

Seeing (through) the Gaze: Marking Religious and Cultural Differences onto Muslim Female Bodies

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Abstract

This article¹ uses the notion of 'gaze' as a tool in attempting to probe how the Muslim female is discursively constructed through the act of a particular *gaze* on her veiled body. The *hijab* (headscarf) and *pardah* (face covering) as forms of veiling are not publicly contested symbols in South Africa. However, local Muslim women who practice veiling are seen by other non-veiling females as embodying a practice that is a visible signifier of a particular religious 'worldview on body'. This signification lends itself to be 'seen' within particular gazes which are in turn embedded in their own sets of observational exigencies and gaze politics. The paper reveals that in the South African context, the gaze of the 'non wearer' sees veiling as performatively oppressing women and rendering them unapproachable. The women who practise veiling, however, possess alternative understandings, as the interviews reveal. The paper uses ethnographic interviews and conversations, and illustrates through the narratives of both local Muslim women who practice veiling, as well as the non-Muslim female 'gazers', that the polyvalent material object of the veil is rendered visible through a particular way of *gazing*. Finally the paper suggests a possible alternative and de-contextualised way of a potentially transformative gaze that may allow for a degree of mutual 'seeing', and greater complicit rapprochement of seer and seen.

Introduction: The Veil² in Global Sight and Scholarship

The images of various forms of 'veiling' hold persistent sway in exercising discursive

power over perceptions of both Islam and the women who follow Islam, with many, although not all, (male and female) Muslims considering the wearing of the *hijab* as theologically mandated and as obligatory. Since the 1990s the politics of covering (or *not* covering the body) has become contested ground where the state has, in particular instances, intervened either to ban the veil, or to impose it. The partial or complete bans on the head, face, and body coverings worn by Muslim females in non-Muslim contexts have been approached in several ways, from theoretical, textual and exegetical studies to more recent, although less frequent, sociological and anthropological studies focusing on empirical field research, and increasingly, feminist studies.

Referring to a cursory sample culled from the more recent scholarship, we see that Secor's (2005) sociological study claims that the veil is positioned as representing a nodal point of intersection between local, nationalist, and international discourses about the import of veiling practices. Vashi and Williams' study on American Muslim women argues that the *hijab* is a symbol that distils a number of issues for young contemporary Muslims "in the process of constructing the practical dimensions of an American Islam" (2007: 270). Additionally a number of globally positioned studies have analyzed the phenomenon of veiling in terms of gender role attitudes and the politics of identity (see Berger 1998; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Macdonald, 2006).

The point is that there are various political, gender, juridical, theological, et al .perspectives cohering around the issue of veiling. However, this paper is narrowed specifically on probing how the religio-cultural Muslim female body in a *hijab* or *purdah* is discursively constructed through the act of *gaze*. The paper works through the premise 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 (Gokariksel and Mitchell 2005: 150). Banning the use of the veil is understood as a kind of (collective) gaze that works in secularist contexts, to keep the female "religious body in the domain and control of the state" (Gokariksel and Mitchell 2005: 150).

Motivation, Methodology and Point of Insertion of Study

Artefacts of clothing and assembled appearances are often embedded in a matrix of religious and cultural situatedness. Droogsmas quite rightly points out that until recently, despite there being a complex cluster of meanings inherent in the veil and veiling practices, and the existence of historical and anthropological research on the veil and Muslim dress, "researchers seldom consulted veiled women in order to understand how the veil functions in their lives" (2007: 295). She argues that scholars tend to "ascribe" meaning as opposed to describing the meaning the veil has for women. There are of course dominant hermeneutics of veiling that assume

that the *hijab* performs to oppress women. However, women who wear the *hijab* or *purdah* may own qualitatively different understandings of how the veil actually functions, and what it means in *their* lives. This is where ethnography, with its methodological imperative of qualitative (and *actual*) engagement with the people being studied, is vital. Droogsma also notes that many studies probing veiling practices either examine mainly Arab and/or Muslim societies (see Honarvar 1988; El Guindi 1999) or labour under the assumption that bodily practices of covering in non-Muslim societies and Muslim societies are the same (2007: 296). Given all of this, it is believed that empirically grounded ethnographic work with local Muslim women is potentially valuable.

The images of veiled Muslim female bodies, Macdonald maintains, possess the ability to provoke in certain instances, intense reactions, from Muslims and non-Muslims (2006: 8). This is certainly true for even the local veiling Muslim women in this country as the interviews show. The plethora of reactions in turn generates a high frequency of popular and scholarly attention narrowed on the issue of veiling. This fixation on veiling can perhaps be alleged as inhabiting sufficient analyses of other issues such as those around the social, economic, and political positioning of Muslim women. While this study may well appear to continue the 'fixation', the study hopes to contribute to both, ethnographic literature on local Muslim women as well as the research contexts of women *outside* Muslim countries. For while the *hijab* as a material and symbolic artefact may possess some shared and mutual religious rationale for the Muslim women who veil, as a cultural artefact the veil eludes any one universal meaning for all Muslim women in the world (Droogsma 2007: 295). This is the point of insertion for this study which was interested in probing how bodily practices such as veiling, and women who practice veiling come to be discursively constructed. The study explores how the South African Muslim woman experiences the meaning of wearing a veil and attempts to position this self-meaning (of her bodily practice) against the discursive framing 'gaze' of the Muslim and non-Muslim female woman, who does not veil. The study thus aims to understand the meanings veiled Muslim women ascribe to the veil, against how they are constructed by other non-wearers, the Muslim and non-Muslim females by proceeding through the heuristic mechanism of 'gaze'.

The Heuristic Device of "Gaze"

The notion of 'gaze,' particularly in the social sciences, within the intellectual traditions of postmodern social theory has been popularised most notably by the work of Michel Foucault (1976) and the 'medical gaze' and Jacques Lacan's (1977) work on the 'mirror stage gaze'. Anne Kaplan's work centred on what she saw as the inherent male gaze, pointing out 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 (Kaplan 1983).

In the context of this study the masculine gaze is that of a non-wearer, who, as Kaplan would put it, ‘activates and owns a gaze’ that perceives veiling acts as, at best, obligating women’s bodies or, at worst, oppressing women and their bodies. The women who practise veiling however, reveal narratives that clearly show the possession of alternative understandings, and do not ‘see’ themselves as being oppressed. Because cultural symbols such as the veil, that are gazed upon can be interpreted in a variety of different ways, they become “a site of struggle and contestation” (Read and Bartkowski 398: 2000). The paper refracts and understands the non wearer as a kind of paternalistic masculine (if not a male) gaze insofar as the masculine gaze holds, “a position of mastery” and designates objects (the local Muslim veiling women) as the “site/sight of difference” (Columpar 2002: 44). Of course, as a reader quite rightly pointed out, the veiling women also possess a gaze that is turned outward. However, this paper chooses to narrow the focus on the non-wearer, although examples of how the veiling women look ‘out’ at those who may see them as oppressed, did also organically surface in the interviews.

The ethnographic narratives of both Muslim women who veil, as well as the non Muslim and Muslim female ‘gazers’, as examples of non-wearers, show that the ‘visible’ (veil) is not so much a *visible* object in as much as the *gaze* renders it visible. Criticism may be leveled that the veil is admitted by both the wearers and non-wearers as something that is ‘obviously’ visible and seen. The point however, is that nothing exists in an unadulterated form which can be seen merely by the instrument of the eye, *as is*. This is not so much a philosophical point, but rather one that the cultural anthropologist takes as her principle premise. To the anthropologist there is very little, culturally speaking, that is *as is*. Much that we take unfalteringly, such as people presumably fitting into categories of race, gender etc. are all *made visible* through particular cultural or other filters, or *gaze*. This is how I can see a Black man while another sees a Coloured person, as we both look at the same individual. Johnson reminds us that the *gaze* sees much more than the naked eye does, and that it doesn’t function as the eye does, since the “gaze is pre-existent to the eye” (1996: 6). The bodily practice of veiling is in turn vulnerable to multiple gazes, each embedded in their own sets of observational exigencies. As such the meanings and ‘visibility’ attributed to the Muslim veil are not necessarily endemic to the veil itself, but produced in and through cultural discourse.

The Sample Community

A small sample of 42 veiled Muslim women took part in the study (40 of whom were married, and 2 engaged to be married). The first group aged 19-24 were

contacted through a local Muslim Students association, via a 'snowball' sampling method in which participants provided the names of other possible participants after each interview. The second group of women aged 25-40, were contacted through a Muslim female colleague, who was able to provide contact details of 8 relatives and friends who in turn were able to point in the direction of other women. These particular groupings were not intentionally age specific. They were rather an opportunistic sample to whom I was able to gain access through an initial 'contact', before employing snowballing techniques in contacting other women. A small additional group of much older women were included at the suggestion of a reader who remarked that "it would be good to hear also from the older ladies". Although initially left out for purely reasons of logistic difficulties and opportunistic access, a sample group was later sought out of 7 women between the ages of 60 and 76. This time however, it proved easier to access this group as they were, in most instances, the grandmothers of the younger women already interviewed.

The interviews and conversations with the various sample groups in turn reveals that veiled women can provide an alternative account of how *they* understand the wearing of the *hijab* or *purdah*. Droogsma (2007) says of her own particular study, that several of the women identified their desire "for people to speak personally with them about the veil rather than avoid them or make uninformed assumptions". I found in my study that although aware that I was myself an unveiled, and moreover non-Muslim woman, all the participants were nevertheless keen to 'talk' and share their experiences once they understood that I had *questions* rather than *presumptions* about their veiling practices.

In addition to speaking to the group of veiled women, a large group of randomly selected 250 non-veiling females were interviewed. This sample included 210 non-Muslim and 40 Muslim women, with a spectrum of ages 20-60 as a representative sample of Indian women (Hindu, Christian and Muslim) who were asked a structured list of questions that sought to probe how they 'saw' women who chose to use the veil. The sample group was consciously restricted to the designated Indian population of females as the assumption was that there would be, relatively speaking, a greater degree of cultural familiarity and cultural contact amongst this group and the women in *hijab* and *purdah*. Delimiting in this manner allowed a tightening of the analytical net around fewer cultural variables that cohere around issues of religious dress and bodily practices, assumed as being more familiar to Indian women. However, these narratives are not proffered as some kind of generic profile of women, but rather allow a micro-sociological lens on some of their thoughts and experiences around the wearing or 'seeing' of the veil. Indeed the broad expanse and diversity of their views even among Muslims, shows up numerous discursive fissures and supports the underlying thesis that Muslim women themselves have a complex understanding of the materiality and meaning of the veil.

The ethnographic material is divided along two streams, the responses of the non-veiling informants, which includes both Muslim and non Muslim females, and the responses of the women who practice veiling.

Stream One: The Non-Wearer and Gazing On Religious Bodies

As veiling women cannot be categorized by any single bodily reference (Body-Gendrot 2007: 291), of particular interest was the references that South African non-veiling (and veiling) women claimed in their experiences and perceptions of veiling practices.

The interviews revealed that the *hijab* or *purdah* underpins Muslim women's visible assumption of an Islamic identity that is 'visual and immediate'. This seeing of a religious identity is of course triggered by the materiality of the veil, and yet, more than just the veil is seen. Rather there is a 'seeing' also of the assumption of a particular (Muslim) religious identity. However, this seeing differs according to the exegetics of a particular gaze on the actual practice. In other words the "pre-existent gaze" (Johnson 1996) appeared to facilitate a particular kind of seeing. This point is perhaps better illustrated by the fact that all the women believed that the decision to veil or *not*, ought to be that of the Muslim woman herself. However, quite revealingly, the overwhelming majority believed adamantly that the decision to *veil* with the *hijab* was exercised by the parents or husbands of the women involved, believing that this was a form of obligating the women's bodies.

Many non-Muslim males and females interviewed claimed that they had "no problems" associating with, approaching and befriending women who chose to wear the headscarf or *hijab*. And among the young university going sample of 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 outdated." 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 from the younger informants 'saw' the headscarf in terms of the aesthetics of being 'good' or contemporary fashion, or not. The older respondents, as well as Muslim women who chose not to veil, were all clear that wearing the headscarf "was an acceptable way of exercising or expressing ones religion and tradition" that "had a place" in this country. While a few women indicated that the scarf was worn to appear *more* religious, the majority felt that the women were simply articulating their religious "sense of themselves."

However, almost all non-veiling informants claimed that they found it extremely difficult to understand the *purdah* or why "modern women in this country would

choose to cover their bodies from head to toe.” The *purdah* emerged, amongst both the young and older group of informants as being quickly subsumed as a familiar trope of oppressed womanhood, with many claiming that this practice was a “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 culture to do so,” as well as several young Muslim females, believed that it was an “oppressive” artefact of dress that worked “to oppress” the veilers. One non-Muslim 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, 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 Macdonald, perhaps only as a “primary signifier” of the oppression and restriction of the Muslim female or female body (2006: 10). Neither did they consider that there could well be other significations of the *purdah* for the women actually wearing them. A few Muslim 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 also found it “difficult to talk to women with face veils.”

Some respondents felt that the women with the face veils 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*, as “being too conservative” with some in the older group feeling that this was “too strong” a “visual statement of religious identity” that was being projected by the veiling women.

Cooke argues that women’s visible assumption of an Islamic identity in the twenty-first century projects a transnational imaginary (2008: 99). She maintains that the veiled women reveal themselves as full members of their religious communities, asserting that it is in terms of, most especially gender and religion, that meanings can be organized around a primary identity that also subsumes the other (identities). Cooke’s neologism in the combining of ‘Muslim’ and ‘woman’ with *Muslimwoman*, works to evoke a singular identity (2008: 91). She argues that the veil, real or imagined, acts as a marker of essential difference that contemporary Muslim women cannot escape. Cooke asserts that the identity encapsulated in *Muslimwoman* draws attention to “the emergence of a new singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and philosophical diversity” (2006: 91). Drawing the net around women who practise Islam in the category of *Muslimwoman* is of course inherently problematic as it essentialises (Muslim) women. Cooke goes on to say that *Muslimwoman* locates a boundary between “us” and “them”, where their (Muslim women’s) identity

comes to be increasingly tied to the idea of the veil (2008: 91). Interestingly, the categories of non-wearers, the younger University-going students as well as the older respondents did appear to essentialise Muslim females within a grouping similar to that described by Cooke's "*Muslimwoman*." However, as an analytical category it needs to be noted that the neologism is an essentialism that does, as Cooke herself points out, overlay "national, ethnic, cultural, historical" diversities. While this may be some aspects of what surfaced in my interviews with non-Muslims, it is perhaps not an analytical category with high purchase, given the visual (and other) essentialisms it is burdened with.

The Gaze and Construction of Body

The 'gaze,' according to Foucault (1976; 1979; 1980), is concerned with the gathering of information which works to inform and create discourse on (that particular) subject, and work to empower the status of the spectator. Much has been written about the gaze's critical role in the politics of seeing. Crossley (1993: 401) points out that for Foucault, 'the visible' or the order of visibility, is what is 'seen'. Likewise 'the invisible', is the practice involved in the making visible of, that which is not in itself, visible. This *making visible* is overlaid with complex layers of projected meanings and interpretation. I found through interviewing the informants that the manner in which they made the veil visible, or how they chose to see the veil, was largely a subjective exegetical reading of the *purdah* as being oppressive on the female body. These types of responses undergird the point that the body is a constructed entity. The 'constructiveness' of the body becomes even more discernable when it draws attention by appearing to 'deviate' from other bodies, or in the words of the feminist anthropologist, Margaret Lock, "when it appears to deviate from the expectations of the dominant ideologies" around it (1993: 139).

The 'body' has also been formulated as one of semiosis, or how the body is able to act as a transmitter and receiver of information (Lock 1993:137). The *hijab*, and more so the *purdah*, turn women into the "site of the border" when transmitting the visual information of *being* Muslim. Berger (1998: 104) maintains that women come to be the ones who delineate the religious space as they wear the veil. The *hijab/purdah* functions first and foremost as a marker of the woman's identity as a Muslim. It is what is gazed on in the first instance, prior to verbal or any other kind of interaction between the woman and other people. It is the first instance of *knowing* the other, constructed through the ocular or vision.

While non-Muslim females could understandably be perceived as being outside the religio-cultural 'field' of bodily practices of veiling, the non-veiling Muslim females were thought of as being religious insiders, relatively speaking. However, the ethnographic narratives revealed that, while the Muslim women

were relatively more sensitive to veiling practices, their insider status was one of degree rather than a given. Within the group of 40 non-veiling Muslim women (from the total of 250), it was noted that their experience and awareness of the reasons for wearing the *purdah* varied from understandings framed by references to “Qur’anic injunctions” thought to “sanction veiling,” to edicts about “bodily modesty,” to frank admissions of “I don’t know why” and “not sure why the face has to be covered.” Most of the non-Muslim women spoke of their understanding that Muslim women veiled because “only the husband was meant to fully see the veiled women.” An overwhelming majority of both categories of ‘gazers,’ Muslim and non-Muslim used the word oppressive here, either as an adjective meant to describe the bodily practice, or as a verb meant to reveal how they perceived the garment worked to articulate the female body in a hyper-visible way.

In multicultural, religiously diverse South Africa, while women with headscarves might well not raise many eyebrows, and may even raise an admirably look when worn more trendily than traditionally, the woman in full *purdah* is told as inviting stares and lingering ‘gazes,’ as the earlier responses of the informants reveal. Historically, so-called hyper-visible groups of religious peoples, Baptists, Quakers, Mormons, Catholics, and Jews have at one time or another been religious ‘others’ (Moore 1986). Lewis reminds us that non-Western clothing has until recently often been relegated to the domain of costumed clothing which has been presented in media images as static expressions of an essentialised cultural identity (2007: 435). ‘Visibility’ is claimed to be a form of ocular metabolisation, or a “form of assimilation through the gaze” (Berger 1998: 95). Put differently, discursive practices are actually created, reproduced, and upheld through visible references (Gordon 2002: 132).

Constructing and Seeing the Walled Body

Most Muslim, and a substantial percentage of non-Muslim, respondents appeared to be in concert that the veiling women were not consciously attempting to put up barriers between themselves and others. However, almost all of the non-Muslim respondents felt that this was indeed the effect of seeing the veil. One response from a non-Muslim 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.” Very surprisingly (to me), the Muslim non-wearers’ gaze onto the veiled women also refracted them as unapproachable and distant. While the non-Muslim women shared starkly worded narratives of: “how ridiculous,” “you don’t feel like talking to *them*,” “they keep to themselves,” “*they* don’t want to be approached,” “they look alien,” “I can’t see their face, how crazy”, the Muslim gazers shared: “I have never approached someone in full face cover”, “I think it’s difficult to approach them,” “they don’t mix easily with others”, “it’s tough

for me as a Muslim who does not cover up.” While a few respondents claimed that as long as the women did not mind, “it was okay,” an equal number spoke, referencing themselves, with utterances such as: ‘I don’t like the face cover!’, “I don’t like it,” “I don’t feel like talking to them!”, and “it scares me.”

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. A non-Muslim woman added that she would never think of approaching, and striking up a conversation with a veiled woman for “fear that I would not stop staring at her.” One woman declared that “shame *they* looked scary in the mask!” Only one young non-Muslim woman declared that she “could and would approach women in *pardah*,” because she “could still see their eyes,” saying that they were “not erecting any cultural barriers because they would talk back.”

Very few, mainly from among the non-veiled Muslim respondents, said that they would try harder to make friends, with most non-Muslim respondents seeing the religiously clad bodies as being very conservative. One Muslim informant also chimed “yes they are putting up barriers between themselves and other cultures.” Only a few of the 250 non-veiling women interviewed had ever approached a veiled woman with casual conversation in the manner that they would other people that crossed their path. People, of course, constantly engage in complex systems of bodily action that are laden with social and cultural significance. However, listening to the many responses of non-veilers reveals that the *pardah*, as a bodily practice, suffers largely from an almost “generic illegibility” on the part of non-wearers (Lewis 2007: 424).

The responses of the people interviewed indicate that the body is indeed conceived as “a set of boundaries” (Butler 1990: 33). This is perhaps also grasped simplistically as what on the body ought to be either marked or unmarked (tattoos and piercings), covered or conversely, not covered (clothing or lack thereof). Some of these boundaries are variously negotiated with among other things, religiously and politically signified religio-cultural artefacts such as the veil. Because there appear to be such strongly rooted feelings about these kinds of boundaries, the constructed body, comes to be in a sense, maintained within the gaze of the onlooker.

When asked if *pardah* should be practised in the South African context, some non-Muslims 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.” Such statements remind us that artefacts of dress, and other bodily markers, also play their roles in the contestation of inter-group identities within, if not conflicting, certainly competing, cultural spaces. 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 to images,

offer a “surveying paternal gaze, similar to the historical colonizer,” who is able to enforce his/her gaze on others (Macdonald 2006: 7).

Stream Two: The Wearer and the Self-seeing Gaze of Women who Veil

Criticism of the veil, in its various forms comes not only from the Western non-Muslim world, but also from some Muslim women as the interviews reveal. Thus, veiling Muslim women themselves wear the veil amid multiple competing discourses, each of which fights to define *hijab/purdah* for the women who wear it, as opposed to how they defined the practice for themselves (Droogsma 2007: 296). Ethnographic windows into this primary category of participants, is thus of critical value.

As ethnographic contact with the women who practised veiling with *purdah* was prolonged and sustained, at times over several meetings, many aspects concerning the lived materiality of their experiences surfaced. Asking about the meanings veiled Muslim women ascribe to their veil focuses the enquiry on women’s material experiences as a vital resource capturing their (own) bodily practice(s). However, for the purposes of this paper, two central lines of enquiry, with invariably blurred overlapping edges, form the focal points with the women in *purdah*. The issues queried were culled in main from the constructed perceptions of the non-veiling women as outside gazers. The lines of overlapping enquiry were meant to ‘undress’ how the wearing of the *purdah* is experienced by the women, and asked whether:

- The wearing of the *purdah* was experienced as a form of barrier or separation from other (non-Muslim) people.
- Having to wear the *purdah* was experienced as restrictive.

The Veiled Woman, Living in a Walled Body?

The women I spoke with shared differing experiences when asked how people reacted to them in *purdah* and whether the *purdah* worked to separate them from others. About half of the women in *purdah* claimed that they did not mean to, nor felt or experienced veiling practices as separating themselves from other people or other cultures, with one woman asking “how can culture separate us?” and “why should it, I am normal like everyone else.” Another woman pointed out that she no longer drew “those stares,” and that she thought “it was okay” since she was not the “only one in society to dress like this.” These women ‘saw’ the wearing of *purdah* as an embodied temporal practice that is spatialized *outside* of the domestic home as religious dress sanctioned by the Qur’an, and with which they were comfortable.

The other half of the respondents had contrary views sharing that “yes,” although this was not the intention, that “it did separate them.” One woman told me that her previous (non-Muslim) friends were “too scared to walk with her,” when she started veiling with *purdah*, and that she “did not join them anymore.” Others seemed to understand an inherent separation which they saw in the looks they received, and by the fact that very few non-Muslim women approached them. Even as the non-veiling women complained that they find 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 the women, even those who claimed to be treated “fine” later admitted that they routinely drew “lingering rude stares” and “odd looks” that were almost always “thrown on” them.

None of them shared that this was experienced as disempowering, rather they seemed to embody a sustained counter-narrative that they “did not care” and “why should” they “be bothered by the looks.” The women asserted that they were “proud of their religion” and although it would be “nice if other women spoke” to them and “attempted to get to know” them, they were not overly concerned that they did not. Many said that “by now” they had grown “accustomed to the stares and just ignored them.” “Ignore” was also a word that came up forcefully and with a measure of mantra-like frequency.

Some of the young university women communicated that their few non-Muslim friends on campus were “shocked and saw them as old fashioned,” or as “an old lady,” while others shared that the friends were “amazed” but grew used to it, although the latter were invariably women who had started wearing the *hijab* and *abaya* but not the *purdah*. Women in the latter *purdah* group communicated that they had organically “moved away from those people who did not understand.” They did not think that approaching or befriending someone in *purdah* was difficult but seemed to grasp that it was the case for the non-Muslim women. They appeared to refract this behaviour as indicative of the non-Muslim women not understanding Islam. To the question as to whether they prompted the most severe critical reaction from unknown men or women, the informants revealed that, while in some cases it was from the male gaze more often than not it was the gaze of the unknown female that seemed to incur the most negative responses with stares or sniggers.

The small group of much older, Muslim grandmothers revealed that they had been practicing bodily veiling for quite a long time, in most instances *hijab* from about 11 years-old and full *purdah* from about 18 or 20 years-old. It appeared in the interviews with them that it was difficult for them to think of a time when they did not veil. When told about some of the responses referring to women in veils as “old ladies,” one grandmother scoffed and said that “the young could do with some old ideas about what it means to be a Muslim woman.” Another

chortled out a good natured answer in her native tongue, which her daughter translated as, “the sun shines on so much of the young people’s skin that they will soon look old!”

While most of the women appeared to have been housewives, one of the older women was an ex-business person and more articulate in English, having spent much time in the public business space. She explained, “that particular way of dressing was not only cultural,” but “moreover a conscious adoption of culture.” Like the other women in this group she appeared to use the word Islam and culture almost interchangeably, claiming that they did not feel like they were consciously wanting to separate themselves from non-veiling women. Appearing fully comfortable in their skin and the covering (veiling) on that skin, these older Muslim women were not overly perturbed about what whether they were perceived as erecting barriers around them, or with the sort of looks they drew from other men or women.

The Veiled Woman, Restricted Body?

The narratives show that most of the veiling women assumed the wearing of the full gown or *abaya* and *hijab* at puberty, having been instructed by their parents. However, some of the younger women communicated that it was not so much “that their parents told them to,” but that they “sort of always knew” that they “would have to” and shared that they did not experience any coercion in having to begin veiling with the gown and scarf. Although this may well not be the case for other Muslim women, most women interviewed for this study used the *purdah* or face cover after marriage, saying that it was out of respect for both their religion and their husbands. Further prompting in subsequent interview meetings revealed that by this they meant that they respected the wishes of their husbands and covered in public spaces. Some of the women either laughed off or frowned at the question probing if they experienced any compulsion and pressure to conform. The former explained that that the husbands were “in their right” to ask what was already mandated by the religion. The women who had responded with frowns appeared however, annoyed at the thought that I was assuming that they were compelled into playing out particular behavioural scripts “for the sake of the husband.” One woman retorted that “the world likes to believe that we have no minds of our own,” while another similarly articulated that “the outside [Western] world seems overly concerned about whether I am oppressed or not,” “do they think that all other Western women are completely free and liberated?”

Restrictions and the Body

It appeared that the women felt that the *purdah* allowed, as some of the participants explained, “not to be seen by males other than those in the family” or being

construed “as a sexual figure.” And while these women believed that it was *also* the wish of their husbands that they wear *purdah*, none of the women felt that they were engaging in the practice of veiling *only* for their husbands, or that it was only their husbands’ understanding of the religion. In many cases respect for the husband was equated to respecting the (religious) mandate to cover the body and face from the view of males, other than that of the husband. This was explained as not so much merely respecting the husband’s wishes that the wife ‘covers up’, but respecting the fact that only the husband (and other immediate males in the family such as brothers and the father) should be able to see the body of the woman. Again, the point they made was that they did not allow their bodies to be construed in any sexual way by the other males. It also needs to be remembered that the face covering is always worn with the *hijab* (scarf) and the *abaya* (full body gown). Any reference to covering the face with *purdah* necessarily, points to the covering of the body as well.

As the women told it, the “covering up” was not experienced as disempowering but rather an expression of their commitment to Islam, and what they believed “Islam asked” of them. Prompted by a reader of an early draft of the paper, this point was revisited with some of the women who had expressed these views. Given my acquaintance, and by now certain level of familiarity with some of the women, I was able this time to probe somewhat more pointedly. I was able to ask *how* the self confessed ‘disciplining techniques’ of the *purdah*, *could not be experienced as even fractionally, restrictive* (Foucault 1976). Some of their answers were simple and direct with a woman claiming “how can it be restrictive if you love your religion.” This was variously echoed by many other women. One woman referred to what she saw as “codes of conduct” operating in any religion, “that you either obey or not,” and that “tells you what you can and cannot do.” Like the other informants she agreed that there should be no compulsion. While they were not overtly critical of Muslim women who only chose to use the *hijab* and not the full face cover, their responses appeared to indicate that they held *purdah* in close association with “how a Muslim woman ought to dress when in public spaces.” It seemed that, what might appear to the outsider, as the disciplining techniques that the *purdah* forced on the body, was in fact experienced differently by these women. According to Lewis, the wearing of any form of dress necessarily requires the development of particular techniques of body management (2007: 426). And it appeared that these women had comfortably negotiated what non-veiling women might otherwise have construed as restrictive.

Surprisingly, while some women in *purdah* described the reason behind covering the face and body as linked to notions of textual injunction, or that the “women of the prophet were covered,” or referred to avoiding sexual objectification or notions of “bodily modesty,” about 11 women from the group of 42 claimed to not really know the reason behind the cover. These women practiced veiling as

a 'given' way to be for a Muslim woman. While the presence of "spatial regimes" and clandestine hegemonies are recognised as inhering in various kinds of social practices, it is not the discussion of the paper whether the *hijab* or *pardah* is a religious sartorial mechanism to oppress women, but whether the women experienced it as such (Secor 2002: 8).

Thus rather than immediately 'seeing' such admissions of "not knowing why" as a normative expression of patriarchal religio-cultural control, 'critical listening' and standpoint theory prompts us to allow space for other discourses to 'breathe' before concluding that this, *not knowing why*, yet *doing it*, meant that the women were necessarily oppressed. Criticism may well be levelled claiming that this, while not a reference to oppression as such; is illustrative of blindly following parochial traditions. However, here again my imperative was that of an ethnographer, to attempt to comprehend the complexity of veiling outside of my or any other dominant assumptions, no matter how *commonsense* these assumption may appear to us. This demands what is referred to as "critical listening practices," aware that so called 'commonsense' is constructed within cultural particularities. Thus, while other competing discourses may well allow for such a conclusion, listening to the women from their own perspective permits one to appreciate that it was perhaps *not so strange* that they confessed to *not knowing* why they had to cover their faces, for it was bodily behaviour that they had to a great extent naturalised for themselves.

Admittedly I am labouring this point, but precisely because it is a considerable point that weighs on how one reads the women's narratives. My research agenda was to document the narratives and thereafter interrogate through particular methodological tools such as (repeated) interviews and phenomenological emic perspectives, *whether the veiling women themselves experienced their not knowing the reasons for veiling as strange or not*. And gentle probing in the second and third encounters with the participants revealed that they sincerely felt no conflict within them regarding the practice of veiling. This was something that the women who veiled with a *hijab* seemed to come closest to grasping. While most shared that they themselves would not cover their faces, they understood that the *pardah* was "appropriate for the women who do this." As the ethnographer I found that it was thus not so much the neologistic *Muslimwoman* who spoke, but rather the women who spoke in the interviews were Muslim women, with both diverse *and* similar experiences of themselves in *veils*.

Conclusion: A Different Kind of "Seeing" Perhaps

The 'body' in its various refracted understandings as social body, gendered body, symbolic body, religious body and discursive body, is conceived as a site of social grounding on which social and cultural processes are inscribed. Colebrook

maintains that thinking about the body beyond sameness and difference allows us to see that the body is an effect of representation in discourse, in other words it is never seen *bare* or, *as is* (2000: 76,77).

However, the metaphoric ‘need’ to “unveil” so called exotic and alien cultures, by “laying them bare” and bringing them into conformity with the ideological norms of the dominant hegemonies has a long discursive history amongst Western colonialists and imperialists. Feminist have for decades sounded the frantic warnings that contests for power were being “played out across the bodies of women” (Macdonald 2006: 9). The body in turn comes to be signified through the gaze. However, this signification has nothing to do with the ontology of the body in itself, but rather with particular epistemic conditions or our particular *ways of knowing*, that cohere around the body (Colebrook 2000: 80).

For women in *hijab* and *pardah* are instantly construed as signifying *who they are as religious women*. They appear to make immediately visible, their religious and community connections. However, the nonverbal artefact of clothing, a scarf or face cover, is in a sense also a form of bodily practice with a living, breathing, sensibility that needs to be seen outside of particular gazes. For this we perhaps need to *gaze* a little differently. I would like to suggest a *possible* alternative way of ‘seeing’ in the concept of *darshan* as a particular kind of ‘seeing’. Uttara Coorlawala is an academic and Indian dance exponent who 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 performer-audience (or seer and seen) in Indian classical dance (Coorlawala 1996).

Darshan while being subjective ‘seeing’ is also heightened personal awareness, with potential for transformative experience, where, in the *seeing*, the mind becomes engrossed in an experience of the god’s presence. However, Coorlawala sought to decontextualised *darshan* outside of its religious and god embeddedness 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. She reminds us that a *darshan* model has less hegemonic implications for the viewer (Coorlawala 1996: 23). *Darshan* as a seeing model, thus, appears to have less attachment to owning the *knowing* in any hegemonic sense.

The comparative religionist Gerald Larson, in the context of extracting teachings of religious bio-divinity into contemporary environmental discourse, is sceptical about borrowings from one tradition for insertion into another, cautioning about potential epistemic violence for both traditions (Larson 2000). Having met Larson years ago on a visit to the then University of Durban-Westville, I remember being impressed with his cogent arguments for *consideration* and *dialogue* rather than *extraction* between traditions, and this is what I propose here. Coorlawala herself is not blind to the difficulties involved in using material from one tradition in

erecting a model in another. She states that examining “one way of looking through another way of looking may yield fascinating connections and insights,” but is also limited as the two different perspectives have each their “value-laden socio-cultural orientations” which must also be factored in (1996: 35). The task is, of course, even more fraught with sensitivities when there are two different religious traditions involved, and extraction from one religion and potentially indiscriminate alignment with another religion is certainly not the option. However, what I 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 and a moment of truer seeing, shorn loose of interpretation and analysis when gazing upon that which we end up refracting as foreign bodies.

Changing the Lens on the Gaze

Coorlawala’s use of *darshan* is intriguing, if perhaps in need of greater development. One suggests that it can find even greater purchase if extrapolated to deconstruct the paternalistic gaze on foreign religious (veiled) bodies, revealed by the non-Muslim and Muslim women in the study who did not veil.

The *darshan* model of seeing is conceptualised as being a “mutually complicit merging” of seer and seen. For the Foucauldian gaze, ‘the visible’ is what is ‘seen’, while the invisible is the practices involved in the making visible of, that which is not visible (Crossley 1993: 401). Accordingly invisibility and non-relationship empower the 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. Through all of this, the spectator (the non-veiling woman) remains unmarked as gazer. While the ‘looker’ in this particular instance is not like the unseen spectator in the theatre, as she can be also seen by the veiled women, she remains unmarked nonetheless. This is because, to put it simply, the unveiled body is sanctioned as ‘normal,’ and unveiling is normalized outside of Muslim countries. The unveiled gaze in ‘making visible,’ thus, overlays the image of the woman in *pardah* with complex projected meanings.

Coorlawala points out that the ‘looker’ who aligns with the dominating male gaze which criticizes and separates, is unlikely to experience ‘transformation’ (Coorlawala 1996: 23,24). This sort of masculine gaze forgets that on some level we are embedded in relationships of many kinds, with many kinds of (religious) so called others. A *darshan* model of seeing affords us, very possibly, the conceptual resources for acknowledging and valuing a self that is both separate in its own religious and cultural individuality, and also connected to other individual religious and cultural selves, differently dressed and differently marked. A non-separating ‘seeing’ that does not fall prey to essentialist collapse between 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 define the veil as oppressive can be disrupted and destabilized for the looker, creating the space for other frameworks of understanding about veiling practices that are meaningful for the veiling women themselves.

Sketching the contours of a *darshan* model of 'seeing' may well appear to move the paper, from description to prescription. This is not the intention. However, anthropology and anthropologists have a responsibility outside of endeavouring to offer particular ethnographic windows through interviews and participant observation. The accountability in the first instance is to contribute to the reflexive *doing* of anthropology itself in the way *we* gaze on our informants and write up our ethnographic material, outside of dominant discourses. Secondly there is also, if not an obligation certainly the responsibility, to feed into a dialogue on how the discipline can engage with the lived cultural contexts of the people with whom we, as anthropologists, elect to work.

For it is recognised that the negotiation of religious and cultural identity is a process and everyday practice laden with ambiguity, contradiction, and struggle as most believing and practicing individuals, perhaps more especially women, minority groups and other so called deviant bodies will attest to. Therefore the plea for competing discourses of the veil to be recognised as individualised dynamic enactments escaping universalization creates room for the looker to 'take *darshan*' or 'see' that veiled Muslim women may well be able to validate *why* they veil. Thus, a non-masculine gaze that surrenders the need to 'own' any kind of hegemonic *knowing* (of the religiously marked female body) beyond sameness or difference, affords us perhaps a small glimpse of the 'face' under the *purdah*. We are then in a position to both hear and see Muslim women and not merely the category of *Muslimwoman*.

Notes

- ¹ I would like to acknowledge two anonymous reviewers for their meticulous reading of the paper and highly insightful comments.
- ² 'Veil' is used to refer to either the *hijab* or headscarf as well as the *purdah* or face covering. When either one is meant specifically, the terms *hijab* or *purdah* are used. The term 'veiling' refers to either one of these bodily practices.

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