

Theorising Experience, Subjectivity and Narrative in Studies of Gender and Islam

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Like many feminist initiatives, this special issue has its origins in long and nourishing conversations about abundance and absence, convergences and missed connections and the possibilities we dreamed of amid the complex terrain of feminist debates and Religious Studies in South Africa. In 2010–2011, the three co-editors of this issue were colleagues in a space that was most hospitable to such discussions, the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. In the course of the year, our talks often centred on the rich history of gender theory in our disciplines of African literature and Religious Studies, yet we also noted the absence of a truly fertile exchange between two areas in which the country had produced much-lauded and influential scholarship: feminist theorising and Islamic Studies. In our discussions, we imagined a space that could generate such an exchange and thus emerged a collaborative feminist research project on “Theorising Experience, Subjectivity and Narrative in Studies of Gender and Islam”.

Central to this vision is a series of conferences which would enable interactions and conversations between African post-colonial feminists and both local and international feminist scholars on Islam. The first conference was hosted by Associate Professor Sa'diyya Shaikh and Dr Nina Hoel at the University of Cape Town in December 2011. The intellectual project of this meeting was to advance feminist theory and methodology about Muslim women's experiences, subjectivities and narratives, and to develop a research community between feminist post-colonial scholars and Islamic feminists. The gathering was at once broader and narrower

than our initial conception: our continental ambitions were limited to the abundant sisterhood of South African feminisms, given our desire to enable local and national conversations. We hoped to begin consolidating intellectual resources on the home front, as it were. On the other hand, we were also able to invite three scholars of Islam from Pakistan, the UK and the US.¹

To address a new and complex set of realities, the conference brought together critical scholars from Women's Studies, Religious Studies, Legal Studies, Psychology, African Literature and Sociology as well as renowned creative writers such as Shabbir Banoobhai, Pepe Hendricks, Shaïda Kazie Ali and Rustum Kozain in a vivid exchange. Our guest-list intentionally transgressed narrow intellectual divisions between creative writing and scholarly academic contributions. Inviting a diverse set of contributions ranging from critical reflections on women's experiences and feminism to creative performances of poetry and story-telling enabled us to engage rich and complex representations and forms of human subjectivity. The interdisciplinary and transnational conversations that resulted were inclusive and occasionally astringent, but ultimately enriching. This special issue of the *Journal for Islamic Studies* collects the resulting work of the novelists, poets, feminist scholars and Islamic Studies scholars as a lasting memento of that meeting and the foundation of a project of theoretical innovation that harnesses multiple creative energies.

Africa as Conceptual Location

Africa, feminism and Islam are three central terms we brought into conversation at our first conference, and constitute significant arenas of engagement in many of the contributions in this volume. African feminisms have provided an important corrective to the dominance of Northern theory, and feminist thinking on the continent has moved far beyond "speaking back" to engage a complex set of realities. As convenors

1 The conference was primarily funded by the South African National Research Foundation (The Thuthuka Programme) and the University of Cape Town (Research Development Grant). We also received a contribution from the College of Liberal Arts and the Rock Ethics Institute at Penn State.

of the project “Theorising Experience, Subjectivity and Narrative in Studies of Gender and Islam”, we have drawn on this rich history of feminist thinking as well as a formidable African record of Religious Studies, to bring together scholars who have worked alongside but not necessarily *with* one another. The conversations at the December 2011 conference and the resultant essays in this special issue have more than fulfilled our hope of expanding and entrenching the local theorising terrain of Islam and gender. We believe readers will join us in welcoming the rich and thoughtful engagements with Islam, gender and contemporary politics, theory, creativity and activism in this volume.

Theorising *Experience* in Studies of Gender and Islam

The analytical category of “experience” in feminist theory has undoubtedly led to theorisations that importantly destabilise universalist claims about knowledge and reveal the gendered subject of knowledge production. Critical of male-centred, partial histories of meaning and meaning-making, feminist theorists have focused, among other things, on examining the diversity of women’s experiences of the everyday. Informed by complex and dynamic cultural, religious, and socio-political locations, inscribed as well by race, sex, class and age, women’s experiences have become the site through which contestations and subversions of male-dominance are articulated and enacted.

Reflecting on the notion of “theorising experience” from a feminist standpoint, we wanted to enable fruitful conversations between African feminist scholars and scholars of gender and Islam based in Africa and elsewhere. The context of our call for theorising gender, Islam, and the everyday is the wealth of debate around ideas of the ordinary and intimate in the post-apartheid era and the current vibrant discussions in this regard in law, the media, academia, the state, social movements and creative arts. The categories of the “ordinary”, “voice”, and agency have been a major focus in South African feminist scholarship and ethics since the 1980s. Scholars such as Pumla Gqola and Njabulo Ndebele have written influential work about “ordinary” lives in fiction and autobiography as counter-narratives to the expectation of “spectacular” resistance to

apartheid in accounts of black people's lives.² Feminists in a range of disciplines, such as history, literary studies, sociology and anthropology, have developed sophisticated theoretical tools to research the everyday lives of South African women. Such tools include nuanced life narratives, autobiography, biography, ethnographies and oral history. These have deepened our understanding of the entangled roles of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, class and religion in the texture of "ordinary life". Through such explorations of the "ordinary" and the "private" we have arrived at critical insights into the legacy of colonialism and apartheid as well as the complexities of the current post-apartheid period.³

Given the central epistemological significance of experience in sculpting transformational discourses and visions, we wanted to theorise the node of lived Islam in the South African post-apartheid context and broader post-colonial settings. Examining the various ways in which experiences are constituted through the localised and situated politics of gender, race and sexuality, we envisioned rich and critical engagements with how meaning is made in the everyday life of believers as well as with questions of social justice in individual and collective, intimate and social relationships and encounters. Moreover, we are convinced that insights gleaned from within the South African context speak to related theoretical developments amongst post-colonial and other feminist scholarship in a variety of contexts.

In the arena of Religious Studies, despite the fact that Muslims are a minority in South Africa, some of the country's male scholars of Islam, such as Abdulkader Tayob, Ebrahim Moosa, Farid Esack and Rashied Omar, have made significant contributions to international debates on Islam. They have brought acute insights to contemporary studies

2 See Njabulo S. Ndebele, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12, 2, 1986, 143-157; and Pumla D. Gqola, "The Difficult Task of Normalising Freedom: Spectacular Masculinities, Ndebele's Literary/Cultural Commentary and Post-apartheid Life," *English in Africa*, 36, 1, 2009, 61-76.

3 For more on the political meanings of private lives in South Africa, see the recent special issue on "Private Lives and Public Cultures in South Africa," edited by Kerry Bystrom and Sarah Nuttall, *Cultural Studies* 27, 5, 2013; and Gabeba Baderoon's article in this issue.

of Islam through their analyses of the challenges of racial, and more variously, gendered oppression for understanding the role of religion in contemporary life. Feminist scholars in Religious Studies have also increasingly turned to everyday experience as a powerful intellectual resource. In the South African context, two of the co-editors of this volume have made contributions in this regard; Sa'diyya Shaikh is the author of a widely cited article on praxis as the ground of theory and ethical meaning for Muslim women, and Nina Hoel has crafted several essays on Muslim women's experience of sexuality, marriage and divorce around the principle of lived experience as both theoretical lens and content.⁴ Because South Africa is also a prime locus of feminist scholarship on the continent and further afield, the confluence of feminism and Islamic Studies in South Africa is an intersection which holds great promise for the future. Our volume seeks to direct this already rich convergence toward new feminist methods in the study of Islam and Muslim lifeworlds.

Theorising Subjectivity in Studies of Gender and Islam

In response to (neo-) liberalist humanist assumptions pertaining to a subject's rational, unitary and fixed dispositions, the notion of subjectivity in poststructuralist feminist work is being increasingly conceptualised as fluid and amorphous, and in a constant process of becoming.⁵ As such, subjectivity is being theorised by feminists as relationally and socially produced through diverse encounters between the self and other. Furthermore, the enactment of different subject positions, complexly entangled within an individual subject, is intrinsically related to available scripts of gendered, racialised and sexual expressions.

4 Sa'diyya Shaikh, "A *Tafsir* of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community," in Dan Maguire and Sa'diyya Shaikh (eds.), *Violence Against Women in Contemporary World Religions: Roots and Cures* (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2007); 66-89 and Nina Hoel, "Engaging Religious Leaders: South African Muslim Women's Experiences in Matters Pertaining to Divorce Initiatives," *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 38, 2, 2012, 184-200.

5 See, for example, the work of Amina Mama, *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender, and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 1995); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford; New York: Blackwell, 1987).

Reflecting on such non-essentialist dynamic configurations of the human subject, we thus ask a number of questions in relation to theorising subjectivity in studies of gender and Islam. For example, how are multi-layered subjectivities constituted through diverse understandings of Islam? What are the ways in which Islamic discourses inform individual and social expressions of gender and sexuality? And also, in what ways do intimate, interpersonal, social and political performances reflect the elasticity of Muslim subjectivities? The ways in which subjectivity is expressed and performed are also related to relations of power which are played out in contested and intersecting public and private domains. Many of the contributions in this special issue straddle compound discourses pertaining to dominant (neo-) colonial, Western, racist and sexist constructions of Muslim subjectivities, while at the same time re-imagining and re-constituting self-defining and empowering subjectivities. It is worth noting that contributors envision Muslim subjectivities through a range of approaches, including Muslim activist initiatives, Islamic feminist theology, post-colonial literary and feminist theory, autobiographical and biographical narratives, poetry, experiential and self-reflective personal accounts.

Theorising *Narrative* in Studies of Gender and Islam

The contributions included in this special issue are, as mentioned earlier, reflective of multiple genres. We imagined the notion of “theorising narrative” as a way to unpack and understand lived Islam, diversely expressed through theoretical, methodological, empirical, autobiographical, fictional and poetic approaches. As such, we consciously move away from the “grand narratives” of imperial and colonial conquests and direct our gaze to the intimate sphere of the personal, experiential, creative and subjectively fragmented, a topic that one of the co-editors, Gabeba Baderoon, has written about in relation to literature and visual art.⁶ We

6 Gabeba Baderoon, “‘Gender within Gender’: Zanele Muholi’s Trans Images of Being and Becoming,” *Feminist Studies*, 37, 2, 2011, 390–416; and Gabeba Baderoon, “‘This is Our Speech’: Voice, Body and Poetic Form in Recent South African Writing,” *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 37, 2, 2011, 213–227.

include narratives of individuals, imagined and real, narratives that disrupt normative gendered and sexual practices and that challenge us to critically revisit our own assumptions, narratives that allow us to journey into insightful and witty academic minds, narratives that complicate women's assertions of autonomy and voice, narratives that make the familiar strange or that incite estrangement, narratives that unsettle us and narratives that comfort and affirm us. Additionally, the narratives included in this special issue are also meant to push disciplinary boundaries in order to develop new and productive ways to theorise experience and subject positions as they emerge in embodied and localised contexts.

Scholarly and Academic Voices

The abundance of contributions in this issue proves how productive the participants at the "Theorising Experience, Subjectivity and Narrative in Studies of Gender and Islam" conference found the challenge of theorising and imagining anew Islam and gender. In addition to the conference presentations, we have included two academic papers (by Hidayatullah and Zaman, and Ahjum) that were submitted to the journal after the conference, both of which are closely aligned to the thematic focus of this special issue. Ahjum's paper adds a unique lens into the aporia of women's experience in relation to Qibla, an anti-apartheid Islamist movement in South Africa most active during the 1980s. Hidayatullah and Zaman's astute analysis of American Muslim women's confessional literature in the post 9/11 context reveals the insidious penetration of geo-politics into women's self-representations.

We begin this special issue with **Sa'diyya Shaikh's** paper, which presents an innovative foray into the feminist epistemological category of "experience" for the study of Islam. Arguing for careful intersectional lenses, she troubles and complicates some of the ideologically functional ways in which "Islam" and women's "experience" are produced in particular contemporary Muslim women's memoirs. Challenging narrow renditions of the Islamic tradition, Shaikh argues for the ethical and political importance of critical, constructive Islamic feminist rethinking of tradition as well as for accurate scholarship and

intellectual work in this regard. She presents a substantive form of such an engagement by focusing on experience and gender in the works of the influential 13th century Sufi, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī. In doing so, she explores how notions of “experience”, traversing the mystical and mundane realms, might produce egalitarian imaginaries on gender and subjectivities within Muslim thought in ways that are productive for Islamic feminists.

Aysha Hidayatullah and **Taymiya Zaman** follow with a critical reading of the seemingly “positive” genre of American Muslim women’s autobiography or “Muslim media chic” emerging in the US post-9/11. They conduct a pioneering intersectional analysis on issues of self-representation, individualism and post-feminist discourses of Muslim women in the US. Their article exemplifies a finely-honed “multiple critique”. On the one hand, they present a critical and sensitive reading on the production of women’s selves and freedoms in relation to dominant socio-political and cultural hegemonies. On the other hand, they imagine possibilities for genuinely emancipatory spaces of Muslim women’s autobiography as sites that allow for reimagining the relation of self, history and community.

Taking on the theme of the “everyday” and “ordinary” in South Africa, **Gabeba Baderoon’s** paper analyses the phenomenon of autobiographies produced in the local activist sector that link religion and sexuality. In reading *Hijab* (2009), the collection of life narratives by queer Muslims, Baderoon shows how such writing expands the category of the “national” by interrupting the dominance of official narratives about apartheid, anti-apartheid and post-apartheid. Such “new” writing counters the exclusionary effects of national identity that preclude the expression of diverse sexualities. She proposes that the techniques of crafting the self in these autobiographical writings interrupt conventional tropes of social belonging and instead model complex and inclusive gendered, sexual and religious subjectivities.

Desiree Lewis’ essay discusses the widely acclaimed novel, *The Yacoubian Building*, by Alaa Al Aswany, and its exemplary engagement with the political and social as well as the gendered, sexual and intimate

dimensions of dissidence in pre-revolutionary Egypt. The intricacy and subtlety of Al Aswany's analysis of the psychology of oppression, complicity and resistance is matched by Lewis' nuanced reading of the novel in light of current geo-politics surrounding Islam and neo-liberalist politics in the Muslim world, in this case, Egypt.

Focused on empirical data, **Nina Hoel** and **Sa'diyya Shaikh** explore a group of South African Muslim women's experiences in intimate relationships. Drawing on theological insights offered by Islamic feminists, they theorise Muslim religious subjectivities of '*abd-Allah* (servant of God) and *khalifah* (moral agent) and bring these into conversation with discourses on sexuality invoked by their respondents. Problematising the intersectional relationships between the intimate, the social and the sacred, Hoel and Shaikh foreground the various ways in which religious ideals and God/believer relationships form part of their respondents' sexual praxis.

Linked to the above theme of intersectionality, and contributing to decentring the dominance of writings on Muslim men's engagements in the anti-apartheid struggle, **Gadija Ahjum** explores the narratives of a group of Muslim women who were actively involved in Qibla, an activist Islamic anti-apartheid movement during the 1980s. Using empirical qualitative methods, she examines the various ways in which her respondents' religious identities were informed and sculpted by their commitments to socio-political justice through their involvement in Qibla.

Creative and Critical Voices: Poetry and Reflective Essays on Being and Becoming⁷

In her critical and thought-provoking piece "Decolonising Muslim Subjectivities", **Durre S. Ahmed** invites us into the world of *mythos* and *logos* in order to prize open the psycho-theological dimensions of Muslim subjectivities. She notes the importance of "re-valuing" *mythos*

7 The creative contributions are gathered in the second part of the volume, not to reflect a hierarchy of thinking and imagining (since we believe that these occur in both sections), but to allow the creative works to resound and jostle near one another with their powerful effects.

and “re-visioning” *logos* as a means of challenging dominant patriarchal religious narratives that de-prioritise feminine subjectivities, expressions and imaginings, in the complex framework of current geo-politics and Islamist currents.

A wealth of novels, plays, poetry, performance, music, film, radio work, autobiography and hybrid prose forms have expanded the ways in which Islam figures in South Africa and the world. In this special issue, we are pleased to include poetry by **Malika Ndlovu**, **Rustum Kozain**, **Shabbir Banoobhai**, **Gabeba Baderoon** and **Roshila Nair** and personal essays by **Anonymous**, **Shaida Kazie Ali** and **Nadeem Mahomed**.

The poetry and personal reflections included in this issue allow us to think through the role of autobiographical writing and literature in South Africa and to understand complex and challenging topics like politics, religion, gender, conflict and personal ethics. Self-representation through autobiography also sensitively and thoughtfully evokes the specificity of Islam in South Africa. In their writings, authors face the challenges of individualism in a world in which modernity is framed by consumerism, instrumentalised human relationships and commodification; they invite us to reflect on the apparent choice between consumerism/modernity and simplicity/tradition. They also allow us to show the value of writing from the “marginal” site — in terms of both Islam and the production of theory — of South Africa and the specific concerns of South African Muslims with issues of race, ethnicity, class, colonialism and xenophobia. This demonstrates that “worldly” matters are in fact deeply “Islamic” matters in the local sphere. The reflective essays and poems allow us to understand the idea of the autobiographical as an attempt to balance the social and the spiritual.

We are privileged to include a ground-breaking personal essay on a woman’s honest and deeply ethical account of exercising her freedom of reproductive choice from an Islamic perspective by **Anonymous**, and a simultaneously moving and hilarious essay by **Shaida Kazie Ali** on the writing of her novel, *Lessons in Husbandry*, about a missing sister and a woman who marries two husbands under Islamic rites.

Nadeem Mahomed provides an absorbing personal reflection on

the idea of being a worthy person in the current climate of neo-liberal pressure for South Africans in general, and younger Muslims in particular, to build identities around accumulation and consumption, rather than on spiritual and community values. His paper explores in intimate detail the issues of *madrasa* education, offering a nuanced appreciation of the value of such an education to create more wholesome values, while at the same time providing honest and insightful critique of such institutions' exclusions of gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Mahomed's essay allows readers to reflect on the need, value and method of questioning in Islam.

Perhaps the central contribution of the reflective essays and poetry included in this special volume is their embodiment of complexity, difficulty, and honesty— and what this means for a thoughtful and ethical reflection about the roles of women and men, as well as varied conceptions of gender and sexuality among Muslims. How does one engage with these challenges in trying to create a humane and meaningful life? Through these personal essays and poems, we learn more about the vision of gender behind such exclusions and thereby the visions of gender that resist such exclusions.

Lastly, this special issue is rounded out by two book reviews, on the important compilation *Homosexuality and Islam* (two volumes) and the long-awaited and nuanced collection, *Sexuality in Muslim Contexts: Restrictions and Resistance*.