For Feminist Killjoys between Love and Justice: The Spiritual is Political[1]

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SHORT BIO

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First Respondent

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.

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

[1] 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.

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."[2]

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."[3] 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'diyya explains above, an illusionary "happiness sustained through structural inequality." It is indeed "a moral imperative to be a killjoy in contexts of oppression," Sa'diyya 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 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

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2 Shamillah Wilson, *Waking Up: How I woke up my Inner Activist to create a Bigger Life* (Self-published: Cape Town, 2018).

3 Sara Ahmed, "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness," *Signs* 35, no.3 (2010): 571-94. See also her book, Sara Ahmed, *Living a feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); also Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare," *feministkilljoys*, 25 August 2014, https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/

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.[4]

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

[4] Ahmed, "Selfcare," 2014

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'diyya 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."[5] The answer that Anna provides is striking: She states that it is because of love. Using ideas of "political sexuality" and "socio-sexual relationships," she offers us "a dialectical concept of love (containing both caring and erotic/ecstatic power)" as well as a theory of "love power."[6] Rather simply, she explains, "If capital is accumulated alienated labour, male authority is accumulated alienated love."[7]

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

5 Anna Jonasdottir, "Sex/Gender, Power and Politics: Towards a Theory of the Foundations of Male Authority in the Formally Equal Society," *Acta Sociologica* 31, no.2 (1988): 167.
6 Jonasdottir, "Sex/Gender, Power and Politics," 167
7 Jonasdottir, "Sex/Gender, Power and Politics," 167

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[8] 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."[9] 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 women may not claim any matrimonial property rights. While it is true that divorce generally impoverishes wives,

8 Asanda Benya, "The Invisible hand: Women in Marikana," *Review of African Political Economy* 42, no.146 (2015): 545-60.

9 Benya, "The Invisible hand," 557

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.[10]

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.

[10] 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/

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 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 Mmatshilo 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.[11]

[11] Mmatshilo Motsei, *Hearing Visions Seeing Voices* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2014), 14.

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