

Historicizing Muslim Women's Identities: Perspectives from South Africa

Goolam Vahed

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The nation-centredness of history as a discipline and the intellectual politics of liberal feminism have together produced Muslim women as the oppressed, mute, backward, and eventually invisible “other” of the normative modern (read conscious and / or rights bearing, Hindu / liberal, citizen / feminist) subject within the written history of Bengal, even when they [Muslim women] exercised all kinds of agency – whether as subjects who should have been easily recuperable within the terms of nationalist or feminist accounts or as subjects who refused the lures of a modernity that exceeded the limits of their comfort or perceived abilities.

- Mahua Sarkar (2008: 2)

Monolithic stereotypes of Muslim women and their agency, or lack thereof, one that ignores racial, geographic, and class variations, has a long history, as Sarkar notes. Over the past decade or so, however, this seems to have intensified in the context of the “War on Terror” during which segments of the media as well as many academic studies have tended to portray Muslim communities in quite negative ways. Mishra (2007), for example, analyzed representations of Muslims in the *New York Times* between 11 September 2001 and 11 September 2003 and concluded that stories about Muslim women living in non-Western countries often represented them ‘as victims of violence and Islamic practices. Representations of Muslim women were also marked by a continual obsession with the veil. Muslim women were often portrayed as victims in need of Western liberation.’¹ This fear and suspicion of Islam is reflected, for example, in contestation over the wearing of veils by women in public spaces and construction of mosques and minarets in certain Western countries.

Many studies of Muslim women tend to essentialise religion and culture by ignoring the women themselves and viewing them as determined by Islamic law. This paper examines how womanhood is negotiated by not-so elite Muslim women in present-day KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. Muslim women in South Africa comprise a diverse group and their social positions across the country vary according to such factors as race, politics, ideology, culture, and social class. The broad focus of this paper is on the women who are the focus of this study relate their identities to universal Islamic principles and values and negotiate/d these with the grounded realities of apartheid laws and classifications, urbanization, industrialisation, anti-apartheid struggles, (lack of) schooling opportunities, post-apartheid socio-economic changes, and dynamic ideas about religious modernity / traditionalism. One of the concerns of this paper is to interrogate the assumption of homogeneity in Muslim women’s status and the commonality of their problems. Should we speak of their experiences and gender systems in the singular or plural? Another concern is whether Islamic nationalisms and Post-9/11 Orientalisms have produced an ahistorical womanhood through the fetishism of the headscarf, burqa, polygamy, Muslim Personal Law, forced marriage, honour killings, and so on. If so, is there a case for historicizing Muslim women's identities?

Put another way, what does it mean to be a Muslim woman under different historical circumstances?

Due to the increased focus on Muslim women in the past decade, as background, the first part of this paper provides a brief overview of Muslim women and the global context in the post-9/11 world.

Post-9/11 Orientalisms and Islamic nationalisms

According to Maira (2008: 325), ‘much of the neoconservative discourse of the War on Terror suggests that it is essentially a “clash between civilizations,” a conflict rooted in religious or cultural differences between “Islam” and “the West”.’ Certain ideas about Islam are taken for granted by many in the Euro-

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‘But what exactly is a black? First of all, what’s his color?,’ Jean Genet

American world: it is monolithic, uniquely sexist, the “Muslim mind” is incapable of rationality and science, inherently violent, and spawns terrorism (Kumar, 2010). Ameri (2012: iii) made a similar point when she concluded:

In dominant contemporary Western representations, including various media texts, popular fiction and life-narratives, both the Islamic faith in general and Muslim women in particular are often vilified and stereotyped. In many such representations Islam is introduced as a backward and violent religion, and Muslim women are represented as either its victims or its fortunate survivors. This trend in the representations of Islam and Muslim women has been markedly intensified following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 2001.

Columbia University based anthropologist, Lila Abu-Lughod, has been often interviewed by segments of the media seeking to “understand” Muslim women in the post-9/11 period. She told a reporter that she found it difficult to tolerate generalizations about “Muslim women” and tried to ‘complicate’ the picture and ‘challenge the sense of superiority that underlies most of the pity with which Muslim women are greeted’ (IMEU). She also questioned why the media never sought to understand the “culture” of women when protagonists in a war were of other faiths. It was absurd to think that

knowing something about women and Islam or the meaning of a religious ritual would help one understand the tragic attack on New York's World Trade Center, or how Afghanistan had come to be ruled by the Taliban, or what interests might have fueled US, and other interventions in the region over the past 25 years.... In other words, the question is why knowing about the "culture" of the region, and particularly of its religious beliefs and treatment of women, was more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the U.S. role in this history. Such cultural framing ... artificially divide[d] the world into separate spheres—recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas (Lughod, 2004: 784).

The “liberation” of women is one of the rationales for Western intervention in places like Afghanistan. Ho argues that women in such places are portrayed as passive victims in need of rescuing by outsiders. This denies them political agency and may not reflect what is important to the women themselves. The *burqa*, for example, may not be as crucial as economic upliftment to the women themselves. Ho believes that there has been a ‘culturalisation of inequality’ as the social, economic, and political factors that influence gender arrangements in different settings are ignored in favour of explanations that focus on an essentialised and universal Islamic culture. This also implies that Muslim women have little in common with their counterparts elsewhere even though ‘women’s vulnerability to gendered violence and inferior access to resources shape their lives the world over’ (Ho, 2010: 437-440).

This is not to deny that some segments in the Islamic world are interpreting Islamic laws in ways that appear to subjugate women to secondary status. In *Believing Women* (2002) Asma Barlas argues that the Qur’an encourages liberation for women and that the misogynistic readings of Islam derive not from Qur’anic teachings but from the interpretations of Muslim exegetes who sought to ‘legitimise actual usage of their own day by interpreting it in great detail into the Holy Book.’ A study of Quranic interpretations historically points to changes in Muslim women’s status at different times. Barlas concludes that in examining Qur’ānic exegesis ‘we need to keep in mind the historical contexts of its interpretations in order to understand its conservative and patriarchal exegesis’ (Barlas, 2002:8)

This paper argues that focusing on religious laws and identity issues deflects from the social and economic conditions of women and their involvement in the public sphere, be it in politics, the labour market, or in civic organisations. Religion is undoubtedly important in the lives of the women, but their identities are shaped by the complex interplay between religion, class, race, ethnicity, language, community, gender, and geography.

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Local setting

The women who constitute the subject of this study were interviewed as part of a larger project on the township of Chatsworth which is situated about twenty kilometres to the south of the city of Durban. They are part of a group who identify themselves, and are known by others as “Zanzibaris”, whose origins in Natal date to the 1870s when close to 500 “liberated” slaves landed in the Colony. After completing their terms of indenture they settled on the Bluff and, over time, came to include the Makhwa from Northern Mozambique, Yao-speaking Malawians, some Swahilis, as well as local Zulus with whom they had intermarried. Under Group Areas resettlement in the 1960s, they were classified as “Other Asiatics” and placed in Bayview, a sector of Chatsworth which had been established as a township for Indians. Though there were some racial tensions early on, they eventually integrated with locals and came to form an integral part of the township (Seedat, 1973).

Many of the township dwellers had worked in the clothing and textile industries in nearby Jacobs and Moberi, subsisting on low wages. In the post-1994 period, shifts in economic policy have created new challenges for working class people in South Africa. The short-lived Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a strategy that required government to play an active role in restructuring the economy to alleviate poverty, create employment, and provide basic service delivery to the masses gave way in 1996 to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic programme, which set in motion such things as the commodification of basic services such as water and electricity and liberalized the trade regime (Terreblanche 1999).

In Chatsworth, services and rents escalated in a period that coincided with huge job losses in the clothing, textile, footwear, and leather industries (see Vlok 2006). In the KwaZulu-Natal Province as a whole, official employment in the clothing sector fell from 45,000 in 1990 to 19,000 in 2000 (Fakude 2000). Whole neighbourhoods were affected by job losses. Additional hardships resulting from the casualisation of labour – lower wages, longer working hours, and loss of social benefits—were compounded even further by cuts in child support grants and social maintenance (see Visser 2004). For women especially, maintaining home and family is a daily struggle, one that is accompanied by a sense of political disillusionment.

Joyce, Halima, and Mariam

This paper is based on interviews with three women from the Bayview area. Open-ended interviews were conducted with all three respondents in order to understand their ‘lived experience’ and identify moments of personal change in their lives and the meanings that they attached to these. While accepting that life stories are subjective, they can offer a deeper perspective. As Portelli reminds us, ‘history has no content without their stories’ (in Abrams, 2010: 53). For Overmark,

although narrowly focused on an individual, family or small group of informants, [life history] is more holistic than what can be inferred by observation, or using other methodological tools, such as surveys.... Many of the studies focus on gender and feminist issues, migration, and poverty. Feminist scholars employ the method primarily to uncover the diversity of women’s experiences and to project women’s voices into areas where they have previously been ignored (Ojermark, 2007: 8).ⁱⁱ

The concept of intersectionality, that is, that people have multiple identities which intersect at certain moments, is important for the purposes of this paper. It suggests that socially and culturally constructed axes of identity, such as gender, race, faith, and class, crisscross on various levels in historically specific contexts. As Brah and Phoenix (2004: 77) point out, ‘different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands.’ Taking oppression as an example, Ritzer (2007: 204) contends that ‘women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity’. Knowing that a woman lives in a patriarchal society, for example, may be inadequate to describe her life experience. Depending on context, her religious orientation, class position, ethnic or

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racial group, language background, and sexual orientation may also be important. Historical context helps us to understand what a society's attitude is towards each of these constructs.ⁱⁱⁱ

The three women who are the focus of this paper all identify themselves as “Zanzibari” even though at least at least one of their parents was not from that community.

Joyce was born in King’s Rest in 1956. Her father was a court interpreter and mother, a Zulu-speaking Christian woman who embraced Islam at the time of the marriage, was a domestic worker. Joyce’s father died when she was quite young and it was her mother who raised the children. Their family was removed from Bluff to Chatsworth when she was five or six. She recalls being ‘very excited ... they just load us into trucks and they brought us to these big houses. They were empty but the lights were there. We clicking [the light switch] off-on, toilet was there, flushing water, you know, it was like, “America here I come”.’ Despite the novelty of their new surroundings, the family experienced severe poverty and Joyce recalled that her childhood years were ‘bad times, very bad times because there was no food, there wasn’t a pair of shoes. In fact ... sometimes we used to hit the Indian children for their lunch because the Indian children used to carry lunch.’

Halima was born in 1952 in Mayville, where her Tanzanian-born father Sa’eed was an *Alim* who led the prayer at the local mosque. Her mother Khadijah was a Zanzibari woman from the Bluff. She describes herself as coming from a background ‘where we were concerned about people.’ Her mother, a homemaker, ‘a very quiet person, but very intelligent, very giving, very loving, very caring. Although she was very homely, people came to her for advice and up till this very day people have good words ... My father was also very giving, very caring.’ They were a family of eleven children.

Mariam grew up in a family of nine children. She was born on the Bluff in 1960 but moved to Chatsworth as a young child. She described her father as ‘a very religious man. He’s come from Malawi and married my mum. She is a Zanzibari.’ Her father was a ‘religious leader, a five-time *namaazi*, people came to him for assistance, he did a lot of *taaweez* [amulet] for people who were ill. When he first came from Malawi he worked as a *muezzin* at the West Street mosque.’

This paper does present a chronological narrative of the three women; rather, the focus is on a few key aspects of their lives. In general, the narratives of the three women were very personal. Typically, they tended to focus on economic struggles growing up, race, schooling, work, marriage and marital conflict, socio-economic problems in the community, and faith.

Race, language and religion

When the Bluff was proclaimed for White residence in terms of the Group Areas Act, it seemed obvious that Zanzibaris, as “Africans” in terms of apartheid designation, should be placed in an African township. But Zanzibari identity has long been contested and while Christians among them were given homes in African townships, Muslim Zanzibaris did not consider themselves “African”,^{iv} and S.Q. Bourquin, manager of the Municipal Bantu Administration in Durban, was ‘absolutely convinced that these people are not Natives,’ and could not be absorbed into ‘African housing schemes.’ Zanzibaris applied to be classified as ‘Coloured’ and 153 families were re-classified as “Coloured” in 1959. ‘Local Coloured leaders’, however, objected to the classification on the grounds that that (Coloureds) were ‘more or less of European descent and these people have never been associated with us.’ The Juma Musjid Trust, the Indian Muslim benefactors of the Zanzibari community, applied successfully to the government in 1961 to designate Zanzibaris as “Other Asiatics” (Seedat, 1973: 37-50). As Kaarsholm (2008: 18) points out, this meant that they ‘were at least citizens of a sort rather than mere subjects, and would be issued with identity cards instead of passes or reference books. They also now had access to housing opportunities made available to Indians under the Group Areas Act.’

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Race and religion thus shaped Zanzibaris' formative experiences in the apartheid years. Being Muslim was key to where they were placed.

There were several other markers of difference between Zanzibaris and the local indigenous population - language, food, and dress.

Dress has from time to time created problems for Zanzibaris. Halima, for example, said that Africans in her community could not understand why she was dressed in "foreign" garb: 'I couldn't like walk around by myself because people used to harass me because of the way I dressed. They had a problem with me being black and following the Islamic teachings. They didn't understand that I was born Muslim, my father came from Tanzania [where] the majority of people are Muslim and my mum's people come from Nampula [Mozambique], ... They believe that Islam's for the Indians only.' Joyce, in pointing to her multiple categories, said that 'this [Bayview] is my community - but as a Zanzibari, I belong to the Zanzibari community.' Many do not know who the 'Zanzibari' are: 'If I tell them I'm a Zanzi, people say what's a Zanzi? I said, I'm a South African Black Muslim to make it easy. [But] some people say, "How can you be a Muslim because you haven't got straight hair, you look like us?" This is a common perception in KwaZulu Natal where Islam is seen as an "Indian" religion.

Language is another marker of difference with local Africans. As Joyce points out, Zanzibaris 'speak a lot of English, and then when we speak English, it's like, she can't speak Zulu, she's speaking English. And, you know, our English will be perfect but because we look like you, you want us to communicate in Zulu, and you make it a problem for nothing.' Zanzibaris also speak Makhua language (of Northern Mozambique). Ironically, when Halima moved from Mayville to Chatsworth, Zanzibaris chided her for not knowing the language: 'I was very pressurized because most of the people from Kings Rest spoke Makhua, the children spoke Makhua more than they spoke English. We spoke English at home. I felt pressurized and there was that to say, why are you speaking English as a child and that?'

Food is also a marker of identity. Joyce identifies herself as "Indian" through the foods she prepares. She said that she could 'never cook any other food besides Indian food. I learnt from my mother, I learnt from my family and we used to buy the *Indian Delights*... samoosas, everything, mastermind it. Everything. You talk about the breyani, the best masala breyani. When there's functions here, we cook pots and pots of breyani. Soji. Kheer (rice porridge).' Mariam, however, identifies the same foods as coming from our ancestors. As you very well know Zanzibar is one of the countries that's very rich in spices. *Breyani* is traditional for us on Eid Day and our samoosas and our special milk which is called *mahaza*. It's made with vermicelli, sago and *elachee* and then you sweeten that with condensed milk ... [Indian Muslims] have the exact same thing, I don't know how. I think it's because of the way the countries are situated so Zanzibar being on the east of Africa, maybe that was then moved to other countries where Indians as well inherited that type of ingredients or recipes. I'm not saying they stole it so maybe some kind of trading recipes.

In describing the breyani that they prepare ('layered'), however, Mariam highlights the link with Indian Muslim foods rather than that of Indians of South Indian descent who are mainly Tamil speaking.

[Our breyani] doesn't differ [from the Indian Muslim one] - the only thing I will say that they make it very hot and ours is not hot but it's the same layered *breyani*, it's not the Tamil *breyani* you will get which is mixed. Ours with the pure masala *breyani*, nice and spicy with all the condiments in it and then the layered rice and boiled eggs in it and all that, ya, with fried onion on the top - very lovely.

In various ways then, Zanzibaris were marked as different from the local African population, as well as from Indian Muslims.

School: race and gender

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The formation of gender and gender roles in society varies across time and space. In Islam, as Barlas above has argued, the sexes are considered equal before God and gender roles are not specified, but, in practice, the private sphere of the home is regarded as a women's space while the public sphere is regarded as the man's space in many Islamic societies. While interviews with mainly middle-class Muslim (Indian) women in the KwaZulu Natal area for a project on the Women's Cultural Group (Vahed and Waetjen 2010) revealed that parents' gendered expectations often defined appropriate behaviour, the lives of these women seemed to be less constrained by gender roles. Zanzibari children, like other children in the Bayview area, attended Summerfield or Protea primary schools and Chatsworth or Protea High. Joyce attended Protea Primary and Chatsworth High. All three women spoke very positively about school sport. Joyce has fond memories of Protea where sport was the avenue through which she gained self-worth. She represented the Natal schools team in athletics. Joyce dropped out of school before matriculating when she fell pregnant. Her world is filled with few regrets but not completing her schooling is one of them. As she put it, 'it was a very big mistake', one that she does not want her children and grandchildren to repeat: 'that's why my grandchildren ... can tell you my whole life story because I told them as is, because I don't want your'll to go down the same route.'

Mariam attended Summerfield primary and matriculated in 1979 from Protea High. She too excelled in athletics:

I was very popular in terms of my athletic achievement. I always represented the school in my athletics. I was a 100m and 200m specialist. I represented the school very well. I went to Kimberley, I went to Paarl, I went to Johannesburg, competed, I got my SASA [South African Schools] colours, I had my green Natal blazer. I was also a high jumper, I was very good. School sport was very important. Even today, when I sit and watch [sports on television], I tear because I feel, if our country was then liberated, I could have went very far in sport. We couldn't go to the Olympic Games, we couldn't go very far. Had we been given the opportunity I could have got colours for this country...

Halima attended Ahmedia school in Mayville and Southlands High when the family moved to Chatsworth. Although the only black learner at Southlands, 'I was welcomed, it was warm, I had lots of friends, the teachers were good.' She too excelled in sport and represented the Natal schools team in netball and athletics: 'I was very good at high jump, sprinting, shot-putt and javelin, so I was like an all-rounder, I would say.' She enjoyed travelling to other provinces in South Africa: 'it was absolutely great, I think that exposure contributed to who I am today and also I had a lot of support from my parents.'

Although all three women came from relatively "religious" families, their families supported their sporting endeavours, which may appear surprising as it meant them breaking the Islamic dress code prescribed by the *ulama* as well as having to travel away from home.

As a 'Zanzi', as Joyce refers to herself, she grew up in an 'Indian' area and attended an 'Indian' school and mixed with children of various religious backgrounds:

Growing up, I mixed with Indians too much.^v I used to go to their houses [and] they used to come to my house. And we used to be together like, when I went to mosque, some of them would follow me to mosque and when they used to go to the Tamil school, I used to go with them. When they had Diwali they will invite us.... When it was Eid I'll invite them

At school, Zanzibari children enjoyed sound relations with children of all religious backgrounds. What was unusual in apartheid South Africa is that they broke racial barriers by attending "Indian" schools. It was in the post-school period that race became a complicated category for all three women. Mariam, who also enjoyed excellent relations with Indian pupils at school, experienced problems...

once we left school. We carry so-called Indian names and surnames so when we went out to look for employment and you send your CV and testimonial and they say, okay, fine, this is good, come in for

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an interview, you'll get a letter. When you go in and then people say, but we looking for Mariam and I said, yes, I am, and then they'll take a second look and say, oh, okay, come in and you'll find maybe you'll be not judged according to your qualifications then, you'll be judged according to your looks because now, who are they looking for? Somebody with straight hair....

Deracialisation in the post-apartheid period has not resolved the issue for Zanzibari's. Joyce, for example, maintains that life has not changed 'so much for us, you know why? I'll say that maybe it changed for the *Black* people [author's emphasis]. And us, also classified as Indians, there's not much changes for us.' Though Joyce is Black, she feels discriminated against because of her name. She points to her daughter Rabia as an example:

Like, if say Rabia will go and apply for a job. Now, because Rabia is an Indian [Muslim] name and they don't know Rabia and then they have this thing like three Blacks, one Indian whatever [so] it doesn't work for us. We have so many matriculants. They have done so well [but] they having that problem, they can't get a job.... So it changed for some people but for us, it hasn't changed. Our children are not working, they're sitting at home and that's how you finding the children getting into drugs.

Race is one example of how fluid identities are and how they intersect in the lives of the women and continue to shape their experiences. Their Muslim religion that defined the women as "Asiatic" and while this may have had advantages in the apartheid period it is a handicap for some in the present moment.

Class and work

Both Mariam and Halima excelled at school but could not pursue tertiary education. Class determined access to education in the local community where young people tended to enter the labour market, usually in the clothing and textile industry, while still in their teens. All three women have worked for most of their lives, all having started in the clothing industry. After matriculating, Mariam secured a job at a clothing company. This did not appeal to her and so she applied to do nursing and was accepted by St Aidan's Hospital in 1981. She did not enjoy nursing and studied early childhood development instead. She worked at Summerfield Primary for over a decade before becoming a trainer in Early Childhood Development. When AIDS became a major issue in South Africa she joined the NGO Senasizo in 2004. Senasizo, which in Zulu means 'We Help', is a project of the Catholic Archdiocese of Durban AIDS Care Commission that provides training, support and care for people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS as well as psycho-social support to orphans and vulnerable children. Mariam subsequently opened her own training company, Malaika's Education and Resource Consultants, and operates in both Johannesburg and Durban. Mariam has clearly responded in positive ways to changes around her, first in getting involved in an HIV / AIDS project and subsequently through training, as the government has prioritized adult training through Sector Education Training Authorities (SETAs).^{vi}

After matriculating, Halima ran a pre-school class at the local madressa for a few years. In 1974 she joined a clothing factory 'so that I could acquire some money to get myself educated because my father was late then and my mother had never worked in her life.' She completed an instructor's course part-time and became a quality instructor. She then completed a "training the trainers" course and joined the Department of Labour where she taught sewing to ladies in rural areas. In 1990, she completed a diploma with the University of South Africa (UNISA) in Adult Basic Education and was employed by Operation Upgrade to teach Adult Literacy at various companies. In 2001, she joined the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), working mainly with young girls, 'instilling values and morals and giving them capacity-building skills.' She also ran a girls hostel for abandoned (mainly Black) children. A strong advocate of women's empowerment, she felt that this was her way to assist young girls. She also completed a course in Montessori teaching and the B.Ed degree through UNISA part-time and has been a Montessori teacher since 2009.

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Joyce, who was pregnant, left school without matriculating and worked in various [mainly Indian-owned] clothing factories in nearby Clairwood. She was initially treated as ‘another unskilled worker’ until, as she puts it, ‘this Indian guy saw – because as a Zanzibari I was classified as an Asian and, like I’m not trying to be a racist now, we were [considered] better than other blacks because we were good in English.’ She was trained as a machinist and eventually became a supervisor. Due to marital problems Joyce became increasingly frustrated and accepted a job in Maseru, Lesotho, around 1980. There she managed a restaurant for five years. She embraced the local culture and was successful in her work, but it was also the time ‘where everything went wrong. I was moving in the fast lane, like, you know, I used to wear pants, I used to bump around – people were excited to see me.’ Joyce returned to Chatsworth after five years and took up with an Indian boyfriend who was not Muslim and who was running a shebeen. This was their only means of survival. All through this period her daughter was taken care of by a cousin, ‘a *hajji* [who] played a very important role in my life because I was gone astray. I was also involved with money-lenders, people were taking my things.’ It was her cousin who helped Joyce to turn her life around. Since doing so, Joyce remarried and has been a “community leader” in the Bayview area.

This period in Joyce’s life coincided with the end of apartheid and worsening economic conditions, high levels of unemployment, drug abuse, child abuse and other socio-economic problems and she reacted by immersing herself in the community. She was voted Chatsworth Woman of the Year in 1993 and has a photograph with soon-to-be South African president Nelson Mandela who congratulated her during a visit to the township. She was vice-chairperson of the Bayview Flats Residents Association (BFRA) for almost a decade. The BFRA worked with other civic organisations in the later 1990s and early 2000s to resist evictions for those who failed to pay rents and service delivery charges. In the early 2000s she also ran a Women’s Empowerment Centre in Westcliffe, which was the initiative of Professor Fatima Meer who was trying to impart sewing skills to women from the local area as well as the nearby township of Chatsworth. Joyce was also the Community Liaising Officer (CLO) from around 2006 to 2012 for a local municipality programme of upgrading the flats. In this position she dealt with local residents, the municipality, as well as political parties.

Like Joyce, Halima and Mariam are also involved in various community initiatives, though to a lesser extent as they have fulltime jobs. At one point, Halima and Joyce ‘actually used to go to the supermarkets to get food to feed the people in the flats, practically, physically go and clean people’s flats but now, because I haven’t got the time of day, she’s doing it on her own.’ Halima has taken to mentoring around ten teenage girls (on weekends) whom she would like to guide to a professional career because ‘every year ... you would find that children get matriculated and they end up working for Pick ‘n Pay [a supermarket chain] – where we going, you know?’ Most of the girls are ‘quite intelligent, they can do much, but the guidance is not there.’ All three women are members of The Women’s Association, which has tried to bridge the gap between women in the Zanzibari community and the adjoining Kokoba informal settlements. According to Mariam, the first meeting drew ten members which grew to around fifty. They organised a Mother’s Day function where ‘we entertained mothers and we had Haleema Giles who was responsible to get sponsorship in terms of getting materials for the old people so each lady that attended received a gift, we cooked a meal and served everybody. Then we had a children’s day function and we started arts and crafts, and we’ve tackled lots of other issues from there.’

The past-apartheid period has thrown up many changes, some welcome, others challenging, and Joyce, Mariam, and Halima have, in various ways, been involved in exploring new opportunities as well as addressing issues of concern to the local community. Throughout, all three women, by working, by managing the household, by caring for their families, mostly without the support of men, have seen to the family’s social and economic welfare. This is not to be seen as strictly the private domain, for the domestic sphere is considered an “intrinsically *political* domain” (Brenner 1998: 85).

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Marriage and household

All three women married spouses of their choice. Joyce married the father of her daughter, who was from the local community. Their marriage lasted almost a decade. They initially lived with his parents but due to ‘a lot of misunderstanding ... a lot of family politics,’ they moved on their own. Her husband wanted to marry a second wife. Due to his persistence, ‘I agreed for him to have a second wife. Unfortunately he couldn’t keep the two wives and all hell broke loose. I left him.’ Although Joyce had opposed her husband taking a second wife, she herself recently became a “second wife”. Her present husband is a panel beater, originally from Maputo, who converted to Islam to marry Joyce. Surprisingly, his first wife, who was from Maputo, and children also embraced Islam and have become, in Joyce’s estimation, ‘staunch Muslims.’ Both wives live in Bayview, and, according to Joyce, ‘we have mutual understanding ... When we have problems we share [them] and the children communicate.’ Joyce and her second husband have a teenage son.

Mariam also married a man from the local community, and they have three children, a daughter who is a nurse, and two teenage sons. Married life was difficult from the beginning: ‘There was no furniture, we didn’t have a bed, we had to sleep on the floor until we saved up some money. In the kitchen there wasn’t even a cupboard. I was the breadwinner of the family then and it was difficult growing two children at that time.’ Things did not improve. Mariam’s marriage has not worked out as she had hoped and she has been the breadwinner for most of her married life. She points out that many men in the community ‘somehow feel you need to be responsible for the household and yet, in Islam, it doesn’t work like that. The man needs to be responsible for his family...’ So while Mariam echoes in passing what an ideal traditional marriage may look like, with the husband taking on the role of breadwinner and wife that of homemaker, her circumstances have had a positive impact on her:

We’ve become very independent as women and therefore we are able to actually take the step and move out.... I think women have a lot of courage, we’ve come a long way because even we grew, we saw our parents were taken care of by their husbands so we all had this image of, you know, getting into a marriage where the husband will look after you, look after the kids. But, as you are in the marriage, you find that’s not the case and then women tend to leave home and find employment.... It’s making women stronger that you are able to do things for yourself and for your family.

Halima married when she was thirty. Her future husband was a ‘very staunch Catholic, altar boy at the church’ who embraced Islam. The marriage lasted around a decade. She separated because her marital problems were ‘affecting them [children] like a whole lot, they were deteriorating at school.’ Halima took on the role of ‘mother and father’ and saw to the children’s education. Her youngest son, who had Downs Syndrome, died at age eleven due to negligence at the hospital. She ‘did not sue the hospital because, being Muslim, I understood that it was his time. I remember him every day – he was a little angel.’ Halima’s children are the ‘pride’ of her life. One son is a lecturer in sports science, another is a chartered accountant, and the third is a karate instructor who competes internationally. Halima also adopted a daughter who runs a Montessori School. Now that her children have grown up and are living independent lives, Halima remarried a few years ago.

Roberts tells us that the story ‘is one’s identity, a story created, told, revised and retold through-out life. We know or discover ourselves and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell’ (Roberts 2001, 128). The narrative of difficulty is one that many women in the community, across the religious divide, repeated. They did not endure troubled marriages but felt confident to branch out to make their own lives. They are strong and resourceful and have great powers of endurance. While constricted gender roles and structural barriers do hamper life opportunities in South Africa, it has not stopped these women from being active agents in marriage, work, and the household.

Faith

Religion operates on several levels in the lives of the three women. They hold certain religious beliefs, values, and traditions within a larger system of Zanzibari culture; Islam is also a form of identity that helps to maintain social bonds and boundaries with fellow Zanzibaris, but one which also connects to the larger Islamic presence locally, nationally, and internationally; it also operates as a social relationship comprising of various interconnections and networks; and their Islam also includes specific rituals. What emerged from the interviews is that religion mattered to the women and, on this point, we concur with Baum (2006: 1077) that it would be 'a mistake to see religious and cultural norms, practices and identities as nothing more than expressions of oppressive power, discounting the meaning that these phenomena have for the agents who enact them.' All three women are guided by their faith and it is undoubtedly an important marker of identity, one that provides strength and influences many of their life choices. Another conspicuous feature is that while the transnational nature of religious belongings and practices have intensified in the present age of globalization, with devotees connecting to others beyond their national borders and even beyond continents, some aspects of faith remain localized.

Joyce emphasized that Islam forms an important part of her identity as she pointed to some of the rituals practiced in her household:

In my house everybody does *salah* (prayer) but sometimes, you know the young boys, they duck, but we say, no matter what you do, you have to make a *salah* and, in my house, because I have learnt from my parents, every Thursday we have *dhikr* and burn *lobaan* (incense) and Friday it's *Jumuah*. And then when it's fasting month (*Ramadaan*), it's compulsory for everybody to fast, from my [very young] grandson that's going to fast at 9 o'clock, 11 o'clock he's opening his fast, and then in the evening again he's fasting, you see [laughs].

Mariam's description of *Ramadaan*, the month of fasting, captures the importance of Islam in the women's lives:

You find this area very vibrant during the fasting month – people going to the mosque, the *aasaan* going, traditional wear – guys with the *kurthas*, ladies with the *abbayas* – and Eid - I can't explain. You have to be here to experience that. Like, you know when you see on TV, they showing Medinah, this is a mini-Medinah, we'll call it. Eid morning it's fantastic – people reading, going to the mosque, children dressed in their traditional garb...

Zanzibaris are unique in one respect. They grew up on the Bluff on a settlement that was entirely Muslim (comprising of 199 families) and when they were relocated to Chatsworth they were given homes that were contiguous. Thus, as Mariam points out, 'you'll find that within this area we all Muslims, we are very close-knit community.' Mariam bemoaned the fact that their married children were forced to move out due to a housing shortage: 'we would love to be within the community because, there, we are just on our own and, like when you are here, you know the neighbour, you know the person that's passing by, you know, there's a lot of camaraderieship and you feel safe.' She did point out that those who lived in other areas tried to send their children to Bayview to receive *madrassah* education to make them into 'proper Zanzibaris'.

Many traditional Islamic practices continue to be observed though there may be subtle changes in the way these are carried out as well as the meanings attached to them in the contemporary period. While most Indian Muslims are of the Hanafi madhab, Zanzibaris are Shafii as were their Makhuwa ancestors in northern Mozambique. In Bayview, the Juma Masjid Chatsworth, also known as the "Zanzibari" *Masjid*, was built in 1967. That Indian Muslims built a mosque a short distance away is testimony to differences of practices and traditions. For example, from earliest times, Zanzibari women have been allowed to pray in the mosque, though they do so separately from men. Children continue to receive regular religious

¹The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew: that is the simple truth from which we must start,' Jean-Paul Sartre

²'But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color?,' Jean Genet

instruction in the afternoons from the madrassah teacher (called *Woshath*). Whereas in the past teachers were male, nowadays madrassah teachers are all female. This is an important change in that males no longer have a monopoly on Islamic knowledge. Girls attend the madrassah until puberty. The old practice of thereafter isolating them in the home is no longer strictly observed because of the need for them to acquire a secular education.

The Ratieb remains an important part of Zanzibari Islam. This ceremony takes place during the birth of the Prophet (in the Islamic month of Rabi-ul-Awwal) when worshippers get into a state of ecstasy by repeating the Prophet's name, beating on drums, and reciting verses from the Qur'an. Another common practice is *Dhikr*, a form of communal worshipping by constantly repeating the name of God until worshippers reportedly experience divine reality. Such sessions are organised by both men and women. It involves devotees sitting around in a circle, and swaying their heads and bodies rhythmically while reciting fixed phrases. According to Joyce, such sessions have a therapeutic effect on worshippers, especially in times of insecurity. She herself organizes *dhikr* on Thursday evenings. The *Moulood*, another act of devotion to the Prophet, usually takes place during a joyous occasion, such as family festivals of birth, circumcision, and marriage, and during special religious occasions, such as the birth of the Prophet.

Over the past two decades, many of these practices have come under attack from reformist segments of the community who have been influenced by transnational movements. In response to this pressure, Halima was forthright when she said, 'Oh, I don't give them the time of day, unfortunately, because I really don't see where they are going because, I mean, as I said earlier on, I come from the old school. For me it's like they're re-inventing the wheel - that's my opinion.' Joyce too reacted with scorn at reformist tendencies: 'we have the so-called, we call them *Tablighs* now. They change and say, no, this is not in the Qur'an, why your'll must do this and why your'll must do that, you know what I mean? And that's another debate we having now. What the heck ... too much nonsense, they're very fussy. Certain things they'll say they do, certain things they're not going to do....'

The religious practices of the women has not remained static. Some of the women, for example, attend educational classes on Sundays. Mariam is one of those women who began attending the classes which were initiated a few years ago:

There's an activity that takes place once a week – it's a *thalim* programme where women come together. It's held in Road 246 mosque. It's held by a couple of ladies that are now trained as *alimas* [teachers] which is an achievement for our community as well. In the past it was like, you know, something that was very far-fetched but, as time is progressing, we have a lot of girls have now graduated as *alimas*. They run these programmes, lots of issues, programmes are run in terms of talking about death, preparing yourself, talking about how to raise the children, each week there's a different programme and we also take turns in terms of reading the Qur'an. Ya, so it's very intense, people are learning a lot from the programme. If you look at the community, you'll see gradually people in the community are now changing in terms of their religion, in terms of their attire, in terms of their interaction, because of these programmes. They are impacting on the community. I'm not saying that we are not God-fearing, conscious community, we've always been God-fearing, conscious, but I think because some of the western culture was somehow pulling us astray but, because of this you find things are gradually going back to what they were supposed to be.

Joyce also underwent a transformation. She gave up on her boyfriend and his line of work. As she points out, her family was highly religious, 'you know, in my house, there's only *hajjis*.' They warned her that if she were to die without changing her habits they could not 'read [the Qur'an] for you.' Her children were also in their teens and she realised, 'hey, I'm losing track of my religion.' She heeded her family's advice: 'forty days you must be clean and you must decide what you want to do. I started recollecting myself.'

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'But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color?,' Jean Genet

They used to have lots of *dhikr* and I used to go for the *dhikr*. Automatically I became pious.’ Joyce subsequently held a series of informal jobs but is grateful for how her life has turned out:

You know what I tell my children every day? I say I want to thank God that he’s made me a better person because I wouldn’t have been here now with the life that I had. I tell my children, whatever I got, I must make *shukr*, what I don’t have I don’t want to cry and say, I don’t have and I’ve done this but, because Allah has corrected me, my family is somebody. I’ll make *shukr* and make your’ll better people because without the mother children go astray. It wouldn’t be a good family.

There are regular communal gatherings to witness rituals and rites of passages, such as birth, puberty, circumcision, marriage, and death. On the seventh day after the birth of a child, the grandmother gives the baby a bath and cuts the baby's hair. This first cutting, known as *akika*, is an important part of Zanzibari culture, and includes the naming of the child and sacrifice of an animal. To protect the baby against evil forces, the grandmother takes the child to view the sun and an amulet is tied around the baby's neck and waist. The coming of age ceremony is one of the most significant moments in a girl’s life and continues to the present. According to Mariam, when a girl reaches puberty, parents call upon an elder family relative or community member, called *mwethie*, who ‘will then be in charge of that particular girl, teach them how it’s done in terms of our culture, how you live with people, how you carry yourself as a female, what are the things that you need to look out for as a young woman.’ All three women are active in organizing these aspects of their religious practice.

These narratives suggest that the women are not “victims” of their faith but willingly committed to it and it appears to provide meaning in their lives. And while Islamic texts and *ulema* may prescribe certain ideals about Muslim womanhood, motherhood, childcare, and so on, the social and material conditions determines how they are living their lives. They do not see this as being at odds with their faith. Among many women, both in South Africa and other parts of the world, there is a reinterpretation of Islamic sacred sources by to advocate women’s rights within an Islamic framework. While all three women live gender equality and social justice, one would be pushing it to argue that they are Islamic feminists in terms of reinterpreting the texts. One point that all the women reflected on is that while in many parts of the world, Muslim women experienced unease and anxiety about practising their religion in the public, they were free to do in South Africa and it was not a barrier to their participation in the wider community.

Conclusions

This paper makes a case for examining Muslim women’s lives on the basis of their lived experience rather than abstract models. The fetishism of the headscarf, personal law, forced marriage, polygamy, burqa, and so on leads to an ahistorical normative Muslim womanhood. Halima, Joyce, and Mariam represent complex lives that do not fit into pre-conceived notions of *the* “Muslim woman”. They are certainly not playing the roles that may be assigned to them by religious texts or *ulama* or culture. All three have been active in the public sphere and are or have been involved in raising their families, often as single parents, under difficult economic circumstances, and exercising agency, to different extents, in demanding social, economic and political redress for themselves and others in their community. This in part may be due to the fact that in South Africa they do not experience second-class citizenship because of their religion or gender and are allowed to participate in the economic and political domains, notwithstanding opposition from some conservative elements in among Muslim.

This paper has tried to show how they adapted, changed, confronted, and negotiated their lives in response to changing circumstance. The post-apartheid society has opened new opportunities but also created challenges. Asiatic-Muslimness, for example, has been a barrier for some. Not being “really Indian” or “really African” is a problem but perhaps it also provides a fluidity that has enabled them as agents. They have responded in different ways. Joyce has immersed herself in civic structures, while Mariam and Halima have taken advantages of opportunities in the education field. In Joyce’s case, it

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should be noted that the limited formal employment options for under-educated and working-class or under-educated is a feature of post-apartheid South Africa, where large numbers of people are relying on precarious casual and informal or home-based. All three women seem to have responded well to separations from their partners. Religion remains an important part of their identity, the women's-only Sunday classes being an example. It is important to note that they have been able to almost seamlessly merge their religious and secular lives.

The women have been active agents, trying to control things, adjust all the time, even though the broader structural issues are beyond their control. What will the next generation of Zanzibari women be like, when their identity is loosened from apartheid but probably still rooted in the local?

In all three lives various identities - gender, race, religion, class, ability – intersect in subject formation. They interact on multiple levels and often concurrently. Brah and Phoenix contend that it is futile to privilege 'a single dimension of experience as if it constituted the whole of life' (2004: 79). We must, they point out, refute 'all final closures.... [and] challenge essentialist thinking that a particular category of woman is essentially this or essentially that. This point holds critical importance today when the allure of new Orientalisms and their concomitant desire to "unveil" Muslim women has proved to be attractive even to some feminists in a "post September 11" world' (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 77). Joyce, for example, can be described as "religious", as working class, as a community activist as she straddles various roles.

None of the women can be pigeonholed as "Muslim", whatever that implies. While Islam is undoubtedly important in their lives, they are not overdetermined by it. Various identities intersect with their faith in shaping their private sphere and public lives. Their rights and empowerment are determined as much, if not more, by the political economy, class, race, education, and language, as it is by their faith. They certainly have more in common with local women of other faiths than they do with Muslim women of other class backgrounds living in other part of the city. We should, Abu-Lughod (2004: 783) advises, avoid 'plaster[ing] neat cultural icons like the Muslim woman over messy historical and political dynamics.... We need to develop, instead, a serious appreciation of differences among women in the world—as products of different histories, expressions of different circumstances, and manifestations of differently structured desires.' Problems such as patriarchy are not confined to Islam. Law and religious prescription are important but many women, in their day-to-day lives, operate outside of these. Focusing on a religion's legal provisions and its prescriptive texts will reinforce the importance of religion in shaping women's lives and result in them continuing to be defined by birth bound identities when their status and identities are shaped in the social and political realm.

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ⁱ A January 2010 Gallup poll showed that 43percent of Americans admitted to being prejudiced against Muslims, a January 2011 poll in Australia put the figure at 50 percent and a 2010 poll in Canada had the figure at one-third (Ameri, 2012: 1).

ⁱⁱ As with most research methodologies, a life history approach carries certain risks and has some shortcomings, such as context specificity, insider (emic) perspectives, and power relations (Wicks and Whiteford, 2006). While critics believe that life history is individualistic and focuses on respondent's narration of their lives in ways that capture personal experiences at the expense of all else, advocates of this approach adopt it precisely because it prioritises the perspective of tellers and helps to restore their agency. Subjects, rather than being passive objects of research, can 'actively engaged in the process of interpreting and evaluating their lives' (Herbert and Rodger, 2008: 62). Another concern about the life history approach is that respondents' stories do not take place in a social vacuum. They are relational and shaped by the relationship of the interviewer and interviewee, which is specific to a particular time and place. The narration may be influenced by the power of the interviewer or interviewee and a conscious desire on the part of the respondent to present a particular perspective of her/himself, while the kinds of questions pursued by the interviewer may also shape responses (Ojermark, 2007: 8). As Abrams reminds us, 'there is no natural and unchanging life story: it is created and recreated through the telling' (Abrams, 2010: 53).

ⁱⁱⁱ The work of hip hop singer Anaya Alimah illustrates this. For example, her song 'More Than Usual' explores the intersection of race, class, gender, music, industry politics, and her own faith.

Simply complex, the best way to describe my demeanor / I'm all about my freedom, don't follow I'm a leader / That's why they tapping me tracking the books that I be reading / My double consciousness, multiplied exponential / To hold these facts I'm into, to be exact I'm into / Hill Collins, Tricia Rose, that's how my mental grows / Mohanty, Anzaldúa philosophies I know... While brothas shouting Huey P., Marcus G. / I'm politicking, sifting through the thoughts of Fatima Mernissi, Listen / I mean no disrespect, them brothas spit some wisdom / But history erased, the sistas right there with them / Silenced with the devaluation of femininity / We don't revolve around you, my brothas can't u see / I'm talking liberation, not of the black man / All people, every nation, tell me can u understand?... I don't think that they feelin me though / That's what happens when you rap about more than getting doe/... So while the people sleep, conspiracies I find / Its revolution time, better yet solution time / Too many just fall in line, capital control they minds.

'My double consciousness is multiplied exponential' is Alimah's arguing that her consciousness is intersectional. It is not just racial consciousness but also factors in class, gender, and other identities in contrast to hip hop culture which privileges male black Nationalists. Capitalism and class come into it when she write / sings that the music industry has closed down the spaces for rap music to deal with complex issues, including rampant materialism ('get rich or die trying' mentality). Alimah's faith also influences her lyrics. She writes that 'issues of social justice such as the treatment of women, government surveillance, and the greed that often accompanies capitalism are necessarily spiritual challenges and are represented as such in my lyrics, which merge my concerns as a member of the hip-hop generation with my faith' (McMurray, 2007: 87).

^{iv} The Native Taxation and Development Act of 1925 imposed an annual two-rand poll tax on African male adults but Zanzibaris claimed that this did not apply to them as they were of Arab descent. The highest court of appeal, the Appellate Division in Bloemfontein, ruled in a 1938 case that Zanzibari's were 'Native within the definition of the

ⁱ 'The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew: that is the simple truth from which we must start,' Jean-Paul Sartre

ⁱⁱ 'But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color?,' Jean Genet

legislation.’ The governance of Zanzibaris was consequently shifted from the Protector of Indian Immigrants to the Department of Native Affairs and they had to carry a “dompas” or reference book (Seedat, 1973: 37-50).

^v Joyce uses the word ‘Indian’ in two ways, first to distinguish those of Indian ancestry from herself as ‘African’, and second (seen later) to distinguish those of Hindu faith from those, including herself, who are Muslim.

^{vi} Parliament ratified the Skills Development Act in 1998 which established Sector Training and Education Authority (SETA) system to sector skills plans within a National Skills Development Strategy. 23 SETAs were formally established in In March 2000. SETAs were concerned with learnerships, internships, unit based skills programmes, and apprenticeships. They collected skills levies from employers and made this money available within the sector for education and training. In 2009 the Department of Higher Education and Training assumed responsibility for skills development from the Department of Labour. The National Skills Development Strategy for the period 2011 to 2016 resulted in the number of SATAs being reduced from 23 to 21.

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