

# Exploring South African Girlhoods: The Self-Identifications of Young Muslim Female Learners in Post-Apartheid South African High Schools

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## Abstract

This paper explores the theme of South African girlhoods<sup>1</sup> within the context of post-apartheid schooling environments and from the perspective of young Muslim female learners. Presented chiefly as an exploratory endeavour within the field of Islamic feminist scholarship in South Africa, this paper navigates the relatively uncharted terrain of girlhood studies and asks the following questions: How do present-day young Muslim girls in South Africa self-identify with the labels “South African”, “Muslim”, “female”, and “learner”? And what does democracy mean to, and for, Muslim girlhoods in South Africa? Drawing on data gathered for a pilot study conducted in 2010 with a group of young Muslim female learners from two girls’ high schools in Cape Town, I present the voices of young South African Muslim girls as a reflection of some of the complexities and diversities of South African girlhoods.<sup>2</sup> The study also considers how different post-apartheid schooling environments may shape the gendered experiences of Muslim girls in South Africa.

## Introduction

Located within the broader framework of gender studies, girlhood studies is an emerging area of interdisciplinary scholarship that is yet to be fully

explored by Islamic feminist scholars in South Africa. As a distinct area of feminist scholarship, girlhood studies addresses the need for more focused studies and research methods that are girl-centered, context-specific, and age-sensitive.

Prior to the early 1990s most feminist research studies tended to be focused on understanding women, rather than girls. Similarly, within the field of youth studies, girls' experiences were often marginalised or subsumed under the general experiences of male youths or boys. Kearney (2009: 5) notes that the relationship between age and generation has served to marginalise the lived realities of girls' experiences in much the same way that the relationship between sex and gender has been used to marginalise women's experiences. The fact that girls have historically been excluded from most social analyses on account of their gender, and then further excluded generationally from nascent feminist discourses on account of their age, has led to the genesis of girlhood studies. One of the key advances made in feminist scholarship since the 1990s has been the recognition of girls as important social actors and the concept of "girlhood" as a critical category for gender analysis, rather than as merely a descriptive category of age.

The term *girl*, however, may be contested by some as it also holds certain discriminatory and deprecating connotations when used in certain contexts. For example, the term *girl* in South Africa evokes a denigrating and painful reminder for many Black females who were commonly referred to using this label during the apartheid era, regardless of their age. The term provided one of the many ways of entrenching deep psychological wounds by creating a stigmatising perception of inferiority based on gender, class, and racial differences. Hence any reference to females as girls can be perceived as provocative and may be considered offensive to some. Alternatively, in certain social contexts where there is a high prevalence of childhood forced marriages or childbrides, or in cases of childlabour, particularly sexwork, the term *girl* has been used strategically by gender activists to highlight childhood abuses. The term *girl* thus provides an important vocalised means of making the necessary age-based divisions and distinctions between women and girls. The term is therefore considered useful for countering and challenging certain cultural practices within communities whereby such age-gender divisions are very often blurred (Mankekar 1997).

Relatedly, the term *girl* has also been used as a means of reclaiming the voices of young females within certain feminist discourses. Many feminist scholars have historically resisted the label *girl* and have instead preferred using the term "young woman". This label has, however, been critiqued as a deprecating feminist tendency to portray girls' lives and experiences from an adult-centered perspective. Rejecting the label "young woman"

recognises young females as the knowing and active agents they are, and not as incomplete or “not yet” versions of what they might become or grow up to be. In other words, unlike the term *young woman*, the term *girl* is not future orientated and does not neglect the present realities of female experience.

The term *girl* has also been used by some feminists as a symbolic means of resisting consumerist and market-driven campaigns by media and by the fashion and cosmetic industries that target young girls by depicting them in age-inappropriate and sexualised ways as women (Kearney 2009: 15). The terms *girls* and *girlhood* therefore do not reflect only a feminist movement towards child-centredness, but also a growing academic awareness and a broader social consciousness of how the life-worlds of young people are gendered.

The underlying premise of girlhood studies that informs this paper is that the lives and experiences of girls and girlhoods can provide an important resource for, and understanding of, Islamic gender constructions in ways that are generationally relevant and contextually appropriate. Much of the available literature within the field of girlhood studies has, however, been concentrated on a few developed countries like North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Kearney 2009; Moletsane *et al.*, 2008: 4) and thus speaks to, and about, very specific notions of girlhood. Very few studies have explored the complexities and diversities of an African girlhood, particularly in relation to the many different and evolving ways that Islam is practised and experienced on the continent. Existing research studies on or about Muslim girls, both in Muslim majority countries and in Western countries where Muslims represent a minority (Banaji 2009; Joseph 2000; Keddie 2009; Winkelmann 2005), serve to reaffirm the situatedness of Muslim girlhood experiences. Such studies reflect how diversely notions of Islam, gender, and age are experienced by Muslim girls in different contexts.

My interest in exploring the lives of young Muslim girls in South Africa through a girlhood studies framework is underpinned by a set of questions related to, yet distinct from, current feminist and/or Islamic education discourses in South Africa. Firstly, scant informational resources are available that can reflect what democracy means to, and for, young Muslim girls in South Africa. Secondly, there is an increasing need to develop appropriate feminist frameworks that can engage the diverse and complex ways that gender is experienced intergenerationally within South Africa. Not only are such frameworks important for understanding the differences – as well as recognising the commonalities – of girlhoods in South Africa; they can also provide an important means of resisting certain essentialist feminist paradigms and help challenge the universalisation of female gendered experiences. Therefore, in framing my research questions

specifically through a girlhood lens, I wish to draw attention to the relevance of understanding the gender experiences and self-identifications of Muslim girls in South Africa from their own perspectives and realities.

Very few studies, to my knowledge, have explored the lived realities of young South African Muslim girls,<sup>3</sup> and even fewer have done so within the context of post-apartheid schooling. Studies by Fataar (2007; 2009), Niehaus (2008; 2011), and Tayob (2011), for example, have made significant contributions in this regard, but within the broader context of Islamic education in South Africa. Such works have not focused on gender, nor considered gendered experience as a key category of analysis within post-apartheid schooling. Girlhood studies, I contend, offers innovative methodologies whereby South African Muslim girls can actively participate and provide an authentic voice to help better understand gender and educational experiences within the South African Muslim context.

## Methodological Approach

The term “Southern African girlhoods”, as used by Moletsane *et al.* (2008), provides the conceptual and methodological framework for this study. Responding to the dearth of focused research studies and methods addressing girls and girlhood in southern Africa, Moletsane *et al.* have developed an inspiring framework for conducting studies “with”, “for”, and “about” girls in southern Africa. One of the key aims of developing context-specific girlhood research methodologies, according to Moletsane *et al.* (2008: 25), is to help understand

in what ways ... existing notions of culture, and in particular, the existing and emerging gendered cultural norms among children and the youth, inform beliefs and ways of relating to each other across various boundaries, including gender, age, sex, race, ethnicity and other identities.

Such a context-specific methodology is considered germane, given the region’s cultural and economic diversities. The varying levels of vulnerability and protection that girls in South Africa may have relative to the effects of HIV and Aids, poverty, gender-based violence, and other related concerns – such as access to education and issues of health and safety – underscore the urgent need to deconstruct what it means to be a girl or to experience girlhood within a specific cultural context in South Africa.

As a minority group in South Africa, the Muslim community is considered an important representation of South Africa’s cultural and religious dynamism. However, despite a long history of cultural vibrancy in

South Africa, it is not uncommon for gender discourses within the Muslim community (discourses on Muslim girlhoods, in particular) to remain largely isolated from some of the broader gender and/or education debates in the country. Since Muslims represent a minority religious group, the gendered concerns of South African Muslim girls often go unnoticed or tend to be ignored within some of the more dominant feminist discourses.

However, as the South African Muslim community is gradually and confidently beginning to negotiate the country's democratic terrain, many gender issues are no longer isolated or contained within intra-Muslim forums.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, within the expanding global Muslim community, Islamic gender discourses have become more nuanced and diversified regionally. Therefore, I argue, there is much expediency in developing informational resources that can help to accurately reflect some of the realities of Muslim girlhoods in South Africa.

Moletsane *et al.* have outlined three basic methodological strategies for girlhood research. These methods correspond to whether one intends doing research "with" girls, research "about" girls, or research "for" girls. Participatory methods, according to them, provide one of the most effective means for working "with" girls in that they allow researchers to foreground the "voices" of girls. These methods involve various ways of engaging girls as "active and knowing agents in their own lives" (2008: 30). They are also sensitive and responsive to the particular challenges that may occur when engaging young girls as research participants. For example, the use of photo-voice (photography, for example) has been successfully used to help young girls better express themselves in cases where they may lack the necessary vocabulary or linguistic skills for effective verbal communication. Similarly, essay writing (Joseph 2000), drawings, and other means of creative and artistic expression are often used strategically in girlhood research methods.

The active participation of girls in the research process does, however, also raise certain ethical concerns. As with most research involving human subjects, it is important to recognise the multiple levels of unequal power relations between researcher and researched. The power dynamic can, however, become exacerbated when working with young research participants. Younger research participants, in particular, may hold little control over how their voices will be reflected through the prism of a researcher's particularised analytical lens. Considering the variable expressive modes used in girlhood methods, girls' voices may therefore not necessarily be reflective of girls' *intended* voices and may very well be interpreted subjectively in a way that is not always true to the young research participant.

Another concern involves a researcher's inability to respond to or deliver on any possible expectations that girls might have when acting as

participants in a research study. For example, girls may confide cases of abuse on the premise that researchers are in a position to intervene; or such knowledge may be revealed inadvertently through participation. Research of this type very often involves highly sensitive and intimate details of young people's lives, and researchers must often navigate topics that may challenge deeply held cultural and religious beliefs. These sensitivities and challenges make the ethical considerations of girlhood methods especially nuanced, highlighting the need to approach them thoughtfully and tactfully.

Gallacher and Gallagher (2008), for example, have been highly critical of participatory methods involving children. They caution against the "ethical allure" of participatory methods: for example, the notion that by engaging young people as research participants or recognising them as producers of their own knowledge, researchers are contributing towards young people's empowerment, agency, and self-determination. As Gallacher and Gallagher (2008: 501) have argued, this assumption can be problematic if and when uncritically employed. Ideally, any research that seeks to engage young people as participants should occur over a sustained period of time, so that interactions can be developed from a space of mutual trust and confidence between researcher and participants.

Notwithstanding these ethical considerations, I do consider the methodological strategies suggested by Moletsane *et al.* to be useful for the purposes and scope of this exploratory study. In a tentative first step towards a more long-term research project on Muslim girlhoods, the scope of this study was therefore limited and aimed at assessing the field and charting research possibilities for a future, more extensive, study project.

### *Study Focus*

In 2010 I conducted a pilot study with a group of Muslim female learners from two girls' high schools in Cape Town. The study was limited in that it focused specifically on girls aged between 16 and 18 years, and the topic of discussion was restricted to that of identity relative to notions of citizenship, religion, gender, and education. Given the limited timeframe of the pilot study and other ethical research considerations, certain sensitive issues were avoided. The selection process of the research participants and their respective schools, as well as related ethical issues, is discussed in more detail hereunder. I will, however, briefly outline the research methodology employed and the structuring of this paper.

Using participatory methods as the main model for gathering data, I invited Muslim female learners in Grades 11 and 12 to respond to a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of five open-ended questions asking the girls to describe (in writing) their understandings of what it means

to be identified as: (1) a South African; (2) a Muslim; (3) a female; and (4) a learner in a South African school. Question 5 invited respondents to indicate what other terms they would use to describe their own identities. Nineteen girls in total completed the questionnaire.<sup>5</sup> The second component of the pilot study was to invite interested participants to discuss these questions further and in more depth through an interview session. Four girls in total participated in two separate interview sessions that lasted for about two hours each. The data gathered from these two pilot studies are discussed here, using a girlhood lens as the main analytical tool.

In exploring the self-identifications of South African Muslim female learners in South African high schools using a girlhood lens, I have followed the lead of Moletsane *et al.*, and allowed the voices of these young girls to be foregrounded. Their narratives have therefore informed the direction and content of this paper. However, in situating these narratives of self-identification within the context of post-apartheid schooling, I am concomitantly engaging a parallel discourse on the diversity of schooling experiences of Muslim children in a democratic South Africa and its influence on South African girlhood experiences. To this end, research participants were deliberately selected according to the types of schools they attended. Muslim girls were chosen from two different schooling environments in Cape Town: an independent Islamic school, and a desegregated, formerly Whites-only, public school. The aim was to provide a contrasting educational backdrop indicative of some of the ways that democratic landscapes in South Africa are evolving and helping to shape particularised Muslim girlhood experiences.

## **Contextualising Muslim Girlhoods in South African Schools**

Present-day Muslim girlhood experiences in South African schools have been shaped by a particular legacy of structural and social inequalities. During apartheid, separatist laws served to differentiate the type of schooling South Africans would or could receive based on racial and ethnic difference. Apartheid education laws and practices facilitated the entrenching of deeply embedded social and psychological notions of hierarchical difference with regards to race, ethnicity, culture, and religion.

One of the multiple social and personal violences caused by a separated and differentiated education system, particularly upon minority ethnic and religious groups such as the Muslim community, is that it served to create particular forms of racialised religious identities. Capturing the narratives of how present-day Muslim women's girlhood experiences were shaped by and during the apartheid era can provide an instructive intergenerational perspective on the theme of Muslim girlhoods and help lend further historical

context to Muslim girlhoods in South Africa. The scope of this paper does not allow for this aspect to be included; nevertheless, I mention it here to help highlight the fact that women's personal stories and recollections of their childhood gender experiences are considered an important research strategy that is instrumental for girlhood studies methodology (Moletsane *et al.* 2008).

Many of the fragmented educational structures inherited from South Africa's apartheid past have undergone a process of transformation, legislatively at least. Underscored by the premise of "unity in diversity", a series of anti-discriminatory education legislation has been introduced since 1994 that makes it unlawful to discriminate against learners on the basis of race, gender, religion, language, and sexual orientation. A significant part of the education transformation process therefore includes the precarious task of balancing respect for the rights of diverse religious and cultural values and unifying those rights through a common educational goal.

To this end, certain education policy measures have been introduced. For example, the Constitution of 1996 provides an overarching expression of South African values and national identity, and the South African Schools Act of 1996 is intended to regulate all schooling in light of those values. Nkomo and Vandeyar (2008: vii) have suggested that present-day schooling environments are intended to be at the "cutting edge" of the project to weave a common post-apartheid South African identity, one that is based on democratic values and principles that simultaneously respect differences. The 2003 National Policy on Religion and Education provides another such transformative measure. In discussing the state's efforts to engage with religion, religious communities, and other cultural projects through schooling, Chidester (2006) describes this policy as testing the potential (and limits) of religion in nation-building, and as one way of addressing the social cohesion dilemma that faces post-apartheid South Africa. Similarly, the South African Constitution of 1996, section 29(3), guarantees the right of existence for independent or private, faith-based schools. Accordingly, religious communities are free to educate and develop democratic citizens in ways and environments consistent with both their faith commitments and the country's constitutional values.

Within this context of South Africa's democratic schooling environments, the main question I explore in this paper is: What does democracy mean to, and for, young Muslim girls in terms of citizenship, their faith, their gendered experiences, and their educational needs? To address this question, I have focused on two contrasting schooling environments representative of some of the evolving democratic educational landscapes in South Africa. The first school, referred to as "School A", was purposely chosen in that it represents

a particular type of post-1994, “desegregated” school — a former well-established, Whites-only girls’ high school that many non-Whites (including Muslims) are seen to be attending in increasing numbers. The racial and religious demographics of the school’s learner population has thus changed considerably since 1994, although the culturally “White ethos” of the school has not necessarily changed.

The second school, referred to as “School B”, is generally considered representative of many independent Islamic schools established by the Muslim community, which have been increasing since 1994. The recent proliferation of Islamic schools is seen by some as one way that Muslims have attempted to preserve their religious values and identities in the face of multiple competing, and possibly conflicting, values (Tayob 2011). The increase of Islamic schools in South Africa is also considered by some a means of responding to the perceived lowering of educational standards and quality of resources in many public schools since democracy. Others, however, may regard private-school environments as isolationist, elitist, and undemocratic (Sadouni 2004), and a pretext for continuing the racist and separatist education policies and status quo of the apartheid era (Tayob 2011).

Both the schools selected for this study are situated in the same middle-class Cape Town suburb. Both are well resourced, have a higher than average school fee rate, and are known to be academically competitive with other top-performing schools in the country.

In choosing these two schooling sites as a pilot study, I wish to make it clear that although I consider these schools reflective of certain transformative measures within the country’s diverse schooling structures, I also recognise that they represent a very exclusivist educational reality that pertains to only a small percentage of all South Africans. For many South Africans, despite the transformative steps taken to democratise education and schools since 1994, many schooling environments still reflect the same racial demographic makeup, and face similar structural challenges as those of the apartheid era. Schooling environments, particularly in some of the more impoverished and rural areas of the country, have not necessarily benefited or changed operationally since democracy. In fact, one could argue that in certain aspects of education, schooling challenges for many children, including Muslim children, have actually been amplified. Whilst recognising that this issue requires a critical debate — particularly in terms of comparing the economic, racial, and other stratifications of Muslim girlhoods in South Africa and how they impact on these girls’ gendered and educational experiences — I do not pursue this particular aspect here.

It is also important to stress that Muslims in this country themselves manifest diversities of race, ethnicity, class, language, gender, beliefs, and

ideology (Omar 2004: 53). These stratifications have not dissipated in a democratic South Africa. Therefore, both apartheid and democracy have formed backdrops to variable realities of South African Muslim experience. It should be noted that my selection of these two schools is not in any way intended to represent a particular standard of schooling for all Muslim girls in South Africa. I do, however, consider them typical representations of two types of schools that many Muslim girls commonly attend.

My initial contact with the research participants was made through the mothers of two of the girls, one from each school, who were known to me. After I discussed the aims and methods of the study with both the girls and their mothers, and following completion of the necessary consent protocols, the girls agreed to participate as representatives of their respective schools. This involved them contacting other Muslim girls in Grades 11 and 12 at their schools who were interested in responding to the questionnaire, and it included the distribution and collection of the completed questionnaires. They did this with the help of an informational cover letter I drew up, outlining the details and aims of the research and assuring respondents of complete confidentiality. Participants were assured that their identities and personal details, including the actual names of the respective schools, would remain confidential. The only personal details the participants were required to disclose on the questionnaire itself were the name of their school, their current grade, and their age. The criteria for selecting prospective participants were that they self-identified as Muslim, female, and learners at that particular school. The participants were all in either Grade 11 or 12 and their ages ranged between 16 and 18 years. The two original representatives were not made privy to any of the content of the other girls' written responses.

The cover letter also invited any interested participant to be part of an interview/discussion forum to further discuss the topics in the questionnaire. Four girls in total agreed to be interviewed, and provided their contact details so that an interview session could be set up. Interviews were held at a mutually agreed venue, away from the school premises and after school hours. The interviews involved two girls from each school in two separate sessions, which lasted for approximately two hours each. Each participant and her parent/guardian was required to sign a consent form agreeing to her participation in the research study.

This paper, as noted, uses the voices of young Muslim girls and their understandings of what it means to be identified as South African, Muslim, female, and a learner in a South African school as a lens for thinking about Muslim girlhoods in South Africa. In applying this lens, I have attempted to draw out from my respondents' narratives both the commonalities and

the differences between the two groups of girls. Presenting the girls' self-expressions in this way is not, however, aimed at making a comparative analysis between the two groups, thereby essentialising their girlhood experiences; rather, my aim is to draw attention to the ways certain themes may emerge when Muslim girls' self-identifications are positioned within a particular context.

It should also be noted that in arranging the identity labels into separate categories I am not suggesting that Muslim girls' identities can so easily and unproblematically be compartmentalised into neat categories. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate the fluidity and interconnections between multiple layers of Muslim girlhoods. I therefore pay attention to the ways that these categories may be negotiated, coalesced, contested, or embraced by the girls themselves.

### **Muslim Girls' Voices on Being a South African**

The majority of the responses from girls attending School A regarding how they identified as South Africans made reference to certain sentiments that are frequently used in nationalist discourses; alternatively, the respondents used other popularised terms related to the country's constitutional values. For example, many used terms like *nationality*, *diversity*, and *tolerance* to express what being a South African meant to them. One girl wrote, "My understanding of me being a South African is that I am a person who has full democratic rights and lives in a free environment with tolerance of the people around you. I can be what I want to be."

Responses to this question varied in length. Some girls expressed their understandings of what it meant to be South African in only a few words: "I am a citizen of South Africa"; "my nationality"; or "to have tolerance of others". Some of the girls from School B responded in terms of geographical orientation. One respondent stated, "I don't feel that being identified as a South African is important, SA is just the country I was born in." Another respondent said, "The only reason I am a South African is because I was born in SA, South Africa is my country but I don't feel being identified as a SA is as important as being identified as being a Muslim."

These differing understandings of what it means to be identified as a South African offer some insight into the variety of ways that notions of citizenship are being negotiated. The responses indicate differing ways that Muslim girls' religious identities coalesce with those concerning their nationality. It also underscores how religion often serves as a filter through which some young girls may self-identify with a particular identity label. The fact that the girls from the Islamic school appeared to be more vocal in

asserting the primacy of their faith in relation to being South African presents an interesting perspective for thinking about the ways that faith-based schools may promote certain narrowed perceptions of citizenship. Many commentators on Islamic schooling (Fataar 2007, 2009; Niehaus 2008, 2011; Sadouni 2004; Tayob 2011) have noted that one of the primary concerns of exclusivist schooling environments such as Islamic schools is that they tend to create a sense of disengagement or isolation from the broader community. Inga Niehaus (2011: 21), for example, found that democratic citizenship education in South African Islamic schools is mainly dealt with abstractly, and that most Muslim learners had very little actual social engagement outside of their faith community.

The respondents from School B appeared to confirm this finding, in that they claimed to have no friendships outside their faith community, and generally had limited interaction with people of other religions. However, the girls from School A also indicated that outside of the schooling structures they, too, had limited social engagements and/or meaningful friendships with people of other faiths. Even within the inclusive environments of their school, they claimed that many girls tended to form cliques or grouped together based on their shared faiths. Suggestive in this finding, from a girlhood perspective, is that shared faith enjoys a high priority as a criterion for meaningful friendships. From the girls' statements it would appear that having friends of a shared faith was not something peculiar to a faith-based schooling environment, nor to how democratic citizenship education is taught in a particular school. This appeared to be a common sentiment expressed by both groups. Although the opportunities to develop meaningful friendships based on common interests other than faith seem more likely to occur in environments such as that of School A, the fact that respondents from this school have not (in this limited sample) done so suggests that the issues of girlhood integration and belonging need to be interrogated further.

### **Muslim Girls' Voices on Being a Muslim**

The girls at School A articulated their understandings of what it means to be a Muslim by referring to matters of belief and their commitment to ritual performances; by affirming certain Islamic moral and ethical characteristics; and by affirming the importance of developing a sense of spiritual consciousness. Religion and religious practices were generally described as personal expressions of faith. The girls from both schools expressed a strong sense of pride in their religion. Some indicated that it reflected their "values and beliefs", others mentioned the importance of religious "obedience", and one girl from School A claimed that her Muslim identity was "a manifestation

of [her] love for God". One girl from School B stated that her identity as a Muslim reflects the values of her parents, which she willingly embraces. This same girl also considered her status as a Muslim to be the same as that of all other humans, in that according to her, "every single person in this world is born a Muslim".

One aspect that was clearly considered relevant in terms of religious identity was that of dress — particularly issues pertaining to modesty and concealment of the hair and body. Such concealment is broadly referred to as the *hijāb*, but this term is not uniformly understood. The girls from School B (where the *hijāb* is an integral part of the Islamic school uniform) appear to have vested a significantly higher value in their dress or clothing as a definitive marker of their Muslim identity than have the girls from School A. From the School B responses, it became clear that these girls regarded other (public/non-Muslim) schools as obstacles to, or impositions on, their religious beliefs. One girl stated that Muslim girls at public schools were often thought of as being irreligious and "not respectful" of the teachings of their religion (here reference was made to the extremely short skirt length of the public schoolgirls' uniforms).

One girl from School A stated that she realised the dress code of her school uniform did not resonate well with what is socially understood to be a more "religiously correct" way of dressing for a Muslim girl. However, when asked to clarify what wearing or not wearing the *hijāb* meant to her, she expressed an understanding that appeared to be well negotiated. She claimed that not wearing a *hijāb* did not necessarily diminish her identity as a Muslim. Rather, her school uniform was something she donned with much pride, due to the underlying connotation that she now attended a well-respected school previously inaccessible to non-Whites.

One of the girls from School B referred to incidents in some European countries where Muslims have had to actively campaign for their religious right to wear the *hijāb*. From this perspective it appeared that her understanding of being Muslim was something she related to broader global identity discourses of Islam and gender. Interestingly, the girls from the Islamic school admitted that they did not always wear the *hijāb* themselves outside of school and other religious environments; however, they considered it significant that they are able to wear it as part of their school uniform.

The varying ways that the girls in this study expressed what being a Muslim means to them, and how prominently they associated their Muslim identities with the *hijāb*, suggest that Muslim girls in South Africa experience Islam in many conflicting and contradictory ways. Although most of the girls in this study understood their faith in ways that were spiritually affirming, these understandings appeared to be embodied differently. Relating these

understandings to some of the prevailing discourses on Muslim identities in South Africa (Nadvi 2011; Omar 2004; Tayob 2011; Vahed 2000) indicates that a girl-centered approach to Muslim identity can offer alternative perspectives and fresh insights for thinking about constructions of gender in Islam, and Muslim identity formation in South Africa.

For example, in his study on Islamic schools, Tayob (2011: 51) made some excellent and insightful observations on the ways that Muslim girls' identities are inscribed and enmeshed within the identity politics of the Islamic school. He notes how the dress and behaviour of Muslim girls, underpinned by a sense of sexual and moral propriety, are used in different ways and at different levels in a complex field characterised by a particular Islamic identity and the ethos of a given school.

Considering these observations from a girlhood standpoint raises a further set of questions. For example, how are these spaces negotiated and/or challenged by Muslim girls themselves? What personal investments or decisions do Muslim girls make regarding their own notions of sexual and moral propriety? Tayob does not indicate whether the girls might willingly and knowingly adopt Islamic dress and behavior because these are personally meaningful to them. Such considerations are very often overlooked due to the assumption that on account of their age and gender, young girls are not competent and knowing social actors. Rather, it is often assumed that they are merely acted upon — or, as in the study mentioned, that their identities are inscribed in and by particularised spaces.

Of course, recognising and affirming girls' agency is not an excuse to ignore the many instances in which they are, in fact, vulnerable because of their age and gender. A girlhood perspective merely enables us to consider alternative and more age-sensitive ways of being and acting, and to recognise those ways as having an important role to play in the social spaces that girls occupy. Therefore, one of the Muslim identity discourses in South Africa to be further explored through a girlhood lens is the nuanced ways that Muslim girls negotiate spaces and create their own meanings and understandings within those spaces.

## **Muslim Girls' Voices on Being Female**

The girls from School B described their gendered identities in terms of femininity and motherhood. Some explained that they understood being female as an honour, or as providing them with a sense of "upliftment". One of the girls put it this way: "[M]y Islamic dress honours me as a female." She added that the way she dresses makes people look at her differently from how they look at other females. From the responses it was clear that dress

was a significant marker, not only of these girls' religious identity, but also of their gendered identity. Their sense of gendered honour was, however, understood as inherent in Islam, or in being Muslim women; it stemmed from their religion (or God), and not necessarily from society or socially determined attitudes. One of the girls responded that "Islam honours women".

The girls from School A discussed their understandings of what it means to be identified as a female by using gender comparisons, making reference to male and female stereotypes and voicing opinions on gender equality. One girl wrote that "it makes no difference if you are a male or female both are equal". Some responses were, however, more terse, e.g., "I am not a boy". Many, however, also used terms such as *motherhood*, *female compassion*, and *intuition* in describing what it means to be female. A few girls made reference to their future roles as potential mothers. One respondent described motherhood as a "religious honour".

One of the points highlighted by a girl at School A, and echoed by the others, was the fact that being at a girls-only school enabled their identities as females to be freely developed and expressed in a shared female environment. One girl noted, "It feels good to know that you can be as girly as you want to be and not put on an act to impress boys. At school all the girls understand your emotions and fears because we are all going through the same thing."

Although the girls' understandings of sex and sexuality do constitute a very significant aspect of Muslim girlhoods, this topic was discussed rather broadly with both groups. In communicating their understandings on matters related to their own sexuality and other sexual matters, the girls appeared willing to discuss the topic in general and spoke readily about the opposite sex. However, in discussing relationships with boys, the girls spoke from the perspective of "other girls'" sexual experiences and attitudes towards sex. They appeared reluctant and somewhat apprehensive about talking of their own personal sexual experiences (or lack thereof). This topic was therefore not pursued beyond what the girls spontaneously offered in the course of the interviews. It should be noted that this aspect of Muslim girlhoods has not been explored in this study due to certain ethical issues related to the sensitivity of the topic, the absence of prior consent from the participants and their guardians, and the limited time spent with participants.

The ways in which the girls in this study communicated their understandings of what it means to be a female is particularly illuminating, especially when considered from a girlhood perspective. Their choice — or rather, paucity — of expressions speaks directly to the urgency of developing girl-sensitive frameworks for thinking and speaking about gender experiences within Islamic feminist discourses. The fact that most girls considered their femaleness to be directly related to a potential future reality — motherhood,

for example — suggests a lack of alternative ways of imagining being a Muslim female. Understanding Islamic gender issues in girl-centred ways is one way that feminist scholars can create affirming discursive spaces that are not future-orientated, are not adult women-centred, and do not neglect the realities of Muslim girls.

### **Muslim Girls' Voices on Being a Learner**

The girls from both schools regarded education and career opportunities as important to them as females and noted that their school, parents, and religion all encouraged this aspect. School B girls described their Islamic schooling environment as being of absolute importance in maintaining their Islamic values, as they are able to dress, pray, eat, and do other related activities in an environment that responds explicitly to their needs. They regard it as an advantage to have peers who are socially and religiously congruent with themselves.

They also cited the quality of education as being good. However, when this topic was probed further, it appeared that there are certainly some elements that negatively affect their learner experience. For example, School B has no library (although it has a mosque), and it offers no sporting activities except on one annual sports day. There is also very little focus on artistic expression through music or the arts; however, prayers and liturgy are an important part of their daily experiences.

Girls in School A expressed their understandings of what it means to be a learner by acknowledging the reputation and symbolic status of their school. They recognised their current school as being important to their post-schooling ambitions. Some girls made reference to the varied activities and facilities offered by their school as enhancing their learning experiences. For example, one girl stated that “being a learner in a school with diversity and exposure to other cultures, religions and traditions, it makes one open-minded and well adapted to the world as a bigger picture. I am open to change and accept differences better.” The girls from School A described the respect and disciplined ethos of their school and claimed that this was an important aspect of their learning in a South African school.

One of the participants from School A, as head of the school's Muslim Student Association, described the school structures as tolerant and very accommodating to Muslim students. She mentioned that her group had recently successfully petitioned to have a prayer facility installed at the school. Although incidents of tension do occur, they tend to be resolved amicably. For example, one of the girls mentioned that a particular teacher often made subtle references to Muslims as stereotypically fundamentalist

and violent. After receiving complaints from several Muslim parents, the school facilitated a forum whereby students and staff members were educated by parents and Muslim religious leaders about Islamic teachings on violence and peace.

School A girls indicated that while integration and understanding between different cultural and religious groups are promoted within the school environment, this rarely continues outside of the schooling structures. Meaningful friendships of these learners were limited to those with other Muslim learners. This factor was somewhat influenced by the fact that non-Muslim learners do not live in the same areas, and that their family and social lives traverse different activities and social interests.

The girls from School A displayed culturally different signatures of deportment from those of the School B learners, despite the fact that the groups shared the same cultural, racial, class, and (of course) religious backgrounds. For example, their choice of expressions, their accents, and their general demeanour during the discussions differed hugely from those in the School B group.

One girl, from School A, reported that she had spent one year, Grade 8, at an Islamic school. She described her experience there as follows: "I wouldn't say it was not nice but it was very different. The teachers and children at the school are so lax ... I was very bored and not challenged ... my mummy noticed that I was so unhappy there and decided that I was better off where I was." A girl at School B reported the opposite experience. She had begun her high school career at a local community school, where "[t]he children there are so rough and rude! I was miserable at [X] High, there is lots of peer pressure there, but here at [School B] I can go to school with children that are actually interested in school."

The girls' descriptions of their learner experiences within their respective schools support some of the findings made by Fataar (2007) in his study on post-apartheid schooling environments and learner adaptation strategies. His observations offer an insightful perspective on some of the challenges involved in racial and cultural integration at formerly White, subsequently desegregated public schools, and on how certain practices may affect learner "belonging" and their notions of identity.

Fataar argues that formerly White schools that now admit children of other races have failed "substantively" to adapt to the cultural and racial backgrounds of new learners. He refers to this as the "discourse of cultural assimilation" – the expectation that non-White learners should adopt the school's "culturally white" ethos – which, he claims, is at work in these schools. There are various ways that formerly White schools may do this, for example in terms of sports, as when rugby is offered to the exclusion

of soccer, a more popular sport among non-White learners. In other school sports, like swimming, certain cultural and religious sensitivities regarding modest dress and gender mixing are not always accommodated. These tendencies are also evident in school performances, where certain “high” cultural art forms like ballet or Shakespearean plays are promoted to the exclusion of interests and activities popular with non-White learners, such as kwaito or hip-hop.

In terms of the School A girls’ descriptions of their learner experiences, it would appear that perhaps certain positive steps towards integration and learner adaptation have occurred since Fataar’s study in 2007 — although many of the challenges he pointed to can be noted from their statements. The fact that the girls from the Islamic school claimed to have no or little exposure to culture, literature, performing arts, and sports other than religious activities lends another dynamic to the differing challenges that Muslim girls in South African schools may face. However, what is not clear from the girls’ statements, and perhaps needs to be explored further, is that some Islamic schools in South Africa do in fact promote certain cultural and sporting activities commonly and traditionally associated with the history of Islamic civilizations. For example, a cursory look at some of the advertisements for and prospectuses of various Islamic schools in the country reveal that activities like horse-riding, archery, Arabic calligraphy, *Qira’ah* (Quranic recitation), and popular sports like soccer do form an integral part of many Islamic schools’ extra-mural programs.

Fataar’s observations, however, do render salient the fact that post-apartheid schooling environments are sites of multiple and competing identity discourses. Fataar argues that in the face of this complex mix of racialised, culturalised, and religious young bodies, many formerly White schools (and I would add faith-based schools, as well) adopt what he calls a “self-congratulatory discourse”, such as an attitude proclaiming that “we don’t see race, only children”. According to Fataar (2007: 11), “this provides compelling justification for schools to acculturate the kids into the hegemonic culturally white habits of being”.

A similar observation has been made by Tayob (2011: 50), who notes that the particularised ideology, ethnicity, and theological positioning informing the ethos of many Islamic schools are promoted amongst all learners, regardless of their personal orientations. However, as Fataar has importantly pointed out, learners themselves are acutely aware of these implied acculturating messages, and learn to adopt “strategic deportments” as they navigate the uncertain and often alienating cultural schooling terrain (2007: 11).

Reflecting on the responses to the final question posed to the girls in this

study – namely, what other terms they would use to describe themselves – is certainly edifying in terms of its broadness and possibilities. Their choices of terms or self-identified labels ranged from “I am me, I am what I am, just me I am”; “sporty”; “diva”; “shy”; “God’s Creation”; and “I am a believer” to “South Africa’s next president”; “a good dancer”; and “I am intelligent, helpful and kind – you know all the good things with some not so good”.

Relating some of these responses to the cultural identity debates in South African schools from a girlhood perspective raises many questions. For example, given the diversity of cultural experiences amongst girls, the integrative efforts made in schools, and the differing and evolving ways that girlhood friendships are formed and are forming in a democratic society, is it then not more judicious to consider and acknowledge that a Xhosa girl may prefer ballet to hip-hop; that a Hindu girl may enjoy kwaito more than she does *bhangra* music; or that a Muslim girl may relate more to Shakespeare than to scripture – and that they may do so as informed and knowing agents?

It is prudent to consider how the dominant cultural identity debates in South African schools are being framed and informed, by whom, and for whom; and most importantly, what voices are being excluded or ignored in these debates, and why. I would suggest that girlhood research methods can contribute richly towards widening the perspectives on this and many other such critical debates, and should therefore be explored for their potential influence on both Islamic feminist discourses and our understanding of South African girlhoods.

## Conclusion

My exploration of what democracy means to and for Muslim girls in South Africa through the limited scope of this study sample will, of course, raise more questions than definitive answers. Muslim girlhoods in South Africa are located at an intersection of many competing and possibly conflicting spaces. However, in paying closer attention to these spaces and listening to the voices of those who occupy them, and in acknowledging these voices as capable and knowing, I contend that we gain a necessary and illuminating perspective on how we think about and understand Muslim girls’ gendered experiences in South Africa.

However, as previously stated, the principal aim of this exploratory paper is to test the field of girlhood studies as a possible means of understanding Muslim gender experiences in ways that are context-specific and generationally salient. As a tentative step in that direction I have attempted

to map out some methods and identify certain key areas for further development. Expanding this paper will hopefully help to broaden the scope of Islamic feminist scholarship and contribute towards a burgeoning discourse of South African girlhoods.

## Notes

- 1 The term “South African girlhoods” is adapted from the title of Moletsane *et al.*'s (2008) seminal book *Methodologies for Mapping a Southern African Girlhood in the Age of Aids*.
- 2 Parts of this paper are based on data gathered for an empirical research study conducted in March 2010 for a Social Science honours thesis, which was submitted to the University of Cape Town, Department of Religious Studies, in November 2010. The thesis also served as a pilot study for an ongoing, long-term research project on Muslim girlhoods in South Africa.
- 3 See Nadvi (2011) for a broad overview in an article entitled “What Does It Mean to Be a Young Muslim in Contemporary South Africa?” Nadvi's main focus is not, however, on young Muslim girls in particular.
- 4 The recent attempts by the Muslim community to ratify the Muslim Marriages Bill represent a typical example of how Muslims are negotiating the democratic terrain and have used the constitutional framework as a preferred apparatus to debate certain gender issues in Islam.
- 5 A total of twenty questionnaires was distributed and nineteen completed forms were returned.

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