

Taking the Gender-Jihad to the Stage

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“At her Feet”, the play written and directed by Nadia Davids, and presented by the UCT drama department at the Arena Theatre, exemplifies the complexities of being a Muslim woman in the modern world. A one-woman play, brilliantly performed by Quanita Adams, it portrays several Muslim women, from ultra-traditional to radical, with their human struggles and dilemmas. Unlike other current art forms about Muslim women, this play does not fall into simple dichotomies between modern and traditional, liberated and suppressed; rather, it shows with unrivalled depth the complexities and ambiguities within each of the characters.

The play opens with a powerful dancing scene by Azra al-Jamal, a Jordanian woman who has been stoned to death for talking to a “strange” man. Graphically, yet poetically, Azra recounts her story: the brutal stoning, and the absurdity of her fate for the single fact of being a woman. This opening scene sets the framework of the play: the injustices being imposed on women in the name of Islam. However, the play goes on to ask, is this all Islam means to women?

The main characters that follow, framing their personal lives into broader concerns, attempt to provide answers to the previous question: There is Auntie Karima, the “typical” strong-willed “Malay” Muslim mother, always in the kitchen, a centre in the family, with adamant opinions about everything and everyone. It could have been easy to present Auntie Karima in a stereotypical manner, playing on the well-known tropes

of a “traditional Malay” women, nevertheless, with wit and humour, Auntie Karima unfolds as a complex, strong character. She is an undying supporter of the Muslim traditions of the Cape, resenting attempts by outside forces—such as those Arab Wahhabi influences—to teach her how Islam must be practiced. Yet at the same time, the audience feels her struggles, imposed by society, that any other woman in the world could feel.

On the other hand, there is Aisha, the radical Afro-Marxist girl who is the scandal of the family, but who nevertheless feels a strong Muslim identity. This character brings into the play political and racial issues that underlie “Indian” and “Malay” Muslim communities while at the same time proposing a neo-feminist approach to Islam with her rap song, “to my united ummah sisters”. Aisha develops the question of the “doekie” or scarf in all its complexities, from the contradictions of girls wearing tight-fitting branded clothing accompanied by the scarf, to her own problem of how to cover her “kroes” or wiry hair. Despite her radical approach, this character also presents the inner spiritual dimension of Islam with her beautiful and lyrical description of the month of Ramadan.

Through the secondary characters, the play highlights other issues of interest. There is the scene that presents the office worker who is forced to remove her scarf by her employer after September 11th, at risk of losing her job, accompanied with her inner struggle to choose between her beliefs and her dreams of establishing herself with her new husband. There is the presentation of Muslim men through the eyes of women, such as the ritual of Muslim youngsters on Eid and the behaviour of children in the

madrassa. Each scene is written carefully, with humour, but also with a deep seriousness about the intricacy of each of the topics.

The play closes with a return to the tragedy of the woman who opened the play. It is a powerful scene by Azra's mother, mourning the death of her daughter. While highlighting the inherent injustice of her daughter's fate, the mother takes the issue into another dimension and gives the inner meaning of the *hadith* about paradise being found under/at the feet of the mother. Azra is now in paradise and there is nothing men in this world can do about it; the powerful spiritual position of the woman/mother is underlined, despite her trials and tribulations in the world. Ultimately the play offers a message of hope, a message of the true meaning of Islam for any human being.

"At her Feet" is brilliantly written and performed and deserves to receive wide recognition. Although some of the humour may escape audiences not familiar with the Muslim environment of the Cape, its exploration of issues facing Muslim women is cross-cultural, and should appeal to audiences who are willing to leave their prejudices behind and open themselves to learning about the complexities, struggles, and strengths of Muslim women worldwide.