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PERFORMANCE OF PIETY:
LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM WOMEN

Romica Vasudev* and Anand Inbanathan**

Abstract

A 'Muslim woman' in India is an ambiguous concept when it comes to understanding agency. The dominant discourse that has been the basis of most narratives on Muslim women has been of someone who is faceless, voiceless and devoid of any agency. The lived experiences of Muslim women show that they exercise agency on an everyday basis. Negotiation and bargaining with the dominant patriarchal norm are a part of their lived experiences. Be it exercising one's choice for working outside the home, in deciding the field of education, wearing or not wearing the burka[1], marrying someone, Muslim women are not entirely voiceless subjects. Within their own social and cultural environment, Muslim women are exercising their will and making their presence felt. They have been continuously doing this within the ambit of religious prescriptions. Some have taken on a higher level of piety, while others have taken the Prophet's teachings as the basis of their actions, to justify these actions not only to themselves, but also to others around them. Through their narratives, this paper discusses the nuances of agency that are part of the daily lives of Muslim women.

Introduction

The present paper explores the lived experiences of Muslim women, most of whom live in Bangalore, and their expression of agency, and how it is operationalized on an everyday basis. It has been extended to understand how women use their agency through their performance of piety practices. The paper has used the combined approaches of Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, both of whom talk about gender being a social construct, and identify political and social conditions of the subject as the sites of agency.

The data for this paper were collected through in-depth interviews with the respondents. Some interviews were conducted in two to three visits to the respondents' homes or places of work. Other interviews were conducted in just one visit to each respondent. Open-ended questions were asked, based on the themes identified for the study. Twenty-five women from the higher economic group and twenty from the lower economic group were interviewed. Two women in the higher income group are activists based in Delhi and Mumbai, working in the field of women's rights. These women have been included to give a broader view of piety, and how it impinges on the practices of Muslim women. They are actively engaged in highlighting the rights-based issues of women on various public platforms, and especially that of Muslim women, to initiate affirmative action. Their narratives have been captured in order to understand their epistemological underpinning, as both activists and Muslim women.

The economic groups were identified mainly through their area of residence in Bangalore, as well as the educational qualifications and occupations of the respondents. The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner. In terms of income, the difference is not as between rich and

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[1] Burqa or *Burka* is a loose garment covering the whole body from head to toe, worn in public by Muslim women (https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/*Burka*)

poor, but between people who can be considered as upper middle class and those in the lower middle class. We did not have anyone in the sample who was absolutely poor. Follow up questions were asked on what the respondent stated during the interview, as these questions were deemed relevant by the researchers.

Muslim women were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The respondents were found working in white collar jobs, living in high end condominiums, or home makers, with husbands working in white collar jobs, and in multinational organisations. Another set of women were mostly those working in lower paying jobs, in the organized and unorganized sectors as cooks, house helps, sales persons in shopping malls, data entry operators in NGOs, or their husbands were working in the unorganized sector, and all of them lived in low-income areas of the city. The inclusion of diverse individuals in the study was to understand different paths that women took to express and exercise their desires, and make their decisions. The areas where women exercised their agency were identified for this study. Some aspects that have been discussed in the paper are: Bodily practices that women undertake as part of the performance of piety, their social networks, their intimate relationships, how they perceived religion and its practices, and how they negotiated with all the experiences that they encountered. The intention was to observe which paths the respondents took, whether they surrendered to, negotiated with, or reinterpreted religion according to their practical needs.

In any religion, piety has two aspects, one that is manifested in the physical form, and the other through internalising the values propounded by the religion. Embodied practices are tangible and visible such as wearing a *burka*, through regular prayer, sex segregation, and maintaining physical distance with non-mahram[2]. Internalising Islamic values connotes imbibing values such as modesty, the ethic of hard work, reciting a *Dua*[3] every time one starts a meal or steps out of the home, and practicing hygiene of body (in the form of *wuzu*[4]), mind and surroundings. There is often an overlap between the embodied practices and internalised ethical values since these values often take a tangible form. For instance, the ethic of hygiene is tangibly seen at the time of *wuzu* when it becomes a matter of ritual purity. It is absolutely mandatory to undergo a cleansing process before saying one's prayers. The same value becomes intangible when it is internalised as part of piety practice, where the subject imbibes it as a value that requires them to cleanse their thoughts of any wrong intentions (like cheating someone, or lying).

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[2] Mahrams are people with whom one can safely interact with, but cannot marry. Mahrams (by blood) are (grand) parents and further ancestor's siblings, (grand) children, and further descendants' siblings, further ancestors' children and further descendants of siblings. There are also Mahrams by marriage such as spouse, father and mother-in-law, son and daughter-in-law, stepfather, mother and step-children. Mahram's are those from whom *purdah*, or concealment of the body with *hijab*, is not obligatory; and who may serve as a legal escort of a woman during journeys longer than three days.

Non-Mahram are the people whom one cannot interact with outside of sanctioned guidelines, but whom one can marry **(Rahbari, 2020)**.

[3] Dua is a prayer of supplication or request. Muslim's regard this as a profound act of worship (https://www.definitions.net/definition/dua)

[4] Wuzu/wudu involves washing hands, mouth, nostrils, arms, head and feet with water and is an important part of ritual purity in Islam. (https://www.asianimage.co.uk/news/18304974.perform-wudu-home-mosque-asks-worshippers/)

Gender and Religion

Gender and religion are two socially constructed phenomena that are intertwined in such a way that the latter provides the grounds for the legitimacy of the former's social acceptance. The prescription for norms, traditions and expected behaviour comes from religion. It gives moral legitimacy to the discourse that establishes heterosexual binaries in society, and also defines what members of each of these socially constructed gender categories are required to do, to be able to belong to that category. Most religions have very clear norms about dress, bodily behaviour or religious purity. These piety ideals are defined differently for men and women. Women are expected to uphold the cultural standards for the religious collective, where men protect and women are protected. This morality emerges out of the God-fearing patriarchal ideals that expect the women of the religious collective to maintain the purity of the collective by means of monitoring and controlling the latter's behaviour (Cooke et al 2008). It is for this reason that feminism has had a troublesome relationship with religious norms, since religious decrees are more in favour of men than they are for women. This relationship is more pronounced in the case of Islam and feminism. The suspicion with which feminists view Islamist movements has intensified after 9/11, the four coordinated terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, on the United States, by Al-Qaeda (Mahmood, 2006). In the case of India, where Muslims are a minority[5], a similar narrative is used to address issues related to Muslim women. While referring to the Muslim population as a minority in the sense of being a smaller number of people than the Hindus, they still comprised 14.2 per cent of the Indian population, and 172 million people across the country (2011 Census). Muslim women carry the burden of representing the community, and the discourse constructs them as the symbolic bearers of collective Muslim honour and identity. Hence, any dialogue pertaining to change and development within the community oscillates between discrimination and patronage, depending on the political goals of the ruling political leadership. In the last few years patronage politics has been played out in the form of amendments in Muslim Personal laws, with the stated intention of bringing justice to Muslim women, but in reality, taking them further away from gender justice goals. The lived experiences of Muslim women in India are far more varied than to be compartmentalized into the existing dominant discourse of *purdah* and personal laws. Women's lived experiences, however, involve various forms of interactions and negotiations in different contexts (Kirmani, 2013). As the present study indicates, Muslim women exercise far more agency in their day-to-day interactions than is generally perceived, and do not always correspond to a docile and marginalized *burka* clad woman who lacks any agency.

A discussion on agency is usually rooted in liberal traditions, which means the resistance to or subverting of hegemonic norms. In the context of this study, agency is defined as the capacity to act independently, of one's own volition. The narratives of lived experiences of Muslim women, not just in India, but across the world have shown that the concept of agency as resistance to relations of domination, by means of subversion or resignification, does not capture those nuances of agency where women realize their will despite patriarchal norms and customs, and support the same system that

[5] Muslims are not only a minority in comparison to the large number of Hindus, but even in a sociological sense, Muslims could be considered a minority due to their subordinate position in society, and who from time to time are discriminated against due to their religious identity. The Sachar Committee Report 2006 has also identified some of the problems that Muslims in India face, due to their socio-economic conditions.

suppresses them. A similar narrative has been observed by Saba Mahmood in her study of the Mosque Movement in Egypt in the 1990s, where she defines feminist agency as

> "The capacity to realize one's own interest against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will or other obstacles (whether individual or collective). The humanist desire for autonomy and expression of one's self-worth constitutes the substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in the form of an act of resistance when conditions permit" (Mahmood 2006: 38).

Hence, women feed into the same system that is one of the major causes for their subordination. They find solace and seek answers for their suffering from the very same institutions that cause their subordination. Notwithstanding this, it is through the same religious norms that women also find their agency and push the boundaries to make space for their piety and its related practices. An expression of agency cannot be accomplished in the simple binary of resistance and subordination. It has to be located within the power dynamics of the context, since acts of resistance would acquire meaning only within the ethical and political conditions in which they take place. Agency has to be understood from within the discourse and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. The meaning of agency cannot be fixed in advance, it has to be understood in the context of prevailing political and social conditions in which the subject is situated. The sense of agency and the process by which it is exercised by the subject will be shaped based on this context (Mahmood 2005: 15). This paper takes Mahmood's concept of agency as the basis for analysis.

Agency can be located in the way norms are inhabited. According to Mahmood, agency is not just about resistance to norms but is also about how one chooses to inhabit or live those norms which could be religious, cultural or social (Ranganathan, 2016). It would then also mean what is seen as subordination from the lens of universally shared western feminist ideals could be just a woman's way of exercising her agency. In essence, the site of agency has to be historically and culturally specific. It is the institutions and discourse that create individuals and not vice versa. Subjectivity is constituted through those discourses in which the person is being positioned at any point in time, through their own and other's acts of speaking or writing (Davies, 1991). Institutions determine the sex, sexuality and gender of an individual along with prescribed normative behaviour (Butler, 1988). Consequently, being a woman is something that we do, rather than something that we are. Institutional powers keep a check on this performance of being and behaving as a particular sex, which is rooted in a particular religious tradition. This identity is formed, continuously redefined, and consolidated through actions, gestures and speech. How an individual chooses to embody this norm is the expression of their agency. Mahmood observes that for women members of the Egyptian Mosque movement, modesty is considered to be an important virtue. There are differences in the ways that women demonstrate this norm. Many believe that the veil[6] is an integral part of the virtue of modesty. The veiled body creates and expresses modesty. The discourse on 'modesty' assumes that it is a virtue that women have to exhibit. The ways in which one does that can vary.

[6] Veil or Hijab is a piece of clothing worn to protect or conceal one's face (https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/veil)

Understanding Gender as a Social Construct

In order to understand the lived experiences of Muslim women and their exercise of agency it is necessary to understand that gender is a social construct. It is through speech, language and performance that one's gender comes into play. Understanding this is a prerequisite to analysing how Muslim women bargain and negotiate with the prescribed hegemonic norms and relationships on a daily basis. Religion, which is also a social institution, clearly demarcates these gender roles and their corresponding performances. Butler, who is a key proponent of the gender performance theory, states that gender is culturally formed. It is performed, repeated and consolidated over time. These repetitive acts, through which gender is performed, solidifies one's identity in such a way that all the acts associated with the performance seem natural and are part of the repertoire that forms gender. According to Butler, there is nothing natural about gender. It is culturally dictated. It is only through its performance that gender comes into existence. The acts of doing gender stem from gender norms that are shaped by cultural beliefs, and in turn, effect the social relational context that maintains the gender system. For Butler, the understanding of gender in its binary of male and female is a part of essentialising gender, which restricts the real expressions of gender by individuals. This gender binary is a fallout of the heterosexual ethic that the society needs to promote to further the patriarchal agenda. It's not given but is essentialised. However, there is nothing natural about the entire human species being classified into this binary of male and female (Butler, 1988). The idea of fixing male and female tags to specific genitalia and defining their corresponding sexual desires and prescriptive social behaviour is culturally determined. Consequently, according to Butler, sex, which is the biological classification, is not entirely a biological concept. It is rather a spectrum within which bodies can be identified. Sex is a cluster of concepts, where one can identify with some of the features, but not necessarily all the attributes of gender. Hence, there is no sharp distinction between gender and sex, as both are socially determined. Physical bodies do not exist outside their cultural meanings. Our social conditioning makes the existence of these bodies intelligible. This social conditioning is done by making sure that some culturally defined gender acts are repeatedly performed, thereby reiterating the continuous formation of sexually differentiated bodies. Accordingly, the concept of a woman comprises a cluster of acts. A subject can identify herself as belonging to the category of a 'woman', if she fulfils enough of the attributes that are applicable for that category. This social construction of a woman is done through gender codes that are part of a dominant discourse in the society. This discourse comprises language (verbal and nonverbal), as well as cultural ideology and power structures, by which gender codes are defined. It is through these codes that a gendered body becomes recognizable. A woman then becomes a woman in the performance of the act that is stamped by this discourse. This performance makes her recognizable and helps to fit subjects into a make-believe framework, and the adherence or performance of this gender identity gives a sense of self identity to the individual. That is, the subject only performs acts that are socially prescribed so that she/he can be identified as a particular gender. The traits that define who is a male and who is a female are pre-decided by social and cultural factors, and the subjects are expected to perform those acts as prescribed.

For instance, modesty as a required feminine trait emerged during many conversations with respondents, and as an essential value that women must internalize. The manner in which this trait is to

be performed or internalised by the respondents differs according to the social and cultural conditions of the society where they live. For one Muslim woman living in a particular area of Bangalore that has a predominantly Muslim population, modesty meant wearing a *burka* or lowering one's gaze when confronting men in a professional setting. For another Muslim woman living in a similar locality, modesty meant wearing a *dupatta* over her salwar suit when she stepped out of her home, and not engaging in any conversation with her husband's friend if she met him somewhere in the neighbourhood. How women exhibit this trait may differ from one to another, but modesty as a value has been internalised and is considered essential by the respondents. There are individual ways of performing gender, but what one does in accordance with pre-existing conventions, sanctions, and proscriptions, is not an individual matter.

The repetitive acts of performance cement the gender norms and requirements of that performance. Even though individual bodies are enacting this performance, the fact is that the script already exists, the framework for this performance pre-exists, and the performer makes it a social act *per se*. These gendered bodies that are produced as a result of the performance are rewarded or admonished based on the cultural norms of the society.

> The creation, maintenance and reaffirmation of constituent acts of gender are maintained by complex institutional and discursive means creating an illusion of gender essentialism (Butler, 1988: 528).

This process of internalising gender codes works from outside to inside. The repeated performance of gender gives it a psychological reality. Gender, is not internal, but repeated acts, desires, gestures, which are evident on the body's surface have been internalised.

Among the already existing gender codes, there exists a window of agency. Since the performance is carried out by thinking individuals, their actions cannot be devoid of individual footprints and the use of agency. Butler states that in the repetition of the acts lies its subversion. The way one chooses to interpret the norms and conventions, and perform them, is where the individual's agency or choice lies. The identifying exercise of agency would be to look at how Muslim women inhabit the normative gender codes. The same norms that further consolidate the woman's subordination are also sites of agency. The manner in which these norms are used to bargain and negotiate with patriarchy on a daily basis is where the agency of the subject lies. The actor is an individual, with a thinking and active mind that can process this information. The multiple ways in which a person decides to perform an act in order to inhabit or live a norm, is an example of individual will. It also opens up a space to assign new meanings to the constituent acts, which make these acts more accommodating over time. In the context of this study, it would mean that pre-existing norms define the act of 'being' a woman. Apart from other social institutions, religion also prescribes these norms that are expected to be inhabited for a biological body to become a Muslim woman. Islam is a lived religion; it defines the way of life right from basic everyday chores to the spiritual course of life. In any religion, norms have been consolidated over time, and the performance of these norms becomes essential for the religious identity of an individual.

Discourse in Islam

Muslim women in our study revealed that they tend to negotiate and interpret the religious teachings contextually. Islam is a lived religion, according to all of them. It defines the way of life from the most practical daily chores to the spiritual. The right way to do *Ghusl*[7], to sermons on marriage and divorce, and the right conduct or virtues of a pious Muslim, are part of the Islamic way of life. Religion is a significant part of the daily lives of Muslim women, be it working women or home makers, and irrespective of their educational qualifications. For them, the idea of being a woman is embodied in religion. The prescriptions come from the culture that is embedded in the teachings and way of life of Prophet Mohammed. Islam as a religion rests on the premise of internalising the intention to perform rituals. There is considerable stress on rituals and the intentions of the believer behind the rituals. For many of the respondents their lives revolve around balancing their piety and their daily chores. Qur'anic teachings and *Hadith*[8] have a very vital role to play in guiding women. The entire discourse (*Quran*[9], *Hadith*, other religious literature, religious sermons, through community meetings or social media) lays the foundation or a script for the performance of acts that are expected for a woman to be a "pious Muslim woman".

The significance of discourse, including written and spoken communication and debate in Islam can be seen in its practice. The Text (*Quran* and *Hadith*) and their interpretation create a ground for a physical body to be recognizable by attaching it with relevant attributes of normative behaviour, for instance how men and women should dress. It is language that gives interpretation to the body and helps in making it recognizable (Butler, 1997). In this sense, the text and related textual discourse in Islam bring into existence a pious Muslim woman, which each of the respondents aspired to become. Language gives us the gender codes. Individuals then express their identity based on these preconceived social codes. Gender is boxed in these boundaries to serve the agenda of a heterosexual society, where the woman is defined by her key role as a reproductive agent. Gendered selves are produced through this discourse, based on a system of reward or punishment for adherence or violation of gender norms. Discourse to this end plays an important role in subject formation. A subject does not exist in solitary conditions, and it is not devoid of the social conditions that led to its formation. The discourse and the conditions in which this discourse is formed govern the kind of subjects that it intends to produce. There is no body that existed as a clean slate on which gender coding was done. Discourse to this end constructs an already sexed body (Butler, 1993:10-11). Unlike the traditional concept that sees social norms as constraining, Butler believes that norms are the grounds through which a subject comes into being and enacts her agency (ibid. 19). The Islamic discourse states the norms and values that are associated with both the genders. And this message is constantly reinforced through the

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[7] Ghusl is the ritual washing of the whole body, as prescribed by Islamic law, to be performed in preparation for prayer and worship, and after sexual activity, childbirth, menstruation, etc. (https://www.lexico.com/definition/ghusl)

[8] Hadith is a record of traditions or sayings of the Prophet Mohammad, revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance, second only to the authority of the *Quran*, the holy book of Islam (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hadith)

[9] *Quran* is a compilation of the verbal revelations given to the Holy Prophet Mohammad over a period of twenty-three years (https://www.alislam.org/quran/)

textual interpretations of the *Quran* and *Hadith*, weekly meetings in mosques or *Ijtemas*[10], sermons from various *Muftis*[11] on YouTube, and other social media.

The respondents of this study, including both higher income and lower income groups, have access to all or at least some of these sources. A *Quran* (with meanings in Urdu or any other language) is present in every Muslim household irrespective of their economic status. *Hadith* (in the form of books such as *Sahih Muslim*[12]) are available in some households in both income groups. The women from the higher income group have easy access to information through online resources such as YouTube videos of sermons given by Muftis, WhatsApp groups of family members, or other Muslim women from their friends' circle, where information of religious significance, or timings of moon sighting are shared. Eleven of the women of the higher income group were also part of weekly meeting groups called *halaqah*[13]. *Halaqahs* are groups of friends or acquaintances who meet on a rotation basis in each other's houses, to discuss lessons from the *Quran* or *Hadith*. They were also actively engaged in weekly classes in Islamic studies institutes located nearby, where they went to understand the interpretation of the *Quran,* and also participated in sermons and discussions around the *Hadith,* and stories from the Prophet's life. There were six respondents whose children were also enrolled for weekend classes in institutes of Islamic studies, where they were taught the meaning of *Quranic* verses along with proper recitation. The children were also told stories from the Prophet's life to give them a lesson in moral values. There were activities like family picnics, visits to orphanages and old age homes, which were also organized for the children. Respondents from the lower income group were seen to be gathering information from the *Quran*, *Hadith* (not all respondents had *Hadith* related books at home), YouTube videos of sermons by Muftis, Google search, and WhatsApp groups as in the case of higher income respondents. The time spent on the phone to access information related to Islam was much less among women of lower income groups as compared to those from the higher income groups. The reason was that after office work, or household work for those who were not working outside their homes, there was little time available to access such information. Every lower income household had at least one smart phone, which was used to listen to sermons, watch TV serials and access social media and Whatsapp. Among lower income respondents *Ijtema* was seen to be a common phenomenon. *Ijtema* is held with a larger group of women and is a more formal set up unlike the *Halaqah*. Being a larger group not all those attending the Ijetma know each other personally, while the *Halaqah* is a close group of people who decide to meet at regular intervals. In both *Ijetma* and *Halaqah,* the purpose is to meet and deliberate on the teachings of the *Quran* and *Hadith*. Among lower income women, regular interaction with an *Aalima*[14] residing in the neighbourhood was also fairly common. Usually, in lower income residential areas, there is an Aalima in the neighbourhood who takes *Quran* and *Hadith* classes for

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[10] Ijtema an Urdu term means congregation of people especially Muslims throwing light on the Holy *Quran* and its significance for achieving salvation (https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/submission/3148/Istema%28N%29+or+Ijtema%28n%29)

[11] A Mufti is a Muslim legal expert who is empowered to give rulings on religious matters (https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/mufti)

[12] Sahih Muslim is considered the second most authentic hadith collection after Sahih al- Bukhari.

[13] *Halaqah* or *halaqa* is a religious meeting for the study of *Quran* and *Hadith*

[14] *Aalima* is a female scholar, who is regarded as the one who protects and explains religious knowledge of Islam.

women and children. According to one of the respondents from the lower income group, the *Hadith* had taught her the correct Islamic way to do her daily activities such as sleeping on one's right side, never lying down with one's feet towards the *Qibla*[15], eating with one's right hand, one should not over eat, and lowering one's gaze when confronted by non Mahrams. All these practices are embodiments of Islamic piety.

In this entire discourse of Islamic piety, there is considerable emphasis on bodily practices which become the means through which a pious Muslim woman comes into 'being'. Submission to some form of authority is a condition to achieve the subject's potentiality. These ethical codes have to be embodied within the subject to be acknowledged and recognised. In this sense, the bodies of women are made of collective identity, where women are made into repositories of norms and traditions. These norms have to be constantly practiced so that they do not lose their significance. Religion performs the function of keeping these norms and their corresponding acts active. In the repetitive acts of performance of these norms lie the opportunity for their resignification or also sometimes failure of their performance. Each iteration has some amount of openness, which can lead to the failure of performance of that norm or resignification, which does not necessarily contribute to the consolidation of the norms. Agency, thus, lies in contexts where norms are questioned or are subject to resignification. Hence, agency here means the individual's capacity for action that is created and enabled by specific relations of subordination. For instance, in the case of Sumbul (name changed), aged 37. Sumbul started wearing a *hijab*[16] at the age of 33, which became a defining moment of her life. She is qualified as Master in Computer Application, and was teaching in a college from 2011 until 2017. She quit her job because she wanted to focus on finishing her PhD, for which she had enrolled in 2014. When she moved to Bangalore in 2005 after her marriage, she wanted to satiate her desire to do a deeper study of Islam, and improve her practice. She joined an Islamic study institute and started going for their weekend classes to read and better understand the *Quran* and Hadith. She said that it was after her deeper study of Islam that she realized that as a practicing Muslim she should cover her head. According to her, *Allah* likes women who cover their head. In 2015 she started wearing a *hijab* and it is only for her love for *Allah* that Sumbul wants to wear it. She observed that initially she was apprehensive about how her colleagues would react to her wearing the *hijab* all of a sudden. She spoke to her colleague and close friend, a Bengali Brahmin, about her desire to wear a *hijab*. This friend encouraged her to go ahead and wear it with confidence. *Hijab,* which is seen by many feminists as a symbol of supression, turned out to be a symbol of empowerment for Sumbul. The act of wearing a *hijab* in the public space was for Sumbul an affirmation of her agency. She feels more comfortable with her *hijab* than she used to earlier as she feels that it gets her more respect from her colleagues and friends. For some Muslim women, it is in their submission to religion that they negotiate and make their own path to reach what they wanted to achieve.

Another aspect of women's exercise of their agency within the already defined religious gender codes is the recent reorientation of how Muslim women engage with the scriptural sources of Islam,

[15] *Qibla* is the direction towards the Kaaba in the Sacred Mosque in Mecca. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/qiblah)

[16] A head covering worn in public by some Muslim women as a symbol of modesty and religious devotion. (https://study.com/academy/lesson/hijab-definition-and-relation-to-islam.html)

especially the Quran. The ideology behind this discursive praxis is that the scriptural source of Islam, the Quran, provides many rights to women that are denied to them by the *Ulema*[17] who give a patriarchal interpretation of the text and deny women their rights. Termed as Islamic feminism, this pathway to religion is a discourse, whose praxis is script related (Schneider, 2009). Not just women activists across the world, but women in their individual capacity too are now engaging with the Quran themselves, and interpreting it in a woman-friendly way (Vatuk, 2007). In the Indian context, Islamic feminism is not a Pan-Indian movement, nor does it bring all Muslim women seeking gender justice through this discursive practice onto a common ground. It is more of a pathway that many activists working in the space of gender justice are using to demand their rightful place in society. This attempt is not limited to a small group of intellectuals, but is adopted by the newly emerging middle class and grassroots organizations all over the country (Schneider, 2009). Similar pathways adopting this discursive praxis have been emerging all across the world, as in Iran where women are attempting to reclaim public spaces and their choice to unveil. The emergence of this new transnational public sphere is a space where Muslim women are reclaiming their rights within the purview of religious scriptures. Women who engage in this form of discursive practice believe that they don't have to be dependent on the Ulema for interpreting the Quran for them. Not all of these women identify or want to call themselves as Islamic feminists. They believe that this way of interpreting the Quran is not new. They are just reclaiming the past. The belief is that historically women in Islamic society had a better status and rights than they have now. Over the years, male Ulema have monopolised the interpretation of the Quran, and have given it a patriarchal twist. The Quran is now available in many languages and various interpretations, making it easier for women to self-study and then form their own world view from an Islamic lens. For respondents of this study, the Quran is the basic guiding text along with the hadith. These women preferred reading the Quran in the language of their choice, and supplementing it with other sources such as sermons and recitation of the Quran on the YouTube, as well as following popular Muftis on Instagram and Facebook. One of the respondents, Sumbul, for instance stated that she does not agree with all the *Hadith* that she reads, and she refers to multiple interpretations either through books or through classes on Islam that she attends on the weekends. One outcome that she described was how her husband changed after attending the weekend Islamic classes. Her husband grew up with a belief that expressing affection to one's spouse is not the Islamic way of living. However, according to Sumbul, after attending these classes her husband realized that Islam stresses on the importance of intimacy and expressing love to one's spouse, though in private.

In Sumbul's case the reinterpretation of the scriptures was used to achieve a more meaningful relationship with her spouse and for a better quality of life. In Shazia's case, she is a woman's rights activist who identifies herself as a practicing Muslim, and is also an Islamic feminist who believes that the Quran teaches equality and dignity of women. Islamic feminism accommodates women of all classes and social denominations. She too feels that the Ulema have had tight control over the interpretation of the Quran. However, with the text available in several translations, it makes it easy for women to read and understand it on their own. Quran, for her, is a universal text and limiting it to a particular

[17] *Ulema* is abody of Muslim scholars recognized as having specialist knowledge of Islamic sacred law and theology. (https://www.lexico.com/definition/ulema)

language, and interpretation by only the male Ulemas, undermines its authority. She draws parallels between the Quranic call for justice and equality and constitutionally guaranteed rights. Shazia runs a NGO where a number of destitute women come to her, seeking help in cases of domestic disputes. She cites references from the Quran to make these women aware of their rights. Grassroots activists believe that any discussion on the status of Muslim women has to go beyond triple talaq and the veil. The perception of Muslim women has to move beyond one of submissiveness and lack of agency (Schneider, 2009). Respondents in the present study believe that the Quran is a comprehensive text that gives many rights to women. They also revealed that unlike the popular narrative of a yielding and fragile Muslim woman, they are vocal, aware, and exercise agency in various situations in their everyday lives.

Muslim Women Speak

Based on the interviews, the responses were clubbed under various themes such as the significance of bodily practices, social networks and intimacies, religion as a personal experience, relationship with religion, and reconciling belief and lived experiences. Pseudonyms have been given to protect the respondents' privacy.

Significance of Bodily Practices

Zubeida, a respondent from the higher income group, is over 60 years old. She is an *Aalima* and runs her own institute for Islamic Studies. She teaches Arabic to women, and how to read the *Quran* along with its interpretation. Zubeida states that a true practising Muslim should go by what the *Quran* states. For her, it is important to practice what she is preaching. Bodily practices such as the five prayers, *wuzu*, *burka*, and segregation between the sexes, hold immense significance. Modesty or "*haya*" is a virtue that every woman should uphold. She believes in keeping the purdah of the voice as well apart from that of the body and gaze. She is entirely dedicated to Allah. She does not listen to music or watch movies. Her youngest son and his wife became devout Muslims after they returned from Haj a few years back. The family runs a school in Bangalore, where Urdu and Arabic are part of the curriculum, and also an Islamic Studies Institute where the *Quran* and the *Hadith* are taught. Zubeida consults the *Quran* for every aspect of her life. She wears a *burka* in public, and refrains from mixed gender meetings with men who belong to the forbidden circle according to Islam. The application of nail paint according to her is not allowed as it obstructs the process of *wuzu*.

Farida, a 41-year-old business woman and part time consultant in the apparel field is a student of Zubeida. Farida belongs to the higher income category of respondents. Bodily practices like five times prayer a day and *wuzu,* hold the utmost significance for her. She became even more dedicated to Islamic practices in the last 15 years. It was after a break up with a boy, who had promised to marry her and then suddenly left for the United States of America without any promise to come back, which led her to seek solace in her religious practices. Apart from the five prayers, Farida does the special prayer at 2:30 am in the morning. She is a working woman so for her to practice sex segregation is difficult. She has meetings, office lunches and offsite trips that she has to attend as a professional. She states that she also goes to pubs for office parties, but she's back home by 11 pm most of the time, and makes sure that there is a trusted male colleague dropping her off at home. She does have male friends

who come home and are friendly with her mother and her sisters. She does all her five prayers every day, even while she is at work. In case she misses any prayer, she clubs it with the next prayer that she is doing that day. She believes in wearing clothes that completely cover her body, whether it's a salwar suit or pants. She carries a stole all the time as she has to pray even when she is on the go. When she steps out of her house, she does her *wuzu* and wears socks, so that she doesn't have to do the whole thing again. She doesn't apply nail paint except for the five days when she is menstruating. Since she does not pray on her prayer mat, nor does she touch the *Quran* during her menstruation, she applies nail paint if she chooses to do so. She states that as part of Islamic practice, one's *wuzu* is not complete if there is nail paint, as it obstructs water from going beyond the surface of the nail and prevents deep cleansing. It is important that while doing *wuzu,* water touches all the prescribed body parts. One has to be completely cleansed to be able to make a connection with *Allah*.

Amna, 47, an Ismaili Shia Muslim, has been a professional in the real estate field for the past 20 years. Amna is a respondent from the higher income group. She believes that religion is something very private. It is a relationship between the individual and God, which no one needs to be privy to, not even her husband. She is not regular with her five prayers but goes to the *Jamaatkhana*[18] thrice a year with her children on special occasions. She is also not regular with her fasting during the holy months. She travels all across the world for her work, with male and female colleagues. Amna states that she belongs to a very progressive sect of Shia Muslims, the *Aga Khanis*[19], and that she had a very liberal upbringing in South Mumbai. For her, faith is more to do with the values that relate to being a good human being, and not so much about the bodily practices.

Haseena, a respondent from the lower income category is a 20-year-old Sunni Muslim. She lives in a modest two room house in a lower income colony in central Bangalore. After grade ten, she had to discontinue her studies due to financial constraints. She has been doing odd jobs since the age of 16. She worked as a part time teacher in an institute close to her house. She has worked in a tele-call centre, as a beauty assistant in Westside (a large establishment mainly selling apparel, home décor and furniture), and various other temporary jobs. She identifies herself as a practicing Muslim but feels that there is much more that she needs to learn and practice. She is not very regular with her prayers. Especially the morning prayer is difficult as she cannot wake up so early in the morning. She has been wearing a *hijab* since grade four. It started with an ear infection when she was in that grade in school. She began to wear a scarf in order to cover her ears as recommended by the doctor. Even at that age she was very particular about matching the colour of her scarf with her school uniform. Later on, when she got her periods, she started to cover her face as well. She used the same headscarf to make her *niqab*[20]. Haseena states that her parents have never been strict with her in her growing up years. They never forced her to wear a *hijab*. She keeps her mother and her sister informed about wherever she

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[18] A designated space for Shia Ismaili Muslims to gather and perform religious practices like zikr, du'a etc. (https://the.ismaili/uk/the-grace-and-blessings-jamatkhanas-our-lives)

[19] Aga Khani Muslims are Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, who belong to the Shia branch of Islam. The Ismailis continue to believe in the line of Imamat in hereditary succession continuing from Ismail to His Highness the Aga Khan, who is the 49th Imam, in direct lineal descent from Prophet Muhammad. (https://www.akdn.org/akdn/about-us/his-highness-aga-khan/ismaili-community)

[20] A veil worn by some Muslim women in public, covering all of the face apart from the eyes (https://www.dictionary.com/browse/niqab?s=t)

goes and whoever she meets. The only thing that her parents are strict about is that she should be home before sunset, or at the most by 7 pm. She stated that she follows religious requirements such as *burka* and prayer, but she also wants to enjoy life. Enjoyment for her means wearing make-up, wearing western clothes, meeting friends and going out to malls and restaurants with them. However, she did all this during the day, as she had to be back in her home before sunset. Haseena was to get married in November 2019, and she felt that she was going to be a good Muslim wife, who does all her prayers, and is a good daughter-in-law and wife. However, till her wedding actually took place, it was time to enjoy her life. For Haseena, by wearing a *burka* not only was she following what her religion wants her to do, but she feels it also gives her the freedom to wear whatever she wants to under it, and go to places that would have otherwise been inaccessible for her. She further stated that she does not have to apply sunscreen lotion as the *burka* prevents her skin from getting tanned. Also, she has seen every woman in her family wear a *burka* whenever they stepped out of their home, so that is the norm for her too. She went on to stress that she wears the *burka* and *niqab* whenever she steps out of her home, and takes off the *niqab* at her place of work and keeps wearing the *burqa*. However, when she was working at Westside, she used to take off the *burka* as it was not allowed at her place of work. She herself took off the *burka* and *niqab* when she went to a hookah bar. She took off the *burka* before entering these places, as that piece of clothing is sacred for her. She felt that if anyone saw a *burka* clad woman in a hookah bar, they would think negatively about her religion, which is not acceptable to her. Also, she did not want anyone, even a stranger, to think that some *burka* clad girl was smoking or drinking, as it would defame her religion. She had more male friends than female friends, with whom she went on bike rides, to malls and restaurants, and occasionally to hookah parlours.

Bodily practices are important for almost all the women mentioned above except for one. Some of them are practicing it in the present, and for some it will be in the future. Haseena states that she has seen many women in her family who have become completely Islamic after marriage, and she will be doing the same. She is very confident as a person, with a lot of clarity about what awaits her in the near future (i.e. when she gets married). In her view, in future she will be an obedient wife and daughter-in-law. She says that if her husband disapproves of her friendship with other men, she will stop talking to them.

Khushi, age 28, works in a NGO with a salary of 10,000 rupees per month. Khushi belongs to the lower income category of respondents. Her husband works as a taxi driver. Her's is an inter-religious love marriage. She was a Christian before she got married. She converted to Islam just before her wedding. Initially, there was opposition from both sides of parents. However, her husband's family came to accept her. After six years of dating each other, Khushi ran away from her parent's home and went to live with her husband's sister. She stayed there for a week, where her initiation into Islam began. She was first asked if she wanted to convert to Islam. After she agreed, a *Hazrat*[21] was called over, he looked for a name in the *Quran* and then placed her finger on a date fruit and she was asked to verbally state that she was embracing Islam by choice. After that she made an affidavit affirming her change of name, and that she is embracing Islam by choice. She got married a week later, in accord with Muslim rituals. Once married, she started to read the *Quran.* The *Aalima* who stayed close to her

[21] Imam from the local mosque.

home used to write everything in English for her to learn. However, she said she learnt more by observing everyone else around her in the family. Her current practice of Islam entails reading two to three pages of the *Quran* once a week and praying once a week every Friday. During *Azaan*[22]she covers her head with a stole. She wears a *burka* when she steps out of her locality. She does not go to the church any more as she wants to stick to one religion, or else it would create confusion for her. She further adds that all her *duas* get fulfilled, and hence, the rest of the family members ask her to pray for them. She feels that because she embraced the religion and was not born into it, all her prayers are answered. She speaks fluent Urdu and tries to follow the Islamic way of living. For that she constantly seeks guidance from her mother-in-law. The Islamic way of life for her means living the religion which includes knowing what is Sunnah[23]. Some of the Sunnah that she follows are practicing *Namaz*, doing *wuzu*, sleeping on the right side, uttering 'Bismillah' before cooking and not touching the *Quran* or *janamaz*[24] when she is menstruating.

Some of the above narratives show that the performance of bodily acts is a key aspect of being a pious Muslim. It is through the performance of the act that the piety of the individual comes into being. Moreover, for all the respondents, piety started with bodily practices, which included reading of the *Quran* and learning the right way to pray. All the respondents except Khushi, stated that as children they did not understand the meaning of what they were reading. As they grew older, especially those who were in their thirties and forties, they had started a deep study of the meaning of the verses in the *Quran*. It appears that as women got older, their desire to know more about their religion increased. For the married women, their inclination to learn more about the *Quran* was also due to the fact that they had earlier learnt to recite the *Quran* without knowing the deeper meaning, and they did not want to give the same experience to their children. For Farida, her life experiences led her to seek solace in God and understand the reason behind her sorrow in this life.

Social Networks and Intimacies

Sex segregation and modesty are virtues that practicing Muslim women feel are basic requirements to be pious. Zubeida who is an *Aalima* stated that the text *Quran* and *Hadith* like 'Sahih Muslim' are guides for men and women to lead their lives. Every aspect of daily lives has been mentioned in these texts. Sex segregation implies that women's social interaction with men who are Na-Mahram has to be very restricted. According to Zubeida, with her husband, a wife is free to openly state her sexual desire and vice versa. A good wife should give in to the desire of the husband even if it is in the middle of the night when she is asleep, or else the angels will curse her till sunrise. The husband should also be considerate about the needs of the wife. She referred to Prophet Muhammad's wife Ayesha's relationship with the Prophet as a guide on how the relationship of a husband and wife can be shaped.

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[22] Islamic call to prayer, recited by the muezzin at prescribed times of the day. (https://www.learnreligions.com/what-do-the-words-of-the-adhan-mean-in-english-2003812)

[23] Sunnah or Sunnat is the Arabic word for customs and practices of the Prophet Mohammad that constitute a model code of conduct for all Muslims to follow. Prophet Mohammad is considered to be the perfect role model for all Muslims. Muslim scholars learn about Sunnah by studying thousands of stories about the Prophet, his family and his first followers. These stories are called Hadith.https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sunnah)

[24] Prayer mat.

Ayesha was not just a wife but a friend and an advisor to the Prophet. Zubeida also stated that dating and pre-marital sex are forbidden in Islam.

Haseena has had very diverse experiences in her life. She identifies herself as religious in that she wears a *burka*, says her prayers whenever she is at home during prayer time, and does her Ramzan fasting. However, she also feels that this is her time to enjoy life, though after she gets married, like her two elder sisters, she too would become a devoted wife, and will not go out with friends to have fun. Her marriage was due in the next fifteen days at the time of the interview. And she was busy stitching her trousseau dresses and shopping for her forthcoming wedding. She stated that till about a month ago, she used to go with friends to malls, restaurants and occasionally to hookah bars. On a few occasions she drank half or just one glass of beer and tried the hookah too. It was only once that she drank a whole bottle of beer. She was able to hide this from her family members since she consumed it during the first half of the day and by the time she reached home she showed no signs of the beer. She was always very particular about the time restrictions that her parents set for her. Whenever she went out, she returned home by six or seven in the evening. She shared most of her experiences with her mother, but alcohol and smoking are things her mother will not accept, and she is scared of breaking her trust, and hence, these are experiences that she did not disclose to her mother. However, she confides in her elder sister, who knows about Haesena's bike rides and hookah bar visits. She stated that she really enjoyed these bike rides, as her friends did bike stunts, such as wheelies. She is active on Instagram. She had a boyfriend in the past but the relationship lasted only for six months. She had met him in a gym, and even got physically close to him. They used to kiss each other occasionally, but had no sexual intercourse, which Haseena believes is not the right thing to do until they were married to each other. However, due to pressure from his father, her boyfriend got engaged to his cousin. He asked Haseena if she would agree to be his second wife, as he wanted her to be in his life. Haseena felt that it would amount to cheating the other girl, and declined. She did not have a problem with her boyfriend having two wives as it is allowed in Islam, but marrying for the second time without informing the first wife is un-Islamic, and something she would not be comfortable with. According to her, not only does it violate the Islamic principle of seeking the consent of the current wife/wives before marrying again, it also violates the trust factor which is essential between husband and wife. Hence, she decided to get married to a boy who was her good friend. Her fiancé knew about her past and had no issues with it. He was also aware that Haseena had many male friends. Haseena's narrative is an indication that piety means different things to different people and its connotation changes depending on their stage of life. In her case, the *burka* is worn for both religious as well utilitarian purposes. It makes her faceless when she wears it over her western attire, and enables her to fulfil her desire of dressing up, which would have otherwise raised many eyebrows in her neighbourhood. It also gave her anonymity when a male friend came to pick her up on a bike, somewhere close to her home. She wore her *burka* and *niqab* when she sat on the bike with him. She is from a conservative family where women do not have male friends, and alcohol is forbidden. Haseena is well aware of her un-Islamic practices like drinking, smoking and roaming around with male friends. However, she was clear that all this would be in the past once she was married, after which she would strictly abide by the decisions of

her husband and in-laws in all matters. At the time of the interview, with her marriage approaching, she had already started praying five times a day, while earlier she used to do so only once a day.

Khushi who had converted from Christanity to Islam (as mentioned above), stated that nothing much has changed for her from what it was before and after marriage. She was working before marriage, and even after marriage her husband allowed her to work. There have been no restrictions from her husband with respect to her mobility or socialising. However, out of her own choice she has completely committed herself to an Islamic way of life after her marriage. Her constant guide for this is her mother-in-law. Her social life has not changed much after marriage. She goes out with her husband and children to watch a movie and sometimes to eat out at a restaurant. Two people with whom she goes out occasionally are, a woman friend in her neighbourhood and her sister-in-law. Her husband insisted that she should travel only by an autorickshaw and not in a bus when she goes out without him. She wears a *burka* whenever she steps out of her home. The only time when she does not wear a *burka* is when she goes to meet her parents. At that time, she covers her head with her *dupatta* and steps out of her home. Her interaction with males, either at work or their neighbourhood, or with her husband's friends, is very limited. Her husband does not want her to work at a place where there are men. The NGO branch where she is employed has only women working there. She observed that her husband allows her to work, so she takes care that she doesn't hurt his feelings, and continues to work in her present workplace. She was offered a well-paying job by Panasonic, but she decided against it because her husband did not approve of working there, since there are a large number of men in that office. Whenever she meets any man known to her, either near her home or at the workplace, she immediately addresses him as *'Bhaiya'* (brother) so that he maintains a social distance with her during their interaction. This gives her a feeling of safety. She had wanted to work even after her marriage, and put her graduate degree to good use. However, in order to fulfil that desire, she had to choose a work place that had her husband's approval, particularly one that had only women working there.

Negotiation and bargaining are parts of women's daily experiences. Both Haseena and Khushi identify themselves as practicing Muslim women, and at the same time both of them have fulfilled their desire by negotiating their way through religion defined gender codes. Haseena uses the *burka* to have experiences like wearing western clothes, but ensures that she is back home within the defined time restriction set by her parents. Khushi who wanted to continue working, decided to work in a place where there is very limited contact with men, so that her husband does not object to her taking up paid employment outside her home.

Religion as Personal Experience

Juri, age 27, works as an architect in a high-end firm in Bangalore. Coming from a higher income, male dominated, patriarchal joint family set-up, childhood was not an enjoyable time for Juri. She was expected to get married soon after completing high school. The women of her family were not allowed to go for higher education or work outside their home. However, Juri had been very clear and firm about her studies and career, with respect to what she wanted to study, and to the choice of institutions. Hailing from an affluent, conservative Malayali Muslim family, Juri had to struggle and negotiate with her father and his elder brother to continue her studies beyond high school. Her mother

had been a constant support for her throughout. She made sure that Juri studied, and opt for a successful career, something that she herself could not do. Juri says that in her extended family, she is now an inspiration for many, but also a warning for some. Her father's sister does not approve of Juri's lifestyle. After architecture, Juri wanted to study more, and for that one of her professors even came home to convince her father. She eventually went to Spain for her master's programme. She is the first girl in her family to have studied up to her Master's degree, and more so in another country. Every time she faces a roadblock regarding what she wants, and what her family does not approve, Juri quotes from the *Quran* or *Hadith* and puts forth a counter argument. Since the age of nine, she has been praying at least 3-4 times a day. She's also had *Quranic* teachers coming home around the same time. However, in grade eleven when she changed her school, she met a Kashmiri Muslim boy who eventually became a very close friend, and had very different views about religion than she. Juri says this boy had a deep impact on how she thought about her religion, and she too started questioning many of the beliefs of her growing years. He was a very liberal and rational person according to Juri, who would question the interpretations and beliefs that were widely held. For instance, why should women be confined to the house, and that wearing the veil by women is not specifically mentioned in the *Quran*. He also introduced her to the book "No God But God" by Reza Aslan, who chronicles the origin, evolution and future of Islam. She started questioning her mother about her beliefs, after she had read this book. The book is her 'go to' factual repository on Islam, according to Juri. After her graduation, there were several instances when she met other Muslims professionally, who according to her, were open-minded and helped her think rationally. At the time of the interview, Juri was planning to move to Gujarat for work. Presently, Juri lives alone in Gujarat, and her life she says, is always about work. Even her social activities are around work, networking with people who she feels could play an important role in furthering her career. Religion now is a matter of her bond with Allah, which is something very private. However, she does not pray regularly as earlier.

Aarti, age 55, a woman's rights activist is based out of Delhi and Mumbai (her husband is based in Delhi while her son is based in Mumbai, hence, she keeps travelling and operating out of these two cities). She holds very similar views as Juri. Religion for her is also something very private, that is, a bond between Allah and her. Aarti who belongs to the higher income category of respondents, does not identify herself as a practicing Muslim. The riots in Gujarat (2002) were the turning point for Aarti in terms of completely changing the course of her life. Aarti was married at a young age of twenty-one, to a man who was thirteen years older than her, and who was also a divorcee. Even though her parents were very liberal and well educated, her choice of partner did not meet with their approval. So she had to get married against her parents' wishes. However, problems started between the couple very early in their marriage, when Aarti's husband asked her to break all ties with her natal family, and also discouraged her from taking up a job. Since she wanted to work, Aarti tried hard to persuade her husband to allow her to take up employment. She got a job where the salary was high, and that helped her to convince her husband. However, the price she had to pay for that was to hand over her entire salary to her husband. Life was about constant negotiation and domestic violence for the next sixteen years, during which time she also gave birth to a boy. Her husband wanted to control every aspect of her life. It was during a chance visit to relief camps after the Gujarat riots that Aarti started thinking

about how she and the riot victims had a similar narrative of suffering and abuse, but her reaction to her personal suffering was different from that of the women riot victims. The riot victims were ready for a long drawn legal fight for justice. They were hopeful, while Aarti felt that in her personal life she was very submissive and yielding. She contemplated that when these women had not lost hope despite losing their loved ones and their homes, why was she not able to take a stand with her husband and stop the abuse she faced in her marriage. Her rehabilitation work for the riot victims resonated so much with her personal suffering that she decided to break away from the pattern of physical and mental abuse in her marriage. In 2003, she ran away from her house along with her son, and never looked back. Her life of activism started then. She has since then been working for women's rights, filing petitions on issues pertaining to rights of Muslim women, providing counselling services, vocational training to women and many other such initiatives, under the aegis of her NGO, which is in partnership with another Muslim activist. She is happily married now, to a Hindu man. By the time she met her second husband, Aarti says, she was a much-empowered woman and there was no chance of anyone abusing her in any way. Her husband was not a practicing Hindu and that was also a factor in religion not being a point of confrontation between them.

For Aarti, religion is a deeply personal matter that belongs to the private sphere. Her piety is about her relationship with Allah. She was never very particular about praying five times a day, though she makes sure she celebrates Eid and other special occasions in the Islamic calendar. However, she made an effort to understand Islam as her work involved dealing with Muslim men and women who had to be counselled in the light of religious interpretations. In order to counsel women in distress she often gives them references from the *Quran* about the rights of women. She does not support the wearing of veil or the practice of *purdah/burka*. She feels that it not only creates a separate identity for women, but is also an inconvenience in their day-to-day life.

Both Juri and Aarti have their own version of interpreting Islam in their day to day lives. However, for both of them it is something very private, does not necessarily require bodily performances be it doing all five prayers or wearing a *burka* or maintaining sex segregation, to feel pious, nor does it require a separate identity.

Shazia, age 49, is a journalist, activist and Islamic Feminist, based in Delhi, and for a number of years has been voicing the cause of women. Her mother, a staunch communist was a teacher by profession, and her father was a government official. She grew up in Kanpur city, Uttar Pradesh, in a very intellectual and liberal environment, where there were no restrictions with respect to education and profession. In her teenage years, she had to go through an emotional turmoil because of her parents' divorce. She and her siblings stayed with her father, who eventually married for the second time. Her father's second wife had a good relationship with her and her siblings. Shazia studied journalism and started her career quite early. Her biological mother's life experience and her own desire to understand the rights of Muslim women inspired her to take up activism. She started writing regular columns on gender and Islamic feminism in a Hindi literary magazine. She went on to marry a man chosen by her parents. Since she was a journalist and activist, and her work required her to be amidst various people, her husband's sisters did not approve of her lifestyle. She had to travel and stay out of the house for long hours. Also, she had enrolled for her Masters' degree after marriage. Hence, in the initial years of

her marriage, there were a few misunderstandings and conflicts. Her husband became insecure about their relationship. He felt that Shazia had become too independent, essentially because she was working as a journalist, she was an activist, and she was also doing her Masters' degree course. As an individual, she stated that as with any other woman, she too has basic needs of food and shelter, despite her activities and her goal of higher education. She does not have any desire for materialist possessions like jewellery, or property. She has immense belief in her own abilities. She never once feared that her husband would leave her, or even if he did, she can sustain herself. She stood her ground and eventually everyone came around, so much so that her family has great respect for the work she does. Her husband's family had a printing press that printed an Urdu magazine, on historical aspects of Islam, and this worked to her benefit. She started her own publication soon after marriage, in which gender issues were her main focus. She also went on to do her MPhil from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. At present, Shazia is enrolled in a PhD programme at JNU. She is also actively involved in counselling and mediating between couples, who seek her help usually when they have reached a point of separation. She stresses that during this time her understanding of the *Quran* comes to her rescue. She quotes from the *Quran* and *Hadith* regarding the rights and duties of the husband and wife in a marriage. She states that Islam provides many rights to women, which have not been interpreted correctly by the *Maulvis*[25] or *Ulemas,* who want to maintain the patriarchal status quo. She regularly writes on Islamic feminism and gender issues, and participates in TV debates on issues pertaining to the rights of Muslim women.

Religion, for Shazia, falls in her personal sphere. It is her direct relationship with Allah, and the values that the Prophet stood for, to be a good human being, and that sums up piety for her. Veiling for her has to be an individual's choice, and not forced. She herself does not wear a *burka*.

The three women who have been discussed in this section are well educated and empowered women who have reinterpreted the norms and the text based on the practicalities of life. Their sense of agency has been demonstrated in their desire to pursue their self-defined life goals, while upholding their religious learning, and to an extent, reinforcing those teachings in their day to day lives. As all of them said, Islam teaches them to be honest and empathetic human beings, and extend help in whatever way they can, to fellow human beings. However, their expression of piety is different. Juri celebrates her religion by internalising values of hard work and idealizes Muslim women like *Khadija* (Prophet Muhammad's first wife) who was a business woman, a divorcee, and married the Prophet who was fifteen years younger than she was. For Aarti and Shazia, religion again is a private matter. Both of them personally do not engage in religious symbolism such as wearing a *burka,* and instead, believe in direct connection with Allah. The knowledge of Islamic texts and norms also helps them in their activism, in reinterpreting them in a gender-neutral way.

[25] *Maulvi* is a learned teacher or doctor of Islamic law (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/*Maulvi*)

Relationship with Religion: Surrender, Negotiate or Reinterpret Religion, or All this and More

The interviews with women of diverse educational and employment background reveals much about the relationship that these women have with Islam. It is a religion that encompasses every aspect of the believers' lives. However, there is a distinction between religion as a relationship with the divine, and as a set of rules that are interpreted and negotiated in social settings, where situational and contextual considerations come to bear on the interpretations and beliefs (Ismail, 2001). How one is situated in the class structure does play a significant role in how the norms and piety practices are interpreted. Many upper middle-class women placed more faith in formal religious authorities. Most of the interviewees were attached to some formal faith-based organization. The women falling within the lower income group, and living in lower income neighbourhoods, used their conditions of life and the practicality of living a life with limited resources, to resolve conflicts. They used their sense of justice which was always substantiated with justifications of divine intentions. However, while this was the general trend seen across the classes, the personal life situation of the women was also vital in shaping the relationship of women with their religion. As in the case of Farida, piety means regular prayer, even when she is at work. At the time of the interview too, we were in a café, a public place, but she excused herself for 5-7 minutes to say her evening prayer. She has a compass application on her mobile phone that tells her the direction of *Qibla*. According to her, her belief and complete surrender to Allah have increased over the years. She is the only earning member of her family, supporting two sisters and her brother's two children. She misses having a life partner, and has no emotional support. She feels that she has to stay strong for her family, and hence, the only solace and peace she receives is from complete surrender to *Allah*, who she feels is testing her. Farida gets her strength from her prayers.

Juri on the other hand has seen a different trajectory with her belief in religion. Until her years in college, she used to be regular with her prayers at least thrice a day and read the *Quran*. She states that when she thinks about her belief system during her childhood, when she was regular with her prayers and *Quran* classes, it probably made things easier for her in the long run. She could negotiate for bigger things, like changing her school after senior secondary, or getting admission in architecture school. However, her transition started in pre-university days. She now feels that as long as one is honest and true to oneself and finds peace within, that is enough. Religion is something very personal for her. She does not pray any more. As an individual she feels that she does not want to depend on anyone emotionally or financially. Hence, dependence on Allah to fulfil her ambitions, needs and desires, are not what religion means to her. She now questions many things that she finds have not been correctly interpreted in Islam. She spoke about the concept of the veil, which according to her, was meant to be a partition to separate the public and private quarters of the Prophet's household. The Prophet used to have meetings with his tribesmen in separate quarters of his household. The men, according to Juri, were supposed to be behind the veil, so that women of the house could move around freely. According to her, this has been wrongly interpreted and, in this day and age, women have been put behind the veil.

The above cases reveal a pattern of how women from various sections of society negotiate with their faith in their daily lives. The key to these different ways of practicing piety lies in the fact that

women are able to negotiate, redraw and push their boundaries in ways that make it easier for them to balance their faith and their practical lives. This is also where Butler's notion of agency comes into play. It is in the reiteration of norms where a breakthrough lies in terms of the resignification of the norm. Some norms are, therefore, classified as neither *wajib* (obligatory) nor *mustahabb* (recommended) nor Sunna (tradition of the Prophet) (Mahmood, 2005: 85).

The idea of absolute autonomy of an individual is an elusive concept. An individual's autonomy always actualizes itself in relation to a community and her/his position in it (class, caste etc.), and it is always in tension with the norms stated by the community. It is through religious beliefs and their consequent practice that women identify themselves as pious. Instead of challenging these beliefs, women are performing them. Their agency lies in how these women interpret, adapt to these norms, and perform them repetitively. Their selfhood is actualized or modelled on these norms. Mahmood (2005) talks of two types of agencies: one is where the power equation in the society is questioned, and there is resistance and questioning of norms that suppress women. The other kind of agency is where the processes that subordinate women are also the processes that help in the self-actualization of their agency. And this is what one can see among the respondents, most of whom identify themselves as practicing Muslim women. From the feminists' point of view, these women are yielding to structures that are ensuring their subordination. They are supporting and also strengthening norms that are causing their subjugation. However, these are the same women who are re-signifying the norms by using their agency to work towards the attainment of piety. Agency does not always mean resistance. It could also mean individual autonomy to choose one's desire, regardless of the content of that desire.

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