Roundtable Discussion from the Annual Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice Public Lecture on Economies of Violence

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Introduction
In South Africa, the month of August is marked by two significant events in the country’s history: The anti-apartheid women’s march which happened on 9 August 1956 and the Marikana massacre on 16 August 2012, in which 34 miners were killed by the police at the Lonmin mine. These events bring up for scrutiny the “Economies of Violence” that continue to sustain the indignity and the poverty which women, queer people, and marginalised black people in South Africa disproportionately experience. The Covid-19 pandemic has simply exacerbated this reality. Recognising the multiple factors which shape access to justice such as gender, religion, race, and class, the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice annually convenes various public and scholarly conversations on these subjects. The 2021 symposium considered the importance of resisting/transcending the epistemic violence which demands that black women focus on research and teaching that is perpetually located within pain and suffering. By doing so, the keynote presenter, Prof Sa’diyya Shaikh, and respondents, Dr Fatima Seedat and Dr Farah Zeb, also considered the spiritual reflections and practices which bring us joy and rest.
Islamic Feminist Imaginaries: 
Love, Beauty, and Justice

Keynote: Sa’diyya Shaikh¹

¹SHORT BIO
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One of the most profound universal challenges to human beings in the twenty-first century is to enable collective transformations that create nourishing modes of being for all lives and for this planet. We are required, indeed obliged to bring to the table of humanity the very best from each of our distinctive traditions, so that life on earth – human and non-human – can be sustained. In seeking to embody the good, the moral, the just, and the beautiful, in essence the virtuous, there is a need for dynamic and engaged reflections on our living traditions of ethics in response to the problems we are confronted with on a local and global scale.

Any attempt to simultaneously reflect critically on the economies of violence that we are located within, while seeking to invoke life-sustaining and joyful resources of being, requires on the one hand, a critical, clear, and unflinching appraisal of our current challenges, and on the other hand, a refusal to being trapped in the resulting pain – a tough call. However, that is indeed the nature of feminist scholarship. Feminist work is generally a “tough call.” As the queer theorist, Sara Ahmed has noted, feminists are often called the “killjoys,” the ones who expose the illusionary nature of happiness sustained through structural inequality.¹

While there is a moral imperative to be a killjoy in contexts of oppression, calling out constantly against complicity, silence, heedlessness, and illusionary constructs of peace and happiness, epistemically and emotion-

ally it is a heavy burden. This toll is compounded in the current time, when so many people on this planet are materially and psychologically overwhelmed by the socio-economic toll of Covid-19. In the South African context, the weight of the pandemic has been intensified by the impact of the recent violence and anarchy in KZN and Gauteng,\(^2\) as well as the racist macho-vigilante murders in Phoenix,\(^3\) while on the international stage, we witness the Taliban’s seizure of control in all the major cities in Afghanistan, with severe and devastating implications for the rights and integrity of Afghani women. Locally and globally, we are in such a collective state of pain and constriction that any sense of joy and rest feels like an impossible task. Amidst what is feeling unceasingly like a world turned upside down, the call for reprieve and rest is more urgent, but ever more elusive: How might we engage between this rock and hard place? Today I offer a partial reading of the nature of this challenge before presenting some reflections on directions to explore for spiritual sustenance and respite.

A formidable challenge for our age is to replace paradigms of domination with those embedded in reciprocity, mutuality, love, and justice. From Phoenix-KZN to Kabul-Afghanistan, from Minneapolis-USA to Delhi-India, we are acutely aware that the current global political landscape is a stage for toxic masculinities running rogue. Traversing religious and secular spaces, a marked phenomenon of our time is the unapologetic forms of rapacious male power. Increasingly, human vices socially manifested as sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ecocide, and xenophobia, among others, are unashamedly paraded in the varying political theatres of the world, causing tremendous suffering to the vast majority of human beings as well as the destruction of various other forms of life across the planet. Modes of power and authority, exercised in the interests of small male elites, have not only resulted in gross socio-economic inequalities, but also compromised the ultimate survival of the earth.

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\(^2\) Social unrest, purportedly triggered by the imprisonment of the former President Zuma, spread into wide-spread rioting, chaos, and lawlessness in Gauteng and KZN in South Africa from 8-19 July 2021. Social analysts argue that the enduring systemic economic inequality in South Africa, continuing in the post-apartheid era, compounded by Covid-19 and the related loss of jobs, aggravated socio-economics hardships, and the state of chaos escalated quickly, resulting in the death of more than 300 people.

Ecofeminists have long pointed to the common root of domination, characterising patriarchal capitalist structures that privilege men over women, and exploitative modes of human engagement with the earth, and non-human environments. The enormity of the current ecological crisis bears a painful testimony to the ways in which these masculinist modes of power have caused extensive planetary destruction – climate change is but the tip of the iceberg.

Gus Speth, professor of environmental law, astutely observed in 2013 that the catastrophic ecological state of the world is at its core a spiritual crisis:

I used to think that top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy…and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation, and we (lawyers) and scientists, don’t know how to do that.4

Speth alerts us that a crucial dimension of the ecological crises is symptomatic of an underlying poverty of human virtue at the collective, political level. Indeed, one of the root causes of the manifold social, political, and ecological disasters which we confront today is our collective spiritual deficit.

There is ample evidence that many prominent contemporary leaders function at the lowest level of human consciousness, embodying negative qualities and vices within communities that have in some way enabled their rise to power. The imperative for social transformation, within which human beings as a collective foster virtue and refrain from vice, is not simply about an individual quest, but has extensive political consequences. If indeed the central root of the problem is spiritual, the cure must also involve inner renewal and modes of personal ethics that manifest in more virtuous publics. While systemic injustice cannot be solely redressed by a revitalisation of individual ethics, nonetheless the renewal of spirituality and the cultivation of virtue remain one crucial

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component among others, in addressing the social challenges of our time.  

A deeper response to the current socio-political crises, therefore, includes attentiveness to the organic relationship between the individual and the society, and the intimacy between the spiritual and the political realms. Indeed, all great prophets, sages, and wise leaders from varied cultures and histories, brought teachings that integrated the cultivation of the inner self in ways that had profound social implications – prophets were often rejected by the powerful elites of their societies, precisely because their revolutionary spiritual imaginaries shifted modes of social power.

Since my approach to religion is one that focuses on the spirit of revolutionary change, it is appropriate to reflect briefly on the idea of tradition. Human beings are as much the shapers of religious traditions as they are recipients of it. The persistent assumption that any religion including Islam is fixed, handed down, and already determined, and that believers should simply submit and follow, is sociologically and historically inaccurate. Any cursory historical appraisal will reveal that religions are not only handed down to people but are also continuously in the process of becoming through the lives, ideas, contributions, innovation, reformulations, rejection, embraces, and meaning-making actions of its adherents.

People are sometimes more easily aware of the dynamic nature of religious meaning-making at the personal, individual level. It is often easier to recognise in the context of our everyday experiences that one’s spiritual path is influenced by varying experiences. We know that there are times when we encounter our own strengths and gifts beautifully,

5 Drawing on Kantian ethics, philosopher Lucy Allais alerts us that in conditions of structural injustice we cannot remedy the situation solely through individual action or virtue, but we require political change. See Lucy Allais, “Deceptive Unity and Productive Disunity: Kant’s Account of Situated Moral Selves,” in Kant on Morality, Humanity, and Legality, eds. Ansgar Lyssy and Christopher Yeomans (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 3.

6 Shahab Ahmed’s What is Islam, despite a dismal lack of attention to questions of gender, nonetheless provides an illuminating archive of the dynamic nature of the Islamic tradition and Muslim creativity within tradition over a period of 500 years (fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries) in diverse geographical regions ranging from the Balkans to Bengal. See Shahab Ahmed, What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).
and yet other times where we have come up sheerly and nakedly against our own weakness and limitation. We might remember times when we have extended ourselves beyond what we thought capable, and other times when we were more constricted and in pain than we had thought we could have borne. We might recall times when we have known our own power to touch another life with love and compassion, and yet other times that we have been so deeply vulnerable, subject to the pain inflicted by another, or incapacitated by the pain that we might have inflicted on another life – we know intrinsically that this range of experiences of ourselves and our world requires dynamic responses from us if we want to grow.

Conscious human beings recognise experientially that the spiritual and ethical path requires presence and responsiveness to the moment, a recognition that for any deeper discernment and cultivation, we must consistently seek to calibrate with the higher qualities and attributes within ourselves. We need a similar sort of awareness and dynamic engagement with religious tradition as it relates to the social sphere, taking seriously the moral agency, responsibility, and accountability that we have as human beings in creating a more just, humane world for all beings – human and non-human.

Some religious people, particularly in times of uncertainty and strained social circumstances, want to relieve their anxiety and insecurity by appealing to an imagined construct of the past that provides clear and undisputable answers. However, if our relationships to the past do not allow us to dynamically respond to the changing needs of our current social contexts, stagnation, imbalance, and destructiveness will inevitably ensue. In my view, these forms of harm are reflected in religious communities – my own included – when we do not effectively engage contemporary challenges to redress gender, sexual, racial, and environmental justice. It might include, among others, the more obvious cases of unjust marital rights in the family, discriminatory divorce procedures, unfair custody rights, denigrating same-sex sexuality, exploitative racist employment practices, and abuse of the earth’s resources, to name but a few.

Responsive to our contexts, it becomes imperative for conscientious believers to engage prevailing interlocking systems of oppression, attentive to what the Qur'an calls the ayat or signs appearing on our
contemporary horizons – and these signs include our evolving sensibilities of justice. Being enriched by tradition, is to boldly embrace one’s own role in creating and crafting contemporary living forms of religion, rather than being hostage to an authoritarian image of the past. As astutely observed by the early twentieth-century reformist Jewish Rabbi, Mordecai Kaplan who highlighted the importance of dynamic Jewish responses to the contextual ethical demands of the time, inherited tradition has “a vote and not a veto.”

Islamic feminism proceeds from a vision of an imaginative and lively dialogue between core values of the Muslim past with those of the present, in order to contribute meaningful understandings of Islam in relation to questions of gender ethics and social justice. Reading the contemporary horizons as a believer, I am inspired by a central spiritual teaching at the core of my tradition, the insight that love and justice are integrally connected, that divine love is at the root of all existence and is the ontological or original womb of justice. In this regard, the Qur’an clearly states that the command of God is adl wa ihsan, adl meaning justice, and ihsan – a more nuanced Arabic word – best translated in my view as ‘goodness’ that encompasses dimensions of beauty, love, and virtue collectively. In my analyses, when the impetus for social justice is driven by love, it is at its most potentially transformative and powerful.

Anger is an important and effective reactive weapon that can powerfully ignite justice-based movements. Indeed, the suffering created by the prevailing economies of violence must elicit anger, resistance, and rejection, born of righteous rage. However, anger cannot ultimately nurture the higher. Anger might push some among us to action, but anger does not truly enable growth and expansion. I suggest that for justice to ripen into a truly transformative and sustaining force, it must draw back from that deep current of love, and this is where we dive into for respite, rest, rejuvenation, replenishment, and creativity.

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7 A popular Qur’anic verse (41:53) invites human beings to respond to the social context as part of a response to the Divine: “We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, till it is clear to them that it is the truth. Is it not enough for them to know that the Sustainer is witness over everything?”

To many people, the term “love” is nebulous and difficult to define. For some people, it is a feel-good emotion or related to a private experience, which is not essentially about social transformation. For others, notions of love have been manipulated theologically and socially to subordinate and even colonise groups of people, purportedly for their salvation. In intimate relationships within patriarchal societies, love is sometimes invoked instrumentally to serve inequitable roles and asymmetries of gendered power. As such, love can be a messy and even an abused concept in our experiences and histories. However, I retrieve and reclaim a vision of love as a transformative political force. Following in the footsteps of some of the great prophets and social reformers, I focus on love as a universal spiritual legacy of humankind that can potentially calibrate human beings to higher forms of consciousness, heralding nourishing forms of relationality for individual and collective flourishing within a society.

To reflect on the deepest spiritual source of love, there is an evocative Muslim tradition (hadith qudsi) in this regard, where God purportedly said, “I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the world so that I might be known.” Many Muslim thinkers have reflected extensively on this tradition, using it as a starting point for understanding human nature and a relationship with God. Within this religious imaginary, it is a divine yearning, longing, and love to be known intimately that is the very impetus for creation. Love is thus lodged in our innermost beings. It is the original divine imprint on every life – we are all mirrors of a divine love seeking to reflect its “hidden treasure.” However, what is this “hidden treasure?” Muslim scholars have understood this to refer to divine qualities or attributes which are embedded in creation as part of our original nature or constitution, the spiritual birthright of every life, and which every human being and all creation have been gifted with. Within the Muslim tradition, the divine attributes that humanity must foremostly embody, are mercy, compassion, generosity, and justice. Here another Muslim tradition (hadith qudsi) is helpful in highlighting the appropriate forms of relationality in contexts of need and inequality:

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[God] descends to stand in our place, such that when one of Her servants is hungry, God says to the others, “I was hungry and you didn’t feed me” and when one is thirsty, God says to His other servants, I was dying of thirst and you didn’t give me water and when another of Their servants was sick, God says, “I was sick and you didn’t attend to me.” And when those servants ask God about all of this, God says to them, “As for the one who was sick, if you had tended to him, you would have found me with him. And when someone was starving, if you had fed her, you would have found her with Me and so for the one who was thirsty, if you had given them water you would have found Me there” (Hadith al-qudsi).\(^{11}\)

This popular Muslim tradition, with its evident biblical resonance,\(^{12}\) indicates God’s presence among “the least,” those occupying marginal and liminal social spaces. Divine love and mercy are such that God partakes in the conditions of one’s deepest human needs. Here, each person is compelled to respond compassionately to the needs of those who are weakened through illness, hunger, and thirst. I interpret these conditions of need as both physical and metaphorical – hunger, thirst, and illness include a physical and socio-economic vulnerability, as well as other intersecting axes of social and political precarity, whether it is the result of sexist and homophobic cultures, racism, or any other context of human suffering due to structural injustice. As such, I propose that a response of care, protection, and upholding justice towards a fellow human being in situations of oppression, is in effect a response to the divine presence.

Therefore, enacting compassion and justice is not merely an act of extension to another human being, it is an act of connecting with the Divine Beloved. As such, the person who extends to those in need, who acts with fairness and justice in their personal relationships to other lives, is not simply the benevolent person who attends with merciful compassion to a marginalised “other.” In fact, responding compassionately to adversities and challenges faced by a poor, hungry, ill, or oppressed person paradoxically provides a fertile opportunity for a fellow human being to encounter the Ultimate Source. Moreover, the oppressed or hungry person is not merely instrumental or an intermediary, but in and


\(^{12}\) See for example Matthew 25:34-45 in the Bible.
through that person’s predicament, the Divine as the embodiment of love, is fully present, inviting compassionate and loving human engagements. This reading of the spiritual dynamics within such relationships disrupts and subverts traditional power relationships between giver and recipient, between the powerful and the powerless. In reality, both parties in this relationship give and receive divine mercy – the humanity and divinity of each are tied to the other and everything is an unfolding of divine love.

From this perspective then, love is a radical transformative force that engages the fullness of one’s being and extends to other lives and into the realm of society as a means of deep encounter. Love is the primary creative force for existence, and the highest call of human community, and is always intimately tied to justice. This insight also emerges within other religious and ethical traditions pithily captured in the well-known aphorism by contemporary philosopher and social critic, Cornell West, “Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private.”13

The intimate connection between love and justice demands that we rethink models of power, and here feminists have long reflected on the importance of turning away from discriminatory hierarchies towards reciprocity and mutuality. I find a deep resonance between the work of many Islamic feminists who focus on the central religious imperatives that embed love, with justice as an integral ethical imperative, and the emergence of what is increasingly been called “love ethics” or “love politics” more broadly amongst black feminist scholars.14

The Islamic philosopher Zahra Ayubi points precisely to this synergy when surveying Muslim love ethics as it takes form among Muslims who are active in the Black Lives Matter movement. She describes this emerging current of love ethics as a constructive attempt to create anti-oppressive communities “for the love of the tradition and fellow Muslims with an eye to the future. Muslim love ethics is not just concerned with assigning moral language to women’s everyday resistance…but is concerned with moral language that characterizes an egalitarian fu-

ture.” Indeed, these moral languages of love and justice are presently taking form in various forms of community-making the world over. I would like to offer examples of two initiatives that I am involved in, which reflect new moral narratives and alternative forms of community, embodying in my view an aspirational “love ethics.”

The first example is a forthcoming anthology of contemporary Muslim women’s sermons that Dr Fatima Seedat and I conceptualized, titled The Women’s Khutbah Book: Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality and Justice from around the World. While there is a traditional genre of sermons or khutbah compilations within Muslim cultures, these have historically been a male preserve, written and presented exclusively by men. Given the burgeoning spaces of Muslim women’s religious leadership and spiritual authority in varied contexts globally, Muslim women are currently producing new and vital bodies of religious knowledge, grounded in commitments of love, spirituality, and justice. Our book, the first of its kind, aims to instantiate, mark, authorise, and celebrate these transformative visions of Islam and inclusive leadership. It includes contributions from diverse women ranging from South Africa to Senegal, Britain, the USA, Pakistan, Egypt, Indonesia, Germany, and Denmark. The collection both continues an established literary tradition of sermon (khutbah) compilations in Muslim societies, while fundamentally transforming, expanding, and innovating that genre. Further, by locating itself within as established Islamic genre, it serves to simultaneously archive and authorise contemporary Muslim women’s spiritual authority. Dynamically balancing continuity and change, this archive reflects a contemporary form of gender-inclusive tradition-making within Islam.

Within the book, Fatima and I bring the insights of these contemporary women khatibahs into dialogue with a marginalised historical legacy of insubordinate Muslim women who have actively contested injustice. In this theorisation, we render visible existing histories and spirited feminist legacies within Islam that have often been suppressed or ignored by mainstream patriarchal approaches, and which allow us to expand the notion of what in fact constitutes Muslim “tradition.” Resisting gender injustice in this reading of history is an intrinsic part of being traditional. Locating contemporary Muslim women in a robust and powerful historical lineage, we argue that our collective spirited resistance to injustice is both traditional and innovative. In being responsive to the ethical chal-

lenges and social issues of our day, it opens up vibrant imaginaries of love and relationality while reframing dominant understandings of the past and reconstitutes the very nature of understanding Muslim tradition.

By making explicit connections between women’s diverse experiences and the creation of inclusive epistemologies, the volume expands the horizons for communal and ritual leadership in ways that might have been previously considered unthinkable for many Muslims. The work fits squarely into the mould of a Muslim love ethics that provides new social repertoires, fresh theological insights, and vivifying ethical possibilities in response to contemporary needs. Books of this type that contribute to scholarly writing and activist arenas; that enable innovative theological and social visions which reconfigure the nature of religious authority; that render visible and models diverse subjectivities and human realities; that pivot the experiences of people residing at the margins of community into its centre; and that energise and animate expansive, inclusive, and justice-based visions of religion and tradition, provide resources of respite, rest, and resistance to many within our communities.

The second example of a contemporary Muslim love ethics that I want to invoke is an online Muslim feminist collective that I am a member of. Due to the closure of mosques during the first pandemic lockdown in April 2020, a group was started by some South African Muslim women, to perform the Friday congregational prayers. The group has since grown into a broader online feminist community which now includes women, children, some men and families from South Africa, as well as participants from other parts of the world. This collective has consciously and intentionally fostered participatory and flat leadership structures, integrating rituals and community-building through creative, inclusive, and socially engaged modes of interaction. Additionally, the group has enabled activist solidarities on social issues arising, as well as enabled collective fora for art, meditation, and other forms of creative expression within this emerging community. Members come from a wide spectrum of interests, lifestyles, age groups, gender and sexual orientations, and professional fields, and a number of congregants are offering their various talents and skills for collective learning and enrichment. Within this group, authority in ritual and knowledge is decentred. Instead, the group enables a plethora of perspectives, experiences, and personalities to have voice within the Friday congregational ritual space, as well as in broader activities undertaken. This feminist collective exemplifies a form of loving community that addresses social and ethical challenges of the
day, facilitating more expansive and imaginative spaces for Muslim women’s agency and social vision, as well as enabling diverse Muslim identities to be recognised, embraced, and celebrated.

These two examples of love politics that I have discussed above, which are the first Women’s Khutbah Book and the online Muslim feminist congregation started in South Africa, reveal emerging Muslim feminist communities which are part of a larger global movement towards gender inclusivity and social justice. Increasingly, there appears to be varying kinds of nurturing Muslim feminist collectives emerging within a variety of contexts, while online platforms have enabled wide-ranging solidarities, networks, and a cross-fertilisation of ideas globally.¹⁶ A central resource for both resistance and rest is indeed the creation of a loving and beloved community which reconfigures power as a radiating circle of enhancement rather than premised on a hierarchical logic of domination. If we are to overcome the dominant modes of toxic masculinity in our world, we must – from diverse locations and orientations – raise prophetic voices of revolutionary love, build alternative forms of communities that reconfigure power and authority, and live our love politics in bold new ways. Without these forms of nourishment and deep connectivity, people cannot genuinely flourish individually and collectively.

I submit that it was precisely such an underlying love politics that was spiritually current for the Women’s Defiance Campaign, a campaign that mobilised 20,000 South African women in 1956 to protest Apartheid pass laws, powerfully singing “Nkosi sikelel’iAfrika” (God Bless Africa), and “Wathint’ Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokordo” (you strike a woman, you strike a rock).¹⁷ This inclusive women’s collective coming from all races, religions, and class backgrounds, including Amina Cachalia and Albertina Sisulu, Rahima Moosa and Ama Naidoo, Lilian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph, Fatima Meer and Sophie Williams de Bruyn, together embodied a

¹⁶ See for example the global reach of the Muslim feminist movement, Musawah, whose work involves feminist knowledge-building, international advocacy and capacity building of NGOs, committed to justice and equality in the Muslim family. They hosted a very successful set of webinars during the pandemic that connected Muslim feminist scholars and activists from various parts of the world with audiences, also attending from all parts of the world. See Musawah, “Knowledge Building Research Initiative: Reclaiming ‘Adl and Ihsan in Muslim Marriages: Between Ethics and Law,” Musawah, https://www.musawah.org/knowledge-building/reclaiming-adl-and-ihsan/.

powerful force of spirit and solidarity, embodying a love ethics that envisioned a more inclusive, just world. May we resonate the legacy of all our feminist ancestors and the prophetic revolutionaries of our time, who invite us to the highest within ourselves for the collective good.

In that spirit I would like to conclude with a poem by the inimitable Syrian feminist poet, Mohja Kahf entitled, *The Mihrab of your Mind*:¹⁸

I’m told that we belong to different faiths and pray at differing appointed times to gods of different names we find comfort in familiar forms, and each soul melts its candle alone in its dark night

But I know this: our bodies’ shapes divine, these columns of flesh, this warm breath of heart talk between us, these contain the covenant
God put at the base of Eve and Adam’s spine

This is what religion is. Its Kaba is the heart Its prophet, savior, and messiah is the nobler self Its scriptures are always written in the here and now

We are all its chosen tribe Its miracle is joy, its fruit is gratitude Its holiest of holies has been placed in the living church inside my chest in the mihrab of your mind

¹⁸ Mohja Kahf, *The Hajar Poems* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2016), 95. A *mihrab* refers to the prayer niche at the front of a mosque which provides the direction for prayer.
Roundtable Discussion: Islamic Feminist Imaginaries: Love, Beauty, and Justice

References


**First Respondent: Fatima Seedat¹**

**For Feminist Killjoys between Love and Justice: The Spiritual is Political¹⁹**

¹SHORT BIO
Dr. Fatima Seedat is Head of the Department of African Feminist Studies at the University of Cape Town, where she specialises in Islamic Law and its intersections with gender and sexuality.

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**Response**
I begin with thanks to Prof Nadar and the team of people she works with for this invitation and this event. My further thanks for the opportunity to share the stage with two remarkable scholars of Islam whose ideas I respect deeply and whose courage I am drawn to regularly. As feminists, our politics should never sit too far away from our academics, and I am privileged to share this space with two souls/sisters/scholars who know how to show up, know that they must show up, and most importantly, they show up! Prof Sa’diyya Shaikh and Dr Farah Zeb, it is a privilege.

¹⁹ This paper was prepared as a response to Prof Sa’diyya Shaikh’s keynote address at the annual lecture, *Economies of Violence: Religion, Resistance and Rest*, hosted by Prof Sarojini Nadar, Desmond Tutu Chair for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape in August 2021.
Prof Sarojini Nadar and the team, my thanks for making possible a discussion among us.

Drawing on our topic “Religion, Resistance, and Rest,” and in response to Prof Shaikh’s presentation, I begin with a reflection on us as feminist killjoys and conclude with our work in the politics and the poetics of love, to advance from Prof Shaikh’s presentation not only the idea that personal is political, but also that the spiritual is political – indeed our love is political.

I begin with the love which we give ourselves, or do not, and a quote from a dear friend and activist, Shamillah Wilson with some guidance for activists who have not yet learnt to care for themselves: “There is no competition between taking care of yourself and changing the world. Both are equally important and necessary when pursuing a life of purpose and passion.”20

Shamillah reminds us that we know much more of the second than the first. In fact, we know so little of caring for ourselves that they say we kill joy, we “take out the fun and the life of a situation” which is why Prof Shaikh directs us to the book of Sara Ahmad, Living a Feminist Life where Sara reclaims our killjoy spirits with a “Killjoy Survival Kit” and a “Killjoy Manifesto.”21 In this perspective, the killjoy does not signal the end of joy but a feminist critique of “happiness,” and not where happiness is the same as goodness, rather where the happiness of people rests on the inequality of others or as Sa’diyaa explains above, an illusionary “happiness sustained through structural inequality.” It is indeed “a moral imperative to be a killjoy in contexts of oppression,” Sa’diyaa reminds us. We may not stop “calling out constantly against complicity, silence, heedlessness, and illusionary constructs of peace and happiness,” yet doing so is indeed “epistemically and emotionally a heavy burden.”

Reflecting on the emotional work and costs of feminist commitment and our inability to recognise when to rest, a phrase that first came to mind

20 Shamillah Wilson, Waking Up: How I woke up my Inner Activist to create a Bigger Life (Self-published: Cape Town, 2018).
was that “there is no rest for the wicked.” I went to search for the origin of this little phrase that seems to have been in my head for ever and learned very quickly that rather than a direct biblical quote, which I had long assumed it to be, it is in fact a paraphrase of Isaiah 57:21, where the actual text reads, “There is no peace’, says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” In this way I learned that peace and not rest is denied to the wicked. Maybe because many of our faith traditions cast us as the wicked – by us I mean the feminists – I have somehow always identified with this idea. Maybe it is also because of what Sa'diyya calls “the intimacy between the spiritual and the political realms.” I am claiming the term because we know our “wickedness” is directed against oppression. Therefore, if you are a killjoy, then indeed you know the lack of peace – mental, emotional, and oft times even physical peace – in the work we do.

While we may know little of how to rest, and we may experience little peace in our own struggles for change, transformation, and worlds without oppression, what we do know is what we want and so we dare to envision a peaceful state of living, whether in our homes as individuals, parents and partners, in our workspaces, or our social worlds. We envision a state of happiness that is not founded on inequality. Regardless of what they say, then, this bunch of wickeds will know peace – either here or in some other place beyond this realm. For all feminists, the personal is political, for faith-based feminists, the spiritual is political too.

We try to create this peace in the spaces we inhabit: The homes and communities we live in, in the movements we build around us because we matter. Drawing on Audrey Lourde, Sara Ahmad narrates that

in queer, feminist and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. This is why when we have to insist, I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters.22

The value of community for feminist work is without doubt. It holds us, sustains us, and if we get it right, it also transforms us. In academic spaces this is vitally important, in spaces where we regularly encounter

hierarchy as we grade our students’ papers, apply for promotions, evaluate colleagues’ research applications, elect to senate, and make a decision in committees, the communities of support that we gather around us can make the difference, giving us the courage to discern between decisions that maintain the status quo and those that transform it. Sustained, replenishing, and fulfilling work happens in community, through community, for community-building, indeed for world-building, without oppression.

However, this is hard work – and my dear Prof Sa’diyah tells us to do this work with love. However, love is also political. Anna Jonasdottir, an Icelandic feminist of many years ago, brought us to a field called “love studies,” when she enquired about how patriarchy continues in those societies “that are formally/legally equal and socioeconomically relatively gender equal.” The answer that Anna provides is striking: She states that it is because of love. Using ideas of “political sexuality” and “sociosexual relationships,” she offers us “a dialectical concept of love (containing both caring and erotic/ecstatic power)” as well as a theory of “love power.” Rather simply, she explains, “If capital is accumulated alienated labour, male authority is accumulated alienated love.”

You may want to read that once more because it is a profound analysis of how love functions in patriarchal societies. I am myself still learning about “love power” as a theoretical concept, but there are two spaces that are relevant for this event where I can see how the alienation of women from their love – both erotic and caring – leaves their energies and efforts unseen and produces economic precarity. Both situations bring us to a complex intersection of relations that can be understood as economies of violence, where the production and consumption, through the allocation of (scarce) resources, produce violence through the actual or threatened use of force or power to produce damage or injury.

Framing intimate relationships in a theory of love makes immediately evident the economies of violence perpetuated through the exploitation of love labour, whether by women or by other people. The first refers to

the Marikana massacre of 2015 where mine workers were massacred by state police in the midst of a strike against low wages, and which event first inspired these annual lectures on economies of violence, and the second speaks to marriage and what happens when the love labour in marriage is not recognised.

In the first instance, we are guided by the work of Asanda Benya\textsuperscript{26} whose analysis illustrates all the different forms of love power of the women partners of the Marikana mine workers, which she defines as social-reproductive labour, or as the title of her article suggests, “the invisible hand.” Cheap labour power, whether on the mines or anywhere else, is reproduced on a daily basis by the invisible love-based labour of countless women and others. The “social reproduction” work of the women at Marikana, whether through care in the domestic space or sexual intimacy, supported the workers in both their minework and their resistance to low wages. The symbiotic relation between the reproductive and productive spheres is a critical fault line in the Marikana crises which Asanda tells us, “collapse(s) the distinction between home and work; it was as much about the mines – the workplace – as it was about the living conditions of workers.”\textsuperscript{27} While this is not a new idea, Asanda’s suggestion that this distinction collapses because men (both husbands and mine bosses) can and do claim women’s love (directly or indirectly) and profit thereby (whether through patriarchy or capital), makes evident the ways in which the exploitation of love manifests in the authority of patriarchy.

The second resonance is in marriage. Last month, in August 2021, the South African Constitutional Court heard arguments about why the state has an obligation to recognise and regulate Muslim marriages, and we are waiting for that judgement which is a protracted process spanning 27 years since 1994, developing new legislation and challenging potentially unconstitutional legal practices. Muslim marriages are not legally recognised in South Africa. Yet a number of scholarly and community formations have also rejected the feminist calls for state recognition of Muslim marriages, thus sustaining an economy of deep structural violence that operates within the framework of marital intimacies. In the absence of legal recognition for Muslim marriages, married, divorced, and widowed

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\item \textsuperscript{27} Benya, “The Invisible hand,” 557.
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women may not claim any matrimonial property rights. While it is true that divorce generally impoverishes wives, especially mothers, women leaving legally unrecognised Muslim marriages, are almost always impoverished at the end of a marriage, with little to no legal protection from the South African state.

Marriage is itself an economy for the production, consumption, and exchange of resources, not only material but also intimate, erotic, and caring love among them. It is arguably this love that ensures that as wives and partners, women do not recognise or claim the full value of the energies which they expend in producing the love that makes relationships flourish. Legal systems recognise marriage not for the exchange of love, but for the entanglements of property and material assets. Depending on the chosen property regime, marriage can either empower or impoverish a wife. Following Anna Jonasdottir, when love encounters patriarchy, it is accumulated by and alienated toward the patriarchs so that wives are never acknowledged for the value of their intimacies, and love is never assigned its full value in the economy of the marriage. Material property, instead, is the basis of value and regulation in a marriage. Consequently, even where a marriage has state recognition, only these material elements are protected and regulated, not the intimate elements of a marriage. More egregiously, where there is no state recognition of marriages, even these material rights remain unprotected, with their violation related directly to the unrecognised value of the intimacies or love that form part of a marriage. We can only hope that the SA Constitutional Court will rule positively. Until then, we will be subject to the state’s arguments that it is not responsible for protecting Muslim women in Muslim marriages.

Around the time of the Constitutional Court case, a document penned anonymously was circulated, arguing that “as it stands, the system in South Africa is perfectly designed to impoverish Muslim wives.” The excerpts which I quote, illustrate how the absence of state recognition of a religious marriage allows for the accumulation of male authority and the alienation of women’s love to collectively produce an economy of violence.

The Real Reason we don’t want Legal Recognition for Muslim Marriage: “A Handy Guide from the Money-Minded Muslim Husbands Club” or “50 Steps on How to Leave a Muslim Wife Destitute.”
1. Marry a woman in Islamic law/rites only.
2. If she asks for a Civil Marriage tell her it’s haram, we can rely on the “shariah” to protect us.
3. If she insists on an Islamic Marriage contract, ensure its not in community of property, pretend like that’s haram.
16. Make sure your wife can never have a share in any of your assets, now or in the future.
17. Remind her that to insist on having assets in her name means she’s a gold digger, and you never married a gold digger.
18. Make sure you never give your wife any money that isn’t for a household expense.
19. When you give your wife money for household expenses give less than she asks for so she can’t save anything for herself.
34. When you divorce, rather spend money fighting your wife in court than let her share any assets you earned while married to her.
50. Again, don’t be guilty, keep pretending this is what Allah wants, keep pretending you’re just doing things the “shariah” way.²⁸

A marriage, therefore, represented as love (in the collective of care and erotic experience), brings with it great precarity, more so when this love is not accompanied by justice. Unfortunately for wives, material capital rarely partners with justice.

However, I know Sa’diyya is talking about love of a different kind, and so to address those concerns, my questions are about how we work with love in systems that are designed to benefit from our love, but not to allow for us, the lovers, to also thrive? How do we love when the system allows our beloveds to use our backs as climbing blocks onto positions of power and then to also deny us our own power?

How do we love when our most intimate spaces are also spaces for the origin of betrayals? How do we sit between our betrayed selves and our

²⁸ The piece was authored anonymously and thereafter also published by an anonymous printer, who commissioned a set of illustrations for the piece and shared it on WhatsApp and other social media. An early version of it is on the Muslim Personal Law Network Facebook Page, n.d., https://www.facebook.com/mplnetworkSA/.
beloved others as they transform into people who no longer see us, happy to have enriched themselves from our love and our care? Our practice as Muslim feminists has been a long training in difference and sitting within it. It is indeed difficult to “sit” in the space of deep hurt. How do we love after being left destitute after 10/20/30/40 years of marriage, committed to our family and children, or after being ignored despite all the love we gave to support the realisation of the constitutional rights to dissent and to claim a living wage? Importantly, how do we love when we do not know how not to love? Some people like to speak about a massive chasm between Islam and feminism, and indeed we must always be conscious about what we bring together when these two ways of the world are trying to converge.

Yet many of us have found ways to recognise our feminist, self-affirming selves within our original divine contract. For us the spiritual is always political. As we come to sit more and more comfortably in our feminist Muslim selves, reflecting on the deep pain that feminist work inevitably encounters, we struggle to always be strong. Recalling Shamillah Wilson’s sage advice, it is not a competition between love for ourselves and our cause. Guided by the words of Matshilo Motsei, writer, healer, activist, and feminist, we do not need to be strong all the time. In the *Bosom of the Goddess*, surrounded by our own love, it is okay to break a little…

Safe in the Bosom of the Goddess
I rock like a little girl
Sucking her thumb
Nursing a bruised knee after a fall
From the Bosom of the Goddess
I wail in pain, only to
Fall into a deep slumber
That dries away my tears
Tender hands to hold me
I learn to break a little
To make room for yet
Another life experience
It is in her Bosom that I
Become an innocent child
Ready to love again without fear
As she mends my torn spirit with love
I know it will be okay.²⁹

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²⁹ Mmatshilo Motsei, Hearing Visions Seeing Voices (Johannesburg: Jacana Media,
2014), 14.
Roundtable Discussion: Islamic Feminist Imaginaries: Love, Beauty, and Justice

Second Respondent: Farah Zeb¹

Spiritual Sibling Discourses³⁰

¹SHORT BIO
Dr Farah Zeb completed her PhD in Arab and Islamic Studies at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK in 2017. She is an Independent Scholar and Research Consultant. Her research focuses on gender, sexuality, ethics, vulnerability and social inclusion. Her broader interests encompass contemporary Islamic thought; law, politics and social policy; postcolonial studies; exclusion and inequality; community cohesion and engagement; and interfaith dialogue. Prior to academia, she was working in various capacities for both statutory and non-statutory organisations to support vulnerable members of our diverse communities – from children and young people to vulnerable adults.

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Response
Dear Professors, colleagues, and friends, it is both an intellectual and heart honour to be invited to respond to the delightfully rich keynote delivered by a uniquely enigmatic and generous intellectual scholar of religion, Professor Sa'diyaa Shaikh. Permit me to begin with a note of gratitude to Professor Nadar and the entire team at the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice. My gratitude is not due to the normative formality of academic protocol, but the kind of gratitude that emerges from within one's heart, the same location from which Professor Shaikh invites us to orientate our ethical engagements, i.e., ones that are situated in reciprocity, mutuality, love, and justice, none of which can become a reality without a beating feeling heart. As scholars of religion with an attentive pulse on matters of race, class, gender, sexuality, LGBTQ, differently abled bodies, socio-economic status, and multiple marginalities, we are alertly attuned to the daily news of racist, sexist, homophobic, and queer phobic atrocities, committed in particular upon the bodies of women and marginalised members of our communities. We are all aware that every aspect of our existence is but a moment.

Attentiveness to our way of being in each moment is a modality that Professor Shaikh invites us to engage with. As I respond to Professor

³⁰ This paper was prepared as a response to Professor Sa'diyaa Shaikh’s keynote address at the annual lecture Economies of Violence: Religion, Resistance and Rest, hosted by Prof Sarojini Nadar, Desmond Tutu Chair for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape in August 2021.
Shaikh’s intricate keynote, I am conscious of the legacy and the work of our ancestor giant Reverend Doctor Katie Cannon\(^\text{31}\) in whose honour this year’s Economies of Violence gathering has launched the special journal edition.\(^\text{32}\) Following in the footsteps of Reverend Doctor Traci West’s keynote\(^\text{33}\) from last year, and the late Doctor Cannon’s phenomenal legacy, Professor Shaikh provides us with method. Last year, Doctor West insisted on method, and this year we have method from Professor Shaikh – a methodology that I will refer to later on – methods of attentive listening and loving, of engaging with the meaning-making richness that comes from our lived experience. As such, our lived experience serves as a template for interpretative possibilities.\(^\text{34}\) This beautifully resonates with the attentive care of Doctor Cannon’s pastoral pedagogical legacy.

Professor Shaikh combines the potential of ethical horizons within the Islamic tradition without being apologetic, without being simplicistically glorious about religion having all the answers, if only we would look deeper, or make the effort to see clearly.\(^\text{35}\) She also does not turn away


\(^{35}\) Professor Shaikh’s Sufi Narratives of Intimacy provides a rich example of how insights rooted in tradition can prove to be a treasure trove from which a historic interpretation
from the hard reality and concrete challenges experienced by humanity, or the wretched treatment meted out to animals, as well as the current state of our burning, parched, famished, flooded, waterlogged, chemically seeped, suffocating planet, a planet that is quite symbolically, like many of us, grasping for its own breath.

Right from the outset, Professor Shaikh categorically states her quest and invites us to reflect on how each of us might contribute to enabling collective transformations that create nourishing modes of being across the spectrum of life. In order to sustain life, she attentively invites us to bring the very best of us to the table, as well as the very best from each of our distinctive sibling traditions of belief. One might feel that this is quite a tall order that our dear Professor Shaikh is asking us to deliver, and this may well be the case for many of us. Where do we begin, or more precisely, how do we even begin to think about what segment or part of us is the best of us, worthy of being called and carried to the table of humanity, and what does that table of humanity look like for those of us who are marginalised members of our broader communities?

Living in constant states of resistance to forms of oppression and silencing is exhausting, and survival from one precarious moment to the next carries its own burdensome weight. For many of us, the question really is, Have any of us truly tasted reciprocity, tasted mutuality, tasted love, tasted justice? Have any of us tasted rest, tasted respite, tasted healing, tasted support? Without having tasted or being sufficiently nourished by such life enhancing forces, how does one even envisage flourishing?36

How do we even extricate what is the best of us when we are so busy surviving, working, traversing different economies of violence perpetuated upon us as women in micro and macro ways that cause exhaustion

of key mystical texts can be reimagined, rethought, and applied to contemporary challenges in ways that are more gender inclusive and attentive to contemporary practices and sensibilities. See Sa’diyah Shaikh, Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: *Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

to the very core of our beings. As women and members of marginalised communities, we do not just burn one candle at both ends, we are often burning multiple candles at both ends wherever ruptures occur along the spines of our respective candles. Our work is back breaking work, and yet we are still expected to deliver on work that places bread on the table from our already precarious forms of *ad hoc* sessional piecemeal employments, and we deliver not only with our tears, sweat, and blood, but we deliver in time and on time, within suffocating systems which are barely receptive to our pulse.

Late yesterday evening, following two weeks of solid work on Muslim feminist activist initiatives in South Africa, that both Doctor Seedat and I have been immersed in, we needed to make a call about which content to include in our respective responses here today in honouring Professor Shaikh’s wonderful keynote. When we find ourselves in these situations, we have to ask ourselves, What gives way and what has to give way? What is lost and what is sacrificed when we are faced with having to make these multiple calls in multiple forms, navigating the crucial timely needs of our diversely marginalised communities, with the demands and expectations placed upon us by an often toxically masculinised academy and a globally problematic political landscape?

Whilst traversing through the midst of the messiness of these landscapes, we still need to honour the work and teachings of our academic and spiritual siblings, educators, mentors, pedagogical giants, and sages across our religious traditions. Each of us must constantly, continuously, consistently, and conscientiously commit to holding ourselves to account. Holding ourselves to account is important. Many of us carry and walk with wounds of vulnerability. These same wounds are portals to deeper understanding of systemic patterns both within us and of relational ones that we encounter on a daily breath by breath basis.

As scholars and engaged grassroots academics, many of us have had to become jugglers extraordinaire. One wonders where we find time for rest because as the late Doctor Alease Brown said, “This stuff stays on the mind and refuses to let go.”37 The exhaustion of our respective labour impacts our mental, psychological, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

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37 Nadar and Robertson, “Recognition, Resistance and Rest,” 8.
As refreshing a paradigm as it can be to see rest and respite as forms of resistance, advocated by the self-ordained “Nap Bishop” Tricia Hersey, how realistic is or has rest and respite been in our lives? And yet, despite our various sufferings and silencing, we continue in our concerted efforts not to reinforce exploitative modes of human engagement. Indeed, we pause, acknowledging that human dignity for all is at our core, and we pause even longer when we witness other women and marginalised members of our community being used as decoys, in patronising patriarchal metanarratives that seek to dim the spirit of one’s individual and collective agency. Intimacy between spiritual modalities of being and the daily messiness of political realms of the academy and the world that surround us is not easy, and yet we must continue to ground ourselves with as much ethical attentiveness as we can reasonably muster, whilst we create paths and carve out our uniquely different ways of replacing various paradigms of dominion and domination. This is indeed a formidable task, as Professor Shaikh indicates.

Alongside the naming of specific systemic challenges, the brilliant contributions in the special addition journal mentioned by Professor Nadar earlier on in this seminar, clearly and categorically calls attention to Doctor Cannon’s brand of womanism, a brand that is aimed to celebrate a more holistic picture of black life, theology, and agency. Many of the contributors to the special issue speak of Doctor Cannon’s lifework as attentive “embodied” knowledge from a contextual framework, while Doc-

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38 Nadar and Robertson, “Recognition, Resistance and Rest,” 15. See also the Tricia Hersey webpage for more information on “rest is resistance” and “rest as reparations” frameworks (Tricia Hersey webpage, “About,” http://www.triciahersey.com/about.html).
Fundiswa Kobo’s paper reminds us of Doctor Cannon’s emphasis on women’s bodies as epistemological sources.\textsuperscript{40}

The academic rigour of Professor Shaikh’s work and beautiful keynote is in delightful harmony with Doctor Cannon’s work. These are precious spiritual sibling discourses in which we see moments, indeed a momentum of flourishing akin to looking out of a window in early spring and seeing flowers of different hues blossoming and swaying alongside one another in the magnificence of light – a light not only towards which they themselves extend, but a light which also embraces, recognises, and receives them. Nature provides us with so many rich examples of walking with, walking with one another across our spiritual traditions, and lifting one another in light, with light.

In conclusion I want to state that the Muslim woman’s \textit{khutbah} book\textsuperscript{41} and the inclusive collective collaborative community that Professor Shaikh references, honour spirituality in ways that women have themselves actively embodied, interpreted, and determined. They are worth celebrating to the core, and shouting out loud about, for these initiatives are powerful testaments to a flourishing of reciprocity, mutuality, love, and justice emerging from supportive communities of women’s solidarity, with marginalised communities included, determined to create a narrative that honours human dignity for all, across scriptures and experience.

I thank you for the privilege of opportunity granted to me for being a respondent to this delightful keynote, to the work of such an enigmatic scholar, Professor Shaikh. Truly honoured.

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\textsuperscript{41} Sa’diyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat (eds.), \textit{The Women's Khutbah Book: Celebrating Muslim Women’s Religious Authority at the Minbar} (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).


