On being South African Muslims, Islamists and women: Expressions of agency and religious construction through the lens of biographies[1]

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Abstract

Exploring the lives of women Islamists through the lens of biographies reveals elements of their experiences which tend to be overlooked if the focus is only on moments of explicit activism. Existing studies of Islamists often focus on leading voices within movements, while studies which focus on piety and self-cultivation obscure ambiguities encountered within the lives of Muslim women. There is an implied denial of their agency as ordinary but active participants within both the private and public space. This paper argues that women made choices based on their deepening understanding of Islam (in general) and Islamist discourse (in particular). Furthermore, their capacity as agents cannot be viewed outside of their social, political and cultural context. Taking seriously the multiple forces *within* which they exist, and which operate *on* them, allows a more nuanced image of the actions of Muslim women activists to emerge.

Introduction

The term Islamism was coined during the 1970s and 1980s in specific response to the Iranian Revolution and the 'Mujahidin' struggle against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Typically, the Islamist project challenged the existing socio-political order: it adopted local characteristics in response to specific local issues while drawing from global ideas and ideologues. Islamists can be identified by their critique of prevailing religious authorities as well as by their condemnation of the west. Through the use of reinvented understandings of the Islamic tradition, Islamists aimed to not only challenge existing socio-political orders, but also to transform them.[2]

The study of biographies questions many assumptions regarding the religious, the personal and the social being. Known as the 'biographical method,'[3] this field has enjoyed an increasing significance within the social sciences since the 1980s. This could be attributed to many reasons; for example, the fact that it became necessary to "pry open the different dimensions of lived totality."[4] The notion of unravelling wider historical patterns and societal structures through biographies found wide appeal

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2 See Salman Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism,* 2nd. ed. (New York: Zed Books, 2003). Broadly speaking, the term refers to a particular interpretation of the religious and the political, where these two dimensions are seen as intertwined. For more definitions, see Frederic Volpi (ed.), *Political Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Introduction," in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Salwa Ismail, "Being Muslim: Islam, Islamism and identity politics," in Volpi, *Political Islam*; Charles Hirschkind, "What is political Islam?" in Volpi, *Political Islam.*

3 Also known as the 'subjective' turn, this approach refers to a methodology whereby personal meanings, rather than just the social, started enjoying privilege. See Prue Chamberlayne *et al*, *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000); Norman K. Denzin (2009), "The elephant in the living room: or extending the conversation about the politics of evidence," *Qualitative Research*, 9(2): 139-160. Within oral history in particular, biographies could be used effectively to illustrate how differences in race, class, gender and religion could affect the historical experiences and the understanding thereof. See Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.

4 Chamberlayne *et al*, *The Turn to Biographical Methods*, 1.

amongst feminist historians who drew abundantly from both oral and biographical sources to show the subjugation of women. According to Gluck, "even if the interviewee herself is not a feminist; it is the creation of a new type of material on women; it is the validation of women's experiences."[5]

A major trend in Islamist scholarship has been to focus on the lives of prominent and founding figures within the Islamist movement. Much of the literature seems to suggest that the biographies of leaders such as Hassan Al-Banna and Khomeini and the movements they led are closely interwoven and crucial to understanding Islamist thought.[6] Islamist biographies often focus on the ideological and the 'successes' in conveying the message of political Islam.[7]

This article follows the view that biographies, as a tool of analysis, reveal the interconnectedness of the macro (social structures and historical context) and micro levels (religious experiences, agency and identity formation) of the individual life trajectory. Empirical studies which focus on biographies allow researchers to explore the constant and consistent intersection of these two levels. With this in mind, this article has three main objectives. Firstly, I argue that delving into the

5 Sherna B. Gluck, "What's so special about women?" in Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart and Karen Weathermon (eds.), *Women's Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

6 Stephen R. Humphreys, "The contemporary resurgence in the context of modern Islam," in Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (ed.), *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World* (New York: Praeger, 1982); Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Q. Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); A.Z. Al-Abdin, "The political thought of Hasan Al-Banna," *Islamic Studies,* 28, 3 (1989), 219-234.

7 Vali, in his study of the life of Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi for example, points out that the life histories and thoughts of men such as Mawdudi, Khomeini, and Qutb are crucial in order to understand modern Islamic thought. See Seyyed Reza N. Vali, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Azzam Tamimi details the life of prominent Tunisian Islamist Rachid Ghannouchi, but this biography is largely regarded as a political treatise which expounds on the political thought of Ghannouchi. See Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism, Religion and Global Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). As the leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Khomeini represents one of the rare cases where an Islamist movement managed to gain state power. Sayyid points out that Khomeini's life and political thought best expresses the rationale of Islamism. See Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear*, 88-89.

biographies of South African Islamist[8] women illustrates that for them, 'living' Islamism became a mode of conduct or action; this reveals the fluidity of their religiosity and uncovers distinctly diverse and nuanced expressions of agency. 'Living' their understanding of an authentic religious life is what impelled them into anti-apartheid activism. In line with Salwa Ismail, "becoming Muslim" and "becoming Islamist" entails drawing from a range of social processes and social and political contexts within everyday life experiences. Religion is a lived tradition, and as a term in identity formation, cannot be theorized as a fixed set of beliefs and principles.[9] The paper will engage Saba Mahmood's[10] conceptualization of agency to illustrate that leading a life governed by religious precepts should not be seen as a case of tradition claiming their agency. However, expressions of agency were always contextually informed and was never a linear process. Being 'good' Islamists was not an end in itself; their ultimate objective was not merely self-cultivation but rather to bring about socio-political transformation. I propose that viewing Islamist women's religiosity and expressions of agency through life trajectories demonstrates that 'living' Islamism was at times arduous, inconsistent and even seemed contradictory.

While this study does not support the notion of women being the custodians of the home, gendered customs and traditions, it identifies and acknowledges that because of entrenched norms, women faced certain limitations. In light of this, I secondly seek to problematize existing definitions of Islamist activism within dominant scholarship. Definitions ought to include the Islamist women's lived experience in its entirety and its complexity, taking seriously the many times they navigated societal forces through actions not deemed as explicitly political. In this regard Anthias and Yuval-Davis point out that although women form part of collectives, "there are always specific rules and regulations which relate

8   In the South African context, I engage the term specifically to refer to Muslims who chose to express their resistance to the apartheid state using a religious lens.

9   Salma Ismail, "Being Muslim: Islam, Islamism and Identity Politics," Government and Opposition, 39, 4 (2004), 23-25.

10 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

to women."[11] This statement remains relevant to the lives of the women interviewed for this study.

The third objective of this article is implicit in the study itself; that is, to relocate South African Muslim women activists back into history where their stories belong. A perusal of the relevant literature confirms the dearth which exists concerning the 'struggle' stories of South African Muslim women[12] as activists who prioritized religion, resisted an unjust apartheid state and still dealt with an array of social forces on a daily basis. Critical of this tacit disregard of their experiences and contributions, Fatima Seedat attributes this to colonialist ideas of Muslim Indian women's political realities. She observes that:

> In valuing her struggle, we are able to value her contributions as she makes them and not as we weigh them up against the efforts of others. In so doing we acknowledge both her contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle and her struggle within her own community; we recognize the various challenges she faced and the strength she showed in confronting them, whatever form that confrontation took.[13]

This paper will start with a methodology section, outlining the value of biographies for the study of Muslim South African activist women. Consideration needs to be given to what was historically relevant to the lives of the Islamists interviewed, hence I will briefly contextualize the South African Islamist movement. Since the scope of this paper does not allow for comprehensive life histories to be presented, I then proceed to provide excerpts from two life stories of political activists. This enables me to draw attention to encounters and incidents in their lives which demonstrate how they 'lived' Islamism – while simultaneously traversing

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11 F. Anthias and N. Yuval-Davis (ed.), *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle* (London: Routledge, 1992), 45.

12 See Gadija Ahjum, "Re-constructing a religious identity through activism in an Islamist movement: Experiences of female members of Qibla," *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 33 (2013): 151-184.

13 Fatima Seedat, "Women and activism: Indian Muslim responses to apartheid South Africa," (Master's thesis, Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 2003).

multiple allegiances and identities. I show how agency was relational to religious construction; both need to be viewed within the social and political context in which they were located. Finally, through excerpts from a third biography I demonstrate that dominant understandings and definitions of Islamism overlook meaningful contributions made by women.

Methodology

Any attempt to explain or interpret an individual's behaviour requires an approach whereby the individual becomes the unit of analysis - revealing why individuals make particular life-choices at particular times of their lives. A life-history interview is defined as "any retrospective account by the individual of his [or her] life in whole or part, written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person."[14]

The search for coherence and a deeper meaning in life is a fundamental objective for religious individuals. Through re-telling, seemingly disjointed fragments in a person's life can intersect and connect to create a sense of order and reason.[15] In view of these reasons, biographies provide an ideal lens through which to reveal the subtle nuances and layers in individual expressions and understandings of religiosity. This approach reveals that their agency was located within a quest for religious authenticity as they sought to transform themselves, those close to them and society. This is evident in the unique and distinct approach to Islam which they charted in the process.

I conducted lengthy interviews of up to two hours per session, in a semi-structured format, with Ghairu, Fahmida and Amina.[16] Prior to those interviews, I made them aware that I was interested in their life trajectories – and not merely glimpses into particular incidents. In selecting them, my

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14 L. Craig Watson and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry* (Rutgers University Press,1985), 2

15 Wade C. Roof, "Religion and narrative," *Review of Religious Research*, 34, 4 (1993): 297-310 (298).

16 Pseudonyms are used for all my interviewees. The first interview I held with Ghairu was in August 2010. We remained in touch and we held two more formal interviews in July 2012. Numerous interviews were conducted with Amina during the latter part of 2010 and early 2011. Interviews with Fahmida were conducted during December 2015.

criterion was simple: either explicit (through an active decision made by the individual herself) or implicit (through, for example, being married to an activist) involvement in the South African Islamist movement. My interview questions were designed to elicit responses which connected with Islamist activities – starting with how and when they became involved. However, the questions were not limited to these pursuits, and the format of the interview allowed for each respondent's narratives to surface in ways which they chose. I am convinced that no other method of research would have supported this outcome. This approach enabled me to scrutinize carefully the transcribed interviews for interrelated themes and findings. These are discussed in this article. The excerpts quoted below, which are sometimes lengthy, serve to contextualize comments and highlight their experiences as Islamist women. Their search for meaning and relevance in their lives, always within the framework of religion, is evident throughout the narratives. Islamism in South Africa, like everywhere else, is a multidimensional and dynamic construct that develops over time.

Expressions of agency and religious construction through the lens of biographies

South African Islamist life trajectories have received attention in scholarship, with possibly the most renowned being the biography of Abdullah Haron.[17] A cleric and, at the time of his death, a member of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC),[18] Haron was killed in detention by security

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17 Barney Desai and Cardiff Marney, *The Killing of the Imam* (London: Quartet Books, 1978).

18 Representing the mainstream Sunni school of thought, the MJC was established in Cape Town in 1945. See Shamil Jeppie, "Leadership and loyalties: The Imams of nineteenth century colonial Cape Town, South Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 26, 2, 1996: 139-162. See Ebrahim Moosa, "Muslim Conservatism in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa,* 6, 1989, for a discussion on the silence of the MJC even at the height of anti-apartheid uprisings. Using the Foucauldian concept of power, Jhazbhay shows how religious scholars representing dominant Muslim organizations exercised control and regulated a particular type of knowledge and theology. See Iqbal Jhazbhay, 'The politics of interpretation: The call of Islam and 'ulama disciplinary power in South Africa," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 22, 2, 2002: 457-467.

police in 1969. With a focus on well-known Muslims of Indian origin who took part in the anti-apartheid struggle, Seedat explores the activism of three such women – through both individual and collective actions.[19] Goolam Vahed's compilation of descriptive short biographies of South African Muslims primarily aims to record some of the contributions made by prominent Muslims. While the book offers detailed profiles of some activists, the author makes clear that it is not his intention to delve into discourse analysis and identity concerns.[20]

This paper contests the notion that societal change is only possible through the actions of renowned individuals. Any focus on the lives of the leading voices within the Islamist movement neglects the contributions made by ordinary Islamists and is an implied denial of their agency. These individuals were ostensibly subsumed within a movement and acted upon by leaders who defined and prescribed a particular religious experience. Yet a close look shows that their lives were often dedicated to perfecting their spiritual and moral selves; they overtly agitated for socio-political change while traversing imposed norms. This lacuna in scholarship means that not enough is known about the experiences of ordinary Islamists.[21]

19 Seedat, "Women and activism," 2003.
20 Goolam Vahed, *Muslim Portraits: The Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (Durban: Madiba Publishers, 2012).
21 This is particularly relevant in Muslim minority contexts such as South Africa. Literature on women's experiences largely focusses on societies where Muslims are in the majority. See for example Asma Basarudin, *Humanizing the Sacred-. Sisters in Islam and the Struggle for Gender Justice in Malaysia* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2016) for a study of the life histories of the founding members of Sisters in Islam (SIS), a non-governmental organization which advocates for women's rights in Malaysia. She explores how women's activism led to a remaking of the 'self', and shows how, as political actors, their presence in the public sphere is heightened. More examples on agency and women's participation in faith-based movements in societies with Muslims in the majority include Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Sherine Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Nadje S. Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Suzanne Brenner, "Reconstructing self and society: Javanese Muslim women and 'the veil,'" *American Ethnologist,* 23, 1996: 673.

The question concerning women's agency is one that has received much attention in scholarship. With specific reference to Middle Eastern societies where Muslims are in the majority, Sehlikoglu traces feminist approaches to women's agency through four waves. Starting from the 1960s, she shows the ways in which women's agency has been approached and illustrates that the many shifts and turns that the concept encountered reflected the theoretical and conceptual debates of the time.[22]

This study will draw from understandings of agency which emerged during the third and fourth waves.[23] The third wave, in particular, is pertinent since the very concept of women's agency was re-theorized through the pioneering work of Saba Mahmood. She challenged liberal understandings of agency which only recognized actions as being agential if some degree of resistance were present.[24] In her oft-quoted work on Muslim women in the Egyptian piety movement, she interrogates existing conceptions of freedom and agency and proposes to "explore those modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic norms."[25] By questioning why Muslim women want to submit to pious norms she suggests agency as being "[a] capacity for action that historically

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22 Sertaç Sehlikoglu, "Revisited: Muslim women's agency and feminist anthropology of the Middle East," *Contemporary Islam*, 18, 2018: 73-92.

23 The fourth wave is marked by methodological perspectives which seek to broaden the lens of gendered agency and expressions thereof. One area of scholarship that has been widely discussed is the notion of everyday life of ordinary Muslims. This scholarship questions the overemphasis on religion and argues for an approach that takes heed of contradictions and ambiguities in the daily lives of Muslims. See Sehlikoglu, "Revisited," 82-84. This study takes the view that those people who centralize religion and religious ideology in their lives, and view all their decisions through a religious lens, should be acknowledged and studied for who and what they are. This is reminiscent of Fadil and Fernando who suggest that scholarship on the everyday and 'actual' lives of people imply that pious Muslims are "exceptional and, more insidiously, not "real." Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando, "Rediscovering the "everyday" Muslim: Notes on an anthropological divide," *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, 2 2015: 59-88 (61). They question the piety/ everyday opposition; arguing "the concomitant opposition between textual norm and individual practice" is "untenable." See Fadil and Fernando, "Rediscovering the Everyday," 63.

24 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 2005.

25 Ibid, 15.

specific relations of subordination enable and create."[26] According to this view, and in the context of pious women in Cairo who strive to achieve embodied piety, agency is grounded in docile religious conduct. Leading a life governed by Islamic precepts should not be seen as a case of tradition claiming their agency.[27]

Theorizing freedom and agency through women's relationship with God allowed for the emergence of a multitude of ethnographies studying Muslim women as Muslims. However, some have questioned the pertinence of this approach to agency. Bautista argues that the theoretical model developed by Mahmood is specifically relevant to the Egyptian mosque movement in her study and excludes most other Muslim gendered agencies.[28] Bautista is not alone in questioning the limitations of this model.[29] Abenante and Cantini claim that the "piety literature has, to a large extent, investigated groups that rely on Reformist interpretations of the written foundations of Islam, while less work has been done on those movements claiming different Islamic traditions and interpretations."[30] This study, for example, focuses not on Reformist interpretations of Islam, but rather on women within the South African Islamist movement.

26 Ibid, 27.

27 Ibid. Mahmood's influential work became known as the 'piety turn,' and has inspired many scholars to explore this connection between women's agency and piety. See Noorhaidi Hasan, "The making of public Islam: Piety, agency, and commodification on the landscape of the Indonesian public sphere," *Contemporary Islam*, 3, 3, 2009: 229-250; Maimuna Huq, "Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh: The politics of 'belief' among Islamist women," *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2-3, 2008: 457-488; Santi Rozario, "Islamic piety against the family: From 'traditional' to 'pure' Islam," *Contemporary Islam*, 5, 3, 2011: 285-308.

28 Julius Bautista, "The meta-theory of piety: Reflections on the work of Saba Mahmood," *Contemporary Islam*, 2, 1, 2008: 75-83.

29 For varied critiques on Mahmood's work see Sindre Bangstad, "Saba Mahmood and anthropological feminism after virtue," *Theory, Culture Society*, 28, 3, 2011: 28-54; Lara Deeb, "Thinking piety and the everyday together: A response to Fadil and Fernando," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, 2, 2015: 93-96; Benjamin Soares and Filippo Osella, "Islam, politics, anthropology," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute,* 15, 1, 2009: 1-23.

30 Paola Abenante and Daniele Cantini, "Life-worlds and religious commitment: Ethnographic perspectives on subjectivity and Islam," *La Ricerca Folklorica*, 69: 2014: 3-19 (9).

Mahmood's work is helpful in querying hegemonic binaries such as resistance and submission and in showing that becoming religious can be agentive in itself. However, it does not explain, sufficiently, the agency of women whose religious subjectivity is produced through questioning normative doctrine (as the women in this study do). Being a good religious subject was exactly predicated on challenging prevailing dominant understandings of Islam. On the other hand, their actions did not fit into liberal concepts which, as Sehlikoglu points out, failed "to recognize any particular feminist agency in Islamic women's involvement in politics, by denying not only their agency but also the complex nature of their political formation and subjectification."[31]

I proceed to illustrate that being South African Muslims, as well as women and Islamists, meant that many patriarchal systems were faced daily; these included the apartheid state, male-centred interpretations of Islam, male-dominated Islamist collectives which they joined to further their activism, as well as gendered social and cultural norms within their communities and families. For Mahmood's subject, agency is grounded in docility, and is largely a linear process. My interlocutors traversed many social and religious structures and familial expectations; thus, agentive capacities took on varied expressions and were contextually informed. Furthermore, exerting themselves to be religious and 'good' Islamists was not an end in itself in terms of cultivating the self only; instead, their ultimate objective was to bring about socio-political transformation through resisting and challenging an unjust state.

In this regard I will draw upon the work of Elizabeth M Bucar who argues for the notion of dianomy, meaning "dual-sources of the moral law, to account for moral agency that relies neither exclusively upon the self as a source of moral authority nor exclusively upon religious traditions."[32]

Dianomy recognizes that both an individual and her community are important; that agency is shaped within specific conditions and yet

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31 Sehlikoglu, "Revisited," 79.

32 Elizabeth M. Bucar (2010), "Dianomy: Understanding religious women's moral agency as creative conformity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 78, 3, 2010: 662-686 (662).

can also point beyond them, and that there is a possibility of creative compliance that is not necessarily intentional resistance.[33]

Bucar explains that dianomy is not a universal theory on agency, but rather an explanation for why theories on agency should be project-specific. She further argues for agency to be articulated through a concept termed "creative conformity." The latter allows scholars to explore agency "within a continuum of creativity and conformity."[34] I will expound on this notion through my data in the following section.

Through the use of life histories, I am able to show how their religiosity is in a constant state of construction. Although they are Islamists, they want to become better ones. Their expressions of agency were relative to their understanding of, and their commitment to Islam and Islamist discourse. Simultaneously these expressions were relational to the varied social structures they found themselves in.

The following section contains excerpts from biographies of South African Islamist women. I use these extracts to show why theories which universalize women's agentive capacities are insufficient to explain the actions and choices they take; especially those in Muslim minority contexts.

Being South African, being a Muslim, being an Islamist and being a woman

Since the inception of apartheid rule in 1948, the Muslim community–as Black South Africans – experienced the harshness of this system of institutionalized racism. Despite their minority status, a handful of Muslims opposed the apartheid regime; thus, some joined the broader liberation struggle movements. During the 1970s and 1980s, anti-apartheid discourse and engagement amongst Muslims increased markedly. South African Islamism became the expression through which to articulate modernization and anti-apartheid politics.[35]

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33 Ibid, 666.
34 Ibid, 681.
35 In this regard South African Islamism had a unique character and was distinctly different from Islamist manifestations in other contexts. See Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1995).

Although most Muslims accepted apartheid hegemony, the contribution made by Islamists remains significant and vitally important when recording the political history of South Africa. In this regard, the absence of biographies and activism focusing on Moslem women is noteworthy.

Islamists all shared a desire to engage publicly with religion and, in the process, articulate distinctive religious identities. After years of collecting women's narratives, I believe that the multidimensionality and the complexity of agentive capacity is best illustrated by the narrative of Ghairu. She is a mother of four, grandmother to many and is currently in her seventies. She recalled how she became involved in activism at school and this intensified when she married a fellow anti-apartheid activist. She joined Qibla[36] when this movement was formed during the late 1970s. She related how her children spent their formative years taking part in anti-apartheid demonstrations with their parents and with laughter she recalled how, after one protest march herself, her sister, her daughter; her husband and her two sons were all detained at the same time. Still smiling, she mentioned that it was her forty-ninth birthday, and while they didn't have cake and other eatables, "at least most of my family was in the same space!" She became sombre on remembering how worried she was about her youngest daughter who had to stay with a family member during the ten days they were kept in detention. Ghairu reminded me

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36   Refer to Ahjum, "Reconstructing a religious identity," 2013; Achmat Cassiem, *Quest for Unity* (Cape Town: Edson-Clyde Press, 1994); C. du P. Le Roux and Iqbal Jhazbhay, "The contemporary path of Qibla thought: A hermeneutical reflection," *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 12, 1992: 84-100; Muhammad Haron, "Qibla mass movement and its leadership: Engaging with the Qur'an in an African setting," 10th International Conference on Qur'anic Researches, Qom (Iran), 2017, for further writing on the Qibla movement. Qibla, along with the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) and the Call of Islam (COI) make up the three significant collectives within the South African Islamist movement. For a detailed study of the MYM see Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*, 1995. Also see Na'eem Jeenah, "The national liberation struggle and Islamic feminisms in South Africa," *Women's studies international forum.* 29, 1, 1995: 27-41.
For a history of the COI see Adli Jacobs, *Punching above its Weight: The Story of the Call of Islam* (Bloomington: Author House, 2014). Also see Farid Esack, "Three Islamic strands in the South African struggle for justice," *Third World Quarterly*, 10, 2, 1988: 473-98.

that: "You know that time they could keep you for two weeks without charging you!"

A few short weeks after their release, she recalled receiving a phone call from a fellow activist:

> That was still in the early eighties yes, and they told me my son and my husband had been arrested again. I remember distinctly that I went to take *wudu*[37] and I went to make *salah.*[38] That was, you know, sort of, my frame of mind and my strength and my everything. Make connection with Allah. You know, that time I still used to drive, and then I used to pick up some other people [who had family or close friends in detention] One week I used to visit my son and one week my husband. They were in the same prison but they were on different floors. And those of us who had husbands and sons used to take them food and collect their washing. And I remember the one day we went it was my son's birthday and I wanted to take him something nice like cake or something. And I was told he had been moved to another prison. And I know there they had to wash outside in the yard in cold water. And it was winter, it was cold! You know now when I go to the bathroom, I need warm water, else I get bladder infection. But then, you know I only used cold water. Even to make *istinjaa.*[39] All the time when he was in prison because I knew they only had this one cold water tap outside. And my son was washing in cold water in winter.

While she was adamant that "it was always about justice, and eradicating oppression," life had to go on. She needed to work, tend to her home and see to her daughters' needs. According to Ghairu, everybody always regarded her as a strong person," but there were times when I also just felt weak. *Alhamdullillah,*[40] I was strong, because I knew what we were about,

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37 Ritual wash performed before praying.
38 Pray.
39 Ritual wash performed after relieving yourself.
40 Praise be to God.

and spiritually I was strong, and as a Muslim I have always supported the struggle."

She recalled that, while some were engaged in debating ideological differences within the Islamist movement, deep bonds were forged between those who were imprisoned, and their families. "We would go and visit people and they would come and visit us, we supported one another like that, we had to, because sometimes our families wouldn't … sometimes … there were cousins and relatives who never came to my house for years, because they feared for their own security." In addition to these fears, many of her relatives also frowned at the fact that Islamists (like herself) challenged hegemonic understandings and practices of Islam, as explained and practiced by the clergy and followed by most South African Muslims. Their questioning of mainstream religious narratives meant that Islamists were ostracized within the Muslim community. Raising her children to be, what she termed, "politically and religiously conscious individuals" led to even more criticism from family and the broader community. Consequently the bonds she developed with other activists and their families transcended religion, as is illustrated by the following recollection of hers: "On Christmas when we wanted to arrange food to take to the prisoners, to Victor Verster and to Pollsmoor, everyone would just help, and we did this for Christmas and for Eid … but all the prisoners ate, always, we made for everyone whether they were Muslim or non-Muslim."

These excerpts from Ghairu's story are reminiscent of Bucar's concept of dianomy. They illustrate why neither liberal (also defined as self-law or autonomy which is regulated by the subject) nor non-liberal (other-law or heteronomy whereby the subject's moral freedom is located within religious authority) models of agency are sufficient to analyse women's agency.[41] Ghairu chose to become an activist, and chose to ground political activism within religious tenets; by doing so, she actively resisted a patriarchal and oppressive government as well as hegemonic understandings of Islam as espoused by the male clergy. She also resisted a Muslim community who were largely silent in the face of injustices and

41 Bucar, "Dianomy," 667-671.

her family who criticised her 'mothering' skills and her Islamist activities. Her resistance to constraining and restrictive structures – religious and otherwise – is clearly evident. This is in line with autonomous ethical theories which consider this type of opposition to be a definitive expression of agency. However, as Mahmood points out, the enactment of a norm should not necessarily imply that freedom and agency are curtailed. When delving into moral discourse, even women's actions and responses which enact and affirm gendered inconsistencies can be seen as expressions of women's agency.[42] Heteronomous approaches, such as that of Mahmood, take serious note of religious traditions as an external force operating on and shaping women's actions. Her argument for a consideration of agency "in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms"[43] allows me to view Ghairu's actions which seem to conform to gendered norms (religious and otherwise), as authentic expressions of her agency. Norms are seldom, if ever, straightforward. They are always filled with nuance, complexity and multiple layers.

Not once does Ghairu contest performing gendered social norms such as taking care of children, cooking and doing laundry. Indeed, these 'reproductive' chores usually performed in the private (domestic) space, which conjures up notions of comfort, familiarity and tranquility were extended into that most abnormal, violent and strangest of spaces: a prison. Performing these tasks fulfilled her vision of motherhood, yet these norms simultaneously became an avenue through which to declare and assert her support of a particular religious ideology: Islamism.

In their rhetoric, Islamists often criticized the clergy for the emphasis they placed on religious rituals, neglecting the socio-political context that Muslims found themselves in. However, Ghairu used these rituals, such as praying, as a means towards self-cultivation and to reinforce her commitment to Islamism. These rituals equipped her with the emotional strength to cope with the detention of her husband and child. Praying, which is primarily a spiritual act between the believer and God, now became her way of affirming her connection with her son, her husband,

42 Ibid, 671.
43 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15.

Islamist discourse and her socio-political context. Thus the act of praying engaged the self, society and redefined traditional understandings of mother-and-wifehood. More explicitly so was the act of making *istinjaa* with cold water. A religious ritual which is generally done while alone, in the privacy of a bathroom, became a powerful yet solitary act of political protest wherein her mothering and Islamist identities merged. These moments illustrate how women used available norms, traditions and religious rituals to attain their vision of the ideal.

Fahmida's story, while different from Ghairu's, reflects similar elements. She is from Cape Town and she explained her activism started in her final year at high school:

> This was during the 1980s which was really the height of the student protests ... And I was at one of the schools that were very active in the anti-apartheid struggle ... No-one in my family was involved in the struggle or in any of the movements at all! There's no-one with an activist background ... So I started attending this *halqah*[44] group and it was organized by one of the students who belonged to the MYM who stayed opposite our house. Eventually I started changing my worldview and I became more critical. You know, of society. But we were also reading *Qur'an* and discussing a lot of the text. And I also became more critical of things I saw in my family and how we were taught to express Islam. And my family thought I was a bit cuckoo! They thought I was just being 'way out' again. Because then I also started wearing *hijab* and I used to even get up for *fajr* [pre-dawn prayer]! And I was really like 'into' this whole thing of becoming aware of other aspects of Islam.

When she started university, she recalled that she hardly ever attended classes; instead she opted to frequent the gatherings held by the MYM branch on campus:

44 Study groups which focused on contemporary issues through reading the Qur'an, the sayings of the Prophet (saw) and other relevant literature.

> So I really just went into it knowing that I wanted something and I wanted to learn. So essentially a lot of the critical thinking and this notion of being a progressive Muslim through the MYM happened through a lot of my own reflections and my own reading and being surrounded by what I think were very good role models. And it was through a variety of forums; whether it was a protest or a *halqah* or even just the discussions we had.

It was also through the Muslim Youth Movement that she became aware of issues pertaining to gender (in)justices. She reflected that at the time these issues in particular resonated with her:

> It was as if these issues were just always there, you know. Even in the Islamic movement. This whole thing of women in public and private spaces and access to mosques and how women were treated generally. So those issues were always raised, but I sometimes used to think they weren't really serious about these things. It's like all these men didn't really internalize what they were saying in terms of what they practiced. Like in the leadership and so on ... Sitting in a *halqah* or being part of a movement is not real life; that's maybe where the transformation takes place and where your worldview is altered and where I developed the ability to think critically. But it's not real life. It's when you go back to the work space and back to your family and back to the private spaces where these beliefs are tested.

She repeatedly confessed her passion for working towards empowering women. She felt that scholars and even activists tend to get bogged down with interpreting the texts and having internal debates while the daily lives and struggles of women are often neglected. It is for this reason that, after years, she decided to move beyond organized activism within an Islamist movement:

> So at this point of my life I feel that everything I'm doing – at work in my professional life, with my children and my volunteer work – is very much aligned with what I learnt back then; and being conscientised then. The way in which I approach life, how I think about Islam and just our lives as South Africans – our politics. And it is important that those of us who have been exposed to that type of education must use it to empower and educate others ... It has become for me a normal and natural way of thinking and living my life ... But it's come a long way since then. When I was so different in my family and everyone thought I was being strange! But I do believe it's because my parents gave me the firm base they did. And when I think about it now, my father was actually very progressive at the time, you know, the fact that he wanted all his girls to study and become professionals. So implicitly he was doing what he could towards empowering women. And that is what I will, and do, impart to my own children. I give them the space to make their own choices, while as a parent I always try to guide and advise.

She observed that it was after having undergone many personal struggles that she came to realise the importance of the religious and traditional values and principles taught at home, while she was growing up. There is a tendency, which is more pronounced amongst those activists who were part of the Islamist movements during the 1970s and 1980s, to overlook this. She was adamant that, although the ideological shift at the time was so evident, Islamism should never be about rhetoric and protests only.

Implicit within activism is the goal of wanting to alter conditions within society; this element is quite clear in both Ghairu and Fahmida's narratives. However, it is also evident that they wanted to change themselves by thinking about religion as something that they 'do' constantly – thus 'living' Islam and more specifically 'living' Islamism. Religiosity is in a perpetual state of construction, and in the process, they

confront loved ones, prescriptive cultural norms and, as Fahmida points out, even individuals within the Islamist movement. The performance of normative religious rituals, wearing *hijab* and praying on time, points to an aspiration which was driven by a need to advance spiritually – thus to self-cultivate as outlined by Mahmood.[45] However, unlike Mahmood's paradigm which advances a model of agency grounded in docility, Fahmida's observance of these norms, along with her reading of *Qur'an*, is driven by her aspirations to confront an unjust state and questionable norms within her private space.

An apparently rebellious personality evolved into an individual who, throughout her life, remained critical, self-reflective and true to what she believed is authentic. Hence she shaped and negotiated her own understanding of how an Islamist life should be lived and she exercised her agency accordingly. The notion of religiosity being constructed over a lifetime is significant to their lives because expressions of agency vary accordingly. She was alerted to societal gender inequities through her commitment to the Islamist movement, and ironically observed these same inequities practiced *within* these organizations. She offered a powerful critique of male-centred conduct within the MYM by pointing out the discrepancy between Islamist discourse as an ideal and as a lived reality. At this point she harkened back to the religious values she was taught in her home; values which she previously resisted. However, her withdrawal from the movement suggests that she chose to be neither complicit with this behaviour, nor to resist it actively. Rather, in reflecting on her own understanding of what an Islamist ought to be, she moved beyond the movement and attempted to reach her aspirations through alternative avenues. Forging her own path demonstrates the dynamic interplay between the ideal and real life as experienced by women activists. Thus, religiosity was constructed through a belief in God, commitment to particular understandings of Islam and daily interaction. This religiosity however always has a clear political element which is evident in Ghairu and Fahmida's objective of transforming an unjust society.

45 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 205.

God was and will always remain the highest Good, but their encounters in real life require tangible responses and solutions which they are obliged to discern by themselves. They may find solace in and increase their piety through normative religious practices such as donning *hijab*, praying and reading *Qur'an*, but these also become explicit political expressions – as is illustrated by their narratives. Furthermore, abstract expressions of religiosity are not sufficient when faced with (regulatory) cultural and traditional norms and other patriarchal structures. Religiosity is thus not static; it is sometimes a rational process and at other times performed to deepen spirituality. At times it is both. Correspondingly, exercising moral agency reflects these differing impulses – it varies between strategic action and imbibed religious norms but can never be viewed in isolation from the local social and political context. 'Living' Islamism remains a work in progress.

Redefining Islamism

The narratives of Ghairu and Fahmida illustrate how religious rituals and understandings of doctrine were relational to expressions of agency; and how this is linked to traditional gendered norms. Furthermore, although actions did not always seem explicitly political, or explicitly Islamist, they often were. The following shortened biography provides further affirmation that women's actions were often couched in distinctly unique terms which are not included in dominant definitions of activism. However, I suggest that recognition needs to be given to activism in all its various manifestations – this would be one way of ensuring that women's activist narratives are written into history.

The following account is related by Amina, daughter of one of the most prominent Islamists in South Africa. Her mother, Ayesha, had passed on shortly before I embarked on this research, and thus she shared her own recollections of what she, her siblings and mother experienced.
Amina recalled how her mother repeatedly, throughout her life, drew strength from verses in the *Qur'an:*

> She drew comfort from the verse in Quran which says that
> God will not place a burden on any person which is too much

to bear. And that HE will test the faith of those who profess their belief … But that's how my mom was … in everything that she experienced, she drew on her faith as a religious person. It's what made her strong. She taught me that.

Ayesha met her husband when she was about sixteen years old and, at the time, he was incarcerated on Robben Island:

He was only eighteen years old, but already a well-spoken, articulate and educated young man,[46] as opposed to her, who came from a principled, religious, but very simple background. She met him through this mutual friend who happened to be friends with my mom. So even though they never formally courted, they had already started their plans to get married on his release.

Despite being placed under house arrest[47] immediately following his release, they married shortly afterwards in January 1971:

It was really awkward to say the least to have a wedding reception. He was given permission to have the *nikah*.[48] Oh yes and he was accompanied by two best men he didn't even know, since they were from the Security Branch! So he couldn't have an ordinary wedding, but she was so proud, and delighted to marry him. The strange thing is, she was never 'groomed for this position.' She was raised in a simple home - deeply religious, but a simple sort of predictable life. And here she was getting married to this person with whom she wasn't quite sure what sort of life she would have.

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46 She noted that at the time they met, he was completing his matric while imprisoned. He continued studying throughout the various periods he was detained.

47 This entailed, for example, obtaining special permission leave the house and not being in the company of more than two people at any given time. This was, according to Amina, "ridiculous - because he was living in a house with goodness knows how many aunts and uncles besides his own siblings."

48 Muslim wedding ceremony which is usually conducted in a mosque.

But she quickly learned. Because of her nature, she didn't protest, she not just accepted it, she welcomed it.

Prior to getting married, her mother worked in a clothing factory. After her marriage, she studied some courses in Early Childhood Development and eventually started teaching at a local crèche. According to Amina, her mother loved children, and was very happy in her job. However, she recalled that it was often a struggle to survive. Their relationship was built on mutual respect, although Amina remembered that the times whenever he was detained, or worse, when they did not know his whereabouts, were very difficult and stressful periods for her mother:

> Those times, things deviated from what was the so-called norm at the time. If there was such a thing! But those times were hard. I think 1980 ... he was taken to Victor Verster Prison at the time, and she had to go to Paarl every week, she had to travel that far and back, in scorching heat. She went with a number of other detainees' families, and then obviously me and my older brother went along, so you know, being pregnant and having to look after two children, having to work, having to manage your husband's affairs outside of prison, making sure that secure messages were being passed back and forth, having to see that he gets clean clothes, that his food was there, but more importantly for her, making sure that he would stay alive in prison. Let me tell you that there were many opportunities for my mom to have gone AWOL and say, you know what, I've had enough, I've had enough, I can't handle this anymore, I want a normal life. I want a husband that comes home every day, that I don't have to stress about.

In Amina's view her mother's commitment to Islam combined with her attachment to her father evolved to eventually include commitment to the Islamist movement. She realised the integral role that her husband

played within the Islamist movement, and she wanted to support him. Amina described in explicit detail the numerous times the Security Branch raided their home – either for the purpose of conducting a search or to arrest her father:

> Every raid was different … Sometimes they would knock on the door politely, other times they would just break down the door and barge in … If they decided today we're going smack you around, then that's what happened … Can you imagine what that was like for us as children; and for my mother!! But her responses varied … But she was always very firm with them. Like she would say to them that they cannot enter! But your experiences over the years prepare you. To the point that the Security Branch couldn't understand her anymore! They couldn't predict her reactions anymore. So we were always worried that they were planting bugs... We became extremely security conscious … I remember one raid when she told my dad don't worry, I will delay them while you jump through the bathroom window. And it wasn't because she was fearful of the Securities, it was because she was protecting him.

Amina recalled her father telling them, in later years, that the closest he had ever come to "breaking" was when the Security Branch threatened him with hurting his children. She remembered the sense of helplessness he expressed; knowing he was in detention and unable to protect his family. However, Amina said he constantly reminded himself that their safety would always be ensured by their mother. She said her father knew how strong she was, as did the Security Branch: "That is why they made her life very difficult when it came to her wanting to visit my dad. They wanted to break her too."

From a young age, Amina's father was known to be a fearless and determined Islamist; in contrast her mother was regarded as an unassuming Muslim girl from a simple and traditional home. In terms

of gendered power dynamics, she seemed at an obvious 'disadvantage.' Unlike Ghairu and Fahmida, she did not actively choose Islamism, yet her quiet determination to not be intimidated by him or the Security Police displayed a strength which cannot be disregarded within women's activist histories.

Her wedding day, an occasion which should be marked by love and joy and beauty, was only the first of many occasions when the violent and brutal Security Police intruded into her private space. Unlike her struggle stalwart husband, who faced the worst forms of torture in a range of different prisons, she chose to express her activism in a distinctly different way. She ensured that her husband's messages were relayed from prison and passed on to the right people, thus maintaining continuity of his Islamist activities. She challenged the patriarchal apartheid Security Branch when they entered her private space -thereby asserting her power as the one who protected her domain, while simultaneously questioning their authority and legitimacy (as representatives of an unjust state).

However, and more significantly, what emerged from these excerpts is an Islamism that manifested in ways which are not included in dominant definitions of the term. Through her actions, she implicitly and explicitly defied normative understandings of wifehood and motherhood. She remained the nurturer and the protector of her children and husband, and even extended these qualities into a violent prison space. This again illustrates the multidimensionality of the Islamist life: protecting her husband occasionally meant encouraging him to jump through a bathroom window, and being a good mother entailed assisting in separating her kids from their father. The formation and development of her own political consciousness altered her personal vision of motherhood which was, in turn continuously intertwined with the objective of overcoming injustices within South Africa.

Her daily life demonstrated the material impact of her religious beliefs. In spite of this, literature on the South African Islamist movements fails to recognize contributions made by women who do not explicitly display Islamist 'credentials' and who continued with the apparent 'banalities' of daily life. Ayesha straddled and navigated multiple identities throughout

her life – a Black South African, a deeply religious Muslim, a pregnant woman, a mother of young children, a wife who continued to cook and clean for her husband even while he was incarcerated and a fearless political activist who relayed secret messages to and from prison. Failure to acknowledge the complexity of her personhood risks overlooking the manifold ways in which she 'lived' her version and vision of Islamism. Consequently the narratives of women such as Ayesha are ignored in the body of literature on activism. In that literature, women's activism is seen only in relation to women's movements, feminist movements or collectives which are dominated by male-centred religious or social discourses. Individual narratives such as those of Ayesha remain invisible, seen only in relation to an activist husband or father or son; resulting in 'wife of', 'daughter of' or 'mother of' narratives.

This, I suggest, is in part due to narrow definitions of Islamism which obscure the creative ways in which women played active roles in shaping and influencing their own environments, both privately and publicly. By excluding certain types of activities stereotypically associated with women and by ignoring the various social forces which operate on women, we limit our understanding of activism and expressions of agency. This signals a need to reconceptualize definitions of activism to include activities which do not seem explicitly political or revolutionary or feminist.

Conclusion

By connecting larger socio-political contexts and historical circumstances with the individual religious imagination, the biographical approach brings to the fore insights which would otherwise be obscured. The exploration of the lives of women Islamists through this lens reveals elements of their experiences which tend to be overlooked if focus is placed only on moments of explicit activism.

The existing studies on the agency of Muslim women, which focus on piety and self-cultivation, tend to mask ambiguities encountered within the lives of women Islamists. Furthermore their agentive capacity cannot be viewed outside of their social, political and cultural context. This study

demonstrated that women made choices relational to their deepening understanding of religion in general and Islamist discourse in particular.

Like the women in Mahmood's study, ordinary Islamist women were not lacking in agency. Thus, they were actors who sought to transform their own personhood, as well as those close to them and society. They were not simply acted upon by leaders, nor did they merely succumb to restrictions imposed by males within collectives or to societal norms. Through their actions, both implicit and explicit, they redefined normative understandings of activism, wife-hood, motherhood and daughter-hood. It is thus not helpful to view their agentive capacity through only the lens of autonomy or heteronomy.

The model of agency implied in dianomy acknowledges that women act within a specific environment but could also reconstitute and determine their own environments. Through creative conformity, they shaped and defined their visions of their spiritual and moral selves and they agitated for social and political change, often by using the resources available to them. Taking seriously the multiple forces *within* which they exist, and which operate *on* them, allows a more nuanced image of the actions of Muslim woman activists to emerge. Over time, continual construction of a particular 'brand' of religiosity, namely Islamism, generated a distinct mode of conveying their ideas, through embracing a particular language and adopting certain symbols associated with this ideology.

The strategic and creative ways in which these women traversed their multiple roles from within restrictive structures need to be acknowledged and valued in order for the tangible impact of their actions to be considered. One of the ways in which to make their contribution more visible, I suggest, is to review, amend and rewrite definitions of activism to include the multiple levels of engagement in which women took part.