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The Depths of Rose, ‘A Wind that Rose’: A Woman called Feroza Rose Mohammed

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Abstract

First they came for the communists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me (Pastor Martin Niemöller [1892–1984], as quoted in Mohammed 2009).

“Speak Out” against injustices is the doctrine that guides Feroza Rose Mohammed, a woman many know simply as Rose. It is this belief that brought her the glare of publicity and created a storm of controversy in October 2007, when she protested on Eid day against the placing of wooden barriers to separate men and women at the TML mosque. The words of Muhammad Ali (1942-), “service to others is the rent you pay here for your room on earth”, underpin the philosophy of Rose as wife, mother and citizen. Guided by the dictates of her faith, Islam, and the admonitions of the *Qur'an*—“You are the best people ever raised for the good of mankind because you have been raised to serve others; you enjoin what is good and forbid evil and believe in Allah.” (3:111)—she firmly believes in the promotion of good which would lead to the improved welfare of Trinidadian society. If one is to be defined by labels, Rose would want the following ascribed to her: Muslim, Trinidadian, passionate, simple, humble, service-oriented, empathetic and tolerant. Most of all, Rose embodies the elusive spirit of the transformative leader.

Who is Rose?

On the morning of 13 July 2011, I met Rose at her home in Port of Spain. This was actually my first encounter with the matriarch who had become a legend. Before we retired to her breakfast nook for coffee, I was introduced to her family—immediate and extended—via a photo gallery. My interview session also concluded with a look at a digitalised slideshow of family photos. Over morning coffee, I was told slivers of her life story and experiences that contributed to making her Rose—Muslim, Trinidadian and civic-minded but most of all, a person/woman with a voice.

Born during World War II, one of eight children, Rose grew up initially in San Juan and at age seven moved to Port of Spain. Moving from San Juan to Port of Spain meant there was interaction with the wider society beyond the confines of the Indian and, in particular, the Muslim group. In her household, Rose recalls, it was emphasised that everyone is a human being and must be treated with respect. As a child walking to school, she had at least to say “good morning”, for what felt like a hundred times before she reached the school gate.

As practising Muslims, her parents ensured that Rose and her siblings received a religious education in addition to their secular one. To that end, Rose and her siblings attended *maktab* (religious classes) at the Queen Street *masjid* (mosque) in Port of Spain. They also attended *Eid namaaz* (prayers) at the St. Joseph TML *masjid* where Moulvi Ameer Ali was the *imam* (priest). As children, Rose and her siblings were expected to read *namaaz* and fast during the month of *Ramadan* (ninth month of the lunar Islamic calendar).

Her parents were active participants in the Muslim community, in particular the movement led by Moulvi Ameer Ali that culminated with the formation of the Trinidad Muslim League (TML) in 1946.¹

The ideological foundations of the organisation suggested that the principles of rationalism, pragmatism and inquiry would be upheld particularly as it relates to religious convictions and applied to modern-day living. It was this progressive atmosphere that Rose Mohammed inhabited as a child and a teen which would define her worldview as a young adult and a respected elder in our society.

As I learned, her parents were married in March 1936 in what is termed in local parlance as a “table marriage”, that is, where the bride and groom are openly seated together on a stage. This marriage took place at a time when it was common among Muslims for the bride and bridegroom not to sit next to each other during the *nikah* (marriage ceremony). Instead, the bride would remain inside her house, while the bridegroom sat before the assembled guests. Witnesses would then carry messages to and fro between them in order that each may be informed of the other’s acceptance of the marriage vows. By the mid-1930s, following the return of Moulvi Ameer Ali from Egypt, the practice of “table marriage” was introduced. This practice was seen as contentious by the more conservative/traditional in the Muslim community.

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At the age of 17, she gained her Cambridge School Certificate and entered public service as a “temporary public servant” at the Government Housing Loans Board. During that time, she met her husband, Tallim, when he came to review the financial statements of the Loans Board from the Audit Department. In her book, *Speak Out* (2009), she relates how they met, their courtship and early family life. Much of it she repeated that morning. Rose indicates that a strong, deep and abiding love and respect for each other have been the foundation of their marital life. As we chatted, the phone rang; it was her husband just checking in with her before he pursued his round of golf. This led to a discussion of marriage—marriage strategies, finding a suitable partner and getting married. Given her upbringing and her experiences, it is not surprising that Rose has a very modernistic perspective on marriages. While Islam permits Muslim men to marry Jewish or Christian women, Muslim jurists hold that Muslim women should not marry non-Muslims.² Despite that, Rose sees no harm in Muslim females marrying non-Muslim men who convert to Islam and, more importantly, treat their wives with respect.

Through the eyes of Rose

One may be forgiven for initially thinking the interpretations and perspectives of the Muslim community that Rose offers are simplistic. But as one delves deeper, or experiences the ways of the local Muslim community and interrogates its *raison d'être*, one appreciates the powerful and keen insights into religion as an institution and its impacts proffered by Rose. Islam, she notes, is a universal religion with a pluralistic face but the Muslim *ummah* (community) is divided. Firmly believing that Islam is a religion for everyone, regardless of class, ethnicity, nationality or gender, she holds that the diversity of the *ummah* is God’s way of imposing tolerance and reconciling differences. “This is a deliberate plan by Allah to bring people together in love and harmony,” Rose said. She notes that many Muslims do not hold to the tenet “to establish upon earth the unity of Allah and oneness of humanity” because of the perspective that Muslims today must adhere to the pristine interpretations of the early Muslims.³ It is worth recalling the speech by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia to the Tenth Islamic Summit Conference in Malaysia, 2003, as Rose did. There, he noted,

From being a single ummah we have allowed ourselves to be divided into numerous sects, mazhabs and tarikats, each more concerned with claiming to be the true Islam than our oneness as the Islamic ummah. We fail to notice that our detractors and enemies do not care whether we are true Muslims or not (Mohamad, 2003).

In this frame, the focus becomes less on the *why*—the principles which underlie the words of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah* (words and acts of the Prophet Muhammad, u.w.b.p.)—and more on the *what* of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah*. The migration of Islam fostered with it cultural creation and, not surprisingly, Muslim scholars and various other spokespersons have attempted to maintain the legitimacy of Islamic knowledge. The philosophical perspective of what is religion and religiosity emerges in the conversation with Rose Mohammed. If the purpose of religion is to build an ideal community in which the adherents achieve social, economic and political wellbeing as well as harmony and peace, then one needs to be more concerned with the substance of faith. To her, the divergences among Muslims are less important than the belief in one God, the observance

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of the pillars of Islam, respect for each other and the ability to do good. She passionately advocates for tolerance of each other's right to differ in practice, indicating that in her opinion Muslims agree on over 90 per cent of practices and convictions. The less than ten per cent over which there are differences is the cause of much anger among the Muslim population. "If only we could be more tolerant," she says, "if only".

Acknowledging that the Muslim community of Trinidad and Tobago is insular, Rose firmly believes that the community should recall some of the precepts of Islam such as "let there be no compulsion in religion." Tolerance and respect should be the watchwords which govern the community. The Muslim community needs to be responsive to the changing dynamics of the society; they need to "open up" to others. After all, Islam advocates peace, Rose notes.

For Rose, Islam and the *Qur'an* can provide insight and guidance for societies. Indeed, as Amina Wadud (1999), who has provided an interpretive reading of the *Qur'an* from an Islamic feminist perspective, contends the *Qur'an* can provide not only insight and clarification into gender justice but holds great promise for gender reform and thus, moving society (Muslim and non-Muslim) towards a more enlightened collaboration between men and women. Rose's creed is "not only to read the *Qur'an* but to try to live the *Qur'an*; to show love, caring, appreciation and understanding. This is the *Qur'an* that I try to live."

Throughout her life, Rose respected people's right to be different and lives the dictum "you to your religion and I to mine"; she believes that through friendships and social connectivity across various communities unity will be achieved. Over the years, Rose Mohammed has been a proactive member of multiple civil society organisations representing the gamut of religions, ethnicities, geographies and classes, holding true to the lesson learnt as a child that everyone is a human being and must be treated with respect. For instance, she has been a Board Member of St. Martins Welfare Organisation (Christian), the initiator of the San Juan Senior Citizens Birthday Club (Christian), a foundation member of the halfway house for battered women in Port of Spain, Executive Member of the Trinidad Muslim League Ladies Association (Muslim), co-founder and first President of the Indian Women's Group of Trinidad and Tobago (all denominations), coordinator for the Mission for Charity (Christian), a Board Member of the Aagaman Committee (non-denominational), a Board Member of the Trinidad Muslim League (Muslim), a Board Member of the Hindi Foundation of Trinidad and Tobago (Hindu), and Founder/President of the National Muslim Women's Organisation of Trinidad and Tobago (Muslim) (Mohammed 2009, 79-89).

During the conversation, Rose reminds me that when the *Qur'an* was revealed, the first word was *iqra* (read) and, as such, Islam is a religion concerned with literacy. Raising the levels of religious literacy will make Muslims aware of the centrality of *Qur'anic* teachings and *Sunnah*. Knowledge, it may be argued, encourages the believers to look at the world around them, strengthen their faith and implement that knowledge in order to worship God. Life, Rose notes, is constantly evolving and the Muslim community in Trinidad has changed as a result of education and co-existing in a Caribbean Westernised-Christian society (understood to be more prone to individual rights,

achievement and success). While Rose believes that the *Qur'an* is translated too literally and the parabolic messages are sometimes lost, she is adamant that the *Qur'an* provides guidance on profound beliefs, values and principles and it must be understood in the context of time, as does Wadud (1999) who has asserted that the *Qur'an* does not prescribe one single, timeless and unchanging social structure.

Today, culture is often mistaken for religion, though sometimes the distinction is unclear. Various streams of global cultural practices and customs have had an impact on Islam, which impact, in turn, has influenced the practices and interpretations of the doctrine. The foreign influence of missionaries on the local Muslim community has been strong and has contributed in no small way to Islam becoming sombre, insular and rigid, Rose believes. Rose noted some of the Muslim missionaries who visit Trinidad sometimes “try to introduce different practices because of the culture of the country from which they come but we should compare and see if our ways meet the essentials of Islam”. The “silly ideas of the *imams*” which have arisen as a result of the increased Arabisation of Islam should also be interrogated before accepting it as truth. These must be assessed using the essentials of the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*.

To counter the debates on the variances in practice and interpretation, Rose advocates for the improvement in faith literacy whereby individuals would improve their knowledge of Islam. In discussing the potential and constraints of the local Muslim community, Rose notes that the community is insular but there are many bright and intelligent young Muslim females, and they must be willing to raise their voices and not be subject to the authority of the *imama* (priests). They need to think critically and engage fully with the tenets of the faith and counter some of these “silly ideas”.

Individuals have minds and intellect, the power of reasoning and the free will to accept or reject knowledge. This rationalism and freedom to inquire are central to the doctrine of *ghair mukallidism*, the creed to which Rose was exposed at TML and continues to hold as truth. Rose encourages local Muslims to engage in self-directed learning and to create an environment in which independent thought and reasoning will thrive. Stating that issues must be examined in their contexts and deductions made using reason, Rose implores Muslims to interrogate the emergent judgmental and orthopractic nature of Islam.

Rose herself has questioned some of the practices. For instance, she interprets the injunction “form a straight line in the mosque” to mean that “when it’s crowded we should make room to accommodate everybody and so, people stand close together, but when there is room in the mosque we can stand in any place and read namaaz (prayers) in comfort.”

Females, Rose says, must interrogate the social practice of wearing the *hijab* (understood as head covering) and the observance of *pardah* (understood as segregation of the sexes). Rose notes that many of her fellow Muslims are critical of her for not wearing the *hijab*. In response to such criticism, Rose remarks, “I believe I am always dressed decently. If I am attending a business meeting or a luncheon I’ll wear a pantsuit; if I am attending a party I wear a modest dress; if I am playing lawn tennis or walking I wear a tracksuit and for Indian or Islamic functions I will wear a *shalwar*, but all times I dress modestly.” She

continues, the “important thing is what is in the head not on the head.” Some females choose to wear the *hijab* on occasion (e.g., at the mosque or at religious gatherings). Rose says that she prefers the *orhni*, she feels comfortable wearing the style of dress she grew up with, the style of her foreparents. She asks, “Does wearing the *hijab* make my prayers stronger? Would it increase my faith? Would it lead me to heaven? It is what is in the heart.” Some females are also engaging in *de-hijabing* that is, having worn the *hijab* for several years they are now choosing not to wear it for a variety of reasons.

She believes that the “deen (religion) of Islam is very strong and that there is a high level of consciousness of Islam among the local Muslim community”. Nevertheless, she believes that there is need for understanding Islam in the context of modern society while ensuring that the practices of adherents meet the required essentials and values of Islam. This underscores the importance of *iqra* and *ijtihad* (freedom to inquire) to achieving a progressive understanding of Islam. For instance, Rose queried modern perspectives on leisure in Islam, noting that the *Qur'an* is silent on the issue and many Muslims frown on any participation in music, song, dance and sport, particularly by women. Rose holds that these activities should be acceptable if done decently and modestly. However, she contends that this is an area that requires further investigation by scholars. She candidly states that she enjoys playing lawn tennis and swimming and attending football and cricket games. As a Trinidadian, she sees beauty in the art forms of the Kings and Queens of Carnival Bands and appreciates uplifting calypsos like *The Ganges and the Nile* or even the steelband playing Indian music or *qaseedas*. As a Caribbean-Western-Muslim, Indo-Trinidadian female who enjoys her country’s culture and environment, Rose firmly advocates an interpretation of Islam for Trinidad and Tobago, here and now. As Rose spoke, I recalled the ideas of ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nablusi (eminent Muslim scholar and Sufi, born in Damascus in the mid-seventeenth century into a family of Islamic scholars) who passionately advocated for truth and social justice and was open to new social practices (drinking coffee, using musical instruments and public entertainment) and examining them in the context of *shariah*.

Rose sees intra- and inter-faith dialogue as a solution to some of the stereotyping and misunderstandings that exist about Islam such as that it is intolerant, violent, oppressive, etc. Further, the *imama* and *ulema* (religious scholars), regardless of religious sect or school of thought should meet annually and discuss matters of mutual interest and take a common position on national matters affecting the community, she believes.

Faith, truth, patience and righteous deeds are as equally important as tolerance, empathy, respect and human dignity. More importantly, as individuals, we are all part of the human race; there is need to see ourselves mirrored in each other, we are all human beings regardless of the external manifestations. Rose’s dream, therefore, is for non-discrimination and respect among the various groups of the human race. “There is need to [re]learn to accept patiently, peacefully and wisely divergent viewpoints from different people,” she said.

As Rose spoke, I was reminded of the wisdom of Ibn’Arabi (Abū 'Abdillāh Muhammad ibn 'Alī ibn Muhammad ibn 'Arabī, a Sufi mystic and philosopher, in *Bezels of Wisdom*

(*Fuṣūṣ al Hikam*), when he advised Muslims not to discriminate against dissimilar creeds or faiths. He states as follows:

Be aware so that you do not restrict yourself to a particular tenet (regarding the knowledge of Reality), for you would forfeit much good, indeed you would forfeit the true knowledge of what Reality is.

Therefore, be completely and utterly receptive to all doctrinal forms, for God, the Most High, is too All-embracing and Great to be confined with one creed rather than another, for He (God) has said, 'Wheresoever, you turn, there is the Face of God' (Kakaie 2009).

There is need to reconsider the institutional structure of Islam that places emphasis on separating the private and public spheres as it relates to restrictions in the way people engage and treat with each other. While Islam may have liberated women, according them various rights and entitlements, practices abound globally that restrict their freedom, demean them and inflict suffering on them. Islam advocates a role-based relationship between husband and wife and both are obliged to treat each other with kindness and respect. Her own courtship and marriage reveal those depths of respect and kindness. As indicated earlier, the story of her courtship is told in *Speak Out*. Rose relates that upon being introduced to Rashide Tallim Mohammed, she asked him which name to use. He promptly responded, "Call me Tallim, as it is nearer to darling." Rose indicated that though he asked her out several times she refused. Eventually, she accepted an invitation to a birthday luncheon of a mutual friend and that changed everything, as he showed himself attentive to her needs and well-being. But, she notes, the real turning point for her was on the return to the office. It had rained heavily in Port of Spain and the canals were filled with water. As they approached a canal, he bodily lifted her over the canal and then took out his clean, white handkerchief and wiped her feet and shoes. Within one week of that date, he proposed to her and they were married in March 1963. She also indicated that for her entire married life, "Tallim never wanted me to cook, clean or wash; he hired help to do those things." Rose must have been happy to hear that she would not have to cook. As a child, she recalls, her mother divided the house chores equally between the siblings. However, when it was her turn to cook she paid her younger brother to cook for her. To this day, she said, she can only do the basics in the kitchen.

In narrating aspects of her life and marriage, she told me that up to the mid-1970s, they were a "one-car family". As such, she and Tallim went to work together, had lunch together and returned home together. When her husband changed jobs during the mid-1970s the togetherness they had of going to work together and returning home together changed and for her it was a very sad period, though as she indicated, she adjusted to the change.

In 1980, Rose retired from the public service as a Senior Organisation and Management Officer in the Ministry of Finance. She did this to assist with the management of the newly established family business. She devoted eight years to growing and developing the business before retiring from work. She noted her dream was to study but, like many

women particularly of her generation, she deferred her dream because of work, family and civil society commitments. At age 55 in her role as wife, mother, mother-in-law and grandmother she returned to the classroom to obtain her MBA. Her dissertation was on steelpan music. It would be recalled that earlier it was stated Rose enjoyed the culture of Trinidad and Tobago. Rose Mohammed was not content to achieve her dream: “I may have retired from work but I have not retired from life,” she said. And believing that more could be done to promote justice and equality, Rose applied her knowledge and skills to assist civil society groups in their quest to improve the quality of life for others.

During the conversation, Rose mentioned that the Muslim community needs to overcome the shame and stigma relating to domestic violence and incest and address the issues head-on as it has implications for individuals and their ability to functionally normally within the society. She notes that there are women in marriages who are dominated by their husbands, they are not allowed to improve themselves and cannot question their husband because of fear he may retaliate, physically or verbally. She feels that some Muslim men see women as maids; they never treat their wives with respect; they believe they are superior. On the issue of polygamy, Rose states that while “men are allowed more than one wife I often ask my female friends why the principle of multiple partners applies to men only.”

The ten-year-old National Muslim Women’s Organisation was formed to build sisterhood and promote the advancement of Muslim women in Trinidad. While acknowledging the role of the organisation is to educate and to engage in charity, the organisation also seeks to promote understanding, appreciation and tolerance of differences between Muslims and non-Muslims. There are many bright young Muslim women who need a forum to express their views. “Muslim women must take up our positions in society, as contributors to society,” she said. The National Muslim Women’s Organisation, Rose agrees, may be well positioned to groom and mentor young women to take up positions in the forefront as contributors to the society. This, Rose said, may include positioning them to be in Parliament. It will mean challenging the cultural concepts and perceptions of the role of Muslim women. Iterating that women are endowed with intellectual capacity and that the first word in the *Qur’an* is *iqra*, she vehemently questioned the lack of female presence on the panels that interpret the *Qur’an* and categorically stated that Muslim leaders should review their perspective on women and allow them to deliver the *kubah* (sermons) and make pronouncements of *tafsir* (Interpretations) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence).

While not a self-proclaimed feminist, Rose articulates the issues of feminism: participation, inclusion, access, voice, equality and self-determination of females. Islam preaches equality but in practice, women are treated differently. She will not allow herself to be treated differently because she is a woman. Women are bestowed with intelligence and have independence of thought and action. Change will come only if women break the pattern of domination, exercise will and voice, educate themselves and express their views, or in the words of Irshad Manji (2011), show “moral courage—the willingness to speak up when everyone else wants to shut you up.” If nothing else, Rose Mohammed’s life has been one of action and “moral courage”. Recall the incident on Eid day, 13 October 2007, when she objected to the placement of barriers to separate the

males and females at the TML Mosque in St. Joseph. Rose Mohammed saw this as a step in the movement towards the beginning of the erosion of freedoms. She pondered that “if I did not speak up could the barriers be higher the next year? Would women eventually not be allowed to attend the masjid, forced to wear the hijab?” To Rose, regardless of the fact that the three-foot high wooden baluster-type railing was placed to define and protect the space for women to pray so as not to be crowded out by the men, it was what the barriers symbolised—the possible erosion of freedoms enjoyed by the women of TML.

The *masjid* is a space of collective piety and, as illustrated by the actions of Rose Mohammed, can be space for contestations, collusions and negotiation of ideological positions. In that specific case at the TML *masjid*, it became a space for consciousness and agency within the framework of Islam but also representative of larger feminist struggles for justice. This action should be seen as part of a larger “contemporary global movement of women to gain equal access to masjid prayers and fellowship” (Reddock 2011).⁴

Generally, in the global discourse on Muslims and, in particular, Muslim females, there is a preoccupation with issues of sexuality and gender relations (dress code, forced marriage, honour crimes, etc.) that ultimately reinforces the eroticisation of Muslim women that would lead to *fitna* (chaos or disorder) or reinforces the view that Muslim women are hidden from the public eye or unwilling to act as subjects in their own right. As such, Rose feels there is need to explore and articulate the ways in which gender and faith have an impact on Muslim women’s participation locally.

Women play an important and active role in organising events and gatherings that promote a sense of closeness and friendship—sisterhood—fuelled by deep devotion and a belief and commitment to Islam. This can be a starting point to promoting Muslim women’s participation in the affairs of national society: from raising consciousness to advocating a Trinidadian-Muslim female perspective on national issues and policies.

As a Muslim female and a witness to the nuances and complexities of actions and thoughts of the Muslim community, I, too, find it exasperating that women are treated differently. In a view expressed by Maulana Kalbe Jawwad, an Indian Shi’ite cleric, “women are created by the Almighty for rearing children...they are not supposed to ride horses, [be] firing guns or selling liquor or making speeches in the parliament” (“Muslim clerics oppose Women’s Bill”, *Deccan Herald*, 13 March 2010.) In fact, not only do males hold that view but other women hold a similar view that Muslim females are to play supporting and complementary roles.

As a 70-year-old Muslim woman, Rose wants to continue to live a healthy, active and full life. She believes that she has lived a full life and she has contributed to the development of family and community. She has served multiple communities—Muslim, Indian and Trinidadian—and enjoyed herself. She has stood for her principles and retained her voice; she has stood for her faith and reconciled it with living in Trinidad. As she reminds me, although 70, she has not retired from life and though she will step back from leading roles, she plans to continue practising all that she has learnt to help make Trinidad and Tobago a better place.

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She believes that she and her husband have realised their dreams together. She notes that they have lived in the humblest of homes in impoverished areas of Trinidad. They have also lived in the best residential areas. They have experienced some of the luxuries of life and travelled to parts of Europe, Asia, North and South America as well as Mecca for the holy pilgrimage. She believes that as a family they have exceeded expectations, but it has been the result of hard work and honesty. “We are happy and contented; Allah has been good to us,” Rose said.

Some final thoughts

As I listened to Rose Mohammed, a matriarch of the community, I cannot help but admire and respect the woman that she is. She came from humble beginnings and it was a struggle to provide for her family, but through hard work, sacrifice and risks, she and her husband now live a life of comfort. Through it all, Rose has retained her humanity and her humility. She believes in service as much as she believes in nurturing another generation. She embodies a commitment to building enduring organisations like the Inner Wheel Club of St. Augustine and the Indian Women’s Group of Trinidad and Tobago, while having a sense of purpose and holding true to a set of core values of service and inclusion. When she served and the opportunity either arose or was created, she brought together representatives of the various organisations in which she participated. She acted as a services commodity broker, a connector, facilitating networking and fellowship, creating a chain for the growth and development of individuals and the community organisations in which she was an active member. Though she no longer holds executive positions in these organisations, at a recent event of the Rotary Club of St. Augustine, held in September 2011 at *Botticelli’s Restaurant, Grand Bazaar* (Valsayn) representatives of several of these organisations in which she served were there to participate in the evening’s activities. This is a testament to her vision and mission of creating a web of social interconnectivity. More importantly, she recognises the cycle of life, thereby knowing when to lead and when to follow and when to relinquish control. As I listened to her story; read her book, *Speak Out*; and reflected on our conversation, the words that come to mind about Rose is that of a “transformational leader”.

Rose Mohammed reminds us that the Muslim community is not homogenous, the *ummah* consists of a broad spectrum of ideological perspectives and practices. As Muslims, living in a Caribbean society dominated by a Western ethos, and in particular, as Muslim females, there is a need to negotiate the dichotomy between Islamic/Muslim (wherein emphasis is placed on social responsibility and accountability) and Western-infused Caribbean values. While gender justice is central to the *Qur’an*, it is also subject to human interpretation, usually male. As has been argued by Ziba Mir-Hoseini (2006), a distinction still has to be made between faith (values and principles) and organised religion (institutions, laws, and practices) that is socially constructed and as such, open to negotiation. However, the daily lives of the majority of Muslim women and girls are defined and determined by a set of beliefs and laws for which divine roots and mandates are claimed, globally, and in some cases, locally. Often times, however, it is only the minority, the highly educated women, who have the luxury of choice to challenge and negotiate the norms and the social structures. Rose was among the

fortunate minority who could choose; her actions are testimony to the right and ability to negotiate that dichotomy of being Caribbean-Western and Muslim while holding to one's truth. She had the will and the courage. The spiritual process of discovering Islam and negotiating its relationship with your lived reality remains critical to negotiation and choice.

Islamic feminism—or even the “women’s issues”—has not arisen in any structured way in the local discourse.⁵ Is it that the issues are silenced by the community? Or is it that the women and girls in Trinidad and Tobago who have benefited from the colonial and post-colonial struggles for justice and equality see no relevance of the “women’s question” to their lives and lived reality? Does gender awareness even exist in the community and if so, to what extent? The contribution of Rose is a small but an important step in raising the issues of inequity and injustice in Islamic practices in Trinidad. Given the global perception that Islam is recalcitrant to modernity, and, in particular, feminism, the actions and exposed thoughts from the conversational narrative with Rose is a foothold for the feminist movement which can be built upon.

The intersectionalities not only of gender and generation but gender and class, religion and ethnicity become important in the discussion on women’s experiences, women’s voice and women’s choices. I argue that the notion of gender equality in Muslim communities requires a strong push from women and girls armed with Islamic knowledge to challenge traditions and practices relating to sexuality, relationships and marriage; gender-based violence; beauty, dress and appearance; religious liberty; gender-based exclusion in public spaces, for example, the *maasjid*, and so on. But more than that, it also requires the development of a more pluralistic and tolerant Islamic ideology that allows for the principle of choice in which there is respect and support for women’s individual and collective right to make their own decisions about their bodies, their families, their jobs and their lives. It would be recalled that the right to choose is integral to the feminist pursuit of social, legal, political, economic and cultural equality for women.

Given that Islamic feminism or the gender question in Islam remains somewhat veiled locally, the question arises as to who speaks for the local Muslim community on these issues? While there are a few voices, there is no common platform or rallying point that brings together these disparate voices to articulate and arrive at a consensus on the gender issues that have an impact on Muslim women. As such, the gender questions remain hostage to a preoccupation with rituals, Islam’s orthopractic form and its physical manifestations rather than the faith itself and its impact on lives and lived realities and Islam’s potential to empower and improve the lives of women and girls to make dignified choices as they negotiate dual realities—Muslim and Caribbean-Western, conservative and modern.

Rose’s life provides an example of how one woman can negotiate a dual reality—religious and secular—and contest the imposition of practices, customs and traditions that may be jurisprudentially challenged. Her actions remind us that rules and social practices that have been claimed as Islamic are only the views and perceptions of some Muslims and that they are not immutable. She shows that one can be Muslim and Western rather

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than have to choose one or the other. This is especially important in the context of multiculturalism. In fact, it may be that Rose Mohammed like many others, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, demonstrates that it is possible to live a life of religious and cultural hybridisation. Her experiences as well as that of other Muslim women can provide inspiration for young Muslim females to challenge the *status quo* in community and enable them, to borrow from Ziba Mir-Hoseini's words, to go beyond the dogmas in search of new questions and new answers.

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¹ TML was incorporated by an Act of Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago in 1950 to represent the views of *Ghair-Mukallid* or Non-Conformists in Islam. As such, TML does not confine itself to any one of the four

recognised schools of thought on Islam named after their four respective Imams or leaders: Abu Hanifa, Malik, Shafi'i, and Ahmad bin Hanbal. They believed that every Muslim of sufficient learning can draw his own conclusions from the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* and not rely on the opinions and decisions of the classical jurists. Their allegiance remains to *Allah* (God).

² According to the *Qur'an*, it is said, "(Lawful unto you in marriage) are (not only) chaste women who are believers, but chaste women among the People of the Book, revealed before your time (5.5)." Also, HQ 2.221, which states "Do not marry unbelieving women (idolaters), until they believe." (Translated by Yusuf Ali.) All jurists agreed that a Muslim man or woman may not marry a *mushrik* (one who sets up partners to God). However, because of *al-Ma'ida* verse 5, there is an exception in the case of a Muslim man marrying a *kitabiyya* (among the people of the book). There is no express prohibition in the *Qur'an* or elsewhere against a Muslim woman marrying a *kitabiy* (among the people of the book). However, the jurists argued that since express permission was given to men, by implication women must be prohibited from doing the same. View of Shaykh Khaled Abou El Fadl, <http://www.scholarofthehouse.org/oninma.html>

³ It should be noted that the period of pristine Islam is considered to be the time period of the first 300 years after the *Hijra*, or emigration, of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622.

⁴ Rhoda Reddock explores this challenge by Rose Mohammed at TML *masjid* and that of the San Juan Muslim Ladies Association and Nur-e-Islam mosque. She contends that the "paradoxical way in which restrictions [were placed] on women's performance of congregational piety result[ed] in the emergence of a consciousness of resistance and feminist agency within the paradigm of Islam" (Reddock 2011). See "Up Against a Wall: Muslim Women's Struggle to reclaim Masjid space in Trinidad and Tobago", Paper presented at The Global South Asian Diaspora in the 21st Century: Antecedents and Prospects Conference held at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, June 1-4, 2011.

⁵ Feminism, even Islamic feminism, is seen by some as antithetical to the ideologies of Islam. The opposition to Islamic feminism stems from the resistance to any changes or perceived changes to eternally valid ways sanctioned by *Shariah* (Islamic Law), also from those who seek to change current practices by a return to an earlier, "purer" version of the *Shariah* and, finally, from those who believe that no other social practice is equal to religious laws and convictions. Feminist scholars have focused their attention on the field of *Qur'anic* interpretation (*tafsir*) and have indicated that the genesis of gender inequality in Islamic legal tradition lies in the cultural norms of early Muslim societies. These norms and social structures impede the realisation of the ideals of Islam, namely, freedom, justice and equality. Consequently, the demand for gender justice can be placed within a religious framework—a brand of feminism that takes Islam as the source of its legitimacy and that can inform political and socio-economic discourses reflecting modern realities and the aspirations of Muslim women.