MUSLIM WOMEN BEFORE THE TRC: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

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Introduction:

Muslim women testified before the TRC between 1996 and 1997. The majority of these women testified in the Gauteng region of South Africa. They included (in addition to the testimonies analysed for the purposes of this paper): Ms Amina Desai (who assisted schoolteacher Ahmed Timol whose story is documented in greater detail later in this paper), Mrs Jubie Mayet (who struggled with re-classification procedures to destroy a dual ethnic identity that had arisen from her being Cape Malay by birth but married to a Muslim of Indian origin) and Mrs Sharifa Fridie (who had lost a loved one in the Trojan Horse incident in Athlone, Cape Town)[1].

Eventually I chose four testimonies that contained aspects of Muslim female identity syntactically embedded in the evaluation and temporal features of the narratives.

Labov defines evaluation of the narrative as 'the reason why the events of the narrative are reportable'[2]. Evaluative devices include adjectival phrases such as 'And I found myself lying there on the floor and you know being completely-completely terrified'[3] Evaluation can be divided into external and internal evaluation. **External evaluation involves the narrator stopping their narrative and telling the listener**

[1] http://www.doj.gov.za

[2] Labov W:
[3] Jaffer, 1997

the point of the narrative. The narrator would then assign an evaluative remark to the particular event in the narrative that he or she is describing[4].

As theoretical bases I will use contemporary narrative theorists: William Labov, Jens Brockmeier and Deborah Schiffrin. Labov is useful to determine that the texts are indeed narratives and in analysing the co-construction aspect of the narratives, i.e. between the person testifying and the interlocutor. Brockmeier provides adequate tools for analysis of identity and autobiographical *temporality* while Schiffrin documents the importance of the relationship between mother and daughter in social identity construction in narratives.

The TRC narrative testimonies analysed in this paper are transcripts of testimonies given by Ms Zubeida Jaffer, Mrs Zahrah Nakardien (nee Greta Appelgren) and Mrs Rokaya Salojee. The testimony of Mrs Hawa Timol will be used as background information to support the analysis. Although, Timol's testimony comprises some rich extracts for the purposes of this paper, a detailed linguistic analysis of this testimony is not possible because I do not have access to the original text. Timol testified in Gujarati as to the killing of her son Ahmed by the security police in 1978. Dr Fazel Randera, one of the TRC commissioners, interpreted her testimony into English. The TRC transcription team then transcribed it. The testimonies analysed are transcripts made during and after the hearings. James Gee's linguistic approaches to narrative were exclusive to the analysis of oral testimonies. I listened to Zubeida Jaffer's testimony on tape and then tried to use Gee's theories as background knowledge to analyse the intonation patterns in her voice.

[4] Labov W

Hawa Timol:

Although translated into English, Timol's testimony still offers some rich views for the purposes of this paper. Timol testified before the TRC in 1996 at the age of 78. Her testimony was given in Gujarati, her mother tongue with which she has stronger narrative competence and greater confidence in testimony. Timol was adamant that her son Ahmed Timol, a young schoolteacher, had not committed suicide as the security police alleged. Another son, Mohammed Timol provided the religious background of the Timol family when he testified before the TRC shortly after his mother. 'Ahmed grew up in a very religious orthodox family of the Islamic faith. He grew up at a time when there was intense oppression in South Africa, and as a young Indian Muslim he too became affected by what was happening in this country[5].' It seems that Ahmed Timol's pilgrimage to Mecca (from exile) in 1966 gave him a new perspective on life. He then returned to South Africa and became actively involved in politics[6].

Hawa Timol's worldview emanated from a strong, Islamic environment. Her audience was shocked by her 'steely resilience' and bravery when she demanded the truth of the events surrounding her son's death[7].

Labov defines narrative as a means of recapitulating past experiences[8]. In order for a text to be placed in the Labovian definition of narrative, one has to identify a few

[5] Timol, 1996
[6] Timol, 1996
[7] Sooka, 2004
[8] Labov, 1972

distinguishing features. Timol's testimony can be classified as an evaluative narrative as described below.

Timol's interpreter, Dr Faizel Randera provided an abstract for her narrative: '…police raided at least 115 homes and offices across the country ostensibly in search of goods and documents relating to banned organizations , offences under the security laws. At least seven people, mainly Indians were detained. Among these was Ahmed Timol, a 30 year old schoolteacher and his brother Mohammed. On the 28th October 1971 it was announced that Timol had died the previous day after a fall from the 10th floor window of John Vorster Square. Brigadier Kruger and Sergeant Rodrigues both stated that Timol had committed suicide by jumping out of the window[9].'

When Randera tells Timol 'It is time for you to give Ahmed's story' she organizes the complicated events temporally around many of the daily routines of Islam. She describes the relentless interrogations by the security police of her late husband and herself. The fact that the Timols were fasting during the Muslim Holy Month of *Ramadan* and that the time for prayer had arrived had little effect on their interrogators:

'They interrogated my late husband and then the *Azan,* the call for prayer went and my late husband asked to be allowed to pray. They refused him to do so. It was the fasting month and my late husband informed them that he had not missed a prayer for many years and that he be allowed to pray. He said that he would pray in their

[9] Randera, in Timol (1996)

presence on the balcony. They told him that he would jump off the balcony and he then prayed and the police then left.'

Through this evaluation in the narrative, Timol has expressed the seriousness of Islam in her home.

Later, after many more interrogations and ransacking of the Timol home, the police arrived and began to interrogate the Timol family landlord's wife. When demanding the landlord's whereabouts they were told he was at the mosque. When his wife requested her right to pray, she was refused. Timol remembers that the landlord returned after 'the mid-afternoon prayer.' He was subjected to interrogations as well. The police left and returned 'after the early evening prayer.'

It was on a Friday, the Muslim day of the Sabbath that Timol was told her son had died. After the 'Friday call for prayer', Ahmed Timol was given the Islamic *ghusl.* After this procedure, his mother noticed that he had 'been assaulted and that his face was full of blood.' Although some of the meaning may well have been lost in translation, this paragraph provides a vivid visual image of what Timol's body must have looked like when it was returned to his family. Indeed she said his coffin 'was filled with blood'. Thus, this description can be classified into the evaluative category.

To then link this observation to Hawa Timol's Muslim psyche, I have provided an Islamic explanation for the shock that she expressed. The presence of blood on a body that has just undergone the *ghusl,* negates the ritual bath i.e. the body was once again unclean. Thus a piece of Islamic identity is encapsulated in an evaluative piece of the

narrative. However, Timol had suffered severe internal bleeding during his detention and this presence of blood after the *ghusl* in the case of a martyr is inconsequential.

Timol then makes a plea to the Almighty for clarity regarding the death of her son. There are some powerful forms of external evaluation in this extract particularly the adverbs used: 'they hit my son tremendously. They arrested him on a Friday and they killed him and said that he committed suicide. I want to know who assaulted him and I want to know who lodged the complaint about my son. It took me quite a bit of difficulty to raise my children. It is 25 years now and I will not forget what happened. I will not forget what happened, I need to know.'

At this point in the narrative, Randera asks Timol to contain herself before he asks additional questions. She is so immersed in the emotional evaluation of her narrative that it seems she disregards Randera's advice. She, instead describes the arrest of another of her sons. She demanded his whereabouts stating assertively that they (the security police) had already murdered one of her sons. They refused to give her any information but instead demanded to see her husband. She replied that he was observing rigorous prayer for a ten consecutive days in the local mosque.

'Thereafter I took them to the mosque and someone came out from the mosque and called my husband and they told my husband that if he wanted to see my son, then he's got to work for us and the public should not know that he's working for us. I told them that if my body had a zip they could open the zip to see how I was aching inside.'

Again she uses external evaluation to explain how she felt at the time.

Dr Alex Boraine, the chairperson of the TRC, provided the coda that signalled the end of narrative. He thanked the Timol family for testifying and recommended they memorialise their son/brother.

Zubeida Jaffer:

Zubeida Jaffer was a journalist during the South African anti-apartheid and trade union movements. She was detained by the South African authorities for two months in 1980 after exposing police killings. Her time in detention included solitary confinement, torture and beatings. In 1986, after editing community and trade union papers, she was detained again, while she was several months pregnant. She was released at the time of her baby's birth, only to be re-arrested nine weeks later and jailed again with her infant. She testified before the TRC in 1996.

Jaffer's testimony provides many aspects for analysis. The first extract is implicitly linked to Islamic identity. The next two will be analysed further on in this sub-section, as they are more explicitly connected to Islam.

In a personal interview, I asked Jaffer if, at any stage of her testimony, she felt she was expressing any aspects of her identity as a Muslim woman.

'I think that much of the information I expressed (during my TRC testimony) was closely connected to being Muslim. There is something intensely personal in my sub-

conscious that I haven't spoken about before (I just bordered on discussing it with Imam Haroon's son Mohammed Haroon). When testifying I experienced a strong, spiritual connection with Imam Haroon (Spyker van Wyk who tortured me during my first detention was responsible for the death of Imam Haroon). This had an impact on the whole TRC experience and became the thread running through it. I'm not sure why I didn't speak about it at length before. I think I was swept away by certain circumstances and a certain sense of duty.' (Jaffer, 2004)

When testifying, Jaffer conforms to the Labovian abstract. At the beginning she lays out the framework for her narrative and why she is testifying: **'I want to start by saying that I am very aware that this is just one, you know, one little story compared to so many other women that have gone through so many things in the Western Cape and nationally.** So I tell the story to illustrate what has happened to so many other women.' In the abstract of the narrative, she immediately constructs a social role for herself. As she proceeds, she orientates her narrative by explaining some of her professional life as a journalist. When listening to the narrative on tape, I perceived a subtle hesitation on Jaffer's part when she outlines her career as a journalist and subsequently as a political activist.

The complicating action is developed in stages as she describes the series of events. Generally her voice is quite calm but she begins to take deep breaths when describing her interrogations and the discomfort of 'men surrounding you all the time during the interrogations' (Jaffer, 1997). She described her fear when her interrogators threatened to abort her pregnancy. This extract has an implicit link with Islam:

‘And then at a certain point he came and said that they-he knew exactly how I was going to co-operate and that they had prepared-he prepared a chemical for me to drink-to kill the baby and to-he was going to burn the baby from my body. Now this was-this was a real threat to me because I felt that we-she is not even brought into this world yet and if she is brought into this world, thinking that her mother gave this information so that she could live, that, that’s a heavy burden for a child to carry. So I think that, that unborn baby inside me, made it possible for me to be strong enough to tell them or not to give into their threats’ (Jaffer, 1997).

Schiffrin provides a strong theoretical base for linking mother and daughter relationships, first to culture and then to self and identity. **’Stories are often told to justify one’s actions, not only during overt conflict, but also during subtle disputes over rights and obligations.** Second, the narrated recounting and resolution of such tensions can highlight the different expectations and obligations associated with social identities, as well as the way they react to the normative practices expected of us. The study of mother’s actions in narratives provides us an opportunity to discover women’s own perceptions and their enactments of particular interact ional strategies to settle or avoid conflict’ (Schiffrin, 1996).

Of course mother and daughter relationships are not exclusive to Muslim people. They are universal. However the *Hadith* says ‘Paradise lies at the feet of the Mother’ (Davids, 2001). In other words, one’s transition to paradise is smoother when one fulfils a relationship with one’s child. The same applies to a child fulfilling a relationship with its mother.

This section also contains some examples of external evaluation, including when Jaffer uses the adjective 'real' to describe the nature of the threat to abort her child and the word 'capable' to describe the determination of the security police to elicit information:

'Now this was **real**- this was a **real** threat to me because of the drug experience I had during my first detention. And I knew they could do it, I knew they were **capable**, I knew they had drugged me the first time, and so I sat there in the cell not knowing what to do.'

Jaffer further magnifies the spiritual connection she shared with Imam Haroon during her testimony before the TRC in her recent autobiography, *Our Generation* (2003). The book enhances one's understanding of her TRC experience. I found it particularly useful because it records her grapple with Islam most clearly: 'Frans Mostert has a terrible reputation. He is not the one who tortured me during my first detention. Then it was my misfortune to land up in the clutches of the notorious Spyker van Wyk. Spyker. Responsible for the death of our Imam (Haroon) in 1969' (Jaffer, 2003).

In *Our Generation* Jaffer says that before testifying, she closed her eyes and prayed: 'Dear God, give me the strength to see this through. Please give me the strength to see this through.' She also stresses the importance of the Quran during her time in police detention. Her family had given her an Arabic-English translation of the Quran. 'It was my only reading material and my only companion through many lonely hours (in detention). The only way I could think of to survive was to tell myself that I had the task of reading the Quran from cover to cover, in Arabic and English.' (Jaffer, 2003).

In addition to the extract of her testimony where she was threatened with a forced abortion there are two other extracts in the evaluative sections that encapsulated Islamic identity.

When prompted by commissioner Glenda Wildschut who asks her about van Wyk, Jaffer again expresses her connection with Haroon:

'I mean, after all, we know he (van Wyk) killed Imam Haroon and they told me that, he is the man who killed Imam and he will deal with me if I wasn't going to co-operate with the others. And I just found myself lying there on the floor and you know being completely terrified. At that stage he-a man came in, and he said to the man, another policeman came in and he said to the man, just rape her, just rape her and this man came up to me and he didn't actually rape me, **but the threat of it was-I felt that I was going to die at that point.'**

The threat of rape had made Jaffer so scared that in that moment she felt she brushed with death. This extract deals with the problem of rape and sexual abuse in conservative religious communities. The act of rape has much shame and stigma attached to it: 'Muslim women tend to be more reluctant to report such incidences, instead letting it eat away at them.' (http://www.themodernreligion.com/women/w_harassmuslims.htm). Evidence of external evaluation exists in the adjectival clause: 'being completely terrified'.

Glenda Widschut assists Jaffer with the narrative's coda by means of co-construction. She thanks Jaffer for her contribution. Jaffer in turn thanks her for the opportunity to testify.

Zahrah Nakardien (nee Greta Appelgren):

Nakardien assisted Robert McBride in the bombing of Magoo's Bar. In 1986 Appelgren and McBride were picked up in Nigel, on the Far East Rand. They were handcuffed and thick woollen balaclavas were pulled over their faces from back to front. They were kept like that for three hours while being driven to the CR Swart Police Station in Durban. Appelgren was relentlessly interrogated and tortured by the security police. As the treatment of Appelgren was intensified, the police realised that it was impossible to break her physically. They then began to abuse her emotionally (http://www.sabctruth.co.za/slicesright.htm).

I found that the aspects of her identity that surfaced both during Nakardien's detention and her TRC testimony were ambivalent. Upon release from jail, she embraced Islam. Thus, when she testified before the TRC, she testified as a Muslim.

Her identity first became problematic in the testimony when Boraine perceived a certain degree of reluctance on her part to take the oath. **When questioned about this reluctance she explained 'I've converted to Islam so when I say the name of God I get the problem of the Christian God and Allah the Muslim, that is the problem.'**

According to Brockmeier, autobiographical identity construction can only exist in the narrative form (Brockmeier, 2000). I will return to this theoretical base throughout my analysis of Nakardien's narrative.

Mdu Dlamini, a TRC commissioner uses co-construction to provide sufficient orientation for the narrative: 'Can I just take you from the time when you were arrested, which, according to your statement, was in Nigel. Was that after the so called Magoo bomb in Durban?' (Dlamini, 1997 in Nakardien, 1997).

'They always had a woman present when they were torturing me and they asked her if she would like to leave because they were going to intensify the treatment. All these days I was wearing the same clothing, just a dress and I was also menstruating at the time which I told them so I couldn't stand so long and I was bleeding a lot. They made me lay on the floor and do all kinds of physical exercises lifting my body with my hands, what they call press-ups then reducing the fingers until I had to pick myself up with just two fingers. By then I couldn't because my body was tired, it was sore and I had to drop it and lift it up and I was hurting my knees every time I dropped it. While I was down they would kick me and tramp on me' (Nakardien, 1997).

The Quran addresses menstruation on three occasions. One aya, which is small but holds a lot of detail, is in Al Baqarah aya 222. It can be translated as: 'They ask you concerning menstruation (mahid) Say: it is a hurt (adha) Therefore keep away from them during their menstruation and go not unto them until they have become clean (Tahara) And when they have cleansed (Tatahhara) (http://www.angelfire.com/mo2/scarves/menstruation.html).

A woman who is menstruating cannot read the Quran, perform any of the daily prayer or fast during Ramadan. I think that the mention of menstruation is also a form of evaluation. By embracing Islam, Nakardien has entered a new chapter in her spiritual life. This alludes to a new beginning that is much like a menstrual cycle.

Nakardien also uses tentative language when describing bodily torture that had occurred during her detention:

'I had to strip naked for about three or four prison wardresses. I had to strip naked and they would go through everything, one would go through my files, my briefcase and the other would take all my clothing and take all the seams to see what I was hiding there. I had to stand fully naked and I used to say never, I'm not going to take my panties off for you, you do all the searching and when you're finished I'll pull it down quickly and I had to do that every single day for two and a half months, when I returned it was the same process. They'd follow me to my cell, I'd have to take off everything and stand there semi-naked as I wanted to, they would do everything and then the quick pull-down.

…twice a day no woman wants to stand naked and when you're menstruating they still want to pull your panty down. On these occasions I used to say one of them can come into the little cubicle where there was a shower and only one was going to look because I mean no woman can stand in front of another group of women at that time of the month.'

Dlamini asks Nakardien if she prayed during her detention and whether she felt at any stage of her incarceration that God had abandoned her. She replies:

‘I was a Catholic before so I had the rosary and I used to pray every single day throughout the day with the rosary and that was to help me not to be there physically. As the months of isolation went I used to feel that God had abandoned me. One day, I was sitting on my bed. I was locked up during the lunch break and we had to sew these big winter coats of the other prisoners by hand with needles which used to poke us and make us bleed and suddenly I had this feeling that I’m all alone and God has deserted me and I’m going to die here. Then I had a psychological feeling that he was there and I corrected myself and said no, he hasn’t abandoned me.’ (Nakardien, 1997).

Her identity is further problematical with the experience of being classified as Coloured by the South African Government. She explains:

‘I think prior to that experience of my Black comrades, I am denying this history that was forced on me by the South African government that you are a coloured and I was trying to shake it off and be this African woman that my parents tried to encourage me to be but I think when I came out I realised that I was being too much of a dreamer, too idealistic that even though I’m achieving this African woman status this Coloured woman status may not be in the inside of me but it is on the outside of me. I had to set that reality painful as it was, it was like taking a good few steps back or eating your own vomit, that’s how bad I felt it was but it was reality and I decided to rather embrace and deal with it. I make it my business whenever I talk to Black colleagues or Black friends and if they make remarks about Coloured people as Coloured people, I correct them immediately.’

After having been placed in solitary confinement because she was 'Coloured' and therefore more of a threat, Nakardien felt that 'it was as if her soul had been eaten by maggots.' She felt that she would never be 'whole again' (Nakardien, 1997).

The 'autobiographical process overlaps with the process of identity construction' (Brockmeier, 2000). These are both processes of coming to terms with one's identity in time. 'Autobiographical time is simultaneously embedded in the distinct temporalities of the individual.' (Brockmeier, 2000). Brockmeier would call Nakardien's narrative a cyclical model of autobiographical time. In her narrative Nakardien repeats certain violations committed against her. Often she was coerced into undressing. There was much discrimination against her because she was 'Coloured' as well. That she felt as if 'her soul had been eaten by maggots' is a strong evaluative metaphor. In this cyclical model, we find many organizing metaphors (Brockmeier, 2000).

I suggest that she mentions the soul during the testimony because she is testifying as a Muslim. The concept of the soul is a crucial part of Islamic philosophy (http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ip/rep/H010.htm).

In signifying that the narrative is over, Boraine challenges Nakardien on her assertion that she will never be a whole person again. He implies that this assertion has been disproved by the bravery she displayed in testifying. He then thanks her for her effort to testify before the TRC.

Rokaya Salojee:

There is only one extract of Rokaya Salojee's narrative testimony that is relevant to this analysis. This narrative within a narrative contains strong evaluation. Salojee was the wife of Sulaiman 'Bubla' Salojee, a young candidate attorney who died after being interrogated by the special branch. She grapples with the patriarchal trends evident in Islam, something that is subjected to much controversy.

When testifying before the TRC, Salojee spoke of challenging these patriarchal trends. She was particularly adamant while speaking of her husband's funeral where she had a principal role: 'You know when it's a Muslim the men take over and in those days there weren't very many men around, it was political because people had left the country and things like that. But in my case I **remembered very clearly the day my husband died, the day I buried him'** (Salojee, 1996).

This evaluative clause is very rich in adverbs. It also has a temporal component as Salojee has confined the narrative to the day her husband was buried.

Conclusion:

I once heard a Friday afternoon *khutbah* delivered at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town by Professor Mahmood Mamdani, formerly head of the University of Cape Town's Centre for African Studies. Mamdani was outlining the role of the Muslim community in societies that are in transition. He failed to mention the role of Muslim women activists in this process.

The TRC may have felt that it did not receive much support from the Muslim community at large. However, it is clear that these Muslim women who appeared before the TRC embodied multi-faceted social roles, they have displayed aspects of Islamic identity in their TRC narrative testimonies through external evaluation and temporal reference points.

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Pull Quotes:

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