



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

30 August 2024

UCT Islam and gender scholar traces her academic journey from early social and gender justice activism



Professor Sa'diyya Shaikh

Photo: UCT

The quest for racial, economic, and gender justice was, from an early stage in her life, what she regarded as a religious obligation, and the anti-racist politics of progressive Muslim organisations strengthened her vision of Islam as a religion that was at once spiritually introspective and politically active.

This is what Professor Sa'diyya Shaikh, director of the [Centre for Contemporary Islam](#) at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) [Department for the Study of Religions](#), told the audience during her inaugural lecture titled "Radical Critical Fidelity: Barzakhi Journeys in Islamic Feminism" on Friday, 23 August 2024.

Shaikh traced key experiences, epistemological concerns, and theoretical explorations that have influenced her scholarship in Islamic feminism over the last two decades.

She defined Islamic feminism as a knowledge-making project and a world-making project. It has three components: Firstly, it involves a rigorous critique of sexism in all its forms; secondly, it involves transformative intellectual and political work; and thirdly, it strives towards a vision of justice, equality and freedom inspired by an Islamic worldview. Thus, knowledge and activism are integrally connected.

"In more recent work, I have theorised Islamic feminism as a "radical, critical fidelity". What do I mean by that? It is radical in two respects: on the one hand, it is defined by a radical love and commitment to the tradition, to be nourished by the tradition; and on the other hand, it is simultaneously a radical critique of any form of injustice – a very candid critique of sexism, misogyny and homophobia."

She noted that she first read the phrase "radical, critical fidelity" used in passing by one of her early mentors, Professor Denise Ackermann, and she lovingly embraced this, and decided to theorise it for her own work.

Islamic feminists have a particular view of tradition as being open, dynamic and in-process. "Islam as a tradition is not seen as something that is simply handed down like a baton to you, it is something that is inherited, is a rich legacy of spirituality, and yet simultaneously the tradition is open and creatively and constructively made in the moment and in the present," she said.

In her welcoming remarks, Professor Elelwani Ramugondo, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Transformation, Student Affairs and Social Responsiveness, said "by increasing our understanding of Professor Shaikh's work in helping to create a feminist decolonial research and teaching hub in Africa we learn about an important interface between Islam, gender and sexuality.

"Islam came into South Africa as a result of the slave trade by Dutch colonisers. These are people who were not born slaves but were enslaved. Muslim communities are helping to shape our South African identity. The talk is significant during Women's Month but it is important to listen to such topics every day," she said.

Professor Shose Kessi, Dean of Humanities, said Professor Shaikh is one of the two leading scholars of Islam and gender. "Any university in the world will be lucky to have her in their ranks and we pride ourselves as UCT to have her here," she said.

In her introduction, Shaikh said: "I would like to begin by taking a moment to acknowledge this time of genocide in Gaza. Most of us move between being overwhelmed by grief, horror, and rage at the barbaric violence unleashed by the Israeli military. Recognising the enormity of this *nakbah*, or the catastrophe, we stand in solidarity with our comrades in Palestine. We pray for an end to genocide, for a free Palestine, and a just peace."

She said the term Islamic feminism can evoke a range of responses depending on how people understand the word 'feminism' and the word 'Islam'. Some people might be intrigued by the idea of feminism within an Islamic framework, genuinely curious to understand how these two concepts intersect in the lives of Muslim women. Others see it as inherently incompatible or a contradiction in terms. Among these are were both anti-religious secularists on one hand, and Islamophobes on the other, who might be quite

different politically, but both groups considered ideas of gender justice to belong primarily to the secular west.

Another group who might respond with indignation and even outright rejection are conservative Muslims who argue that Islam liberated women 1400 years ago, and didn't need feminism. This group might find feminism not only unnecessary, but potentially dangerous, as it challenges their specific interpretation of Islam, including traditional gender roles. Finally, there is a group who might experience Islamic feminism as "a breath of fresh air, a language, a reality, a movement that speaks to the intersections of their lives and the harmonious blend of their commitment to faith and their pursuit of justice. They recognise the importance of intersectionality of oppressions and see Islamic Feminism as that which uplifts their unique experiences as Muslim women whose faith is an animating part of her struggle for justice in the community".

Shaikh described knowledge-making as a journey. "Travel metaphors capture beautifully the elements of fluidity and movement at the centre of the human project, the religious project and indeed I suggest, the scholarly project." She notes that that it is not just that a scholar moves through an external world that continuously changes, but on that journey the scholar's gaze transforms as she too grows and changes.

As a child growing up in downtown Durban, she was nurtured by a deep sense of Islamic spirituality. Her father would often come home and regale her with stories of what would now be known as 'friends of God', (the *awliya*). She was fascinated by these stories. "In my childhood the love of God was closely entwined with the love of community and that translated into social justice," she said. Another cherished memory was her mom leading prayers with ladies of the neighbourhood at home.

Her "religious teachers at religious school (*madrassa*) reinforced the idea that men were in charge religiously, and that God was to be feared." Fortunately, she adds, those teaching failed to affect her. Later as a young adult during apartheid, her relationship with religion became "more fraught because of the prevailing social norms that made women secondary in the family and in society. Sexism intersected with racism, ethnocentrism and shadism in the community created a suffocating environment," she notes.

"As a young student I rejected an Indian identity, embracing instead ideas promoted by black consciousness. In these struggles, Islam was the matrix through which I wrestled issues of existential purpose, spirituality, politics, human dignity and social justice." The Quranic teaching of standing up as 'a witness to God for justice' was her constant guide.

"The South African struggle I was exposed to recognised the intersection of oppression before the language of intersectionality was used for scholarship. As a graduate student I began to understand the insidious ways that patriarchy infiltrated many traditions. I also learned how women from diverse religious traditions resisted and instead engaged constructively as a foundation for justice and dignity. This is how the formative influences in my life inspired me to this scholarship in the area that has now come to be known as Islamic feminism," said Shaikh. She said it was crucial to recognise that varying communities and different traditions and political realities shape all scholarly journeys.

Shaikh said: "In the current era, the broader political realities and global debates that frame Islamic feminism are fraught. Geopolitically, particularly in the global North, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism stereotype Islam as fundamentally violent, evil and especially a misogynist religion. For Muslims committed to gender justice, the importance of holding a

"multiple critique" becomes vital – we need to, at once, be critical against essentialising, racist and Islamophobic narratives of the singularly 'oppressed Muslim woman' on the one hand, and remain steadfastly critical against patriarchy within our own communities on the other – a delicate balance indeed."

"It is very important for us to recognise that in many traditions women experience both affirming and diminishing elements. Within many traditions on the one hand there are central religious impulses that are deeply humanising, that provide answers to deepest existential questions of who am I? Why am I here? What is the purpose of my existence? Where do I go after death? For many women, religion also provides a sense of belonging and community, and inspires them to stand up for justice. Many Muslim women hear these and respond to these," she said.

"On the other hand, there are currents that are misogynist, sexist, patriarchal and seek to oppress women and reduce their humanity. And women Muslim communities, like women in other religious communities, react in a variety of ways. Some women are complicit with discriminatory practices, some bargain and negotiate with patriarchy, others reject religion entirely and walk away, yet others interrogate, resist patriarchal elements while remaining practitioners and believers, forging out a crucible of faith that is on their own terms," she noted.

"I need to make this point in those contexts where staunchly secular women dismiss all religions as patriarchal. And when they do so, they also end up also dismissing the ways in which religion has sustained women through some of the most gruelling, hard struggles of their lives. By so doing they ignore what has been life-giving for many religious women," Shaikh observed.

She said it was also important to contextualise the study of Islamic feminism in academia because much of the history of representing the subject in academic spaces continues to be haunted by the long shadow of enlightenment dualisms. Since Islamic feminism is clearly an explicitly religious positioning, it challenges the secularist elephant that often stubbornly persists in the room of academia. Now, decolonial thinkers have thoroughly critiqued the hegemonic secularistic claims of detached universal and objective scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. They observe that the coloniality of knowledge has resulted in the subjugation of indigenous knowledge, including many religious worlds. Decolonial ideas of "pluriversality," as a recognition of many universals, or "multiple ways of being and knowing", creates space for engaging religious worlds in more generous ways in academia.

Shaikh said: "Reflecting on some of these developments on subjectivity and epistemology, I find the Koranic concept of the *barzakh* quite important. The *barzakh* refers to an intermediate space, a state of in-betweenness referred to in Koranic verses, the space or the barrier between two oceans, saltwater oceans and sweet water oceans. The barrier or the *barzakh* signifies the intermediary world, a third space that can hold things simultaneously without becoming either of them. "It invites us to this third space beyond the cruder binaries of theology versus religious studies, secular versus religious knowledge, subject versus object, mind versus heart as two different modes of knowing, scholar versus believer, activist versus academic. Resisting these binaries allows us to explore forms of scholarly production that coherently can encompass ethical reflections, spiritual yearning, intellectual unfolding, and activism for justice in cosmopolitan contexts," she said.

In her research, Shaikh employed, among other things, research methods such as hermeneutics of suspicion, which covered deconstruction, critique and what she describes

with a garden metaphor of 'weeding,' as well as a 'hermeneutics of reconstruction' which addresses retrieval, reimagining and 'seeding and feeding' of new or marginalised liberatory pieces knowledges.

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Thami Nkwanyane

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer

Communication and Marketing Department

University of Cape Town

Rondebosch

Tel: (021) 650 5672

Cell: (072) 563 9500

Email: thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za

Website: www.uct.ac.za