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The identity of South African Muslim - women: the modern Muslim woman

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The Identity of South African Muslim - Women:

The modern Muslim woman

Raheemah Boomberg

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ABSTRACT

There are outstanding stereotypes about the realities of Muslim women, as neat categories, plastered on to Muslim women across the world. These inadequate representations of Muslim women's actualities stem from political images, provided by international media relating to Middle Eastern women. Not to say that some Muslim women are subjugated by patriarchy, the actual lives of many Muslim women in other states such as South Africa are different. Hence, this research study aims to better understand the identity of Muslim women in relation to broad socio-cultural systems, Islamic ideals and secular lifestyles. Conducting ethnographic, qualitative analysis within the discipline of Anthropology, the focus of this study pertained to a group of Muslim women found in a middle-upper class suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa. Ultimately Muslim women themselves deconstruct stereotypical ideas of what it means to be Muslim in secular society. Instead of resisting Islamic ideals, even though accustomed to modern society, Muslim women embrace these ideals and mediate how they identify themselves as well as the ways in which they, as modern Muslim women, express their identity to society. Muslim women are seen as self-determinants rather than inactive participants of modern Muslim communities.

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CHAPTER 1

1 Introduction: Research aim, Objective, Questions and Interests

1.1 Introduction

My religious beliefs are intertwined with my identity. It has served as a socially accepted justification for being married at an age many would consider too young in secular society. The confusion begins when I also reveal that I have the role of student while being married. The 'typical' Muslim woman is easily accepted by society as a married woman who assumes the role of caretaker and mother. My presence in this world, as a student or an individual, that is capable of adopting multiple roles, often understood as contradictory, is questioned by some and admired by others. There have been occasions where I have been questioned in the following way:

> "But you're married, how can you still be on campus? Does your husband allow it?"

These statements epitomise the perception of many in society about Muslim women, even in the democratic South Africa. The statement presumes two major flaws about society's judgements of Muslim women in Johannesburg and wider South Africa. Firstly, Muslim women can and do study or work. Secondly, being married and studying or working as a Muslim woman is a reality. Muslim women in Johannesburg should not be stereotypically placed as just wives and mothers, or even as hidden objects with no form of agency or autonomy. Preferred dress choices and practices

should not be deemed explicit indications that Muslim women have no agency or are not autonomous beings (Huisman & Hondagnue-Sotelo, 2005; Davary, 2009; Abu-Lugod, 2002). It is with this in mind that my interest in educating the wider society about Muslim women originates. The roles and social circumstances of Muslim women in Johannesburg is an interesting topic to explore, because it is dynamic and contested. It is not a question that can be answered without a closer look into the lives and circumstances of the women in question.

As a Muslim woman in Johannesburg, I am intrigued by the dynamic nature of our dispositions and the versatility of roles in society. Hence there is a necessity for academic knowledge concerning Muslim women in South Africa and particularly Johannesburg. The larger question that should be asked; what is the Identity of Muslim women in Johannesburg? To adequately represent such information, the following questions are pertinent to probe in solving the larger question: What kinds of roles do Muslim women assume? What are the seemingly mundane activities Muslim women engage in? How do they perceive themselves in relation to their individual and social being? What is the perception of Muslim women by other Muslim women? How does their religious affiliation impact or encourage various life choices? In which ways does being Muslim influence their social behaviour on a personal and communal level? I believe that these questions will provide a clearer and more realistic study of Muslim women in the twenty first century. This research aims to dismantle hegemonic ideas of the identity of Muslim women as singular and fixed; rather the identity of Muslim women should be understood as fluid and ever changing. The identity of Muslim women should be located within a specific socio-historical

context that considers factors such as race, ethnicity and class (Edross, 1997; Sader, 2008).

1.1.1 Literature Review

The theoretical debates I focus this research on are the following, Gender and identity. Such theories assist with engaging meaningful questions about what this study unravels about Muslim women. How does a Muslim woman perceive herself as an individual? What kinds of roles and priorities does she regard as fundamental? How do daily practices inform the roles and lifestyle of a Muslim woman? How do women mediate their chosen forms of dress practices? Ultimately, the focus is to grapple with the ways in which Muslim women claim an identity on a personal and societal level while connecting with gendered identities and religious influence. The literature discussed in this section comprises a range of issues and debates surrounding Identity formation, religious discourse focused particularly on Muslim women. An extensive gaze at past and current research conducted about Muslim women is provided in this section. In attempts to frame this study, the scope of literature mentioned extends not only from South Africa but encompasses actualities of Muslim women present in Britain.

This study is focused on the lived realities of Muslim women. It attempts to inquire about social circumstances of Muslim women in relation to their identity as impacted on by religious and secular ideals. Exploring their womanhood as Muslim's is a useful departure point to entirely understand Muslim women. At this point it is also important to note that within this study Muslim women are perceived to perform their

identity through daily practices and role-playing. Navigating these field sites (Gym/*Madrassah* [1] classes) the identities of Muslim women are affected and influenced by social institutions around them. I begin by introducing a general study on Gender and then refine the focus to literature specifically about Muslim women.

This research report aims to contribute to this knowledge and in doing so produce a valid anthropological representation of Muslim women in Johannesburg, South Africa. This section of the literature review focuses on knowledge produced about the experiences of Muslim women across the world. This literature specifically focuses on the formation of gendered identity in relation to religious influence, specifically Islam. This section is further divided into several sub-sections, each highlight and bring to the fore various discussions pertinent to subjectivities of Muslim women in Johannesburg. For example, as we see a range of academics referring to the abilities of better socioeconomic circumstances, Muslim women find themselves in places such as Britain or South Asia, comparisons can be drawn to the Muslim women of Johannesburg. This study ultimately aims to translate the notion that Muslim women in Johannesburg participate in a secular space while assuming hybrid and diverse, contradictory forms of identities.

1.1.2 South African Literature

South African literature about Muslim women's identity has two major arguments. Firstly, in terms of Islamic adjudication, men subjugate South African Muslim women in that they are unable to initiate divorce. Within this literature it is socio-economic

[1] An Islamic institution that teaches: Islamic principles, Quranic scripture and practical knowledge to Muslim children and adults.

circumstances Muslim women are victim to and not just Islamic doctrine. It is the responsibility of society, to ensure the protection and rights of Muslim women, and ultimately allow her to initiate a divorce (Domingo, 2005; Amien, 2006). Secondly, other articles argue that the identity of Muslim women in South Africa is not fixed or stable. The identity of Muslim women should be located within a specific socio-historical context that considers factors such as race, ethnicity and class (Edross, 1997; Sader, 2008). South African literature about Muslim's is generally inadequate, especially in representing micro-processes that exist between Muslim women and broader South African society. Closer observations of Muslim women and their subjectivities are relatively non-existent. This research study aims to broaden the scope of knowledge about Muslim women in post-Apartheid South Africa.

1.1.3 Gender – informed by social institutions

Islamic political and social institutions within secular South Africa assist in shaping the identity of Muslim women. Not to say that Muslim women aren't 'agentic' individuals however their lifestyle choices are influenced by institutions such as, the *Madrassah* and family units. I argue that these lifestyle choices result in gendered forms of identity such as assuming the roles of working mothers or career women. An individual does not merely assume a gendered identity but organisations and institutions found within society contribute to the creation of such (Whittier *et al,* 1995; Staggenborg, 1998).

Appropriate ways to live a good Muslim life are encouraged by religious ideals found within the teachings of the *Madrassah* class. Living a righteous and valuable Islamic life is role-played through being a mother and accepting responsibility over the

household. The gymnasium on the other hand is the space where Muslim women attempt to create personal identity in relation to broader secular influences. Ultimately, Muslim women navigate these spaces while enacting broader socio-cultural systems (Islamic religious ideals and secular society). As discussed later, Islamic ideals and living in secular society broadly affect the identity of Muslim women. Determining lifestyle choices of a family for women in Houghton and Killarney is part of the larger process where, gender relationships between husband and wife are negotiated. In other words, the institution of the "family acts as a dynamic social space" (Mohee, 2011; Gilbert, 1993). Within the dynamic space of the family, assuming necessary roles such as who should be the breadwinner or the caregiver constitutes Muslim woman's gendered identity. Documenting the inferior and unequal position of women in the family, studies have analysed how the construction and reinforcement of power, gender and patriarchy have informed women's status, as well as gendered roles and identities/subjectivities within sites such as the family unit and the household (Hartman, 1987; Pateman, 1988; Coontz, 1992; Perry Jenkins, 1994; Morgan, 1996; Okin, 1997; Mckie *et al,* 1999).

Islam's influence on the identities of Muslim women has been a topic of constant debate internationally, Keddie (2002) traces the literature produced by English scholars about women's history in the Middle East from the nineteenth century. She argues that, Westerners claim Muslim women in the Middle East suffer bad social conditions, directly resulted to/resulting from? Islamic beliefs found within those societies (see also Abu-Lugod, 2002: 784). For example, women in Algeria have suffered severe policies and terrorism by militant fundamentalists. Meanwhile in other States, such as Tunisia, women enjoy a better situation because of legislative

mechanisms, assisting them in making decisions about marriage and divorce (Makar, 1998). There are also instances where Muslim women have gained better access to educational qualifications over Muslim men, potentially resulting in the entrance of more Muslim women in the labour market (Dale *et al,* 2002; Dwyer & Shah forthcoming). Therefore, it is not entirely correct to argue Islamic beliefs directly and exclusively impact negatively on the identities and roles of Muslim women. The reality is that representation of Muslim women's conditions in the Middle East and all over the world for that matter can differ from one state to another. The Middle East cannot be considered an exclusive model of Muslim women's realities across the world.

Many articles discuss the identity of Muslim women and the stereotypes that have been provided by international media (Murji, 2010; Offenhauer, 2005; Sheikh *et al,* 2011; Abu-Lugod, 2002; Hannah Papenak, 1984; Davary, 2009; Huisman & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1995; Ahmed, 1992; Lewis, 2007; Dale *et al,* 2002; Edross, 1997; Mehta, 1997; Kambiz Ghanebessri, 2012; Sader, 2008; Offenhauer *et al* , 2005; Knott & Khoker, 1993; Basit, 1997; Haw *et al,* 1998; Mohamed, 2005; Dwyer, 2000; Kay, 2007; Brown, 2006; Afshar, 2008; Bowlby & Lloyd Evans, 2009; Phillips, 2009; Kiloran 1998; Brah, 1993). International media describe the lives of Muslim women as oppressed, secluded, and subjugated as a direct result of Islamic beliefs. The aforementioned authors have attempted to dismantle such singular and biased representations of Muslim women. Abu Lugod, while discussing the actual positions of Muslim women in the Middle East exclaims:

> . . . we need to develop, instead, a serious appreciation of differences among women in the world – as products of different histories, expressions of

different circumstances, and manifestations of differently structured desires." (2002: 783)

1.1.4 Identity - fluid and multiple

Muslim women in secular South Africa encounter an array of socio-cultural influences and as a result attain hybrid fluctuating identities similar to any other woman in America or the Middle East. While assuming valued roles as mothers, many Muslim women in Houghton and Killarney attempt marking themselves as determined professionals. A Muslim woman has the ability of satisfying motherhood and juggling a professional career, exposed by multiple social institutions. This section broadly discusses literature exploring this issue.

All of the Muslim women that participated in this study firmly established themselves as faithful Muslims. Religious ideals were extremely important for these women, thus encouraging the ideal of having nuclear families. As Islam encourages women to maintain the household as her primary space, Muslim women in Johannesburg are also capable of venturing into public space in the advent of determining their own individual being not just as wives and mothers but as career women- educated and employed. Muslim women are examples- discouraging the perception that gender identity of women is monolithic and homogenous as exclaimed by certain social theorists and mainstream feminists (Mahanty, 1988). Other literature further argues that gender identities are renegotiated, contested and debated. While being renegotiated and contested they give rise to multiple subjectivities and diverse gendered identities (Sader, 2008; Edross 1997; Butler, 1990).

1.1.5 Gender – performed

As mentioned above, the ways in which Muslim women in Houghton and Killarney exclaim their gendered identities are predominantly done revealed in forms of daily practices and role-playing. As others have argued the performance of gender identities, I appropriate the same argument for Muslim women of Houghton and Killarney. Participating in daily life, they enlist ways of performing their identities through active role-play. In turn Muslim women present their gendered identities through repetitive activities. To substantiate such a claim I refer to Judith Butler when discussing gender constitution:

> . . .gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which
>
> various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in
>
> time-an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts.*" (1988)

A Muslim woman's identity can be seen as performed through daily engagement with caring for children, attending work as well as committing to religious classes (Werbner *et al,* 2005).

1.1.6 Identity – modern discourse

The prevalence of Muslim's in the world leads one toward epistemological discussions within Anthropology. A discipline devoted to understanding and dealing with cultural difference can provide a rather critical grasp on terms such as: Islamic civilisation, Western civilisation and globalisation (Abu Lugod, 2002; Malik, 2004). These terms are products of history and commonly deployed to explain and classify diverse masses of people (Malik, 2004). Unfortunately, they do not adequately cater

for describing and representing the diverse being of a Muslim woman. It is just this existence of Muslim women that challenge hegemonic stereotypes. Aforementioned, Muslim women are not exclusively, socially and economically disabled but rather enjoy a strong sense of agency (Dale *et al,* 2002). Not only do many authors discuss the issue of misrepresentation (see kambiz & Ghanebassiri, 2012; Malik, 2004; Vahed & Jeppie, 2005) they also agree that Muslim women epitomise the necessity of accepting the existence of difference and multiplicity. A Muslim woman challenges neat categories. To deny a legitimate representation and encourage such categories is as unlawful as claiming that European women and women of colour have shared the same history. In allowing such categories to filter into the general understanding, of Islamic culture versus Islam as a religion, is problematic. In other words broad categories cannot fully verify the differences between Islamic religious teachings and the cultural implementation of such religious Islamic teachings. As it has done before political motives substantiate incorrect representation of Muslim women. Relevant writers on this topic include Abu Lugod and Leila Ahmed discussing the iconic figure of a Muslim woman wearing the veil as creating the binary opposition of the West as civilised, while Muslim societies are portrayed as backward and repressive. Nothing could be more incorrect than this notion as it encourages a form of cultural hierarchy (Afshar, 2008)

1.1.7 Gender Identity - dress practices

This section highlights various ideas focused on different forms of dress Muslim women practice. Dress practices by Muslim women stimulate criticism of Islam. Without consulting the actual women who don the *Hijab* or the Veil*,* hegemonic stereotypes have rendered Muslim women as oppressed (Ahmed, 1992; Ahmed, 1997;

Sader, 2008). The actualities of Muslim women, who wear Islamic modest dress, depend on the socio-political circumstances they find themselves. Historical, social and political circumstances influence dress practices of Muslim women. There are states where the *Burqa, Hijab,* or the veil have been discouraged (Shively, 2005). Whilst certain authors present Muslim women, who assume Islamic modest dress for reasons of virtue and 'God-fearingness', other authors explain the cultural justification for covering oneself in public space, an ideal that came much earlier than Islam (Keddi, 1990). Papanek argues that the *Burqa* should be recognised as a tool allowing women mobility while complying with the moral requirements of being separated and protected from men she is not related to (1982). The *Burqa* is a symbolic representation used to define a Muslim woman's identity and as a social distinction between men and women (Abu-lugod, 2002; Davary, 2009). Veiling is a dress practice Muslim women use within a post-traditional context to maintain their religious values while still participating in a Western society (Read & Bartowski, 2000). Abu Lugod mentions:

> "Black head cloth cover over the face in the company of older respected men is actually considered a voluntary act of women who are deeply committed to being moral and have a sense of honor tied to their family" (2002: 786)

Other authors have found that Muslim women assume Islamic modest dress, be it the *Hijab, veil* or *Hijab,* as a sign of religious devotion to being not only moral but also pious (Abu Lugod, 1995; Abu lugod, 1998; Brenner, 1996; El Guindi, 1999; Macleod, 1991; Ong, 1990; Mahmood, 2001; Lewis, 2007).

1.1.8 Gender Identity - socio-economic circumstances

Muslim women as prescribed by the Quran do not need to be breadwinners of the household instead they are preferred as guardians and caregivers to children. Roles such as wife and mother are highly valued roles in Islam. This being said, Islam does not prohibit Muslim women attaining employment or education but in fact allows and encourages women to do so. Access to education and employment can in many ways provide Muslim women with a wider range of choices about lifestyle. In this section I present literature about creating an identity of Muslim women in relation to economic situations. Perhaps it is true that Muslim women in the Middle East may suffer at the hands of a Patriarchal society acting as Islamic culture, however there are many Muslim women in other socio economic contexts that are able to manipulate employment and education to their advantage. As found in this research and other studies (see Dale *et al,* 2002; Dwyer & Shah forthcoming; Sader, 2008; Brah, 1993), Muslim women should be acknowledged professionals and proactive contributors to economies not only mothers and wives in the home. In places like the United Kingdom and South Africa, Muslim women are professionals and mothers at the same time. As a result Muslim women create the opportunities to renegotiate their roles within family units.

As is with the identity of any woman, their positionality in this world has to be seriously considered based on more than single aspects of society. Positionality refers to the physical and ideological truths surrounding Muslim women. Butler (1990) maintains that it is important to recognise the intersection of gender with racial, class, ethnic and sexual issues. In this way women are allocated their diverse social realities. In other words circumstances of Muslim women should be reconciled with

acknowledging the influence of racial, ethnic or class contentions. Accepting aforementioned influences of globalisation means the acceptance of the possibility of a Muslim woman as mother, professional and wife. This is to accept the multiple and complex nature of a Muslim woman's identity in twenty first Century South Africa (Brown, 2006).

1.1.9 Identity – consumer practices

Considering knowledge of consumerism and Muslim people in general is crucial when dealing with a broad argument made in this research study. As stated before Muslim women within Houghton/Killarney are influenced and impacted by secularism and enact secular ideals through consumption practices. Therefore it is important to recognise other representations of Muslim women and broadly Muslim identity found in other places regarding consumption. A study by Sheikh *et al* (2011) found that Muslim women consider marriage as an equal relationship where they can also contribute financially to the household. This allows them to assume an identity traditionally associated with men as breadwinners. Other studies focus on Muslim identity mediated through commodities and consumption practices. The attendance of Halaal certified restaurants, purchasing Islamic lifestyle magazines, and subscribing to Islamic television channels are examples that assist in creating a Muslim identity (Gokariksel & Mclarney, 2010; Lewis, 2010; Abu-Lugod, 1995; 2005; Oncu, 1995; Saktanber, 1997; 2002; Gole, 2002; Fealy & White, 2008; Fischer, 2008; Pink, 2009).

1.1.10 Conclusion

Based on the review of past and present literature about issues of Gender and Identity in this chapter a few key ideas are important to outline. Society and larger social institutions inform gendered identity but it is also important to recognise that Muslim women (especially) within secular states like South Africa (and Britain) create hybrid and multiple forms of identity that are seemingly contradictory. For this particular study, the creations of gendered identities are done through active role-playing. In the preceding literature the lived realities of Muslim women found in middle to upper class suburbs in Johannesburg have not been reflected.

CHAPTER 2

2 Methodology

The relationship between Identity and Religion are closely associated. Islam is often referred to as a 'way of life' and as such, Muslims intimately experience Islam. Muslim women in this study are deeply connected to the Islamic 'way of life'[2]. The nature of this research meant that classified issues of their identity and religious life had to be explored. Eventually personal and private information about Muslim women and the identity thereof emerged. Therefore, accessing knowledge pertaining to the identity of Muslim women was not only tricky but also involved discussion and witnessing of sensitive issues. In the following section, a large emphasis is placed on the benefits of the Gymnasium/*Madrassah,* justifying the validity of this research-while mention is made to the inaccessibility of other possible field sites, such as the private space of Muslim women's homes. A large portion of this section discusses the relevance of choosing the Gymnasium and *Madrassah* as primary field sites. Later, there is discussion about the benefits and challenges encountered while conducting this study. However, a constructive approach to methodological dilemmas is preferred. Reference is made to Pierre Hugo (1990); a compilation of chapters concerning the research challenges and methodological issues about social science work. This book is most useful because it examines methodological issues within South African contexts. These case studies enlighten the researcher to the positive nature of challenges and difficulties whilst conducting research. Consequently methods of enquiry resulted in interesting and extraordinary knowledge about Muslim women in

[2] This means Muslim women attempt to live according to prescriptions by Quranic scripture and advice given by Islamic scholars. Such prescriptions and advice inform personal perceptions and connections to Islam.

a secular society. Knowledge produced by this study about Muslim women is crucial and significant. The identity of Muslim women and the ways in which they create, negotiate and express their identity in secular South Africa is valuable. Previous studies about Muslim women fail to encapsulate knowledge about Muslim women in a Post-apartheid context and within social spaces such as a gymnasium and *Madrassah.*

Research was conducted casually and often interaction with Muslim women occurred through formal introduction by the main informants. Participating in classes at the gym/*Madrassah* allowed for observing and engaging with Muslim women of Houghton and Killarney. Conversations encompassed queries of familial relations or requested information about their studies if they studied, children if they had any or general talk about current events. This was the initial strategy to gain a closer relationship with Muslim women. Eventually, discussions of private family matters and personal opinions about Islam and other Muslims generated a landscape of the complex realities of Muslim women. The majority of the restricted information involved one Muslim woman's opinion about another and was potentially destructive for social and familial relationships. Hence, caution was necessary when delving into the social lives of Muslim women.

2.1.1 Historical Information of the Madrassah

During Dutch rule at the Cape, Muslims were restricted from explicitly practicing Islam. The emergence of British rule lifted these restrictions on Muslims. Around the

beginning of the nineteenth century the building of Mosques were permitted. During this time Islam in South Africa experienced an interval of swift growth. It was decided that a trained Islamic Scholar by the name of Abu Bakr Effendi be imported from Turkey. Abu Bakr Effendi subsequently established an Islamic Girls School and the school of Higher Islamic Theology. Islamic schools that were independent of the Mosques were only instituted in the early part of the twentieth Century; these are referred to as *Madrasah's* (Sonn, 1994). The emergence of Apartheid law had a crippling impact on Islamic education. The Group Areas Act meant that Muslim people were relocated thus abandoning the *Madrasahs.* However, during the 1960's a new kind of Madrasah surfaced, these were after school programs that were in addition to public school education (Da Costa, 1994; Haron, 1998). Madrasahs still exist today as a formally instituted way of educating and rearing Muslim children in theology of the Holy Quran and Islamically acceptable practices of a Muslim. Madrasahs, as a social institution form a key process of a Muslim's life and subjectivity. In this research study, the term 'subjectivity' loosely refers to the way in which an individual subjectively engages, perceives and understands the world. Normally children attend Madrasah from the age of six years old until the age of seventeen and many adults, especially Muslim women within the area of Houghton and Killarney, continue attending Madrasah weekly. The kinds of regulatory practices that are taught in this space are fundamental to learning how to be a 'good Muslim woman'. Formation of Muslim women's identity as prescribed by religious ideals in terms of dress practices, role-play choices and a general understanding of Muslim womanhood are negotiated and contested publicly by Muslim women. *Madrassah,* is therefore an important social institution mainly concerned with educating and socialising Muslim people. The *Madrassah* became a forum whereby Muslim women

negotiated and re-negotiated aspects of their religious life, subsequently filtering into their choices of daily practices and fundamental beliefs about firstly being a woman and secondly being Muslim.

2.1.2 Why Houghton/Killarney Community

The community of Houghton and Killarney was chosen mainly because of already established access to the research participants. Moreover, other South African Muslims critique Muslim women of Houghton and Killarney due to the latter living seemingly lavish lifestyles. Islam encourages a life of simplicity and discourages luxury as it may negatively affect the spiritual capacity of a Muslim. A community such as Houghton and Killarney is controversial in nature because it is associated with consumer capitalism (Uddin, 2003). To fully understand the ways in which Muslim women negotiate their identity specific to their appearance and body, a chosen field site was the gym. The gym is useful to explore, as a social and public space, for Muslim women because it is out of the private home space where women consciously place their bodies. While exercising, Muslim women are within a social space that is compact enough for them to become familiar with other women and possibly non-related men. Particular attention was focused on Muslim women's dress practices at the gym, the ways in which they interact with other women and the reasons for attending a gym that strange males also visit. The gymnasium broached individual subjectivities of Muslim women related to secularism. The Old Edwardian Gym has a Virgin Active and Kauai Restaurant, which is open to all and this field site is based within Houghton. There are Muslim women who attend other female-only exercise classes within Houghton/Killarney area. Other Muslim women don't attend gym at all

although the focus was on the substantial amount of Muslim women who do attend Old Ed's Gymnasium. Muslim women that do attend Old Ed's became the focus of this study, because they intentionally ventured into public space. Consciously attending the Old Ed's gym communicates agentic capabilities of these particular Muslim women. This does not imply that women who attend single sex gym's or don't attend gym at all are not capable of agency. However, including the Muslim women who attend Old Ed's and those who do not would be too broad a scope for this particular study. A comparative study of the Muslim women members of Old Ed's versus those women who aren't members in relation to their identity might be an interesting research that could be further explored.

As previously mentioned the choice of the gymnasium and *Madrassah* as primary research field participation sites was due to the accessibility of research participants. Observing Muslim women between the ages of eighteen and forty was a primary concern. Choosing a Muslim woman within a stipulated age- between eighteen and forty was due to the capability of further connecting and creating more social networks within the community. Four main research participants, between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, were chosen due to their social connections to each other via friendships as well as connections to several more Muslim women that were eventually accessed[3]. Having access to the homes of Muslim women was considered prohibited given that Muslim women within this community insisted on privacy and confidentiality. Regularly being in the physical and very private space of Muslim women's homes would have been an intrusion. Secondly, physical allocation of time Muslim women could spare was limited. Muslim women within this community were

[3] For snowball techniques see (Bruce L. Berg, 2000)

restricted due to time constricting household duties, study and work-related schedules. Apart from consistent but limited interaction with Muslim women, other interactions with Muslim women arose. Spontaneous coffee dates occurred allowing a slightly more relaxed environment for these Muslim women involved with this research to divulge more about themselves. These dates are valuable for this study as complex social systems became apparent as one Muslim woman engaged with another. At times coffee dates involved a research participant and I only, provoking deeper engagement. While at other times a few Muslim women interacted with each other providing circumstances similar to informal focus group discussions. In this setting Muslim women were prompted to discuss issues around daily activities, Islam, family responsibilities, life choices and other Muslim women from within the community.

2.1.3 Qualitative Research

Conducting Qualitative research within these chosen field sites aimed to identify so as to explain the ways in which people operate in these spaces. The point was to account for and understand the ways in which Muslim women manage their daily lives within the Gymnasium and *Madrassah* (Berg, 2000). Within primary field sites employing the technique, participant observation was the predominant choice of interaction. This became a central research technique because Muslim women showed more compliance to my casual presence instead of being petitioned for formal or sudden informal interviews. In fact this method yielded intricate social relations amongst Muslim women and the researcher. In *Maids and Madams* Cock (1980) explains that she had to access the private domains of the household. She discusses methods of research she employed still maintaining the choice of semi-structured interviews as

being the most useful within that particular setting. When Cock did interview people she refers to a maxim by Beatrice Webb "Accept what is offered". I too employed this strategy in order to gain a closer and more comfortable relationship as well as information with my research participants.

2.1.4 The Madrassah

During *Madrassah* a customary affair - hosting a concert was to occur during the time this research was conducted. Closer friendships between researcher and research participant materialised when I offered help in relation to administrative duties. Volunteering and assisting with administrative duties for the concert procured trust and the affection of research participants. In achieving a successful concert, crucial information about the social-workings (relations, customs, perceptions one woman had of another) between Muslim women surfaced. During *Madrassah* between fifteen and twenty minutes of break-time presented the opportunity to engage more freely with Muslim women. In this setting Muslim women enquired about my social presence. My own lifestyle choices were questioned in the following ways: What do you do? Do you work or study? Are you married? Who are you married to? Do you have any children? In attempting to learn about Muslim women, they required similar information about me. On several occasions research participants directed questions about familial relations within Houghton and Killarney toward me. Muslim women affirmed for themselves about which family I was connected to, to know for themselves 'where' I come from. This mattered for them because within Houghton and Killarney kinship relations socially demarcate people where reputations of families are socially paramount. For this reason Houghton and Killarney are

recognised as an intimate community. Some families are related to each other in extended ways, be it distant cousin relationships or relations forged through marriage. Families are also aware of each other socially by way of formal and informal functions. Children's parties and wedding events are but a few examples of gatherings where families socialise and interact with each other.

2.1.5 The Gymnasium: Old Ed's

Social relations amongst Muslim women were wider spread than only at the Gymnasium. In other words Muslim women interacted with each other in ways that are less intimate than they did within the space of the *Madrassah.* While *Madrassah* meant more intimate forms of engaging and closer relations between Muslim women, the Gymnasium exhibited cliques of women and single women who did not socialise much with others. There were Muslim women who knew each other personally and interacted in casual encounters at the gym in addition to alternate forms of social meetings, whether it is coffee dates at the Gym's Kauai restaurant or dates away from the gym. The few who preferred to be alone attended gym for the singular purpose of exercising and exclaimed that there was not much time to socialise with others and had no desire to do so. The gymnasium in this community is considered a hostile environment whereby Muslim people in general are heavily scrutinised by each other. In a later chapter I expand on the hostility of the gymnasium and the kinds of unfavourable social interactions that occurred in this space. Similar to Cock, introducing the research focus was done in a casual manner (1990). Introducing myself as any other individual, and not focussing on my interaction with them as solely for the purpose of the research study, assisted research participants to feel more comfortable and accommodating toward discussing themselves. Documenting

discussions meant that sometimes a visit to bathroom cubicles or withdrawing to the privacy of my vehicle to note down all that could be remembered.

2.1.6 Being Reflexive

The main interest in Muslim women stemmed from my own identity as a Muslim woman being fluid and fascinating. Once interaction with research participants began, the realisation that other Muslim women felt the same way manifested a desire to adequately represent them. There were benefits of being a Muslim woman researcher as networking and communicating with them was manageable. However an equal amount of difficulties and challenges quickly appeared. Advantages and difficulties in relation to researching Muslim women produced phenomenal results. The results thereof produced knowledge of Muslim women as agentic, dynamic and multiplex.

Being Muslim meant that the Muslim women connected with me on common ground. Jacklyn Cock describes research methods she employed when researching domestic workers in South Africa during the Apartheid era. Titled *Maids and Madams* (1980), the research focussed on the lived realties of black women during the Apartheid years in South Africa. Cock's research method while conducting semi-structured interviews preferred the interviewer to be of similar characteristics of research participants. The similarities in attributes assisted in gaining trust and a good rapport with the research participants (1990). For this study it further assisted to be socially recognised through the main informants because of relational networks. Those who were not initially accessible eventually acceded to the idea of interacting with the researcher because

they trusted the judgement of another main informant or an already acquired research participant. Pierre Hugo (1990) discusses challenges he faced in the Northern provinces of South Africa in *Truth Be In The Field*. As well as the aforementioned research, Hugo's research occurred during the hostile Apartheid era. Even though the focus of his chapter is on the difficulty of confrontational political unrest, it nonetheless applies within this context when considering the aforementioned socially hostile environment in which Muslim women in Houghton and Killarney find themselves. Hugo urges the positive benefits of "equipping oneself with a good working knowledge of the chosen community" He then refers to Gordon:

> " . . . the respondent often judges the researcher not on the basis of
>
> his skill in interviewing but on the basis of his knowledge and interest
>
> in those subjects in which the respondent is an expert" (1975:22)

Therefore it proved useful to possess a certain level of logistical knowledge about the Muslim women. Additionally being a Muslim woman researcher assisted participating and observing with a certain level of propriety. Gordon further comments:

> "Such special knowledge helps the interviewer 'gain access to the
>
> respondent in situ; it helps him understand the respondent who refers
>
> to local detailed information, it provides him with the universe of
>
> discourse needed and gives the respondent respect for and confidence
>
> in the interviewer. (1975: 228)

Alternatively the presence of a Muslim woman researcher amongst Muslim women

periodically became contested and questioned. Muslim women were sometimes critical toward the idea of one Muslim woman enquiring about another purely for research purposes. As previously mentioned, Muslim women within this community insisted on privacy and confidentiality. In addition to this, the social being and opinions of the researcher were questioned. Muslim women persisted in learning as much about me as they would of any other Muslim woman. They often socially placed me in relation to my family members, either granting me validity or quickly mistrusting my presence. The courage of Muslim women to question my place as a Muslim woman and researcher displays Muslim women as interrogative and agentic. Questioning my presence implies that they are interested in questioning their surroundings as well as their social realities. A fundamental obligation on my part was to be reflexive as employed in the way that others have prescribed (see Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Van Maanen, 2011) According to Berg the reflexive characteristic implies:

> "That the researcher understands that he or she is part of
>
> the social world(s) that he or she investigates" (2000: 139)

Recognising that as a qualitative researcher but also as a Muslim woman my presence within this community can be described as one that is active. I am not just present and invisible, throughout the research I actively participated in the social world of Houghton/Killarney. Therefore it became essential for me to indicate the 'location of the self within the constellations of gender, race, social class and so forth' (De Vault, 1995; Williams & Heikes, 1993) through the perspective of *Reflexivity* I became aware of my own position and interests and how they in turn affected the research. Furthermore, a reflective process between research participants and I enabled my

emotional retraction whilst interrogating instances of bias. Therefore, the study extends an objective and more comprehensive representation of Muslim women.

2.1.7 Challenges

Difficulty arose once rapport was gained with the research participants. Trusting me then further entailed the research participants dispensing knowledge of other Muslim women in ways that were potentially destructive for social and familial relationships (Discussed later in more detail)[4]. Many Muslim women commented on a few others found within the community in ways that were personally biased and opinionated. Before concluding about the realities of these particular Muslim women, certain facts had to be authenticated. Hence, I had to assume the role of investigator for two reasons: the first being ethical and the second being to fully understand the nature of Muslim women's identity in Houghton/Killarney. Confirming such sensitive information about others meant that sometimes the entry of introduction was not entirely true. In other words it was stated that the focus of the research was exclusively focussed on the roles of Muslim women when in fact (in only those cases) the aim was to acquire tales of rumour and gossip. In one particular case I initially engaged in conversation about the roles of motherhood and wife-hood. Once a sense of comfort was felt, extracting information about other Muslim women became easier. Even though the gym and *Madrassah* classes were primary field sites, alternate circumstances to learn about Muslim women arrived. The main informants occasionally visited restaurants with others and requested my presence. These

[4] A later chapter discusses rumour and gossip within the Houghton/Killarney community.

opportunities occurred only a few times yet provided the study crucial information about Muslim women. Topics of discussion were generally about other Muslim women of the community, many of whom attended the gym or *Madrassah* and previously participated in the research. Although these encounters contributed substantial amounts of information pertaining to Muslim women they were also sensitive situations. Some women had feelings of animosity toward the women I initially spoke to. The Muslim community of Houghton/Killarney is one where social relationships are relatively close - Muslim women and families know each other and in some way are socially connected[5].

The predominant difficulty was formally conducting interviews with Muslim women due to their insistence on privacy and confidentiality. Muslim women were unwilling to engage in interviews where a voice recorder was present. In fact note-taking on a piece of paper for some ignited feelings of discomfort. Muslim women were also hesitant if the research stimulated information from them that they would only share with their closest friends or information they wouldn't share at all. (See Roberts, 1959; Preston Whyte, 1969).

Hence, the use of participant observation, semi-structured, informal interviews and deceptive techniques became necessary. While conducting fieldwork in Port Elizabeth, De Jongh explored the views of black industrial workers toward liaison committees and labour relations. As this research happened during the Apartheid era, researchers

endured many physical restrictions. Unfortunately there was a general unease of interviewing managers and workers thus other methods proved profitable:

> "To presume that data obtained, for example, exclusively by means of an interviewing strategy, even a very good one, is either sufficiently comprehensive or substantial, is to deny the efficacy of other 'field-work senses' that are at the researchers disposal." (Berg, 1990:46)

In this study other methodological strategies produced indispensable knowledge, since any interview whether formal or not has the purpose of making people talk about themselves (Madge, 1965).

2.1.8 Conclusion

Methodological challenges often display interesting and significant information about society. To fully appreciate the significance of this particular study means the methodological dilemmas have to be understood optimistically. Recognised in this section is the ability of creative strategies to generate fruitful knowledge about Muslim women. Confidentiality and privacy appeared initially, as a challenge for adequately attaining information about Muslim women, nevertheless provided rich qualitative research material. Benefits and challenges encountered during the process of this research study cultivated ideas of Muslim women as agentic, dynamic and multiplex. It also provided a closer look at the ways in which Muslim women navigate and negotiate their identity within a secular state. Perhaps, further studies could include information about Muslim women in other social contexts besides the

gym or *Madrassah*. A comparative study between the kinds of Muslim women recognised in this study and those that were not accessible might add significant value toward the knowledge of Muslim women across Southern Africa and other states alike.

CHAPTER 3

3 Analysis: The Modern Muslim Woman

In this section I predominantly refer to Christine Jacobsen's work titled *troublesome threesome: feminism, anthropology and Muslim women's piety* (2011). Jacobsen's work is crucial to theoretically frame this chapter as it assists in highlighting the major arguments of this research. Jacobsen relates to ethnographic research about Muslim women in Norway. Her focus refers to 'understand women's religious piety in relation to questions of self, agency and resistance' (2011: 65). Throughout the text Jacobsen constantly refers to feminist notions of agency, autonomy and desire. This reading of concepts such as agency, autonomy and the self articulates and situates ethnographic material of this study in relation to the broader argument of Muslim women 'agentically' negotiating multiple identities. There exists a tension between being a Muslim woman while living in secular South Africa. What initially seems a tension is in fact a resolution, this is apparent by the ways in which Muslim women negotiate multiple identities. I explore apparent tensions between leading an ideal, modest, pious Islamic lifestyle while striving for a modern and secular lifestyle. There is a dichotomy between Islamic and modern concerning the performative behaviour of Muslim women established in the roles and choices they make.

Presenting the Muslim women of Houghton/Killarney I begin this chapter with a descriptive section on the Apartheid and post- Apartheid history of Muslim people in South Africa. A narrative of the physical space of Houghton/Killarney illuminates 'the modern lifestyle' Muslim women enjoy while they go about their daily lives. The

main discussion of this chapter explores the apparent conflict between Muslim women's religious identities and at the same time, creations of modern identities. This chapter concludes that in actuality Muslim women formulate a multiple religious and secular identity by utilising agency in resolving the disparities between religious piety and modern lifestyle choices.

Muslim presence in South Africa occurred in the eighteen Century with the arrival of convicts and slave converts to the Cape. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, restrictions on Muslim's publicly practicing Islam were lifted under British rule. Not only were places of public worship (mosques) built but Islam also enjoyed a period of rapid growth in South Africa. While Muslim presence in South Africa is affiliated to both people of Malaysian and Indian descent, the focus in this study is on Muslim women that are of Indian descent. A new phase of Indian Muslim existence began in South Africa during the 1860s. Natal witnessed an importation of both Hindu and Muslim Indian labourers initially limited to the coastal regions but which soon advanced toward the interior parts of South Africa. Starting as labourers, the Muslim population have prospered in South African society becoming an increasingly literate population as well as succeeding in professional occupations (Haron, 1998).

During the Apartheid era Muslims have lived within close proximity to each other, the group areas act designated people of Indian descent to areas such as Fordsburg and Mayfair and Pageview. Within these close-knit communities, Muslim's have established *Madrassah's*, Mosques and other social institutions both religious and secular (see Sonn, 1994). Their pronounced foundation has produced Muslim's with a

strong sense of 'Muslimness' (Tayob, 1996). Racial divisions classified people as white, black, coloured or Indian. Muslim Indians were recognized as Indian with other Hindu migrants resulting in an allegiance between them for the purpose of protecting their economic and political rights. It was their shared 'Indianness' that allowed the Muslim population to be united with the Hindu population against whites and Africans (Bhana, 1997). With the expansion of educational opportunities and economic mobility, the 1960s saw younger and better-educated Muslims challenge traditional conceptions of Islam while an emergent *Ulama*[6] began shaping local Muslim communities (Vahed, 2000). Islam in South Africa became a contested phenomenon. However an emerging revivalism of Islam was a result of the Muslim youth although eventually the Muslim community preferred conservative views of Islam (Vahed, 2000).

Post- Apartheid South African Muslim's live within a democratic State that does not support an extreme Islamic world-view. Since this is the case, Muslim people have made a greater effort to improve personal spiritual piety. Examples of behavioural transformations are, Muslim women increasingly wearing modest clothing and the emergence of children attending Muslim schools. Now the *Ulama* maintain a close association with 'Islamic truth' and to contest the *Ulama* means to then question the essence of the truth of Islam. Recently Muslim people have attempted to claim their own Islamically compliant industry within South African society. Islamic compliancy, relating to financial services and lifestyle institutions, are examples of the enterprises Muslim's have introduced and maintained in South Africa. Islamic banking and investment is a field that Muslim's have rapidly improved. Al Baraka, an Islamic

[6] A group of Islamic scholars trusted by Islamic society

bank that invests in companies that do not deal with gambling, non-halaal foods or alcohol is a popular bank situated in Fordsburg (Vahed & Jeppie, 2005). Islamic media such as CII (Islamic Television Channel) cater for lifestyle segments (religious education, consumer goods) that are Sharia compliant. An alternative to magazines like the *Cosmopolitan* is *Muslim woman.* This magazine aims to project images of the ideal Muslim woman (Vahed & Jeppie, 2005). *Radio Islam* and *Voice of the Cape* are popular radio channels catering to Muslims across South Africa. These establishments assist Muslim's to attain a social identity within South Africa no matter the economic class they fall under. Muslim women are constantly confronted with consumer products both on an international and national scale. Muslim women entrepreneurs arrange small to medium sized businesses that sell *Abayas, Hijabs* and other Islamic attire products. Some produce dresses and *Hijabs* locally while others import haute couture *Abayas.* Social media assist in connecting South African Muslim women to popular Islamic Fashion wear found in places like Dubai and the UK. Popular Islamic *Fashionistas*[7] from British Muslim communities are namely, Amenakin and Dina Tokio, they blog and circulate on widespread social media such as twitter, Instagram and Facebook about the latest modest fashion trends. Muslim women within Houghton/Killarney constantly flaunt expensive imported *Abayas* at *Madrassah* while non-conservative Muslim women enjoy internationally imported western attire in both the private and public space. Consumption of both Islamic and Western clothing is not only fashionable but also imperative for the expression of a modern Muslim woman's identity.

[7] Popular International fashion bloggers

The modern Muslim women participants of this research exist amongst the exclusive and illustrious estate in Johannesburg, Houghton/Killarney. Each property ranges from a thousand square metres to an acre of beautiful and majestic houses and gardens, some modern and some vernacular to Italian villas. The suburb of Houghton is set within the central areas of Johannesburg, close to major motorways and surrounded by neighbourhoods such as; Killarney, Norwood, Rosebank and Saxonwold. The historical residents of the area during the Apartheid era were mostly wealthy Jewish, white people. The suburb has changed quite a bit since then, with the influx of Indian people, the place has been cynically referred to as the "new Mayfair" by some South African Muslim's. Mayfair has long been the area of many Indian people, specifically Muslim people, for many years during the Apartheid era and until now. Houghton is now popularly known as the neighbourhood of the late Nelson Mandela and other wealthy members of South African societies. Driving around the suburb of Houghton one sees many Muslim women with *Hijab* and niche sunglasses in large expensive motor vehicles. Third generation family members are the youngest of the Houghton residents. Some have family that have lived there for the past thirty years, parents that built homes and brought up their children through striving as entrepreneurs. The trend follows that children of these homes get married and have the option to build homes (just as big) next to their parents. Other children marry and decide to reside in apartments within the Killarney area. Other families have only recently managed to afford the property move into Houghton, having laboured before and having lived in other Indian areas such as Lenasia, Johannesburg South and Fordsburg.

The fancy and most recent motor vehicles parked in the private guarded driveways range from three hundred thousand Rand to millions of Rands worth of automobile technology. Amidst the expensive homes and driveways are gardens where children play and families entertain guests. Mothers hurry their children into cars so that they may attend private schools or afternoon sessions at various *Madrassah's*. The most popular and established *Madrassahs* for children are found in the two main mosques. *Masjid-ul-Furqan* commonly referred to as second avenue mosque and then the *Madrassah* on West Street. The West street and second avenue mosques are the community mosques that are visited by all. Men attend prayers, five times a day and women attend functions or drop-and-pick-up their children to and from *Madrassah.* The mosques are majestic structures similar to the houses that have been built in the area, only much larger. The community through the resident's financial contributions built Second Avenue Mosque. West street mosque secured an investment by an international Saudi politician. Ultimately both mosques were expensive to build and are consistently busy throughout the year. There are prayers five times a day, care takers who live on site and many programmes, mostly for men but also for women too.

During the course of this research study a major focus on the identity of Muslim women was in relation to how they construct religious-selves. Studying the issues surrounding the complexity of women's religious piety and 'crafting religious selves' is a popular trend within feminist literature (see Gross, 1996). Daily activities exemplify performative ways Muslim women enact the 'good Muslim woman'. These performative acts include, taking children to and from school, attending the gym and

or showing up at *Madrassah.* Reasons for these performative acts, signifying the way of 'good Muslim women', will be analysed later. The primary field site for this particular aspect of Identity formation was a central feature of the *Madrassah.* Muslim women attended the *Madrassah* at least twice a week and would discuss, be educated and learn about various topics of Islam. It should be noted that similar to ethnographic research as conducted by Jacobsen, Muslim women find their way to *Madrassah* voluntarily and from a position of wilful choice (Jacobsen, 2011). *Apas* (Islamic female teachers) would explain verses of the *Quran* (Scripture) and their current relevance for Muslim women. They would also educate Muslim women about the practical ways of living an Islamic life. Maintaining a *halaal* (permissible) lifestyle is crucial, eating meat that is slaughtered in the Islamic way[8]. Amidst teaching of the *Quranic* scripture as well as practical laws and regulations, Muslim women are advised by *Apas* to behave in a way that is modest, the goal being to achieve piety. The following section briefly discusses the *Apas* and relays ethnographic material on the ways in which they inform piety within the context of the *Madrassah.* The foremost argument throughout this chapter is, related to the differences and contradictions, between living a pious life and being present in a modern, secular Houghton/Killarney.

Muslim women who attend the *Madrassah* consider themselves lucky and blessed because they believe, they have been directed toward the truth of Islam. Islamic education allows them a greater understanding of how to live an Islamic life. It is also

[8] Halaal meat is a result of a Muslim person slaughtering an animal (chicken and meat) while announcing the name of Allah (God). The main artery of the animal has to be slit and the blood should be drained off from the animal to rid it of toxins. Muslim's are not allowed to eat animal meat that has not been slaughtered in this way and they are not allowed to consume the meat of a pig.

believed, attaining piety through understanding what is required to be a 'good Muslim woman' will assist for salvation in the after- life. The *Apas* possess complete supremacy within the space of the *Madrassah.* Muslim women who attend *Madrassah* entirely trust and seldom question the authority or teachings of the *Apa.* There are two *Apas* who participated in this study; they both attended an Islamic school situated in the South of Johannesburg known as the *Darul-Uloom*[9]. A brief biographical account of the *Apas,* as explained by them during the course of the research, is provided.

A recent debate that in fact has occurred within Houghton/Killarney is a relook at the ways in which Muslim womanhood is understood, practiced and what it means to be a 'good Muslim woman', in terms of the distinction between cultural practices and true Islamic principles. The next section outlines ethnographic material, particularly focused on Muslim women taught by a female *Apa* who strongly rejects the idea of women being mistreated and disrespected as based on Islamic teaching. Rejecting the notion that those cultural versions of Islam, which subjugate women to men, are religious when they are in fact 'associated with cultural traditions of the parental generation' (Anderson, 2005; Jacobsen, 1998; Roy, 2004; Schmidt, 2002; 2005). For instance, during a class one day the *Apa* refers to the customs of marriage within the Indian Muslim community of Houghton/Killarney. Parental and older generations seem to prefer their children to marry into other families who are from the same village as they are related to ancestrally in India. For the older generations the logic behind this reasoning is so that couples have some form of compatibility in their

[9] An Islamic educational institution which offers teenage to young adult males and females (separate) Islamic education pertaining to the Doctrine of Sharia Law, Indo-paki Islamic customs, Arabic and so forth.

marriage and similarities in terms of their family customs. According to *Apa Ahlam* while this may seem logical it hinders many youngsters from marrying those whom they really love and would prefer to marry and which often lead to fights and fallouts between them and their parents. *Apa Ahlam* acknowledges this dilemma within the community and strongly exclaims to the older women in class:

> "And, now, those women who insist that their son or daughters marry a memin[10] boy, this is not Islamic! Don't say that it is! We don't do this anymore" (*Apa Ahlam*)

Within this statement recognising the socio-cultural issues are vital. *Apa Ahlam* attempts to make the older women within the class understand that the social practices of older generations with regard to marriage are not rooted in Islamic Principles. Rather she wants the women to understand that it is a cultural practice. Alternatively there is much literature from Europe [11] that deals with younger Muslim's distinguishing from what is Islamic and what is relative to cultural customs. Similar to the *Apa Ahlam* other researchers of Muslim experiences in Europe demonstrate:

> " . . . showed how religious argumentations were used against women-unfriendly 'traditional' practices, and how an engagement with the Islamic tradition allowed younger women to negotiate intergenerational gender issues across

[10] This is a name given to people from a village in India, in South Africa there are a significant number of Muslim's whose ancestral roots are from within this village.
[11] I refer to Europe because I believe that there are strong similarities between European Muslim communities and South African Muslim communities (see for example Lewis, 2007; Dwyer, 2010; Jacobsen, 2011)

numerous fields (in the organisations, in the family,

in marriage)" (see also Jacobsen, 1998; Amiraux, 2001; Tietze, 2001; Saint-Blancat, 2002)

Both *Apas* in Houghton/Killarney have contrasting identities but also in the ways they manage their Islamic education and teaching. However the main similarity they share is the desire to educate and instil in Muslim women of Houghton/Killarney a love and conviction of Islam. Their lifestyles and histories influence different approaches and understandings of Islam. While at the same time they share with other Muslim women the negotiation of a distinct identity cast through religious and secular processes.

Apa Amsah resides within the Houghton/Killarney area. She has three children and is married to a prominent *Moulana* (male Islamic teacher). Her time is mostly spent taking care of her home and family. She regards herself predominantly as a mother and wife. Her maiden family and husband's family are Islamic and relatively conservative. *Apa Amsah* is timid and her approach to teaching Islam is recognised as strict and cautious. When issues arise regarding the best way to Islamically address a situation *Apa Amsah* suggests that it be done in a manner, which is conducive towards cultural customs. Emerging from an Indo-Pakistani background *Apa Amsah* in Houghton and Killarney tends to encourage behaviour that is familiar with Indian customs. Some Muslim women disagree with this approach and prefer to distinguish between what is cultural and what is Islamic. The logic behind *Apa Amsahs* technique is to maintain peace and order within families and communities. *Apa Ahlam* (will be

discussed later) prefers to separate culture and religion, as others prefer. *Apa Amsah's* personal conservative nature seems a result of her father's strict approach on rearing his five daughters. *Apa Amsah's* mother passed away when she was quite young and grew up with the guidance of her sisters. Once she reached the age of puberty she was to attend the *Darool-Uloom.* Shortly after graduating *Apa Amsah* was contracted to an arranged marriage procured by her father. *Apa Amsah* wears the *Veil* and does not mingle with any strange[12] men. She has also not studied further than secondary education and has never worked. Within the community of Houghton/Killarney, *Apa Amsah* epitomises the conservative, antithesis of a modern woman. Other Muslim women recognise her conservative lifestyle and perspective on understanding Islam as opposed to *Apa Ahlam.* Although, *Apa Amsah* finds comfort and joy in her life choices and circumstances. Other women appreciate her technique and personality notwithstanding her strict and conservative manner.

Apa Ahlam is a young exuberant woman who is a student of the doctrine, rules, conventions and history of Islam. This particular *Madrassah* is one I refer to as the 'Mobile *Madrassah'*, because this *Madrassah* and the apa's course are also taught in other areas of Johannesburg. *Apa Ahlam* does not live in Houghton/Killarney but is capable of travelling across Johannesburg independently. The *Apa* travels to different areas and enlightens different Muslim women about the teachings of Islam. *Apa Ahlam* is different to previously mentioned *Apa Amsah. Apa Ahlam* is not yet a mother and her interests or beliefs do not restrict her from studying, travelling or working. She has also studied western knowledge and has acquired an Honours degree in psychology from the University of Johannesburg. *Apa Ahlam* is also a

[12] Strange men refer to those men that are not related by blood to a Muslim woman.

councillor at an Islamic institute called the *Jamiatal-Ulamaa*[13]. This institute is a mechanism that attempts to deal with situations between people that involve Islamic Sharia law. Throughout our time at the *Madrassah, Apa Ahlam* uses information and personal experience to explain and make suggestions about being 'good Muslims'. The *Apa* is a newly married woman and has no children but independently works. Wearing the *abaya*[14]*, hijab* and *veil* was a voluntary act after attending the *Darool-Uloom.* Throughout *Madrassah Apa Ahlam* explains that she comes from a relatively 'modern' household. The antithesis of 'modern' within this community refers to an individual being 'very holy' or 'Islamic' and 'conservative'.

The term 'modern' in the community of Houghton/Killarney is used to describe the identity of a Muslim person. Generally the term modern describes a person in relation to their choice of dressing as well as general lifestyle. For a Muslim woman to be classified as modern she would wear clothing that people would consider as Western (whether she wears the *Hijab* or not). Lifestyle choice is another way women are classified as modern. Working women and those who study are typically regarded as modern. The only confusion is with regard to Muslim women who study or work but wear clothing such as the *Veil.* This term 'modern' was a term that many Muslim women who participated in this study loosely used to describe either themselves or other Muslim women. The following life history of Maysam displays the way in which the term 'modern' is applied.

[13] The Jamiatal-Ulamaa is an Islamic institution that offers advice, counseling and general Islamic information pertaining to the context of Johannesburg. The Jamiat is based in Fordsburg.

[14] A black robe that Muslim women within South Africa wear to cover the skin and shape of their bodies. It is recognised as modest by Islamic scholars and recently become a high-fashion item across the Islamic world. Muslim women wear Abayas that are valued at between three hundred to six thousand South African Rands.

Essentially Maysam considers herself as modern because of her dress practices and lifestyle choices. Maysam's life story begins in a suburb of Durban where she grew up with a father who was an academic and luckily for her, appreciated tertiary education. Maysam's dream was to become a dentist and to eventually marry and have children. Unfortunately the University of Durban (at that time) did not offer dentistry leaving her to find a university elsewhere that did. Maysam ended up in Johannesburg at the home of her aunty and uncle to study dentistry. She says:

> "It was unheard of for a Muslim girl to leave the home of her parents, but my father let me go and obviously I was under the care of my uncle. It was challenging because my parents extended families are extremely religious and of course I missed my parents." (*Maysam*)

Maysam mentions more than once that she feels she lives a 'double-life' in relation to her parents' families. Maysam explains that the women in her extended family do not study further than high school, they do not work, are primarily housewives and all wear the veil, not displaying any shape or skin of their bodies. This distinguishes Maysam's family from her in the sense that they are 'Islamic', 'conservative' and 'very holy'. Maysam prides herself on wearing the hijab but does not do so at the gym. She says that she dresses to cover most of her body but at the gym she finds it too hot to work out in such concealing clothing. On this day she wears fitted pants that cover her legs all the way to her ankles. She does not wear a scarf allowing me to see her hair. She also wears a short sleeve t-shirt displaying the shape and skin of her arms.

Her t-shirt hides the curvature of her waist and shape of her bottom but seems to allow her comfort at the gym.

Maysam attends the gym after she drops her three daughters off at school in the morning before she attends her surgery. Her most important roles as wife and mother allow her to work from ten in the morning to around three thirty in the afternoon. Maysam fetches her children from school after work, goes home to make preparations for dinner and assist's her children with homework and general care. Maysam seems to enjoy being a wife and mother explaining that she is glad and happy she is married. She says:

> "I love my family but I could never sit at home all day, I am so used to being 'out and about'". (*Maysam*)

Working is something that Maysam does 'for herself', providing her with a sense of individuality and allowing her to become capable of accomplishing independence. Maysam relies on her work to provide her with her own life sentiment acknowledging that she is lucky to have succeeded this far both financially and academically. Interestingly, Maysam doesn't mention anything about her husband, she does say that she is glad she studied first and then got married, as her husband's family would not have been too happy for a married woman to be studying.

Maysam's life history is an illustration of other Muslim women within the Houghton/Killarney area. Not only does she describe herself as having multiple identities, she negotiates them strategically, dependant on various situations. Wearing

the *Hijab* everywhere else but not at the gym is part of the decision she makes to be a 'good Muslim woman' while at the same time attending a secular institution and feeling comfortable doing so. 'Being a good Muslim woman' is what Maysam religiously believes is good for her. Maysam's recognition that she lives a 'double-life', exhibiting shyness because her extended family members are conservative, while priding herself on her qualifications and capability to work is yet another example of the process of negotiation 'modern' Muslim women engender. Maysam decides and then enacts her perspectives, values and interests. Maysam exclaims and acknowledges her own views of the 'ideal Muslim woman' but also recognises her 'self' in a way that is capable of living within a modern world. By doing this Maysam therefore creates her own 'person'. In a discussion about perspectives of morality Calhoun explains:

> "As conscious agents, we regard ourselves as *persons,* with
>
> perspectives, values, interests and beliefs'" (2005: 87)

The life history of Nuha is another example that exemplifies Muslim women of Houghton/Killarney as resolving an identity that simultaneously includes a religious woman as well as a modern woman. Nuha while somewhat different to Maysam, with agency maintains negotiating a multiple identity. While maintaining a strong sense of her chosen belief, Islam, she recognises herself as a Muslim woman while living a 'modern' life. Nuha spends at least an hour at the gym every day and can manage to train up to three hours. Whenever I have seen her she has always worn clothing that contours the shape of her body, and does not cover the skin on her arms and legs. Today, she wears very bright coloured fitted leggings and a sleeveless tank

top. She has very short hair and a very good build. I have seen her many times at the gym and learn that she has been working out at the Old Edwardian club for more than ten years. Nuha is forty years old, has already been married and divorced with no children. Nuha lives with her parents. She is the youngest of several siblings and sarcastically confirms that it is her 'duty' to take care of her parents. Hoping to move out she considers her life as one that has been interesting and eventful. Nuha was married at a young age and got divorced shortly after. She explains that she only got married because she wanted freedom mainly due to the conservative nature of her family. She was married for a year and a half, divorced by her husband and began studying medicine in 2001. Nuha specialised in 2008. A few months before she wrote her final exams Nuha was diagnosed with cancer, and shortly after, began chemotherapy sessions. She focuses on this part of her life story because she feels that it was an emotional turning point: She exclaims while pointing to her head, which features a very short boys-cut hairstyle.

> "I completely came out of my shell after I had cancer, I used to
>
> be an introvert and now I find it easy to express myself, I used to
>
> even have long hair and looked like a typical village girl!". *Nuha*

Besides appreciating the presence of her family such as her nieces and nephews, Nuha is a career orientated individual. Besides gym and family she spends most of her time working. This is understood through the way she proudly explains her presence in a predominantly white male occupied Medical-clinic. She considers herself as a professional equal of the men she works with. Acknowledging her friendship and professional relationship with them she says:

> "I went to Mauritius all by myself for two weeks and did not worry about my surgeons and patients because my colleagues divided the work amongst themselves and I was off enjoying myself all alone." *Nuha*

Once we get to this part of the conversation, Nuha's phone rings. The soft, affectionate way she speaks to the person on the phone leads me to believe that it is her partner. Incidentally this person is her 'boyfriend'. She does not explain much about him but just that she is expecting him for lunch and needs to cook for him. This allows me to enquire about her perspective on relationships. Nuha says very distinctly that she does not date or find any interest in Muslim men purely because she cannot relate to them. However, she is very much in love, finding great comfort and happiness in the male she currently calls her boyfriend. She does say that she may seem rather rebellious or not-a-typical-Muslim-woman in many ways however recognising that she is traditional when it comes to relationships. She says:

> "I like it when a man takes responsibility for me, I don't like this splitting business, I say to him: You relax and enjoy the meal, I will cook for you!" *Nuha*

While affirming her conventional perspective on relationships, she emphasises that she does not have many Muslim friends and many female friends either. When asked, she says it is because they are just way too competitive and there is too much drama. She provides an interesting example to illustrate this. Her story is of a couple that I have heard others speak about too. It seems that the couple attend the gym together while on one side of the gym the husband advances on other women and the wife on the other side advances on other non-related men. Nuha does not disregard Islam as something valuable to constructing a strong identity for herself. She merely prefers

the company of others besides Muslim women. To justify her distance from Muslim women she tells me a story about when she attended the mosque during the holy month of *Ramadhaan.* Nuha attended the mosque only to pray because fellow Muslim women stare at her in a way that makes her feel uncomfortable. She says, "I have always felt left out with other Muslim women". She finds that other Muslim women cannot understand her perspective on life and Nuha would much rather spend her time doing other more 'productive things'. She believes, like many other Muslim women, her firm hold on Islam is present within and not something she exhibits by wearing the *Hijab* or having to be a mother and wife.

Nuha is the antithesis of the 'typical' Muslim women. Other women within this research study are in favour of marriage and children. They are also not as career orientated as Nuha and do not spend as much time at the gym as she does. This is also the case with other women besides Nuha and Maysam. While Muslim women search to be satisfied by the bounties of education and employment, they also strive for Islamic knowledge and practice, in order to receive the benefits of family life and the hope of spiritual piety. Theoretical knowledge of Muslim women's participation in and support of Islamic revival is discussed by Christine Jacobsen (2011) Jacobsen argues that:

> . . .configurations of personhood, ethics and self- realisation drawn from the Islamic and liberal-secular discursive formations inhabit not only the same cultural and historical space, but also shape individual subjectivities and modes of agency." (2011: 65)

The *Apa's* within Houghton and Killarney emphasise the learning and striving for piety. Attempts towards accumulating favour for the after- life as opposed to the current world in various ways are constantly reiterated. Enacting the 'good Muslim woman' is the essential means of attaining piety and reaping the reward in the after-life. Emphasis is primarily placed on the dress practices of Muslim women as understood by *Apa's,* modest clothing, which results in modest behaviour. To begin attaining modesty and ultimately piety, the *Hijab* is continuously encouraged. While encouraging, *Apas* deem the *Hijab* and modesty as crucial for piety, Muslim women are also engrossed with modern secular lifestyles. Muslim women manipulate certain Islamic principles and secular values to assert an identity they believe is deemed worthy of them being a 'good Muslim woman'. Even the more conservative Muslim women such as Maysam who attempt to display the pious self through their dress practices do so in a way that attests to secular ideals. In wearing western clothing she consumes fashionable items but at the same time ensuring they satisfy the conditions of piety (by being modest) and encapsulating the 'modern good Muslim woman'. Thus the manipulation by Muslim women, dependant on the place or influences surrounding them, of what they choose to consider as valuable from Islamic teachings and secular lifestyles create them as individual persons (Calhoun, 2005). Muslim women regard their lifestyles as a result of their own choices. Affirming their ability to make choices may be read as an effect of specific means of 'governing modern individuals' (Jacobsen, 2011). Jacobsen cites Rose:

> " . . . are not merely 'free to choose' but obliged to be free, to
>
> understand and enact their lives in terms of choice."(1999: 87)

This section has outlined and discussed the 'modern Muslim woman' within the context of Houghton/Killarney. It argues that Muslim women are in fact capable of negotiating both a modern and religious self. The focus on piety and religion as well as modern and secular is to present the apparent tension that exists. What emerges is quite the contrary; it may seem a contradiction to construct an identity that is religious and or secular however Muslim women resolve this dilemma. Some do it by means of dress practices as executed by Maysam while others contend their religious piety stems from within. Attending the *Madrassah* is another way that women feel as if they satisfy the requirement of a religious self. Those who argue their Islamic piety is inside, such as Nuha take pride in their lifestyle choices as modern women, motivated to succeed in their career paths. Ultimately, this chapter supports the broader argument of the research study that Muslim women successfully negotiate multiple identities.

CHAPTER 4

4 Analysis; The Modern Muslim Woman's Image, Socially Defined.

It has been established that Muslim women of Houghton/Killarney negotiate a lifestyle that satisfies both modern secular and Islamic ideals. There exists a seeming dichotomy between the 'modern' Muslim woman as a "voracious consumer" and a 'good Muslim woman'. Past literature has offered the notion that there is a seeming tension between professed Islamic virtues and the logic of modern consumer capitalism. While the former is often defined as modesty, thrift, other worldly devotion, spiritualism and communitarianism, the latter is perceived to cultivate self-indulgence, conspicuous consumption, this worldly orientation, materialism and individualism (Uddin, 2003). Considering the resolution Muslim women in Houghton/Killarney model between secular lifestyles and Islamic ideals, I argue they negotiate an acceptable behaviour between these socio-cultural systems through gossip and rumour. Muslim women casually discuss others regarding their lifestyle choices and dress practices. While Muslim women either comment negatively on or compliment others on their lifestyle choices and dress practices they demarcate what is acceptable or what is not illustrating an image of the 'good modern Muslim woman'. Ultimately Muslim women determine boundaries that should be abided by to form a group social identity while discussing the accepted conventions and norms. When one challenges the acceptable norms of the 'modern Muslim woman', they are heavily critiqued, disregarded as belonging to the larger *ummah* of Muslims. The previous chapter predominantly focussed on the performative behaviour of Muslim

women established in their roles and choices determining a modern Muslim identity. Even though dress practices were previously discussed, relating the individual perceptions of the self as modern, this chapter additionally considers the prevalence of dress practices as determinants of the modern Muslim woman's image from the public perspective (the perspective of one Muslim woman by another).

In the previous chapter I argued that Muslim women negotiate an identity in relation to two opposing socio-cultural influences. Being a good Muslim woman equates to living a life of piety and simplicity, according to Islamic ideals, whereas living in a modern secular society in certain instances is considered as contrary to those Islamic ideals. Living in Houghton/Killarney requires that one be situated within the middle to upper class strata of South African based on the expense of attaining property and maintenance. The lifestyles of Muslim families in Houghton/Killarney are exclusive and luxurious in that they have access to rather expensive assets and other consumable items. The identity of Muslim women of Houghton/Killarney as elsewhere is also created through commodities and various consumption practices (see Abu Lugod, 1995; 2005; Oncu, 1995; Saktanbar, 1997; 2002; Gole, 1999; Fealy & White, 2008; Fisher, 2008; Pink, 2009). Muslim women are interested in the latest fashion trends present in both the Islamic and secular world and access expensive imported Islamic and 'western' clothing. Other Muslim women who don western clothing with or without the *Hijab* are still considered as modern in as much as Muslim women who have had access to education and employment opportunities. It should be noted here, Muslim women who do not wear the *Hijab* or modest clothing, are considered too modern as described by their counterparts because displaying the shape or skin of the female body is considered contradictory to the image of the 'good

Muslim woman'. This particular issue is the predominant subject of discussion in this chapter.

Gossip and rumour is frequently practiced and disdained by Muslim women in Houghton/Killarney. For the purpose of understanding the social phenomena of rumour and gossip within social circles of Muslim women I refer to rumour and gossip as being a social interaction between two people about another or others in general while they are not around and involves some kind of evaluation about them (Foster, 2004; Eder & Enke, 1991). I also rely heavily on the understanding of Gossip (and rumour) through the approach of South African anthropologist Max Gluckman (1963; 1968). Discussing the function of gossip within small communities Gluckman's predominant claim is the following:

> " . . . one begins to get the feeling of a community which is
>
> partly held together and maintains its values by gossiping and
>
> scandalising both within cliques and in general" (Gluckman, 1963: 308)

Gluckman further explores gossip as presented by others such as Herskovits (1947), where gossip is connected with the maintenance of morals. Gluckman also refers to James West (1945) and his study of Plainsville USA, where there is a connection of gossip with the maintenance of the unity of groups and an analysis that demonstrates the 'pervasive role of gossip in community life'.

Muslim women both socially engage in gossip and discussion of others casually with other Muslim women. Generally Muslim women gossip or spread rumour about other Muslim women to close friends and family members. This social practice provides Muslim women the ability to discuss and negotiate what is deemed socially acceptable or not. What is acceptable or not is dependant on the larger socio-cultural systems that Muslim women enact, these being Islamic ideals, modern and secular living. The mediation of these seemingly opposing ideals is specifically performed to successfully construct the image of a 'good modern Muslim woman'. I argue that gossiping, rumour and general discussion of others are social practices Muslim women use to socially construct this image. The behaviour or appearance of another Muslim woman, contrary to the acceptable norms of Muslim women, in Houghton/Killarney is met with intense criticism. I begin this section by exploring the theoretical dimensions of rumour and gossip thereafter providing ethnographic accounts of Muslim women relating to rumour and gossip. An analysis of the motivations of engaging in rumour and gossip is further elaborated, providing a discussion of the ways in which smaller groups of women form social solidarity by excluding others.

Gossip is mainly understood as intimate discussion of individuals within a small group of people. Rumour on the other hand is described as:

> " . . . public communications that reflect the private hypotheses
>
> about how the world works. Embellished by allegations or attributions
>
> based on circumstantial evidence, they are attempts to make sense of

uncertain events" (Rosnow, 1988)

According to the above definitions Muslim women in Houghton/Killarney partake in both rumour and gossip. Muslim women of Houghton/Killarney gossip about others regarding what they know privately about others and public rumours that circulate. While there seems to be a distinction between rumour and gossip, within Houghton/Killarney they occur at the same time and often the specificity between rumour and gossip is unclear. In other words Muslim women discuss others within their smaller social groups (cliques) about personal experiences regarding the person they are discussing, but they also exchange information about that person concerning public rumours that circulate broadly within the larger community. In this regard distinguishing between specific instances of gossip or rumour is difficult. Therefore, this research study categorises instances of rumour and gossip as individual acts of social practice.

Sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists have deliberated rumour and gossip as social phenomenon since the twentieth century. For this research study the focus of rumour and gossip is mainly related to how it is understood within the discipline of Anthropology. Therefore the emphasis is on the social aspects of rumour and gossip as communications of group norms and the enhancement of group cohesion (see Nevo, Nevo & Derech-Zehavi, 2004). In other words rumour and gossip is a social mechanism stipulating acceptable behaviour and by stipulating such norms group unity is created (Gluckman, 1968). In this study I do not mean 'unity' in an amiable way, but rather social connection as the identification of being Muslim and belonging to that group because it is not desirable to be considered, compared to or classified as

non-Muslim. Therefore Muslim women determine their Muslimness as an exclusive identity, exclusive to other non-Muslim members of society. For Muslim women it is important to maintain an identity that is affiliated with the larger group of 'Muslims' and so self-monitoring occurs to either conform to these norms or be heavily scrutinised (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). However, there are others who claim that their Muslimness and piety occurs at a personal level and should not be determined by others. Ethnographic research here shows that the criticism and judgement evaluations about Muslims (who claim their Islam is inside and not for social judgement) is the way in which Muslim women demarcate what is acceptable to be considered by society as the 'good modern Muslim woman'. Hence, Muslim women within Houghton/Killarney do not only personally negotiate their modern and Islamic identity, but they classify the identity of other Muslim women and in so doing state the acceptable behaviour that determines the modern Muslim woman. Muslim women demarcate socially acceptable behaviour for the larger community by excluding others through rumour and gossip amongst a few Muslim women. In other words Muslim women affiliate with other women in smaller social groups and scrutinise others. I refer to these smaller groups of Muslim women as 'cliques'. Within such cliques, Muslim women find commonality in disliking others and form a kind of social solidarity through the social exclusion of others.

It starts off with a simple, "Do you know so and so?" Rumours reverberate and seem to define the social placement of Muslim women. Many women claim that they abstain from partaking in gossip and rumour. Gossip is considered as a grave sin within the discourse of Islam. A *hadith* (Saying of the prophet Muhammed) substantiates this belief:

> "Rumour and gossip is worse than committing adultery where during the act of adultery two parties enjoy themselves while in spreading rumours and gossiping only one party benefits"[15].

The idea of gossip and rumour degrading the spiritual being is a common belief for Muslim women as mentioned by various informants on several occasions. It seems though that many, consciously aware of the problems and warnings relative to engaging in gossip or rumour, still actively partake in this social act. Some women express guilt after relaying a judgement or story about another woman. Others display anger and outright resentment to woman they gossip about. Within the social space of the Muslim women in Houghton and Killarney, rumour and gossip shadow the daily social spaces both in the gym and during their daily movements. Whether a group of women intentionally assemble to share the difficulties they experience with their mother in laws or just relaying a story in passing that is current, Muslim women can be found conversing about each other on a regular basis. It is only at *Madrassah* classes where instances of rumour and gossip are minimised and decreased. This is due to the sacred space and expected sacred interactions between women. Muslim women are more inclined to being directly criticised by others confidently substantiated by the sentiment that "*Apa Amsah* says we should not be talking bad about others"[16]. This is a statement that Muslim women passed around more confidently within the space of *Madrassah* versus other social spaces (such as the gym).

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[15] Bukhari (Islamic scholar) dedicated his life to collecting and affirming the sayings of the prophet.

[16] research participant, *Aliyah.*

Some are direct and very vocal about describing "so and so" as a particular kind of person or relaying stories about them. Women that tend to be slightly indirect utilise statements such as: "You should be careful of this person" or "Did you know I have heard that . . ." Various women have been increasingly affected by the advent of rumour and gossip. The following ethnography will recount two particular women that have both been active agents engaging in and affected by gossip and rumour. Those affected by rumour and gossip make choices based on past experiences while some defend their muslimness and piety as being internal.

On an icy cold Saturday morning, the gym is full and buzzing with people working out. The 'v-cycle' section of the gym where cycling classes take place is filled with men and women, of all different ages. A few Muslim women attend this spinning class at eight thirty am before they rush around for the rest of their Saturday shopping or attending young children's birthday parties. The Muslim women wear items of clothing that they comfortably wear on other days at the gym. These are fitted leggings and loose sleeveless vests. A specific woman that I have met before catches my eye. According to many other people that I have spoken to she is considered beautiful and 'hot' for a mom of teenage twin daughters. Her name is Haifa and today she wears a black striped midriff top with a bright pair of pink leggings. Her long hair is loosely tied and flowing on her back. Haifa greets a few other ladies that are not Indian and not Muslim either. Once I seat myself next to her she immediately greets me with a smile. I was lucky to have been introduced to her by a mutual friend. Haifa is currently 34 years old and has teenage daughters that are 14 years old. She considers herself a modern Muslim woman, able to wear clothing that is not typically associated with the conservative Muslim woman such as the *hijab* or *Abaya*. Haifa

was seventeen when she got married and shortly after had children. When she married she was still studying and had to stop to take care of her daughters. When they were around three years old she attempted to go back and attempted studying again but "felt guilty for leaving them with granny". They are now much older and she has considered studying something either academic or creative.

Haifa considers her family as her main priority and defines herself as a mother and wife. Throughout our conversation, Haifa mentions her children and the importance of her mother in her life. She proudly shows me images of her children that she has saved on her cellular phone and has uploaded to a social media site, Instagram[17]. She also briefly mentions her devotion to being a Muslim woman. For her, Islam is found on the inside in her heart. It is what she feels inside that defines her as a Muslim not the outward appearance. The gym is a place that she claims is something that she does for herself and clearly expresses the importance of attending the gym. "When I leave the gym then I am there only for my children and husband, my life is for them". Haifa further explains that she draws self-pleasure and satisfaction from attending the gym, she also says that her husband would never take that away from her. Haifa attends the Gym regularly and separately to her husband. Following this Haifa classifies her identity as a modern-Muslim woman but also capable of enacting Islamic ideals through the choices she has made about her roles as a mother and wife. There have been times when they have attended the gym together but ventured into different parts of the gym. There are also times when they have come at different times, met up during their gym sessions and left separately. During the holy month of Ramadhaan,

[17] A social media site that assists people in uploading and sharing pictures that are taken with their cell phone cameras.

Haifa and her husband have come to the gym together at night after the time of prayers.

Haifa does not generally pay attention to the other Muslim women at the gym because of previous experiences she has had (I will discuss this at a later stage in this ethnography). We agreed the previous day that I would be able to interview her at breakfast after our cycling class. Throughout the cycling class I notice Haifa constantly glancing out of the window into the main areas if the gym. From here she views her husband while he gyms and socialises. Haifa sees him conversing with two other females while he gyms with another male friend. She shows indifference to her husband's interaction with other women. During our conversation (after the cycling class) she explains:

> "These Muslim people at the gym like making up stories and
>
> talking behind our backs. My husband and I have been through a
>
> lot but at the end of the day we trust each other and that's all
>
> that matters." *Haifa*

Haifa converses with other men casually while her husband converses with other females too. Several people have highlighted to me that Haifa is flirtatious toward other men on the one side of the gym while her husband is flirtatious to other women on the opposite side of the gym. Whether this couple advances on other people or not is still a mystery to be solved. However this apparent happening is widely considered as truth and substantial enough for many to repeatedly make such claims and distastefully emphasise how it is un-Islamic. This particular instance of rumour is an

example of what is unacceptable behaviour of a Muslim woman. Her apparent flirtatious behaviour is considered as immodest and behaviour that others do not engage in too. Other Muslim women who attend the gym with or without their husbands openly state that they only attend the gym to workout and not to engage with strange men especially if they are married. This unacceptable behaviour is dependant on Islamic teachings that strange men and women are restricted from engaging with each other. When Muslim women discuss the behaviour of Haifa in effect the intention of the conversation is to inform the social group about expected behaviours and point out those who are not following norms (Foster, 2004).

Once we begin breakfast I quickly learn about the background of Haifa. She is easy to talk to, friendly and open. Her personality is seemingly genuine and she has a sense of honesty about her that I appreciate. She provides much information about her life growing up, children, parents, the relationship she has with her husband and her lifestyle. This is a different response in comparison to the first time I met her. Before knowing my aim to conduct research she reacted defensively as one would to a potential threat. When I was introduced to her (she later explained), her expectation of me was to negatively judge and evaluate her based on external appearance. Once I explained the purpose of being introduced to her and affirming that my intentions were academic she quickly displayed a sense of comfort and ease toward me. Haifa's initial response toward me confers John Beard-Haviland's when he explores the social practice of Gossip titled *Gossip as Communication in Zinacantan*:

> "Gossip is powerful and dangerous weapon within the larger set
>
> of behaviours that limit intimacy and promote evasion " (1977: 187)

In this specific case while conducting research my presence as a Muslim woman proved difficult to gain intimacy with a research participant. Immediate mistrust occurred because of my presence as Muslim but also because gossip amongst Muslim women of Houghton/Killarney often occurs and Haifa's response proved the anxiety she felt several times before when engaging with other Muslim women. Her defensive response was in fact a way that she claims Islamic piety and being a good modern Muslim woman as a personal experience, it should not be determined by her black striped midriff top and bright pair of pink leggings that are considered immodest and un-Islamic by others. This occurrence in itself authenticated the effects of rumour and gossip in Houghton/Killarney amongst Muslim women.

On this particular Saturday, during our conversation another of my main research informants comes by our table. She is not only a research informant but also a friend that I have known longer than Haifa. She glances at me and I respond by hugging her immediately introducing her to Haifa. Hadiyya responds quickly and bluntly, "I know Haifa"! She says 'Salaam[18]' and carries on telling me about her gym workout and all that she has planned for the day. While I converse with Hadiyya, Haifa removes herself from the conversation by busying herself on her cell phone. Haifa's body language becomes guarded and I notice Hadiyya glance at her slyly from the corner of her eye. I sense a feeling of animosity and awkwardness in the atmosphere. Later that day I receive a phone call from Hadiyya warning me about associating myself with Haifa because of her immodest dress practices and social behaviour.

[18] A colloquial Islamic greeting, the full greeting is "As-Salaam-mu-alai-kum", meaning may peace be upon you and the blessings of Allah.

A few days later when I visited Hadiyya, she quickly explains to me that Haifa is an unsavoury person that I should abstain from associating myself with. Through using derogatory terms Hadiyya insinuates that Haifa has been un-faithful to her husband and enjoys the attention she gets from other strange men. Interestingly, Haifa's husband and his friend also spoke about Hadiyya. I eventually find out that the only reason animosity and resentment is prevalent between these two women, is because of a past friendship Haifa had with another Muslim woman that happens to be Hadiyya's current best friend. The incident took place a few months prior; Haifa confided in Hadiyya's friend about a personal situation (which neither of them disclosed to me) and Haifa believes that Hadiyya's friend publicly shared the information. According to Hadiyya, this never really happened and Haifa is just an unsavoury person 'who likes to cause trouble'. On several other occasions Hadiyya has discussed Haifa with other close friends and the women all add in their own personal opinions and remarks about Haifa and others who dress and behave in the same manner.

Even though her 'immodest behaviour' is the topic of rumour, Muslim women mention they predominantly dislike Haifa's dressing due to its inappropriate and shameful nature. As a mother and a wife she displays her midriff area and much more skin than the average Muslim woman within Houghton/Killarney. Several people have mentioned that the photographs she uploads on social media websites are too revealing and many have used the term 'disgusting' to describe them. A few women have specifically mentioned Haifa in the midst of their conversation on more than one occasion. They argue that she is not innocent in her being judged because "she asks for it". One woman argued that if she wears such clothing she is asking for attention and should not be surprised when people comment or make judgements on her

outward appearance. Accessing social media and public spaces (such as the gym or *Madrassah*) allows Muslim women to easily engage and view others on a daily basis. An increase in social interaction amongst Muslim women encourages the practice of rumour and gossip. During coffee dates with a small group of research participants on several occasions, scrutiny of Haifa and others (with similar dress practices), demonstrated the way in which Muslim women demarcate acceptable boundaries of enacting the modern Muslim woman. These Muslim women found commonality based on someone that they dislike creating social solidarity by excluding another. Accordingly:

> "Gossip fulfils a so called tribal need – the need to be accepted
>
> by an exclusive group characterised by intimate and affective
>
> ties" (Jaeger, Skelder, Rosnow, 1998: 106)

A sense of belonging is created when Muslim women such as the aforementioned research participants co-operate to critique another Muslim woman based on the identity she individually forms for herself. The individual identity of a Muslim woman is created at her discretion and to satisfy her own ideas of what it means to be a good Muslim woman but socially her identity is condemned. In condemning the identity of another modern Muslim woman, as one that is immodest and not along the lines of what is considered as Islamic, other modern Muslim women socially exterminate women such as Haifa. Within the social community of Houghton/Killarney there are smaller social cliques that are constantly broken, formed and reformed. Clique forming occurs as a result of Muslim women requiring friendship to satisfy a sense of belonging but mostly to create an identity that is rooted from within the public social community. Muslim women regard themselves as

belonging to a Muslim *Ummah* of which they negotiate and renegotiate what it means to be Muslim. 'The good Muslim woman' is an image (that we have seen) is both personally and socially created.

Another story ventures around social circles of Muslim women and is a topic of discussion amongst people. Haifa is accused of visiting another country with a famous tycoon and another friend of hers. The friend that accompanied her was subsequently divorced, apparently, as a result of this trip. The women in Houghton and Killarney argue that it is taboo for a married woman to engage in and encourage social meetings or socialising with other men. On the basis of Islamic belief, many argue that it is incorrect for unmarried women and men to interact beyond a certain socially acceptable point. For women in Houghton/Killarney it is socially acceptable for an unmarried man and woman to signal a hand wave or greeting out loud in public and not converse about each other's interests. There has been an occasion where a married woman conversed with another man in the public space of the gym, another Muslim woman overheard and explained that she considers this as a form of flirtation between the two. On several occasions younger Muslim men and women had commented on the revealing way she dresses. Some have claimed that Haifa enjoys the attention she gets by dressing in a revealing manner and that her husband too enjoys being reaffirmed by his friends that he has an attractive wife.

Hadiyya has also been negatively affected by instances of rumour and gossip. As a single Muslim woman of 34 years old she has been accused of adultery with other married men that according to her never happened. She has angrily defended herself

to me on many occasions about the nature of gossip in the Houghton and Killarney community. Other women that would otherwise consider her a possible daughter in law have accused Hadiyya of being "high maintenance". This judgement is based on the fact that Hadiyya's father gifted her with an expensive house and often with expensive cars as well as other expensive items such as handbags and clothing. Hadiyya does not have to work because her father is capable and provides her with enough money to take care of her. Due to the lifestyle and material items she is accustomed to, older Muslim women assume and express to others that she would be difficult to satisfy if such a lifestyle was not provided by her husband. Hadiyya expresses that such gossip and rumour about her are hurtful and distasteful. During a *Madrassah* class Hadiyya has expressed the sadness and disgust she feels towards women that have accused her of being "high maintenance" and of committing adultery. While she has been subjected to the negative effects of rumour and gossip, Hadiyya feels comfortable to discuss others while with her close friends.

At the *Madrassah* classes, all women abstain from openly partaking in rumour and gossip. During *Madrassah* the *Apa's* emphasise the grave nature of this social act, they also discourage this social act by providing information about the punishment in the after- life, which could result if one has to engage in rumour and gossip. The sacred space of the *Madrassah* class seems to restrain women from talking about others in a way that can be demeaning and offensive. However, the same Muslim women who refrain from gossiping or spreading rumours at *Madrassah* partake in rumour and gossip at the gym. At *Madrassah* a woman who speaks negatively of another is immediately reminded of the deconstructive implications associated with gossip and rumour by the teacher and fellow attendants.

One particular day at *Madrassah* the lesson at hand was about the ways in which private space by family members should be respected as advised by the Holy Quraan. In relation to respecting private space the topic of discussion focussed on the relationships between mother in laws and daughter in laws. The teacher bluntly expressed to all women that it is forbidden for a mother in law to enter the space of her daughter in law without permission. A younger woman that has been married for ten years expressed her regret and difficulty with her mother in law not respecting her space. Many other women in the class sympathised with her and offered advice. Some suggested that she confront her husband initially to request his mother stop exceeding certain boundaries while others suggested she take a more direct approach and 'nicely' speak to her mother in law and express her issues to her. The young woman, having dealt with this all her married life, expressed cynically that it is not possible to overcome this difficulty. After class I shared a story about another friend of mine who has a similar problem and made a suggestion of my own. During our conversation an older lady from *Madrasah* walked passed and immediately reminded us of the aforementioned *Hadith* and advice about gossip and rumour that we were given in class just before.

Within the space of the *Madrassah* women seem less likely to openly engage and encourage rumour and gossip. Within the space of the gym and other private spaces such as their households and coffee dates, they feel more comfortable to engage in gossip and rumour without guilt. They tend to choose the 'appropriate' time to discuss others based on the possibility of another overhearing and reprimanding them.

Muslim women are also dissatisfied with people talking about them. They also feel the need to defend and complain about the prevalence of rumour and gossip in Houghton and Killarney only when it negatively affects them. When the opportunity to discuss another's life or engage in rumour and gossip about another, only rarely do they feel guilt and subsequently abstain. Gluckman articulates the delicate situations of rumour and gossip:

> " . . . gossip control disputation by allowing each individual or clique to fight fellow members of the larger group with an acceptable, socially instituted customary weapon, which blows back on excessively explosive users for the battle of scandal has its own rules, and woe to him who break these rules. By the act of carrying his scandalising too far, he himself over steps the values of the group and his scandal will turn against him, will prove that he or his small clique is unworthy of the larger groups . . . The animosities between individuals and cliques are built into the larger social order through the cultural techniques of gossip and scandal" (1963: 313).

In effect Muslim women of Houghton and Killarney choose specific times to engage in rumour and gossip or abstain from spreading rumour and gossip for the purpose of demarcating what is socially acceptable behaviour, be it how a Muslim woman should behave in public spaces in relation to her modesty or lifestyle. While on the other hand Muslim women define the socially acceptable behaviour of abstaining from

engaging in rumour and gossip. Rumour and gossip is the social tool that enables Muslim women to claim what is acceptable or not for a modern Muslim woman[19]. Ultimately Muslim women negotiate when and where their identity as a good Muslim woman can be expressed or where they can socially demarcate the identities of others. Evaluating other Muslim women and the ideal behaviour of a modern Muslim woman also recognises the Muslim women as part of a distinct group within society. It is their identity as Muslim women that determine how they should appear and behave in public. When any Muslim woman challenges these ideals they are criticised to the extent of which they are stripped of the 'hallmark of membership' of Houghton/Killarney modern Muslim women (Gluckman, 1963). Other Muslims then exclude them as un-Islamic and immodest like non-Muslim members of society.

[19] see the following authors who argue that rumor and gossip assist in developing social norms or values (Fine, 1986; Eder & Sanford, 1986; Gluckman, 1986; Foster, 2004; Brison, 1992)

CHAPTER 5

5 Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored the multiple identities of Muslim women in Houghton/Killarney, the ways in which they negotiate an individual and social identity, relating to larger socio-political systems such as religious and secular ideals. I argued that Muslim women negotiate a multiple form of identity, which appears contradictory at first but is in fact an agentic resolution. Muslim women advocate their personal identity by reconciling disparities between Islamic ideals and a modern lifestyle. Furthermore, Muslim women socially negotiate what it means to be a 'good Muslim woman'. In addition Muslim women demarcate acceptable behaviour and in turn create a personal and social Muslim female identity through instances of rumour and gossip within smaller social circles. Ultimately Muslim women within the space of Houghton/Killarney negotiate and renegotiate what it means to be a 'good Muslim woman' while actively participating in secular society. Essentially, resulting in hybrid and multiple forms of identity, whereby the subjectivities of Muslim women are informed by their surroundings and socio-cultural circumstances. The most significant point of this research is that Muslim women are active agents in the creation of their own identities. Different to stereotypes of Muslim women as provided by the media, Muslim women enact both religious and secular ideals in creating the modern South African Muslim woman.

In Chapter one the focus of this thesis was to grapple with the research aims and objectives. The focus being to ask relevant questions that would assist in relaying an adequate representation of Muslim women in Houghton/Killarney. The larger question asked was: What is the Identity of Muslim women in Johannesburg? Pertinent topics that were explored related to the kinds of roles Muslim women assume, the seemingly mundane activities Muslim women engage in. I was primarily interested in how Muslim women perceive themselves in relation to their individual and social being. Hence, relevant questions dealt with the following, perceptions of Muslim women by other Muslim women, how religious affiliation impacts or encourages various life choices, and which ways does being Muslim influence their social behaviour on a personal and communal level? Chapter one also examined current literature about Muslim women internationally and in South Africa. Important theoretical debates that framed this research study were related to Gender, Identity and Religion. The prominent authors in these fields were the likes of Lila Abu-Lugod, Judith Butler and Nikki Keddie. I argued that past literature represents Muslim women in Middle Eastern states and Western states but there is nothing of adequacy about the identity of Muslim women in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Chapter two predominantly reflected the methodological process of conducting this research study. I argued that there was value in researching Muslim women using qualitative methods even though many challenges and difficulties arose throughout. Literary assistance when conducting this research mainly corresponded to writers such as Pierre Hugo and Bruce L. Berg. These authors proved useful in substantiating the value of using research methods such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

The first analysis chapter (Chapter three) focussed on providing ethnographic material of Muslim women in Houghton/Killarney. I argued that Muslim women resolve the disparities of contrasting social systems – Islamic religious ideals and modern secular lifestyles. This chapter provided a description of the broad positionality of Muslim people in Johannesburg and then focussed on the process of identity formation by Muslim women as they navigate between the *Madrassah* and gymnasium. Christine Jacobsen, extrapolating notions of agency and piety for Muslim women, in Houghton/Killarney provided theoretical support. Chapter three presents the negotiation of Muslim women within a community impacted by religious ideals and secularism. It also highlights the agency of Muslim women to manipulate social systems and specifically choose what they deem appropriate to classify as the 'modern Muslim woman'.

In extending the argument from the first analytical chapter (chapter three) about Muslim women's negotiation between socio-cultural systems. Chapter four argues that Muslim women negotiate acceptable behaviour of a modern Muslim woman informed by the social practice of rumour and gossip. By discussing other Muslim women's dress practices and lifestyle choices Muslim women socially demarcate the appropriate enactment of religious and secular ideals for the Muslim community of Houghton and Killarney. Muslim women actively participate in accepting and challenging individual interpretations of what it means to be the 'good Muslim woman' in Johannesburg.

This study has presented Muslim women in a way that differs to typical notions of the Muslim woman. Maintaining that Islam is a crucial and serious aspect of their identity, Muslim women enact religious ideals that are not only, reconciled with living modern lives, but also challenge broader ethnic historical traditions their parents and grandparents have tried to entrench. Some Muslim women of Houghton and Killarney express their persistence for an individual identity not necessarily affiliated with conservative Islam. Those who do insist on conservative Islamic identities, do so autonomously in satisfying spiritual piety. Muslim women enact socio-cultural systems by themselves and sometimes enforce such ideals on other women. This form of women-on-women monitoring creates a new and complex set of Muslim identities. Muslim women themselves deconstruct stereotypical ideas of what it means to be Muslim in secular society. Instead of resisting Islamic ideals even though accustomed to modern society, Muslim women embrace these ideals and mediate how they identify themselves as well as the ways in which they, as modern Muslim women, express their identity to society. I believe this research is valuable knowledge because it exhibits Muslim women of Houghton/Killarney as self-determinants rather than inactive participants of modern Muslim society.

This research study has only represented a relatively small number of existent middle to upper class Muslim women of Johannesburg. There are still many other noticeable Muslim communities in Johannesburg and South Africa at large. There are a range of Muslim women with different economic, historical, political and social circumstances in Johannesburg. Further research could animate a comparative study between the kinds of Muslim women recognised in this study and those that were not accessible

regarding the differences, similarities and circumstances of both. This will largely contribute to a more comprehensive representation of the identity of Muslim women.

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