

At Her Feet

Leila Davids

“Standing here
staring down at my feet
Knowing that’s where my children
Will meet Paradise,
I devise
That what I see
Is journeys
Maps made of silk
And routes to freedom
That have not yet been built.”

At her Feet, a play about the diversity of Muslim women’s experiences locally and globally, premiered at the Arena Theatre, Hiddings Campus in late October this year. Nadia Davids, who penned and directed the play, and Quanita Adams, who performed the one-woman show, are both young Cape Muslim women. The piece explores the gendered nature of the Muslim experience- the way in which women interact with their physicality, their devotion and/or questioning, and the manners in which these women perceive the men in their lives.

Islam as practiced at the Cape is re-imagined in the play as a commodified space- a group of communities whose lives, like most South African communities, are enmeshed with popular culture and religious influences. Mentions of Groschaan on Big Brother and the Latin singer Shakira provide humorous reflections on the claiming of identities. The interconnections that *At Her Feet* presents are indicative of the sense of communities in flux, identities that are constantly reconstructed and go beyond the stale division between traditional and modern.

At her Feet opens with the stoning to death of a Jordanian girl, Azra Al-Jamal, whose story forms the throughline of the play, and each character interacts with Azra's story on a different level. Woven through the stories that the women tell us are issues of culture, belonging and/or marginality explained through experiences of joy, sadness and respect.

Women are often rendered invisible or constructed in a unitary and negative light by the myriad of voices speaking to them, at them, about them and on their behalf. This play is an attempt to present the words and feelings of a group of characters, most of who are from Cape Town, in a non-judgmental and honest way. *At Her Feet* uses a multiplicity of art forms- poetry, music, movement and talk to echo the plurality of experiences and opinions that these women have. Diversity and truth are words that are becoming increasingly associated with South African culture, sometimes to the point of redundancy; but this does not diminish the strength of conviction that these terms carry. The play is built on fluidity- moments of discordant realities and fractured positionings that are somehow all linked in

ways that go beyond language, and described through internal dialogues and interpersonal relationships.

In keeping with the subtext of the play and current feminist methodologies on knowledge production and dissemination, the following interview takes the form of a dialogue between Nadia, my sister, and me, two women from Cape Town, born Muslim and engaging in discussion about the issues the play presents.

Leila: Tell me about what made you write this piece and what processes you went through while writing it?

Nadia: The process of writing this play was very much about an internal impulse. I am at a point in my life, and I have been for the last year or so, where in a very conscious way I try to address the issue of how it is that I relate to the outside world based on certain identities that have been prescribed. For me it used to be very much a race issue, based on the fact that I am a South African woman who is not white, and not black, but classified as coloured. After Sept. 11, it has been very much about where do I position myself as a Muslim woman, or as somebody who happens to be born into Islam as a faith? This was highlighted for me by your research on issues around what it is to be a South African Muslim woman, and whether it can be a political subjectivity for some and a spiritual link for others. My work is a practical exploration of certain ideological and theoretical ideas that you have been developing. I was also responding to talks with Muslim women, my family and

friends, which sent me into a deeper space of reflection about it. I wanted to focus on certain taboo issues or certain issues that were specific to a Cape Town Muslim context. We have such an incredibly fractured, creolised society, subject to so many different pulls and influences all the time. Actually, like any other society. It feels specific because it is under- explored. My friend told me about this honour killing in Jordan that she had seen and it was just so frightening. I began to wonder what happens when a Muslim woman living in Cape Town, in essentially a very diasporic headspace because we have this extraordinarily strong psychological link with the Middle East, who has access to all kinds of education and communication and has a fairly interrogative and questioning mind, what happens when you see something like that done in the name of your faith? And when you see a girl or a woman and by virtue of the fact that they are scarved you make a very strong imagistic connection with them. That is when I started to write about Azra, because I needed to go through a process of establishing a relationship with those women.

Leila: How did Azra become the thread through which we see the other women in the play?

Nadia: It's very clear that it's an imagined space, the play is book ended by two symbolic, lyrical, surrealist spaces of what my perceptions of Middle Eastern women are- probably very flawed. The point of the play is how we imagine them around here, in Cape Town. I think it is quite clear that if one of the women in the play who is not Middle Eastern were stoned to death, there would be a very different reaction. I want people in Cape Town to realise that there should not be double standards for

their states of freedom and the women over there merely because they appear to be living a more Islamic life.

Leila: Your perceptions about Muslim women have been pivotal to the creative process of this production, how have those perceptions shifted?

Nadia: There was a group of about eight very conservatively dressed women in their 40's and 50's who came to watch the play. I must admit that something inside me tightened up before the show. I hoped nobody would be offended or upset, because it is not my aim to be disrespectful. I felt so shamed by my pre-judgement, because after the show these women came up to Quanita and me and they hugged us for doing the show. They thanked us for saying things that they themselves had not been able to. That made the whole process worthwhile.

Leila: Do you think there has been a generational shift? The fact that you and Quanita can say these things is because we have matured to adulthood in a culture that openly values freedom and justice highly?

Nadia: I think that it's not necessarily generational shift in terms of Muslim society, I think it's a global generational shift, where attempts have been made to accord women's freedoms the same space and importance as race freedom. For so long the dialogue of gender freedom has been subsumed in a racial one, and I think you see it in traditional African communities where the same paradigm is being played out now.

Leila: How did you address these issues in the play?

Nadia: Well for one, through issues of veiling and hair and showing how in Cape Town with our notions about 'genuine' hair and people who look more Muslim than others, we conflate race issues with gender ones. The characters in the play have specific ways of dealing with these ideas, but I have tried to keep them nuanced and multidimensional. They are each composites of people I know and love dearly. So, Aunty Kariema is horrified that her university educated niece, Sara, calls herself black and African, because she has such long, straight hair. Sara in turn is grappling with her faith, trying to reconcile cultural dictates and her very personal connection to God. Her friend, Ayesha, takes Islam very seriously and is Aunty Kariema's son's ex-girlfriend. Their break up is preceded by his refusal to introduce Ayesha to Aunty Kariema because Ayesha's hair is not straight. So Ayesha, in a theatrical display of defiance, purchases a long blonde wig and has tea with a stunned Aunty Kariema. The scene is hilarious, but at the same time very painful, and that pain is accessed because we know that hair is bound up in issues of shame which is pertinent to gender and race identities.

Leila: Did you write with a specific audience in mind, one that would relate to those types of connections?

Nadia: Strangely, not. I wrote from my experiences and the stories told to me throughout

my life, from when I was very little and confused because I attended a Christian school for most of the day and then Madressah in the afternoons; through to the present and my interactions in the world with people generally. It does have a very local feel- certain characters speak words that perhaps people who are not Muslim or don't have much contact with Muslims wouldn't understand, but that is part of the process of telling stories with honesty. You can't dictate language parameters and cater to an audience. There is a mention of Monsoon Wedding in the play and I suppose on reflection its serves a dual purpose. It highlights prejudice and the discord that some people encounter between and within Muslim communities in Cape Town, the supposed Malay/Indian divide. It also illustrates the way art can transcend cultural boundaries, that you don't have to be an insider to relate to people and their joys and struggles, you don't have to be a woman to understand that being restricted from certain arenas is unfair. Emotions are sometimes effective tools of communication- a look can convey a message without a word being spoken. Azra's mother says, "there are no words for you now" and proclaims that her daughter is in Paradise and at the feet of the infinitely compassionate.

Leila: The title of the play is an obvious nod to a particular *hadith*...

Nadia: I used the religious paradigm to title the play because that is one of our strongest links to each other. These women are related through their religious heritage, however different, and to whatever level they do or do not subscribe to it. Personally, that hadith has played out in many ways for me. It has been a

soundtrack in my mind whenever I see atrocities against women committed in the name of Islam.

Leila: There is a strong unwavering intracultural criticism that every character expresses, how much do you think that reflects the way you understand women's resistance?

Nadia: Well, we all talk. In that talk and those conversations are moments of hesitation and moments of comprehension. Cultures and traditions are constantly changing, and women debate amongst themselves and occasionally in public, but we also work things out introspectively. It is not endemic to Islam or Muslim women in Cape Town, for every person in the world straddling whatever cultures there are things that work for them and things that do not. Why are Muslim women not given the space to air their doubts and beliefs?

This is the question that drives the play, and Davids answers it in her work by focussing on what women have to say. The characters in *At Her Feet* range from women who subvert hegemonic notions within marginalised spaces through to women who claim collective space for their own words and philosophies. Tahira, actively searches for a new job at her current place of employment because her boss has denied her the right to wear a scarf; while Ayesha proclaims her search for her global *ummah* sisters in a song at a public party.

At Her Feet, has opened the space for the theatrical expression of Cape Muslim culture without relying on platitudes and obligatory musical references to *goema*. It is a fresh

public construction of Muslim women's experiences that does not shy away from painful issues like gender violence and racism, or retreat from joyful articulation. A soundtrack that includes Zayn Adams and Black Star attests to the profusion of artistic expression and cultural influences, connecting political and cultural theory with intergenerational exchange, illustrating cultural flexibility that has so often been denied expression.