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# Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities: Towards Awareness and Accountab

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Picchi, Margherita. 2024. "Shifting Sands: Public Discourses on Sexual Violence in the South African Muslim Community." In *Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities: Towards Awareness and Accountability*, ed. Samah Choudhury and Juliane Hammer. 171-189. Boston: OpenBU.  
<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/49530>

*Sexual Violence  
in Muslim  
Communities*

Towards Awareness  
and Accountability

Edited by Samah Choudhury and Juliane Hammer

Foreword by Kecia Ali

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### **Shifting Sands: Public Discourses on Sexual Violence in the South African Muslim Community**

*Margherita Picchi*

#### **Abstract**

In South Africa, sexual violence is the focus of an intense national public debate that grew out of the anti-apartheid struggle and gave rise after the 1994 democratic transition to several campaigns aimed at addressing apartheid's violent legacy and its harmful impact on women and girls. Muslims have not shied away from this debate. This chapter explores the historical development of public discourses on sexual violence elaborated within the South African Muslim community, focusing on two types of media: the press and the Friday sermon (*khutba*). In terms of sermons, special attention is devoted to the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town. The chapter ends with some reflections on the impact of the global "Me Too" movement on discourses on sexual violence and some recommendations for activists engaged in preventing and combating it.

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#### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the historical development of public discourses on sexual violence elaborated within the South African Muslim community, adopting a position of solidarity that is rooted in my deep personal commitment to combating both Islamophobia and gender-based violence.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, this chapter follows up on a recently published essay on "*Khutba* activism in South Africa: the Claremont Main Road Mosque's community *tafsir*" (Picchi 2024), where I examined the exegetical framework used in six selected sermons delivered in Cape Town's Claremont Main Road Mosque (CMRM) to support the struggle against gender-based violence. Established in 1854, CMRM is a historic Capetonian mosque that has, since the 1980s, affirmed itself as a key platform in South Africa for the elaboration of a liberationist Muslim discourse that holds the struggle for gender equality ("the gender jihad") as one of its fundamental pillars. In the conclusion of that chapter, I suggested that CMRM's community *tafsir* with regards to gender-based violence (summarized at the end of this chapter) "holds the potential to break the discursive nexus between gender hierarchies and verses that seem to legitimize

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgments: This chapter arises from the research project: "Khutba Activism in South Africa: A History of the Claremont Main Road Mosque's Community Tafsir" (2022–2023), funded by the Humboldt Foundation and carried out with the scientific support of the Centre for Contemporary Islam (University of Cape Town) and the Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies (University of Freiburg). I am also grateful to (in alphabetic order) Na'eem Jeenah, Gairoonisa Paleker, Mahmood Sanglay, Farid Sayed, and Fatima Seedat, for their patience in answering my questions on a delicate subject like sexual violence. Naturally, responsibility for any mistakes or shortcomings still present in this essay is entirely mine.

them, and to point at escape routes found within the Qur'anic text itself" (Picchi 2024, 98).

This chapter aims to provide a genealogical background to the emergence of CMRM's unique approach relying on Michel Foucault's methodology of writing a "history of the present." This method involves uncovering the discursive traces of distinct moments in South African (Muslim) history and re-assembling them to exhibit the layers that structure "the order of discourse" (Foucault 1971). The historical exploration is centered on two monthly magazines (*Muslim Views* and *al-Qalam*) chosen for their relevance to the CMRM discourse. *Muslim Views*, established as *Muslim News* in 1961, is the main community magazine for Cape Muslims; *al-Qalam*, published in Durban since 1974, is the mouthpiece of the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa (MYM). The MYM is where several of CMRM's preachers conscientized and became politically active, starting with the mosque's imam, Rashied Omar, who was its president between 1987 and 1990.

The following sections arrange the historical genealogy of discourses on sexual violence in the South African Muslim community in four almost geological layers, starting with the hidden core of the traumatic legacy of colonialism and slavery. The second section exposes the mantle of traditionalist narratives on respectability and shame, hardened by centuries of racial oppression and segregation. The third explores the crust of benevolent patriarchy, built on the values of democratic South Africa and a reframed reading of Qur'anic verse 4:34. The fourth focuses on the "gender jihad", which began erupting in the Muslim press in the early nineties and has found in CMRM the most reliable religious space to be expressed.

The comparison with the geological strata of the Earth is purely symbolic. Their visible separation is the result of my own "director's choices," aimed at artificially structuring and thus making readable a reality that is inevitably chaotic and non-linear. In doing so, while remaining committed to the values and methods of scientific objectivity, I have no claim to be neutral nor innocent in my choices. Instead, I am leaning on Donna Haraway's suggestion that "objectivity is not about dis-engagement, but about mutual and usually unequal structuring, about taking risks in a world where 'we' are permanently mortal, that is, not in 'final' control" (Haraway 1988, 595-6).

### **The Hidden Core: White Colonists and the Company's Slave Lodge**

South African Muslims are a historical part of the larger secular society, their history in the country being as old as that of white settlement. The Cape Colony was founded in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company as a provisioning station to supply ships traveling to and from Batavia (modern Indonesia) with food and water. Soon after that, the Company began deporting slaves, political exiles, and convicts from India and the Indonesian Archipelago. Some of them were Muslims, and they most likely "formed the embryo of the Cape Muslim community" (Davids 1980, 31).

Tracing the history of Cape Muslims under Dutch colonial rule is a rather disheartening operation; indeed, all descriptions of the Muslim presence at the Cape under Dutch rule are found in travel literature and missionary reports written by colonial hands, where Muslims are "typically presented as exotic, submissive and static" (Baderoon 2014, 1). A less typical example that is of particular relevance for this essay is found in a diary written by a Dutch sailor named Leendert Hasenbosch, who, shortly after

having passed by the Cape in 1724, was set ashore on Ascension Island as a punishment for sodomy. His diary, written during his solitary confinement and found after his death by a British ship, includes one of the earliest appearances of a Cape Muslim character in European travel literature, whom Hasenbosch met while walking around the city with a friend:

We came upon four of our shipmates standing in line outside of the Company's Slave Lodge, waiting their turn to fornicate with the colored slave w\*\*res. (...) The crewmen standing in line, many of them drunk though it was the Sabbath, mocked us when we refused to join them in line. (...) Near us stood an elderly Moslem, from Persia I believe, who had been watching while our shipmates taunted us. (...) He pointed at the sailors swaying in line waiting for the w\*\*res and said: (...) "look at what you are. You behave like swine, like drunken, w\*\*ring pigs. I would never allow my daughter to marry a Dutchman. I would break her neck first. Now you have the better ships, the bigger guns, and you make us your slaves. But one day Allah will be revenged". I could not reply. The old man walked away (Agnos 2014: 1068-1070).

This anecdote could be entirely made up: after all, this is storytelling, not history. It is a perfect example of Gayatri Spivak's well-known argument that subaltern subjects can only speak by being "ventriloquized" in the hegemonic discourse of the colonizers (Spivak 1988). In this case, the Muslim character is subject to double ventriloquizing, for Hasenbosch's original diary has been lost, and later English translations have fictionalized his account. Made up or not, the anecdote brutally and yet effectively conveys a historical truth, one that white historiography systematically erased: for more than a century and a half, the Company's Slave Lodge was "Cape Town's main brothel" (Keegan 1996, 20), where enslaved women of color (many of them Muslim) were subject to systematic sexual exploitation and rape by white colonists.

In more recent years, South African black feminists such as Rayda Jacobs (1998), Pumla Dineo Gqola (2015), and Gabeeba Baderoon (2014) have addressed the "problem of silence" that surrounds the topic of sexual violence under slavery and exposed how "race was made through rape in very direct, deliberate and indirect ways." (Gqola 2015, 38) On one side, the bodies of black women were made disposable to exploitation, and the sexual violence perpetrated against them normalized to the point of making them "impossible to rape." This, as Gqola clarifies, "does not mean making them safe against rape. It means quite the opposite: that black women are safe to rape, that raping them does not count as harm and it is therefore permissible" (Gqola 2015, 4). On the other, white women's sexuality was policed through narratives of purity and panics about the "black peril," i.e., the perceived threat of the predatory sexuality that enslaved and indigenous men would pose for white women (Graham 2012). The "license to rape" black women's bodies, normalized in colonial times, persisted undisturbed throughout the apartheid years (1948-1994), while gender-based violence and rape statistics progressively escalated, as is common in situations of conflict (Armstrong 1994).

Thirty years after the democratic transition, despite the engagement of public institutions in campaigns against gender-based violence and notwithstanding the relentless efforts of activists, sexual violence still has the proportions of an epidemic in South Africa, which Interpol has labeled as the "rape capital in the world": 10,818 rape cases were reported just in the first quarter of 2022 (Govander 2023). These disturbing

statistics, combined with “the silence and denigration that greets sexual violence towards black women in South Africa, are direct legacies of slavery” (Baderoon 2014, 87).

### **The Mantle: Respectability, Shame, and the Islamic Dress**

As Baderoon has remarked, “a heightened sensitivity to sexual shame in communities descended from slaves has led to an insistent valuing of respectability and propriety” (Baderoon 2014, 96).

Apartheid’s racist classification categorized Cape Muslims as “Malays,” defined as a subgroup of “Coloured.” This racial group included all those in between European whiteness and African blackness and hence, all descendants of slaves. As “Coloured,” the “Malays” were physically segregated by law (the infamous Group Areas Act) from Muslims who had migrated from the Indian subcontinent during British colonial rule and who had mainly settled in Durban and the Transvaal region; the latter were racially classified as Indians regardless of their religion (Haron 2018).

Indian Muslims did not experience enslavement and hence do not share with Cape Muslims the collective experience of transgenerational trauma derived from systemic sexual violence. However, the two communities feel a similar pressure to maintain their distinct religious identity in a country where they represent a minority that comprises 2% of the total population, and a related concern for protecting themselves from the influence of the larger non-Muslim society. Accordingly, women’s sexuality is disciplined as a community value, premarital sex is severely condemned for both genders, and there is a general reluctance to discuss sexual matters in public.

All this considered, I do not find it surprising that Cape Town-based *Muslim News* began addressing the issue of sexual violence about a decade before the Durban-based *al-Qalam* started doing so. To be precise, the earliest mention I could retrieve<sup>2</sup> of the “rape problem” in South Africa appears on *Muslim News* on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1979 in a column titled “Moving Finger”. The columnist, nicknamed “Riter,” regularly commented on the political affairs of the day. At the time of this piece, a number of contributors wrote behind the nickname, so it is unclear who was the one bashing Solly Essop, a Muslim member of the advisory Coloured Representative Council (CRC), for suggesting that “legalized brothels would be a solution to the rape problem in the Cape peninsula” (Riter 1979):

It is pathetic that a Muslim, whose code of life should be based on the highest regard for morality and a spiritually and physically clean society, should think on this line. [...He] is dealing with the rape problem by ignoring the root, which a lady in reply to Mr Essop stated were poverty, exploitation of others and discrimination. [...] Mr Essop, please do not exert yourself in calling for the exploitation of our women. It is enough that you are perpetuating exploitation of a broader kind by your membership of the anti-Islamic Coloured Representative Council (Riter1979).

The date is relevant. In 1979, news about the Islamic revolution in Iran flooded South Africa together with a new wave of radical publications; Muslim students began avidly reading them, gaining awareness of the transformative potential of Islam as a political ideology. The enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution rapidly captured *Muslim*

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<sup>2</sup> The archives of *Muslim News* and *al-Qalam* are incomplete, which renders my historical reconstruction somewhat tentative.

*News'* editorial staff; the same magazine that once supported mainstream Muslim organizations such as the Muslim Assembly and the Muslim Judicial Council (MCJ) now openly raised criticism against them while offering extensive coverage of the activities of the radical group *Qibla* (est. 1981). *Muslim News'* radicalization eventually led to its closure and rebranding as *Muslim Views* in 1986 (Haron 2004).

The invective against Essop's initiative at the CRC must be read in this larger context. In this regard, it is worth noting that Riter's outrage did not translate into any solidarity with the women impacted by sexual violence. On the contrary, the anonymous "lady" he ventriloquized in the column invites women, as a "small beginning to the solution of the problem (...) [to] accept their responsibility to the community regarding dress" (Riter 1979). Riter was not alone in holding this view. Quite the opposite: the presumption that modest attire would protect women from rape inevitably recurs in all discussions of sexual violence I could find published in the Muslim press throughout the eighties.

This does not mean that other narratives did not exist. South African gender activists already knew well that rape is an exercise of power, not a byproduct of desire, and that focusing on dress only burdens women with the responsibility of preventing the violence perpetrated against them and thus revictimizes survivors. However, these narratives did not make it to the surface of the Muslim press at a time when all contributors and editorial staff were male. The political positioning of the writer did not make any difference in this regard. "Radical" and "moderate" Islamists fiercely clashed on many issues, but they seemed to agree on framing sexual violence as caused by the moral decay of society and argued that an Islamization of morals and society (with a focus on women's clothing) was the necessary solution.

As the next section will discuss, South African Islamist movements underwent crucial transformations in the late eighties, which led to a significant reformulation of their gender discourses and practices. After the 1994 democratic transition, the Muslim intelligentsia that had emerged from the anti-apartheid struggle significantly contributed to the promotion, within the Muslim community, of the gender egalitarian values expressed by the new South African constitution. These remarkable efforts notwithstanding, the traditionalist discourse around sexual violence and its related focus on clothing is still very much alive in religious spaces, including those committed to being "women-friendly."

For instance, on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021, I was invited to attend a *jumu'a* service at the Habibia Soofie Astana Mosque in Durban, which qualifies as women-friendly for the mere fact of having a dedicated women's space – which is still rare in the Indian communities of Kwa-Zulu Natal. The annual 16 days of activism against gender-based violence had just begun, and the imam chose to focus his *khutba* on this campaign, informing the congregation about the disturbing statistics around rape and offering suggestions for ways to engage with the problem. Despite good intentions, his sermon reiterated the old arguments around the high incidence of rape being due to the corruption of society, the diffusion of alcoholic beverages, and the capitalistic exploitation of sex. The focus of his *tafsir* was Qur'anic verse 33:59, where women are instructed to "draw their cloak over their bodies; in this way, it is more likely that they will be

recognized as virtuous and not be harassed,”<sup>3</sup> he led the first *rak‘a* of the *salat* by reciting the same verse.

The woman activist and friend who invited me to this *jumu‘a* service was very disappointed, for she credits the imam for usually giving engaging *khuṭab* with interesting *tafsir*, incorporating modern terminology and technology. A rapid exploration of his *khuṭab* available online led me to concur with my friend: the imam’s exegetical stiffness seems to be confined to gender issues. This experience was revealing for me of the gap existing between the male-dominated religious discourse and the lived experience of South African Muslim women.

### **The Crust: Benevolent Patriarchs and Q. 4:34**

An anonymous article published in the Call of Islam (COI)’s student newsletter *Campus Call* in 1990, with the title “Women in focus: Qur’an liberates you!” contains the very first published recognition I could retrieve that sexual violence is indeed a Muslim problem too.

The article reveals that “50% of women who report physical abuse to Rape Crisis are Muslims abused by their husbands.” Noting that these abusive men rely on the Qur’an to justify their harmful behavior, it makes a plea for “unleash[ing] a debate” on Qur’anic verses dealing with women and apply gradualism (*tadrij*) to passages such as the one instructing husbands to “beat them (lightly)” as a third step in dealing with disobedient wives (Q.4:34). “Of course,” argues the writer, “we agree that beating them lightly is a tremendous improvement on the death sentence of pre-Islamic society. But other *ayat* (verses) improve even on this” (*Campus Call* 1990).

This early call for critically engaging with the Qur’an with the purpose of combating gender-based violence is most likely authored by Farid Esack, one of the founders of Call of Islam and its leading theologian until his resignation in 1989.<sup>4</sup> The Call of Islam was established in 1984 by four former MYM members who had split from their mother organization over strategic considerations about political alignments in the anti-apartheid struggle. The MYM maintained a “positive neutrality” position where participation in resistance activities was encouraged without committing to any larger anti-apartheid organization. In contrast, the group that formed COI became part of the United Democratic Front, the non-racialist alliance formed in 1983 to campaign against the introduction of the Tricameral Parliament (Jacobs 2014).

Despite counting no more than a hundred members countrywide, the Call of Islam had a crucial role in developing and then popularizing a theology that could integrate the languages of Islamism and the non-racialist Left.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, COI’s leadership was at the forefront of articulating principles and actions that later became synonymous with “progressive Islam” in fields such as environmental justice, interfaith dialogue, and

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<sup>3</sup> As I did not record the *khuṭba*, this translation is from the Saheeh International (recommended by most ulama organizations).

<sup>4</sup> Since he had resigned from COI at the time of this publication, the article is probably a re-edition of a previous paper or talk; as an academic, Esack developed his arguments on Q.4:34 in his “Islam and Gender Justice: Beyond Simplistic Apologia” (2001).

<sup>5</sup> Non-racialism was the ideological position of Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress (ANC) and, since 1994, the official policy of democratic South Africa.

gender equality. Exposing in public the “dirty linen” of sexual violence falls in line with this broader commitment to combat racial capitalism.

I need to pause the historical examination here to make room for some ethical considerations. In light of current feminist sensitivities, this acknowledgment of Farid Esack’s contribution to the gender jihad in South Africa might seem paradoxical and inappropriate. This is a consequence of an accusation raised against Esack for intellectual, emotional, and sexual abuse by a former protégé of his in March 2021. The complainant and his wife disclosed their experience in a letter that rapidly circulated in academic circles;<sup>6</sup> Esack responded with a statement in which he categorically denied the allegations and launched counter-accusations for blackmail and extortion. These mutual accusations gave rise to the polarized reactions that have become customary in high-profile “Me Too” cases.

Given that I am personally committed to the feminist policy of giving as little visibility as possible to men who exercise their power by oppressing people who rely on or depend on them (whether or not the abusive behavior has sexual implications), in the already mentioned article *Khutba Activism in South Africa* I have quoted the 1990 *Campus Call* article without disclosing whom I considered to be its most probable author. In doing so, I attempted to mediate between calls to boycott and historical objectivity, but I came to the conclusion that I was wrong: boycotting cannot mean historical erasure. I will discuss this point more extensively in the conclusions of this chapter.

Moving back to history, COI’s vanguardism prompted the Muslim Youth Movement to undertake a “contextualist turn”, initiated in 1988 by the newly elected president Rashied Omar and national director Ebrahim Moosa (Tayob 1995). As part of this transformation, in 1990, the MYM made the attainment of gender equality one of the group’s pillars. Ebrahim Moosa, who had trained, like Farid Esack, as *mawlana* in Pakistan, launched a series of women’s study groups, where selected activists discussed the meaning of Qur’anic verses on women. The exegetical method taught in these lessons heavily relied on Fatima Mernissi’s “hermeneutical skepticism”, and the legitimization of domestic violence through Q. 4:34 was among the topics discussed in class (MYM ca.1990).

Despite being located at the periphery of both the Muslim and the Western worlds, in a country isolated by international boycotts against apartheid, this young Muslim intelligentsia was up-to-date on critical debates surrounding gender relations in the Islamic sources, which at the time were mushrooming all over the Muslim world.<sup>7</sup>

After South Africa’s democratic transition, when women’s empowerment became a central constitutional value of the new “Rainbow Nation,” conversations about the gendered aspects of South Africa’s long legacy of violence became not only possible but necessary. The years between 1998 and 2000 were a turning point in this sense. In 1998,

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<sup>6</sup> The complainant’s letter was also posted online at <https://unsilencingabuse.wixsite.com/exposingabuse>. (Last accessed September 4, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> In Pakistan, the Women’s Action Forum was founded in 1982 to lobby against the Ordinance on Zina, promulgated by General Zia ul-Haq in 1979 as part of his program of Islamization for the country. Fatima Mernissi published her groundbreaking book *Le harem politique* in Morocco in 1986. amina wadud wrote her PhD dissertation on “Qur’an and woman” in 1988 in the United States, then moved to Malaysia to participate in the founding of the group Sisters in Islam and the publication of their first two pamphlets: “Are Women and Men Equal before Allah?” and “Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat Their Wives?” (1991).

the South African government passed a new Domestic Violence Act, and the following year, it initiated the first national campaign for the *UN 16 days of activism against gender-based violence*. In 2000, sex education became part of the curriculum of South African public schools, an attempt to prevent and contain the rapid spreading of HIV infections; the program adopted a secular, sex-positive approach that raised many objections among Muslims.

In this rapidly changing context, ‘ulama organizations such as the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) came under increasing pressure to take a firm position against gender-based violence. Not without resistance, they eventually complied, but many criticized their initiatives for being ineffective and ‘ulama organizations in general for “ostraciz[ing] those who seek more effective ways to deal with the problems in the Muslim community, as actions that call for change also challenge their authority” (Abdallah 2007).

Condemnations of gendered abuse remained inevitably framed within reaffirmations of hierarchical gender roles. A revealing example can be found in a unified *khuṭba* on gender-based violence issued by the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) for National Women’s Day, on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017. After exposing the disturbing statistics of a country where “every 26 seconds a woman is raped,” this *khuṭba* confronts “the wrong perception that these acts do not happen in our Muslim community” and (finally!) admits that “not even the ‘ulama fraternity is free of this atrocious behaviour.” In search of solutions to this widespread problem, the MJC focuses its exegetical exploration exclusively on Q.4:34, quoted in its first part only: “Men are the caretakers of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth” (MCJ 2017).

I find it significant that the *khuṭba* does not engage with the verse’s second and most controversial part. It is also relevant that the MJC relied on the Saheeh International translation for this verse, which is generally considered a “highly conservative” one, making, however, a significant change: “*al-rijal qawwamun ‘ala al-nisa*” is rendered as “men are the caretakers of women,” instead of “men are in charge of women.” This exegetical choice is revealing of the MJC’s will to act as a mediator between “conservative” and “progressive” South African Muslims; it is also a good illustration of what bell hooks has defined as “benevolent patriarchy.”

In her *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, hooks describes benevolent patriarchs as those men who “exercise power without using force,” relying on the image that hardworking men can take full patriarchal responsibility for their family and kin (hooks 2004, 17). In Muslim communities, the exegetical pillar for articulating such discourse is a reframed reading of Qur’anic verse 4:34, which interprets *qiwama* as the right for women to be maintained and protected rather than the right for men to be obeyed. Such reframing is not unique to the South African Muslim community; instead, it was adopted by many Islamic movements that have undergone a democratization process in the last thirty years, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Tadros 2012). Exegetical discussions of verse 4:34 also dominate *khuṭab* on the topic of domestic violence that are available on YouTube, mostly delivered in United States mosques (i.e., Qadhi 2016; Al-Shukri 2017). This privileged attention given to Q.4:34 is hardly surprising: Muslim religious discourse is still dominated by male intellectuals and ‘ulama, who have an interest in reiterating that *qiwama* is a fundamental pillar of Islam.

Because of its centrality in patriarchal readings of Islamic sources, feminist interpreters of the Qur’an have also devoted special attention to this verse, producing a

vast amount of scholarly literature. (i.e., Shaykh 1997; Chaudhry 2013; Mir-Hosseini et al. 2015) I want to suggest that this extensive exegetical engagement, while necessary, has also led gender jihadis into a hermeneutical loop full of pitfalls. Giving privileged attention to this verse contains the inherent risk of reinforcing its sovereignty on discourses about gender relations in Islam, even in the attempt to deny it.

In light of this, avoiding the pitfall and focusing the exegetical efforts elsewhere in the Book might be strategically more effective. In this regard, the South African gender jihad has provided beautiful suggestions, which will be discussed next.

### **Gender Jihadi Eruptions and the Claremont Main Road Mosque**

In April 1992, the Bosnian War began in what was formerly known as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. When the United States recognized Bosnia-Herzegovina's independence, paramilitary Bosnian Serb forces attacked several towns in eastern Bosnia, perpetrating the genocide of the local Muslim population. As the year drew to its end, reports emerged that "rape was being used as a weapon of war on a massive scale" by Serbian forces against Muslim women. (Women in the Law Project 1994, 94).

*Al-Qalam* published the summarized content of one of these reports, issued by the Bosnian women's group Tresnjevika, in January 1993; this is the earliest discussion of sexual violence I retrieved from this magazine's pages. South African Muslims thus learned that 35,000 to 50,000 Muslim women had been imprisoned and raped as part of a systematic policy to drive Muslims out of their land and humiliate them "to show them that the honor of their women is no longer safe" (al-Qalam 1993). The news provoked intense reactions among South African Muslims, who were living in a revolutionary situation where hopes for change mixed with fears of society's collapse and civil war.

In April, a letter sent to the editor by a Durban man who signed himself as Ismail relied on the traditionalist narrative centered on modesty and shame to suggest that "women's un-Islamic behavior leads to their rape", and hence, that Bosnian women were raped because they "have forgotten all Islamic laws on hijab." The letter concluded by stating that "Muslim women of this country had better come to their sense quickly, before South Africa becomes another Bosnia and women are raped" (Ismail 1993).

In the following months, *al-Qalam* published three letters sent to the editors to counter the misogynist arguments expressed by Ismail in his April missive. The first and most relevant of these responses is signed by Shamima Shaikh, who was about to become the national coordinator of the new MYM Gender Desk. Calling Muslims to "declare jihad on rapists, not the victims," Shaikh advocated that

Rape is a weapon used in all wars to belittle, brutalize, and control women (...) How dare any God-fearing, God-conscious individual suggest that Allah, the beneficent, the merciful, and the protector of the oppressed, would give a group of rapists the right to "punish" women because of their "indecent" behavior. Your correspondent also completely ignores the sociological reasons why men rape and violently assault women. The confused writer should declare jihad on the rapists and oppressors in our society instead of admonishing the victims of oppression (Shaikh 1993).

This is the first commentary on sexual violence published in the Muslim press by a woman exposing her name. It is not surprising that it comes from Shamima Shaikh, a

pioneer in promoting inclusive mosques and a leading figure of the South African gender jihad until her premature death in January 1998 (Rivera and Jeenah 2019).

After the democratic transition, such commentaries became much more common in Muslim media. For instance, in its May 1994 issue, *Muslim Views* published the very first media report that I could retrieve about a South African Muslim scholar accused of “sexual impropriety.” The piece, signed by Gairoonisa Paleker, investigates the accusations raised against a Western Cape imam by three women whose affidavits “are in possession of *Muslim Views*.” Although the accusers did not press any formal charge, the article openly mentioned the name of the man accused and described with plenty of details how he “allegedly violated his position to suggest and engage in sexual relations as part of a problem-solving therapy” (Paleker 1994). When I contacted Paleker, now a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies at the University of Pretoria, she expressed being “quite astounded that I reported on this –happily astounded, I might add.” A series of circumstances made this publication possible: *Muslim Views*’ editor, Farid Sayed, was not in town at the time, and the all-male Board of Directors was also not particularly active, so Paleker “was to all intents and purposes the de facto editor, sub-editor and sole reporter.” Because of the great deal of editorial freedom she enjoyed, the report easily made it to publication.<sup>8</sup>

Only a few years later, such straightforwardness about an alleged sexual abuser would become impossible, at least without raising severe backlash against the magazine that dared publish it. For instance, in October 1999, *al-Qalam* published a report on sexual abuse in Muslim communities written by Abdul Kayum Ahmed, then a student in Islamic theology at the University of Cape Town. For his piece, Ahmed interviewed two survivors of sexual abuse and two social workers from the Islamic Social Welfare Association (ISWA), who reported a high number of incidents perpetrated by religious scholars. Quoting their remarks, Ahmed wrote of the “need to expose the crimes committed by our religious leaders since they have been conferred greater status and power by the community, which they use as a means to commit these heinous crimes” (Ahmed 1999).

Two months later, the then secretary general of the Muslim Judicial Council, Ahmed Sedick, responded to the article with a vitriolic letter in which he accused the two ISWA social workers of a “gross violation of confidentiality and integrity insofar as social work principles are concerned” and requested *al-Qalam* to “publicly make known the names of these imams and shaikhs” or publish a public apology to “set the record straight” (Sedick 2000). *Al-Qalam* Editorial Board responded by declaring to “firmly stand” by Ahmed’s report and making public the names of two religious scholars formally charged for sexually abusing children attending their madrasa (al-Qalam 2000). No further protest from the MJC seems to have followed. Still, this public exchange of letters makes clear that with the popularization of campaigns against sexual violence, publicly exposing abusers came at a greater cost.

Despite all the difficulties, a palpable sense of optimism emerges from the various reports and articles published in the first decade of the democratic transition. As Gqola recalled in 2015, in those years, “we arguably had never been more vocal about how far we had come. We were self-congratulatory [...] we enjoyed the fact that none of the naysayers and prophets of doom had been right about the fate of our country post-freedom” (Gqola 2015, 58). Despite the violence that saturated the lives of many South Africans, hopes for a bright future were still strong. As evidence for this, when reporting

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<sup>8</sup> E-mail interview with this author. April 29<sup>th</sup> 2024.

about the high rates of physical and sexual abuse, activists writing on the pages of *Muslim Views* and *al-Qalam* encouraged survivors to report to the police, in the expectation that in doing so, victims would find justice. Such optimism crumbled over the 2006 Jacob Zuma rape trial.

On December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the prominent politician and later President of South Africa Jacob Zuma was charged with rape. On May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the Johannesburg High Court dismissed the charges, accepting Zuma's version that sex had been consensual. The trial received immense media coverage, which gave feminist commentators and activists a level of visibility that was unknown to that date, but also exposed them to severe backlash from Zuma's supporters. In a notorious incident, for instance, the complainant's name was displayed on a placard and her picture burnt - to the chants of "burn the bitch" (Motsei 2007). The outrage at such a performance of misogyny prompted former MYM president Na'eem Jeenah to comment on the trial in his *al-Qalam* column "Another Angle" and to exhort Muslim men to boycott all perpetrators of sexual violence among them: "We will expose them, shame them and refuse to have anything to do with them. We will do it in our homes, in our organizations, and from our minbars, it is only then that we can live peacefully with our consciences - if we have consciences" (Jeenah 2006).

In subsequent years, appeals to all Muslims, and especially religious scholars, to act against the abusers within their ranks multiplied, most often sparked by specific cases of violence committed that were publicized in the media. February 2013 represents another turning point in this regard. In that month, the femicides of two women from very different backgrounds, black poor teenager Anene Booysen and white supermodel Reeva Steenkamp, ignited a new wave of debate in the country. Prominent politician Jay Naidoo was one of the many voices who appealed to religious leaders and faith-based organizations to speak out against gendered abuse; a few weeks later, CMRM's imam Rashied Omar declared to *al-Qalam* that his congregation was ready to accept Naidoo's challenge and take action (*al-Qalam* KZN 2013). In the following seven years, the CMRM hosted fourteen sermons primarily focused on gender-based violence, typically (but not exclusively) delivered in mid-February to commemorate the anniversary of Booysen and Steenkamp femicides, or during the *16 days campaign for the elimination of violence against women* (Nov. 25 to Dec. 10).<sup>9</sup> Each sermon was delivered by a different preacher,<sup>10</sup> highlighting the communitarian and pluralistic nature of CMRM's discourse. The chosen guest preachers were not traditionally trained 'ulama: instead, they were gender studies scholars or students, social workers, and male scholar-activists with no specific expertise on gender but a historic commitment to social justice.

The community *tafsir* that emerged from these *khuṭab* is markedly unique, in South Africa and beyond, the most noticeable peculiarity being that Q.4:34 is never recited or commented on – not in a single occurrence. Rather than focusing on the nature and limits of male *qiwama* over women, the various CMRM preachers chose to frame their analysis of gendered violence with reflections on the violent legacy of colonialism and

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<sup>9</sup> My analysis stops in April 2020, when CMRM closed due to COVID-19-related concerns. The mosque reopened in February 2022, but due to limitations of time and funding, I have not examined sermons delivered since then.

<sup>10</sup> I am using "sermon" to refer to both *khuṭab* and pre-*khuṭba* lectures. The pre-*khuṭba* lecture is an option used in CMRM to allow speakers who do not fit the traditional criteria for performing the role of *khaṭīb* to address the CMRM congregation before the Friday prayer. This definition includes Muslim women, non-Muslims, and Muslim men who do not have enough knowledge of Arabic to correctly recite the Qur'an and pronounce ritual formulas.

apartheid in South African society, the structures of power internalized within the Muslim community, the pervasiveness of patriarchal gender roles, and the persistence of massive economic inequalities, which cripple ongoing attempts for collective healing.

To give a few examples: in March 2013, professor Sa'diyya Shaikh relied on surat al-Tin (Q. 95) to explore "the range of human possibilities" outlined in the Qur'an and remind the congregation that abusers "are not monsters," but rather "a product of our South Africa and our world"; therefore, "we are all at least partially implicated in their descent to what the Qur'an describes as the lowest of the low" (Shaikh 2013). In a 2017 *khuṭba*, Mujahid Osman, then CMRM's youth coordinator, relied on the same sura to discuss systemic violence and toxic masculinity, pointing at "micro-aggressions, rape culture, and slut-shaming" as creating a complacent society and facilitating more violent forms of gender-based violence (M. Osman 2017). In February 2014, the then PhD student Nafisa Patel began her sermon by reciting the opening verses of surat al-Takwir (Q.81: 1-9), where "the female child who was buried alive" is asked, "for what sin was she killed." She chose these verses to draw attention to the Qur'an's firm condemnation of any devaluation of life based on one's gender and social vulnerability and to shed light on "the wounded and fractured nature of our collective heart" (Patel 2014). In February 2019, community activist Magboeba Davids engaged with the creation verse (Q.4:1) to illustrate the sacredness of motherhood, with the specific that "the world needs male motherhood too." She recommended elder men in the congregation to "hold a young man in their heart" and become responsible for their harmonious growth (Davids 2019).

In her 2016 sermon, social worker Gabeba Gaidien did not engage in Qur'anic hermeneutics, but shared her and other women's stories of abuse to illustrate the "tangled web of the intersecting narrative of violence that is underscored by racial, colonialist, cultural and political dynamics," and advocate that "violence is always about power" (Gaidien 2016). Nuraan Osman, director of the only Muslim-run shelter for abused women in the country, spoke in 2017 of harmful gender roles and "demeaning cultural habits" that impact women by impeding their self-determination and reducing them to "sexual beings whose chief purpose is to satisfy the sexual needs of men" (N. Osman 2017).

Shuaib Manjra and Aslam Fataar, who had been prominent members of the Islamic movement during apartheid's final years, appealed to Qur'an 4:75 to call the congregation to join the struggle against gendered violence. Q.4:75 was one of the most ideologically charged verses used by Muslims to support the anti-apartheid struggle; by quoting it, Manjra and Fataar highlighted how combating gendered violence is part of the broader commitment to fight alongside the *mustaq'afin fi-l-ard*, the "oppressed of the earth" (Manjra 2019; Fataar 2019). In February 2020, CMRM's Board secretary Jaamia Galant relied on Q. 4:19 ("Live and consort with your wives in loving kindness and benevolence") and Q.9:71 ("The believing men and the believing women are protectors and allies (*awliya'*) of one another") to invite all men in the congregation not only to call out violent abusers but also to reflect on their own behavior. To those realizing that they have perpetrated some form of gender-based violence, the appeal was to "pledge that today is the day you will make the change (...) you will walk out of here, self-aware of your male privilege and power, and vow never again" (Galant 2020).

This short exploration hints at the richness of the Claremont Main Road Mosque community *tafsir*, a discursive practice shaped by the dynamic interaction between an imam who takes his commitment to pluralism seriously, a dedicated Board of Governors,

and a lively community of lay preachers who passionately contribute to the mosque's discourse with their diverse creative autonomies. CMRM's commitment to act against gendered violence did not remain at the level of theoretical discourse: after a long negotiation between congregants and leadership, on May 5, 2019, the mosque adopted a sexual harassment policy that provided a definition of what constitutes sexual harassment, instructions about how to report abuse, and a description of the investigative procedures. The exegetical creativity expressed in CMRM's sermons provides good evidence that the hermeneutical loop created around Q.4:34 is not the result of a lack of alternatives nor of poor exegetical skills; instead, it is a direct consequence of the rigid unwillingness of male-dominated religious institutions to accept any challenge to their authority.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations: The "Me Too" Movement and the Lernaean Hydra**

When the (second) "Me Too" movement flooded social media, from late 2017 on, sexual violence had long been the focus of a vast array of institutional and civil society actions in South Africa. Public exposure of abusive religious scholars was not a novelty in the South African Muslim community; international cases, starting with that of the Swiss-born popular scholar Tariq Ramadan, intensified an ongoing debate rather than opening a new one. Still, the global "Me Too" movement brought new inputs and significantly impacted strategies of action.

An important element of novelty concerned the very definition of rape, sexual abuse, and sexual violence. Previous cases of local Muslim scholars who were exposed as abusers had involved gruesome acts of violence or the sexual harassment of minors; those that emerged with the "Me Too" movement focused on accusations of manipulating the consent of adults. This forced many to question and reframe their assumptions about the definitions of sexual abuse and consent, and the existence (or lack thereof) of ambiguous situations or grey areas.

In her chapter in this edited volume, "Spiritual Abuse, Grooming, and Religious Leaders: Rethinking Gender Ethics within Muslim Communities," Sa'diyya Shaikh reflects on the actions carried out in May 2019, when the famous US preacher Nouman Ali Khan, who in late 2017 had been accused of spiritual and sexual abuse by multiple women, was invited as a Ramadan guest speaker by Cape Town's Masjidul Quds mosque. Her chapter provides the best possible evidence of the reactivity and creativity of the South African gender jihadis in responding to the international suggestions of the "Me Too" movement and integrating them into their local context (Shaikh 2024).

To conclude my chapter, I would like to dedicate a few lines to the already-mentioned accusations raised against Farid Esack, which have opened a deep wound in Muslim progressive and feminist circles. This wound is yet to be healed, mainly because it remains hidden: no published work has engaged with the case to this date. However, many exhausting conversations occurred behind the scenes, discussing the opportunity of inviting him to a particular conference or including his work in our syllabi and bibliographies. I actively participated in some of these conversations and heard about many others: they are emotionally draining, and no answer looks final or right. What follows is my opinion since no investigation has been able to settle the issue. I am sharing it as the starting point for some conclusive reflections and recommendations on the merits and limits of the "Me Too" movement.

In the only conversation I had with Esack on the matter, an informal, unrecorded interview held in Cape Town in January 2023, he acknowledged having “fucked up” (lit.) the friendship with the complainant. Still, he reiterated his firm denial of any allegation of rape. I do not contest this latter claim. I do believe there are ambiguous situations and grey areas concerning consent and that this is especially true for same-sex friendships developed in homophobic contexts. Yet the point of sexual abuse is not sex; it is power, control, and possession. A non-sexual relationship can be toxic and abusive, and abuse can be sexualized even without any actual sex happening. “Fucking up” requires reparation and healing, whether or not genitals were involved. As social worker Gabeba Gaidien remarked in the pre-*khutba* talk she delivered at the Claremont Main Road Mosque, “healing starts with acknowledgement, and the journey to acknowledgement requires reflection, dialogue, and accountability.” The process of healing is a very personal and individual journey, but also “a collective process in which we should hold and guide each other as community members, family members and citizens” (Gaidien 2016).

An informal, superficial acknowledgment, followed by counter-accusations at a much less powerful complainant, cannot lead to any healing. Regardless of what happened between him and the complainant, Esack’s defensive strategy has been profoundly harmful to survivors of sexual abuse. I am referring in particular to the well-known tactic of deflecting the attention from the accusation (abuse) to the complainant’s alleged faults, relying on the patriarchal idea that only “good” people can be raped and only “bad” men can rape. Esack employed this tactic in his public response and our private conversation. Here is where I draw the line. Such an approach reinforces rape culture, revictimizes survivors, and conveniently overlooks the huge imbalance of power between the accused and the complainant. I found it indeed enraging to hear such arguments coming from a “comrade,” but this is nothing new: black South African feminists have long denounced the profound masculinism that permeates the leftist movement despite its male militants’ professed progressivism (i.e., Moodley 1993; Gqola 2001). This tendency is by no means unique to the South African left: Italian feminists of UDI (Italian Women’s Union) coined the expression “comrades in the party, fascists in bed” as early as 1943 – but our male comrades still get very mad when we quote it.

In this regard, it is worth noting that Esack was not the first to be publicly accused of “sexual misconduct” among his circle of comrades. In April 2019, Mohamed Desai, co-founder with Esack of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction movement in South Africa (BDS-SA), was accused of sexually harassing three women who attended a conference on Palestine held in Johannesburg the month before (Ibrahim 2019). The conference organizer (Afro-Middle East Centre, AMEC) and several attendees sent a list of demands to the Board of BDS-SA, requesting unconditional apologies from Desai, the formation of a commission of inquiry into the allegations, and the suspension of Desai from all positions in the BDS-SA until the end of the investigation. Contestations around the management of the investigation, which dismissed the accusations shortly after that, contributed to a split in the South African Palestinian solidarity movement and to the subsequent formation of a new organization named “Africa4Palestine,” led by the same board members as BDS-SA - including Esack and Desai.

The whole affair hints at the deep masculinism that is still dominant in progressive and leftist circles and the divisive potential that comes from publicly addressing the issue. I remain hesitant about the best strategies to adopt to combat this grave, long-dated problem, but I would like to conclude with some tentative recommendations.

1. Individual, high-profile cases have crucial symbolic importance because they can create openings in conversations that gender jihadis can use to transform discourses and practices. It is essential to engage with such cases; however, we should remain disenchanted in terms of getting these individuals to face severe consequences. The experience of many “Me Too” cases is instructive in this sense: the current legal system is inadequate to deal with cases where coercion, rather than physical violence, is involved. Therefore, we should provide support and counsel to survivors who choose to report, at least when there is room for collective action against a specific individual or an institution that enables him. Still, we should be aware that this is an exhausting battle that, more often than not, ends in defeat. Even in the case of success, we should not forget that patriarchal violence acts like a Lernaean Hydra: if one man falls, he is nothing but the “disposable head of a monster” who has plenty and can regrow them.<sup>11</sup> I have shared for a long time Naeem Jeenah’s 2006 feelings that we should “shame them and refuse to have anything to do with them”; yet rapists are not a distinct minority that we can identify and cut from our communities. As we chant in Italian feminist demonstrations: “The man who rapes is not sick: he is the healthy child of patriarchy.”<sup>12</sup> Unlearning the toxic patterns of patriarchy is a never-ending process. Hence, I believe the primary goal of feminist action should be the implementation of consent workshops and the adoption of clear sexual harassment policies in all spaces that we want safe rather than pinpoint or shame individual perpetrators. Consent workshops and sexual harassment policies do not guarantee that incidents will not occur, but they can provide a collective basis for negotiation and action when they do occur. Moreover, when banning specific individuals is necessary, I believe this should be a preventive measure to protect vulnerable people who might be preyed on, not a punitive measure against perpetrators, which only reinforces a patriarchal conception of justice.

2. Boycott is a political tactic with a long history in the South African left, rooted in the practices of Trotskyist groups and the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM, est. 1943). Its effectiveness, however, has been debated; there is good historical evidence to argue that the 1994 South African democratic transition was made possible by the creation of broad alliances such as the United Democratic Front rather than by strict non-collaborationist policies. There is definitely room for debate on this point; still, we should allow ourselves some flexibility and, perhaps more importantly, some room for dissent about whom to boycott and in which circumstances. In any case, I do not think that boycott can extend to any form of *damnatio memoriae* - epistemic erasure is never a good idea. When perpetrators are part of our history, I suggest it would be wiser to change how we talk about them instead of trying to cut them from our memories.

3. Silence is a major problem when it comes to combating sexual violence. Speaking about it is hard and comes with great personal, social, and economic costs. We need safe spaces to keep sharing stories and build relations of trust. Yet creating safe spaces requires a lot of human and material resources and is a long-term process. In the interim, we need to carve out safer spaces through negotiation; this might require identifying what institutions and organizations might not be ideal but have the potential

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<sup>11</sup> The expression is borrowed from Mahmood Sanglay (Ibn al-Fikr 2011), who used it to refer to the charges of sexual assault filed against Dominique Strauss-Khan by an African-born maid of a New York hotel. On 23 August 2011, the judge formally dismissed all charges, asserting that the complainant’s “untruthfulness” made it impossible to credit her.

<sup>12</sup> <https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/a-slogan-aggiornato.pdf>

for being influenced and eventually - hopefully – transformed. CMRM did not embrace a gender egalitarian ethos out of the blue, as a gentle concession from the imam, but in response to and as part of a struggle that the women have been carrying out in the congregation since the late seventies: it is a good example to be followed by gender jihadis all over the world. Bargaining with patriarchal institutions and traditions is not an easy task – to survive such an immense effort, my conational Antonio Gramsci recommended keeping the intelligence pessimistic and the will optimistic. He died in prison, but his work made history. I wish for all gender jihadis to make as much history and have a much longer and happier life.

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