

BETWEEN AWARENESS AND ACTIVISM: GENDER AND ISLAM IN SOUTH AFRICA

FARHANA ISMAIL

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Interview with Farhana Ismail, MYM Gender Desk member, at the moment when efforts were being made to re-invigorate the Gender Desk, by Margot Badran, Johannesburg, August 8, 2002.

Farhana Ismail (FI) I was born in 1971 in Johannesburg. I started my education at an Indian school called Ferreira Primary School. For secondary school education, I went to the Sacred Heart College, a non-racial Catholic school which had started accepting people from different backgrounds and religions. I finished my matric (high school diploma) in 1989. I then trained as an optometrist and worked in this profession for about four years. It was during that time I first became associated with the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM). In 1995 I went to Jordan where I studied Arabic at Zarka al Ahliyya. I also travelled to Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and Turkey. When I returned to Johannesburg I resumed my involvement with the MYM and started broadcasting at its radio station. I also had babies.

I first met Na'eem Jeenah and Shamima Shaikh at a *halaqa* (Islamic study circle) at Wits (Witswatersand University) around 1992. My husband Ashraf Ahmed Park who was a friend of Na'eem had introduced me to the halaqa. About six or seven of us used to meet every Friday night for discussion at the *jamat khana* at Wits. We read Fatima Mernissi's book *Beyond the Veil*. We also read a book called *Muslims and Identity* about how you identify yourself as a Muslim in your community and in the wider society which was an eye-opener for me. I came from a very conservative jamaat and Tablighi background. I also got involved more generally in MYM activities. I had only read writings by Abdul Rahman Doi, a lecturer in the Islamic Studies Department at RAU (Rand Afrikaanse

Universiteit now known as the University of Johannesburg) and books put out by the jamaat. I had never been exposed to other kinds of literature.

I think my whole life I was irritated by Muslims' social views on women. I used to have arguments with my father. When people came looking for money for mosques I would say: why don't you ask them why they don't have facilities for women. I had been made to think I was not allowed in a mosque as a woman and that kind of thing.

Margot Badran (MB) Within the Indian Muslim community would you say your parents were slightly more liberal?

FI They were liberal as far as my studying and going out with friends was concerned. As far as attitudes toward women they were very conservative. My Mum was quite open-minded but not my Dad. We constantly came to blows. But when I spoke for the first time at the juma prayer in the mosque last Friday my father came. It was really nice to see him there and to see that he had opened up and had begun to support me.

MB *Why do you think he came around?*

FI I think he decided he needed to tap into his daughter's brain to see what she was thinking. He said to me: you were very controversial, I think you'll need bodyguards now. But he was quite impressed actually. He was very proud of me. The subject of my talk was Islamic women's history and how it was recorded, controlled, and manipulated, and how culture and traditions have informed and shaped it. I also spoke about the experience of Muslim women in South African society drawing from my experience in the Indian Muslim community.

MB *Can you tell me about Shamima and your relationship with her?*

FI I was intimidated when I first met her. She was about ten years older than me. She had all these radical ideas about women and especially their position in society. Shamima was very well-spoken. For me coming from a very conservative background and not having the facts and not knowing my rights or privileges it was a bit daunting at first but she made me start thinking. She introduced me to a lot of literature.

MB *Was she one of the most influential women drawing you into the gender scene?*

FI Definitely, there were not many people on the gender scene at that time. She was one of the very few. Shamima organised an MYM conference--more like a public discussion group--on Women Gearing up for Change. One of the guest speakers was Ebrahim Moosa who gave out a reading packet. It included, for example, chapters from Fatima Mernissi's book *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Women and men of different ages came but there were more women. Some women got very upset and walked out but most stayed. This event was a turning point for me because it introduced me to more of this new literature.

Shamima led the effort for women to be able to go to the mosque for congregational prayer. In the Muslim communities in Johannesburg and Durban women did not go to the mosque. We were told women are not allowed. Single-handedly Shamima wrote letters to different *ulama* councils and to the *jamaat*. She wrote to the Fietas mosque (also known as the Twenty-Third Street mosque) in Johannesburg saying women wanted to be part of the coming Ramadan program in the mosque. The Fietas mosque had a reputation for being a bit more progressive and also it had an upstairs room. Shamima backed the insistence that women participate in congregational prayer at the mosque with *hadiths* (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) and verses of the Qur'an. A lot of letters went back and forth. The letters are still in the MYM files. During Ramadan we women started going to the mosque. Men, including many who donated money to the mosque, were very upset and threatened to stop coming. One night when I went to the mosque with Mofidah Jaffer (an MYM member) for *tarawih* (evening prayer in Ramadan) we found the door to the upstairs room locked. We learned that before the *tarawih* the imam had told the men to tell their mothers and sisters not to come to the mosque because there is no space for them. About fifteen women gathered in the courtyard and we had started reading the Qur'an when suddenly it began to rain. Mofidah had her little baby with her and her husband Jaffer Khan got worried. He went around and found an entrance near the *wuduhkhana* (place for ablutions) which was unlocked and called us. We passed by the *wuduhkhana* where the men making *wuduh* (ablutions) and headed up the stairs and found the room empty. The imam had obviously lied. During the rest of Ramadan the women continued to pray upstairs. For the celebration of Lailat al-Qadr (Night of Power) on the 27th night of Ramadan marking the revelation of the first verses of Qur'an and considered a night of blessings and forgiveness, the mosque is filled to capacity because men who do not appear during the regular days of Ramadan show up then. The men of the mosque decided to erect a tent outside to accommodate the women and to put up a big television screen so we could see the *imam*. Shamima was upset. She said: "We women want our space in the mosque and we don't want that space to be taken away when all those men decide they want to

come to pray. We have been there the entire month of Ramadan. Leave that space alone. It is our space.” There was a big huha. Shamima and other women went upstairs and stayed there. Some of the men came with guns and one or two threatened the women. But the women did not budge.

Around this time Shamima and I were trying to work out the programs for the community radio station in Johannesburg called The Voice. I had the idea to do a kind of halaqa on radio but Shamima wasn’t too sure it would work. Anyway, I went on air with a guest speaker. I was just the host. I really didn’t know much about the Qur’anic verses so it was a good way for me to start learning as well. My guest speaker was Na’eem. We spoke about why you should study the Qur’an and who should study it. In our communities, and especially in Na’eem’s community, we have a lot of tablighis and jamaat who believe you should not read the Qur’an in English unless a *maulana* (religious teacher) is there to provide interpretation. I felt as a Muslim your beginning point should be the Qur’an, that you should start there. I saw that the Qur’an has been very much neglected in our community. When Shamima heard the program, she said: “It was brilliant, it will work”. That is how I began the program called 'In the Shade of the Qur’an'. The Qur’an was the place where you could find answers to your problems. We dealt with issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, death, and the hereafter. I ran the program until 2000 when I went to Cape Town for a year.

Liberals and conservatives alike say the Muslim community isn’t ready for new ideas and you must go slow. Even though the liberals are saying we should open up their minds they insisted on gradualism, just like the conservatives. I feel we have to get through to the women in the Muslim community because they are the ones who need to learn about their rights and privileges. If women themselves are not willing to take their cause forward no matter how much you try nothing will happen. If we can reach them, maybe they’ll start asking questions and then maybe you can start throwing out more radical ideas.

Is Islam driven by a text or shaped by experience and by society? People are discussing this. Radio journalist with the Voice of the Cape (VOC) Munadia Karaan brought up the subject of the force of practice, traditions, and customs versus independent thinking and new ideas. It used to be the ulama (religious scholars) who controlled religious knowledge, especially concerning the Qur’an. But now the word is out. People know about the Qur’an and hadith. The ulama know that once people can read the religious texts for themselves and can make up their minds for themselves they won’t need them. Detractors claim the Claremont mosque, which they label ‘the MYM mosque,’ and which is known for its

progressive ideas, is irrelevant and that they are isolated from the community and nobody is with them. I think when they say this it means they fear they are irrelevant at some threatening level. The community is in a state of ambivalence and nervousness but I think the ulemah are the more nervous. They need to possess the control card. They claim that the progressives don't understand the community. I answer: do you understand the community and why are you able to understand the community more? You say you have specialised knowledge but the progressives have PhDs. But we have to remember the ulemah in Cape Town are different from those elsewhere. A very good example of how they try to control is the issue of the women's voice on Radio Islam. Before, the ulemah in Johannesburg would never have sat down in the same room with women and had a discussion with them and now they do. They are forced to because they are scared they are not going to be relevant anymore. They need to show they are progressive but I think they are scared of being left behind.

MB *Do you call yourself an Islamic feminist?*

FI No, because I feel being a Muslim--a true Muslim--is being an Islamic feminist in the way you describe. For me the Qur'an has laid down principles of justice and gender equality and the way I practice my Islam is what Islam is all about so as a Muslim I don't need to identify myself as a feminist.

MB *People give feminism negative connotations as a way of silencing or intimidating you and me. We define feminism for ourselves. Feminism in a generic sense upholds gender justice and human equality which may be embodied in the tenets of our religions, our national constitutions, international instruments, and in our commonsense. It is up to us to define and shape the contours of our own feminism. Islamic feminism is a discourse and practice grounded in the Qur'an and other religious texts so it is not something imposed from outside.*

FI I just have a problem taking on the label feminist.

MB *They are silencing you.*

FI Exactly. Feminism comes with lots of negative connotations in the community which I don't want to deal with. I like being a feminist in a silent kind of way. I'm a strong silent type.

MB *It's partly strategic?*

FI Yes.

MB *It is partly psychological because you don't want to be bashed around?*

FI I am just tired.

MB *Do you think there is some space for people within the Muslim community to stand up and say: I am a feminist, I am an Islamic feminist and work within an Islam-based feminist framework? There is space. Do you think it is important for people to occupy this space today in South Africa?*

FI Yes, I think it is. But if you put yourself in that space you limit yourself to being heard by only a few people.

MB *Are there any people who occupy that space?*

FI Na'eem is definitely an Islamic feminist.

MB *Is he heard?*

FI He is in Johannesburg. There are Farid Esack and Ebrahim Musa but I think they have left the country.

MB *The women?*

FI Of course, Shamima was an Islamic feminist but I can't think of anyone else.

MB *Why only men?*

FI I think maybe because men don't have much to lose when they speak out. But you don't have to take on the label because very often when people hear you are an Islamic feminist nobody wants to listen to what you have to say. In the community where I operate it is important to maintain silence about where I stand. I want to get people thinking and to start dealing with the issues. Actually, I am an Islamic feminist. My husband tells me all the

time that I am an Islamic feminist although I deny it, I am. I should say this to myself. It would be a first step.

MB *Where are you now in your gender jihad?*

FI I am working at the radio station here in Johannesburg called The Voice doing the program 'Lifting the Veil'. As I have mentioned, Shamima had started the program 'Lifting the Veil' that ran on Monday mornings in which she dealt with problems facing Muslim women from a feminist perspective. After she died they couldn't find anyone to take over and I wasn't around in that period. When I returned to Johannesburg I wanted to continue the program but in a slightly different way. I wanted to look at the history of Muslim women and show how women in the past were active in politics, in economic life, and in literature—things Muslim women in our society would not dream of doing today. I wanted to draw on stories from women's past and relate women's earlier experience to contemporary problems facing women. For example, I told the story of the Prophet's daughter Fatima and how when her husband Ali wanted to take another wife she went to her father who then spoke with Ali who did not proceed to take another wife. Polygamy is a real issue in our society. In confronting polygamy, I linked it to the Prophet's approach. I am doing a lot of research. Historians have been selective in what they write. I had a program about the story of Hagar and said: let's look at it this way: that she was black, a woman, a slave and oppressed when religion came to liberate her. We have come full circle. Fatima Mernissi gave a presentation at the UN Conference in Beijing Conference recalling Muslim women rulers in Islamic history. She spoke about how this history was hidden and threw out the challenge that Muslim women get more involved in their own history. This is what I am busy doing.

When Shamima died Na'eem called and told me: Shamima wanted you to lead the *janaza salat*, the funeral prayer. I went to her home and led the funeral prayer. Afterwards, her mother and sisters and I went to the mosque. It was the first time it was all right for Shamima to be downstairs in the mosque. It hurt because for her entire life she was fighting for women to be in that space. The only time that the mosque committee and no one else had any problem with this was at her janaza. For me leading the janaza was a way to say goodbye. Being asked by Shamima to lead the prayer was very touching to me. When she was around I always thought she was a bit too progressive as I was still coming to terms with where I stood on gender issues in the community. When I met Shamima I was very Tablighi but I had been growing at the time of her death. I needed to progress to where she had been. It was her way of saying: this is your legacy, take hold and go forward.

Contributor:

FARHANA ISMAIL. Is a community activist and academic with a focus on gender equality and youth development. Farhana obtained a M.A. in Religion, Gender and Health at the University of Kwa- Zulu Natal in 2016, and B.A. with honors in Journalism and Media studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2007. She participated in the anti-apartheid activism of the progressive Muslim movement in South Africa, including women-led gender rights struggles. She was a presenter from 1997 to 2000, and later trustee, of the community radio station The Voice in Johannesburg, hosting programs on women's experiences of injustice related to the Muslim family and marriage law. She has written on the non-recognition of Muslim marriages in South Africa. She helped draft a submission to parliament on the South African Muslim Marriages Bill. She offers a woman-friendly Qur'an study group for young teens with an ethos of equality, dignity and justice.