

THE NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLE AND ISLAMIC FEMINISMS IN SOUTH AFRICA

NA'EEM JEENAH

Abstract: In this article, I investigate the impact of the national liberation struggle on the rise of Islamic feminisms in South Africa. Muslims form less than two per cent of the population in South Africa yet their minority status has not meant their exclusion from political life, including the anti-apartheid struggle. Their involvement in 'the struggle' has had many consequences for the Muslim community including encouraging the emergence of Islamic feminist tendencies. I argue that the development of political Islam in South Africa in the 1980s and its interaction with the national liberation struggle helped give rise to Islamic feminisms that flourished from 1990 to the year 1998 when the Islamic feminist tendency began to decline.

The article was originally published in *Women's Studies International Forum* 28 (2006) 27-41.

Keywords: South Africa, national liberation struggle, Islamic feminism, Muslim women, Muslim Youth Movement, Muslim personal law

Introduction

For many Muslim women (and men)—whether in minority contexts like in most of the Western world or in Muslim majority communities— the label 'feminist' is often not worn comfortably. For many of them, 'feminism' carries a specifically Western meaning with particular historical and ideological baggage. Most Muslim activists prefer not having to be accountable for such baggage. Thus, the label 'feminist' is often avoided by such activists for strategic purposes.

But Muslim activists are not the only ones expressing such concerns. Many third world feminists express similar concerns. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, while

emphasising that ‘I always call myself a ‘feminist’’, nevertheless warns that ‘we must be willing to give it [the term ‘feminism’] up if there is reasonable resistance to it from groups we respect (Spivak 2000, 115). Many women in Muslim societies do, however, regard themselves as part of a feminist project—even if they do not use the ‘F’ word. This has seen the development in parts of the Muslim world, as well as in the West, of ‘Islamic feminisms’, where Muslim women (and men) articulate a discourse and struggle for the establishment of women’s self-worth, gender equality and the subversion of patriarchy.

But what is Islamic feminism and who is an Islamic feminist? Furthermore, what are the manifestations of this kind of feminism in South Africa? These are some of the questions this article will explore. In exploring these questions, however, I will sometimes impose the label ‘feminist’ on people who would not—at least publicly—call themselves feminists. Such application will, however, be based on a definition—within the South African context—of ‘Islamic feminism’ that I will suggest.

This article will examine how feminisms in South Africa emerged out of the national liberation struggle, arguing that the anti-apartheid Islamism that swept South Africa in the 1980s, provided the impetus for the emergence of Islamic feminisms. Thus, an important focus of this paper will be the interaction between the Islamic Movement¹ and the national liberation struggle and how such an interaction influenced Islamic feminisms. To accomplish this I will look at the manifestations of Islamic feminism in two organisations: the Call of Islam and the Muslim Youth Movement.²

In the interest of full disclosure and so that readers will understand the background with which I approach this topic, I need to mention that my interest, as a man, in the topic of Islamic feminisms—and especially Islamic feminisms in South Africa—is partly because of my involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle through organisations in the Muslim community and my subsequent involvement in the terrain of Islamic feminisms—particularly through the Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk. It is noteworthy that in the South African context—particularly during the anti-apartheid struggle – it was not unusual for men to be involved in feminist struggle and it was not something that was subjected to much scrutiny. The final reason for my interest in this topic and my involvement in the struggle of women is that my partner of 10 years, Shamima Shaikh, was one of the foremost Islamic feminists in South Africa in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Being married to her, I could not but be involved in women’s struggles. (The significance of this statement will be revealed in the rest of this article.) In sketching the development of feminisms in South Africa, I will refer to the following key events and ‘moments’:

- 2 February 1990: Unbanning of South African liberation movements
- January 1990: Malibongwe Conference—heralded as the beginning of a feminist movement in South Africa
- 1990: First woman to be elected to MYM National Executive
- 1990: MYM adopts ‘Women’s Rights Campaign’
- August 1990: Relaunch of the ANC Women’s League
- December 1991: CODESA [Convention for A Democratic South Africa] I (see p. 12)
- March 1992: CODESA II
- 1992: Launch of Women’s National Coalition
- 1993: Muslim Youth Movement women in mosque campaign in Johannesburg
- 1993: Formation of the Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk
- 1994: Women’s National Coalition unveils its ‘Women’s Charter for Effective Equality’
- April 1994: ANC initiates task team to form representative body of Muslims to examine the possibility of Muslim Personal Law (MPL) legislation
- April 1994: South Africa’s first democratic election in which a record number of women were elected to national and provincial parliaments
- August 1994: Launch of MPL Board
- April 1995: MPL Board shut down by United Ulama Council of South Africa
- 1996: Rylands vs. Edros court case results in limited recognition of Muslim marriages
- 1997–1998: Controversy of Radio Islam not allowing women’s voices on air
- January 1998: Funeral of Shamima Shaikh
- 1999: Appointment of Muslim Marriages Project Team of the South African Law Commission

- 2000: Formation of Shura Yabafazi.

Not Everyone's Feminism

The dominant expression of feminism—Western feminism³—has come under much criticism from gender equality activists in the South, particularly for the assumption that underlay much of Western feminist theory which homogenised the oppression and the struggles of women throughout the Third World (Mohanty 1991b). Joanna Hicks (2000) writes about this when she critiques the approach of Western feminists from the perspective of women of the South:

[T]he enunciation of the foundations of the women's movement and feminist ideology within the industrialised world has been dominated by white, middleclass women. These women often un-reflexively set forth their concerns within their societal context as most important, uncritically use their culture's norms to judge others, and finally, leave unexamined their positions of privilege as citizens of formerly colonialist and, in many cases, neo-colonialist countries. Although these feminists, who try to help women in the 'Third World' liberate themselves, might be well intentioned, they still bring their own ethnocentric and racist assumptions along with their trenchant critiques of patriarchy in the deployment of context insensitive feminism (Hicks, 2000, <http://www2.soc.hawaii.edu/css/dept/owr/Joanna.html>).

Hicks' critique of Western feminism is not unique. Her thoughts on this matter are common to many expressions of what is often called 'Third World feminism'. This criticism is also articulated eloquently by women in the South like Desiree Lewis (1993) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991a, 1991b). Many Third World women have criticised feminist movements (in the West) "on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism and homophobia" (Mohanty 1991a, 7).

Despite such criticism, most Third World feminists prefer to redefine the term feminist and use it for themselves, rather than to change the terminology (Schussler Fiorenza 1992, 8). Others 'have always engaged with feminism, even if the label is rejected in many instances' (Mohanty 1991a, 7). An example of this latter trend as described by Mohanty is Indian women's rights activist Madhu Kishwar, editor of the women's magazine *Manushi*, which is regarded as a beacon of Indian feminism. She explicitly states that she is not a feminist

(Kishwar 1990). This kind of criticism of Western feminism is also present in Muslim discourses about gender equality and many Muslim women, like Kishwar, opt to engage with feminism but reject the label.

Muslim women activists also critique Western feminism for a range of other reasons. For Azizah al-Hibri (cited in Fernea 1998, 388), the homogenisation that some Western feminists apply to women is problematic. As Badran (1999) points out, amina wadud, whose writings have been inspirational to Islamic feminists in South Africa and around the world, has only recently started calling herself a feminist. Talking about those who approach the issues of women's equality in Islam from 'feminist ideals and rationales', wadud says that although they are often concerned with 'valid issues', they would sometimes 'vindicate the position of women on grounds entirely incongruous with the Qur'anic position on women' (Wadud-Muhsin 1992, 2). Elsewhere, she says she 'gets tired' of:

[T]he ideas that come to us in so-called global dialogue. Most of that discourse suggests that we should put religion aside so we can get real women's problems on the table. As Muslims we can't do that, religion is the base. . . I can't separate religion from my identity. It's just not possible (cited in Fernea 1998, 403).

Similar concerns exist among South African Muslim women. Sa'diyya Shaikh interviewed a range of women in Cape Town, 'from those who called themselves religiously "conservative", to those that considered themselves "progressive and modernist" Muslims'. In these interviews:

Some progressive women indicated that while there were problems which all women had in common, Western women had their own yardstick for measuring freedom which was not necessarily the same for Muslim women (Shaikh 1996, 34).

Having noted the above criticisms of Western feminism, I believe that Muslims can reclaim the word 'feminism' so that it might be used on their own terms. Such an exercise would require a redefinition of the term and the addition of the qualifier 'Islamic'.

An Oxymoron?

Can there be such a thing as 'Islamic feminism' or is it a contradiction in terms? For many people, the term would seem an oxymoron. Some view women under Taliban rule, media images in movies and the controversy over Muslim school girls wearing headscarves in France, as examples that create a perception of Islam as inherently oppressive to women.

Thus, the idea of a movement for women's liberation having the qualifier 'Islamic' might seem strange. For many Muslims, the term seems to be an attempt to use Islamic texts and symbols in the cause of Westernism, and it would, therefore, be rejected. Expressing such concern, Al Hibri, referring to the Sisterhood in Global Institute, says it 'adopt[s] religious discourse—including Qur'anic verses—as a tool to achieve secular goals' (cited in Fernea 1998, 396).

What then are the possibilities for defining 'Islamic feminism' in a way that takes it beyond being 'a tool to achieve secular goals'? Since even the meaning of 'feminism' is contested, defining Islamic feminism should begin with an understanding of feminism. Margot Badran's (1996) description of feminism is useful in this instance. Discussing feminisms in Egypt, she refers to:

Women's coming into an awareness that being born female meant that they would lead their lives very differently from those of similar classes and circumstances who were born male. I refer to women's questioning *why* this was so, under what authority and what they started to do about it. The *why* was the beginning of an analysis of patriarchy—that is, the power that men had accorded themselves, irrespective of class, to make rules and to impose their rules on women to keep them subordinate. The *what* was feminism—ideas and actions expressed individually and collectively about personal life, family life, societal life; . . . in short, about being a woman in its totality and plurality of meanings—about gender and power (Badran 1996, 3).

Taking this as an adequate understanding of feminism, the question is: what makes 'Islamic feminism' different. Lamya' al-Faruqi (1988) attempts to define Islamic feminism by discussing the elements within Islam that make it different from Western feminisms and which feminist movements must understand in order for the cooperation between feminism and Islam. The first of the three points she makes in arguing that Islamic feminism can exist is that it would be an ideology where the Qur'an and the life example of Prophet Muhammad (the Sunnah) would represent the ideal for women. Asifa Quraishi is more forthright about using the term Islamic feminism; she does not regard it as an oxymoron or as illusionary. 'Islam holds the potential for a really vibrant kind of feminism. The basis of egalitarianism is there in the Qur'an,' she insists (cited in Fernea 1998, 378)

For Shamima Shaikh, '[t]he Muslim feminist looks to the Qur'an and the Prophet as a force for liberation (Shaikh 1997). And while the Call of Islam called on Muslims in the 1980s to 'unleash a debate on the question of women so that equality and freedom become achievable,' it added that '[t]his debate need not depart from the pages of the Qur'an'

(Esack 1997, 223). For Islamic feminists, keep Islamic sources (the Qur'an and Sunnah) used in the service of their feminism or does it flow from it? Shamima Shaikh (1994) says: I am often asked by people who are not Muslim why I do what I do; why struggle for the rights of women—and particularly Muslim women. What happened in my past that drove me to this? The answer is simple: we respond to the injunction of the Qur'an to 'enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong', as we did when faced with the terrible injustices of apartheid and oppression on the basis of race and class (Shaikh 1994).

Following the perspectives of al-Faruqi, Quraishi and Shaikh, I propose a definition of Islamic feminism for the purposes of this article. Islamic feminism is, firstly, an ideology which uses the Qur'an and Sunnah to provide the ideals for gender relationships, as well as the weapons in the struggle to transform society in a way that gender equality is accepted as a principle around which society is structured. Secondly, it is the struggle of Muslim women and men for the emancipation of women based on this ideology.

Such an approach does two important things. In the first place, it applies a qualifier to the understanding of feminism in that the principles of the feminism that it refers to, and the inspiration for it, are rooted in Islamic scripture. Secondly, while Shamima Shaikh (1997) says that 'Islam is a force of empowerment rather than of disempowerment', Islam has been used for the disempowerment of women as well. This approach then brings into sharp focus the issue of interpretation of Islamic scriptures. Islamic feminists seek to read scriptures on the basis of a liberatory theology of justice. 'It was not the text which restricted women', says Wadud-Muhsin, 'but the interpretations of that text which have come to be held in greater importance than the text itself' (Wadud-Muhsin 1992, vi). Her work seeks to review the Qur'an 'with its principles of social justice and human equality, and its objective of guidance.'

As with all religious scriptures, however, the principles of social justice and human equality are not always pre-eminent in the interpretations of those scriptures. Indeed, interpretive texts of the Qur'an are littered with misogynistic notions of men's superiority, gender roles and various restrictions on the movement and activities of women (Esack 2001; Majlisul-Ulema undated; Sa'diyya Shaikh 1996).

Feminism in South Africa in the 1990s

Many South African feminist scholars argue that there was no feminist movement in South Africa until the beginning of the 1990s (Meintjies 1996, 49). Others suggest that a feminist

movement did exist— although not self-consciously. The Malibongwe Conference in January 1990 in the Netherlands—2 weeks before the unbanning of South Africa's liberation movements by the Apartheid government—which brought together women from within and without South Africa for the first time, is heralded by many as the beginning of the emergence of feminism or a feminist movement in South Africa (Albertyn, Goldblatt, Hassim, Mbatha, & Meintjies 1999; Charman, de Swardt, & Simons 1991; Hassim, 1991; Meintjies 1996).

The 1980s saw the development of strong women's organisations like the United Women's Organisation, the Natal Organisation of Women and the Federation of Transvaal Women. This was also a period of increased anti-apartheid resistance and women emerged as a powerful force fighting around bread and butter issues. However, the relationships between class, race and gender were then only seriously explored in the trade union movement. The increased role of women as political actors generated new political debates about the possible transformation of political organisations so that they might take account of women's interests and facilitate women's participation. Thus, the Malibongwe conference was opportune. It 'legitimated feminism as a political discourse' (Albertyn et al., 1999: 10) and 'the position and status of women were legitimated as political issues to be addressed within the process of national liberation' (Charman et al., 1991: 40). An important aspect of the conference was the networking between South African women and women from other countries: Palestine, Mozambique, Angola, for example.⁴

Hassim's prediction, that the political transitional period to follow Malibongwe would provide the space for a feminist movement to emerge (Hassim 1991), was proven to be true soon after the unbanning of the liberation movements. Four months after the Malibongwe conference, the ANC issued a landmark policy statement on women's emancipation (African National Congress 1990). For the first time in the liberation struggle, an official position from a section of the liberation movement acknowledged the centrality of gender equality to national liberation and its role in a future constitution. The document also called on the ANC Women's League to initiate a debate that would result in a 'Charter of Women's Rights'. This call led to the establishment of the multi-party and multi-organisational Women's National Coalition (WNC). The WNC was a broad front of women from across the racial, political, cultural and religious divides for the singular purpose of ensuring equality for women in the new constitution. It 'helped to bring [gender equality] directly into the mainstream of public discourse at a critical political moment—that of negotiating the new democracy' (Albertyn et al. 1999: 12). But it also served as a platform on which to mobilise women and women's organisations for gender equality. By

1994, when it presented its ‘Women’s Charter for Effective Equality’ to a Women’s Convention, the WNC had 90 national organisations and 14 regional coalitions as its members (Meintjies 1996).

Besides women being organised in the WNC, the various negotiation processes leading up to democratic elections in April 1994 also saw increased women’s involvement. In December 1991, when the first plenary session of the multi-party negotiating forum called the Convention for a Democratic South Africa met (which was later referred to as CODESA I), women were excluded virtually completely; only 5% of the delegates were women. By CODESA II, there was a symbolic feminist victory with the formation of the multi-party Gender Advisory Committee (GAC) as a result of pressure by the ANC Women’s League (ANCWL). The ANCWL’s policy section also made inputs into the terms of reference of the CODESA working groups and into ANC positions in the negotiations. As well, the GAC allowed civil society gender activists and academics to get involved with the process. Women had even more impact in the second round of negotiations as they were included in all negotiating teams in the Multiparty Negotiating Process (MPNP) which was the new negotiating forum formed after the collapse of CODESA II. The WNC too was involved in the MPNP. The end of the negotiating processes saw the adoption of the Interim Constitution which was widely recognised as having tremendously advanced the cause of gender equality. The rest of the decade was witness to even more political gains being made as women were included in large numbers on party election lists (albeit still not in terms of their demographic proportion) and the strengthening of the ‘triple alliance’ of women politicians, activists and academics. (Albertyn et al. 1999).

The Emergence of Islamic Feminisms in the 1990s

While the Muslim scenario did not *mirror* the above national process in the emergence of feminisms—especially in terms of party politics⁵, I will argue in this section that, at around the same time, there were similar developments in the emergence of Islamic feminisms. Diagram 1 illustrates some of these similarities.

Islamic feminisms of the 1990s developed out of organisations—and through individuals that had played a role in the struggle against Apartheid—notably in the 1980s. From the previous section it is clear that the development of feminisms (in general) in South Africa followed a similar path. The nationalist struggle (converging with a class struggle) in South

Africa led to the development of a strong human rights discourse among left activists and intellectuals. This then led to feminist discourses. From a Muslim perspective, the process began with an Islamist discourse influenced mainly by international Muslim politics. Islamic anti-Apartheid activists were also part of the nationalist (and class) struggle and attempted to develop Islamic discourses of this experience. These discourses, overlapping with the general human rights discourses, led to attempted Islamic discourses of human rights. These 'Islamic human rights' discourses then interfaced with the South African women's rights/feminist discourses, and were heavily influenced by international Islamic modernist discourses and international Islamic discourses on gender equality, to result in the emergence of indigenous South African feminist discourses.

The Muslim Youth Movement was established in 1970 and, since its inception, had dealt with a number of issues that might be regarded as elements of a women's agenda—although the organisation did not have a coherent women's agenda at the time. Addressing these issues often brought the organisation into conflict with the clergy. These elements included inviting foreign women guests for speaking tours; establishing a Women's Council; campaigning for women to be allowed spaces in mosques and attempting to form a 'Women's Islamic Movement'. The 'women in mosques' campaign attracted the most vitriolic response from the Muslim clergy, the ulama.⁶ This campaign was one the organisation

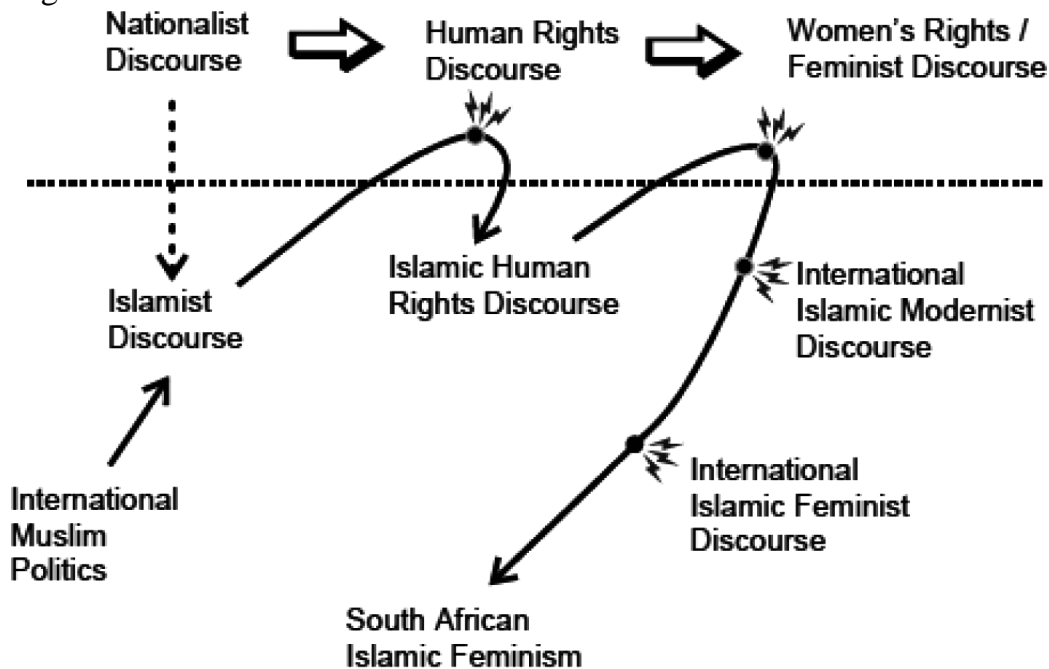


Diagram 1.

took up mainly in the Natal and Transvaal provinces (as they were called at the time) where virtually no mosques had any facilities for women. The MYM agitated for mosques to provide such facilities and attempted to encourage women to attend mosques where these facilities existed. Abdulkader Tayob (1995: 117) argues that in that period the MYM believed in a ‘parallel development’ of women within society, implying that women and men should have separate spheres within which they operated. The ‘Women’s Islamic Movement’ was an attempt to entrench this separation. Such separation was also evident at most major MYM programmes until the mid-1980s.

The issue of women’s leadership has been for centuries a thorny issue in Muslim discourse. Mainstream positions on it have ranged from the view that women could not be heads of state to the view that women could not hold any leadership position. The issue also posed a dilemma for the MYM. While the MYM’s student wing, the Muslim Students Association (MSA), elected two women to its National Executive in 1984 (Muslim Students Association 1984), the MYM elected a woman to its National Executive only in 1990. Fatima Noordien became the first woman to become a member of the MYM’s National Executive when the 1990 General Assembly decided to include regional chairpersons on the National Executive (Muslim Youth Movement 1990b). Noordien had just been elected Western Cape regional chairperson. This followed about 4 years of debate about the level of leadership that women could occupy. Noordien herself had taken a frontline position in this debate, arguing that there should be no restriction to women’s leadership (Tayob 1995). Despite Tayob’s correct criticisms, the MYM had remained—until about 1984—the most progressive Muslim organisation in the country as far as a discourse of Islam and women’s rights issues was concerned.

In 1993, four MYM members broke away to form ‘Muslims Against Oppression’, an organisation which changed its name a year later to ‘Call of Islam’. Farid Esack, Ebrahim Rasool, Adli Jacobs and Shamiel Manie left the MYM when they did not succeed in convincing it and the MSA to affiliate to the ANC aligned United Democratic Front (UDF). From 1984, until the late 1980s, the Call captured the role of being in the forefront of the articulation of women’s rights among Muslim groups. One of the early Call brochures (undated, but circa 1984) had ‘On Women’ as the first point under the heading ‘What is our line’: We believe in the equality of men and women and in the liberation of the Muslim woman from legacies pertaining to the period of Muslim decline. We believe that our country will never be free until its women are also free from oppressive social norms (Call of Islam circa 1984, 2).

By the late 1980s, the MYM had rethought many elements of its theology and ideology, and began expressing ideas about the 'equality' of women and men. The debate about women's leadership had begun and the accession to national leadership of Abdur Rashid Omar (as president) and Ebrahim Moosa (as Director) (Tayob 1995), with their ideas of the contextualisation of scripture, began a new phase in the history of the organisation. That notion of reinterpreting scriptures for new contexts played down old, classical interpretations and opened the door for later feminist interpretations. Increased political activity, inter-faith relations and women's rights became among the most important issues on the MYM's agenda (Tayob 1995). The organisation's emphasis on women's rights was both a continuation and development of its previous commitment and an attempt to address the issues of the day. In a sense also, the MYM followed the lead of the Call of Islam, as far as these three issues were concerned.

On the other hand, by 1989, the Call had begun to somewhat downplay its message of gender equality. This was due to two reasons. Firstly, in its efforts to draw in the 'ulama into the liberation struggle, the Call was willing to compromise on some of its positions that were unpalatable to conservative Islam. One of these was women's equality. Secondly, while the Call began as an Islamic organisation attempting to develop a comprehensive Islamic programme, its focus soon became political activity, and for the sake of mobilising support for the national liberation struggle, compromises had to be made. The woman agenda was one of those. In this respect the Call mirrored the strategy of its political mentor organisation, the ANC. Hassim points to the August 1990 relaunch of the ANCWL as a 'depressing affair for feminists' and argues that 'the priority for the Women's League remains organising women for national liberation' (Hassim 1991, 67). She also talks about the 'macho nature of politics' in which the UDF was involved in the 1980s (Hassim 1991, 68). Another woman, Patricia Horn (1991) laments that women's [F]ear of creating divisions in the national liberation struggle has led to the development of a women's movement which is afraid of seriously challenging patriarchal domination. This timidity comes through in the general avoidance within the mass women's movement of strategic gender interests (Horn 1991, 37).

The positions and activities of both the MYM and the Call had given Muslim women a greater sense of assertiveness. An example was at a 1988 conference organised by these organisations when a 'women's caucus'—led by veteran anti-apartheid activist Fatima Meer—resolved to 'disarm' the 'ulama organisations and called for a number of actions to support the struggles of Muslim women (Campaign for Muslim Awareness, 1988).

In 1990, the MYM adopted a ‘Women’s Rights Campaign’ as one of its three national campaigns.⁷ While the campaign was in some senses a not-unexpected development, after the focus the organisation had placed on women’s issues in the past few years and the increasing assertiveness of women in the organisation, it was also an attempt to remain relevant and address the issues of the day that defined progressiveness. Since a women’s rights discourse was being articulated strongly within the liberation movement, it was appropriate that the MYM also took up such a campaign. ‘The problem of emancipating women’, notes a campaign brochure, ‘is to change the overall relationship between male and female’ (Muslim Youth Movement 1990a, 3). The brochure lists as one of its objectives: ‘To examine the various verses in the Qur’an that contain “both the potential for oppression and liberation” of women and look at exploiting the latter’ (p. 2). It lists 14 issues ‘in which women are unjustly treated’, including ‘women in mosques’, ‘Muslim personal law’ and ‘women’s leadership’. For the next 3 years, however, the campaign did not have a national character but was taken up in an ad-hoc manner.

In Transvaal the focus became the ‘women in mosques’ issue. However, unlike in the past when the MYM contented itself with speaking and writing pamphlets about the issue, and when the issue of women’s presence in mosques was taken up by the men, MYM women now decided on a more confrontational approach. The new approach reflected the presence and role of more assertive and confident women in the organisation, women who had by now decided that they could take their own positions, develop their own strategies and prosecute their own struggles—and the men could join in if they wanted to. It was also an approach that required more mobilisation, and mobilising was a skill that MYM activists had learnt well, through political activity in the 1980s. Just before the Muslim month of Ramadan in 1993, MYM female activists anonymously printed pamphlets calling on women to attend the Tarawih prayer daily at the 23rd Street Mosque in Fietas, Johannesburg. The pamphlets were distributed at shopping centres and reflected 1980s-type political activity through door-to-door visits. While some MYM male leaders initially distanced themselves from the campaign, it led to the MYM’s General Assembly deciding later that year to form the MYM Gender Desk, with Shaikh as its national coordinator. The change of mind for the men was due partly to their coming round to the idea that the gender agenda was enough of a principled issue that they could not be soft on it, and partly because—despite the men—the women and their women’s rights campaigns had gained the MYM a lot of media coverage and respect in the broader South African society. Women’s defiance of the mosque committee, and the committee’s almost violent responses to it, drew much media attention—especially for the leader of the campaign, Shamima Shaikh, a rising star in the MYM.

The Gender Desk was represented on the National Executive of the organisation by its National Coordinator and became effective in promoting gender equality and the agenda of Islamic feminism. Yet the Desk never claimed for itself the title of ‘feminist’. The first time that Shaikh publicly applied the label ‘feminist’ to herself was 3 weeks before her death when, at an MYM training programme, she included herself among those she referred to as ‘Muslim feminists’ (Shamima Shaikh 1997, <http://www.shams.za.org/itppaper.htm>). Female and male members of the organisation from all over the country identified with the agenda of the Desk which included an education programme (including seminars, workshops and the distribution of publications) around its Islamic feminist agenda; campaigns (including the attempt to get Muslim women ‘equal access’ in mosques and the campaign for a ‘Just Muslim Personal Law’); networking with Muslim women’s organisations—even those without the same feminist agenda, and publicity and lobbying for Muslim women’s rights (Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk undated).

The Islamic feminism of the 1990s was influenced in part by the writings of foreign Islamic feminists like Amina Wadud-Muhsin (1992), Fatima Mernissi (1991) and Leila Ahmed (1992). Wadud-Muhsin’s feminist hermeneutic of the Qur’an, and Mernissi’s hermeneutic of suspicion in approaching the Hadith, were especially effectively employed by South African Islamic feminists to argue for a discourse of gender equality. But the assertive national feminist discourse also played its role. Both the MYM Gender Desk and the Call became members of the WNC (Shaikh undated) and promoted the Women’s Charter idea within the Muslim community through workshops, al-Qalam—the newspaper of the MYM—and other forums.

The Private and the Public

Activities in the 1990s that highlight the feminist agendas of the MYM Gender Desk and the Call of Islam cover both the public and the private domains. The mosque campaign was representative of the attempt to claim space for women in the Muslim public domain, while the Muslim Personal Law campaign (the ‘Campaign for a Just Muslim Personal Law’, as the Gender Desk calls it) sought to improve the private lives of Muslim women. Hassim (1991) explains the need to examine both of these domains:

The political identities of women and of men are constituted through different relationships with the public and private spheres. Patriarchy forms a barrier between these two spheres, a barrier which feminism attempts to break down. Women are defined primarily in relation to their location within the private sphere, roles defined in terms of the family. For men, it

is the public role outside the family which is emphasised. The western political tradition has tended to limit its concept of “politics” to the public realm, thus marginalising women. A wide range of issues, such as child care, family violence, which directly relate to the private sphere, are thereby excluded from “serious” political debate, being labelled “moral” concerns. However, women’s material and social location rooted in the “private”, has deeper implications, shaping the very way in which they view politics (Hassim 1991, 73).

I have already covered the 23rd Street Mosque controversy which led to the formation of the MYM Gender Desk. Soon after that controversy, the MYM altered its language to call not for ‘space in mosques’ for Muslim women, but to demand ‘equal access to mosques’. Shamima Shaikh (1996:2) claimed that this expression was introduced into Muslim discourse by the Gender Desk. This was a significant shift; ‘equal access’ implied that women and men should share the (same) main space in the mosque rather than the genders occupying different spaces—with women usually being relegated to a secondary space. The struggle for equal space became victorious in at least one case: at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town.

Islamic feminist scholar and activist, amina wadud, visited South Africa in 1994, 4 months after South Africa’s first democratic election. During her national speaking tour she delivered a Friday pre-sermon lecture at the Claremont Main Road Mosque. This was the first time in South Africa that a woman had delivered the Friday talk (al-Qalam 1994a, 1–2; al-Qalam 1994b, 2). (The pre-sermon lecture is an innovation in non-Arab Muslim societies where it plays the role of the sermon, admonishing the audience and analysing the events of the week. Indeed, some scholars argue that the sermon (or khutbah) is the Friday prayer.) wadud (in the press) subsequently criticised the episode, saying that she, as a woman, was again marginalised because most progressive Muslims involved with organising the lecture were more concerned with the fact of a woman speaking than with the content of her lecture.⁸ wadud’s lecture sparked an international controversy and resulted in violent responses in Cape Town. She was subsequently prevented from speaking at another engagement (al-Qalam 1994c, p. 2), and 6 months later, the mosque was picketed by members of the Muslim Judicial Council who physically prevented worshippers from entering the mosque for its Annual General Meeting. Some worshippers complained that they had been physically and verbally abused (al-Qalam 1995). wadud’s courageous lecture set the scene for women to speak at the Friday prayer. It is now commonplace for women to speak on Fridays, both at the Claremont Main Road Mosque, as well as at Masjidul Islam in Johannesburg. The event was thus precedent-setting; it pushed the limits of Muslim women’s participation in the Muslim public domain and it gave Muslim women

a voice in the most important Muslim institution—the mosque. In most mosques in South Africa women are not even allowed to attend the prayer, let alone being allowed to speak.⁹ And in mosques where they are allowed, they are generally shunted to a gallery or basement section. The day that wadud gave the lecture was also symbolic, in that it was the first time that women had ‘equal access’ in a mosque in South Africa—women began praying in the main section of the Claremont Main Road Mosque from that day on. The incident was positively commented on by many important Muslim scholars (Esack 1994; Hathout 1994; Magardie 1994; Shaikh 1994; Tayob 1994), and the progressive Muslim monthly, *al-Qalam*, published wadud’s entire sermon (wadud 1994).

At the same time that the Claremont Main Road Mosque story was making news about women claiming their space in the public domain, another development was taking place which affected Muslim women very directly in the private domain, in the sphere of life where patriarchy thrives. This development—which assisted the development of Islamic feminism in South Africa—was the Campaign for a Just Muslim Personal Law (MPL). The apartheid government had attempted on many occasions—particularly in the 1980s—to woo the Muslim community with promises of the recognition of MPL. This was significant for a community whose marriages were not recognised as legal by the state and many of whose children were therefore illegitimate in terms of South African law. Such attempts, however, were continually opposed and thwarted by progressive Muslims, particularly the MYM. Progressive Muslims in the 1980s viewed any handout by the apartheid state as attempts at co-option into state structures. The 1980s were characterised by such attempts by the state to attract Black support: the Tri-cameral parliament; the Bantustan policy; the legal recognition of registered trade unions¹⁰; among others. MPL was regarded as one of these tools of co-option and was therefore rejected by progressives.

In April 1994—before South Africa’s first democratic election—the ANC began a process to establish a representative body of Muslims to look at MPL (Kathrada 1994). Thus, the Muslim Personal Law Board (MPLB) was launched in August 1994 with eight founding members: the Call of Islam, the MYM and six clergy organisations (Muslim Personal Law Board 1994). In less than a year, the Board was unilaterally closed down by the five clergy organisations that constituted the United Ulama Council of South Africa (UUCSA) (M. S. Omar 1995). The closure followed a period of intense organisation and mobilisation by the MYM Gender Desk and the Call. The last Board meeting was characterised by organising and debating techniques that these two organisations brought from their legacy in the national liberation struggle. The Gender Desk also mobilised women who were not members of the Board to attend the meeting as observers. These women walked out of the

meeting in frustration at the refusal by the Board's president, Shaikh Nazeem Muhammad, to allow them to speak, and at his malicious 'presidential decree' that women had to wear headscarves to the meeting (al-Qalam 1995, p. 2). Also, the MYM's involvement in the MPLB was firmly taken charge of by its Gender Desk rather than by its National Executive. The MYM's representative on the Board executive was theologian-academic Maulana Ebrahim Moosa. Yet, because the MYM had decided that MPL was a campaign to be driven by its Gender Desk, he—a former deputy president of the MYM—reported to the Gender Desk rather than to the National Executive. Other MYM, MPLB members—including the organisation's president and general secretary—were also accountable to the Gender Desk through its National Coordinator. The Gender Desk's main legal mind on MPL—Soraya Bosch—was also an advisor on legal aspects of MPL to Moosa and so influenced his academic writings on the subject. The Call's Fatima Hujjaij, a woman, was elected as a vice-president of the Board at a time when the clergy were refusing, on other occasions, to sit in the same meetings with women. The clergy members were also forced to accept that women would be represented on the Board 'as women' rather than only through their organisations. After the collapse of the Board the Gender Desk continued with its 'Campaign for a Just Muslim Personal Law'.

The continuation of that campaign saw the Desk shift its focus to attempting to influence Muslim experience of family law through the courts. One view within the MYM was that MPL should not receive more than minimal acknowledgement by the state, in that only Muslim marriages should be recognised. This, it was argued, would afford better protection to women because the civil courts were seen as more trustworthy than clergy organisations in safeguarding women's rights. Bosch, as a lawyer with the legal aid clinic at the University of Cape Town, represented Thoerayah Rylands in the Rylands vs. Edros case in the Cape Town provincial court in 1996. Rylands sued her ex-husband for a range of maintenance and other benefits after he had divorced her. The decision of the court¹¹ was a limited victory for Islamic feminists, because although Rylands was not awarded all that Bosch had hoped for (such as an 'equitable' share of the estate), she was awarded benefits that went beyond what the clergy would normally agree to award: arrears maintenance and a conciliatory gift. Furthermore, although the marriage in question was illegal in that it was only performed according to Muslim rites, the court nevertheless recognised it as a legal contract and so allowing other aggrieved Muslim women the option of using the courts to obtain justice in the case of divorces.

The issue of MPL also afforded Islamic feminists another voice, a voice in the national rights discourse. Members of the MYM Gender Desk represented the organisation at

various Constitutional Assembly hearings to put forward the idea of a 'Just MPL'. The stark contrast between the feminist and conservative positions is well illustrated by the debates around the clause on religious systems of family law in the Interim Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Members of the UUCSA argued that this clause and the clause on freedom of religion should be allowed to trump other clauses in the Bill of Rights. Their main concern seemed to be that the Equality Clause might be used to interfere in their interpretation of MPL. Islamic feminists, on the other hand, argued that MPL was consistent with gender equality and there was no need for any such exemption. It must be noted that their passionate defence of the constitution and its equality clause was not motivated only by their Islamic ideology. These anti-apartheid activists were defending a document for which they believed they had struggled for decades and which encapsulated the achievements of that struggle. Interviewed by *al-Qalam* (1993), Shamima Shaikh, echoing the views of progressive Muslims throughout the country, argued that customary and religious family law "cannot be exempted from the Bill of Rights and be allowed to perpetuate inequalities. To even consider excluding any sector of society from being covered by the Bill of Rights is an injustice and makes a mockery of the Bill" (*al-Qalam* 1993, 1). Hujjaij responded that she recognised the "absolute equality of men and women as sanctioned by the Qur'an" (*al-Qalam* 1993, 1). Bosch pleaded for a review of Islamic law to bring it into line with the transformation taking place in the country and with constitutional provisions (*al-Qalam* 1993, 1). For Islamic feminists, the positive outcome of the anti-apartheid jihad had become a terrain for the 'gender jihad¹²', as they began referring to it.

In conclusion, it might be noted that no interaction results in only a one-way transfer of knowledge. Indeed, some Islamic feminists would argue that the Islamic feminist discourse was also active in the national scene and was not just a passive recipient. Esack (2000)—a former member of the Commission on Gender Equality—suggests (perhaps somewhat superciliously) that his efforts were probably responsible for the insertion of—or, at least, for the 'widest coverage' of—the phrase 'non-sexist' in the ANC call for a 'non-racist, non-sexist democratic South Africa' in the 1980s.¹³

Same Struggles, Different Struggles?

The above discussion suggests that the intersection with the national struggle did not have uniform results on the progressive Islamic Movement. Other factors also intervened, including people's political and Islamic backgrounds, and their gender. In particular, four groups of people responded differently to Islamic feminist challenges: women who enter

from a background in the liberation movement; men who enter from a background in the liberation movement; women who enter from a background in the Islamic movement; men who enter from a background in the Islamic movement. (Diagram 2 illustrates these groups.)

Soraya Bosch and Shamima Shaikh were two of the main proponents in the MYM's articulation of feminism. Interestingly, although both were committed Muslims, their entry into the Islamic Movement was through nationalist liberation organisations. Bosch was a member of the Gender Desk of the ANC-aligned National Association of Democratic Lawyers before she was recruited to the MYM and its Gender Desk, joining the organisation to work on its Just Muslim Personal Law campaign, as a legal expert. She entered the MYM with experience obtained from a professional association that was anti-apartheid and in the ANC's Congress tradition. This experience included ways of working, strategising and even understanding of concepts like negotiation, compromise and principles. Shaikh had been an activist with the Black Consciousness organisation, the Azanian Peoples Organisation, since her student days. She joined the MYM about 5 years after having already been involved in the heat of struggle during the MYM's anti-apartheid activities, feeling comfortable with an Islamic articulation of the struggle against apartheid. She, then, also came to the Islamic Movement with her own political baggage. Most of the earlier female MYM activists had been schooled in politics, organisation and struggle within the Islamic Movement. Many of these women often followed the feminist-type prodding of the influential men in the organisation—like Ebrahim Moosa and Rashied Omar—and looked to these men for leadership and for their understandings of women's rights in Islam. The feminist tendencies of these men derived from their newly adopted project of reinterpreting Islamic scripture and contextualising Islam. By contrast, Bosch and Shaikh insisted—as seen in the MPL Board case—that as women, it was their right to take the lead as far as women's issues were concerned

The members of the Call were somewhat different in their backgrounds to the members of the MYM. The Call, as mentioned earlier, was formed by MYM members who broke away from that organisation. The original four that broke away—Esack, Rasool, Jacobs and Manie—were based in Cape Town where the Call started and where its initial ideology was shaped. They—all male—were schooled in the Islamic Movement in the form of the MYM and then entered the national liberation struggle with their particular understandings of principles, strategies and negotiations shaped by the Islamic Movement dynamic. The Call's initial forthright positions on women's rights were drafted by this group led by Esack. This was the period in which—as I have argued above—the Call took the women's

rights initiative away from the MYM. By the late 1980s, as the Call grew, it began developing a group of members in Johannesburg. Most of these (mostly male) members entered the Islamic Movement (the Call) with a background of involvement in the national struggle. They were mostly members of the ANC-aligned Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) and the UDF. They, then, as with the other three groups mentioned above, entered their new ideological homes with their peculiar political and organisational baggage. While many of these men were politically fairly radical in their anti-apartheid stances, they were theologically conservative. They did not have the benefit of the radical Islamic schooling

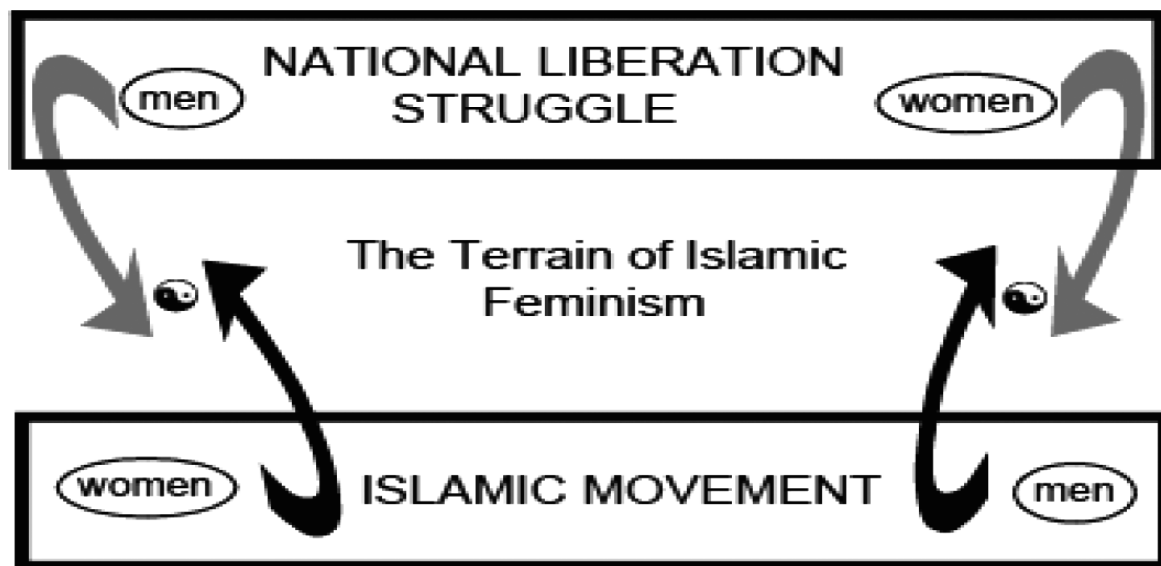


Diagram 2.

that their Cape colleagues had attained through their involvement in the MYM.

While in the MYM the group of women and the notion of women's agency represented by Bosch and Shaikh had achieved ascendancy in the 1990s, the Call's two groups (the Islamic Movement-schooled and the Congress movement-schooled men) existed side-by-side. Two examples of exchanges between Call and MYM members will illustrate the differences in the articulation of Islamic feminism that resulted from the different ideological starting points and the different genders of the protagonists. Both relate to the issue of women in the Muslim public domain.

The day before the launch of the Muslim Personal Law Board in Durban, the leadership of the Call and the MYM met to discuss the possibility of a merger between the organisations. Such an initiative was important for progressive Muslims, especially since—at about the same time—the six clergy founding members of the MPLB had united to form the United Ulama Council of South Africa in order to have a bloc against the two progressive organisations. Thus, the imperative of the merging of the Call and MYM became more critical. In September 1994, within 2 weeks of that merger exploratory meeting, the National Chairperson of the Call, Johannesburg-based Yusuf Saloojee, informed me that the proposed merger would "never take place". The Call had made this decision, he said, following the Claremont Main Road Mosque incident with Wadud where the MYM gave its full organisational and media backing to the mosque in the face of violent ideological and physical opposition. This had proved to the Call (or rather, to the Johannesburg Call) that the MYM was—in Saloojee's words—"ultra-radical and ultra-leftist". That signalled the end of the merger talks. Call members in Cape Town (Ebrahim Rasool, Rosieda Shabodien and, by now, ex-member Esack), whose background was more Islamic Movement (as noted above), had supported the mosque and the MYM.

Another example occurred in Ramadan of 1997 in Johannesburg at the Masjidul Islam, a mosque whose ex-coordinator, Iqbal Jhazbhay, is generally regarded as being progressive. Jhazbhay, a Call member at the time, was the coordinator of the mosque for the first 4 years of its existence. On the fourth Sunday in Ramadan, during a lecture at the mosque after the noon prayer, the sound system in the (upstairs) women's section broke down. Two MYM female members, Shamima Shaikh and Jennifer A'isha Roberts, entered the men's section of the mosque to listen to the rest of the lecture. Roberts was another woman whose entry into the Islamic Movement came through the National Liberation Struggle: she had been an activist in the National Union of South African Students. Their action resulted in a confrontation outside the mosque the following Friday between, on the one hand, Shaikh and Roberts, and on the other, the mosque chairperson Akhtar Thokan, Jhazbhay and Call member Muhammad Dangor, who was also an ANC member of the Gauteng provincial parliament (now based in the South African embassy in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia).¹⁴

According to Roberts, Dangor was the 'least progressive' of the three men. He had angered Shaikh with his accusation that she had "taken the women's struggle 20 years back". He was suggesting that the confrontational approach that Shaikh had taken, alienated the women's rights cause from the community, and made it more difficult to achieve any gains. "As if he knows anything about the women's struggle," she later retorted angrily.¹⁵ Jhazbhay kept insisting that the altering of gendered space in the mosque must be a slow

process so as not to upset "the community". This was 2 years after members of the Call in Cape Town had already exposed themselves to violent retaliation by supporting the Claremont Main Road Mosque. A year later, on the 8 January 1998—the day of Shaikh's death—women were officially allowed to pray in the main section of Masjidul Islam for the first time. Before the funeral prayer Thokan approached me, and informed me that he had instructed Jhazbhay to direct the women to pray in the main section because: "We must set a precedent". For the rest of that month, two women who decided to follow through on the "precedent" and pray in the main section of the mosque were begged not to and harassed by Jhazbhay.¹⁶

The difference in understanding of Islamic feminism between these two groups—one male and one female, but both of which entered the Islamic movement with the experience of the national struggle—can be symbolised by the world (representing the national domain) and the mosque (representing the Muslim domain). It was as if the women had the world and were trying to find their space in the mosque. The men, however, had the world and the mosque; they were willing to share the world but were afraid that if they shared the mosque they would lose the world. Those men's main concern was not the feminist struggle that the women were waging, but the result of that struggle on their national agendas. Furthermore, having women as partners in a national struggle was somehow personally safe, but sharing the mosque with them began to get too close to home. And home is where patriarchy is most starkly powerful, in the personal relationships between men and women.¹⁷

Conclusion

While Western feminist models are often criticised in Muslim circles, there does exist within progressive trends of Islam, various strands of Islamic feminism. This is true of various national contexts; it is true too of South Africa.

In South Africa, one of the main impetuses for the emergence of Islamic feminisms and Islamic feminist thought has been involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle by a number of Muslim activists—especially those within the Muslim Youth Movement and the Call of Islam. The terms 'Islamic feminism' and 'Islamic feminist', however, are hardly ever used by these activists. South African Islamic feminists feel, in the main, that the baggage associated with these labels makes their use too burdensome. They are not alone in feeling this way. This has been an argument by a number of Third World feminists, like Madhu Kishwar (1990), who reject the feminist label but do the feminist work nonetheless.

In South Africa, the development of Islamic feminisms ran, in some ways, parallel to the development of other forms of feminisms. As the nationalist discourse in South Africa helped develop a human rights discourse which, in turn, helped develop a women's rights and feminist discourse, so too were there parallel developments in Islamist circles in South Africa. The initial Islamist discourse helped give rise to an 'Islamic human rights discourse' which helped spark an Islamic women's rights and Islamic feminist discourse. The parallel developments were assisted by the involvement of Islamists in the other discourses and with other liberatory organisations.

The 1990s witnessed the Islamic feminist discourse— and activism linked to it—coming into its own and saw an increasing confidence among Muslim women's rights activists at various levels, including at the level of challenging the clergy on jurisprudential matters. In 1998, Islamic feminist activism reached a peak, and then rapidly declined. Though such activism began to rise again in 2000—mainly in response to the process around the development of Muslim Personal Law legislation for South Africa—it has not yet reached the strength it had by 1998. Contributing to this is the ascendancy of Muslim conservatism and Muslim reaction to Islamophobia in various parts of the world and the United States' 'war on terror' which has targeted mainly Muslims. Progressive Muslims, in this climate, find it difficult to draw their co-religionists into the theological unknown to interact with such adventures as Islamic feminism. However, the regrouping of the Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk, and the emergence of new groups like Shura Yabafazi and Taking Islam to the People (TIP), point to the possibility of increased Islamic feminist activism in the next few years.

POSTSCRIPT (2017)

Originally published in 2006, this article reflected on and analysed the emergence of Islamic feminisms in the 1990s in South Africa. It also posited the late 1990s as a high point in the development of South African Islamic feminisms. Much has changed on the Islamic feminist terrain in South Africa since this article was written. Much has also changed regarding Muslim women's rights and yet much has also remained the same.

Over almost two decades, activist forms of Islamic feminisms in South Africa have declined as a result of various organisational and other challenges. The Call of Islam, which had helped provide part of the ideological basis of South African Islamic feminisms, was in decline from the beginning of the 1990s and effectively ceased to exist before the end

of the 1990s, following South Africa's first democratic election in 1994. In its latter years the organisation had distanced itself from any feminist agenda in its attempts to endear itself to the more conservative elements in the Muslim community so that it might garner as much Muslim support as possible for the political (especially electoral) agenda of the African National Congress (ANC, the ruling party in South Africa since 1994). After the death of Shamima Shaikh in 1998, the Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk began a slow decline, ignoring the past campaigns of the Gender Desk including its education campaign that sought to reread Islamic scriptures from a women-friendly perspective. Within three to four years it had all but discarded any feminist agenda. South Africa also witnessed attempts at forming strong women's organisations such as Shura Yabafazi which failed after brief periods of activism. A positive development has been the emergence of a few, mainly women, academics who have sought to theorise issues of women in Islam. But the activist vibrancy of the 1990s has waned significantly.

This should not, however, give the impression that there has been a wholesale deterioration of Muslim women's rights, or that there are no active advocates for Muslim women's rights except in academia. On the contrary, the notion of discussing the rights of women in Islam has seeped into the Islamic discourse at various levels beyond the spheres of influence of the 'traditional' feminist or 'progressive' circles, and such discussions sometimes happen in surprising places and fora. Although the feminist discourse has become muted at a public level, the effects of the feminist activism of the 1990s persist and reproduce themselves in not altogether predictable spaces.

In many traditional and even conservative Muslim circles there has been a gradual re-evaluation of the role of Muslim women in society. Much of this has been done subversively. People initiating or engaging in these discussions do not necessarily exhibit themselves in the mode of the powerful public expressions of the 1990s. Nevertheless, this suggests a possible long-term persistence of debate, and even an entrenchment of the idea that Muslim women need to realise their rights, if sometimes in ways that the feminists of the 1990s might feel uncomfortable with.

An example of one of these surprising spaces is Radio Islam. One of the 'battles' around Muslim women's rights, particularly the right to have their voices heard, occurred around the Johannesburg-based Muslim radio station in the mid-1990s. The station, owned by the traditionalist ulama organisation Jamiatul Ulama, was hauled before the South African broadcasting regulatory body, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, for refusing to allow women to be heard on air. At the threat of losing its license, Radio Islam

compromised and agreed it would allow women's voices to be broadcast. Many critics felt, at the time, that the station got off easily, without having to commit to what kind of women would be allowed, what they would be allowed to do at the station, and at what times they would be allowed on air. Today, however, Radio Islam has women presenters at various different times of the day, discussing all manner of issues, including politics. One of its flagship current affairs programmes is produced by a woman, and women regularly call in on air to discuss matters they feel strongly about. The station and its owners would balk, and might even feel insulted, at the suggestion that they had made any move in a feminist direction, yet their encouragement for women's voices to be heard heralds long-term significance and a gain unlikely to be easily reversed within Muslim media and broader Muslim community.

Another development, grossly understudied, if studied at all, is what I refer to as the 'assertive niqabi' phenomenon. Partly as a result of the impact of articulate feminist women who publicly discussed matters concerning fiqh and shari'ah, partly as a result of the insistence of various progressive organisations about the need for women to be educated, and partly because of the human rights and women's rights culture in South Africa from the late 1990s, the Muslim community witnessed the formation of religious schools to further the Islamic education of young Muslim women. The education that these religious schools provide is as conservative as their counterpart male institutions but the standard of education in the religious schools for girls is not as high. Women in these institutions are not being trained to be ulama, but to be educated mothers and wives. Nevertheless, many of the graduates of these institutions, who will be seen in public donning their niqabs or face veils (as they have been made to understand that this is ordained by religion) have developed an assertiveness that is refreshing and displays potential for the future. Many insist that they were given certain rights by the Qur'an and Sunnah that are not being realised, and they insist on exercising these rights. In conservative homes this has resulted in bitter battles between daughters and parents, as well as between young married women and their husbands on the one hand and their parents-in-law on the other. Given the nature of conservative sections of the community these battles do not explode into the open but the long-term effects of these underground developments could be significant.

Finally, there is now greater acceptance of the activities of Muslim women in the broader society. Perhaps the best recent examples are of two Muslim women student leaders who have been at the forefront of the #FeesMustFall university protest movement, which has placed them in positions of leadership, negotiating with university management and government, and even placed them at the centre of violent confrontations with police. One

of them was recently shot 13 times with rubber bullets by police. Both women are devout Muslims who have, interestingly, been proudly accepted by a broad cross-section of the Muslim community in a manner that would not have been possible two decades ago. This is not to suggest that the entire community has moved in a more liberatory direction. But these developments are indicative of the role of incrementalism in women's struggles. While the 1990s might be seen as explosive and very public in terms of the articulation of Muslim women's rights, the current developments, which doubtlessly are due in part to the heritage of 1990s, are more quiet and incremental. Often the latter type has greater long-lasting effects on society.

NOTES

¹ The term 'Islamic Movement' carries particular meanings and developed out of the Islamic resurgence movements in the Middle East and South Asia. It was imported into South Africa by the Muslim Youth Movement in the 1970s (see Muslim Youth Movement 1981, pp. 8–94 and Muslim Youth Movement, circa 1984, pp. 21H1–21H6). It (loosely) referred to Muslims who believed in a 'comprehensive understanding of Islam'. In the 1980s it became a contested term as organisations outside the MYM also laid claim to it. The definition changed to accommodate that contestation. It became 'Muslim individuals and organisations that have a comprehensive understanding of Islam and are part of the anti-apartheid struggle' (Shuaib Manjra, "Islamic Movement in South Africa", unpublished talk delivered at numerous MYM camps). Thus, the definition of the Islamic Movement was broadened to include those organisations that formed the 'three strands' (Esack, 1988, pp. 473–498) of Muslim anti-apartheid activity in South Africa. I will use 'Islamic Movement' with this latter definition. However, because of the subject of this paper, the term will be used here to refer to only the MYM and the Call of Islam.

² This is not to suggest that Islamic feminism in South Africa has been their sole property. There have been other—particularly local—manifestations of the phenomenon which will not be covered here.

³ See Mohanty (1991a, pp. 3–4) where she expresses the difficulty of using the term 'Western feminism' but argues that the term can be used in terms of the kind of scholarship produced by feminists in the West especially regarding Third World women.

⁴ Cathi Albertyn, in personal conversation, 15 June 2000.

⁵ While two Islamic parties were formed in 1994, Muslims largely ignored these parties and neither of them won any seats in national or provincial parliaments. Muslims were rather involved in, and supported, the established political parties.

⁶ While there were numerous attacks against the MYM for its position on women's presence in mosques, the most detailed was contained in Majlisul- Ulama (undated). The Arabic word 'ulama (literally, those who are knowledgeable) is generally used in reference to Muslim clergy.

⁷ See Muslim Youth Movement (1990a). The other two campaigns were its "Living Wage Campaign" and the "Campaign against Alcohol and Drug Abuse".

⁸ The lecture was called "Islam as Engaged Surrender" and discussed, almost exclusively from a woman's biological perspective, submission to God. For the full text, see wadud (1994).

⁹ Internationally, there is greater accommodation for women in mosques. Nevertheless, in recent history, this was one of the first occasions on which a woman delivered the Friday lecture.

¹⁰ While the broad liberation movement generally rejected such attempts, trade unions decided—as a strategic manoeuvre—to register and thus get legal recognition. The state's plan at co-opting trade unions went terribly wrong as legalisation allowed unions to grow at phenomenal rates.

¹¹ Rylands vs. Edros, 4 ALL SA557 (C), 1996.

¹² The term 'gender jihad' was first used by Rashied Omar (1995), former president of the Muslim Youth Movement and imam of the Claremont Main Road Mosque. Subsequently, it has become a popular term in progressive Muslim discourse in South Africa.

¹³ Personal email from Farid Esack, 3 June 2000.

¹⁴ Information about this confrontation was obtained from a personal conversation with Shaikh (January 1997) and an interview with Roberts (3 June 2000).

¹⁵ Personal conversation with Shamima Shaikh (January 1997).

¹⁶ Interview with Moefidah Jaffer, 5 June 2000. Jaffer was one of the women who prayed in the main section for a few nights before Jhazbhay forced her with repeated phone calls (even asking her husband to convince her) to abandon that mosque for the rest of the month of Ramadan. (Her husband responded that his wife ‘does not listen to me’.)

¹⁷ See, for example, Srilatha Batliwala’s (1997, <http://www.qweb.kvinnoforum.se/papers/RFSU1.htm>) argument that the family is ‘the last frontier of patriarchy’. See, also, the assertion by Yakin Erturk (cited in UNPO 2004, http://www.unpo.org/news_detail.php?arg=02&par=616), UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Commission on Human Rights, that ‘oppression in the home was a particular problem, since it was often overlooked and justified as a private matter’.

REFERENCES

African National Congress. “Statement of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress on the Emancipation of Women in South Africa.” May 2, 1990. Web. <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pr/1990/pr0502.html>.

Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Albertyn, Cathi, Goldblatt, Beth, Hassim, Shireen, Mbatha, Likhapha, & Meintjies, Sheila. *Engendering the Political Agenda: A South African Case Study*. Johannesburg: Centre for Applied Legal Studies, 1999.

al-Faruqi, Lamyā’. *Women, Muslim Society and Islam*. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1988. *al-Qalam*. “Sorry, you can’t be Equal.” 19 (10). 1993.

----- . “Another First for South Africa (and the world?)!” August, 1–2. 1994.

----- . “A Small Cape Town Mosque Makes World Muslim History.” August 2, 1994.

----- . “Anti-Wadud Protestors Desecrated Mosque”. August 2, 1994.

----- . “Women Angered by MPLB Meeting.” March 2, 1995.

Badran, Margot. *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1996.

----- . "Feminisms and Islamisms." *Journal of Women's History*, 10 (4), 1999. 196–204.

Batliwala, Srilatha (1997). "What is Female Empowerment?" Web. <http://www.qweb.kvinnoforum.se/papers/RFSU1.html>. *Call of Islam* (circa 1984). Call of Islam, undated. Campaign for Muslim Awareness. "Shariah and South African law: An Islamic Conference Organised by the C for Muslim Awareness." 1988.

Charman, Andrew, de Swardt, Cobus, & Simons, Mary. "The Politics of Gender: Negotiating Liberation." *Transformation*, 15, 1991. 40– 64.

Esack, Farid. "Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice." *Third World Quarterly*, 10 (2), 1988. 473– 498.

----- . "Hang in there, Brother Rashid." *al-Qalam*, August 13, 1994. Print.

----- . *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression*. Oxford: Oneworld, 1997.

----- . Email received from Esack, 3 June 2000.

----- . "Islam and Gender Justice: Beyond Simplistic Apologia." In John C. Raines, & Daniel C. Maguire (Eds.), *What Men Owe to Women: Men's Voices from World Religions*. New York: Suny Press, 2001. pp. 187– 210.

Ferne, Elizabeth Warnock. *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

Hassim, Shireen. "Gender, Social Location and Feminist Politics in South Africa." *Transformation*, 15, 1991. 65–82.

Hathout, Summer. "We Applaud Your Courage." *al-Qalam*, November 13, 1994.

Hicks, Joanna. "Leila Ahmed's Women and Gender in Islam." 2000. Web. <http://www2.soc.hawaii.edu/css/dept/owr/Joanna.html>.

Horn, Patricia. "Post-apartheid South Africa: What About Women's Emancipation?" *Transformation*, 15, 1991. 83–88.

Kathrada, A. M. "Letter to Muslim organisations," 15 April, 1994.

Kishwar, Madhu. "Why I do not Call Myself a Feminist." *Manushi*, 61, 1990. 2–8. Lewis, Desiree. "Feminisms in South Africa." *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16, 1993. 535– 542.

Magardie, Khadija. "Wadud is a Brave Woman." *al-Qalam*, September 13, 1994.

Majlisul-Ulema (undated). *Women in Musajid and Islam*. Benoni: Young Men's Muslim Association.

Meintjies, Sheila (1996). "The Women's Struggle for Equality During South Africa's Transition to Democracy." *Transformation*, 30, 47– 64. 1996.

Mernissi, Fatima. *Women and Islam: A Historical and Theological Inquiry*. Mary Jo Lakeland (Trns). Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Introduction: Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism." In Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, & Torres Lourdes (Eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (pp. 1– 47). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

----- . "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." In Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, & Lourdes Torres (Eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (pp. 51–80). Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1991.

Muslim Personal Law Board. "Constitution of the Muslim Personal Law Board." 1994.

Muslim Students Association. "Minutes of the annual MSA Natex meeting." 1984.

Muslim Youth Movement. *Islamic Training Programme Manual*. Durban: Muslim Youth Movement, 1981.

----- . *Halqa Manual*. Durban: Muslim Youth Movement. 1984.

----- . "Introducing the MYM's Women's Rights Campaign." MYM, 1990.

----- . "Minutes of the MYM General Assembly." Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk (undated).

Movement Gender Desk., circa 1994. Web. <http://shams.za.org/gdesk.html>. Omar, A. Rashied. "dId ul-Fitr Khutbah." Unpublished. 3 March 1994.

Omar, M. S. "Letter to MPL Board member organisations." 12 April, 1995. Rylands vs. Edros. 4 ALL SA557 (C), 1996.

Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1992.

Shaikh, Sa'diyya (1994). "Sexual Men and Spiritual Women." *al-Qalam*. September 6 1994.

----- . "Battered Women in Muslim Communities in the Western Cape: Religious Constructions of Gender, Marriage, Sexuality and Violence." Unpublished MA Dissertation, Religious Studies, Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1996.

Shaikh, Shamima (undated). "Letter from the Gender Desk to MYM Regional Chairpersons."

----- . "Women's Role in Contemporary Society." Presented at Rhodes University Islamic Week. <http://shams.za.org/role.html>. Web.

----- . "Gender Desk Report to the General Assembly 96", 29 June, 1996.

----- . "Women and Islam—the Gender Struggle in South Africa: The Ideological Struggle." Presented at the MYM Islamic Tarbiyyah Programme, 22 December, 1997. Web. <http://shams.za.org/itppaper.html>.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Feminism 2000: One Step Beyond." *Feminist Review*, 64, 114– 116. 2000.

Tayob, Abdulkader. "The Pre-khutbah, Khutbah and Islamic Change." *al-Qalam*, August 15, 1994.

Tayob, Abdulkader (1995). *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement*. Cape Town: UCT Press. Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) . UN press release on the fourth day of the permanent forum on indigenous people. 2004. Web. http://www.unpo.org/news_detail.php?arg=02&par=616i.

Vahed, Goolam, & Jeppie, Shamil . "Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post- apartheid South Africa." In John Daniel, Roger Scuthall, & Jessica Lutchman (Eds.). *States of the*

Nation: South Africa, 2004—(pp. 252–286). Pretoria7 Human Sciences Research Council. 2005.

Wadud-Muhsin, Amina. “Qur’an and Woman.” Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd. 1992.

Wadud, Amina . “But What did she Really say?” *al-Qalam*, September 4, 1994.

----- (in press). “Public ritual leadership and gender inclusiveness”. In a forthcoming book, expected to be published by Oxford University Press. 2006.

Contributor:

NA’EEM JEENAH. Is the Executive Director of the Afro-Middle East Centre, a research institute based in Johannesburg, South Africa, He received an MA in Religious Studies from the University of the Witwatersrand in 2002 with a thesis on 'The Emergence of Islamic Feminisms in South Africa' in the 1990s, and is currently working on a PhD on political Islam in South Africa. He lectured in the Department of Political Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. Jeenah is a former president of the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa and assisted in developing its Gender Desk. He has been a columnist for a South African Muslim community newspaper, Al-Qalam, for over a decade. He co-authored (with Shamima Shaikh) the book, *Journey of discovery: A South African Hajj* (2002). Among his articles are: ‘Towards an Islamic Feminist hermeneutic’ (Journal for Islamic Studies: 2001) and more recently, “Pretending democracy: Israel, an Ethnocratic State” (AMEC, Johannesburg: 2012).