

Flirtations with Muslim Female Sexuality¹

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Let's Talk about Sex...

The sexual realities of Muslim women have largely remained unexplored in a South African context. Muslim women's understandings of their sexual culture and the religious underpinnings that often frame sexual encounters are important sources of knowledge that can highlight the various ways in which relations of power are being mediated.

In my doctoral research I investigate the many ways in which Muslim women talk about, understand, and experience sexuality. I explore personal narratives that deal with women's experiences in intimate relationships and examine the extent to which gendered epistemologies might be present in shaping subjectivities, influence understandings, and guide sexual praxis. I also investigate possible resonances between South African Muslim women's experiences with the theoretical constructs proposed by Islamic feminists on issues of morality, ethics and agency. This essay discusses some of the emerging themes from my empirical research and is driven by the feminist commitment of utilising women's experiences as a vital constituent in contemporary knowledge production.

Research Sample and Method

The research sample for this study consisted of 33 Muslim women between the ages of 20 and 69. All participants had been historically disadvantaged under the apartheid system and the majority of the respondents reside in areas that were formerly designated to "coloured",

Indian, and Black South Africans in terms of apartheid law. Although a transition to democracy has taken place, economic and other structural barriers have influenced many Muslim families' lack of opportunities to move into previously white areas.

The only eligibility criterion for being a respondent in this study was that the participant self-identified as a South African Muslim woman. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were utilised as the main instrument of data collection in order to elicit comprehensive and detailed narratives. This approach was utilised to forefront women's narratives and to better capture the intricacy and richness of South African Muslim women's realities and experiences.

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Islam and Sexuality

In the interviews I conducted it became apparent that the textual foundations of Islam, the scholarly and legal traditions, as well as current religious authorities informed some of the ways in which Muslim women spoke about, understood and engaged with sexual dynamics. One of the dominant understandings of sex in Islam, as articulated by the majority of the respondents, is that Islam is a religion that embraces and values sex. Islam is seen as a sex-positive religion and sex is perceived as a natural aspect of our humanness. For example, Nuriyya, married for 3 years, asserted:

"It [sex] is the most beautiful thing and it is a gift given, sex is this gift and Islam gives this beautiful gift to people to enjoy."

The inclination to view sex in Islam as a positive phenomenon solicits other questions dealing with the purpose of sex as well as the conditions that legitimise sexual interactions. For these Muslim women sex for pleasure is part of an Islamic worldview. The God-given gift of sexual pleasure was understood as something that should be celebrated and enjoyed mutually by men and women. This implies that sexual encounters are not restricted to the sphere of procreation. With regards to contemporary Muslim women's experiences, sexual infidelity, wife battery and marital rape are realities that espouse certain understandings of women's bodies and sexuality. While the justifications for these debilitating transgressions derive from various gendered power locations, gendered discourses informed by religious underpinnings can be applied to support male sexual privileges.

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“A Good Muslim Woman should not Refuse her Husband Sex”

The understanding that it is not right for a Muslim woman to refuse her husband sex formed part of a dominant discourse on sexuality that holds social currency. However, although respondents acknowledged the existence of this discourse, there were a number of ways in which they engaged with its implications for their social reality. For some women, the gendered epistemologies that assert male sexual privilege and consequently the need for a wife to be sexually available to her husband, informed sexual praxis in very real ways. The following narrative illustrates the influence of this dominant discourse on Khadija's marital relationship:

“I'm a Muslim woman and I should be obedient towards my husband ... that time my brain told me that he has a right ... he has a right to have access to my vagina so I didn't think of it as violation at that time, now I can say yes, but that time it was just ... what I have to do because I'm a good Muslim woman and good Muslim women satisfy their husbands.”

For Khadija, wifely obedience and sexual availability are behavioural components that make up a good Muslim woman. Consequently, she did not feel, at the time, that her husband's unrestricted access to her vagina was in any way a violation because she was simply complying with her understanding of what it meant to be a good obedient Muslim woman. However, Khadija also asserts a shifting subjectivity in that her views on sexual dynamics changed during her marital relationship. Due to her experiences of abuse and infidelity in her marriage, Khadija started to challenge her husband's right to sex:

“...he said that you are going to be punished if you don't [have sex with him] ... so I said I won't, because then I started challenging him and saying, God is not unmerciful, everyday I tell myself that we have a merciful God, and God will not put anyone through this, I'm not listening to you [husband] using religion for your own benefits, I'm into using this [pointing to her head], my logic, my brain that Allah has given me in order to defend myself against people like you.”

Khadija's decision to contest the discourse of a wife's sexual availability is deeply informed by her contextual reality. There are aspects of her sexual relationship with her husband that she finds unacceptable and she enacts her right to say no to sex partly due to her understanding of particular qualities of God that informs her religious worldview. Khadija's assertion that God is merciful can be seen as a form of resistance to a dominant patriarchal narrative that has influenced the sexual dynamics in her marital relationship. Through elaborating on God's mercy, Khadija also presents an ethical ideal that empowers her in her unmerciful social reality. In addition, the belief in a merciful God challenges her husband's more instrumentalised use of religion in matters of sexual dynamics. Furthermore, through this engagement with religious values and ethics, Khadija asserts her right to utilise what she considers as her God-

given logic. This engagement resonates with the ways in which Islamic feminists have presented women's responsibility to act as moral agents (*khalifah*). Khadija's response to her husband is fundamentally based on moral reasoning that is intricately linked with her social context. Her moral reasoning also projects particular understandings of Islamic ethics that should guide interpersonal relationships.

Besides reflecting women's sexual duty towards a husband, the abovementioned hadith also intimately link women's sexual readiness with divine satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Invoking hadith in the bedroom

Many respondents referred to the existence of one particular hadith when speaking about sexual dynamics. This hadith is included in *Sahih al-Bukhari* and goes as follows: "If a man invites his wife to sleep with him and she refuses to come to him, then the angels send their curses on her till morning." Women who experienced the invocation of this hadith in their marital relationships responded in a number of ways. For some women, this hadith has become part of an accepted jargon, oftentimes only as an enticing invitation to have sexual intercourse. For other women, this hadith informed sexual praxis and particular understandings of sexual dynamics, often legitimising a husband's right to demand sex whenever he wishes. Yet, other women challenged the legitimacy and justification for the invocation of this hadith in intimate relationships. The following narrative is an excerpt from an interview I had with Nurunisa:

Nurunisa: "I was raised to never say 'no' to your husband even if you are making a pot of food ... if I make a pot of food and he decides that he wants to go in the room and whatever [have sex], then I have to put off [stop cooking] and you have to go [to have sex], you can't say 'no', then the angels would curse you from the morning to the night ..."

Nina: "Did he say that to you?"

Nurunisa: "Yes he always says it, even now he will say it ... maybe Allah is going to punish me ... I must pray a lot ..."

For Nurunisa, this hadith forms part of a broader Islamic ethical framework that has informed her upbringing as well as current sexual dynamics.

Like Khadija, Nurunisa accepted the religious legitimacy of this particular construction of a wife's sexual readiness in the beginning of her marital relationship. Similarly, due to experiences of spousal infidelity and various forms of marital abuse, Nurunisa

contests the current acceptability of the discourse on women's sexual availability. Her reference to "maybe Allah is going to punish me" is linked to the fact that she recently told her husband that there will be no more sex in their marriage. She refuses to accept the legitimacy of this hadith for her embodied reality and as a consequence denies her husband sex even if he does invoke this hadith as a religious justification for sexual intercourse.

Besides reflecting women's sexual duty towards a husband, the abovementioned hadith also intimately link women's sexual readiness with divine satisfaction or dissatisfaction. If women *refuse* to accept the directive implicit in this hadith, i.e. that they should have sex with their husbands and never refuse, the implication is that they will receive divine punishment. Do the husbands who invoke this hadith in contemporary contexts really have God's will, or best intention, in mind; or is it a case of religious injunctions simply being used for personal salacious enticement? Due to the fact that it is men, and only men that are invoking this hadith in various current marital contexts (I have yet to encounter women that recites this hadith for the purpose of sexual interaction), men are in a way acting as the 'moral' custodians of divine intent. In this sacred canopy a woman's body and her sexuality functions as a mere commodity to fulfil male sexual gratification and by extension an assumed sacrosanct pleasure.

The abovementioned hadith, with its prominent historical residues, is relevant for the understanding of contemporary sexual dynamics. Particular expressions of Islamic sexual ethics are being reproduced in intimate relationships

through reviving the social currency of patriarchal epistemologies that influence women's realities in various ways. At times, women are constrained by these particular discourses on sexuality, while at other times, they subvert and challenge religious underpinnings that can shape un-egalitarian sexual dynamics. The ways in which women negotiate these very discourses is often informed by their social reality. Oftentimes, women employ particular narratives of sexuality that can shift the relations of power through locating religious authority at the centre of their embodied experiences.

Muslim women's understandings of these intimate and often challenging aspects of religious identities and self expressions are neither explicitly nor singularly shaped by men's understandings of female sexuality. Nor is it necessarily determined by particular religious constructs of women's sexuality. More broadly, Muslim women's perceptions of their sexuality cannot be divorced from various socio-political dynamics in contemporary contexts. For example, Muslim women's experiences of various forms of marital abuse and drug/alcohol abuse are situated against the backdrop of a historical context characterised by intricate relationships of violence, oppression and domination. Muslim women's social realities are embedded within contexts marked by racial politics, poverty and unemployment. Hence, constructions of sexuality and self-identity are enunciated through partaking in several, sometimes ambiguous discourses, that collectively influence intimate relationships in varying ways.

Spiritual Sex

For many of the respondents that participated in this study, the articulation of the interconnectedness of sexuality and spirituality was salient. Consequently, by acknowledging sexuality as a vital and necessary component of spiritual engagement, many women suggest alternative ways to produce religious meaning while simultaneously challenging dichotomies present in religious discourses. For example, Somayya explains:

By invoking God in this union, in order to protect the sexual act from negative influences, piety is also expressed in a way that place emphasis on the sacredness of the sexual act.

“you just don't go for the pleasure of it ... because if you are going to cohabit then he prays his niyat and you say your own niyat, and it is a niyat for the male and a niyat for the female...so God is involved on all levels...what you actually are saying there is...take the male shaitan...the male devils and the female devils, take this away from this union and if there is offspring then let this offspring be pious...so that is why...”

Somayya points out that there is a particular prayer that should be recited before having sexual intercourse. In this way, she argues, “God is involved on all levels”. Consequently, for Somayya, sex is more than a pleasurable and enjoyable experience. Sex is about being conscious of God and by employing this particular prayer prior to the sexual act, the couple is in a way involving God in a spiritual foreplay. Somayya places emphasis on

God's protection from the devils that might be present during this act of unification, as well as the yearning for piousness in offspring that can blossom from this sexual union.

Hence, sexual encounters is open to both positive (God) and negative (shaitan) forces. In this way sexual intimacy could be seen as a spiritually charged realm that is vulnerable and potentially ambiguous. By invoking God in this union, in order to protect the sexual act from negative influences, piety is also expressed in a way that place emphasis on the sacredness of the sexual act. For Somayya, this prayer can be understood to form part of an Islamic sexual praxis in which the pleasurable experience of the physical act of sex is only made meaningful through divine commemoration and invocation. Consequently, spirituality and sexuality are integral categories that reflect the fundamental nature of a complete human experience and at the same time challenge normative patriarchal dichotomies between the body and the spirit.

This brief account of some of the existing perceptions and understandings with regards

to sexuality in intimate relationships are by no means a definitive picture of current views within Muslim communities in Cape Town, nor is it representative for all Muslim women's attitudes and reflections regarding this issue. It is also important to acknowledge that understandings and interpretations of what the text says, among other sources of information, do not necessarily determine how sexuality is played out or literally played with, in reality.

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Sex on the Agenda

Raising awareness about sex and sexuality in contemporary South Africa is of utmost importance in order to challenge discourses that marginalise and debase women's humanity. Sexual ignorance, sexual indifference, sexism, and androcentric constructions of a sexual ethos are some of the culprits that override or undermine women's needs. Interpretive trends deriving from dominant religious value systems can pay homage to particular male-favourable understandings of sex and sexuality that influence women's lived realities in various ways.

In some religious narratives women are often defined in relation to their closeness with the earth and subsequently their regenerative life giving capabilities.² However, instead of celebrating the unique sacredness of women's bodies and sexuality, women's humanness is often devalued through attacking their supposedly inferior spirituality.³ The tendency to juxtapose body and spirit can be seen as reflective of a particular patriarchal zeitgeist which advocates dichotomous hierarchies between body and spirit. Subsequently, the significance of elaborating the interconnectedness of sexuality and spirituality is one of the many ways in which women can reclaim or re-member their humanness. By acknowledging sexuality as a vital and necessary force that shape our spiritual embodiment as well as our spiritual engagement,

we create alternative and germane ways to battle and question religious dichotomies and idiosyncrasies. While polarisations and dualisms are not necessarily intrinsic to the primary Islamic text, the application of the religious teachings are employed and adapted within patriarchal frameworks in which duality is innate.

Notes

1. This essay is based on empirical research conducted among Muslim women residing in Cape Town. The qualitative interviews took place between November 2007 and March 2009. All names in this article are made up in order to protect the identities of respondents participating in this study. I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to all respondents who participated in the research process.
2. For explorations of religious narratives that place emphasis on women's closeness to the earth see for example, Marglin, Frederique A. 1985. *Female Sexuality in the Hindu World*. In *The Female in Sacred Image and Reality*, edited by C. W. Atkinson, C. H. Buchanan & M. R. Miles. Boston: Beacon Press; Kinsley, David R. 1986. Sita. In *Hindu Goddesses*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Rigby, Kate. 2001. *The Goddess Returns: Ecofeminist Reconfigurations of Gender, Nature, and the Sacred*. In *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred: Creative Suspicions*, edited by Devlin-Glass, F. and McCredden, L. New York: Oxford University Press; Christ, Carol P. and Plaskow, Judith (eds.). 1979. *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
3. For a feminist critique regarding patriarchal constructs of women's supposedly inferior spirituality and the recuperation of feminine iconographies of the sacred, see for example, Gross, Rita M. 2009. *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press; Christ, Carol. 1997. *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*. San Francisco: Harper and Row; Goldenberg, Naomi. 1979. *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*. Boston: Beacon Press; Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1983. *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*. London: SCM Press; Scüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth. 1992[c1983]. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad.