# Chapter 13
# Muslim Women Academics in Higher Education: Reflections from South Africa

**Doria Daniels and Nazreen Dasoo**

**Abstract** In this chapter, we present the experiences of five Muslim women academics at their South African universities in a time of transformation. All five women are respected and accomplished individuals in their academic environments. We wanted to understand the prevailing organisational culture and the ways in which aspects of that culture could impede or encourage the process of inclusion of Muslim women as a minority within the university. The chapter is organized in two parts. In the first part, we contextualize Muslims within the bigger racial and ethnic landscape and provide an overview of transformational initiatives in higher education. In part two, we present our experiences.

## Introduction

> My portion would be plastic wrapped and separated from the rest of the buffet. Though I am appreciative that my work environment is aware of my dietary needs, I often wish that just vegetarian foods be served so that we can all eat the same.

This narrative of a Muslim woman academic teaching at a South African higher education institution is characteristic of the experience of a new academic generation, namely, Muslim women academics. 1994 was a momentous year for Muslim South Africans in that they celebrated 300 years of Islam in South Africa as well as participated in the country's first democratic elections. Still, our daily experiences

D. Daniels (✉)
Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University, Private Bag XI, Matieland 7602, South Africa
e-mail: doria@sun.ac.za

N. Dasoo
Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, P.O. Box 524, Auckland Park 2006, South Africa
e-mail: ndasoo@uj.ac.za

in the workplace as two Muslim academics, born and bred in South Africa, makes us reflect on whether being Muslim makes us less mainstream than our fellow country folk. Very limited research has thus far been conducted on the personal affective experiences of academics who work at institutions that they in the past were denied access to as students and academic staff because of their race and ethnicity. International research has found that being in the minority significantly impacts on a worker's personal affective experiences, and contributes to feelings of isolation and lack of worth in team relationships (Mor Barak 2005). Recent research on human resource development in the workplace has suggested a focus shift from diversity to inclusion (Roberson 2004) as the theme of diversity largely ignores the dynamics and consequences of exclusion (Prasad 2001). This thinking finds support from Alleyne's research (2005) that suggests that diversity initiatives be interpreted more broadly. However, even where academic barriers have been overcome, some of them felt excluded from their immediate work environment's mainstream activities owing to socially exclusive practices. Research on inclusion suggests that minority faculty experience more barriers to their professional socialisation in the workplace than white women faculty (Bernstein and Cock 1994; Nieves-Squires 1992).

In this chapter, we present the experiences of five Muslim women academics at their South African universities in a time of transformation. All five women are respected and accomplished individuals in their academic environments. We wanted to understand the prevailing organisational culture and the ways in which aspects of that culture could impede or encourage the process of inclusion of Muslim women as a minority within the university. The five women's narratives include that of the two authors. We assigned pseudonyms for all the women to protect their identities. Zaida is a lecturer in a medical sciences department, Akeelah is a medical professional working in a medical faculty, Gouwah is a lecturer in the Science faculty, Hudah is a professor in education and Nadia is a senior lecturer in curriculum. The women teach at three higher education institutions, of which one is a university that in the past was designated for people classified as coloured, and the other two historically white institutions (HWI). The chapter is organized in two parts. In the first part, we contextualize Muslims within the bigger racial and ethnic landscape and provide an overview of transformational initiatives in higher education. In part two, we present our experiences.

## Transformation and the Academic Trajectory

Higher Education was earmarked by the post-apartheid government as a key role player in "the consolidation of democracy" in South Africa. Government identified its universities as the settings where economic imbalances that were created by our country's apartheid past (Higher Education Act 1997) were to be addressed. It was argued that higher education has the potential to both serve a re-distributive social function as well as play an economic role in training future professionals. Since

1994, there has been remarkable development in policies and practices aimed at transformation and advancing culturally diverse university campuses. The Higher Education Act, Act 101 of 1997, formed the primary statutory framework for most universities' transformation initiatives. Policy related to Higher Education and its role in society supports the view that institutions of Higher Education should create environments that are conducive to strengthening democracy, redressing inequalities, producing social critics, promoting economic development and contributing to an educated and informed citizenry. The overall guiding documents for the transformation process were the Constitution of South Africa (Act 108/1996), the Higher Education Act (Act101/1997), The Skills Development Act (Act 97/1998), the Employment Equity Act (Act55/1998) and the Basic Conditions of Service Act (Act 7/1997).

The establishment of a multicultural university society at a Higher Education Institution is often perceived as a benchmark of the institution's commitment to transformation. Post 1994 there was a rush by especially historically white universities to employ designated groups such as academics of other colour. At the HWI, these academics could remain a group that functions on the margins of the mainstream population. Muslim academics are a minority within this group and could be even more marginalized as a sub group within.

Redress is not merely a numbers game. When an institution is perceived as not investing enough effort to understand incoming groups' cultures and their religions, it can lead to such academics' alienation within their work environments. Redress without acceptance of all faculty members working at the institution is problematic.

## Identity, Racial Categorizing and Being Muslim

Black community life, which included religiously defined Muslim communities, in the past registered at the periphery of the South African white nationalist consciousness, resulting in very limited knowledge about Muslims and Islam. In present day South Africa, views tend to be shaped more by the global discourse than by experience of the other races as the democratic state is still transforming its racial past. The global discourse on Muslims is an inadequate representation of those from Sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa's Muslims were historically located on the margins of developments in the Muslim world, and of its representational centre – the Middle East in particular (Da Costa 1993). By logging all Muslims together as a homogeneous group, however, African Muslims who are ethnically and culturally different from Arabs are gagged from sharing their experiences as Muslims.

South African Muslims comprise 654,000 of a total population of over 50 million. This group is not homogeneous and in South Africa they were part of two racial categories: Coloured and Indian, which have different ethnic and cultural roots. These racial categories were part of the National Party's apartheid policies to subordinate the black races under white rule. The Population Registration Act no. 30 of 1950 classified South Africans into four distinct categories, namely Whites,

Indians, Africans, and Coloureds. The Coloured group was further subdivided based on their ethnic and religious background, into 'Cape Malay,' Other Coloureds, Khoisan, and Bastards (Haron 2002). Most of the Muslims who resided in the Cape Province were classified as Cape Malay. There are different views on this classification, which some researchers say reflected their cultural roots, while others link it to the language this group spoke before the nineteenth century (Haron 2002; Erasmus 2001; Fataar 2007; Shell 1974). This sub-group was of Indonesian descent, and spoke Malay, which was the *lingua franca* of the Indonesian archipelago (Shell 1994). Though classified as a sub-category of the Coloured group, the Cape Malay's religious and cultural traditions distinguished them from the rest of the group (Erasmus 2001). Many people classified as such, however, referred to themselves as South African Muslims. Erasmus (2001) has argued that the preference of the religious label of South African Muslim over the ethnic Cape Malay in the 1970s and 1980s should be read as a form of resistance against the racist labelling by the Apartheid government.

South African Muslims are also of Indian descent. In 1869, many arrived as traders or referred to as "passenger Indians" from India. The appellation "passenger Indians" refers to those who paid their own passage to the Natal Colony. Unfortunately, the British felt threatened by them and viewed them as economic competitors, thus making it difficult for Indian Muslims to acquire residential and trading rights (Mahida 1993). The descendants of these Indian Muslim traders who traditionally inherited the business did not pursue professional qualifications.

Education was also segregated according to race. As part of its apartheid legacy, 36 higher education institutions had to be supported by the state. Enforced racial segregation contributed to a plethora of institutions being created to accommodate specific racial and language groups. Muslims of the 'Coloured' race could only attend the University of the Western Cape, the designated coloured university, while Muslims classified as Indian attended their designated university which was the University of Westville. The post apartheid government undertook a radical restructure of higher education through mergers and incorporations, rationalizations and collaborations. By January 2005, it had created 21 institutions out of an existing 36 universities and 'technikons'. This new creation consisted of 11 universities, 6 universities of technology and 4 comprehensive institutions.

## The Secular Versus the Social Space

The university space gets defined as a secular space where academics come to practise their trade. It is therefore assumed that its impact on the life of the academic should be negligible. From this perspective, the institution should exert no influence on the degree of social inclusion or exclusion and social cohesion that is being experienced by the academic. Moreover, religion will not be propagated nor play a role in influencing the workings of the institution. This is a perspective that was endorsed by those who participated in the pilot study (Daniels 2009) that preceded

this study. In the pilot study, it was the male participants who strongly supported a secular environment where religious issues are not centralized, nor part of the discourses that are advanced.

We challenge the view of the workspace as a secular space. According to the women, there are official times when cultural and religious events and phenomena impose on secular space. In South African universities, the hegemony of Christianity as a relic of Christian National Education is evident. In state schools, Christianity was part of the formal curriculum. At university, it continues to be part of the hidden curriculum. Religion, as well as language and ethnicity, may define group membership and group divisions that could contribute to exclusions of other group members from positions of power and opportunities (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Mor Barak (2005) fingers race, class and gender as determinants of exclusion. Muslims are in a double bind as their religion separates them from other minorities at their institutions while their race excludes them from the majority group at HWI.

We found social identity theory (Tajfel 1982), which links social structure and identity, useful to explain our experiences at these institutions. According to this theory, a person's perception of her/his group's inclusion or exclusion is an important process in the individual's desire to secure positive group affiliations. Though universities have various policies to guide them with transforming, both Gouwah and Akeelah felt that their presence at institutional level was a tolerated presence in an accommodating environment. Their responses spoke of isolated efforts in an exclusionary space to accommodate the "other". A typical example that they gave of accommodation was to "also provide halaal if they know that we will be present", otherwise they felt that they were not considered to be actors in the mainstream. The narratives produced many examples of inclusive and exclusive acts. The inclusive acts that the academics spoke about were the awareness that their immediate work environments have about their dietary constraints when they served food that is acceptable for Muslim consumption, so called "halaal" foods. During end of term functions, their departments were considerate in selected venues that make provision for religious dietary constraints. Zaida, Gouwa and Akeelah's immediate environment also makes a prayer room available to them. These were all symbolic acts within their immediate environment that the women interpreted as inclusive acts.

However, there are also exclusionary acts that these academics spoke about, that push people who are not Christian, to the periphery, and make them aware of being the outsider. Though our institutions and work situations contain many religious influences, they are overwhelmingly Christian. For example, even though the overt discourse endorses the university as a secular space, university holidays that coincide with Christian religious festivals such as Easter and Christmas are observed through institutional planning. For example, academic timetables will list most religions' holidays, though only Christian holidays are taken into consideration in the institutional planning of the examinations, tests and university breaks. Thus, religious accommodation of one religion sends covert messages of exclusion by the management to those not from the mainstream religion. Such messages can be found at official events such as inaugurations, meetings, seminars and workshops. It is at

such times when the Western (Christian) perspective seems to become the standard criterion against which other perspectives are evaluated. An example is the installation of one of our university rectors a few years ago, which one of us attended. This official event took place in a church on campus, and the selection of songs that the choir sang were influenced by the setting. The introduction of the incoming rector as a religious man made Hudah feel like an outsider, instead of an employee of the institution who came to celebrate this great occasion. This was because the university celebration was organized as a religious celebration of a person of the Christian faith.

One of the biggest exclusionary practices for the participants of this study concerns their institutions' lack of understanding of cultural and religiously observed traditions concerning food. In all South African universities, one will find that food has become part of the process of academic networking. Thus, it is common for food to be served during long meetings or other work-related functions such as farewells and end-of term parties. Meetings were described as occasions rife with exclusionary practices for Muslims. One of the women has gotten into the practice of taking her lunch to the many institutional meetings to avoid awkward situations. She found it especially disconcerting that her colleagues never question why there is a need for her to bring her own food to such meetings, while they are being catered for. When she shared this experience, some of the authors' own experiences were validated by her story. Hudah had had similar experiences at her institution. She was once invited to a lunch meeting with the rector's management team, only to find that they did not cater for her dietary needs. The hostess suggested that she pick the vegetarian food off the mixed platter, which she refused to do. There are some who question whether the requests that Muslim colleagues make, are indeed religious requests, and not cultural. From this position, a perception of Muslims as "a nuisance when it comes to issues of Halaal" could be advanced.

Akeelah spoke of the isolation that went with "eating halaal". She said that when she is catered for, her food would be plastic wrapped and separated from the other colleagues' food. Instead of appreciating the gesture, she said that such actions isolate her from the mainstream. According to her, the assumed inclusionary effort becomes an excluding experience for her. What was clear from these narratives was that though their immediate environment was making an effort to be inclusive, the same could not be said about the institutional environment. She cautioned against confusing individual acts of accommodation with institutional goodwill. According to her, it might only be the immediate environment within which the individual works, rather than the institution that is inclusive. As such, individual experiences of accommodation should not be generalized as representative of institutional commitment to change.

The environments where there was cognisance of different religious and cultural practices of new colleagues were few. There was consensus that, as institutions, the HWI are ill prepared for a workforce that reflects religious and cultural diversity. Both Nadia and Gouwah felt that their institutions fail to recognize that diversification

requires them to reflect on the existing practices and whether they are inclusive of those who have been appointed. They used venues for meetings and functions, and the timing of such events as an example. Nadia explained how important staff meetings continued to be scheduled during the obligatory Friday prayer time, despite Muslim staff raising this concern. Though it is common knowledge that alcohol is prohibited for Muslims, Gouwah pointed out how "wine farms are still the number one staff choice for outings". So too, even when it is Ramadan, "before (they) still continue to organize parties during the fast". As most of their white colleagues know very little about Islam, they tend to misconstrue certain religious practices, such as that Ramadan is the month when Muslims starve themselves. Muslims who refrain from drinking alcohol or only eat permissible foods could be perceived as "difficult" and intolerant colleagues. So too abstainers could be seen as people who are judgemental of those who drink alcohol.

## The Muslim Stereotype and Its Challenges in Academia

The traditional lens, that is the one that views Muslims through the prism of religion, tends to also be the one through which South African Muslims are viewed. The Orientalist and modernist paradigm, together with Western media coverage of global events such the ongoing Middle East crises and the 9/11 bombings, have validated racially ignorant colleagues' perceptions of Muslims as "other". Such events have influenced perceptions of who we are and what we stand for, an experience that was acknowledged by all of the participants. There was consensus that such world events have led to a negative, biased view of Islam as a religion that does not ascribe to a democratic value system. Muslims are then stereotyped as being religiously intolerant.

From their accounts, many of the stereotypes that they say are held are about women in Islam, and the role that men play in influencing that positioning. An undeclared belief is that Muslim women are in a subjugated position owing to Muslim men being oppressive, patriarchal and domineering. The perception that Muslim men exploit women and expect their wives to be their slaves was also voiced. The evidence that is used to support such viewpoints is that Muslim brides are not allowed to be present at their own marriages, and that they are not allowed to pray in mosques with men. What was ironic was that these women shared the same view about Afrikaner women being oppressed by their men.

Women's clothing tends to be taken as an identifier of the subservient roles that they are perceived to perform in society. One bias about Muslim women that has been fuelled by the media relates to the headscarf that many Muslim adult women wear. Zaida and Gouwah wear headscarves to work while the other three academics occasionally cover up. Their contexts also determine the response: at the HWI, Muslims are a small minority; thus, they stand out. At Zaida's university, her headscarf does not draw attention to her because there are many students and staff who

cover their heads. The participants' comments about Muslims as a critical presence on their campuses showed that those who schooled at the former coloured university, as well as those who worked there, found it to be easier to wear the headscarf in that environment. They commented that the staff and student population are used to seeing faculty wearing African, Western and Eastern clothing. According to Gouwah, Hudah and Zaida, all former students at the institution, women faculty and students who wear headscarves there are not responded to as if they are dressed "exotically".

The academics were in agreement that what they wear determines how people respond to them as academics. The consensus view was that women academics who wear hijaab or even just a headscarf are more vulnerable to such racialized and gendered stereotyping. Women who wear a scarf and abaya are perceived as being pious, while those who dress in Western clothing could be labelled as non-practising Muslims. The "Cape Malay" shares the same culture as Christian coloured, and often times have Western last names. Those who dress similar to their fellow country folk are assumed to be Christian. This has been the experience for both Akeelah and Hudah, whose colleagues seemed surprised when they found out that they are Muslim. Akeelah felt pigeonholed into a category that is defined by misperception of how a practising Muslim should be dressed. She relayed an incident where her colleagues were shocked to find out that she observes her five daily prayers. It offends her that her identity should be determined by a headscarf, "but I always tell them that my clothes and how I look does not make me any more or any less of a Muslim." Although Nadia occasionally dons a headscarf, she was appalled at a recent comment by a white male professor that faculty members should undertake a study on how the headscarf symbolizes oppression of Muslim women. This "research" endeavour she singularly objected to.

The five women are accomplished in their own right and challenge such stereotypes. Zaida pointed out that change is gradual and that visibility of Muslim women in authority positions serves to challenge the stereotypical views of them as subjugated and subservient to men. At the University of the Western Cape, there are two Muslim women deans, and their appointments have already started to counter such views. Akeelah is a medical doctor who occupies a very challenging position at her university. She uses herself as an example of an empowered Muslim woman. Her work with people who have contracted HIV AIDS sometimes places her in situations that could be interpreted as conflicting with her personal religious positioning. She, however, challenges the singular way in which society wants to categorize Muslim women. Nadia is a senior lecturer and researcher in her department and comments on how she nurtures her role as a Muslim woman in academia by encouraging other Muslim colleagues and Muslim female students to raise their concerns when necessary. She sees herself as a role model for Muslim female students in her faculty. Hudah is a full professor in her university who says that she takes her job as a role model for younger women seriously. "I do not just want to debunk the myths and prejudices about Muslim women, but about all women academics. We need to remember that race, gender and religion intersect in these institutional contexts."

## Expressing Their Muslimness

What was interesting from what emerged from our discussions concerned the different roles that some of these women say they take on, based on their reading of their colleagues' knowledge about Muslims and Islam. These women were aware that many of the views about Muslims would not necessarily be expressed openly in the university space. Akeelah believes that:

> … there are many people at my institution who are possibly Islamophobic but in the new South Africa would not be able to express their views therefore just because I haven't heard anything does not mean that negative perceptions do not exist. In fact I would say that they actually do.

Their stereotyping was not necessarily experienced as a negative only as it serves the academic purpose of engaging colleagues in discussion about religion and, in this case, Islam. Furthermore, it provides the space to challenge the bias as well as address the negativity embedded in others' thinking about Islam. Akeelah described it as a platform to exchange views and to advance non-mainstream opinions about the different ways of being of South Africans in regard to race, culture and religion. Those who teach at the HWI, where people are less knowledgeable about Islam, Muslims were more likely to take on an educator role. These women were using such opportunities to make their identity and cultural world part of the existing one. They confine the information they divulge to that of their practices and what are permissible to them as Muslims, as they did not want to be accused of being proselytizers. They engage in such discussions informally through staffroom socializing and break time chatter after meetings and have experienced it as a crucial part of forging ties. At the former ethnic university, it seemed not to be necessary to play this role. Zaida found it easier to be assimilated in an institution where many of her colleagues are also Coloured. As a race, they share a cultural background with Muslims of the Cape, and are more likely to be familiar with their Muslim colleagues' practices.

## Conclusion

A policy of equity and redress requires resolute intervention in the different levels of the working and social life of South Africa to rectify the consequences of past discrimination. This semblance of a multicultural university society could be deceptive, however, as previously excluded groups' experience challenges to function as equal members of this multicultural society. The assumption that universities are secular spaces could create the impression that no religion is influencing policy, decision making and interventions. This is not so for the environments of this study. Based on some of the women's experiences at HWIs, new appointees from other religions such as Islam could rightfully assume that they should leave their culture and religion by the door. Islam is a lived religion and some practices such as fasting

and praying five times a day could advance perceptions of religious fanaticism amongst the uninformed. When participants do not experience their environment as religiously inclusive, religious practices such as the fast during Ramadan could become almost clandestine activities in the workplace. This raised the question of how ambivalence could be contributing to maintaining an institutional culture that is tolerating instead of including their religio-cultural practices as part of its transformation processes.

Concerns were raised about Muslim women as faculty not "blending in" as easily as the men. As such, they are also the ones who are being challenged and who challenge their immediate environments' perceptions of Muslims. Within the broader issue of diversity, religious inclusion could often be taken as peripheral to race and disability issues. The five academics often take on the role of educator in spaces that they identify as in need of new knowledge about their culture and religion, albeit within the context of academic discourse. As such, their active protagonist stance already puts a process in place that challenges existing biases about Muslim women. Finally, the problem of inclusion of Muslim academics in higher education should not be reduced to issues about halaal foods and times off for prayer. Like all other academics, Muslim academics should be understood as being in need of a university culture that is sensitive to and inclusive of their religio-cultural backgrounds.

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