

Embracing the *Barzakh*: Knowledge, Being and Ethics¹

Sa'diyya Shaikh
University of Cape Town

Abstract

Scholarly research on Muslim ethics is attentive to the ways that contemporary Muslim subjectivities and ethical concerns are informed by multiple sources and complex relationalities. These include relationships to what is thought of as tradition or the Muslim archive in all its diversity, as well as other prevailing intellectual and political traditions of virtue and justice. Muslim ways of being and becoming in the contemporary world are often derived in relation to cosmopolitan imaginaries, and this is in fact no different from other significant eras in Muslim history. Islamic feminism in its scholarly and activist iterations represents one such development among Muslims in the contemporary period, focused as it is on fostering ever more comprehensive forms of gender and social justice within their communities, and on expanding the ethical archive. In this paper, I trace key animating sources and developments in my scholarly trajectory focussing on Islamic feminism over the last 20 years by exploring metaphors of journeying and of in-betweenness (the *barzakh*) as a theoretically and epistemologically helpful posture. I conclude with some reflections on my current theorising on Islamic feminism.

1 This paper was presented as part of the opening keynote plenary panel at a conference jointly organised by several South African tertiary institutions, entitled “Studying Islam and Muslims: Trajectories and Futures of South African Scholarship”, 6-8 September 2021.

Approaching the study of Islam through the evocative language of trajectories, journeys and pathways is epistemologically fruitful. Indeed, the metaphor of travelling on a path is organically linked to significant knowledge enterprises within the Islamic tradition: it is represented by the word *Shariah*, which can alternately be translated as “the well-trodden path”, or “the road to the watering hole”, signifying a way leading to the source of nourishment; or the term *Tariqa*, used to describe the inner experiential path of those seeking intimate knowledge of God. Both these metaphors of the *Shariah* and the *Tariqa* as pathways instantiate and mark something central about movement and change as central to the Islamic imperatives of gaining knowledge, cultivating the self, being virtuous and living ethically.

Presenting scholarship as a journey makes visible the dynamic forms of relationship intrinsic to gaining knowledge. Human beings as epistemic subjects, journey through the varying textures and timbres of changing seasons and contexts encountered along a path being traversed. This perspective allows us to more easily recognise that what constitutes knowledge and/or tradition is the result of continually unfolding processes. Travel metaphors beautifully capture the elements of fluidity and movement at the centre of the human project, the religious project and indeed, I suggest, the scholarly project.

Scholars all travel in our fully embodied, historically situated, communally informed, intellectually conditioned, and politically located ways. All of what we encounter, analyse, criticise, and deconstruct, construct, and create are informed by the full palette of experiences that inform our subjectivities, which inevitably morph and also hopefully grow as we journey.

Despite more recent refreshing theoretical developments in the humanities, much of the history of thinking the subject in secular academic spaces continues to be haunted by the long shadow of Cartesian/ Enlightenment dualisms. Such dualistic approaches often privilege the mind as the central, exclusive location of the intellect while rendering the corporeal body as instrumental and depicting the heart as the location of undervalued emotion and affect. Feminist analyses have alerted us to the

ways in which these binary conceptualisations of mind/body, intellect/emotion, spirit/matter, culture/nature, subject/object are gendered and saturated with hierarchy, where the superior pole of spirit, mind, intellect – in effect the primary human subject – is associated with maleness, while dimensions of the body, emotions, and matter are rendered as the subordinate female, and objectified.² Increasingly, dualistic Cartesian epistemologies have been subject to scholarly critique, with a number of innovative insights that propose more encompassing and integrated perspectives.

Recent theoretical developments in Critical Posthumanism and New Materialisms highlight epistemic complexity, presenting scholarship as a diffractive process where multiple entanglements organically characterise all epistemological endeavours.³ Such approaches clearly reveal that any conception of the knower, the known and the processes of knowing as independent or clearly differentiated are inaccurate. Critical Posthumanism and New Materialisms, amidst broader developments in post-structuralism, focus one's scholarly gaze on the porousness and interdependency between the relational components within any epistemic context. As such, these approaches point to the vibrancy of space and matter which overlap and 'bleed' into human subjectivities and allow us to recognise the ways in which affect and emotion saturate intellectual work.⁴ By reconstituting core assumptions about how varied

2 For extensive explorations and critique of Cartesian dualisms, see Susan Bordo (ed) *Feminist Interpretations of Rene Descartes* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 1999).

3 Vivienne Bozalek and Michalinos Zembylas, "Diffraction or reflection? Sketching the Contours of Two Methodologies in Educational Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30, 2, 2017, pp. 111-127. For a helpful introduction to the range of positions within Critical Posthumanism/New Materialism see also Vivienne Bozalek and Michalinos Zembylas, "Critical posthumanism, New Materialisms and The Affective Turn for Socially Just Pedagogies in Higher Education: Part 2." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30, 3, 2016, pp. 193-200. These authors note that while there are some differences amongst approaches within Critical Posthumanisms/New Materialisms, all are concerned with "relational ontologies; a critique of dualisms; and engagements with matter and the non-human" (p. 193).

4 An influential contribution in the development of these ideas in Critical Posthumanisms/New Materialisms is Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham:

and overlapping elements collectively co-construct our epistemology, such theories remind us of the intrinsic partiality that informs the framing and selection of scholarly questions. These approaches sensitise us to knowledge production as a process of complex and entangled assemblages which require epistemic vigilance at many levels.

Attempting to engage complexity, intersectionality as a theoretical lens first emerged within black feminist scholarship; it timeously highlights for us the entanglements of race, class, sexuality and other axes of power and privilege that characterise knowledge, ethics, and politics⁵. South Africans continue to confront the impact and symptoms of these interlocking systems of racialised power, heightened with the tragic eruption of violence and anarchy in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng in July 2021.⁶ For South Africans, these events demand that we interrogate the foundational roots of conflict entrenched in persisting asymmetries of power and privilege, and resulting in structurally violent worlds of lack and deficit for the vast majority of our citizenry. Such phenomena are captured powerfully in a term coined by Laurent Berlant, namely, “slow death”, where attrition and constant physical attenuation is a defining condition of the experience of a people in an unjust political economy⁷. It should not only be spectacular catalysts like the July 2021

Duke University Press, 2007). For the relationship between affect and New Materialisms see Katie Barclay, “New Materialism and the New History of Emotions,” *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* 1, 1, 2017, pp. 161-183.

5 See Kimberlé Crenshaw’s pioneering article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, pp. 39-67.

6 Significant pockets of social unrest, purportedly triggered by the imprisonment of the former President Jacob Zuma, subsequently spread into widespread rioting, chaos and lawlessness in Gauteng and UKZN provinces in South Africa from 8-19 July, 2021. Social analysts suggest that ongoing socio-economic inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa, exacerbated by the deleterious impact of COVID and related loss of jobs, intensified socio-economics hardships, and the state of chaos that rapidly escalated resulted in the death of over 300 people. This paper was prepared for a conference that was originally scheduled for July 2022 and was postponed due to the unrest which impacted some presenters personally. The conference finally took place in September 2021.

7 Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death: Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, 4, 2007, pp. 754-80.

violence erupting in South Africa that push us to engage the deeply unjust underlying structures of our political economy and governmentality. The imperative to transform our worlds becomes ever more urgent.

While the response to a violent political structure indeed demands political solutions, these need to be accompanied by a reimagining of the situated, inclusive human subject and a renewal of public religious and ethical discourses that enable a community to develop shared notions of virtue. As such, there is a moral imperative to critically rethink our role as scholars in relation to disrupting hegemonies and the status quo epistemically, ethically, and politically. We increasingly need to integrate ways in which our scholarship might sustain more just and inclusive ideas of human nature, action, and sociality into the world. We need to take full account of our responsibilities at the level of critique as well as the constructive collective project of justice-making and dignity for all lives and for the survival of the planet. Within the study of religions, we might consider ways of crafting engagements with tradition that open up more capacious, integrated understandings of human nature and sustaining forms of relationality.

Sufi Feminist Apertures:

Methodological Reflections within Islamic Studies

Turning to nuanced scholarly approaches to the situated human subject within Islamic Studies, a number of more recent studies in Sufism have foregrounded embodiment, knowledge and spirituality. These include Aziza Ouguir's 2020 book entitled *Moroccan Female Religious Agents*; Meena Sherify-Funk, William Rory Dickson and Merin Shobhana Xavier's co-authored 2018 volume entitled *Contemporary Sufism Piety, Politics and Popular Culture*; Joseph Hill's 2018 book, *Wrapping Authority: Women Islamic Leaders in a Sufi Movement in Dakar, Senegal*, Rudolph Ware's 2014 book *The Walking Qur'an*, and Scott Kugle's 2007 *Sufis and Saints' Bodies*.⁸ Each

8 Aziza Ouguir, *Moroccan Female Religious Agents: Old Practices and New Perspectives*, (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Meena Sherify-Funk, William Rory Dickson and Merin Shobhana Xavier, *Contemporary Sufism Piety, Politics and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018); Joseph Hill, *Wrapping Authority: Women Islamic Leaders in a Sufi Movement in Dakar, Senegal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018);

of these books draws on specific histories, personalities and/or and communities within Muslim life-worlds to present varying conceptions of the self that are premised on a seamless intimacy of body, mind, heart and spirit. In most of these communities, self-formation, ethics, learning, and knowledge engage the fullness of embodied, spirited, human beings, where notions of spiritual cultivation are connected to optimal forms of intellectual discernment in complex, changing socio-political contexts.

Reflecting on some of these developments in relation to the epistemic subject, I find the Qur'anic concept of the *barzakh* productive to think with. In Muslim thought, and within Sufism, more specifically, the *barzakh* signifies an intermediate state, or a state of in-betweenness. This draws on the Qur'anic idea of an isthmus or barrier that exists between two oceans: the one of salt water and the other of sweet water.⁹ The barrier or *barzakh* signifies that intermediary world which simultaneously stands between the two oceans while incorporating each of them within it. In current work, I am developing the ideas of humanity as *barazakhi* creatures and the knowledge project as a *barzakhi* enterprise to represent a both/and perspective, or the notion of a third space of intermediacy that holds two things simultaneously without becoming either, thus more capaciously embracing multiplicity¹⁰. The idea of embracing the *barzakh* invites us to occupy that third space – beyond the cruder binaries of theology versus religious studies, secular versus religious knowledge, subject versus object, mind versus heart as separate modes of knowledge, scholar versus believer, activist versus academic. Resisting binary locations enables

Rudolph Ware, *The Walking Qur'an* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Scott Kugle, *Sufis and Saints Bodies* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

9 The relevant Qur'anic verses in this regard are: "It is God who let forth the two oceans, this one sweet, grateful to taste, and this one salt, bitter to the tongue, and God set between them a barrier (*barzakh*), and a partition forbidden to be passed (Q. 25: 53), as well as "God has given freedom to the two great bodies of water, so that they might meet, [yet] between them is a barrier (*barzakh*) which they may not transgress." (Q. 55:19-20).

10 See Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Ibn 'Arabi and Mystical Disruptions of Gender: Theoretical Explorations in Islamic Feminisms," *Signs* 47, 2, 2022, pp. 475-497; and Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology, and Experience: Critically (En)gendering the Study of Islam," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 33, 2013, pp. 14-47.

greater possibilities, allowing us to explore forms of scholarly production that seamlessly encompass ethical reflections, spiritual yearning, and intellectual unfolding in diverse contexts. More especially, a resistance to binary positions becomes ever more salient considering the orientalist biases and narrow secularist assumptions that have framed colonial histories in the study of Islam and Muslim societies.

Clearly, contemporary Muslim subjectivities and ethical concerns are informed by multiple sources and complex relationalities. These include relationships to what is thought of as tradition or the Muslim legacy in all its diversity, as well as other prevailing intellectual and political traditions of virtue and justice. Muslim ways of being and becoming in the contemporary world are often derived in relation to interweaving cosmopolitan imaginaries, and this is in fact no different from other significant eras in Muslim history.¹¹ Islamic feminism in its scholarly and activist iterations represents one such development amongst Muslims in the contemporary period, focused on fostering ever-more comprehensive forms of gender and social justice within their communities, and on expanding the ethical archive.

I am not going to elaborate the somewhat dated debates on authenticity and the compatibility between Islam and feminism, since the literature in this regard is easily accessible.¹² I am simply proceeding from the

11 For a rich, historical record that documents five centuries of creative and innovative Muslim tradition-making engaging with and drawing on varying cultures and norms ranging from the areas of the Balkans to Bengal, see Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016). Unfortunately, Ahmed is markedly inattentive to questions of gender and sexuality when retrieving diverse archives. For an archive of Muslim cultural diversities in relation to gender and sexuality see Vanja Hamzić, *Sexual and Gender Diversity in the Muslim World: History, Law and Vernacular Knowledge* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

12 See for example, Etin Anwar, *A Genealogy of Islamic Feminism: Pattern and Change in Indonesia* (New York: Routledge, 2018); a collection of positions and debates in Anita Kynsilehto (ed). *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives* (Tampere: Peace Research Institute. Occasional Paper, 96). Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009) Fatima Seedat, "Feminism, and Islamic Feminism: Between Inadequacy and Inevitability," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 29, 2, 2013, pp. 25-45; Fatima Seedat, "Beyond the Text: Between Islam and Feminism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 32, 2, 2016, pp. 138-142. Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Transforming Feminisms:

empirical observation that Islamic feminisms or, if one prefers, Muslim initiatives towards gender justice, have gained increasing momentum over the last three decades and constitute a robust and burgeoning area of transformative activism and research. For an increasing number of Muslims, living in ways that are attuned to social justice in different arenas of life, including gender and sexuality, constitutes one meaningful, faith-based, virtuous response to being Muslim in the world today. Gender-sensitive and Islamic feminist scholars are continually expanding the archive, reconfiguring the historical imaginary to retrieve a lineage of strong, vocal, and engaged Muslim women who are our ancestors in this trajectory, even as we may simultaneously be enriched by contemporary conversations within broader feminist thought.¹³ Indeed, the Islamic archive on gender and bending gender has much space for exploration and is growing rapidly.¹⁴

In terms of cultivating a relevant and constructive gender ethics for

Islam, Women, and Gender Justice,” in Omid Safi (ed.), *Progressive Muslims and Gender Justice*, 147–162 (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003); and Shaikh, Sa’diyya. 2013. “Feminism, Epistemology and Experience” pp. 14–47.

- 13 See for example, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Mohja Kahf “She Who Argues: A Homily on Justice and Renewal,” *The Muslim World*, 103, July 2013, pp. 295–304; Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991); Fatima Seedat, “Gender and the Study of Islamic law: From Polemic to Ethics,” in Justine Howe (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook on Gender and Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 83–98; Sa’diyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat, *The Women’s Khutbah Book: Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality and Justice from around the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), amina wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oneworld, 2006)
- 14 For nuanced scholarly approaches to gender and sexuality in Muslim tradition and history see, for example, Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005); Bouthaina Shabaan, “Love and Life at Al Tawariqu Society,” in Pinar Ilkcaracan (ed.), *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*, 171–185 (Istanbul: Women for Women’s Human Rights, 2000); Nadeem Mahomed, “Religion and Same-Sex Behaviors” in Howard Chiang and Anjali Arondekar (eds.), *Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, 1363–1369 (New York: Macmillan, 2019); Nadeem Mahomed and Sa’diyya Shaikh, “Islam between Margins: Reassessing Gender and Sexuality in Islam,” *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* 24, 2, (Dec) 2018, pp. 120–138.

our times, we need a nuanced mapping of the debates, one that refuses to reify Muslim views on gender. My approach engages Islamic tradition as an existential archive which offers multiple possibilities and ways of being, where meaning(s) emerge in vibrant interdependent relations between past and present, and where neither of these temporalities have monolithic views of gender.

For Islamic feminists whose justice-work and feminism emerge organically out of their faith commitments and multiple locations in the world, there are some crucial epistemological questions to address. These include: How does one frame a nuanced relationship to the past? What is the nature of tradition? How does one engage forms of authority, particularly in light of pervasive legacies of androcentrism, while retrieving egalitarian understandings of human nature that are also part of the tradition, even if the latter are often marginalized by patriarchal gatekeepers?

A crucial epistemological intervention that Islamic feminists make is to contest dominant understandings of the nature of 'tradition'.¹⁵ By foregrounding the variability, range, and polyphony of voices within historical Muslim tradition particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, feminist scholars expose the false limitations of authoritarian patriarchal approaches. The latter selectively ignore, hide or render invisible vigorous historical debates and contestation to create a narrow, limited view of 'authentic Islam or 'the traditional perspective' in ways that preserve prevailing hegemonies. Feminist scholars instead reveal

15 A parallel intervention in feminist scholarship are critiques of scientific traditions regarding how notions of "nature" and "natural science" have been constructed in ways intimately linked to European enlightenment and colonial projects. Feminist scholars have illustrated how some of these histories are imbricated in justifying racialised neo-colonialist and capitalist ventures that have precipitated the current climate crisis and ongoing socio-economic conditions of inequalities in post-colonial worlds. For some of this critique see Johanna Oksala, Johanna. "Feminism, capitalism, and ecology." *Hypatia* 33, 2, 2018, pp. 216-234. Islamic scholarship on environmental justice provides another important lens for thinking about gender as part of a broader critique on western science and its relationship with capitalism and technology. For some of these debates see Anna Gade, *Muslim Environmentalisms: Religious and Social Foundations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019)

the complexity and heteroglossia within Muslim histories, opening up a more expansive historical archive for constituting Muslim tradition and contemporary Muslim self-making and meaning-making. Such historical retrievals are crucial, since many a “religious community constitutes itself by means of its collective memory, the past that it recalls and [*seeks to*] emulate.”¹⁶ Most especially, deepening our understanding of tradition also places Islamic feminists squarely within a rich and organic genealogy of Muslim debate, contestation, ambivalence, contradiction and engaged deliberations.

In my work, I draw on an established tradition of feminist hermeneutics that begins with a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ which critically analyses patriarchal biases in the texts and dominant practices that destabilise accepted interpretations of “truth.” This approach exposes discriminatory structures and values embedded within discourses emerging from primarily male experiential realities. Such an approach enables us to understand how androcentric historical formations compromised and sometimes even sabotaged the egalitarian ethical call of Islam, as it continues to do in some contemporary contexts.

Using a horticultural or garden metaphor, this deconstructive, critical work can be seen as the process of weeding a garden. As we know, weeds steal precious resources by growing rapidly and quickly taking up all the space in the soil, monopolising nutrients while casting shadows on other plants, depriving them of sunlight. Similarly, Islamic feminists can cogently argue that androcentrism and patriarchy sucks up the life-giving provisions from within the tradition, depriving Muslim women of the full nourishment of revelatory and prophetic justice, and of human dignity. Deconstructive work thus involves extracting the weeds within tradition and clearing the ground from elements which destroy fertility and growth for all believers within the tradition.

Secondly, I use a ‘hermeneutics of reconstruction’, which uncovers alternative egalitarian gender narratives within texts and within present praxis, foregrounding creative and constructive approaches. Approaches

16 Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p 20.

such as these can provide life-giving water to the beautifying plants in the garden of tradition while also planting new seeds responsive to the changing and dynamic realities of our time. This approach is about simultaneously retrieving nurturing sources within the historical tradition while enabling creativity, innovation, and tradition-making in the present. Much of my work methodologically encompasses both a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ as well as a ‘hermeneutic of reconstruction’; that is, I engage in the twofold dimensions of critique, or ‘weeding’, as well as “seeding”, or retrieving wisdom from the tradition and within Muslim communities. Moving between critique and construction is an ongoing journey for many Islamic feminists.¹⁷

Diffractional Readings, Embodied Entanglements, Theoretical Ventures

Having outlined key epistemological and methodological considerations in my thinking, I turn to the specific textures of my intellectual trajectory as forms of embodied entanglements. I find it valuable to approach scholarship as a diffractive process that “attends to the multiplicity of interdependencies and ecological networks that constitute and shape interactions between subjects and objects.”¹⁸ Drawing on these theoretical insights from New Materialisms, I identify three central nodes within my scholarship that emerged through specific experiences, locations, phases, and intra-actions in my life.

Firstly, during my fieldwork among Muslim women within abusive marital relationships, I theorised an epistemological category called the “tafsir of praxis”, drawing on the experiences of ordinary Muslim women to present religious meaning-making. Secondly, in dialogue with the works of the 13th century polymath and Sufi, Muḥyī al- Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, I offered a creative Sufi feminist ontological framework and a religious anthropology (that is, notions of personhood from within

17 For some of the most sophisticated recent academic work by Muslim feminists see Justine Howe (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

18 Nafisa Patel, “Muslim Childhoods in South Africa: Gendering the Madrasah Space,” (PhD Dissertation, Cape Town: University of Cape Town 2021).

Islam) to inform renewed understandings of gender, social justice and human dignity.¹⁹ Thirdly, my current work as a continuation, elaboration and refinement of these earlier moments, is focused on a constructive theological and ethical project that foregrounds egalitarian religious anthropologies premised on an intimacy between the spiritual and political realms. Here I present my nascent theorisations of Islamic feminism as a ‘friendship with-in tradition’ characterised by a “radical, critical fidelity”.²⁰ I now elaborate these three related parts of my scholarship as they have unfolded in my embodied journey within the study of Islam in South Africa.

In 1992 I came to the University of Cape Town (UCT) to work with Prof. Ebrahim Moosa, having previously heard him present a public talk on gender, race, and justice within Islam. Growing up in apartheid South Africa, the imperative for resisting racism and working for social justice was an immediate and formative aspect of my development as a young person. Moosa’s talk, which he presented as both a scholar and a religious leader, inspired me. I was compelled by the honest and erudite internal critique of sexism within Muslim communities by a scholar who was also committed to anti-racism and whose critique of both sexism and racism was framed as a believer inspired by, and invested in, Islam. At UCT I was immersed in an incisive critical scholarly approach to the study of Islam, with Professor Ebrahim Moosa and Professor Abdulkader Tayob as my teachers. Another powerful scholarly influence on me was Professor Denise Ackermann, a leading Anglican feminist theologian, in whose classes I found language, theory and tools for the critical analysis of gender power relations. This transformed my intellectual approach by effectively providing a way for me to analyse experiences and realities that for a long time I had struggled to name and describe. With her mentorship, I also became a member of the local branch of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, a continental interfaith group

19 Sa’diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender and Sexuality*. (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Sa’diyya Shaikh, “Ibn ‘Arabi and Mystical disruptions of Gender”, 2022.

20 I am currently working on this conceptualisation for my forthcoming book tentatively entitled *The Breath of Merciful: Jamali Ethics, Gender and Spirituality*.

founded by the Ghanaian theologian, Mercy Amba Oduyoye. In this space of sisterly solidarity and community, I learnt about engaging women's experience as an epistemological category as well as the importance of building social movements to catalyse change. In this formative period, I was increasingly convinced of the imperative for engaged scholarship on religion and theology, scholarship attentive to the political and ethical challenges of the day.

Concerned about violence against women as a social reality while grappling with specific related gendered teachings in the Qur'an, my master's research project was both textual and empirical. Given the prevailing authority of premodern *tafsir* to derive authoritative Qur'anic meanings, my textual analyses examined selected interpretations of Qur'an 4:34. Applying a critical feminist hermeneutics to classical *tafsir* texts, I foregrounded the diversity of interpretation between three premodern exegetes while illustrating how their interpretations were thoroughly imbued with, and contingent on, their particular social, political, and cultural norms. This analysis revealed the extent to which all Qur'anic exegesis and interpretations are the product of embedded human experience – religious authorities have always been, and continue to be, situated, conditioned and particular human beings, rather than universal and dispassionate interpretations, as they are often presented within patriarchal religious paradigms. The challenge then becomes about how to shift to meaning-making outside this elite, privileged group of men – that is, to prize open a larger archive of Muslim meaning-making both in the past and in the contemporary context. In terms of the latter, not only did I introduce how contemporary Muslim women scholars presented alternative interpretations of Qur'an 4:34, but I shifted focus to the embodied interpretations of ordinary Muslim women through the empirical component of the study.

My qualitative interviews with Muslim women who had experienced violence in their marriages exposed the surrounding religious discourses in relation to gendered marital violence, as well as how women negotiated these in real terms. Questions that animated my research project included: In which ways (if any) did contemporary

Muslim women's religiosity mediate their experiences? How did family members and religious leaders respond to the predicament of women in violent marriages – that is, what were the governing social, communal, and religious discourses? What processes of meaning-making, selfhood and religious subjectivity emerged from the experiences of these women who were on the receiving end of one of patriarchy's ugliest faces?

My study revealed the complex ways that ordinary Muslim women negotiated patriarchal power within their relationships and communities. It also illustrated how these women arrived at forms of personal religious praxis and faith that served as a source of strength and resistance to various forms of dehumanization and violence. Based on this data, I subsequently theorized the concept of a '*tafsir* of praxis,' which foregrounded ordinary women's experiences, revealing the ways in which the contemporary social world of the Qur'anic text is an arena of engaged, dynamic and polysemic encounter. The study also rendered visible the underbelly of patriarchy as it pervades religious and social spaces. Through this work, I critically engaged with fundamental theoretical questions of religious authority and interpretation, challenging hegemonic perspectives on knowledge production and ethics.

By opening up traditional understanding of Qur'anic exegesis beyond the preserve of elite male religious scholars to include the embodied, dynamic interpretations of ordinary Muslim women, I theorized a more inclusive epistemological ground for conceptualising Qur'anic hermeneutics. My conceptualisation of a "*tafsir* of praxis" pre-empted Shahab Ahmed's idea of Islam as an exploratory hermeneutical tradition, where ongoing meaning-making within tradition forms part of the entire field or "vocabulary of meanings" produced during hermeneutical engagement with revelatory truth. More importantly, my study foregrounded knowledge produced in the trenches, that is, engaging with the harm of patriarchal structures first-hand. As such, my focus on theorizing through the experiences of a marginalized, socially oppressed group of women not traditionally authorised as exegetes, effectively offers a Muslim liberation theology at work. My theoretical conceptualisation of a "*tafsir* of praxis" has gained currency

in subsequent Islamic feminist thought.²¹

The study of gendered violence and injustice raised some crucial religious questions for me; I was troubled by the ways in which, for example, some ulama counselled women to remain within abusive marriages by invoking religious ideas of *sabr* (patience), or asked women to behave in ways that would not provoke their husband's anger, as well as how religious leaders more broadly invoked *fiqh* (legal) positions that sustained unjust, inequalitarian practices in marriage, divorce and inheritance law. It became increasingly clear to me that many of the sexist practices I observed within my context were based on a deeper structural problem: a gender-biased, discriminatory conception of human nature, or what might be described as a deficit in gendered religious anthropology. In other words, patriarchal social ethics are often premised on specific religious ideas of human nature that are gendered in sexist ways. As a corrective, I was in search of deeper ontological maps to help me understand the contours of Muslim thought that foregrounded the primary equality of human beings, and that nurtured a spiritual life which encompassed inclusive forms of justice and human dignity, a reality that I had had some taste of as a child who eagerly feasted on inspiring Sufi stories of human virtues narrated by my father.

These questions remained an abiding concern for me as I undertook my PhD studies at Temple University in Philadelphia on a Fulbright scholarship, which ushered in the next two nodes in the development of my scholarship focused on gender and Sufism. I was spiritually riveted by the writings of the premodern Muslim thinker, Muḥyī al- Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, whose conception of human nature and God drew on the Qur'an, the *Sunnah* and profound mystical insights, only to later discover that he

21 Julianne Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More Than a Prayer* (Austin: University of Texas Press. 2012); Julianne Hammer, *Peaceful Families: American Muslim Efforts against Domestic Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, "Strange bedfellows: Qur'an interpretation regarding same-sex female intercourse," *Theology and Sexuality*, 22:1-2, 2016, pp 9-24; Abdul-Hamid, Mustapha and Nana Aba K. Forson, "In Search of Gender Justice: An Analysis of the Arguments of Two Ghanaian Feminist Groups," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 10, 4, 2020, pp. 22-28.

had some revolutionary understandings of gender, both cosmologically and socially. At the time, the standard and only full-length book on Ibn ‘Arabi’s approach to gender was Sachiko Murata’s brilliant work, *The Tao of Islam*. However, while her analyses provided a sophisticated and nuanced engagement with Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas on gender, she ultimately re-inscribed a traditionalist gender ideology onto his work, interpreting it through the lenses of a gender complementarity premised on a spiritual matriarchy and social patriarchy. On reading Ibn ‘Arabi’s original texts, I was astounded to discover that Murata, despite her manifest mastery of Ibn ‘Arabi’s corpus, had simply not included a number of crucial gendered positions where Ibn ‘Arabi explicitly linked ontological equality to legal equality. It became even clearer to me that it is imperative to be aware of the gender lenses and biases through which we engage any text, including my own.

Through my PhD and subsequent book project entitled *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, I developed what I described as an *Uwaysi* feminist friendship with Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas.²² My approach was not exclusively derived from academic sources – it was also embedded in my experiences within a vivifying Sufi community in Philadelphia, as well as my immersion in contemporary discourses on gender, feminism, and social justice imperatives both in South Africa and North America. This intermingling of past and present, spirituality and justice, texts/teachings and living communities, practice, and discernment, reflected the interweaving entanglements animating my academic work, or, to use Qur’anic language, these constituted the *ayat* or signs on my horizons.

Not only were my explorations of Sufi texts and teachings personally enriching, but with a feminist lens, I also found rich traditional resources for thinking through gender equality ontologically. Particularly valuable to my thinking were the ways in which Sufi discourses consistently foreground Qur’anic religious anthropologies that accord primacy to people’s inner state (rather than the outer indices of social power), and that assert universal human imperatives for spiritual cultivation. These, accompanied by a sharp vigilance that Sufis adopted towards the lower self

22 Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, p. 33.

(*nafs al-ammarah*) and its ego-centered actions; as well as their wariness towards spiritually misguided understandings of power, prompted me to develop a foundational spiritual critique of patriarchy. Reading through a Sufi lens, it became increasingly clear that much of patriarchy epitomised male ego, chauvinism, and false assertions of authority – effectively, a systematisation of unjust and spiritually damaging relations of power.

However, it is imperative to clarify that the ways in which I draw on Sufism is critical, creative, and constructive. As I have explicitly argued in previous work, Sufism in its historical forms presents a mixed and tense history of gender. It is *not* exclusively the realm of all things peaceful, gender-sensitive or egalitarian in Islam: Sufism does not simply represent the “good Muslims” as they appear in some binary representations in western media.²³ Sufism in its historical and current forms, presents us with the full spectrum of gendered norms ranging from, on the one hand, patriarchal and androcentric approaches that persist robustly to this very day to, on the other hand, gender and sexually inclusive approaches, which are also burgeoning in exciting ways. My work does not seek to ignore or flatten this tension in the works of Ibn ‘Arabī nor in the broader tradition, but rather focuses on some foundational ideas in Sufism that can be engaged with creatively and dialogically for the constructive project of contemporary Islamic feminist theorizing.

In this period of my scholarship, which continues into the present, I constructively engage Sufi resources to develop egalitarian gendered religious anthropologies premised on an integrity between spirituality and justice-based ethics. Such an approach facilitates a more finely-honed scepticism amongst Muslims when they confront assertions that Islam is about spiritual equality between men and women which is not accompanied by the necessary social transformations that reflect such equality. Instead of seeking freedom and liberty only in an ineffable spiritual realm, my reading of Ibn ‘Arabī’s worldview encourages us to seek continuity and congruence between theological and spiritual

23 See Omid Safi’s incisive analysis in “Good Sufi, Bad Muslim” retrieved 11 February 2022, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/good-sufi-bad-muslims-omid-safi>.

perspectives on human nature, and practical demands for social and legal equality. Drawing on Ibn ‘Arabi’s map, I argue for a vision of the law that is about more than simple gender equality. It is about facilitating societies that foster the spiritual refinement of human character, a refinement to which gender equality, I argue, is absolutely intrinsic.

This leads me to another development in my scholarly work and a new publication on women’s religious authority, for which I need to briefly zigzag back in history to a former intra-action. As a graduate student at UCT during the momentous 1994 South African democratic moment, a formative experience for me was belonging to the activist Claremont Main Road Mosque congregation. In tandem with the exuberant national narratives of human dignity, equality and freedom, our congregation, under the courageous and visionary leadership of Imam Dr Rashied Omar, invited Professor Amina Wadud to perform the Friday khutbah or “pre-khutbah” as it was subsequently named. The erudite, compelling and woman-centered khutbah given by Professor Wadud, enabled by the vision of the CMRM, officially birthed what would subsequently become a global movement. It initiated a small but significant critical mass to reconstitute the gendered nature of religious authority as well as the kinds of knowledge produced at the *minbar* in ways that have catalysed inclusive egalitarian approaches to community and ritual internationally.

The fruition and culmination of this revolutionary South African moment that started a global movement is captured in a new scholarly volume, conceptualised by Dr Fatima Seedat and I, titled *The Women’s Khutbah Book: Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality and Justice from around the World* (Yale University Press, 2022). Including diverse women contributors ranging from South Africa to Senegal to the UK, the USA, Pakistan, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Germany and Denmark, this book instantiates the burgeoning of contemporary Muslim women’s official spiritual authority. In making explicit connections between diverse experience and inclusive epistemologies, the volume expands the possibilities for inclusive communal and ritual leadership in ways that might have previously been considered unthinkable for many Muslims. This collection gathers contributions that offer new social repertoires,

fresh theological insights based on the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, and vivifying ethical responses to contemporary needs.

The present phase of my scholarship is focused on theorizing a spiritually robust Islamic feminist ethics. My current book project, tentatively titled *Friendship with God: Jamali Ethics, Gender and Spirituality*, presents a constructive feminist theology which draws on specific understandings of the divine-human relationship that call for foregrounding justice, love and beauty. Moreover, I theorize Islamic feminism as a 'friendship with-in tradition'.²⁴ Locating it as a friendship 'with-in' tradition signifies that Islamic feminist work holds nuanced spaces of belonging and participation in Muslim communities, which include reconstituting the very terms of belonging in the face of fraught patriarchal legacies and norms while at the same time presenting vibrant new possibilities for conceptualising self and community.²⁵ I locate Islamic feminists as part of an ongoing historical trajectory of believers who are both the subjects and co-creators of a living, emerging Islamic tradition.

Moreover, I theorise this 'friendship with-in tradition' as a location of "radical, critical fidelity."²⁶ Such fidelity, I suggest, springs from

24 I am appreciative of Kirsten Wesselhoeft's lucid review of four contemporary works on gender and sexuality in Islamic tradition including my own previous work, and she suggests that these works constitute "a set of ethical relationships in their own right," a view that I engage in more depth in my forthcoming book, *Friendship with God: Jamali Ethics, Gender and Spirituality*. See Wesselhoeft "A Hermeneutics of Intimacy: A Discussion of Recent Work on Gender and Sexuality in the Islamic Tradition," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 45,1, 2017, pp. 165-192.

25 This formulation enables one to assert the fullness of human agency in the contemporary period as constitutive of tradition, to echo the critical insight by William Cantwell Smith that each believer contributes to the nature of a living tradition which is continually unfolding. See Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Mentor Books, 1962), p.168. A pioneering, lucid work that presents an incisive vision for contemporary Islamic feminist theology is Jerusha Tanner Lamptey, *Divine words, Female Voices* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

26 I encountered this phrase in a throwaway line by Denise Ackermann, when describing her membership of the church as one of "radical, critical fidelity," in *After the Locusts: Letter from a Landscape of Faith* (Glodsderry, South Africa: David Phillips Publishers, 2003), p. 47. Since that time the phrase resonated deeply with my own location and work in relation to Islam. My more detailed elaboration and development of this concept emerges from my own unique reflections that I elaborate it in my forthcoming book, *The Breath of Merciful: Jamali Ethics, Gender and Spirituality*.

experiences of love, devotion and commitment rooted in deeply nourishing visions of human nature, possibilities and inspiration provided within core parts of the tradition. Simultaneously, these forms of critical love and friendship are radical in their candid critique of parts of the inherited tradition which have unacceptable currents of misogyny, sexism, and homophobia.

I argue that such a radical politics also needs clear recognition that all our ideas of justice are evolving and changing over time. Moreover, it is necessary to analyse the multiple locations of power and privilege that position groups of human beings at the nexus of different hierarchies, that is, to sustain an intersectional gaze that connects gender to the broader web of social power. I propose that friendships defined by a “radical, critical fidelity,” signal loyalties, commitments and belongings characterised by critical forms of love that steadfastly resist injustice, that are attentive to the needs of those who are marginalized and oppressed within our communities, that grapple seriously with changing ideas of gender, and that foreground ever more inclusive visions of God, the self, and society.²⁷ So in these terms a ‘radical, critical fidelity’ describes how Islamic feminists engage modes of religious becoming through inclusive, compassionate, critical, justice-based, imaginative, and courageous ways of being.

To summarise and conclude, my scholarship overall focuses on retrieving marginalized egalitarian aspects of the tradition and to dislodge its dominant patriarchal readings by using critical feminist tools that open up an alternative horizon of possibilities for future readings of religious texts and emerging Muslim practices. My approach highlights, expands and constructively develops voices of dissent to patriarchy that exist in

27 An instructive insight from thirteenth century Muslim thinker Al-Tusi, is that the need for justice arises from a lack or absence of love (cited in Ahmed, *What Is Islam?* p. 40). I recognize the overarching value of this insight by Al-Tusi, while simultaneously recognizing that his views of justice seamlessly incorporated androcentric and patriarchal assumptions and are not commensurate with the specificities of Islamic feminist views of justice. A rigorous feminist engagement with Al-Tusi’s work is found in Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019)

the plethora that is Islamic tradition. My approach is one among many ways of reading the nature of tradition, neither more nor less “authentic” than other approaches. However, I consciously mobilise resources from the past for a different future. Drawing on methodological insights of the great feminist Rabbinic scholar, Daniel Boyarin, I freely acknowledge that my selection of particular Sufi narratives reflects my identifications and my desire to foreground, highlight, and amplify one set of compelling possibilities within the tradition.²⁸ In tracing these feminist narratives, I do not claim dominance or exclusivity for these possibilities; I am merely pointing out that they exist and that I would like to hold them forth as beacons for the contemporary Muslim community.

28 Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 25-27.