

**Demystifying the Muslimah: changing subjectivities, civic engagement and public participation
of Muslim women in contemporary South Africa**

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I, Fatima Asmal (941300984), hereby declare that this is my own work and that all sources that I have used have been acknowledged and referenced. No part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author and are in no way representative of those of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination, either in the Republic of South Africa, or overseas.

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ABSTRACT

Demystifying the Muslimah: changing subjectivities, civic engagement and public participation of Muslim women in contemporary South Africa

This study interrogates the validity of generalisations about Muslim women. While Islam is undoubtedly important in the lives of most practising Muslim women, rather than regarding their actions and behaviours as governed by Islamic law, the study seeks to historicise their experiences through a life history approach of five women engaged in the civic life of their communities (however widely this may be defined) and in public participation in various ways. Using oral history as a methodology, it investigates what drew these women to civic participation; the nature of their participation in terms of the organisations they are members of and the activities they are involved in; the stimulus for civic engagement and public participation and their achievements in this regard as well as the impact of participation on their identities and subjectivities. Most existing work on Muslim women deals with issues such as sexuality and reproductive choices, the AIDS pandemic or conversion to Islam. This study adopts a life history approach to understand *multiple* aspects of the women's lives, including and especially their civic and public engagement.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my son, Amr. My journey with you has been by far the most meaningful chapter of my life. Like me, you have interacted many times with some of the women I interviewed. I hope that just as I was inspired by writing about them, so too will you be inspired by reading about them.

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GLOSSARY OF ARABIC AND URDU TERMS

Abaya - a long, loose-fitting garment, worn by Muslim women; has long sleeves and is often black

Ahadith (pl. singular: hadith) - sayings of the prophet Muhammad

Adhan - the call to prayer sounded out by an individual, before the performance of each of the five compulsory Muslim daily prayers

Allah - the name Muslims use to refer to God

Allah Ta'ala - Allah, the Most High

Alhamdulillah - a statement reflecting gratitude to Allah, translated as "all praises are due to Allah"

Alim - a male who is knowledgeable about Islam, having studied it at tertiary level

Alimah – a female who is knowledgeable about Islam, having studied it at tertiary level

Amirah – a female leader of an organisation/group

Apa – a female teacher of Islamic studies

Aql - intellect

Awni – a long, rectangular head covering

Barelwi – a group of Muslims

Bid'ah – an innovation, something introduced to Islam by someone other than the Prophet Muhammad

Bismillahir rahmaanir Raheem – a statement usually uttered by Muslims when commencing an action, translated as "in the name of Allah, the most Beneficent, the most Merciful"

Burda – mantle; contentually refers to the Qasidah Burda, an ode of praise for the prophet Muhammad

Burqah – a head covering which South African Muslim often wear for the performance of prayers

Darul Uloom – literally a house of knowledge; institutions first initiated in India and Pakistan, where men and women study Islam at tertiary level

Da'wah – inviting others to Islam

Deen – the religion of Islam

Deeni – Islamically inclined

Dhai – a midwife

Dhul-hijjah – a month in the Islamic calendar (which works according to a lunar cycle)

Du'a – the act of supplicating to Allah

Eid – a Muslim festival, two of which are celebrated annually, one marking the end of Ramadan (Eidul Fitr), and one during the Islamic month in which hajj is performed (Eidul Adha)

Eidgah – the name given to the Eid prayer when it is performed in a wide, open space like a field

Fajr – the Muslim early-morning prayer which has to be performed before sunrise

Fardh – compulsory/obligatory

Fiqh – the field of Islamic jurisprudence

Hadith (pl ahadith) – a saying of the prophet Muhammad

Hafidh (pl huffaadh) – a male who has memorised the Qur'an in its entirety

Hafidha (pl hafidhaat) – a female who has memorised the Qur'an in its entirety.

Hajj – the pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, the performance of which is compulsory upon every financially and physically able adult Muslim, once in his/her lifetime

Halal - permissible

Halaqah – literally a circle; refers to the gathering of Muslims to study various aspects of Islam, informally

Haram - forbidden

Haya - modesty

Hifdh – the act of memorising the Qur'an

Hijab – the covering of all parts of the body, by a Muslim woman, except for her face, hands and feet, in loose fitting, non-transparent clothing

Hijabi – a woman who wears the hijab

Iftar – the time of breaking fast, at sunset

Ijaar – a pants/trouser usually used to refer to that worn by a woman

Imam – a leader, contextually it refers to the leader of the congregational prayers

Iman - faith

In sha Allah – a statement Muslims use when indicating the intention to do something, it is translated as “if Allah wills’

Jamaat - congregation

Jumu’ah – the day of Friday; considered to be a day of greater spiritual significance by Muslims than the other days of the week

Kafir – used by the Qur’an to refer to people who do not believe in the existence of God

Kurta – a long garment worn by men, either knee or ankle length

Madhhab – a school of jurisprudential thought founded by one or the other of various classical Islamic scholars

Madrasah – a place where individuals (adults or children) can study Islam, different madrasahs cater for different needs

Maghrib – literally sunset, but usually refers to the prayer which Muslims are required to form at sunset

Makruh – detested/disliked by God

Maulana – a term Muslims of Indian/Pakistani descent use to refer to someone who has studied Islam at tertiary level, at a Darul Uloom

Mawlood – an event held by the Barelwi/Sunni community to celebrate the birthday of the prophet Muhammad; Deobandis are opposed to its observance

Meelaad – another word for mawlood

Muharram – the first month of the Islamic calendar

Musjid - mosque

Muslimah – a female Muslim

Naath – an Urdu song which sings the praises of the prophet Muhammad

Namaz – the Urdu word for prayer

Nikah – the Islamic marriage ceremony

Niqab – the face veil worn by some Muslim women

Niyyah - intention

Purdah – Urdu for the face veil worn by some Muslim women; also refers to a physical barrier erected between men and women

Qur'an – the scripture followed by Muslims; they believe that Allah revealed it to the prophet Muhammad

Qur'an Sharif – noble Qur'an

Radiyallahu anha – may Allah be pleased with her; a statement which is uttered/written after mentioning the name of any of the female companions or relatives of the prophet Muhammad

Ramadan – the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, during which Muslims fast

Rasul – a messenger; implying a messenger of Allah

Rasulullah – a messenger of Allah

Sabaq - lesson

Sadaqah – voluntary charity

Saff – a row of people assembled for the prayer (salah)

Salam – the Muslim greeting

Salat – the Muslim prayer

Salaf – pious predecessor

Salafi – someone who claims to be following Islam in its 'purest' form, free from innovation, and following only the Qur'an and authentic sayings of the prophet Muhammad

Salah – the Muslim prayer

Salami – the practice of greeting the prophet Muhammad in gatherings, only observed by the Barelwi school of thought

Sallallahu alayhi wassallam – may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him; a statement uttered/written after the name of the prophet Muhammad is mentioned

Seerah – the biography of the prophet Muhammad

Shahadah – the act of bearing witness that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger; usually the first thing a person converting to Islam does

Shari'ah – Islamic law

Shaykh – the title given to someone out of a sense of respect, usually because he is learned in Islamic studies

Shi'ah – a Muslim sect, mainly differentiated from the Sunni Muslim sect in that the latter believes that the prophet's companion Abu Bakr, was entitled to become the first caliph after his death, whilst the former believes that the caliphate should have in the first instance been assumed by Ali, the prophet's first cousin

Shukr - gratitude

Sufi – a person who

Sunnah – the way of life of the prophet Muhammad based on his sayings and actions, which Muslims are encouraged to follow

Sunni – globally it refers to a Muslim sect, mainly differentiated from the Shi'ah Muslim sect in that the latter believes that the prophet's cousin Ali, should have been the first caliph after this death,, whilst the former believes that the caliphate was rightly assumed by the prophet's companion, Abu Bakr; in the South African context the word is used to refer to Barelwis vis a vis Tablighis

Surah – a chapter of the Qur'an

Surtees – people who trace their origins to Gujarat in India

Tablighi – a Sunni school of thought originating in India; its teachings focus on the reformation of Muslims through preaching the basics of the religion to them; it is ideologically opposed to the Barelwi school of thought as it is against mawlood/meelaad gatherings

Tafsir – the exegesis of the Qur'an

Tarawih – a lengthy prayer performed nightly during the month of Ramadan only

Ulama (pl. singular: alim) – used to refer to the body of people within a Muslim community, who have more Islamic knowledge than everyone else

Umrah – a voluntary pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, the performance of which is not obligatory

Ustadh – a male Islamic studies teacher

Wajib – compulsory, but not at the same level as fardh

Wudhu – ritual ablution which Muslims are required to perform for certain religious acts like the prayer

Zakah – compulsory charity which financially able Muslims are required to discharge annually, at a rate of 2.5 per cent of their total wealth less liabilities

Zikr – the act of remembering/mentioning Allah through the utterance of statements taught by the prophet Muhammad

Chapter One

Setting the scene

In 1996, whilst working as a student reporter at *The Natal Mercury*, one of the daily morning newspapers in KwaZulu-Natal, I wrote an opinion article titled 'Not All Women Are Oppressed', which focused on the stereotyping of Muslim women who wore the *niqab*¹, by sections of the media and the public, as seen in my interaction with people, Muslim and non-Muslim, as well as newspaper reports and in the 'Letters to the Editor' section of newspapers. My article was based on several interviews that I conducted with women who wore the *niqab* as well as my own experiences. I wrote in my column:

As a Muslim woman who wears a scarf, I have often been termed a fundamentalist. I sometimes get the impression that people see me as a rather un-liberated person. What most people forget is that the western concepts of fundamentalism and liberation differ from the meanings Muslims attach to these words. All practising Muslims are fundamentalists in the sense that they adhere to the fundamentals of Islam. It is the west, which has twisted the word 'fundamentalism' around to denote something violent.²

Mishra's analysis of representations of Muslims in the *New York Times* newspaper between September 2001 and September 2003, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacks,³ concluded that Muslim women in non-Western countries were mostly represented in reports 'as victims of violence and Islamic practices. Representations of Muslim women were also marked by a continual obsession with the veil and that they were often portrayed as victims in need of Western liberation.'⁴ This suggested to me that little had changed since I wrote my article five or so years previously. In fact, the situation has probably deteriorated further as the 9/11 attacks catalysed an arguably unparalleled level of scrutiny of Muslims as a people and Islam as a faith at macro-governmental level, in the media and on a micro-level within communities, leading to a palpable rise in Islamophobia, a term that broadly refers to 'prejudice against, hatred towards, irrational fear of, or racism towards Muslims,'⁵ in many parts of the world.

¹ This refers to the covering of the whole face with a veil, and is not to be confused with the *hijab* which excludes the covering of the face.

² Asmal, Fatima. "Not All Women Are Oppressed." *The Natal Mercury*, August 5, 1997.

³ This refers to the incident on 11 September 2001 when 19 members associated with the Islamist group *Al-Qaeda* hijacked four airliners in the US in order to carry out suicide attacks. One plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania and a second hit the Pentagon just outside Washington, D.C., while two of the planes were flown into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Around 3,000 lives were lost and resulted in US President George W. Bush launching his 'War on Terror' which continues to have repercussions to the present. It is popularly known as 9/11.

⁴ Mishra, Smeeta. "Saving" Muslim women and fighting Muslim men: Analysis of representations in the *New York Times*, ' *Global Media Journal*, 6 (11), 2007.

⁵ Modood, Tariq. 'Remaking multiculturalism after 7/7,' *Open Democracy*, 29 September 2005.

Background: motivation and reasons for the study

This study is undertaken in the context of the ‘War on Terror,’ the ‘Clash of Civilizations,’ the ‘Arab Spring,’ the emergence of the Islamic State,⁶ and the more general rise of xenophobia against foreign migrants and refugees in many parts of the world, not just Europe, over the past two decades. Such incidents are on-going and well recorded, including many instances in South Africa.⁷ Exclusion, stigmatisation, and racism against certain ethno-racial groups are evident in many parts of the world, with structural and cultural constraints often making it difficult for such groups to overcome discriminatory barriers. Examples include African Americans in the USA, Palestinians in Israel, foreign Africans in South Africa, Sri Lankans in Australia, and many other such instances. While Muslims constitute a religious group made up of multiple races,⁸ classes, ethnicities, and nationalities, they too are stigmatised in many parts of the world on the basis of their religion as a result of global tensions which are often couched as ‘religious.’ One example that comes to mind is India where the rise of Hindutva and economic prosperity, which has seen the emergence of a middle class, has been matched by growing negative connotations of Islam and Muslims. The media, movies, and politicians have taken to portraying Muslims as a distinct ‘other’ and as a potential threat to Hindu security. Muslim culture is demonised and Muslim identities are disparagingly projected in order to further the hegemonic designs rooted in Hindutva majoritarianism.⁹

It is difficult for individuals ‘belonging’ to excluded groups to insist on being treated as individuals. As Jenkins has argued, social identity results from both group categorisation (collective identities/‘us’ and ‘them’) and self-identification. Thus, on the one hand, individuals are identified as belonging to a certain group to which characteristics may be ascribed while, on the other hand, individuals may seek umbrage

⁶ The “War on Terror” refers to the Bush administration’s worldwide ‘war on terror’ which included such measures as open and covert military operations, new security legislation, and attempts to block the financing of global terrorism in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks; the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ theory (see Huntington 1996) postulates that people’s cultural and religious identities are the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world; while the Arab Spring refers to the popular revolutionary wave in the Middle East that started at the end of 2010. To date, this political turmoil has effected leadership change in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen; uprisings in Bahrain; civil war in Syria and Mali; and protests in Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait and other places; and it has seen the rise of the Islamic State [also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)] which are the offshoot of *Al-Qaeda* but which differ in strategy in that they have occupied territory stretching from Aleppo, Syria’s largest city, eastward beyond Tikrit in Iraq. Islamic State has established what it brands a caliphate and is associated with such things as grisly public beheadings which have been videotaped and circulate on the Internet, while human rights groups have accused the group of ethnic cleansing, recruiting child soldiers, and forced child marriages. Islamic State has attracted supporters from all over the world and is viewed with abomination by millions of people all over the world, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

⁷ See, for example, Vahed, Goolam and Ashwin Desai. ‘The May 2008 Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: Antecedents and Aftermath’, *Alternation*, 20 (7), 2013.

⁸ Whilst I accept that race is not a biological reality, it is a social fact in most contexts, and has legal weight in South Africa where the population is divided according to the following ‘races’ for such purposes as affirmative action: ‘Black African,’ ‘Coloured,’ ‘White,’ and ‘Indian’/‘Asian.’

⁹ Kazmi, Fareed and Sanjeev Kumar. ‘The Politics of Muslim Identity and the Nature of Public Imagination in India: Media and Films as Potential Determinants’, *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, (4), 2011.

in the already available and obvious group boundaries, such as race, ethnicity, or religion, when discriminated against rather than less tangible identities such as gender or class.¹⁰ However, this collective identity is not static but may change in reaction to changing global and national contexts.¹¹ In other words, identities are not essentialised but are contextual as they are shaped in particular political contexts. In the South African context, for example, many Muslims' identities are transforming from a situation where being Indian was a primary identity during the apartheid period to one where they give primacy, or are forced to give primacy to being Muslim which is a contested and lethal identity.¹²

One of the consequences of these struggles is the politicising of Muslim womanhood globally. Muslim women were stereotyped even before 9/11 but this has become more intensified within this global context,¹³ with a perpetual obsession in many quarters, especially the media, with the concept of veiling. At the same time, conservative elements within the Islamic world increasingly interpret and propagate Islamic laws (*Shari'ah*) which appear to subjugate women to secondary status. Asma Barlas, for example, argues that although the *Qur'an* encourages liberation for women, misogynistic readings of Islam derive from the interpretations of Muslim scholars who sought to 'legitimise actual usage of their own day by interpreting it in great detail into the Holy Book.'¹⁴ There is also a tighter embracing of Islamic norms (schooling, dress, women's withdrawal from public life, etc.) which has resulted in the creation of what Oliver Roy calls 'liberated zones', that is, spaces where the ideals of an (Islamic) future society can be implemented, but where 'no counterpower is established, no counterstate.'¹⁵

This global context forms the backdrop to this study. The study historicises Muslim women in South Africa through a life history approach of women from a broadly middle-class background, using the methodology of oral history to examine their changing subjectivities, civic engagement and public participation. A working hypothesis is that such an approach will point to the heterogeneity of Muslim women and question the assertion that Muslims are overdetermined by Islam. The role of political economy, class, race, education, and language, amongst other factors, in influencing and shaping women's behaviour, is interrogated.

As a Muslim woman involved in civic organisation, I bring a particular perspective and my story cannot be divorced from this story. This requires me to be reflexive for in some ways I am also the one

¹⁰ Jenkins, Richard. *Social Identity, Social Identity*. London: Routledge, 1996.

¹¹ Lamont, Michèle and Nissim Mizrahi. 'Ordinary people doing extraordinary things: responses to stigmatization in comparative perspective', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35 (3), 2012, 368-69.

¹² See Vahed, Goolam. 'Indian Muslims In South Africa: Continuity, Change and Disjuncture, 1860-2000', *Alternation*, 7 (2), 2000 for a discussion of these transformations.

¹³ Mishra, "'Saving' Muslim women", 2007.

¹⁴ Barlas, Asma. *"Believing Women" in Islam Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'a-n*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.

¹⁵ Roy, Olivier. *The Failure of Political Islam*. Harvard University Press, 1994, 80.

researched and indeed have been researched.¹⁶ In my early twenties, corresponding with the mid-1990s, after I had completed a course in journalism, I decided that I wanted to learn more about Islam. The only avenues that I could access in South Africa for Islamic education were *madrasahs* founded by *ulama* schooled in India and Pakistan, such as the *Darul Uloom*s in Deoband and Jalalabad. Attending their talks, I was implored to cover my face as this was *fardh* (compulsory). I was also told that women could not attend congregational prayers, and so on. Influenced by the *ulama* and the other young women who attended the *madrasahs*, I left my position as a student journalist at *The Mercury*, donned the *niqab*, and stopped watching television, including the news and sport which I had previously followed avidly.

Further change in my life was catalysed by exposure to an international Islamic scholar, a Jamaican who had embraced Islam in 1972. Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips studied Islam intensively at university level in Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom, after which he penned several books. One of these books, *Tafseer: Surah Al-Hujurat*, which is essentially the exegesis of a chapter of the *Qur'an*, marked a turning point for me. Philips expounded on the difference between innovation and religion, and went to great lengths to authenticate sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Greatly inspired, I became obsessed with reading his books, and encountered one, *The Evolution of Fiqh* in which Philips questioned the need for a Muslim to follow a *madhhab*, or school of thought of Islam.¹⁷

When, by accident, I mentioned this work to my teachers, I was told that Philips was a '*salafi*,'¹⁸ and was warned against reading his work. I later left the *madrasah*, and continued my quest to understand 'authentic Islam' through self-learning, a journey which was made easier by the advent of dial-up home Internet access, which brought me into contact with Muslim scholars in the United Kingdom and United States through the medium of Islamic chat rooms. Through these websites, as well as books and lectures that I read passionately, I came to learn of North American scholars

¹⁶ See Goga, Safiyya. "We're all finding places": ILM-SA and middle-class, Muslim women in post-apartheid South Africa', *Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity*, 28 (1), 2014.

¹⁷ There are four main *madhabs* in Islam. These arose in the eighth and ninth centuries and are named after their founders, Abu Hanifah (*Hanafi*), Malik ibn Anas (*Maliki*), Al-Shafi'i (*Shafi'i*), and Ibn Hanbal (*Hanbali*). They are all part of *Sunni* Islam, though there are some differences in detail and practice. Most Muslims believe that one has to adhere strictly to any one of the *madhabs* and cannot interchange even though all constitute *Sunni* Islam. Critics of *madhabs* argue that these scholars were human and fallible and that with all sources of Islam now available, Muslims should arrive at common laws, practices and beliefs.

¹⁸ The Arabic *salaf* means 'forefathers' and refers to the Prophet Muhammad and the succeeding two generations of Muslims, whom *salafis* regard as models for conduct and worship. Most *salafis* call for reliance on the *Qur'an* and *sunnah* but reject adherence to any *madhab*.

like Yasir Qadhi¹⁹ and Muhammad AlShareef,²⁰ and found myself greatly inspired by them, so much so that I travelled to North America to attend seminars they were involved in. I also initiated an organisation, the Institute for Learning and Motivation – South Africa (ILM-SA), which has hosted conferences featuring the likes of Qadhi, and Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss academic, who later also had a profound impact on me. Through this process I developed new ideas and analytical constructs about Islam. This study thus challenges not only Western constructions of Muslim womanhood, but, equally, ideas of gender and the role of women among Muslims.

Literature Review

This study adopts a life history and storytelling approach.²¹ In-depth interviews were used to reconstruct the partial biographies of informants, including their experiences and memories of girlhood and womanhood, as well as their public and civic labour, and the meanings they bring to this labour. The narrative material that was gathered helped to track the broad social changes in the gendered worlds of Muslim women in South Africa's apartheid and post-apartheid (rainbow) periods, eras that coincided with important global doctrinal shifts. Lee believes that stories should have some value for readers. They should, for example, 'teach us how to live our lives, or open our minds to lives very unlike our own.'²² Many who are not Muslim have pre-conceived notions of Muslim women and it is hoped that this study will serve an educative purpose.

At a time when Muslim communities in many parts of the world appear to be 'hunkering down,' this study considers whether and how Muslim women are networked into local, national, regional, and global concerns and groups. There is very little work on Muslim women in South Africa of the kind envisaged here. Most studies deal with such issues as sexuality and reproductive choices, attitudes to contraception, the AIDS pandemic, or conversion to Islam.²³ They focus on limited and specific aspects of the lives of Muslim women. Notable exceptions are the study by Vahed and Waetjen on the Women's Cultural Group, which adopted a life history approach, and a very recent study by Goga on the ILM-

¹⁹ American Yasir Qadhi is a scholar of Pakistani descent, and Dean of Academic e.Affairs at the *AlMaghrib* Institute, based in Memphis, Tennessee.

²⁰ Canadian Muhammad Alshareef founded the *AlMaghrib* Institute. A graduate of the Islamic University of Madinah, he also founded DiscoverU, an Islam-based personal development institute.

²¹ See Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History*. Third Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015 (2002), 14-27; Abrams, Lynn. *Oral History Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 106-129; Lee, Hermoine. *Biography. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 16-25.

²² Lee, *Biography*, 16.

²³ Wahl, Sabina. 'Conversions to Islam: Personal Narratives of White Muslim Women in Durban,' 2013. Unpublished; Davids, Leila 'Positioning Muslim Women: A Feminist Narrative Analysis,' *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa*, 6, 2003; Shaikh, Sa'diyya, Hoel, Nina and Kagee, Ashraf. 'South African Muslim Women: Sexuality, Marriage and Reproductive Choices, Research Report', *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 31, 2011; Goga, "We're all finding places", 2014; Vahed, Goolam and Waetjen, Thembeisa. *Gender, Modernity and Indian Delights: The Women's Cultural Group of Durban, 1954-2010*, Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010; Baderoon G and Green L. 'Small Differences', in *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 38(2), 2012.

SA, which I run. This study adopts a life history approach in order to focus on the *multiple* aspects of the women's lives, including and especially their civic and public engagement.

As such, the study not only contributes to the literature on Muslim women in South Africa, but also to the broader literature on civic engagement. For the purposes of this study, drawing on the 1993 United Nations Development Program Human Development Report, civic engagement 'refers to that process whereby citizens or their representatives are able to engage and influence public processes, in order to achieve civic objectives and goals.... [C]ivic engagement is a process, not an event that closely involves people in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives.'²⁴

Robert Putnam has argued that there is a decline in civic engagement in the contemporary world due to factors such as the increasing participation of women in the labour market, residential mobility and reduced social rootedness in local communities, and more single-person households.²⁵ Wilson counters that labour force participation has the potential to increase civic participation because working women develop skills and contacts that are essential for civic engagement.²⁶ Women are described as key pillars of civic associations, either visibly or in invisible ways, and their involvement is crucial to overall civic participation.²⁷

However, in many situations women face barriers to participation in civic organisations. Gottlieb (2014), for example, found that civic education courses in Mali widened the gender gap when women were denied access and many women reported 'implicit and explicit threats of sanctions from male relatives and village elders' if they got involved in any form of civic activity in the public sphere. African Canadian women avoided running for political office and voting, but were active in local communities and activities. Asian Indian women in Texas participated in religious and civic community associations which provided opportunities to celebrate their religion and culture and thus reinforce their identities as Indians and Americans.²⁸

²⁴ 'Civic Engagement,' UNDP Human Development Index. Available at http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/democraticgovernance/focus_areas/topics_civic_engagement.html. Retrieved 15 March 2015.

²⁵ Putnam, R. 'Bowling alone: America's declining social capital', *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 1995.

²⁶ Wilson, J. 'Volunteering', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 2000.

²⁷ Rotolo, T. and Wilson, J. 'Work histories and voluntary association memberships', *Sociological Forum*, 18, 2003; Martin, D.G. 'Constructing the "neighborhood sphere": Gender and community organizing', *Gender, Place and Culture* 9, 2002; Andersen, R., Curtis, J., and Grabb, E. Trends in civic association activity in four democracies: The special case of women in the United States', *American Sociological Review* 7, 2006; Fincher, R., and Panelli, R. 'Making space: Women's urban and rural activism and the Australian state', *Gender, Place & Culture* 8, 2001.

²⁸ Knight, Michelle, Ramatu Bangura, and Vaughn Watson. '(Re)Framing African Immigrant Women's Civic Leadership: A Case Study of the Role of Families, Schooling and Transnationalism', *The Global Studies Journal*, 4 (4), 2012, 137.

In the South African context, the most illuminating study is that of Shireen Hassim who focuses on women's role during the transition to democracy, showing the ways in which women helped to shape the democratic movement and influence policy, but also the compromises they made as their feminism was moulded by the framework of democratic and nationalist ideologies.²⁹

Among theorists of feminism, the works of people like Ann Laura Stoler, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Latal Mani, amongst others, is illuminating. Feminist anthropologists regard all social relations as gendered and call for an epistemology that favours close collaboration between researcher and researched as a means to empower women. They also favour qualitative methods as the most efficacious way of bringing together researcher and researched and in particular give preference to life history methodology to both give voice to women and locate the structural factors impinging on them. Ann Stoler's (2002) work on the sexual politics of empire is important as she claims that European women in colonies were oppressed by European men while they, in turn, oppressed indigenous peoples. The aim, ultimately, was to impose racial and class distinctions between settlers and indigenous peoples, which reinforces the point that categories like 'woman' are heterogeneous.

The work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty is important. In her various works (see 2003 for example), Mohanty critiques the projection of women in the Third World as a homogenous grouping by academics in the western academy. She argues that the experiences of women in the "south" is diverse and that it depends on place, space, culture, religion and history. This perspective is thus important in alerting us to disaggregate 'women', 'Indian women', even 'Muslim women' according to such axes as race, class, generation, religious tradition, and so on.

Mani (2010, 1998) focuses on the practice of sati (widow burning) and argues that criticism and outlawing of the practice was expedient for the project of colonialism and appropriated by missionaries to raise funds for their work. Colonial powers and missionaries were not really interested in the oppression of women and Mani argues that feminists need to locate such practices in the larger context of women's oppression. Women's agency is important and one should not take the easy route of seeing women as either entirely free (free will being a bourgeois idea) or coerced.

This dissertation probes the level of women's involvement in civic organisations, particularly the kinds of tasks that they undertake, their level of decision-making within these organisations, their agency in a restrictive Muslim community, and the boundaries between the domestic and public spheres.

²⁹ Hassim, Shireen. *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.

Research problems and objectives: key questions

For many, the post-9/11 ‘War on Terror’ seemed to confirm Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the clash between ‘Western’ and ‘Islamic’ civilisations, which cannot co-exist, and that ‘Western’ civilization is under threat from Islam.³⁰ Huntington was responding to Francis Fukuyama who, writing in the aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, argued that the advent of Western liberal democracy marked the endpoint of humanity’s sociocultural evolution and was the final form of government of human beings. Fukuyama wrote that, what we were witnessing was ‘the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.’³¹ The ethnic, cultural, and religious conflicts that have engulfed the world since then, with religious fundamentalism and radical Islam in particular dominating the headlines, suggest that Fukuyama’s thesis was premature and that history is very much alive. One of the consequences of global developments post-9/11 is that the policy of multiculturalism, which respected and even promoted group rights in the countries of Western Europe and Australia from the 1970s, has come under pressure as policymakers believe that such identities threaten national identity. At the same time, these countries have witnessed the rise of Islamophobia. At the heart of this growing fear is the belief that Muslims and their values are incompatible with “Western” values. The compatibility / incompatibility between Islamic and Western “civilisations” is one of the broad issues that will be interrogated in this study. The visibility of Muslim women through donning the *hijab*, for example, makes them especially vulnerable.³²

Another broad issue framing this study is the politicising of Muslim womanhood globally. Western intervention in Muslim countries has in part been rationalised under the guise of ‘gender liberation’ – the voices of Muslim women themselves have been notably absent/drowned within this context. As a Muslim woman working actively in the field of women’s empowerment, I can attest to the fact that there are enormous variations in what Muslim women perceive their roles to be, and how they project these perceptions/interpretations. Monolithic stereotypes distort these variations in Muslim women’s circumstances and status. The causal factors (class, culture, ethnicity, political orientation, and very importantly, Islamic ideological orientation) that determine women’s different situations are often ignored. This may in part be attributed to the fact that Western perceptions of Muslim women are unduly coloured by knowledge of Muslim women in the Middle East, who make up a minority of Muslims globally. This study tests some of the assumptions made about Muslim women and explores how their adherence to supposedly patriarchal Islamic norms challenges assumptions within feminist theory about agency, authority, and human subjectivities.

³⁰ Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

³¹ Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, 1992

³² Contractor, Saria. *Muslim Women in Britain. Demystifying the Muslimah*. London: Routledge, 2012, 5.

As far as the participation of Muslim women in civic organisations is concerned, this study focuses specifically on what drew the women to civic participation; the nature of their participation in terms of the organisations they are / were members of and the activities they are involved in; the stimulus behind civic engagement and public participation; their achievements in this regard; whether civic participation in general is increasing or decreasing among Muslim women, and why, and what we can attribute this to; and the implications of Muslim women's participation in civic organisations for their identities and subjectivities.

This study interrogates the validity of various generalisations about Muslim women. While Islam undoubtedly plays a very important role in the lives of the informants, as it does for most practising Muslim women, rather than regarding the actions and behaviour of these women as determined solely by religion and Islamic law, this study historicises their experiences through a life history approach of some women who are engaged in the civic life of their communities (however widely this may be defined) and in public participation in various ways.

The key questions that this study set out to investigate include:

- How valid are generalisations about Muslim women's lives? Is there a case for presenting a nuanced view through historicising their experiences?
- What educational/life opportunities were available to girls/women when they were growing up and was this different from the opportunities available to boys/men?
- What does being Muslim mean to the women and how has their understanding of Islam, and specific rituals and practices transformed over time?
- Has being a 'Muslim woman' presented any particular obstacles to the women in the various spheres of their lives? If so, how are they dealing with such challenges?
- What kinds of race, class, gender, cultural and class barriers have they faced or face, and how did they/are they challenging these?
- What is the source of their civic engagement and public participation? What, if any, relationship is there between work and civic engagement? Is there anything particularly 'Islamic' about their civic engagement?
- How have the women's subjectivities transformed over time, and what is the relationship between their faith, work and civic engagement?
- As 'Muslim women' what roles are they expected to fulfill in their everyday lives? Have they encountered criticism from within the Muslim community due to their participation in civil society platforms?

Theoretical framework

According to Katherine Bullock, from around the seventeenth century Orientalism was the primary methodology used by Westerners to study Muslims. This methodology tended to 'view Muslims through the prism of religion. "Islam" has been seen as a static, monolithic, backward doctrine that both explains and determines Muslim behaviour.'³³ Christina Ho writes that seeing women as passive victims in need of 'rescuing' by outsiders denies them agency and ignores what may be important to the women themselves. Ho proposes that the social, economic, and political factors influencing gender arrangements in different settings should be analysed in terms of their origins and the role they play instead of attributing women's behaviour to an essentialised Islamic culture which sees women as 'victims' of 'male Islam' or as being liberated due to their conversion to the Western/liberal-secular worldview.³⁴

Saba Mahmood writes that, more recently, liberal so-called 'second wave, Western feminism' has cast Muslim women as 'sisters' by virtue of their patriarchal victimisation. She believes that scholars and activists should find alternative ways of considering gender subjectivity through theory and ethnography.³⁵ Mahmood postulates that practices that appear objectionable from a liberal feminist perspective need to be studied, understood and theorised on their own terms. It is this perspective that informs this research. She believes that academic study should move beyond the judgmental to 'grasp what other notions of criticism, evaluation, and reasoned deliberation operate in the world. This in turn requires opening up a comparative (and dare I say critical?) study of different forms of subjectivity and concomitant disciplines of ethical self-formation.'³⁶ Mahmood implores researchers to focus on the specificity and historicity of Muslim women as Islamic doctrine is open to interpretation and this, together with customs, and economic, political, and social factors, influences women's choices and their treatment in various settings.

There is a rich literature on the relationship between Islam and feminism.³⁷ Some scholars feel that the term does not have utility;³⁸ others see 'Islamic Feminism' as an oxymoron;³⁹ or as incompatible with

³³ Bullock, Katherine. *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil. Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*. Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003. Also Jameelah, Maryam. *Islam and Orientalism*. New Delhi: Adam, 2007.

³⁴ Hafis, Mampad, 'The Liberal (Feminist) Agency and the Discursive Blackout of Pious Muslim Women in Literature: A Reading of Saba Mahmood's Politics of Piety and Leila Aboulela's Select Novels', no date.

³⁵ See Mahmood, Saba. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005.

³⁶ Mahmood, The Politics of Piety, 34.

³⁷ See Contractor, *Muslim Women in Britain*, 94-98 for a general discussion and literature review.

³⁸ Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*, 2002.

³⁹ Haddad, 'Feminism and Islam: The Global Islamic Feminist Movement,' 2009.

Islamic thought;⁴⁰ and a few embrace the term.⁴¹ According to Contractor, there is diversity in Muslim women's struggles as a result of different needs and demands in different contexts. The demands or focus range from 'emancipatory feminist ideals; Islamic theological interpretations; national, ethnic and cultural ontologies; and the individual Muslim woman.'⁴² Islamic feminism is 'not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning.'⁴³

Following from this, the study adopts an empirical approach that includes mainly oral interviews, supplemented by a study of newspapers, websites and other ephemeral publications. What emerges is that the women were not consciously undertaking a crusade against patriarchy or deliberately seeking to start a feminist movement but were, in most cases, doing what they considered to be their 'Islamic duty.'

Intersectionality is also important to this study. This term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw who argued that individuals' gender, skills, class, race, religion, ethnicity and so on interact at various levels rather than acting individually. These intersections must be taken into account by researchers. As Crenshaw puts it, 'Intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you're standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both.'⁴⁴

Research methodology

In their account of the religious lives of women in the South Asian diaspora in the United States, Anjana Narayan and Bandana Purkayastha show that life narratives can correct, on the one hand, Orientalist imagery of subordinated Muslim womanhood and, on the other, fundamentalist prescriptions for traditional ways of being in the world. Personal histories can help to reveal the diversity of lived experience and the way that women 'weave beliefs, choices and practices; the changes they initiate, the opportunities they perceive; and the barriers they encounter.'⁴⁵ Such an approach places women at the centre of a historical account that both challenges and enriches the 'Area Studies' approach to histories of civic life and political change.

Given the area of investigation of this study, and the theoretical perspective that informed it, interviewing and storytelling, which are qualitative research methods, constituted the primary research methods. Sarkar argues that oral history allows 'us to both understand the subjective experience of

⁴⁰ Jameelah, 'The Feminist Movement and the Muslim Woman,' 2009.

⁴¹ Badran, Margot. 'Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1 (1), 2005.

⁴² Contractor, *Muslim Women in Britain*, 98.

⁴³ Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 59; In Contractor, *Muslim Women in Britain*, 99

⁴⁴ Crenshaw Kimberlé, 'Intersectionality: The Double Bind of Race and Gender,' 2004.

⁴⁵ Narayan, A and B Purkayastha. *Living Our Religions: Hindu and Muslim South Asian American Women Narrate their Experiences*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2009.

social change, and bring it to discussions of what is historically significant.⁴⁶ Oral history engages narratives of memory and life history and in this study helped to give voice to the way in which conceptions of tradition and modernity are shaping the public opportunities of Muslim women who are engaged in civic activities. My interaction with the respondents during the research process allowed me to understand how the women act (content) as well as how they experience their actions and comprehend them (meaning).⁴⁷

Qualitative research is not neutral; as the researcher I was able to wield power over the process through my choice of research topic, the way in which I formulated my research questions, and the fact that I decided how and what data was to be collected. During the interviews, I was able to lead the informants with questions, to interrupt and redirect them as I chose, and to use the recorded transcripts in ways that I chose. The informants, in turn, were not entirely powerless; in the first instance they could choose whether or not to participate in the research process as well as what they wished to reveal or withhold. They could use this research to further their own agendas,⁴⁸ although that was not apparent to me.

As Denzin and Lincoln point out, the personal biography of the researcher intervenes in the research process as his / her class, racial, gender, cultural, and linguistic background influences his / her perspective.⁴⁹ This can be problematic since qualitative interpretations are constructed by the researcher who produces the public text. This interpretive practice is both 'artistic and political' as there is no single interpretive truth but 'multiple interpretive communities'.⁵⁰ This means that respondents' testimonies can be used selectively to create a certain narrative, rather than provide a balanced perspective. On the other hand, while the capturing of lived experience, memory, and meaning is subjective, it can offer a deeper perspective of the past.⁵¹ In constructing the informants' lives I made a concerted effort to remain true to the recorded transcript.

Due to my extensive involvement in a civic organisation and as a freelance journalist (which is ethnographic research of a kind), I have an excellent network and did not experience any difficulty in finding informants. I identified a number of individuals, three of whom were reluctant to participate as they did not want any publicity for themselves or their organisations. One of the issues that I had to resolve early in the research process was whether to seek out informants across the race, language,

⁴⁶ Sarkar, Mahua. *Visible histories, disappearing women. Producing Muslim womanhood in late colonial Bengal*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 580.

⁴⁷ Sarkar, 'Visible Histories', 582.

⁴⁸ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 129.

⁴⁹ Denzin, Norman K. and Lincoln, Yvonna S. 'The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research', In Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.) *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. Third Edition. Sage Publications, 28.

⁵⁰ Denzin and Lincoln, 'The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research', 35.

⁵¹ Sarkar, 'Visible Histories,' 2012.

ethnicity, and class divide in order to ensure representivity, or to confine myself to women with some similarities. In the end, I opted for the latter for several reasons. One was that this is one of several studies around the theme of Muslim women and civic organisation, and rather than aiming for representivity I thought it better to focus on women with certain similar characteristics to establish what commonalities and differences there were. These findings could then be compared to other studies.

When I set out to do the study I had in mind around eight interviews and planned to present the material thematically. However, once I began interviewing, I had a change of heart and decided that each story presented a rich and important case study and deserved a separate chapter. I had wanted to interview eight informants, but stopped at five as I found that the interviews were comprehensive and that there was little to be gained from additional interviews. The initial interviews were semi-structured and in-depth and lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. The interviews were transcribed, a time-consuming process, and were used to construct the life stories of informants. Although interviews were analysed through such strategies as thematic analysis, paradigm cases, biographical comparisons, and exemplars,⁵² in the end it was decided not to present the material in a thematic format. While a computer package such as Nvivo would have helped to arrange the material thematically, in view of my extensive journalistic experience I opted to use the tried and trusted method of manually studying and analysing the transcripts.

Once I had written each informant's story, the gaps became obvious. I read and re-read each story and drew up a set of questions for each informant. A second round of interviews and transcription took place. Where informants were not available for a second interview, answers were obtained via e-mail.

Chapter outline

As already noted, two options were initially considered in terms of presenting the material. One was to adopt a thematic approach, given the rich data that was gathered on issues such as attitudes to education, civic participation, family rights, changing gender roles/expectations in the domestic and public spheres; work and economic dependence/ independence; changing interpretations of Islam; political participation; changing roles in the public sphere; and so on. However it was decided to present each life story separately in order to do full justice to the informants' stories and the organisations that they are involved in. The thesis thus consists of an introduction, followed by the stories of five women that are structured in a similar way (childhood, education, exposure to Islam, nature of civic engagement, etc.) and thereafter draws some comparisons and theoretical lessons in the conclusion.

⁵² Benner, P. 'The tradition and skill of interpretive phenomenology in studying health, illness, and caring practices', In P. Benner (Ed.), *Interpretive phenomenology: Embodiment, caring and ethics in health and illness*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994.

Before discussing the life histories, a brief history of Islam is presented in order to contextualise and understand the place of the informants in the broader context.

Islam in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa – brief overview

The majority of Indian Muslims arrived in Natal between 1860 and 1911 as contract indentured workers or free migrants who were known as passengers. Both the indentured and passenger migrants were diverse in terms of ethnicity, religious practices, language, and culture as they were drawn from various parts of India. Passengers were mainly from Gujarat on the west coast of India and included Memons from Porbandar, Surtis from Surat and surrounding districts, Urdu speakers from Randir who came to be known as Miabhais, and Koknees from Konkan. Descendants of indentured Indians came to be known in local parlance as ‘Hydrabadis’ even though they were from all parts of India.⁵³ The Islam of traders centered around mosques, such as the Grey Street and West Street mosques in central Durban, while the Islam of indentured Muslims and their descendants revolved around the *Muharram* festival and other popular practices.

The decades after 1920 were witness to rapid urbanisation and from the 1940s there was an expansion of education. Early Muslim organisations were confined to localised areas, such as the Iqbal Study Group, Orient Islamic Educational Institute, Young Men’s Muslim Association, May Street Muslim Jamaat, and Isipingo Muslim Social Group. The first umbrella Muslim organisation was the Natal Muslim Council (NMC), which was formed in 1943. While Islam was a taken for granted aspect of the lives of most Muslims the decades from the 1950s saw important changes with the emergence of three broad tendencies, which can be termed ‘modernist,’ ‘*Deobandi*’ and ‘*Barelwi*.’ The modernist tradition manifested itself in the shape of the Muslim Youth Movement (formed in 1970) and Muslim Students’ Association (formed in 1974) which drew wide support from students and professionals.⁵⁴ The *Barelwi* tradition drew its main support from the descendants of indentured Muslims while the *Deobandi* tradition was a reformist movement that gathered support from increasing numbers of Muslims from the 1970s and continues to increase its support base.⁵⁵

Institutionally, this tradition was represented by the Jamiatul Ulama Natal. *Deobandi* Islam sought to eliminate popular practices associated with *Muharram* and the visitation of saints’ shrines. Large numbers of Muslims began changing their behaviour in a number of areas, such as women covering their faces and wearing cloaks, annual pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia instead of vacationing in a European

⁵³ Vahed, Goolam and Surendra Bhana. *Crossing Space and Time in the Indian Ocean. Early Indian Traders in Natal. A Biographical Study*. Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2015, 33.

⁵⁴ Tayob, Abdukader. *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa. The Muslim Youth Movement*, Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1995.

⁵⁵ See Vahed, Goolam. ‘Contesting “Orthodoxy”: The Tablighi-Sunni Conflict among South African Muslims in the 1970s and 1980s’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 23 (2), 2003.

capital, banning televisions from their homes; marrying younger and eliminating lavish ceremonies; opting for Islamic finance; and establishing Islamic schools.⁵⁶

What do orthodox Islamic traditions have to say about women and their place in society? The book whose teachings guide all the traditions is the *Bahishti Zewar* (translated as *Heavenly Ornaments*), which was written by *Maulana* Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi (1864-1943), and focuses on religious and social reform, but especially on Islamic conceptions of gender and women's roles, behaviour, and conduct in the family and society. The book strongly endorses education for women, not 'to get employment because knowledge which is compulsory to acquire is not knowledge for a livelihood but knowledge of the *Deen*, knowledge with which man's beliefs, actions, dealings, society, and character are put in order.' It argues that women need religious knowledge because they are 'naturally deficient intellectually, meaning that where there is no intellect and no knowledge then there will be no limit to the shortcomings.'⁵⁷

Maulana Thanawi opposed education that led to women reading 'the different booklets and magazines of their choice' or learning 'History, Geography and English'. All knowledge had to be of a *Deeni* nature. While one could acquire secular knowledge for purposes of work, this did not apply to women since 'the need to earn a livelihood is only experienced by men and not women, the reason being that the responsibility for supporting and providing for them is on the men.' Due to *pardah* women cannot work and 'to teach them these things [secular subjects] is fruitless and a waste of time. In fact, apart from being fruitless, it will also be harmful....'⁵⁸

Maulana Thanawi advocated home study of the first ten parts of *Bahisti Zewar* as sufficient knowledge for girls. He was especially concerned about the quality of teachers. He feared that if the teachers (women) were liberal-minded the girls would lose their *haya* (shame and self-restraint). This would be problematic because of the general 'rule, "when *hayaa*' goes away from you, then do whatever you wish.'" This is 'applicable more to women than men. This is so because men still have *aql* (intellect) as a deterrent, while women have a shortfall of this as well. Therefore, they will not have anything to save them.'⁵⁹

The views of *Maulana* Thanawi are cited here to show what the orthodox *ulama* position was and how, in many ways, the women discussed here had to work their way around this criticism of Muslim women being educated and working. The lives of the women, all born in the 1960s, coincided with a period in

⁵⁶ See Vahed, Goolam. 'Indian Muslims in South Africa' 2000.

⁵⁷ *Bahisti Zewar*. Translated by Islamic Bulletin, 23; See Metcalf, Barbara D. *Perfecting Women. Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's "Bahishti Zewar"*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

⁵⁸ *Bahisti Zewar*. Translated by Islamic Bulletin, 25-26.

⁵⁹ *Bahisti Zewar*. Translated by Islamic Bulletin, 27.

the history of Muslims in South Africa when women had access to mass education for the first time as free education became available to Indians in 1970. This is reflected in the following table:

Table 1: Highest Educational Level attained by Muslim Males and Females in Durban, 1996

Educational Attainment	Male	Female
Matric Only	7,419	6,811
Matric & Certificate	375	148
Matric & Diploma	717	819
Matric & Bachelors degree	710	577
Matric and Bachelors & diploma	74	75
Matric & Bachelors & Honours	57	59
Matric & Masters degree	101	53
Matric & Doctoral degree	85	39
Matric & Other Qualification	402	325
TOTAL	9,940	8,906

Source: Population Census, 1996

In the 1990s, this situation would have been reversed, largely as a result of religious reformism which resulted in many parents no longer deeming it necessary for girls to receive secular education beyond a certain age, if at all. There has been a rapid growth of Muslim schools where girls learn minimal English and Mathematics and thereafter focus on Islamic knowledge.⁶⁰

Against this background, the following five chapters focus on the women who are the subject of this study.

⁶⁰ Vahed, Goolam. 'Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 20 (1), April 2000, 60.

Chapter Two

“Finding me”: Quraysha Ismail Sooliman

Being a Muslim woman for me is an honour in South Africa. The indigenous [Black African] people certainly recognise you, they respect you, and in many ways they are curious to learn more about you.... In many ways I think the Muslim woman identity correlates with the African identity that we revolve around the whole concept of *Ubuntu*. [Being a Muslim woman] has made me, firstly, much more conscious, conscious about the macro and the micro cosmos of the world. So you don't live in a state of selfishness. The liberal identity of everything around 'I,' like individualism ... that definitely does not exist [in Islam]. And so it is a much more holistic approach to your environment, your surroundings. But also I think being a Muslim woman has given me a phenomenal sense of confidence, of well-being, a sense of pride. I could actually say it's given me a sense of pride. I'm proud to be a Muslim woman, whether in South Africa or anywhere else, because I know that it is a religion with immense integrity and value.

– Quraysha Ismail Sooliman

Quraysha Ismail Sooliman is a social activist, academic and journalist based in Pretoria. She graduated with a degree in journalism from the University of Pretoria (UP) in 2011, and thereafter completed an MA in multi-disciplinary human rights in the Faculty of Law at the same university. Quraysha has also held an assistant lecturer position in Political Science at UP. She is married, is a mother to three children, and presents a show entitled 'Finding Me,' on DSTV's (Digital Satellite Television) Islam Television (ITV) channel 347. Quraysha is well known in the Muslim community for her dynamic lectures on television, as well as at various events and conferences. Many admire her passion for Muslim women's rights, including their right to entry to congregational prayer spaces, a practice which is frowned upon in many areas in South Africa. Quraysha's story is interesting and important in showing both her gradual development into a public figure, as well as the formative experiences in her life that, in retrospect, prepared her for her recent roles.

Childhood and family dynamics

Quraysha was born in Potchefstroom in 1968 to Farida Ismail and Ismail Sooliman, a businessman, both of whom belonged to the Memon community. Her parents divorced when she was 18 months old, an unusual step in the conservative Muslim community which regards divorce as taboo, particularly at that time. Her parents agreed that Quraysha's father would raise her, as well as her two older siblings, Imtiaz and Zakeeya as her mother was not financially able to do so.

Farida subsequently moved to Durban. Quraysha's father remarried when she was about three-and-a-half. She lived in Potchefstroom until she was eight, visiting her mother with her siblings at least twice a year during the winter and summer school holidays. She took the separation from her mother during her formative years in her stride. She recalls the time she spent as a child in Potchefstroom with much nostalgic fondness:

It [being brought up in Potchefstroom] was probably the best decision that ever happened because the family structure in Potchefstroom was phenomenal.... My father's sister was a spinster. So she basically took care of us, me, Zakeeya and Imtiaz, like we were her own kids.... So the love and the support and the education, and everything, and of course the fun of childhood, playing with cousins, and you know, in those days you used to play outside, hop scotch, bicycles, and in small towns, you know what the unity was like. So it was incredible, although I missed my mother and I missed her love.

In 1976, the eldest sibling Imtiaz (then 14) decided that he wanted to move to Durban to live with his mother and complete his high school education. Quraysha's father reluctantly agreed. By then their mother's circumstances had changed considerably. She had started working and in 1974 married a medical doctor. As Quraysha puts it, 'she had a proper roof over her head, and she had, you know, an income in terms of food, and so on. But my father always, always supported and paid for our living costs, our education, our clothing, our food, etc.' Six months later, Quraysha and her older sister Zakeeya (then ten) followed. 'Zakeeya and I just decided to chat, this eight year old and this nine year old, and we said "well, we also want to go and stay with Mummy." We told my father. He was devastated [but] he let us go.'

Quraysha describes her Pretoria-born mother as an 'educated,' 'progressive' and 'outgoing Indian woman,' who was ahead of her time. According to one report, Farida's father ran a mobile cinema and would go to all the small Transvaal cinemas to show films. Farida would accompany him and as a result, in her words, 'I fell in love with Hindi music. He also showed Tamil and Telegu films, so that was part of my education too.'⁶¹ This, as we see below, made her a pioneer in Indian radio.

Farida Ismail married in 1960 and moved to Potchefstroom, which, Quraysha points out, was 'the heart of the *Verkrampies* [conservative Afrikaners] of Transvaal.... I mean, it was the capital of the *Verkrampies*, and she was there.' It was at this time that the National Party (NP) government, which had come into power in 1948, was busy implementing its policy of apartheid which

⁶¹ Naicker, Viveka, 'Radio Port Natal's "Kaleidoscope"', *Fiat Lux*, April 1980, 10.

essentially aimed to divide South Africa into various racial groups – African, white, Coloured, and Asian/Indian – in all aspects of their lives.⁶²

Living in a small town placed additional pressure on Indian Muslim women as their every move was monitored by community members. In Quraysha's words, Farida was,

outgoing. She wanted to do things, she used to do radio broadcasts. People, whoever met her, even the Afrikaners, they loved her. She had a shining personality, so they would give her short stints on Radio SABC [South African Broadcasting Corporation] at that time.... There were lots of things that she did, like public speaking...I think she was too "modern" for that era and for that town.

Quraysha speculated that her parents' marriage may have ended due to an underlying "clash of civilisations." 'Maybe she wanted bigger things and you know – can a small town offer something like that?' Clearly, her mother was not content with fulfilling the traditional roles expected of Indian Muslim wives at the time.

Quraysha recalls that when her mother moved to Durban, she began to present short programmes on SABC radio. While she cannot recall the exact details, she does remember that some of the programmes involved giving women beauty tips. In fact, Farida was a pioneer and one of the best known voices in the Indian community. She was a presenter, together with R.B. Ram, Sergie Naidoo, Logan Govender and Y. Chiniah, on Radio Lotus, a commercial station launched on 8 January 1983 which initially targeted the Indian community in the Durban-Pietermaritzburg region. Radio Lotus broadcast for 49 hours per week, having previously (1980 to 1982) broadcast a two-hour programme called 'Kaleidoscope' on Sunday evenings from 9.30 to 11.30 pm.⁶³ Farida Ismail started the 'Kaleidoscope' programme on Radio Port Natal with another well-known local radio and theatre personality, Ketan Lakhani. According to one report, they were so well known that they could not walk in the streets of Durban without being 'accosted.'⁶⁴

As a Muslim woman, Farida Ismail's career was very unusual at that time; indeed, conservative South African Muslim scholars banned Muslim women's participation in an Islamic radio station

⁶² See Zuleikha M. *A treasure trove of memories: A reflection on the experiences of the peoples of Potchefstroom*. Durban: Institute for Black Research, 1996 for an excellent and poignant discussion of apartheid and Group Areas removals in Potchefstroom.

⁶³ Naicker, Viveka. 'Radio Lotus on the Air', *Fiat Lux*, Jan / Feb 1983, 8 (1), 2-3.

⁶⁴ Naicker, 'Radio Port Natal's "Kaleidoscope"', 10.

as recently as the late 1990s.⁶⁵ However, it was perhaps not that unusual as these stories show that gender norms were least prescribed during the 1970s until the mid-1980s and were increasingly tightened thereafter.

According to Quraysha, while divorce is usually acrimonious and rancorous, it helped her and her siblings that their parents enjoyed a relatively pleasant relationship post-divorce.

We had an exceptional upbringing – lots of love and lots of cooperation between the divorced parents. My mother never ever spoke about the divorce, and my father never ever spoke [about it]. It was like a solemn promise between the two of them – I never heard my father say a bad word about my mother. Until she went to her grave I never heard her say a bad word about my father, and they both never said why they divorced.

The paternal aunts that brought up the children ‘maintained this phenomenal relationship with my mother.’ When her mother took ill and was on her deathbed, her father and his family came to Durban and spent ‘Sunday afternoon. Monday, Tuesday, they sat there with my mother.’ They returned to Potchefstroom on Wednesday and almost as soon as they reached home, word reached them that her mother had died and they made their way back to Durban to attend her funeral. Quraysha describes the relationship as ‘something else. It really was something else.’ Perhaps this explains why she and her siblings are well-adjusted and harbour no ill-feelings with regard to their upbringing.

Quraysha was surrounded by and brought up by strong women, which influenced her own development. The paternal aunts in Potchefstroom ‘were just exceptionally loving and giving human beings. What do you need most? Do you need a parent to be around to raise you, to love you, to care for you, to nurture for you? And they were simply just always there.’ Her maternal grandmother was a ‘very smart woman’ while her maternal grandfather was ‘very extroverted ... He was a peoples’ person, so I think my mother got both their personalities.’ Quraysha clearly has very reassuring memories of the past and the influences in her life. This is why she is well-adjusted in her personal and professional life today.

Her mother completed high school as a teenager, and later, at the age of 36, began studying towards a degree in Islamic Studies at what was then known as the University of Durban-Westville

⁶⁵ See <http://mg.co.za/article/1998-02-13-iba-walks-softly-with-radio-islam> and <http://www.fx.org.za/archive/Linked/update/janfebup/radio.htm> for an incident involving community radio station, Radio Islam, being taken to the Gender Commission for refusing to employ women announcers.

(UDW).⁶⁶ She passed away in 1987 during the final year of her studies, at the age of just 42.

Schooling

In Durban, Quraysha enrolled at the Orient Islamic School which she attended from grade two to standard five (grade seven) before transferring to the Durban Indian Girls High School as Orient did not have a high school at that time.⁶⁷ She stayed there for only a year, before being enrolled at Our Lady of Fatima Dominican Convent School in Durban North from which she matriculated. This was another sign of Farida's willingness to go against prevailing norms at a time when Muslim parents were only beginning to send girls to high school, and few contemplated sending their children to a Catholic school.

I was excelling academically at Orient. So she [my mother] moved me.... I was not being recognised in the Indian schools, so my mother moved me to Our Lady of Fatima Convent... I did about two-and-a-half months of standard seven [at Lady of Fatima], yes and the principal called my Mummy and said no, I'm wasting my time in standard seven, they want to promote me. They wanted me to go to standard eight. I said, "No ways Mum, no. I haven't even like, you know, done the maths or science and everything," and my mum said "No, just take it. *Allah* is giving you an opportunity... Whatever will be, will be..."

Quraysha's older sister Zakeeya later also moved to the school, and they were among a handful of Black learners at the school: 'There were no black kids. There were one or two Coloured students, so like, I remember Chantelle. She, no she was a Mauritian. Chantelle was Mauritian. No, it was just me, Zakeeya, it was Shenaaz – I think we were three Indians.' According to her, apartheid did not impact on their relationship with the school's predominantly white population of learners who were 'very very kind.' In fact, Quraysha recalls that she was a favourite of her Afrikaans teacher (whom they called 'Mevrou'), who 'loved' her 'to bits.'

However, Quraysha's high school years were tinged with sadness as her mother died around the time that she had just finished the June examinations in standard nine (grade eleven). Zakeeya was in matric at the time and was preparing for the 'trials,' as the mock examination before the final examination was known. Although the sisters were among a handful of Indians in a White school,

⁶⁶ See Goolam Vahed, 'In the end it was academic: Responses to the establishment of the University College for Indians,' *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 31.1 (2013): 22-44 for a discussion of segregated universities during the apartheid era.

⁶⁷ See Vahed, Goolam and Thembisa Waetjen. *Schooling Muslim in Natal. State, Identity and the Orient Islamic Educational Institute*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015, 320-326 for a discussion on debates about girls in high school and their eventual acceptance in 1985.

and Muslims in a Catholic setting, the support of the staff proved crucial: ‘really, we both would have never finished school had it not been for the teachers and the principal at our school.’

Islamic education and influences

Quraysha cannot recall attending *madrasah* as a child in Potchefstroom. Her first exposure to formal Islamic education took place at Orient Islamic School, where she was taught by two male Islamic scholars. Her recollection of these lessons is favourable and they left a positive impression on her.

It was excellent! The teachers who taught us were very passionate. I remember, it was *Maulana* Khan, and *Maulana* Suliman. They were the teachers in the religious department at that time.... I think they were far better than any *Apas* that you could have, and I don’t remember having *Apas* – I always had male figures teaching me Islam.... What was interesting was, you know we used to read the *Qur’anic* verses, you do the Arabic and you do the English translation, and the history. I think we were just blessed. I never had a negative experience of Islam from them.

Quraysha was also exposed to informal learning of Islamic practices. She recalls that her stepfather, Dr Ismail, was ‘very much inclined towards the *Sufi* way,’ and would regularly take them to *mawlood* gatherings. She recounts the impact of such gatherings on her:

We used to go sing and that was where we got attracted to the, to the *Sufi* way, if I might put it. And I’m still very much a *Sufi* singing person. I mean I love it. I love standing up and making the *salaami*... I love the culture because I felt, just those experiences softened us a lot. Your heart, somehow you felt an inclination to the Prophet. You felt that, you know, he was *your* Prophet. There was an affinity, a bonding.⁶⁸

According to her, love, be it in relation to her family or religion was the foundation upon which her early interactions with Islam were based. Quraysha was fortunate that her experience of religious instruction was positive and she believes that it is probably not one that was widely shared. She said that some of her contemporaries would relate that their early interactions with

⁶⁸ Beginning in the late 1960s / early 1970s there was a schism amongst Muslims between those who carried out such acts as sending salutations to the Prophet and others who regarded these actions as *bid’ah* (innovation) that had to be eradicated. The former came to be known locally as ‘salamis’ and the latter as ‘tablighis’. From the early 1970s to the early 1990s these differences were marked by public altercations of various kinds, though this bitter feuding gave way to accommodation. See Goolam Vahed, “Contesting “Orthodoxy”: The Tablighi-Sunni Conflict among South African Muslims in the 1970s and 1980s,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 23.2, October 2003, 315-336.

Islam affected them negatively because it involved corporal punishment and the imparting of a ‘firestone and brimstone’ understanding of Islam, particularly at *madrasah* level. It is not known how widespread this experience is.

I think what drove the upbringing, and literally I’ll put it in one word, is love. So in every interaction, we found love. So in going to the *meelaads* I found the love of the Prophet, love of the religion, and going to Orient Islamic I found love for what the religious teachers (taught). I remember swotting those *Qur’anic* verses and till late in my life I remembered them. You know, normally you forget things that you learned in school. This year and then the next year. It is like a clean slate, you like let go of that information. But what I learned at Orient Islamic I never forgot. It was solid, because when I went into the convent, as part of the convent timetable you have a compulsory period of religious instruction (RI), where Father comes to teach you Christianity, and I would question him.

Elder brother Imtiaz also influenced Quraysha’s early formulation of her Islamic thinking. She describes him as ‘a very, very dynamic influence in our lives; in a context where “there’s no father figure.”’ Together with other Muslim boys, Imtiaz, who matriculated from Sastri College, started a *halaqah* where they would discuss various aspects related to Islam. Later, they published a magazine called *HISAF* (High School Affairs) and Imtiaz and his peers wrote various articles on issues like science, health, politics and culture. They would approach different businessmen in Durban for sponsorship to print 500 to 800 copies of the magazine which was distributed at high schools in Durban.⁶⁹

Quraysha recalls that Imtiaz’s group congregated at her home in Louise Lane, Durban, where they discussed and prepared the magazine, and that she and her sister Zakeeya were inevitably drawn into the discussions:

That’s where I first started learning about the scientific aspects of the *Qur’an*, because Yusuf Amod, he’s a medical doctor now...that was his passion. So he would talk about the different scientific miracles in the *Qur’an*.... And all the boys were crazy about *Maulana* Ansari, so they would listen to his lectures and deconstruct, and make little comments. So there also we had that [Islamic] experience.

Such engagement with texts contrasted with many Muslim teenagers of that generation whose Islamic learning was limited to rote learning as primary school children attending afternoon

⁶⁹ See Shafiq Morton. *Imtiaz Sooliman and the Gift of the Givers. A Mercy to All*. Cape Town: Bookworld, 2015.

madrasah classes after school.⁷⁰

Quraysha was also influenced by a local scholar of comparative religion, Ahmed Deedat, whose lectures she would attend with her brother and his friends. She says that this taught her about argumentation and debate.⁷¹ With this sound Islamic knowledge, Quraysha would often question the Father who imparted knowledge of Christianity to her class at Lady Fatima, so much so that the school voluntarily excused her from RI classes.

I used to take him on with questions. “So how can you say there’s three if God is one. One is not three. How does three become one?” All those things that Deedat used to say. And Father got irritated with me because I was casting doubt in his class. They called my mother and asked if it was okay if I could be excused from RI class and use it as a free period. I was like “yay,” you know. And so I used to have a free period once a week. And Zakeeya qualified for the free period too when she came subsequently, and I think Shenaaz Motala’s parents then asked if Shenaaz could be excused too.

Quraysha’s mother was an important influence in her life in more ways than just through her work. She followed the Islamic faith, and was passionate about the concept of modesty and simple living. The Prophet Muhammad was reported to have said that modesty was central to Islam. Quraysha points out that many Muslims equate modesty with outward dress code only; in the case of a woman, this means the wearing of the *hijab* which entails covering everything except for the face, hands and feet. However, Farida Ismail attached a broader meaning to the concept of modesty. Quraysha points out that her mother always advised her and her siblings to exercise modesty in ‘everything.’

She was very strong on modesty. She didn’t cover her hair as a public figure but when she was not a public figure she never stepped out of the house without covering her hair...you never found her with short sleeves or anything like that, you know. She was very simple. I tell you that when she died, Fatima, she had approximately five sets of daily wear clothes. Five *kurtas*, you know the Indian *kurtas*, the short *kurtas*, like crimpolene pants? Literally five. She had saris, she loved saris. And she had two or three pairs of shoes and that was it...she used to say “Don’t worry about worldly things and houses and clothes and all of these things. The best thing you can have is

⁷⁰ See Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1998, for a discussion on the influence and impact of the MYM on young Muslims in South Africa during this period

⁷¹ See Goolam Vahed, *Ahmed Deedat. The Man and His Mission*. Durban: IPCI Press, 2013.

memories and education”.

Farida Ismail was also a great believer in travel and in 1981 she took the family on a six-week trip which included the performance of the voluntary Muslim pilgrimage, the *umrah* in Saudi Arabia, as well as visits to India and Pakistan. She also had a special love for the Arabic language which she had picked up during her trips to Saudi Arabia, and encouraged her children to listen to it and recognise its beauty. Quraysha recalls that her mother instilled a love for the Arabic language in them during their 1981 trip, so much so that as a teenager, Quraysha would imagine that one day she would ‘marry an Arab prince, and sail off to this far land and things like that.... I engaged in a very flirtatious relationship with the language’ [laughs].

Farida Ismail also encouraged her children to pay special attention to the meaning of various *Qur’anic* verses:

She would have special favourite verses and she used to have them printed, you know you get the copper plates with them. Always, everywhere, she’d say “Look at this, isn’t this beautiful?” So automatically you were attracted to this language of the Prophet (pbuh), and I also told you we have this affinity and attraction and love for the Prophet (pbuh) through the *mawloods*.

Quraysha’s experience of Islam in Natal was different to that of her paternal family whom she described as ‘spiritual’ in that they performed the five daily Muslim prayers and all other rituals of Islam: ‘they were very genuine souls, if I may put it that way. Good people, [who] generally practice a religion in a good way.’ In contrast, Quraysha was critically engaging with Islam from a young age, discussing aspects of it with her brother and his friends, attending lectures by Ahmed Deedat and *Maulana* Ansari, assimilating her mother’s teachings and advice and projecting a confident sense of who she was as a Muslim in her debates at her RI classes at convent school. She certainly stood apart from most of her contemporaries.

Mother’s death

The loss of her mother ushered an extremely challenging period in Quraysha’s life. At the time, she was in standard nine (grade eleven) and Imtiaz, who newly-married, was in his final year at medical school. She relates that although her mother, the family’s breadwinner, was on her death bed, losing a battle with lung cancer, the landlord who owned the house that they were renting in Louise Lane served them with an eviction notice. Her maternal grandmother stepped in, offering them accommodation in her one-bedroomed flat in Collard Street, and Quraysha and her siblings were in the process of moving when her mother passed away. She vividly recalls the events of that

night:

So that night we were there by her, and it was *Maghrib* [sunset] time. And she said to us, “Now go home, you need to finish packing the boxes and everything and settle yourselves.” And I remember, I was still running up the flat steps and I heard the house phone ringing. And I was the first one to get into the flat and I picked up the phone, and my cousin Nazeema, said “She’s gone, come back.” And so we had to rush back and I remember, we were still moving, because the landlord was horrible, he wanted us out.

Quraysha was devastated by the loss of her mother and struggled to get her life back on track. In fact, the following year, in matric in 1986, she did not even apply to attend university although her family expected that she would study further considering her impressive academic performance throughout her school years. ‘I didn’t even have that desire that I need to do something with my life. I was like just floating, getting through the days...those were dark days,’ she says. Her father eventually convinced her to undertake tertiary studies and she enrolled for a Bachelor of Commerce Law degree at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in 1987. She and three other girls from Durban, also studying at Wits were boarders in the suburb of Mayfair.

However, she says that dark though those times were she walked away with one lesson from the experience which was not to obsess over relationships as per the directive of various *Qur’anic* verses. ‘I was totally devastated. My whole life was my mother. And I lost her.’ Although it is more than three decades since her mother passed away, Quraysha is still affected by her death, as was apparent from the tears that she shed whilst talking about her during our interview.

Marriage

Shortly after she began her tertiary studies, Quraysha met her future husband Rashid Yousuf, and they married in 1987. She moved to Laudium, just outside Pretoria, and discontinued her studies at Wits, but enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English at the University of South Africa (UNISA), graduating in 1992. Quraysha said that her husband also came from a ‘modern’ background, and that neither he nor his parents had any reservations about her studying and working. In fact, he insisted that she continue with her studies and was still supporting her at the time of this study while she pursued her PhD.

Whilst pursuing her undergraduate studies, Quraysha assisted her husband in his curtaining and linen business. She successfully combined multiple roles as a wife, mother, student and businesswoman. She would cook for the family in the morning before 7:00 am, and then accompany her husband to his business with their infant children. She was active in the business,

and she and Rashid raised their three children together without the assistance of a child minder. Although many of their contemporaries began adopting tighter Islamic norms and discouraging girls from studying, Quraysha and Rashid believe that boys and girls have an equal contribution to make. Their eldest daughter Shaakira was awarded a scholarship to undertake a Masters degree in Food Science in Ireland; son Zain is a chemical engineer; and younger daughter Iram is presently in her third year of legal studies at UP.

Islam

Quraysha describes the phase of her life immediately after completing high school as a vacuum as far as Islam was concerned. She admits:

Zakeeya and I ... were always conscious of *Allah* and I don't think we ever lost that consciousness. But in Orient Islamic we wore *hijab*, you know, the uniform. But when we went to the convent we wore the short uniform.... Up to the time when my daughter was nine years old I would say we were still very "modern." When I say modern, like I would wear a swimming costume, not a bikini, but a full costume, and I'd go to Sun City and I would swim and things like that.

Quraysha traces the change in her lifestyle to a sudden, watershed moment. She and her husband, like many Muslims, occasionally visited Sun City and Wild Coast, two resorts famous for their gambling, golf and water sport facilities, which were built during the apartheid era in so-called "independent homelands" and therefore permitted mixed-race audiences, even though gambling is prohibited in Islam.

Once we were there, it was either at Sun City or Wild Coast, and Rashid and I were walking at night and all these kids were sitting outside the door by the casinos waiting for their parents, and he looked at that and he said to me "We cannot raise our children like this." He said, "Tomorrow Quraysha, me and you will be inside and our daughter will be sitting there." And from that day we just stopped. It just stopped, and we never went back. We never ever went, and that, and now that he is so strong [spiritually] we don't go to Monte Casino, we don't go to any place that's associated with a casino, even if it means you walk through just to go to the entertainment.

One reflection of their changing identity is that when their eldest daughter Shaakira was of a school-going age, the couple enrolled her at the Central Islamic School (CIS) which had been set up by Rashid's maternal uncles, who belong to the Carrim family.

When Shaakira was eight years old (grade three), *Maulana* Naseem Mitha, a local Islamic scholar, began teaching at CIS and introduced a *hifdh* programme which was open to both male and female learners. Quraysha cannot recall whether she asked her daughter to enrol in the programme, or whether she decided to do so on her own, but Shaakira joined the programme, and was one of 16 girls who were part of the first cohort of *hafidhaat* at CIS to complete the memorisation of the entire *Qur'an*. While millions of Muslims around the world have memorised the *Qur'an*, as a means of preserving it as well as to develop their spirituality, this practice has traditionally been confined to males, partly because gender norms were a disincentive to women.

Muslim males are presented with numerous opportunities to lead congregational prayers and ensure that they remember the *Qur'an*. This is particularly the case during the Muslim fasting month of *Ramadan* when lengthy congregational *Tarawih* prayers are offered each night at mosques and homes in various communities. These have traditionally been led by the *huffaadh*, boys and men who have memorised the *Qur'an* and who, because of this prayer, are forced to revise their work thoroughly. The overwhelming majority of Muslim jurists hold that women cannot lead a communal prayer of men and women under any circumstances, while a small number believe that women can lead other women in prayer if no male is available. It is a rare occurrence for women *hafidhaat* to lead other women in prayer, especially among Indian Muslims in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, where the majority of Muslims follow the teachings of scholars schooled or linked to *Darul Uloom*s (seminaries) on the sub-continent who strongly forbid or discourage women from leading congregational prayer of any kind.⁷²

Shortly after introducing the *hifdh* programme, *Maulana* Naseem Mitha introduced a *hadith* programme for women and Quraysha was amongst the first to enrol in that class.

He said it's time to educate the females, the mothers. And so he started a *hadith* programme twice a week, or it was three times a week? From 9:00 am to 10:00 am, he would teach us *hadith*. And the first *hadith* was about how revelation came, where the Prophet said it sounded like the ringing of the bell, and Aishah said it was heavy, you know, when his head pressed on her lap. I remember

⁷² The majority of scholars accept that three of the four Sunni Schools of Islamic law, Hanafi, Shafi'i, and Hanbalis, permit a woman to lead other women in prayer, provided that she does not stand in front of the women in the congregation, while the Maliki School prohibits women from leading others in prayer, whether men, women, or a mixed group. See, for example, rule by Shaykh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, 'A Collection of Fatawas on and Legal Opinion on the issue of women leading the prayer,' 16 March 2005. Available at <http://docslide.us/documents/fatwas-and-legal-opinions-on-women-leading-prayers.html>. Retrieved on 10 July 2015. Abou El-Fadl, a professor of Islamic Law at the University of California, Los Angeles, issued a *fatwa* (religious decree) in 2000 in response to a question from the audience, that a woman could lead men in prayer provided the community approved of it and the men were not positioned directly behind the woman Imam. In Hammer, Julianne. *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More Than a Prayer*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2012, 38.

that.... I loved the (Arabic) language, and when *Maulana* Mitha started teaching *hadith* to us, he wanted us to learn the language, so he would break down every word and teach you the *hadith*, and so that was when the first taste started.... He was an excellent teacher...funnily enough, the people who made an impression [in Islamic education] on me were men, at an, at an earlier stage.

This is quite understandable as Islamic knowledge seems to have largely become the domain of men even though the Prophet's wife Aishah was renowned for her knowledge of *ahadith*, and early Islamic history is filled with the names of illustrious female Islamic scholars, many of whom taught men.

Children's attendance at an Islamic school and their involvement in Islamic activities can also result in behavioural change among parents. For example, Quraysha recalls, that while her husband Rashid prayed regularly, this was not always at the mosque and he often 'prayed more at home.' But with Shaakira and then their son Zain doing their *hifdh*, Rashid had to take them to the mosque every morning and was thus compelled to attend congregational prayer. Equally, observing her daughter doing *hifdh* and attending an Islamic school impacted on Quraysha:

One day I just said to myself, "What is this? Your daughter does it every single day, not a complaint. She wears her head scarf, she wears Islamic dress, she goes and learns. Like, what are you up to?" It was like an internal conversation with myself, and then I just decided, well that's it. And so the first step was, before I even had Islamic knowledge, it was, I started to wear the scarf....

In her view, the *hijab* has not served as an obstacle in her civic engagement, but on the contrary has acted as an aide, even during her overseas travels.

Rashid and I love travelling to Arab countries. Rashid hates European countries. He lived for five years in London, so he's just not keen to go back. So we only travel to Arab states for holidays, and to the Far East. And since I started putting on my *hijab*, there was a different respect. Automatic recognition. But obviously we were going to places where Islam was the predominant religion ... but even when I went to Tunisia, and it had just recovered from the Jasmin Revolution, and you know, the people have suffered from a deficit of Islam, and funnily enough here's a South African coming with one black woman, one white and then in the midst of it, he says, "Woman with a *hijab*." Like, you know, you're from South Africa, really? Then I was speaking Arabic to them and they used to come and sit. The Tunisian students would come and sit at the table with me, and I think, in a way, I instilled them to start thinking about Islam, and I instilled them to start thinking about

Palestine, because now I see them on my Facebook and on my Twitter, tweeting and participating on issues of Palestine.

She adds that the *hijab* has also never constituted a problem at local level. However, she admits that this could be because she is comfortable in her own skin and feels confident as a Muslim woman. ‘You must remember, like I was much older when I started varsity. So I was much more confident. So I could, you know, project and, and answer with confidence.’

In 1997, Quraysha undertook the Muslim pilgrimage of *hajj* with her husband, an experience which, she says, heightened her spirituality.

Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam, deemed compulsory once in a life time for every mentally competent, adult male and female who has the financial means and physical ability to undertake its performance. It entails travelling to Saudi Arabia during the Islamic month of *Dhul-Hijjah* (which changes every year in accordance with the Muslim lunar calendar) and observing various religious rituals in the holy city of Mecca and its surroundings, over a period of five days. This includes staying overnight in a tented camp in an area called ‘Mina’ which is situated about five kilometres to the east of Mecca.

Each year two million or more people converge on Mecca from around the world for the performance of *hajj*. One of the distinguishing features of the pilgrimage is that for the greater duration thereof, men are required to shed their everyday clothing in favour of two pieces of cloth, one of which they tie around their waists and the other around their upper bodies. This is intended to encourage equality and eradicate class-based prejudice.

In Quraysha’s case, in that particular year, the *hajj* held even more significance, as 340 pilgrims died in a fire at the Mina tent camp. She clearly recalls that day:

We had just walked to Mina and the fire broke out at the Indian and Pakistani tents. It was chaos. And so the police came and knocked the tents down and that year, you know how people died, were burnt in the fire? And that’s why, after that, it became the fireproof tent story. And then we walked back to Makkah. The next morning we had to walk back (for the remainder of the *hajj* rituals). So I think that challenge also was a wakeup call for me... like death is right here....

Rashid, an avid reader, bought many Islamic books during the trip, which the couple read and discussed, most of them focussing on Islamic history and the life of the Prophet.

In the late 1990s (she doesn't remember when) Quraysha enrolled at *Darul Uloom* Pretoria, an institution specialising in Islamic education for women, which was founded by *Maulana* Farhad Docrat. She speaks positively of the experience and says that Docrat – who taught them from behind a *purdah* – was

...compassionate and polite.... He's not an aggressive teacher, right? He's not dogmatic. He certainly had fixed viewpoints. But he never humiliated you if you differed with him, let me put it that way. He never made you feel that you were less. So I have huge respect for him. For example, he is not pro, advocate of secular education, yet I've gone on to like extra, extra secular education, etcetera, and yet I've studied everything I literally know in terms of my foundation and my roots by him. He was exceptional in *Qur'an* but when it came to *hadith*, there was nobody to touch *Maulana* Asad, his colleague who was in charge of the *madrasah*. *Maulana* Asad taught us *hadith* and sadly passed away on a Friday morning in September 2015. When Asad taught you *hadith*, you felt the Prophet was there sitting with you, and you were doing *hadith*.

The first six months of the institute's curriculum entailed intensive grounding in the Arabic language, after which lessons in other subjects like *tafsir* (exegesis of the *Qur'an*) and *hadith* (saying of the Prophet) were taught. It was during the *hadith* lessons that she first encountered a saying of the Prophet in which he advocated that women attend the *Eid* prayer.

During the latter part of her studies, Quraysha began attending the lectures of various Islamic scholars, such as *Maulana* Suleman Moolla. Even though she disagreed with some of their views, she benefitted from the lectures and says she learnt a lot from them. Her sister Zakeeya, a travel agent, also gave her recorded lectures of overseas Islamic scholars, which she listened to, as she expanded her Islamic horizons.

Quraysha's interest in studying Islam increased when she enrolled at UP to study journalism in 2008 and found herself being the only *hijabi* in most of the lectures she attended. 'I was the only Muslim. It was and is still in many ways a white university. And of course they were propagating Islamophobia in journalism with the lecturers that presented. They only brought in examples they could find, and it so happened to be about Muslims.'

This angered her deeply and wanting to 'set the record straight,' she began what she terms her 'real journey towards wanting know more about Islam'. She started reading articles on the internet as well as listening to and watching lectures by overseas scholars like Tariq Ramadan, Yahya Rhodus and Yasir Qadhi. Perhaps Quraysha summed it up best, during an earlier email interview I

conducted with her for a newspaper article I was researching at the time:

They are symbolic of the ‘wise preacher’ – of individuals who ‘live’ the reality of the modern century as minorities and who identify the virtues and superiority of Islam and then clearly point it out against western failings. They are educated in both secular and Islamic knowledge and hence are able to draw on understandable and comprehensible approaches that encourage 21st Century Muslims by giving them confidence and substance. It’s no longer just about ritual, but about integrity and understanding.

Civic Engagement

Public Speaking

In the early 2000s and towards the latter part of her studies at the *Darul Uloom* Pretoria, Quraysha was invited by the Docrat family to deliver a speech at a function for women to mark the opening of a mosque in Laudium. It was an important moment in her development as a public figure.

I said like, “Sure, why not.” And um, that launched my career ... because everybody was so thrilled by the speech I gave. For the life of me I can’t remember what it was. And then after that the ladies said, “We enjoyed it, won’t you come and talk,” and so that’s how I started. It literally, it launched me, and that’s how I started talking.

After delivering several public lectures at different events, including weddings, in 2007 a group of women asked her to begin a weekly lecture programme which she continued until 2008, whereupon she reduced it to once a month, because she had enrolled at university to study journalism. Quraysha remains an inspirational public speaker, especially for young women, and speaks as an invited guest at various conferences across the country. For example, she has been one of the main guest speakers at the IMS-SA’s annual *Muslimah Today* conference since its inception three years ago, and has also been invited to speak at various events hosted by well-known organisations like Islamic Relief and the Islamic Medical Association. Her topics have ranged from those specific to women like ‘Muslim Women: Balancing our Roles’ to other more general topics like explanations of the last sermon of the Prophet Muhammad.⁷³

With reference to her lectures, one Facebook user writes on Quraysha’s page: ‘How I wish I was there to hear her speak. Her passion and intellect is ever-inspiring! Will there be a broadcast or video

⁷³ <https://www.facebook.com/QISooliman?fref=ts>. Accessed on 8 August 2015

link of this?’⁷⁴ Another writes, ‘Aslkm (peace be upon you) sister quraysha jazakAllah (May Allah Reward you) for your inspiring lectures at the Muslimah today conference may Allah tala (Allah, the Most High) give us next year inshaAllah (if Allah Wills) to see you at the next conference inshaAllah wlsn (and peace) xx.’⁷⁵

Charitable Work

In 2005, Quraysha and other women attended an event hosted by the Caring Women’s Forum (CWF) of Johannesburg, and after being inspired by the experience, launched CWF-Pretoria on May 16 2005. CWF-Pretoria is a registered non-profit organisation, comprising Quraysha and other Muslim women from her community, namely Kulsum Moosa, Zaheera Mahomed, Nazma Tar, Rozana Omar, Feroza Joosub, Fatima Shakoor, Farida Suleman, Hajoo Tayob, Haseena Tayob and Nadia Joosub. All of the women use their own resources to fund the administrative costs attached to running the organisation.

According to CWF-Pretoria member, Zaheera Mahomed, ‘the organisation has built its core values and purpose through the extraction from two dynamic epistemologies, Islam and African philosophy.’ She adds that its work is channelled through a philosophy that incorporates the *Ubuntu/Ummah* based approach. ‘In this regard, the CWF-PTA does whatever it can to assist whomever it can whenever it can. We are realistic in our ambitions, vigilant and prudent in our accountability and diligent in our duties,’ she says.⁷⁶

In order to achieve maximum impact and benefit, CWF-PTA works with other role players when necessary, including businesses, other organisations and other community-based networks. According to Mahomed, the key aims are: upliftment through knowledge and empowerment, bursary allocations, feeding schemes, outreach programmes and social interaction and development.⁷⁷ Its significant achievements have included partnering with Esquire Technologies on Mandela Day to help with the upliftment of underprivileged schools by ‘revamping libraries and planting’; providing annual bursaries to enable students to complete their studies; funding underprivileged school children in order to enable them to access primary and secondary education; empowering widows and single mothers to start home industries; organising talks aimed at uplifting women in the community; hosting events to raise funds for other organisations like the pro-Palestinian Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement, as well as a fund-raising brunch for war-devastated Syria (funds were given to the *Al-Imdaad* Foundation which is working in Syria); co-organising an annual walk for a blanket and

⁷⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/QISooliman?fref=ts>. Accessed on 8 August 2015

⁷⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/QISooliman?fref=ts>. Accessed on 8 August 2015

⁷⁶ E-mail from Zaheera Mahomed; 21 June 2015

⁷⁷ E-mail from Zaheera Mahomed; 21 June 2015

eliminate hunger campaign with Esquire Technologies; working with other organisations in Laudium to distribute 1,500 *Ramadan* food hampers to the needy; organising an annual *Eid* card and gift initiative from which hundreds of underprivileged children benefit; and hosting various other motivational events featuring personalities like the Muslim spiritual singer Zain Bhikha, Tariq Ramadan and American comedian Baba Ali, all of which double up as fund raisers for various charity projects.

Television Programmes

When the Muslim television station ITV was launched, its management approached Quraysha to record her lectures, and subsequently broadcast about 12 programmes featuring her. The station later underwent a complete makeover, and Quraysha has since featured as the presenter of a popular weekly programme entitled 'Finding Me,' in which she focuses on issues of identity:

That was my idea. ITV had contacted me and asked me would I present and at first I said no, I was too overwhelmed and then one day I said to myself, "I've got so much to say." You know? So, I called Farhaad (the CEO of ITV) and I said, "Okay, but the programme is mine. So I do whatever I want to do. This is mine." He asked, "So what's your idea?" I said, "Well, I'm busy discovering myself, so I want to call it 'Finding Me'. How do I establish my identity? How do I learn about myself? So these are the questions that I want to interrogate." I also thought it was a way for me to put across my views using the platform, but of course through interviews with like-minded people. And so he agreed, "as long as you don't insult, humiliate," all of those things.

Among the many topics and guests she has featured are establishing the rights and responsibilities of Muslim women, with Professor Tariq Ramadan; the challenges faced by and successes of Nigerian Muslim women, as well as the impact of cultural practices on women, a discussion with two Nigerian women identified only as 'Sister Fathima' and 'Sister Rofiah'; a discussion with a woman called Zuleikha Shabangu who accepted Islam whilst in exile in Zimbabwe in the eighties; and an exploration of the lives of four women who memorised the *Qur'an*, focusing on aspects like how they incorporate being *hafidhaat* into their everyday lives, career, academia, marriage, etc.

Pro-Palestine Activism

Quraysha developed an interest in the Israeli-Palestinian issue in 2007. Being in an environment where activism, learning and questioning were common she felt obliged to learn more about and interrogate the issue. As a journalism student at UP from 2008, this interest was heightened and she encouraged other students to form a body called the Palestinian Solidary Alliance on campus:

I provide a lot of background support to the youth, and I push them in front because I feel

that they need to take over. But I mean, everybody knows me, so I get involved, um actively. I actively protest, demonstrate, write, and you know my Master's thesis has been on Palestine also, on South Africa's foreign policy on Israel in relation to the Palestinian question.

Gender Activism

In was whilst studying at the *Darul Uloom* Pretoria in the 1990s, during a *hadith* lesson that Quraysha first encountered a saying of the Prophet Muhammad in which he advocated the attendance of women at the congregational prayers held on the morning of both *Eid* festivals. This must have come as a surprise to her, as traditionally, in the South African context, in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng the '*Eidgah*' (mass *Eid* prayers hosted in open spaces like sports fields) has only been open to men, due to the opinion held by and propagated by *ulama* from the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent who deem women's participation as being *makruh* (disliked, second only to *haram*, which is forbidden).⁷⁸ According to the Facebook page, 'Eid Salaah for All':

In January 1995, thirty women ventured into the Middle East and North Africa for the love of learning. We returned with a dose of reality and a passion for community, especially the sense of community that emerges in a communal *Eid salaah*. Since our return we've committed ourselves to initiating and supporting community *Eid salaah* in South Africa. A campaign in Johannesburg in 1996 advocated for women to attend the *Eidgah* hosted by *Masjid-ul-Islam* where the guest of honour was Tata Madiba himself, thus securing women's access to this *Eidgah* venue until today. In 2003 we initiated the first Family *Eidgah* in Durban and this event has also continued until today, becoming part of the landscape of Islam in Durban.⁷⁹

The *Eidgah* in Durban is hosted by an organisation called Taking Islam to the People (TIP) which Rumana Mohamed, one of the 30 abovementioned women belongs to. I recall that in its early stages it faced heavy criticism from conservative elements within the Muslim community. Nonetheless it has grown exponentially (I attend it annually, as does my entire family) and caters for thousands of men and women. In 2009, Quraysha began writing and disseminating (using email and social media platforms like Facebook) a series of articles, under the heading 'Do you know?' which she says were aimed at 'dispelling myths' on the subject of women attending the congregational *Eid Salah*.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ See http://www.askimam.org/public/question_detail/14924 and <http://jamiat.org.za/blog/women-and-the-eid-gah/>

⁷⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/145686092115840/> Accessed on 8 August 2015

⁸⁰ Email from Quraysha Ismail Sooliman, dated 5 February 2011. See also <https://www.facebook.com/notes/174591735887426/>

In one of these articles, she writes:

Regarding the *Eid Salaat*: It *is compulsory (wajib)* for women to attend the *Eid salaat* as per the *hadith* cited in number 5, **but there are conditions to attendance** – the women must be dressed modestly not extravagantly and they must not wear perfume. It is the responsibility of the scholars and *Imaams* to inform women that they must attend, but that they should beware of disobeying the conditions. At the same time the scholars and *Imaams* must admonish the men to respect the rights of women and advise the men that it is obligatory on them to lower their gazes. And it is the responsibility of the men who organise the *Eid salaat* to ensure that safe, separate and adequate facilities are provided for the women – this includes parking space, specific entrances for the ladies where possible, a decent sound-system and a general respect for the females. And females should exhibit similar modesty and humility.

Remember: What the Prophet Muhammad SAW made permissible and commanded, and which the companions practised upon, cannot be made impermissible by the scholars of today, nor can they say that it is not allowed for the women to attend the mosque.

That is going against the teachings of the Prophet SAW.

What the scholars should say is that it is permissible for women to attend the mosque, but that the women must dress modestly and not use perfume: The Prophet SAW said: "If any *woman* attends the *Musjid*, she should not use any perfume" (*Sahih Muslim*).

So why would the Prophet SAW make such a statement if it was prohibited for women to attend the mosque?⁸¹

Fellow gender activist, Safiyyah Surtee who is based at the University of Johannesburg and is equally passionate about the subject of Muslim women came across some of Quraysha's articles and began posting them on Facebook, as well as disseminating them in the form of printed pamphlets: 'We just felt it was time to start telling the truth about the misconceptions and lies that the *ulama* have been spreading. It was instinctive,' she recalled in an interview I conducted with her in 2011. According to Quraysha, 'the real genius and activist here was and still is Safiyyah – she made the topic accessible through all the mediums you suggest above – I was not even on Facebook at that time. Then the articles just went viral and Facebook discussions exploded.'

Various notes on Quraysha's Facebook page focus on the subject of women and *Eid Salah*.⁸²

⁸¹ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/174591735887426/> . Last Accessed on 8 August 2015

⁸² See What is Imaam Abu Hanifa's verdict regarding the Eid salaah for Women? at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/quraysha-ismail-sooliman/what-is-imaam-abu-hanifas-verdict-regarding-the-eid-salaah-for-women/174589832554283>; Eid Salaah Important Facts at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/quraysha-ismail-sooliman/eid-salaah-important-facts/174591735887426>; The Conclusion: Now each has the knowledge to decide at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/174595309220402/>;

Commenting on one of the notes, a woman writes: ‘I found this comprehensive dissertation invaluable. Such extensive research deserves practical application and a shift in the current practice of exclusion. Thank you for sharing.’⁸³ Commenting on another note, another Facebook user, also a woman writes: ‘Wow sister u are extremely passionate and totally correct about this issue. We need to spread the message and prevent the males from using islam for control any longer. Muslim men n women shud b educated regarding this matter in order to facilitate a move from the indian cultural values being applied towards true islam. Jazakallah for the tag.’⁸⁴

Quraysha came under severe attack from various individuals including *Mufti* AK Hoosen a popular member of the *ulama* who presents a questions and answers programme on a radio station called Channel Islam International (CII). In an article entitled, ‘Without a prayer: Eid for Muslim Women in South Africa’, Safiyyah Surtee looks at how Muslim women used the media ‘to further their campaign, as well the counter-attacks launched by a number of Muslim media agencies.’⁸⁵

‘Another significant highlight in the campaign is the contribution by journalist and Islamic scholar Quraysha Sooliman, who wrote extensively about the matter during *Ramadan* using both traditional knowledge and journalistic know-how to educate as many women as possible,’ she writes. ‘She and Farhana Ismail, another community journalist, were catalysts in giving the campaign momentum through their community paper articles, radio and television interviews. For me, these women are Muslim women with voices, loud voices, speaking for themselves. Sooliman, who writes with power and confidence, routinely asks pressing questions in the media about the logic of some of the scholars.’ Surtee goes on to describe some of the attacks directed at Sooliman:

Ismail was on the receiving end of the said *mufti*’s ire when she went live on CII after securing an interview to discuss the matter. Hussein was outraged that she had been allowed to air her views, and immediately went on a rampage, calling all women involved in the matter “the party of Satan.” Another jarring example of public libel is the booklet making its rounds, entitled “A

Reality, Rights and Responsibilities at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/192092417470691/>; Muslim Women should attend the Eid Salaah at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/quraysha-ismail-sooliman/muslim-women-should-attend-the-eid-salaah-by-quraysha-ismail-sooliman/129008410445759/>; Response to Mufti AK’s Answer on the Eid Salaat for Ladies at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/quraysha-ismail-sooliman/response-to-mufti-aks-answer-on-the-eid-salaat-for-ladies/156126734400593/>; Ladies Must Attend the Eid Salaat at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/quraysha-ismail-sooliman/ladies-must-attend-the-eid-salaat/156127167733883/>; Eid Salaah for All – Understanding Realities at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/quraysha-ismail-sooliman/eid-salaah-for-all-understanding-realities/259391807407418/>.

⁸³ See <https://www.facebook.com/notes/174595309220402/>

⁸⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/192092417470691/>

⁸⁵ Surtee, Safiyyah. “Without a prayer: Eid for Muslim Women in South Africa,” 12 October 2010. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmw/2010/10/they-dont-have-a-prayer-eid-for-muslim-women-in-south-africa/> Last accessed: 7 November 2015

Dumb Woman's View and its Refutation." To make matters worse, the booklet is pink! It serves as an attack on Sooliman's work, and repeatedly calls her "dumb," "stupid," "intellectually deficient," "corrupt," and a number of other expletives. The level of engagement is shocking, and speaks of frightened and injured male egos.

However, Quraysha prefers to focus on what she perceives as a positive shift taking place within the South African Muslim community.

There's a shift from worshipping of the scholars to worshipping of Allah, a shift from gullible admiration of *mullahs* to an absolute identification with the Prophet SAW, and a better understanding of Islam as a complete liveable religion applicable to all times and situations and not just a religion of admonishing, but a religion of hope, of rights, of justice, of dignity, of compatibility and creativity – a religion that CAN be lived completely and through which one is able to find absolute contentment and energy.⁸⁶

Sources of inspiration

Quraysha believes that her involvement in social welfare activities was inspired by her upbringing because her mother was always generous and empathetic. She remembers that, during the Muslim fasting month of *Ramadan* lots of beggars would come to the door of their home.

She used to teach us to give, always to give. Like she would notice the homeless on the street and make us aware of it. So when Caring Women's Forum started, like it was just a natural follow-through, and Imtiaz and the HISAF in high school affairs, all of that, part of that academic learning involved social activities. So we used to go out and we used to do things. Always from that tender age, where you recognise those who were below you and you did something. It was just a natural follow-through.

In a poignant note entitled 'A Tribute to Mothers,' published on her Facebook page, she writes:

As my mother lay on her death bed, she addressed each of her children with the appropriate thoughts she carried – as only a mother can. I remember her serene face and comforting advice. My mother was never shy to use terms of endearments and in one of those last moments she gave us perhaps the most sustaining blessing of all- words of encouragement. "Remember, if Allah closes one door, He will open ten others for you." At the time of loss and grief, these words seem far and hollow, but at a time of reflection, they carry solace and glad tidings. For the lesson is clear, Allah is the Beholder of all. If I have Him, I have all. If I trust Him, I will gain all. In one

⁸⁶ Email from Quraysha Ismail Sooliman, 13 March 2012

short reminder, she had summed up the notion of profit and loss. In a few parting words, she had explained how we could achieve success.

The advices of a mother are never out of spite. She carries too much of each child in herself to seek their ruin. Sometimes mothers can be mis-read; sometimes they need our patience... just as we were afforded patience, just as we were tolerated in our wee-years. As I stood in the *saff* tonight, waiting for the Imam to start the next cycle of the *Taraweeh salaah*, I reflected fleetingly on a house that is no more. The bricks may have come down, the walls broken and the roof flattened, but the love, the laughter and the shared insights have made castles of wonder and joy in my existence – and the home has lived on. How is it that a child learns to love *Allah* and his *Rasul*? Surely it is the mother's love that transfers? I remember the beautiful *Eid* mornings when our home would reverberate with the *Burda* and the Malaysian *Zikr*. Little fuss was made of food and clothes, but brilliance in any matter was never overlooked.

Her teachings were simple, short and sweet. They were emboldened by the few copper frames that she kept close to her. As young children we grew up with the verses engraved on those copper frames – '*Hasbun-Allahu - wa ni'mal wakeel*' ('Allah alone is sufficient for us') and '*Nasrun-minnallahi were fathun qareeb*', ('the help and victory from Allah are near') the start of a love and a longing – To know the Arabic language and to learn the *Quraan*. She always said she would not leave us money – for her it was temporary and transient. She chose education and memories. She always said that the two best places to visit and appreciate one's bounties, were the Holy Cities where one could basque in His Mercy, and then to visit India and see the suffering. This, so that we could never forget to be grateful. These journeys were to be life-long lessons.⁸⁷

As much as Quraysha's mother seems to have impacted on her, so too, does she look set to have a similar far-reaching positive impact on many a contemporary Muslim woman who views her as a role model – an epitome of what a confident *Muslimah* should be, knowledgeable about her religion and unwavering in her resolve to propagate truth and justice.

⁸⁷ See <https://www.facebook.com/notes/quraysha-ismail-sooliman/a-tribute-to-the-mothers/152581528088447>

Chapter Three

Faeenza Suleman and the Circle of Care

I try to remember to start each day with a prayer that whatever I do today, *Allah* [God] help me, be pleased with me and help me please You. So it does not matter whether it is to do with work or anything else. I try to apply that concept. Basically we are here [on earth] to serve others. You worship your Creator and you serve others. So that is my guiding force, nothing but!

– Faeenza Suleman

Faeenza Suleman is a social worker by profession. Her participation in community affairs has been entirely voluntary. She currently assists the non-profit organisation (NPO) Baytul-Nur (House of Light) as a counsellor and is also a founding and active member of the Circle of Care Association (COCA), which offers both immediate relief and empowers individuals to become self-sustaining. Faeenza is married to Solly Suleman, himself an active member of various community-based organisations, and the couple are parents to five children, including triplets. As the epigram suggests, faith plays an important part in her civic participation, and as this chapter shows, marriage was also important in her personal growth and development into being an active agent in civic organisations.

Childhood and family dynamics

Faeenza Suleman was born in Durban to Hawa and Alli Mahomed in 1963. However, her mother's uncle and his wife 'unofficially' adopted her. Faeenza isn't sure why they did so, but she has always assumed that it was because they were unable to have children together.⁸⁸ Prior to adopting her, Faeenza's adoptive parents whose names were ironically also Hawa and Alli Mahomed, adopted a boy, Ismail.

Faeenza grew up in Warwick Avenue, Durban, which was then purportedly a predominantly "Indian" area, but one which was fairly mixed racially, with many Coloured and some African families in the area, while the bus terminus, Indian Market and Curries Fountain Sports Stadium also brought large numbers of people to the area. Warwick Avenue was also the site of numerous schools, the Indian technikon, hospitals, churches, Greyville race course, a cinema and the local fire brigade. Furthermore, it was home to legendary political activists and icons such as Billy Nair,

⁸⁸ The author of this dissertation personally knows of various other cases of 'informal,' in-family adoption during the period in which Faeenza Suleman was born and grew up. This was usually an agreement between two couples – one who did not have any children, and a couple who had many. In speaking to older family members it appears that the main reason was one couple not having children, though occasionally, such "adoptions" took place because a couple was finding it difficult to financially support their family.

Phyllis Naidoo, and Dawood Seedat.⁸⁹

Faeza's adoptive father worked as a salesman, whilst her mother was a homemaker. However, her adoptive father passed away when Faeza was just seven and she grew up with her (adoptive) mother and brother. After the death of her father, Faeza's mother became the primary breadwinner, taking in boarders. During the apartheid era, Indians were required to attend "Indian" tertiary institutions and students from other parts of the country undertook tertiary studies at UDW, which was initially based on Salisbury Island and subsequently in Westville, and the M.L. Sultan Technikon which was based in the Warwick Avenue area, close to where Faeza lived.⁹⁰ It was these students who sought places to stay. Faeza also recalls that her mother was financially assisted by a nephew as the income from the boarders was not enough to make ends meet.

Education

Faeza attended the Orient Islamic School due to its physical proximity to her home, from the age of six (in 1969) until standard six. Orient was a special kind of school. It was known as an "integrated" school because it was a secular school that fell under the government's Department of Indian Affairs, but was permitted to teach Islamic Studies during normal school hours. The importance of this for Faeza is discussed below. Another standout feature is that until 1979 girls were only permitted to attend the primary school and had to transfer to the Durban Indian Girls High School thereafter. Faeza was amongst the earliest cohorts of girls accepted into Orient's high school. However, after a year the school abandoned its experiment with girls, though it would again admit girls to high school in 1985.⁹¹

After completing standard six, she transferred to the Durban Indian Girls High School across the road from Orient until grade eleven, when financial considerations led her to decide to leave school to seek employment.

I am not even sure what fees she [my mother] paid or how she paid it. I never quite asked her that. So further in my school life I found that because she was widowed, she had to take in lodgers and that supplemented her income, but also once I hit high school and there were a few more expenses, I felt obligated towards family that helped, so I actually dropped out

⁸⁹ For a history of the development and evolution of this area, see Rosenberg, Len, Goolam Vahed, Aziz Hassim, Sam Moodley and Kogie Singh. *The Making of Place. The Warwick Junction 1870s-1980s*. Durban University of Technology, 2013.

⁹⁰ See Vahed, 'In the end it was academic,' 2013, for an overview of the development of racialised tertiary institutions and the problems that this created for students.

⁹¹ See Vahed and Waetjen, *Schooling Muslim in Natal*, for a history of the Orient School, and integrated schooling in particular. For a discussion of the debates around accepting girls in high school, see pp. 320-327.

of school, and did my matric (grade twelve, school-leaving examination) many years later, as an adult on my own.

Much later, after she had married and was in her early thirties, Faeenza completed her matric via correspondence and then registered for a general Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree, majoring in Psychology and Communication Science, through the correspondence university, UNISA, as she was not sure exactly what she wanted to study:

It was a general BA so in fact I cannot tell you how many courses I did for non-degree purposes which was a bit silly. I should have sought advice because there was no focus. I cannot say I wasted the time. Knowledge is never wasted. I think it gave me a very solid broad base of a lot of different subjects, including media, that are probably all out of date now.

She graduated in 2006; and returned to studying, three years later, completing first year and second year social work modules in a single year, for non-degree purposes. Together with the credits she had accumulated as part of her BA degree, this enabled her to qualify as a social worker. She wants to do her Master's degree but decided to postpone her studies in favour of dedicating her time to her children, and applying her social work knowledge at a practical level. 'I think what was frustrating was to take out books and not being practically involved,' she says.

Faeenza also completed several courses via LifeLine South Africa, eventually becoming a facilitator, counsellor and board member there. LifeLine was initiated in Australia in 1963 as an extension of the pastoral work of a Methodist minister. According to the organisation's South African website the vision was 'that a telephone network will be like a mantle of care covering the whole city.' LifeLine was brought to Cape Town in 1968, and thereafter, various telephonic counselling centres and other services offering support to individuals suffering from emotional distress were initiated around the country. Faeenza's training as a LifeLine counsellor complemented the theoretical knowledge she gained during her academic studies through UNISA.

Islamic influences and development

Faeenza's first exposure to formal Islamic education occurred at Orient, where the basics of the religion were taught to her by mainly female teachers.⁹² Of her Islamic education, she said:

⁹² See Vahed and Waetjen, *Schooling Muslim in Natal*, chapter 6, pp. 232-274 for a discussion of Islamic education at the Orient school.

It was a very solid Islamic education there, and I still remember one so-called *Apa* (literally ‘big sister’ in Urdu, but refers to a female religious teacher) in particular who drummed into us the *Salaat* (formal prayer offered five times daily) and how to read it and the exact positions and the correct technique, and I still find I think of her every time I do the *Salaat*.

However, she does not have positive memories of all her religious teachers and described one of her male Islamic education teachers as ‘extremely harsh.’

If you did not know your *sabaq* (recitation of the *Qur’an*) lesson or anything, you would get a whacking or a shouting, or you would be humiliated in some way. So that stuck with me and I think to a degree, even now, we find that happens in the *madrasahs*. But I do not want to generalise it.

Faeza points out that this was not unusual as corporal punishment was not prohibited or even socially frowned upon when she attended school, although it was rare for girls to be physically punished.

Another aspect of her early Islamic education that Faeza recalls is that lessons took the form of rote learning: ‘it was just going through the motions, because probably at a very young age, I did not think about ... why this or why that. As I grew into senior primary and that, it was different.’ It was the same at home where the family performed their five daily prayers and Faeza ‘did not question what she learned, she just followed.’

According to her, by the time she reached high school in the 1970s, there weren’t any restrictions on females in her family studying, and her decision to leave school was based purely on financial considerations. In fact, she recalls that other young girls in the family studied beyond high school, and were encouraged to do so.

I did want to do something but I did not know what it was. It was just, it was more about getting through every day because I mean, it was more like a hand-to-mouth living, so it was not about expectations – you plod towards whatever you want, but dreaming was not quite on the agenda then.

However, she points out that gender roles amongst the older generations in the community were very clear-cut, with the man being the primary breadwinner, and the woman staying at home: ‘In my family I cannot think of a single woman who worked. It was more the male that worked, and not necessarily a profession, but they worked, be it for somebody else or in business.’ Faeza’s

recollections reflect a broader trend among Indian Muslims in that the generation born in the late 1950s and 1960s was the first to have access to mass education and to enter employment. This was denied to earlier generations and now, it appears, subsequent ones as Islamic reformists are seeking to curb the involvement of Muslim women in the public sphere. As an analogy, my own mother, born in 1949, left school during her standard eight year, and neither of her two sisters (one older, one younger) completed school. Whilst her father was all in favour of educating them, he gave in to pressure from his mother and his brother who were of the view that girls should not study.

Due to the family's financial circumstances, Faeza began working at a branch of Barclays Bank (now First National Bank) in Gardiner Street. The bank had just introduced computerised processing of transactions and their accompanying documents, and her job entailed processing these documents.

In spite of the clearly defined gender roles within her family, Faeza's seeking employment and even joining a bank were not frowned upon, but were regarded as 'an achievement', especially considering that she had to go for an interview before securing employment at the bank. Her generation was the first among Muslim women where work and education became the norm for most women.

Faeza described herself as being 'very modern' as a young adult and qualified this by saying that she 'did not even cover her legs or her arms.... Most of the girls dressed that way in the family.' In part this was because 'the aunt who adopted me was more modern than my biological parents.' "Modern" is used here very loosely to refer to the departure from the traditional dress style of most Muslim women which consisted of a long dress, pants to cover their legs, and an *awni* (a long scarf) loosely draped around their heads, when they left their homes. Few women wore cloaks or covered their faces, which was a post-apartheid phenomenon.

Faeza has developed and transformed her understanding of what being a Muslim means to her. Put simply, it means trying to spend every moment knowing who her creator is and serving her fellow brothers and sisters. She recalls that there was a time when she did not think about Islam and would say, 'Okay this is forbidden, this is allowed' and would 'just follow that ...because it was taught to me.' This has been a journey for her.

Gradually her understanding and practice of Islam became a conscious decision:

I think the role of Islam [in my life] goes back to the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. Trying to live it in a modern world. Trying to apply it to a modern world. My goal is that whatever I do, to step back and think to myself okay, now what is in the *Qur'an*, what is in the *Sunnah*, and

how the prophets ... how did they handle it? And follow that example. So basically live the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*...*in sha Allah* the reward is the attempt, in the journey.

Whilst discussing her Islamic development with Faeenza, I was struck by how much I could relate to her experiences. For me too, being a Muslim woman has entailed undertaking a journey not only of discovery of religious texts, but one of self-discovery and arriving at an understanding of Islam which makes most sense within the context in which I live. This entailed adopting the face veil, then removing it, and leaving the mainstream media only to return to it years later as a contributor to the *Mail & Guardian*, intent on making my voice heard. Like Faeenza, I have moved from following Islam in terms of the rules laid down by local *ulama* (Islamic scholars), which are often heavily shrouded by culture, to a position where I believe that the following of such rules cannot be separated from the spirit of the *Qur'an* and its call for justice and equality.

Like me, Faeenza acknowledges that there is a danger of individuals following the most convenient interpretation of the *Qur'an* to suit their needs at particular moments, but she says that she tries to find a way that is consistent and that makes sense to her in terms of *Qur'anic* injunctions.

Marriage

After working for approximately two years, 19-year-old Faeenza left work in order to marry her cousin “Solly”, a pharmacist. As was the norm for her generation, the marriage was an “arranged” one⁹³, and the couple lived with Solly’s parents in an extended family set up in Merino Heights, Durban. She describes her in-laws as ‘very traditional’ in their ways, and her role at home was

⁹³ In the past, in some cases an arranged marriage entailed the bride and the groom meeting for the first time after their Islamic marriage (*nikah*) was contracted. This is rarely the case in contemporary South African Muslim society, though older informants say that this practice was more common amongst their generations. In most cases in an arranged marriage, the groom is taken to “see” the bride by a mutual acquaintance / family member / marriage broker. Once the families introduce themselves, the prospective bride and groom are given a few minutes to chat. Amongst Muslims, this has come to be known as the “Samoosa Run” since the visiting man and his family has traditionally been served samoosas as a mark of courtesy. Two recent publications focus on Muslim women and marriage. A collection entitled *Riding the Samoosa Express Personal Narratives of Marriage and Beyond*, edited by Zaheera Jina and Hasina Asvat (Cape Town: Modjaji Books (Pty) Ltd, 2015) records the experiences and reflections of the marriage proposal and marriage itself of around 20 South African Muslim women, while Qaanitah Hunter (Johannesburg: Emerald Publications, 2015) also writes of the expectations of marriage among Muslim women and their families in *Diaries of a Gujji Girl*, a work of fiction, which started as a blog and became so popular that it was later published as a hard copy book. If the man is interested in the woman, he would lodge a formal proposal with the bride’s family. Rarely would the woman propose to the man. The bride and her family have the choice of accepting or rejecting the proposal. It is important to note, however, that in terms of Islamic law, the consent of a bride is required, as is indicated by the *hadith* (saying of the Prophet): “Abu Huraira (*Allaah* be pleased with him) reported *Allaah's* Messenger (*sallAllaahu alayhi wa sallam*) as having said: A woman without a husband (or divorced or a widow) must not be married until she is consulted, and a virgin must not be married until her permission is sought. They asked the Prophet of *Allaah* (*sallAllaahu alayhi wa sallam*): How her (virgin's) consent can be solicited? He (the Prophet) said: That she keeps silent.” (<http://www.sahihmuslim.com/sps/smm/sahihmuslim.cfm?scn=dspechaptersfull&BookID=8&ChapterID=548>)

very much that which was expected of a daughter-in-law, which was basically to see to the needs of the family, including cooking for the extended family.

Faeenza found it relatively easy to adapt because although she had grown up in what she describes as a 'more modern family', she was also familiar with the more 'traditional, cultural family where women stay at home.... I knew that environment as well, so it was a bit easier for me in that regard. I had a foot in each camp, as such.' Faeenza knew what would be expected of her and was prepared for her role within the family. According to her, it was expected that the wife would take care of the home and the idea of a woman working after marriage was still frowned upon. However, her husband Solly made a huge difference in her life, she says, as he not only never prevented her from doing anything that she wanted to do, but also encouraged her when it came to education and work: 'He allowed me a lot of freedom. I could come and go as I pleased, it was never an issue. So that made a difference. I did not know anything different.'

Faeenza believes that the fact that Solly had studied away from home in Cape Town, contributed to his 'non-traditional views' on women studying and working. 'I think that made a big difference...because he studied away ... maybe he was exposed to more.' However, he was very traditional in the sense that family was very important to him and as the eldest son he took care of the extended family for a while, 'but it did not mean that he did not see to me, you know? So that was quite easy and because he was educated he valued education.' Solly supported her decision to study: 'There was never a "No" from him.' Faeenza's description of Solly's views on women studying and working as 'non-traditional' must be understood in the context of many younger Muslim women from various backgrounds who face social pressures when they choose to study or work. In fact, as discussed by Faeenza later in this chapter, this is one of the factors contributing to an escalating divorce rate within the Muslim community. Conversely, as I found whilst researching a feature article for the *Mail and Guardian*⁹⁴, for many Muslim women, being educated is an obstacle to getting married, with potential 'suitors' being deterred by educational qualifications, and professions.

In Faeenza's case however, things were different. A year into the marriage, she decided that she wanted to return to work at Barclays Bank, and although this 'didn't go down very well,' with her in-laws 'Solly said fine, so I went back to work for a while, and then I miscarried so then I did give up because I was having problem with my pregnancies.'

⁹⁴ See Fatima Asmal, 'Modern Muslimahs: A step in Mr Right's direction,' *Mail & Guardian*, 5 June 2014. <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-06-05-modern-Guardian, muslimahs-a-step-in-mr-rights-direction>.

The couple have five children. Fathima, born in 1991, is an audiologist; Tasneem, born in 1992, is currently (2015) studying towards an Honours degree in Accounting at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the triplets, Ameera, Muhammad and Taahir, born in 1997, are completing grade 12.

Civic Engagement

Ten years into their marriage, Solly became involved with the Islamic Medical Association (IMA), a non-profit organisation that is actively involved in assisting disadvantaged communities in accessing healthcare. According to its website, the IMA was established in 1980 by Muslim healthcare professionals ‘for the sole purpose of practicing medicine within the rules of the *shari’ah* (Islamic law) and providing healthcare to the underprovided and needy in South Africa.’ It initially provided healthcare services to neglected, primarily underprivileged African communities during the apartheid era.

The IMA did not develop in a vacuum. The emergence of a younger educated class of Muslims in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in the formation of a number of organisations. The Muslim Youth Movement (1970) and Muslim Student Association (1974) were two early organisations that enjoyed support among students and professionals. They were inspired by global events such as the 1973 oil crisis, the Iranian Revolution of 1978, the unresolved Palestinian question, and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, as well as a global drive aimed at the ‘Islamisation of knowledge’. It is in this context that a number of organisations emerged that aimed to bring Islam into people’s daily lives, including the South African National Zakaat Fund (1977), Islamic Dawah Movement (1981), Association of Muslim Accountants and Lawyers (1980) and the IMA.⁹⁵

Today, the IMA continues to service the ‘underprivileged, specifically in rural areas where public healthcare services are still non-existent.’ While it began by providing basic medical care, the IMA has grown exponentially in terms of its membership as well as the number of patients treated, and it currently runs four primary health care clinics, a renal dialysis unit, and cataract extraction and ophthalmic laser projects. Around 70 000 patients are treated annually by IMA members who number around a thousand health professionals countrywide.⁹⁶

Faeza’s civic engagement began when she accompanied Solly to dinners hosted by the organisation. Thereafter, she started assisting him with the IMA projects he was involved in. When the IMA decided to start a telephonic counselling service, she volunteered to man the lines and

⁹⁵ Vahed, ‘Indian Muslims in South Africa: Continuity, Change and Disjuncture,’ 86-87.

⁹⁶ Islamic Medical Association. Available at <http://ima-sa.co.za/about/>. Retrieved on 25 May 2015.

received training (at LifeLine). She also attended courses offered by the IMA on community work and self-development.

In May 2000, Solly and Ebrahim Patel founded the Minara Chamber of Commerce, with the aim of creating synergy between Muslim businesses. A “*Minara*” usually refers to the tall tower at mosques from which the call to prayer is made. It can also be used to make general public pronouncements. Minara seeks to bring its members together to expand business opportunities while honouring Islamic principles. It is officially recognised by the South African government and is formally linked to various Chambers of Commerce in the country.⁹⁷

Faeza assisted Solly and Minara in organising meetings and functions. This enabled her to meet people that she would not otherwise have met, and this exposure along with a university degree, was ‘a massive confidence booster.’ However, after assisting Solly for some time, Faeza felt that she was losing her identity. ‘I needed my own identity and sometimes I just did not want to do it because I felt obliged to do it. So I have learned to say “No, I do not really want to do that”.’ Solly did not mind, she says, because he had not asked her to become involved in the first place. This ‘actually made it more difficult’ when she wanted to take a step back. But now, ‘when he is involved with something I do not necessarily feel I have to participate. I can choose to be part of it or not.’

Faeza ‘came into her own’ when she began attending empowerment courses at the IMA’s Baytul-Nur centre. The IMA established Baytul-Nur (literally “House of Light”) in 1998 as ‘a community upliftment, treatment, counselling and training centre for social and community issues.’ The centre was initially set up in response to the prevalence of substance abuse in the greater Durban area which members of the IMA were witnessing first-hand. Since its formation, Baytul-Nur has expanded its services to deal with other challenges such as domestic violence, marital tension, and HIV and AIDS. Furthermore, Faeza points out that Baytul-Nur aims to be proactive and to this end it provides self-empowerment training in subjects like marriage education, home-based care, capacity building and first aid. Providing affordable counselling is central to Baytul-Nur’s activities, and this is offered to individuals, as well as groups, families and couples (pre- and post-marriage). The organisation has a fully functional volunteer programme – its volunteers play a pivotal role in the activities of the organisation and training is offered to those who are interested in offering their services.⁹⁸

After completing several counselling courses at Baytul-Nur, Faeza volunteered as a telephonic

⁹⁷ Minara Chamber of Commerce. Available at http://www.minara.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=108&Itemid=48. Retrieved on 15 June 2015.

⁹⁸ Baytul-Nur informational flyer

counsellor there. She remains involved in Baytul-Nur as a qualified counsellor, both at the organisation's premises in Sherwood, as well as from her own home in Westville after hours. The counselling includes one-on-one sessions, counselling couples, and family counselling. Faeenza also designed and runs a marriage preparation course for Baytul-Nur, the aim of which is to assist couples to enjoy blissful marriages (according to a Baytul-Nur informational leaflet). She also assists in the coordination and running of functions – all on a voluntary basis.

Faeenza points out that the marriage preparation course and regular marriage counselling sessions are all a reflection of unprecedented levels of divorce and marital tension among Muslims. While Islam strongly discourages divorce, unlike some religions, it does make provision for it. Faeenza cannot think of a specific cause but attributes the increased divorce rate to a raft of factors ranging from the breakdown of family support systems, to a lack of tolerance on the part of young couples, the social acceptance of divorce in the community, and women's financial independence, a point picked up later in this chapter.

Faeenza also offers grief counselling, play therapy, couples therapy and trauma counselling for Baytul-Nur, all in a voluntary capacity.

Circle of Care Association (COCA)

Aside from developing her skills as a counsellor, Faeenza made some like-minded friends at Baytul-Nur and after discussions, around 2006, several of them realised that they had a common vision, skills, and know-how, and decided to band together to form their own organisation rather than be an offshoot of the IMA:

The group that was there formed a tight bond, all with similar interests, who wanted to give back to the community. I think it is almost clichéd now but it is true.... So we decided to go off on our own because we had our own aims and objectives and we wanted to be part of the decision-making of what we do. So obviously, if you have your own organisation you can do that. And once again, it was a learning curve because we started off with about ten of us, and now we are about twenty eight.

The group wanted to serve women and children, and 'decided to focus on those that are infected with HIV.' It was a trial and error process and their aims were 'very broad. Really speaking, we were not quite sure. We were finding our way. But we did it informally. We were not registered at that point and it became more of relief work.'

As the scope and extent of their work increased, they realised that there was a need to formalise

themselves into a legal entity and Faeza and her peers registered their organisation as the Circle of Care Association (COCA) in 2007. She stresses that although this necessitated the creation of positions like a chairperson and vice-chairperson, ‘everyone has decision-making power.’ The COCA has an executive committee, comprising of nine members, and when it is not practical to ask everyone for their opinion, the executive committee is called upon to make decisions which are then put to the group when they meet, ‘and then if everyone is happy we go ahead.’

The name Circle of Care was chosen because when brainstorming this, the founding members agreed that they wanted a name which reflected their Islamic ethos and values, but could simultaneously be understood by anybody. Faeza stresses that the COCA’s membership and services are not restricted to Muslims.

The organisation currently comprises 28 Muslim women ranging in age from 35 to 65. Many are home executives, two are social workers, two are student social workers, one is a counselling psychologist, three are non-practising teachers and one is a qualified fine artist. Whilst all the current members are Muslim women, the COCA is open to people of all backgrounds, and membership, while Muslim is diverse, with some women who wear the *hijab*, as well as those who do not. That all members are Muslim is a reflection of identity changes, particularly in the post-apartheid period where religious, rather than racial, identities are assuming primacy and various denominations among Indians, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian, are tending to organise along religious lines. During apartheid, the state’s racial policies forced Indians to coalesce around racial identities in pursuit of social, economic and political goals.⁹⁹

According to Faeza although she had been involved in community work prior to the formation of the COCA, it has given her an opportunity to apply the knowledge she gained informally over many years in an organised manner and also allowed for genuine decision-making by women. One important change was that there was ‘a sense of responsibility, because now you have to run it legally and professionally and that sort of thing.’ This has helped to develop her organisational and managerial skills.

Whilst studying social work through UNISA, Faeza met a workshop facilitator who was part of an organisation called Community Outreach Centre (COC), which was based in Marianhill, some 30 kilometres west of Durban. Faeza introduced members of her group to the work that COC was

⁹⁹ See Vahed, Goolam. ‘Islam in the Public Sphere in Post-apartheid South Africa: Prospects and Challenges’, *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 27, 2007, for a broader discussion of identity changes.

doing, and as a group they were inspired:

They have drop-in centres for children from child-headed households. In other words, they found that the bigger children were not going to school because they had to look after the little ones. So they had these drop-in centres for the little ones. So the bigger children left the little ones and went off to school and when they came back they had a meal there, their homework was supervised, and then they took the little ones. And it is still running. I am not sure about the number exactly. Whether they have grown or they cut down. So we all went and then we went visiting these different drop-in centres which are situated in homes of people living there. So the women of the community look after the children from child-headed households and they get paid a stipend for that.

Faeza and her friends who were part of the COCA began visiting these centres regularly to lend a helping hand.

The COCA has two arms, relief and empowerment. Its relief work includes the provision of funds for meals at a soup kitchen, provision of bread to a school, and provision of winter clothing to various communities. The organisation's involvement in empowering communities stretches from education to health and includes such things as teaching sewing to an economically disadvantaged community and developing a Montessori course to stimulate children at under-resourced crèches and the drop-in centres at Marianhill, as well as providing the material and resources to implement these courses, and training caregivers to execute these programmes. Faeza explains how she got involved in starting the crèches:

The one project that was very close to my heart was these drop-in centres. We found that when we went there the little ones that were left were not stimulated and I think that is the common problem. Since then we have been to many crèches, for refugees, children of refugees. A crèche is just a place to keep your child while you go off to work. It was very often single-parent households. They just need a safe place to keep their child because they need to get to work. So the child is kept in that environment and just fed. That is enough.

The COCA has also built a crèche alongside an IMA clinic in Malukazi, Isipingo, which services a socio-economically disadvantaged black community; and runs a literacy programme at an under-resourced school in Clareville, Clare Estate, where COCA members and volunteers assist children with their reading.

Sources of Inspiration: the role of Islam

Aside from drawing inspiration from her religious beliefs, several individuals have inspired Faeenza. She specifically referred to three people. One was Anne Tuohy, facilitator at LifeLine South Africa during Faeenza's first course there. Although Anne was in her seventies at the time, her 'empathy, humility and grace' greatly inspired Faeenza who recalls that 'her expert facilitation of an excellent personal growth course gave me the space to discover myself.' Faeenza's late adoptive mother also continues to influence her: 'Being a mum myself, I realise how difficult it must have been for her to raise two kids. She did it with patience and fortitude.' Hajra Moola, a Durban-based community worker who is heavily involved in community upliftment independent of any organisation, has also inspired her because 'to this day she quietly and humbly goes about her community work'.

According to Faeenza, 'these three have taught me to strive to do things only for Pleasure of *Allah* – STRIVE being the operative word because I question my intention every day. It's so easy to slip over the edge to the slippery slope of serving the ego instead of serving the other.' Islam forms an important part of Faeenza's life and that of the organisations she belongs to.

Although membership is open to all, the ethos of the COCA is Islamic in the sense that the group tries to implement the teachings of the religion, such as time management, respecting one another, speaking one at a time, making and abiding by decisions, and by attempting to be honest, dependable, reliable and responsible. While most of these values are common across religions, COCA meetings also start with an Islamic prayer. Faeenza stresses that whilst members of the COCA do perform their mandatory prayers if these coincide with their activities, their intention is not to punt their religion: 'If we do have to read, I would rather we did it quietly to ourselves. We do not go there and start with massive prayers, nothing of that sort. We are respectful of that.'

The concept of humility is central to Islamic teachings and a core quality that Faeenza embraces. In one of many *ahadith* and *Qur'anic* verses on the subject, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: **'Verily, *Allah* has revealed to me that you must be humble towards one another, so that no one oppresses another or boasts to another.'** Unsurprisingly then, Faeenza refuses to take credit for assisting people to resolve their problems, and constantly evaluates her own reasons for being involved in community upliftment.

I cannot say I assisted. I think I just facilitated. Sometimes people get stuck and they just need someone there to clarify their thoughts, so that is all I have done. So I do not know how much of credit I can take, because people have the innate ability to resolve their own issues. So I think I have helped people just clarify their own thoughts and move along.

From her involvement in civic work, Faeza observes that ‘one thing about community work – the more you do out there the more *you* gain.’ She argues that, ultimately, involvement in civic organisations is about an individual’s intentions, which should be to serve a higher good and one’s fellow brings, and the outcome should be judged by what God thinks of one’s contribution rather than how others view you: ‘It does not matter what others think of me, but if your intention is clean I think people also sense that eventually. And if they do not, tough.’ She adds that this is related to the concept of *niyyah* or intention in Islam and is something which she is constantly debating:

You have to be very careful of your intention when you are doing community work. If you want the reward for it, make the intention, “Yes, I am doing this for You [God], give me the reward”. Otherwise you are just doing it for self-satisfaction and there is a difference there.... You have to be careful and often make that intention. But then you feel good when you see something you have started bearing fruit. So you know, you feel good and the ego plays a very big part. You have to be very careful in community work....

Civic participation has been highly rewarding for Faeza who believes that she has gained much more than she has given. With regard to counselling, she has learnt that while it is ‘nice to help people you can only facilitate the helping process. They do it themselves really. The way people tick amazes me, how people can be so alike and so different, where you can have the same conversation with two of them that perceive it so differently. It is about the mind and the person, really.’ Moreover, as a result of counselling individuals and visiting communities in Marianhill and other places, she has learnt how ‘communities function, how closed they can be, what affects them. It is amazing. It absolutely fascinates me.’

Changing Muslim society: some reflections based on civic engagement

Faeza believes that the number of Muslim women engaged in civic participation is increasing ‘like crazy. There are a whole lot of them doing it.... [This trend] may get busier down the line before it changes.’ She believes that this is because ‘women are more exposed to things... If I count the number of women I know personally who are doing something or the other, it is amazing how much they are doing.’ In my capacity as a journalist as well as director of a non-profit organisation, I am frequently approached by Muslim women who want to make a positive difference in society – either through donations to NPOs or through personal involvement in such organisations. When the organisation I direct requires food or clothing for the socio-economically disadvantaged, or funds to enable someone to study, appeals are put out via social media platforms such as Facebook and Whatsapp and the largest response is from Muslim women who are always ready to donate or to get physically involved. As a journalist I meet many Muslim women who

are involved in either formal or informal charity groups.

Faeza observes that increased involvement in civic engagement is visible not only amongst women whose children are grown up and who now have the time for such activities, but also amongst mothers of school-going children. 'It is even the younger women. Some of the women juggle their roles, you know, the school rounds ... you have to see to your family first, right? They juggle it. I think it is more a case of just being aware of what is happening around them.'

She describes this as a positive trend for several reasons:

Firstly, in Islam the duty of the individual is to help one's fellow Muslim brother and sister, so it is their duty to become involved. Number two, they have very much come into their own. The Muslim woman might become an individual in her right, because you cannot tell me doing this does not empower, right? Also looking at the country we are living in, from a political perspective, we are such a minority. [As Muslims] we need to ultimately please the creator. There is a bit of a problem there because now you are also doing it to be safe in your country. We have to try and make sense of that because if we do not wake up and make ourselves heard and be visible, it is going to be a problem for us in this country.

Faeza makes several important points here and the last one in particular is poignant. She warns that as a minority in South Africa, both as Muslim and as Indians, it is important for Muslims to embrace the wider society and not be seen as a self-obsessed enclave. South Africa has a history of racial tension between Africans and Indians, including explosive riots in 1949 and 1985.¹⁰⁰ While Faeza was speaking long before the xenophobic attacks of April 2015 and the defacement of various statues, including that of Mohandas K. Gandhi, there is a clear signal of the possible consequences of not engaging with the wider society.¹⁰¹ In addition, Muslims in many parts of the

¹⁰⁰ During the January 1949 riots, the official loss of life and property was as follows: deaths: 142 (87 Africans, 50 Indians, 1 white and 4 others); injured: 1 087 (541 Africans, 503 Indians, 11 Coloureds and 32 whites; 58 of the injured died); buildings destroyed: 1 factory, 58 stores and 247 dwellings; buildings damaged: 2 factories, 652 stores and 1 285 dwellings. See Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *Monty Naicker. Between Reason and Treason*, (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter, 2010), chapter 8, pp. 173-205, for a discussion of the causes, course and consequences of the 1949 riots. In August 1985 hundreds of Africans attacked the Gandhi Settlement in Inanda, which was defended by Indian vigilantes with shotguns. The four days of riots led to at least 55 deaths. See Heather Hughes, 'Violence in Inanda, August 1985', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 13 (3), pp. 331-354 for a discussion of the 1985 riots.

¹⁰¹ See Pillay, 'Four reasons Gandhi's statue being defaced doesn't bother me,' *Mail & Guardian*, 15 April 2015. Pillay writes: 'Gandhi's most harmful acts were his sentiments expressed about black South Africans while campaigning for Indian rights, and the fact that he did not join in a unified struggle with the country's majority.... Gandhi said some spectacularly awful things about black South Africans....' While Pillay believes that the fact that Gandhi 'is being criticised for doing so says little about my identity or me,' the reality is that many South Africans of Indian descent feel guilty as a community as they believe that their attitudes about race are under scrutiny. Many believe that the xenophobic attitudes of South Africans towards foreign Africans, many believe, are a foretaste of what lies in store for them. An organisation calling itself the Mazibuye African Forum (MAF) has been formed to pursue African rights and has peddled strong anti-Indian rhetoric.

world post-9/11 also face the problem of Islamophobia. To date, this has not been an issue in South Africa but with the threat of Nigeria's Boko Haram and Somalia's Al Shabbab coming closer to home, and the activities of ISIS / ISIL or simply the Islamic State in the Middle East, many Muslims fear that this situation could change rapidly.

The other point made by Faeza concerns Muslim women's empowerment through their involvement in civic organisations. She points to how members of the COCA have grown on a personal level as a result of their involvement in community work:

I can see they became more confident, more able to voice their opinions, more aware of what is happening around them. Most of them are more aware of the power of working in a group and also the challenges of working in a group...and you become more tolerant and you learn so much more.

In Faeza's view, this empowerment reflects a wider transformation of the roles of men and women in the Muslim community, which have changed significantly during the course of her life: 'thinking of then and now, there is a very big difference. More women are studying and working and because, as part of my job, I am a social worker, I do marriage counselling, I am finding more and more that the woman is very independent financially.' The result is that 'roles are very blurred, and this can lead to problems.' While not advocating for a return to the time when men had financial control over women, she does note that in the past

... the roles were so clear cut.... So, the tradition also came through where the male is more dominant and the woman stayed at home and cooked and cleaned. The roles were clear cut.... It was simpler especially if the woman was happy with that role. If you are happy with that role there is nothing wrong with it. I am not saying it is acceptable, for me it would not be. I would want every opportunity as a female. But right now it is becoming very complicated. With the last five couples I counselled, the woman was earning as much or more than her husband and was equally educated or better educated, and thus leading to problems because the roles are so blurred. Each member of the marriage is trying to navigate his or her way through the marriage and it is very complicated.

She also points to other changes that are contributing to more marital problems and a higher divorce rate. In the past, many women married young and almost immediately became mothers. 'That maybe fettered further working and education but now lots of girls are getting married whilst they are also studying. They get married because they more often than not meet someone on their own. It is not like a formal proposal (arranged marriage).' Faeza's point is that with "dating" or

“courting” regarded as taboo in Islam, as soon as young Muslims meet prospective marriage partners, they marry in order not to transgress this Islamic prohibition and continue with their studies, delaying motherhood in the process. The pressures of studies, a lack of awareness of the responsibilities that come with marriage and other factors often create stress and tension which lead to marital breakdown.

The media, social media, cell phones, and the Internet also influence gender roles: ‘I do not know whether it can be called progress or not – depending on the scenario we look at nowadays, but that is what is impacting because the youth are questioning tradition now because they are exposed to more via the media.’ Here, she specifically had in mind the traditional expectations of wives in Muslim homes.

Faeenza also points to the end of apartheid and the ushering in of non-racial democracy in 1994, which coincided with globalisation and rapid technological change as factors in changing Muslim identities. The new society has resulted in young people being ‘exposed to more. We live anywhere and everywhere. So we see other cultures and may or may not be influenced by them but we are aware of what is happening, so the youngsters question more, and rightly so.’ Faeenza’s view is that past ‘traditional roles of men working and women staying at home, were the result of a mixture of Indian culture and the Islamic faith. Only recently you can see ... we are separating culture from religion. I think it was very much cultural.’

A few months after interviewing Faeenza, I was invited to her home for *iftar* (breaking fast) during the fasting month of *Ramadan*. The purpose of my visit was to give a talk to a group of high school learners who belong to the Westville Girls High School Muslim Students Association (MSA); each year the MSA organises a group *iftar*, and this year Faeenza’s daughter was hosting it; an indication perhaps that although still in school, she is following in the footsteps of her mother and father (their sons are also actively involved in their high school’s MSA).

As a woman who is herself involved in civic engagement, although a good few years younger than Faeenza, I have always felt very inspired by her, both during my brief chats with her at various events, as well as by the interviews with her. But I was perhaps most inspired as I stood in her home, chatting to her in the kitchen and watching her fry samoosas, interacting with her husband, and her five children. When it was time to pray, the entire family made their way to the living room. One of the sons sounded out the *adhan* (call to prayer) and the other led the prayer, whilst Faeenza, Solly and their daughters followed. Here I saw in action the role that faith plays in the life of Faeenza and her family. Returning to the epigram, it is the bedrock of who she is and certainly inspires her engagement in civil society as well as the kinds of projects she is involved in. Faeenza

sees no contradiction in her involvement in the public sphere and her Islamic beliefs.

Chapter Four

“Against All Odds”: Shakira Mohamed Cassim

I feel the intelligence I have, the ability I have, the resources I have, the potential I have, it would be a sign of ingratitude if I didn't excel myself to the utmost to show my Creator when I go back (to Him) “this is what I have done with my life.” I think it was one of the motivational speakers who said that most of the potential is in the grave because most people die with all their potential so when I go back to meet my Lord I must tell Him “you gave me so much potential and I am coming to you empty; I have used it all up.”

– Shakira Cassim

Shakira Mohamed Cassim is a paediatrician based in Durban. A mother of four, she has also formally studied various aspects of HIV and AIDS and holds a Master's degree in Public Health from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She is a well-known figure in the Muslim community, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal where she has been actively involved in promoting health awareness and other forms of health education, both in her individual capacity, as well as via the Islamic Medical Association (IMA). Shakira was the first female chairperson of the IMA's KZN branch. Her story is significant in that it shows how a Muslim woman consciously decided to carve a space for herself in a male-dominated sphere, and succeeded in doing so, in spite of immense challenges, with an adequate support system coupled with a deep sense of faith.

Birth and family background

Shakira Cassim was born in 1962, in her mother Tahera's hometown of Pietermaritzburg, where her maternal grandfather Moosa Badrudin ran a small retail store. According to Tahera,¹⁰² Moosa was born in Umlaas Road, Pietermaritzburg on June 6 1910 (he passed away in 1963).

Tahera recalls that Shakira's maternal grandmother Zainub Sabdar Saheb was born in 1918 and passed away in 1991. Zainub's father came to South Africa as a scribe. Her mother was a *dhai* (traditional midwife). Zainub herself did not attend school, but according to Tahera, she did go to *madrasah* and was a highly accomplished seamstress who was very 'clever,' as

¹⁰² Shakira referred some of the questions I asked her to her mother, who is still alive, and sent me the latter's recollections in an email.

well as adept in baking and cooking. She was also a businesswoman, assisting her husband in his business by sewing clothes for customers.

Moosa and his wife had 11 children, as a result of which the Badrudin family is a large one. According to Shakira, they are a well-known family, many of whom have specialised in various professions including economics and medicine: ‘Unfortunately we haven’t kept in touch with the cousins of my mother, but just in my mother’s family, my cousins ... there are quite a few doctors, lawyers, one is in a publishing house.’

Although it was uncommon for girls to be educated further than primary school, Tahera’s eldest sister, Zaiboon Nisa trained as a teacher (b1936 – d2015) at Springfield College in 1956/57. Moosa and Zainub’s second daughter, Sheriffa (b1938) left school in standard eight, and studied dressmaking. Interestingly the third daughter, Safura (b1940 – d1974) studied medicine at Happy Valley in Wentworth for two years (1959-1960), leaving when she married Goolam Jogiat. She later became a Biology, Mathematics and Afrikaans teacher. According to Shakira, their daughter Amina Jogiat was the first Indian matriculant to achieve six distinctions.

Shakira’s mother, Tahera was born in 1942. She left school in standard eight due to financial considerations and assisted her father in the bakery despite the fact that she was academically inclined and extremely intelligent.

I think once the eldest went to university and the second one went and subsequently I think they used up all the money that the family had and then the rest of the sisters were married very early and then towards the end there were quite a few, the last one was allowed to go to study teaching but she unfortunately passed away at the age of 21. But my cousins (their daughters and their sons) – their parents really made sure that they were educated.

The fact that some of the Badrudin girls were allowed to study and subsequently work, even though both were uncommon during that period, could be attributed to the fact that Moosa was ‘very learned Islamically’ and read extensively. His interest in the news (he frequently read newspapers) brought a constant stream of people into his shop wanting to discuss issues like the politics of Pakistan and India’s independence. Based on the recollections of the elders in her family, Shakira believes that her grandfather was ‘liberal’ in his thinking. According to Tahera, Moosa was well-versed in English, Urdu and Farsee, and often delivered lectures at the mosque.

Shakira's grandmother was also 'progressive'. Even after Moosa passed away and when finances were presumably better, her younger daughters were allowed to study and work; one studied nursing and the other worked as a laboratory assistant. However, as noted, Tahera (who was the fourth sister), and Sherrifa (the third) did not study due to financial considerations, and were married on the same day, at the age of 17 and 19, respectively.

Shakira does not think her mother was resentful of the fact that she never got to study. She continuously educated herself by reading a lot of books, as well as by watching documentaries and reading newspapers, and to date, her memory continues to impress those she interacts with.

Shakira's father, Cassim Dildar hailed from Clairwood, where his father Ismail, was a very well-known businessman who ran the Kismet Bakery. According to her, Cassim was one of the early founding members of the South Coast Madressah School in 1944. In fact, she says that the first meeting at which the establishment of an Islamic school was discussed was held at his bakery.

Cassim's siblings did not study at tertiary level; many joined their father at the bakery, but after he passed away, the business disintegrated, as was typical of many Indian businesses, and the brothers went their separate ways. Thereafter, Cassim – who married Shakira's mother at the age of 21 – worked as a truck driver for the Coca Cola soft drinks company, before eventually going into the asphaltting business, making driveways, a skill he learnt from his elder brother.

Although he did not receive a formal education, Cassim ensured that those of his children who wanted to study did so. Shakira's elder brother Khalil, a physician is a sub-specialist pulmonologist in Australia. Her younger sister Nafiza, a nurse, is a learning centre manager of the nursing college at Entabeni Hospital, whilst Salim is a businessman, Aslam a pharmacist, and Feroz assists Aslam in his pharmacy.

Childhood

When Shakira was about two or three years old, her father left the family home in Clairwood, where they were part of an extended family set up, together with his wife and three children.

At first they lived in Merebank in an outbuilding, during which time she became very ill with diphtheria against which she had not been immunised. She ended up in hospital and almost lost her life, which is why – she says – she is incredibly passionate about educating people about the importance of immunisation. After a brief stay in Merebank, the family moved to

Clairwood, where they lived in a ‘dull, crowded building with not much electricity, outside which there was a primus (paraffin) stove.’

Thereafter her father rented, and later purchased a semi-detached, two-bedroom house in Merebank, in what was known as the Navy area, which in terms of the area’s hierarchical structure, was considered as being ‘lower class.’ This area in South Durban also has a long history of environmental problems due to the presence of an oil refinery.

Schooling

In Clairwood, Shakira attended South Coast Madressah School, where she completed classes one and two, an experience she thoroughly enjoyed because many of her cousins were also there due to Ismail Dildar’s link to the school. She has fond memories of that period of her life.

Once, she had to write a composition so her mother helped her write about the Taj Mahal:

King Shah Jahan was the person who built it in memory of his wife and I know my mother wrote it for me and in class one, I learnt all the words and I could spell them and the teacher wouldn’t believe that I wrote it so he told me “okay write it” so I wrote it down from memory not telling him that my mother wrote it for me. Years later, which was last year [2014] when I took my mum and them for the first time to India it was very nice for me to tell her “you know what – you wrote that essay for me when I was in class one.”

Shakira used this example to illustrate the fact that while her family was not materially very well off during her childhood, she and her siblings enjoyed the warmth and support of their parents.

Shakira has an IQ of 139 which essentially means that she’s a genius. She excelled at school from the very beginning, and the second aspect of South Coast Madressa School which she recalls is that one of her academic “rivals” was Altaf Hussain the current principal of the school, whose father taught at the school at the time.

School sports days were special because her mother and aunt Sherrifa would make her and her cousins special outfits.

My aunty was the artist – she would make very special costumes and they all had the

gift with sewing, so special costumes, and they spent hours the one day making the costumes and it rained and the costumes were in this crepe paper and they all had the colour dripping down [laughs].

Another occasion that she clearly recalls was Republic Day celebrations, which were held at the end of May each year. The then white minority Afrikaner NP government was not happy that British Queen Elizabeth was head of the Union of South Africa and declared South Africa a republic on 31 May 1961, ending this link with the British. Shakira recalls in particular what she thinks was the 1971 commemoration in which her father's sister who was at Clairwood Girls High participated. This was a major celebration in that it marked the tenth year of the declaration of the Republic. Republic Day was celebrated each year in schools across the country to inculcate loyalty to the South African state, but this ploy failed as students became increasingly radicalised during the 1970s.

When the family moved to Merebank, Shakira began schooling there, first at Alipor Road then at Merebank Primary School. She recalls that there were not many Muslim families in the area or at the schools she attended.

Early exposure to Islam

According to Shakira, although her family was religious, they were not very strict about the performance of the five daily prayers.

Neither her mother, nor her aunts, and many other Muslim women in the neighbourhood wore the *hijab*, although they all dressed modestly. Normal dress comprised of dress and *ijaar* (pants), with some wearing a loosely tied *awni* (long, rectangular scarf) around their necks. She recalls that some of her more “modern” cousins wore skirts without pants, but that she herself always wore a dress and pants (without a scarf).

Bollywood films were a trend and her aunts and uncles would regularly go to the cinema to watch the famous actors and actresses of the time, such as Amitabh Bachan and Hema Malini in action – this was considered a ‘big event’ (see Jagarnath 2004; Ebrahim 2008).

Shakira recalls that her basic Islamic education – the Arabic alphabet, and practical aspects of the religion, like how to perform ablutions – was given to her by male and female teachers (*ustadhs* and *apas*) at South Coast Madressah School. However she recalls that her mother would recite the *Qur'an* and it was under her guidance that she memorised the first page of *Surah Yasin*, a popular chapter thereof. South Coast Madressah was unique in that it was one

of five schools in Natal that were known as “integrated” schools because they combined Islamic and secular education. Shakira’s grandfather Ismail was a founder member of the South Coast and District Muslim Association (SCDMA) in 1943. In 1945, they formed the South Coast Madressa Trust and opened the South Coast Madressa State-Aided Indian Islamic School in June 1947. It was the first integrated school, with Anjuman, Crescent, Ahmedia, and Orient schools subsequently opening.¹⁰³

In Merebank, only two Muslim families lived in the Navy area as a result of which there was little contact with Muslims and exposure to Islamic education. Muslim children who did not attend integrated schools usually attended a private *madrasah* after school.

An after-school *madrasah* in Dakar Road, Merebank, catered for the basic Islamic education needs of children, but because it entailed having to cross a busy road, Shakira only started attending later on in primary school.

She recalls that the teachers at the *madrasah* were very ‘harsh’ but because she had memorised *Surah Yasin*, they were impressed with her.

I think they were very harsh – the male *madrasah* teachers. The *apas* were very sweet, but as time has gone by things have changed. Because I knew my work it was okay but it wasn’t like that for those who didn’t know the work. I think that for me, at that early stage even, I realised that the way they were trying to impart Islamic knowledge wasn’t a very good one.

Shakira says that her religious views were only comprehensively formulated at university level; however she is empathic that Islam was important to her even as a child growing up in a predominantly non-Muslim community in Merebank. Part of this was due to her father’s influence. At primary and high school, although she was usually the only Muslim girl in her class, he would insist that she had to wear pants as part of her uniform. He was also strict about the fact that his daughters could not talk to boys, or go out to socialise.

Whilst her father did not insist on adherence to religious rituals, Shakira was inclined to some of them, even as a child and teenager.

And as far *salah* (prayer) and things were concerned at that stage they [elders] were not

¹⁰³ Vahed and Waetjen, *Schooling Muslim in Natal*, 155.

very strict about that. On a Thursday I used to take the *Qu'ran* and make sure I would read. It was like from then although I didn't go much to *madrasah* but I, myself – in me I had this deep love for the religion so I knew it was Thursday I would read...I only became really conscious about *salah* when I was in medical school. In the first and second year of medical school where I started wearing a scarf – at that time, I started reading *salah* five times a day.

Civic engagement: early seeds

Shakira excelled at school in Merebank and recalls that she always came top of her class – except in standard two when someone beat her by 'half a mark.'

At Merebank High School she was head girl, and was quite involved with the student body. She benefitted greatly from her time at the school, and recalled the following about this period of her life at a speech she delivered at a Merebank High School reunion of ex-pupils and teachers in the 1990s:

The school days were filled with academic learning and other extra-curricular activities. The teachers were a dedicated bunch and sometimes tuition would be given in the morning and afternoon and this would reach fever pitch during exams especially during matric finals.

Mr Ayre, Mr P Singh, Mrs Sigamoney who taught us the richness of Hardy, Shakespeare. We also learnt to appreciate and feel proud of our Indian heritage when we read the works of V.S. Naipaul. The kindles of freedom were lit when we read the works of Nadine Gordimer, Chinua Achebe, Wally Serote Soyanka – these created an awareness of the political injustices.¹⁰⁴

However, much to her disappointment when her fellow students were participating in anti-apartheid protests she was not able to get involved:

In 1976 something happened, and in 1978, 1979 and 1980 too. I wanted to be part of the protest but because of parental influence I couldn't. The students were marching, and not going to school and being disruptive. You know my father was so strict, if he saw me talking to a boy it was the end of us. So we couldn't go for a protest where there were boys present – that was enough for him, so no way - you had to go to school. So

¹⁰⁴ Text of a speech entitled 'High School Memories' delivered by Cassim on 5 November 1999 at a Merebank High School reunion, held at Regional Hall in Merebank.

that is one of the regrets I have – you know I didn't join but I made up for it when I got into medical school.

According to Shakira, Merebank was a 'very politically active place,' and meetings would take place in various homes in the area. She would hear about these from a teacher who was an activist, and was also given a reading list. One of the books she recalls reading was *Things Fall Apart* by African author Chinua Achebe. After years of reading books that presented a European perspective on world affairs and other cultures which were seen as backward, it was refreshing for Shakira to read an African perspective that showed the rich culture, and advanced social and political institutions that existed at the advent of colonial rule. This shattered many European stereotypes of Africans.

She was also active in sport at school level and took part in discus and running, neither of which her father was opposed to, as long as she covered her legs.

The decision to study medicine: Islamic consciousness and civic engagement

The education of females was a non-issue in the Dildar home. However, there were other challenges, the main being the family's financial situation. Cassim wasn't earning much and had to support a large family.

There were three children in the small house and later on, I was in matric when the other three were born and we had now six children in a two bedroom house. So when we got into medical school my brother and I, we got in on merit...but it was very, very difficult – financially we didn't know where the money was going to come from.

A few donors stepped in to assist, and Shakira recalls that her father worked extremely hard to make it possible for them to study.

Neither Shakira's mother nor father had any reservations about her pursuing studies in medicine. In fact – on the contrary – her mother was very encouraging and would even read their medical text books when they brought them home.

Shakira considers herself fortunate as a few Muslim girls in her age group were forced to leave school in standard eight (grade ten) either because they were not academically inclined or because their parents did not approve of girls studying.

However, all her cousins studied further, and there was no question of them leaving school.

Four of her female cousins who are around her age are also doctors. Others studied teaching and some commerce. ‘There are only one or two cousins you can think of that really didn’t pursue any education after school,’ she says. She stresses that this had nothing to do with religion: ‘It was just that they were not academically inclined.’

Initially, Shakira wanted to study law. She was a keen public speaker and often took part in debating at school, so when her aunt related stories about her contemporary who was studying law and was an impressive debater, she became inspired to pursue the same path.

That changed in standard eight, when a teacher, Mrs Samuels, looked at her hands and said, that they were made for healing. ‘I think that was something that stuck. Then after that it was standard nine, standard 10, I knew I wanted to do medicine and that was all.’

There was another reason why medicine appealed to her. She had also applied to train as a teacher at what was then known as UDW, and having led a sheltered life during which she had not even travelled on a bus on her own, when she went there for an interview she found the experience daunting, in terms of the size of the campus and its distance from her home.

Going to university also was a very frightening thing because you had to choose your subjects, you had to travel but medical school was just down the road. From Merebank to Umbilo was like 15 minutes...you stayed at home, you didn’t have to worry much about travelling and you didn’t have to choose – you just moved from first to second year.

For Shakira, medical school seemed like a safe environment and this also influenced her choice. She matriculated in 1980, faring well in the final examinations.

She recalled that she had always looked up to the boys who ‘used to sweep’ the awards at the awards ceremony. ‘Malcolm Barry Kistensamy, Vikradithya Ramdev, Ashok Rathan, Riedawan Pillay, Sandy Pillay – it was these as role models that spurred me on, there were no girls’ names in a long time and I wanted my name to be on the Dux.’¹⁰⁵

These aspirations and her hard work paid off, and she was awarded the Dux at Merebank High School, which also presented her with subject awards for English, Afrikaans, Biology and

¹⁰⁵ Text of a speech entitled ‘High School Memories’ delivered by Cassim on 5 November 1999 at a Merebank High School reunion, held at Regional Hall in Merebank.

Maths. She obtained distinctions in Afrikaans (she recalls that she was one of the first learners at her school to get an A in Afrikaans), Accounting and Biology and C symbols in English, Mathematics and Physical Science. In those days these results were considered excellent. In fact a few years before that, when Shakira's cousin Amina Jogiat achieved six distinctions in matric it made front page news. 'We were so excited, to make history like that was absolutely amazing,' she recalls.

For Shakira, medical school came with its own new experiences. As a Muslim she had always been among the minority in Merebank – where she comfortably interacted with people from other faith backgrounds. But medical school was 'a different ball game altogether because there was so many Muslims there.'

Medical school catered for Black students. In the terminology of the time, as defined by Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s, this included Africans, Coloureds and Indians. Biko rejected the term "non-white" because it implied the negative of white; Black was seen as a positive affirmation of identity.

In Shakira's class of about 50 there were about five or six Muslim girls. For the first time, people asked her which village in India she came from, a concept she had never encountered before. She also experienced a divide between *Surtees* and non-*Surtees*, a 'clannishness' which she managed to transcend.

It was at medical school that Shakira experienced a religious awakening of sorts, largely thanks to her introduction to and involvement in the Muslim Students Association (MSA) which was very active during that period. 'This was the generation of Shuaib Manjra and Ahmed Manjra and Riaz Asmal,' she recalls (Shuaib and Ahmed – who are brothers – were also medical students, whilst Asmal, an active member of the MSA was studying elsewhere).

While Muslim students associations had existed on many university campuses across the country, the national body, Muslim Students Association of South Africa, was formed in 1974. According to the MSA's charter, it was 'an ideological movement, with Islam as its sheet-anchor'; it rejected 'all sectarian prejudices' and aimed to weld Muslims into 'a single brotherhood'; and it was dedicated to 'uplift' Muslim students and help them to maintain their Islamic identity 'in the midst of various hostile forces threatening to engulf us.' Amongst its pledges, the MSA aimed to 'deliver the message of Islam to the students and to evoke in them

a desire to study Islam and to fulfil its moral obligations.’¹⁰⁶ This and the fact that the MSA was outspoken against the apartheid regime tied in with Shakira’s needs as she entered medical school.

She joined the MSA because she was ‘thirsty for Islamic knowledge’ and the organisation provided this knowledge in the form of weekly *halaqahs* at the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) offices in Queen Street as well as regular camps, which her father allowed her to go to because of the ‘Muslim environment.’ At the *halaqahs*, she joined other students in researching and presenting topics on various aspects of Islam including the *seerah*. At medical school, a *halaqah* was held on a weekly basis where the students read Yusuf Ali’s translation of the *Qur’an*.

These experiences inspired Shakira to become more conscious of the Muslim prayer which she started diligently performing five times a day.

In addition to strengthening her knowledge of Islam they also gave her an opportunity to interact with different people, because the MSA would invite various guest speakers, including Ahmed Deedat, a prominent figure in the community at the time, and listening to them motivated her to enhance her public speaking skills.

Many Muslim doctors would join the students for the Friday prayer on campus, and this further inspired Shakira. ‘For me it was great to see some of the Muslim doctors who were working as doctors but still being Muslims. They were very proud of the fact that they were Muslim,’ she says.

The head of Paediatrics, Professor Ali Moosa was also ‘very Islamically inclined’ and this further influenced her understanding of Islam as a holistic way of life which cannot be divorced from one’s profession.

It was during Shakira’s second or third year on campus that the IMA was formed. ‘There was a lot of resistance (to its formation) and then here I was seeing all these Muslim doctors raising their voices and they wanted to do things,’ she says. The IMA was, in fact, formed at a convention at the Medical School in Natal on the weekend of 14-15 March 1981. Opposition to such an organisation came from other Muslim doctors, such as Professor Hoosen Coovadia

¹⁰⁶ Mahida, Ebrahim Mahida. *History of Muslims in South Africa. A Chronology*. Durban: Arabic Study Circle, 1993, 103.

of the Medical School and an executive member of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), who felt that forming a Muslim organisation was divisive and fed into the apartheid ideology of divide and rule. The founding members, however, felt that existing medical bodies did not cater for the needs of Muslim doctors. The IMA's aims included promoting a better understanding of medicine within the framework of Islam; aligning healthcare education with Islamic values and outlook in the application to patient care; and to be a 'mercy unto mankind' in the example set by the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁰⁷

As part of the IMA's student component Shakira helped to organise the first convention which, she recalled, drew health workers from all over the country. Most of those who attended, even the sceptics, were impressed by what they heard and many joined up. Professor Moosa, who Shakira mentioned, was elected vice-president of the IMA executive for 1981-82, with urologist Dr Goolam M. Hoosen as president.

As a member of the MSA, and later the *Amirah* (leader) of the medical school chapter, Shakira grew accustomed to researching, preparing and delivering talks on a wide array of subjects, such as adoption and family planning in Islam, as well as the role of Muslim women in society. Her views on the latter have not changed since then: 'I still feel that a Muslim woman must be an active member of society,' she says.

During her fourth year at campus, as the MSA *Amirah*, Shakira arranged a seminar for women, and on the advice of Professor Ali Moosa, invited the well-known community activist and author of the famous cookbook *Indian Delights*, Zulieka Mayat, who was known for challenging the more conservative elements in the community with regard to Muslim women's right to speak. She also invited the now deceased Kurshid Nadvi, the wife of Salman Nadvi, then professor of Islamic Studies at UDW. Kurshid – who held a Master's degree in the Health Sciences – used to conduct *tafsir* lessons for women which were very popular.

However, Shakira was not only involved in Islamic activities on campus but was part of the Student Representative Council (SRC). She was involved in organising its convention, at which she presented a paper. She recalls this clearly and credits the time she spent at Merebank High School for giving her the confidence to speak in front of an audience.

I was a very active member of the conference convening committee. I did the first presentation and I had to do a slide presentation; I also included an audio recording

¹⁰⁷ Mahida, Ebrahim Mahida. *History of Muslims in South Africa*, 116-118.

which somebody helped me do and a small audio clip. The fact that I had gone to a non-Muslim school helped me work with non-Muslims and not be afraid of boys as well. It also helped me with my public speaking skills. I was a debater (at school) as well.

As a first year medical student, she also acted in a play about dental hygiene.

As part of the SRC she served at a student clinic at Happy Valley in the Valley of a 1000 Hills which is on the route to the Natal Midlands, where she and her peers gave health advice, and provided health screening and other basic health procedures for an underprivileged community.

Attending medical school also increased Shakira's involvement in politics. Student and community protests escalated in the 1980s, with countrywide student boycotts in 1980 and 1981 and smaller protests in subsequent years, while communities engaged in rent and service delivery boycotts, and workers protested through their trades unions. While the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned, within the country, activists formed the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983 to spearhead protest against the apartheid regime. Shakira attended UDF meetings at campus level. She participated in protests – during which she recalls being tear-gassed – and attended talks and meetings.

Shakira's father was not averse to her newfound interests and activities – on the contrary, he was proud, as was her mother, because neither of them had access to similar opportunities due to their life circumstances. In part, this was also because entire communities were swept up in political fervour, and many attended the mass rallies that became a regular feature of life.

However, she recalls that her fellow Muslim female students were not as involved in the various aspects of campus life as she was.

Because I had come from Merebank I wasn't shy in terms of speaking so that is why I could mix with the Muslim group and the non-Muslim group. Although in the beginning it was difficult for me to deal with the *Surtee-Urdu* kind of issue – but I quickly overcame that.

She recalls that a notable exception was Umme Salma Jhetam, one of her contemporaries who was very involved in political activism and was even detained.

Shakira began wearing the *hijab* in the 1980s at medical school, when she became the *Amirah* of its MSA.

It was just the scarf that I had to add on – I was always wearing a pants. I think it was in my first year I had joined MSA, during my second year during the introduction to the MSA, they were looking for an *Amirah* and they said “okay you came, you be the *Amirah*” now. As I told you my *madrasah* education wasn’t very much – it was a lot of my own reading. Here I am the *Amirah*, and what do I know anyway – that was something for me now to go and learn and read and do things. I think I was one of the very first girls to start wearing the scarf at that stage in medical school.

As one of the only females wearing the *hijab* both on campus and in her family, she was perceived as a ‘very holy girl,’ she laughs.

Despite the challenges they faced, both Shakira and her brother excelled in their studies. As home was a two-bedroom house which they shared with three small children, they studied at the campus library and were the last to leave. At weekends, they would study in an old car in their backyard, fighting about who should sit in the front seat, because that was the quietest place they could find.

Shakira believes that the seeds of her passion for community involvement were born at high school level, where she wasn’t given much of an opportunity to sow them, apart from developing her public speaking and debating abilities.

At medical school, these skills were built on, and with her involvement in both the MSA and SRC, her passion for civic engagement flourished.

At that stage I didn’t see it as an Islamic obligation – just this inherent thing in me that I need to do something...even years later when I got married. If you look at a lot of the students that were active [at university, but] they fell down by the wayside, they were not so active after marriage and children. In fact many of my colleagues that were very active with me, the females in the MSA, many of them I don’t see them active. And being part of the IMA now as a student I would just see mainly male figures being projected – the IMA was a male-dominated organisation at that stage, they never even considered having a female in the front line.

At that stage – in relation to the IMA – women were quite happy to confine themselves to

doing background work, like arranging tea and meals. A women's wing was initiated by the wife of urologist Dr Goolam M. Hoosen, a founding member of the IMA (also known as Dr Goolam Hoosen Lachka – see Chapter Six), and it focused on literacy and skills development but 'not active participation on an equal basis in terms of one's profession.'

As a student we attended the end of the year graduates dinner which the IMA hosted, and I remember seeing only male speakers at the front and thinking to myself, "you know what I'm going to change this," but that came much later with four children and a husband.

Marriage

Shakira met her husband Ebrahim Khan, a medical doctor whilst she was doing her internship at the RK Khan Hospital. He had come to visit his uncle who was Shakira's patient and they were immediately attracted to each other, getting married a few months later. She relates that his life was also filled with numerous challenges:

He couldn't study here because at that stage medical school would only take I think about 30 Indians; the rest were black students. Because of the limited number of spaces available to them, many Indians had to go abroad to places like India, Pakistan and Ireland to study – if they could afford to do so. So my husband had to first work as a dispensary assistant in a doctor's practice and doing part time bookkeeping work, working odds jobs etcetera, selling popcorn etcetera, saving enough money to go and study abroad. That was his journey.

One of the first questions she asked him before agreeing to marry him was whether he would allow her to work after marriage: 'I had a proposal before that and this chap was a *Surtee* guy from Ladysmith, also a doctor but one of his conditions was "if you get married you are not going to work and you are not going to go to your mother's house."' This was not uncommon for a period during which the role of women was a more traditional, stay-at-home one. However, Ebrahim responded that if she wanted to work, she could. The idea of women working was not foreign to him as his sisters worked as teachers.

The financial difficulties Shakira and her husband faced growing up, as well as when they were students, impressed upon them the importance of education, to the extent that when limited places meant that their daughter couldn't get a place at medical school in KwaZulu-Natal, even with seven distinctions in matric, they sent her to the Eastern Cape to study.

After marriage

Shakira completed medical school in 1986, and married Ebrahim in 1988. When the couple got married, Ebrahim moved to the “independent homeland” of Ciskei (now part of the Eastern Cape), because he was not allowed to work in South Africa. At this stage Shakira knew she wanted to specialise in paediatrics so before joining Ebrahim she completed a six-month course in this field in South Africa.

Thereafter, she joined him in Ciskei and they lived there for three years, from 1989 until 1991, on the premises of the Victoria Hospital, a rural hospital at which they both worked, in the town of Alice. They thoroughly enjoyed their stay there, although they were among a handful of Indians. They were also cut off from the Muslim community – the nearest mosque was 60 kilometres away, and so they would buy their own sheep and slaughter themselves.¹⁰⁸

Although Shakira was a medical officer at that stage (as was Ebrahim) she virtually ran the paediatric ward, due to the fact that the hospital was rural and under-resourced.

Whilst in Ciskei, the couple had their first two children, Mohammed Hoosain and Zainub. Ebrahim was extremely supportive of Shakira, to the extent of standing in for her on the after-hours call roster.

Whilst in Ciskei, Shakira was also able to complete a diploma in child health (1990) through the College of Medicine of South Africa. She recalls that although pregnant with Mohammed Hoosain, she used to travel to a venue one-and-a-half hours from their home in Ciskei to attend weekly classes. This attests to her courage; though pregnant she was quite determined to expand her skills set and knowledge. Shakira recalls that she and Ebrahim watched the release of Nelson Mandela on television in Ciskei.

From Ciskei they moved to Umlazi where they both worked at the Prince Mshiyeni Hospital, for a period of two years (1991 to 1993), once again living in the doctors’ quarters. Whilst in Umlazi, they had another child, Mohammed Ismaeel, and Shakira recalls that whilst working, she would return to their residence to breastfeed the baby.

Specialisation

By the time the couple completed their duties at Umlazi in 1993, Shakira was 31 years old and

¹⁰⁸ In terms of Islamic law, Muslims are only permitted to eat the meat of animals which are slaughtered in a way governed by a strict set of rules. Only such meat is considered to be ‘*halal*’ (permissible).

a mother to a five-year old, three-year old, and one-year old. Still, she was determined to qualify as a paediatrician and smilingly points out that ‘always while I was pregnant I had a baby in one hand and a book in the other. So I was busy preparing for my exams.’

Due to family responsibilities, there were few women specialists in the Muslim community at that time, but she was determined to be a pioneer, and began specialising in 1994, qualifying as a paediatrician in 1997. Her fourth child Hawa was born in 1995, whilst she was doing her registrar training in paediatrics.

She says she chose to specialise because she felt that, it was essential for her to have ‘something’ behind her name in order for her to be taken seriously ‘as a Muslim woman.’

A few incidents also strengthened her determination and efforts to specialise. Firstly, at medical school, during her second year, a Muslim lecturer asked her a question which she could not answer. ‘He said “you know you are wasting your father’s money in medical school” and I think that comment it can either break you or make you and it made me such that I said to myself “no way am I going to waste my father’s money.”’

Secondly, whilst specialising, one of the senior registrars reprimanded her whilst she was doing a hospital round. ‘He said, “how can you do this – you rather go back to looking after your children.” – I said to myself, “no ways am I going to take this lying down so I was so determined to complete.”’

Other people when they came in to specialise – in those four years, they wrote their exams two times, and sometimes they didn’t even pass, you know, so some people went through the whole training without even getting the specialist exam. But I knew I was there for a limited time and I knew every moment of mine had to count so I wouldn’t be making jokes with people at tea time and at lunch time – I would be studying because I knew if I am at home I am a mother and I really have to make every moment count. And so that really helped to develop me.

She is thankful for the support that Ebrahim provided as she embarked on this difficult path, and points out that they even had a fourth child, Hawa, between the first and second parts of her specialisation examinations.

So if you ask anyone now to be a specialist and have three little children they will think you are crazy, absolutely crazy but I mean at that stage, I wanted to do paediatrics and I

felt that the longer I waited the opportunities won't come... Studying was in my blood and I am still studying even at this stage of my life. So I would sort of juggle my time very efficiently, don't sleep much if I was on call, you know, and I know when I was preparing for my exams he [Ebrahim] did a splendid job with the children as well, so when I was studying at campus, he would call me and say "hey you could come home now they are all sleeping" – this would be at about 9 o'clock. When we moved here [Durban] we stayed in Overport where my in-laws were just a house away. But we decided that if I am going to study and I am going to work, these are our responsibilities – we are going to look after them ourselves and we cook ourselves.... Ebrahim has been very good, he is very good in the kitchen. So I mean it was exam time, I would just give him the key and say, "the kitchen is yours," he can cook *biryani* he can do everything. The only thing he couldn't make was *roti*, but now he can do that too.

Civic Engagement

The IMA

After qualifying as a paediatrician in 1998, Shakira went into private practice in 1999 in Durban Central in Lorne Street, and once again began pursuing her desire to become involved in community work, via the IMA.

So I knew I wanted to get involved in community activity but there wasn't much for me – IMA was the main vehicle via which I could do it. And I wanted to create women empowerment and health awareness and show that you are a Muslim woman you can do something to give back to society it doesn't matter that you are a Muslim, it doesn't matter that you are a woman, it doesn't matter that you are a mother with four children too, so you can still go and do something.

At that stage the IMA was hosting a conference focusing on the topic 'Islam and the Environment' and she presented a paper about recycling and environmental waste management. As part of her research, she visited the Durban Solid Waste land refill site. She recalls that the IMA had invited a Palestinian environmentalist to present at the conference, and also remembers that the conference entailed her learning how to put together the first of what would be many PowerPoint presentations.

Shakira became an active member of the IMA, playing a significant role in the execution of its various health programmes and the organisation has been the main platform for civic engagement in both her, as well as her husband's life.

HIV and AIDS

In 1995, Shakira experienced a needle stick injury at work; at the time she was breast feeding her youngest child, Hawa, something she had to stop after the injury. She was also forced to go onto a course of anti-retroviral treatment. She recalls that the incident instilled the thought in her that ‘HIV / AIDS could happen to anyone.’

By 1998/1999 HIV and AIDS was a talking point in the country due to its prevalence in South Africa as well as on the African continent, and the IMA realised the need to play a role in educating people about it. Recalling the needle stick injury, Shakira did not hesitate to become involved. She enrolled in an HIV and AIDS training programme which the IMA organised, and became the chair of the organisation’s sub-committee on HIV and AIDS. Once again husband and wife worked as a team, travelling to various areas in KwaZulu-Natal, to educate diverse groups of people on the subject.

‘The audiences were from across the board,’ she recalls. ‘Male and female, children, medical students, Muslims, non-Muslims, *Imams*, doctors, nurses, AIDS counsellors and AIDS educators – people from all kinds of income groups.’ She also addressed people belonging to burial societies due to the risk they faced of contracting HIV through contact with blood.

Audiences responded positively to her, she says, in part because of the fact that she had only ever been married once, and had experienced a needle stick injury, bearing testament to the fact that HIV and AIDS could happen to anyone.

With Muslim audiences, the aim of these programmes was to convey the message that HIV and AIDS is not to be viewed as a punishment within Islamic teachings, and to also look at protective mechanisms within the Islamic faith for the prevention of AIDS.

In the year 2000, Durban hosted the World AIDS Conference, and this coincided with the time when the South African government led by Thabo Mbeki, insisted that AIDS didn’t exist. ‘This was absolute nonsense – I knew inside information about how Professor Coovadia was ostracised for his view – and I think in one of my talks I said Mandela spent more time with the Spice Girls than talking about HIV when he was in power.’

Professor Coovadia was the convener of the World AIDS Conference, and was also her professor in paediatrics. Consequently, Shakira considered him a role model. As well as doing her own research on HIV and AIDS, she paid careful attention to the information he was disseminating and would often benchmark her knowledge with his.

The IMA hired a stall/exhibition stand at the World AIDS Conference, and showcased the work it was doing in HIV and AIDS education. In this way, Shakira and her peers at the organisation became acquainted with many Muslim organisations working in the same field. Witnessing the AIDS prevention messages she saw within this Islamic organisational context further strengthened her resolve that Islam had a solution for HIV and AIDS.

Parallel to the conference, the IMA coordinated a sub-programme, inviting conference delegates to share knowledge and ideas with them. As part of this programme it hosted a Ugandan delegation whom Shakira had previously met during a conference in Libya. Ironically, although Professor Coovadia had initially opposed the formation of the IMA, he was part of this programme.

In Libya Shakira had heard members of the Ugandan delegation which belonged to an organisation called ‘Ambassadors of Hope Mission’ speaking about a successful United Nations accredited programme which enlisted the help of Ugandan *Imams* to educate communities about AIDS. This inspired her greatly and further convinced her that the Muslim community had a role to play in combatting and preventing HIV and AIDS.

When she learnt that the delegation was going to attend the World AIDS Conference in Durban, she became instrumental in arranging an ideas exchange session between them and the IMA, where the former explained how the Ambassadors of Hope programme was implemented. The IMA then shared this information with the local South African clergy encouraging them to become involved in combatting HIV and AIDS.

Shortly thereafter (in 2001) Shakira was asked to work with facilitators to plan a module on HIV and AIDS for first year students at the Nelson Mandela Medical School. She herself often addressed medical school students about the subject, demonstrating the usage of the male and female condom and discussing other matters related to sexuality. She found that the public speaking skills, which she had accumulated over the years, stood her in good stead in this regard.

Due to the fact that the IMA was involved in interfaith work, Shakira was often invited to conduct health workshops by the World Council on Religions and Peace (WCRP). Initially these focussed on HIV and AIDS, but later expanded to subjects like the benefits of breastfeeding and circumcision.

In 2003, she was invited to attend a conference on HIV and AIDS in Malaysia. Although she didn’t present any papers at the main event, she spoke within the context of smaller sub-committees, and discovered that whilst in South Africa, HIV and AIDS was largely a result of multiple sexual partners, in Malaysia it was contracted mainly through intravenous drug use and homosexuality.

‘Attending a conference where there were only Muslims and speaking about HIV in a Muslim country – that’s when I started looking at the subject of HIV in Muslim countries, and getting more information about this and including it in my talks and educational programmes,’ she says.

In Malaysia, she also encountered a home for prostitutes run by a *maulana*. This made a significant impact on her: ‘You can’t be narrow-minded. *Allah Ta’ala* wants you to help them. You can’t be stereotyping people. There were eunuchs, and gays and you had to listen to their difficulties, many are born with transgendered qualities – it teaches you a lot of compassion.’

This equipped her better to deal with and HIV AIDS within an interfaith context – something she later became involved in as a part of the IMA’s partnership with the WCRP: ‘I found myself on platforms where I sat next to women who were lesbian, and I had to watch how I spoke, I had to be sensitive to everyone. When you treat gays and lesbians you have to beyond the box of being Muslim.’ What Shakira is referring to here is that most traditional schools of Islamic law regard homosexuality as a sin that is punishable, though no punishment has been prescribed. According to Faisal Kutty (2014), pre- and extra-marital and same-sex sexual activity are prohibited in Islam. While Islam does not ‘regulate feelings, emotions and urges’, the conversion of these feelings into action is unlawful. Shakira was thus forced to tread carefully in order to provide care while not offending local Muslims.

By 2004, Shakira was so heavily involved in issues surrounding HIV and AIDS that she decided to study towards a diploma in HIV Management, through the College of Medicine of South Africa. In paediatric medical circles she came to be recognised as an HIV paediatric specialist, something which was further reinforced in 2009 when she completed a Master’s degree in Public Health through the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Other health awareness programmes

As a member of the IMA, she also presented medical programmes on Radio Azania, a Muslim community radio station, and later on Radio Al-Ansaar which replaced Azania. This was previously uncharted territory within the Muslim community and not everyone responded positively: ‘That was the first time you would hear people talking about things like reproduction or menstruation openly and people would phone and say “you can’t mention this on air.” Well we took it in our stride, we said, “you’ve got to.”’

She was also instrumental in organising and being a part of various IMA public health awareness programmes, particularly those targeting women. At some of these programmes she enlisted the assistance of medical doctors to conduct breast examinations. Talks presented at these programmes varied from discussing the importance of breast and cervical cancer

screening to explaining vitamin D deficiencies. Although open to all faith groups, she admits that it was mainly Muslim women who attended these programmes, which were held in areas like Overport, Chatsworth and Phoenix.

Arab Afro Unity Forum

In 2002, the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) an offshoot of the MSA, nominated Shakira to attend a conference in Libya organised by the Arab Afro Unity Forum, an initiative of Muammar Gaddafi. ‘Gaddafi wanted to place himself as the head of African unity and had a meeting of all the non-governmental organisations together,’ she says.

During the conference she was surprised to find that HIV and AIDS was not on the agenda and she boldly requested a 15 minute slot in which to speak about the South African experience in this regard, which was granted. She recalls that her presentation, albeit short, was well-received.

She recalls that she saw pictures of Gaddafi ‘everywhere’ in Libya, and that ‘you couldn’t say anything wrong about him.’

Everything to do with Gaddafi was a lot of pomp and ceremony – you had to wait for hours to be addressed by him and he was heavily guarded...the first meeting was to commemorate the American bombing of their house – he invited a lot of people from all over Africa and gave us five star treatment and we eventually landed up at a house of his, where the aeroplane was, then we were to learn in media how NGOs from all over Africa are protesting about the American treatment of what happened...so a lot of things were done to promote himself.

She is also certain that she, like all other delegates, was being followed.

Nonetheless she found the Libyan people hospitable, and attended the conference again in 2003 and 2004.

Looking at the people, and his document the green revolution, the economy of the country seemed to have flourished a lot. Right till 11 or 12 at night you’d find people enjoying themselves, you felt very safe there....they were so hospitable....in terms of way they’d treat us....

Air Mercy

In 2003, Shakira and her husband – as part of the IMA - became involved in the Red Cross’s Air Mercy project.

Ebrahim first began working stints as a general practitioner in rural Hlabisa. When he found that there were patients in the area who required cataract procedures, he became the main coordinator of the IMA's Cataract Project in Hlabisa. Because Shakira wasn't able to perform cataract procedures, Ebrahim arranged for her to volunteer her services to the paediatric ward in Hlabisa Hospital.

The couple would set out at 6am in a helicopter from Durban's former airport site near Isipingo, and go to either Hlabisa or Christ the King, a hospital in Ixopo, returning at 5pm on the same day, and arranging for Ebrahim's family to look after their children once they returned from *madrassah*, in the afternoon.

They undertook these journeys once every two months between 2003 and 2005. She thoroughly enjoyed the experience. 'We used to see quite a bit of the country in that way,' she says. 'We'd see it from the top, we'd then get off on a grassy patch, not a landing field, which was sometimes risky and then from there, there was another drive through a game park, it was nice to get to know South Africa – it was very rewarding – the drive was very pleasant, it was a very spiritual experience.'

Shakira found that her expertise was desperately needed during the Air Mercy missions. She would undertake paediatric ward rounds and teach nurses emergency paediatric procedures. One of the most common health issues she encountered was paediatric HIV, and the sight of 'uneasy' and 'suffering' patients who did not have access to ARVs at the time is one she still remembers. Nonetheless, considering that the hospitals did not have a specialist, her services were needed and greatly appreciated.

Her children did not mind their parent's absence during these Air Mercy stints, she says: 'It wasn't that regular – once in two months wasn't too bad, I'd have to have supper organised, they are quite used to it – I hope some of them that ethos...now you do see some seeds of it emerging, I'm hoping the seeds are there for them to develop.'

Whilst Shakira would stay behind to look after the children, Ebrahim also sometimes travelled overseas to lend voluntary medical assistance. For example, he was the head of the medical mission appointed by the South African Hajj and Umrah Council (SAHUC), serving South Africans during the Muslim pilgrimage, the *haji*, and also played a role in Haiti and Pakistan after they were hit by earthquakes, travelling there as part of a Gift of the Givers medical team.

Muslim marriages and sexuality

At some stage during her community involvement (she estimates that it was in 2002), the Al-Ansaar Foundation organised a seminar on the subject of Muslim marriages and asked Shakira to speak on sexuality within this context.

The Foundation had initially invited a gynaecologist but she was ‘too shy,’ which is not surprising because, generally speaking, the Muslim community tends to be “closed” when it comes to discussing this subject, even though the Prophet Muhammad in his teachings encouraged his followers to ask questions about all subjects they required clarity on. Muslims generally tend to show disdain for sex education (Awad 2009).

When the gynaecologist declined, the Foundation approached Shakira instead:

They were feeling too shy but because of my HIV awareness programmes you had to speak about sexuality – there was no way you could address HIV (without doing so), so I mean I remember sitting at my first HIV workshop totally squirming when they were talking about this. I mean as a student when we did the anatomy I know all the Muslim girls would be hoping the ground would open up and I think that doing the HIV awareness decreased my inhibitions. And then I agreed to talk about sexuality – it was in the 45th cutting Mosque Hall [in Sherwood, Durban].

Subsequently, she was invited to speak on the same subject at other places like Newcastle and Ladysmith. This eventually culminated in Shakira writing a book in 2003, entitled *Marital Intimacy – an Islamic guide to sexual bliss in Nikah*. The book proved extremely successful, and received much publicity due to its daring subject matter, as did her workshops on the subject.¹⁰⁹

She says that the idea for the book first came to mind when she learnt that a prominent *maulana* in the Muslim community, whom she had great respect for, had told someone she knew that a lack of understanding of marital intimacy was leading to many divorces in the Muslim community.

Equipped with the vast amount of research she had done on the subject, due to the workshop presentations, she decided that it was time to write a book.

I had been researching a whole lot of other aspects of marriage as well, but I found that marital intimacy was not covered well, both, the medical, as well as Islamic aspects thereof. After the presentations and research I felt I needed to write the book – through the WCRP as well, I’d been doing sexual education, so I felt ideally placed to put everything together.

¹⁰⁹ (see <http://www.iol.co.za/lifestyle/spice-up-bedroom-secrets-the-islamic-way-1.625641#.VT03rSGqqko>)

The book, entitled *Marital Intimacy – an Islamic guide to sexual bliss in Nikah*, was realised at the IMA's convention in 2003. It was reprinted a few years later, when the Islamic financial institution Albaraka Bank hosted a wedding seminar.

According to Shakira, the book has been one of the IMA's fastest selling publications, and there are only a few copies left. At some stage she'd like to update it, by adding research she conducted on the differences between the male and female brain.

'Everything in my life was a step leading to something else,' she says. 'From HIV to marital intimacy, from marital intimacy to studying the male and female brain – there's a lot of differences between the male and female brain. If people understand each other, they'll understand why each behaves the way they do.'

In her view, several factors have contributed to the increasing divorce rate in the Muslim community:

I think when people get married they are not realising that marriage is for keeps. The commitment is not there, there are communication issues. If they talk to each other, a lot of things can be sorted out. There's also pressure from in-laws, and financial pressures. I also think sexuality is a big problem in the Muslim community. Social media openness is also creating a lot of problems in marriages. It leads to expectations that are unrealistic. People are just moving away from Islamic principles of nurturing and caring.

Other community involvement

Shakira served as the regional (KZN) chairperson of the IMA for five years, starting in around the year 2000, and thereafter continued to serve as an executive member in various capacities, ranging from secretary to vice chairperson. She resigned from the executive committee in July 2014 to pursue some of her other ambitions, which are detailed in the following section. However she continues to be involved in the activities of the IMA whenever possible.

During her time at the IMA, she has presented various papers at its annual conventions which attract hundreds of medical professionals from around the country to a central venue, either in Durban, Johannesburg or Cape Town. The topics she has presented on include: waste management, male and female brain differences, breastfeeding, and the guerrilla marketing tactics of the formula feeding industry and HIV and AIDS. She has also chaired sessions at the conventions.

She remains a trustee of the IMA's Baytul Nur (see Chapter Three), and was involved in planning the Ahmed Al-Kadi Private Hospital, a project of the IMA which aims to encourage an Islamic ethos that promotes the rights and respect of patients. The hospital is currently at

an advanced stage of construction and will be open to patients from all religious backgrounds.¹¹⁰

Shakira believes that her husband Ebrahim's background contributed to his easy going nature when it came to her involvement in community work:

Fortunately it wasn't so difficult (for him) because he came from a background wherein his father was a *maulana* so he was quite involved in Islamic activities himself; he used to read *naaths*, sometimes give the *adhan* at the mosque and lead the *salah*. As a student he was an activist in Pakistan, and also part of the student body on campus, so we were involved in parallel things but on different continents.

In her view the IMA continues to play a significant role in post-apartheid South Africa. She points out that '99.99 per cent' of the patients at IMA clinics are indigenous Africans, and that a lot of the organisation's HIV work is with indigenous communities. She adds that the cataract and renal dialysis programmes also make no distinction between Muslims and other faiths, re-iterating that the IMA serves people across the board: 'Hindus, Tamils, Whites, Blacks, Muslims, non-Muslims – we've never made a distinction between religion and race.'

Recognition

Through her work with the IMA, Shakira has received many accolades. In 2005, the Durban Group of Amnesty International South Africa recognised her for 'the significant role she has played as defender of human rights in South Africa.' The WCRP also honoured her by including her in its hall of fame, at its inaugural Desmond Tutu Peace Lecture in 2009. She was a finalist in the category 'health and wellness' for the KZN Women of Excellence 2012 award, an initiative of the Durban Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Outside of the IMA

Outside the IMA, Shakira has regularly spoken on issues relating to paediatrics on Radio Lotus, a well-known radio station run by the SABC that caters for the South African Indian community.

She has also written articles for publications like the Clicks magazine, and *Al-Qalam*, a Muslim community newspaper, on subjects like the importance of immunisation, colic in babies, common viral infections, etc.

¹¹⁰ See http://www.ahmedalkadi.com/?page_id=2735 last accessed 9 September 2015

Shakira is also involved in presenting paediatric cases to nurses at St. Augustine's, Parklands and City Hospitals, imparting knowledge on subjects like paediatric life support, paediatric emergencies, common paediatric problems and neo-natal care.

All of this is done voluntarily, for the pleasure of God: 'In fact if anyone asks me how much you charge I say "you can't pay me but my payment will be in the hereafter."'

Islamic studies and other interests

In 2009/2010, Shakira began to cut down on her involvement in the IMA due to some health issues like a vitamin D and B, and iron deficiency. Feeling the need to start exercising regularly, she signed up for martial arts. Currently she is enrolled at the Foundation for Reformation and Self-Healing, a martial arts academy run by a Muslim couple in Durban and attends a Saturday morning 6am class.

Around that time a lady paediatrician in Johannesburg was raped and I do a lot of night time work. I felt I needed to do something which would help me. Martial arts is also a good release for anger. There's a lot of spirituality in martial arts which people don't know about. There's a meditation component which I've been practising. I like it because my *sensei* is in full *hijab*.

She currently has a brown belt, one grading away from a black belt which she is hoping to obtain by December 2015.

Since reducing her IMA responsibilities, Shakira has also continued her Islamic Studies journey, something she started many years ago by completing a *madrasah* teacher course initiated by the Muslim Charitable Fund (MCF), but did not subsequently have the time for.

She is also currently enrolled in a diploma in *Shari'ah* programme at the Soofie Academy which is based in Riverside, Durban.

I started last year (2014); this is my second year. I need twenty modules. Each semester they offer five. All classes are in the evening in Riverside. Only one class is held on a Thursday morning. By the end of this year I would have completed eleven. I want to do it so badly. I started studying Islamic studies via UNISA but I never completed because I got side-tracked with the HIV work. I feel I need to do it for myself. I want to understand Arabic. I want to reach perfection in my *Qur'an* recitation.

For her, studying Islam in depth will also help to enhance her credibility:

I need some backing. The last time I did a reprint of a book, even though it was proof read by an Islamic scholar Professor Muhsin Ebrahim, I received an anonymous letter from someone who said “you shouldn’t endeavour on a book like that on your own – you must work with some *alim* then only can you say that”...it disappointed me a lot.

Views on the roles of Muslim women

For Shakira, civic engagement is a must; in her view, not being involved in the community is akin to a form of ingratitude:

I feel the intelligence I have, the ability I have, the resources I have, the potential I have, it would be a sign of ingratitude if I didn’t excel myself to the utmost to show my Creator when I go back (to Him) “this is what I have done with my life.” I think it was of the motivational speakers who said that most of the potential is in the grave because most people die with all their potential so when I go back to meet my Lord I must tell Him “you gave me so much potential and I am coming to you empty; I have used it all up.”

Like various other local Muslim personalities, she was once the target of criticism from the Port Elizabeth based *Majlis* newspaper which is well known for being critical about individuals and organisations who/which hold an opposing view to those of its founder *Maulana* AS Desai. Shakira incurred Desai’s wrath in 2009, when she cracked some jokes as an MC of an IMA function which featured the Muslim comedian Riaad Moosa. Desai is of the opinion that the mixing of genders is strictly prohibited by Islam and that women shouldn’t engage with men. Consequently he branded her a *kafir* (disbeliever) in one of his publications and stated that her marriage was now invalid as she had left the fold of Islam.

However, over time, Shakira learnt to take this as well as other criticism in her stride:

It wasn’t amusing, we were on holiday in the Eastern Cape and stopped at friend’s place in Port Elizabeth and he said “Did you see the *Majlis* article?” My name in print! Initially it was amusing but it did take its knock on me.

I’ve been asked “why are you talking about this thing sexuality, out there in the public?” but the IMA members have been very supportive but there are some who feel you know that you shouldn’t really be out there. But (it’s okay) as long as I am within the Islamic framework and what I was doing wasn’t un-Islamic...in fact we just did a sexuality workshop last weekend and I found there is a need for that.

Shakira says she has never felt inferior or ashamed of being a Muslim woman wearing the *hijab*; nor has she ever felt unliberated. She observes that even in the non-Islamic world, the definition attached to the concept of women's liberation is changing. 'They say that woman's liberation doesn't mean that a woman needs to be taking off her clothes.'

I feel I can be quite competent even in the paediatric conferences I go to. I have addressed them without any feeling of being ashamed or inferior being a Muslim woman. I feel I am quite liberated; I don't feel taking off your *hijab* or roaming around without your pants and short sleeves is a form of liberation.

However, she cautions that whilst in terms of seeking education, prophetic and *Qur'anic* teachings encourage followers of the Islamic faith to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave, when it comes to the pursuit of a career, some Muslim women may be entering a grey area in which this is more important than the protection of the family.

I feel now with some of the Muslim women they are taking it to the extreme where the pursuit of the career is far more important than keeping your family life intact and being good to your partner. And now because of the changing dynamics with women going out to the workplaces and getting tertiary education – it's giving them a great sense of "power" but it is the kind of "power" that I had long ago, you know, but still dealt with within the context of a very well-balanced happy marriage without making my partner feel inferior. When I see some of the women who are really at the top there in the business – they have sort of lost their femininity, I feel that is very important to retain some of your feminine qualities, to retain some of your softness, that when people see you they recognise you as a Muslim first rather than for your PhD or Masters, or whatever it is that you have.

In her view this has led to an increase in the divorce rate in the Muslim community, because some women feel that due to being financially independent they don't need to be in a marriage; and this in turn intimidates their husbands.

Shakira is also pleased to observe that an increasing number of Muslim women are becoming involved in civic engagement. She attributes this to them having a greater number of role models, as well as access to more information and more platforms to create their own spaces. She does, however, recall that once, soon after qualifying as a paediatrician, she had an opportunity to work in Holland – however, when she attended the interview, she was told that although she was qualified for the job, she would not be allowed to wear her *hijab*. 'I felt

it would have advanced my career in terms of getting a specialisation but I couldn't compromise [on my values].'

Religion is an integral part of Shakira's life. She fasts voluntarily once or twice a week, regularly wakes before sunrise to engage in voluntary prayer and tries to remember God regularly, even whilst engaging in her daily activities of work and leisure. She is also trying to memorise a portion of the *Qur'an*:

If you had to ask me how I see myself for the future I think it won't be seeing myself as much of a paediatrician – it would be more to see how I can develop my Islamic abilities...I used to read a lot of fiction in my youth, well when I was 18, 19, but by the time I was in my twenties, I said to myself "I am not going to read much fiction anymore so apart from reading my medical books, most of my reading has been non-fiction and a large portion of that has been Islamic literature as well." It gives me so much of courage and pride to be a woman, to be a Muslim first then a woman and then after that all my other qualifications. But it is being a Muslim that has really sort of, if you could say, been the wind under my sails – my inspiration to go ahead.

Never one to lead a sedentary life, Shakira is considering retiring in a few years' time in order to reinvent herself as a health specialist promoting a healthy lifestyle and active aging, using the Ahmed Al-Kadi Hospital as a base. This study of a life rich in productivity is enough to convince me that this dream is not beyond her reach.

Chapter Five

Shameema Mayat - The “Ring Leader”

Give your one hundred per cent to the underprivileged. That’s my motto – help, help, help. We have to thank God every second of the day that we have got everything, now we must help the underprivileged, help the poor.

– Shameema Mayat

Shameema Mayat is the current president of the Women’s Cultural Group (WCG), a well-known South African Muslim women’s organisation, which her mother-in-law Zuleikha Mayat founded.¹¹¹ She is also a wife, daughter-in-law, mother and grandmother. Her story is interesting in that she has taken the WCG into new territory, by involving the organisation in a range of Palestinian solidarity activities. It is also significant in that she highlights the role of family support in enabling a woman to be active within the community.

Childhood and family dynamics

Shameema Mayat was born in Pietermaritzburg in 1957. She was the first of two daughters, the other being Shamshad who is an accountant, born to Dr Omar and Zohra Essack.

Dr Omar Essack¹¹² was the first black doctor to set up a medical practice in Pietermaritzburg (in Edendale). He qualified in Bombay, India, at around the same time as his close friend Chota Motala. Motala and Essack, who were both from Dundee, completed their high schooling at Sastri College, then the only high school for Indians in South Africa, matriculating around 1940. Upon their return to South Africa in 1948 both became heavily involved in politics. Chota Motala’s home in Boom Street, Pietermaritzburg was the site of numerous meetings of the Pietermaritzburg branch of the NIC which they revived.¹¹³

After Essack, Motala became the second black doctor to set up a practice in Pietermaritzburg. The two eventually went into partnership in Retief Street, together with Dr Vasu Chetty. Dr Essack was widely respected for his political acumen and was regarded as the ideologue of the NIC in Pietermaritzburg.

Shameema recalls that her paternal grandfather Ishaq Hassim came to South Africa from India

¹¹¹ See Vahed and Waetjen, *Gender, Modernity and Indian Delights*, for a discussion of the history of Zuleikha Mayat and the group.

¹¹² Goolam Vahed, *Muslim Portraits. The Anti-Apartheid Struggle*. Durban: Madiba Publishers, 2012, 124-125.

¹¹³ Vahed, *Muslim Portraits*, 267-274.

in the 1920s and was later joined by his wife Fatima. They had seven sons and one daughter; five of the sons were born in India and accompanied them to South Africa whilst the other children were born here. The couple settled in Dundee, where her grandfather Essack ran a mattress-making and French polishing business. Shameema describes her grandmother, Fatima as an ‘enlightened woman’ who – unusually for that era – was very determined that her children would receive an education:

She was determined to get her children educated. I mean I am talking about in the thirties hey, she had a vision to get her children educated. Although she came from India with her husband and her children, she made sure she got her children educated. So my dad went to India and his two other brothers after him too became lawyers – they were highly successful lawyers in the apartheid struggle.

However, enlightened as her grandmother was, her only daughter was not educated and Shameema says ‘the poor thing...they got her married off very early in Dundee. I think they were happy to get her married. You know those days, your boys were your life.’

Shameema speaks with a great sense of pride about the involvement of her uncles, Dr Omar’s brothers, in the anti-apartheid struggle. Her uncle Kader Hassim was active in the trade union movement and the Unity Movement and was the first Indian to open a law practice in Pietermaritz Street, Pietermaritzburg. He was arrested in 1970 and sentenced to eight years on Robben Island.¹¹⁴

Another uncle, Abdul Karim Essack, qualified as a teacher at Fort Hare, then as a lawyer at Natal University Non-European Section and ran a legal practice in Verulam, but was forced into exile in 1965 after being in solitary confinement for 90 for his involvement in the Unity Movement. Shameema has a vague recollection of the day he escaped the country:

I was like four years old. He took us to the beach for the day. We were waiting on the beach and he never pitched up to pick us up, because it was all a ploy to put the special branch off. So while we were happily picnicking at the beach – it was a family picnic – me, my sister, my cousins and my other uncle, like a whole lot of us – he ran away and ended up in Tanzania, and that is where he died.

A.K. Essack led a rich life in exile. He completed a course in journalism at the age of 55; then

¹¹⁴ Vahed, *Muslim Portraits*, 148-151.

went to Tanzania where he was a close friend of President Benjami Mkapa. He wrote for newspapers like *News Line*, *Daily News* and *Sunday News*, taking up the cause of anti-colonial organisations across the continent as well as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). He was well-known in the highest government circles in Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia, and Mozambique.¹¹⁵ Another of Shameema's uncles was a principal of a school, one was a teacher, and another an accountant. Shameema speaks with great admiration of the fact that 'in those days, one brother after the other, would study and educate the next brother.'

None of the brothers joined their father in his business, and Shameema believes that he did not object because her granny was 'the boss' – the dominant figure in the family, who wanted her sons to have a good education, despite their financial difficulties. According to Shameema, it was due to the help of a wealthy trading family that her father was able to go to India and study; she recalls that later on, he paid that family back.

Shameema speaks with less authority about mother's family, the Hurzuks of Cape Town. She thinks that they were involved in business in Cape Town but is not certain. Her mother was the third of three children, the eldest of whom was a female and the second a male. Her parents' marriage was arranged by 'somebody in Maritzburg' with the couple seeing each other before the wedding day. Shameema describes her upbringing in Pietermaritzburg as a 'middle-class' one. She recalls that due to the involvement of her father and uncles in politics, she and her sister Shamshad who is three years her junior, were aware of the exploits of, and interacted with political activists such as Yunus Carrim,¹¹⁶ Jay Naidoo,¹¹⁷ and Irshad Motala, the son of Chota Motala.

Shameema also grew up in a family of strong women. She recalls that her mother and other women in the community were involved in the community in the sense that they had to take care of households when the husbands were involved in political meetings, in exile or in prison. They also provided moral and material support to one another. She recalls that her mother used to 'attend all the rallies.' Her aunt, Nina Hassim, Kader's wife, qualified as a pharmacist and supported her family when Kader was on Robben Island.

¹¹⁵ Vahed, *Muslim Portraits*, 121-123.

¹¹⁶ Carrim was active in politics from his high school days and was the chairperson of the National Youth Action (Pietermaritzburg) during 1972 and 1973. He was detained without trial from August to December 1976 for his role in organising demonstrations against the Soweto massacre at UDW. He subsequently studied Sociology in England, was a member of the executive committee of the NIC and at the time of writing was the South African Minister of Communications. See Vahed, *Muslim Portraits*, 66-67.

¹¹⁷ Naidoo was at the forefront of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s. He was the founding general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) from 1985 to 1993 and served as a minister in the ANC government from 1994 to 1999. See Naidoo, Jay. *Fighting for Justice, A Lifetime of Political and Social Activism*. Picador Africa, 2010

Shameema's father passed away in 1969 when she was just 12. She recalls that her family coped well with his death, thanks to the extended family context within which they lived. Finances too, were not a problem, as her father had many investments which made it possible for her mother to move the family into a flat in Pietermaritzburg.

Schooling

Shameema first schooled at Pietermaritzburg Islamia School and then at Raisethorpe High School. The former, she says was not an Islamic school, but a government school funded by the Muslim community, or what in the parlance of the day was a state-aided school. One thing which stands out in her memory is that 'very very few, in fact not even a handful' of girls went to high school. Most either dropped out of school wilfully or were 'taken out of school' by their parents, who 'just didn't want to educate the girls. I mean like in matric in Raisethorpe High, hey Fatima, one, not even two Muslim girls were there.... The Muslim girls never went to school.' Shameema was born a few years earlier than the other subjects in this study and it appears that there was a sea change in the years that followed.

Shameema did not have any problems regarding schooling as her father's family were firm advocates of education. That she, her sister and her female cousins had to go to school was a 'no-brainer,' she says.

Shameema's recollection of the 1960s and 1970s is that, 'nobody was very religious,' and her family was no different:

They were average. Nobody was [very religious]), and let's just put it this way, my mother and them never knew what was a scarf on the head. You understand, nobody, even when we were in the '70s at UDW, there weren't as many religious people as now. It is different [now].

The upside of this, she points out, was that there was no divide between Muslims and others who were not Muslim, and some of Shameema's closest friends were and remain in the latter category. Part of the reason for this, she believes, is that Islamia School was not an Islamic school; it was simply a school built by the Muslim community but attended by children from diverse religious groupings:

And we had a lot of non-Muslim children there. There were not Muslim children only, everybody was there. These were like not like la-di-da schools, they were just run of the

mill schools that everybody came to...it was just for ordinary children and at the same school, we had *madrasah* in the afternoon.

Shameema's observations are correct but the relationship between attending Islamic school and people's sense of religiosity is a bit of a chicken and egg situation. Are Muslims becoming religious, whatever that means, because of the presence of Islamic schools, or does becoming religious cause them to send their children to Islamic schools? I would suggest the latter because schools are part of a raft of institutions being embraced by Muslims, ranging from *halal* certification authorities to Islamic finance.

Shameema recalls that at *madrasah* she was taught the basics of Islam by *apas* (*madrasah* teachers) who hailed from the Mia family from nearby Nottingham Road. She does not recall being taught anything apart from basic *Qur'an* recitation.

After matriculating, she registered for a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1978 at UDW majoring in English and History. She also completed her honours degree in Oriental Studies and later a Higher Diploma in Education at the University of Natal (she doesn't remember specific dates as all relevant documentation was stolen when her home was broken into years later). In keeping with her exuberant personality, she also did a course in Speech and Drama as part of her undergraduate degree and recalls 'acting on stage' at university many a time.

Significantly, she chose Islamic Studies as a "filler" subject, and thoroughly enjoyed Professor Salman Nadvi's lectures, saying that she learnt 'everything' about Islam from that course. Pakistan-born Professor Nadvi, who holds a PhD from the University of Chicago, was brought to South Africa at the instigation of the Muslim community to start the Islamic Studies department, which educated a few generations of students before being shut down in the 1990s in the name of rationalisation. Shameema found him open-minded when it came to most issues, especially his views on women:

He was very open-minded, and he never criticised us at all. Like those days nobody was covered [head] on campus. So I mean it encouraged us like to enjoy the course and ... and he has got very, very ... you know him, vast experience. So we enjoyed it thoroughly, I enjoyed it thoroughly and that helped me later at *Maulana Yunus Patel's* school.

Marriage

It was during Shameema's first year on campus in 1978 that she met Aslam Mayat, the son of Zuleikha Mayat, a founding member of the WCG and a prominent figure then, and now, in the Muslim

community. They married a year later in 1979. Aslam was studying law at the time and she continued her studies after marriage. Aslam was extremely supportive, and both her mother-in-law and father-in-law were ‘enlightened’, she says, so this did not constitute a problem at all: ‘For them, you have to study, you have to study, go for it.’ As she sees it, then as well as now, the opposite scenario constitutes a problem in marriages, i.e., where the wife wants to study but the husband and in-laws are opposed to it:

My mother-in-law volunteered my services to *Maulana* Yunus Patel (see later in the chapter) and all that, right...that wasn’t an issue. I think that was battle number one. If they are not encouraging you to study and your husband is not liking the idea, you are not going anywhere, right Fatima, but with them ... with us it wasn’t a problem. You want to go, you carry on going.

Shameema and Aslam have two children, a daughter Dilshaad (born in 1984) who studied commerce, and is now married and a mother, and a son Asif (born in 1989), a chartered accountant.

She is also well-supported in her desire to uplift the community by both her husband and her mother-in-law, she says, pointing out that in their 36 years of marriage, Aslam has ‘not minded at all,’ but on the contrary, is always keen to advise her. Also, since she doesn’t feel very confident about driving a car, he often takes her to the places she needs to go.

It is often said that behind every successful man is a woman; in this case we can say that behind two successful women, Shameema and Mrs Mayat is Aslam who has supported every endeavour of his mother, who at 89 at the time of writing, continues to play an active role in the community, ever since her husband passed away unexpectedly in a motor accident in 1979.

Civic Engagement

Madrasatus-Sawlehaat

A few years after Shameema completed her studies (she estimates it was around 1983 or 1984), Zuleikha Mayat ran into *Maulana* Yunus Patel, a well-known South African *alim* (religious scholar), whilst shopping in Overport. Shameema believes that this chance meeting was part of a Divine Plan. In fact, she related the meeting with great clarity:

She [Mrs Mayat] bumped into *Maulana* Yunus Patel at Sunrise Fruiterers [in Brickfield Road] in the early 1980s. And she asked *Maulana* Patel “How are you?” and he told her about the girls *madrasah* he had just started; it was an unknown concept in Durban, he had just started it in Glenearn Road, Overport, and she asked him “What help do you

need? Can we help you?” And he told her that the number one challenge that he had was that he had students but he had no teachers. He is like stuck for staff. The house was donated to him at no charge by a Muslim family, they helped but he said the big challenge was he had no teachers. So she said, “Don’t worry, I have got teachers for you.” And she said, “Look I am sending them to you but they are not exactly very strict with Islam and with their dressing.” He said “Don’t worry, you send them over.” So she sent me, and that was my first introduction to the real Islamic training, and I ended up there for over eight years.

Maulana Patel, who received his higher Islamic education at *Darul-Uloom* Deoband from 1962 to 1969, was arguably the best known *alim* within the *Deobandi* / *Tabligh* tradition in Durban following the death of *Maulana* Ansari and until his passing away in 2011. During the 1980s he was the president of the Jamiatul Ulama, KwaZulu-Natal (Council of Muslim Theologians) and sat on the religious committee of the Orient School. He subsequently established and served as *Imam* of the Mallinson Road Mosque in Asherville, from where he acquired a transnational following. *Maulana* Patel initiated the *Madrasatus-Sawlehaat*, which translates literally to ‘Madrasah of the Pious Women’ in the 1980s, an institution aimed at educating Muslim girls and young women about Islam, as well as imparting basic housekeeping skills.¹¹⁸

Shameema, who was in her early twenties at this time, roped in a group of her friends from the circles of the WCG to assist in teaching the girls who were aged roughly between eight and ten. They would go to the *madrasah* daily from 9am to 12pm and teach the learners how to cook and bake, and impart basic Islamic knowledge, and some English and arithmetic. She recalls this period in her life with much fondness:

I just started enrolling women willy nilly – whoever I knew, I’d say, “let’s go”, and *Maulana* was ever so grateful that we started teaching there. Not a day did he criticise us – or say something like “your hair is showing.” He gave us English books with an Islamic theme to teach, like *Isabella*.¹¹⁹ From Glenearn Road we moved to a bigger premises in Tarndale Avenue. I taught English and Islamic History. It was the most wonderful experience of my life. If we were not there, these girls would have been sitting

¹¹⁸ See Jamiatul Ulama. KwaZulu-Natal. <http://jamiat.org.za/the-life-of-hazrath-moulana-yunus-patel/> Last Accessed: 6 October 2015; Maulana Yunus Patel. <http://yunuspatel.co.za/myp-yunuspatel.php>. Last accessed 6 October 2015. . See Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982, for a discussion of the role of Deoband in Islamic education in India.

¹¹⁹ Written by Maulana Muhammad Saeed Dehlvi in 1974, *Isabella* is the classic tale of a young girl who finds Islam and encounters danger in medieval Muslim Spain, which is ridden with religious conflict. <http://blog.darulislam.info/node/93>, Last Accessed: 6 October 2015

at home and not being exposed to anything brighter. One year we forced *Maulana* – we said to him “Let’s have a concert.” He said “Fine.” So we had a ladies-only concert. The girls were very talented – they showcased their talent and it was so successful, it really opened the public’s eye.

Shameema and her friends would also help transport some of the other *apas* to and from *madrasah*, including *Maulana* Yunus Patel’s wife daily, and she describes her relationships at the *madrasah* as ‘a family affair’. As the *madrasah* grew, and its student population increased, she and her friends felt that they had done their duty and ‘put the school on the map,’ and they ‘moved on’. By then Shameema, who was doing this more as a service than a vocation, also had her own children to take care of, and she was confident of the school’s future as they had a core of trained and dedicated teachers. Shameema proudly says that when she meets some of her former students today, some three decades later, they tell her they still comment fondly on those times and the lessons she imparted to them.

It was around a decade after Shameema had given up teaching at the *madrasah*, in 1997, that I first came to learn of *Maulana* Yunus Patel and his *madrasah* for young females. As noted earlier in this thesis, I was fresh out of the Natal Technikon, doing my in-service training as a journalist at *The Mercury* in the Independent Newspapers building in Greyville, Durban, when my news editor asked me to do a story on working Muslim women who wore the *hijab* or the *niqab* (face veil). My first reaction was to call the Jamiatul Ulama and ask them to refer me to some suitable candidates that I could interview. The *maulana* who was tasked with dealing with my query abruptly told me that Muslim women wouldn’t want to be featured in the media, and advised that I call Zuleikha Mayat because ‘she likes publicity.’ This offhand remark pointed to the deep chasm among Muslims where the traditional *ulama* believe that women’s roles should be confined to the private sphere while those that engage in the public sphere must have an ulterior motive and cannot be doing so simply for the public good.

Having failed with the Jamiat, I visited a women’s *madrasah* in Durban Central, initiated and run by *Maulana* Nazim Hunter, in the hope of speaking to the students there since most of them wore the *niqab*. As a 21-year-old who had just started wearing *hijab* herself, I was curious about the concept of the face-cover. Unfortunately the women there – although they had consented to the visit by a journalist – were not keen to be interviewed and seemed more intent on questioning me about my views on Islam and some of the articles I had written.

Exasperated, I decided I would abandon the idea of conducting interviews and decided to pen an opinion piece instead about how I felt society viewed women in *hijab* and *niqab*. Since I only wore the *hijab*, I decided that I would also speak to women in *niqab* in order to better understand the subject. I had heard much about *Maulana* Yunus Patel in various sectors of the Muslim community. He seemed to be well-respected and well-liked so I contacted him and requested permission to conduct research amongst the students of Madrasatus-Sawlehaat. He suggested that I speak to the post-matric group, which was made up of the older students in the *madrasah*, most of whom had just completed school, and were attending the *madrasah* of their own accord in search of spiritual meaning in their lives.

By then *Maulana* had a complement of teachers who were very different from Shameema, who does not wear the *hijab*. One had graduated as an *alimah* (a female who has studied Islam beyond a basic level in a *Darul Uloom*, literally a house of knowledge, which is essentially a *madrasah* catering exclusively for one gender or the other) in Maligaon in India; another had graduated from the *Darul Uloom* Zakariyyah in Lenasia, Gauteng. All the teachers and the learners wore the *niqab* within and outside the *madrasah*. This was part of the *madrasah*'s code of conduct. *Maulana* preached that the wearing of the *niqab* was *fardh* (obligatory).

Whilst the young women at the *madrasah* were very friendly and helpful, they clearly felt that working as a journalist in mixed-gender environment was *haram*, as a result of which, I began to question whether I was doing something sinful (see the introductory chapter to this study for more information about this phase of my life). An inner battle ensued which culminated in me abruptly leaving work and going to the *madrasah* almost daily, to listen to *Maulana* Patel's lectures and to assist him with administrative work. I too began wearing the *niqab* and in fact wore it from 1997 to 2004, eventually removing it when my own reading led me to the conclusion that the wearing thereof was not compulsory. As much as I enjoyed my many visits to the *madrasah*, in that they were spiritually fulfilling and the students and teachers were friendly, and *Maulana* Patel was highly approachable, in retrospect it must be conceded that the environment also closed my mind to other possibilities, and played a critical role in my decision as a 21-year-old to leave *The Mercury*, wear the *niqab*, stop watching television, marry as soon as possible, and pressurise my immediate family to follow the same path.

I was therefore very surprised when Shameema, who is well-known as an extroverted, non-*hijab* wearing, Muslim woman who confidently speaks her mind in private and in public,

told me that she had spent eight years teaching at the *madrasah*. The first question which arose was whether the parent community had objected. Shameema said that they had not; they were happy as long as their children were in a *madrasah* environment. Analysing this discussion, it is evident that this would not be tolerated in the present day. As this thesis points out, the period from the mid-1960s to mid-1980s was the time when most Muslim women were able to access secular education. Before this time, Indian, including Muslim, women were denied these opportunities by factors such as poverty, a lack of facilities, and the conservative attitudes of parents. This changed from the mid-1960s but there was a counter-revolution from the mid-1980s due to the influence of religious reformists who regard secular education for girls (and in some cases even for boys) as prohibited in Islam. Gradually, many girls have been withdrawn from secular girls' schools and placed in Islamic schools, some of which lead to *Darul Ulooms*, eliminating the possibility of secular education in the future. This is part of a gender counter-revolution and time will tell what the sociological consequences will be for Muslim society in South Africa. The point being made is that the roots of this transformation date back to the time that Shameema started her teaching and while she was accepted, now that the revolution is in full swing, such dress will not be tolerated.¹²⁰

Assisting the South African National Zakah Fund

At around the time that Shameema began teaching in *Maulana* Patel's school, she also conducted cooking classes for female beneficiaries of the South African National Zakah Fund (SANZAF), together with two of her friends who she roped in to assist.

SANZAF is 'is a faith-based, socio-welfare and educational organisation that strives to facilitate the empowerment of needy families through the efficient collection and effective distribution of *zakah* (compulsory charity) and other *sadaqah* (voluntary charity) in a proactive and cost effective way through projects – with dignity, sincerity and a shared responsibility.'¹²¹

At the time in question, its Durban branch was based in Queen Street and Shameema and her two friends would go there to teach a group of underprivileged female recipients of SANZAF's grants/food hampers/other assistance how to cook and bake as a means of earning an income:

For many a year we taught them basics...taught them how to make chicken curry...they used to

¹²⁰ See Vahed and Waetjen, *Gender, Modernity and Indian Delights*, chapter 5, 'Iqraa', 199-244 for a discussion of Muslim girls' access to education; Also Davids, 'Muslim schools in post-apartheid South Africa,' *Living with an apartheid past?* *Education as Change*, 18 (2), 2014 who argues that Islamic schools in post-apartheid South Africa perpetuate stereotypes about Muslim women.

¹²¹ SANZAF. Available at <http://www.sanzaf.org.za/about-us>. Last accessed on 6 October 2015.

make and sell cupcakes, and some of them we taught them how to bake biscuits...Like easy things, not difficult things now, easy things, cheap things to sell. They did sell and they made a lot of money...and then a couple of years later, we told them they must come to the centre and we ... and then we asked them what they wanted to learn, and they said they wanted to learn how to make things like *dhaal* and rice and then they could cook for funerals...It was great, and then we taught them how to make easy cheap things, like *akhni* (an Indian rice dish) and things like that.

This was a natural fit for Shameema as she was a member (and is now President) of the WCG, which was responsible for publishing the *Indian Delights* series, which is discussed below.

Women's Cultural Group

By the time Shameema married Aslam, the WCG had been in existence for a period of 35 years. It was by default that she too became involved in it: 'Let's put it this way, I got involved with it because I was in the house', that is, the house of her mother-in-law Zuleikha Mayat who founded the group. Meetings and 'everything' happened in the house at that time, she recalls, as this was long before the organisation acquired its own premises in Kenilworth Road, Overport.

She has served as the president of the WCG since around 2000, overseeing its numerous activities, which include fundraising, a bursary scheme, and hamper and sandwich distribution projects, amongst other activities. She explains that the organisation distributes hampers annually to various bona-fide organisations which in turn, make these available to the poor and needy, while sandwiches are distributed once a week to a local school. Hampers are mainly distributed during the Muslim fasting month of *Ramadan*, when feeding the poor is especially encouraged, and distribution points include areas like Chatsworth and Phoenix, which are home to many working class Muslims, though Shameema prides herself on the fact that hamper distribution is not restricted to Muslim beneficiaries. Part of the reason that hampers are distributed through other organisations is that given women members' multiple responsibilities as well as the high crime levels, it would be difficult for the group to do so.

Shameema is also happy about the visible impact the WCG bursary programme has had on the lives of the disadvantaged:

You know the Zondi brothers, those lawyers? You must meet them, with their mothers, so stylish, the brothers. I mean, two brothers, lawyers. Another organisation the Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI) referred them onto us right, so we took them on as lawyers. We got them qualified, we even found them better accommodation compared to where they were staying when they were studying.

These are just two of the hundreds and hundreds of students who have been assisted by the group.

The bursary programme is not limited to university students. Shameema cites the example of two little girls, at pre-school, who are being brought up by their uncle, since their mother passed away and their father is unable to support them:

They came from the pre-school next door [the Mariam Bee Sultan Pre-School which is situated on the same premises as the WCG] to say that they have got these two little girls, so cutie pie ... five and four ... so every year somebody pays their school fees. Now school fees is not enough to sustain you, so now every month we just give pre-school money to buy juice, to buy bread ... then we bought school bags and juice bottles and we bought underwear you know, to keep them going while they are at school.

The term 'president' may connote a figure distant from the day-to-day running of a body, and more involvement in higher level engagements, but in the case of Shameema this is not true. She is involved in a totally hands-on manner:

I oversee everything. Okay, let's start with basic hall hire. People hire the hall, now say Fatima wants the hall [and] we charge R1 800 but Fatima can't afford that, Fatima wants to pay R1 500, then I make the phone calls, let Fatima have it. Then if Fatima doesn't pay, now my job is to run after Fatima.... Then, all the fund raisers we do, I have to oversee everything, find a speaker, or things like that, something to now attract the public. This Palestine walk to see A-Z, I have to supervise all that.

She is not afraid to take the initiative to get something off the ground, then involve others.

Over the years, Shameema has tried to encourage the WCG to 'move with the times'. For example, she once invited Jailoshini Naidoo, a comedienne, to perform at an event, to 'liven things up' because 'I don't know if you noticed, at all these like ladies' functions and whatever, they like something humorous. They don't like serious things, right or wrong?' While she initially faced resistance from some members who wanted Naidoo to tone down her act, and make it 'more legit', in the end it all turned out well. All in all, she has thoroughly enjoyed her years of involvement with WCG, and views her fellow members as not only friends, but 'best friends.'

One of the group's main claims to international fame is the *Indian Delights* series, famous for teaching

generations of young Indian brides how to cook “authentic” Indian food.¹²² Based on recipes from the community and edited by Zuleikha Mayat, the book carries hundreds of recipes, interspersed with anecdotes and advice on how to put together various dishes, ranging from the simple to the more complex. The first edition was printed in 1961, and an expanded second edition was published in 1970. Since Shameema’s marriage to Aslam in 1979, three different versions have been published and she has been involved in each, assisting Mrs Mayat. Shameema describes the project of producing the book as a ‘full time’ endeavour:

When the books are written, we do it at home. Everything gets done from here. The kitchen is ... not a kitchen for me. We cook the food as every recipe ... we try out. We take the photographs, here at home. We are fully occupied because we have to buy all the ingredients, we have to prepare them, then we have to get the photographer in to take the photos.

Because the Mayat's home phone number is listed as a contact in the recipe books, Shameema and her mother-in-law are sometimes called by people wanting further instructions on how to make certain dishes featured in the book. She finds this funny:

People will phone me in the middle of making *suttarphirni* (a traditional Indian sweetmeat), and they'll say “tell us how to make it.” I tell them straight “Listen darling, I myself can't make that thing – how am I going to teach you how to make it? Go and get professionals to teach you.” I'm honest – I won't say “Now let's go with that recipe and try to figure it out.” Hell, please, ... none of my generation members can make *suttarphirni* but the public want to make *suttarphirni*... I tell them, buy it man, buy it for R4.00 and I give them numbers too where you can purchase it [laughs].

She is struck by the central role that *Indian Delights* plays in sustaining the WCG, after all these years:

Allah said that sixty years ago, “they are getting their *Indian Delights* book” and that was the best thing that could have ever happened to the Women’s Cultural Group. There is no looking back, no looking back...the whole strength of the group depends on that book. We have income from the hall hire and other small things, but basically ... if we didn't have that *Indian Delight* story, we wouldn't ... have been where we are today, no way.

Though a book of “Indian” recipes, the demand for *Indian Delights* is global and remains as buoyant as ever. The idea for *Indian Delights* was coined by Shameema’s mother-in-law before Shameema was

¹²² See Vahed and Waetjen, *Gender, Modernity and Indian Delights*, chapter 2, ‘Indian Delights’, 105-145.

even born, but to date, it is considered WCG's full time business. Income generated from sales is invested 'wisely,' which means healthy returns that contribute to the sustainability of the organisation.

Activism around Palestine

Shameema is also involved in the Palestine Walk for Freedom which takes place in various cities around the country. It was initiated by the Palestine Solidarity Alliance (PSA), a South African based Solidarity Movement that 'supports the struggle for a free, non-racial and democratic Palestinian State for all who live in it.' The PSA initiated the walk in 2010, after Israel's 2008 attacks on Gaza, with the aim of educating the public about the situation in Palestine. Over the years the walk has grown to incorporate a number of towns and cities, nationally and internationally, and in 2014 included Lenasia, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Benoni, Roshnee, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Durban, Tehran, Jerusalem and Gaza.¹²³

Shortly after the walk was initiated, Shameema's husband Aslam attended a meeting at the offices of the South African Muslim Network (SAMNET), a Durban-based Muslim advocacy group, which was addressed by Yusuf Saloojee, one of the organisers of the walk in Gauteng. Saloojee emphasised that Durban had not hosted the event previously, and 'somehow', Shameema does not remember exactly how or why, Aslam was asked to take on this task. He agreed and promptly enlisted the help of the WCG, in other words Shameema and his mother.

He told me he can't do it without our backing, because our offices do all the work ... So that is how we got involved with this whole thing and we took it on....When we do things, we do it with a passion, let's go for it, do or die, and it was Aslam as an individual who initiated the walk in Durban and behind him was the Cultural group.

The WCG handles the entire registration process for the walk in Durban. It also arranges for 400 underprivileged children to attend the event, providing their transport as well as meals and t-shirts for the day. This means a lot to Shameema:

The Cultural Group pays for all that – to bring the kids here and enlighten them, and basically more importantly to treat them for the day. These are like really impoverished children. We give them a nice burger and a t-shirt and the kids love it because it is an outing.

Shortly after becoming involved in organising the Palestinian Freedom Walk, Shameema and Aslam were contacted by Muhammed Desai, the national coordinator for the Boycott, Divestment,

¹²³ Palestine Solidarity Alliance. Walk for Freedom. Available at <http://www.palestinesa.co.za/walkforfreedom.htm>. Accessed on 6 October 2015.

Sanctions. South Africa movement (BDS SA), a South African NPO established to advance the international global BDS campaign against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. According to the organisation's website, it was initiated in response to a 2005 call by Palestinians, inspired by the successful boycott and isolation of apartheid South Africa, for the international community to support a non-violent campaign of BDS against Israel until the latter complies with international law and upholds human rights with regard to Palestine.¹²⁴

Shameema marvels at 'God's Plan' and how it has time and time again, made it possible for her to become involved in civic activity. In this case, Saloojee, impressed by the way in which the Walk for Freedom was organised, referred Desai to Aslam and Shameema.

It is very strange how we got into BDS. God has got a plan. The same trend, the same thing happened. Muhammed Desai got in touch with us and said that Yusuf Saloojee had said that we were the people to get a hold of. So I arranged a talk because people were very, very confused about what to buy and what not to buy [that is, in terms of the boycott]. So we invited Muhammed Desai to come and talk to our community, especially our ladies.

In addition to hosting Desai as a speaker the event also served as a fundraiser, as the WCG had taken a decision to donate all proceeds from ticket sales to BDS SA. Since then, BDS SA – which is based in Johannesburg – contacts the WCG whenever it needs to organise an event in Durban. Shameema does not mind this. As she points out, 'we are ever-readies, we jump in ... if it's for the cause, we don't mind. We decided, it's a good cause, in Durban, they needed somebody to help out, so we decided to help out.' Over the years, the WCG has invited some dynamic individuals to address the community at its centre. In October 2013, Fadwa Barghouti, the wife of prominent Palestinian political prisoner Marwan Barghouti, visited South Africa as part of high level Palestinian delegation, which also included Luisa Morgantini the former vice president of the European Parliament, to launch the "Free Marwan Barghouti and All Palestinian Political Prisoners" campaign at Robben Island in partnership with the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation. On this occasion, the Ahmed Kathrada¹²⁵ Foundation and BDS SA asked the WCG to organise a fundraiser for the "Free Marwan Barghouti and All Palestinian Political Prisoners" campaign, as well as for BDS SA.

The dinner was attended by approximately a thousand people at the NMJ Islamic Centre, and Shameema

¹²⁴ Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions. South Africa. Available at <http://www.bdssouthafrica.com/>. Retrieved on 1 October 2015.

¹²⁵ Ahmed Kathrada is one of South Africa's most prominent Robben Island political prisoners. He was arrested at Rivonia in 1963 along with Nelson Mandela and sentenced to life imprisonment. He spent almost 27 years in prison. Kathrada began an epistolary correspondence with Zuleikha Mayat for a decade from 1979 and they have cooperated in the post-apartheid period. The Ahmed Kathrada Foundation was established to promote peace and non-racialism. See *Dear Ahmedbhai, Dear Zuleikhabhen. The Letters of Ahmed Kathrada and Zuleikha Mayat 1979-1989*. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2009.

is proud that it went off smoothly:

We had to do all the paperwork, collecting all the funds. Safoora [administrator at the WCG] and the others are so efficient, when BDS SA wanted accounting records, they were surprised to see how efficiently everything was run, every ticket, every sale was accounted for. They couldn't point a finger at the Cultural Group. We did it so well, ran the whole show, the entire show we ran...

In April 2013 Aslam and Shameema visited war-torn Gaza as part of 'Team SA Gaza,' which was formed when a group of avid South African Muslim long distance runners decided to travel to Gaza to participate in the annual Gaza marathon, organised since 2011 by the United Nations Relief Workers Agency (UNRWA) to raise funds for its Summer Games programme for children in the region. The event was cancelled in 2013 when Hamas, which governs the territory, decided not to allow women to participate for religious reasons. However, the UNRWA decided to fulfil its commitment to those who had already registered¹²⁶ and 37 South Africans visited Gaza over four days.

Shameema and Aslam were amongst the group. Members assisted at hospitals and clinics, presented Early Childhood Development workshops to educators, and engaged with local businesses and NGOs. The group also gifted a water truck, for which they had raised funds back home, on behalf of all South Africans, to Gaza, where there is a dire water shortage. The trip stands out in Shameema's mind for many reasons. She felt fulfilled by collecting money for the people of Gaza and personally witnessing the impact of the funds on the beneficiaries. 'Normally you just give the money and say "Go" but here we went ourselves.' She also recalls that they were kept busy for the full duration of the trip. One of the things she discovered, was the severe shortage of spectacles and on her return she sent more than 700 ('if not more') spectacle frames. She describes the trip as 'very very' enlightening. 'To think we have so much and they have got sweet nothing, when we went to some of the houses...' she reflects. 'Not that here [in South Africa] our people are suffering any less, but under different circumstances, that one is really man made. I mean those people are bombing away, they have got no choice, they are just stuck in there.'

Shameema laments that due to the ongoing instability in Gaza, she has no idea what became of the water tankers: 'I don't even know if those tankers are still going, I can't tell you. Even the libraries too, I can't tell you if they were bombed or not.'

Another aspect of life in Gaza which struck Shameema was the phenomenon of young women in Gaza

¹²⁶ <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-cancels-2013-gaza-marathon> Last Accessed: 6 October 2015

marrying young men who were injured in Israeli attacks of their own accord. 'These girls feel these guys have sacrificed their lives. So they marry these guys and they take care of them and their families.' She was also moved by a function the group attended at which they met several Palestinian widows, as well as the wives of men who are in Israeli prisons.

The little children, being brought up in ... in this atmosphere...they feel for their homeland so much. They are so passionate about Gaza. We gave each adult a voucher in an envelope, each one got fifty dollars. The government is very clever – they can only use that money at the government shops, to buy their food stuff... so they can't spend the money on anything else, ... it was so sad. When you see all these young women and children, and they are not despairing or despondent ... we were crying more than anything else, it was heart wrenching. They are not crying, we are crying.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has repercussions in South Africa. In February 2015, for example, Leila Khaled, a member of the Political Bureau of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine visited South Africa on a speaking tour as a guest of BDS SA. Khaled was involved in several plane hijackings in 1969 and 1970, and pro-Israeli South African bodies condemned the visit. In a statement titled 'BDS-SA invites hijacker while world condemns terrorism,' published on the website of the South African Board of Jewish Deputies, its director, Wendy Khan, stated that the BDS SA 'has conclusively demonstrated yet again that it has no interest in promoting peace, dialogue, reconciliation or understanding.'¹²⁷ In a blog post published on the *Times of Israel* website, Josh Benjamin a former chairman of the South African Union of Jewish Students wrote that Khaled should not be allowed to visit South Africa: 'Universities should ban her from their campuses – if not on principle then in the interests of ensuring a feeling of security for all students.'¹²⁸ But BDS SA went ahead with the tour and Khaled visited various cities around the country. In Durban, she addressed an audience of about a thousand at a fund-raising dinner. The WCG was involved in organising the event, this time assisting Team Gaza SA. Shameema found this challenging: 'Remember we as the cultural group – we are used to doing things our way, but in a partnership it works differently.'

Gandhi Salt March

Shameema and Aslam also represent the WCG on the Gandhi Salt March committee, which is organised by the Gandhi Development Trust (GDT), whose head, Ela Gandhi, is the Mahatma's granddaughter. According to the GDT's website, the march is organised annually to celebrate the lives of Gandhi and

¹²⁷ <http://www.jewishsa.co.za/general/bds-sa-invites-hijacker-while-world-condemns-terrorism/> Accessed: 6 October 2015

¹²⁸ <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/leila-khaled-and-the-hijacking-of-human-rights/> Accessed: 6 October 2015

Nkosi Albert Luthuli, 'to show solidarity with the principles of ubuntu and nonviolence.' The walk starts at the Phoenix Settlement established by Gandhi in 1903 and ends at the Kings Park Athletic Stadium on the Durban beachfront. Shameema laughingly points out that her 'big job' is to ensure that there is something for everyone to eat en route to the finish. The laughter is due to the connection that is often made between the WCG and food, due to the various recipe books that it has published and the culinary skills of its various members. She and Aslam found it strange that no refreshments were provided during the walk and secured sponsorships for edibles like fruit, dates and biscuits. Shameema believes that this walk has great significance in several respects. It is symbolically important at a time when South Africa is beset by so many problems ranging from crime, to corruption and racial intolerance, and she also considers it important to break out of a 'Muslims-only' mentality and participate in an organisation that is multi-faith and non-racial.

Assisting the elderly

Via the WCG, Shameema is also involved in the Baitul Hifazat, a home for female senior citizens in Sydenham. The home is a project of Darul Yatama wal Masakeen, which credits the WCG as assisting the convener of the home on its website.¹²⁹ Group members visit the residents regularly in an effort to counter their feelings of loneliness:

They are lonely people. The moment they see you, they are so happy and ready to chat. If I don't go for a while, then one of the residents who has been there for 17 years will phone me and say "I didn't see you for so long. Why are you not coming?"

When the home was first initiated, Shameema and other members of the WCG provided cooking lessons to the cooks employed at the home. They also provide meals once a week. WCG member Sarah Simjee visits the home twice a week and reports back on residents' needs which are addressed as far as possible. Shameema enjoys working with the aged and spoke enthusiastically about another project involving this sector of the community which the WCG is also involved in.

In 2014 the WCG became involved in a project initiated by the Islamic Medical Association (IMA) targeting senior citizens within the Muslim community. Held at the NMJ Islamic Centre in Overport annually since 2014, several other organisations are also involved in various aspects to ensure that the day is a success. Five hundred senior citizens were hosted in 2014, and 700 in 2015. Many were bussed in from outlying areas like Chatsworth and Phoenix to the NMJ Hall where the day's events included educational talks, health screening services and meals. The WCG contributed R2 000 towards the cost

¹²⁹ Darul Yatama wal Masakeen. Available at <http://www.darulyatama.org.za/hifazath.htm>. Accessed on 6 October 2015.

of cutlery for the event, funded the wages of ten waiters, and organised part of the refreshments, with members preparing some of the eats at the Group's kitchen in Kenilworth Road. Shameema was left with mixed feelings:

It is a very, very rewarding and a very, very depressing day, depressing to think that so many people are living basically hand to mouth. For the 700 people this year — we gave them *samoosas*, *bhajias*, cake, we gave them a whole lot of things, we plated it and gave it to each one. Do you know what they did? They took serviettes from the table and said “we are taking it home for the family”. I said “be my guest, do what you want, it is for you all. If you want to take it home, take it home.” We packed food for all of them. It was very, very, very sad to think that we take all these things here for granted and for them it is a total luxury.

Whilst telling me about the occasion, Shameema also offers to get ILM-SA, the NGO I run, involved from next year. I agree, and tell her that we can perhaps look into providing a goodie bag for each individual in attendance. She responds by issuing a stern caution to me:

I am just warning you now. Make sure if they tell you 500 people, make sure there is 500 goodie bags or make extra goodie bags, because last year, goodie bags ran very short. Then someone brought blankets, big mistake, big mistake ... because the blankets were short. We almost had a riot there. And I got blamed, they are telling me ... listen to this, they are telling me, oh I am very prejudiced...they are telling me I am looking at all the white ... the fair people and giving them. They told me this year, why you didn't give me presents this year? I said oh okay, next time present for you, but where is the presents? Then they had a few sponges and soaps on the table, that too caused it, there wasn't enough for everybody.

Shameema believes that while the day's events were highly successful, it can be improved by replacing some of the talks with entertainment: 'I saw some of them falling asleep. You can't give them a talk, you need Hindi songs and that for them.' On the plus side, she reported that five tables were allocated to each organisation involved in the event and they were required to “host” those tables, including interacting with the elderly seated there. This made the guests feel special. She warned: 'You can't have snooty people there. You have to be sympathetic and be happy and cheer them up, they need cheering up.' While the aim is largely to cater for the underprivileged, Shameema remarked that 'very, very affluent old ladies' phone the Group's offices for invitations 'because they are lonely.' This causes Shameema to reflect on the fact that it is considered taboo amongst Muslims to put the elderly in homes; yet, changes in lifestyle and family structure have made it difficult for many families to take care of the physical and emotional needs of the elderly, an issue that she feels needs to be addressed in a serious

and comprehensive manner by Muslim organisations.

Xenophobia

I interviewed Shameema shortly after a spate of xenophobic violence hit Durban in April 2015. The situation escalated to the extent that thousands of foreign nationals sought refuge in make-shift camp sites in Isipingo, Chatsworth and Phoenix. Shortly after the violence started the premier of Kwazulu-Natal, Senzo Mchunu called for a march against xenophobia. According to media reports, around 10,000 people, among them Mchunu himself and the mayor of Durban James Nxumalo, participated in the event.¹³⁰ Shameema and Aslam joined the march, donning their pro-Palestine regalia, and made their way to the Durban CBD to participate. However, they headed in the wrong direction and found themselves in the midst of a large *panga* and stick-wielding group, who were intent on preventing the march from taking place.

There was a riot. All these people with the cops chasing them, ran on the pavement and we are standing on the pavement, and they pushed us and almost ran us down. My biggest fear was that the police were running behind them with guns, if these guys take out guns and shoot, we are stuck there. It was the most frightening experience of my life.

For Shameema, the very concept of xenophobia is ‘horrific.’ She says there is no place in her life for that, and believes that human beings should allow everyone to live. The killing of foreigners is a tragedy in her book, and is unacceptable. Yet she and others in the Muslim community began to understand that the issue went much deeper.

Participation in this march was part of wider involvement by Muslims against xenophobia. The Minara Chamber of Commerce organised meetings of various Muslim NGOs to ensure that they were not duplicating relief efforts for the refugees in the camps; equally important, they wanted to understand the causes of xenophobia and the role that faith-based community organisations can play in countering it. I also attended these meetings as a member of ILM-SA. At one of these meetings, an indigenous black South African, who had embraced Islam, told us that one of the reasons for the xenophobic attacks was that the local population who were perpetrating these attacks, felt that foreigners were taking their jobs as they were willing to be exploited with wages below the minimum rates, due to the fact that many were not here legally, and also because they were absolutely desperate to earn an income. Shameema sympathises to a point but also points out that locals employ legal foreign workers as gardeners, for

¹³⁰ ‘Peace march against xenophobia turns ugly in Durban CBD,’ *Eyewitness News*, 16 April 2015. Available at <http://ewn.co.za/2015/04/16/Peace-march-against-xenophobia-turns-ugly-in-Durban-CBD>. Accessed on 6 October 2015

example, because most local people don't want to do such work rather than because of the pay.

The xenophobic attacks also underscored another lesson. Shameema points out that people 'with good intentions of wanting to help others, don't ask what they need, but just give them what we think they need.' Learning from her Palestine experience, she tried to establish what the needs of the people in the camps were, from their perspective, and to provide that. At the refugee camps she consulted with the coordinator so that they could supply the food that the people preferred. She recalls that many people were given 'big, big pots of *akhni*. They told me they don't like [Indian] Muslim food.' She believes it is more important to cater for specific needs than give for the sake of giving. The NGO I direct was also involved in providing meals to the refugee camp and we learnt from the camp coordinator that there had been chaos at the camp on one of the days because the refugees were unable to eat the meals that had been provided. Shameema's point seems valid, 'Our people need to be educated.'

Final thoughts

Islam plays an important role in Shameema's life but it is not an Islam of rituals. Her understanding of Islam is that it should be 'marked by honesty, sincerity and a desire to do things the right way, without saying one thing and doing another.' It means 'being good to others and conducting ourselves properly.' She holds fast to the five pillars of Islam – fasting, charity, prayer, *haji*, and the *shahadah* (testifying in the oneness of God and accepting the Prophet Muhammad as his messenger) – but valorises charity 'and most important Fatima, is honesty. Give your one hundred per cent to the underprivileged. That's my motto – help, help, help.'

In her view, compassion (or charity) should start at home, with one's domestic assistants. She finds it hypocritical that many people rush to help others but ignore those closest to them. In her own case, the Mayats are helping the children of their domestic assistant to further their education. Shameema feels strongly that the rights of employees should also be respected in terms of the hours worked, lunch breaks and so on, and finds it 'shocking' that people are mortified at the thought of giving their workers a lunch break, and a minimum wage.

Given the multitude of problems in South Africa, Shameema feels that Muslims have an important role to play and should become involved in all aspects of assisting people, not just monetarily, but also by sacrificing time. It concerns her that many Muslims are becoming 'insular'. She herself grew up in a racially mixed environment; her husband Aslam attended an international boarding school in Swaziland rather than an Indian school in apartheid South Africa, and her own children did not attend Indian or Islamic schools for this very reason as she wanted them to interact with children from all racial and religious backgrounds.

Shameema laments the fact that only two generations of women are actively involved in the WCG. They have found it difficult to recruit younger members because many of the younger generation work and those that don't, are often ultra-conservative in the religious sense and participate in other support networks. She understands why the daughters of most of the members work:

Young girls have to work. Every home needs two incomes or you can't come out. Look at school fees. School fees are two arms and three legs, they can't afford it, so they have to ... and look to run two cars ... on one man's salary today it can't come out.

For her part, Shameema's day is extremely busy and she would not want it any other way. She thrives on helping people and this gives her immense pleasure. In fact, she does not feel that she can function or that her life would have meaning without being involved. Interestingly enough, she says she has no role models in this regard, and her inspiration simply 'comes from within' even though her pre-married and married life is littered with examples of powerful women engaged in both civic action and civic activism.

She observed that the local Muslim community has changed considerably over the past two to three decades in that 'everybody wants to do their bit to help everybody.' She is quick to add, 'it is not that people weren't willing to help at all before, but today wallets are more open,' meaning that people are more willing to contribute funds. The problem though is that more people are willing to contribute funds rather than *commit* time to being personally involved in civic activities. From her own experience she has learnt that ultimately a desire to help and commit to helping has to 'come from within.' She points to many reasons for this: women working, the nuclear family set up which means that women cannot just leave the home if there are children to take care of, and other such factors, but she does find it 'frustrating'.

Shameema hopes that just as she benefited from the involvement of others in civic engagement, her own children have become 'better human beings'. From a young age her children would go everywhere. Each year, when her children's birthdays came along, she would take them and the rest of their family, to celebrate the day at an orphanage, taking food and other treats. They did the same a couple of years ago when her grandson celebrated his first birthday.

As the daughter and niece of activists who fought for a democratic South Africa, Shameema feels disillusioned with how things are shaping up in post-apartheid South Africa, in particular the nepotism, 'mad corruption', and lack of service delivery. In retrospect, she feels she was 'idealistic and stupid,' having been a student of history, to expect things to be different. Somehow, the figure of Mandela looming large over the country made her believe things might be different. This just added to her

disappointment.

Shameema does not mince her words in her assessment of the way things are around her. This was evident in the interview I conducted for this study as well as my various interactions with her. Surprisingly, she has never been the target of criticism from within the community. She feels that it is simply a question of others adopting the attitude, 'Shameema is Shameema,' and accepting her for who she is. It is perhaps the essence of who she is, empathetic and sensitive to the needs of others, which has taken her to where she is: at the helm of one of the better-known Muslim women's organisations in the country.

Chapter Six

Mariam Ismail¹³¹: serving humanity in sickness and in health

(As a Muslim woman), you are trying to please *Allah*, and at the same time helping the poor, studying at the same time, gaining Islamic knowledge at the same time because Aishah¹³² *radiyallahu anhaa* (may Allah be pleased with her), studied so many *ahadith*¹³³, and she was also knowledgeable in medicine. What I'm saying is Muslim women are trying to follow the path of '*Bismillahir rahmaanir raheem*'¹³⁴ by studying and implementing the knowledge and behaving in the way that the *Qur'an* tells us to behave.

- Mariam Ismail

Mariam Ismail is an interior decorator and an artist. A mother and grandmother, she has been active in programmes and activities aimed at uplifting local communities since her early twenties. Her story is important because she breaks many stereotypes about women in *niqab* (face-veil) and their engagement with broader society. Moreover, it is interesting because, when struck by an illness the symptoms of which are difficult to cope with, instead of entirely giving up on serving the community, Mariam turned to serving them in a different way, inspiring others who have the same illness as her.

Childhood and religious upbringing

Mariam Ismail was born in Yusuf Dadoo Street (formerly Grey Street) in 1962. Her paternal grandfather had come to South Africa from India and after a period of apprenticeship established a business selling fabric in the Durban CBD. Mariam grew up in an extended family set up, in a flat situated above the business.

Mariam points out that her grandfather...

¹³¹ This is a pseudonym. The interviewee did not want her name to be used in this study because she does not want to be seen as 'boasting' about her achievements. When it was explained that this was not the aim of the dissertation but rather to understand what it was that drew women into civic engagement, she said that still preferred her name not to be used but that it was fine for other individuals and organisations mentioned in the chapter to be retained. This does mean that some people will identify who Mariam is, but this seems to give her some comfort in speaking freely.

¹³² A wife of the prophet Muhammad; Aishah was proficient in various aspects of Islamic sciences as well as medicine. See <http://www.themodernreligion.com/prophet/aishah.html> for a detailed biography.

¹³³ The plural of *hadith*, which within Islamic studies means a saying of the Prophet Muhammad. Aishah is one of four persons (the others being Abu Hurayrah, Abdullah ibn Umar, and Anas ibn Malik) who transmitted more than 2 000 of these sayings. <http://www.themodernreligion.com/prophet/aishah.html>

¹³⁴ Literally, 'in the name of God, the most Beneficent, the most Merciful'. Muslims are encouraged to begin every action with this phrase, as a means of attaining blessings and protection from negativity.

was very well known and he had interaction with all communities, Hindus, Europeans – he had lots of friends and I think he gave *da'wah* (the concept of inviting people to Islam) in his own way as well. I still remember being a little girl and at Christmas time he would make hampers and give Mr Green and Mr Brown and you know and then *Diwali* time he'll be giving GC Captain opposite or the next door business. So there was no like, you know Muslims one side, Indians one side. No we weren't brought up like that. We were brought up you know, mixing with everybody.

Her maternal grandfather who came to South Africa from India, worked as a retail assistant for a Muslim business family in Pietermaritzburg, then Ladysmith, and then settled in Richmond, where he ran a business. She recalls that he was 'quite intelligent, and very good looking,' and well-liked by his employers. He was also politically active, and a member of the NIC and staunch supporter of the ANC. He travelled to India to marry her grandmother, with whom his marriage had been arranged, and a daughter was born to them in India. His wife and daughter only travelled to South Africa when the latter was six years old, and he had established himself with a business and a home. Ironically, Mariam's paternal grandparents were on the same ship as her maternal grandmother and aunt, when the latter travelled to South Africa. Decades later, when Mariam was an adult, her aunt told Mariam her that the Ismails were part of the family long before her father married one of them.

Mariam recalls that both her maternal and paternal grandfathers were extremely particular about their dress: 'Their shoes were very polished, they wore pants and a shirt and a coat. I can't remember that people used to wear *kurtas* then.'¹³⁵

Her grandmothers and her mother wore long dresses with pants and *awnis* (rectangular shaped, long scarves). They were strict about covering their hair in front of men, particularly in front of her grandfather. Since Islamically one is not required to wear the *hijab* in front of one's grandfather, father, brother, son, husband, nephew or uncle, they did so as a mark of respect for the patriarch. Her memories of childhood are pleasant, with recollections of trips to the beach and visitors coming home daily to eat: 'We had a lot of people coming home – every day was like an invite. Cooking was a very big thing at that time. Every day was like a five course meal and we were brought up with that – lot of visitors.'

¹³⁵ A long, loose garment worn by men. Previously, as per custom in South Asia, the garment was knee-length. Over the past two decades it has been adopted by larger numbers of Muslims and as is the custom in the Middle Eastern world, it is a full length garment, falling to just above the ankles.

Mariam was the second of five siblings. She recalls that as a child, she and her siblings would regularly go to Richmond on holiday and she describes her time there as a ‘lovely life.’

Mariam’s family was very Islamically inclined and she describes her background as ‘spiritually very strong.’ However, she emphasises that what was considered ‘Islamic’ has evolved. Thus, for example, when Mariam was growing up women rarely wore the *niqab*, but they believed they ‘were following the footsteps of *Rasulullah sallallahu alayhi wassallam* (literally, the Messenger of *Allah*, peace and salutations be upon him)’. This included the performance of the five daily prayers, the importance of which was emphasised from the time the children were very little and her father encouraged her and her siblings to perform even the *Tarawih* prayers at home in *Ramadan*.¹³⁶ She recalls that as a child she even prayed *Fajr*, the morning prayer which is performed before sunrise, daily, and recited *Surah Yasin*, a chapter of the *Qur’an*, the daily recitation of which is considered virtuous by many Muslims, every day.

I still remember, one day, I don’t know how old I was, 7 years or so and I always bring this up as an example to my children, I love saying this story to my grandchildren as well. I woke up one day, I just performed my *Fajr Namaaz* (prayer) and I went to lie down and my mother came and said “you didn’t read *Yasin*” and she lightly pinched me to get me up and my grandfather,... normally he doesn’t like you scolding the children, but that particular day, he asked, “why your mother pinched you, because you didn’t read *Yasin*?” He was very happy for that...*Qur’an Sharif* (the noble *Qur’an*)...we were brought up with *Qur’an Sharif*. You know we read *Qur’an Sharif* every day...

A special day of the week was ‘*Jumu’ah* (Friday), a day of you know great spirituality where all the shop staff should come – Muslims and non-Muslims – and have lunch upstairs and this is how we were brought up...’ This was very much a part of ‘town life’ among Muslims. On Fridays, most Muslim-owned stores would be shut from noon to 1:00 pm as Muslim males would attend the midday prayer at one of the city’s two large mosques. It was also common for many households in the city to provide lunch for staff members, and friends and family who happened to be in ‘town’ around this time.

Both of Mariam’s grandfathers were *huffaadh* (singular: *hafidh*), which refers to a person who has memorised the entire *Qur’an*. They learnt this in India. Whilst *huffaadh* today literally number in their thousands, in mid-twentieth-century South Africa they were a rarity. Mariam’s

¹³⁶ A long prayer performed over and above the compulsory five prayers during the entire fasting month of *Ramadan*.

paternal grandfather led the *Tarawih* prayers, a special nightly prayer performed only in the fasting month of *Ramadan*, during which the entire *Qur'an* is recited from front to back – at the famous Grey Street Mosque. Her maternal grandfather was a trustee of a mosque in Richmond.

Mariam's maternal grandfather went for *Hajj* in 1969 or 1970. He had been denied a passport because of his political involvement and was only given a special passport to go on pilgrimage. He passed away in Saudi Arabia, whilst performing the *Hajj*, and his wife was accompanied back to South Africa by family friends who were also present on the *Hajj*.

From an early age, Mariam and her siblings attended *madrasah* in Queen Street, where they were taught by an *apa* and the *apa's* husband. She credits the *madrasah* with enhancing her already strong Islamic background. She also grew up in an environment in which gender segregation was emphasised:

We were brought up in a way that men are separate, ladies were separate. Everything was separate and not like today where we go to the shops where men are. I mean we used to shop, obviously, when we needed something but at our shop, we weren't allowed to go through the shop.

In the flat in which she lived, male and female visitors were hosted separately, as far as possible. While Mariam experienced *strict* gender segregation between males and females who are not closely related to each other, this was different from the experience of the other women interviewed for this study. In part, it is clear from what she narrated that the elder males in her family were extremely devout, with most Muslims in South Africa effecting a change towards such strict gender boundaries from the late 1990s only, but it may also be due to the fact that there are differences of opinion among Muslim jurists regarding gender contact.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ For example, an article published on Islamtoday.net, the website of *Shaykh* Salman Al-Odah, a prominent Saudi scholar, states that 'Islam forbids any mixing between the sexes that might provide even the remotest possibility of temptation.... [But] the presence of men and women together in the same place ... is something that is definitely not prohibited by Islamic Law. Men and women gathered in the same place at the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in the mosque and in the marketplace. It would be wrong to treat this as unlawful mixing, since the reason for prohibiting free mixing does not exist in such circumstances.' On the other hand, most conservative South African Muslims prohibit any contact between men and women, irrespective of how modestly the women are dressed and for what purpose. For example, in chapter five, I detailed my experiences at an all-girls *madrasah*. Gender segregation was emphasised at the *madrasah* and the girls who studied there came from homes at which it was also emphasised. This is increasingly the practice in many Muslim homes in the Durban area, with girls not permitted to complete secular schooling but instead encouraged to study the tenets of Islam, as well as things like cooking and baking to prepare them for homemaking. However, in view of the increasing divorce rate amongst Muslims in South Africa, some parents with conservative views are sending their daughters to university and it is not unusual to see young women clad in the *hijab* and even the *niqab* on university campuses. This more recent trend has been evident to me during the past decade.

Mariam observed that when she was growing up, there was no sharp ideological distinction between Muslims. This tolerance is in contrast to the present day when there are many ideological divisions, such as *Barelwi/Sunni*, *Tablighi*, *Salafi*, *Shi'a*, and so on, often competing for the hearts and minds of Muslims. She says that it was only much later in life, probably around the 1980s when she was actively working in the community that people began asking which side of the *Sunni/Tablighi* divide she fell on.

Looking back, Mariam reflects nostalgically that life was simpler but 'richer' and more meaningful and fulfilling, in an age when children like her were not obsessed with technology but somehow found ways to pass the time constructively.

Education

Although Mariam grew up in a gender-segregated environment her childhood also coincided with a time when basic education was being embraced by the community and facilities were becoming available. She attended school until standard eight (grade ten), and recalls that teachers also came home to teach her aunts before her. Mariam's paternal grandfather was of the view that females did not need to be educated beyond standard eight. Consequently, she left school while the boys of her generation completed high school and some studied beyond that.

Although she was disappointed about having to leave, not having a choice in the matter, she feels that because she was patient, she was later rewarded in that as a married woman, she was able to study further with the support of her husband who actively encouraged her to pursue further education.

Marriage

Mariam married her first cousin, Yusuf, at the age of 18. The marriage was semi-arranged, in that even though the couple did not court, and her aunty sent a proposal to her family, they knew and liked each other and were in agreement with the marriage. In fact, Mariam turned down several marriage proposals before agreeing to marry Yusuf. Her experience was different from that of her parents, who only met on the day of their wedding, after the marriage ceremony was conducted, which was not unusual during that era.

Yusuf was six years older than her. After matriculating, he worked at a bank for a few years. After their first child, a daughter was born, his father and brother opened a business in the Durban CBD, and he left the bank to join them. After their marriage the couple lived with

Yusuf's parents in Mobeni Heights for almost six years. Initially, she found it awkward to interact with her father-in-law due to the segregated environment at her parents' home but she overcame this with time. From a spiritual perspective there was continuity between her pre-marriage and marital homes. When Yusuf's younger brother got married, Yusuf and Mariam moved into their own home, also in Mobeni Heights and close to his parents.

Initial source of inspiration

Whilst living with her in-laws, Mariam became close friends with a neighbour, Sumaya¹³⁸ who had converted to Islam from Hinduism, when she married a Muslim man. She was keen to familiarise herself with the teachings of Islam. Mariam recalled that her mother-in-law was very fond of Sumaya and in fact gave her first *burqah*.¹³⁹ Mariam and her mother-in-law taught Sumaya the rudiments of Islam and Mariam and Sumaya became close friends. As Mariam put it, the two of them 'did everything together.'

On one occasion, Sumaya took Mariam to visit an impoverished Indian Muslim community in Mariannhill. Sumaya had been distributing grocery parcels to some families there, and wanted Mariam to get involved. Mariam was moved and enlisted the assistance of her father and uncle, who donated money with which toiletries – such as soap and facecloths – were purchased for the community. Mariam and Sumaya also got a donor to donate *burqahs* for the women, and employed an *apa* to teach community members the basics of Islam, on a once-a-week basis. These lessons were not taught at a formal *madrasah* infrastructure since this was an informal settlement with just a small number of Muslims. Mariam and Sumaya themselves provided some Islamic education and gave English lessons to the children. They also personally assisted some of the families to repaint their homes, taking the paint along with them.

Now a widow, Sumaya continues to assist the people of this community.

This was just one of 'a lot' of civic activities that Mariam undertook with Sumaya. She also taught Sumaya how to cook *akhni*, a well-known Indian rice dish, and together, the two of them ran feeding schemes at 'different government schools.' They would cook *akhni* for up to 50 impoverished people at a time in Umlazi. At times they would feed in excess of 300 people in areas like Unit 2, Chatsworth, as well as various schools in Newlands. For this they would hire a cook to prepare the food.

¹³⁸ Her name has been changed to avoid causing offence to any of her family members.

¹³⁹ A garment worn by South African Muslim women when praying – it covers the upper body.

Mariam was greatly inspired by Sumaya, who was always inclined towards charity, even before she became Muslim. Although Sumaya credited Mariam with teaching her about Islam, Mariam feels it was the other way around, because Sumaya encouraged her to read the English translation of the *Qur'an*. The English meanings of verses in the *Qur'an* deepened her understanding of her faith: 'You know, whatever I'm reading now, I try to understand it, so I can say to the family, "this is what the *Qur'an* says, this is what the *Qur'an* says" and she [Sumaya] was the one who inspired that in me and I can't forget that.'

IPCI *da'wah* course

Sumaya wanted to learn how to enlighten others about Islam, so she and Mariam signed up for a *da'wah*¹⁴⁰ course offered by the Durban-based Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI). By her own admission, the fact that she came from a conservative family made being taught by an academic Abdullah Deedat something new to Mariam; however, she snapped up the knowledge eagerly, and learned fast. As part of the course, she had to learn verses from the Bible and was so adept at doing so that she was put in charge of listening to the other students. Mariam found the course comprehensive and extremely stimulating.

Mr Abdullah Deedat was the lecturer. So everything came into it, lecturers don't only focus on one thing, you study history, you study mankind and about the *da'wah*. Obviously it was about *da'wah*, it was about quotations from the Bible, and how to interact with non-Muslims and how you have to practise your religion so that you can be an example to everybody else and how you lead by example.

Mariam frequently referred to the knowledge gained in the course as important in her various interactions with people from other faith backgrounds. Importantly, one of the lessons she learnt was to 'lead by example with patience.' This has stood her in good stead in situations where she is questioned by others about Islam.

For example, when she did a course with Childline, she was asked many questions about Islam by a pastor, such as whether Muslim women are oppressed by men. These questions initially irritated her. However, she found that the IPCI course stood her in good stead because it taught her to respond calmly and rationally, without becoming defensive. She would ask them 'What are we doing here, if our men are not allowing us to go out,' and this would surprise them. She would then attempt to answer their questions from a *Qur'anic* point of view, by explaining what the *Qur'an* said.

¹⁴⁰ *Da'wah* is the practice of conveying the message of Islam to non-Muslims.

Years later, when two ‘White’ Christian women interviewed her for an academic study, she adopted the same attitude when they asked her if Muslim men asked their wives to wear the *hijab*.

I said “no”. Our men are not saying this. We read the *Qu’ran* and we understand it. In our homes we are dressing how we want to dress. We come out of our home; we want to cover ourselves up because from experience, from my experience I feeling protected since I am wearing *purdah* (another word for the *niqab*) now for three years. I don’t feel I am being stared at though I did have one experience with a white man winking at me because I’ve got my *purdah* on just to test me to see how I react...but other than that I feel very protected and in my home I can dress whichever way I like.

After completing the IPCI *da’wah* course, Mariam stayed in touch with Abdullah Deedat as well as his brother, the well-known comparative religion expert Ahmed Deedat, and Deedat’s nephew Goolam Agjee. She even approached them with the addresses of families in Phoenix and Chatsworth, who were in need of intervention in terms of understanding Islam.

House visits

Beggars would often come to Mariam’s home in Mobeni Heights, requesting assistance. Much to the chagrin of some of her neighbours, instead of turning them away, she would take down their addresses. She and Sumaya, or she and Yusuf would then visit these homes in the adjoining Chatsworth area while some were as far north as Phoenix. They sometimes found that these impoverished people had Muslim names but had stopped practising Islam over the years and were eager to reconnect with it.

All the time I would think, oh they have Muslim names, they are all following Islam. But, after going on home visits, that’s when I really understood that these people had Islamic names but they used to tell us that their parents didn’t have money to send to them to *madrasahs* and they would really like to learn. These people I’m talking about were 60 years, 50 years old but they really didn’t know how to read *surahs* because of the lack of funds to go to *madrasah*.

The purpose of the visits was to establish if these individuals were eligible to receive *zakah* money which Mariam would collect from various people, including her family, and distribute.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ *Zakah* is one of the five pillars (essential practices) of Islam). Annually, Muslims who possess a certain minimum wealth are required to give 2.5% of that wealth to poor and needy Muslims. This is defined as

In addition to the beggars who visited her home, various individuals were referred to her by one of her neighbours, Fatima Lachka, who was involved in an organisation called Imdaad Trust Adult Literacy and Educational Programme, which, as the name suggests, focused on improving literacy among adults. Fatima was the wife of Dr Goolam Hoosen Lachka, a founding member of the Islamic Medical Association (see Chapter Four). Mariam views the couple as mentors from whom she learnt a great deal.

In response to older Muslims' need for Islamic education, Fatima Lachka initiated *madrasah* classes and arranged literacy programmes. Mariam recalled that 'we were doing house-calls to see what sort of things they need and how can we help. We also took an *apa* there to teach them *wudhu* (ablution) and *salah*. Fatima Lachka and them are opening *madrasahs* and starting literacy courses and we are reporting back to them.'

At one of these *madrasahs*, Mariam met Zubeida Asmal, who was later instrumental in setting up an Islamic high school for girls in Chatsworth. Zubeida was lending a helping hand to Fatima at the time, and when she learnt of Mariam's 'house-calls,' she gave Mariam the addresses of impoverished Chatsworth residents that she had come into contact with through her community work. When Al-Imdaad needed funds, its members hosted a fund-raising lunch, and even though Mariam was not a member of the organisation, she attended the plenary meeting, volunteered to assist and managed to secure meaningful sponsorship.

Counselling

Shortly after the birth of her third and last child in 1993, Mariam began experiencing various health problems. 'I was baffled. What's this? One day my hands are not working, my legs are not working. I come to town to go to a welfare organisation, to go to the IPCI and you know, I can't walk and I have to go back to Mobeni Heights you know.' These symptoms persisted and it was only two years later, in 1995, after visiting numerous specialists that she was diagnosed with Lupus. Her energy levels began diminishing and she found it difficult to walk or stand for any length of time, and had to stop the house visits as well as the trips to Mariannhill with Sumaya.

Determined not to give up, Mariam sought something which entailed sitting down and signed up for a one-year counselling course at Childline. The course taught students how to provide

people who are unable to meet their basic living expenses. It is for this reason that those who distribute *zakah* conduct home visits to ensure that the potential recipient is indeed eligible to accept *zakah*.

counselling to individuals affected by HIV and AIDS, incest, marital problems, child abuse and a range of other issues, both face-to-face as well as telephonically. Shortly thereafter, she met Farida Coovadia, a fellow community worker who was assisting the Jamiatul Ulama (Council of Muslim Theologians) with social work (this was around the year 2000). Farida suggested that she assist with counselling people who approached the Jamiatul Ulama for help. Farida dealt with the face-to-face counselling, while Mariam assisted with telephonic counselling.

She credits the experience with developing her further spiritually. She confesses that as a teenager and even when she married, she enjoyed dressing up, wearing long tops and pants. The journey towards wearing *hijab* began with discussions with Sumaya and when she went on *haji* in 1984 she began to cover her hair and wore longer dresses and pants, and eventually the *abaya*/cloak when going to the Jamiatul Ulama for the counselling sessions. The Jamiatul Ulama was then the premier theological body in KwaZulu-Natal and was strict about gender segregation. Out of respect, Mariam would wear an *abaya* and a *niqab*.

At the Jamiat, Mariam observed that Farida often consulted *Maulana* Yunus Patel (see Chapter Five) and *Mufti* Ebrahim Desai for an Islamic perspective and spiritual advice on the problems that some of the callers were facing. She was impressed that ‘everything was according to the *shari’ah* – what the *Qu’ran* tells us. How my grandfather brought us up. I became very spiritually inclined. From there I was fully cloaked (wearing the *abaya* full-time).’ Through hearing the advice given by *Maulana* Patel and *Mufti* Desai to other people, she learnt valuable lessons that she could implement in her own life, particularly those related to building a successful marriage and parenting. With the latter, she acquired tips on how to encourage her children to pray without arguing with them, and how not to adopt a ‘Don’t do this, don’t do that’ style of parenting, but to rather deal with her children with wisdom.

How to stay with the spouses, how to dress up for them... I learnt quite a bit. I think that was something no English education can teach you.... Understanding everyday situations, your children, how to get your children to listen to you, you know play, sports with them, take them out...give them opportunities, you know, teaching them to make *salam*, to understand what the lesser of the two evils is in a situation, how to deal with a hot-headed child, how to speak to your children, don’t go and say ‘Go read *namaz*, go read *namaz*.’ There’s a way to speak to them. Not only that. Your way of life. Everything. I started understanding all that at the Jamiat, so that was good for me.

From the numerous house visits Mariam undertook in Phoenix and Chatsworth, she realised that Muslim families were not immune to the many social problems afflicting other

communities. She was reluctant to specify these but said that this thinking was further reinforced when she read a newspaper report about a young Muslim man raping a grandmother. She said that before her counselling and house visits, she would have been shocked to encounter such problems among Muslims.

You know I was just telling one of my nieces – she’s an accountant and my daughters too, that you can be a lawyer, you can be an accountant, you can be a doctor. That you can be whatever you want, but you’ll have a problem – marriage problems, divorce problems. That’s where my eyes started opening, you can be a *maulana*, whoever you can be, you can have a problem.

Due to ill-health, Mariam was only able to assist the Jamiatul Ulama for about a year.

From that time she had only worn the *abaya* when leaving home. About three to four years ago, she and her husband jointly decided that she would start wearing the *niqab*, and him the *kurta*. She felt that the *niqab*, or ‘*purdah*’ as she calls it, was ‘for her’ as it made her feel safer and ‘more protected’ and ‘much happier’ than before. She does not consider it restrictive in any way, and believes that the *niqab* prevents people from ogling her, something she feels uncomfortable with. However, she does not look down on women who do not wear the *niqab*. On the contrary, she feels that inherently they may be better than her.

Further studies

Mariam’s husband has supported her in everything she has wanted to do, ‘within the boundaries of the *shari’ah*,’ she stresses. Although he is protective of her, in the sense that he worries about her safety due to the high crime rate in South Africa, he has never stood in the way of her attaining her goals. After being diagnosed with Lupus, Mariam developed an interest in nutrition and Yusuf encouraged her to pursue it as a field of study, but she opted instead to pursue a life-long dream of studying and completing a two year ‘intensive’ interior design course (in 2009 and 2010) via Style Design in Westville, attending lectures daily – with Yusuf’s full support. She particularly loved the architecture component of the course, and the teachers were impressed by her talent for interior design. From time to time, she takes on interior decorating for clients.

Interior decorating gave her an opportunity to nurture the creativity she always felt she had, and inspired her to sign up for a painting course.

I said one day to Yusuf and to my son in-law, when I came to live in Windermere Centre (her previous home, after Mobeni Heights) when I started seeing the views of the sea, that I wish I knew how to paint so I could've painted the sunset. So both of them said to me, "It's not too late why can't you paint it now?" So I went to painting courses where I painted my first landscape which I love and seascape which I did on my own from a picture, Addington Beach and from that time – I am painting now for quite many years and I am teaching painting as well.

The course entailed learning first how to sketch and draw before starting to paint. However, after painting her first landscape, Mariam began to feel physically tired due to the Lupus and borrowed library books from which she learnt how to paint seascapes. She then began doing abstract paintings and when people saw these hanging in her home, they would ask her to paint for them (for a fee); they also encouraged her to teach them how to paint. She started art classes from home (she has a designated workshop area for this) in 2012. These are in big demand and it is not possible for her to meet demand due to ill-health. She once became so ill after a class that she had to be hospitalised.

Her classes are attended by women from all backgrounds, including professional women. Her aim is to get them to explore their own creativity:

You know the people that are my age and who are at home, have lots of talents, creative talents and when they come and say "We don't know how to paint but we want to paint," and at the end of it, they complete the whole painting and they let out their creativity and then I get, let's say dentists and I had a few accountants, I had a few opticians, teachers and when they learn by me and do the painting, and some will say "Hey it's not easy when you doing it," but they let out their creativity and take the finished picture home. It makes me happy and they are happy as well.

A booklet about Lupus

It is 22 years since Mariam was diagnosed with Lupus. She explains that it is difficult to diagnose because the symptoms are often similar to those associated with other diseases. Before her last child was born, she had travelled overseas on holiday with her husband. Being December, it was extremely cold in London, and whilst at a tube station she experienced a severe, stabbing pain in her chest. It was so severe that she thought she 'was going to die', and fervently began praying. From London they went to New York and then to Saudi Arabia on *umrah* but she was fine.

When they returned to South Africa, she fell pregnant with her third daughter and experienced the same stabbing chest pain several times during her pregnancy. Her doctor could not explain it, but said that it was not linked to her pregnancy, and no medication was prescribed. Six weeks after her daughter was born, one night, she experienced a 'bone deep' excruciating pain in her right arm. The next day her arm was so stiff that she could not even carry her daughter. However, she ignored the pain and it did not return for a month: Then 'it started off with one left leg going stiff, then I am stiff, and after one or two hours it was fine.' She then experienced stiffness in her right leg, which she ignored because it would eventually subside. However, a month later, the pain became so severe that on one occasion she was reduced to helpless tears and saw a specialist who told her she was suffering from rheumatoid arthritis.

She is grateful to God that whilst other Lupus patients become very sick for a few months at a time, to the extent that they may even be bed-ridden she has not been in this situation. Over the years she has interacted with numerous other Lupus patients and has learnt much about the illness. Fatigue is a common symptom, where just walking from 'A to B is something else.' Mariam's older sister, now deceased, also had Lupus, and impressed on her the negative impact of steroid treatment. Mariam opted for nutrition as a means of treatment. However, at times she is so stiff that she is forced to take a minimal dose of steroids and anti-inflammatories. Nutrition and spirituality are her preferred methods of coping.

Recognising that her practical experience of having Lupus, as well as the experiences of other patients she had met, both via her own interactions as well as through her sister, could help others, Mariam decided to compile a booklet on the subject. There was no lengthy planning process. Once she decided to write it, she brainstormed the idea with those close to her to establish what to include and assist with editing.

I just took it from there, and I know when I was writing too, I said to my husband "I'm sending this book to the Jamiat", it just came to me, and I sent it to them to check, and then I told my doctor, "I'm writing it", and he encouraged me and said I could send it to him for checking, and from there I sent it to Zubeida Asmal and Mrs Mohammed, an English teacher, to edit. In the end I was forgetting this *du'a*, that *du'a*, and I was phoning people and getting the meanings and *Alhamdulillah*, Allah willed it would be achieved. I didn't expect it to be published so many times. I didn't expect it to help so many patients.

The booklet entitled *Illness: A cure through spirituality from the view of a lupus patient*, was first published in 2003 after her sister passed away in the same year. The title page carries a quotation from Mariam, which captures her dilemma: "I did not find the answers for many of

my questions. Today, I write this book with the sincere hope that present and future Lupus patients won't be as confused as I was."¹⁴²

Mariam's sister, Fathima, was clearly a powerful motivation in writing the booklet. In the Acknowledgements section, she writes that her sister encouraged her to write about Lupus, 'that so many people are unaware of.' She supported 'me towards starting this manuscript.' In the prelude, too, Mariam mentions her sister:

For many years, I watched my younger sister suffer from this imposter disease; I watched her confusion and her pain as she changed from a lively, active and sporty person to being confined to a wheelchair. It was unknown to me that, I, too was going to be diagnosed with this same frightening disease: Lupus, also known as SLE (Systemic Lupus Erythematosus).¹⁴³

Mariam also emphasised spirituality. In the first chapter of the booklet, entitled 'My Personal Experience,' she reflects:

Time makes everything easier, however. But my real strength came from my spiritual connection with the Almighty. I grew tremendously during this illness. A spiritually uplifting experience took place. I performed *Umrah* at the Holy City of Makkah. After this, I found the courage to decrease my dosage and, at the same time, I began taking nutritional supplements (vitamins). Eventually I gave up both nivaquine and cortisone, with the help of the Almighty.¹⁴⁴

She found 'inner peace, serenity and comfort,' in speaking to her Sustainer, 'supplicating to Him and reading His glorious speech, "The Holy *Qur'an*."' It was at this time that she began to see God's wisdom in creating illness for human beings, she says. Chapter six of the book is entitled 'My Faith – My strength.' Mariam discusses how she has drawn on her faith in God to help her deal with Lupus. 'I found relief for my physical pain in prayer and my emotional and mental well-being improved drastically,' she states. 'I urge you, my readers, to turn to Him, don't fight or resist Him, for you cannot win. And should you turn to Him, you will find Him full of forgiveness, mercy and compassion.' She concludes this chapter with the English translation of 16 verses from the *Qur'an* which, she says 'removed her distress,' and 'eased'

¹⁴² The booklet has been published various times. The copy in my possession was published by Ar-Raudah Publications in Estcourt, KwaZulu-Natal. Neither Mariam's name, nor the date of publication is mentioned.

¹⁴³ *ibid*

¹⁴⁴ *ibid*

her ‘suffering.’ ‘By reciting these verses with sincerity and faith, the reciter will be cured of any disease; if *Allah* wills,’ she says.

During the interview, Mariam emphasised again that Lupus was a blessing from God, a divine test of sorts:

Fatima, let me tell you this, I tell this to patients and I’m telling this to you and every day I say it to myself as well. You know the *Qu’ran* says that everybody, why we are put in to this world? Not for fun and enjoyment. Okay, *Allah* has given us that as well but the main thing is the *Qu’ran* says you are here for a purpose – to think of *Allah* and every day is not going to be a good day. You are going to get the good, the sad, the not too good, and how are you going to deal with it? Obviously you are going to get devastated, that is normal. *Allah* give us that as well to you know – we are going to get devastated but how you are going to take it, if you know you have this disease?

Mariam admits that in the early days after being diagnosed, she cried a lot, and felt helpless, because she had been an independent person. But she began to cope when she turned to God for strength and help:

When I have a pain, I say ‘*Allah* you gave this to me, you are going to make it better.’ I remember having these pains whilst in Makkah, and as soon as I said, ‘*Allah* you are going to make me better, *Allah* if you’re going to give me that you are going to give me that with *Iman* (faith). I got this, I know you are going to make me better. In my mind when I said that *Allah* made it easy for me. I could take the pain and *Allah* made things go better, and better for me and from there I always say it was a blessing. After that I saw that a lot of gifts open up for me. Lots of gifts opened because in good times and in sickness I still make *shukr* (give thanks) to *Allah*. ‘*Allah* I am grateful you gave me this so I am looking at this. You gave me this sickness so I started appreciating my life. I started looking at your scenery, the sky, the different greens in a leaf. I started looking at the colour of the sunsets or sunrise. I am pausing at every stage of my life now, whereas before I was just running and walking and running and walking, and my granny used to say you’re not giving your body a rest, and for the first time in my life I started appreciating what my *Nanima* (maternal grandmother) and two *Dadimas* (paternal grandmothers) – my husband’s and mine, used to say.

The booklet is very informative, with details on symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, and so on. Perhaps one of the more important chapters, from the perspective of a Lupus patient, is the

fourth chapter entitled ‘Dealing with Illness (Lupus in Particular).’ Mariam shares practical advice for Lupus patients on how to deal with the illness, drawing on her own experience, and focusing on acceptance of the disease, diet, breathing, aromatherapy, the role of anti-oxidants, and medication, including herbal / alternative remedies.¹⁴⁵

The booklet has been so popular that it has been printed five times. The distribution mechanism is interesting: sometimes people hear about the book from others and request copies, while some doctors, of various faiths, have also passed the book onto their patients. For Mariam, compiling the booklet was important in order to come to terms with her illness and her sister’s death, but it also opened up opportunities to meet other Lupus patients, which has given her a sense of fulfilment. Patients of all racial and religious backgrounds have made contact with her, many seeking her counsel about family and friends who have failed to understand their plight.

There was a young girl, in her mid-twenties, a professional, a beautiful girl – it took her a lot of courage to contact me but eventually she came to me and took a copy of the book, and from her I learnt that these young girls, they’ve got Lupus, their friends don’t understand because they can’t come out in the sun, and if they come out in the sun they get very tired and then their symptoms start...the aches start, the pain starts, and I experienced this myself...then when patients began telling me the same things, and they said these things are happening and the husbands are not understanding, mothers are not understanding and they are telling us we are lazy.

Through interactions like these, Mariam also picked up that there was stigma attached to Muslims who had Lupus. She recalls instances where patients would call her crying, but at the same time were wary of sharing their stories with her.

I had some professionals calling me, and because some of them are from a Muslim background, they’re coming from families other people know, sometimes they think twice about calling me. Like, you know, they don’t want you to tell anybody. I don’t mention their names and surnames to others. You know because they don’t want other people to know they have Lupus, but after that they see I am talking openly about the disease, and I am explaining to them “This is how you manage, it is your disease and you must also understand that it is a long term disease and people are not always going to understand you...you must also understand and don’t get cross with people”... and at the same time I talk to husbands, talk to mothers, tell them “This is what the disease is.” Once a mother

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

phoned me, after finding out that her daughter had Lupus, because the doctor gave them my book. And she was saying “Okay what are people going to say? What is the husband going to say? She is so young.” And I thought in my mind, Lupus is a manageable disease. What is it divorce or something? I said to her, “You are talking like that... (by doing so) you are going to make the child more sick.”

In another instance she counselled a young professional who has Lupus on how to perform the *hajj*, which, due to the various rituals involved, as well as the heat in Saudi Arabia can be tiring, even for a person who does not have Lupus.

I told her “This is what happens with Lupus. You are going to get tired.” Oh, she came to me, she is a doctor herself, she came to me. She was so happy when I told her “Okay, you are going for *hajj* – this is what you do if you can’t manage the *Safa-Marwa*¹⁴⁶ – because it takes a lot of energy – you can go in a wheelchair, this is what I did, see how you can manage.” She did it walking and I was very proud of her.

The Lupus patients she interacts with are inspired by the fact that Mariam is open about the fact that she has Lupus and is happy to share information about it, as well as the fact that she explains the symptoms to significant others in the lives of Lupus patients. The booklet has become a source of Lupus awareness for patients from as far afield as Cape Town and Johannesburg, to the extent that she can’t keep count of the number of people she has interacted with as a direct result. She is inundated with phone calls from patients and their families. Many interactions concern Lupus patients as young as eight.

Soon after publishing the booklet, Mariam and her family decided that there was a need to do more to educate people about Lupus: ‘People were saying they don’t know what Lupus is – what is Lupus? All the patients who had Lupus their family members were asking what Lupus is, so we said it would be nice if we organise Lupus Awareness Days to support the patient.’ Her daughters, sons-in-law and husband assisted her to get these events off the ground. Mariam began holding meetings for groups of people with Lupus.

¹⁴⁶ This is the colloquial term used to refer to the *saiyy* - one of the rituals attached to the performance of both pilgrimages – *hajj* and *umrah*. It entails walking from a hill called Safa to another hill called Marwa and back, seven times, a total distance of about 2km. This is in remembrance of Haajar, the wife of the prophet Abraham, who the latter left in the then uninhabited Mecca, with their infant son Isma’il, as per the divine command of God. When their water and food supplies ran out, Haajar ran between Safa and Marwa seven times, searching for water for Isma’il. On the seventh trip, water began to erupt from a well – this water is famously known as *Zam Zam* water, and Muslims considered it to be blessed. The well continues to exist, and millions of pilgrims carry its water home with them annually, after their pilgrimages. Islamic jurisprudence allows for invalids/those unable to complete the *Safa Marwa* rite to use a wheelchair.

The first was held in 2003 at the flat where she then lived, and featured a white nutritionist (non-Muslim)¹⁴⁷ who gave an ‘in depth and very, very nice’ talk on nutrition for Lupus patients. This served as a book launch of sorts, as copies of Mariam’s booklet were given to those in attendance. In 2011, she hosted another awareness day at her house. This was open to both males and females, and Dr Mariam Amla, a family practitioner, addressed around a dozen attendees about Lupus. In 2013, Mariam hosted another awareness day which was advertised on Radio Al-Ansaar, a community radio station. Seventy people attended what she describes as a ‘very successful’ event, which featured more than one speaker. In addition to Mariam, Dr G.H. Latiff, a specialist, and Dr Mariam Amla spoke about the medical aspects of Lupus, whilst Zubeida Asmal addressed the spiritual angle. Mariam herself spoke about her personal experiences of managing the disease.

Such events were welcomed by the community and for the next Lupus information day she intends to ask a young female doctor who fell pregnant and gave birth whilst suffering from Lupus, to share her experiences. ‘I thought it would be nice to have her – because she is a doctor and people are scared, “Can we have children, we are pregnant, can we have children?” “You can, if Allah *wishes*, you can, *in sha Allah*.”’

This newfound appreciation of life not only inspired Mariam to enjoy every minute of her grandchildren’s lives; it also led to her wanting to creatively express her appreciation of nature by embarking on a painting course, as well as one on interior design. A saying she came across really resonated with her: ‘When life throws you lemons, make lemonade.’

Mariam has three daughters, two of whom are married. The eldest holds a degree in commerce. She is a housewife who is also active in the family business, and runs a small home industry, making and selling confectionary like cakes, as well as having a keen interest in floral arranging. Her second daughter holds a Bachelor of Arts degree and works as a teacher, in addition to assisting her husband in their business. The last-born is in her final year of study towards a degree in Corporate Business Communication. She also runs a small business, selling handbags and shoes. That Mariam’s daughters are educated is important. Although Mariam herself did not study, and in view of her embracing “Islamic” dress, one would have thought that she would not have allowed her own daughters to study. Mariam takes a different view. She believes that her daughters should be able to fend for themselves should the need arise.

¹⁴⁷ I have mentioned race groups and religions at various junctures because there is a perception globally, within various quarters that Muslim women, particularly those who are religious, interact only with fellow Muslims. I felt it was important to show that this is a generalisation.

On being a Muslim woman

For Mariam, being a Muslim woman first and foremost entails thinking of God:

First of all, Muslim means to me is as my father gave me the advice too in that whatever you want to do you know as a social worker, when I was doing my social work. He said to me: 'First thing being a Muslim is you think of your *Allah* five times a day, five times a day, don't omit your *salah*.'

But the five prayers are not a mechanical ritual:

When you pray five times a day, when you wake up in the morning to pray, you are thanking *Allah* for being alive and for giving you the time to pray as well. You are thanking him every step of the way, you are asking *Allah* to guide you, to help you...

Mariam has been an avid reader of self-help books, and in her view, their main message is something Islam has already taught her which is 'give love, do good, think good, see good and be good.' She points out that Christianity and Hinduism encourage their followers to do the same.

In her view, being a Muslim woman is multi-dimensional:

You are trying to please *Allah*, and at the same time helping the poor, studying at the same time, gaining Islamic knowledge at the same time because Aishah *radiyallahu anhaa* (may Allah be pleased with her), studied so many *ahadith*, and she was also knowledgeable in medicine. What I'm saying is Muslim women are trying to follow the path of '*Bismillahir rahmaanir raheem*' by studying and implementing the knowledge and in the same way behaving in the way that the *Qur'an* tells us to behave.

Mariam's childhood played an important role in encouraging her to get involved in community upliftment later in life. Her mother encouraged her to love cooking and baking from the tender age of eight, and at the family flat visitors, including beggars, were fed daily. Her mother, father and grandfathers from both sides were 'community-loving' people who did 'lots of charity work.' Mariam observes that, when she was growing up, extended families lived together and this helped make people less selfish and more willing to share.

She also laments the fact that whilst children today have ample access to both Islamic education and secular education, they seem to be spiritually disconnected from God. This is different from

her situation growing up, where children were aware of God, even though they did not enjoy the same access to Islamic knowledge.

I see the youth today are more well-versed in Islamic education than we were ... but the difference is we did not have that much Islamic education, let's put it that way ... but the fear of *Allah* was there, the fear of *Allah* every step of the way, every step of the way. So today I think that's the *du'a* that we have to make for today's youth – don't fear me as a mother, don't fear the teachers, the principal – but fear your creator. Why are you here on this earth? Which way will your materialism help you? What are going to take from this earth and bring to God?

Mariam is very happy to see how Muslim women have become more active in their communities over time. She believes that in previous times, women dedicated too much of their time to the kitchen, not by choice but because it was expected of them. She considers herself and her daughters and friends – many of whom have studied beyond high school – to be fortunate in that they can pursue the paths they are passionate about; she cites the example of a cousin who wears the *niqab* and practices as a doctor.

Mariam also wears the *niqab*, and grew up in an environment where gender segregation was the norm. But she has not allowed this to stand in the way of being involved in the community, dealing with both genders during her home visits and on Lupus Awareness Days. For her, this is not about socialising, but about interacting over something she is passionate about.

Mariam's is a remarkable story that shows that upbringing is not a barrier to civic engagement. As a Muslim woman who wears the *hijab* but not the *niqab*, I have, in the past, made the mistake of stereotyping women who wear the *niqab*, as being overly conservative and insular in their approach to civic engagement. I realised I was wrong, through my personal interaction with numerous women who wear the *niqab*, who – far from judging me – have embraced what I do by lending support to the NGO I direct, and attending its seminars. Mariam further reinforced this view that far from being insular, many women in *niqab* are immersed in community engagement that transcends religion and gender – in fact in their minds, far from being a disabler, the *niqab* is an enabler which assists them in feeling that they are making a difference, within the context of their interpretation of the *shari'ah*.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

A few years before I embarked on this study, Goolam Vahed commissioned me to assist him in researching different aspects of the history of the Muslim community in Durban. His brief was simple: to collect the oral histories of as many Muslim individuals, aged 70 and above, as possible. Armed with a dictaphone and a few basic guidelines about what to ask, I conducted a series of interviews, some of which lasted under two hours, while others ran into four hours. The interviews were unstructured and the selection of interviewees was very random. I would run into or hear about an interesting person somewhere, and arrange to interview him or her. The people I interviewed were not necessarily well-known in the Muslim community, let alone outside of it. Our objective was to interview “ordinary” people and learn about their everyday lives. Many were reluctant to share their stories, but what I learnt very quickly, and what the informants themselves learnt, is that everyone has something important to share, a contribution he or she has made within his or her own context, life experiences and perspectives; the list goes on and on.

Thus, before interviewing Quraysha, Faeza, Shakira, Shameema and Mariam for this project, I had some familiarity with the methodology of oral history as a research instrument. I had spent hours in the lounges and offices of many Muslim men and women, asking them question after question on their recollections of both their own lives and the Muslim community in general, covering issues such as education, business, marriage, the pilgrimage of *haji*, the festival of *Eid*, and so on. I expected the research process for this study to be similar, but soon realised that it was different in that these interviews entailed conducting oral history that aimed to seek responses to *specific* questions. Beyond that, this project also entailed transcribing the interviews, analysing them, and constructing a narrative from the women’s testimonies, skills that I have not developed in the earlier project which only entailed interviews. This proved challenging initially though my skills as a journalist helped. This experience as a journalist also meant analysis by hand (making extensive notes on the margins to identify themes) rather than using computer software for data analysis.

Analysing the interviews and seeking out common themes and patterns was stimulating and thought provoking. In this regard I used an inductive approach which meant not having a preconceived framework for analysing the data but using the transcripts themselves, in conjunction with my occasional field notes and observations, to construct the analysis. This approach is, of course, time-consuming as it means reading the transcripts carefully and spotting the common themes. Unlike research involving quantitative data, in this instance data analysis began during and certainly virtually upon completion of the interview as I listened to the recording, and especially during the transcription process. Unlike a quantitative method, the initial interviews also influenced subsequent data collection

in terms of the kinds of questions posed, and it also led to queries, a need for clarification, or additional questions which also influenced the line of enquiry in subsequent interviews.

This placed me under a certain degree of pressure, as at the back of my mind I was well aware that the women I was interviewing lead very busy lives and I would have to make maximum use of the time allotted to obtain responses to my numerous questions. For example, Quraysha was interviewed in the foyer of a hotel, after 8:00 pm, during her fleeting trip to Durban. Mariam suffers from Lupus which meant that after a while she was visibly tired. Shakira, a medical practitioner, was ‘on call’ during my interview with her, and both Faeza and Shameema have multiple responsibilities. One of the key challenges was to balance a general discussion with the interviewees about their lives with a focus on the narrower objectives of this study.

Consequently, follow up communication (mainly e-mail but also informal meetings) was necessary with each of the interviewees (see Chapter One for more on this). This aimed to seek additional information, better understand their life histories from a chronological perspective, or seek clarification on something that they may have said. During the first interview, some of the interviewees did not remember specific dates on which certain milestones in their lives had occurred and follow-up was necessary. I was thrilled to find that when I contacted Shakira with these queries, she invited me to her home for a second visit, and when I got there, she had laid out numerous files containing documents such as qualifications, conferences brochures, leaflets, and copies of speeches on her dining room table, all of which contextualised her civic engagement more clearly. All of the interviewees were extremely accommodating and this facilitated my task.

However, as a perfectionist, I had to accept and work around the fact that no two interviews were going to be the same. For example, Shakira’s was more substantial for the simple reason that she shared more information.

Through my civic engagement, I encountered the interviewees in this study, in various contexts, including conferences and seminars. This research has increased my appreciation of the work they do and the ways in which they juggle their multiple roles, the obstacles they overcame and the hurdles they face. I believe that the stories of these women provide important insights into the roles of Muslim women within the Muslim community as well as their role in the wider society. Civic engagement is a good indication of women’s involvement in society as it requires a deliberate and concerted effort.

Apart from Mariam, all the interviewees grew up in an environment where women were encouraged to pursue education, even beyond high school, and all of them did so, later going on to achieve undergraduate and post-graduate qualifications. One, Faeza, voluntarily left high school without completing

due to financial considerations, but later completed her high school education as a married woman. Mariam, too, was able to complete her education post-marriage, with the full support of her husband. These experiences fit with the broader trajectory of the Indian experience in South Africa where there was an expansion in schools and learners from the 1960s as the state recognised Indians as South African citizens and provided education opportunities up to tertiary level. However, in the case of Muslim women, reformist tendencies from the 1990s have reversed this trend with girls being groomed for marriage and home-keeping roles. Nonetheless, the women in this study offered opportunities for their children, including their daughters, to acquire secular education, while not neglecting the Islamic aspect of their upbringing.

All the subjects of this study have multiple roles, as wives and mothers, daughters-in-law, professionals, and in civic organisations. In fact, apart from Faeza, all are mothers-in-law. Whilst one of the interviewees mentioned that her husband's family was not in favour of women working, they did not stop her from acquiring education or from civic engagement. As mothers, all five women have played an active role in their children's development and have nurtured them to become responsible young adults, all of whom have successfully studied post-school. The women have all managed to effectively juggle their various roles within their families with their roles in the community. In all cases, husbands provided whole-hearted support in terms of attaining their various goals. This did not translate into mere approval, but rather action-oriented support, whereby the husbands assisted them in executing their various roles. The women believe that such support was crucial in their lives as students, mothers, daughters-in-law and community workers.

None of the interviewees viewed Islam as an impediment in the path to achieving their various goals; on the contrary, Islam has served as an impetus and a blueprint of sorts, guiding them in their everyday lives, reminding them of who they are, and helping to define their purpose, and what their intentions should be in the roles they carry out. In this, their views contrast with those of the majority of (Indian) *ulama* in South Africa who reject any kind of public role for women. What this points to is that the roles of Muslim women should not be judged by the utterances and interpretations of Islam of certain *ulama*. On the other hand, the women in this study recognised that in early Islamic history, women played a crucial role in consolidating and propagating the new faith; in fact, the first person to embrace the Prophet's message, Khadija, his first wife, was a woman, while another of the Prophet's wives, Aishah, not only participated in 656 AD in what was effectively Islam's first civil war, in which her side was defeated by Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph of Islam, but she also spent the last two decades of her life relaying the Prophet's words and actions to male and female scholars, which came to constitute an important body of Islamic knowledge.

Faith-based rituals like prayer and fasting are important to all of the interviewees; but so too is Islamic character development, central to which is service to humanity. For this reason, whilst Quraysha, Faeenza and Shakira wear the *hijab*, Mariam wears the *niqab* and Shameema considers the wearing of the *hijab* compulsory (although she does not do so herself), none is overly obsessed with the notion of externalities like dress. To them, wearing the *hijab* is a choice, and no woman should to be judged based on whether she wears it or not. Nevertheless, the fact that the majority of the women do cover their hair is also a change from earlier generations of Muslim women in KwaZulu-Natal, who dressed modestly but did not cover their hair in the same way and as widely as Muslim women do today.

All five women recognise the value of the rote learning via which the basic teachings of Islam were taught to them as children; but all have taken it upon themselves to gain a deeper understanding of their faith as adults. This is in contrast to the time when they grew up, when a basic understanding of Islam was considered sufficient, and Indian cultural practices were often misinterpreted as Islamic practices. Access to contemporary Islamic scholars like Tariq Ramadan, Yasir Qadhi, Salman Nadvi and Abdullah Deedat has enhanced their sense of knowing who they are as Muslim women and with this knowledge, they have comfortably carved a space for themselves within South African society, studying, working and serving all sectors of society. They have not been ridiculed for their beliefs and actions as Muslim women by people outside of the Muslim community. What criticism there has been has come from within the Muslim community, and this too, has been from quarters which are considered conservative by the majority of this community.

Whilst all five interviewees agree that social responsibility is an inherent part of Islamic teachings, and their religious upbringing and strong faith played an important role in their identity formation, their foray into, and on-going involvement in civic engagement, was not solely due to this. As children, all of them witnessed informal social responsibility at play in the generosity of their elders (not all of whom were “religious” in the narrow sense that we understand the term) towards the less fortunate. Later on in life, all of the interviewees were inspired by both activists within and outside the Muslim community, as well as their own observations of what was going on around them and globally. For example, Quraysha and Shameema found stimulus in Palestinian solidarity activities, though some may argue that this issue is conflated with Islam; Shakira in HIV and AIDS activism; and Mariam in Lupus. It can thus be argued that it was not only ‘a sense of Islamic duty’ which motivated them to become involved in civic engagement, but also other factors at work in the societies in which they live. That religion should encourage civic engagement is not unusual and is not confined to Islam. Studies of other faith groups have reached similar conclusions. Theorists like Robert Putnam believe that engaging in religious groups is a kind of cultural capital that leads to the attainment of further cultural capital through civic engagement.

In the introductory chapter to this study, Putnam's argument that 'there is a decline in civic engagement in the contemporary world due to such factors as the increasing participation of women in the labour market, residential mobility and reduced social rootedness in local communities, and more single-person households,' was presented. However, Quraysha, Faeza, Shakira, Shameema and Mariam are all involved in civic engagement within the context of the contemporary world, and within their respective contexts, they have observed an opposite trend to that argued by Putnam. In the case of Quraysha, Faeza and Shameema, this is evident in the fact that all three are involved in philanthropic organisations which are entirely made up of women. Furthermore, Faeza observed that even outside the context of the COCA, the number of Muslim women engaged in civic participation is increasing 'like crazy.'

Whilst Shameema did concede that it is difficult for the WCG to recruit younger members, because they are unable to attend daytime meetings due to work and other commitments, she also pointed out that whilst they may not be involved in the WCG specifically, Muslim women find ways to get involved by structuring their schedules accordingly and effectively juggling their responsibilities. Shakira attributed the increase in the number of women becoming involved in civic engagement to them having a greater number of role models, as well as having access to more information, and platforms on which to create their own spaces; whilst Mariam, too observed that over time, Muslim women have become more active in community work, unlike the period when she was growing up when 'women dedicated too much of their time to the kitchen.'

Shameema concurred that access to education has led to an increase in civic engagement, where 'everybody is enlightened' and 'everybody wants to do their bit to help everybody.' Faeza also agreed that women are 'more exposed to things' like societal issues, inspiring them to want to make a positive difference. She shares Shameema's view that women with school-going children are very involved in civic engagement, and not just women whose children are grown up and have time on their hands. She pointed out that they are quite comfortable juggling their roles as mothers, wives and community activists. Growing up in a family of strong women was certainly a positive influence. Many women who could not get involved 'hands on', they are willing to contribute financially.

However, it is apparent that the women tend to be involved in organisations that have a strong Muslim base. There is some debate as to whether women such as those discussed in this study can be considered 'Islamic feminists'. I would postulate that the women in this study were prepared to do what they considered to be correct in terms of Islamic norms, sometimes in conflict with *ulama* proclamations, but were not consciously undertaking a crusade against what some may see as patriarchal norms in Islam. While in other parts of the Islamic world, there are women who want to re-read Islamic sources to challenge what they see as patriarchal interpretations of the *Qur'an* in particular, the women in this

study found a niche in which they felt comfortable operating within existing understandings of Islamic texts.

In fact, it is apparent that the women tended to participate in organisations and roles that were considered as 'acceptable' for women, and which, feminist critics may argue, fulfil the 'hegemonic' view of women's essentially female nature as nurturers and mothers (social workers / caregivers / working with children), which are sociological rather than biological roles. Whereas a woman's body fulfils a biological role as mother, motherhood is a sociological role which some feminists see perpetuating men's dominant position in society.

Notwithstanding this, the interviewees were pleased that women were actively involved in making a positive difference to society. This is firstly, because helping the less privileged is a *Qur'anic* injunction which they all take seriously, and civic engagement is a means of implementing this injunction. Secondly, civic engagement plays a major role in helping to carve the identity of the South African Muslim woman as an autonomous, independent individual, capable of making and executing her own decisions. Religion aside, all five women strongly feel that civic engagement is a duty incumbent upon them as South African citizens, as they do not exist in an insular, religiously monolithic environment. For them, being part of a multi-cultural, multi-faith society means being involved in building it. This was aptly articulated by Faeza:

Also looking at the country we are living in, from a political perspective, we are such a minority. [As Muslims] we need to ultimately please the creator. There is a bit of a problem there because now you are also doing it to be safe in your country. We have to try and make sense of that because if we do not wake up and make ourselves heard and be visible, it is going to be a problem for us in this country.

Faeza's views are particularly relevant in the context of what has been perceived as rising race tensions between Africans and Indians in South Africa since 2013¹⁴⁸ that reached a crescendo at the time of

¹⁴⁸ In May 2013, *City Press* published a controversial column which was described by some as 'dripping with anti-Indian hatred.' The column was directed at Afzal Khan, the mayor of the Newcastle, a town in KwaZulu-Natal, who reportedly laid a complaint against a traffic cop, who mistook him for a Gupta. In the column in question, Phumlani Mfeka wrote: 'I penned this letter to you in the interests of educating, liberating and giving you a free, but stern, warning not to grandstand against an African person in the way you did to the traffic official who innocently mistook you for one of the Guptas. Such an action is certain to attract severe African contempt. First and foremost, you are in Indian and, contrary to what you believe and what you perhaps have been taught, South Africa is an African country with its land in its totality and proportion rightfully belonging to indigenous African people. In article entitled 'Anti-Indian Resentment' published on news24.com in 2014, a reader calling himself 'Chriso' wrote that 'the most salient and dangerous element of the intra-blacks resentment is what has become known as the 'anti-Indian' resentment which is said to be on the rise.' He goes on to mention the Mazibuye African Forum, a group which he states has called for 'the liberation of KwaZulu-Natal from Indians.' 'The group is advocating for some 'Indian-

writing in November 2015. The newspapers and social media are filled with stories threatening the existence of Indians in South Africa. This led SAMNET and the Al-Ansaar Foundation to convene an urgent meeting of religious leaders, community activists, community policing forums, and ordinary members of the public at the Al-Ansaar Hall in Durban on 26 October 2015 to discuss alleged ‘anti-Indian sentiments’. The fears of most of those at the meeting were palpable.¹⁴⁹ Social media is undoubtedly playing a role in creating hysteria. On Thursday, 28 October 2015, the subject was discussed on SAFM’s ‘After 8 Debate’, hosted by Rowena Baird. The programme drew callers from all over the world. Some of the ideas expressed were that Indians were inward looking and refused to engage with the wider society, focused outwards towards India and the Middle East rather than those around them, exploited African workers, and so on. In such a context, the views of Faeza and others of the need to be involved in the wider community are apposite.

This study posed the questions, ‘How valid are generalisations about Muslim women’s lives? Is there a case for presenting a nuanced view through historicising their experiences?’ The answer is clearly in the affirmative. The portraits of the women interviewed for this study underscore the fact that negative generalisations of Muslim women do not resonate with reality and that historicising their experiences reveals rich lives in which they fully engage in various activities. This is not to say that these findings can be applied universally to Muslim societies everywhere; they clearly apply to the women studied in this context and probably to the many other women who are of a similar social class. Such qualitative and ethnographic studies, and perhaps even quantitative and empirical ones, in other contexts are likely to reveal equally rich stories and should be undertaken in lieu of lazy stereotypes and generalisations about Muslim women which suggest that they are detached from the wider societies in which they are located.

owned land’ to be distributed for Africans and for ‘Indians to lose their BEE status,’ among other things,’ he states.

¹⁴⁹ They called this meeting after Mfeka sent out an inflammatory anti-Indian SMS. In an advert headed ‘Rising Anti-Indian Sentiments’ widely circulated via Whatsapp and email SAMNET and Al-Ansaar Foundation stated that Mazibuye is ‘a new radical forum that wants Indians to be excluded from affirmative action and black economic empowerment programmes.’ ‘Al-Ansaar and Samnet invites you to a meeting to discuss Rising Anti-Indian and Violent Threats by groups like Mazibuye.’ Willies Mchunu, the KZN MEC for Transport, Community Safety and Liaison, and Ravi Pillay, the KZN MEC for Human Settlements and Public Works, obtained an urgent interdict against Mfeka in the Pietermaritzburg High Court. See <http://iono.fm/e/221910>. Accessed: 8 November 2015

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Appendix A

Interview guide

1. What educational / life opportunities were available to you as well as to women/girls in general when you were growing up?
2. Was this different from opportunities available to boys / men?
3. If there were differences, what were these and why was this so?
4. What were the respective roles of Muslim men and women during the period in which you were growing up?
5. Have these roles in changed in any way over the course of your life? If so, how?
6. To what do you attribute how these roles were defined in the first place, and to what would you attribute their evolution?
7. What does being “Muslim” mean to you?
8. What is the role of religion within your life?
9. Tell me a bit about about your education, training, and work, if any.
10. What drew you to civic participation?
11. What is the nature of your civic participation – organisations / activities? What is the stimulus behind your civic engagement and public participation?
12. What have been some of your achievements in this regard?
13. In your opinion is civic participation in general increasing or decreasing?
14. To what do you attribute this?
15. Have you encountered criticism from within the Muslim community due to your participation on civil society platforms?
16. How has political change (end of apartheid) been experienced in the spaces of home, family and community—the “private sphere”?
17. What is the ability of women and opportunities for them generally in South Africa to participate in socio-economic and political processes?
18. What resources or structures embedded in social relations assist or impede women in meeting their needs and can these be mobilised for the purpose of collective action through the use of civil society?
19. How has the importance of religion in you life as well as your understanding of specific rituals and practices transformed over time?
20. Has being a “Muslim woman” presented any particular obstacles in the various spheres of your life, particularly your civic involvement? How are you dealing with these challenges?
21. What are the kinds of race, class, gender, cultural, and class barriers that you have faced or face? Are you (and how) challenging these?

22. If you wear the hijab/niqab, why did you choose to do so? Has wearing it hindered you in any way – why/why not?
23. What kind of relationships do you have with other Muslim women?
24. What kind of relationships do you have with women who are not Muslim?
25. As a Muslim woman what role are you expected to fulfill in your everyday life?