

Processing self: negotiating the tensions of Muslim womanhood through art-making in  
South Africa

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April 2022

## **Declaration**

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own right, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date: April 2022

**Abstract**

This thesis investigates processing the sociocultural complexities of being a South African Muslim woman, both locally and globally. The labyrinth of being a Muslim woman lends itself to questioning my Muslim identity in relation to the Middle East, and as a South African Muslim woman, how themes like gender, materiality, intertextuality, and my personal experiences influence my art practice. In my thesis, I use auto ethnography as a self-reflexive research method in the form of journal entries to motivate my artwork. These personal narratives inform a practice-led material inquiry into ritual and heirloom objects for me to better understand my faith.

**Opsomming**

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die verwerking van die sosiokulturele kompleksiteite van 'n Suid-Afrikaanse Moslem-vrou, plaaslik en wêreldwyd. Die veelvlakkigheid daarvan om 'n Moslem-vrou te wees, leen hom daartoe om my Moslem-identiteit met betrekking tot die Midde-Ooste te bevraagteken, en as 'n Suid-Afrikaanse Moslem-vrou, hoe temas soos geslag, materialiteit, intertekstualiteit, en my persoonlike ervarings my kunspraktik beïnvloed. My tesis gebruik outo-etnografie as 'n selfreflektiewe navorsingsmetode in die vorm van dagboekinskrywings om my kuns te motiveer. Hierdie persoonlike narratiewe vorm die grondslag vir 'n praktykgeleide materiële ondersoek na rituele en erfenisitems sodat ek my geloof beter kan verstaan.

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Bismielah-hie-ragh-maa-nie-ragheem

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## INTRODUCTION

Intertextuality stands at the centre of contemporary conceptions of art and cultural production generally. As Barthes reminds us, the word 'text' is, if we remember its original meanings, 'a tissue, a woven fabric' (Barthes 1977a: 159 cited in Allen 2000:6). The idea of the text, and thus of intertextuality, depends, as Barthes argues, on the figure of the web, the weave, the garment (text) woven from the threads of the 'already written' and the 'already read'. Every text has its meaning, therefore, in relation to other texts (Allen 2000:6).

## PERSONAL BACKGROUND

### **Where it started: becoming an artist and a Muslim woman.**

At the age of five, sitting on the mat in art class, I was introduced to powder paint, and I felt a deep connection to art making. I cannot describe the feeling, but it has stayed with me ever since. In grade nine (at the age of 13) 9/11 happened. My peers began to ask me questions about being Muslim. My school uniform dress was longer than the other female students - more than five centimetres below my knees - unlike my peers' uniform dresses which were well above their knees. For this reason, I was easily spotted as the Muslim girl. I was the only Muslim in my grade throughout High School.

I was constantly asked questions about my faith - why I dress differently, why I did not drink alcohol, why I do not eat pork, why my dress code is modest and why did I not go clubbing on the weekends. Questions questioning Islam became a regular conversation. I realised then that I was representing my faith, and because of 9/11, my actions and beliefs came under scrutiny.

After completing Matric, I studied Surface Design at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (2006). I was 17 years old. I struggled. I failed my first year and my second year because of personal reasons and battled with my theoretical subjects.

It was in my third year at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, standing in front of Zeenatul Islam Mosque in Cape Town, when I asked myself, am I an artist? What is a Muslim artist? And how do I make Muslim art? I began researching Muslim artists and came across Iranian visual artist Shirin Neshat, Cape Town visual artist Igshaan Adams, and South African playwright Nadia Davids, all of whom explore Muslim female identity. I realised that I could do the same.

As my personal narrative above shows, 9/11 played a major role in the stigmatisation of Muslim women, globally and locally. In 2002, a year after 9/11, South African playwright Nadia Davids solo play *At Her Feet*, foregrounded:

... various responses to 9/11 and to cultural systems as expressed in different parts in the world. The play is powerfully written, evocative on many levels, and very effective as a staged solo piece (Blumberg 2011:21).

9/11 was the catalyst that scrutinised Muslim women's identity today. Davids's play focuses on gender which:

... allows her to explore fully the wariness, competitiveness, racial contempt, class differences and consumerism that can divide Muslim women, and it also elicits the empathy and humour of the play's characters (Baderoon 2014:140).

*At Her Feet* (2002) challenged the 'stereotypical and reductive representations of Muslims; (Blumberg 2011:22). Leila Davids, Nadia's sister, states:

A limitation to the general literature on Islam in South Africa is the ignorance surrounding the roles and life experiences of Muslim women (2004:5).

As a South African Muslim woman, I assert myself as a multi-disciplinary fine artist to gain a deeper understanding of Islam. As a South African woman, my experiences in Saudi Arabia on pilgrimage highlights Muslim women's response to and the consequences of patriarchy and power both in Saudi Arabia and South Africa. However, in Davids' play, the vulnerability of Muslim women is portrayed through shared experiences that inform a relatable sociocultural

understanding of South Africa and globally. I draw on this and other Muslim's women's experiences and art to produce this master's project.

One of the most contentious topics concerning Muslim women is the politics of the *hijab*. In this thesis, I refer to the *hijab* as a headscarf. In challenging historical and modern stereotypes, Dr Katherine Bullock states that:

The aim is to challenge the popular Western stereotype that the veil is oppressive. My main argument is that the popular Western notion that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression is a constructed image that does not represent the experience of all those who wear it (2002:xv).

Post 9/11 Western Muslim women are reclaiming the *hijab*. The resistance and struggle of wearing the *hijab* is currently ongoing in France:

Muslim women who wear the hijab have always been on the receiving end of Islamophobia for their visible identity, Nazma Khan, the founder of World Hijab Day, told TIME. "Simply put, the proposed hijab ban is a systematic vilification and discrimination against Muslim women in hijab" (Lang:2021).

My aim is not to explore or investigate Islamophobia, but I am aware of it and I have had experiences of it that have shaped my understanding of my own identity. As a Muslim woman, I do not condone the ban on wearing the *hijab* in France, and I appreciate that, as a South African woman, I am in the privileged position to express my religion.

Despite different ideological structures and contexts, both France and Iran impose laws and regulations that reduce many Muslim women's capacity for agency and self-expression in the public sphere. We identify certain parallels in how seemingly disparate cultural and national political discourses in these two contexts instrumentalise images of Muslim women for specific ideological agendas (Hoel & Shaikh 2007:111).

As a South African Muslim artist, I mention how Islam influences my art practice. Since my thesis explores the dichotomy of being a Muslim woman in South Africa and Saudi Arabia, the following explores my personal family history.

**Where it comes from: some family histories**

Sitting in my bed, I reach for the laptop. Touching the cool surface, I lift open the screen and notice a shadow fall on my right hand. To my surprise, I hear my mother’s voice say, “Here, this is for you.” She places a discoloured archival newspaper onto the keyboard. As I pick up the newspaper, I instantly recognise my oupa in the picture. The Cape Times, Friday, November 28, 1986, article reads ‘Court orders on Mosques: Muslim community “in crisis”’ by Roger Williams.

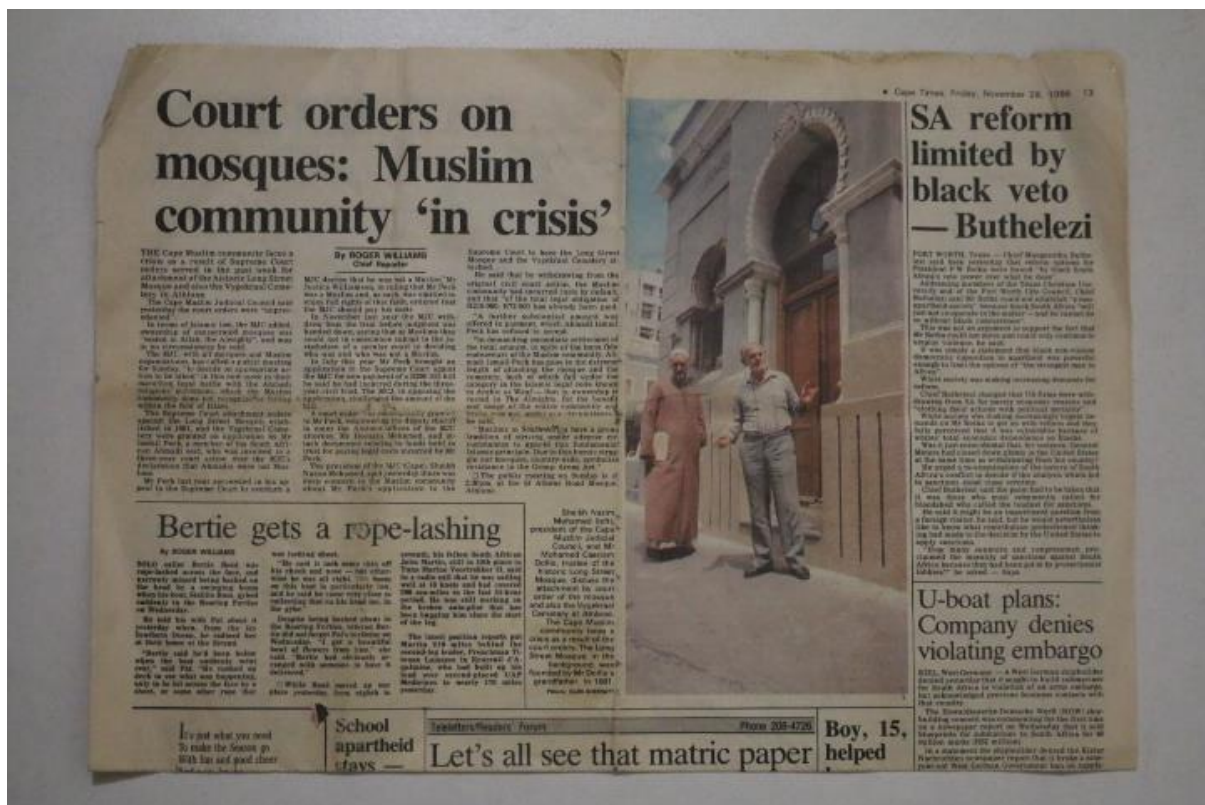


Figure 1: Rushda Deaney, *Muslim community in Crisis*. 2021.

What really catches my attention, other than my oupa, is the small caption next to the photo, which reads, ‘the Long Street Mosque, in the background, was founded by Mr Dollie’s grandfather, in 1881’. I pause. Shocked. My oupa’s grandfather in 1881? This information is a personal link that connects my family to the ‘Muslims’ role in shaping the country’s history

and culture' (Baderoon 2014:5), and I'm interested in following it up, because my own work deals intimately with Muslim identity and culture.

I must point out that from the outset my aim is not to rewrite the place of Muslims in Cape Town, South Africa, but to rethink my position in it, as a woman and an artist.

Hours after following up on this story on the internet, I am frustrated, and think of giving up. I stare at the discoloured 35-year old newspaper clipping. The two and a half years of researching for this thesis has taught me that I need to identify keywords to get the information I need and approach challenges with an 'I can do this' attitude. So, I continue. Hours later, feeling almost defeated, I discover a book titled *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology* (2013) by Roman Loimeier. It is 385 pages long, and I do not have the time to read every single page, but by using the search option in Adobe Acrobat Reader, I type the year 1881, and lo and behold there is a sentence that includes my oupa's name and 1881:

In 1881, the small Hanafi Muslim community, led by Abdol Rakiep, Mohammad Dollie, and Jogie Siers, established the Buitengracht Hanafee mosque and thus separated from the (Shafi) Nur al-Islam Mosque in Buitengracht (Loimeier 2013: 256).

Proud of myself for persisting, I realise that this quote identifies my great-great-grandfather Mohammad Dollie as a member of the iconic Noor el-Hamedia Mosque in Long Street, Cape Town. Upon further investigation, it is revealed that Noor el-Hamedia Mosque has a Turkish connection.

The further I research the name *Mohammad Dollie* on the internet, the more curious I become. *IlmFeed.com*, launched in March 2014, is a popular UK-based website dedicated to publishing inspirational and informative articles about Muslims and Islam. *IlmFeed.com* focuses on articles about Islamic history, Muslim personalities, mosques around the world, and inspirational stories about Muslims. The article on this website about my oupa's grandfather is titled *Hadji Mohammad Dollie - The man who founded London's first 'Mosque'*

by Abdul Maalik Tailor (2018). My initial reaction was, *another mosque, but in London?* What is the connection between my great-great grandfather's activities in London and Cape Town?

The article provides the answers:

Hadji Mohammad Dollie was the son of a Scottish father and a Malay mother born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1846. He opened the first "Hanafi" Mosque in Cape Town along with a Dutch convert to Islam in the 1880s. He arrived in London around 1895 and took up residency in Albert Street, along with his two sons as it was difficult for them to study in South Africa at the time. Dollie had been asked by the Muslim community of London who perhaps numbered 200-300, to teach their children Qur'an since he was a hafiz (someone who had memorised the whole Qur'an). He agreed, and from then onwards, he decided to turn his drawing room into a mosque (Tailor 2018).

Fascinated and bemused, I notice an oddly familiar photograph. I call my sister and she asks, "Why does he look familiar?" I call my mother and she says, "Yes, your granny had this photo on her dressing table tucked under the glass, your uncle asked to borrow the photo and I have not gotten it back from him."



Figure 2: *Hadji Muhammad Dollie* (ilmfeed.com).

After reading the article, I get a sense of the kind of person he was. Half an hour later, I begin reading another article written about him titled *A glimpse of Victorian Muslim London: The Ottoman Archives* by Yahya Birt (February 2020) from the website *medium.com*.<sup>1</sup> The first paragraph of this article reads:

Here is a letter, written in November 1899 by Hajji Mohammed Doulie (1846-1906, also known as Dollie) who established London's first attested mosque in December 1895, to the caliph-sultan Abdul Hamid II. Originally from Cape Town, Doulie, a hafiz of the Quran, was a student of the Ottoman scholar Abu Bakr Effendi (1814-80) who had been sent by the Ottoman court to the Cape to teach Islam at the request of Buckingham Palace. Already well-established community activist who had founded two mosques in South Africa, Doulie came to Liverpool

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<sup>1</sup> Medium.com is an open platform for writers, journalists, experts and individuals with unique perspectives to share their thinking.

in 1893 ostensibly to educate his children at Quilliam's Islamic college (where his son Omar excelled), but then relocated to London sometime in 1895. He quickly took up a leadership role in the capital becoming vice –president of the pan-Islamist Anjuman-i-Islamia and became a regular London correspondent for The Crescent. His two sons then pursued medicine, and his two daughter's music. He converted a room in his London home to a mosque that was first opened at the end of 1895 at 97 Albert Street in Camden; later the mosque moved to 189 Euston Road. It remained a temporary mosque; plans to build a purpose built-mosque modelled on Hamidie Masjied in Cape Town never came to fruition (Birt 2020).

I am a bit confused, did I just read Doulie and not Dollie? Dollie is my mother's maiden surname, so where does Doulie come from? The more I think about this, the clearer it becomes. More than eight years ago, when my grandmother was alive, we would talk about her life. One of the topics she brought up was that our surname Dollie was changed from a name that sounded similar but was spelt differently. I fondly remember how she raised her arms with a look on her face (pulling her tongue out) saying "Allah (God) knows best." This article confirms her story.

Figure 3 is the beautiful letter that my oupa's grandfather sent to the caliph-sultan Abdul Hamid II. It highlights his passion for education and dedication to grow the Muslim community in London by acquiring resources to build a mosque.



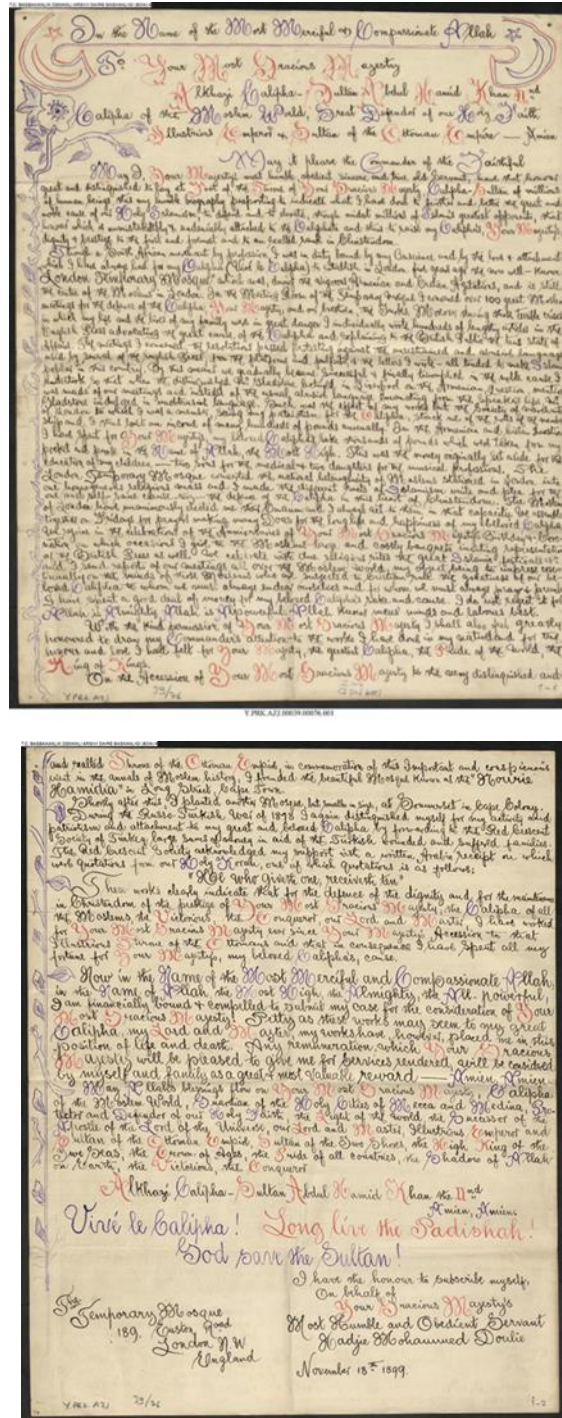


Figure 3: Hadji Mohammed Doulie's ornate letter to caliph-sultan Abdul Hamid II, 18 November 1899, Ottoman Archives BOA Y.PRK.AZJ.00039.00076.001, Courtesy of Dr Halim Gencoglu, University of Cape Town (medium.com).

Because of the 1986 Cape Times newspaper article, I am able to research my family's history which shows signs of the 'complexity of the place of Islam in South Africa' (Baderoon 2014:9). I discuss the complexity of being a Muslim woman in Part three: My Madinah and Makkah

Experience. Although my personal history is important to situate myself as a South African Muslim, it is also important to navigate the connections between slavery and Islam in South Africa to understand my legacy as a Muslim woman. South African author, Gabeba Baderoon, explores how Muslims fit into South Africa in her book *Regarding Muslims from slavery to post-apartheid* (2014):

Slavery and Islam are intricately connected in South Africa. Muslims first arrived in the Cape Colony in 1658 as slaves and free servants of the Dutch, only six years after the Colony's founding. This makes slavery and the arrival of Muslims coterminous with the beginning of colonial settlement in South Africa. However, slavery is not just the temporal starting point for this study. The historian Nigel Worden points out that slavery shaped all social relations in the Cape Colony and its hinterland; for significant periods between 1658 and emancipation in 1834, slaves in fact formed the majority of the population of the Cape Colony (Worden 1985:4; Dooling 2007:7 cited in Baderoon 2001:7-8). Islam arrived in South Africa in the context of colonial settlement and slavery. In 1652, the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Ostindische Compagnie or VOC) established a refuelling station at the Cape to serve a trade in spices from Asia (2001:8).

The personal connection between slavery and Islam for me, are my ancestors. My oupa's grandfather, Hadji Muhammed Doulie played a pivotal role in establishing Islam in Cape Town.

A few days ago, my mother was restocking and cleaning her spice drawer. The smell of turmeric, masala, *jiera* (cumin seed), and *koljana* (coriander) hung heavy in the air. I approached my mother and asked, "Do you know where this comes from?" Shaking her head and looking confused, I then told her, "From our ancestors". She replied "You know what? You are right, without the slaves arriving at our shores bringing along the spices we would not have such flavoured curries."

The spices used in the Cape Malay dishes are also attached to memories I have of my grandfather. I would accompany him to Fargo Trading CO spice shop in Salt River, Cape Town.

The smell of various spices was overwhelming. I would stand aside and try to identify the smell of any particular spice I could recognise, while watching my grandfather purchase spices from the list my granny gave him. Back then some of the spices were poured into wooden cabinets with glass surfaces and the sales-woman would scoop out the spice and weigh it on an old-fashioned scale.

Cape Malay food is associated with traditions like *doekmal* (a Cape Malay baby's naming ceremony), weddings, *ghadats* also known as *thikr* (remembrance of Allah) and even *janaazahs* (funerals). Cape Malay food is an integral and important part of my South African identity and culture. The spice trade and cooking with the spices connects my South African history to my Muslim identity and my memories/personal experiences.

While my work does not directly deal with food or spices, the central importance of cuisine is explored by Berni Searle, a South African artist based in Cape Town, who explores narratives that connects history, identity, place and memory. In her installation *Colour Me* (1999) series, she 'focuses on food as an important element of history and representation of slavery' (Baderoon 2014:46).

The trade in spices between Asia and Europe was the reason for the establishment of the Cape along the same routes as spices. Therefore the nutmeg, pepper, chilli and turmeric in *Colour Me* series index a brutal history. The installation invokes vertiginous shifts of scale: the connection of domesticity with global histories of exploitation, and one body with thousands of others (Baderoon 2014:44).

My mother (born in the Bo-Kaap) is very particular about where she buys her spices. One of the spice shops she frequents is the Atlas Trading Company in Bo-Kaap particularly because of her memories of the Cape Malay culture. I explore the term *Malay* via Baderoon's definition:

Islam and slavery were so intimately connected in this period that the word 'Malay,' which refers to the lingua franca of Bahasa Melayu spoken by enslaved people at the Cape, who had come from different territories around the Indian Ocean, became the word for 'Muslim' at the Cape. Because of this history, slavery remains central to the meanings that Islam holds even in contemporary South Africa (Baderoon 2001:9).

Why do I not call myself a Cape Malay Muslim? I approach my mother with this question in the hope that she has the answers as she is my connection to the past, but she just shrugs her shoulders and walks away. These are important questions to address and explore as it forms part of my identity formation. Baderoon mentions a vital aspect of the standing of early Muslims in the Cape:

Muslims brought to the Cape were leaders exiled from South-east Asia, where their role in driving resistance had proved an obstacle to Dutch trade and colonial expansion. Among these leaders was Sheikh Yusuf, who arrived in the Cape in 1694. Exiles such as Sheikh Yusuf were isolated in remote areas outside Cape Town to reduce the risk of their influencing Muslim slaves (Baderoon 2014:9).

Easter Weekend is an important Cape tradition. Although this is a Christian public holiday marking the resurrection of Jesus Christ, South African Muslims also come together from all parts of Cape Town to celebrate the history of Sheikh Yusuf. It is a tradition that some Muslim families set up tents (at a fee) and stay over at Macassar (a small town close to Strand and Somerset West) or as I grew up calling it, the *Kramat*. I have fond memories of this event. The last time we followed this tradition as a family was when I was in primary school, but it was cut short due to rainy weather and the flooding of our family-sized tent. This festival was an occasion including local markets and family entertainment, one could call it a celebration of Muslim history. But there was nonetheless a seriousness to it. The local mosque on the premises showcases educational talks about the history of Sheikh Yusuf and *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah). My mother has many memories of visiting the Sheikh Yusuf *Kramat* as a child and to this day she is friends with the people who live there.

The *Kramat* is a historical shrine that is:

A significant indication of how Shaykh Yusuf had been adopted as a symbol of Muslim presence in the country and Islamic resistance to colonialism and apartheid (1999:23) (Baderoon 2014:10).

The *Kramat* represents the history of slavery in the Cape, while the Noor el-Hamedia Mosque is a personal and historical landmark for Islamic education.



Figure 4: Rushda Deaney, *Noor el-Hamedia Mosque, Cape Town, 2018*.

My encounter with Noor el-Hamedia Mosque has been limited. A few years ago, while walking with friends in Long Street, I took a photo of the mosque not knowing my deep ancestral knowledge of it. But there is more. I admit that walking or driving past Noor el-Hamedia Mosque for most of my life, I never knew the significance the mosque held for my family's history. I have not yet entered the mosque, although I hope to walk through the space to which both my oupa's grandfather and my oupa had such a close connection. My parents had their *Nikah* (a religious ceremony for a Muslim couple to be legally wed under Islamic law) there 38 years ago.

South Africa and apartheid go hand in hand. One cannot research the history of South Africa without reading about apartheid which operated from 1948 to 1994. Born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1988, the first six years of my life was under the apartheid regime. I vaguely

remember staring at the television in the comfort of my home watching a crowd of people gather on the grand parade in Cape Town, not realising its historical reference. After learning about Apartheid, I tried having conversations with my parents about their personal experiences during Apartheid. They told me they were characterised as mixed race (coloured).

The definition of a 'coloured' in the population register is someone that is not black, and that is not white, and is also not Indian, in other words a non-person... they are the left-overs (Blumberg 2011:22).

My parent's definition of Apartheid is racial segregation, by separating the people according to the colour of their skin. Baderoon adds that:

Abdulkader Tayob points out that race significantly shapes the experience of being Muslim in South Africa. Islam is frequently assumed to supersede the influence of class, language, ethnicity, and history - as though Muslims are somehow exempted from such factors. Erasing attention to specificity and variation among Muslims creates the erroneous perception of a singular Muslim community. Instead, as Tayob notes, 'Muslims in the various racial categories of apartheid South Africa experience Islam in very different ways' (2002:20; Bangstad 2007 cited in Baderoon 2014:17).

Apartheid also meant dislocation and forced removals. My mother moved from Bo-Kaap to Woodstock and my father moved from Claremont to Manenberg to Retreat, revealing the extent to which 'coloured' people's lives were affected by forced removals:

The Group Areas Act created 'group areas,' controlled the acquisition of property, and regulated the occupation of land and premises (Brown 2000:201).

My understanding of apartheid comes from my listening to my parent's memories of it. My father mentions to me that because apartheid made them move home a lot, and often their relocation was not suitable for a family of ten, who had to make do with a two-bedroom flat. The flat in Manenberg is mostly spoken about. As the story goes, my father and his brother

had to convert the lounge/dining room into a bedroom for five boys every night. Today, whenever we drive past Manenberg he points to the flat where he used to stay.

In Part three: My Madinah and Makah experience, I discuss being racially profiled in Stellenbosch in relation to experiencing gender apartheid in Saudi Arabia. I am not suggesting that the apartheid experienced in South Africa is the same as gender apartheid in Saudi Arabia, but I argue that my experience of this kind of separating of people has been in my religion, where I have experienced gender apartheid – specifically in Saudi Arabia, in Makkah. In short, my journey departed from my personal experiences as a South African Muslim woman when visiting the Middle East in 2018 and 2019.

### **The wider Muslim story and my place in it:**

In Islam it is one of the five principles<sup>2</sup> and compulsory for all Muslims to perform Hajj in Makkah which is situated in Saudi Arabia at least once in their lifetime. However Muslims can perform Umrah at any time of the year and it is not compulsory.

As a practicing Muslim woman when I arrived in Saudi Arabia, I experienced a culture shock. Growing up embodying the Sunni<sup>3</sup> branch of Islam, within a secular environment, I struggled to grasp the restrictions and limits women have.

Saudi Arabia is considered one of the most conservative and orthodox Muslim societies in the world. In fact, Saudi Arabia is the only Arab theocratic country where Islam is greatly intertwined with the government (Mustafa & Troudi 2019:133).

For example, at home in Cape Town, South Africa, I can walk out of the front door with no hijab on and wear revealing clothes (if I desire to). But in Makkah the moment, I step out of my hotel room I must wear a hijab and a long sleeved knee length dress. I realise that being a

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<sup>2</sup> In Islam there are five core beliefs and practices in Islam that is compulsory for all Muslims namely: the profession of Faith (the shahada). The belief that "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God" is central to Islam, prayer (salah five times a day), alms (zakat, if you are within the means to), fasting (in the month of Ramadaan) and pilgrimage (hajj, if you are within the means to).

<sup>3</sup> Sunni is one of the two branches in Islam. Sunni's believe the redemption of human beings is dependent on faith in Allah, the belief of the prophets, acceptance of Muhammad as the final prophet, and the belief in righteous deeds as explained in the Quran.



South African Muslim woman in Saudi Arabia differs because it is ruled by a monarchy and is governed by Islamic law (*Wahhabism*).

Wahhabism is understood in two different ways. The first is usually pejorative, often intended as a slur. In that sense, Beydoun (2011) defined Wahhabism as a 'textual interpretation hallmarked by its intolerance for other Islamic traditions and modernity' (p. 81). This definition of Wahhabism perpetuates the prevalent paradigms in the literature on Saudi Arabia being essentialist/social structuralist. This paradigm is represented mostly by governmental and masculine positions that see biology (being born a woman) and social structure (women's status and roles in Saudi Arabia) as the basis for their identity (Mustafa & Troudi 2019:134).

It is with this understanding that gender apartheid is built into Saudi Arabia's governmental and social structures as their interpretation of Islam 'is derived from a literal reading of the Koran and Sunna' (Mustafa & Troudi 2019:139). However in the Quran, the fourth chapter titled An-Nisa references the importance of women in Islam. Yet in Makkah, I was treated poorly in public spaces.

This means that for Saudi women:

Societal practices institutionalise negative discrimination concerning women, often codified in laws that prohibit women from participating in much of public life or fully competing in the labour market ... The patriarchal belt is characterised by extremely restrictive codes of behaviour for women, such as the practice of rigid gender segregation and a powerful ideology linking family honour to female virtue. Men are entrusted with safeguarding family honour through their control over female members; they are backed by complex social arrangements that ensure the protection, restriction, and dependence of women (Littrel & Bertsch, 2013, p. 313 cited in Mustafa & Troudi 2019:135).

As a South African Muslim woman who has the freedom to gain an education, to wear the hijab freely without political repercussions. In Part Two: Crossing Borders: My Egypt and



Palestine Experience, I refer to my experiences in terms of gender/patriarchy, gendered spaces, and exploring the *hijab* as a source of material inquiry.

### **MOTIVATION: PERSONAL WORLD, PRIVATE FEELINGS**

The research for the thesis covers my personal experiences as a Muslim South African woman, which primarily motivates and frames my artistic practice. It is impossible to separate journaling from my art practice, so journaling plays a very central role in this written component of my research. At the core of his book *Art as Experience* (1934), John Dewey provides a link between materiality, experience, and knowledge. He states,

A conception of fine art that sets out from its connection with discovered qualities of ordinary experience will be able to indicate the factors and forces that favour the normal development of common human activities into matters of artistic value (Dewey 1980:11 cited in Barrett 2007:118).

The knowledge gained from my personal experiences filters into my artwork through creative practices. These processes of artistic enquiry can be linked to what Dewey describes as:

... the flow of experience that runs its course to closure or fulfilment through processes of adjustment to our environment and objects in the world. In artistic experience, as in everyday experience, 'action, feeling and meaning are one' (Dewey 1980: 35 cited in Barrett 2007:118).

Making art is deeply personal for me. It is a self-reflexive activity that translates meaning and value into artistic practice. As a South African multi-disciplinary artist, my research is initiated by my personal experiences through journaling. Journaling is not a day-to-day entry for me, but rather a practice I reach out to when I feel the need. For me, the purpose of journaling is to gain a better understanding of myself and to connect who I am with what I do. Joanne E. Cooper states that, 'writing in the journal can help us understand both who we are and what we are doing with our lives' (2013:40). For me, it is a complex, personal and private dialogue I have with myself, like a sort of meditation.

For this thesis, I include my private journal entries which is my personal narrative of being a South African Muslim female multi-disciplinary artist. The personal nature of my research practice weaves through the thesis in the form of private journal entries that consists of three parts exploring my Muslim identity, with added academic exploration of the themes of gender, intertextuality, and materiality. Each part is introduced by private journal entries that contain hidden themes with a supporting theoretical framework that warps and wefts under, over, and through the private journal entries, echoing the theme of weaving in my practice. The relationship between my personal journal entries creates tension that guides the components of the theoretical framework to weave into one another to create a rich tapestry.

### **AIM**

My aim is not to rebel against my Islamic faith, but to motivate, discuss, describe, investigate, and explore the multi-layered, conflicting, restricting complexities of being a Muslim woman to create my own sustainable path that balances my faith and art practice.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

In relation to the Middle East and as a South African Muslim woman, how do themes like gender, materiality, intertextuality, and my personal experiences influence my art practice?

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

My research objective is to explore my Muslim heritage as a woman through an engagement with Muslim ritual objects and practices, and through journaling.

I investigate the materiality of the objects to get a sense of their material qualities to better understand Islam and interpret what it means to be a Muslim woman.

My research is a practice-led material inquiry, which can be described as follows.

Knowledge also resides in the artefacts themselves, in their form and materials. Some of this knowledge is also inherent in the process of manufacturing the artefacts. This knowledge can be gained through making and reflecting upon the making of these artefacts (Cross 2001:54-55 cited in Farber & Mäkelä 2010: 12).

During the process of making, I explore Islamic objects' materiality. This reflective research process is a 'relationship of praxis, that is practice-following theory following practice' (Farber & Mäkelä 2010: 14). This kind of experiential and tacit knowledge occurs in different stages of my making process.

This approach has been used by those qualitative researchers that agree upon the contextual nature of research (and all understanding), and who acknowledge its situatedness and time-relatedness (see, for example, Ellis & Bochner 2000). The idea of situatedness, or emphasis on personal experience, is also a basis of the feminist epistemology, as evinced in the first-generation feminist mantra 'the personal is political'. This epistemology has challenged and deeply influenced the comprehension of knowledge production in the field of contemporary research (Farber & Mäkelä 2010: 13).

One such material investigation is through an exploration of my personal prayer mats. In general the significance of prayer mats are used exclusively for religious or spiritual purposes. As a visual artist and art practice, I unravel my prayer mat to resolve, contemplate, and provide a more holistic personal interpretation of Islam.

Niedderer (2009:65) believes that the artefacts do not contain knowledge within themselves but provide data from which to build knowledge (Farber & Mäkelä 2010: 14).

The information I gather while unravelling my prayer mat are my thoughts written down in my journal. These thoughts include questions about the structure of the threads and what do I do with the unravelled threads. As I am unravelling the prayer mat, I am in a state of meditation which helps me resolve personal problems which I choose not to discuss in this thesis about. By loosening the threads in a continuous repetitive action I think about my mental wellbeing and navigate how I feel while unravelling. Learning about myself in such a practical manner provides ideas from which to build knowledge from.

Discovery starts from one's lived experience and personal reactions. Learning takes place through action and intentional, explicit reflection on that action. This

approach acknowledges that we cannot separate knowledge to be learned from situations and experiences in which it is used. Situated enquiry or learning demonstrates a unity between problem, context and solution. A general feature of practice-led based research is that personal interest and experience, rather than objective 'disinterestedness' motivates the research process (Barrett 2007:123).

My lived experiences motivates my research into art making. Creating an artwork based off a lived experience does not mean that I resolved the problem or created a solution. The reward is not the final artwork but rather the enquiry into the context and understanding the lived experiences is. I therefore conduct an interdisciplinary research which adds authenticity in my art practice to create my 'own' knowledge.

The ... issue is ... about the self-reflective and self-critical processes of a person taking part in the production of meaning within contemporary art, and in such a fashion that it communicates where it is coming from, where it stands at this precise moment, and where it wants to go (Hannula et al 2005:10 cited in Farber & Mäkelä 2010: 15).

My objective while making art is clear, I let the artwork communicate to me. This is a self-critical process, an important aspect, I consider while making art. This manner of processing allows me to broaden my understandings of the context within the artwork in relation to 'where it wants to go' (Hannula et al 2005:10 cited in Farber & Mäkelä 2010: 15). Popoveniuc discusses self-reflexivity as follows:

As a method or theory characteristic in social sciences, reflexivity implies 'taking account of itself or of the effect of the personality or presence of the researcher on what is being investigated' (Hobson, 2004, p. 364). The reflexive means the object reflects the qualities of the subject or the subject is reflected in or by the object (2014:205).

Because I am the subject, I scrutinise myself. As the researcher, my interaction and reaction is always observed and reflected upon. This micro introspection of reflexivity is 'a self-

awareness of the relationship between the investigator and the research environment' (Lamb & Huttingler, 1989, p.766). Popoveniuc elaborates that:

In relation to the researcher, (self-) reflexivity denotes both self-reflection and introspection: the fact that the author, when he/she think or study is aware about he/she existence and influence on the object, about its own subjectivity (2014:205).

My thesis and art practice involves deep cogitation of processing and my individual interpretation of Islam as a means to negate the gender tensions of being a South African Muslim woman in Saudi Arabia.

In this regard, the *hijab* is a deeply personal journey for me, and I can only speak of my personal experience of wearing it (I discuss this further in Part 2: Crossing Borders: My Egypt and Palestine Experience). I am aware that I am addressing gender, but that does not make me an Islamic feminist. Rather I engage the restrictions flowing from my religion and gender as a challenge. Being a Muslim woman has definite restrictions, such as being forbidden from travelling overseas alone. Because I am a Muslim woman, I need a male companion (either a husband or father or brother). Regarding gender and Islam:

What is or is not unique, specific, or intrinsic to Islam with respect to ideas about women and gender has already, then, become a complicated question. It is also clear that conceptions, assumptions, and social customs and institutions relating to women and to the social meaning of gender that derived from the traditions in place in the Middle East as the time of Islamic conquests entered into and helped shape the very foundations of Islamic concepts and social practices as they developed during the first centuries of Islam. All these facts emphasize the importance of considering Islamic formulations of gender in relation to the changing codes and practices in the broader Middle East (Ahmed 1992:5).

This quote, and my own experiences, show that gender in Islamic practice differs from country to country. In this thesis, I investigate gendered spaces that I experienced in the Middle East, specifically in Saudi Arabia. To separate from or to be singled out of an environment because

I am a woman confused me. Therefore, I aim to process my position as a multi-disciplinary fine artist to incorporate the 'feeling' of being a Muslim woman, without necessarily resisting it, but by coming to terms with it.

In December 2018, I travelled to Egypt with my sister to meet my brother and the rest of the travel group. It was my first international travelling experience. When we arrived at two o'clock in the morning at the Cleopatra Hotel in Al-Minya, I immediately went to sleep only to be woken up by the Fajr athaan (morning prayer). I thought of the novel *Minaret* (2005) by fictional writer Leila Aboulela that I read in English studies during my undergraduate year.

The novel depicts a sympathetic view of immigrant Muslim communities and Islamic lifestyles through illustrations of the veil and Islam and how the female protagonist, Najwa, goes through stages and transitions characteristic of liminality to achieve a hybrid identity that is modern in Western terms, but firmly Muslim through the wearing of the veil (Al-Karawi & Bahar 2014:255).

Although Aboulela's novel is fictional, it features a common experience that Muslim women undergo.

The veil is a trope for the contrasts of struggle and comfort, ambivalence and surety of self-experienced by Muslim women whether they wear the veil or not. The veil speaks to the positive, negative, and in-between experiences that Muslim women confront in their continuous effort to shape their identities as modern and respectable women of faith (Al-Karawi & Bahar 2014:255).

The topic of the veil is a metaphor of daily life for a Muslim woman. The veil is loaded with contested meanings. 'To understand the veil and appreciate the diversity of Muslim women, exploring their liminal journeys and hybrid identities is necessary' (Al-Karawi & Bahar 2014:255). In the thesis, I refer to the *hijab* and not the veil. The context of the veil is 'laden with the negative stereotype' and the meaning of the word, according to Bullock, has ethnocentric connotations:

In the English language a 'veil' is normally a piece of usually more or less transparent fabric attached to a woman's hat etc., to conceal the face or protect against the sun (2002:xl).

In contrast, I refer to the meaning of the *hijab* as originating from:

... the root *hajaba* meaning to cover, conceal, hide, [which], is a complex notion encompassing action and apparel. It can include covering the face, or not. These days, *hijab* is also the name used for the headscarf that women wear over their heads and tie a pin at the neck, with their faces showing (Bullock 2002:xli).

The *hijab* is a universal 'piece of fabric' that constitutes a visible identity for Muslim women. Depending on the country in which the Muslim women live, 'different Muslim women at different times and for different reasons have decided to wear or discard the *hijab*' (Moghissi 2006:175).

Towards the end of December 2020, a MA documentary arts student from the University of Cape Town, Thaakirah Behardien, filmed me for her master's documentary. As two South African master students, studying in different disciplines at different universities, we shared our views and opinions of the *hijab*. Our reasons for wearing or not wearing the *hijab* are based on personal experiences. We saw similarities in what the *hijab* meant to us as individuals and as Muslim women. The idea that wearing the *hijab* is a personal journey, comes not only from the context of where Muslim women live in the world, but must also be considered within the context of an individual woman's understanding of Islam.

The ways of being a Muslim woman is a personal journey. At an early age, I was questioned about Islam because 9/11 shone a harsh spotlight on Islam and Muslims, especially Muslim women. Being cross-questioned about my cultural identity resulted in more questions about how Muslims make art. These questions materialised when I began researching artists inspired by Islam or who use Islam as a direct influence in their art practice. I then began to probe what Islam means to me personally. I began to analyse how the world looks at Muslim women, and then probe my own life through journaling. Because I am constantly internalising

my environment, my understanding of my Muslim identity is a constant process of self-discovery. The core of the thesis is therefore to process myself: to negotiate the tensions of Muslim womanhood through art making in South Africa.

### By heart<sup>4</sup>

As a child I learnt things off by heart.  
Private angels worked under the skin of my chest  
scratching prompts on impulse tissue.

In the afternoons at madressah  
I prayed with sounds from engraved organs,  
repeating after the moulana Arabic letters  
starting their lives in different parts of my throat.

Don't mix them up, he said.  
You could be saying dog instead of heart.  
The meanings of other things he did not teach,  
crafting for us sacred chants only God would understand.

As an adult I had to look again to my heart,  
the places the angels left, their tools scattered blindly.  
I bent to pick one up.

This poem by Saleeha Idrees Bamjee is divided into four stanzas as the human heart is made up of four chambers. The first stanza describes the heart as a muscle memory that holds the memory of experience, protection, and guidance. She explores learning as a sensory experience in the second stanza where she refers to 'sounds from engraved organs'. The musical pipe organ produces sounds like the throat produces Arabic letters 'in different parts of my throat'. In stanza three, the word *dog* translates in Arabic as *kalb* and *heart* in as *qalb*.

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<sup>4</sup> (Bamjee 2018:38).



These words sound similar but are pronounced slightly differently and have distinct meanings. Unaware as a child learning Arabic, I was taught how to pronounce the letters, with a warning that if the Arabic letters or Arabic words are not uttered properly then I indirectly change the meaning. In the fourth stanza Bamjee says, 'as an adult I had to look again to my heart, the places the angles left, their tools scattered blindly. I bent to pick one up'. This stanza reveals Bamjee reflecting on and picking up a tool, just as I use my art-making as a tool to explore my subjective experiences as a Muslim woman.

To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes intertext (Allen 2000:1).

I understand *By heart* as knowledge that can be taught and experienced. My thesis is similarly an introspective account of being a Muslim woman, both locally and globally. I explore my Muslim identity in a postmodern ethnography by processing my own beliefs; I investigate how I interpret my understanding of Islam as an individual.

Over the past few years, I have identified that Muslim women worldwide are speaking up about their personal experiences as Muslim women. Their shared experiences in the form of TED talks, poetry, memoirs, non-fiction or auto-biographies, articles, and documentaries are platforms to voice their opinions, lived experiences, vulnerability, and fears of being a Muslim woman. My thesis does not explain what it is like being a Muslim woman in South Africa but rather how I process my experiences as a South African Muslim woman.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

I chose to include my journal entries in my thesis because they represent my sociocultural experience of being a Muslim woman. My personal experience lends itself as a research method of reflection to better understand Islam. I begin the process of making art by using personal objects to explore my identity as an 'on-going, open-ended activity' (Guignon 2004:65). This ongoing investigation of the object's materiality translates into a reverse

process of making where the found object becomes a source to examine, unravel, or inspire by generating a blueprint that translates into an artwork.

I use an auto-ethnographical research method to reflect on my lived experience, while using these experiences as the primary research resource in my art practice. Interspersing my journal entries with academic quotes, I trace textual relationships between the two; therefore the 'text becomes the intertext' (Allen 2000:1).

I apply an auto-ethnographical research methodology throughout the thesis as a self-reflexive method that allows me to share my personal narrative. From the perspective of the 'I', I consider "how my own life can be made a story worth telling" (Ellis & Bochner cited in Denzin and Lincoln 2000:735).

Sharing stories is like sharing experiences.

Autoethnography inspires me because it creates a virtual circle for sharing narratives and offers me a platform to, in my own voice, speak to my unique insights and realities (Schmid et al 2019:265).

This method uses,

... the individual reflexive narrative to creatively highlight undisclosed, untold and potentially subversive texts. It is a deeply personal research approach, linking identity and culture, as well as the individual and social, and so simultaneously contextualising the research and the researcher (Schmid et al 2019:266).

This self-reflexive approach provides reflection, introspection, and awareness of my surroundings.

Thus, in autoethnography, instead of investigating the stories of others, autoethnographers reflexively share their own stories, their voice being placed in the foreground (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011 cited in Schmid et al 2019:267).

Cape Town Muslims have a tradition. When Muslim families or friends come back from performing Umrah or Hajj, their respective relatives and friends visit their homes to pay their respects. Men and women sit at separate tables sharing food while listening to the stories of their respective family or friends - *Umrah* or *Hajj*. As a child, I was always on the receiving end and the most common story I heard is how unfairly the women have been treated. Now after my own experience, I understand. To include my stories in my thesis of the Middle East places my voice at the foreground of my research.

It is compulsory for Muslims to perform *Hajj* (a holy pilgrimage) at least once in their life. I, however, performed *Umrah* (a pilgrimage that can be performed at any time of the year except during the *Hajj* period) which is not compulsory. Sharing my *Umrah* stories highlights the social and cultural differences and similarities as a South African woman visiting the Middle East.

Autoethnography studies cultural and social life, specifically the researcher's unique historical, social and political context affirms the value, worth and meaning of the individual experience and validates the subjective reciprocity of the self and her/his social context (Anderson, 2006; Boylorn & Orbe, 2013; Butz & Besio, 2009; Chang, 2014; Ellis et al., 2011; Grant et al., 2013; Whitinui, 2014 cited in Schmid et al 2019:267).

My personal journal entries proceed as a 'comparative anthropology of the line' (Ingold 2007:1) that traces gender/patriarchy, my South African identity, intertextuality, and materiality. The threads become entangled and create tensions which speaks of the 'twists and turns of the labyrinth and into the crafts of embroidery and weaving' (Ingold 2007:2).

Tim Ingold further argues that:

A thread is a filament of some kind, which may be entangled with other threads or suspended between points in three dimensional space. At a relatively microscopic level threads have surfaces; however, they are not drawn *on* surfaces (2007:41).

At a micro level, the thread can be a ball of yarn or artificial like an observant walk through the *souks* (market) of Palestine:

Threads may be transformed into traces, and traces into threads. It is through the transformation of threads into traces, I argue, that surfaces are brought into being. And conversely, it is through the transformation of traces into threads that surfaces are dissolved (Ingold 2007:52).

In this thesis, I metaphorically and physically use the word 'line' that forms this unconventional text as:

Far from connecting points in a network every relation is one line in a meshwork of interwoven trails. To tell a story then, is to relate, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, retracing a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow in the process of spinning out their own. But rather as in looping or knitting, the thread being spun now and the thread picked up from the past are both of the same yarn. There is no point at which the story ends and life begins (Ingold 2007:90).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this thesis, the earliest personal journal entry is from 2013. Two years before I began my Fine Art Undergraduate studies at Stellenbosch University. During this time, I questioned many things in my life, but more specifically the notion 'that we can be different things to different people and in different circumstances' (Jenkins 2008:16). These circumstances showed me what I want out of life. My insecurities and doubts and the complexities of everyday life meant that my Muslim identity was always under debate.

My identity is in an ongoing negotiation between being a woman, a multi-disciplinary artist, and South African. This creates a constant tension associated with being Muslim. As Jenkins states:

Identifying ourselves, or others, is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation (Jenkins 2008:17).

In my art practice, I am motivated by Islamic objects (rituals or heirlooms). These objects convey my thoughts and feelings about my Muslim identity. My thesis adopts a postmodern approach, suggesting that the objects 'speak' in tandem with my personal experience which is significant to understand how meaning can be drawn from the material itself. I argue that the materiality of the objects describes an 'unfolding story' (Guignon 2004:65).

Unfolding and unravelling the ritual and heirloom objects, I begin the process of exploring my faith and family legacy. My journal entries feature my authentic experiences to make sense of being a Muslim woman 'within a wider context of historical culture' (Guignon 2004:69).

The German word translated as 'authentic' in *Being and Time* (the word *eigentlich*) comes from a stem meaning 'own' (*eigen*) and carries with it connotation of owning oneself, owning up to what one is becoming, and taking responsibility for being one's own. To 'become who you are,' as Heidegger sees it, is to identify what really matters in the historical situation in which you find yourself and to take a resolute stand on pursuing those ends (Guignon 2004:69).

As a South African Muslim woman living in a secular environment, I am often confronted by daily *haram* (forbidden practices). It becomes challenging in our late modern society. By taking responsibility for my own actions, I interrogate the materiality of ritualised objects to formulate a personal meaning for them.

[identities] are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity . . . Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference . . . identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude (Hall 1996: 4–5 cited in Jenkins 2008:20).

My Muslim identity is in a constant negotiation between a secular environment and my faith. I refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception:

By relating with the world's objects, beings and things, a person is a being who perceives the world *from different standpoints depending on the situation in time and space*, who perceives particular perspectives that vary accordingly to the perceptual field – which is a *horizon*, that is, the place of perceptual experiences. We can perceive objects from different places, at different moments (Sadala & Adorno 2002:287).

For me, being a South African Muslim woman means that I am constantly aware of my actions and decisions. I am always contemplating my actions before I do something, whether I am thinking about what technique I aim to use in my artmaking or asking myself: is this acceptable in Islam? This cross-questioning occurs naturally in my process of artmaking because my Muslim identity is in a constant process of weaving into or out of other identifications, sometimes complementing them, sometimes creating tension. However, as I use a reflexive method to process my Muslim identity, my identity is 'always multi-dimensional' (Jenkins 2008:17). Jenkins further adds that:

Identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us). It is a very practical matter, synthesising relationships of similarity and differences. The outcome of agreement and disagreement, and at least in principle always negotiable, identification is not fixed (Jenkins 2008:18).

For the last two and a half years, I have been reading fictional stories, autobiographies, memoirs, articles, journals, poetry, TED Talks and watching YouTube videos about being a Muslim woman, in particular women's experiences with patriarchal structure and the wearing of the *hijab*. Reading and listening to these Muslim women from all over the world and locally made me realise that although we share the same religion, we experience it differently. For this reason, I look to cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall (1994), who offers an alternate means of understanding identity. He states that identity should be thought of as a:

... 'production' that is never complete, always in process and constituted within, not outside, representation (1994: 222).

Following from Hall, Chris Barker (2003) concurs that identity is constituted through social, political, cultural, and historical markers. While identity is fluid and subjective to transformation, culture:

... is concerned with questions of shared social meanings, that is, the various ways we make sense of the world (2003:7).

Having multiple identities means that I am constantly moving between them, often blurring the invisible boundary and creating a grey area where I generate my art work. Since my thesis focuses primarily on processing how my collective identities weave into one another, Manuel Castells (2010) states that the power identity offers strong sources of meaning. Like Barker, Castells agrees that identities are multifaceted and more importantly, identity is marked by similarity and differences (Castells 2010:7). I explore this 'doubleness' or duality in more detail in Part Three: My Madinah and Makkah experience. With this understanding, my identity is not just my own, it is socially constructed in relation to Islam and in the wider context of Muslim women's experience.

## EXPOSITION OF CONTENTS

The structure of my thesis is unconventional. My thesis consists of journal entries (in columns) as personal narratives and academic research. For the practical aspect of my thesis, I will print parts of my thesis onto copper.

Part One: Processing my Muslim Identity explores *Faith II* (ritual object) and *Untitled (heirloom object)*. Using Maurice Merleau-Ponty's definition of phenomenology on perception, I discuss how these objects inform my everyday perceptual experiences through my art practice. The process of *Faith II* explores the terms entanglement and catharsis to unravel my Muslim identity. As a Muslim artist, I discuss what Islam and art is. Taking part in the Mashūra Group Exhibition at Greatmore Studios, my artwork *Untitled* is inspired by being a Muslim woman in Makkah. By discussing the process of *Untitled*, I discuss the materiality of copper.

In Part Two: Crossing Borders: My Egypt and Palestine Experience precludes my journal entries to Egypt (Cairo), Jerusalem, and Palestine- Al Aqsa. I explore the term 'border' in its literal sense and 'boundaries' in a metaphorical space to navigate the concept of *hijab*. I investigate the concept of *hijab* as a source of material inquiry by creating a scarf installation in my domestic environment. I include the journal entry of my scarf installation process. This process explores terms like gender and patriarchy.

Part Three: My Madinah and Makkah experience precludes journal entries of Madinah and Makkah. I explore the terms gender and intertextuality (textile as a metaphorical language) through an artwork titled *An-Nisa*. I discuss *An-Nisa* as a response to my experience in Makkah.

In Part Four: Material Inquiry, a journal entry describes my exploration into material inquiry. I discuss the terms 'tacit knowledge' and 'intuition' to further explain my art process.



## Part One: Processing my Muslim Identity

Friday, 30 August 2013. At home, in my bedroom.

It is late at night when I get home from work. We drove home in silence. I exited the car and entered the house and stood like a statue. Numb and overcome with emotions. I look around me and notice a tear-drop falls on my hand. As I lift my hand up, I notice it is shaking. Slowly, almost intuitively I go to the bathroom and prepare myself for prayer. Upon entering my bedroom, I put on my prayer clothing and headscarf, I grab my prayer mat, place it on the floor in the direction of the **qibla (the direction to pray)**. I place my feet at the bottom centre of my prayer mat and lift my hands in supplication. I can feel the tension in my body slowly easing away. I can feel my heart beating steadily. The impact of what had happened, the smell, the voices and touch are visible as I blindly stare at a section of my prayer mat. With my hands folded above my bosom I feel the dampness of my tears dropping onto the prayer mat. My eyes are flooded with tears, and it continues to fall as I continue praying at a slow staggered pace. The movement is familiar. I find comfort in that.

The house is quiet. My parents are visiting my grandmother who is very sick. My sister is at work. My brother is in his bedroom, I hear his voice. He must be on the phone speaking to someone. I slowly breathe in and out, repeatedly trying to control my breathing. After a few moments I start crying uncontrollably, gasping for breath. After a while, my pulse begins to ease. I slowly stand up with my right hand gathering the prayer mat. I drop it onto the floor and walk slowly to my bed. As I sit on my bed with my hands in my lap, I hear a movement. I lift my head slowly and see my reflection in the mirror. My eyes are blood red and swollen. My tear-stained face is flushed. I notice my bedroom door open; my brother pokes his head in, slowly walks into my room and places a cup of sugar water on my bedside table, without saying a word he walks out.

For the longest time I sit on my bed in silence, the incident replaying in my mind repeatedly. As the seconds turn into minutes and the minutes into hours, I hear my mother and father's voice. My mother walks into my bedroom, her hands open wide, and I intuitively reach out and

embrace myself in a hug. I heard my father talking. His voice is loud asking me what happened. I did not reply immediately. I

struggle to compose myself. For safety reasons I choose not to describe the details of the robbery in this thesis.

**Saturday, 31 August 2013.**

My father woke me up, he said "Rushda, granny died." I looked at the time it is six am.

### Phenomenology of perception

Processing my experiences means that I am consciously aware of my surroundings. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's definition of phenomenology is 'a transcendental philosophy which indeed suspends the affirmations characteristic of the natural attitude. But it does so only to shed light on them...' (Gallagher 2010:183). With this understanding, phenomenology sheds light on everyday perceptual experiences.

This part of my thesis explores how my perception of my Muslim identity allowed me to identify objects (rituals and heirlooms) that I collected between August 2013 and July 2021.<sup>5</sup> Approaching the object means 'to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it' (Tighe 2004:49). The blue prayer mat used on the 30th of August 2013, the beginning of my exploration of objects, was gifted by my parents when they went for *Hajj* 24 years ago.



Figure 5: Rushda Deaney, *Faith II*, 2020.

### Art as catharsis

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<sup>5</sup> August 2013 and July 2021 are the journal dates I refer to in the beginning of Part One.

*Faith II* is one of three prayer mats. *Faith I* was unravelled in 2017 during my undergrad year and *Faith III* remains untouched for now. The way I was feeling on 30 August 2013 initiated a catharsis of 'emotional discharge' (Beilby 1997:4).

Social and practical elements, constraints, and influences affect subjectivity at the time of production, determining the extent to which the artist's intention is fulfilled. How artist's catharsis interacts with the conditions of production and influences the content of art is the subject of this issue (Beilby 1997:4).

At the time, I did not think about what I was doing or why, I just intuitively reacted to how I was feeling by using the prayer mats as a primary source of inquiry into my Muslim identity. When I unravelled *Faith I* in 2017, I felt hopeless. My self-esteem was low, I questioned the act of praying, I felt stuck because I always have to think of Islam first. I felt frustrated that I could not just create art for the sake of creating, I questioned my actions as a Muslim, I questioned the secular space I found myself in while I unravelled my prayer mat, I had doubts. I kept asking myself whether I had made the right decision to study art at Stellenbosch. I was unravelling the prayer mat in the main passage of the Visual Arts building where students and lecturers walk past. As I asked myself these questions, people who walked past began to ask me questions about the prayer mat, about my faith, about why I was unravelling the prayer mat, and whether that meant that I was disrespecting my faith. And while they asked me questions, I asked myself questions and realised that I was a student in an educational institution, and that all these questions, though personal, were appropriate because of the space I was occupying. I would hear the student's questions, I would see them walk by, and though it was never my intention to perform the act of unravelling the prayer mat, this interactive, performative dimension happened naturally. My interpretation of art and Islam manifested itself naturally through this cathartic experience.

### **Unravelling my thoughts**

Making implies unmaking, remaking, making connections whether through deliberate entanglement or drafting code (Jeffries et al 2016:3).

*Faith II* is a continuation of *Faith I*, however, I see it not as a catharsis but more of a celebration of my Muslim Identity. Years have passed between *Faith I* and *Faith II* and my feelings towards Islam and my Muslim identity has become firmer. I am still questioning my Muslim Identity but more holistically. As my daily lived experiences are never the same, so too are my feelings towards my Muslim identity.

When I started unravelling *Faith II*, I struggled. There were four colours in *Faith II* - royal blue, yellow, white, and brown. I began pulling the yellow warp thread but it was very thin. It was so thin that when I pulled it the prayer mat bunched or the thread broke. The yellow threads started to accumulate and became entangled, so I decided to bobbin lace it.

I use the term 'entanglement' as a metaphor for unravelling the prayer mat. Metaphorically, I am unravelling my thoughts regarding being Muslim, however, while I am pulling the threads they break or become entangled. This tension foreshadows the constant challenges I negotiate between my art practice and my faith.

Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness. It works with difference and sameness but also with their limits, their predicaments, there moments of complication (Nuttell 2009:1).



Figure 6: Rushda Deaney, *Faith II process (i)*, 2020.

The bobbin lace took longer to create than the unravelling. After two days of bobbin lace, I became frustrated and left it unfinished, like an unfinished thought. This needlework technique was to create a tapestry within an existing tapestry. The problem I uncovered was that because I bobbin-laced the bottom piece, I could not unravel the yellow threads unless I purposefully cut a section on the prayer mat to continue to unravel the yellow.

Frustrated with the decision to cut or not to cut, I began unravelling the white thread (the weft). This thread was easier to pull out because the thread was thicker, but because the prayer mat was 27 years old and machine-made, the thread's appearance was irregular. After unravelling all of the threads, I realised that the mat had made small waves because it was layered under or over two or three threads. After a few months of unravelling the white thread, I became irritated because the border was sewn so tightly that I had to give the white thread a hard tug to release it. Instead, I decided to leave the white threads hanging on the right side of the prayer mat.

After a year of staring at *Faith II*, I began unravelling it again. In *Faith I*, I unravelled most of the images on the prayer mat, removing parts of my Muslim identity, which symbolised, for me, the undoing of things to which I no longer relate— especially some past/bad choices I made. Physically removing the threads meant that I could let go of my past. In *Faith II*, I used different yet similar processes. I was unravelling the threads, but I took longer because I struggled with confrontation. My confrontation was personal in that it is a struggle with patriarchy (I explore it further in Part Two: Crossing Borders: My Egypt and Palestine Experience). This unravelling process revealed unspoken confrontations with my father.



Figure 7: Rushda Deaney, *Faith II process (ii)*, 2021.

The white threads hanging on the right-hand side started to aggravate me because even after a year, I did not want to confront my emotions, so I pulled each white thread one by one. The act was slower, and I could hear it snap, but the slow process forced me to confront my emotions. Once I pulled the last white thread, I felt lighter with a clear understanding of my emotions. Placing the white brittle threads on my desk's surface accumulates into an entangled mess. Holding the prayer mat for a closer inspection, I begin to trace my hand over the fragile areas.

The artistic experience with normal processes of living is derived from an impulse to handle materials and to think and feel through their handling (Barrett 2007: 115).



My Muslim identity is not static; whenever I return to unravelling the prayer mat it goes through physical changes. How I feel over time impacts the aesthetic of the prayer mat. The freedom of unravelling has become easier.

Through unravelling *Faith II*, I have a better understanding of my Muslim identity. My Muslim identity is characterised through the principles of Islam whilst practising Islam. My experience as a Muslim woman is influenced by my immediate environment and in a broader global setting. The group exhibition titled Mashūra at Greatmore studios held in Cape Town, Woodstock, explores the different ways the majority of South African Muslim artists interpret Islamic art.

24 July 2021

### Mashūra Exhibition at Greatmore Studios<sup>6</sup>

is pleased to present it's first exhibition **MASHŪRAH**

**OPENING**  
24 July - 30th September 2021  
At **GREATMORE STUDIOS** - 47 Greatmore St,  
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**MASHŪRAH ARTS** YouTube Channel

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ATIYYAH KHAN  
GULSHAN KHAN  
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HANNA NOOR MAHOMED  
NYAMBO MASA MARA  
NABEEHA MOHAMED  
RAHIMAH ISMAIL RAJIWATE  
ABDUS SALAAM  
ACHMAT SONI

CURATED BY  
SARA MONEER KHAN

GREATMORE

I glance at this poster before walking into the Gallery space with my father. As I look at every artwork and installation, I notice the space slowly begin to fill with people. As time passes, I begin to take photographs of the artwork and the people. Some faces are familiar because over the past two months almost every Sunday at ten o'clock in the morning we have had Zoom meetings. Here we talk about what Muslim art is, the

Figure 8: Sara Bint Moneer Khan, *Mashūra* online poster, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> "The exhibition's title MASHŪRAH مشورة translated from Arabic means 'consultation' or 'to seek advice'. It serves as a means through which people consult on topics of public importance. This pre-Islamic custom has evolved and exists in many cultures and civilizations in various forms. MASHŪRAH draws on this process of communal decision-making, reciprocal consultation and learning, to explore Muslim epistemologies, visual culture, narratives, and histories in the context of South Africa" (Bint Moneer Khan, 2021).

"MASHŪRAH ARTS is founded by Sara Bint Moneer Khan, a curator and researcher from London. The exhibition is the first presented by MASHURAH ARTS, an initiative I founded as part of my PhD study in visual literacy and art advocacy in Cape Town's Muslim community. I moved from London to South Africa in 2015, and observed a lack of Muslim voices in the South African art ecosystem. This initiative aims to create a space for collaboration, development, dialogue and dissemination of artistic practices with a special focus on Muslims and Islam in Africa. It forms part of broader debates on postcolonial curatorship, art practice, engagement and collecting" (Bint Moneer Khan, 2021).



struggles Muslim artists face before making art and while making art. I was struck by the various ways Muslims experience Islam, and how the art work reflects that. Our understanding of Islam as individuals allows each of us to interpret personal ways of being Muslim as unique, yet similar. These shared stories or rather shared experiences becomes a collective contemporary understanding of Islam through various mediums namely, mixed media, traditional calligraphy, photography, painting, video and installations.



Figure 9: Hasan and Husain Essop, *Four Fathers*, pigment ink on rag paper, 64 x 102 cm, 2009. Taking the time to read each artist's information about the artwork, I am learning about my heritage through their work.



Figure 10: Sahlah Davids, *Thamaaniya* Mixed Media, 85 x 45 x 96, 2021.

Davids' installation brought back a memory of my grandmother who was a seamstress, when I used to visit her I would sometimes find dressing pins lying on the floor.



Figure 11: Kamyar Bineshtarigh, *Untitled* (Ghazi no. 359, 39, 389, 198), Printing ink on denim, 154x145 cm, 2021.

Iranian artist Bineshtarigh creates a contemporary take on traditional calligraphy. The poetic nuances read as unspoken words.

## Islam and Art

Muslims are answering these questions in diverse ways

(Said & Abu-Nimer & Sharify-Funk 2006:2).

To research means to ask questions. The main question I explore in this section is why there is an absence of figural representation in Islamic art. To answer this question, I briefly explain what Islamic Art is.

The universal approach to Islamic art sees all arts produced by Muslims everywhere as reflecting the universal verities of Islam (Blair & Bloom 2003:158).

My perception of what Islamic Art is, is based on what it is not. Because it is an absence of figural representation, I investigate my own understanding of Islamic Art in a non-figurative way. The restriction of figural representation challenges the boundaries of how I can create my artwork. Restrictions allow me to navigate my own understanding of Islamic art, which causes tensions in my faith and my art practice. In my art practice, I unravelled my *Faith I* as a response to my personal understanding of Islamic art. Pulling the white and yellow threads out blurs the iconic images and characteristics that represents Islamic art. This obscures the perception of how prayer mats are seen. The function of the prayer mat changes from an act of devotion and translates the 'rhetorical frame' of Islamic visual culture into the discourse of Islamic art (Shaw 2019:8).

My purpose for making art is to build a relationship with Islam. My religion plays a big part in helping me to make and understanding my decisions in life. In my art practice, the original objects (ritual or heirloom) initiates a material exploration that develops into the creation of new artworks.

In limiting Islamic aesthetics to formal qualities, this approach has also limited the ability of Islamic objects to function as 'art': that is, as a mode of cultural production distinguished from other visual cultural forms through its expression of meaning beyond the visual, whether that meaning is conceptual or narrative (Shaw 2012:4).

The Mashura exhibition explored individual understandings of Islamic Art through various mediums based on each artist's understanding of Islam in South Africa. It relies on the personal experiences and interpretations of the artists concerned. As art is subjective, and Islam likewise filters into the everyday personal actions of everyday living, in my view Islamic art cannot have a fixed definition.

### ***Untitled***

*Untitled* (figure 18) explores the restrictions I encounter as a Muslim woman in Makkah and Madinah. In Part 2, which deals with my Middle Eastern experience, I explore gendered spaces in more depth, but in Part 1, I focus on the process I used in *Untitled* for my master's practical exam and Mashura Exhibition. This focus on process includes both the physical printmaking process and the development of ideas. I discuss my thinking about this piece in detail because it shows how questions and feelings guide my process.

I chose to use copper for two reasons. Firstly, I was taught screen printmaking and etching techniques in my undergraduate years. The process of printmaking allows me to play with silhouettes and positive and negative shapes. These shapes are often inspired by photographs I took on my Middle Eastern trip or mediated images found on the internet. Secondly, I used copper for this artwork because in Makkah there are 'women only' signs in the eating areas of the shopping mall (see figure 13 below). The women only signs in Makkah are not made out of copper, but my artwork I use copper to create a 'women only' sign as it reflects on Islamic decorative copper objects I am familiar with in my home environment. This interplay with copper is symbolic of my public and private relationship with my Muslim identity.

Copper is a versatile material that extends itself into the interior and exterior of buildings. Here, the copper used references a decorative object in my home. In my art practice, I am inspired by the copper *rakam* that was gifted to my parents by my grandmother 38 years ago (see figure 12 below). After years of neglect, the wooden structure framing the object deteriorated. In a similar approach to unravelling my *Faith I*, I disassembled the copper *rakam*.



Figure 12: Rushda Deaney, *Heirloom Copper Rakam*, 2020.

Copper is a medium used in printmaking, specifically etching, but I do not use the etching technique with the intention to print. Taking inspiration from Figure 12, I use the copper as a material on which to print. Thinking of copper as a material means, I can manipulate the appearance by implementing basic metal techniques in jewellery design such as annealing, patina, and using a jewellery rolling mill. Using an interdisciplinary approach, I blur artistic boundaries to generate an artwork.



Figure 13: Rushda Deaney, *WOMEN*, 2019.

*WOMEN* is a photograph that highlights gendered spaces in the food court in Makkah. A Mosque has allocated spaces for men and women, so I am familiar with the separation of genders in a space. In South Africa, Cape Town, I have experienced a wedding for women only, yet seeing a sign overseas in a public space at shop in a mall that allocates a space for WOMEN translates to how people locally and globally interpret Islam. This experience led me to create *Untitled* (2021).



Figure 14: Rushda Deaney. *A representation of Faith I*. 2021

I stood staring at the second design. Knowing that I was on a deadline, I did not have much time to decide what to do. The background is a section of *Faith I* that I unravelled in 2017. The more I looked at the image, the more I questioned myself. As set out above, to research is to ask questions. Since this artwork was done in 2017, did I want to rework it into a different medium? If so, what would this conversion mean? The more I looked at it, the more it reminded me of the feelings I felt when I unravelled *Faith I*. Did I want to revisit those feelings? Had my Muslim identity deepened or evolved since then? If it had evolved, then asking myself these critical questions was why the background design needed to change.





Figure 15: Rushda Deaney, *Untitled in process*, 2021.

Figure 18 is the final design for *Untitled*. The background is from *Faith I* but not in its unravelled state. I chose this image because it has stylised shapes and floral patterns that are the characteristic of Islamic art found in the *rakam*<sup>7</sup>s in my home.



Figure 16: Rushda Deaney, *Painting with Bitumen*, 2021.

Bitumen or asphaltum is a thick black substance used in etching and lithography that acts as a resistant to the acid. At this stage of the *United's* process, I am painting some areas thicker. This process was time-consuming so I continued to paint at home. My father noticed the

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<sup>7</sup> A rakam is a traditional Islamic calligraphy artwork mounted in the formal lounge or dining room of a Muslim home. The traditional rakam is black velvet fabric as the background with gold or silver embroidered calligraphy and floral or geometric patterns and framed in either a bright yellow imitation gold or silver frame.

artwork and asked me about the process. I explained that the bitumen acts as a resistant and he explains that in his career as a quantity surveyor, asphaltum is a medium used for resurfacing roads. This connection adds a personal layer, but also signifies that bitumen is a versatile medium.



Figure 17: Rushda Deaney, *Etching at home*, 2021.

Etching *Untitled* in the privacy of my home made the art-making process more intimate. While setting up the etching area my father questioned me further about the process. My father's inquisitiveness initiated a discussion about the concept of *Untitled* in which he shared his experience in Makkah. The relationship between my father and myself is complex yet he became part of the process.



Figure 18: Rushda Deaney, *Untitled*, 2021.

The image on the left was taken on 3 July 2021 in my bedroom; the image on the right was taken on 23 July 2021 at Greatmore Studios. *Untitled* reacts to the oxygen in the air therefore the copper plate is fading, discolouring and naturally turning green (oxidizing) in some areas which symbolically represents that *Untitled* is still going through the process of change, just as I am constantly evolving.

The following journal entry in Part Two describes my experience in Egypt, Jerusalem, and Palestine to explore themes such as gendered spaces, *hijab*, borders, and boundaries.



## Part Two: Crossing Borders: My Egypt and Palestine Experience

Saturday, 15 December 2018.

Cairo, Egypt.

I slide my right hand into my burgundy sweatpants pocket and take out my cell phone. I press the main button and the cell phone lights up. According to my cell phone it is just after one o'clock in the morning. My eyes are teary and puffy from the lack of sleep. I hear a constant humming noise and search for where the sound is coming from. I notice my sister standing beside the conveyer belt. Slowly, in short, staggered steps I walk towards her. "Grab your suitcase when it comes," it takes me a while to acknowledge what she is saying. I bend forward as I see a bright orange ribbon coming my way. An unfamiliar pain in my hip causes me to cringe, as I hold out my right arm and grab my suitcase. Followed closely by a rumble in my stomach. I am hungry. The taste of a thick magenta pudding still lingers in my mouth.

It is empty. A huge open space with shiny white floor tiles. There is not a single soul in sight. Dragging my suitcase behind me I walk alongside my sister. "Oh! I cannot message them that we have arrived." I

abruptly stop walking and pull my cell phone out of my burgundy sweatpants pocket again, with the intention of contacting my brother. A few minutes later I realise what my sister meant. Our cellular services do not work in Egypt.

I catch up with my sister and notice various sizes of Arabic signs with the English translation. I follow my sister, but as far as my eyes can see there is no one in sight. As we walk through an archway that says "Exit" I begin to get worried. Where is everybody?

Suddenly, I notice a tall fair man wearing a long sleeve white thobe and a red and white traditional kaffiyah<sup>8</sup> scarf loosely framing his face. I hear a deep slur of Arabic. He is speaking fast. The only words I recognise are "Assa Lamu Alaykum<sup>9</sup>". Confused I look at my sister and then at him and say "English." Immediately his accent changes to a language we both understand. He says "sorry, I see you wearing scarfs, that is why I spoke in Arabic". I nod my head as he leads us through large sliding doors. The cool night air hits my face.

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<sup>8</sup> Traditional Palestinian scarf

<sup>9</sup> Peace Be Upon You

A group of what looks like twenty men standing behind a barrier start shouting on top of each other. “Yalla” “Taxi?” “Ladies come here” “Salaam”. Worried, tired and hungry I notice men of various ages waving their arms, swinging posters of hotel logos trying to get our attention. I look at my sister and say, “What now?”

**Tuesday, 18 December 2018.**

### **Palestine**

Leaving the bus behind, I stand on the edge of the Egyptian border, I walk hesitantly towards military armed soldiers, in the direction of Jerusalem. Guarded soldiers holding rifles made my heartbeat faster. Reading about the conflict between Palestine and Jerusalem in the newspapers and watching the war on the news halted my thoughts. Composing myself, I walk further and further towards the various checkpoints. Submitting the necessary documents, my cell phone and luggage, the military guard pats me down. After handing over all my personal possessions, I walk into an office like space with rooms and cubicles. As I look around I notice only women. Some of the women have military haircuts or tattoos and one woman has a funky pink/purple hair colour. It is my turn. I walk up to the cubicle and sit down. A woman behind the desk asks me questions, am I on Facebook? Who is my father? What

is my reason for traveling to Jerusalem? I swiftly reply to her questions without hesitation. The woman nods her head and says, “Take a seat.” I walk towards a row of chairs and sit down.

A few hours later, I am sitting at the Jerusalem border. Waiting. Three hours has passed, and I am still waiting with my siblings. One of my travel group leaders takes a seat next to me.

He asks me, “What is the purpose of this Middle East journey?” I look at him and look on the floor and I do not know how to respond. After a while of thinking I say, “I want to experience what it is like to be Muslim in another country.”

He replies: “How will you do that?” I respond “Through art.” He responds, “Oh, so you are an artist.”

I reply “Yes, I have heard negative stories from people who have travelled to the Middle East, and how the media portrays Muslim women negatively.” He adds: “Break the pattern, Rushda.” Then he walks away. Two hours later we cross the border into Jerusalem.

**Saturday, 22 December 2018.**

### **Palestine, Al Aqsa**

“No, let’s take a different entrance.” A white, scuff- marked soccer ball rolls past me, followed by a boy who looks about five years old running at full speed, forcing me

to stop abruptly. I turn my neck, smiling at a group of boys laughing and running sideways waiting for the soccer ball to return.

In front of me I see a tall stone wall, and I continue walking down the path, holding out my right arm to touch the wall. The stone is cool to the touch and is welcomed as I feel the sun's heat warming my face. I begin walking slowly as the cobble stones are uneven underneath my sandals. People young and old walk past me in a hurry going about their day. We just finished Fajr<sup>10</sup> salaah, Alghamdulillah,<sup>11</sup> and it looks like people are queuing in front of the food stalls for breakfast. I feel sad that I will be leaving this beautiful city in a few hours.

Out of the corner of my eye I notice a royal blue with bright orange accent scarf, and I immediately pick up my pace and walk towards it. It feels as soft as silk, but not silky as silk, it has a weight to it and the colours are vibrant and bright with intricate, detailed patterns. I hold it in my hands and crush it, no creases. I inspect it further and notice a label "original cashmere 100% cashmere gift from Jerusalem." Smiling I ask the store holder "Salaam, how much?"

Instead of an immediate response, I hear scuffling of feet behind me. Still clutching onto the scarf, I notice two teenage boys, each one of them grabbing a fistful of each other's sweaters, shoving each other, provoking each other and speaking in a language I do not understand. I shrink back further into the stall, but my gaze is fixed on the commotion. A few minutes later a young girl dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt under a formal black sleeveless dress, touches one of the boys on the shoulder, coaxing him to pull him away, but she is unsuccessful and runs towards the shadows grabbing an older gentleman's arm. Suddenly the boys are pulled apart, and they continue walking. Behind them are a group of men of various ages, each one either wearing the traditional kippah's or shteimal on their heads. Soon after I notice an older man wearing a white loose thobe, walking slowly and gracefully with the tallest brown oval shaped shteimal on his head. It reminds me of candy floss, and I can see through it. As the older man came closer towards me, he looks up and looks directly at me. I will never forget his stare and the memory attached to this cashmere scarf.

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<sup>10</sup> Dawn prayer.

<sup>11</sup> Praise be to God.

**Boundaries and Hijab:**

I use the term boundary according to Yuri Lotman's definition as 'the primary mechanism of semiotic individuation'. He defines a boundary as 'the outer limit of a first-person form'. This means that the one that divides 'us' from 'them' and 'our' own safe, cultured, and ordered world from 'their' unsafe, barbaric, and chaotic world (Viljoen 2013: xi).

In this part of my thesis, I explore the term border in its literal sense and boundaries in a metaphorical space to navigate the concept of *hijab*. Lotman further states that:

Boundaries are for him semiotic hotspots, because they are the regions where the self-descriptions of the centre of semiotic systems become strained or start conflicting with the realities at the periphery (Viljoen 2013:xiv).

Crossing a physical border to Egypt, an Arab man immediately spoke Arabic to me because I was wearing a *hijab*. The *hijab* is a visible marker that identifies me as a Muslim woman.

Hijab, the Islamic cover for women, has become one of the most contested arenas both among Muslim women and between Muslim and non-Muslim women (Afshar 2008:411).

In Islam, wearing the *hijab* is compulsory for Muslim women.

The fact that Hijab creates a separate sphere for women juxtaposed with the continuous portrayal of Muslim women in the media as victims of oppression by male figures in their societies has led the West to view the hijab as a tool that Muslim men use to coerce women to submit to their desires and wills (Abu Huwajj 2012:1).

Because the *hijab* is viewed negatively by the West, I want to investigate the *hijab* as an object for a material inquiry. Following my experience in the market in Palestine, I bought two pashmina scarfs as a tactile reminder. The scarf lends itself towards the theoretical stance of Igor Kopytoff, *whose cultural biography of things: commoditization as process* is relevant to my context from a cultural perspective, where the production of commodities is a cultural and cognitive process (1986:64). My art practice is a sociocultural response to the

'social life of things' (Jappie 2011:15) and 'cultural biography of a thing' (Kopytoff 1986:66). The value of things focuses on social objects and the movement and divergences they traverse in their 'social life' as a means to shed light on the greater social context in which this social life occurs (Jappie 2011:15).

The scarf is a transactional exchange, for the purpose of wearing it as a *hijab*. The *hijab* can become a signifier for a Muslim woman. Over the years I have accumulated many *hijabs*, some rectangle or square shapes and at various lengths and widths. The *hijab* has many purposes. Depending on the type of material, *hijabs* are seasonal, like chiffon scarfs which are worn more in the summer and the thicker textile-like quality *hijabs* I wear during winter. *Hijabs* are not an accessory; it is part of a ritual act practiced five times a day. It is a spiritual piece of fabric that can be worn in many styles for different occasions but are primarily a ritualised object.

During brainstorming the *hijab* as a source of material inquiry, I went to a family wedding and noticed that the walls and the chairs were all covered with white fabric, unlike the bride who did not wear a *hijab*. Noticing what we choose to cover ourselves made me reflect that if a scarf is seen as a material that covers, then why not extend this thought pattern to covering my bedroom walls to further explore the term *hijab* in my own domestic environment. The following journal entry describes in detail my installation experience.

### 17 August 2020

I am nervous. My bedroom/studio space is empty of all its contents. I walk towards my cupboard and start pulling all the scarfs off the two shelves onto the floor. Hands on my hips I start thinking, "What next?"

I walk towards the laundry room and grab old blankets; blankets I have used since my childhood days and throw it next to the scarfs. Feeling satisfied I begin spreading

the blankets on the floor. I place my all scarfs on top of the blankets.



The room starts smelling like oud. Since my sister and I place a few drops of oud on the

neck area it makes sense why the scarves have various scents of oud.

I begin hanging one headscarf at a time vertically next to one another with double sided tape. I continue this process until one side of the door is covered. I stand back and realise I have covered the entire wall including the bedroom door. I look around and the room becomes smaller. I look down and notice my grandfather's scarf, my Umrah-white scarf, the Palestinian scarf, my first date scarf, the breakup scarf, the interrogation scarf. All the memories start flooding back. I begin to panic. I start breathing heavily. I need to get out. Run. The smell, the memories is getting too much for me, I rush towards the door, but I do not see it. I panic.

I start moving the headscarves feeling for the door handle and eventually my right-hand touches cold metal. I pull the door handle down and run out of my room.

I make my way to the kitchen and put the kettle on thinking a warm cup of tea is what I need.



After a few minutes I realise I only took a few photos of the installation.

Irritated with myself I gather my thoughts and slowly walk towards the installation.

My heart sinks. Most of the scarves fell. Now I need to redo the installation. But I cannot. Emotionally and mentally, I cannot.

The next day I decide to redo the installation.



However, this time I leave the space open where the door is in case I start feeling claustrophobic.



Hours later, with the room covered with my headscarves, I begin taking photographs.

Minutes later my father stands in front of my room staring at the installation saying nothing.

I say, "Here, take the camera and come take photos" He looks at me and then at the installation and to my surprise he begins taking off his shoes and taking the camera from my hand he begins taking photographs.



While he is taking photographs, I sit on the step watching him. Instead of taking photographs of the installation he begins taking photographs of me in the space.

In that moment I say to him that I want to take a photograph of us, and to my surprise he agrees.



Working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted my perspective of my relationship with my father.

### **Exploring the Hijab and Gendered Space**

Pinning my scarfs together creates a larger tapestry that covers my bedroom walls like a boundary that interrogates why:

Muslim women were segregated from men, and many women in the upper classes were secluded. In the colonial era, seclusion, symbolised by the harem,



assumed a central place in the discourse on women, Islam, and progress. The harem was also linked in the European imagination to the veil. Like the veil, the harem was seen as a barrier to progress (Bullock 2002:18).

The barrier in the discourse of women and Islam relates to a historical past. My installation creates a visible barrier that prevents male entry. In other words, I created a gendered space.

The emphasis has been on the public-private dichotomy-with the public world of men associated with power, status, control of information and decision making, and the private world of women associated with relative powerlessness and domestic life (El-Scolh and Mabro, 1994). Women are portrayed as helpless, passive victims, whose every identity, status and existence are dependent on their male kin (Mazumbar & Mazumbar 2001:303).

As negative as this quote is, it is the truth. Some of the conflicts I have with my father are dominated by his patriarchal views and embodied actions.

Feminist Gerda Lerner traces a 'creation of patriarchy' in Islam through the continual repetition of male-dominated rituals and events in Islamic society over time (Ebbitt 2015).

Religion, women, and gender are unstable terms. These terms cause tensions that is often negotiated in a changing sociocultural society. I consider my home a private space where my family members navigate these unstable tensions, and within my home, my bedroom is my private sanctuary. Within the perimeters of my home, my scarf installation became a gendered space.

My scarf installation is a space created for women only. To unpack my scarf installation further:

Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power (Castelli 2001:1).



I explore the concept of space as ‘dynamic, constructed and contested’ (Beebe et al 2012:524). My intention is not to provoke the restrictions of being a Muslim woman, except that the confines of a space covered with scarves addresses that ‘memory is both personal and social’ (Daniels 2009:83).

Covering the walls with scarves creates a physical boundary that conveys issues of ‘belonging, exclusion and ambiguous’ (Beebe 2012:525). Therefore, the gendered space that I created can historically relate to harems. Lisa Lowe states that,

...the harem is not merely an orientalist voyeur’s fantasy of imagined female sexuality; it is also a possibility of an erotic universe in which there are no men, a site of social and sexual practices that are not organized around the phallus or a central male authority (1991:48, cited in Moore 2008:60).

My scarf installation suggests a harem reference, however, for my thesis I am more interested in the scarfs as a memory to help my personal understanding of wearing the *hijab*.

*Representational spaces* are where meaning is made from the ‘complex symbolisms’ drawn from the experience of the everyday ‘lived’ physical space and the meaning we make of it, through the ‘conceptualizations’ we assign to that ‘lived’ space. In [Henri] Lefebvre’s words, *representational spaces* are ‘lived through associated images and symbols and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’. The space can be changed or appropriated by the imagination. According to Lefebvre, it ‘overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects’ (Beebe 2012:528).

The *hijab* is a symbol that I wear for religious and personal reasons, but the *hijab* translates to a scarf an object that holds meaning and memories.

These memories are described in a prelude journal entry to Part three: My Madinah and Makkah Experience in terms of gender, intertextuality (textile as a metaphorical language), and embodiment.

### Part Three: My Madinah and Makkah Experience

Saturday, 29 December 2018.

#### Masjidul Quba, Madinah

It is thick, stuffy and suffocating with a faint smell of urine in the air. Instantly, I lift up my dress as I notice a layer of water on the floor. "Walk faster," I hear my sister behind me, but I am mesmerized at the sheer vastness of the space, lined with toilet cubicles, framed with white square tiles. The further I walk the more pungent the smell becomes.

I remind myself why I am here. Although this place is lacking some basic hygiene principles, I search for a somewhat clean and clear spot to make wudhu (ablution). At the corner of my eye, I notice a lady holding a small thick green towel as she bends over to dry her foot. It sounds like a busy flea market filled with women's voices from around the world, gushing water from nearby taps and high-pitched throat gurgling.

I spot an area with a basic wooden stool; a tap and clear wooden shelves and I immediately pick up my pace. As I sit down on the hard stool, I place my bag on the shelf. I roll up my sleeves to my elbows. I grip my scarf and unfold the layers and drop it haphazardly onto the shelf, shortly

followed by my onder kappie (a small scarf worn under the *hijab*). As I lift my dress up further, I tuck it into my pants waist making sure it stays in place. I bend over and loosen my shoelaces and pull each foot out followed by my blue and white socks and place them neatly on the floor beside me.

I open the tap gently allowing a little cold water to trickle towards the drain. I whisper "Bis-mil-laa-hi-wal ham-du-lil-laahi" before I begin wudhu (ablution). I wash my hands three times, I rinse my mouth three times, I rinse my nose three times, I wash my face (from ear to ear) three times, I wash my right arm up to my elbow three times, I wash my left arm up to my elbow three times, I rinse my forehead (at least three strands of hair) three times, I wash my right ear three times, I wash my left ear three times, I wash my right foot up to the ankle three times, I wash my left foot up to the ankle three times. I grab my hand towel from my bag and begin drying off all the exposed wet areas of my body.

As I am walking out of the bathroom, I remember what my mother said to me years ago, "Remember, it must come from the heart, that's what counts." No matter the smells, lack of ventilation or lack of basic hygiene principles, I am reminded of

my purpose, which is to pray (make salaah) for the sake of Allah and being intentionally conscious of the act I am about to perform.

**Monday, 31 December 2018.**

**Madinah.**

I do not know where we are. It is dark I am tired and hungry. The bus begins to slow down. I look to my right-hand side and see various food restaurants that I am unfamiliar with. But I am hungry and in need of a decent meal.

The bus stops. I do not know what time it is. We have been travelling for hours and eating is the only thing on my mind.

With my siblings we begin walking to the restaurants. The air is cool but there is a lot of people. Everywhere I look there are men, women and children running around.

After ten minutes, fed up waiting in a long queue, I notice much shorter queues on my left-hand side. I have the urge to walk over there, but I notice a hip length wall barrier blocking me from walking to that side. Looking around at my immediate surroundings I plan how to get to the shorter queue. I exit the restaurant, walk five steps to my right, push the door open, enter the restaurant and stand in a short queue.

Smiling and quite proud of myself for figuring out how to stand in a shorter queue I heard a man with a deep Arab accent told me “You belong there!” pointing to a separate “family” section for “woman” only.

I looked up into the man’s eyes ignoring the voice in my head saying “Lower your gaze” which I was taught at a young age to do, I stamped my foot, turned my back and walked out of the restaurant.

With a flushed face I angrily walked back to the “family” section where my sister laughed at me. This is my first encounter with how a woman is treated in Saudi Arabia.

**Thursday, 03 January 2019.**

**Makkah.**

It is midnight. I am wearing a white salaah (prayer) top and white headscarf. My intention is to perform my second Umrah with my siblings and a small group of people I travelled with.<sup>12</sup>

I lock my hotel room and begin walking towards the elevator. I stop at the elevator and press the ground floor button and wait. After a few minutes, the elevator door opens and as I enter, people greet me as they exit.

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<sup>12</sup> Umrah is a non-mandatory pilgrimage made by Muslims in Makkah at any time of the year.

The elevator door stops and opens, and I begin walking to the foyer where I see a group of familiar faces gathered in a group. Ten minutes later we start making our way to the entrance of the hotel.

I hear our travel group leader say our taxis have arrived to take us to the Mosque. I stand back to allow the older people to go ahead of me. As I look around me, I notice the streets are busy with cars, taxis and buses stopping to drop people off.

As I await my turn, I open the front passenger side of the taxi, lift my left foot onto the step and begin lifting myself up take my seat, when I hear the Arab driver say:

“Haram, haram”, “no woman sits here!” Taken aback, shocked at the outburst, I hear my group leader say softly “Oh yes, Saudi and their views, Rushda, rather sit at the back, they do not allow females to sit at the front.”



Puzzled I nodded and said nothing and walked towards the back seat.

**Monday, 7 January 2019.**

### **Makkah**

Sometimes I think to myself I should have considered wearing a pardah (a black cloth/veil that covers the face and sometimes the eyes) just to be treated well in Saudi. It is how I am feeling now. It is frustrating. And it is not the language barrier, it is about being a woman and being treated differently.

My sister and I did our last shopping for the day and we were walking to our hotel room when I reached out and swiped the door card key, but it refused to unlock. Frustrated because it was not the first time it happened and tired from exploring the streets of Makkah, my sister asked me to go sort it out at the reception.

Our hotel had two towers and the reception is in the first tower. As I exit my hotel and enter the main reception area, I notice an Arab man in the traditional Saudi white thobe behind the counter. I walk up to the reception desk. Tapping my key card against the encounter waiting for my turn. As he concludes with a customer, he helps another man that has come after me. Shocked and annoyed, I start moving closer to him, thinking he might not have noticed me. Then he begins helping someone else

after he made eye contact with me. Annoyed with him ignoring me, I walk up to him shouting “Hey!!” and everyone around the room looks up and I shout “Fix!!” holding my key card in the air and slamming it on the counter.

I hear him mumbling something in Arabic which I do not understand but I say out loud “Yes, respect goes both ways”, not caring if he understands. He places the key card on the counter. I march out of the hotel with mixed emotions.

### **Experiencing and Making:**

My journal entries in Part three explore how I experienced Saudi as a South African Muslim woman. To summarise, the first encounter was when I walked into a restaurant space and a man with a deep Arab accent told me, “You belong there!” pointing to a separate ‘family’ section for ‘women’ only. The second encounter happened when I got into the front seat of the taxi, when the Arab driver said “*Haram, haram*, no woman sit here!” As a woman from South Africa, I did not fully grasp both incidents as it is an uncommon scenario in Cape Town. Yet, when I read the book *Daring to Drive: My Life as an Accidental Activist in a Kingdom of Men* by Manal Al- Sharif, I began to understand the visceral struggles of Saudi women.

In Makkah, the transcultural experience describes the textual space in which I made sense of the invisible boundaries between sociocultural norms.

Women are found in a multitude of different circumstances and their identities tempered by religious beliefs, class backgrounds, the social contexts in which they find themselves, and personal experiences . . . identities do not have a fixed essence but rather are always made and remade [and] power relations are an important part of identities . . . Thus such a broad label as Arab women may at times also encompass conflicting and antagonistic identities and experiences (Moore 2008:1).

I therefore feel a need to express my feelings after my experiences of gendered spaces in Madinah and Makkah. I know that the Quran has a chapter dedicated to women, titled An-Nisa.

The Quran, as we have seen, expresses women's equality and the Prophet did much to improve the status of women (Roded 2008:17).

After making *wudhu* (ablution), I take my Quran and read Surah An-Nisa (The Women) in Arabic and the English translation.<sup>13</sup> Thinking about the concept of women, I decide to weave the experience into a textile because my grandmother was a seamstress and my mother crochets as a hobby.

'Textiles' in this context provides a site in which cultural, social, personal, historical and aesthetic concerns intersect (Jeffries et al 2016:3).

However, from a historical study of textiles, Mary Schoeser an American textile historian and curator states that 'language and textile production share something in common' (Jeffries et al 2016:3). Schoester further states:

With or without inscriptions, textiles convey all kinds of 'texts': allegiances are expressed, promises are made ... memories are preserved, new ideas are proposed.. The 'plot' is provided by the socially meaningful elements; the 'syntax' is the construction. [. . .] Textiles can be prose or poetry, instructive or the most demanding of texts (Schoeser 2003: 7 cited in Jeffries et al 2016:3).

Having multiple identities lends to an interdisciplinary art practice that blurs my artistic boundaries and further translates into the tapestry *An-Nisa* as a visual representation of merging traditional weaving and crochet into a modern woven textile.

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<sup>13</sup> Before touching the Quran one needs to make *wudhu* (ablution) first.



Figure 19: Rushda Deaney, *An-Nisa*, 2019.

*An-Nisa* is a tapestry that explores the meaning of Muslim women. As the:

Etymological derivation of line and tissue suggests, it is perhaps in stitching and weaving that we find the most obvious examples of how surfaces are constituted from threads, and how traces are generated in the process (Ingold 2007:62).

The process of repurposing a wooden frame, to make a loom to weave creates an alternative use more valuable. Using my mother's ball of crochet yarn, I begin to loop the thread around the bottom nail and tie a knot. Once the knot is tight and secure, I pull the thread vertically towards the opposite top nail and loop the thread around the nail keeping an even tension.

With a single, continuous line of yarn but with one set of parallel lines, the warp, strung lengthwise, through which another line, the weft is threaded clockwise, alternately over and under the warp strings (Ingold 2007: 62).

Instead of traditionally weaving the weft with the yarn, I crochet the weft. Essentially a crocheting stitch is a knot, but when I combine the different techniques, it mimics the similarities of the self and 'Other'. The warp metaphorically identifies as the self (me) that

experience the tensions of the strict sociocultural norms of Saudi. By crocheting the warp, I produce an 'other' macro perception of interpreting my experience of Islam.

The cultural boundary between the West and its colonies – or between imperial centre and colonial periphery – is one important boundary that we want to negotiate, though we are aware that the 'other' beyond the border can often only be understood – and in a skewed way at that – in terms of the self and the categories of the 'we'. Insofar as Orientalism, for example, is a specifically Western cultural way of understanding the Orient, to understand the other often comes down to a kind of misrecognition of the self; an understanding of the other only to the extent that it can be understood as a kind of mimicry of the self; an imaginary image of the other (Viljoen 2013:xiii).

Because of my personal experience of being a Muslim woman in Saudi Arabia, I write this thesis from a dual perspective. The duality between the self and other relates to feeling invisible and ignored which negates the stereotypes often portrayed by Muslim women in the West.

The relationality of boundaries: i.e. boundaries as devices for creating, articulating, maintaining, crossing or negotiating relations between 'self' and 'other' or a range of 'others', self and world, text and world, text, and nature, etc.; (Viljoen 2013: xvii).

The Arabic dialect is generally spoken in Madinah and Makkah therefore, the crocheted Arabic calligraphy *An-Nisa* is a direct reflection of Muslim women in Saudi Arabia and my experiences of being a Muslim woman initiates a metaphorical 'idea of the text as a woven tapestry' (Ingold 2007:68).

Metaphor, itself defined metaphorically in textile terms, 'provides an interpretative thread by means of which we can weave together into a fresh constellation the brute 'literal' facts of the world' (Tilley 1999: 7 cited in Jeffries et al 2016:124).



*An-Nisa* is my embodied experience that explores the sociocultural norms of Muslim women from Madinah and Makkah.

*Embodiment* is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (n.d.) as ‘a tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, or feeling,’ and the concept of sense if self is an example of an idea-the idea of who each of us is an individual (Chrisler & Robledo 2018:3).

Furthermore:

The term embodiment originates in the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962), a philosopher who contributed significantly to phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty wrote about the lived body as a social agent. All perception—indeed, all of our experience—of the world is embodied. We cannot understand the world we live in, nor can we interact with each other or act on the environment around us, without our bodies. Everything we know, everything we do, and everything we are is mediated by the body (Chrisler & Robledo 2018:3).

The Middle Eastern culture is practiced differently to the Western culture.<sup>14</sup>

Although Western cultures frame the body as private and allocate different amounts of personal space around it to form boundaries between individuals and others, Merleau-Ponty (1962) insisted that the body is never isolated from the world but instead is always engaged in it, observed and touched by others (McHugh 2017:9)

Being a South African Muslim woman in Saudi, I felt the restrictions of movement in my personal space. The discomfort frustrated me because I am used to the liberty of living. My physical appearance blended with the dress code that mirrors the rest of the Muslim women in Saudi. My religion made me feel insignificant.

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<sup>14</sup> I refer to the Western culture in terms of how Muslim women are portrayed.

From a different perspective, this journal entry explores the sociocultural context of being a Muslim woman in South Africa.

**Monday, 09 January 2017.**

**Stellenbosch.**

"I stole nothing!" The door closes. I place my left hand on my right shoulder and apply pressure as I begin to slowly massage it. The tension in the air tightens.

The door opens again and a female police officer walks inside and says, "I am here to frisk you." I look the female police officer in the eyes and nod my head, I stretch my arms out as she begins.

"Take off your headscarf", says the female police officer. I look around me, puzzled by the instruction. Standing in front of her, I stand taller, breath in slowly and say, "Close the door please, before you take my headscarf off". A few moments later, I lift my arms, grab hold of either side of my folded headscarf and gently lift it off my head, and hand it over to the female police officer.

She unfolds my headscarf, shakes it multiple times, looks me in the eyes and says, "Thank you", and hands my headscarf back to me. Not bothering to fold my headscarf to the way it was folded before, I placed the headscarf on my head in a gestural manner. As the female police offer leaves, I hear "What! She does have it." A

few moments later I hear muffled voices on the other side of the door. Much later, the door barges open and I lift my head up. A man in a police uniform walks in, closes the door and starts speaking. His voice is extremely loud and clear. For personal reasons I will not share what he said. For the past hour I have kept my composure, but as the male police officer continues to speak, I break down and begin to cry, pleading my innocence over and over again. Finally he says, "Go with this police officer." As I leave left the room I notice people are staring at me. I instantly drop my gaze to the floor and exit the store. I look up again. A big mistake. People in the street are standing outside the shops, in front of the cars, starring. It is warm. I feel sticky. I continue walking until I stop in front of the police van.

"Get in", says the male police officer. He opens the door. I place my foot on the vans step, lifting myself up, but I stop, frozen. Inside it is dirty. It smells like a mixture of sweat, alcohol, and crime. The two windows at either side of the van has black bars, dimming the bright sunlight creating an eerie atmosphere. I do not want to get

in. But I brace myself. I take a deep breath,  
and then I hear someone say:  
“No! not there, come sit in the front, you  
don’t belong in the back of the van”.

### **Reflecting on my Muslim Identity:**

I have the privilege and liberty within my sociocultural context to practice Islam freely in South Africa. This journal entry alludes to thinking about apartheid ‘as simultaneously connected and oppositional’ (Gqola 2001: 2). Pumla Dineo Gqola further states that,

Such an approach allows us to see the shifts between apartheid and post-apartheid realities not in terms of rupture - even as we recognise what has changed - but also in terms of association. Put simply, we are both free and *not entirely* free of apartheid. These meanings rub up against each other and inflect our lives in material ways (2001:2).

Placing the *hijab* on my head and folding the *hijab* around my face creates a border that identifies me as a Muslim woman. This is unlike Saudi Arabia where I blur in with the rest of the Muslim women, making me almost invisible. However, in South Africa wearing I am easily recognised as a Muslim woman.

Veiling, for example, takes on different meanings for women depending on their exact location at the moment of performance-wearing a veil in Egypt helps a woman ‘fit in’ while in the United States it ‘differentiates’ her (Read and Bartkowski 2000, 430-4 cited in Prickett 2015:54).

Muslim woman (singular) is seen ‘as a category that is isolated and needs to be penetrated’ (Shakry, 1998 cited in Daniels 2009:84).

This ‘othering’ of Muslim and African women works against identifying the often hidden connections and struggles that women share globally. Likewise, by lumping Muslim women together as a homogeneous group, the experiences of non-Arab Muslims tend to be overlooked (Daniels 2009:84).

My experience informs my art practice. In Part Four, I set aside themes like gender and patriarchy and feel my way through the process of making. This allows me to generate practical ideas. These practical ideas are documenting my thoughts, taking process photographs, or drawing. The following Part: Four: Material inquiry describes my process in more detail.

## Part Four: Material Inquiry

Monday, 3 August 2020.

### Local fabric shop.

It is a warm winter's day in Cape Town as I walk into my local fabric shop. Walking into the shop wearing my compulsory face mask, I sanitize my hands. Rubbing my hands together in a slow motion, I begin looking at the various fabrics on display. The reason I came to the shop is two-fold. Firstly, to have a look at the chiffon material. I have come to enjoy how a chiffon headscarf drapes, but I feel it is expensive to purchase. However, as I am walking to the chiffon section, I notice the price is reasonable per meter, but the quality is not nearly the same as what I usually purchase at local scarf shops.

As I am touching the chiffon fabric I began moving towards warmer

fabrics. I do not mean warmer tone fabrics but rather thicker, heavier fabrics. I have a habit of touching fabrics, holding the fabric and crushing it. This action shows me whether the fabric creases easily. I take this step further and hold the fabric in each hand and pull it. This allows me to feel if the fabric has a one way or four way stretch. It is a habit. I do these actions at clothing shops too. One could say I inspect the fabric before I purchase it to feel its quality.

Twice, I am called by my sister. I move in her direction and inspect the choice of fabric she likes. A hobby that she began during lockdown is sewing, which is why she began asking questions about how the fabric drapes or is this fabric thick enough to sew pants.

I consider myself an amateur. I could not answer her questions honestly as I have never used fabric for the purpose of making clothing items.

As I walk away from her, I intuitively go to the same spot. The thick fabrics. I stand there looking around me, asking myself why am I here again? I begin touching the fabrics. My fingers start lingering on what looks like a canvas fabric. Without thinking I begin pulling the threads and the fabric slowly unravels. I see customers walk towards me. I walk away. After a while I see them walk away and I walk towards the same area and like a bad habit I begin unravelling again. A few minutes later my sister asks me, why am I here? I could not answer that same question to myself

which is why I pulled the whole roll of fabric out from the shelf and asked the gentleman to cut me a meter of the fabric. As I walked out of the fabric shop, I decided I needed to rather find an answer to the question by getting to know the fabric intimately.

Two days later, after I rinsed and ironed the fabric, I begin inspecting the fabric. It is stiff. Holding the fabric in my right hand I can feel the weight. As I place my fingers along the fabric, I can feel the complexity of the weave. Since I started unravelling the fabric in the shop, I decided to continue with that technique. I noticed the fabric is thicker and the weave is distinct. The weave is more noticeable to the eye.

I start from the right pulling the warp thread in a downward motion, but I notice that I need to pull two threads instead of one. This finding surprises me because I am used to pulling one thread at a time. It is not easier or harder to unravel, however, it makes me realise that the fabric is made up of a different weave. The more I unravel I notice a pattern beginning to form.

Taking inspiration from the pattern I continue to unravel. As the hours go by, I begin to create a bold, visible pattern. And then I stop. I ask myself: 'Where is this going?' I begin looking through my journal and I stop on the page where I first wrote the word 'process'. At that moment I take into consideration that I am

involved in a process and need to trust the process. I place the needle onto the fabric because my *taghiyaat*<sup>15</sup> finger starts cramping. I begin stretching my arms and rubbing my hands together. As I shift in my grandmother's chair, I realise that I need another way to process my thoughts. Writing my thoughts as I am doing unravelling is only one aspect of this process. This might seem naïve, but I consider myself an amateur photographer. I decided to take photos of making process.



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<sup>15</sup> Index finger.

My father owns a Canon EOS 70d digital camera and a tripod. I decided to take advantage and use it. To me photography is a medium that allows me to express myself visually. It gives me the opportunity to capture time instantly for reference. I grip the camera with my left hand while my right-hand zooms in and out of the frame as my eye focuses on what I see through the lens. My body moves along with the camera. The camera becomes an extension of me. We become in sync and I get lost in taking different angles or zooming in and out and playing with natural light. Seeing the process through the lens becomes a way of communicating how I see and supports the process which encourages me to explore my Muslim identity further.



The next day I continue to unravel. It has been three days and I feel a connection with the fabric. Sometimes I need to pull and tug on the threads when I pull the needle through the weave. The more I unravel the thread the longer the thread becomes. It is time consuming. I realise I need to cut the thread as too much pulling can create tension within the weave. I do not want that. I notice a pile of threads start accumulating. Over time the pile gets bigger, some threads are short some threads are long. I notice three things happening, the fabric itself, the unravelled pattern I am

purposefully creating and finally the loose threads gathering in a pile.

I am aware of an A4 notebook in the corner of my eye. As I reach for it I realise that this can be another avenue for art making. I can draw. An abstract drawing. Another way of interpreting the process. For this drawing I decide to use the pile of broken threads as inspiration. I begin drawing. After ten minutes I take progress photographs of the drawing with the pile of threads. As I place the camera on the table, I grip the needle between my index finger and thumb and pull the threads. After twenty minutes I continue drawing and thereafter take photographs. Towards lunchtime it becomes a continuous movement between drawing, unravelling and photographing.



I made a mistake. I give a huge sigh and I begin to worry. For the past few days, the unravelling began to form a pattern. I did not plan to create a pattern but I began noticing a pattern emerging and I took advantage of the process. But four or five rows later I made a mistake.

To unravel I pull the thread out, but I cannot erase a mistake. I cannot unravel an unravelled thread. Therefore, the pattern changed. I am nervous. I drop the needle on the fabric and stare at my mistake. It changed. The pattern changed. The more I repeated 'the pattern changed' out loud to myself I consciously

decide that it needed to change. I need to adapt to the change. The repetitive movement had become such a comfortable activity that the merest little mistake made me nervous. I therefore decided that it was not a mistake, but rather 'a making and creating of a pattern'. It was not my unconscious making the decisions but my needle deciding for me.



### 6 August 2020

There is an oddly satisfying feeling when I pull the threads out. The tension of the material/weave is so tight. I have to grip the thread at

a reasonable tension to not disrupt the previous pattern.

I hear my father asking if there is a faster way to unravel. I do not immediately respond, but rather write it down in my journal to ponder on what he has said.

Unravelling, crochet, loom-weaving are all handcrafted. By using my hands, I use my sense of touch. I feel my way through the process. My hands become part of making which I feel creates more meaning.

I continue to unravel, reading, writing, drawing and taking photographs of my process/progress.

Something was bothering me. The constant movement between reading, unravelling, drawing and photographing has become monotonous. The motion became a routine. And from personal



experience, routine, although it has a purpose, can become stifling. I felt in this case that my process needed another layer so I decided to reuse the thread I unravelled and create a 10cm x 10cm weave. The reason behind the size is that I needed to make a mock-up. I wanted to weave broken threads. I took a 10cm x 10 cm Styrofoam square. I drew 1 centimetre apart vertical lines for guidance. With the technique of weaving in mind, I constructed a makeshift loom weave. I placed office pins at the top and bottom and attached the unravelled thread.



I find it more challenging to weave in this manner in comparison to unravelling. To take it a step further I had to separate the existing longer threads from the more medium length threads. The traditional method of weaving is to weave the weft in a continuous movement, keeping the tension even. Since I made an unconventional loom weave, I decided to continue to weave the weft in a non-traditional manner.



The photograph above on closer inspection shows the warp threads hanging on the left side of the weave. This happened because I used single existing threads. As I insert the unravelled thread into the needle's eye, I need to weave under and over the warp slowly and carefully. The unravelled threads are soft and brittle and break easily. As I weave I start to recognize a new perspective. A few days ago I bought material on impulse and instinct. The material changed in appearance through an intuitive process of unravelling. Through this process the appearance of

the fabric changed by creating patterns I never planned or foresaw. By using the unused, unravelled threads I create a 'new' fabric.

**8 August 2020**

### **Weaving with recycled threads**



It took me three days to weave a 10cm x 10 cm square. The process of remaking a textile from an existing fabric is rewarding. It is unique in the size, frayed look and recycled thread.



The material is fragile, delicate, light, dainty and flimsy. It is soft to the touch, compared to the original material, which is hard, heavy and thick.



The photograph above highlights how fragile the material is. I only noticed after taking the photograph that my hand can be seen through the fabric. This transparency

translates how fragile and delicate the material is.

After completing the material, I continue to draw. I need to keep the momentum, even though I do not know what the next step will be. As I am drawing my mind becomes relaxed. I sift what I have done so far. I can continue to create a larger weave with the left-over unravelled thread, but that would mean I need to knot the thread to extend it to create the warp, and I was not feeling ready to start a new project. Drawing for me is a calming, expressive gesture that allows me to process my thoughts. I find that it is in being busy in the creative process of making that I find answers.



I gather my thoughts from my journal, I look at my drawings in my Hahnemühle notebook and I relook at all the progress/process photographs I have taken so far. I know that they are intrinsically linked together and weave a cohesive body of work. But upon further introspection I separate the links and look at each section separately, and it is in that moment that I remember the prayer mat that I had unravelled in 2017. The first object I unravelled. I still have the unravelled threads in a

packet in my cupboard. Years ago, I began separating them by colour and knotting the same colours together with the intention to weave, but I did not. Now years later I hold the threads in my hand with a new sense of commitment.

Reweaving the prayer mat by using the unravelled thread is a challenging concept. I have to decide to either weave landscape or portrait. I must decide on the scale of the mat. Since I have woven recently with unravelled thread, I know there are restrictions. I need to negotiate a method that works best for the fragile thread.

After many deliberations I purposefully decided to connect the fragile threads together. This process was not easy. The threads become entangled. Some threads

are only 1 centimetre long, some are five centimetres and other are much longer. I become frustrated. The unravelled threads are so brittle they break when I try to connect the threads together. To loom-weave, the tension in the warp needs to be tight and firm. I know that sometimes the thread snaps as I thread onto the pin and give the thread a gentle pull to the opposite end. I notice that some threads are thicker, some are finer and connecting them together does make them stronger.



After working on this project for two days I

stopped. Not because I am the project, but because it my reading time. To be not going to continue with took up way too much of continued...

### **Reflecting:**

My research is a practice-led material inquiry. In Part One, I investigated my Muslim identity with a ritual and decorative object. In Part Two, I discuss the literal and metaphorical terms borders and boundaries in relation to themes like gender/patriarchy, gendered spaces, and the *hijab* in relation to my scarf installation. In Part Three, I discuss *An-Nisa* (The Women) tapestry as a maker for my experience in Madinah and Makkah.

For Part Four, I feel the need to include that not all of my research is centred on objects associated with Islam with themes of gender, religion, and woman. This journal entry explores how I interpret materiality of the fabric and how the recycled threads are reweaved for artwork. Unravelling the fabric as

.. an investigation, material exploration becomes an activity within the research process, which the researcher observes and reflects upon while making. Materiality of the artefact emerging in the material exploration not only affect the appearance and meaning of the artefact, but also shapes the experience of the maker during and after the exploration (Nimkulrat et al 2016:4).

Generating new knowledge through art-making translates into a kind of experiential and tacit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge is the personal knowledge resident within the mind, behavior and perceptions of individuals. Tacit knowledge includes skills, experiences, insight, intuition and judgment. It is typically shared through discussion, stories, analogies and person-to-person interaction; therefore, it is difficult to capture or represent in explicit form. Because individuals continually add personal knowledge, which changes behavior and perceptions, tacit knowledge is by definition uncapped (Casonato and Harris, 1999 cited in Busch & Richards 2007:3).

In this written component of my research, I have woven significant academic quotes from multiple sources through my personal experience of these themes, as they emerge from my

journals. Just as I unravelled the fabric of prayer mats to meditate on these themes, I used this project to unravel and re-weave the complexities of my identity as a Muslim female artist engaging the spiritual and the social through material practice.

By including my experiences in an auto ethnographical manner, the objects that are associated with Islam allows me to contemplate questions concerning my Muslim identity. Exploring my Muslim identity through my art practice is a constant challenge. There are some considerations I need to research while creating an artwork.

The material exploration and making is an intuitive process.

Intuition is knowing without (or against) discursive thinking or ratiocination (Reid 1981:27).

My intuition guides me throughout my art process. In other words, I feel my way through my making. Like my experiences in this thesis occurred naturally, my intuition guides my material exploration to generate knowledge. I generate knowledge through the material exploration by deconstructing the material. By taking the material apart, I begin to gesture how I feel through the limitations of the reclaimed material. I document the process by taking photographs, drawing and writing about the restrictions and problems that occur while creating. This process gives me insight that generates over time.

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