Maternal Identity and Muslim Ethics: South African Women’s Experiences

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Abstract: Muslim women are often caught between idealized images of motherhood within Islamic traditions and the challenges of their lived experiences, as they navigate their subjective identities as Muslim mothers in contemporary South African society. We discuss mothering experiences as an epistemological site for the construction of complex Muslim maternal subjectivities. In part, these subjectivities demonstrate innovative responsiveness to the complexity of mothering amid changing social norms, through the crafting of maternal value frameworks that reflect both the particularities of contemporary social life as well as the quest for a more universal Islamic moral perspective. We argue that Muslim women’s dynamic constructions of their maternal subjectivities represent a form of lived, contemporary Islamic ethics.

Keywords: motherhood; Islamic ethics; Islamic feminism; ijtihad; ordinary ethics; subjectivity

1. Introduction

This paper draws on a doctoral research project that involved qualitative interviews conducted with South African Muslim women exploring their experiences of motherhood in relation to their religious identity and understandings of Islamic religious tradition. An important part of the research examines the discourses that the women engage in and draw on in their representation of their lived experiences as Muslim mothers. In so doing, we aim to understand how women’s religious subjectivities are influenced by and reflect upon dominant renderings of motherhood in Islamic traditional discourses. Normative religious views that motherhood is a desired identity that women should aspire to and meet with joyful compliance tend to obscure the day-to-day reality of complex psycho-social challenges that mothers navigate, often short of substantive guidance from religious sources.

In this paper, we approach motherhood as an experiential site of knowledge production in which mothers engage in a dialectical negotiation of their Muslim identity vis a vis their socio-cultural and ethico-religious lifeworlds (Barlas 2008, p. 22). Using excerpts from interviews with Muslim mothers, we discuss some of these dialectical engagements as complex negotiations between various sets of ethical scripts aimed at producing social solutions to contemporary family and parenting challenges. We conclude with the argument that these Muslim women’s constructions of their maternal subjectivities (their motherhoods) represent a form of lived, contemporary Islamic ethics.

2. Muslim Motherhood Discourses

Traditional and neo-traditional (Woodhead 2013, p. 65) Islamic discourses tend to present women in essentialist terms, primarily through androcentric representations of women’s sexuality and reproductivity. In these discourses, motherhood is rationalised as the natural outcome desired by women based on their biological design to bear children. The emphasis on positing motherhood as a natural, desirable condition of womanhood...
both obscures the complex and nuanced nature of Muslim women's mothering experiences. In this process, such discourses often render invisible the complex and nuanced nature of Muslim women’s mothering experiences in the interplay between social, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. Here, a central Islamic feminist epistemological critique is that such neo-traditional approaches tend to offer androcentric notions of gendered subjectivity, often based on gender ideology developed in pre-modern socio-cultural settings. As such, these discourses regularly reflect normative understandings of gender constructs characteristic of historical contexts quite different from the contemporary period. (Kueny 2013) Such constructs, for example, that women primarily belong in the domestic sphere, prevail within contemporary dominant Muslim discourses and continue to influence gendered and religious subjectivities in contemporary Muslim communities despite the tensive reality of social contexts where women are regularly active in the public domain.

Motherhood constitutes one influential category of gendered identity underpinning neo-traditionalist gender ideologies. Islamic discourses are replete with images of the lofty status of mothers, a valorisation of mothers’ self-sacrifice and childbearing ability as the epitome of successful motherhood. Such discursive framings exhort Muslim women to pursue motherhood as their primary identity marker and ties this identity to no less than a form of religious piety as it is said to represent the acquiescence to the natural role intended for women by God. Yet, whilst Muslim women are exhorted to the primary identity of motherhood, there is a historical absence of engagement with the actual day-to-day realities many mothers contend with. In the contemporary period, this includes women who endeavour to execute the role of primary caregiver/nurturer in raising Muslim children, often without substantial material or emotional support that traditionalists simply assume is present.³ The idyllic Muslim family in prominent neo-traditionalist discourse presumes a two-parent hetero-normative family with the husband providing financial maintenance and other forms of benevolent support to the wife and family. This, however, does not reflect the experiences and materialities of many Muslim mothers in the contemporary South African context.⁴

To explore some of these tensions, contradictions, and potential overlaps between dominant gendered traditional constructions of mothering and the actual realities of contemporary Muslim women, it is crucial to engage their lived experiences and how they embody their roles as mothers. Moreover, an exploration of how women’s lived and imaginary relations to mothering both inform and are informed by their diverse religious and spiritual contexts allows for a plurality of subject positions and realities to be heard (Jones 2016, p. 113). In our pursuit of understanding the maternal religious subjectivities of the mothers in this study, we focused on exploring the diverse ways the participants engaged in ethical meaning-making as religious subjects.

We argue that there are precedents within Islamic tradition to think about the intersections of mothering and lived ethics. Indeed, an epistemological grounding of Muslim ethics through maternal subjectivity is a visible pedagogical trait of the Qur’an. Representations of motherhood are present in Qur’anic narratives about certain women, such as Prophet Musa’s (Moses’s) mother and ‘Isa’s (Jesus’s) mother, Maryam (Mary), amongst others. In examining such narratives, more clarity may be gained about a Qur’anic view of motherhood, with these historical women presented as mirrors through which issues pertaining to maternal ethics (as Muslim ethics) may be considered (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016, p. 15).

For example, one of the foremost figures mentioned in the Qur’an is Maryam (Mary),⁵ along with her mother (Qur’an 3:35–36). According to the Muslim narrative, Maryam (Mary) faced significant social and physical hardship, enduring a taboo pregnancy as an unmarried young woman who experienced a solitary childbirth.⁶ The Qur’an demonstrates how God responds to her maternal anxieties about childbirth, sending the archangel Jibreel (Gabriel) to support and guide her during her labour (Qur’an 19:23). In one particular verse, the Quran relays that Maryam is inspired to ‘shake the date palm’ (Qur’an 19:25) so dates may fall to nourish her. These details reflect upon underlying lessons evidenced
in this account, such as the pursuit of physical and psychological effort, and of agency in approaching intensely difficult situations.

Furthermore, the Qur’ān centres Maryam’s birth experience in vivid detail. Childbirth is usually not witnessed by many people, particularly men. So, from the perspective of those attentive to it, the Qur’ān foregrounds the significance of embodied female experiences as a vehicle for spiritual refinement and ethical cultivation, which provide pedagogical insights for the broader Muslim community. Shaikh and Seedat (2022, p. 211) illustrate that the Qur’ānic “niche of Maryam’s seclusion also becomes the niche that births salvation and guidance for humanity”. Moreover, Sa’dīyya Shaikh (2007) highlights the centrality of women’s embodied experiences as a conduit for apprehending the Qur’ān’s ethical teachings, which she conceptualizes as a ‘tafsir of praxis’. While a tafsir of praxis refers to the ways that women engage in an embodied way with Qur’ānic ethics, the character of Maryam and the detailed Qur’ānic description of her childbirth illustrates how the Qur’ān itself foregrounds women’s embodied experiences in spiritually significant ways. Here, it is also important to note Aliyah Schleifer’s (1997, p. 49) observation that at the outset, the Qur’ān, before representing Maryam as the mother of ‘Isa, presents her as a strong moral agent and religious subject in her own right. Schleifer notes that the Qur’ānic Maryam is a woman “whose own piety, religious empowerment, strength and blessedness were recognised before the birth of her son.” (ibid.). This means that in the Qur’ān, Maryam’s piety is not contingent on her motherhood (of ‘Isa) but on her devotion to worship her Lord.

Other mothers are not mentioned by name but are indicated by their role in various Qur’ānic narratives. Prophet Musa’s mother is highlighted in the Qur’ān through the narrative of her needing to safeguard her infant from Pharaoh’s persecution. As with Maryam, the Qur’ān narrates how God engaged her maternal anxieties and guides her response to her predicament (Qur’an 28:7, 28:10, 28:13). Also connected to Musa is his adoptive mother, Asiya, who, despite her precarious relationship with her tyrannical husband, Pharaoh, is inspired by God with love for the infant Musa. She thus takes him into the palace to be raised as a child of the royal household in a poetic undoing of Pharaoh’s plan to prevent an Israelite child from usurping his kingdom (Quran 28:9). In this way Schleifer describes her as “a defiant queen. . . who in later life chose to practice the religion preached by Musa, in direct rebellion against her husband” (Schleifer 1997, p. 49). Ethical and spiritual teachings on the nature of courage, fortitude, receptivity to the Divine, and intelligence are all modelled through these women in the Qur’ānic narratives of motherhood.

Arguably, these accounts present such women/mothers in the context of their full personhood, having socio-historical import firstly as religious actors, which included their care and protection of certain men—‘Isa and Musa in these cases. Such a reading offers a constructive alternative to the dominant renderings of women as the passive recipients of male guardianship and guidance. This is especially significant when considering that these women were, by neo-traditionalist standards, unconventional. Their domestic circumstances did not always conform to the popular narrative of the nuclear patriarchal family that is projected in the dominant conservative constructions of family and motherhood in Islamic texts. The tradition, however, presents these women in the fullness of their particularities and specificities, yet they are commonly bound by core ethico-moral codes, which they exemplify significantly, but not exclusively, through their role as mothers. Through such stories, these archetypal mothers serve as ethical guides for the broader Muslim community.

In attending to this interpretation, Cheruvallil-Contractor (2016, p. 15) highlights that “these women are varyingly described as supporters of the truth (Qur’an 5:75), who are inspired by God, who looks after their interests and does not let them grieve” (Qur’an 28:13). It is important here to acknowledge that this Qur’ānic interpretation of mothers can be set against the interpretation of men as exclusively messengers of truth. In most understandings of Islamic tradition, prophets and messengers are men who are tasked with the social
responsibility of delivering a message to their communities, even though Qur’anic mothers are portrayed as powerful supporters and adherents to these messages in their own right. In addition to Qur’anic narratives, the hadith literature and *qasas al-anbiyā* also relate details from the lives of certain mothers that refract religio-ethical principles of conduct. One such important mother is Hajar (Hagar), wife of prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) and mother of prophet Ismail. Although not mentioned by name in the Qur’an, Hajar is pivotal in the overarching narrative of establishing a prophetic lineage together with the Prophet Ibrahim, which culminates in the messenger of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad. The early Meccan community itself, which produced the ancestors of Prophet Muhammad, is traced back to Hajar’s epic endeavour in the desert, having been left there by her husband alone with her nursing, infant son. This seemingly incomprehensible act sets up the premise for the unfolding of an archetypal story portraying Hajar with the general spiritual and psychological constitution of a true believer in exegetical literature. Hajar and her trials are also implicitly evoked in the Qur’anic description of a *mu’min* (believer), which pointedly places the two hills that Hajar ran between (*sā’i*) in Mecca, in the group of verses addressed to the early members of the nascent Muslim community. Subtly evoking the struggles of Hajar, the verses teach believers about what *sabr* (patient perseverance), sacrifice, and trust in God in the face of uncertainty and insecurity represent (Qur’an 2:153–158). Hajar, driven by her need to safeguard her son’s wellbeing, after their supplies and probably her breastmilk dries up, creates a series of actions displaying behaviour emblematic of an ethics aligned to a spiritual consciousness and material awareness. She does not give in to hopelessness but maintains a willingness to strive, despite the harsh, barren conditions of the desert. Her actions become epitomised in the hajj rituals of the *sā’i* and the drinking of *zam-zam* up to this day. What we glean from Hajar in the various source texts echoes with some of the powerful invocations of mothers in the Qur’an as discussed above.

The Qur’an thus employs narratives of mothers to showcase the cultivation of certain character dispositions demonstrative of various ethical orientations symbolic of the nature of belief (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016, pp. 15–16). Such pedagogical maternal narratives are rich, creative resources that the Qur’an offers for distilling crucial concepts of spiritual self-refinement and moral/ethical orientations reflective of its worldview.

Although the research presented in this paper does not overtly investigate the participant’s views on Qur’anic mothers, their narratives nonetheless mirror some of the characteristic themes from Qur’an and hadith depictions of various mothers. From maternal anxieties regarding an infant’s safety, difficult labour, complex decision making, and psychological effort under strenuous circumstances in the best interest of their child, these are some of the themes that similarly reside in the experiences of the mothers in the Islamic tradition and those in this study. As the archetypal Qur’anic mothers acted within the parameters of their social contexts and personal circumstances to produce particular mothering choices, so too these participant’s dynamic engagement with their social contexts produced mothering choices representative of a striving to align with Qur’anic ethics as a form of lived, contemporary Muslim ethics.

3. Method

The empirical data for this paper is drawn from a selection of qualitative findings from the first author, Shafieka Moos’ doctoral research thesis entitled ‘Motherhood in Islam: A South African Perspective’ completed in 2021. The objectives of the research were to explore how South African Muslim women engage their Islamic religious tradition in their understanding and practices of motherhood. The study sought to render visible the discourses and meanings that Muslim mothers attribute to their mothering experiences and how they reflect on dominant renderings of motherhood in Islam.

The fieldwork component of the research was conducted between November 2018–May 2019. Participants were recruited via community-based organisations such as mosques and women’s groups in addition to using ‘word of mouth’ strategies where recruited women were invited to tell other women about the study and invited them to participate if they
were willing. This recruitment method is referred to as ‘snowball’ sampling and assisted us in contacting additional participants.

Participants comprised Muslim mothers from Cape Town, South Africa, mainly considered ‘coloured’ or ‘Indian’ according to the racial stratification system of South Africa’s apartheid population classification policies. A total of 19 women were interviewed, and, within this sample, 12 were married and 7 were unmarried. Of the unmarried participants, 5 were divorced and raising their children as single mothers, with one of them being an adoptive parent. The remaining 2 participants were widowed and mothering their grandchildren. Lastly, one of the married participants was in her second marriage, mothering her own 3 young children and a stepmother to her husband’s two young children from his previous marriage. Further to these identifying variables, there were also other socio-demographic variables such as differences in age, class, and educational background.

The interview schedule was piloted in a focus group with 8 women from a mosque-based religious instruction class (madrassah), in which we interviewed them on a range of questions related to their experiences of motherhood as Muslim women. Through administering the interview schedule to the focus group, the questions were refined for clarity and flow as the women were allowed to provide feedback on the kinds of questions and the scope of the questions asked.

After finalising the interview schedule, we conducted individual, face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews (SSID), in which we explored a range of topics focusing on the participant’s mothering experiences. These included questions on pregnancy and childbirth, parenting practices and values, social attitudes towards mothers as experienced by them, and how their religious tradition influenced their mothering. Each interview lasted between 90 to 120 min.

The data was analysed using a discourse analysis approach, the purpose being to understand and interpret the participants’ thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and conceptions (Davidsson Bremborg 2014) about their experiences of motherhood at the intersection of their faith tradition. We were interested in rendering visible participants’ various assumptions about motherhood, Islam, and women, and how these shaped their constructions of their subjective identities. Moreover, employing feminist qualitative research methodology, we must account for our own positionality. Being Muslim mothers ourselves, it was important to manage the dynamic of having close personal relationality to the subject matter. While recognising the positionality of all researchers, we attempted, through constant self-awareness and self-reflection, to be vigilant against projecting our pre-conceptions onto the data, and we sought to engage the women’s voices on their own terms. In acknowledging that meaning is produced within discourse (speaking/communication) (Maynard 1994), we focused on allowing the participants to lead their narrative constructions to allow for their positions to emerge as organically and independently as possible.

4. Findings

Two of the main themes to emerge from the data were, firstly, motherhood as a site of plural and diverse subjectivities rather than a uniform identity and, secondly, motherhood as a process of engaging the meaning of Islam and living as a faithful Muslim in current times. In the first theme, simplistic notions of self-sacrifice, patience, and the natural joy of motherhood were complicated by more nuanced, ambiguous responses from the participants to the demands of mothering. From differences in parenting styles, religious observance, and psychological responses, each participant had her unique relationship to motherhood. The second theme reflects the participants’ constant wrestling with notions of Islamic moral registers and their application to the rapidly changing social norms that they and their children face. These shifting norms often leave them feeling uncertain as to whether their parental responses are ‘Islamic’ enough. Despite this uncertainty, though, they persist in grappling with challenging parenting scenarios, often negotiating multiple decisions within the perceived constraints of Islamic permissibility and non-permissibility.
We consider these themes to be representative of ethical subject formation, which has resonance with the Muslim concept of *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* is a process of independent reasoning and analysis of Qur’an principles and values in discerning *shari’a* applications to specific social inquiries of either a private or public nature (Rhone 2011). In traditional Islamic scholarship, *ijtihad* is normatively considered a technical process reserved for religious scholars and practiced with specific methodological requirements within the main schools of jurisprudence (*madhabs*) within Sunni Islam (Perrin 2005). However, while the traditional, formal practice of *ijtihad* is historically associated with classical *ulama* (religious scholars), Muslim reform thinkers during the 20th century have promoted its use as a central feature of contemporary Qur’anic hermeneutics. *Ijtihad* can thus be considered a constructive approach to Islamic reform discourse marked by pivotal concepts, such as the primacy of the Qur’an as a source of value systems to be appropriated for generating social norms in line with both overarching fundamental Qur’anic values as well as the temporal contours of changing socio-political dynamics shaping the lived realities of Muslims (Ibid.).

Several gender reform scholar-activists have also engaged the importance of *ijtihad* in contemporary reform efforts (Al-Hibri 2000; Barlas 2002). In addition, Muslim women scholar-activists such as Amina Wadud (1992), Asma Barlas (2002), and Sa’diyya Shaikh (2007) foreground the importance of lived experience as an interlocuter of analysis and interpretation in women’s engagement with the Qur’an. Shaikh (2007) conceptualized the “*tafsir* of praxis” as an analytical category that focuses on experience as a site of knowledge production and ethical meaning-making. This, she argued, allows us to discern how women engage in the creation of an embodied Qur’anic hermeneutics through the prism of their lived experiences, which represents the dynamic social world of the text (Ibid.).

Employing such an approach, Islamic feminist scholarship promotes the equal status of women as religious actors who engage their faith traditions in producing meanings that shape their understanding of how ‘to do’ Islam. The detailed accounts offered by participants render visible the social mechanics of how they ascertain and apply Islamic principles and values to their everyday lived experiences, and it is what arguably constitutes what we posit is a “lay *ijtihad*”.

The idea of “lay *ijtihad*” has resonance with anthropologist Michael Lambek’s (2015, p. 10) broader notion of “ordinary ethics”, which focuses on how ethics pertain to the ordinary doings and sayings of people in their everyday comportment with the aim or objective of doing good or right. It is similarly focussed on appropriate ethical responses to the challenges of everyday life, while creatively and constructively negotiating these challenges from within Muslim life-worlds. Our participants’ narratives provide the living creative praxis of ordinary Muslims, which meaningfully enriches our understanding of Muslim ethics.

5. Encountering Challenges: Mothering as “Lay *Ijtihad*” or Ordinary Ethics

All participants’ narratives echoed the difficulty of mothering in current-day society, especially raising children “in the *deen*” (to follow the prescripts of Islam). Several participants linked this difficulty to the importance of religious education or the lack thereof.

“So, it’s difficult nowadays to raise children properly in the *deen*... we went to moslem school... The children today, where are they? There are no children who attend moslem school.”

In exploring how the participants approach the difficulty of raising children “in the *deen*”, some explained that they persevere in inculcating an Islamic identity in their children for the reward of witnessing their children adopting the religious values they have imparted through their mothering practices. As one participant stated:

“The satisfaction that I get out of motherhood is to see where all my hard work went to. I’m very proud of my twins. They made a conscious decision and told me ‘mommy, we want to study *deen*, we want to know Allah better, we want to study the Qur’an’. It’s just the way that they were brought up, such as having to make salah. Every Friday after...
school we had lunch at the table and we would talk about the jumu‘ah khutbah. Even sex, which used to be taboo in my time, but nowadays I tell them to ask me questions because I don’t want them to make the mistakes that teenagers are making today. I think I created an open relationship where we could speak to each other. So, they can come to me and say ‘mommy, I like this boy’ and then I would say ‘ok, you know what Allah ta‘ala says about girlfriend and boyfriend. I know you admire him or whatever, but that is as far as it goes’. I think their up-brining is why their mind-set went in the direction of studying deen. So that is the satisfaction that I now have for all the struggles that I have had up until now.”

This participant stresses the importance of creating open channels of communication in the family home for discussion between parents and children, including topics that were taboo to talk about with parents when she was growing up. Allowing her children to discuss social issues in the family, including sexuality, facilitated her role as a guide to her children on Muslim social and religious norms and values. She further believes that it led to their interest in wanting to further their Islamic studies and cultivate their relationship with Allah and the Qur’ān. Thus, she feels successful in her central mothering goal of raising God-conscious human beings.

Including sexuality in her discussions with her teenage children challenges normative South African Muslim social discourse, which predominantly approaches sexuality as a topic to be avoided, unless spoken about as a legal, educational discourse versus a social, critical discourse. Though she opens the topic of sexuality in her family discussions, she nonetheless does so to reinforce a normative Islamic discourse of sexuality as being outside of the ambit of what unmarried, young Muslims should partake in. This evidences the view that, despite Islam being regarded as a sex-positive religion, Muslim social discourse yet remains marked by conservative, ambiguous attitudes toward sex and sexuality (Hoel 2010). In our view, while Muslim discourse may include issues about sexuality, it is more often for the purpose of regulating a normative sexual identity and steers away from engaged, informed discussion on sex and sexuality reflective of contemporary community dynamics. Hence, there remains some ambiguity and uncertainty in how to approach and understand sexuality in contemporary debates about sexual development and identity.

Juxtaposed to the uncertainty surrounding sex education, Muslim parents are generally expected to coach or exhort their children to religious practices, such as salah (prayer). In reflecting on this, one participant highlighted her experience of her ex-husband’s rigid, imposing approach to prayer on their children, who forced them to perform the five daily prayers from the age of four years. In her view, her husband’s parenting approach to religious practice was devoid of affective qualities such as kindness and compassion. After her marriage ended, she undertook the task of creating a more positive environment for her children concerning such religious observances.

“I was forced to become very relaxed, to the extent that even if they make only their fard, I just overlook. Now, for me, I tell them “This is your journey, how you worship Allah is your journey”. Because I realised that they have such a hatred for everything Islamic, I have to create that ease where it doesn’t become a burden on them. They must learn to love it, which is going to take a very long time.”

In order to offset her ex-husband’s rigid approach to ritual prayer with their young children, this participant adopts a “relaxed” approach with the aim of guiding them to an understanding of worship as a relationship with Allah that travels along a journey of self-cultivation. Her approach to worship circumvents a rigid approach to tradition and instead presents Islam as a living reality intended to foster love, care, and well-being. This navigation that seeks to highlight spiritual and psychological well-being as a lived experience is resonant with Shaikh’s concept of a “tafsir of praxis” (2007). Reading these mothers’ narratives presents us with a dynamic maternal ethics that unfolds in ways that are psychologically astute and responsive to their contexts and their children’s developmental journeys.
The concept of the ‘journey’ features prominently in several participant’s narratives. Some describe motherhood as an unfolding journey, including that of experiencing their own personal and spiritual growth concerning their faith and social identities. This process of personal growth or self-cultivation is powerfully connected to the participant’s constructions of their maternal religious subjectivity. Many participants were centrally concerned with the question, ‘How do I mother my children to live in the real world where they are being confronted with so many questions about their own and others’ identities?’ It became evident that participants do not regard this as a question pertaining exclusively or primarily to religious laws and rules. Rather, it is an ethical question of how to be in the world in a way that aligns goodness, truth, and virtue meaningfully—an ethically robust way of being. As one participant articulated:

*It’s really hard. It’s a struggle. It means that with every decision I have to question myself. Where do I then position myself in relation to, for example, what she wears, who she plays with, what are the kinds of things that I think is ok for her to be exposed to or not. My best friend is gay. For us to have a conversation around the fact that he may be my best friend, but Islamically I have a position on homosexuality. It’s a lot of negotiation and for me it’s a lot of constantly having to question myself. Which can be exhausting because it also highlights for me that there’s not only a paradox in terms of my role as mother, but there’s also personally a paradox for me in terms of who I am as a Muslim woman, living in a non-Muslim society. So actually, it’s not just about mothering. It’s about me fundamentally.*

In this narration, this participant refers to the paradoxical nature of holding contradictions between religious norms and social contexts both in terms of responding to their children as well as their own identities as situated Muslim women. Through the process of engaged parenting, they encounter questions about their own identity as Muslim women in their social world. It is through grappling with these questions of how to ‘situate themselves’ ethically and how to extend their ethics in their parenting responses, that they formulate their mothering identities. These identities are not static but constantly in the process of being refined as they encounter the challenges of living their Islam in a dynamic, fast-changing, diverse society.

This represents Shaikh’s (2007) embodied tafsir or “tafsir of praxis” in that the individual’s lived experiences constitute the social world of the Qur’anic text. Moreover, in order to situate dynamic, ambivalent and at times contradictory lived experiences within a frame of religious meaning, the individual negotiates between intersecting discourses of religious values, social norms, and personal circumstances. It is a process that involves crafting Islamic ethical responses to lived experience within the particularities of one’s social context.

The common Islamic term used to denote developing, educating, and guiding a person to cultivate good human nature and achieve Allah’s pleasure is tarbiyah (Abdurrahman and Rosyidin 2017, pp. 93–94). It is a term commonly associated with the role of mothers. However, the narratives demonstrate that the mothers themselves are recipients of tarbiyah through the conduit of parenting, being educated and developed psycho-spiritually through experiencing themselves as mothers. Thus, for these participants, motherhood facilitates an inner journey of self-understanding, which in turn illuminates inner spiritual knowledge, deepening the mother’s own development of virtue and refinement of character traits, such as justice, appreciation, and concern. Hence, mothering serves as a means of self-formation and religious subjectivity for these women as they dynamically engage and respond to the challenges of their social contexts.

One theme that consistently appeared in the narratives is the pervasiveness of technology in family life as an entrenched dimension of contemporary parenting. Muslim children are, like their general age cohort, exposed to technology and its effects. Thus, a salient question raised within the narratives was, ‘How do Muslim mothers (and fathers) parent their children in an increasingly technological environment and how does it affect the...
enculturation of an Islamic identity?" One participant reflected on this question particularly in relation to the community factors impacting her family.

“We’ve grown into a society that just gives children technological access and gadgets because it’s physically violent outside. There are drugs outside, so parents hold their children in the home and curb them from going out. So, technology becomes the means of managing that safety aspect.”

For this participant, the widespread occurrence of crime and violence, particularly in urban Cape Town, creates a general perception that children are safer in their homes than outside. As such, she regards technology as a substitute social life for her children, circumventing the necessity for physical play and social interaction with friends outside their home.

In addition to using technology as a substitute social life for their children, another aspect appearing to affect the relationship between participants and their children is a digital gap, which one participant describes below.

“When we grew up, there were no cell phones. There wasn’t all the technology that there is now. You have to get onto their level, which is difficult. How do we get onto their level when we don’t have or understand all their technology? They are more advanced than us. We still have to get to that level on which they are, and when we ask them to help us (with something technological), they laugh at us.”

Contemporary life is increasingly integrated with virtual reality and social media. The current generation of children are digital natives, never having experienced life without the internet and cell phones. Parents are progressively finding themselves at the receiving end of their children’s advanced technological know-how, which brings to the fore a changing set of power dynamics that parents and children must navigate. The disparate levels of technological expertise between parents and children, referred to by the above participant, exacerbates the commonly held notion of a generation gap. Therefore, the above participant experiences this gap as disadvantageous in not being able to keep up with the technological world of information and understanding that her children inhabit.

The topic of parenting in relation to technology and social media is not prevalent in the literature on mothering studies or religious studies concerned with family life. Muslim children are increasingly being integrated into the cultural and value frameworks governing the social media universe, being ‘influenced’ at a greater speed and scope than ever. Due to its pervasiveness and import for navigating contemporary Muslim family life, it presents fertile ground for further exploration in contemporary social research agendas (Douglass et al. 2022).

Along with the theme of mothering in an increasingly technological world, participants also referred to the challenging nature of their decision-making about setting limits of ‘acceptable’ versus ‘unacceptable’ behaviour with their children within the parameters of the shari’a. The following two narratives describe the conundrum. The first participant stated:

“My daughter was invited to her friend’s disco party. She’s ten years old, she’s not mukallaf yet and the way I reasoned was to say, this is her best friend’s party, but discos are not something that I would want her to go to. So, what I then did was, I investigated and found out that it was only girls, there would be no boys. Then, I sat her down and told her that I’m letting her go for two reasons: one, she is not mukallaf yet, and two, there would only be girls present. But I said you need to be mindful of the fact that when you become mukallaf, things will change. The rules then become different.”

Another participant stated: “Our children grow up in such a busy time. They’re exposed to so much more than I feel I was when I grew up. And yes, as a Muslim mom, there’s certain guidelines that we have to follow, but sometimes it’s so hard. There are times when I think, ‘do I deviate and say yes it’s ok to do something’ that’s not acceptable. Like an example would be, there’s a party at Grand West. Do I say yes, its ok because it’s on the other side away from the casino, or do I say no because its Grand West? So, it’s hard to say that there can be an ideal Muslim mom because
there's so much other factors that's built in that makes it hard to just be strict and say 'this is it or nothing else'."

Both participants describe their difficulty in deciding what their children can or cannot do in relation to what they believe is Islamically permissible or appropriate. They particularly highlight their experience of struggling with the application of normative concepts of halal and haram against other socio-cultural factors that affect their decision-making processes.

For example, in the first narration, this mother determines that her daughter can go to a disco party only if there are no boys. In this way, she upholds the Islamic religious rule that prohibits ‘free mixing’ of males and females outside the confines of permissible interaction, such as between males and females related by blood or marriage. Similarly, the mother in the second narration allows her son to attend a party at Grand West Casino only because it is held in a part of the casino complex separate to the actual gambling hall, since gambling is prohibited in Islam. In both narratives, the application of religious laws seems to work as a pragmatic negotiation of choices that allow these mothers to apply religious prescripts to an extent but also not be completely constrained by such prescripts. Their negotiation of parenting choices is mainly focused on coalescing religious laws with their social contexts to produce parenting solutions to their and their children’s social realities. As such, their children are not completely restricted from participating in social activities that might be deemed un-Islamic from a strictly traditional fiqh point of view but, nonetheless, represents the participants’ attempts at locating their parenting decisions within an Islamic ethical framework.

We suggest that, in these narratives, an Islamic ethical framework constitutes religious laws coupled with values deemed central by these mothers as an expression of an Islamic ethical self. As such, the process of discerning values that define their understanding of ethicality in Islam within their social contexts is considered by most participants to be difficult and complex.

“I feel the society we are raising our children in today is very different. Even though we know certain things are haram, we have to give and take. If you don’t want your child to be watching movies, you need to replace that with something that is entertaining for them. If you don’t want your child listening to music, you need to be able to replace that with something else. But you cannot tell the child that everything in life is haram because life will become very hard for that child and they will have such a dislike towards Islam because they will view Islam as the one thing that is preventing them from even enjoying anything in life.”

The above narrative suggests the nuanced and dexterous ways in which the participants negotiate dominant halal-haram discourse that are part of the broader social context. Here Lambek’s (2010, p. 4) insights are helpful: Rather than being solely based on the strict adherence to prescribed moral codes that are more likely to alienate their children, the mothers inhabit an ethical condition that denotes what Lambek identifies as human responsiveness to the immanence of ordinary, everyday actions making up social life. More specifically, the participants’ narratives suggest that mothering is a space for refining creative and strategic forms of independent religious reasoning—what we consider “lay ijtihad”—which is where every-day parenting, decision-making, discernments, evaluations, and judgments are centrally influenced by the question of what defines ‘the good’ within a set of real constraints. Through their dexterous and pragmatic negotiations, the participants implicitly illustrate that binary Muslim legal categories of haram and halal are sometimes inadequate for everyday ethical living. Rather, these mothers embody engaged forms of discernment, making judgements and decisions that create conditions for a tenable, socially responsive Muslim ethics amidst potentially polarising options.

Muslim discourses of navigating a middle path often invoke the Qur’anic idea of Muslims being a balanced or middle community (ummatun wasatun) to animate creative ways of engaging a changing world (Zarif et al. 2013, pp. 121–22). Lambek reminds us that the concept of a middle path has a more universal relevance in broader approaches to ethics,
where it maps a way to address ‘the good’ within ethical practice as the most balanced response and actions that suit the specific situation at hand (Lambek 2015, pp. 19–20). Thus, in relation to this definition of ‘the good’, our participants appear consistently concerned with trying to choose the best decisions in their estimation that are responsive to their children’s needs as well as what is ethically, Islamically sound. Thus, negotiating the world as Muslim mothers invites a dynamic and pragmatic ethical reasoning and praxis by these women in their quest for raising good Muslim children.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study was motivated by a desire to explore the ways in which religion informed the motherhoods, maternal identities, and mothering practices of Muslim women in South Africa. We wanted to hear from mothers themselves what their lived experience of this important role is, given that it is often spoken about in Muslim religious discourses from the vantage point of androcentric scholarship. By bringing the voices of Muslim women into conversation with dominant renderings of motherhood in traditional and neo-traditional Muslim discourses, we sought out more grounded, integrated, and nuanced renderings of the lived realities of Muslim women as mothers.

In mapping some of the androcentric approaches, we problematized the dominant renderings of motherhood that reduce women’s agency to that of wife and mother premised on hierarchical gender dynamics in the home. In refuting the limited approaches to motherhood, we argued that Qur’anic narratives of mothers can be read for more expansive pedagogy. These Qur’anic depictions of mothers provide teachings on the religious subjectivity and ethical dispositions that can be extrapolated into broader frameworks of Islamic ethics relevant to all segments of Muslim public and private spheres. Thus, our contention is that motherhood extends beyond a formulaic execution of certain biological, domestic, or educational tasks that women are thought to perform within their families. Readings of the Qur’an that expand our understandings of how mothers operate in relation to a broader social and ethical landscape are relevant to the contemporary period. Contemporary Muslim mothering, set within a pluralistic, diverse society such as South Africa, is a highly dynamic and challenging performance of ethical dexterity that offers deep insights into the making of Muslim ethics and reflects a dynamic “tafsir of praxis” (Shaikh 2007), with varied forms of maternal subjectivities emerging.

Living with pervasive questions of how to guide their children to navigate the complexities of the real world, where these children encounter numerous questions about their identities and others’ identities, represents an overarching concern of our participants. Through these robust processes of parenting, the participants maternal identities emerge through their continuous refinement of what is Islamically ethical in relation to their social worlds.

This is an arduous process, as the participants commonly speak of feeling challenged and pressurised in their task of performing this balancing act. Through the difficult pursuit of ethical forms of mothering, motherhood appears as a form of ethical jihad. We consider this to also align with Maha Badissy’s reading of jihad as a Qur’anic rendering of motherhood that extends beyond the biological tasks of childbearing and childrearing to the pursuit of moral agency as a form of a “spiritually and intellectually aware contribution to society” (Badissy 2016, p. 971).

The participant’s constructions of their maternal subjectivities are reproduced within a matrix of multiple discourses. Whilst they placed importance on religious prescripts of halal and haram, they were also focused on ‘doing Islam’ through actively and strategically engaging in the discursive construction of how to live their everyday lives within their socially embedded contexts. In doing this, they drew on Islam as a social discourse of ethical responsibility for being contributing, constructive members of their social environments. This is representative of the conceptualisation of motherhood in Islam as a role of moral agency in which Muslim women bring all their talents and capabilities to bear on their ethico-moral commitment to upholding virtue (Badissy 2016).
While the mothers in this study did not overtly relate their motherhoods to Qur’anic archetypal mothers, the concept of motherhood as a form of moral agency resonates with the Qur’anic representations of maternal ethics as depicted through the narratives of mothers in the Qur’an. What links historical and contemporary Muslim mothers is their sincere embodiment of living an ethical relationality towards a guiding truth within the contours of their lived experiences. In taking up their maternal role, each in their own time and circumstances, they reflect motherhood as a form of *ikhlas* (sincerity) in upholding Qur’anic values, and for these participants, it involved constant wrestling with notions of what is Islamically acceptable or permissible when engaging mainstream social norms. The complexity of these dilemmas is what participants highlight as the conundrum of contemporary parenting, with many participants experiencing conflicting thoughts and feelings regarding these phenomena. Negotiating these ethical conundrums significantly informs their maternal subjectivities.

Their experiences also amplify Lambek’s (2010) assertion that the ethical condition recognises the inevitability of cracks, ruptures, inconsistencies, and contradictions in ordinary experience. The ‘ordinary’ encompasses the ubiquity of responses to the ever-present limits of (religious) criteria and paradoxes of the human condition. Hence, attempts to inhabit an everyday ethicality in thought and practice will inevitably involve the “uncertainty... incompleteness, inconsistency; the unsayable, the unforgivable, the irresolvable and the limits of voice and reason” (Lambek 2010, p. 4). In this way, motherhood was strongly spoken of as a journey in which the participants found themselves growing and developing their parenting skills and sensibilities as they, together with their children, encountered various social and ethical scenarios to which they had to craft meaningful Islamic responses.

One of the central ways in which the participants make sense of themselves as ethical subjects is through embodying virtue in their role as mothers. Through grappling with an Islamic ethico-moral code concerning the challenges of parenting, they negotiate multiple and myriad decisions regarding what they allow and do not allow, say and do not say, do and do not do. They do this continuously on a daily basis, sometimes moment by moment. They do so whilst balancing their religious tradition with social norms and considerations for their and their children’s development within a specific lifeworld made up of multiple systems of moral values. In so doing, the application of the concept of good or virtue is a fundamentally important way in which the mothers construct their religious ethical subjectivity by determining the best ethical choice of action within a particular set of circumstances.

Thus, the process of analysing and judging how to apply Islamic traditions and values to the practice of everyday mothering is, we propose, a contemporary form of “lay *ijtihad*”, centrally informed by the ethical subjectivity of these Muslim mothers. This process closely resembles a reformatory approach to *ijtihad* in that it is the individual Muslim who engages with their reference points to Islam, those being the core Qur’anic principles and values, to ascertain reasonings that influence their behaviours in various social situations where normative Islamic scripts may provide limited direction or be absent altogether.

We argue that part of the impetus for participants’ engagement of an Islamic moral register, in concert with their contemporary social norms through examining core Islamic principles to apply to their parental responses (lay *ijtihad*), is partly due to the narrow available offerings from traditional Muslim scholarship. These limitations are particularly acute when addressing issues facing contemporary families, parents, and modern living as well as the exclusive nature of *ijtihad* as limited to religious scholars, particularly classical scholars whose *ijtihad* was produced in pre-modern times. As a result, Muslims such as these mothers’ both pro-actively and reactively engage in a search for meaningful Islamic parental responses that meet the needs of parenting young Muslims amidst the complexities of the modern Muslim world.
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Zam-zam is underground water that sources the area of the Haram of Mecca. It is said to be water that appeared to Hajar as she searched for help for her and her son in the desert.

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In an empirical study of South African women in Cape Town conducted by Shaikh, Hoel and Kagee they found that over half of the women interviewed worked and contributed financially to the home (Shaikh et al. 2011, pp. 117–18). This percentage is in keeping with findings of a 2022 survey of the broader South African society that found 53% of working-age women are part of the labor force nationally. Available online: https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15668#:~:text=In%20South%20Africa%2C%20the%20labour,actually%20used%20by%20the%20economy (accessed on 26 July 2024).

Chapter 19 of the Qur’an is named Maryam (Mary), referring to the mother of ‘Isa (Jesus).

This is in contrast to the Christian narrative, which places her alongside a male partner at the time of the birth of ‘Isa (Jesus).

There were some pre-modern scholars, like Ibn Arabi and Ibn Hazm, who presented a minority interpretation of the Qur’an and the tradition to understand that Maryam and Asiya, Pharaoh’s wife, were recipients of prophecy. See Fierro (2002, pp. 184–86) for this discussion.

Traditional Muslim texts narrating stories of the Abrahamic prophets.


For an excellent feminist reading of Hajar’s creativity and modes of survival formulated within dire material constraints, see Jeers Lantey’s Divine Words (Jerusha Tanner Lamptey 2018, pp. 156–89).

The sā‘i is a seven-times purposeful walk between the two hillocks al-saffa and al-marwa said to emulate the walk/run of Hajar as she searched for help for her and her son in the desert.

Zam-zam is underground water that sources the area of the Haram of Mecca. It is said to be water that appeared to Hajar as she searched for water/assistance for her infant son, Ismail, after her breastmilk had dried up and Ismail was in dire need of hydration. Zam-zam is tied to divine intervention in that dominant narrations of this event depict the arch angel Jibreel being involved in its appearance through tipping his wing on the earth where the water appeared. It is typically drunk by pilgrims performing Hajj or Umrah.

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The process of discerning Qur’anic principles and values to apply to novel social scenarios are performed in concert with referring to hadith, fiqh precedents, and qiyās (analogical reasoning) (Perrin 2005, pp. 69–74).

Reform scholars such as Fazlur Rahman are synonymous with arguing for employing an ijtihad approach to the reformation of traditionalist, classical sharī‘a formations, which, at times, reinforce asynchronous socio-political norms (Perrin 2005, p. 77).

Jumu`ah khutbah refers to the sermon given by the imam prior to the communal Friday prayer, which is mandatory for Muslim males.

Given the emphasis and detail with which sexual matters are addressed in the prophetic and legal traditions, Islam can be said to appear as comparatively sex positive. See Hoel (2010, p. 206).

In Islam, there are five obligatory prayer times daily.
Compulsory components (of prayer).

Widespread poverty, gang violence, and drug trafficking disproportionately affect historically black and ‘coloured’ communities in Western Cape, South Africa. These phenomena are entrenched and perpetuated in part by the ongoing legacy of Apartheid neglect and the under-development of these neighborhoods. Such historic neglect is compounded by the present day perpetuation of harsh living conditions due to the slow pace of community development and under-provision of basic services, further exacerbating the social and economic disadvantages of the people living in these communities.

There have been increasing publications on the topic of technology-use by Muslim youth. A cursory online scan of current publications shows the main focus of such publications to be on parenting models and approaches for managing online presence and limiting children’s screen time. There appears to be less a focus on the development of social identity in Muslim youth in the context of being digital natives.

Shari’a refers to Islamic sacred law.

Mukallaf refers to a developmental state/age when a person becomes religiously accountable for performing acts of worship in accordance with Islam. For girls, this status is generally signified by the onset of menses.

Grandwest is a local casino in Cape Town.

Virtuosity goes beyond individual acts of virtuosity to an everyday comportment or self-understanding, which allows one to judge the right balance of actions to fit the immediate circumstances. Lambek (2015, pp. 19–20) argues that this process of doing virtue, as a matter of judging the best middle path, is the Aristotelian meta virtue—knowing how to find the judicious middle path between opposing extremes—and it is this that constitutes wisdom.

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