

Haji Mohamed Dawjee, *Sorry, Not Sorry: Experiences of a brown woman in a white South Africa*.

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Sorry, Not Sorry: Experiences of a brown woman in a white South Africa captures your attention immediately. In a candid, almost curt style, South African journalist Haji Mohamed Dawjee allows you to enter her life through a series of 20 essays that cover race, religion, gender, sexuality, mental health, identity, and romance. This book is an admirable assessment of both “wokeness” within the South African political milieu and what intersectionality means at the level of the quotidian. It is a book that not only theorises about what it means to have an intersectional political ethic – it also shows this at the level of praxis and ontology. As a queer woman of colour from an Indian Muslim background, Dawjee embodies an intersectional identity that is held, with great tenderness and thoughtfulness, *vis-à-vis* configurations of power of the broader socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. In this review, I would like to focus on the inter-locking themes of religion, gender, and sexuality as they reflect the character of the personal as unavoidably political. Finally, this review has been written for an academic audience. While the intended audience goes beyond the porous boundaries of the academy, my reading of *Sorry, Not Sorry* has been elicited from my experiences within that context.

Dawjee sincerely reflects on her background as a Muslim. In Chapter Six (And how the women of Islam did slay),¹ Dawjee, drawing inspiration from the popular American TV show, *Game of Thrones*, to describe some of the illustrious women within Muslim history. For example, she pronounces the Prophet Muhammad’s first wife, Khadijah (and also the love of his life) as “Khadijah the great, the first of her name, the pure one, the first believer,

¹ Dawjee, “Sorry, Not Sorry,” 49-57.

cornerstone of the Islamic faith, philanthropist, blessed in wealth.”² This way of description and affinity speaks to the powerful and ground-breaking role that some women held within the early Muslim community, even in the deeply patriarchal context of seventh-century Arabia. However, Dawjee sharply juxtaposes this rich legacy with the reality of many contemporary Muslim women, drawing on her experience of the South African Indian Muslim community. She discusses the fact that many Muslim women are treated as second-class members of the faith whose sole responsibility is to tend to the needs of men. Dawjee astutely traces the origin of this androcentrism to a “male-dominated narrative”³ in which men (mainly brown men within this setting) have set the agenda for the rest of the community to follow. She correctly notes that Aisha (wife of the Prophet) would not stand for this type of open discrimination, and, as such, neither will Dawjee, which has led to her not attending any male-dominated Muslim space.⁴

However, Dawjee’s simplistic and decontextualised analysis of gender dynamics within Muslim communities does not illustrate the whole picture. While Muslim-sanctioned sexism, misogyny, and deep patriarchy certainly does exist in many Muslim spaces, it is not the only narrative of Islam within the South Africa Muslim imaginary. Indeed, there does exist gender-egalitarian Muslim spaces within the broader South African community. For instance, even in the more historically “conservative” Gauteng province, there is a space like Masjid al-Islam in Brixton, Johannesburg, and, of course, the historic Claremont Main Road Mosque in the more “liberal” Cape. In not fully acknowledging this complexity, Dawjee further entrenches Islamophobic tropes in the Global North and, increasingly, in the Global South. However, her gender framing is not entirely flat. She talks about her mother, for example, as “the true radical.”⁵ In this beautifully-crafted chapter, Dawjee gives her readers an accessible lesson in feminism and the multiple iterations thereof. Through an intersectional lens of praxis, she describes the “feminist” nature of her mother and multiple inter-locking experiences of racial, gender, and class

² Dawjee, “Sorry, Not Sorry,” 52.

³ Dawjee, “Sorry, Not Sorry,” 56.

⁴ Dawjee, “Sorry, Not Sorry,” 56.

⁵ Dawjee, “Sorry, Not Sorry,” 111-20.

struggles.⁶ In this candid style, she explores what Muslim feminist scholar, Sa'diyya Shaikh, has described as an assortment of heterogenous forms of feminisms, in which we can “detect a range of Muslim women’s gender activism, or Islamic feminisms.”⁷

In her second chapter, “A brain tumour can change your mind,”⁸ Dawjee meditates on the painful experience of her father’s struggle with cancer and her struggle of “coming out” of the “closet” to her parents. The chapter opens with a description of the medical team’s efforts to extend her father’s life through a risky brain surgery. Dawjee ponders about how a few days before his possible death, her father convened a family meeting in which he spoke about his last will and testimony and potential funeral plans. At this particular moment, she had not “come out” to her parents, and in an attempt to maintain the strong family bonds before her father’s death, she decided not to “come out” then, as she did not want to disappoint her father. She describes this feeling cogently when she says: “Perhaps when he passes, I can live a life out of the closet without the fear of disappointing him.”⁹ Setting aside the politics of “coming out,” Dawjee, in great agony, traces her feelings about living a life of “freedom” (i.e. out of the closet) in juxtaposition with the possibility of losing her father.¹⁰ After her father wins his battle, the anxiety of “coming out” again is re-opened. In October 2016, Dawjee “came out” to her parents, informing them of her impending marriage to her partner, Rebecca, in an email. Her father replied by saying he did not know what to say at that moment in time. Two months later, however, he delivered a beautiful, affirming, and welcoming speech at their wedding. Dawjee accounts for this change of mind and heart to his near brush with death.

⁶ Dawjee, “Sorry, Not Sorry,” 114.

⁷ Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender and Sexuality*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 23.

⁸ Dawjee, “Sorry, Not Sorry,” 11-9.

⁹ Dawjee, “Sorry, Not Sorry,” 15.

¹⁰ For a reading of the politics of “coming out of the closet,” see: Jasbir K. Puar. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 20-3.

Within Sufi psychology, the heart is the home of the spirit.¹¹ This is not the physical heart of blood-pumping, nor is it the affective heart of our emotions. This is the home of the *ruh* (spirit), the resting place of the spirit which gives life and that essence which is from God¹² and on a process of returning to God.¹³ It is because of this *ruh* that human beings have an inherent worth and dignity.¹⁴ It seems like Haji's father's near brush with death allowed him to re-evaluate the spiritual state of his heart and allow for a lifting of certain veils of arrogance, hatred, queerphobia, and discrimination. His experience of almost dying allowed his heart to be spiritually (and therefore socially) receptive to his daughter's coming out process and partnership with another woman. His heart was softened. It was cleansed of spiritual and socio-political impurities. It was in a state of receptivity. In this case, the spiritual became political – a transformation that goes beyond a theology or *fiqh*, which would legitimate same-sex intimacy within a normative framework of the *Shari'ah*. It "speaks" to the *insani* (human) and *ruhi* (spiritual) dimensions of queer intimacy, which is an area of research that requires greater attention and focus.

My overall perception of *Sorry, Not Sorry* by Haji Mohamed Dawjee is that it is a timely book especially for its South African audience. In the contemporary political moment of #MustFall, "wokeness," and more robust calls for intersectional social justice, this text is a cogent interlocutor. It is a book that captures the irritation and deep anxiety that many people of colour, marginalised folks, and women face, especially within the contemporary South African setting. As I thought through my own political positions, informed by my positionality, I identified with much of what was written in the 200-page text. It left me laughing at times, but it always kept me on my toes in ways that have pushed me to reflect on my own politics. This book brings an experiential mode of knowledge to our theoretical meditations as academics who work at the intersection of religion, gender, and sexuality in Africa.

¹¹ Shaikh, "Sufi Narratives of Intimacy," 36.

¹² See Qur'an 15:29.

¹³ See Qur'an 2:156.

¹⁴ See Qur'an 17:70.

References

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