

THE OTHER VOICES

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The Other Voices is a 53-minute documentary film about women from five different religious traditions in South Africa who are questioning male domination and female subjugation within South African religious institutions. The film brings to awareness the all-pervasiveness of patriarchy in religious institutions and its perpetuation of sexism in South Africa. *The Other Voices* is dedicated to the memory of Shamima Shaikh and to the courageous women from all religious traditions whose faith has inspired them to ‘push the boundaries’. The documentary was developed under the auspices of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (South Africa) and produced by Harriet Gavshon (Executive Producer) of Curious Pictures, and myself (Producer/Director). In this article I want to reflect over the issues raised in the documentary and Shamima’s role in inspiring me personally.

In 1995 Shamima Shaikh wrote “In order that we believing men and women, God-conscious men and God conscious women, can reclaim our full humanity, reclaim our Islam, we need to revolutionise our categories of maleness and femaleness. We must reject the idea of uncontrollable male sexuality and evil women.” The prevailing view in most religious traditions is that women must be kept out of the way because they distract men from their relationship with the Transcendent. In all the religions, it is understood that God speaks to and through men, who predominate as the interpreters and conveyors of religious texts, values, and norms. “On a very subtle level, perhaps, a woman questions whether she is competent to receive the truth,” one of the women in the film comments. To what extent does the interpretation of religious texts contribute to the marginalisation and exclusion of women, the film asks? Is it possible that the disempowerment (or subjugation) of women, and the over-empowerment of men in religions, and in the society more broadly, lays the ground for women to become victims of abuse? Another woman in the film

comments: “I started to understand the dynamics of abuse, what it is that underlies violence against women. I started to understand the framework within which it’s place, where men are allowed or given the freedom or the right to abuse women”.

What is it that religions are, or are not doing to keep women (and men) in a state of inferior underdevelopment? How can we together, in solidarity, bring around those who are asleep, who are unaware that everything we need to create a more compassionate world is buried in the interior recesses of both women and men? My hope is that many religious women and men from all faiths will seek the answers to the questions posed by the film from within themselves, and begin to take a meaningful role in the transformation that will come, with or without our participation.

As an activist with a general social concern and a particular burden for the position of women, I hoped to develop a project that would create the space for women from different religious traditions to speak about their experiences of their religions in a reflective and authentic way. It was hoped that they themselves would be affirmed, and that the beginning of a new consciousness might take root, at least in some religious women and men, of the injustices experienced by women in religion.

The research for the film, which was initially entitled: *Women At The Heart of a Renewed Vision for Humanity*, began at the Parliament of the World’s Religions held in Cape Town in December, 1999. In my search for a Muslim woman who was willing to be involved as one of the “characters” in the film, I spoke to many women, and even filmed a few, but, as with the other religions, I struggled to find the right woman for the film. Many women I met had not developed a vision beyond the formal rituals, interpretations, and practices of religious life. And, as with all the religions, many of the women I spoke to appeared to be so rule-bound that they had not conceived of the possibility of a personal connection with the Transcendent. These were not the kind of women I was looking for for *The Other Voices*. I was looking for women who would be an inspiration to others; women who

had struggled to find self-expression within their religious institutions; women who had reflected deeply on how their religion relates to the suffering of the broader society; women whose political and moral choices were informed not by what they had been taught to believe but by their own response to religious texts arising from their own interior relationship with God; women with a fearless passion to know the truth.

After months of struggle, I discovered the Shamima Shaikh website and from here made contact with her husband, Na'eem Jeenah, and her friend, Moefidah Jaffer, who features in *The Other Voices*. Shamima, I felt, met all the criteria. Although I had known of Shamima, and had read of her courageous initiative to claim her right to take part in congregational prayer at the 23rd street mosque in Pageview, I had never met her. Perhaps, if I had not been so desperate in my search for an interpretation of the text by a woman (which I intuitively knew to be possible) her words would not have had the profound impact on me that they did – perhaps I would not have been ready. Shamima was a woman unafraid to engage the Qur'an in her search for meaning. The following two examples express this very clearly:

1. Men and Women created equally from one Source:

“O Humankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created humanity out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand (your rights) from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you!” (Q. 4:1).

“Women could have been created first, or men could have been created first; it's difficult to say. What we know is that from one entity multitudes of men and women were created. All individuals are born from one entity, according to this verse, and have the same status and equal potential to do good and evil.” (Shamima Shaikh)

2. Women as prophets:

“She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then we sent her our angel and he appeared before her as a man in all respects. She said: ‘I seek refuge in The Most Gracious from you: (come not near) if you are conscious of Allah.’ He said: ‘No, I am only a messenger from your Lord, (to announce) to you the gift of a holy son.’” (Q. 19:17-19)

“Oftentimes the assertion is made that there has never been a female prophet. To that I say that there is no conclusive evidence that there did not exist a woman prophet. And yes, women have received *wahy* (revelation)”. (Shamima Shaikh)

Although I have no doubt that Shamima and I would disagree about many things, as I read the papers and letters and tributes on Shamima’s website, I felt a real sense of engagement, a deep sense of consensus around the issues raised in *The Other Voices*. I often found myself in dialogue with Shamima in my imagination, during the filming and even in the early hours of the morning, I discussed some of the things she said, asking her what she meant, and what she thought was best. I almost felt that she was guiding me.

I also shared Shamima’s frustration in trying to engage religious leadership on a meaningful level. Her comments on the attitude of the United Ulama Council, which I had a sense of in my repeated futile efforts to secure an interview with a member of the Jamiat in Fordsburg, had a resonance, I felt, for the religious leadership across all faiths. “Every time we challenge them, every time we speak to them, they don’t respond... I sent them a five-page letter quoting these verses. They sent me a reply asking Allah to give me hidayah (guidance) and saying that I was arrogant.” (Shamima Shaikh).

I grappled with how to include Shamima in the film which now became known as *The Other Voices* because of Shamima's insistence that "*The Other Voices*" be heard, and of course, because of *The Voice* community radio station, which was one of her many initiatives. In the film, Moefidah Jaffer says: "Shamima was big on the idea of letting *The Other Voices* – particularly the marginal voices - be heard..."

I felt that I wanted to place Shamima at the centre of the film, like the sun, a light to which others turned for inspiration and guidance, as clearly happened in her life. I am not sure that I succeeded, but nevertheless, Shamima is, for me, at the heart of *The Other Voices*. I believe that it is her qualities of courage and compassion that bring life to the film and, strangely, it is these qualities which some people, perhaps especially men, will find threatening.

Moefidah Jaffer's contribution to *The Other Voices* is also very important. Whilst I interviewed her, I had a sense of Shamima's ongoing 'presence' in her life. Towards the end of the film, Moefidah says: "On the day of judgement, God is not going to ask you did you live as a man or a woman, but God is going to ask you about God and your faith in God and your consciousness of God. And that is the ultimate accountability".

The Other Voices was screened on SABC-3 on Sunday 19 November at 16.00, and again at 23.00. Copies of the film, and an accompanying workbook are available at a cost of R90.00 for the set, including postage, from: Melody Emmett, *The Other Voices*, World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) –SA, P.O. Box 93642, Yeoville, Gauteng, 2143.