Positioning Muslim Women: A Feminist Narrative Analysis

Leila Davids

Introduction

There is a car in Cape Town that has in its back window a bumper sticker that reads: "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people". A young Muslim woman drives this car and that quote is from a book written by Amina Wadud (1999), a Muslim scholar who once visited Cape Town and stirred things up a little.

Notions of identity and research into identity can be approached from a number of different perspectives. This paper is informed by my orientation towards feminist narrative analysis as a sound and practical methodological tool for the analysis of interviews with women about their lives, and for the analysis of my own positioning. At the moment, I would describe my identity in terms of being a woman, who lives in South Africa, speaks English, was born Muslim and more recently has embraced the term as an identity marker from a political, more than religious, space. Similarly, my identity as a third world feminist with all the baggage and connotations attached is a political act. I am a Muslim feminist, but I do not necessarily identify with Islamic feminisms. I pray to Allah, but I do not make salaat and have only been inside a mosque 3 times – once during Ramadaan, once for a pre Khutbah lecture and Juma'ah, and once as a tourist. My Islam is just that – my understanding of what it is to be a Muslim woman, how it feels for me to be Muslim, and how Islam resonates with me.

The relationship between feminism, colonialism and westernisation has been well-documented (see Shaikh, 2002 for a brief, but comprehensive overview). The 'liberation' of Afghani women from the Taliban by American forces and mostly western feminist groups without affording the Afghani women a say in the matter is a conspicuous and recent example. Feminisms are problematic, and often third world feminists are labelled as

"one more incarnation of a colonised consciousness, the views of privileged women in whiteface" (Narayan, 1997).

Certain feminisms, however, are also engaged in a self-critical project that allows for the inclusion and affirmation of all women's experiences. Uma Narayan in her book *Dislocating Cultures* (1997), explains that third world feminisms are not necessarily foreign to third world contexts. Instead, this form of intracultural criticism and intracultural change for the betterment of women's lives is sometimes so much part of the culture that it is considered commonplace. Only once it is couched in feminist terms is the process teased out and imagined as aberrant or liberatory. Take for example the selective rejection of westernisation in terms of her mother and grandmothers marriages. Uma Narayan's grandmother was married at 13 years old. Her mother was married at 21, once she had received an education provided by her family. This significant change in access to education between two successive generations and the changing perceptions of the criteria for marriageable age could be theorised in terms of western feminism. Uma Narayan (1997) explains that in her family, the term feminism is not applied to the doings or philosophies of the women in the family. But for her, their actions form the basis of what it is to *do* third world feminism.

Why do this research?

This research is in part a response to intracultural critique. While doing a piece of research on cultural identity amongst young Muslim Cape Townians, I identified a definite gendered split. The young women in the study claimed a distance from what they perceived as the 'Muslim community'. Much of the research on Muslim women in South Africa has focussed on an assumption of the dualistic split between sacred and secular, east and west and the challenges of reconciling these two opposing and contradictory poles [for an example of this type of research see Edross, 1995; Edross, 1997; Dangor, 2001]. More careful and detailed research has recently been undertaken [again see Baderoon, 2000; Ismael, 2002; Lee 2002; Shaikh, 2002] – but positioning women as either religious or secular has sidelined the complexity of women's experiences.

Challenging discourse is not always publicly shared and is rarely welcomed. From my observations, certain women engage in moments of subversion and questioning privately and publicly but in specific moments and places. That there is not frequent and regular organised protest at all mosques in Cape Town for equal access does not necessarily reflect the beliefs of women on this matter. Of course, there are women who feel that mosques should be segregated, and that is their choice. But, there are pockets of resistance and those pockets are not confined only to vocal and organised women's movements and/or academia. Women speak to each other, and in so doing create moments of resistance.

What is narrative analysis and why this particular methodology?

This talk deserves respect. I would argue that when doing qualitative work one must work within a paradigm that affords the participants the chance to speak freely and the choice of the degree to which they would like to participate. The talk of the participants is the text to be analysed; the discourses and narratives employed by the participants are the topic of analysis in their own right.

Narrative analysis is a methodological tool that incorporates the participants to the point where *they* partly drive the research process. Narrative construction is a social act, and must therefore be placed within a historical, cultural context (de la Rey, 1999). A piece of narrative is at the same time intensely personal and reflective of the wider social dynamic within in which the story took place and the telling occurs. Catherine Kohler Riessman (1994) puts it beautifully: "Culture speaks itself through an individual's story".

Interview Structure and reflexivity

The interviews were fluid and in keeping with notions of participatory research, the structure was determined to a large extent by the participants, within a flexible framework.

The research was for the most part conducted laterally. Reflexivity holds the researcher accountable for the power dynamics within the research situation. One manner of

incorporating the challenge of reflexivity, if conducted respectfully and with sensitivity, is to conduct within-group research. Amina Mama (1985) warns that choosing a multiply oppressed group to research, however, even if one is a member of that same social group, does not in itself ensure that one's research does not affirm the status quo. In addition, it also does not necessarily ensure a more democratic power relation between researcher and researched.

I was very much aware of the social, gender and class dynamics that operated within the research situation. The participants were approached with this in mind – to try to ensure that reflexivity was built into the research process. This does not hold true for all participants. I became aware during the transcribing process that my tone, inflection and manner around the oldest participant was markedly different than with the rest of the interviewees. I treated her as an 'aunty', even calling her aunty was at times in keeping with cultural traditions of respect between people of differing age groups.

The Participants

Six women aside from myself participated in this research. Each was interviewed in a place of their choosing, where they felt most comfortable and at a time that suited them. They can loosely be grouped as Muslim women. One of the participants although born into and raised by a Muslim family, no longer identifies herself as Muslim. Another participant was not born Muslim, but in her words, reverted to Islam. The women ranged in age from 24 to 42. They had all completed at least undergraduate tertiary education; and all the women identified themselves as middle class. These women are students, teachers, software programmers, writers, artists, mothers, widowed, married, single, chefs, business people, activists and physiotherapists.

Findings – The issue of veiling

The focus in this paper is on the positions the participants took with regard to wearing a scarf. Because of time constraints, it is a limited reading and I have selected a few pertinent pieces of narrative to present to the reader.

The political significance of veiled, re-veiled, unveiled, and non-veiled women is thriving as a practice and an academic critique. The veil has been a symbol of status, a dividing marker between Muslim and non-Muslim, a source of female power, an ideology espousing women as objects in terms of shame, honour, pollution and purity, and used to maintain and subvert gender hierarchies (Jeffrey, 1979; El Saadawi, 1980; Rozario, 1982; Stivens, 1994; 1994 in Rozario 1996; Shaikh, 2002; etc). The symbolism of the veil, like the situation for Muslim women world-wide is contingent on many factors and specific to class, socio-geographic, national, cultural, economic and political dynamics.

The participants in this study respond to veiling in differing ways. For the most part they do not wear scarves, and all of them have never worn hijab except to try it on. One participant, Sahra, has chosen to wear a scarf since she was 16. Another participant, Shanaaz, had chosen to cover her head as a symbol of piety and respect before her reversion to Islam, and continues to do so within her Islamic spirituality. Others feel that the scarf conveys a message of respect for Islam and Muslim rituals and is worn on specific occasions. Issues of concealment and aestheticism have made marked inroads on the symbolic meanings of scarves. What is clear is that for all these women the meaning of donning a scarf is fluid, subject to change and circumstance.

For Jamielah, the meanings associated with veiling are outside of her everyday experience – she does not commonly wear a scarf and is angered by an injunction to wear it at ordinary times, that is occasions that are not in themselves religious.

Jamielah: …*Not for everybody. But for me again; a veil is a chain. I don't like the way it is worn in South Africa.*
Leila: *Have you worn a veil or a scarf?*
Jamielah: *Ja, I have worn them and I don't feel that its me. And I feel very angry when I have to wear one because I feel like its an absolute lie. I would feel differently if it was something that I wore everyday. But I don't see why I have to put it on, for me its just*

decorative, its window dressing. Its religious window dressing. To make people believe that I … its different, I think its different if there are actual prayers going on or if theres a funeral or…Because, it's the same way that I would not walk into a mosque with my shoes on. And I would find it quite offensive if anybody else did. It's the same way that I would wear a hat in the Vatican. It's just a respect issue. But I don't see why I have to wear one on Eid when I am visiting somebody's bloody house, and eating their samoosas.

Jamielah's narrative exposes the complexities involved in wearing a scarf. Her veiling is contextual, situated specifically in moments associated with religious space and prayer. Wearing a scarf outside of that space is considered by her to be 'a chain', 'a lie' and 'religious window dressing'. Yet she paradoxically also sees the scarf as a symbol that conveys her own sense of religious and cultural respect.

In the interviews for the most part the women spoke about scarves in terms of rejection and resigned assimilation. Wearing a scarf for some is linked with being a good Muslim woman, or visibly demonstrating the depth of one's piety and sense of belonging. Natasha and Shakira indicate the changing symbolism of the scarf in their lives. Intertwined with the idea that piety requires physical concealment, are notions of cultural differences, and personal freedoms.

Lelia: *You wear scarves Aunty S?*

Shakira: *Just around my neck. Ja.*

Leila: *What does that mean to you?*

Shakira: *Honestly, it's a las. [laugh]. Honestly it's a las. I found that it actually looks very nice hanging over my one shoulder. That's how I tend to wear it these days. and for me at the moment its become a, an accessory to what I'm wearing. There was a time for about 2 years when I actually wore completely, my hair was completely closed. And that was about,*

almost 15 years ago. And that was just after my father died. And … and I went through this whole scary bit about oh my god, I can also die, and then if I go foot in the grave, you know they will chop me into little pieces because you know, I have been a very naughty Muslim girl you know. So I just hoped and prayed that doing so I would be redeeming myself and … I suppose I just had to go through that as well and then discover that no it's not. I feel totally choked and because it's not the person I want to be; or the person who I am that I am just not setting free. So now I feel freer than I have ever done in my whole life.

Freedom is intimately tied to this participant's sense of self. She has come to terms with wearing the scarf as an accessory, again out of respect for others and has integrated wearing a scarf with a sense of personal freedom. Previously, when she had worn a scarf it had been out of a sense of the need for redemption; and that passage of time is described in terms of self-discovery. Her choices are personal and reflective of her inner journey.

Natasha's story incorporates the cultural dimensions of veiling.

Leila: *Do you wear a scarf?*

Natasha: *Ja. Only when my hair is dirty. [laugh]. When I was very young, I wore a scarf because I thought that I had to pray to be good. But Haroun's culture, Haroun is my husband, they don't wear scarves. Like his mother and aunt they were the cleanest and most pious women I have ever met in my entire life and they never wore scarves. In fact in their culture, the hair is always plaited and taken back. Put henna on and everything. But its open, the scarf goes backward over your neck. You know, and so theres something that that would tell you, you know? That its not about shame and all the other things that Malay culture teaches.*

Leila: *Did you grow up in…*

Natasha: *I grew up in the Malay culture, and my mother always wore a scarf, always, always had a scarf on her head. And I did for a while wear it. But I don't like, I don't like a*

scarf. I think its, you know I don't like it. The funny thing though is that even when I do meditation, I want to cover my head. Its very funny that when I approach the sacred, I want to cover my hair, but I don't know what, I haven't even thought about it enough.

The scarf is reduced in this narrative to three symbols – as a covering for the sacred at times of prayer and/or meditation; as a mark of shame and piety; and as a cultural marker. As with Shakira's experience, the scarf is employed as a visual symbol of piety and being 'good'. Natasha mentions the idea of shame and its integral link with the culture in which she grew up. The cultural dimensions to the issue are further revealed by Natasha's interaction with her husband's family. Meeting her husband's mother and aunt, she comes to an understanding that the wearing of scarves does not necessarily denote piety. But for Natasha, the covering of one's head is intricately linked with the sacred. She doesn't enjoy wearing a scarf, yet when meditating feels the desire to cover her hair. As she says, "…when I approach the sacred, I want to cover my hair".

For Sahra, who chose to wear a scarf at the age of 16, the meaning of her dress code is intimately related to her faith and her relationship with Allah. At the same time, while bringing her a sense of peace her act takes courage. Respect plays a crucial role in her choices – her respect for her body and relationship with Allah; and the lack of respect shown towards her choices. She has been discriminated against because of these choices, and her narrative reveals a story of race, gender, economic and religious politics.

While discussing her personal meanings around the scarf, I asked Sahra whether she had ever sensed any overt cultural discrimination.

Sahra: *Yes. It was also related to the scarf. I was at university and I was on a clinical rotation. I had a scarf on my head. And one of the lecturers, she was at, she was previously from Britain, and she shouted at me because I was wearing a scarf. She said like I am not allowed to have anything over my shoulders even thought the scarf was just around my neck. It wasn't over my shoulders. And I looked at her, because she had hair, her hair was*

hanging over her shoulders and I thought what difference does it make. But she was actually, she treated me, she used to treat me in a very nasty way if I didn't take my scarf off. And, but I would show her that I refused to take it off because I didn't see why I had to. And then, at the same time that ruling had been changed, there was a rule before that you know, hospital staff weren't allowed to wear things over their shoulders. But there was consideration for religious reasons. That was the one. And then even at work. When I, I was a student and I was working at Woolworths and Truworths. And so when I was wearing a scarf they didn't like it. And ja, I actually lost my job at Woolworths because of that.

Leila: *And did you appeal? Did you do anything?*

Sahra: *I think I was too young to actually, I think I was about 16 or something. I was just really upset but at the same time I really needed the job, so I got the job at Truworths.*

Leila: *And they were fine?*

Sahra: *As long as I tied my scarf up in a turban!*

Leila: *What, how does that work?*

Sahra: *Yes, for some reason it makes a big difference! [laughter]. Somehow according to them its not as bad! I thought it was ridiculous. But, but then also its like I said about people are just kind of intolerant I suppose. And, I really needed to work and I was still covering my hair and I didn't mind so much.*

In two critical and public areas of her life – her education and work, Sahra experienced discrimination because of her scarf. Her second job at Truworths and her insistence on wearing a scarf at hospital despite the nastiness that she encountered, gives clear indication

of resistance. Her scarf, whether tied up as a turban, or traditionally draped, is a site of struggle within her piety.

The women in this study have explained that for some of them it is a testament of faith, an object that takes courage to carry. Others have indicated that is a thing of nuisance and necessity. It is useful in conveying respect, and at times tedious in its application. The article has also been shown to have fluidity – it means different things at different stages of the women's lives, and has differing meanings and applications across cultures. In claiming and/or rejecting the scarf, powerful messages are communicated of belonging and forging one's own space either within or without a veil. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned any Quranic injunction to wear the scarf. For Sahra it is a personal choice. For the others there is a sense of community or social expectation that takes precedence over a specific religious phrase to either wear or not wear the scarf.

Conclusion

One of the joys and frustrations of qualitative research is that no singular conclusion can be reached. By its very nature the work is subject to multiple interpretations and conclusions. Another analysis of the extracts provided above may elicit a contesting version and equally valid reading. Similarly, should the same participants be involved in a replicate study, I would expect that their narratives would have changed.

The aim of this piece of research has been to present an alternative way of looking at Muslim women's experiences. The use of feminist narrative analysis is a deliberate attempt to subvert the notion that only Islamic feminisms provide a suitably respectful method of analysis for Muslim women's lives.

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