

**Tracing ‘the Anorexic’  
and ‘the Veiled Woman’:  
Towards a Relational Approach**

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# **Tracing ‘the Anorexic’ and ‘the Veiled Woman’**

## **Towards a Relational Approach**

**Carolyn Pedwell**

The solution is to refuse...to be dragged into the binary opposition between East and West in which so many arguments are mired. However, the most powerful way to do this is to fearlessly examine the process of entanglement.

*Lila Abu-Lughod, 1998a:16*

The 'new' Muslim veiling phenomenon represents a contemporary 'equivalent' to the growing epidemic of anorexia in the industrialised West, Mervat Nasser has argued (1999). Like anorexia<sup>1</sup>, she contends, the new veiling<sup>2</sup>, represented by the growing number of young Muslim women wearing Islamic dress within universities, workplaces, urban centres and political organisations around the world, responds to 'conflicting cultural messages and contradictory cultural expectations' experienced by women globally (407). Both embodied practices<sup>3</sup> function as forms of problem solving which, in the absence of real power or control, help women cope with the competing demands of ambitious professional goals and pressure to maintain a traditional female identity. And both, she suggests, ultimately lead to the reproduction of tradition and the reinforcement of gender inequality.

The establishment of 'the anorexic subject' as a counterpart to 'the veiled woman' within cross-cultural comparisons such as Nasser's draws on a significant strand of feminist literature now pervasive in mainstream cultural discourse. Against constructions of 'the West' as the land of gender equality, liberation and freedom, feminist cultural critics have

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<sup>1</sup> Anorexia is today the object of various competing discourses. It is constructed simultaneously in terms of physiological dysfunction, genetic predisposition and cognitive deficits or biases, as a consequence of familial dysfunction, social ideals of thinness and of patriarchal oppression (Malson, 1998: 98).

<sup>2</sup> 'Veiling' is an English word used to refer to a very wide array of women's Islamic dress around the world, including the turban in Turkey, the chador in Iran, the hijab in Britain, the burqa in Afghanistan (and the many internal variations of Islamic covering in these and other locations). As such, while the term 'veiling' has wide currency in Western industrialised nations, it problematically homogenises a diverse collection of practices. There is no one Arabic term equivalent to the English 'veil' (El Guindi, 1999, xi: 7). Furthermore, veiling is not exclusively a Muslim practice, but is also associated with Jewish, Christian and Hindu traditions.

<sup>3</sup> While all cultural, religious and political practices are 'embodied' in the broadest sense of the word, I use the term 'embodied practices' to refer to those habits, rituals or performances that are oriented specifically towards intervening in and/or altering 'the body'.

inaugurated the figure of the anorexic as a metaphor for all that is wrong with gendered power relations in Western industrialised nations (Orbach, 1993/1986, 2006/1978; Wolf, 1990; Bordo, 1993). Within these texts, and comparisons between veiling and anorexia which employ their terms, 'the anorexic' serves as a generalised figure representing the widespread oppression of the female body within the West's patriarchal, capitalist beauty system – a system that impels women and girls to discipline their bodies in pursuit of an unachievable ideal. As Nasser comments, 'weight phobia, fear of fatness and pursuit of thinness are modern terms that are now used interchangeably to refer to anorexia nervosa' (1997:1). She adds, 'If eating disorders are indeed metaphors... it is likely that what they symbolize now encompasses this social disruption and cultural confusion' (97). A general message these cross-cultural comparisons impart is that when it comes to gender and the body, 'the West' is no less patriarchal or oppressive, and may in fact be more so, than 'the Muslim East'.<sup>4</sup>

Several other theorists have drawn links between Muslim veiling and embodied practices linked to the 'Western beauty system'.<sup>5</sup> Homa Hoodfar (2003) argues that the veil 'may be worn to beautify the wearer...much in the same way Western women wear makeup' (11). Nancy Hirschmann (1998) suggests that Western feminists need to ask themselves whether the veil is more oppressive than Western fashion trends such as Wonderbras, miniskirts and blue jeans (361). In a similar vein, Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen (2006) suggest that both girls wearing headscarves and those dressed in 'porno-chic' are 'submitted to the meta-narratives of dominant discourse' which characterise their everyday practices as inappropriate and deny them the power to define their own action

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<sup>4</sup> See also Randi Gressgård (2006) who argues that, on a structural level, the figures of 'the veiled woman', 'the anorexic' and 'the transsexual' reveal a 'striking similarity' (325). Through using their 'freedom of choice to choose submission', all three figures display an ambivalence between 'transcendence' and 'immanence' attached 'to the notion of woman, within a hierarchical order' (336).

<sup>5</sup> I employ terms such as 'Western' and 'non-Western', 'Eastern' and 'Muslim' to indicate the types of distinctions made in the literature I am analysing. The generalisations they imply, however, are often problematic. For example, labelling Muslim veiling 'non-Western' obscures the wide practice of veiling in Western industrialised countries by women who may consider themselves both 'Muslim' and 'Western'. In turn, labelling 'anorexia' as 'Western' similarly effaces the growing number of women who experience eating disorders in locations outside the industrialised West. It is also clear that so called 'Western' beauty procedures are practiced all over the world. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the ways in which practices such as veiling and anorexia are socially and discursively produced through relational encounters which criss-cross boundaries of East and West, fundamentally imbricating the two poles.

(103). Sheila Jeffreys (2005) argues, furthermore, that beauty practices prevalent in the West such as makeup, dieting and cosmetic surgery should be understood as ‘harmful cultural practices’ comparable to procedures typically thought of as non-Western, such as female genital mutilation and veiling. She suggests that makeup and the veil represent ‘two sides of the same coin of women’s oppression’ - both have been seen as voluntary practices through which women can express their agency, yet both arise from pressures linked to male dominance (37). These types of comparisons are now increasingly echoed within mainstream media and cultural discourse. For example, an article exploring veiling practices in the UK in *The Observer* argues that ‘the veil and the bra top are really two sides of the same coin’ (Anthony, 2005:17). The premature recognition of female sexuality implicated by the veiling of girls as young as seven or eight, the author contends, ‘is every bit as significant, and disturbing, as dressing a child in a high-street approximation of Britney Spears, all bare midriff and attitude’ (17).

Theorists who establish commonalities between veiling and anorexia and/or ‘Western’ beauty regimes differ in their social locations, perspectives and political agendas.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, however, most *frame* their comparisons with a concern to interrogate ethnocentrism, racism and cultural essentialism. They seek to deconstruct the ubiquitous self/other binary of the ‘liberated, uncovered Western woman’ and the ‘oppressed, veiled Muslim woman’. This dualism can be traced back through the centuries to representations within early Western travellers’ narratives, proto-feminist colonial discourse, nationalist and anti-Western idiom and, most recently, the rhetoric of the American-led post-9/11 ‘War on Terror’. In the midst of a second Western-initiated war in Iraq, such culturally essentialist portrayals of ‘free, skin-showing, Western women’ and ‘downtrodden, covered Muslim women’ once again dominate the mainstream Western socio-political consciousness. In different ways, those theorists who link veiling

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<sup>6</sup> The diverse groups of feminist theorists I have listed above are located differently in relation to nation, ethnicity, religion, and political perspective, among other axes of differentiation. Their varying social locations of enunciation raise interesting questions, which I do not have space to address adequately in this paper, regarding how the potential social and political effects of the comparisons they make may differ. How, for example, might a comparison between veiling and make-up made by the white, Australian radical feminist Sheila Jeffreys be interpreted or received differently by various audiences than a similar comparison made by Homa Hoodfar, a feminist of Iranian origin currently working in Canada? How might we examine and trace the complex relations of power structuring such political and cultural enunciations?

with anorexia and/or Western beauty practices aim to contest enduring Orientalist images of Muslim and Arab women as ‘other’ against a privileged ‘Western self’.

It is my contention in this paper, however, that a more in depth inquiry into the possible effects of constructing these gendered cultural practices as ‘similar’ or ‘equivalent’ is necessary. In the first part, I argue that while similarity-based cross-cultural comparisons can productively trouble culturally essentialist constructions of ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ practices as fundamentally different and distinct, they are also frequently problematic. On the one hand, through their emphasis on establishing *overarching commonalities*, these approaches often collapse into an economy of sameness that risks effacing crucial historical, social and cultural particularities. On the other hand, superficial claims to commonality frequently slip into essentialist constructions of cultural ‘difference’. Furthermore, through constructing ‘the veiled woman’ and ‘the anorexic’ as metaphors for their respective cultures, these approaches extract these figures from the historical processes through which they have been (re)produced and fetishise them as objects (Ahmed, 2000). The contours of anorexia and veiling can consequently become fixed in troubling ways. As such, these similarity-based cross-cultural approaches do not, on the whole, succeed in radically disrupting the essentialist Western/Muslim, self/other binaries they set out to interrogate and indeed may function to reify the hierarchical relations of power on which such binaries depend.

In the second part of the paper, I develop a relational approach that genealogically traces the ways in which practices such as anorexia and veiling, and their imagined subjects, have been constructed historically, in part, *in and through* one another. This approach focuses on teasing out the *constitutive connections* (rather than commonalities) that link ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ historically. Unlike commonality, the concept of connection does not imply the ‘sameness’ or ‘equivalence’ of these imagined subjects. Instead, it points to the ways in which such entities are entangled and interdependent, and as such, preserves social, historical and embodied particularities without disavowing the

possibility of common ground. Through the process of tracing the discursive-material<sup>7</sup> links that bind ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’, a relational methodology illustrates how it is possible neither to hold the ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ apart as fundamentally separate nor to collapse them together within a single linear plane because they remain constitutively intertwined. I aim to show that a relational approach provides the opportunity to develop more intersectional, contextually-specific and historically-grounded analyses of these two practices (and their relationships to one another) than those offered by similarity-based, cross-cultural approaches. It also offers a more effective means of interrogating the culturally essentialist binaries through which such practices are articulated – a task that remains vital in a socio-political context in which essentialist constructions of ‘cultural difference’ abound.

A reader might argue that my emphasis on examining the production of essentialised *figures* such as ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ may function to reify or re-fetishise such stereotypical constructions. The *process* of this relational approach, however, is geared precisely towards illuminating and the historical and political processes of their relational constitution. Indeed, its persistent focus on contextual relationality produces a shift *away* from thinking of set ‘figures’ and ‘practices’ and towards contemplating the relationships produced in and through particular encounters within specific contexts. A relational approach acknowledges that embodied identity categories are not pre-given or fixed, but are the product of particular socio-political histories of construction and, as such, retain the potential to be radically reconstructed

## **Veiling, Anorexia and Beauty Practices: Comparisons and Critiques**

Sheila Jeffreys, Nancy Hirschmann and Mervant Nasser all establish commonalities between Muslim veiling and anorexia and/or ‘Western’ fashion and beauty practices.

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<sup>7</sup> I use the term ‘discursive-material’ to convey the complex imbrication of ‘discursive’ and ‘material’ processes and structures of power as well as the need to temporarily separate these strands at times for the sake of analytical clarity.



In this section, I examine the various cross-cultural comparisons they make and consider some of the problematic effects associated with their attempts to counter Western cultural essentialism and disrupt self/other binaries.

Sheila Jeffreys (2005) argues that the United Nations' concept of 'harmful cultural practices'<sup>8</sup> is helpful for analysing 'Western' embodied practices, as well as those in other parts of the world, because it situates 'traditional' gendered practices within the culture of male domination, rather than simply linking them to notions of individual choice. From her perspective, 'a continuum of Western beauty practices from lipstick on the one end to invasive cosmetic surgery on the other, fit the criteria set out for harmful cultural practices...although they may differ in their effects' (28). Couching her analysis in the language of anti-cultural essentialism, she explains that her book was motivated by a 'growing impatience' with the 'Western bias' of the United Nations' conceptual categories. These categories currently interpret practices in the West as 'emanating from consumer "choice" from "science" and "medicine" or "fashion"', rather than culture, which 'may be seen as something reactionary that exists in the non-west' (34). While veiling and makeup are often seen as opposites, she argues, they are in fact analogous in that both mark women as subordinate, revealing their 'lack of entitlement' in patriarchal cultures (38). If Western beauty practices are also recognised as harmful cultural practices, she maintains, 'governments will, as required by the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, need to alter the social attitudes which underlie them' (45).

Nancy Hirschmann (1998) seeks to move beyond essentialist and ethnocentric Western feminist portrayals of Muslim veiling. She frames her article as a critique of Western privilege and cultural essentialism, emphasising that 'many Westerners tend to associate veiling with extreme gender oppression, even seeing the veil as the ultimate symbol of a unified, monolithic Islam' (357). As a means to disrupt portrayals of patriarchy as a problem unique to Muslim cultures, she asserts that 'from fashion shows to domestic

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffreys is referring to the UN's 'Fact Sheet No.23, Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children' published in 1995.

violence, Western women participate in a myriad of practices that can be seen as deeply patriarchal' (360). Rather than condemn veiling, she argues, 'the need to attend to contexts within which choices are made should make Western feminists ask whether the veil is any more oppressive than Western clothing trends such as Wonderbras, miniskirts, or even blue jeans' (361). While Jeffreys dismisses feminist analyses of the ways in which veiling and other embodied practices may enable women to express their agency in particular contexts, Hirschmann is more interested in 'understanding veiling as a complex practice within which women's agency functions in similarly complex ways' (348). She suggests that 'veiling can be used as a vehicle' (349) for developing 'a cross-cultural feminist understanding on agency' (360).

Linking 'the Western anorexic position and the new veiling', Mervat Nasser (1999), suggests that rise of veiling among young Muslim women globally may be interpreted as 'an anorexic equivalent' (407). She suggests that while the new veiling may appear 'completely different, if not alien to the anorexic position' it is necessary to examine their commonalities as a means 'to go beyond the traditional Orientalist definition and perception of the veil and to depart from the Western static vision of women of the Orient' (408). Drawing on Arlene McLeod's (1991) concept of 'accommodating protest', she argues that both anorexia and veiling are types of 'veiled resistance' undertaken by women who are torn between tradition and modernity (411). She also points to the 'social contractibility' of both practices, represented by the phenomenon of 'me-too-anorexics' and the wide spread of veiling among young women (409). As both practices are 'are derived from tradition and affirmative of it', Nasser argues, anorexics and veiled women both 'obstruct the potential for real change' in regards to gender roles and relations of power (411).

There are several potential benefits to these comparative cross-cultural approaches. They can disrupt ethnocentric and essentialist assumptions that 'Western' and 'non-Western' practices are fundamentally and hierarchically distinct, generate greater awareness and critical thinking about the relationships between gender and culture and promote productive cross-cultural dialogue. Moreover, providing a counter discourse to post-

feminist perspectives which ‘assume female sexual agency and desire to be inscribed in the visibility and openness to view of the body’ (Macdonald, 2006:12), these comparative constructions highlight the ways in which women’s and girls’ bodies regularly function *across cultural contexts* as carriers for wider political, cultural, economic and nationalistic imperatives and the surfaces onto which political positions are etched (McClintock, 1995; Narayan, 1998). Analysis of the gendered oppression involved in beauty practices prevalent in the West also interrogates simplistic notions of personal choice and individual agency and emphasises that ‘the personal is political’. Nasser’s and (particularly) Hirschmann’s analyses are useful for thinking critically about conceptions of agency and subordination within particular social and historical contexts and relations of power. Furthermore, Jeffreys’ argument can be seen as linked to a well-established trajectory of radical feminist critique. A key argument of the widely held sexist ideology to which radical feminist models in the 1970s and 1980s protested, and which Jeffreys seeks to interrogate further, was the assumption that women alone – and not men’s desires or patriarchal culture – bore responsibility for their suffering in regards to matters of beauty and the ‘bodily tyrannies of fashion’ (Bordo, 1993: 21). Yet, despite these advantages, cross cultural approaches which depend on establishing fundamental commonalities among various embodied cultural practices are problematic in several ways. In the remainder of this section, I discuss some of their limitations in further detail.

### *Flattening intersections*

Within many of these cross-cultural comparisons, commonalities between veiling and anorexia and/or ‘Western’ beauty practices are established predominantly on the basis of gender (and to some extent sexuality). Gender and sexuality are clearly crucial to the operation all of these embodied practices, which makes feminist analysis particularly important in this context. Yet when gender is privileged ontologically in such comparisons, the role of other axes of differentiation, such as race and nation, may be problematically occluded. Jeffreys’ analysis, in particular, relies predominantly on a model of universal patriarchy to link ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ practices. While she

makes brief reference to feminist analyses of the ways in which veiling may enable Muslim women to 'alleviate the harms suffered by women as a result of male dominance' (39), she (unlike Nasser) does not address the ways in which veiling and anorexia may serve as adaptive strategies which respond to other oppressive systems such as racism and poverty. In her study of Muslim women living in Canada, Homa Hoodfar (2003) found that veiling has played a crucial role in helping some Muslim women adapt to the Canadian society in the face of cultural difference, exclusion and racism.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Becky Thompson (1992) has argued that, rather than relating exclusively to the gendered 'culture of thinness' in the West, eating disorders such as anorexia represent ways in which women cope with a broader host of traumas including sexual abuse, racism, classism, heterosexism and poverty. Jeffreys does not address these complexities. She also does not consider the connections between veiling, anti-colonialism and a rejection of 'Western' values, which are of course linked to localised gendered relations of power, but cannot be simply incorporated into a reductive model of gender oppression (Ahmed, 1992; Göle, 1996; El Guindi, 2003).

Jeffreys' theoretical framework has implications at the level of intervention. In the context of her comparison of veiling and makeup she seems to suggest that simply deciding to not be concerned with wearing makeup or veiling can provide liberation for Western and non-Western women, insisting:

Women can invent themselves anew outside the stereotypes of Western and non-Western patriarchal culture. Women can have access to the privilege possessed by men of not having to be concerned for appearance and being able to go out in public barefaced and bareheaded (38)

Jeffreys' language here veers dangerously close to the brand of 'unveiling for freedom' rhetoric employed by the Bush/Blair alliance to 'legitimise' the Western military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq (as if simply going barefaced and bareheaded could produce gender liberation). Her apparent desire for Muslim women to unveil themselves

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<sup>9</sup> Hoodfar discusses how Somali refugees who had come to Canada to escape civil war and upheaval turned to Islam, the Muslim community and veiling for support upon their arrival, as 'for many Somalis emphasizing their membership and participating in the Muslim community is a means of coping with a new culture and social system' (2003:13).

also suggests a problematic assumption of what constitutes a ‘natural’ body. In constructing the ‘bare-headed’ Muslim female body as associated with freedom from harm or oppression, she universalises one particular conception of embodiment as the feminist ideal. Yet this implied equation of bare-headedness (and bare-facedness) and liberation risks reifying post-feminist assumptions that associate the visible display of the body with female sexual agency. It also ignores historical lessons from countries such as Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan, which have shown that unveiling can be felt as just as oppressive to women as veiling, especially if coerced by government pressure (Ahmed, 1992; Göle, 1996; Macdonald, 2006). These examples illustrate the inadequacy of a linear cross-cultural model of gender oppression in theorising the relationship between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ embodied cultural practices and point to the need for a relational, intersectional analysis. Indeed, if the object is to address the cultural essentialism and racism inherent in representations of (or frameworks set up to deal with) these embodied practices, a model that proceeds by dropping race, nation and cultural difference *out* of the picture is problematic.

### *Superficial sameness*

Through the establishment of superficial similarities based on uncritical assumptions, the comparative approaches used to link veiling and anorexia and/or Western beauty practices can also paradoxically reify essentialist notions of cultural difference. For example, in including ‘Western’ beauty procedures alongside ‘non-Western’ practices within the category of ‘harmful cultural practices’, Jeffreys unambiguously assumes that a variety of ‘non-Western’ practices, such as female genital cutting and veiling, are fundamentally patriarchal and harmful to women (thus reifying ethnocentric notions of non-Western cultural backwardness and barbarity) and simply seeks to have ‘Western’ practices measured by the same yardstick. Furthermore, it seems significant that Jeffreys, like Hirschmann, only employs the notion of a ‘continuum’ to articulate the need to theorise distinctions between ‘Western’ practices (suggesting that some of such procedures may be more extreme or ‘harmful’ than others). The implication of this theoretical move is that similar distinctions need not be theorised with respect to ‘non-

Western' practices, which can be less problematically lumped together as 'oppressive'.<sup>10</sup> She also reinforces a divide between 'Western' and 'non-Western' procedures that downplays the ways in which these practices clearly cross-over national and cultural contexts. Thus, while Jeffreys' analysis is framed as one motivated by anti-cultural essentialist imperatives, one might argue that her model risks reifying ethnocentrism and cultural essentialism by taking the oppressive nature of non-Western practices for granted. My argument here is not that generalisations or assertions of similarity can never be made but that, in texts like Jeffrey's, an uncritical insistence on 'sameness' or 'equivalence' easily slips into assumptions of the essentialist cultural differences that the authors claimed initially to want to overcome. This appears to be a problem in cross-cultural approaches which emphasise commonalities between embodied practices.

### *Fetishising figures*

In order to establish similarities between 'Western' and '(non-Western) Muslim' women, several of these authors construct 'the veiled woman' and 'the anorexic' as metaphors for their respective cultures. As Nasser explains,

In anorexia, the cultural ideal of thinness was seen as a metaphor of woman's struggle against conflicting social definitions of femineity (sic), combining desirable qualities of the new woman namely control with the qualities required from the traditional woman, i.e. attractiveness, weaknesses and helplessness... The same metaphor is used here as a framework towards understanding this 'new veiling', arguing that it could in fact be a contemporary *anorexic equivalent* (italics in original) (1999:408).

The figure of 'the veiled woman' has long been read within the West as a synecdoche for Muslim culture as a whole. As mentioned in the introduction, the construction of 'the anorexic' as a symbol for Western culture can be traced in part to the work of feminist cultural theorists, such as Susie Orbach and Susan Bordo, who have understood anorexia as a 'metaphor for our time' (Orbach, 1993/1986).<sup>11</sup> The work of these theorists has

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<sup>10</sup> As I argue elsewhere, however, continuums often function merely to stretch out culturally essentialist binaries, leaving their hierarchical poles in tact, and thus should not be seen as an easy 'way out' of cultural essentialism (Pedwell, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Orbach argues that 'Anorexia nervosa – self-starvation – is both a serious mental condition affecting thousands upon thousands of women, and a metaphor for our age' (1993/1986:4). Similarly, Bordo

been crucial in calling attention to the gendered oppression associated with ideals of feminine slenderness and beauty in western industrialised contexts. However, the effects of producing ‘the veiled woman’ and ‘the anorexic’ as cultural symbols can be highly problematic. Through such processes of fetishisation, these figures are extracted from the historical processes their discursive and social production and framed as objects (Ahmed, 2000). The contours of anorexia and veiling and their imagined subjects can consequently become fixed in troubling ways.

When anorexia is employed as synecdoche for Western culture’s patriarchal, consumer-driven oppression of women it is often constructed as a condition ‘caused’ exclusively by media ideals of feminine thinness and beauty. This dominant narrative not only functions to constitute anorexics as passive victims and/or cultural dupes; it also effaces the many other complex factors which may combine to produce anorexia in particular contexts, such as experiences of trauma and abuse (Brain, 2006).<sup>12</sup> Similar problems with theorising women’s agency occur when ‘the veiled woman’ is fetishised through such cultural comparisons. In Nasser’s text, ‘both anorexia and the veil demonstrate *women’s confusion* about the seriousness of society’s intention towards their progress’ (1999:411) and, through both practices, ‘women *unwittingly* obstruct the potential for real change’ (*italics mine*) (411). She goes on to describe both anorexia and veiling as signs of ‘cultural lag’ which must be overcome to produce more appropriate gender relations:

It is hoped, however, that this *cultural confusion/cultural lag* (symbolized in gestures like anorexia and the veil) would finally lead to a *proper formulation of gender roles* and a better development of a new identity for women that is more reconciled with itself and society (*italics mine*) (411).

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comments that ‘the anorectic thus appears, not as the victim of a unique and “bizarre” pathology, but as the bearer of very distressing tidings about our culture’ (1993:60).

<sup>12</sup> In fetishising anorexia and ‘the’ problem facing women and girls in the West, such constructions also elide the diversity of other forms of disordered eating and body image distress which women (and men) face, not to mention the wide array of other areas in which women in Western industrialised nations continue to be disadvantaged, devalued, discriminated against and/or oppressed, from income inequality to domestic and sexual violence.

The connotations of the term ‘cultural lag’ are clearly problematic, suggesting that as the primitive vestiges of particular cultures who have failed to assume proper gender roles, both ‘anorexic’ and ‘veiled women’ remain fixed in an atavistic state.<sup>13</sup>

Hirschmann offers a sophisticated analysis of how agency is constructed differently across cultural contexts in ways that disrupt or exceed any ‘universal’ Western model. Yet she does not interrogate how representing veiling as a mirror for Western consciousness and subjectivity may serve not to deconstruct Orientalist representations but rather to reify Western privilege. For example, in her analysis:

Westerners must *listen*, if for no other reason than that more comprehensive understandings of *our own experiences* – including the way we dress and its significance for Western women’s freedom – can occur with such attention (second italics mine) (364).

Indeed, precisely because veiling is “other” to most Westerners, it may be able to *reveal aspects of the West to which Westerners are often blind*, such as assumptions about individuality, agency, and difference, as well as Western feminists’ lack of self-consciousness about our own practices, including our forms of dress (italics mine) (1998:349).

The primary role of ‘the veiled woman’ in these examples is to help Westerners become more developed, aware and multifaceted subjects. Indeed, while Reina Lewis and Sara Mills comment that the veil ‘is invested with the potency to hide or reveal the “truth” about the Orient which the West ultimately seeks’ (2003:14), we might add that it is also apparently invested with the power to reveal the truth about *the West* to the West. The risk of such constructions is that veiled women themselves can, by contrast, remain fixed and voiceless. Employing veiling as a ‘vehicle’ for theorising agency in these examples may thus function not to produce a more ‘generous’ view of ‘the other’, but rather to reflect the privileged ‘Western’ gaze back to itself (Ahmed, 2004b:2).

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<sup>13</sup> While Nasser draws on MacLeod’s (1991) analysis of the new veiling in Egypt and her concept of ‘accommodating protest’ to frame her argument, MacLeod herself criticises the concept of ‘cultural lag’, arguing that terms such as break, gap and lag ‘disguise a lack of understanding of the actual dynamics of the moment of social and political change’ and fail to grasp ‘the concrete actions and concerns of subordinate groups in relations of power, the concrete struggles and negotiations which end at times in the reproduction of power relations and occasionally in real change in the terms of inequality.’ (15)



Through emphasising cross-cultural commonality, these comparative approaches all avoid theorising the ways in which the imagined figures of ‘the anorexic’ and the ‘veiled woman’ are, and have been, constructed relationally. In collapsing ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ into an economy of sameness (which often slips back into problematic difference) these cross-cultural models can cut these figures off from their historical and contemporary trajectories of production. They may thus fail to interrogate the ways in which these figures have been constructed, in part, *in and through one another*. Yet, from my standpoint, it is only through a historical tracing of the relational power dynamics through which these figures have been (re)produced, that the discursive fibres of contemporary dualisms may be examined, unravelled and radically re-woven. In this sense, I share Lila Abu-Lughod’s perspective that the most powerful way to refuse to be ‘dragged into the binary opposition between East and West’ is to ‘fearlessly examine the processes of entanglement’ (1998a: 16). In the next section, I explore how such ‘entanglements’ might be mapped and theorised with respect to anorexia and veiling by employing a relational approach.

## **Towards a Relational Approach**

I aim to show that a relational approach that focuses on tracing constitutive connections (rather than commonalities) provides the opportunity to develop more intersectional, contextually-specific and historically-grounded perspectives on the relationships between veiling and anorexia than those offered by similarity-based cross-cultural approaches. Relationality offers a framework for theorising the links and disjunctures between veiling and anorexia that avoids both collapsing into ‘sameness’ and fetishising ‘difference’. Through illustrating the broader web of discursive-material interdependencies connecting ‘the veiled woman’, ‘the anorexic’ and other related cultural figures, a relational framework also offers a means of radically resignifying culturally and racially essentialist binaries.

Anorexia and veiling are clearly different embodied practices with divergent and localised histories of construction and meaning. The social trajectories of production of

these practices do, however, cross-over and flow into one another historically through particular moments of relational representation, embodied encounter and performative enactment. In this section I map some of the ways in which ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ have been (re)produced relationally and, as such, can be neither homogenously collapsed together through the register of ‘sameness’ or ‘equivalence’ nor discretely and hierarchically separated through the discourse of cultural essentialism. My perspective pivots on Sara Ahmed’s (2000) notion of inter-embodiment which acknowledges that embodied identities are produced asymmetrically through acts of ‘saming’ and ‘othering’ that differentiate between bodies on the basis of multiple intersecting axes of power such as gender, race, sexuality, class, nation, religion and culture. Within this framework, difference cannot simply be read off the body of ‘the anorexic’ or ‘the veiled woman’, but rather must be understood as created through a relation *between* bodies.

In tracing the relational constitution of these two figures, I draw on material from both ‘Eastern’ contexts (primarily Egypt, but also Iran and Turkey) and ‘Western’ milieus (primarily Britain and the United States), dating from the eighteenth century through to the present. I do this, in part, because ‘the veiled woman’ and ‘the anorexic’ have been produced historically precisely through the (often indiscriminate) yoking together of customs and values rooted in divergent ethnic and cultural contexts. My objective is not, however, to reproduce such homogenising discourses by suggesting that the histories of construction associated with either veiling or anorexia are ‘the same’ across these diverse geo-political contexts. It is important in this respect to underscore that the Middle East, like the industrialised West, is and was a vast and ethnically diverse region ‘where local differences seemed more vivid than those between East and West’ (Hoodfar, 2003:18). Nor do I seek to underscore a fundamental continuity between past and present. My aim is to show that, *as discursive-material constructions*, particular cultural binaries, concepts and figures linked to anorexia and veiling have been produced relationally via movement both within *and across* geo-political borders and boundaries.<sup>14</sup> As these constructions

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<sup>14</sup> While I aim to trace the ways in which discourses regarding femininity and womanhood emanating from ‘the Muslim East’ and ‘the West’ have been (re)constructed relationally across this border, my object here is not to suggest that the relationship between East and West is the only, nor necessarily always the prominent, axis of relationality relevant to the construction of ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled women’ or

have ‘travelled’ across time and space they have retained some commensurable features, but have also been radically rearticulated and reproduced, and as such, cannot be fixed.

### **Colonialism, (proto)feminism, hysteria and ‘the veil’**

The Muslim veil was first transformed into a substantive object of social, political and religious contention in the context of European colonialism in the Muslim East in the late nineteenth century (Ahmed, 1992; Hoodfar, 2003). During this period, discourses among Western colonialists, native modernisers, religious conservatives, nationalists and feminists (and other groups) produced competing politicised images of ‘the veil’. Each group sought to construct veiling in ways that supported their own social and political interests. Around this same time, anorexia nervosa was constituted as a feminine nervous disorder in an Anglo-North American context in which social and medical links between ‘women’ and pathology were particularly salient, the ‘hysterical woman’ was a prominent cultural figure, and feminists were challenging women’s social and economic subordination (Malson, 1998: 57, 67). It is within this socio-historical nexus, I suggest, that a relational construction of the ‘weak, frivolous and appearance-obsessed Western woman’ and the ‘strong, pious and modest Muslim woman’ materialised as a precursor to the contemporary anorexia/veiling comparisons. This binary was (re)produced as part of discourses around the ‘new veiling’ which emerged in various Muslim countries during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and is linked to the rise of the ‘anorexia epidemic’ in the West. It is, of course, alongside and against other binary cultural constructions, namely the ‘free and liberated Western woman’ and ‘the oppressed and downtrodden Muslim woman’, that this dualistic construction is repeatedly (re)constituted.

The topic of women and the veil as a political problem was first discussed publicly by Muslim intellectuals in countries such as Egypt, a nation which experienced a process of ‘Westernization’ through British colonial occupation beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In these discourses, ‘the woman question’ was directly linked with imperatives of

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other related imagined figures. It is clear that traces from other cultural locations, such as those emanating from Africa and ‘the South’, have also played a role in forming both ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ notions of womanhood.

national advancement and political, social and cultural reform (Ahmed, 1992:128). In *The Liberation of Women* (1899), for example, Qasim Amin, the elite reformer considered by many as the ‘father’ of Egyptian feminism - although his ‘feminist’ credentials have been criticised in recent years by feminist historians (Ahmed, 1992; Abu-Lughod, 1998b) - argued that ‘the inferior position of Muslim women’ is the ‘greatest obstacle’ preventing Egypt’s advancement as a nation (Amin, 1992/1899:60). He maintained that ‘if Egyptians have an interest in and a sincere desire for happiness, if they wish to preserve their existence and to strive toward security and survival, they should discard all unacceptable habits and eliminate every undesirable trait that hinders their progress’ (64). Advocating women’s partial de-veiling, he insisted that ‘the veil as we know it is a great hindrance to women’s progress, and indeed to a country’s progress’ (47).

Modernisers such as Amin wrote in a colonial context in which the occupying British powers sought to legitimise their colonising mission by illustrating the essential ‘backwardness’ of Middle Eastern cultures visible through ‘oppressive’ practices such as veiling and polygamy. The British colonial official in Egypt, Lord Cromer, argued that Islam’s oppression of women, expressed through ‘the veil’, represented a ‘fatal obstacle’ to the Egyptian’s ‘attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilisation’ (Amin, 1992/1899: 153). Colonialists like Cromer relied on social evolutionary theories of race and culture, and models such as the ‘Great Chain of Being’, which elevated middle-class Victorian English society (and mores surrounding Victorian womanhood) as the pinnacle of evolutionary progress and civilization (Ahmed, 1992; Gilman, 1992; Young, 1990). Through such hierarchical frameworks, Muslim veiling could be portrayed as ‘patriarchal’ and ‘backwards’ against a white, British ideal of femininity - despite the fact that Queen Victoria often wore a veil herself (Gressgård, 2006: 330).

It is clear that Egyptian reformists drew on and reified these hierarchical cultural distinctions. Amin insists that in arguing for a less rigid practice of veiling for women, he ‘is not in any way requesting this change because we wish to imitate for the sake of

imitation Western nations and traditions and conditions' (46). Yet he proceeds to produce a cross-cultural comparison in which Western culture is 'strong', 'happy' and 'advanced' and Egyptian culture is 'weak', 'miserable' and has 'fallen back' (46). Praising the 'benefits gained by Westerners in bringing up their daughters properly and accepting their place in the world of men' (59), he argues that a less extreme approach to veiling would 'greatly improve our way of life' (46). What is evident from these brief examples is that the arguments of British colonialists and Egyptian reformers regarding women and veiling were intimately linked and depended in part on comparative cultural constructions of femininity. Within this context, it is through relational colonial and modernising discourses that the veil is constituted as a sign of Muslim backwardness and gender oppression and the binary of liberated Western women/oppressed Muslim women is (re)produced.<sup>15</sup>

While these 'proto-feminist' voices portrayed Western societies as 'advanced', 'strong' and 'happy' and constructed 'the Victorian middle-class woman' as an ideal to be emulated by Muslim women, an examination of Victorian notions of femininity points to a rather different story. Within nineteenth century Britain and North America, the link between 'women' and pathology was particularly evident.<sup>16</sup> A figure of the 'hysterical woman' had gradually begun to emerge in nineteenth century medical literature, signified by characteristics such as suggestibility, narcissism, idleness, self-indulgence, moral weakness, lack of will power and 'craving for sympathy' (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972: 659, 667). While hysteria was generally seen as linked to women's inherently 'diseased' reproductive system, namely the womb, a wide array of symptoms, ranging from seizures, to headaches, to general fatigue and depression, were seen as indicative of the condition. Such medical discourses were reinforced by scientific ideas relating to women's evolutionary weakness (such as those of Darwin) and cultural notions of 'the

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, actors other than colonial officials, such as missionaries and European feminists, also participated in the construction of this Western/Muslim binary through their engagements veiling practices (Ahmed, 1992: 154).

<sup>16</sup> Women, especially middle class married women with children, frequently complained of 'isolation, loneliness, and depression' (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972: 657). Books written in the last half of the nineteenth century consistently 'assert that a large number, even the majority of middle class American women, were in some sense ill' (Douglas Wood, 1973: 26).

perfect Victorian lady' who combined 'total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the workship of the family hearth' (Vicinus, 1972: ix).

Specific to middle class white women, these medical, scientific and cultural ideas about feminine fragility and pathology did not generally extend to working class and slave women who, consistent with Victorian economic and political imperatives, were thought to be healthy and robust and fit to work in the fields and wash-houses (Erenreich and English, 2005:125-6). When working class or black women were diagnosed with hysteria, it was seen as originating in their sensuality, indecency, and sexual excess (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972: 670). Characterised as 'essentially asexual and not uncommonly frigid' (663), the figure of the white, middle class 'hysterical woman' was thus produced directly against representations of black and working class women's unrestrained sexuality. In this sense, we might also see the de-sexualised Victorian 'hysterical woman' as constructed through the Middle-Eastern 'harem woman', represented within ubiquitous eroticised Orientalist representations at the time as overly sexualised and libidinous (Melman, 1992; Lewis, 2004).

Interestingly, assumptions regarding Muslim women's excessive (and yet hidden) sexuality at this time were often linked with notions of their abundant appetites. As Billie Melman argues, within Victorian culture and travel literature, food and eating as symbols had 'become inseparable from the image of the Orient as *locus sensualis* and that of orientals as generally lascivious' (italics in original) (1992: 122-3). Muslim women were continually described during this period as consuming food with others and 'references to excessive, irregular eating are scattered in harem literature, particularly in descriptions at the harems of the elite' (123). Particular references were made to women in harems consuming 'rich and heavy' foods and digesting meat, which was 'universally believed to arouse sexual feelings, aggravate lust and cause somatic disorders' (126). From a relational perspective, descriptions of Muslim women's communal and unrestrained eating were particularly significant because they represented a marked contrast to pervasive gendered social norms in the Anglo-American Victorian context which constructed eating as 'unfeminine'. In the nineteenth century, the figure of the

‘hysterical woman’ emerged in a context in which ‘invalidism and scanty eating commonly accompanied each other’ and ‘wasting was in style’ (Brumberg, 1988: 171). For Victorian white, middle and upper class women (who were most likely to be diagnosed as hysterics), food was linked to gluttony, which was in turn linked to lasciviousness. Denial of food thus ‘became a form of moral certitude’ and a means of ‘advancing in the moral hierarchy’ (182).

By the late nineteenth century, hysteria was a chronic and ‘socially accepted sick role’ for white, middle class Victorian women (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972: 671). Ill health had become ‘positively fashionable’ (Douglas Wood, 1973: 26) and a ‘morbid aesthetic developed in which sickness was seen as a source of female beauty’ (Erenreich and English, 2005:119). As Erenreich and English argue, ‘It was acceptable, even stylish, to retire to bed with “sick headaches”, “nerves”, and various unmentionable “female troubles” (2005: 118-9). These prominent links between womanhood, pathology, nervousness and hysteria (as well as discourses around ‘unfeminine eating’) formed the social and political context for the emergence of anorexia nervosa as an object of medical discourse in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Malson, 1998). As Helen Malson suggests, intimately linked to gendered notions of hysteria, ‘anorexia figured as a political forum, as much as a medical one, in which to debate and therefore constitute and reconstitute feminine nervousness’ (1998: 49). It was not until the late twentieth century, however, that ‘the anorexic’ would come to figure as potent metaphor for Western femininity.

As feminist theorists have emphasised, the figures of ‘the hysteric’, and later ‘the anorexic’, emerged as pathological gendered subjects precisely within social contexts in which feminists and other women sought to contest patriarchal oppression (Douglas, 1972; Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1998). Indeed, just as colonialists such as Lord Cromer were espousing proto-feminist arguments about the need to liberate Muslim women in Egypt, British women were rising up to protest their own subjugation under patriarchy. As Leila Ahmed (1992) has discussed, however, the ‘feminist’ views of British colonialists abroad certainly did not extend to women in their own countries. In England

Lord Cromer served as founding member and president of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage (153). Thus, while the morally refined and socially capable 'Victorian woman' was installed by colonialists and native modernisers as the ultimate ideal of femininity in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, the figure of the fragile, depressed and sickly 'hysterical woman' had come to, in many senses, define femininity in the Victorian Euro-American context.

Historical evidence suggests that these prevalent images of Victorian women's debility, nervousness and 'inappropriate' fixation on fashion made the cultural crossing from Western nations to the Middle East. For example, in his travel memoir recounting his journey to a scholarly congress of Orientalists in Stockholm and his subsequent travels throughout Europe in 1889 (the same year that Amin's *The Liberation of Women* was published), the Ottoman author Ahmed Midhat described his travelling companion, Madame Gülnar, a Russian noblewoman, as often feeling ill, needing excessive amounts of sleep and spending some days without leaving the hotel (Findley, 1998: 32). After Madame Gülnar's mother and son arrive to join the pair on their travels, Midhat is startled at her 'childlike submission to the will of her mother and her absent husband' (32). Such descriptions of fragile and subordinate Western femininity came at a time when Muslim conservatives and nationalists were concerned not only by European economic encroachment in the Middle East, but also by the infiltration of Western social and cultures mores (Ahmed, 1992: 142). It was in this context, I want to argue, that those who objected to the modernising projects of British colonial powers and Egyptian reformers drew strategically on such images of Victorian womanhood to reappropriate a figure of the Muslim 'veiled woman' as strong, pious and modest *against* a construction of 'Western woman' as weak, frivolous and appearance obsessed.

Those who opposed the Western modernising project in Egypt constituted not only nationalists and religious conservatives, who sought to preserve Islamic and national heritage and did not want to be unseated from their positions of power and control, but also some Muslim feminists who were critical of colonial and reformist rhetoric



regarding the liberation of women (Ahmed, 1992: 147, 148, 179-181).<sup>17</sup> The dominant voices of Egyptian feminism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, like their European feminist counterparts, supported the calls of Amin and others for unveiling and ‘promoted a feminism that assumed the desirability of progress toward Western type societies’ (174). Upon returning from a meeting of the International Alliance of Women in Rome in 1923, the prominent feminist Huda Shaarawi and her colleagues in the Egyptian Feminist Union removed their veils to onlookers on the train platform in Cairo as a sign of protest against enforced veiling and the harem system (Shaarawi, 1986: 1). Other Egyptian feminists, such as Malak Hifni Nassef, however, were wary of reformist arguments for unveiling and pointed to the problems with abrupt demands on the part of male elites for women to unveil when women were accustomed to veiling (Ahmed, 1992: 180). Arguing that women should ‘bring a critical and discriminating eye to the issue of adopting Western customs’ (181), Nassef commented on the phenomena of women on the streets of Cairo in European dress, ‘congratulating themselves on being modern’. She describes these Westernized ‘upper class women’ as ‘pre-occupied with fashion’ and ‘not motivated by a desire for liberty or persuaded that the veil hampered them in the pursuit of knowledge’ (180). Such discourses draw on prevalent images of Victorian women within the era of ‘the hysterical woman’ as idle, lacking in agency and obsessed with frivolous fashions (even to the point of making themselves appear ill in order to be ‘in style’), setting them against Muslim veiled women’s greater political awareness, strength and sensibility.

### **Veiling, anorexia and ‘Westoxification’**

Similar relational constructions of ‘Western women’ and ‘Muslim women’ resurfaced in the context of nationalist conflict throughout the twentieth century in different Middle Eastern contexts. A pertinent example is provided by a strand of political discourse and debate pervasive in Iran in the years leading up to the 1979 Iranian revolution, an event which profoundly reinforced existing identifications between radical Islamism and veiled

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<sup>17</sup> This group also included lower and lower middle class people who were negatively affected or derived no benefits from Western occupation (Ahmed, 1992).

women. It is important to point out the social and political history of women's wearing of the chador in Iran differs from that of veiling in Egypt. In Iran the Shah banned the chador as a means to Westernize the nation and the Islamic revolution in turn enforced wearing of the chador in order to indigenize tradition. Whereas in Egypt, Islamic dress worn after the mid 1970s by women was part of a grass-roots activist movement (El Guindi, 2003: 587). However, the similar relational representations of 'Western' and 'Muslim' femininity that emerged as part of nationalist discourses in both nations provide a salient link between these two historical and geo-political contexts. Within both milieus, political representations of veiled Muslim women as 'strong, pious and modest' were produced *against and through* images of Western women as 'weak, frivolous and appearance-obsessed'.

In the early 1960s, the Iranian writer Jalal al' Ahmad published his famous critique of Iran's 'mindless' push towards Western modernization, entitled *Westoxification* (Sullivan, 1998: 215). Ahmad employs the term 'Westoxification' to symbolise all that is negative about the Western economic, political and cultural influence in the Middle East. He refers to 'being afflicted with "westisis"' as akin to 'being afflicted with cholera' (215). In the wake of the 2,500 year celebration of Persian monarchy in Persepolis staged by the Shah of Iran, the radical thinker Ali Shariati employed this controversial text to denounce the Western cultural influence on Iranian women who symbolised the moral crises produced through westoxification: 'the idle, made-up, consumerist Westernized "painted dolls"' (Ahmed, 1992: 14-15). Despite their 'power to effect social change' Shariati argued, Western women, and those Eastern women who seek to emulate their model, 'allow their desires to be so manipulated that they become vulnerable pawns in capitalist consumption and leisure' (Sullivan, 1998: 218). Against these images of 'westoxified' femininity, Shariati (through his much celebrated text *Fatima is Fatima*) (re)constructs the figure of Fatima, the daughter of the prophet Mohammed, as a symbol of how Iranian women could 'enter modernity and remake themselves as neither Western nor traditional' (217). Once again, the strength and honour of 'the Muslim woman' is constructed relationally against the weakness and frivolousness of 'the Western woman.'

It is interesting to note that Iranian representations of ‘westoxification’ and Western(ized) women as inactive, appearance-conscious and consumerist, such as Shariati’s, emerged precisely at a time when the notion of an ‘anorexia epidemic’ had infiltrated public consciousness within the West. While the causes of and treatments for anorexia nervosa had been discussed and debated within medical, psychological and cultural journals since the late nineteenth century, knowledge of the condition did not cross the public radar until the early 1970s with the publication of articles in more popular mediums such as psychiatrist Hilde Brunch’s *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia* in 1978 (Brumberg, 1988). By 1981 the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* had been founded and the (reported) incidence of anorexia in the United States increased more than 50 percent in the 1970s and 1980s (Gremillion, 2003: 1). As Joan Brumberg argues, ‘In effect, anorexia was the disease of the 1970s’ to be eclipsed only by AIDS in the 1980s’ (1988:10). Within this context of a rising anorexia ‘epidemic’ in the West, al’ Ahmad’s concept of ‘westoxification’, and Shariati’s application of the term to Iranian ‘painted dolls’, provide powerful metaphors linking Western culture, gender and disease. Western culture is imagined as a powerful contagion, poisoning women with its toxic bodily ideals and values.

These representations of diseased Western(ized) women were also employed at a moment when feminist critiques of Western culture’s patriarchal, competitive and consumerist values as a breeding ground for the development of eating disorders and body image distress, such as Susie Orbach’s *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978) and Kim Chernin’s *Obsession* (1981), were just beginning to come to the fore. From a relational perspective, Shariati’s image of ‘the idle, made-up, consumerist Westernized “painted dolls”’ (Ahmed, 1992: 14-15) can be seen to combine images of both the nineteenth century idle, fatigued, middle class ‘hysterical woman’ and those of the late twentieth century ‘anorexic’ who grapples with the competing cultural pressures of capitalist consumption, individual competitiveness and the feminine imperative to remain always slim and ‘beautiful’. Against toxic Westernized ‘painted dolls’, it is the image of the strong, ‘fundamentalist’ Muslim women marching en masse in black chadors that the Iranian revolution installed as a model of Muslim womanhood. Images of feminine hysteria

were in turn deployed by Western media to describe the Iranian Revolution as the 'collective hysteria of frantic masses' (Göle, 1996: 83). In this moment, Western 'hysterical femininity' is again re-appropriated to feminise and hence Other 'irrational' and 'pathological' Muslim fundamentalism.

In the contemporary context, relational constructions of 'the anorexic' and 'the veiled woman' have become more explicit. In a post 9/11 social and political context in which depictions of 'downtrodden' veiled Muslim women are wide-spread, contrasting images of the 'anorexic, body-image conscious Western woman' and the 'confident, secure, veiled Muslim woman' are (re)produced, in part, as a means to disrupt the resurgent 'liberated Western woman' and 'oppressed Muslim woman' binary. One significant stand of such comparative cultural discourse is voiced by young Muslim women (many of whom live in Western industrialised countries) in Islamic websites and magazines. Makeda Knight claims, for example, that 'Muslim women don't suffer from insecurities about their bodies, because the philosophy and clothing of their culture discourages it' (Dixon, 1999: 2). Similarly, Sehmina Jaffer Chopra argues that 'The Muslim woman does not feel the pressure to be beautiful or attractive, which is so apparent in the Western and Eastern Cultures... It is very different from the cruel methods that other societies subject women, in that their worth is always judged by their physical appearance' (2002: 1).<sup>18</sup> The main argument expressed by such comparisons is that veiling, and the embrace of Islamic values that the practice represents, serves to empower Muslim women and increase their self-esteem by ensuring that they are not affected by the body-related 'cultural pressures' and experiences of disordered eating that distress non-Muslim Western women.<sup>19</sup>

While providing a powerful counter-discourse to dominant representations of 'Muslim women' as oppressed and downtrodden, these relational representations also function problematically, as other dualistic discourses have in the past, to fix 'Muslim' and

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<sup>18</sup> See also Franks, 2000; Ali, 2000; Chopra, 2002; Yusufali, 2002; Hoodfar, 2003 and Rahman, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Although, interestingly, other Muslim and Islamist discourses acknowledge that increasing numbers of Muslim women *are* suffering from anorexia and other eating disorders and blame this on the influence of Western culture. See, for example, Leila Ali (2001) 'Anorexia: A Product of Western Ideals?'

‘Western’ femininities in essentialised ways, thus leaving self/other binaries in tact. In homogenising ‘Muslim’ and ‘Western’ femininity, they elide social, political, historical and embodied particularities and reify an essentialist ‘packaged picture’ of cultural groups in similar ways to some of the historical representations discussed above (Narayan, 1998).

Representations of Islamic culture as ‘anti-consumerist’ against Western culture’s rampant ‘consumerism’ (which is in turn associated with the ‘anorexia epidemic’), for example, disavow the various ways in which Islam is mobilised for and intertwined with consumerist discourses. In their analysis of consumption patterns in contemporary Turkish society, Ozlem Sandickci and Gülnez Ger, for example, argue that ‘Islam, at least in the context of Turkey, does not seem to oppose consumption or offer an alternative to consumerism’ (2001:148). They discuss how, since the 1990s, as wealth among particular sections of the religious population has grown, a bourgeoisie class, ‘conservative in values but avant-garde in consumption practices’ (148) has emerged, heightening consumer demand for the ‘200 Islamic fashion companies now competing in an ever-expanding market to serve women who want to look fashionable yet fulfil the requirements of Islam’ (146). As consumers of Islamic products such as luxury Islamic hotel resorts, middle and upper class ‘turbaned women are seen...doing aerobics or heard talking about dieting’ (Ger and Sandickci, 2001:147). Similarly, Barış Kilicbay and Mutlu Binark (2002) note the rise of a ‘fashion for veiling’ in Turkey which ‘is inseparable from consumption, commodity, even pleasure patterns, and is stimulated by global and local trends in the market economy’ (499). Such analyses interrogate the notion of an essentialist divide between Islam and consumerism. They also disrupt rigid distinctions between ‘Muslim femininity’ and concerns regarding fashion, appearance and body image.

Moreover, it is clear that ‘the veil’ and other forms of Islamic dress (presented in young Muslim women’s discourses as symbols of their empowerment and essential ‘difference’ from mainstream Western culture) may easily be co-opted by Western consumer

industry. An article from the fashion section the *International Herald Tribune* (2006) flagging up the contemporary ‘Muslim-iz-ation’ of fashion points to this possibility:

Various influences are pushing fashion away from bare-it-all vulgarity... thoughtful designers are putting the change of mood into a different context, as they talk about the “Muslim-iz-ation” of fashion. They are referring both to drawing, deliberately or unconsciously, on a culture of female sobriety. In a world clearly in turmoil, cocooning clothes are a response (Menkes, 2006:11).

This example illustrates how susceptible identity politics which depend on binary reversals are to recuperation back into the very cultural and socio-economic relations of power they seek to counter or distance themselves from. The article also points again to the relational links between ‘the anorexic’ (this time symbolised through the ubiquitous ‘anorexic’ image of the runway model) and ‘the veiled woman’. With the ‘Muslim-iz-ation’ of fashion, the figures of ‘the veiled woman’ and ‘the anorexic’ flow into one another in a capitalist figure of cultural fusion or hybridity.<sup>20</sup> As much as the figures of the ‘Western woman’ and the ‘Muslim woman’, ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ are contrasted, differentiated, and held apart, they are never stable or fundamentally fixed but rather always open to reversal or redeployment in a different guise.

In teasing out the ways in which the figures of ‘the Western woman’ and ‘the Muslim woman’ and ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ have been constructed in and through one another – and yet have always been subject to reformation and reinvention – a relational approach points to the problems with both fixing these figures within binary categories and positioning them along a single linear plane. It shows that it is possible neither to separate the two figures through the imposition of rigid boundaries nor to collapse one into the other because they remain constitutively intermeshed.

In the first part of this paper, I argued that similarity-based cross-cultural approaches to countering cultural essentialism, such as those offered by Jeffreys, Nasser and Hirschmann, are problematic because they often: i) fail to theorise the intersection of multiple axes of social differentiation, ii) assert superficial similarities between embodied

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<sup>20</sup> I would also note the interesting phenomenon of ‘Western’ fashion designers such as Calvin Klein developing ‘haute couture’ hijabs.

practices that slip back into essentialist notions of cultural ‘difference’ and iii) fetishise the imagined subjects of particular embodied practices as objects. The relational approach developed in the second part of the paper seeks to avoid each of these problems. Rather than cutting ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ off from their historical, social and discursive trajectories of production, it teases out these processes, situating them within specific contexts and relations of power such as colonialism, nationalism, racism, patriarchy and capitalism. It shows that the figures of ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled women’ have been (re)produced *not* through indigenous, culturally-bound discursive systems, but precisely through discursive-material interactions and encounters that reverberate across East/West borders. As such, a relational approach disrupts culturally essentialist attempts to separate these two figures into discrete, hierarchical categories of Western/non-Western, liberated/oppressed and so forth. It illustrates that anorexia and veiled are *not* (as similarity-based cross-cultural approaches frequently suggest) constructed exclusively along a linear plane of gender, but rather through the intersecting axes of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, religion, nation, and culture.

Furthermore, the ongoing reversal, reconstruction and resignification of ‘Western’ and ‘Muslim’ femininities highlighted through the relational tracing indicate the ways in which ‘difference’ is produced as a relation *between* bodies, rather than existing as an essential property which can be read off particular bodies (Ahmed, 2000). This is not, of course, to say that embodied particularities do not exist, but rather to highlight the ways in which embodied ‘differences’ are socially and discursively (re)produced through particular relations of power, and as such, are not innate or natural, as cultural essentialism implies. Finally, as a way of trying to resist fetishising women from ‘Muslim’ (or ‘Western’) cultures as passive, a-historical objects and vehicles for Western knowledge, it emphasises the ways in which women in different geo-political locations actively participate in the processes of discursive construction and relational representation through which particular embodied subjectivities are (re)constituted.

## Conclusions

What does a relational approach offer to a critical feminist project of theorising cultural formations and binaries? Providing an alternative to similarity-based cross-cultural approaches, a relational methodology enables theorisation of particularity as well as connection with respect to embodied cultural practices. As such, it moves us away from the reification of essentialist cultural differences *and* the flattening or effacing of important specificities. It provides a theoretical framework through which the production of salient gendered cultural figures and practices can be genealogically traced with an emphasis on intersectional, historical and contextual relations of power.

The concept of particularity is useful in this context because it departs from a colonialist 'difference from' register which posits hegemonic axes such as 'the West' and 'whiteness' as norms against which subordinate entities and embodiments reveal their 'difference'. In this sense, particularity does not 'belong' to the minoritized 'other', but rather represents the specific intersection of multiple social and embodied axes through which each particular subject, practice or figure is constituted. Mapping the complex discursive-material processes through which various cultural practices and figures have been produced enables the development of more intersectional, contextually-specific and historically-grounded views of embodied cultural practices than most similarity-based cross-cultural offer. Being attuned to the particularities of various practices is critical in preventing essentialist, ethnocentric and homogenising constructions. It may also aid comprehension of the complex reasons why particular forms of specific practices perpetuate in certain contexts (and not others). Crucially, in conjunction with theorising particularity, a relational methodology also maps the constitutive connections between various practices or figures. As a theoretical tool, connection underscores the ways in which processes of social and cultural differentiation and the production of embodied particularities are always relational, rather than bounded or discrete. A relational approach acknowledges that the discursive-material links between various practices or figures are *relationships of power* which may function as modes of 'othering' and exclusion. Yet, it also suggests that such constitutive links represent relationships of



mutuality which hold the potential for the development of transformative social interactions and solidarities among differently located subjects.

Through the process of genealogically tracing particularities and connections, a relational approach also offers the possibility of disrupting and resignifying essentialist binaries and identity categories. By illustrating how ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ have been constructed in and through one another, it troubles the essentialist binary which attempts to hold these figures apart. Exposing the binary’s mechanics and historical trajectories of production, a relational methodology *disrupts* the power it commands. However, as a means of both concluding this paper and suggesting avenues for future analysis, I want to argue that in order to *radically resignify* this and other binaries, a relational approach needs to go one step further. Moving through discursive disruption to radical resignification necessitates that we theorise relationality *beyond* the self-other dialectic. Clearly, ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ cannot be seen as insulated from all other embodied constructions and historical and cultural traces. They are not related *only* to each other and constructed *exclusively* through each other, but rather, are historically, subjectively and materially linked to a host of other embodied ‘selves’ and ‘others’. As such, we need a model for representing and theorising relationality in such contexts as *complex* and *multiple*. If we widen our field of analysis and imagine the binary in question as existing within a *relational web* of other binary relations we can think about resignification from an ontological starting point of multiplicity. Within such a web, ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ would be situated as simultaneously linked to numerous other imagined subjects or figures. Tracing some of the multiple links structuring such a relational web may therefore allow us to begin developing a relational approach to resignification that enables theorising of relationality *beyond* the binary self/other dialectic, yet without effacing the relations of power that particular binaries produce or disavowing the power of such binaries to endure.

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