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**Performing the *Gendered Self* in
Intercultural Communication**



PETER LANG

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Contents

PREFACE

I. CHAPTER ONE

<i>Identity and Communication as Intersectional Performances</i>	1
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II. CHAPTER TWO

<i>Theorizing Communication, Gender & Identity</i>	10
A. Re-Reading of Communication Theories	18
B. Gender and Identity	

III. CHAPTER THREE

<i>Biblical Narratives of Gender</i>	21
1. Institutionalized Interruptions	23
2. Scriptural Subjugations: Immaculate Conception of Gender	25
3. Biblical Manhood and Masculinities	28

IV. CHAPTER FOUR

<i>Fragmented Narratives</i>	30
1. Convergence as Coercion	37
2. Feminist Interventions	38

V. CHAPTER FIVE

<i>Subjugated Subjectivities</i>	40
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VI. REFERENCES	44
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Preface

This book originated from my Master's thesis at Metropolitan University in Budapest, where it was first developed within a strict academic setting. After moving to Austria, I encountered new cultural perspectives that prompted a thorough re-evaluation and expansion of my thesis, resulting in this scholarly work. In this study, I delve into the complex relationships among culture, religion, and communication, highlighting their essential role in shaping social identities. I examine how culture and religion influence human subjectivities, illustrating how individuals are formed into collective groups.

Religion, often seen as a fundamental aspect of human culture, is also influenced by cultural frameworks. Discussions about religious beliefs and cultural practices often spark heated debates, especially regarding religious identity. Biblical teachings on gender significantly impact intercultural communication, serving as crucial elements in this dialogue. The performative nature of social identities goes beyond simple representation, involving a rich tapestry of symbolic markers that create varied, decentralized meanings. Within this context, essentialist ideologies play a significant role in shaping gender. This book offers a critical examination of gendered constraints, focusing on how power dynamics are gendered and the influence of religious ideologies in defining and regulating gender norms. It provides an in-depth look at the human experience, particularly the intricacies of religious rituals and the gender norms they uphold.

Through this work, I encourage readers to investigate the intersections of culture, religion, and communication, aiming to challenge oppressive structures and foster a more inclusive society. I hope this exploration will spark transformative discussions and actions in the quest for social justice.

Ozan Can Yılmaz
Vienna, 2021

CHAPTER ONE

Identity and Communication as Intersectional Performances

“Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries” (Foucault 216).

In the field of intercultural communication, various factors significantly influence how interactions unfold, with some having a more substantial effect than others. These factors encompass ethnocentrism, stereotyping, assumptions, racism, sexism, and educational backgrounds. Each of these aspects poses distinct challenges to effective intercultural communication, highlighting the need for a thorough examination of the barriers that hinder meaningful exchanges across cultural divides. The global political landscape, economic relationships, the positioning of cultures in a trans-local context, and the impacts of globalization are all deeply intertwined with identity-related conflicts. Within this complex competition, traditional forms of religiosity manifest in contemporary settings, shaping specific gender identities. Major religions often include dogmatic teachings that portray mothers as primary caregivers, enforce submissive roles for women in various life areas, and position men as leaders and clergy. For example, in Catholicism, only cisgender men can serve as priests, which effectively excludes the acknowledgment and acceptance of alternative gender identities (Johnson and Repta 17-39). Additionally, there are cases where minority groups, when integrating into different cultures, adopt established gender roles influenced by normative indoctrination within their own affiliations, showcasing the powerful impact of religion on gender. Consequently, the challenges encountered in intercultural communication go beyond surface-level expressions and delve into the

deeply rooted gender beliefs and their performative manifestations. This performative dimension is especially crucial in the context of intercultural dialogue, as it significantly shapes how communication is perceived and interpreted across various cultural boundaries.

Throughout history, religion has played a significant role in shaping and defining gender roles across different cultures. This close relationship between religious beliefs and societal norms indicates that many of these norms have their roots in religious teachings. Major religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism outline specific gender roles in their sacred texts, which have become deeply ingrained in modern societies around the world. As a result, the rigid principles found in religious teachings can greatly affect communication, creating obstacles and challenges when differing gender norms arise. These normative and dogmatic expressions often impede both verbal and nonverbal communication, disrupting the natural flow of interactions. Cultural diversity becomes especially evident in cross-cultural environments, where various cultural expressions lead to unique communication styles. Distinct aspects of identity expression can further highlight these differences in how people communicate. Ultimately, the roles tied to gender identities are expressed and enacted within communication contexts. Therefore, the enforcement of rigid, gendered behaviors in interactions, along with their performative aspects, complicates intercultural exchanges. The relationship between religion and gender roles provides a compelling insight into social construction and identity development. In ancient sacred texts, we can see the echoes of divine narratives that have intricately woven themselves into the cultural fabric, significantly influencing how gender is perceived and expressed.

The strong influence of religious beliefs, with their specific ideas about masculinity and femininity, resonates deeply within the hearts and minds of followers, shaping the way they communicate daily. Delving into historical texts takes us on an intriguing journey that sheds

light on the roots of established gender concepts, behaviors, and the lasting norms passed down through generations. These sacred teachings, much like whispered secrets through the ages, transcend cultural and geographical boundaries, influencing the essence of intercultural integration. In the subtle and overt exchanges of communication, we observe the transmission, preservation, and sometimes reevaluation of gender norms shaped by religion. When individuals from various religious backgrounds come together, each bringing their unique perspectives on gender, there is potential for both enriching dialogue and possible conflict. As these differing viewpoints interact, tensions may arise, hindering the path to mutual understanding. Yet, within this mix of beliefs, there is also fertile ground for transformative discussions, where rigid gender norms can evolve in response to changing times. As social beings, we are interconnected through a web of complex identities that shape our self-perception through the intricate dynamics of our relationships. Naturally, we seek connection and belonging within social groups defined by gender and religion. Thus, our exploration of this topic uncovers the powerful interplay between institutional interpretations, deeply held beliefs, and the conventional meanings that contribute to the intricate mosaic of identity formation.

Surrounded by the normative landscapes shaped by religious structures, we navigate the complex terrain of gender performance. In each cultural context, the essence of existence resonates with the echoes of dogmatic teachings, creating a vivid picture of gendered identities. In this dynamic exchange of cultural influences, we aim to explore the intricate relationship between religion and gender, seeking to bridge the gap between tradition and transformation. In the upcoming chapters, we will examine specific aspects of biblical indoctrination to assess their impact on the intercultural assimilation of religious gender identities. It is crucial to emphasize that our analysis will concentrate on how rigid perceptions of gender can either facilitate or hinder intercultural communication, rather than viewing gender roles, religion, and

communication as separate elements. To guide our exploration, we adopt a critical perspective that examines the intersections of gender, religion, and communication. This brings us to a central question: *How much does the oppression inherent in gendered dogma restrict individual agency in shaping the identity markers expressed through communication?*

We understand social identity as the way individuals define themselves through their connections to specific social groups. Henri Tajfel's research on social identity theory suggests that our ties to these groups cultivate a sense of pride and confidence, which in turn affects our intercultural interactions (Tajfel 33–47). Social identity can be seen as the image we strive to present to improve our self-perception. This book explores how particular social memberships are enacted during intercultural encounters and the resulting impacts—whether they hinder or facilitate—on communication processes (McLeod et al.). Gender, as described by West and Zimmerman, is a continuous creative process shaped by interactions with others and social groups, playing a key role in the development of one's gender identity. Since both verbal and nonverbal cues are vital for expressing gender, communication should be viewed as a complex process rather than a simple and uniform one (West et al. 127). From the social constructionist perspective on gender, normative gender roles are perpetually created and reinforced within cultural contexts. The normalization of gendered roles linked to the sex binary occurs within socio-cultural boundaries. Just as gender is shaped by social and cultural factors, subgroups within larger cultural contexts can also create their own normative ideals regarding gender.

Historical turning points like the Reformation and the Enlightenment have reshaped the conventional view of religion as merely a cultural identity assigned at birth. Nowadays, religion is increasingly seen as a personal choice, moving into the private realm within a more diverse worldview. However, it is important to recognize individuals and groups who hold strong religious connections that are

deeply woven into their identities, resisting the trend to individualize and privatize their beliefs. Tolerance plays a crucial role in intercultural communication, as a lack of it in certain religious contexts can obstruct effective interactions. Intolerant teachings can give rise to dogmatic religious sects, each with its own distinct cosmological perspectives, even within the larger framework of mainstream religions. This distrust of outsiders often originates in the early stages of religious involvement and can create significant obstacles to future engagement with the outside world and various cultures. Religiosity and religious identity are separate concepts. While one's religious identity may be influenced by their upbringing, it doesn't necessarily reflect the level of their religiosity. Yet, when examining dogmatic beliefs—where individuals actively adopt a belief system—religious identity becomes a key element in shaping and expressing social identity.

The way gender is understood within religious groups plays a crucial role in shaping individual identities, influencing how people enact, socialize, and practice their beliefs daily. This underscores the importance of considering religious elements in the social construction of identity, especially when it comes to gender differences in religious expression. There is a pressing need for more academic research into the prevailing male-driven ideologies found in religion. In these settings, men often enjoy privileges within 'sacred' patriarchies, which are upheld by male-focused religious teachings. Religion is generally seen as a core and dogmatic part of human experience, encompassing beliefs about the universe's origin, nature, and purpose. It often intertwines with devotional and ceremonial practices, along with a moral framework that guides human behavior. On the other hand, another perspective suggests that religion can be viewed as an anthropological, sociological, and psychological phenomenon. This approach goes beyond narrow definitions and presents religion as a comprehensive and essential aspect of human life.

CHAPTER TWO

Theories of Communication, Culture & Identity

A. Re-reading of Communication Theories

Understanding that examining human interplay is fundamentally tied to the scrutiny of culture is of utmost importance. Scholarly inquiries pertaining to intercultural communication may encompass subjects such as "attitudes, beliefs, cognition, language and linguistics, nonverbal signals, perceptions, stereotypes, patterns of thought, and values", as proposed in the Encyclopedia of Communication (Littlejohn, 248–250). In his seminal work, *The Cultural Dialogue* (Prosser 10–344), Michael E. Prosser delved into the role of discord and its resolution, positioning communication as an interactive mechanism to exert control through power. As such, societal control's power dynamics profoundly sway intercultural communication, and the progression of cross-cultural exchanges is significantly impacted by the hegemonic exertion of power and normative control systems that may prominently emanate from religious enactments (Raven, 161–186).

Communication Accommodation Theory, proposed by Howard Giles, holds substantial relevance in dissecting how intercultural exchanges are framed around speech mannerisms, vocal patterns, and identity-conveying gestures (Turner and West 492). This theory provides valuable insights into why people tend to emphasize or downplay their social differences in both verbal and nonverbal communication. It sheds light on the selection of specific cross-cultural interaction methods and how differences and similarities are highlighted

in intercultural communication (Xu 884–87). The theory addresses both intergroup and interpersonal dynamics that lead to changes in communication styles, indicating that broader social and cultural contexts influence how people communicate (Giles and Ogay 293). It proposes two strategies for accommodation. "Convergence" refers to individuals adjusting their communication styles to lessen social gaps (Giles and Ogay 293). This convergence can occur through both verbal and nonverbal signals, and as noted by Turner and West, "when communicators feel attracted to others, their conversations tend to converge" (Turner and West 492). The desire for social acceptance drives an individual's intent to converge, with stronger feelings of this desire leading to greater degrees of convergence (Giles and Smith 45–65). In the realm of intercultural communication, convergence represents more effective communication, breaking down barriers of ambiguity and interpersonal anxiety (Giles and Coupland 1–68).

The Communication Accommodation Theory is widely applied in intercultural communication due to its significance in interpersonal, intergroup, and interethnic interactions (Anderson and Ross 20–50). As discussed in chapter four, there can be a tendency to converge with the behavioral norms of a new environment, stemming from an awareness of the lifestyle norms in a different cultural setting, which aids in effective socio-behavioral convergence and integration (Gallois and Callan 245–269). On the other hand, the theory also introduces the concept of over-accommodation. This can take three forms: sensory, dependency, and intergroup over-accommodations. My main focus is on intergroup over-accommodation, which indicates that individuals are influenced by broad stereotypes. This occurs when speakers categorize listeners into specific cultural groups, overlooking their unique characteristics. In this context, we encounter socially constructed stereotypes that individuals or groups have about others, along with the definitions people use to describe their surroundings, which can create a socio-cognitive barrier to effective communication. This type of over-accommodation can illustrate how belief systems

create specific definitions and stereotypes that may lead to a cognitive process that hinders effective intercultural communication. Gender portrayals that are socially established and categorized often stem from rigid ideologies, and these gendered beliefs reinforce certain normative roles. This, in turn, can result in over-accommodation and negatively impact the interaction process (Turner and West 492).

Another important aspect to consider is divergence, which highlights linguistic differences to promote a sense of uniqueness from others. This encourages individuals to maintain their in-group language, thereby preserving their social identity (Giles and Coupland 1–68). This concept can be seen in situations where one's religious identity establishes a power hierarchy in discourse, diminishing the influence of others and ultimately fostering divergence during cultural assimilation (Giles and Ogay 293). A schematic representation of AUM Theory from Gudykunst's work, "An Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory of Effective Communication: Making the Mesh of the Net Finer," introduces categories such as 'Social Categorization of Strangers,' which includes positive expectations, perceived personal similarities, and understanding of group differences. It also presents 'Ethical Interactions,' which emphasize maintaining dignity, moral inclusivity, and respect for others. It also discusses 'Reactions to Strangers,' which include empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and rigid intergroup attitudes, as well as 'Self-Concept,' which encompasses social identities, personal identities, and collective self-esteem (Griffin 426–38). Within these categories, certain aspects such as maintaining dignity, moral inclusiveness, and tolerance for ambiguity are crucial, as they play a significant role in the integration process for individuals facing the social clash of identities.

In this regard, I argue that the effort to maintain dignity in interactions can either hinder or facilitate the earning of respect during communication (Cragan and Shields 274–276). Likewise, the level of tolerance for the ambiguous lifestyles of strangers may indicate a considerable degree of mindfulness (Gudykunst 282). Therefore,

avoiding potential misconceptions and misunderstandings during interactions is a complex challenge, especially when cultural understandings conflict. This is why the theory suggests that anxiety and uncertainty are fundamental causes of intercultural misconceptions, highlighting the need to manage anxiety and uncertainty in social contexts (Griffin 426–38). Considering how personal beliefs can either hinder or facilitate effective intercultural communication depending on the cultural context, the interactional norms that people use for communication can also be influenced by their religious affiliations (Gudykunst 3–25). In this sense, it is important to recognize Georg Simmel's idea that a social type is shaped by the recognizable responses of others (Simmel 1950). This notion suggests that there are different behaviors directed toward individuals and groups with varying backgrounds. It introduces the idea of an outsider who never quite fits into the group throughout the course of interactions (Wolff 402-408).

As a result, viewing a social type as an outsider can create specific challenges during cross-cultural integration. Personal beliefs about ethics and spirituality may reinforce individual perceptions of a social type as an outsider. An outsider whose cultural and religious background differs from the local group norms may find it challenging to express certain identity traits. Gudykunst suggests that to reduce anxiety, we need to enhance "the extent to which our social identities inform our interactions, given that our social identities are stable" (Gudykunst 302-303). This implies that higher self-esteem can lead to lower anxiety levels (Gudykunst 1-28). In this context, Henri Tajfel's social identity theory states that "official engagement within a specified social group bolsters individuals' social identities in relation to that group" (Greenfield and Marks 245-259). Social identity is described as "the awareness of being part of certain social groups, coupled with emotional attachment and value ascribed to group membership" (Tajfel 272-302). Emile Durkheim's perspective is also relevant, as he argues that religious beliefs and practices can be understood on both personal and group levels. A variety of social categories shaped by personal

religious practices can play a significant role in forming a self-concept that influences our social interactions during integration processes (Greenfield 245-259).

Consequently, the strong social identities and self-esteem developed within communal religious settings may lead to a certain degree of rigidity and predictability in intercultural communication. Understanding how social interactions are deeply affected by individual perceptions of social identity, which are influenced by religious teachings, can result in specific gender behaviors that either promote effective communication or hinder cross-cultural integration (Berger and Calabrese). George Yip's research in Global Missiology explores the conditions under which cross-cultural missionaries experience either support or challenges in their interactions with local communities. His findings suggest that individuals or groups with distinct religious identities, when entering mission fields that demand intercultural communication skills, may face difficulties in their integration efforts (Spitzberg 7–24). The idea of collective self-esteem, which stems from confidence in group affiliations, can sometimes devolve into a lesser form of self-esteem, leading to social isolation by confining individuals within religious boundaries. This confinement can hinder people from using contextually and culturally appropriate interaction cues, resulting in communication misunderstandings (Yip 2010). How we respond to outsiders significantly influences our ability "to process complex information about strangers, maintain attitudinal flexibility, tolerate ambiguity, and empathize" (Gudykunst 255–256). This skill helps us see strangers not just as cognitive entities but also allows us to move beyond entrenched attitudes that can lead to "ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and prejudice" (Gudykunst 298, 1–28). It's also important to note how in-groups attempt to categorize out-groups in ways that fit their understanding, which brings about the concept of stereotyping.

According to Simmel's social type theory, both negative and positive expectations of behavior towards strangers can create anxiety

and lead to avoidance of interaction (Simmel 8–34). On the other hand, developing strategies to cope with high levels of uncertainty and anxiety in cross-cultural communication is essential (Yip 2010). Mindfulness offers a new way to view strangers, encouraging us to approach them with greater openness and to appreciate their unique cultural interaction markers (Langer 62). Steve J. Kulich presents a model for future cross-cultural research that includes a nine-level analysis of culture, describing it as “propagated mythic ideals,” “expected behavior mechanics,” “mediated metaphors,” and “personalized meaning” (Littlejohn and Karen 248–50). His observations on cross-cultural communication lead us to our main research focus: the strong link between intergroup and intercultural research and the myths that shape the boundaries and definitions of gender identity and roles. It is essential to consider how individuals enact specific communication codes influenced by their religious affiliations, as well as the inherited metaphors and symbolic constructions of gender ideals that reinforce religious identities, especially in intercultural encounters. Gudykunst and Lee suggest a five-part framework to “integrate culture into communication theories,” highlighting that one of these components is the role of communication theories “as creators of culture” (Xu 884–887). This perspective suggests that the communication practices developed within specific in-group activities and linguistic subtleties can ultimately lead to the formation of their own interactional subculture (Lee et al. 373–387).

Communication theories aim “to provide explanations for interactions between individuals from different cultures or to clarify how communication differs across cultures.” It is also proposed that cross-cultural studies, “in addition to traditional social science methods such as logical coherence, explanatory power, and simplicity,” should include “multiple aspects of cultural variability, linking these dimensions directly to cultural norms and rules that influence the communicative behavior being studied” (Xu 884–887). This suggestion presents a research approach that avoids generalizing group behaviors and enables us to recognize intercultural and inter-group interaction

signals within their cultural contexts. Therefore, the role of communication in shaping culture and the complexities in definitions of communication that depend on rigid ideologies call for a more nuanced and multi-faceted approach to studying cross-cultural integration. Regarding the unique aspects shaped by an individual's awareness of specific identity norms, communication between people with differing normative views may result in breaches of societal and cultural standards.

Viewing intercultural communication as a dynamic exchange of behaviors and a clash of different codes of conduct, Judee Burgoon's Expectancy Violations Theory offers a broader perspective on why and how an individual's actions can violate another's expectations during an interaction (Burgoon et al. 58–79). Since expectations are largely based on socially established norms and the characteristics of a related social identity, our anticipations may consist of pre-existing cognitive frameworks that embody normative schemas (58–79). Hence, communicational expectations can be argued to be socially engineered within certain dogmatic norms. The meeting of disparate and contrasting cultures on a shared interactional stage can lead to undesired and violated communicative expectations, creating a communicative dilemma (Griffin 84–92). A receiver perceives the sender's actions not as random but as clearly intentional. The theory identifies two main types of expectations: prescriptive and predictive (Houser 217–218). In their specific cultural settings, religious groups often create norms and behavioral rules that are characteristic of that community, which are referred to as predictive expectations.

On the other hand, the beliefs regarding which behaviors should be performed and the intentions of the communicator are categorized as prescriptive behaviors (217–218). These beliefs, which define the limits of human behavior and are viewed through the lens of social identity, arise from the idea that individuals face certain permissions and

restrictions in their actions. Intercultural communication significantly depends on how well each communicator integrates into the local social and cultural environment. Therefore, each interaction is assessed based on the individual's ability to handle communicative anxiety and uncertainties. This concept is central to Young Yun Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, which explores the processes of adapting to stress and personal growth (Kim 3–10). In her studies, she suggests that encountering new interaction patterns can heighten anxiety and lead to confusion, stemming from deeply rooted beliefs and perceptions about appropriate communication behaviors. This observation supports her argument. Defense mechanisms may be used to alleviate negative stress, while self-defense can result in resistant behaviors that help maintain established communication habits, ultimately affecting the progress of cross-cultural integration (3–10). While there may be a noticeable change in an individual's willingness to adapt to a new cultural environment, this is often hindered by a strong adherence to specific social identity markers, as any deviation is seen as a threat to their identity. The theory also examines how the processes of cross-cultural integration can differ among individuals based on their readiness to navigate various cultural practices (Kim 283–300).

Additionally, it suggests that polycultural cognitive frameworks in our minds can foster the development of an intercultural identity, replacing traditional views of self and otherness with a more global perspective (283–300). Conversely, we can consider why some individuals choose to remain within their culturally defined safe spaces, resisting the changes that intercultural interactions might bring. I propose that religious institutions provide a) certain foundational strategies that create subtle, dogmatic guidelines for individual behavior, b) meta-communication that sets the rules for how interactions are understood and interpreted, and c) indoctrination of limiting ideologies that confine members within a closed system, preventing them from exploring other aspects of social and cultural life. Given how deeply a strong commitment to an ideology can envelop a

believer in a desire for collective belonging, this creates an illusion of satisfaction and fulfillment as long as the believer stays within the dogmatic framework. Therefore, it is essential to link this argument to what the theory examines: the pace of a successfully achieved adaptation process (Kim 15–40).

While the theory explores the potential for an identity shift to enable pluralistic interactions, I find myself more fascinated by the resistance to plurality in communication that arises from rigid identity enactments (Kim 3–10). The U-Curve model, developed by Kalvero Oberg, highlights the emotional challenges that come with intercultural communication. It suggests that a person's journey of integrating into a new culture begins with high motivation but tends to decline after the initial 'honeymoon' phase ends. This process forces individuals to make various compromises, adapt to new behavioral norms, and undergo certain changes to effectively assimilate into the culture (Kalvero). The adaptation process is largely a psychological experience that can lead to feelings of discomfort and anxiety in communication. Similarly, sociocultural adaptation refers to the time when individuals learn to engage with members of the host society, which includes developing culture-specific communication skills. According to well-known models of cultural adaptation, gaining a deeper understanding of the values, beliefs, and norms that are cherished and practiced in the host culture is also a crucial aspect of sociocultural adaptation. One such model, the transition model developed by William Bridges, outlines three phases, one of which includes the potential for anxiety and skepticism that can arise during the cultural adjustment process (Bridges 1–8). All these theories are fundamentally connected to the idea that communication is a complex process with many layers, which involves challenges related to sociocultural and psychological adaptation that require effective management of anxiety, confusion, and the ability to integrate.

The acculturative stress theory (Ausubel 617–631) was created to explain the stress reactions that stem from an individual's experiences

with cultural blending. This theory suggests that such stress often involves finding a balance between personal values and those of the new cultural setting (Lueck 186–195). It is important to emphasize the term 'acculturation' in this context, as it refers to the merging of social and cultural elements, and the acculturation process often requires a significant shift in how an individual perceives socio-cultural aspects (Sam et al 472). The acculturation process mainly pertains to immigrants and addresses issues related to cultural pluralism, while some religious groups show a stronger inclination towards socio-cultural disengagement or separatism instead of integration (Zhou 975–1008). The integrative communication theory (Kim 15–40), proposed by Young Yun as a framework for cross-cultural adaptation, suggests that the key to more effective intercultural communication lies in an individual's willingness to let go of certain aspects of their native culture. The theory that explores deculturation and acculturation processes (Kim 435–453) offers an alternative perspective on how individual beliefs and values shape communication. It suggests that the longer a person lives in a host culture, the stronger their integration into that environment becomes. Over time, this leads to a restructuring of cognitive frameworks, aligning the individual's perceptions and viewpoints with those of the new culture (Kim 66–77). However, this model faces challenges from the norms upheld by certain in-group dynamics, which can hinder adaptation to an out-group setting. Individuals, conditioned by their mental frameworks, may feel compelled to maintain a consistent behavioral stance, making them appear hesitant to shift their thinking towards new cultural paradigms.

Kim also discusses the idea of intercultural identity (Kim 1992), which involves moving beyond one's native culture to embrace new cultural experiences. It is highlighted that "Communication is crucial to acculturation. It acts as the primary means through which individuals gain understanding of their new environment" (Kim 66–77). Therefore, reducing uncertainty and anxiety is essential for successful acculturation: "In the theory of uncertainty/anxiety reduction, anxiety

and attributional confidence are seen as key drivers of intercultural adaptation" (Gudykunst 106–139). Likewise, Milton Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity outlines the stages of the acculturation process. It suggests that a person's first encounters with a new culture often start with denial, followed by defensive reactions. After denial, individuals progress through stages of minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and ultimately, integration in intercultural communication.

Chapter four presents important primary research related to situations where these stages are either overlooked, challenged, or strictly followed. Beyond the sociological and psychological factors mentioned earlier, individual cognitive acquisition processes also contribute. Social identification interacts with cognitive processes and perceptions regarding "how individuals or groups see themselves and the effects of stereotypes and discrimination on their identity" (Adler 13–23). The cognitive framework mainly addresses the evolving and shifting processes of social and cultural identities, which can either be resisted or inevitably expressed. Given that one's social identification can undergo continuous change, the transitional experience model developed by Peter S. Adler highlights the changes that occur in identity markers during cultural transition and adaptation. The model indicates that after the initial encounter with a new culture, feelings of confusion, disorientation, and fragmentation arise. Amid these challenging emotions, individuals become aware of the differences in beliefs, norms, and values within the host culture. This scenario can either lead to a rejection of cultural integration or an acknowledgment of alternative cultural representations and expressions (Adler 13-23). Shalom Schwartz conducted extensive research emphasizing the need to explore the value systems that clarify the essence of culture. These key values shape and influence communication behaviors, resulting in the development of preferred interaction styles. The idea that a communicator interprets the behaviors of the communicatee through their cultural values underscores the importance of examining the value

dynamics involved in communication. It's also important to recognize that “many of the most recent international and intercultural conflicts have been driven by value disparities” (Schwartz 43–73). When we analyze cultures as Schwartz describes them—a “dense complexity of meanings, beliefs, practices, symbols, norms, and values prevalent among individuals in a society”—we can identify three cultural dimensions in his theory of value orientations (43–73).

Among these dimensions, the concepts of autonomy versus embeddedness and hierarchy versus egalitarianism are particularly significant. The first dimension focuses on the relationship between the individual and the group, highlighting the extent to which people are autonomous or embedded within their communities. This immersion in a specific collectivity is central to religious formations, where shared values, lifestyles, and social relationships within dogmatic structures shape the ideal identity performances of individuals involved (43–73). The processes of meaning-making and interpretations of interactions are influenced by a collectivist and communal connection to a larger group. Therefore, it can be argued that embedded cultures tend to maintain the status quo by resisting changes, which includes avoiding communication processes that might threaten in-group loyalty and traditional order. Strict adherence to communication structures and compliance with group norms are crucial in sustaining and reproducing masculinist gender roles and rigid social identities. In this context, the principle of embeddedness promotes hegemonic interpretations of gender. Another important dimension is the concept of hierarchy within a cultural framework. The hierarchical structure found in religious organizations aims to strip individuals of traditional gender roles by taking control of their identities to preserve order. Even though identity roles are often distributed unfairly within these systems, the issue of unquestioned acceptance of imposed, non-agentive gender identities persist.

B. Gender and Identity

Bourdieu's concept of habitus refers to the ingrained tendencies and predispositions that individuals acquire through cultural conditioning. I find the ongoing spread of ideologies and the continuous socialization of identities fascinating, as both social and physical identities are shaped within the framework of habitus. This blend of social and physical elements helps to form the subject by solidifying gender ideals and normalizing concepts of femininity and masculinity (Kelly 3). The idea is that "not only is the spatial socially constructed; the social is also constructed spatially" (Massey, 1994). Therefore, it can be argued that space and culture are closely linked. When we view space as a cultural setting, the social reflections of gender become evident in how spatial areas are constructed, and these gendered arrangements provide us with specific inclinations about human interactions. Social interactions during socialization are deeply rooted in the gendered habitus, where socially acceptable forms of gendered behavior are enacted. This implies that "society becomes ingrained in individuals in the form of enduring dispositions, or trained capacities and structured tendencies to think, feel, and act in certain ways, which then guide them" (Wacquant, 2005).

Habitus develops and subtly influences what is socially ingrained, which Bourdieu describes as "in this sense, habitus is created and reproduced unconsciously, without any deliberate pursuit of coherence, without any conscious concentration" (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, it is pertinent to suggest that a dominant religious ideology, with its rigid implications on gender, is linked to the social and cultural expression of hegemonic masculinities, as well as the social isolation and dogmatic subjugation of women to prevailing androcentric norms. It is within this habitus of gendered body performances that human interactions are grounded in established norms and structured tendencies. In this framework, I argue that intersubjective interactions across different cultural contexts can be influenced by the dogmatic infusion of structured symbols, both verbal and nonverbal, that signify identity. However, human agency must not be overlooked; despite the rigidity and essentialism of religious identity constructs, gender possesses a unique ability to challenge its own dogmas

and re-emerge in new forms. Thus, gender continually manifests itself, regardless of the strict limitations imposed by any ideology, depending on the deconstructive will of the individual and the potential for subversion. In exploring gender dynamics, I intend to integrate key aspects from Butler's framework of gender. Dogmatic definitions of gender present a binary perspective on gender formation, determined either by biological birth or inherent nature, promoting a static coding of one's body that overlooks individual agency and the socio-cultural development of gender.

Butler's approach emphasizes the socio-cultural process through which gender is formed, highlighting that gender is far more intricate than a simple binary classification. Building on the concept of gender as performative, I propose that societal taboos and prohibitions significantly contribute to the creation of performative gender acts (Butler 519-531). As Butler argues, "gender is neither a radical choice...[nor] something imposed or marked on the individual" (519-531). The essentialist foundation of gender ideology suggests that normative gender expressions, shaped by human interactions, have led to the emergence of male-centered social structures that reinforce the gender binary (519-531). This gender binary, upheld by the interests of religious authority, requires distinct and exclusionary divisions between gender identity categories, effectively dismissing alternative expressions of gender. Since there is no 'original identity prior to repetition' (519-531), the mimetic and repetitive nature of gender performance supports the unchallenged institutional power over gender identities. The prescriptive discourse surrounding gender identity indicates a socially recognized ritualization of gender ideals through human interactions, which in turn fosters rigidly structured gender norms. These idealized rituals, focused on human identity, forcibly reshape the social construction of gender roles (Butler 95). Consequently, such gender roles and varying gender performances create socio-cultural barriers in communication that can lead to intercultural misunderstandings, religious conflicts, ostracism, and social marginalization.

CHAPTER THREE

Biblical Narratives of Gender

“So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27)

Identification is expressed in various ways and carries profound complexities that depend on the context of interaction and the markers exchanged between individuals. Consequently, how we present our identities can reflect our insecurities as we navigate diverse social settings. As we explore these prominent environments, one recurring theme in every experience is the range of expressions and communication styles used; as our interconnected world expands, these differences become increasingly apparent. As individuals move through various systems, cultures, and social situations, the unique communication signs add additional layers of complexity to identity. People often encounter challenges in effectively conveying their identities in these varied interaction settings. Social differences, language barriers, and varying cultural norms can all influence how identity is expressed and understood. These complexities can lead to insecurity as individuals grapple with the fear of being misheard or misunderstood. Nevertheless, finding common ground in discussions about identity can provide a glimmer of hope amidst these challenges.

When individuals connect and understand one another through reliable interactions, it can mitigate feelings of instability. A genuine expression of one's identity, coupled with compassion and acceptance from others, fosters a sense of belonging and enhances self-esteem. As the term "heterosexual" has evolved, its significance has undergone significant transformation over time. It no longer simply refers to someone who engages with both sexes; rather, it has been reshaped

through various cultural interpretations, originally emphasizing procreation and the marginalization of women (Katz 33–83). In this context, gender identity can be viewed as a continually evolving construct—an idea that constantly deconstructs and redefines itself. This dynamic portrayal of gender, shaped by ongoing social development, arises from human interactions that involve communicative identifiers. While inappropriate or inadequate expressions of identity can lead to discord within groups and may result in social ostracism and distress (Shaffer), these authentic identity markers—both verbal and nonverbal—act as signals of our collective connections. The identity markers we convey through our speech and nonverbal cues communicate a message that allows us to discern the identities of those we engage with based on the identifiers they present.

Particularly, gender and religious identities hold more symbolic and mutual coding, laden with identity-specific expressions and unique verbal and nonverbal signals. Nakayama shared a similar perspective: "Who am I perceived to be when I communicate with others? My identity is very much tied to the ways in which others speak to me and the ways in which society represents my interests" (Nakayama 14).

"The world is covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs, which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than forms of similitude. To know must therefore be to interpret: to find a way from the visible mark to that which is being said by it and which, without that mark, would lie like unspoken speech, dormant within things" (Foucault 375–380).

Religious or doctrinal language unveils the social mechanics of power imbued within everyday human interactions and behaviors. Institutional power, upheld by the holders of oppressive knowledge, cultivates a systematically ordered language within realms of dogmatic encoding and decoding, ultimately reflecting a hegemonic intent. This hegemonic exertion of power becomes conspicuous in routine human

interactional practices and communicative language structures. Consequently, an interactional universe of existence is prescribed for performing pre-established identity markers. Viewing power as the revelation and embodiment of knowledge, power development within a given religious knowledge framework strives to control the episteme structuring human existence. It further generates an absolute ontology, entrapping the human subject within the existential specifics of its own spiritual universe.

The Christian Church, as an institutionalized power, has maintained a long-standing culturally sanctified hegemony and subtle methods of social control over the faithful communities. Foucault's conception of 'the exercise of confession' is pertinent in observing how a religious practice functions as a means to assert ownership of knowledge and crucially engender new forms of knowledge. Since the act of confessing inner truths creates factual knowledge, and the knowledge is acquired through the exercise of power inherent in the act of confession, it can be inferred that doctrinal power imposes a form of knowledge that emerges and endures through spiritual devotion and submission in our everyday practices. Essentially, this is either an unthinking capitulation to divine will and its earthly representatives or a gentle sacred mechanism to subdue the humble. In Foucault's discourse, gender identity remains indivisible from power dynamics: "Through the confession of inner secrets, truth becomes how sex is manifested" (Foucault 1–133). Consequently, sex, as a biological category, is established as an instrument of hegemonic power rather than an intrinsic component of human biology. As Foucault perceived the interplay between power and knowledge as not merely restrictive but also a conduit for new modes of thought and action, I propose that dogmatic dominance over individual identities may catalyze the development of novel identity markers and unanticipated behaviors in communication (1–133).

1. Institutionalized Interruptions

“Christianity taught us to see the eye of the lord looking down upon us. Such forms of knowledge project an image of reality, at the expense of reality itself. They talk figures and icons and signs, but fail to perceive forces and flows. They bind us to other realities, and especially the reality of power as it subjugates us. Their function is to tame, and the result is the fabrication of docile and obedient subjects.” — Gilles Deleuze, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia

Historic spiritual women, revered as divine beings, have played crucial roles in shaping gender norms, suggesting that the distinctive qualities of these figures have directly influenced societal expectations regarding gender. Various cultures have reexamined these deities to create a more inclusive representation of gender. For instance, the Norse goddess Freya originally embodied both love and war, but her representation has evolved over the centuries to emphasize love and sexuality. Conversely, the Hindu deity Kali challenges traditional female roles, advocating for more radical representations of femininity. This established notion of female representation is notably contentious, as traditional roles—such as love, beauty, and fertility—are often upended by Kali's embodiment of destructive warfare. In contrast, we see goddesses like Aphrodite from Greek mythology, who personifies vanity and beauty, maintaining conventional feminine attributes (Davidson). The powerful dynamics of gender foster a dualistic view of sexual identity, promoting a binary framework for gender expression. This dichotomy is constructed and perpetuated by ancient spiritual texts and their associated characters.

The reverence for gender-specific deities and religious figures has given rise to distinct modes of communication, which subsequently reshape the identities of individuals who embrace these beliefs through religious symbols. This indicates a profound connection between our ambiguous historical background and the contemporary context. In the Abrahamic faiths, the prophets highlighted in sacred texts are

predominantly male and exhibit quintessential masculine traits. Notable figures such as Abraham, Moses, David, and Elijah exemplify this pattern. Their prominence reinforces longstanding notions of masculinity and the societal expectations placed upon men. These venerable biblical figures also establish particular symbols for their followers, promoting the concept of divinely inspired masculinity. For instance, Abraham embodies qualities like obedience, loyalty, and courage for male adherents, while David, Elijah, and Moses are regarded as exemplars of bravery and combat.

Within this framework, complementarianism—a principle that allocates leadership roles to men and supportive roles to women—plays a vital role (Wright 2004). Thus, one could argue that the cultivation of masculine traits in men has been transmitted across generations through oral traditions and sacred texts, continuing to be upheld by present-day believers. The biblical framework defining the roles of men and women significantly influences the contemporary hierarchical structure of the church. The apostles, exclusively male and hailing from various backgrounds, have reinforced a patriarchal system that marginalizes women, relegating them to subordinate positions. Catholicism often emphasizes the contributions of the church fathers in shaping its theological doctrines and traditions. However, it is crucial to critically assess the implications of a male-dominated lineage, where the twelve apostles, all subsequent popes, and church fathers have been men. This historical context reveals a persistent masculinist ideology that permeates the governance of the Catholic Church. Consequently, the narrative constructed by male leaders assigns Catholic women a limited role, primarily as caregivers and devoted servants, thereby constraining their potential contributions to the faith community.

2. Scriptural Subjugations: Immaculate Conception of Gender

“Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio,” proclaimed Dante, who perhaps best embodies the interplay of the three feminine roles—daughter, wife, and mother (Kristeva 139). Institutionalized ideas and doctrinal interpretations of gender significantly influence individuals' socialization process. This becomes evident when examining how the formation of human subjects is shaped by the interaction between normative knowledge and male-dominated power dynamics, which in turn scrutinize, restrict, or reinforce gender norms specific to particular religious constructs. In this section, we explore Marian models of gender, supported by notable examples from biblical texts, as pivotal factors in the normative construction of gender roles, particularly for women. The Virgin Mary transcends her role as the mother of her son; through her unwavering faith and devoted service, she also embodies the role of his daughter. In a mystery that defies straightforward understanding, she is concurrently viewed as his wife or spouse, a belief stemming from the notion of her conception by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, Kristeva asserts that “she passes through all three women's stages in the most restrictive of all possible kinship systems” (Kristeva 139).

In this context, I am interested in the concept of the Virgin Mary as Mater Dei and Co-Redemptrix, and most importantly, as a gendered figure depicted in diverse physical appearances and forms, yet remaining an almost universally influential mother figure across various religious cultures. In this regard, I delve into the implications of a divine female body for contemporary women of faith, particularly concerning its gendered implications on body and sexuality. For many, the act of kneeling before a statue of Mary is a profound demonstration of faith. Devotion to the male deity is expressed through the humble act of prayer to the motherly female figure. Genuflecting before the Blessed Virgin Mary, expressing gratitude, and voicing inner pain, sorrows, and desires connect believing individuals to a human-made representation of a heavenly female divinity—the queen of heaven. However, the

imagery constructed around Mary seems to affirm male-centric views rather than dismantling long-standing patriarchal structures. Beyond the female divine, the male gaze eventually lands on a male deity, Jesus. The male son's presence ascends above and beyond the female co-redeemer, and a defenseless infant son, cradled by the most venerated of women, supersedes her through his male divinity. Mary serves solely as a mediator for humankind's journey to Jesus; unable to provide redemption, she remains an inadequate symbol of women's liberation. Although the Redemptoris Mater—referring to Mary's redemptive role in Catholic Catechism—is not associated with teaching and leadership, she has been elevated to such a divine and blessed status that she is a critical figure in Catholic soteriology. Setting aside theological interpretations of her true nature, I would like to focus on the female gender roles she imposes on contemporary believing women. Mary's perpetual virginity is a key component in understanding the spiritual framework that heavily constructs women's gender boundaries and, ultimately, male perceptions of women. Her perpetual virgin state and immaculate conception of Jesus are among the Marian doctrines that extol the virtue of chastity across all denominations. She not only represents the ideal believing woman through her perpetual virginity but also suggests considerably modest gender roles for female believers in their interactions with the external world. Given Mary's high veneration, predominantly in the Western and Eastern churches, it has slowly constructed a heavenly image of a gendered queen of heaven that has ultimately become a divine model for all devout women of faith. The modest and obedient behaviors exhibited by Mary, as depicted in the Bible, have become one of the most influential role models for women of faith.

The Marian phenomenon continues to hold significant relevance for Christian women today, largely fueled by the persistent institutional reinforcement of gender roles. Recently, the Pope highlighted the Virgin Mary as a role model for women during a general audience. In his address, women were portrayed as collaborators rather

than initiators. Although there is a genuine intention to uplift women, this intention often falls short in practice. This particular complementarian viewpoint not only seeks to counter arguments for egalitarianism but also undermines the notion of women's equality with men. Consequently, the understanding of womanhood shaped by scriptural gender doctrines fosters a wider societal and cultural framework for women, affecting their communication styles, nonverbal interactions, and, importantly, their intercultural dialogues. The gendered stigma placed on women continues to influence the idealization of a modest, meek, and obedient lifestyle.

The imagery of female saints, along with the visual and discursive representations of Mary, can offer consolation and relief to women who feel oppressed by predominantly male-dominated churches. Marian devotion, as well as the veneration of female saints, ultimately reinforces the patriarchal presence by positioning women as mediators, intercessors, and collaborators. Thus, the conceptualizations of gender related to Mary provide afflicted women with an illusionary sense of relief, subtly masking the violation of gender equality that arises from a complementarian understanding of gender roles. Beauvoir's argument (Beauvoir 439–638) brings to light ancient times when goddesses wielded autonomous power and acted independently of male influence. While ancient female deities utilized men to further their own interests, Mary, as a divinized figure, embodies a more dependent representation of women. By assigning women roles of servitude, obedience, and reliance on a male supreme figure, the potential for individual agency among women remains obscured. Mary's expression of her willingness to serve is encapsulated in her words of obedience found in Luke 1:38: "I am the Lord's servant," which underscores her perceived inferiority to her son. It is through these obedient and dependent portrayals of scriptural female role models that the subordinate and subjugated status of believing women becomes increasingly evident. Thus, divine patriarchal doctrines are reflected in the everyday lives of believers.

The Beauvoirian perspective characterizes women as the "second sex," highlighting their status as defined in relation to men. St. Thomas viewed women as the "imperfect man" and an "incidental" being (Hauke 28). In her chapter "Woman: Myth and Reality" from *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that men have marginalized women by mystifying the unfamiliar. Lacking a genuine understanding of women, men imposed a sense of otherness upon them, resulting in dogmatic perceptions and an androcentric framing of womanhood. Beauvoir asserts that such fundamentally misogynistic oppression manifests not only across class and race boundaries but also within religious groups. Therefore, it can be argued that male dominance and the patriarchal order became more entrenched through gender dogmatism and the standardization of negative perceptions of women (Beauvoir 21–126). Traits that have been historically attributed to women, stemming from creation narratives that depict a woman as the one who was tempted and became disobedient, have transitioned to portrayals of Mary as dependent and obedient—symbolized by the serpent, which is vanquished beneath her feet. This serpent once led Eve to her fall from grace. In this context, Mary represents hope for believing women, offering solace from the guilt imposed by male superiority. While some may suggest that Marian figures have contributed to the spiritual upliftment and liberation of women within the church, the fact that she is the mother of God—a male divine son—reinforces notions of maternity, also sanctifying the role of motherhood: "Many civilizations have subsumed femininity under the Maternal, but Christianity, in its own way, developed this tendency to the full" (Kristeva 135).

I maintain that Mary's idealized view of womanhood functions primarily as a restrictive depiction of female gender roles, ultimately serving the patriarchal interests of the church. The literalist interpretation of biblical teachings presents a challenge for women; while it acknowledges women's liberation, that freedom is confined to a spiritual realm. Conversely, this literalist approach often reinforces

male-centric agendas that seek to limit women's self-interpretation and their ability to establish their own identities. This is evident in the restricted access women have to positions of religious authority and church leadership, as the Bible supports this notion. Scripture promotes roles centered around motherhood and nurturing, portraying women as "weaker vessels." For instance, 1 Peter 3:7 (ESV) states, "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered." The male-dominated structure within family dynamics and the relegation of women to supportive roles in religious contexts exacerbate this issue, with men occupying positions of power. Leadership roles and teaching responsibilities are largely assigned to men, while women are often expected to guide smaller groups. Ephesians 5:23 (ESV) notes, "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body." The Bible outlines the qualities of virtuous women, reinforcing an idealized version of femininity: "A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones" (Proverbs 14:2, ESV).

I do not seek to contest the truth or authenticity of the Bible; however, it is essential to acknowledge that these prescribed traits shape the perception of an ideal woman according to biblical standards. This idealization reinforces a masculine notion of 'divine' authority, thereby bolstering the dominance of male figures within religious institutions and elevating traditional masculine roles. In this light, I argue that the celebration of conventional female virtues ultimately supports patriarchal systems by upholding the idea of male authority as divinely ordained, which further solidifies the power of masculine roles within religious hierarchies.

3. Biblical Manhood & Masculinities

The historical context of ecclesial governance reveals a persistent trend of masculinist dominance that not only delineates roles traditionally assigned to men but also relegates women to subordinate positions. This patriarchal framework, deeply entrenched in certain interpretations of scripture, often portrays women primarily as supporters and devotees, frequently overlooking their potential for spiritual advancement and leadership within the church. For instance, while figures such as Mary Magdalene were pivotal to the early Christian community, their narratives tend to fade into obscurity, overshadowed by the accounts of male apostles. This systematic marginalization reflects a broader ecclesiastical narrative that privileges male voices and experiences, thus reinforcing the association of leadership and authority with masculinity.

Moreover, the theological contributions of early church fathers predominantly showcase a male-centric perspective that has significantly shaped doctrinal development, often diminishing or entirely omitting women's roles. Consequently, this hierarchical structure perpetuates gender inequality and limits the spectrum of voices that can enhance the church's spiritual and communal life. Recognizing this gender imbalance is imperative for cultivating a more inclusive understanding of faith that acknowledges the contributions of all genders, ultimately enriching the church's mission and outreach. The ramifications of this male-centric perspective extend beyond representation; they also impact the very fabric of the church community. Women, who frequently assume roles that underscore their supportive abilities, often find their spiritual gifts overlooked. This not only curtails their involvement but also reinforces a restrictive definition of leadership within ecclesial contexts. The absence of women in decision-making positions perpetuates the notion that authority is

inherently linked to masculinity, thereby discouraging women from aspiring to leadership roles. Furthermore, the church's doctrinal teachings often perpetuate traditional gender roles, thereby entrenching existing disparities. Narratives surrounding women in the church—whether they pertain to saints or martyrs—tend to emphasize their sacrifices in service of men, rather than highlighting their own agency and contributions. The representation of male figures within societal narratives reinforces traditional gender roles linked to physical strength, protection, and hunting, thereby perpetuating masculinist hegemony and positioning men as central to survival dynamics.

This framework often leads to male-dominated religious hierarchies. The theological implications of these gender roles also carry significant ramifications for women, as the religiously codified constructs of masculinity shape the intercultural interactions that men of faith engage in with the broader society. Men are ascribed autocratic essentialist traits, alongside the advantages associated with a male-centric ontology, which profoundly influences the contours of religious male identity. While the egalitarian perspective advocating for gender parity is relevant in certain contexts, familial structures frequently hinge on male authority, assigning men roles perceived as beyond the capabilities of women. Men are counseled against indulging in trivial or hedonistic pursuits that risk leading to moral decay, and they are also encouraged to eschew vulgar discourse, imprudent choices, and infidelity. The privileges afforded to men can morph into coercive burdens and rigid gender norms. Given that no specific gender performance is inherently linked to the biological sex of the performer, the religious framework surrounding gender effectively suppresses individual subjectivities among men of faith.

The excessive focus on an idealized human prototype, as delineated in theological creation narratives, positions men's aspirations as an elusive ideal—an archetype of masculinity into which all men are encouraged to conform. This archetype establishes a man's objectives

around fostering a healthy family life, achieving professional success, and maintaining devotion to God. These biblical constructs of virtuous masculinity predominantly reflect the expectation for men to adopt protective roles toward women. While similar expectations exist for men in secular contexts, it is essential to recognize that religious doctrines and biblical teachings concerning masculinity fundamentally inform the cultural paradigms at play.

Christian men, similar to their female counterparts, are profoundly shaped by the complex interplay of various identities and the multitude of conflicting communication signals encountered during intercultural interactions. These encounters often challenge their beliefs, values, and self-perceptions, compelling them to navigate a landscape influenced by cultural nuances, social expectations, and theological interpretations. As they engage across cultures, they may find themselves reconciling traditional views of masculinity with more progressive ideas about gender roles, ultimately influencing their understanding of faith and community in a global context.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fragmented Narratives

“We argue that gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort. What then is the social doing of gender? It is more than the continuous creation of the meaning of gender through human actions. We claim that gender itself is constituted through interaction”
(West et al. 127).

In regard to the specifics of my fieldwork, the individuals involved in this study share a common set of religious beliefs within a particular cultural context. These participants are dedicated followers of the Christian faith, hailing from diverse countries yet currently residing in Turkey, a society with its own distinct cultural and religious characteristics. I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with a variety of individuals, including an Australian Protestant Christian theologian and professor specializing in the Old Testament, a German Protestant Christian pastor, North American Protestant Christian male and female missionaries, and a Haitian Protestant Christian. These interviews were conducted in person, with questions designed to steer their responses toward the central focus of my research.

During the interviews, participants were encouraged to reflect on religious doctrines, biblical teachings, and exemplary figures from scripture that have shaped and influenced their perspectives on gender roles. They were asked to compare their expression of gender in their countries of origin with their interactions with individuals of the same and opposite sex in their current country of residence. The goal was to identify both the similarities and differences in their beliefs and behaviors regarding gender within an intercultural context. I

interviewed this group of cisgender individuals in their natural living environments, where they were expected to adapt to local customs, suppress certain behaviors, or diverge from local norms.

The interviews were conducted with reference to ancient sacred texts that subtly guide the lives of these individuals, utilizing scriptural references to shed light on the reasons behind prescribed gender roles. Ultimately, the findings of this study are linked to the participants' levels of acceptance or resistance to integration into their new surroundings. Furthermore, the research underscores the intersection of effective intercultural dialogue and the expression of religious identities. In addition to conducting interviews, I utilized participant observation as a key investigative method. This approach allowed participants to explore both their religious communities and their new environments, striving to embody their religious identities. In doing so, they authentically illustrated how intercultural integration can be facilitated or hindered by their beliefs and their ability to express their identities. By observing and analyzing the communicative behaviors of participants from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, this research has the potential to provide valuable insights and alternative perspectives on the primary research questions examined in this study. Additionally, I plan to investigate the prevailing cultural practices and socio-cultural notions of gender within the research area. The participation of Turkish women in public life has long been a subject of ongoing debate and contention, particularly regarding their expression of femininity. While there have been notable changes in women's attire and non-verbal communication that may suggest progress, the reality remains that women continue to face significant restrictions.

The Kemalist view on women's liberation in civic and public spheres has not fully achieved the goal of emancipation. Women were permitted to enter the public domain largely as objects of desire, while their primary roles as mothers and homemakers remained largely unchanged (Kandiyoti, 1987). The persistence of internalized male

dominance, coupled with limited opportunities for women in the public sphere, ensures they do not encroach upon men's domains or disrupt the prevailing patriarchal order. Participants in this study, through their non-verbal cues—such as their attire, gestures, eye contact, and interactions within their families and with community members—consciously conform to the normative expectations of their religious community. The dominant gender roles entrenched in this community significantly shape their expressions of gender and have repercussions for various aspects of their lives, including marriage, child-rearing, and family dynamics. For example, the expectation of female submissiveness reinforces a male-centric family structure that confines women within a patriarchal system.

In Appendix A, a female participant expresses admiration for Jesus and his unconventional treatment of women, which challenged established cultural norms and afforded them the respect they deserve. It is essential to recognize that within traditional Judaic customs, the social hierarchy was predominantly male-centric, with women often depicted as subordinate. Typically, in Judeo-Christian gender hierarchies, women were assigned roles primarily associated with caregiving, nurturing, and household responsibilities. The power and authority ascribed to men fostered a male-dominated society, thereby restricting women's involvement in various societal spheres. Furthermore, it is important to understand that the participants in this study face constraints not only within their religious communities but also in their new cultural environment. They endeavor to integrate into this new society while simultaneously preserving certain gender expressions characteristic of their original cultures. For instance, in Appendix A, a female participant shares that the traditional hierarchical superiority of men does not exist in her marriage or family life. According to communication accommodation theory, such divergence can lead to conflicts and communication challenges, particularly with local women, whose gender roles are often suppressed under the dominance of their male partners. Similarly, male participants recognize

that Christian men frequently regard Jesus as a role model who treated women with respect and without judgment. In this context, it is notable that female participants often choose Mary Magdalene as a role model, as she symbolizes liberation for Christian women who grapple with feelings of guilt and sin. Magdalene, identified as a former female prostitute, was traditionally seen as highly inappropriate for religious men to engage with in conversation. The divine subversion of conventional views on women and female sexuality holds significant relevance for Christian women. However, it is important to consider that the same Christian men who advocate for respectful treatment of women may also reinforce specific gender role boundaries that inhibit women's participation in masculine domains. This dynamic can be observed in the anticipated communication patterns based on each participant's biological sex.

For instance, an American Christian woman, whose understanding of gender aligns with traditional norms similar to those of a devout Muslim woman, may limit her interactions with local Muslim men and avoid certain nonverbal cues to prevent any misunderstandings regarding her sexuality. An interesting point emerges from the interview with the male participant in Appendix A, which explores both gender roles and the participant's sexuality. He reveals his experience of being victimized by other men and acknowledges that he lived as a homosexual man during his early adulthood. He attributes his unwanted sexuality to external abuse and admits to suppressing his homosexual feelings to adhere to the expectations of his religious community.

When the female participant in Appendix A is asked about the differences in gender roles between her home country and the host nation, she reflects on the principles of individualism versus collectivism. She observes that American culture prioritizes individualism and personal achievement; while recognizing the challenges she encounters in her new environment, which places a

stronger emphasis on the collective. Embracing the integrative communication theory, she notes that over time, she has adopted more collectivist perspectives and behaviors. Coming from a context where gender equality is relatively more pronounced, particularly outside her religious community, she feels constrained in her communication and in expressing her identity as a Christian woman. The participant struggles to fully comprehend the situation of the supposedly "oppressed local women" within her new cultural context. She realizes that these conceptual disparities contribute to communication difficulties with individuals of both the same and opposite sex.

Moreover, she theorizes that her nonverbal cues, expressed through her physical appearance, may be intimidating to locals, particularly as she is a blue-eyed American woman with distinct gender markers. Both participants argue that it is entirely feasible for both parents to share the responsibilities of raising their children and recognize the significant contributions of fathers to domestic chores. However, these viewpoints may not align with those held by more traditional Christian families, where childcare and household responsibilities are typically regarded as maternal duties. Nevertheless, I have observed a more equitable distribution of domestic tasks within progressive Christian families.

Relocating to Turkey—a country with pronounced gender roles concerning domestic duties and family leadership—proved to be quite challenging for these participants, to the extent that their lifestyle was perceived as culturally incongruous by their Turkish acquaintances. The female participant faced accusations of negatively influencing Turkish husbands due to her husband's involvement in household tasks, thereby disrupting the conventional male-dominated family structure. Their distinctive approaches to caregiving and child-rearing diverge from local norms, leading to misunderstandings and even resistance from the local community. Similarly, their shared responsibility in providing for the family—a role traditionally reserved for men—further highlights these

disparities.

These differences, rooted in contrasting cultural and religious norms, present significant obstacles for the participants as they strive for seamless cultural integration. They encounter considerable challenges in their intercultural communication, as their differing gender roles clash with local expectations, resulting in discomfort and societal fragmentation, according to the male participant. These disparities in gender roles do not promote convergence with local norms but rather lead to divergence, significantly influencing communication dynamics. Both verbal and nonverbal interactions are profoundly affected.

For instance, Christian women exhibit diverse dress codes, with some choosing to wear modest attire. The excessive use of jewelry is often perceived as provocative, and certain Christian denominations disapprove of body piercing. The female participant in Appendix A has modified her dressing style to avoid being labeled as "promiscuous" in the new cultural environment. While adhering to local dress codes can symbolize respect for different cultures, it becomes problematic when motivated by fear and anxiety about being misinterpreted. Consequently, I observed that participants tend to navigate their social identity in ways that encourage communicational divergence and the avoidance of specific nonverbal cues. Public interactions with members of the opposite sex also raise concerns for these participants. To prevent potential cultural misunderstandings, they have established a guideline that the male participant should not be alone with their female nanny. It is considered culturally inappropriate for a married man to be seen alone with another woman, prompting them to adapt their household interactions accordingly. In this local cultural context, excessive conversations between men and women may be regarded as dishonorable, and participants are expected to follow culturally acceptable interaction patterns based on their perceived gender identities. In contrast, the male participant in Appendix A exemplifies

how even interactions with peers can become problematic due to differing views on sexuality.

For example, he often found himself in uncomfortable situations where local men offered him things he considered sexually immoral. This led to feelings of anxiety and discomfort, prompting him to continually refuse and avoid what he deemed "immoral" behaviors during his interactions with male peers. The majority of the men he interacted with identified as nominal Muslims, while devout and practicing Muslim men—who strictly adhere to abstaining from adultery—were less common. He recognized that he faced challenges not only in his dealings with women but also with men.

Effective intercultural communication necessitates social integration and adaptive interaction within a new cultural environment. The difficulties encountered during cross-cultural integration primarily arise from deeply rooted norms within the host culture. Religious differences can serve as barriers to communication, particularly when one party is resistant to assimilation. The individuals referenced in Appendix A faced considerable cultural challenges in their efforts to align with local religious customs. Their refusal to participate in religious ceremonies or to accept food prepared according to Islamic traditions has significantly disrupted their intercultural dialogues. Their religious beliefs restrict their engagement in local rituals and practices, which may conflict with their own spiritual convictions. Consequently, they find themselves as cultural outliers, which limits their integration into the deeper facets of local life. Religious structures can create ideological divides and marginalize individuals of differing faiths.

The participants recognize that their ability to communicate with locals is largely influenced by the openness of the local community. In societies where religious differences are perceived as obstacles to effective communication, foreigners striving to assimilate may encounter harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and biases. Gaining an

understanding of local cultural norms is essential when seeking integration into new social environments.

The enforcement of traditional gender roles is apparent in the upbringing of participant four, who was taught to remain at home while boys enjoyed greater freedom. Her mother's complete dependence on her father, who made all family decisions, contributed to the participant's negative feelings regarding her mother's submissive role. This experience underscores how traditional gender roles are imparted to children from a young age, beginning at home and shaping their understanding of the expectations tied to their assigned gender. Furthermore, these norms are often perpetuated by religious communities well into adulthood.

The female participant in Appendix D draws a comparison between the United States and her new residence, observing that the subordinate position of women within families persists across cultures. She notes that her father's interpretation of the Bible shaped him into a highly patriarchal figure, effectively excluding women from the decision-making process. This example illustrates how personal interpretations of religious texts can foster hierarchical, male-centric family structures, which may be challenged in different cultural contexts.

A significant aspect of this situation is the compromise participants make regarding their dress code. Participant four, like many others—particularly women—tends to conform to the dress norms of her new environment to avoid misunderstandings. However, she distinguishes herself from the female participant in Appendix A by exclusively wearing long skirts and opting out of jeans. In Turkey, traditional older women often wear long skirts as a symbol of modesty and to signify adherence to a specific lifestyle. For her, long skirts serve as a nonverbal representation of her modest, religious way of life. She believes that by adopting this simplified appearance, she can sidestep

unwanted interactions with the opposite sex, thereby reducing communication anxiety and limiting contact with men, which she feels aids her integration, albeit in a way that may not be regarded as fully authentic.

It is also worth noting that her reception in more secular or nominal areas of the city has been lukewarm, as locals perceive her as excessively pious and somewhat eccentric. Through her choice of clothing and modest bodily gestures, she conveys her faith, crafting a unique expression of gender and femininity. In her intercultural interactions with locals, she tends to avoid eye contact and physical touch, which stands in stark contrast to the more relaxed norms in the United States, where such avoidance is less common. She admits that she only engages in conversation with Christian men and consciously avoids interactions with other men, viewing them as potential threats.

This notably restricts her interactions with men. Wearing skirts is a significant aspect of her identity, embodying the virtues and religious values associated with pious modesty. In Turkey, where Islam also emphasizes women's chastity, her expression of femininity is not contested, as she aligns herself with Turkish women. Her Christian values, which view non-believing men as a potential threat to the virtue of women, contribute to her gender performance being "pure and withdrawn" from worldly desires. The female participant in Appendix B notes that the teachings of the Apostle Paul have profoundly influenced her understanding of gender roles, and she strives to lead a life characterized by modesty in all aspects. Recognizing the interplay between the concept of modesty, its effects on nonverbal communication, and its role in shaping gender performance is essential in cross-cultural contexts.

The belief in embodying and upholding modesty significantly influences interaction patterns, shaping both verbal and nonverbal cues to align with the desired impression. Modesty affects various

dimensions, including body language, gestures, attire, intonation, and vocabulary. While the term "modesty" is often viewed positively, it fundamentally contributes to the unequal status of women in relation to men and reinforces patriarchal structures. The female participant notes that a faithful woman's expression of gender is deeply rooted in Biblical teachings on gender roles. Therefore, investigating the correlation between intercultural communication and social identities requires a consideration of sacred texts. The male participant in Appendix B expresses that he no longer regards women as a sexual taboo and treats them with the utmost respect. However, he acknowledges that societal norms often place men above women and admits to being influenced by the complementarian perspective on gender roles.

This perspective highlights challenges he faces within the local Islamic context, where the family structure significantly depends on male presence. In his interactions with local men, he discovers that his commitment to abstaining from casual relationships until marriage often takes them by surprise, as such experiences are considered commonplace among many young Turkish men. Notably, all male participants maintain a certain distance even in same-sex interactions, leading to a lack of intimacy with local men. The participants prefer to engage in deeper conversations with peers who share their faith, while limiting their interactions with locals. This exclusivity rooted in religion encourages believers to distance themselves from the outside world even as they strive to assimilate into the local culture.

Nonverbal behaviors also exhibit distinct patterns of avoidance. The female participant in Appendix B, who would typically smile more and maintain eye contact in the United States, avoids these nonverbal cues in Turkey, viewing them as potential threats to her religious gender identity. She refrains from shaking hands with men and avoids direct eye contact. This avoidance of certain nonverbal behaviors serves as a means for the participants to express their religious gender identity,

highlighting their distinct identity markers and exclusionary interaction styles when engaging with locals.

In intercultural communication, the preservation and representation of religious identity take precedence over communication efficiency. Participants often engage in avoidance and reductionism regarding gender performance to align with their religious identities. Avoidance becomes evident when a conversation diverges from a participant's identity performance, prompting them to redirect the dialogue toward their religious interests. Engaging in conversation with older men presents challenges, as assertiveness may be perceived as disrespectful. The male participant experiences difficulty in interacting with the elderly, resulting in largely unidirectional communication. Cultural perceptions associated with elderly individuals in the local context further influence the participants' gender performance and shape their communication patterns. Additionally, fear and anxiety about being misinterpreted by locals significantly affect their gender performance. The female participant expresses ongoing apprehension about being misconstrued, leading her to alter her nonverbal interactions and dress code to present herself as a 'Godly woman' in the local environment.

1. Convergence as Coercion

“Femininity is imposed for the most part through an unrelenting discipline that concerns every part of the body and is continuously recalled through the constraints of clothing or hairstyle.” (Bourdieu 23)

I am interested in exploring the pressurizing effects that biblical characters may have on the intercultural interactions of believers. Recognizing that doctrinal interpretations of gender roles can limit individual agency; I argue that antiquity possesses significant potential to shape specific characteristics and behavioral patterns that serve as

role models for believers to emulate. These figures can be perceived as virtuous and respectable members both within their religious communities and beyond. For instance, participant seven was frequently compared to Esther and Mary from the Bible, and there were expectations for her to conduct herself in a manner befitting the role model she represented. However, she felt suppressed, confined to a degree that left no room for error.

As a result, she concealed various aspects of her life, leading her to live in a state of concealment and compromised integrity: “I was battling with myself. I knew I had to behave in a certain way, not out of personal desire but due to the expectations of others. Everyone had faith in me. I was in an internal struggle because I did not want to disappoint them.” Her challenges were not limited to her religious community; she also faced barriers in integrating into the broader society, as she was a woman whose gender was perpetually subjected to institutional control. Advised to avoid relationships with men and rigorously encouraged to dress modestly, she encountered significant intercultural obstacles that hindered her ability to assimilate into her new environment.

In her religious culture, women were expected to wear skirts, and jeans were considered inappropriate attire for them. Upon relocating to Turkey, where she sought self-autonomy, she continued to wear skirts. However, the locals viewed her choice of clothing as immodest. As a result, her previous gender signifier linked to modest dress was significantly challenged in Turkey, prompting her to adopt jeans instead. This adaptation helped her prevent potential misconceptions by aligning herself with the new cultural environment. Notably, she ultimately relinquished the religious gender roles she had been raised with, choosing to separate her female identity from her religious beliefs. This reflects a significant case of cultural adaptation to local customs.

She also shared her struggles with interactions, such as when the

food she prepared was rejected by locals, who assumed her Christian identity rendered her cooking 'unclean.' Her intention in preparing these meals was to embody the feminine hospitality she had learned in her childhood church. Additionally, she frequently faced misunderstandings, being mistaken for a prostitute and propositioned for sex in exchange for money. This experience was a grave violation of her Christian moral values, leading to ongoing anxiety that hindered her ability to effectively integrate into the new culture.

2. Feminist Interventions

This section begins with insights from participant six in Appendix F, a distinguished theologian within the Protestant denomination and a recognized expert on the Old Testament. In contrast to other female participants, she advocates for gender role egalitarianism, challenges the submissive roles traditionally assigned to women, and asserts that women should have the right to serve as teachers and leaders. She articulately explains her perspective on gender binaries and biblical gender roles: "Women have significant role models within the biblical texts, particularly in the Old Testament, such as Deborah in the Book of Judges. She served as a judge, prophet, and leader to Israel. Similarly, Esther defied the cultural norms of her time. Her bravery and decisive actions are profoundly inspirational."

As a result, she avoids communicative cues that could reveal her identity as a Christian Western woman. She rationalizes this choice by stating, "I am much more aware of dressing conservatively to avoid standing out as Western, as it attracts negative attention." Unlike other female respondents who consider it inappropriate to initiate contact with men, she comfortably interacts with individuals of both genders. However, she does encounter a dissonance in her communication: "I

have had interactions with an Imam who indicated that I was a woman of lesser status. I was advised that my engagements should be exclusively with women, highlighting significant gender segregation." Similarly, the third participant in Appendix C aligns with the viewpoint that a patriarchal family structure exists in Islamic countries, a notion that contrasts with his masculine roles within his family as a Christian man. He regards Jesus as his model, who embodies traditional masculine roles such as nurturing and providing. Nevertheless, the example he follows in his archetype encourages him to assist his wife with domestic tasks, which he sees as contradictory to the traditional Islamic role of men in the family.

Conversely, Participant Three is primarily influenced by locals who maintain a barrier from foreigners by avoiding personal contact with him. He agrees that this significantly hinders his ability to assimilate into his new cultural environment and adapt to local customs. He articulates, "The question is how much I allow myself to be influenced," indicating that he selectively adopts aspects of the culture that he views positively. Nevertheless, he expresses concern when locals pressure him to participate in activities that he disapproves of, such as animal sacrifice or henna nights, which conflict with his religious beliefs. At this point, his religious identity is at odds with local expectations. Additionally, he finds the local interpretation of the dress code challenging, believing it should align with an individual's professional role in society. As a male religious leader, he chooses to dress modestly and casually, yet the local perception of religious attire offers a completely different aesthetic concept, hindering his ability to express his religious identity. On another note, he asserts that Christianity has significantly influenced German culture, where individuals are appreciated more for their individuality. He feels the locals do not value his social identity and that his expression of gender roles, grounded in his Christian values, is often questioned and dismissed by the local community.

CHAPTER FIVE

Subjugated Subjectivities

Religious doctrine acts as a foundational element, much like the base of a grand cathedral, supporting the intricate network of communication within society. However, any alteration or misrepresentation of the sacred symbols that define one's identity can lead to considerable emotional turmoil, disrupting the fragile balance of human relationships. These misrepresentations, similar to cracks in a delicate mirror, can disturb the equilibrium of gender role performance, creating a deep sense of uncertainty in the journey toward personal integration. Consequently, individuals encounter significant obstacles in expressing their gender roles while navigating the complex landscape of local cultural norms. In search of direction, they often look to religious teachings, finding inspiration in biblical figures who exemplify traditional ideals. Figures like the Virgin Mary, known for her purity, and Mary Magdalene, with her mysterious charm, hold substantial symbolic significance in the context of gender performance. For those with strong religious beliefs, there is a profound respect for these figures, whose roles in ancient texts shape modern understandings of gender roles.

Figures like David, Moses, Martha, Mary, Deborah, and Esther have left a significant mark on our collective consciousness, providing modern believers with a way to understand and embrace traditional gender roles. As cultures evolve, intercultural dialogues serve as a stage where people from different backgrounds negotiate their identities. In this complex web of interactions, the limits of cross-cultural engagement are shaped by how well deeply rooted ideologies can be genuinely expressed. The performance of gender, with its organized events and societal norms, plays a crucial role in facilitating these intercultural

exchanges. It is in this important space that dominant ideologies, closely linked to religious identities, influence communication patterns, reinforcing the beliefs that form our shared understanding. Intercultural communication becomes a dynamic arena, where the clash of social identities is fueled by differing interpretations and expressions of gender roles across cultures.

These identities, much like careful brushstrokes on a canvas, come to life through thoughtfully chosen verbal and non-verbal signals. Yet, the success of this communication hinges on a mutual understanding of these subtle meanings. Misunderstandings, similar to off-key notes in a symphony, often stem from misreading identity markers. Within the strict binary view of gender, women from various cultures frequently feel restricted by the cultural expectations of traditional roles. While some bravely push back against these limitations, others embrace them as a fundamental part of their deep religious commitment. The involvement of participants in this study is closely linked to the intricate network of representational and performative social identity markers. For female participants who strictly follow the rules and expectations of their faith, significant challenges arise in their interactions with men and in the impressions they create. Their preferred way of communicating, much like a secret language among those in the know, depends on particular verbal and non-verbal signals that reinforce their social identities.

When they diverge from local cultural norms, communication becomes a transformative process that allows them to assert their unique identities, often in contrast to societal expectations. However, this strong resistance to conformity can create a significant barrier to their social and cultural integration, making it more difficult for them to find acceptance and coexist harmoniously. The challenges these women encounter in aligning their outward appearance, gestures, eye contact, and proximity with local norms are deeply influenced by their religious identity. Grounded in devout beliefs, this identity often

discourages interactions, especially with men, which can lead to a subtle detachment from the local culture's communicative fabric. In their strong commitment, these women prioritize their femininity, viewing it as a treasured aspect of their identity. Their perception of men as potential threats fosters a sense of caution, causing them to withdraw from meaningful conversations with the local community. Consequently, these women, seeking comfort within their families and religious groups, frequently show reluctance to engage in situations that might challenge or contradict their idealized gender roles.

In navigating this complex landscape, they work to uphold their religious identities while also yearning for social acceptance. Even with their strong beliefs, their choices often lead to their exclusion from the wider community, limiting their interactions and opportunities for cultural exchange. The women interviewed in this study show incredible resilience in facing these significant challenges, effectively addressing the misconceptions that the local community holds about them. A key insight from their stories is that, despite their Western backgrounds, it is their religious ties that most deeply shape their life paths. The distribution of authority regarding gender is notably uneven, leading to the creation of standard roles that people frequently accept, even as they exercise some level of personal agency.

This structural framework is deeply embedded in society, reinforcing established patterns of interaction that shape both intercultural encounters and gender roles. In this intricate discussion, knowledge is revealed as a construct of power, influenced by hierarchical systems that dictate norms of behavior and communication, often through a male-centric lens. The ongoing reinforcement of traditional gender roles within this framework limits the potential for diversity and hinders freedom of expression. Bound by strict expectations, the rich variety of human experiences is stifled, unable to thrive under such rigid constraints. While religious doctrines strive to impose essentialist gender roles, they ultimately undermine the complex

social and cultural dynamics that shape gender. It is essential to understand that these doctrines, frequently seen as unchangeable, are actually products of historical development, molded by significant social and cultural forces that have profoundly impacted their evolution. Androcentric practices, which are deeply rooted in scriptural texts, the lives of biblical figures, and widespread phallocentric indoctrination, have significantly influenced our societal landscape.

By closely examining the complex nuances of gender dynamics in religious contexts, we can begin to develop a more nuanced understanding. This understanding aims to create an environment where equity and fairness can flourish. Engaging with these complexities allows individuals to reach a higher level of awareness and gain new insights. It is through this broadened perspective that we can establish the groundwork for meaningful engagement. Such engagement serves as a driving force, pushing society toward a future that goes beyond the traditional gender boundaries found in religious contexts. The principles of inclusivity and equality become essential foundations for societal progress. By breaking down the restrictive barriers set by societal norms, we start a transformative journey that liberates individuals from the limitations of gender-based discrimination. As these limiting norms fade away, a significant cultural shift takes place, marked by the rejection of oppressive stereotypes and the acceptance of genuine self-expression.

In this changing environment, the importance of diversity is celebrated, allowing individuals to explore and express their unique identities without fear of judgment or backlash. The empowerment of marginalized voices and the acknowledgment of intersectionality become vital parts of this progressive movement, ensuring that everyone is included. As a result, gender no longer serves as a source of division and hierarchy; instead, it is reimagined as a harmonious tapestry, woven from the threads of respect, understanding, and equal opportunity. Institutions and systems experience a fundamental change, adapting to

the needs of a more inclusive society. Educational systems are revamped to encourage a thorough understanding of gender dynamics and to promote critical thinking, challenging and dismantling deep-seated biases. At the same time, laws and policies are revised to safeguard the rights and well-being of all individuals, regardless of gender, reflecting the evolving values of a genuinely inclusive society.

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