The anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa is one of the axiomatic campaigns against racism in the twentieth century. The word ‘apartheid’ became the byword for intractable divisions in societies. It has been applied as a descriptor for the Israel-Palestine conflict, for sexual disparity as ‘gender apartheid,’ and the like. The exclusive racial connotation of this historical movement as ‘black and white,’ however, obscures the diversity of those who had vested interests in maintaining the status quo as much as it obscures those who engaged with dismantling Apartheid. An overlooked, or rather subsumed, aspect of movements against Apartheid is that of Muslims, and in particular of Muslim women. Muslim women founded or took part in various forms of resistance, such as trade unionist movements, protest actions, and charitable activities across racial and religious divides. They took up the cause of social equality often under threat to their own safety from the Apartheid regime, from autocrats in the resistance movements, or even from their own community.

Extracting Muslim women as activists in the anti-Apartheid struggle implies that religion, and in particular Islam, was an organizing and mobilizing factor in the political sphere of twentieth century South Africa. However, the Muslim minority of South Africa is fragmented and diverse; it has divisions along hermeneutical as well ethnic lines, and it should not be seen as a homogenous entity. The Muslim voice against Apartheid was itself fragmented because of internal debate about modernity and traditionalism, as will be seen in the description of political movements that arose among Muslims. Furthermore, the voice that set the agenda for women during the anti-Apartheid struggle was more often from black working-class women who mostly subscribed to customary African beliefs and Christianity, and it was in the midst of these contending discourses that Muslim women made their mark. In the process, Muslim women not only challenged injustices in the Apartheid state, but they also revisited Islamic propositions of ethics and gender equality in terms of justice for all. Their activism was formed by cooperation beyond the Muslim community and in dialogue with discourses other than the Islamic in a reformist stance.

The preamble to the Apartheid state constitution theocratically claimed belief in the sovereignty of God with which Muslims and other religions could be in accord, but it differed in the manner and extent to which this belief imposes limits on human powers. Liberatory readings of the Qur’an stressed that humans are to actualize the will of God on earth while also “fighting in the cause of Allah for the downtrodden of the earth” (Q4:75). It is the second of these two principles to which the Apartheid state was blind and that caused it to be held in worldwide condemnation, galvanizing disparate voices and philosophies to cooperate. In this way, Islamic values were understood in humanist terms, with liberation and dignity
being the prerogative of the human agent—whether Muslim, non-Muslim, black, or white. Thus, while Muslim women’s engagement against Apartheid was not unique in terms of protest activity or the demands made on them, their activism shows how women can engage injustice for society as a whole. Bringing to the fore Muslim women’s public engagement in this context is to envision Islam as a pathway to religious and political pluralism, and it finds liberatory reasonings of Islamic scriptures together with others for the sake of common humanity.

This article does not present a theoretical or theological exposition of Muslim women’s activism as much as it provides a description of a transitional context wherein feminist consciousness, religion, and politics intersected. Muslim women’s activism in the transitional context of South Africa shows the web of complexity that women have to traverse, not only as activists but often as part of daily life. Their testimonies of the struggle illustrate that the care of their children often had to be weighed over and against care for the oppressed. Loyalties to family and community came into conflict with loyalties to the cause of justice and its agencies. The physical threat to their lives and livelihoods required immense courage, all the while grounded in, or at least in conversation with, the principles and texts of religious faith. This article will therefore describe and explain Muslim women’s activism within an historical overview of the Muslim engagement with anti-Apartheid movements that gave rise to the articulation of an Islamic feminism by both women and men through the idea that Islam demands human agency in the quest for social justice. While the formulations of parity and equality were not universally welcomed throughout South Africa and have not been unproblematic in their implementation, Muslim women’s voices were established and legitimized as constituent of South African society. As a result, they provide us with a moment for reflection on the interaction between human agency and religious sub-texts in pluralist societies and transitional contexts in the wider world.

**A Tradition of South African Muslims**

The current Muslim population comprises approximately 1.5% of the South African demographic which, despite its small number, has been rooted in South African society for centuries. The first documented Muslims in South Africa were brought from Malaysia to the Cape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as slaves or prisoners of the Dutch East India Company. The second noteworthy group of Muslims were Indian indentured laborers imported by the governors of the then British colonies in southern Africa in the nineteenth century. Therefore, the ethnic demographic of South African Muslims is such that those of the southern-most parts are considered mostly of Malay descent, with a history of resistance against colonial rule going back to the seventeenth century. In north-eastern parts of South Africa Muslims are mostly of Indian parentage and the remainder derives from various African, Middle Eastern, or indigenous backgrounds. The ethnic divisions of Malay and

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Indian were entrenched in Apartheid’s racial policies and remain to some degree a part of South African Muslim identity today. As Rayda Jacobs, a South African Muslim author who hails from the Cape, says in her 2003 novel:

It was that old Indian-Malay thing that’d been going on for years. The Malays were never going to be easy about their daughters marrying Indians, and the Indians were always going to think that they were better than the Malays. The term Malay is of course another carbuncle […] My forefathers might’ve come from the islands around the Indian Ocean, but I’m no Malay. The government did a terrible thing in the nineteen forties when it made meat of the Malays, and fish of the Indians. And that’s how it’s been since. There’s a rift. Not a big one, but occasionally you’ll hear a story.7

It is ironic that the injustice of exclusion and oppression of Apartheid was perpetrated by a white minority who had suffered brutality at the hands of the British Empire at the turn of the 20th century in their struggle for independence.8 The Anglo-Boer war can be understood in terms of anti-imperialism and the formation of sovereign identity. Thus, it forms a part of the anti-colonial movements in Africa that sought to put an end to the British conquest of South African peoples, both black and white. As a result, the discourses that mobilized Apartheid and its discontents were not so much characterized by secularism against Orientalism, which forms the narrative of the ‘clash of civilizations’ in the European and Anglo-Saxon world.9 In South Africa, Muslims were not the primary Other in the state’s nationalist agenda, but they were marginalized together with a large cast of others due to their ethnic identities rather than their religious identity. The main discourses for articulating the injustices of Apartheid were Marxist or socialist, particularly through labor movements. The Communist Party of South Africa continually played a role, although those who wanted to follow a purist Communist line became somewhat separated from mainstream African resistance movements and operated in exile after South Africa’s Suppression of Communism Act of 1950.10 Nevertheless, an increasingly radical approach to the entrenched Apartheid regime made much use of the revolutionary language and ideology of Marxist socialism, which was seen as the most effective way of undermining the power of the white capitalist minority. Muslims acted across the range of these movements, and the early Muslim campaigners against racism saw the diversity of ideas and races in South Africa as no obstacle to unity or religious expression. For example, a long-time leader of the Communist Party, Yusuf Dadoo (1909–82), made a pilgrimage to Makkah and bore the title of Haji with pride.11 In the earlier part of the twentieth century, much of the activism against the encroaching segregationist policies of the South African government were inspired by the

9 Elizabeth Hurd argues that secularism defines Western political relations, and that Islam in particular has been the Other against which Europe has defined its secularism through colonial enterprises. (The Politics of Secularism in International Relations, [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008], 55.
work of Mahatma Ghandi and other anti-colonial movements. Muslim professionals and activists shared a platform with Ghandi and supported his anti-colonial activism, with little regard to his Hindu background.¹²

The Prophetic Activism of Muslim Women

For women, Ghandi’s critique of power provided a means to articulate gender injustice, not for its own sake, but as part of a collective mobilization for equality. Ghadija Christopher (born Gool, b. 1896), for example, spoke on a stage with Ghandi’s wife at a rally in 1932. Later in 1954, Ghadija organized a protest against racially biased sentences in two separate rape trials of a ‘colored’ man and a ‘white’ man. The ‘colored’ man was sentenced to death for raping a ‘white’ woman while the ‘white’ man was sentenced to only nine months imprisonment for raping an Indian girl. The protest condemned these unequal sentences. Registering women’s engagement against the confluence of systematic racism and sexism, it presented its condemnation in a joint memorandum from the Child Welfare Society and Women’s League.¹³ The egalitarian activism of Ghadijah Christopher continued in the work of her daughter, Zuleika (b. 1924), who practiced as a medical doctor in South African state hospitals where she became acutely aware of the disparity caused by segregated medical care. Zuleika was one of the first to articulate a politics of medicine, arguing that it was futile to treat the symptoms of diseases without addressing the underlying socio-economic problems in society. Her work may be seen as prophetic in the light of South Africa’s HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early twenty-first century and in light of other critiques of the global monetary system and health issues in the developing world.¹⁴

Zainab Asvat was likewise inspired by her father’s involvement with Ghandi’s anti-colonial movement. A contemporary of Nelson Mandela, she took part in a 1946 passive resistance campaign where she was attacked by a mob of white government supporters. The campaign included a diversity of ethnicities and persuasions, with the ‘white Christian’ Reverend Michael Scott later recounting that he had witnessed Zainab exhibiting a better understanding of mercy from her practice of Islam than the mob had exhibited in its professed Christianity.¹⁵ Zainab’s younger sister, Amina, likewise took a political stand from early on. Amina refused to sing the national anthem at school at age eleven (which, at that stage, was “God Save the King”) because of her awareness of injustices in South African society. Amina remained an activist. On one occasion, she was imprisoned for two weeks for arranging a protest march, and she was then banned for five years while her husband was under house arrest after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960.¹⁶ She suffered constant harassment by the security police while her husband was imprisoned, during which time she also had to care for their family as sole breadwinner. Muslim women were often involved in resistance through the work of their husbands, and they were regularly harassed, imprisoned, or tortured

¹² Ahmad M. Kathrada, Memoirs (South Africa: Zebra Press, 2004), 43.
¹³ Vahed, Muslim Portraits, 73–4.
¹⁴ Ibid., 75.
¹⁵ Kathrada, 44-5.
¹⁶ The Sharpeville massacre on March 21, 1960 followed a day of protest against the carrying of pass books in which 69 people were shot dead by police.
to divulge secrets of the resistance movements. They were also subjected to periods of solitary confinement, which in Nina Hassim’s case (b. 1936) lasted for fifty days.

While the main focus was on the racial politics of South Africa, there was an implicit connection with gender inequality that found expression in women’s literary contributions. Amina Desai (1919–2009) and her sister Halima, for instance, regularly wrote letters under pseudonyms to the newspaper Indian Views in the early 1940s to express their opinions not only on the political situation in South Africa, but on gender relations in the Muslim community. Some of these pieces by women were so astute and influential that many did not believe they could have originated with a female author. Halima Gool (1916-1992), who wrote under the pseudonym ‘Hawa Ahmed’ or ‘Muslim Girl,’ challenged the androcentrism that prevailed in society and in the resistance movements, so that most male readers were convinced it must have been a man writing under a woman’s pseudonym.

Organized Islam in South Africa

For the most part, organized Islamic leadership (termed ulema and jamiat respectively) did not voice political opposition, as they saw themselves mostly as cultural organizations to educate Muslims and maintain Muslim socio-religious culture. Muslims who became involved politically, therefore, were mostly courageous individuals who purposefully chose ethical care and justice to help and advocate on behalf of the oppressed. In the mid-twentieth century, Muslim scholars graduating from training overseas began to marginalize local Muslim leaders, and divisions formed along Deobandi lines over and against more modernist approaches, such as Barelvi thought. In the southern-most parts of South Africa, Muslim opinion was represented by the Muslim Judicial Council formed in 1945, while the Deobandi-influenced faith leadership formed the Jamiat ul-Ulema in 1934 in the north and the Majlis al-Ulema on the east coast in 1952. These groups represented the most organized and identifiable Islamic faith leadership in South Africa from the 1960s onwards. While the more modernist groups, such as the Muslim Teachers Association (est. 1951) and the Cape Muslim Youth Movement (est. 1957) had vociferously opposed the state’s nascent Apartheid laws, they articulated their protest in terms of left-leaning unity movements rather than in terms of expressly Islamic ideas.

Muslim women at this time often became activists after attending universities, at work when they became acutely aware of the injustices of Apartheid, or when they joined relations who were involved in the resistance movements that were becoming integral to the articulation of a South African feminism. And yet, their activism remained removed from the growing feminist consciousness of Europe and other westernized nations in its focus on collective rather than female suffrage for the larger part of the twentieth century. Muslim women’s activism reflected the immense diversity and contradictions of the gender struggle, as a confluence of currents within the broader liberation movement. Fatima Meer

17 Vahed, Muslim Portraits, 101.
18 Ibid., 152.
19 Ibid., 92.
20 Ibid., 134.
(1928-2010), for instance, was born in a polygamous household to a Muslim father and a mother of Jewish and Portuguese descent. Meer described her huge extended family as a happy one, calling her father’s first wife ‘Ma’ together with her biological Ma. Her political activity started at age 16 when she raised funds for the 1944 Benghali famine, and she later helped to form a local women’s league to work across racial and religious boundaries, providing child care services for working mothers in the area. Meer developed a friendship with Winnie Mandela, with whom she was incarcerated in 1976. The multifaceted aspect of the gender struggle is also clear in Rabia Motala’s life (b. 1932), showing how male dominance itself cannot be homogenized. Rabia’s father ended her schooling after primary school and had her working in his store or dress-making until her marriage at age 19. However, her husband Chota recognized her love of learning and encouraged her to complete her schooling, after which she enrolled for a degree at university. Chota and Rabia campaigned together against Apartheid, and the couple was later appointed as first ambassadors to Morocco by President Nelson Mandela.

Notwithstanding Muslim women’s tacit and explicit contributions to anti-Apartheid movements, women, as elsewhere in the world, were symbols of the South African Muslim community’s commitment to political transition. Nelson Mandela wrote about Amina Pahad, who was imprisoned by the Security Police, in his autobiography:

"I often visited the home of Amina Pahad for lunch, and then, suddenly, this charming woman put aside her apron and went to jail for her beliefs. If I had once questioned the willingness of the Indian community to protest against oppression, I no longer could."

Another struggle leader, Walter Sisulu, came to the same conclusion, saying that his initial assessment of ‘Indian women’ as conservative and unwilling to involve themselves in public life changed after meeting Amina Pahad and her comrades. And yet, these Muslim women’s cross-political involvement with non-Muslim and socialist organizations often came at the high price of accusations of apostasy from Islam. This was the case for Cissie Gool (1897-1963), who was one of the founders of the Anti-Fascist League in 1935 and who protested the growing threat of fascism in Europe whilst campaigning for equality in South Africa.

Apart from a few exceptions, the ulema were characterized in the main by socio-political quietism in the 1950’s and 60’s, emphasizing religious matters without articulating socially relevant ideas or inspiring greater political activism. Conservative faith leaders may have tacitly endorsed resistance against racial oppression, but anxiety remained about the blurring of boundaries, especially the sexual boundaries of conservative Islam that they feared would result from cooperation with non-Muslims. Pregs Govender, an Indian activist


24 Nadia Davids, “‘This Woman is not for Burning’: Performing the Biography and Memory of Cissie Gool,” Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies 38, no. 2 (2012), 253-76.

and later parliamentarian, writes in her memoirs that a mixed social event for secondary school students raised a furore that was headlined in a local newspaper. The mosque had asked Muslim girls to boycott the event because it would lead to *zinah* (lit. fornication, social upheaval). Even so, many of the Muslim girls did not comply with the mosque’s advice, and they seem not to have received censure from the mosque after the event. It is therefore evident that many clerics understood their role as vanguards against modernity and conservers of traditional Islam, while mosque congregants interpreted their faith in terms of the pluralism encountered in their daily lives. Shamima Shaikh, on whom more is said below, responded to questions about why she had involved herself in protest movements by citing from the Qur’an:

> The answer is simple: we respond to the injunction of the Qur’an “to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong”, as we did when faced with the terrible injustices of apartheid and oppression on the basis of race and class.\(^{27}\)

**The Struggle in Islamic Terms**

Some commentators suggest that the attitudes of organized Islam changed with the death of Imam Abdullah Haroon in 1969 in police custody.\(^{28}\) Haroon was a Pan-Africanist Congress member; a faction that was more focused on black consciousness than the African National Congress (ANC) in the anti-Apartheid struggle. Haroon canvassed overseas support, in particular from Canon John Collins in London (1966) who was coordinating international funding to assist political detainees and their families in South Africa. Yet Haroon was considered a thorn in the side of his contemporaries, who resented his political activities. He was even known by some in his community as the ‘*kāfir* (infidel) imam.’ A recent documentary by Khalid Shamis, the British-born grandson of Haroon, points to the ambivalent attitudes of the Muslim community at this time, even with the death of Haroon.\(^{29}\) Shamis opines that conservative Muslims in the Apartheid era were largely complacent with their reasonably undisturbed lives. He concludes that though Christianity had a privileged status in public life and education, Muslims could attend mosque, travel, and adhere to traditional views and practices without censure from the Apartheid regime. One could argue that the Apartheid system of segregation, justified under the slogan ‘separate but equal,’ actually suited some of the conservatives who were intent on sheltering the Muslim community from un-Islamic influence. The clerical establishment did not, therefore, feel a particular urgency for getting politically involved. Instead, Shamis reported that many of Haroon’s contemporaries found him objectionable because he was drawing the attention of the Apartheid regime. They therefore contrived a critique of his lifestyle as unacceptable: Haroon was criticized for flamboyant dressing and promoting the study of fine arts among his

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children. He sent his daughter overseas to study at the age of eighteen, and he screened James Bond films in the madrassa for fundraising events. Most controversially, he initiated religious classes for males and females, and he allowed women to participate in the mosque’s executive. The internal Muslim critique against Haroon was therefore very much in gendered terms—that is, until a masculinist narrative of his torture and death was emphasized by Muslim activists in the early 1980’s, when Muslim organizations adopted overtly political tones. Haroon was then held up as a Muslim icon of resistance, and his death became considered a martyrdom in the cause of the anti-Apartheid struggle. Haroon ‘the Maverick’ became a rallying figure who consolidated Muslim resistance against Apartheid, but the ambivalence toward political activism that characterized attitudes toward Haroon in his lifetime was to resurface when women became the subject of Islamic articulations of liberation.

The two events that galvanized South African Muslims more categorically were the 1976 Soweto student uprising against the Apartheid state’s education policies, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. At this time, Muslims organized around socially and politically relevant expressions of Islam that had been articulated by Muslim individuals and leftists for decades. The two historical events led to more overt political action and articulation of an Islamic response to the anti-Apartheid struggle, together with the formation of new organizations and affiliations. The most noteworthy of these were the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) and Qibla. Muslims were vitalized to turn to texts from the Qur’an and Sunnah for wider and more general meanings to bridge Muslims and non-Muslims alike in terms of resisting tyrannical oppression and establishing divine order in Creation. Relationships in the early Madinan society, as reflected in the Qur’an, provided the text for explicating social relations in segregated South Africa: the awliya’ (associates) and kāfirun of Q3:28 became signs of the oppressive white minority, and the munafiqūn (hypocrites) of Q4:137-9 become the description of Muslims who participated in the tricameral parliamentary system introduced by the Apartheid state. Those organizations that allied themselves with non-Muslim resistance against Apartheid developed views on inter-faith dialogue, the labor movement, and gender discrimination, whereas the conservative ulema became more focused on carving out an Islamic space within South African politics. The most radical conservative wing envisioned an Iranian-style Islamic revolution for South Africa, albeit as a minority of Muslim opinion.

Muslim activists sought an understanding of Islam that was compatible with modernity, some taking inspiration from the political thought of Sayyid Qutb and Abu’l Alla al-Maududi, together with a focus on da’wah (lit. invitation to faith) as a form of outreach and help across racial and religious divides. The MYM codified what Abdullah Haroon had already put into practice in the 1960s, believing that mosques ought to be multi-purpose centers that holistically addressed not only the needs of the Muslim community, but the needs

30 Vahed, Muslim Portraits, 143.
31 Günther, 117–8.
32 Haroon was certainly not the only Muslim to have died in police custody. Ahmed Timol (1941-71) died at the same police station under similar circumstances to Steve Biko (http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/ahmed-timol). Another case that led his family to take up the cause of death in detention of the Security Police was that of Hoosen Haffejee (1949-1977). (Vahed, Muslim Portraits, 137–9.)
33 Le Roux, 25.
of society in general. The mosque should include a place of worship for both men and women, a library, a community center, and a political center, and they therefore identified four issues as central to their program:

1. that one could read the Qur’an without an alim (learned interpreter) to become fully conversant with the primary principles of Islam;
2. that women should attend mosque to the same degree as men;
3. that the Friday khutbah (sermonic address) should be delivered in the language spoken by the community;
4. and that the giving of zakah (prescribed charity, one of the Five Pillars of Islam) should be organized nationally, with zakah-collectors paid out of a central fund.34

These four issues were opposed by the ulema on each count, and when the World Muslim League of Pakistan promised large sums of money on the condition that the Muslim community unite under one umbrella body, the MYM itself was thrown into disunity. Some members broke away to affiliate with a newly formed Islamic Council of South Africa in 1976. Particularly in the western Cape, closer contact with the labor movement resulted in the MYM taking a softer approach toward socialism and contextualizing Islam in terms of social justice. In their threefold campaign on living wages, women’s rights, and drug abuse, the MYM worked with other organizations who had similar goals wherever possible, whether Muslim or not.35 The MYM successfully engaged with the anti-Apartheid struggle, and non-Muslim parties recognized it for its contribution to this struggle more so than other Muslim organizations. Farid Esack, together with Ebrahim Rasool, changed the organization’s name to Call of Islam in 1984 and took a strong stand on gender equality, especially as racial liberation came to fruition with the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990. Esack was appointed by Nelson Mandela as the first Gender Commissioner of South Africa, and Rasool became premier of the western Cape. Esack was raised by a single mother in abject poverty and attributes his commitment to gender justice to witnessing his mother’s triple oppression, as he terms it: patriarchy, apartheid and capitalism.36 Yet Esack was not esteemed by all in the Muslim community, and the MYM’s ‘women in mosque’ campaign attracted a vitriolic response from the clerical establishment.37

South African Islamic Feminism

Despite fragmentation of the Muslim voice, these radical Muslim expressions dislocated conservative power at the time, while creating a permanent space for Muslim legitimacy in pluralist South African politics post-1994. Radical, mostly young South African Muslims reached an understanding with other worldviews in the context of a broad commitment to the struggle for justice, nevertheless placing primary emphasis on the commitment to Islam. The accommodations with non-Muslim activists were framed by the Qur’anic idea of wilayah (just rule) with the objective to establish a just society in South

34 Tayob, 112.
35 Ibid., 119.
36 Vahed, Muslim Portraits, 116.
37 Jeenah, 6.
Africa for all, including a diversity of race and religion. Therefore, Muslim struggle for justice in South Africa first and foremost aimed at purging the non-Islamic society of injustice and then to guarantee freedom for Islam within a new pluralist order. These dual objectives continued to reflect the divided approach of Abdullah Haroon’s Muslim community through conservative strains of Islamic discourse, on the one hand, and radical strains on the other. By 1992, the radical strain of Islamic discourse was exerting pressure on the conservative *ulema* due to its alliance with the successfully changing social-political landscape in South Africa, giving shape to an Islamic feminism.

At this time, Na’eem Jeenah and Shamima Shaikh, a married couple who expressed liberation in particularly gendered terms, were leaders in the MYM. Na’eem was the general secretary of the MYM during the 1980s, editing its mouthpiece *Al Qalam*. He met Shamima when they were both arrested during a consumer boycott campaign. Together, they played a decisive role in the MYM, with Shamima a founding member of the MYM’s Gender Desk. The couple documented their Hajj together in 1997 after Shamima had been diagnosed with cancer. Nevertheless, during this time, Shamima was the founding chairperson of the *Muslim Community Broadcasting Trust*, initiating a community-based radio station in the Johannesburg area called “The Voice.” She also protested women’s exclusion from participation in mosque prayers and eventually launched an alternative congregation where women and men were considered equals. Shamima critiqued gender arrangements of the Muslim community and wider society, assuming that the Islamically justified democratization of society naturally included women. The Voice, therefore, articulated women’s rights, inter-religious tolerance, and anti-racism in Islamic terms, but Shamima tragically succumbed to cancer four months after the radio station started broadcasting in 1997. Shamima had arranged before her death to have her funeral prayers led by a female friend and for women to be part of the service in every funerary space. While Na’eem continued publishing on feminism and Islam, the radio station eventually became embroiled in gender battles that diverged from its origins. Muslim women broadcasting and acting as executives of the radio station became opposed by traditionalists who argued that women’s voices were a part of their body that should be concealed and excluded from public. The government’s Gender Commissioner at the time, Farid Esack, found that the case contravened equality laws of the new South African constitution, and the radio station lost its licence in 1998. Esack himself was called a South African “Salman Rushdie” and faced several death threats. In the meantime, a compromise seems to have been struck with the re-founding of Radio Islam, in which women broadcasters present “programs for sisters.” However, another controversy was sparked in November 2013 with the live international airing of a women’s conference, where

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38 Le Roux, 26.
39 Ibid., 26–7.
40 *Journey of Discovery: A South African Hajj* (1997), distributed by the Afro-Middle East Centre.
41 Esack, 133-4.
42 Ibid., 135.
women were heard “laughing and giggling.” However, the exposure of this issue has remained in internet forums and has not attracted headline news.\(^{45}\)

**Feminist Voice in South African Politics**

The tension between progressive, conservative, and radicalist Muslim expressions remains in South Africa, and the question is to what extent these internal debates are influenced by ethnic divisions, or to what extent they are fueled by external geopolitical discourses, especially in relation to feminism. While women became increasingly outspoken on gender equality as part of the anti-Apartheid struggle, they often had an ambivalent attitude towards feminism. The label of ‘feminist’ had not yet found widespread expression within the anti-racist movement through organizations such as the Women’s League and the Federation of South African Women. In the governing white community, despite the presence of liberals in government from 1909 onwards, the Liberal Left never won a respectable share of the vote in Parliament. Afrikaner nationalists, with their corporate ethic, had an inherent distrust of the English liberalism of which feminism was seen to be a part.\(^{46}\) While parity before the law seemed to be a natural part of the democratic struggle, feminism was viewed with suspicion as a white/English intellectualist agenda. Working-class women began to oppose programs by the state or NGOs that seemed to have little bearing on their daily struggles, a stance encapsulated in the 2003 accusation that “while…feminists are concerned with getting out of the kitchen, our fight is to get a kitchen.”\(^{47}\) Nevertheless, in Islamic discourse towards the end of Apartheid, an Islamic feminism crystallized out of the liberation struggle. Muslim liberation movements identified gender equality as a distinct objective for their faith community, together with wider consultations towards a constitution for post-Apartheid South Africa. In this, liberal Muslim thought was actually ahead of its conservative counterparts and other religious/traditional communities in South Africa, who remained implacably suspicious of feminism.\(^{48}\)

Since the establishment of the ‘new’ South Africa, the relationship between democracy and gender mainstreaming, just as elsewhere, has not been straightforward. Several commentators have argued that the gains made for women during the struggle against Apartheid were subjugated by the national agenda for liberation which was often a ‘macho’ affair dominated by male leaders of the resistance movements and not limited to the Muslim demographic of South Africa.\(^{49}\) After 1990, civil society fragmented, and grassroots organizations were subsumed into political parties, mostly into the ANC as the internationally recognizable face of the anti-Apartheid struggle, represented by the iconic presidency of Nelson Mandela. Muslims who participated in resistance against the Apartheid regime often became part of the political elite in the new South Africa, bringing new forms of


\(^{46}\) Leatt et al., 57–8.

\(^{47}\) Fester, 111.

\(^{48}\) See also Sa’diyya Shaikh, 148.

\(^{49}\) Jeenah, 8. See also evidence of regressive public policy with regard to women, expressed by the vice-chair of the Human Rights Commission of South Africa (2010) as the ‘honeymoon’ being over in South Africa (110).
accountability. Radical Muslim groups, who were involved in the negotiating process and who had helped bring down Apartheid, came to blows with the clerics, and they to some extent succumbed to conservative Muslim tradition and ceded representation of the Muslim voice to the ulema for the sake of unity. The MYM, which had worked and gained respect in the broader South African society because of its campaigns for women’s rights, became overrun with global geopolitics and repositioned itself in terms of international feminist discourses with the fading of the memory of struggle.

Nevertheless, Muslim participation in politics over the first two decades of the new democratic South Africa remains largely committed to pluralism in South Africa, with Muslim votes showing widespread support for political parties other than the two Muslim parties on the ballot. While there are critical Muslim voices disapproving of the post-Apartheid constitution that allows gay rights, abortion, and decriminalization of prostitution, some of the most progressive movements within Islam are found in South Africa. Amina Wadud led her first Friday sermon at the Claremont mosque in Cape Town in 1994, and in 2004 *Inner Circle*, an organization that welcomes sexual diversity under the leadership of an openly gay Imam was established. More recently, an ‘open mosque’ was initiated in September 2014 under the auspices of the Oxford scholar Taj Hargey, who was born in Cape Town. Muslim women continue to take principled positions against oppression, continuing their critiques of abusive power where they see it in the new governing regime, albeit as individuals rather than as representatives of Islamic organizations. Ferial Haffajee, editor of the prominent newspaper *City Press*, for instance, was embroiled in a public row in October 2013 for criticizing harmful traditional practices and ‘reversed racism.’

These events and movements are not without controversy, both in South Africa and internationally. Nevertheless, despite differences among Muslim women and fractures within the Muslim community, Muslim women continue to represent collective interests and to respond creatively in shaping a pluralist South African identity, conceiving of a progressive religion that is committed to human equality. Their contribution questions simplistic notions of patriarchy as ‘men oppressing women,’ showing that social behavior and political action come to be pervasively gendered, with repressive behavior and codes often being assumed by women and men who are determined to protect their privileges and power. Yet, the growth of an Islamic feminism out of the South African political transition demonstrates how Islamic faith may campaign for common values. Therefore, the intersection of political context and religious intent in Muslims women’s activism asks whether an exact line can be drawn between the religious and the secular in public life, and indeed whether secular society stands to lose an important mobilizing and modulating voice when it calls for the exclusion of religion in public debate. Furthermore, in the face of the overwhelming media exposure of militant Islamist politics in the post-9/11 world, Muslim women’s contribution to the end of Apartheid reflects the diversity of Islamic legacies that may enrich experiences of political transition.

51 Jeenah, 9.
52 Niehaus, 124.
Muslim Women’s Activism against Apartheid as Scriptural Reasoning

In terms of a pragmatic evaluation of scriptural reasoning, the activism and re-visioning of Islamic ethics by Muslim women during the struggle against Apartheid displays a prophetic pragmatism in the public sphere. In their cooperation and dialogue with multiple contending ideologies, the selection of Muslim women’s actions recounted above were informed and negotiated by their religious allegiance, yet religion did not trump public engagement orpolitical expression in common terms with others. It could be argued, however, that a majority of South African society at the time was religious in character, as evidenced by the establishment and wide acceptance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The ethnic, tribal, linguistic, and racial diversity of South Africa presumed a broad religious rationality as part of public discourse that had not precluded cooperation with atheistic exponents. Religiosity did not, therefore, need to fit a particularly secular agenda as defined in Western terms, where ‘secular’ has come to be understood as that which is non-religious. Rather, the secular space of South Africa was constituted in a negotiated settlement, where plural communities pragmatically afforded each other a democratized worldly space. Therefore, religious beliefs and opinions did not have to vie for credence, but they had to negotiate the ‘compromizable’ and ‘uncompromizable’ of their creeds in a setting where others were doing the same. In this context, scriptural reasoning in its broadest sense facilitated political revision, and it conformed to Habermas’s claim “that religious people can express their attitudes, desires and needs in religious language without being immediately judged as incompetent for not being able to provide a secular reason.” The constitution, then, provided a secular measure founded on equality as defined by universal human rights, with recourse to customary law for judgment of religio-cultural norms. By these means, South Africa acquired one of the most liberal constitutions in the world while accommodating conservative beliefs and practices.

The positive appraisal offered here does not mean to suggest a utopian resolution of the South African question, and much justified criticism has arisen in and of the political sphere after 1994. Gender equality remains contentious in public life, and the judicial resolution of issues of religious beliefs and practices within customary law are not always unproblematic. Yet, it is the implementation of safeguards and accountability that is more often at fault than the negotiated principle. It could be said that current political dilemmas in South Africa have resulted from assumptions, both nationally and internationally, that communal reasoning was accomplished when the Apartheid state was successfully removed. The structures that facilitated this transition have therefore been dismantled, often resulting in the loss of opportunity and space for reasoning through the political dilemmas of the new South Africa.

Bibliography


55 Ibid.
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