

Women, Cosmopolitanism and Islamic Education

On the Virtues of Engagement and Belonging

Nuraan Davids



Peter Lang

Preface

The research study which forms the basis of this book is located within the Muslim community of the Western Cape, South Africa, and commences with a contextualization of the shift from an apartheid to a post-apartheid landscape.¹ For the sake of clarity, and very briefly, the term apartheid is an Afrikaans word, meaning separation. In very simplistic terms, the fundamental objective of apartheid was to maintain and ensure 'White' supremacy through the implementation of separation along racially constructed lines, which was formally institutionalized in the apartheid laws of 1948, under the government of the National Party. Apartheid, in terms of the Population Registration Act (1950), classified South African citizens into three main racial categories: 'White', 'Black' and 'Coloured' (mixed descent), which included the two sub-groups of Indians and Asians.

As a product of apartheid, and as a Muslim woman still experiencing the remnants of an apartheid legacy, I refer to terms of race, such as 'White', 'Coloured', 'Indian' and 'Black', throughout this book. In using these terms, I am neither endorsing them, nor am I attaching greater importance to race as a grouping of analysis. What I am stating is that it is impossible to explore and examine notions of identity and belonging within a South African context without reference to the vestiges of a racist bureaucracy. And while I recognize that it is restricting and restrictive to think about citizenship in racial terms, I am, however, testifying to a life experience, which has been both shaped and distorted by these very terms. The dawn of a post-apartheid society in 1992 held many good and misplaced assumptions, one of which was and is, that we, as South Africans, know how to respond to notions of democracy and freedom. To me, however, it has become apparent that this response remains in suspension until we comprehend

1 The Western Cape is one of nine provinces in South Africa.

that notions of democratic citizenship are tied to notions of identity and identity construction.

It is my viewpoint that even in his flowing white *thawb* [garment resembling a robe] and long beard, the Muslim man's Islamic dress code has in no way been as politicized as the veiling of the Muslim woman, even when she marries this cloth with that ultimate symbol of American working class – the denim jeans. The increased wearing of the *hijāb* [head scarf] among women in post-apartheid South Africa converges with the post-9/11 discourse of Islamophobia, which converges with the ensuing debates about the wearing of the *hijāb* [head scarf] in public spaces from France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Turkey to Singapore which, in turn, collides with conceptions of identity, belonging and citizenship.²

As a Muslim woman, I have witnessed and experienced many instances where what I wore and how I presented myself created a barrier to an authentic interaction. Throughout my time as a teenager, I have struggled to marry my identity as a Muslim woman with what I perceive to be the expectations of a non-Muslim society. And as a professional, I have deliberately been undermined and challenged simply because of my *hijāb*. I have been asked about why I wear it, if it is to please my spouse, if I enjoy wearing it, and even if there is something wrong with my hair. Within myself and through my interaction with other Muslim women, I know that I have made my own choices about who I am and how I choose to express myself. But I find that in living in a society, where my religious community is in the minority, and where nineteen years ago, I could not live where I live now, there is something missing in my attempted interactions with others in a diverse society, and in their interaction with me. I have found that inasmuch as people do not understand why I wear the *hijāb*, they do not grasp how Islām constructs and informs my Muslim identity. And allow me to quickly add, that the construction of my Muslim identity has not

2 Islamophobia: a relatively unexplored term which refers to deeply ingrained prejudices and/or hatred towards Muslims and Islām. It is a term which specifically entered the mainstream media after 9/11.

always informed and allowed me to interact and understand a community other than my own.

The decision, therefore, to write this book has to a large extent, been about making sense of who I am, so that I and others like me, who are in the minority, are better equipped to live and express their identity in a pluralistic society. It has also been about the realization and recognition that there exists as much difference and diversity among Muslim women as there does in a pluralistic society. Having your identity shaped within the guise and doctrines of any religion does not necessarily allow you to make sense of how and what informs the shaping. And it seldom encourages you to step outside yourself and openly interrogate whether any of it actually makes sense. *Women, Cosmopolitanism and Islamic Education* is my attempt to make sense of my Islām, to know myself better so that I might know others better, and ultimately, so that others might know me better.