominant religious mores do not only exist at the level of text but are frequently invoked, contemplated and experienced by women in local contexts. I find Shaikh's discussion on a "tafsir of praxis" (2007) extremely useful when examining the various ways in which my respondents *embody* texts in their intimate relationships. As a novel hermeneutical lens through which to challenge elitist scholarly production of religious meaning, women's "embodied tafsir" as suggested by Shaikh, can be seen as one way of rendering women's experiences essential when investigating what constitutes a contemporary Islamic sexual ethics.

By utilising this feminist lens, what becomes clear is that contestations of religious meanings come in different forms. The paradoxes and ambiguities implicit in dominant contemporary epistemologies – constituting part of this context-specific social text – are largely contested through women's lived engagements. For example, as noted in my chapter dealing with polygyny, although this particular religious construct might be accepted theoretically, it is increasingly challenged at the level of women's experience. I contend that this kind of engagement is one form of moral agency that women *participate in* through their experiences.

Also, the kinds of reflections articulated by my respondents when thinking about how to make particular choices in life related to marital relationships and their own wellbeing, fundamentally contribute to how one can think about what it means to be a moral agent.

### **9.3 Towards a Contemporary Islamic Egalitarian Sexual Ethics**

Clearly, the emergence of the Islamic feminist discourse contributes with ingenious and creative ways to re-reading and rethinking the Islamic tradition in order to provide counter-narratives that are in accordance with the feminist ideal of gender justice. Not only do many Islamic feminists employ methodological strategies developed in the classical period to interpret religious texts, but they also develop novel hermeneutical methods that speak to the challenges in contemporary social contexts. Without a doubt, the continued development of Islamic feminism/s provides useful gender-sensitive approaches that increasingly can inform contemporary Islamic sexual ethics. Nonetheless, even as they excavate the egalitarian resources in the Islamic tradition, what becomes clear through my respondents' narratives is the continued existence of dominant discourses on sexuality underpinned by patriarchal epistemologies. Also, the multifaceted and sometimes paradoxical meaning systems of particular normative ideals on sexuality emerge as a salient theme in many narratives.

I contend that a contemporary Islamic sexual ethics is expressed both through understandings and experiences. By paying particular attention to the latter, the narratives presented in this dissertation present one way of exploring the theoretical construct of a *tafsir* of praxis, posited by Shaikh (2007). By taking into account the interplay between experiences, religiosity, dominant religious norms and ideals, and a particular local context, this *tafsir* of praxis foregrounds the various ways in which lived engagements contribute to the understanding and creation of a contemporary sexual ethics. My respondents' narratives represent diverse articulations of an ambiguous contemporary Islamic sexual ethics that is *lived* and continuously being *produced* by women in a particular South African context.

It is increasingly important that feminist scholars, and we as researchers, pay attention to the fact that a sexual ethics, or a code for sexual ethical behaviour, is a co-creation that is always in the

making. Sexual ethical ideals and norms do not exist only at the level of texts but are lived out through a social text that is embodied and experienced, hence always changing. There seem to be significant levels of dissonance between particular Islamic feminist notions and many of my respondents' lived realities. Simultaneously, there also seem to be some levels of incongruence between several of my respondents' conceptualisations of sexuality and their experiences of marital relationships. Some of the realities within which my respondents were situated reveal that particular contextual factors such as HIV/AIDS, infidelity and gender violence intersect with religious norms and ideals, sometimes in very problematic ways. We must continue to ask critical questions related to the ways in which religious norms and dominant discourses on sexuality intersect with some of these context-specific realities.

My empirical research revealed that there were moments when my respondents were subdued by and complied with the parameters set out by dominant religious norms, yet other times they were resisting these very boundaries. Sometimes they just did what they needed to get done in order to get out of harmful relationships, without conceiving of this type of agency as resisting a dominant discourse. Sometimes structures were negotiated rather ambivalently and particular patriarchal ideals retained. Other times, my respondents clearly resisted and contested religious norms and practices that unsettled their sensibilities and capacities as engaged Muslims.

So what is the way towards establishing a contemporary Islamic egalitarian sexual ethics? I contend that more careful attention must be given to empirical studies that foreground women's experiences so as to examine and reveal the multiple and nuanced discourses that function and inform women's lives. In order to work towards a sexual ethics that prioritises gender justice, women's voices and experiences need to be heard and acknowledged as essential components of contemporary knowledge production. Within the context of South Africa, Faghmeda Miller, the first Muslim woman who publicly revealed that she was HIV-positive, stirred up much controversy and public debate with regard to the risk of HIV in Muslim communities. The fact that the first woman who came forward had been infected by the man she was married to, brought the topic of HIV to the fore in ways that foregrounded particular marital dynamics. Simultaneously, this debate opened the way for interrogating normative religious ideals pertaining to women's roles in contemporary local contexts. During the aftermath of this public

engagement, Faghmeda Miller was part of spearheading an organisation called *Positive Muslims*, now situated in Cape Town, whose purpose is to raise the awareness of HIV in Muslim communities. This example shows the importance of giving voice to particular experiences and also the possibilities for further action as a consequence of raising public awareness.

I contend that the first step in any feminist empirical research is to examine what is actually happening in women's lives. The next step in feminist projects is to make an effort to contest particular norms and behaviours that negatively impact upon women. There are a number of ways in which one can undertake this endeavour. The next phase of this particular project is to share some of my empirical findings with the women who generously participated in this study as well as with organisations and scholars that work within the field of gender and Islam.

I propose that the varying ways in which feminists are theorising the different relationships between subjectivities and power contribute to *productive ambiguities* that might open up spaces for more pluralistic expressions of feminism. I argue that Islamic feminism/s underscore important dimensions of women's experience that pay particular attention to the construction of religious subjectivities. Islamic feminism/s encourages reflections on the nature of women's discursive religious affiliations that influence their perceptions, ideas of self, and male-female dynamics. By viewing religious meaning systems as constituting a powerful source of authority, affecting women both positively and negatively, Islamic feminism/s highlight the various possibilities for subjective interaction with the continuous production of religious meaning.

This dissertation foreground localised accounts of women's narratives where religion constitutes an influential framework through which subjectivities are produced. I propose that this dissertation contributes to the field of local empirical studies firstly, in that it highlights voices that have previously been marginalised. Secondly, I contend that this study adds important insights to the studies already undertaken in South Africa in that it elaborately points out particular structural dynamics that need to be contested within the South African landscape.

I note that this brief account of some of the existing perceptions, understandings and experiences with regard to sexuality and gender dynamics is by no means a definitive picture of current views

or experiences within Muslim communities in Cape Town, nor is it representative for all Muslim women's attitudes or reflections regarding this issue. I also acknowledge that my interpretation of the research material is a particular understanding amongst numerous potential interpretations. In addition, I would like to point out that the interview space is a temporary space. Thus, the subject positions expressed by respondents are always processual and dependent on the context and relationship dynamics that develop during the interview encounter. Respondents express their understandings and experiences in dialogue with the researcher, and thus narrations are always open to multiple appropriations.

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## Glossary

- Awrah:* lit. nakedness, referring to aspects of the self that should be publicly concealed. It includes a range of referents from the 'genitals' or 'pubendum' for men and women alike in some perspectives; to women's hands, face, and voice in the view of others.
- Burqa:* an enveloping outer garment worn by some Muslim women for the purpose of cloaking the entire body, including the face
- Dhikr:* plural, *adhkar*: Lit remembrance (of God). Might refer to recitation of religious texts, repetition of certain words or formulas in praise of Allah
- Din:* religion, faith
- Du'a:* plural, *ad'iya*: invocation of God, supplication, prayer asking God for something (e.g. asking God for forgiveness, cure you from disease, or to grant you children)
- Fasakh:* a divorce granted the wife by a judge
- Fiqh:* Islamic Jurisprudence
- Fitna:* lit. 'temptation,' 'trial'; commonly used to indicate chaos
- Hadith:* plural, *ahadith*: detailed narratives reporting on the life and praxis of the Prophet, i.e. sayings and doings of the Prophet
- Hajj:* pilgrimage to Mecca, held annually and prescribed for all Muslims at least once in a lifetime
- Halal:* legal term indicating that which is permitted, lawful, allowable, contrary to *haram*
- Haram:* legal term indicating that which is prohibited, forbidden

<i>Hijab:</i>	in popular literature; a headscarf or a veil that some Muslim women wear. The word <i>hijab</i> has been interpreted differently by various Islamic scholars, sometimes referring to dress, yet other times to seclusion, separation in space (domestic/public, men/women), and/or protection
<i>Ibadat:</i>	lit. acts of devotion, religious observance, worship. Prescribed activities of worship
<i>Ijtihad:</i>	lit. ‘effort,’ ‘exerting oneself’; independent investigation of religious sources
<i>Imam:</i>	prayer leader
<i>Isha:</i>	the last prayer to be recited before the sun ascends again
<i>Jahiliyyah:</i>	‘time of ignorance’, a Qur’anic term, applied by Muslim theologians to the period of paganism prior to the advent of Islam
<i>Jihad:</i>	lit. ‘striving,’ ‘exertion,’ or ‘effort in the direction of a certain goal.’ There is a basic distinction between two forms of <i>jihad</i> : the ‘great’ <i>jihad</i> and the ‘small’ <i>jihad</i> . The ‘great’ <i>jihad</i> denotes an effort imposed upon oneself to achieve moral and religious perfection, whereas the ‘small’ <i>jihad</i> refers to the duty to do battle against an outside enemy.
<i>Khalifah:</i>	moral agent, moral agency
<i>Khutba:</i>	Friday sermon
<i>Mahr:</i>	dower or nuptial gift promised by a prospective husband in a marriage contract
<i>Mawlana:</i>	form of address to a religious leader. Here: religious scholar with training from institutes of higher religious education in India or Pakistan, or from institutes of Indo-Pak provenance in South Africa
<i>Minaret:</i>	tower of a mosque
<i>Miswak:</i>	twig used as a toothbrush
<i>Musalla:</i>	prayer mat

<i>Ni'ma:</i>	blessing
<i>Niqab:</i>	a face veil covering the lower part of the face (up to the eyes) worn by some Muslim women
<i>Niyat:</i>	the intention one evokes in one's heart to do an act for the sake of Allah
<i>Qiyamat:</i>	Day of Judgment
<i>Sabr:</i>	patience
<i>Sahih:</i>	plural, <i>sihah</i> : sound, authentic, with reference to <i>ahadith</i>
<i>Salah:</i>	Islamic daily ritual prayer
<i>Shaitan:</i>	Satan
<i>Shari'a:</i>	lit. 'the path that leads to the source'. In modern usage, 'Revealed Law' or 'Islamic Law'
<i>Sheikh:</i>	plural, <i>shuyukh</i> : an elder, teacher, a learned, pious man, master of an order, title of scholar
<i>Sukun:</i>	love, deep intimacy
<i>Sunna:</i>	lit. 'trodden path'; customary practices; when capitalised refers to the Prophet's practices
<i>Tafasir:</i>	interpretations of the Qur'an
<i>Talaq:</i>	a divorce formula that can only be pronounced by a husband and will have immediate effect for the dissolution of the marital union if pronounced three times
<i>Taqwa:</i>	God-consciousness

*Tarawih:* during Ramadan the *Tarawih* prayer proceeds after the *'Isha* prayer, which is the last prayer to be recited before the sun ascends again

*Tawhid:* the doctrine of Allah's oneness, uniqueness

*Ulama:* religious scholars

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## **Appendices**

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## Appendix I



### South African Muslim Women: Sexuality, Marriage and Reproductive Choices

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are a Muslim woman. We appreciate your participation. You are under no obligation to participate and are free to decline to participate if you choose to do so.

If you agree to participate, please answer the questions on this questionnaire. Your answers will remain anonymous and confidential.

#### PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ON THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.

There is no way to link your responses on this questionnaire to you. **This is an anonymous questionnaire.**

The questions are of a personal nature. Please answer as honestly and truthfully as you can. Your honest responses will help us understand the experiences of Muslim women and their attitudes towards marriage and sexuality. The information you provide will help us develop ways to empower Muslim women and help address the challenges they face.

Some questions are of a highly personal and sexual nature including questions on sexual abuse. These might be quite difficult for people who have experienced sexual abuse. We have included these questions as it appears to occur in some Muslim families but is not spoken about publicly. By including these questions we hope to understand the extent to which sexual abuse is a problem in our communities.

All of the information we collect will be kept confidential and no one will see it except for research staff at the Universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch. All questionnaires will be kept locked up at the University of Cape Town. **No one else** will see your responses to the questions.

Please make an X in the corresponding box if you are either a married, divorced or widowed Muslim

woman:

If you are not a Muslim woman, please do not proceed with this questionnaire.

If you are not a married, divorced or widowed Muslim woman, please do not proceed with this questionnaire.

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Please write today's date here: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please write your age here: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Please make an X in the box(s) that best describes your current marital status:

	Marital status	Number of years married
Widowed		
Seperated		
Divorced * (see below)		
Married		
Remarried * (see below)		

\*If divorced/remarried please tell us the main reason that your previous marriage(s) ended:

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3. Please make an X in the box that best describes your current living situation:

Live alone	
Live with husband, no children	
Live with husband and children	
Live with other adult(s), no children	
Live with other adults and children	
Live with children	
Live in a retirement home/home for the elderly	
Live in an institution	

4. Please indicate the highest level of education that you have completed:

No formal education	
Completed primary school	
Attended high school but did not complete matric	
Completed matric	
Attended university, college or technikon but did not graduate	
Currently studying at a university, college or technikon	
Graduated from university, college or technikon	
No formal schooling but some adult education	

5. Please indicate which race/cultural group you are identified with. We need this to understand difference among population groups. Please do **not** state that you are Muslim – you have been included in this study because we know you are Muslim:

Indian	
Malay	
African	
White	
Other (please specify)	

6. What is your current work situation? Please make a cross in the box(s) that best describes your employment situation:

Employed full time	
Employed part time	
Student	
Unemployed	
Disabled	
Housewife	
Unable to work due to medical problem	
Retired	
Volunteer work	

7. Which of the following best describes your approximate yearly family income from all sources, before taxes?

Less than R10 000	
R10 001-R40 000	
R40 001-R80 000	
R80 001-R110 000	
R110 001-R170 000	
R170 001-R240 000	
R240 001 and above	
Don't know	

8. Please indicate whether you or anyone in your home owns any of the following items:

	Yes	No
Television set		
Radio		
Motor car		
Microwave oven		
DSTV		
DVD player		
Video player (VHS)		

9. How do you get around most of the time? Please make an X in the most appropriate box:

I get around mostly with my own car	
I get around mostly with someone else's car	
I get around mostly by taxi	
I get around mostly by bus	
I get around mostly by train	
I get around mostly by walking	
Other (please state)	

10. Where were you born?

Name of suburb/area	
Name of city	
Name of rural area (if applicable)	

11. What is your first language?	
12. Which other languages do you speak?	
13. Please state in which area you currently live:	

### EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM WOMEN

The following questions ask about your experiences with your husband and family. Please choose the answer that best applies to your experience. Please choose only ONE answer per question.

14.  When I got married the decision about whom I would marry was entirely mine  
 When I got married I had a say in choosing my husband  
 When I got married my family decided whom I would marry

**For the following question - If you do NOT have children please, tick this box  and then answer the following two questions by IMAGINING how you and your husband would have made these decisions and respond accordingly.**

15.  My husband was the one who decided we would or would not have children  
 I was the one who decided that we would or would not have children  
 Both my husband and I were involved in the decision to have or not have children  
 Having children was unplanned
16.  In my marriage taking care of the children is mainly my responsibility  
 In my marriage taking care of the children is mainly my husband's responsibility  
 Taking care of the children is a task that is equally shared by my husband and I  
 While my husband and I both take care of the children, I have more childcare responsibilities than my husband  
 While my husband and I both take care of the children, my husband has more childcare responsibilities than me

17.  In my marriage doing housework is mainly my responsibility  
 In my marriage doing housework is mainly my husband's responsibility  
 In my marriage whatever housework needs to be done is equally shared by my husband and I  
 In my marriage most of the housework is done by a domestic worker
18.  My husband is the only one who earns money for the household  
 My husband pays much more towards the household expenses than I do  
 My husband and I pay equally towards the household expenses  
 I pay much more towards the household expenses than my husband  
 I am the only one who earns money for the household
19.  My husband is the head of the household and makes all the major decisions for the family  
 I am the head of the household and make all the major decisions for the family  
 Both my husband and I generally make decisions that relate to the family together  
 My husband makes some decisions for the family and I make other decisions for the family\*\* (if you tick this box, see below)

\*\*In the space below please provide some examples of decisions that you make for the family/household:

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Please provide some examples of decisions that your husband make for the family/household:

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The following questions have to do with whether or not you use contraception. Please mark the answer that best applies to you:

20.  I have never used contraception  
 I sometimes use contraception  
 I often use contraception  
 I regularly use contraception
21. How did you decide on the contraceptive method:  
 I decided myself  
 I decided after talking to a nurse/doctor  
 My husband and I decided together  
 My husband decided for me

22. I use contraceptives without my husband's knowledge:

Not at all	Sometimes	Often	All the time
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23. If you do use contraception without your husband's knowledge, please write in the space below **WHY** you feel you have to do so without his knowledge:

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24. If I thought it was necessary, I would feel comfortable asking my husband to use a condom when we have sex:

Not at all	Sometimes	Often	All the time
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25. If I thought it was necessary I would feel comfortable asking my husband to practice withdrawal during sex (that is, remove his penis from my vagina before he ejaculates):

Not at all comfortable	A little comfortable	Quite a bit comfortable	Very much comfortable	Extremely comfortable
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**Please mark the answer that best applies to you:**

	Not at all	Some time	Often	All the time
26. My husband and I have good communication				
27. I feel free to ask for sex with my husband any time I want				
28. I am able to say no to sex when I don't want to have sex				
29. I am generally happy in my marriage				
30. I am sexually satisfied in my marriage				
31. My husband forces me to have sex against my will				

32. **Please mark the answer that best applies to you:**

- My husband has never hit me for as long as we have been married
- My husband has hit me once but has never done so again
- My husband has hit me on a few occasions
- My husband beats me
- My husband beats me regularly

**Please mark the answer that best applies to you:**

33. My husband hits our children in a way that I do not like:

Not at all	Once in a while	Sometimes	Often	All the time
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34. I am afraid of my husband:

Not at all	A little	Quite a bit	Very much	Extremely
------------	----------	-------------	-----------	-----------

35. My husband forces me to do things that I would prefer not to do:

Not at all	Sometimes	Often	All the time
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36. My husband is emotionally abusive:

Not at all	Sometimes	Often	All the time
------------	-----------	-------	--------------

37. My husband is verbally abusive:

Not at all	Sometimes	Often	All the time
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38. My husband had extra-marital sex while he was married to me:

- Yes
- No
- I can't say with certainty

39. I had extra-marital sex while I was married:

- Yes
- No

40. My husband took another wife without me knowing:

- Yes
- No

Please answer the following questions **whether or not** your husband has another wife. We are interested in your **opinions** rather than your actual experiences.

41. If my husband wished to take a second wife, I would feel:

Very unhappy	Unhappy	Indifferent	Happy	Very happy
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49. Did you discuss the risks of HIV/Aids and sexually transmitted diseases with your husband before you got married to him?

- Yes
- No

## **WOMEN'S UNDERSTANDINGS OF ISLAM**

The following questions concern women's understandings of Islam in terms of marriage, and sexual and reproductive choices. Please answer the following questions as best you can. If you feel that you do not know the answer, please take your best guess, according to **your understanding** of Islam. THERE IS NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWER. We only want to know what your understanding of Islam is on these matters.

### **Marital matters**

50. According to my understanding of Islam, I can decide whom I will marry:

- Yes
- No

51. According to my understanding of Islam, whether I have children or not is:

- For me to decide alone
- For me to decide mostly
- For my husband and I to decide together
- For my husband to decide mostly
- For my husband to decide alone

52. According to my understanding of Islam, taking care of the children is/would be:

- My responsibility alone
- My responsibility mainly
- Equally my husband and my responsibility
- My husband's responsibility mainly
- My husband's responsibility alone

53. According to my understanding of Islam, taking care of the housework is:

- My responsibility alone
- My responsibility mainly
- Equally my husband and my responsibility
- My husband's responsibility mainly
- My husband's responsibility alone

54. According to my understanding of Islam, providing money and taking care of the household financially is:
- My responsibility alone
  - My responsibility mainly
  - Equally my husband and my responsibility
  - My husband's responsibility mainly
  - My husband's responsibility alone
55. According to my understanding of Islam, I am allowed to work for money outside of the home.
- Whenever I want to
  - Only when it is absolutely necessary
  - Never under any circumstances
  - Only with my husband's permission
  - Preferably after discussing it with my husband
56. According to my understanding of Islam,
- The husband is the head of the household and makes all the major decisions for the family
  - The role of head of the household is to be shared by both the husband and wife and all major decisions are made together.
  - The wife is the head of the household and makes all the major decisions for the family
  - Islam has no fixed teaching about who should be the head of the household
57. According to my understanding of Islam:
- A Muslim marriage is based on obedience of the wife to the husband
  - A Muslim marriage is based on mutual consultation between a husband and a wife
  - A Muslim marriage is based on mutual consultation between a husband and wife, but the husband has the final say
58. According to my understanding of Islam, my husband is allowed to hit me:
- Any time he is displeased with me
  - Under no circumstances whatsoever
  - Under extreme circumstances (*If you made a cross next to this question, please write in the space below ALL the circumstances under which he may hit you*).
- 
- 
- 
-

## Sexual matters

Please indicate the extent to which the following statements are true for you:

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
59.	According to my understanding of Islam, my husband can have sex with me anytime he wants to because he has paid <i>maskawii/ mahr/ dowry</i>	1	2	3	4
60.	According to my understanding of Islam, I must agree to have sex with my husband whenever he wants to.	1	2	3	4
61.	According to my understanding of Islam, my husband must agree to have sex with me whenever I want to	1	2	3	4
62.	According to my understanding of Islam, it is important for a woman to be a virgin when she gets married for the first time	1	2	3	4
63.	According to my understanding of Islam, it is important for a man to be a virgin when he gets married for the first time	1	2	3	4
64.	According to my understanding of Islam, it is acceptable for a woman to ask for sex with her husband any time she wants	1	2	3	4
65.	According to my understanding of Islam, I have a right to have sexual pleasure with my husband	1	2	3	4
66.	According to my understanding of Islam, my husband can force me to have sex with him	1	2	3	4

For the following questions please mark **as many** of the statements that apply to you:

67. According to my understanding of Islam:

- Sex is a gift from Allah to be enjoyed
- Sex is only a duty that I owe to my husband
- Sex is a burden for women
- Sex is most importantly a way to have children
- Sex is something that one should not really enjoy too much
- Sex is a way to satisfy your natural appetites so that you can get on with other more important parts of life
- Sex is a form of *ibadat* (worship)

Please indicate the extent to which the following statements are true for you:

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
68.	According to my understanding of Islam women are rewarded by Allah for having sex with their husbands	1	2	3	4
69.	According to my understanding of Islam men are rewarded by Allah for having sex with their wives	1	2	3	4
70.	According to my understanding of Islam Allah is displeased with a woman who refuses to have sex with her husband	1	2	3	4
71.	According to my understanding of Islam, Allah is displeased with a man who refuses to have sex with his wife	1	2	3	4

Please mark the statement that best applies to you.

72. I think that:
- Men have stronger sexual urges than women
  - Women have stronger sexual urges than men
  - Men and women have equal levels of sexual desire
  - Levels of sexual desire are not determined by gender

Please indicate the extent to which the following statements are true for you:

		Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Probably No	Definitely No
73.	According to my understanding, Islam allows people to use contraception	1	2	3	4
74.	According to my understanding of Islam, it is acceptable for me to ask my husband to use a condom when we have sex	1	2	3	4
75.	According to my understanding of Islam, it is acceptable for me to ask my husband to practice withdrawal (that is, remove his penis from my vagina before he ejaculates)	1	2	3	4

76. According to Islam, abortion is:
- Never permitted under any circumstances
  - Permitted any time before the *ruh* (spirit) enters into the fetus (120 days) for whatever reason a women may have
  - Permitted before the *ruh* (spirit) enters into the fetus (120 days) only in particular circumstances (*If you made a cross next to this question, please write in the space below ALL the circumstances under which abortion may be allowed*)

Please indicate the extent to which the following statements are true for you:

		Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Probably No	Definitely No
77.	According to my understanding, Islam allows single men to masturbate (that is, touch their own private parts sexually)	1	2	3	4
78.	According to my understanding, Islam allows married men to masturbate (that is, touch their own private parts sexually)	1	2	3	4
79.	According to my understanding, Islam allows single women to masturbate (that is, touch their own private parts sexually)	1	2	3	4
80.	According to my understanding, Islam allows married women to masturbate (that is, touch their own private parts sexually)	1	2	3	4

### ROLE OF RELIGION

The next several questions ask about the role that religion plays in **your** life. Please indicate the extent to which the following statements are true for you:

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
81.	I consider my religious faith to play an important role in my life	1	2	3	4	5
82.	I get comfort and strength from my religion	1	2	3	4	5

		Yes	No
83.	I belong to an Islamic organization		
84.	I currently do unpaid/ voluntary work for an Islamic organization		

		Not at all	Sometimes	Often
85.	I attend religious events such as Taleems, Mouloud, Thikr, Gajat's			
86.	I am active in the Muslim community			
87.	I take time for Salah/Namaz, meditation or contemplation during the course of my day			
88.	I pray outside of usual Salah/Namaz times			
89.	I give charity			

90. How religious would you say you are? Please circle the most appropriate response.

Not religious at all	Not very religious	Somewhat religious	Very religious	Extremely religious
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91. On average, how many **times** do you pray (make salaah/namaz) each day? Please make a tick in the most correct box.

- 5 times a day
- 1 to 4 times a day
- At least once a month
- On big nights only and/or during Ramadan only
- At least once a year
- Never

92. On average, how many **days** do you typically fast during Ramadan? Please write the number of days here: \_\_\_\_\_

93. On average, how many **days** are you physically able to fast during Ramadan? Please write the number of days here: \_\_\_\_\_

94. On average, how often do you fast outside of the month of Ramadan? Please write the number of days a year that you fast outside Ramadan: \_\_\_\_\_

95. How often do you give Zakat?

- Every year without fail
- As often as I can
- Not at all

**P.T.O** The questionnaire continues on the next page

**THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE OF A HIGHLY PERSONAL AND SEXUAL NATURE INCLUDING SENSITIVE QUESTIONS ON SEXUAL ABUSE. THESE MIGHT OFFEND SOME PEOPLE OR BE QUITE DIFFICULT TO ANSWER FOR SOME PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL ABUSE.**

**AS RESEARCHERS WE DO NOT MEAN TO BE OFFENSIVE OR INSENSITIVE BUT WISH TO UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGES FACING MUSLIM WOMEN REGARDING THEIR SEXUALITY.**

**IF YOU ARE OFFENDED OR DISTURBED BY THESE QUESTIONS, PLEASE FEEL FREE TO STOP COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE AT ANY POINT.**

**IF YOU PROCEED WITH THIS QUESTIONNAIRE WE WOULD APPRECIATE YOUR HONESTY.**

**REMEMBER ALL YOUR RESPONSES ARE ANONYMOUS.**

96. I had an abortion before I was married:  
 Yes  
 No
97. I had an abortion during my marriage:  
 Yes  
 No
98. I had an unwanted pregnancy before I was married:  
 Yes  
 No
99. I had an unwanted pregnancy while I was married:  
 Yes  
 No
100. If yes, please mark the answer that best applies:  
 (1) I had an unwanted pregnancy but chose not to have an abortion  
 (2) I had an unwanted pregnancy and chose to have an abortion
101. Please answer the following question ONLY if you answered (1) above.  
I chose not to have an abortion because:  
 I don't think that abortion is the right thing to do  
 My husband stopped me from having an abortion  
 Abortion is wrong Islamically  
 Other reasons: please explain:

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102. I was a virgin when I got married for the first time:  
 Yes  
 No
103. My husband was a virgin when he got married for the first time:  
 Yes  
 No  
 I don't know
104. Do you masturbate (that is, touch your private parts for sexual pleasure)?  
 Yes  
 No

105. If yes, why do you masturbate (that is, touch you private parts sexually)?

- I enjoy it
- My husband does not give me sexual pleasure
- My husband is absent
- I am no longer married

Has any of the following ever happened to you outside of your marriage with someone who was not your husband? Please make an X in the appropriate box(s).

		No	Yes	If yes, what was your age at the time?
106.	Someone touched my private parts (e.g. breasts, vagina, or anus) when I did not want them to			
107.	Someone inserted an object into my private parts when I did not want them to			
108.	Someone inserted their penis into my private parts when I did not want them to			
109.	Someone put their mouth on my private parts when I did not want them to			
110.	Someone forced me to touch or lick their private parts when I did not want to			
111.	Someone fondled my private parts when I did not want them to			
112.	Someone other than my husband tried to rape me but did not succeed			
113.	Someone other than my husband raped me			

If you answered no to all of the above, please stop here.

114. If you answered yes to any of the above items, please indicate how regularly it happened:

- Once
- A few times
- Continuously for several months
- Continuously for several years

115. What was the person's relationship to you? (e.g. uncle, father, brother, mother, stranger).

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116. Who did you tell about this?

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117. Please write a sentence or two describing how they responded.

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**YOU ARE DONE. THANK YOU VERY MUCH!!**

University Of Cape Town

## Appendix II

### University of Cape Town

**Sa'diyya Shaikh, Ph.D., Principal Investigator**

Department of Religious Studies, UCT

Telephone Number: 021 650-3462

**Ashraf Kagee, Ph.D., Co-Principal Investigator**

Department of Psychology, Stellenbosch University

Telephone Number: 021 808-3446

### INFORMATION SHEET

## **Title of Study: South African Muslim Women: Sexuality, Marriage and Reproductive Choices**

### INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are being asked to participate in this research study because you are a Muslim women living in South Africa.

### PURPOSE

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences and attitudes of Muslim women in relation to marriage, sexuality and reproductive choices. We believe that in order to develop community initiatives for women's empowerment, it is important for researchers to be aware of the realities, expectations and challenges faced by Muslim women. We hope that this research will help us to develop ways to empower Muslim women from within their religious communities and from within a gender-sensitive Islamic framework.

The primary researchers in this project are Dr Sa'diyya Shaikh of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT), and Prof. Ashraf Kagee of the Department of Psychology at Stellenbosch University (SU). Ms. Nina Hoel, a doctoral student at the University of Cape Town, is the research manager of the study.

### PROCEDURES

As a participant, you will be asked to answer a questionnaire about your experiences and attitudes to sexuality, marriage and reproductive practices. As the questionnaire will be anonymous, you will not be asked to put your name on it. However, in order for us to know that you agree to be a research participant, you will be required to sign a

consent form that is entirely separate from the questionnaire. We will collect the consent form before you begin to fill in the questionnaire. There will be no way to link your completed questionnaire to your consent form. Your responses will remain completely anonymous and confidential.

## RISKS

Since we are studying marriage, sexuality and reproductive issues, many of the questions you will be asked to answer are very personal. Some people may be sensitive to these questions.

In the last section of the questionnaire there are questions that relate to sexual abuse and other sexually sensitive issues. Before you get to this section we let you know you have reached this section and that for some people answering these questions may be difficult.

We have included these questions because sexual abuse appears to occur in some Muslim families but is not spoken about publicly. By including these questions we hope to understand how big of a problem sexual abuse is in the Muslim community. If at anytime you feel you would like to stop filling in the questionnaire you are free to do so.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

All of the information we collect will be kept confidential. The completed questionnaires and consent forms will be locked up at the University of Cape Town. The only people that will have direct access to the questionnaires are the primary investigators. No one will see this information except for research staff at the Universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch for genuine research purposes. All access to information is subject to our commitments of confidentiality and anonymity to all research participants. The research will be used for academic publications, and possibly contribute to an education workshop manual written for Muslim women. In all cases and for any possible publication, your confidentiality, anonymity and the security of the original documents will always be protected. You cannot and will not be identified by name at any point.

## COSTS

There are no financial costs directly associated with participation in this project.

## BENEFITS

There is no guarantee that you will benefit directly from the study. However, the investigators believe that this research will help to make an important contribution to research addressing the challenges faced by Muslim women. As such there is a potential benefit that this research might have on developing strategies to empower Muslim women in their local communities.

## COMPENSATION

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

## SUBJECT RIGHTS

If you have any questions pertaining to your participation in this research study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Sa'diyya Shaikh, by telephoning 021-650-3462.

University Of Cape Town

In the event that you have been sexually abused in any way and experience distress during/after answering this questionnaire, you might want to contact one of the following free counselling centres:

### **Cape Town City - LifeLine/Childline Western Cape**

LifeLine offers a 24-hour crisis telephone counselling service, 365 days of the year. Trained counsellors are available to talk to you and confidentiality is assured. LifeLine/Childline Western Cape also offers a face-to-face counselling service from most of their centres. Individuals are able to have four free one-hour counselling sessions with a trained LifeLine counsellor, after which time the counsellor will refer the individual to a therapist or specialist counsellor if there is a need for further consultation.

Call 021 461 1113 to find out more information or to make an appointment.

#### **Telephone support:**

LifeLine counselling line: +27 021 461 1111

Childline counselling line: +27 021 461 1114

Childline toll free counselling number: 08000 55 555

National Women's Helpline: 0800 150 150

Counselling: 08000 55 555

### **Rape Crisis Cape Town Trust (RCCTT)**

RCCTT provides counselling and support to thousands of rape survivors and their family and friends.

#### **Telephone support:**

Observatory - 27 (0)21 447 1467

Counselling line - +27 (0)21 447 9762

Manenberg - +27 (0)21 633 5287

Counselling line - +27 (0)21 633 9229

Khayelitsha - +27 (0)21 361 9228

Counselling line - +27 (0)21 361 9085



University of Cape Town  
Consent Form

Title of research project:

**South African Muslim Women: Sexuality, Marriage and Reproductive Choices**

Names of principal researchers:

Dr Sa'diyya Shaikh and Prof Shaheen Ashraf Kagee

Department/research group address:

Department of Religious Studies (UCT)  
Department of Psychology (Stellenbosch University)

- I have read and understood the information sheet on this questionnaire. I have been fully informed about the research project.
- I agree to participate in this research project.
- I agree to my responses being used for education and research on condition my privacy is respected and my responses are kept anonymous.
- I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this project.
- I understand I have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage.

Signature of Participant

Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signatures of principal researchers:

a) \_\_\_\_\_ (Dr. Sa'diyya Shaikh)

b) \_\_\_\_\_ (Prof. Ashraf Kagee)

## **Appendix III**

### **Form of Consent**

#### **South African Muslim Women and the Power of Sexual and Reproductive Choices**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are a Muslim woman.

This study seeks to explore Muslim women's experiences and views on questions around sexuality, reproductive rights (abortion and contraceptives), and HIV/AIDS. Through investigating Muslim women's understanding(s) of Islam, this study will examine the relationship between the role of religion and Muslim women's decision-making power around matters of sexuality. At the same time the study will explore what factors other than religion that influence Muslim women's experiences around sexuality.

**This study will be anonymous;** all the information collected during the interviews will be kept confidential by the researcher. The questions that you will be asked during the interview are of personal nature. Please answer as honestly and truthfully as you can. Your honest responses will help me understand the realities that Muslim women face and the attitudes of Muslim women towards matters of sexuality. The key focus of this study is your experiences. Ultimately your answers will be included in a research-report (Ph. D.). However, no one will be able to trace the information you gave out during the interview back to you. The Ph. D. thesis will use made-up names and will not include any descriptions that might identify you as the respondent. The Ph. D. thesis will be made publicly available at the University of Cape Town library in its final form. On your request, I will be happy to give you a copy of the report once the research is finalized.

The interview will be audio-taped and the researcher will be taking notes during the course of the interview. Only the researcher and Dr. Shaikh will have access to this information. No one else will read (or hear) your responses to the interview questions. The data emerging from the research will be stored in a secure and appropriate manner. You can withdraw your consent at any time during the research and interview process.

If you have any questions concerning this form of consent please ask the researcher before you sign this form.

Date:

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Sign.

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University Of Cape Town

# Appendix IV

## Demographic Information

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please write today's date here: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please write your age here: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Please make an X in the box(s) that best describes your current marital status.

Single	
Widowed	
Separated	
Divorced	
Married	
Partnership	
Living with a significant other in an intimate relationship	
Remarried* (see below)	

\*If remarried please tell us what was the main reason for the end of your previous marriage(s)

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3. Please make an X in the box that best describes your current living situation.

Live alone	
Live with other adult(s), no children	
Live with other adult(s) and children	
Live with children	
Live in a retirement home	
Live in an institution	

4. Please indicate the highest level of education that you have completed:

No formal education	
Completed primary school	
Attended high school but did not complete matric	
Completed matric	
Attended university, college or technikon but did not graduate	
Graduated from university, college or technikon	
Completed postgraduate degree	
No formal schooling but some adult education	

5. Please indicate which race/cultural group you belong to:

Indian	
Malay	
Coloured	
African	
White	
Other (please specify)	

6. What is your current work situation? Please make an X in the box(s) that best describes your employment situation.

Employment full time	
Employment part time	
Student	
Unemployed	
Disabled	
Housewife	
Unable to work due to medical problem	
Retired	
Volunteer work	

7. Which of the following best describes your approximate annual family income from all sources, before taxes?

Less than R10 000	
R10 001-R40 000	
R40 001-R80 000	
R80 001-R110 000	
R110 001-R170 000	
R170 001-R240 000	
R240 001 and above	
Don't know	

8. Please indicate whether you or anyone in your home owns any of the following items.

	YES	NO
Television set		
Radio		
Motor car		
Microwave oven		
DSTV		
DVD player		
Video player (VHS)		

9. How do you get around most of the time? Please mark an X in the most appropriate box.

I get around mostly with my own car	
I get around mostly with someone else's car	
I get around mostly by taxi	
I get around mostly by bus	
I get around mostly by train	
I get around mostly by walking	
Other (please specify)	

10. Where were you born?

Name of suburb/area	
Name of city	
Name of rural area	

11. What is your first language? \_\_\_\_\_

12. What is your partner/husband's first language? \_\_\_\_\_

13. Which other languages do you speak? \_\_\_\_\_

14. Which other languages does your partner/husband speak? \_\_\_\_\_

15. Please state in which area you currently live: \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix V

<p><b>Note:</b> The following three documents should be read in conjunction with each other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <b>UCT Code for research involving human subjects</b> (which sets out the principles relevant in the relationships of the researcher to (i) The research community and its ethos; (ii) Research subjects; (iii) Society as a whole; and (iv) The sponsors of research</li><li>▪ <b>Ethics For Researchers Involving Human Subjects: Standards And Procedures</b> (which sets out the Faculty responsibility regarding research proposals).</li><li>▪ <b>Ethics in research for staff, including joint staff on provincial conditions of service, and for students</b> (which deals with the policy and procedures for minimising, and dealing with allegations of dishonest, fraud, or other ethical misconduct relating to research.)</li></ul>
<p>Issues regarding research involving animals are dealt with via the Animal Ethics Committee.</p>

## UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN CODE FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

The University of Cape Town encourages and supports research in a wide range of human sciences. In the exercise of this task it strives for a just distribution and a responsible utilisation of resources and of the benefits of its research in the interests of South African society and the human condition as a whole. This means that the University of Cape Town sets itself the aim of doing research:

- (i) With scholarly integrity and excellence
- (ii) With social sensitivity and responsibility
- (iii) With respect for the dignity and self-esteem of the individual and for basic human rights
- (iv) With reference to clearly specified standards of conduct and procedures ensuring proper accountability

In the pursuit of this ideal, UCT subscribes to the interdependent principles of scholarly responsibility, integrity and honesty, of human dignity and of academic freedom and openness. In the context of research, these principles are relevant in the relationships of the researcher to:

- (i) The research community and its ethos
- (ii) Research subjects
- (iii) Society as a whole
- (iv) The sponsors of research

### Researchers and the Research Community

1. Research should always be carried out in a thoroughly scholarly and responsible manner. Researchers must recognise their responsibility for:
  - (i) The design, methodology and execution of their research
  - (ii) Planning it in such a way that the findings have a high degree of validity
  - (iii) Reporting their findings, and their limitations, so that these may be subject to peer review and publicly available, and
  - (iv) Pointing, where relevant, to the possibility of alternative interpretations
2. The right of fellow researchers to research from a variety of paradigms, and to use a range of methods and techniques should be respected.
3. In the communication of their findings, researchers should adhere to the principles of honesty, clarity, comprehensiveness, accountability and openness to public scrutiny.
4. The authority of professional codes relating to specific disciplines should be recognised and honoured.
5. Researchers must not misuse their positions as researchers for personal gain.

### Researchers and participants (research subjects) in the Research process

1. In the planning of research, researchers should consider the ethical acceptability and the foreseeable consequences of their research.
2. If conflict arises between the interests of researchers and those of research subjects, the principle holds that the interests of the research subject take precedence.
3. Participation in research requires informed, uncoerced, consent of participants. Researchers should inform participants, in language they can understand, of the aims and implications of the research project and of any other considerations which might reasonably be expected to influence their

willingness to participate.

4. Researchers should respect the right of individuals to refuse to participate in research and to withdraw their participation without prejudice to them at any stage.
5. Researchers must protect participants against foreseeable physical, psychological or social harm or suffering which might be experienced in the course of the research. Researchers should be especially sensitive in their protection of the rights and interests of more vulnerable participants, such as children and the aged. When there is risk of harm, discussion of this with participants or their guardians must precede the research and be included in the informed consent procedure. No research should be undertaken on such vulnerable subjects if the required information can be obtained by other means.
6. Information obtained in the course of research which may reveal the identity of a participant is confidential unless the participant agrees to its release.

**Researchers and society as a whole.**

The University is committed to conducting research which will contribute to health and quality of life and which strives to serve humanity and South African society as a whole rather than any sectional interests.

The University of Cape Town recognises society's right of timely access to research findings and to open debate on their implications.

**Researchers and the sponsors of research.**

Research, which is undertaken on behalf of sponsors, is subject to the usual conventions of contract research. Remuneration arrangements for subjects and researchers should be outlined in the contract. Conflicts of interest should be avoided, and all researchers should be asked to declare any potential conflicts of interest. Interference on the part of sponsors, which may jeopardise the integrity of the research, is not acceptable.

Information which reveals the identify of individual participants in the research will not be supplied to the sponsors other than with the permission of individual research subjects.

In its dealings with the sponsors of research, UCT is committed to upholding the principle that findings should be made responsibly and freely available to the public within a specified and limited timeframe.

UCT is committed to upholding this code, but recognises that as research is a human endeavour it is also dependent on discretionary decisions for which individual researchers must accept ethical and scholarly responsibility. The scholarly and ethical standards of researchers are central to the research endeavour and efforts to sustain and develop these are integral components of research at the University of Cape Town. This code and the more detailed versions available within Medicine\* and other disciplines aim to be more educative than coercive; but minimal procedural standards must also be set.

Ethical reasoning requires thought, insight and sensitivity. As with scholarly work, peer review is important. In the case of ethics, peer review includes the larger intellectual community, society at large, and research subjects. Seeking ethical approval should be seen as an opportunity for informed ethical reflection and discussion with ethical peers.

In this spirit approval will be required in terms of the principles of this Code of Research, as supplemented by specific disciplinary codes, for;

- (i) all research projects undertaken by staff and students of the University involving the participation of human subjects;
- (ii) all research projects undertaken by staff and students of the University being likely to have significant social consequences;
- (iii) all research projects by researchers external to the university involving the members of the University as subjects.

from the Faculty committees charged with responsibility for research ethics and reporting to the Code of Ethics for Researchers Committee.

\*See Medical Research Guidelines on Ethics for Medical Research (SA Medical Research Council, 1993)