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Framing Feminine Identity: Exploring Ways of Being a Woman, through the Practice of Faith, and Ideas of Equality and Justice through Narratives of South African Muslim Women Activists

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**Framing Feminine Identity: Exploring Ways of Being a Woman,
through the Practice of Faith, and Ideas of Equality and Justice
through Narratives of South African Muslim Women Activists**

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School for International Training

South Africa: Social and Political Transformation

Spring 2016

This reflective research is dedicated to women of faith, everywhere.

Acknowledgements

While no amount of writing involving woman's identity and experience will ever fully capture who she is completely, I want to thank the women who were gracious enough to share a part of themselves with me:

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To Aneesa, thank you for patiently directing me to the Westville Soofie Mosque for Friday prayer when I was lost at the wrong Mosque down the road. Lunch with your family was truly delightful and delicious. Surely, I can only hope my family is as smart and kind as yours. I can tell how lucky your kids are to have you as a mother, and how lucky your community is to have you as a woman. Your candid conversation was really thought provoking and profound! Thank you for letting a complete stranger participate in your life for the day, it was lovely for me.

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Prologue

“I understand when people from the outside look in and want to talk to or understand Muslim women, they want to know what they are. But they can only understand it in their terms. I think true inquiry must be that you understand’ the other’ in their own terms.”¹

I was grateful to hear Fatima Seedat’s honest reflection on the problematic nature of wanting to ‘understand’ Muslim women from the outside looking in. For a week or so after sitting down with Fatima, I questioned whether I, as an outsider, a White, Non-Denominational Christian, American woman had any authority whatsoever to attempt to “understand Muslim women” in South Africa. The answer I slowly realized was that, I didn’t. I had no merit to understand them, because women, or rather humans in general, can never be fully understood, let alone from the outside.

After talking to Fatima and Rumana, two of the women whose life reflections I feature in the pages to follow, I resolved to not try to understand or define, but rather to learn and reflect. Maybe, just maybe, my inadequacy actually qualified me to play the part of listener. For as Fatima suggested to me upon our first meeting:

“What you’re exploring in us women, is really what you’re exploring in yourself: ways of being a woman, through the practice of faith, and ideas of justice and equality.”

“Exactly,” I told her, “You’re exactly right [exhaling in relief].”

“So don’t be afraid to call it just that,” Fatima smiled.

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Abstract

What began as an attempt to explore Islamic Feminism through the life narratives of Muslim women, actually enabled a journey into exploring ways of being a woman, through the practice of faith, and ideas of justice and equality. Through multiple in-depth interviews and conversations, a visit to the mosque for Friday prayer, and a night at a theatrical production in the Muslim community, I spent time with influential Muslim women activists in the Durban community of South Africa listening, learning and reflecting.

What I found was less concrete than labeling these women as 'Islamic Feminists' but it was also more unifying. Through telling these women's stories, I hope to take the reader on a journey through the complicated nature of identity in order to not only shed light on a group of women who are making strides in social justice but to allow the thoughtful words of these women to help you along your own faith or identity journey.

In the end, I offer a look into how, contrary to feminist thought, rejecting labels of Islamic feminism and instead allowing for narrative discourse free of labeling can actually prove to be more unifying for women of all faith backgrounds.

Introduction:

Over the past year, I have formed two very meaningful relationships in my life with two mothers from Saudi Arabia who whole-heartedly follow the religion of Islam. Over countless meals together, and being welcomed into their homes and personal lives, our English teacher-student relationships turned into some of the most meaningful friendships of my university experience. Through these women's friendship, coupled with my own faith journey towards self-identity, I began to discover the complex negotiation of feminine identity that occurs within women of faith around the world.

The narrative research that follows began at the intersection of Islam and "feminine identity", that is, the way that women perceive their identity as women. I attempted to explore this identity within the context of these South African Muslim women's involvement in social activism. I wanted to discover the way in which South African Muslim women are negotiating their identity as women and as social activists within their religious identity in order to gain a greater understanding of "Islamic Feminism."²

Over hours of conversations, 5 women so graciously welcomed me into their places of work, their homes, and their lives. Each of these women identified as Muslim, of Indian decent, and born and raised in South African. What unfolded from this narrative research was so much more than I could have hoped for. As I sat down to listen to the life stories of these women through a series of conversational in-depth interviews, I gained an invaluable into the ways of being a woman, through the practice of faith and ideas of justice and equality.

Preface & Limitations of Study:

The women's narratives, which you are about to read, are personal stories and something I take very seriously. I scolded myself for taking so much time to transcribe and listen to these women's words, but I wanted to make sure that the women's voices were highlighted above my own.

In each chapter of my narrative research you will find each of the three women featured: Zuleikha (age 89), Rumana (age 42) and Fatima (early 40s). They have each experience different parts of history, of their Muslim community, and of the world, but their paths also cross in many ways as I have found is often the case in the tight knit, Durban Muslim community. Indeed, Fatima and Rumana are good friends and together they both know Zuleikha Mayat. I had the privilege of also being guided by Lubna Nadvi. Similarly, Aneesa Moosa was able to bring me to Friday prayer at Westville Soofie mosque in the greater Durban area.

So often there is a lack of women's voices in topics of religion and faith. Narratives offer an important view into perspectives and experiences of women, which are often hushed by what we feel we *should* feel, or be, or say. Additionally, I believe so often in academia voices are lost to facts and theories. As I attempt to show in this study, theory sometimes only serves to generalize and overshadow true experiences.

Over in-depth conversations, I attempt to get to know the three women I feature. As a result, I have formed what I consider to be friendships with these women. One could say that this limits my reflection on this topic, but I believe it has enhanced the work. Certainly

it has enhanced my own experience and made this topic something of great importance to me.

Background (Literature Review):

Debunking the “Monolith” of Islam in South Africa

According to Goolam Vahed and Shamil Jeppie, Muslims living in contemporary South Africa are too often viewed as a “monolith.” Many South African’s conclude that the turn to Makkah in prayer each day serves as evidence enough to categorize all Muslims as a “unitary bloc” in South African society.³ However, this narrative ignores the many different realities, opinions, and beliefs that persons of Islamic faith might experience in South African society. This “homogenous” view of Islam wrongly conglomerates the many different political thoughts held by South African Muslims. It also ignores the many different classes, socioeconomic standings, and races represented in the greater South African Muslim community. Furthermore, it ignores theological divisions within Islam itself and debates along varying Qur’anic interpretations. Finally, I believe it ignores the different experiences of women and men within the Muslim community and within the practice of Islam.

South African Indian Identity and Islam

Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal, has the province with the greatest concentration of Indian’s in the world aside from the Indian subcontinent itself. It claims that 47.3 percent of South African Indians identify as Hindu, 24.6 percent as Muslim and 24.4 as Christian.⁴ For the purpose of my studies, I will be focusing on the Muslim community, which is largely

made up of Indians in Durban, South Africa. This concentration is limited and not a complete reflection of a group of individuals who are in no way homogeneous. However, I think it is important to understand the role that Indian culture has played in influencing Islam in the South African context. A key to understanding the Muslim community in Durban, comes from understanding the influence of Indian cultural and its traditions, patriarchal system, history, and culture.

It is important to preface South African Muslim Identity, or any construction of South African identity, with the careful consideration of the implications of South Africa's tumultuous past. During the Apartheid era, identity was used to oppress, silence, or privilege entire groups of South Africans, especially based on racial identity. The Apartheid regime managed, in many cases, to divide and separate entire groups of people based on races that they deemed: "Black", "Indian", "Coloured" or "White". While these racial categories were often arbitrary and highly contested, they were nonetheless used to categorize and systematically separate different communities from each other. With the Group Areas Act of 1950, the regular separation of Indians into "buffer" zones (often between "black" and "white" areas) affected Indian identity significantly. This conglomeration often ignored the differences within Indian identity such as between cultural and language groups like the Tamil, Hindi, Gujarati, Telugu, and Urdu speaking sub-groups. Indian groups who can trace their roots to the indentured laborers who immigrated to South Africa for work were placed alongside wealthier merchant-class Indians.

This historical summary can offer us a look into what Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen refer to as the "Indian South African Communal" identity in their book *Gender*,

Modernity & Indian Delights. This identity which was deeply shaped by not only the Apartheid era, but also the history of Indian indentured labor in South Africa, and South African Indian's "transoceanic origins".⁵

Indian Feminine Identity, Islam, and the Women's Cultural Group in Durban

In 1954, one group of thirteen, mainly Muslim, upper-middle class, Indian women formed the Women's Cultural Group. The group of women aimed to "channel their creative and civic energies, cultivate their friendships and their intellects, and to express themselves as modern women."⁶ While they were mostly Muslim women, Zuleikha Mayat, the leader and founder of the group, stresses that at fundraising events, lectures, and artistic performances by the Women's Cultural Group (WCG) there were women of Hindu, Christian, and non-religious affiliation from many different racial backgrounds present.⁷ The group was open to "all women over the age of sixteen years."⁸ During this period, opportunities and education were limited for many women in South Africa, but the Women's Cultural Group provided an outlet for women of these communities to develop themselves personally, as well as develop their leadership skills and artistic ability.

A few years after the group's formation, Mrs. Mayat suggested the that group create a recipe book with the intention of "getting the old recipes down." With recipes orally collected and perfected by various women in the community, they put into print a collection of recipes, poems, stories, religious proverbs, and history; it was an *ethnographic* cookbook that they called *Indian Delights*. The group's attempt to "preserve the richness of a well-established culture" through cookery became a country-wide bestseller and a South African Indian cultural staple."⁹

Vahed and Waejet see this production of Indian Delights as “validation of changes in family and women’s opportunities” as it “re-asserted the figure of the Indian housewife within a gendered and cultural divisions of labour.”¹⁰ Ideals of womanhood and feminine identity are explored in Indian delights and through the Women’s Cultural Group. Vahed states:

There is a mix of parody and respect for “them days.” Notions of what it means to be a ‘modern’ housewife are cultivated [in Indian Delights] in gently humorous contradistinction to these visions of a gendered “Indian” past.¹¹

In a time period in South Africa’s history that placed restrictions on movement, the Women’s Cultural Group crossed cultural and political boundaries with their interracial interaction and their fight to define a space for women in the private sector. Their religious and interracial acceptance of all women of color promoted understanding and cooperation and served to empower women of all identities.

However, with a majority of women coming from upper-middle class, Indian, Muslim backgrounds, the Women’s Cultural Group also served as a forum to inadvertently negotiate feminine identity within an Indian and Muslim South African context. Historically, in these communities, as is the case in a great deal of societies around the world, patriarchal influences had influenced the movement and publicity of women. The meetings, the geographical movement and social interaction of these women in the Women’s Cultural Group were, in many cases, not only cause for an eyebrow-raise within their cultural context, but also they were sometimes *illegal* under Apartheid laws. Mrs. Mayat reflected on how meetings could be held in racially segregated neighborhoods that WCG members of other races were not ‘supposed’ to be.¹² Yet, while the Women’s Cultural

Group's motives, meetings and philanthropic endeavors were often centered on ideas of justice and equality, they were not necessarily an activist group as one might traditionally consider. Their acts of defiance were more subtly against cultural norms or "traditional" limitations on women rather than political defiance.

In this way, the Women's Cultural Group is an important look into the issue of labeling identity. While many of the motives of the Women's Cultural Group empowered women, embraced feminist ideals and broke social norms, one could hardly label the group as feminist or political. The reason for this lies within the complicated nature of labeling, the methodology of justice and equality, the politics of pro-feminist actions, and the issue of choice regarding one's personal, feminine identity. Many scholars in South Africa and around the world have explored all of this specifically within the context of Islam, as the WCG so often acted within. In a field controversially deemed "Islamic Feminism", ideas surrounding the Qur'an, womanhood, justice and equality are explored. However, the label of Islamic Feminism and the study of its principles aren't without ethical and controversial implications.

Feminism and Islam

Feminism acknowledges that the experiences of women in any culture are often very different from the experiences of men in similar "class and circumstance".¹³ This view is central to feminist philosophy and has driven women around the world to fight against the gendered nature of power and patriarchy. However, with many of these "feminists" being white, middle class women, western-ideals are often places upon women in what Joanna Hicks calls "context insensitive feminism"¹⁴. Researchers have looked into how

Muslim women have reclaimed “feminism” to take on a more culturally and religiously embracing feminism which Na’eem Jeenah and other scholars call “Islamic Feminism”.¹⁵

In the South African context, Islamic Feminism has its roots in Muslim activism during the struggle for freedom from the Apartheid regime and equal treatment of all races that took place during the 1980’s. Many of these activists, who belonged to progressive school of thought within Islam, were women who fought for equal human rights that included and highlighted women’s rights. Scholars cite the late 1980’s to early 1990’s as the beginning of a movement that came to be referred to as Islamic Feminism. Jeenah further explains the complicated formation of Islamic Feminism in his “Emergence of Islamic Feminisms in South Africa”:

Islamic activists found themselves re-interpreting Islamic scriptures in the cause of an anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist struggle. Such re-interpretation later impacted on the discourse of women’s rights as well. However, the development of Islamic feminisms in the 1990s did not occur in isolation of initiatives by Muslim women in the past few decades to assert themselves and gain a greater role for themselves in Muslim society.¹⁶

While women in South Africa have been involved in issues of justice and equality for women for many decades now, scholars do not universally accept the convergence of Islam and Feminism, whereas other scholars like Fatima Seedat accept the convergence but feel the need to qualify the word feminism with “Islamic” in order to redefine and reclaim the word.¹⁷ Lamya’ al Farugi claims that there are elements within Islam that differ from traditional Western feminism. She believes that these must be understood in order for cooperation between feminism and Islam. al Farugi explains that Islamic Feminism “ would

be an ideology where the Qur'an and the life example of the Prophet Muhammad would represent the ideal for women."¹⁸ Asifa Quraishi claims that the basis of egalitarianism is there in the Qur'an, and that, in fact, the Qur'an holds "the potential for a really vibrant kind of feminism."¹⁹ Understanding Islamic Feminism would require the realization that, for most Muslim women, religion cannot be separated from their identity.

However, many women in South Africa, and the west as well, chose not to identify with the feminist title even though they embrace the ideals and concepts behind it. This is because for many, "'feminism' carries a specifically Western meaning with particular historical and ideological baggage," Jeenah continues, "Most muslim activists prefer not have to be accountable for such baggage. Thus the label 'feminist' is often avoided by such activists for strategic purposes."²⁰ Margot Badran also warns against the assigning the label Margot Badran also warns that 'it is important to be attentive to the identities individuals claim for themselves and not to impose unwanted feminist identity labels on persons."²¹

Women choosing not to identify as feminist while still embracing the ideals surrounding feminism offer an important look into concepts of identity. Truthfully, identity is something often we can almost never fully understand about ourselves, much less other people. Often caught between notions of what we should be and who we are, identity is complex and often fluid. In addition to the complicated nature of identity, lies the added complexity of understanding a woman's "feminine identity", or how she chooses to define herself within the context of being a woman. This is further complicated by what a woman feels she must be in accordance with her religion.

Women and Identity

Notions of identity are at the core of our journey to define ourselves within our respective contexts here on earth and in the life to come. Identity lies at the intersection of culture, race, religion, sexuality, class, socioeconomic standing, gender, and more. It is nearly impossible to completely understand an individual's identity as it is certainly complex and often, fluid. Aside from the complicated nature of identity, understanding a woman's "feminine identity", or how she chooses to define herself within the context of being a woman, can be especially complex. Kathryn Anderson claims that this is because "a woman's discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men's dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman's personal experience."²²

With Anderson's perspective in mind, one must consider ways in which women's identities can be understood further, and in their own words. In the case of the Muslim community in South Africa, discovering the narratives of women is extremely important. This field of research could serve to change wrong assumption about the religion of Islam that are exemplified in anti-terrorist legislation and slow the spread of Islamaphobia from parts of the United States and Europe. Further research into the narratives of Muslim women in South Africa could serve to dispel "homogenous" definitions of Islam in South Africa and abroad. Furthermore, personal stories of love, loss, aspirations, happiness, anger, motherhood and family can often speak to other women. Emotions and stories we can relate to as human beings have been seen to transcend differences in class, geographic location, wealth or religion.

In my own life, I have experienced the identity crisis between wanting to embrace feminist ideals and Christianity, which the world often tells me, cannot coincide. The way we negotiate our place within religion, politics, and woman-ness is the way we constitute our identity. Often, as women, our identity changes with our audience. Kathryn Anderson says this is because “a woman’s discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men’s dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman’s personal experience.”²³

This intersection of religion, identity, and politics is where I believe so many women find their complex identities. Whether participating in activism and religion, or science and culture, for example, women often find themselves choosing one over the other in accordance with what our community assumes a woman *should* chose.

Recording Women’s Stories

In order to truly capture the power of a woman’s personal narrative or expression of feminine identity one must chose the right medium. Dana Jack suggests: "Oral interviews are particularly valuable for uncovering women’s perspectives. Anthropologists have observed how the expression of women’s unique experience as women is often muted, particularly in any situation where women’s interests and experiences are at variance with those of men.”²⁴

Methodology:

In an attempt to understand Islamic Feminism, I was pointed in the direction of a few Muslim women, active in the Durban community, who had devoted a part of their lives to social justice and equality work.

Before contacting any women, I researched the topic of Islamic Feminism. I not only read literature surrounding Islam, feminism, and Islamic Feminism, but I also read works about and by the women themselves. Before meeting Zuleikha Mayat I had read her letters to Ahmed Kathrada in the book *Dear Ahmedbhai, Dear Zuleikhabehn*. Before meeting Rumana, I read up a little on her current job and some of her previous work, in order that I might familiarize myself more with these women and the topics I would be discussing with them.

One of the women I had intended on interviewing, unfortunately, was just too busy with work and life to participate (hey, it's great work so I can't blame them!). But Rumana Mahomed was nice enough to agree to meet with me at a coffee shop on North Beach called Café Jiran. It was here that I would conduct two, hour-long conversations with her on April 7th and April 14th.

Zuleikha Mayat was also so kind as to answer my call and respond right away. She invited me to come to the Women's Cultural Center for an hour long interview on April 12th. We would meet again at her household in Westville for an hour on April 21st.

After meeting with Rumana and having such a lovely conversation, she suggested that I speak to 3 more of her friends in the Muslim community, who she felt would contribute to my research topic. Rumana so kindly reached out to these women for me

After following up with these women, I set up an interview with Fatima Seedat at UKZN Howard College Campus on April 15th.

Each Wednesday during the month of April, I ventured to UKZN Howard College Campus in order to meet with a Lubna Nadvi, professor in the Political Science Department at UKZN, and obtain advice and suggestions for writing my research.

After sitting down with these women, I re-examined my research question and developed a new way of gaining meaning from my interviews. I then transcribed my interviews and categorized similar quotations.

I then set out to relay the narratives I had been told within each specific category. I waited to develop any reflections until after I had fully written the narratives in order that I might use the process of writing that as another form of reflection.

Women's Narratives:

For this narrative research, I had the privilege of sitting down with five women who currently reside in the city of Durban in South Africa. Collectively, these five women span several generations, socioeconomic backgrounds, academic backgrounds, and geographical locations. Three of the women sat down with me for formal personal interviews, one woman met with me weekly to help me formulate my research and one woman kindly showed me a part of her life for a day and spent her afternoon in conversation with me. What they revealed to me over these meetings was a mixture of opinions, personal histories, anecdotes, and self-reflections. In the following pages, I will offer the piece of these women's self-told identities that was given to me over our conversations. The only piece of identity agreed upon by all five of the woman was their Muslim identity, however each woman engages with their faith in a variety of ways. For other aspects of their identity, I will allow these women to tell you themselves. In the pages to follow, you will be brought along, as I was, through what it means for these women to be women following the faith of Islam in the South African context and how this informs and impacts ideas of justice and equality within the women themselves.

It has become apparent to me that I lack the authority or willingness to critique or analyze the identities, experiences, or opinions of these women. Rather, I hope that the women themselves can impart their own identities upon you in order that you might fully contemplate their meaning yourself. Following the women's narratives, I will offer

suggestions into how I think these women's life stories are relevant in unifying justice and equality work by women of faith.

Chapter 1: Introduction

*"Faith is something very personal, it's virtually part of you. So I am Muslim. But my whole upbringing and my whole culture and so on... is Indian. And my family has been in India for I don't know how many years. So I just have to say: I am a South Africa Indian Muslim."*²⁵

-Zuleikha Mayat

*"I identify as Muslim. I don't disclaim that identity. My Indian identity is a lot more contestable, because I don't know what makes me Indian besides the fact that I eat curry. [smiling] I am historically, genetically Indian, I suppose... but, you know, identity is so political in South Africa. So the degree to which I frame it in, my identity is limited."*²⁶

-Fatima Seedat

The identities of Zuleikha Mayat, Fatima Seedat, and Rumana Mahomed have three obvious factors in common; each of these four women, were born as females, to Muslim families, in South Africa. After sitting down with each of these women, I have found that this is simultaneously where their similarities end and begin. For while each of these women has their own unique life stories, you can find in their words and actions a similar longing for justice and equality for all people informed by their understanding of the Qur'an, the actions of the Prophet (Peace be upon Him), and the examples of those close to them.

If the only aim of this research was to simply re-tell a part of these women's stories and for others to hear the importance behind their words, it would prove entirely worthwhile, for I believe each of these women are true inspirations and role models to young women in South Africa and around the world. In the different facets of their lives, all three of the women featured have pursued ideals of justice and equality, stood up to patriarchy, and redefined the conventions of their time. However, if they were to have not achieved any of these things in their lives, their words and life stories would remain of equal importance. Maybe, in the end, this is the true test of influence. For the way these women integrate ideas of justice, acceptance, community, love and thoughtfulness into their ways of explaining and being in the world is an example that crosses culture, religion, language, race, class, and context. Truly, these women's words offer us a unique view into ways of being a woman, through the practice of faith, and ideas of justice and equality. Here are their stories; I hope you enjoy listening as much as I have.

Chapter 2: Younger Years

~~~

### Rumana

*“That’s how I grew up.... You questioned, you reasoned, you used logic, you didn’t just accept what people threw at you. And as a result, when I experienced gender inequality, or just general justice inequality, between races or culture or things like that, I think that impacted a lot upon me.”<sup>27</sup>*

Rumana Mahomed details her relationship with her family and reflects on her childhood as she sips her Milo during our second meeting at Café Jiran on North Beach in Durban, South Africa. Her glowing presence is the type that commands yet humbly exists in a room. I had loved getting to hear Rumana talk of her life work and her view of humanity through her faith. I smiled at the way she explained her relationship with her mother and father:

My parents have always been my best friends. And being the eldest daughter, my dad and I have always had an extra special relationship, typically [smiling] Up until now, my greatest pillars of strength were my parents. Even with my husbands family, they’ve always given us a lot of support.<sup>28</sup>

She continued saying, “We were always sort of at the periphery of tradition. My parents always kept a very open mind of what defines their faith. It was less of a sort of a cultural way of defining being Muslim and more of a spiritual sense.”<sup>29</sup> Over the two long conversations I shared with Rumana, I had gathered that she, indeed, had a unique way of interacting with tradition. It seemed she could simultaneously engage with the positive aspects of tradition and culture, while rejecting the stifling aspects that she viewed as



running contrary to the teachings of the prophet (peace be upon him) and the words of the Qur'an.

Rumana has certainly not simply accepted what people have thrown at her. In her life, she has also questioned, hegemony, tradition, and inequality. This bent towards justice has been empowered by Rumana's faith, even when her actions involve a correction of justice in her own community, or rather, a re-guiding of South African Islamic tradition back to how Rumana believes it was during the time of the prophet and how the Qur'an was meant to be understood (according for historical context). Rumana's decision to start "Taking Islam to the People" (TIP) was just one of the areas of her life in which justice, equality, and Islam have collided.

~~~

Zuleikha

"By the time I grew up, we saw [my mother] as a business woman virtually taking charge of the shop. She became so popular that the shop became known as Amina's Shop because she was the one that was really in charge of the shop."³⁰

Even at the amazing age of 89, Zuleikha Mayat still vividly recalls the strength of her mother, Amina, who after witnessing dishonest activity occurring in her husband's shop while he was away on business, decided that it was her duty to help Zuleikha's father in their family shop. Zuleikha's father was South African and her mother was from India.

Zuleikha and I shared a laugh over her mother's decision to help out in the shop: "We started serving in the shop during all of our free time helping our mother- Child labor! Child labor!" [laughing]."³¹ Joking about the endless hours Zuleikha spent helping her mother, she reflects on her interaction from a young age with people from all walks of life:

Now in our shop you had the Afrikaaners coming, and the coloureds coming, and you knew their lifestyle, you knew their problems, you knew how they were suffering under the Apartheid regime, and you had these Afrikaaners behind you who were really so uneducated and so on. Then we had the higher clientele coming from far to our shop. Then you had the salesmen coming in...So when I moved to Durban, I missed that. Here I was cocooned in a very elite family with elite friends and so on. You didn't need anybody else in that situation.³²

Missing the cultural integration and stimulation of her childhood, Zuleikha, with the encouragement of her new husband ("Don't hang onto me, do your own thing!") and the help of her friends, "Christians, some Pharsis, majority Muslim" women, started the

Women's Cultural Group in Durban, South Africa. The Women's Cultural Group Brochure commemorating the group's 35th anniversary retells the creation of the group:

In the early 1950's there was in Durban a crying need for an organization where women could meet as women. An organization through which they could discuss and tackle the problems of family and community life, participate in cultural activities on an organized level and above all to have a forum where Indian women could meet women of the other communities and get to know them better.

With humble, yet groundbreaking, beginnings during the racial segregation of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, Zuleikha reflects on the value of women, especially women of different backgrounds, gathering together: "You know, if you do things together, it have much more force! So because I did everything with the support of the group, I could write my books, we could have it published- we did it ourselves."³³ Indeed, they could do so much together. The Women's Cultural Group went on to develop quite the presence in Durban and across South African.

The group's most influential activity came in the form of a cookbook of collected community recipes: *Indian Delights*. "Indian Delights is now going into its 15th edition! We are just giving in the order today!"³⁴ Zuleikha exclaimed to me on the day of our first meeting in the Women's Cultural Group Building, the happiness and pride sparkling in her eyes.

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### **Fatima**

*“Ideas of justice, goodness, ideas of equality, fairness and integrity. They most likely come from my upbringing, from my childhood. It was Muslim, but it wasn’t an Islamic dogma. My father is very Soofie. Islam is good practice, good neighborliness. It’s good relations with people, helping and caring, giving- those sorts of things. That’s my understanding of Islam.”<sup>35</sup>*

Fatima Seedat speaks of her time growing up in the South Coast of Durban. She responded with the quote above when I asked her which principles she lived her life by as we sat in her office at UKZN, Howard College. On Fridays, she holds office hours away from her usual office at the UKZN Meritzburg Campus in order to make herself more available for her masters students who live in Durban. Living by *ideas of justice, goodness, ideas of equality, fairness and integrity*. These motives are certainly evident in her life.

Growing up in a “primarily Indian community” and attending a catholic school for 7 years, Fatima qualifies that “religiously, we socialized across the board. Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi. All sorts of friends!”<sup>36</sup> I asked Fatima whether it was hard for her going to a Catholic School, even though she herself was not Catholic. This was a contextually erroneous question, and Fatima politely corrected my logic and reminded me of the religious tolerance that existed in this facet of her childhood, but hints that this integration on a larger scale has declined:

It was sort of normal because they were also people who were your neighbors at home. We didn’t go to a neighborhood school or anything but they were the same people that you socialized with on the weekends. I never saw it as an issue, I never saw it as something significant. Because that was a time where I think people were much more integrated, religiously, than they are now.<sup>37</sup>

She then laughs as she recalls another aspect of her childhood: her after school Islamic lessons.

We always went to my grandmother who ran a school, an after school Islamic class. She was interested in teaching us language. So she taught us Urdu and Gujarati. But she never taught us Arabic and she never taught us how to pray. Not formal prayer, but she taught us Islamic history! [laughing] So that was my understanding of Islam. It was languages, it was history, it was, okay we read Arabic, and we learned certain verses.<sup>38</sup>

She later moved to a formal Islamic school and learned how to “properly pray” (she jokes that she was the only 12 year old who didn’t know how to pray so she had to learn with the ‘7 year olds’) Informal or formal Islamic training, *ideas of justice* that have come from her upbringing have played out in different ways in Fatima’s life, and like anyone else, these actions have been propelled by motives at different times.

I started not being connected to Islam at all, just being interested in social justice issues- It wasn’t from an Islam background, it was simply that what was happening in our country is wrong. So I had a bit of student activism.... then moved away when the family moved away, to Canada. Then we got involved with the Muslim Students Association at U of T. We came back and I started working for the Pan African Congress (PAC) as a researcher and for some reason the practice was not connecting with the ideology, my thoughts we not connecting with my practice.<sup>39</sup>

So began our long conversation about identity, the “contingency of faith”, ideas of justice and equality, and ways of being a woman. As we sat in her office at the UKZN Howard College, I remember being so excited that I got to speak with a woman who devoted such a large part of her academic career to Islam and ideas of feminism. I quickly realized that even this assumption was one that required an understanding of Fatima’s background and the way she defined these schools of thought for herself, and it needed to be in her own words.

## Chapter 3: Indian Identity and Islam

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### Fatima

*“My Indian identity is a lot more contestable, because I don’t know what makes me Indian besides the fact that I eat curry. [smiling] I am historically, genetically Indian, I suppose... but, you know, identity is so political in South Africa.”<sup>40</sup>*

Fatima reminded me of the political nature of identity in the South Africa context. As a non-South African and a white woman, I can in no way pretend to identify with a racial struggle as all three of the women whose narratives I am portraying have experienced, instead I can only listen- to these women and to history. What I hear from these women is that race was used to classify and oppress their community as they were growing up during the Apartheid Era in South Africa. It wasn’t always as evident as it had been for their parents or their friends, but all three women acknowledged reflectively the way it shaped their lives. As Fatima suggests, “Identity is so political in South Africa.”<sup>41</sup>

She’s patient with me as I question what she identifies as. Perhaps my question is on the wrong side of history. She pushes against my attempt to categorize her identity, and rightfully so. Her response about not being sure what makes her Indian “besides the fact that she eats curry” made me laugh. Surely, she is exploring how identity, and race, can often be as arbitrary as *that*. But her Muslim identity was something she didn’t “disclaim.”

~ ~ ~

### Zuleikha

*“Faith is something very personal, it’s virtually part of you. So I am a Muslim. But, my whole upbringing and my whole culture and so on is so Indian and my family has been in Indian for I don’t know how many years. So I just have to say I am a South African Indian Muslim.”<sup>42</sup>*

For women like Zuleikha, her self-proclaimed, Indian-ness is included as a part of their Muslim identity, or maybe more so their “culture”, within in the South African context:

Now, we’ve been in India for so many years. So Arabia was virtually forgotten. The customs were forgotten. [Islam] was there, that held us together. But in India you were among Hindu people, our forefathers and so on must have had Hindu women. So half of our genes must have been Hindu. We have taken a lot of their [Hindu] culture in with us and so on. Now, recently, because of the Wahbi influence in Saudi Arabia, they’ve started now, because of their riches, their influence has carried into India, in some of the places.<sup>43</sup>

Zuleikha touches on the way she perceives much of the Muslim community experiences Islam in South Africa, considering that more than three fourths of Muslims in Kwazulu-Natal can trace their roots to India:

*“A lot of it is Indian Islam. They did take a lot of Indian values in with Islam which is different than Saudi Arabia, different than Persia. So when they came to South Africa, it was very much an Indian perspective on Islam.”<sup>44</sup>*

Some might say that Zuleikha’s connection with her extended family’s villages in India, and her travels to India have offered her a connection to India that is unique, however, maybe

the popularity of Zuleikha's own cookery creation, Indian Delights, is a testament to many South African's continued identification with India, both culturally and racially. Zuleikha acknowledges that Indian culture, as well as outside cultural influences like Saudi Arabia, certainly penetrate aspects of the way the Muslim community in Durban understands and practices Islam.

However Mrs. Mayat also speaks to the political nature of identity and its effect on the Muslim community in South Africa:

[The Muslim Community] is a very, very vibrant community! But I think what's happening... they feel that they are again the in-betweens. [Indian Muslims] were never white enough to be in the white camp and now they are not black enough to be in the black camp. So they are withdrawing from politics. Unless you have a voice there [in politics] nothing is going to happen for you.<sup>45</sup>

Zuleikha acknowledges the way race has oppressed and continues to affect her community, specifically those who have been historically labeled as 'Indian' within her community. It seems Zuleikha has been forced to live much of her life in-between. She speaks of balance often in our hours of conversation to come, balancing tradition and modernity, balancing freedoms with duty, balancing the Qur'an and culture, and I wonder if perhaps balance is the key to a long life like hers.



~ ~ ~

### **Rumana**

*"I think when I visited India I realized how non Indian I was (laughing), but when I visited Turkey I realized how Indian I was! So it's difficult because we... we eat our spices and we cook... we have a very sort of Indian culture. We're very comfortable in a sari or a hijabi. But if I go to India, obviously, my South African background is very much more western."*<sup>46</sup>

Rumana also hints at the complicated nature of her Indian identity through stories of her travels around the world. She commented on the way she felt so non-Indian when she actually visited India, and yet how blatant her 'Indian' identity became upon visiting other parts of the world. But the influence of Indian culture, she feels is undeniable, from the "spices we use, the way we cook... we're very comfortable in a sari."<sup>47</sup> But the impact of being in South Africa has certainly left the Muslim community in Durban with a struggle to 'define' a definite identity. Rumana believes that this cultural identity has certainly had its effects on the way Islam has manifested itself in South Africa:

*"It's impacted on those people converting or reverting to Islam....they would teach Islam in a very sort of Indo-Pak sort of way. As opposed to, saying to them that Islam is a way of life, it's an ideology-Use the principles of Islam and adapt it to your own culture."*<sup>48</sup>

Throughout our talks, Rumana consistently insisted that Islam was not Indian culture, and we must distinguish between what is Islamic and what is simply cultural or traditional:

*“We must ask ourselves: ‘Would the Prophet frown upon the way we are living?’ and I think the answer is yes. Because there is no modesty, we are extremely austentacious. And yet I understand fully that Islam promotes richness of culture. But I think the humility is lacking, that’s the difference.”<sup>49</sup>*

Rumana certainly explores notions of humility, justice, equality, and non-judgment throughout her talks with me. Her stories to come paint a picture of the humility and equality she strives for which blooms from her faith.

## Chapter 4: Ways of Being a Woman

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### Rumana

*“What I love about being a Muslim woman, in terms of my understanding of Islam, is that I’m not required to do anything. The only thing that’s required of me, is to do anything and everything I can that takes me closer to my creator... So there’s no limitations there and that’s what I like about it.”<sup>50</sup>*

Blooming from Rumana’s faith was also passionate views on her Creator’s vision for her life. She advocates for the way that she believes the Almighty looks upon humanity, with understanding and justice. She sees God’s vision for women as one with one true requirement: “to do anything and everything I can that takes me closer to my creator.”<sup>51</sup>

However, Rumana acknowledges that, unfortunately, this is not always the message Muslim women receive from some Islamic scholars in South Africa. She suggests:

For some women, it’s like, ‘I’m Muslim in the mosque, but I’m not Muslim in my business.’ So at home, they might not treat their domestic workers properly. And yet, they will walk out of their homes fully clothed because that is ‘Islamic’. It’s almost like a selective morality kind of thing. And it all boils down to the kind of messages you are taking from the scholars out there.<sup>52</sup>

I spent some time talking to Rumana about how the same phenomenon happens in the Christian faith. How is it that Christian Americans can identify with a political party which prides it self on Christian values and yet cut government funding to struggling mothers or homeless individuals? Her words make me ponder anew how some can ignor the commands of Jesus, to help the poor and feed the hungry, even though Jesus is the very

person the Christian faith is based upon. Our chat about this “selective morality” she spoke of led to more talks about tradition, patriarchy, and the way our faiths are either used to promote or dissolve conventional ideas of being a woman.

It was comforting to know that Rumana had also struggled with ideas of what it means to be a woman, while simultaneously trying to live your life according to what you believe your creator intended for you to be. Rumana offers many stories of the Prophet (Peace be Upon Him) and his wives to exemplify where she believes the Qur’an to me how each of the wives were “really dynamic” women:

[The Prophet’s] wife Isha was a great scholar of that time. [His wives] were scholars of their time, they went into battle, they were involved in day-to-day activities as well as academia and legal, all of that. So they were very active women. Which is why it’s such a travesty that we now, so many years later, are saying ‘No a Muslim woman should stay home, in her home, in the furthest, darkest corner.’ Because that was not the kind of women that he [the Prophet] married.<sup>53</sup>

Yet even with this understanding, and with male figures in Rumana’s life supporting her efforts, Rumana spoke of the reality of life for many women, regardless of religious or cultural background:

As non-conventional as your husband might be, at the end of the day he wants to come home to a home cooked meal. He wants the children sorted out. He wants support and health. But sometimes I’m like, ‘I don’t want to.’ [laughing] I’d rather get up in the morning, drive in my car, do what’s needed and then come home. So I struggle with fitting into those roles.<sup>54</sup>

As a woman, Rumana finds it difficult to not fall into roles that might not be necessarily traced back to the Prophet’s (PBUH) ideals for women, but have been promoted by patriarchy and tradition over the years.

*"I wish the world didn't see Muslim women as Muslim women but rather just as women."*<sup>55</sup>

To round off our conversation, Rumana responded to my question: "What do you wish the world knew about Muslim women?" In hindsight, I can remember how sheepish I felt after asking this question. *Yes, of course! I didn't mean it like that*, I immediately apologized in my head. But how else did I mean it? I suppose I wanted her to refute all of the stereotypes that are propelled in western media about Muslim women and Islam. I wanted her to avenge all the looks that my fellow students give the Saudi Arabian women I tutor at the University of Oregon. I wanted people to realize that these women weren't oppressed but rather misunderstood by outsiders. I wanted her to say something profound and world altering, something that I could parade back home to bigoted news outlets. Something I could publish and stand upon as conclusive truth.

But she did say something profound and something that in that moment altered my world: She was simply just a woman. She could speak to no more than that, just as I cannot speak for all white, Christian women. She wanted the world to see that she was just a woman, yes, but she wanted *me* to see that, although I'm convinced she was far too understanding of my view point. It was myself, the world consists of non-Muslim people like myself, that were making her a 'Muslim woman.' Not only that, but I was making her a 'Muslim woman' for my own agenda, for my own attempts at subconsciously 'saving Muslim women.' It was logic ripe with undetected racism and superiority. I was as much of the problem as I was trying to be the solution. This point in my research changed everything for me, and I suppose in that way Rumana ~~saved~~ taught me. Maybe, in the end it's really all about learning from each other for in this way both remain the students, rather than trying to be the saviors that only our Creators can be.

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Fatima

"I think beauty is a nice analogy actually. Because there we are very clear as to how women get pulled into a norm. We are very clear that women get drawn into a norm and women are required to fit certain norms. Because beauty is something obvious, it is aesthetic, it's something we can see. It's visual. But religion as a practice- same as if you take beauty as a practice- to insist that everyone has to fit the norm is as problematic. To insist that everybody has to look a certain way if you are Muslim or if you are Christian is as refining or limiting."⁵⁶

Fatima and I half-concernedly laugh about how standards of beauty are pushed on women after we had just compared faith to unthreaded eyebrows (more on that later) but Fatima thought that the analogy of beauty and notions of femininity was a perfect way to explain how societal norms and cultural norms influence religious identity. She states that while religion isn't aesthetic like beauty, forcing people to fit a norm is "just as problematic."⁵⁷

Forced identity is an open wound in South African society, one that will take time to heal if it can, in fact, *ever* be healed. Fatima reflects on the consequences of South African and global society's persecution of her identity:

[Being a Muslim woman] locates you in a place where I find it very easy to identify with other vulnerable communities in the equation of empire. The identification with other vulnerable communities comes easily because of the location of Islam. And I think with South Africa because of the historical location of black subjectivity the identification with vulnerable communities comes almost naturally.⁵⁸

I admired the way the Fatima talked about her intensely personal connection with vulnerable communities because of the situation her faith and her identity had placed her in. “Yes I do identify as black,”⁵⁹ she tells me. I am transported back to my past months of visiting museums, countless lectures, and living with families in the Durban area. I had seen, heard about, and learned of the disastrous actions of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, but one thing I hadn’t done is felt it myself. Fatima had. Her community had. It was something that couldn’t be undone, only lived through and despite.

~ ~ ~

Zuleikha

“When we started the Women’s Cultural Group, housewives were perfect. Every woman was supposed to be a perfect housewife. But now, we wanted something more than being just a housewife. And this is where the Woman’s Cultural Group played a big part. We started to tell them ‘now come on, you’ve got more within you than just, you know, the 4 walls of your beautiful homes’”⁶⁰

It was our first meeting when Zuleikha exclaimed to me that she was 89 years old! She certainly has the energy to surpass many women half her age. I loved the way that she would recall to me what she had said in situations and I could picture her younger-self saying exactly that. *Now come on, you’ve got more within you than just the four walls of your beautiful homes!*⁶¹ Zuleikha and the Women’s Cultural Group would instill this concept in the women in their community who were willing to listen and join them. And I could actually imagine Zuleikha saying this to younger women. After all, Zuleikha and the Women’s Cultural Group were knowingly and unknowingly breaking down the barriers of what the “perfect housewife” was supposed to be. As Zuleikha says, “we wanted something more.”⁶²

They wanted something more because they felt as if they were morally correct in wanting it, not because it was controversial or scandalous, but because they had husbands, families, and friends exemplified for them that women don’t have to fit into the roles patriarchy had

defined for them. Zuleikha's mother had set an example for Zuleikha and expressed that it was "Islamically correct" for her to help her husband in their family shop.

Zuleikha believes the Prophet's (PBUH) wives had also set an example for Muslim women:

Now look, in the earliest time of the prophet. Women were everywhere. They went into war with [men], they did everything. [Women] were recognized as people, they could take anything on! Now, the Qur'an recommends that the woman's best place is to look after her family. But this is because a good family makes a good community, a good community makes a good public, so that, I think even in the Bible it is the same thing! But things change over the years.⁶³

Zuleikha informs me that she is supported by the teachings of the Prophet (PBUH) and the Qur'an. She tells me that the teachings of the Qur'an, when understood in their historical context, dispute a set "role for women" and rather promote the idea that men and women deserve mutual respect:

"Women should be what their potential is! The Qur'an is a very natural thing. You have a man... and he might bring the bread on the table, so you respect him a bit, but it doesn't mean you can be looked down upon. And if you see in the history, the prophets and the people of that time, how they talked to [the women] like a wife talks to a husband."⁶⁴

She ponders aloud how views on women have changed since the time of the Prophet (PBUH)

But really all these new laws came around when Muslims became rich. When they became richer now they must protect their women more and you know... [that became] overprotection.⁶⁵

Chapter 5: The Practice of Hijab

~ ~ ~

Zuleikha

“Every time a western person comes they want to know ‘Well aren’t the men forcing the women into the veil’ and I give them an answer... but I want to tell it to you differently.”⁶⁶

My feelings of respect for Zuleikha had only increased after our time together. I was glad that Zuleikha felt as if she could be honest with me on a topic that is so misunderstood by ‘western’ women like myself, but she was determined to tell me a different story. She began with a memory:

My friend in Durban, his daughters said they wanted to put on the veil. He said, ‘You can’t just you know, on the spur of the moment say you want to put on the veil, it’s a serious decision. You must think about it!’ They said, ‘No, we are determined.’ And Slowly both daughters, fairly well educated, both started dawning it on. So he never pushed them but he told them, “Once you put it on you can’t just take it off again, so please think about it.”

So it’s a serious issue that everyone has to make. So this is what we have. So nobody is really *forcing* them. Now there might be some husbands who have now started going with all that and so on, who might feel that my wife had better you know... maybe that could be happening but I’m not so sure about that.⁶⁷

“Nobody is forcing me to take this off, but I voluntarily take it off and I am going to help my husband in the shop.” –Zuleikha about her mother Amina⁶⁸

One of the very first stories Ms. Mayat told me was a story of when her mother had decided to remove her full Niqab. Zuleikha’s mother was 20-22 years old (“somewhere around that age”) when she moved from India, across the Indian Ocean to South Africa to join her

husband, Zuleikha's father, in a small town in the Transvaal of South Africa. Zuleikha's mother spent 2 years in full Niqab before taking off her covering and deciding to help her husband in their family shop. Zuleikha added, "This shows a woman who after a long time stood up for her rights, she knew it was Islamically correct to help her husband. She had to step in when the need was there, and she did that."⁶⁹ Zuleikha herself agrees that her mother's decision to help her father in the shop had an impact on her- not only in the form of increased work!

Zuleikha gave another example of a woman in the Women's Cultural Group:

I had a friend who was very modern, her husband was a doctor, she was a member of the group. And suddenly she started not coming as much to the meetings and started wearing the black cloak. And she told me, "My husband told me: 'What do we do? Our sons and daughters are turning that way and we feel uncomfortable, so we might as well join them before we lose them.'"⁷⁰

Zuleikha thinks that "it's a serious choice that everyone has to make"⁷¹ choosing to don the black cloak, or to cover ones head with a head scarf. But she refutes the perception that women are not allowed to make this choice for themselves. She continues

"So this is what we have. So nobody is really forcing them [into the veil]. There may be some instances, definitely, where there is some sort of coercion. But generally what's happening, the younger generation, some, are paying more attention to their religion... and this is worldwide.

So they've started donning on the Niqab which their mothers didn't wear here in South

*Africa"*⁷²

Zuleikha goes on to tell me what she holds the Qur'an actually says about the practice of

Hijab:

The Qur'an only says you must cover yourselves. You see in the beginning everyone was taught how to behave in public, how to behave with each other, how to give way when you're walking and so on. But suddenly when hundreds were starting to enter the religion, they were not having sufficient training in how to behave in society. So if they saw women in the road they would just push against her and go on. So the women started complaining about this. This is when the Prophet told them, 'Okay please stay away from the streets or when you walk, walk against the walls so that those who want to pass can pass.' He told the women to put, I think they all used to have a little scarf like this [shows wear the scarf would hang] but the front was bare. So they were told 'See to it that they bring it in front.' That is the only thing the Qur'an says, it was not the covering of the face. The covering of the face was so that people could know that you were someone of importance.⁷³

She informed me that when she was younger she had never worn a headscarf, and found it unnecessary to do so. However now, she says, "I wear the scarf because I have hardly any hair left [laughing] and it's so white and I can't dye it because the moment I dye my hair I have a rash on my face!"⁷⁴

She notes that western perceptions that Muslim women must don the full Niqab, or the "black cloak" is not reflective of all Muslim women:

That black cloak only came out after the Iranian revolution, wearing that, and the children were excited, and you saw what people could do within a revolution. They said, 'Look at the women there, let's be like them!'⁷⁵

For some women, donning the "black cloak" was a declaration of freedom and solidarity for Muslim women, for others, taking off the scarf is an equally personal declaration of faith.

~ ~ ~

Fatima

“To use, for example, a western woman’s understanding of covering to interpret a Muslim woman’s practice of Hijab- in that context, immediately Hijab looks oppressive. Where as for Muslim women Hijab can be anything: it can be oppressive, it can be not oppressive, it could be nothing, it could be something that they like wearing, it could be high fashion. It could be anything, you know?”⁷⁶

Fatima’s reiterates the importance of understanding Hijab in the terms of the women practicing it. Blatant labeling of hijab as ‘oppressive’ nature is interpreting *hijab* from a “western woman’s understanding covering”. Using the lens of an outsider to judge the practice of Hijab and leaves Muslim women’s opinions left at the door of the conversation and is equally oppressive.

For Fatima, she claims that her “awareness of [hijab] became more astute as [she] did more research.”⁷⁷ She discovered that it “has a historical context... that is pre-Islamic.” She continues saying that, “it has lots of contingencies around its practice.”⁷⁸ Particularly, she notes, the historical sentiment that “if you were wearing it, people thought you were somehow pious, that you were holy, that you were religious.” Fatima replies, “I don’t think I’m instinctively that way, and perhaps I was at one point, more *that way*.”⁷⁹

Fatima reflects on her own journey to taking off her headscarf. An action that other women have taken based on the belief in historical contextual Qur'anic evidence that it is unnecessary, rebellion against tradition, a stance against patriarchy, a personal choice, a vanity choice, or simply a change of mind. Her words about the practice of "hijab meaning anything to any woman" had finally sunk in. Whatever her reasoning, it wasn't for me to make anything of, for it could be anything. Fatima offered me a glimpse into her reasoning, though she needn't give me one at all:

"I think the dissonances almost forced me to take it off... I wasn't feeling integrated in myself, wearing something and thinking other things. So I took it off. And taking it off is harder than putting it on."⁸⁰

~ ~ ~

Rumana

“Hijab refers to your entire aura.”⁸¹

Rumana tells me about the intended modesty behind the practice of *hijab* for both men and women, as she reminds me that it applies to both, and the way hijab “refers to you entire aura.” During our first meeting, she reflects on how she interprets hijab, according to the Qur’an and its historical context:

Some people say your hair doesn’t need to be covered and some people say your hair does. So I just default to, okay, ‘My hair is supposed to be covered, my bosom is supposed to be covered, until my wrists, my ankles, not see-through, not figure hugging, and modest.’⁸²

Rumana also clarifies how she believes hijab can be fulfilled while “dressed in a sari...and similarly with African dress.”⁸³ She suggests that the Qur’an intended to allow for this cultural acceptance. However, Rumana further critiques imposing a certain cultural practice or a sect of Islam as ‘truth’:

“We tend to sort of impose our sect of what Islam is. I have lots of conversations with people in my family who say: ‘I’ve decided to become more religious so I’m going to start wearing the black cloak.’ And they don’t understand that being religious doesn’t necessarily mean you need to wear the black cloak because the black cloak is Saudi culture. It’s not Indian culture.”⁸⁴

She leaves me with the final advice for women who are looking to become closer to the Almighty: *“If you want to become more religious, don’t change your dress code. Rather, adapt*

*it to what the Qur'an says."*⁸⁵

Chapter 6: Ideas of Justice and Equality

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### Zuleikha

*“So now I had support from my religion, from my upbringing, and from my husband.... I got these friends of mine and we said, ‘Let’s start a women’s group’”<sup>86</sup>*

Under the leadership of Zuleikha Mayat, the Women’s Cultural Group was born in Durban, South Africa in 1954.<sup>87</sup> Zuleikha describes the cultural climate during the time that she started the group as ““very, very orthodox in Durban, more so than the Transvaal.”<sup>88</sup>

She describes the beginning of the group detailing the Arabic Studies Circle speech contest they felt legitimized their group:

The one-day the Arabic studies circle started a speech contest for me. They had that for two years but one year they wanted to include women. But now who do they get? There were no women’s societies! [lauging to herself] So this is where we stepped in. And after that it just gave us a foothold because no we had recognition, we had a group, we’ve done something publicly and now we can go on our own.<sup>89</sup>

When Zuleikha moved to Durban she missed the exchange of culture she had found in Guteng where her family had lived before. She also felt that the orthodox culture in Durban ran counter to how she had grown up and what she felt the Qur’an and Islam allowed her to be. With the “support of her religion, upbringing, and husband”<sup>90</sup> she began a life long journey of pursuing what she felt was right, for women, for men, for human beings in general.

Zuleikha states that the mission of the Women's cultural group was "to improve the members: Physically, mentally, emotionally, and to be active. And to spread this to as many as we could!"<sup>91</sup> She tells me of the ways the Woman's Cultural Group was fighting to redefine the place of women in the private and public sphere:

*"Our fight has always been not only for gender, Our fight was also against different things: against the government, against politics, against our own backwardness, and against orthodoxy. It was really a tough, tough going on."*<sup>92</sup>

Zuleikha herself has fought against orthodoxy, backwardness and the government a time or two in her life. In reality, most of her life has been devoted to this. When she was a young mother with two kids, she was asked by Fatima Meer's father to write a women's column that she called Fahmida's World. She claims that she couldn't pass up the opportunity. But she recalls to me the day she decided to walk away:

After that [newspaper] closed down, that man had another paper. But I myself resigned from there because he had a different political agenda. And I was with the activists and so on. So when I wrote one or two things tinging on politics, he scrapped that, he wouldn't allow that. So I couldn't have anybody scrapping my thoughts... it's a *women's column* and if women want to be interested in politics it's our right. So I said to him sorry, I am not working for you any more.<sup>93</sup>

She reflects on her own voice and the voice of women in South Africa during the 1950's at the onset of the group's foundation:

So look they had a voice, it doesn't mean that women didn't have a voice! But it was subtle from behind, not right in front! And my generation wanted to put it in front, to be visible.<sup>94</sup>

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## **Fatima**

*“My dissertation focuses on a concept of women in law, but through the legal idea of capacity.*

*So what is [a woman’s] capacity to act legally?”<sup>95</sup>*

Fatima is all at once a scholar and an activist. She has used academia, research, activism, and her faith in the pursuit of social justice. From a legal standpoint, Fatima looks at ideas of justice and equality through examining and redefining a woman’s “capacity to act legally” within Muslim Personal Law. In her academic and personal work she questions: “Who would be the women governed by this law? What would be the legal capacities inherent to this woman?”<sup>96</sup> For her PhD dissertation she explains “essentially what I’ve done is a comparison with the historical text in legal jurisprudence and contemporary jurisprudence text as well to compare how they both frame women’s legal capacity.”<sup>97</sup>

One aspect of women’s capacity in the law that Fatima roots her work is through Muslim marriages. She states:

Muslim marriages are not recognized. The work I do, well there are some submissions that I’ve written to the Muslim Personal Law Board. These submissions were wrote about different ways of framing this law so it’s more empowering for women.<sup>98</sup>

In an attempt to empower Muslim women legally, she is working to allow Muslim marriages to be recognized by the law, however, in an attempt to allow these women into the legal system currently in place she highlights another aspect of her work:

[I am] actually doing nikah, actually performing marriage ceremonies for women, who want to get married in ways that work for them and with a marriage contract. I draw up a marriage contract for them and in that contract, secure their rights.<sup>99</sup>

Fatima also works with women who are going through a divorce:

So [a woman] has just received a ṭalāq, or divorce, what does she do now? She has no money, she has no house, she's got nothing. [We] assist women in their divorce negotiations. So when she goes to sit with the husband or with the husband's lawyer or the imam [we] could go with them and support them through the process so at least they get some advice on how to go through the process. So they're sitting with an ally in the room.<sup>100</sup>

I suppose that is exactly what Fatima strives to be, an ally. She is critical and questioning of labeling that often is placed on the equality work she and many other Muslim women do.

Her position in both the activist and academic world allows her to interact and engage with Islam and Feminisms in a critical manner. Though her current research centers around the convergence of Islam and Feminism, though she specifies to me that the convergence of the two fields is highly contested.

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## **Rumana**

*“If you believe that God is the ultimate, than surely that is his job; It’s not our job to determine whether ‘you’re good or you’re evil’ because we’re all human beings! We have a job: to do unto your brother as you would want done unto you. That’s our job and that’s it.”<sup>101</sup>*

Principles of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s (PBUH) way of living dictate the way Rumana has lived her life. As a part of the Muslim Students Association at the University of Natal during a wave of student activism in the late 80’s and through her work that she has engaged in ever since she has walked out her belief that we must do unto “our brothers” and we would want done unto us. In Rumana’s journey to bring justice and equality to the forefront of her Islamic community, Rumana together with Fatima Seedat and Aneesa Moosah and other influential women, started a group called Taking Islam to the People:

*“So we started this group called TIP... Taking Islam to the People. Not for the purpose of converting people, but rather to take the message and the principle of Islam so that they can understand what Muslims are about and not even just what Muslims are about but what Islam is about.”<sup>102</sup>*

She highlights the advantages about the Eidgah ceremony, which the group holds in public every year to celebrate the holiday of Eid. TIP’S Eidgah celebration is open and accessible to every gender, socio-economic class, race and religion in Durban to attend. The goal was simply to help the public see Islam for what it really represents to these women and many others: justice and equality.

Rumana reflects on how the women who started TIP wanted to break down stereotypes and perceptions about Islam:

Because as you said you would have never know about Islam if you didn't meet these women and realize 'Oh, the perceptions out there verses our actual daily living is very different... So that's our purpose!<sup>103</sup>

As we sat and talked about the difficulty of categorizing people and the tendency of human being to do so in order to understand others, Rumana reminds me of the humanity that lies under the labels we too often give each other. In a moment of brilliance (she has many of those) she said:

*"I think that's my greatest challenge, that's what motivates me in my work: I struggle to see the gender difference. Because I look at a person and I look at them as, not black or white, not male or female, but as a human being, you know? Yes, we are different degrees of expertise, but that's where it ends. You shouldn't be sort of bound by your external appearance which is going to dictate what you are going to do."<sup>104</sup>*

## Chapter 7: Facing Opposition

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### Rumana

*“When we did the Eidgah prayer. They called us lesbians for asserting our masculine tendencies for wanting to put up this whole thing... and they called our husbands homosexuals for drawing on their more feminine side of their personality by allowing us to dominate them. You know that sort of rational that they use.”<sup>105</sup>*

Rumana reflects on the way the Public Eidgah Prayer, a celebration of acceptance, was rejected by some facets of the Muslim community in Durban. She reflects on the reason behind these harsh sentiments and offers an alternative view to categorizing other people:

We are more comfortable with categorizing people because we are so afraid of not knowing. It’s easier to say, “Well okay, you’re Christian so that means a, b, and c... so now I can decide whether I want to sit next to you or not.” I think that’s the challenge to overcome that.

But it’s very difficult to convince others of the same thing, and you can’t, you can’t do that. You’re stereotyping, and making judgments, and ultimately if you believe that God is the ultimate, than surely that is His job.

It’s not our job to determine whether ‘you’re good or evil’ , ‘you’re lesbian and that’s wrong’ , ‘you’re homosexual and that’s wrong’ .... Because you know we’re human beings!

We have a job: to do unto your brother as you would want done unto you, you know, that’s our job and that’s it. And you know believe that God created you and that he’s your creator and to believe in the prophets, now that’s where I would be different, I believe in the prophets and I believe that Mohammed is the last prophet and, hey, that’s where I might differ from the next person but that’s, that’s fine. And that’s, for me, as far as the distinction between you and I would go. But we agree to disagree, and that’s our job. But to be ‘judge, jury, and executioner’ .... That’s so typical of I think most religious people. It makes me uncomfortable. <sup>106</sup>

~ ~ ~

## Zuleikha

*"Now you see what sort of subtle opposition we had. But it's powerful opposition."*<sup>107</sup>

*Subtle, but powerful.* Zuleikha had prefaced this statement with a story about women and the cinema in Durban. When she had first moved to Durban in the 1940's, elite Indian families would usually hire cinema movies to come in their homes so that the women could stay home to watch current cinema features while the men would go to the cinema theaters. Zuleikha recalls the reactions of some older women when Zuleikha, herself, decided to start going to the cinemas theaters:

Some of these big women in Durban, the really, very rich women. They used to get people, these women [who helped them in the house] and say, 'You go to the cinema, on Elbert Street and see which Muslim woman goes there.'

So Fatima Meer's mother, called her and said: 'I hear you were at the cinema on Wednesday [laughing] but now you know that is not right! Now other people see you and now they want to go too, my daughter in law heard you were there now she wants to go too!' [mimicking the older woman's voice while laughing to herself]

Now look at that, I'm going and now *she* is telling me not to go- but *my* husband allows me!<sup>108</sup>

The opposition *was* subtle, but powerful according to Zuleikha. Tradition was bearing down on her, both religious and cultural, and the older generation expressed concern in the actions of the younger women in the Durban Muslim society. Zuleikha and the Women's Cultural Group had to navigate both their "in-laws" and "the Ulama", the Islamic religious leaders.



Through her life, Zuleikha has both navigated and negotiated tradition. She remembered the reactions of some of the older generation to their daughters-in-laws joining the Women's Cultural Group, and reflected on the line the WCG walked between granting respect to the elder generation while still requesting respect for their own self-development:

*"There was reluctance from their in-laws saying, 'Won't they be going to far to fast?' 'Won't they sort of lose their values?' So we had to tread very gently, always being very careful not to upset the Ulama, not to upset the old generation. I think this has 'paid dividends'. Because the moment we respected their values, they started to respect us. And they allowed us to go ahead- which they would normally not have done."<sup>109</sup>*

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## Fatima

*"I mean the thing is we had always wanted the Eidgah to be so much more when we started it... We wanted it to be a lot more radical but..."<sup>110</sup>*

For Fatima, opposition not only came from the outside (and for Fatima this opposition was fiercer than other opposition- she received death threats regarding her involvement with TIP and the women's introduction of a public Eidgah Prayer) but it also comes from within, from her knowledge of justice and her drive to do more. The Eidgah prayer has been taking place for 13 years now, since Eid occurs twice a year, they have completed around 25 public Eidgah ceremonies in Durban since TIP's founding. I was proud of the women for what they'd done in the Durban community, for the mark they'd made. But Fatima reflects on what she considers the shortcomings of their own social justice work. I was a little taken a back to hear this as I myself had become so on board with the Eidgah Durban Prayer after conversations with several of the women involved in TIP. But Fatima reflects:

*"The Eidgah is also froth with its own tensions. Everyone thinks it's awesome and I'm sitting here thinking 'We could be doing so much more... and this is all we're doing.'"<sup>111</sup>*

As one of the visionaries behind the Eidgah project, she feels as if they community still criticizes their work but not in the way they had when the prayer first started. She reflects:

They still criticize it! The thing is *our* community, the communities that attend, don't criticize it except to say, 'the speech was too long' or 'the time was off.' They don't criticize the ideology. They aren't critical of our methodologies or of our theories... they're not. They're not critical of that. They're actually quite happy and content in it. And I think that's problematic because I know there is a lot more that we *can* do... to push a lot, maybe, more boundaries and we're not.<sup>112</sup>

## Chapter 8: Faith and Acceptance

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### Rumana

*"I'm convinced God's looking at us, and I'm talking about not Muslims but just humanity itself, and all he wants for us is just to acknowledge him and to do good to the next person, you know? At that point I really didn't think that he would want, that he would categorize, us and expect us to fulfill what is required of us so strictly. And that changed my perception of being Muslim so much. It actually made me less judgmental in a huge way and more accepting, and I like to think that I was always accepting of other religious sense and other ideologies out there but it just entrenched that for me, you know? That how dare I condemn someone, who's practicing their life in a good way, condemn them because they're not Muslim."<sup>113</sup>*

I won't forget when Rumana said the statement above to me during our first meeting in Café Jiran. She was describing a recent run in at the airport in Dubai where she experienced almost an epiphany about the nature of humanity. She admitted that maybe some would call her a heretic, but I understand the sentiments behind her realization. Maybe Rumana's thoughts aren't so heretical after all. After all, accepting other ideologies doesn't necessarily mean you have to don them yourself, but you can love others despite their beliefs. You can love and accept them because, if there is a Creator, he created *those* people too. Sitting with Rumana, I realized I had come to this same epiphany. Separated by time and space, identity and culture, religion and ideology, we had arrived at similar point. If I may disregard religion and politics for just a minute, that in and of itself, for me, was something to marvel

at.

~ ~ ~

### **Fatima**

*“Faith within any individual it is such a contingent thing. Like anything else in your life. If you have or have not managed to thread your face... religion’s like that. You know, one day my eyebrows might look like this, another day they might look like caterpillars you know?”*

*[laughs]”<sup>114</sup>*

Fatima’s description of her faith led me to believe that, for Fatima, as for many of us if we’re being honest with ourselves, faith is something dynamic. Whether you believe it *should* be dynamic is something completely different. But if we’re being honest with ourselves, at faith is something that’s changing; something relevant one day, and not the next. Something remembered intensely and something forgotten. Something apart of us and something separate. We might not always mean for it to be some of these things, but we are after all human and we surely are not perfect. I love Fatima’s metaphor of threaded eyebrows. Sometimes our faith might manifest in our lives it self one particular way and “the next day the might be caterpillars.”

## Epilogue: Feminism and Islam

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### Fatima

*“If you use a theory it has politics attached with it.”<sup>115</sup>*

I came into Fatima’s office the first time I met her with an idea of ‘Islamic Feminism’ swirling around in my head. From the research I’d done, scholarly writing I’d examined, and the unbiased opinions I tried to hold, I expected my inquiries to be legitimate, whether or not I would be able to draw any conclusions I assumed would be another story. I hadn’t realized that even exploring a theory through the narratives of women who don’t subscribe to the label themselves was both highly political and problematic.

Fatima’s current work centers around ideas of Islam and Feminism and upon arriving to our meeting, we discussed whether or not the two areas can “converge” as she explores in her recent research:

*“My conclusion for the convergence article is that if we’re using this idea of Islamic Feminism we have to go on very carefully and tentatively and rather than use it as a formal conclusion that there is a thing called Islamic Feminism, we have to be careful to suggest there are possible convergences of Islam and feminism and what might they be. Do they have to conclude in a thing called Islamic Feminism? Or could they be something else?”<sup>116</sup>*

She speaks about the nature of naming “Islamic Feminism” and the way the phrasing doesn’t necessarily speak to the aspirations of the Muslim women; it limits their

aspirations to a feminist paradigm. She suggests that these limitations are not just theoretical but they are also political. In fact, they are “over determined by politics”<sup>117</sup> she states. Fatima suggests:

*“It’s almost inevitable that we wanted to call women’s equality work, feminism, and that’s why anything that Muslim women do that is about equality gets labeled feminism...It’s inevitable but also inadequate.”<sup>118</sup>*

Okay, I was beginning to understand. I asked her if she completely rejected the title or if she would ever subscribe to the label of “Islamic Feminist?” Her response:

*“I would never call myself an Islamic Feminism. I am a feminist theorist. I theorize within the space of feminism. I believe the use of the term Islamic Feminism has to be done very carefully, very tentatively and with an awareness of the limitations of the term. The limitations it places on both feminism and Islam.”<sup>119</sup>*

It seemed as if my research had only just begun, and it was already looking like it was a dead end. But was there any merit in exploring the space between Islam and Feminism? Fatima seemed to think there was a benefit of holding Islam and Feminism as separate entities.

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### Zuleikha

*“Feminism is recognizing that you are different from a man. You have different things and they have different things. It’s not that they are better than you, you have an equalizing thing within you. There is always, nature has seen to it, that there is a balance. If the balance is not upset, life carries on. Sometimes the man wants to prove too powerful, and that causes trouble. If a woman is too laid back, then that causes trouble. Each must assert what is within their right to do. This is my feminism. I recognize the difference between a man and a woman and I am very much a woman.”<sup>120</sup>*

After she had poured us cups of tea, I sat back on Zuleikha wonderfully beautiful couches from her travels abroad and asked her if she considered herself a feminist. She had a comical but important response:

Well I’m very much a woman! Very much a woman. But not in the sense that you want to throw off your bra and all that stuff! I never wanted to be *that* modern, no.<sup>121</sup>

For myself, Zuleikha’s response opened up a new way of thinking about feminism. I came to the realization that it was one thing to hold ideals of progress, justice and equality for women, as a woman, all of these ideals that feminism also holds, but it is another thing to identify with the movement of feminism itself. The feminist movement has “baggage”, as Margot Badran refers to it<sup>122</sup>, that many women aren’t willing to carry.



But more than that, the perception of the western, secular nature that 'feminism' often carries was not necessarily the motive or the description that Zuleikha attached with her life's work. Surely, she has worked with women her whole life, empowering them, and standing up to patriarchy. Then she admitted to me:

*"To be honest, to be really honest. The men just think that we are made just for their pleasure, really this happens with lots of them. But my brothers were different, my father was different, my husband was different, it was companionship more than anything. So I can't speak for everybody."*<sup>123</sup>

It seems that perhaps Zuleikha had just as much concrete evidence in her life for the potential of good men, as she did that for the potential of good women. Zuleikha's own feminism touches on this balance of potential: "There is always, nature has seen to it, that there is a balance. If the balance is not upset, life carries on. Sometimes the man wants to prove too powerful, and that causes trouble. If a woman is too laid back, then that causes trouble. Each must assert what is within their right to do. This is my feminism."<sup>124</sup>

For Zuleikha, feminism is a balance, a negotiation, but she wanted to keep her bra, thank you very much.

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### **Rumana**

*"It's not about being feminist, it's not about following a sect, it's about what we understand the Qur'an to say and, of course, what the actions [of the prophet] were that supported what the Qur'an said. So we try to live our lives through that. The foundation principles come from the Qur'an and [the prophet's] actions which we call the sunnah would obviously be subservient to that."<sup>125</sup>*

Rumana said at the beginning of our first conversations that she couldn't subscribe to a certain sect of Islam, but acknowledges that her friends might say otherwise claiming that she is more pro-feminism as opposed to not. But for Rumana, she understands her faith and her role in the world through what the Qur'an says and the actions of the Prophet (PBUH). But for Rumana it seems that tradition has sometimes asked of her different actions that what she reads the Qur'an to ask of her, as a woman:

*"I'm looking at this sugar bowl and I'm thinking to myself I remember, as young girls in the family, when we had guests and we had to make a pot of tea and.... I think that was my first point of rebellion because I couldn't understand why I had to put in the milk, I had to put in the sugar, I had to stir the tea and present it. Why is it that this male couldn't do it himself. If I had to do it myself than why couldn't he do it himself?!"<sup>126</sup>*

Rumana feels that with cultural, patriarchal tradition runs counter to the actions of the Prophet (PBUH) himself:

It's such a travesty that we now so many years later, are saying 'No, a Muslim woman should stay home, in her home, in the furthest, darkest corner.' Because that was not the kind of women that [the prophet] married.<sup>127</sup>

Then Rumana inserted a profound thought:

*"When we present ourselves to our creator.... He's going to ask, 'Why didn't you go out and do your duty to empower others?' He's not going to expect you to say, 'Oh, I couldn't because my husband didn't allow me to.'"*<sup>128</sup>

With all of our discussions about identity, tradition, faith, patriarchy and gender, Rumana left me with one thought that is absolutely groundbreaking if it can be grasped:

*"So I think God just expects us to do good, whether you're male or female. To me that's the litmus test. How close are you to him in all of your actions, thoughts, excetera?"*<sup>129</sup>

She thinks that this thought can be grasped by women, who she believes can empower themselves to "go out and investigate themselves." In this way she believes woman can know what is Islamic and what is tradition or patriarchy. She states:

The greatest barrier is education. The fact that they haven't educated themselves to know what's permissible and what's not permissible. They haven't empowered themselves sufficiently to go out and investigate themselves. That is a huge barrier because they are taking perspectives on Islam that hinder their grow rather than promote their growth.<sup>130</sup>

## Reflections

What began as an attempt to understand a brand of feminism deemed 'Islamic Feminism' through the narratives of Muslim women activists in Durban, South Africa turned into something far different as this narrative research unfolded. Upon realizing my inability and unwillingness, as an outsider, to attempt to "understand Muslim women" in terms other than their own, I instead vowed to allow my inadequacy to render myself simply a listener. After beginning formal conversations with each woman, I knew I had much to learn.

What I discovered through their stories was ways of being a woman, through the practice of faith and ideas of justice and equality. All three women whose narratives I featured were strong women of faith, pursued justice and equality, stood up to patriarchy and redefined the conventions of their time. Each of these traits could be considered to be 'feminist ideals,' however, I have learned that engaging with feminist ideals and claiming a feminist label are separate actions. I felt that my desire to unify these actions and associate these women with Islamic Feminists would paint over a far more elaborate picture that exists underneath. I found that what was left when I avoid labeling these women's work as 'feminist' was far more unifying.

Outside of the label of Islamic Feminism, I was able to begin to know these women in their own terms instead of through the perceptions that come with a label. For the women and myself, the framework of "feminism" was often alienating, difficult to relate to, and overshadowing. As Fatima Seedat, one of the women whose narrative I feature, suggests: Feminism often overshadows the *different* aspirations of women.

I expected to find unity in the label of ‘feminism’. I had embarked on this research hoping that exploring Islamic Feminism would unify three worlds that I had struggled my whole life to negotiate: faith, feminine identity and social justice. But what I found is that these two worlds were not simply united under the feminist umbrella, not even under nuanced feminisms such as Islamic Feminism. I found that narratives by nature actually break down labels. By letting the women tell their own narratives, by engaging in conversations with them, not only had I, unfortunately (but, in the end fortunately), lost my entire research objective to this realization but I had simultaneously allowed for myself to break down other labels as well.

I realized that the ‘Muslim woman’ is in no way an archetype. In fact, she is simply just a woman. As women, we have different motives for engaging in ideas of justice and equality. Similarly, different women have different ways of remaining devoted. Religion shapes some women’s ideas of justice and equality. For other women, ideas of justice and equality allow them to engage with their faith in new ways. Similarly, we all have different views on *how* justice and equality work should be done and in what manner?

While these narratives make it more complicated to draw conclusions and define what can be gained from this study, this narrative work has also worked to further complicate stereotypes. For the next time bigotry attempts to tell us that a group of people are a certain way, we can give them examples of the contrary, told in the victim of the bigotry’s own words.

My hope is that these women’s stories open up a conversation: with our communities, with each other, and with ourselves. While there are many factors that differentiate my narrative from the narratives of the women I have just shared, I’ve learned

that we share many of the same aspirations and goals in life. As long as we keep talking, as humans and not as our respective societal 'labels', we can actually work to break down misconceptions. Thank you again to the women who shared their time with me and showed me a part of what it means to be a woman of faith.

## **Recommendations for Further Study**

I envision this type of narrative inquiry bounded between the covers of a book, not because I feel as if my discourse has merited that, but rather because putting these women's inspiring stories and insights onto the pages of an academic research paper felt as some points like I was doing them an injustice. However, I have discovered the academic merit behind this type of research and I strongly advocate for its continuation, as it is one of the oldest forms of research.

For those who believe in the power of narrative research approaches, I encourage you to take this subject, examine yourself, as I had to do, and critique my approach or build upon it.

Myself, I would love to expand upon this research. Given the funds and the means, I would return and eventually donate the appropriate time and research to do these stories justice. In further research, I would merge the historical elements, theories of identity, theories of feminisms, and the narratives instead of having them separate. I would also include the voice of Non-Indian Muslims and provide a forum with which ideas of class can be reflected upon.

For anyone looking to build upon this research I encourage you to immerse yourself in Islam, better yet, I imagine this research would be far more powerful if the discourse was between a Muslim researcher and activist Muslim women. I can imagine that the insight and mentorship found in that research would be absolutely worth-while.

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The purpose of this study is to .....

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In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please take some time to carefully read the statements provided below.

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- b. **Anonymity** - all names in this study will be kept anonymous unless the participant chooses otherwise.
- c. **Confidentiality** - all names will remain completely confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. By signing below, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents. The interviewer will also sign a copy of this contract and give it to the participant.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's name printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature and date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer's name printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer's signature and date

## Appendix H: Sample Informed Consent Form

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ . I am a student in the School for International Training Program in Social and Political Transformation in Durban. I am conducting a short field study. The data that I collect today will be used to write my final project paper for this program.

Researcher agreement:

1. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw your consent at any time during and after the interview.
2. All the information you give me will be treated confidentially.
3. I will not disclose your name, unless you give your express permission for me to do so.
4. When reporting on the findings I will use other names where appropriate in place of your name (e.g. coded/disguised names).
5. The information will be stored in a safe manner at all times in a place to which I alone have access.

Participant Agreement:

The above information has been explained to me and I understand it. My name will not be disclosed. I allow my information to be used in a confidential manner that will not harm me, my professional and my private life in any way. My individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from this study. I understand that you will record the interview and/or take a sample of my image (e.g. picture/photographs) as data for the study. I understand that the recordings and/or photographs will not have my name on them and no one will be able to use them for commercial purposes or **any form of publication** including personal blogs and online photo albums without my express written permission. I understand that if I have any questions or complaints about this study or the researcher that I can anonymously contact Imraan Buccus of the School for International Training – at (031) 207 5513, or 082 644 6088

I acknowledge reading and understanding this consent form, and furthermore, I agree to participate in this study.

Signature (Participant) \_\_\_\_\_

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature (Researcher) \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C: Sample of Transcription of Interview 1 with Rumana  
Thursday, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

Rumana: "So we started this group called TIP... Taking Islam to the people. Not for the purpose of converting people, but rather to take the message and the principle of Islam so that they can understand what Muslims are about and not even just what Muslims are about but what Islam is about. Because as you said, you would have never know about Islam if you didn't meet these people and realize 'Oh, the perception out there verses daily living is very different... So that's our purpose."

Rumana: "So One of our initial projects was, we started a Friday congregation. You know on Fridays we usually have a congregational prayer... the jumah, right?"

Rumana: "So we started that out on the steps of the city hall.. and it was amazing because we would uhh... have- just in that open space- uhh set up a prayer and we would have a nice uh, talk.. Because it's one of the requirements that you have a talk, okay? And we'd do something thought provoking, and something that didn't deal with the rituals... Something that sort of for *us* (emphasis added) captured the essence of what the prophet would have done... or what *he* did in his time, you know... which was not talking about the rituals but rather talking about the social-economic justice that needs to prevail in society, you know? And the political justice and so we are really sort of justice themed."

"Traditionally in South Africa women don't attend these prayers, they are not encouraged to attend the mosque and things like that-

Rachel: "But they still can still pray at their home, correct?"

Rumana: "Yes... yeah that's the perception in South Africa. So we challenge that... because in the society that the prophet lived, or that he created, the women were very much an integral part of that congregation."

"So, there too we would have the men in front in their group and the women just sort of step away, behind the men. So that was the message that was also projecting to the society, or to the Durban community that was walking through."

Rachel: "They could see."

Rumana: "Yes, so...so we would have lots of people sort of stop us and have a chat with us after the program. So we were sort of amazed that this is how things happen because this is not obviously what they see, because when you pray in a mosque no one's able to see what we're doing, so that why we want to take it out and uhh.. yeah. I think it's had a mark... made a mark on the people at the time because they could see that Islam is about a joint congregation, it's about women playing an active role, it's about talking about umm

elements of justice and equity and fairness, uhh as opposed to terrorism and you know all of that, that conservatism...”

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<sup>1</sup> Fatima Seedat, Personal Interview, 15 April 2016

<sup>2</sup> Jeenah, Na'eem (2006) The National Liberation Struggle and Islamic Feminisms in South Africa. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29, 27-41

<sup>3</sup> Vahed, Goolam (2000) Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 20(1), 43-73

<sup>4</sup> "[International Religious Freedom Report 2005](#)". US State Department. Retrieved 2016-04-16.

<sup>5</sup> Vahed, G. and Waetjen, T. (2010) *Gender, Modernity, and Indian Delights: The Women's Cultural Group of Durban 1954-2010*

<sup>6</sup> Vahed, G. and Waetjen, T. (2010) *Gender, Modernity, and Indian Delights: The Women's Cultural Group of Durban 1954-2010*

<sup>7</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

<sup>8</sup> Vahed, G. and Waetjen, T. (2010) *Gender, Modernity, and Indian Delights: The Women's Cultural Group of Durban 1954-2010*

<sup>9</sup> Mayat, Zuleikha (ed) *Indian Delights*. Durban: Women's Cultural Group, 2007 (13th Edition). P. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Vahed, G. and Waetjen, T. (2010) *Gender, Modernity, and Indian Delights: The Women's Cultural Group of Durban 1954-2010*

<sup>11</sup> Vahed, G. and Waetjen, T. (2010) *Gender, Modernity, and Indian Delights: The Women's Cultural Group of Durban 1954-2010*

<sup>12</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

<sup>13</sup> (Badran, 1996, p.3).

<sup>14</sup> Hicks, Joanna (2000). Leila Ahmed's Women and gender in Islam. <http://www2.soc.hawaii.edu/css/dept/owr/joanna.html>

<sup>15</sup> Jeenah, Na'eem (2006) The National Liberation Struggle and Islamic Feminisms in South Africa. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29, 27-41

<sup>16</sup> Jeenah, Na'eem (2006) The National Liberation Struggle and Islamic Feminisms in South Africa. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29, 27-41

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<sup>17</sup> F. Seedat, "Islam, Feminism and Islamic Feminism: Between Inadequacy and Inevitability," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 2 (2013)

<sup>18</sup> Jeenah, Na'eem (2006) The National Liberation Struggle and Islamic Feminisms in South Africa. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29, 27-41

<sup>19</sup> Jeenah, Na'eem (2006) The National Liberation Struggle and Islamic Feminisms in South Africa. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29, 27-41

<sup>20</sup> Jeenah, Na'eem (2006) The National Liberation Struggle and Islamic Feminisms in South Africa. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29, 27-41

<sup>21</sup> (Badran, 1996)

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, K. and Jack, D. (1991) Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analyses. *Women's Words: the Feminist Practive of Oral History* (11-26)

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, K. and Jack, D. (1991) Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analyses. *Women's Words: the Feminist Practive of Oral History* (11-26)

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, K. and Jack, D. (1991) Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analyses. *Women's Words: the Feminist Practive of Oral History* (11-26)

<sup>25</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

<sup>26</sup> Fatima Seedat, Personal Interview, 15 April 2016

<sup>27</sup> Rumana Mahomed, Personal Interview, 7 April 2016

<sup>28</sup> Rumana Mahomed, Personal Interview, 7 April 2016

<sup>29</sup> Rumana Mahomed, Personal Interview, 7 April 2016

<sup>30</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

<sup>31</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

<sup>32</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

<sup>33</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

<sup>34</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

<sup>35</sup> Fatima Seedat, Personal Interview, 15 April 2016

<sup>36</sup> Fatima Seedat, Personal Interview, 15 April 2016

<sup>37</sup> Fatima Seedat, Personal Interview, 15 April 2016

<sup>38</sup> Fatima Seedat, Personal Interview, 15 April 2016

<sup>39</sup> Fatima Seedat, Personal Interview, 15 April 2016

<sup>40</sup> Fatima Seedat, Personal Interview, 15 April 2016

<sup>41</sup> Fatima Seedat, Personal Interview, 15 April 2016

<sup>42</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

<sup>43</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

<sup>44</sup> Zuleikha Mayat, Personal Interview, 12 April 2016

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