CHAPTER 8

Gujarati Muslim Diaspora and the Politics of Home in Apartheid South Africa

Thembisa Waetjen

Introduction

From 1956–1963, Durban housewife and community organizer Zuleikha Mayat wrote a regular column for the Gujarati/English language South African newspaper Indian Views. With a readership that extended from the Cape to Mozambique and trickled northward as far as Malawi, the weekly (later bi-weekly) Indian Views covered news on both shores of the Indian Ocean and helped to reproduce a communal imaginary for Gujarati-speaking Muslims in early-mid 20th century southern Africa. At its height, its run hovered at just 5,000 papers. Still, as Mayat knew from her own childhood, 1 a single subscription—costing £1 11 s 6d per annum—provided shared reading and discussion within households and between extended family members and neighbours. It circulated through immigrant families and their African-born progeny who had in common a notion of home and belonging that straddled the Indian Ocean (Waetjen and Vahed, 2011).

Founded in 1914, the paper had been in circulation for precisely three decades when ‘Miss Zuleikha Bismillah of Potchefstroom’, then a young woman of 18 years, submitted her first commentary to be published in its pages. This letter-to-the-editor advocated education for Muslim girls and lamented that ‘in these modern times’ parents denied their daughters secondary and tertiary education. 2 Twelve years later, her own dreams of a higher education thwarted by family and religious authority, Zuleikha was now married to the dynamic Dr. Mahomed Mayat and living in the Indian Ocean port city of Durban, associating with the tightly networked Muslim professional and business classes. Among her friends were members of the influential Meer family, headed by

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1 Biographical information about Mayat and her own family history, if not otherwise specified, is derived from interviews: 21 February 2008, 7 March 2008, 6 October 2008, 12 February 2009, and 29 April 2013, as well as informal communications and from her ‘fictional’ autobiographical history (Mayat 1996) and some of the information appears in another form and to another purpose in Vahed and Waetjen, 2010.

2 Letters to the Editor. Indian Views, 1 September 1944.
M.I. Meer, the editor of *Indian Views*. He invited her to take up her pen and try her hand at writing a women's column. Under the pen name ‘Fahmida’, Zuleikha Mayat developed a witty conversational style in which she took up issues pertinent to her social milieu.

This article considers Mayat’s writings as a window on the dynamic and progressively unsettled conception of home and belonging that was shaping the cultural worlds of the Gujarati-speaking Muslim diaspora during a period of intensive spatial and social re-mapping by apartheid's engineers. It highlights the historical centrality of sexual and domestic relations in structuring local and transoceanic orientations and identities, as well as their changing political meaning and gendered divisions of labour. Mayat wrote in her capacity as a housewife and modern enthusiast, her submissions expressing the progressivist optimism of her times, welcoming the technological innovations that were mechanizing the household domain of women in her class. Situated in the world of the customary, her writing was one of several means she employed in crafting a public voice and in bearing witness to the political transformations around her. Thus, she is not merely an individual woman, expressing her lived experience. Her column was written as a public intervention, a moral prescription towards a definition of national citizenship that she envisioned could best secure the local reproduction of diasporic community and its hard-won socio-economic prosperity and class standing. She wrote during crucial years of political ferment, when apartheid's attempt to correlate civic identity with racialized geographical space was unifying people from diverse backgrounds through acts of resistance. Yet much of her column remained focused on the positional concerns of the peers who comprised her female readership, and her expertise was offered around housework, marriage, and childrearing. For Mayat, agency in these quarters comprised a local politics of home, situated at the heart of a changing cultural world.

**Indian Muslim Families in South Africa**

Born in the Transvaal in 1926, Zuleikha Bismillah was the daughter of a shopkeeper who operated ‘Dabhel House’, one of several Muslim-owned shops on King Edward Street in the town of Potchefstroom, capital of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR). Her paternal grandfather, Hassim Bismillah, hailing from the village of Dabhel in Gujarat, had arrived in the southern Africa in 1881, a young entrepreneur. In a few years he established a successful trading business in the territory between Kimberley and Johannesburg, the two key sites of the region's unfolding scramble for mineral wealth. Hassim Bismillah’s