

RELIGIOUS ‘RELATIONALITY’ AS AN ETHICAL RESOURCE

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1. Introduction

The paper probes the notion of ‘relationality’ as a possible ethical resource, having resonance in both Hindu religious thought, as well as in particular strands of feminist thinking. Drawing from an earlier ethnographic study¹ on Muslim women who follow the bodily practice of veiling,² this paper situates the observations emerging from that particular ethnographic context within a discussion of religious ethics and a framework of constructed religious alterity.

One notes that historically, particular artefacts of clothing and assembled appearances are recognized as being embedded in a matrix of religious and cultural situatedness. Likewise, the images of Muslim female bodies in items of clothing such as the veil, has in certain instances provoked intense reactions from non-Muslims. The study shows that there is a pronounced level of ‘disconnect’ between the perceptions of the Hindu women *looking at* the veil, and the experiences of the Muslim women *wearing* the veil, and suggests a possible resolution of this ‘disconnect’, through the notion of ‘relationality’ approached within the context of feminism and the Hindu notion of *darshan*.

Thus in the final instance, working through the heuristic tool of the ‘gaze’, the paper attempts to re-read ‘gaze’ within the spectacles of *darshan*. This re-reading explores an alternate way of ‘gazing’, which is seen to speak more profoundly to relationality and the transcendence of *difference*.

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¹Maheshvari Naidu, “Seeing (through) the Gaze: Marking Religious and Cultural Differences onto Muslim Female Bodies,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 22, 2 (2009), 23-42.

²Veil and veiling refers interchangeably to both the headscarf or *hijab* and the full gown, scarf and face covering, the *nikab* or *purdah*.

2. Relationality and Veiling Relations?

Relativism and relationalism are informed by postmodernism and notions of relationalism are seen as being more allied to religion and religious thinking and behaviour.³ Relationality can be distinguished as ‘strong’ and ‘weak.’ Strong or ontological relationality assumes a mutually constitutive, holistic relation. Identity is thus simultaneously individual, as a unique nexus of relations, and communal, because according to this perspective, all things have a shared being. Bauwens tells us that relational frameworks yield a “shared being,” unique and mutually constituted nexus of historical, situational, interpersonal, and moral contexts. Relational frameworks imply that we are, most vitally, already in community of beings, and must live this ontological relationality and social space as a ‘space of relations’. Atomistic individualism is rejected in favor of the view of a relational self, a balance between individual agency and collective communion.⁴ This very Hindu perspective which speaks to the interconnected-ness of everything also puts the emphasis on *relationships* as being constitutive of social reality.

With respect to the artefact of the ‘veil’, Droogsma⁵ quite rightly points out that people tend to “ascribe” meaning as opposed to describing the meaning the veil has for (Muslim) women. Images of ‘veiling’ among Muslim women appear to persistently exercise discursive power over popular perceptions of both Islam and the women who follow Islam. It is interesting to examine how bodily practices such as veiling, and women who practice veiling come to be discursively viewed by women of another religious tradition and what this says about their claim in being religious, ethical and modern women. Both the sample groups of women, Hindu and Muslim, perceive themselves as being religious, ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’. The ethnographic material generated from interviews with Muslim women who choose the bodily practice of veiling and interviews with non-veiling Hindu women about their perceptions about the veil, and the women who choose to veil, is used here within the wider discussion of religious ethics and feminist ethics.

³B. D. Slife, “Modern and Postmodern Value” in *Centers for the Family* (2002) at www.brentdslife.com/FamilyvaluesandRelationality.pdf

⁴Michel Bauwens, “Introduction on Individuality, Relationality, and Collectivity: Primacy of Relationality” (2006) at p2pfoundation.net/Introduction_on_Individuality,_Relationality,_and_Collectivity. Online accessed 25/10/2010.

⁵Rachel Anderson Droogsma, “Redefining Hijab: American Muslim Women’s Standpoints on Veiling,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 35, 3 (2007), 294-319.

4. The Veil in South Africa

Hijab and *nikab* or *purdah*, are not public contested symbols in South Africa, where religion and religious practices are not perceived as politically menacing to nation state. The word secular was eschewed when drawing up the South African constitution, and reference to ‘God’ in the preamble was permitted, indeed welcomed. However, enshrined within the document is the individual’s right to freely express her religion (whatever that may be in the case of non believing atheists) in both private and public spaces. While Christianity with an overwhelming representation of 73.52% is practiced in South Africa, all minority religions (Islam 1.45%) are afforded equal respect and freedom in the religiously plural South African constitution, and institutional structures. The diverse religious expressions of the equally diverse representative religious groupings and adherents are thus understood as being subsumed under the various constitutional religious freedoms. However, Since the 1990s the politics of covering or not covering the body has become hotly contested ground, in particular countries, where the state has in certain instances, intervened either to ban the veil or to impose it. A number of globally positioned studies have in turn analyzed the practice of veiling in terms of gender role attitudes and the politics of identity.⁶

South Africa has been, and is looked upon, fairly enviously by many other nations for its liberal and seemingly liberated constitution that spells out numerous freedoms for different minority and groups perceived as subalterns: the minority religions, previously marginalized groups of Black African and other non White women, the rights of children, as well as the interests of gay and lesbian individuals. Given the entrenched religious freedoms in the constitution and the visible absence of the local South African communities of Hindu and Muslim, Christian et al, in becoming embroiled in communal conflict stemming out of motherland spaces such as India and Sri Lanka, I was interested in probing the grassroots perceptions of religious difference as they come to be experienced in bodily practice and artefacts of religious and culturally encoded clothing.

The sample group for the ethnography comprised a purposively identified group of 40 Muslim women who practiced veiling, and a large group of purposively selected 120 non veiling Hindu women. Both sample

⁶Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, “The Newly Veiled Woman: Irigaray, Specularity, and the Islamic Veil,” *Diacritics* 28, 1 (1998), 93-119; Jen’Nan Ghazal Read and John P. Bartkowski, “To Veil or Not to Veil? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas,” *Gender and Society* 14, 3, (2000), 395-417.

communities were within the age spectrum of 20-60, although, the bulk of the material emerged from the larger numbers of women in the 20-45 age bracket.⁷ Both groups of Hindu and Muslim women professed being “*religious*,” and spoke of themselves as being “*ethically conscious*” and “*liberated*” women. All these self identification categories were fluidly understood according to the women’s own normative frameworks.

5. The Ethics of Gazing on Other Religious Bodies

It is perhaps safe to say that the wearing of the *hijab* (headscarf) or *pardah*⁸ (headscarf and gown with face covering) expresses the Muslim women’s assumption of an Islamic identity that is immediately visual. Many Hindu women interviewed claimed that while they had “*no problem*” associating with, approaching and befriending, women who chose to wear the headscarf or *hijab*, almost all claimed that they found it extremely difficult to understand the face covering or the *pardah*, or why “*modern women in this country would choose to cover themselves from head to toe.*” Among the younger Hindu informants, there was a host of responses to the headscarf with some respondents claiming that it was “*the right of the women to cover their heads,*” or “*follow their tradition.*” Some individuals claimed that the scarf looked “*cool*” and that they knew many young girls who teamed up a “*well coordinated look with scarf and pants,*” while others felt that “*wearing the scarf was okay,*” but leaned toward being “*somewhat old-fashioned and out dated.*” Aside from the reactions indicating an awareness of the *hijab* as a veiling practice and part of a religious tradition, most of the other responses ‘saw’ the headscarf in terms of the aesthetics of being ‘good’ fashion, or not.

The *pardah* or full face covering, as opposed to the headscarf, however, emerged, amongst both the young and older group of informants as being quickly subsumed within a familiar trope of oppressed womanhood, with many claiming that this practice was “*bit extreme,*” “*ridiculous*” and that they “*could not understand*” why the women agreed to “*cover so much of their bodies*” and felt that the women “*must be terribly restricted wearing the full gown and full face cover.*” Almost all the respondents, including those women who pointed out that “*it was their [the Muslim women] culture to do so,*” as well as several young Muslim

⁷While Hindu and Christian Indian women were interviewed, for the purposes of this essay I have used only the interview responses with the Hindu women.

⁸It seemed that what was referred to in other parts of the Muslim world as *nikab*, gown and head and face cover was called *pardah* in the South African context.

females, believed that it was an “*oppressive*” artefact of dress that worked “*to oppress*” the women. One woman was especially vocal, and referred to the *purdah* as “*terribly stupid and oppressive,*” even though she had said earlier that it was *their* culture. None of these respondents, some students, many in their second or third year of studies, or the more mature older respondents questioned that they were reading the *purdah*, in the words of Macdonald⁹ as perhaps a “primary signifier” of the oppression and restriction of the Muslim female, or that there could well be other significations of the *purdah*, *for the women wearing them*. A few respondents did indicate that the *purdah* was not oppressive. However, most of the informants in this category stated that they themselves would never wear the face cover, and that they found it “*difficult to talk to women with face veils.*”

One is reminded that the (constructiveness of) body becomes more discernable when it appears to ‘deviate’ from other bodies or, in the words of the feminist anthropologist, Margaret Lock,¹⁰ “when it appears to deviate from the expectations of the dominant ideologies” that cohere around it. Some respondents felt that the veiled women wanted “*to be seen and known*” as being “*more than anything else,*” as “Muslim.” All these respondents showed a strong reaction to the Muslim women in *purdah*, seeing them as “*being too conservative,*” with some in the older group of Hindu women feeling that they (the Muslim women) are projecting a “*too strong visual statement of religious identity.*”

The Hindu women shared starkly worded narratives of “*how ridiculous,*” “*you don’t feel like talking to them,*” “*they don’t want to be approached,*” “*they look alien,*” “*I can’t see their face, how crazy,*” or “*I have never approached someone in full face cover,*” “*I think it’s difficult to approach them,*” “*they don’t mix easily with others,*” etc. One response was, “*you are prevented from talking naturally,*” while another maintained that “*you can’t see their expressions and you don’t know if they want to talk.*” While a few Hindu respondents claimed that as long as the women did not mind, “*it was okay,*” an equal number spoke referencing themselves, with utterances, “*I don’t like the face cover,*” “*I don’t like it,*” “*I don’t feel like talking to them!*” and “*it scares me.*”

⁹Macdonald, Myra, “Muslim Women and the Veil: Problems of image and voice in media representations” *Feminist Media Studies*, 6, 1, 2006, 7-23, 10.

¹⁰Margaret Lock, “Cultivating the Body: Anthropology and Epistemologies of Bodily Practice and Knowledge,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 1993, 133-155, 139.

Even the women who voiced that they “*could not judge*” such practices and that it was a “*free country*” collapsed their narrative into their conclusion that seeing someone in full face cover meant that little contact or dialogue could be initiated, with one informant stating, “*yes they are putting up barriers between themselves and other cultures.*”

Only a few of the 120 Hindu women interviewed, had ever approached a woman with her face veiled, in casual conversation in the manner that they would with other people. It is not so much that they *refused* to talk to the veiled women, just that they claimed that they did not feel comfortable approaching the women with face coverings. A Hindu woman added that although she “*respected them*” she would never think of approaching, and striking up a conversation with a veiled (face cover) woman for “*fear that I would not stop staring at her.*” One woman declared that “*they looked scary in the mask!*” Only one young woman declared that she ‘could and would approach women in *purdah*,’ because she “*could still see their eyes,*” saying that they were “*not erecting any cultural barriers because they would talk back.*”

When asked if *purdah* should be practiced in the South African context, some claimed that it was “*an individual’s right,*” while others claimed that “*these women should not be different from everyone else*” and “*it makes them look unfriendly.*” The same informant started, and then checked herself, but not before I was able to discern from her (and a number of other informants) that she felt sorry for the women, whom she perceived as *having to* completely cover the face. Such responses reveal a “*surveying paternal gaze, similar to the historical colonizer,*”¹¹ who is able to enforce his or her gaze on others.

Even as the non veiling women complained that they found it difficult to strike up a conversation with a woman in *purdah*, most women in *purdah* also shared that very few non Muslim women spontaneously approached them. While several answered that they were treated “*just fine by strangers,*” almost all of them, even those who claimed to be treated ‘fine’ later admitted that they routinely drew “*lingering stares*” and “*odd looks*” that said was almost always “*thrown on*” them.

Contrary to the perception of the Hindu women, conversations with the Muslim women over some months allowed a level of *emic* penetration into their lives and revealed that these women were very comfortable with assuming the bodily practice of veiling and certainly did not experience

¹¹Anne E. Kaplan, *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology*, Maryland, USA: University Publishers of America, 1983, 46.

this as oppressive in any manner. Many Muslim respondents indicated that they “*did not know what the fuss was all about*” and said that they “*did not know what it was exactly the other women saw, or thought they saw when they looked at them!*” Many of the older Muslim women and some of the more assertive, younger women asked... “*These women that look at us like we are so strange*” ... “*are they not religious themselves?*”, and “*how is it they find **our** practice so odd?*”

A large percentage of the Hindu women interviewed, about 85% claimed to be religious. Many referred to the Hindu religion as a tolerant one that was not compelled to be proselytising. Many of the women were articulate and claimed that they were ethically conscious individuals. A large number, about 80% claimed that they had a strong Hindu (religious) identity and considered themselves religious. It was intriguing for me that their sense of being Hindu, ethical and religious still allowed them to ‘see’ and objectify the Muslim women as being ‘oppressed.’

6. Feminist Ethics and Relationality

Feminist ethics is considered as emancipatory and as offering liberation from various systemic oppressions for women and other marginalized groups. More often than not the many expressions of systemic oppressions are ascribed to males, and patriarchal structures carved by males. However, I suggest that there are certain kinds of less discernable types of oppressions, subtle epistemic and ethical ‘violence’ that women also perpetrate against other women, who appear to ‘deviate,’ or be different from what is accepted as the norm(al).

The reflexively positioned Second Wave and later Third Wave feminisms can be seen as having rebelled against ‘othered’ categories such as women, and essentialised and othered groups of religions and religious communities of people. As a body of theory it sought to include the lived experiences of the subalterns as previously marginalised others.

Feminist movements thus had as their imperative, the redress of the political, religious and social asymmetries experienced by women. Within the literature, the wave model has been popularly used to describe both, the chronology, as well as the exigencies of the earlier movement from those of the latter. Feminist theory can be seen as having emerged from feminist movements, as the questioning and examination of the materiality of women’s lives came to be mirrored in the scrutiny at the level of discourse. While earlier First and Second Wave feminist critiques were concerned with the under-representation of women and women’s

experiences within the social sciences (and increasingly even the natural sciences), later strains of more reflexive and situated feminisms were suitably self-conscious and cognizant of the homogenizing and hegemonic effect of the theories of Western origin. Feminist revisions of knowledge can be seen as having also a social imperative, where knowledge is not sought for its own sake but is positioned toward interconnected action and outcomes, and in essence an emancipatory role.

The emancipatory imperative within feminist ethics is in turn claimed as being offered with a ‘communal’ context; it is not meant to liberate just the one female, at the expense of the larger group. Carroll Robb¹² points out that feminist ethics teaches that individuals are not isolatable from their communities. According to the contours of feminist ethics, communities have an identity as a group that supersedes the identity of the individual, and personhood is read more contextually, or relationally, that is, in relation to one another. She claims that feminist researchers place on their agenda, the creation of knowledge that is emergent from people in relationship with one another. Another feminist writer, Jean Keller, concurs and adds that feminist ethics incorporates a relational model of moral agency, the insight that the moral agent is an “encumbered self,” who is “always already embedded in relations with flesh-and-blood others and is partly constituted by these relations.”¹³ The point of ‘relationality’ is considered the critical access point of commonality in the dialogue between the two, Hindu ethics and feminist ethics.

Descriptive ethics refers to the general beliefs, values, attitudes that guide behaviour and determine what is customarily done. The difference between descriptive and normative ethics is “the difference between what is and what ought to be.”¹⁴ But both *what is* and *what ought to be* is meant to be understood in a relational context. Pointing out that feminist thinkers (epistemologically) view the person as essentially relational, not individualistic, does not equate to denying the existence of the self, but rather, as affirming that the self has relationships that cannot be separated from its existence.¹⁵

¹²Carol S. Robb, “A Framework for Feminist Ethics,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 9, 1, (1981), 48-68.

¹³Jean Keller, “Relationality, and Feminist Ethics,” *Hypatia* 12, 2 (1997), 152-164.

¹⁴Josie Fisher, “Social Responsibility and Ethics: Clarifying the Concepts,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 52, 4 (2004), 391-400.

¹⁵Brian K. Burton and Craig P. Dunn, “Feminist Ethics as Moral Grounding for Stakeholder Theory,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 6, 2 (1996), 133-147, 135.

7. Ethical and Relational Way of ‘Seeing’

While bodies may well be a vehicle for staging cultural et al identities,¹⁶ the study shows that in this particular context, the bodies of Muslim women are inscribed and read within a repertoire of difference, and enforced through particular boundaries. Increasingly the body has been highlighted as a central site for the reproduction of various kinds of discourse, created by those gazing upon the body. More than biological materiality, the body is the ‘site’ where interactions of discourse and power enact themselves. In its various refracted understandings as social body, gendered body, symbolic body and religious body, it is conceived as a site of social grounding on which social and cultural processes are inscribed. The ‘body’ is conceived as “a set of boundaries”¹⁷ that are, among other things, religiously and politically signified and maintained. This religious signification occurs within the gaze of the looker (or non veiling Hindu), feminist or otherwise, perceiving veiling acts as, at best obligating women’s bodies, at worst, oppressing women and their bodies.

Colebrook¹⁸ maintains that thinking about the body beyond sameness and difference allows us to see that the body is not a pre-representational ground, but an effect of representation, that instead passes itself off as grounding. The gaze(r) who looks upon this ‘grounding’ is synonymous to a masculine gaze because it accords to the looker a position of mastery. In this context, that which is gazed upon is the Muslim woman, and the gaze of the Hindu woman, designate her as the site and sight of difference.¹⁹ Bodies are given, “a radical outside, limit, or surplus that cannot be exhausted by representational closure.”²⁰ But she points out that this ‘excess’ has nothing to do with the ontology of the body itself, but rather with particular epistemic conditions that come to accrete to the body.

‘Visibility’ is spoken of as a mechanism of ocular metabolisation, and a “form of assimilation or introjection through the gaze,”²¹ and

¹⁶Pippa Brush, “Metaphors of Inscription: Discipline, Plasticity and the Rhetoric of Choice,” *Feminist Review* 58 (1998), 22-43.

¹⁷J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, London: Routledge, 1990.

¹⁸Claire Colebrook, “From Radical Representations to Corporeal Becomings: The Feminist Philosophy of Lloyd, Grosz, and Gatens,” *Hypatia* 15, 2 (2000), 76-93.

¹⁹Corinn Columpar, “The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone: The Intersection of Film Studies, Feminist Theory, and Postcolonial Theory,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 30, 1/2 (2002), 25-44, 44.

²⁰Colebrook, “From Radical Representations to Corporeal Becomings,” 80.

²¹Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, “The Newly Veiled Woman: Irigaray, Specularity, and the Islamic Veil,” *Diacritics* 28, 1 (1998), 93-119, 95.

‘visibility’ precedes the process of internalization. Put differently, discursive practices are actually created, reproduced, and upheld through visible citation,²² which in the context of this study is a reference to the visible context of the veiling women that are perceived by the Hindu women as establishing boundaries between themselves, their (covered) bodies and those of others. The women who practice veiling however, share narratives that clearly show the possession of alternative understandings, and do not ‘see’ themselves as being oppressed. This they clearly articulate in the interviews. The polyvalent meaning of the different forms of veil, *hijab* and *purdah*, revealed itself in the many different reasons shared by the women for veiling. Some referred back to what they saw as scriptural imperatives, while many younger Muslim women pointed to enjoying an emphatic visual expression of their religion and culture. The meanings attributed to the Muslim veil are thus not endemic to the veil itself but produced in and through cultural discourse by others. In other words the so called meaning of the veil is ‘created’ by the outsider looking upon the veil with her own subjective biases.

Theories of discourse call attention to the contested character of cultural forms and point out that cultural forms such as (institutional and doctrinal) ‘religion’ are to be grasped as implicitly constructed. Johnson reminds us that the *gaze* sees much more than what the naked eye does, it does not function as the eye, since the “gaze is pre-existent to the eye.”²³ The notion of gaze within the intellectual traditions of postmodern social theory has been popularised by the work of Michel Foucault²⁴ in his work on ‘the medical gaze’ and Jacques Lacan²⁵ and his work on ‘the mirror stage gaze.’ Ann Kaplan’s work focused on what she saw as the inherent male gaze, but further explains that the gaze is not necessarily male, but that to “own and activate the gaze,” within the structures of language and the unconscious, points to its ‘masculine’ position.²⁶

The responses from the Hindu women reveal that the ‘visible’ (veil) is not so much a *visible* object in as much as the(ir) *gaze* renders it visible. The

²²Neve Gordon, “On Visibility and Power: An Arendtian Corrective of Foucault,” *Human Studies* 25, 2 (2002), 125-145, 132.

²³R. Neill Johnson, “Shadowed by the Gaze: Evelyn Waugh’s ‘Vile Bodies’ and ‘The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold’,” *The Modern Language Review* 91, 1 (1996), 9-19, 6.

²⁴M. Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, London: Tavistock, 1976.

²⁵J. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1977.

²⁶Ann E. Kaplan, *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology*, 45.

paper refracts and understands the non wearer as a kind of paternalistic (neo)colonial gaze(r) likened to a masculine (if not a male) gaze insofar as it accords the bearer (the Hindu women) a position of mastery.

The understanding is that the gaze ‘sees’ religious symbols such as the use of the *hijab* or *purdah* as marking differences onto bodies that ought to be neutral, unmarked and uncomplicated by religious difference, or as bodies that should look like any other dressed body.²⁷ The ‘gaze’ according to Foucault²⁸ is concerned with the gathering of information which works to inform and create discourse on the subject, and works to empower the status of the spectator. Crossley²⁹ points out that for Foucault, ‘the visible’ or the order of visibility, is what is ‘seen’, while the invisible is the practices involved in the making visible of, that which are not themselves visible. This making visible is overlaid with complex layers of projected meanings and interpretation and in this context a form of subjective exegetical, ‘popular’ reading of the *purdah* as being oppressive on female body.

8. Relationality and Taking *Darshan*

I would like to suggest a *possible* alternate way of ‘seeing’ in the Hindu religious concept of *darshan* as a particular kind of ‘seeing.’ Uttara Coorlawala is an academic and Indian dance exponent who presents us with an exciting methodological praxis. She has worked with the methodology developed within feminist film theory of deconstructing the gaze and uniquely applying it to read *abhinaya*, which she describes as the narrative component in Indian classical dance and the performer-audience (or seer and seen) relationship³⁰ or relationality.

Darshan implies ‘sight’ on a rich multiplicity of symbolic and spiritual levels, demonstrating “a complex mix of doctrinal, perceptual, visionary and experiential dimensions.”³¹ As presented by Coorlawala, *darshan* is where, in the *seeing*, the mind becomes engrossed in an experience of god’s presence. However, Coorlawala sought to decontextualise *darshan* outside of its specific religious and god

²⁷Sophie Body-Gendrot, “France Upside Down over a Headscarf?” *Sociology of Religion* 68, 3 (2007), 289-304.

²⁸M. Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, London: Tavistock, 1976; M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1979; M. Foucault, “The Eye of Power” in *Power/Knowledge*, C. Gordon, ed., Brighton: Harvester, 1980.

²⁹Nick Crossley, “The Politics of the Gaze: Between Foucault and Merleau-Ponty,” *Human Studies* 16 (1993), 399-419.

³⁰Coorlawala, “Darshan and Abhinaya,” 21.

³¹Coorlawala, “Darshan and Abhinaya,” 122.

embeddedness (in this case Hindu) and proffered an alternative model to Kaplan's model of the (inevitable) male gaze, with a new way of seeing that sought to suffer *less objectification* and *more identification* with that which was gazed upon. The decontextualisation or said differently this re-contextualisation, is vital for our purposes, allowing us to recognise that *darshan*, very possibly holds the potential for transformative experience, *outside of religious experiences*. This transformative experience pivots on relationality and connectedness, and while meaningfully religious for the adherent, can also be understood within a feminist paradigm that equally places a stress on relationality and socially constitutive relations.

Coorlawala reminds us that perception models informed by the famous analyst Freud, and later Lacan recognise the power of seeing and its relationship to knowing and iterates that a *darshan* model has less hegemonic implications for the viewer.³² *Darshan* as a seeing model appears to have less attachment to owning the *knowing* in any hegemonic sense. Coorlawala³³ is not blind to the difficulties involved in using material from one tradition in establishing a model in another. She states that examining "one way of looking through another way of looking may yield fascinating connections and insights,"³⁴ but is also limited as the two different perspectives have each their "value-laden socio-cultural orientations" which must also be factored in. What is proposed with a *darshan* model of seeing is a *consideration* of a particular way of perceiving, freed from any particularistic theological anchoring, that allows for a greater subject-object rapprochement, in this context between the Hindu women and the Muslim women and a moment of truer seeing between the two, thus paving the way for more ethical kinds of behaviour.

Coorlawala's use of *darshan* is intriguing, if perhaps in need of greater development, and it finds greater purchase when extrapolated to deconstruct the voyeuristic and paternalistic gaze on foreign religious (veiled) bodies, some of which was voiced by the Hindu women in the study who did not veil. One need not necessarily be Hindu or religious to be able to appreciate this alternate way of *seeing* and *being* in relationality.

A Foucauldian hermeneutic of gaze is concerned with creating discourse on the subject, and is seen as working to empower the status of the spectator. The *darshan* model, however, is conceptualised as being a "mutually complicit merging" of seer and seen. For the Foucauldian gaze,

³²Coorlawala, "Darshan and Abhinaya," 23.

³³Coorlawala, "Darshan and Abhinaya," 35.

³⁴Coorlawala, "Darshan and Abhinaya," 35.

‘the visible’ is what is ‘seen’, while the invisible is the practices involved in the making visible of, that which is not visible.³⁵ Accordingly invisibility and non-relationship empower the voyeur-spectator with the capacity to name or interpret, and thereby manipulate mentally, what is being projected on the screen, or in this case, the canvas of veiled female body, while the spectator, the Hindu female remains unmarked as gazer. The unveiled gaze in ‘making visible’ overlays that which is made visible (woman in *purdah*) with complex tiers of projected meanings and interpretation, and a constructed ‘reading’ of *purdah* on oppressed female body. Coorlawala points out that the ‘looker’ who aligns with the dominating male gaze which claims possession, or which criticizes and separates, is unlikely to experience ‘transformation.’³⁶ This sort of masculine gaze forgets that on some level that we are relational agents, and that we are embedded in relationships of many kinds, with many kinds of (religious) so called others.

9. Conclusion

A *darshan* model of seeing is an example of a dynamic model that affords us, conceptually, the ethical resource for acknowledging and valuing a self that is both separate in its own religious and cultural individuality (non veiling Hindu women), while also connected to other individual religious and cultural selves (veiled Muslim women), differently dressed. *Darshan* comes from the Sanskrit root *drs*, meaning to ‘see’ and *darshan* could very possibly act as a “bridge”³⁷ connecting through non-cognitive methods of altering perception, the seeming separate religious and cultural selves, of Hindu and Muslim. A non-separating ‘seeing’, that does not fall prey to essentialist collapse between the two traditions, holds the possibility of contributing to an epistemological stance that is open to *not knowing* (about the religious other) or to *other ways* of knowing about women who practice *purdah*. In this way, dominant discourses that are created by outside gazers, that define the veil as oppressive, can be disrupted for the non Muslim lookers, creating the space for alternate frameworks of understanding about veiling practices that are meaningful for the veiling women themselves.

Identity negotiation, not least of which religious identity, is a process and everyday practice laden with ambiguity and power struggles as most

³⁵Nick Crossley, “The Politics of the Gaze: Between Foucault and Merleau-Ponty,” *Human Studies* 16 (1993), 399-419, 401.

³⁶Coorlawala, “Darshan and Abhinaya,” 23-24.

³⁷Lucy Du Pertuis, “How People Recognize Charisma: The Case of Darshan in Radhasoami and Divine Light Mission” *Sociological Analysis* 47, 2 (1986), 111-124, 121.

believing and practicing individuals, perhaps more especially women will attest to. Standpoint feminist theories have emerged in the context of feminist critical theory attempting to explain the relationship between the production of knowledge and practices of power.³⁸ Therefore the plea for accepting alternate popular and scholarly discourses of the veil creates room for the looker to ‘take *darshan*’ or ‘see’ that veiled Muslim women may well be able to validate *why* they veil, on grounds that are commonsense to them.

Ruth Smith³⁹ reminds us that we are but social beings who are morally called to relations of mutuality, that is, relations that are just and reciprocal, rather than relations of constructed alterity. Smith maintains that whatever else they are about, relations are always about morality and power and therefore about the positioning and repositioning of these relations.⁴⁰ This re-positioning speaks to transposing the masculine authoritative gaze into a non masculine gaze or feminist gaze of ‘seeing’ that asks the non veiling *looker* to surrender the need to ‘own’ any kind of hegemonic *knowing* (of the religiously marked female body) thereby opening the space for more ethical behaviour that can be rooted in *both* religious and feminist ethical imperatives. Writers within particular feministic frames of thinking have themselves proposed the concept of a mutual self. Those who advocate the mutual self from a feminist standpoint also insist on an ethic of care and understanding as being part of a connected concept of the self. The primacy of relationality comprehends the social world in such a way that it is not composed of separate entities, but constituted by the processes of relationship. In the context of South Africa, as indeed any other multicultural society, these processes of relationship exist within the common citizenship that we all possess, which is in turn enshrined in our constitutional imperatives. However, while constitutional imperatives are enacted on one level, it is at the very real level of human interpersonal interactions that ethical imperatives are enacted. It is believed that within a *darshan* model is held a kind of *hierophany*, a revelation at an interpersonal level of bringing to light, and into purer sight that which is gazed upon. It is suggested that construed thus, **relationality** is able to be experienced more intimately for the non Muslim (Hindu) female who gazes on the veiled body of the Muslim woman.

³⁸Sandra Harding, “Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate” in *The Feminist Standpoint Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, New York and London: Routledge, 2004, 1.

³⁹Ruth L. Smith, “Relationality and the Ordering of Differences in Feminist Ethics,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9, 1/2 (1993), 199-214, 202.

⁴⁰Smith, “Relationality and the Ordering of Differences in Feminist Ethics,” 204.