

Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt¹

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Abstract

This article argues that inasmuch as feminism is both an analytical and politically prescriptive project, it aims not only to analyze the situation of women in different historical and cultural locations but also to transform their conditions of subjugation. Consequently, feminist scholarship tends to accord freedom a normative status, and to emphasize those instances that exemplify women's desire to be free from relations of subordination. An important consequence of this tendency in feminist scholarship is to limit the conceptualization of agency to acts that further the moral autonomy of the individual in the face of power. Through an examination of the women's piety movement in Egypt, this article argues for uncoupling the notion of agency from that of resistance as a necessary step in thinking about forms of desire and politics that do not accord with norms of secular-liberal feminism and its liberatory telos.

Keywords: Islam, Islamist movement, Islamic revival, feminist theory, gender, moral agency, religious movements.

In the last two decades one of the key questions that has occupied many feminist theorists is how should issues of historical and cultural specificity inform both the analytics and politics of any feminist project. While this questioning has resulted in serious attempts at integrating issues of sexual, racial, class, and national difference within feminist theory, questions of religious difference have remained relatively unexplored. The vexed relationship between feminism and religious traditions is perhaps most manifest in discussions of Islam. This is partly because of the historically contentious relationship that Islamic societies have had with what has come

¹ I would like to thank Princeton University Press for allowing me to reprint this excerpt from my book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 2005.

to be called “the West”, and partly because of the challenges contemporary Islamic movements pose to secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral (if critical) part. The suspicion with which many feminists tended to view Islamist movements only intensified in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, especially the immense groundswell of anti-Islamic sentiment that has followed since. If supporters of the Islamist movement were disliked before for their social conservatism and their rejection of liberal values (key among them “women’s freedom”), their association with terrorism – now almost taken for granted – has served to further reaffirm their status as agents of a dangerous irrationality.²

In this essay, I will probe some of the conceptual challenges that women’s participation in the Islamist movement poses to feminist theorists and gender analysts through an ethnographic account of an urban women’s mosque movement that is part of the Islamic Revival in Cairo, Egypt.³ “Islamic Revival” is a term that refers not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within Muslim societies more generally, particularly in Egypt, since the 1970s.⁴ I conducted two years of fieldwork with a grassroots women’s piety movement based in mosques of Cairo. This movement is composed

² This dilemma seems to be further compounded by the fact that women’s participation in the Islamic movement in a number of countries (such as Iran, Egypt, Indonesia, and Malaysia) is not limited to the poor and middle classes (classes often considered to have a “natural affinity” for religion), but also from the upper and middle income strata.

³ There are three important strands that constitute the Islamic Revival: state-oriented political groups and parties, militant Islamists (whose presence has declined since the 1980s), and a network of socioreligious non-profit organizations that provide charitable services to the poor and perform the work of proselytization. The women’s mosque movement is an important subset of this network of socioreligious organizations and draws upon the same discourse of piety (referred to as “*da’wa*”). For an analysis of the historical and institutional relationship between the non-profit organizations and the women’s mosque movement, see Mahmood 2005, 40–78.

⁴ This sensibility has a palpable public presence in Egypt, manifest in the vast proliferation of neighborhood mosques and other institutions of Islamic learning and social welfare, in a dramatic increase in attendance at mosques by both women and men, and in marked displays of religious sociability. Examples of the latter include the adoption of the veil (*hijāb*), a brisk consumption and production of religious media and literature, and a growing circle of intellectuals who write and comment upon contemporary affairs in the popular press from a self-described Islamic point of view. Neighborhood mosques have come to serve as the organizational center for many of these activities.

of women from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds who gather in mosques to teach each other about Islamic scriptures, social practices, and forms of bodily comportment considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self.⁵ Even though Egyptian Muslim women have always had some measure of informal training in Islam, the mosque movement represents an unprecedented engagement with scholarly materials and theological reasoning that had to date been the purview of learned men. Movements such as this, if they do not provoke a yawning boredom among secular intellectuals, certainly conjure up a whole host of uneasy associations such as fundamentalism, the subjugation of women, social conservatism, reactionary atavism, cultural backwardness, and the rest. My aim in this essay is not to analyze the reductionism of an enormously complex phenomenon that these associations entail; nor am I interested in recovering a redeemable element within the Islamist movement by recuperating its liberatory potentials. Instead, I want to focus quite squarely on the conceptions of self, moral agency, and embodiment that undergird the practices of this nonliberal movement so as to come to an understanding of the ethical projects that animate it.

I want to begin by exploring how a particular notion of human agency in feminist scholarship – one that seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power – is brought to bear upon the study of women involved in patriarchal religious traditions such as Islam. I will argue that despite the important insights it has provided, this model of agency sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose sense of self, aspirations, and projects have been shaped by nonliberal traditions. In order to analyze the participation of women in religious movements such as the Egyptian mosque movement I describe, I want to suggest we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific

⁵ My research is based on two years of fieldwork (1995–1997) conducted in five different mosques from a range of socio-economic backgrounds in Cairo, Egypt. I also carried out participant observation among the leaders and members of the mosque movement in the context of their daily lives. This was supplemented with a year-long study with a sheikh from the Islamic University of al-Azhar on issues of Islamic jurisprudence and religious practice.

relations of subordination enable and create. This relatively open-ended understanding of agency draws upon poststructuralist theory of subject formation but also departs from it, in that I explore those modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic norms. As I will argue, it is only once the concept of agency is detached from the trope of resistance that a series of analytical questions open up that are crucial to understanding nonliberal projects, subjects, and desires whose logic exceeds the entelechy of liberatory politics. In conclusion I will discuss the political stakes of such a modality of analysis.

Topography of the Mosque Movement

The women's mosque movement occupies a somewhat paradoxical place in relationship to feminist politics. It represents the first time in Egyptian history that such a large number of women have mobilized to hold lessons in Islamic doctrine in mosques, thereby altering the historically male-centered character of mosques as well as Islamic pedagogy.⁶ This trend has, of course, been facilitated by the mobility and sense of entitlement engendered by women's greater access to education and employment outside of the home in post-colonial Egypt. In the last forty years women have entered new social domains and acquired new public roles from which they were previously excluded. A paradoxical effect of these developments is the proliferation of forms of piety that seem incongruous with the trajectory of the transformations that enabled them in the first place.⁷ Notably, even though

⁶ Mosques have played a critical role in the Islamic Revival in Egypt: since the 1970s there has been an unprecedented increase in the establishment of mosques by local neighborhoods and non-governmental organizations, many of which provide a range of social services to the Cairene, especially the poor, such as medical, welfare, and educational services. Given the program of economic liberalization that the Egyptian government has been pursuing since the 1970s and the concomitant decline in state provided social services, these mosques fill a critical lacuna for many Egyptians.

⁷ Currently there are hardly any neighborhoods in this city of eleven million inhabitants where women do not offer religious lessons to each other. The attendance at these gatherings varies between 10–500 women, depending on the popularity of the teacher. The movement continues to be informally organized by women, and has no organizational center that oversees its coordination.

this movement has empowered women to enter the field of Islamic pedagogy in the institutional setting of mosques, their participation is critically structured by, and seeks to uphold, the limits of a discursive tradition that regards subordination to a transcendent will (and thus, in many instances, to male authority) as its coveted goal.⁸

According to the organizers, the women's mosque movement emerged in response to the perception that religious knowledge, as a means to organizing daily life, has become increasingly marginalized under modern structures of secular governance. The participants of this movement often criticize what they consider to be an increasingly prevalent form of religiosity in Egypt that accords Islam the status of an abstract system of beliefs that has no direct bearing on the way one lives and structures one's daily life. This trend, usually referred to as secularization (*'almana*) or Westernization (*taḡhrīb*) of Egyptian society, is understood to have reduced Islamic knowledge (both as a mode of conduct and as a set of principles) to the status of "custom and folklore" (*'āda wa fūkloriyya*). The women's mosque movement, therefore, seeks to educate lay Muslims in those virtues, ethical capacities, and forms of reasoning that the participants perceive to have become either unavailable or irrelevant to the lives of ordinary Muslims.

In Egypt today Islam has come to be embodied in a variety of practices, movements, and ideas.⁹ Thus some Egyptians view Islam as constitutive of the cultural terrain upon which the Egyptian nation has acquired its unique historical character, some understand Islam as a doctrinal system with strong political and juridical implications for the organization of state and society, and others, such as the women I worked with, see Islam first and foremost as individual and collective practices of pious living. This does not mean, however, that the women's mosque movement is apolitical in the wider sense of the term, or that it represents a withdrawal from socio-political issues. On the contrary, the form of piety it seeks to realize

⁸ This is in contrast, for example, to a movement among women in the Islamic republic of Iran aimed at the reinterpretation of sacred texts so as to derive a more equitable model of relations between Muslim women and men; see Afshar 1998 and Najmabadi 1998.

⁹ For recent studies of the Islamic movement in Egypt, see Hirschkind 2006 and 2001; Salvatore 1997; and Starrett 1998.

is predicated upon, and transformative of, many aspects of social life.¹⁰ The women's mosque movement has affected changes in a range of social behaviors among contemporary Egyptians, including how one dresses and speaks, what is deemed proper entertainment for adults and children, where one invests one's money, how one takes care of the poor, and what are the terms by which public debate is conducted.

While at times the mosque movement has been seen as a quietist alternative to the more militant forms of Islamic activism, in many ways this movement sits uncomfortably with certain aspects of the secular liberal project promoted by the state.¹¹ These tensions owe in part to the specific forms of will, desire, reason, and practice this movement seeks to cultivate, and the ways it reorganizes public life and debate in accordance with orthodox standards of Islamic piety. It is therefore not surprising that the Egyptian government has recently sought to regularize and sanction this movement, recognizing that the proliferation of this kind of Islamic sociability makes the task of securing a secular-liberal society difficult if not impossible.¹²

Agency, Resistance, Freedom

The pious subjects of the women's mosque movement occupy an uncomfortable place in feminist scholarship: they pursue practices and ideals embed-

¹⁰ Piety here refers more to one's practical (and thus "secular") conduct, than to inward spiritual states as the term connotes in the English Puritan tradition. For an analysis of the politics that the piety movement (and the mosque movement) has enabled, see Mahmood 2005.

¹¹ Secularism is commonly thought of as the domain of real life emancipated from the ideological restrictions of religion. As Talal Asad has argued, however, it was precisely the positing of the opposition between a secular domain and a religious one (in which the former comes to be seen as the ground from which the latter emerges) that provided the basis for a modern normative conception not only of religion but politics as well. See Asad 2003. This juxtaposition of secular and religious domains has been facilitated through the displacement of religious authority to the state and its institutions of law. To say that a society is secular does not mean that religion is banished from its politics, law, and forms of association. Rather, religion is admitted into these domains on the condition that it takes a particular form; when it departs from these forms it confronts a set of regulatory barriers. The banning of the veil as a proper form of attire for girls and women in Turkey and France is a case in point.

¹² In 1996 the Egyptian parliament passed a law that aimed to nationalize the vast majority of neighborhood mosques, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs now requires all women and men who want to preach in mosques to enroll in a two year state-run program regardless of their prior training in religious affairs. See *al-Hayat* 1997. In addition, women's mosque lessons are regularly recorded and monitored by state employees. The government continues to suspend lessons delivered by women mosque teachers for making remarks critical of the state.

ded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status, and they seek to cultivate virtues that are associated with feminine passivity and submissiveness (e.g., shyness, modesty, perseverance, and humility – some of which I discuss below). In other words, the very idioms that women use to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres are also those that secure their subordination. While it would not have been unusual in the 1960s to account for women's participation in such movements in terms of false consciousness, or the internalization of patriarchal norms through socialization, there has been an increasing discomfort with explanations of this kind. Drawing on work in the humanities and the social sciences since the 1970s that has focused on the operation of human agency within structures of subordination, feminists have sought to understand the ways women resist the dominant male order by subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their own interests and agendas. A central question explored within this scholarship has been: how do women contribute to reproducing their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it? Scholars working in this vein have thus tended to explore religious traditions in terms of the conceptual and practical resources they offer which women may usefully redirect and recode to secure their "own interests and agendas", a recoding that stands as the site of women's agency.¹³

It should be acknowledged that the focus on locating women's agency, when it first emerged, played a critical role in complicating and expanding debates about gender in non-Western societies beyond the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy. In particular, the focus on women's agency provided a crucial corrective to scholarship on the Middle East that had portrayed Arab and Muslim women for decades as passive and submissive beings, shackled by structures of male authority.¹⁴ This scholarship performed the worthy task of restoring the absent voice of women to analyses of Middle Eastern societies, showing women as active agents who live an existence far more complex and richer than past narratives had suggested.

¹³ In the Muslim context, see for example Boddy 1989; Hegland 1998; MacLeod 1991; and Torab 1996. For a similar argument made in the context of Christian evangelical movements, see Brusco 1995; and Stacey 1991.

¹⁴ For a review of this scholarship on the Middle East, see Abu-Lughod 1990.

While such an approach has been enormously productive in complicating the oppressor/oppressed model of gender relations, I would submit such a framework remains not only encumbered by the binary terms of resistance and subordination, but is also insufficiently attentive to motivations, desires, and goals that are not necessarily captured by these terms. Notably, the female agent in this analysis seems to stand in for a sometimes repressed, sometimes active feminist consciousness, articulated against the hegemonic male cultural norms of Arab Muslim societies. Even in instances when an explicit *feminist* agency is difficult to locate, there is a tendency to look for expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male domination. When women's actions seem to reinscribe what appear to be "instruments of their own oppression", the social analyst can point to moments of disruption of, and articulation of points of opposition to, male authority that are either located in the interstices of a woman's consciousness (often read as a nascent feminist consciousness), or in the objective effects of the women's actions, however unintended they may be.¹⁵ Agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective). Thus the humanist desire for autonomy and expression of one's self-worth constitute the substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in the form of an act of resistance when conditions permit.¹⁶

What is seldom problematized in such an analysis is the universality of the desire to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination, a desire that is central for liberal and progressive thought, and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes. This

¹⁵ Consider, for example, Janice Boddy's rich ethnographic work on women's *zar* cult in northern Sudan, which uses Islamic idioms and spirit mediums. In analyzing the practices of these women, Boddy argued that the women she studied "use perhaps unconsciously, perhaps strategically, what we in the West might prefer to consider *instruments of their oppression* as means to assert their value both collectively, through the ceremonies they organize and stage, and individually, in the context of their marriages, so insisting on their dynamic complementarity with men. *This in itself is a means of resisting and setting limits to domination [...]*" (Boddy 1989, 345; emphasis added.)

¹⁶ Aspects of this argument may also be found in a number of anthropological works on women in the Arab world, such as Davis, S. 1983; Dwyer 1978; Early 1993; MacLeod 1991; and Wikan 1991.

positing of women's agency as consubstantial with resistance to relations of domination, and its concomitant naturalization of freedom as a social ideal, I would argue is a product of feminism's dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project. Despite the many strands and differences within feminism, what accords this tradition an analytical and political coherence is the premise that where society is structured to serve male interests the result will be either a neglect, or a direct suppression of, women's concerns.¹⁷ Feminism, therefore, offers both a *diagnosis* of women's status across cultures as well as a *prescription* for changing the situation of women who are understood to be marginal/subordinate/oppressed. (Strathern 1988, 26–28.) Thus the articulation of conditions of relative freedom that enable women both to formulate and enact self-determined goals and interests remains the object of feminist politics and theorizing. As in the case of liberalism, freedom is normative to feminism: critical scrutiny is applied to those who want to limit women's freedom rather than those who want to extend it.¹⁸

Feminist discussions about human freedom remain heavily indebted to the distinction liberal political theory draws between positive and negative liberty. In the liberal tradition, negative freedom refers to the absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, whether those obstacles are imposed by the state, corporations, or private individuals.¹⁹ Positive freedom, on the other hand, is understood as the capacity to realize

¹⁷ Despite the debates within feminism, this is a premise that is shared across various feminist political positions including radical, socialist, liberal and psychoanalytical, and marks the domain of feminist discourse. Even in the case of Marxist and socialist feminists who argue that women's subordination is determined by social relations of economic production, there is at least an acknowledgment of the inherent tension between women's interests and those of the larger society dominated and shaped by men. See Harstock 1983 and MacKinnon 1989. For an anthropological argument about the universal character of gender inequality, see Yanagisako & Collier (eds) 1987.

¹⁸ John Stuart Mill, a central figure in the liberal and feminist tradition, for example, argued: "The burden of proof is supposed to be with those who are against liberty; who contend for any restriction or prohibition [...] The *a priori* assumption is in favor of freedom [...]" (Mill 1991, 472).

¹⁹ Within liberal political philosophy, this notion (identified with the thought of Bentham and Hobbes) finds its most direct application in debates about the proper role of state intervention in the protected sphere of the private lives of individuals. This is also the ground on which feminists have debated the appropriateness of anti-pornographic legislation proposed by a number of feminists. See, for example, Bartky 1990; MacKinnon 1993; Rubin 1984; Samois Collective (eds) 1987.

an autonomous will, one generally fashioned in accord with the dictates of “universal reason” or “self-interest”, and hence unencumbered by the weight of custom, transcendental will, and tradition. (Berlin 1969; Green 1986; Simhony 1993; Taylor 1985, 211–229.) While there continues to be considerable debate over the formulation and coherence of these entwined notions, I want to highlight the concept of individual autonomy central to both, and the concomitant elements of coercion and consent that are critical to this topography of freedom.

The concepts of positive and negative freedom, with the attendant requirement of procedural autonomy, provide the ground on which much of the feminist debate unfolds.²⁰ For example, the positive conception of freedom seems to predominate in projects of feminist historiography (sometimes referred to as “herstory”) that seek to capture historically and culturally specific instances of women’s self-directed action, unencumbered by patriarchal norms or the will of others.²¹ The negative conception of freedom seems to prevail in studies of gender that explore those spaces in women’s lives that are independent of men’s influence, and possibly coercive presence, treating such spaces as pregnant with possibilities for women’s fulfillment or self-realization. Many feminist historians and anthropologists of the Arab Muslim world have thus sought to delimit those conditions and situations in which women seem to autonomously articulate their own discourse (such as that of poetry, weaving, cult possession, and the like), at times conferring a potentially liberatory meaning to practices of sex segregation that had

²⁰ It is quite clear that both positive and negative notions of freedom have been used productively to expand the horizon of what constitutes the domain of legitimate feminist practice and debate. For example, in the 1970s, in response to the call by white middle-class feminists to dismantle the institution of the nuclear family which they believed to be a key source of women’s oppression, Native and African American feminists argued that freedom, for them, consisted in being able to form families, since the long history of slavery, genocide, and racism had operated precisely by breaking up their communities and social networks. See, for example, Brant 1984; Collins 1991; Davis 1983; and Lorde 1993. Similarly “A Black Feminist Statement” by the Combahee River Collective rejected the appeal for lesbian separatism made by white feminists on the grounds that the history of racial oppression required black women to make alliances with male members of their communities in order to continue fighting against institutionalized racism. See Hull & Bell-Scott & Smith (eds) 1982.

²¹ For an illuminating discussion of the historiographic project of “herstory,” see Scott 1988, 15–27.

traditionally been understood as making women marginal to the public arena of conventional politics. (Ahmed 1999; Wikan 1991.)

A number of feminist scholars over the years have offered trenchant critiques of the liberal notion of autonomy from a variety of perspectives.²² For example, while earlier critics drew attention to the masculinist assumptions underpinning the ideal of autonomy, later scholars faulted this ideal for its emphasis on the atomistic, individualized, and bounded characteristics of the self at the expense of its relational qualities formed through social interactions within forms of human community.²³ Consequently, there have been various attempts to redefine autonomy so as to capture the emotional, embodied, and socially embedded character of people, particularly of women. (Joseph [ed.] 1999; Friedman 2003; Nedelsky 1989.) A more radical strain of poststructuralist theory has situated its critique of autonomy within a larger challenge posed to the *illusory* character of the rationalist, self-authorizing, transcendental subject presupposed by Enlightenment thought in general, and the liberal tradition in particular. Rational thought, these critics argue, secures its universal scope and authority by performing a necessary exclusion of all that is bodily, feminine, emotional, nonrational, and intersubjective. (Butler 1993; Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994.) This exclusion cannot be substantively or conceptually recuperated through recourse to an unproblematic feminine experience, body, or imaginary (*pace* Beauvoir and Irigaray), but must be thought through the very terms of the discourse of metaphysical transcendence that enacts these exclusions.²⁴

In what follows, I would like to push further in the direction opened by these poststructuralist debates. In particular, my argument for separating the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will is indebted to poststructuralist critiques of the transcendental subject, voluntarism, and repressive models of power. Yet, as will become clear, my analysis also departs from these frameworks inasmuch as I question the overwhelming

²² For an interesting discussion of the contradictions generated by the privileged position accorded to the concept of autonomy in feminist theory, see Adams & Minson 1978.

²³ In the first group, see Chodorow 1978 and Gilligan 1982; in the second, see Benhabib 1992 and Young 1990.

²⁴ For an excellent discussion of this point in the scholarship on feminist ethics, see Colebrook 1997.

tendency of poststructuralist feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion or resignification of social norms, to locate agency within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power. In other words, the normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion. This scholarship thus elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance. In order to grasp these modes of action that are indebted to other reasons and histories, I want to argue that it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics.

The ideas of freedom and liberty as *the* political ideals are relatively new in modern history. Many societies, including Western ones, have flourished with aspirations other than these. Nor, for that matter, does the narrative of individual and collective liberty exhaust the desires of people in liberal societies. If we recognize that the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is also profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions, then the question arises: how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?

If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes “change” and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, the capacity for agency is entailed not only in acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.

It may be argued in response that this kind of challenge to the natural status accorded to the desire for freedom in analyses of gender runs the risk of Orientalizing Arab and Muslim women all over again – repeating the errors of pre-1970s Orientalist scholarship that defined Middle Eastern women as passive submissive Others, bereft of the enlightened consciousness of their “Western sisters”, and hence doomed to lives of servile submission to men. I would contend, however, that to examine the discursive and practical conditions through which women come to cultivate various forms of desire and capacities of ethical action is a radically different project than an Orientalizing one that locates the desire for submission in an innate ahistorical cultural essence. Indeed, if we accept the notion that all forms of desire are discursively organized (as much of recent feminist scholarship has argued), then it is important to interrogate the practical and conceptual conditions under which different forms of desire emerge, including desire for submission to recognized authority. We cannot treat as natural and imitable only those desires that ensure the emergence of feminist politics.

Consider, for example, the women from the mosque movement that I worked with. The task of realizing piety placed these women in conflict with several structures of authority. Some of these structures were grounded in instituted standards of Islamic orthodoxy, others in norms of liberal discourse; some were grounded in the authority of parents and male kin, and others in state institutions. Yet the *rationale* behind these conflicts was not predicated upon, and therefore cannot be understood only by reference to, arguments for gender equality or resistance to male authority. Nor can these women’s practices be read as a reinscription of traditional roles, since the women’s mosque movement has significantly reconfigured the gendered practice of Islamic pedagogy and the social institution of mosques. One could, of course, argue in response that, the intent of these women notwithstanding, the actual effects of their practices may be analyzed in terms of their role in reinforcing or undermining structures of male domination. While conceding that such an analysis is feasible and has been useful at times, I would nevertheless argue that it remains encumbered by the binary

terms of resistance and subordination, and ignores projects, discourses, and desires that are not captured by these terms, such as those expressed by the women I worked with.²⁵

My argument should be familiar to anthropologists who have long acknowledged that the terms people use to organize their lives are not simply a gloss for universally shared assumptions about the world and one's place in it, but are actually constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience.²⁶ For this reason I have found it necessary, in what follows, to attend carefully to the specific logic of the discourse of piety: a logic that inheres not in the intentionality of the actors, but in the relationships that are articulated between words, concepts, and practices that constitute a particular discursive tradition.²⁷ I would insist that an appeal to understanding the coherence of a discursive tradition is neither to justify that tradition, nor to argue for some irreducible essentialism or cultural relativism. It is, instead, to take a necessary step toward explaining the force that a discourse commands.

Docility and Agency

In order to elaborate my theoretical approach, let me begin by examining the arguments of Judith Butler, who remains, for many, the preeminent

²⁵ Studies on the resurgent popularity of the veil in urban Egypt since the 1980s provide excellent examples of these problems. The proliferation of studies on the veil reflects scholars' surprise that, contrary to their expectations, so many "modern Egyptian women" have returned to wearing the veil. Some of these studies offer functionalist explanations, citing a variety of reasons why women take on the veil voluntarily (for example, the veil makes it easy for women to avoid sexual harassment on public transportation, lowers the cost of attire for working women, and so on). Other studies identify the veil as a symbol of resistance to the commodification of women's bodies in imported Western media, and more generally to the hegemony of Western values. See, for example, El Guindi 1981; Hoffman-Ladd 1987; MacLeod 1991; Radwan 1982 and Zuhur 1992. While these studies have made important contributions, it is surprising that their authors have paid little attention to Islamic virtues of female modesty or piety, especially given that many of the women who have taken up the veil frame their decision precisely in these terms. Instead, analysts often explain the motivations of veiled women in terms of standard models of sociological causality (such as social protest, economic necessity, anomie, or utilitarian strategy), while terms like morality, divinity, and virtue are accorded the status of the phantom imaginings of the hegemonized.

²⁶ See, for example, Keane 1997; and Rosaldo 1982.

²⁷ The concept "discursive tradition" is from Asad 1986.

theorist of poststructuralist feminist thought, and whose arguments have been essential to my own work. Central to Butler's analysis are two insights drawn from Michel Foucault, both quite well known by now. Power, according to Foucault, cannot be understood solely on the model of domination as something possessed and deployed by individuals or sovereign agents over others, with a singular intentionality, structure, or location that presides over its rationality and execution. Rather, power is to be understood as a strategic relation of force that permeates life and produces new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses. (Foucault 1978; 1980.) Second, the subject, argues Foucault, does not precede power relations, in the form of an individuated consciousness, but is produced through these relations, which form the necessary conditions of its possibility. Central to his formulation is what Foucault calls the paradox of *subjectivation*: the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent. (Butler 1993; Foucault 1983.) Stated otherwise, one may argue that the set of capacities inhering in a subject – that is, the abilities that define her modes of agency – are not the residue of an undominated self that existed prior to the operations of power but are themselves the products of those operations.²⁸ Such an understanding of power and subject formation encourages us to conceptualize agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable.

Drawing on Foucault's insights, Butler asks a key question: "if power works not merely to dominate or oppress existing subjects, but also forms subjects, what is this formation?" (Butler 1997a, 18.) By questioning the prediscursive status of the concept of subject, and inquiring instead into the

²⁸ An important aspect of Foucault's analytics of power is his focus on what he called its "techniques", the various mechanisms and strategies through which power comes to be exercised at its point of application on subjects and objects. Butler differs from Foucault in this respect in that her work is not so much an exploration of techniques of power as of issues of representation, interpellation, and psychic manifestations of power. Over time, Butler has articulated her differences with Foucault in various places; see, for example, Butler 1993, 248 n. 19; 1997a, 83–105; 1999, 119–141; and Butler & Connolly 2000.

relations of power that produce it, Butler breaks with those feminist analysts who have formulated the issue of personhood in terms of the relative autonomy of the individual from the social. Thus the issue for Butler is not how the social enacts the individual (as it was for generations of feminists), but what the discursive conditions are that sustain the entire metaphysical edifice of contemporary individuality.

Given Butler's theory of the subject, it is not surprising that her analysis of performativity also informs her conceptualization of agency; indeed, as she says, "the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency" (Butler 1993, xxiv, emphasis added). To the degree that the stability of social norms is a function of their repeated enactment, agency for Butler is grounded in the essential openness of each iteration and the possibility that it may fail or be reappropriated or resignified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms. Since all social formations are reproduced through a reenactment of norms, this makes these formations vulnerable because each restatement/reenactment can fail. Thus the condition of possibility of each social formation is also "the possibility of its undoing". (Butler 1997b.)²⁹

There are several points on which Butler departs from the notions of agency and resistance that I criticized earlier. To begin with, Butler questions what she calls an "emancipatory model of agency", one that presumes that all humans *qua* humans are "endowed with a will, a freedom, and an intentionality" whose workings are "thwarted by relations of power that are considered external to the subject" (Benhabib & Butler & Cornell & Fraser 1995, 136). In its place, Butler locates the possibility of agency within structures of power (rather than outside of it) and, more importantly, suggests that the reiterative structure of norms not only serves to *consolidate* a particular regime of discourse/power but also provides the means for its

²⁹ Butler explains this point succinctly in regards to sex/gender: "As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm [...]. This instability is the *deconstituting* possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which "sex" is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of "sex" into a potentially productive crisis." See Butler 1993, 15.

destabilization.³⁰ In other words, there is no possibility of “undoing” social norms that is independent of the “doing” of norms; agency resides, therefore, within this productive reiterability. Butler also resists the impetus to tether the meaning of agency to a predefined teleology of emancipatory politics. As a result, the logic of subversion and resignification cannot be predetermined in Butler’s framework because acts of resignification/subversion are, she argues, contingent and fragile, appearing in unpredictable places and behaving in unexpected ways.³¹

I find Butler’s critique of humanist conceptions of agency and subject very compelling and, indeed, my arguments in this article are manifestly informed by it. I have, however, found it productive to argue with certain tensions that characterize Butler’s work in order to expand her analytics to a somewhat different, if related, set of problematics. One key tension in Butler’s work owes to the fact that while she emphasizes the ineluctable relationship between the consolidation and destabilization of norms, her discussion of agency tends to focus on those operations of power that resignify and subvert norms. Thus even though Butler insists time and again that all acts of subversion are a product of the terms of violence which they seek to oppose, her analysis of agency often privileges those moments that “open possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation against their violating aims”, or that provide an occasion “for a radical rearticulation” of the dominant symbolic horizon. (Butler 1993, 122 and 23.) In other words, the concept of agency in Butler’s work is developed primarily in contexts where norms are thrown into question or are subject to resignification. An important consequence of these aspects of Butler’s work is that her analysis of the power of norms remains grounded in an agonistic framework, one in which norms suppress and/or are subverted, are reiterated and/or resignified – so that one gets little sense of the work norms perform beyond this register of suppression and subversion within the constitution of the

³⁰ Echoing Foucault, Butler argues, “The paradox of subjectivation (*assujétissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power” (1993, 15).

³¹ See Butler’s treatment of this topic in “Gender is Burning” in Butler 1993, and in 2001.

subject. Butler's exploration of agency therefore remains subservient, on the one hand, to her overall interest in tracking the possibilities of resistance to the regulating power of normativity,³² and on the other hand, to her model of performativity which is primarily conceptualized in terms of a dualistic structure of consolidation/resignation of norms.

The Subject of Norms

I would like to push the question of norms further in a direction that I think allows us to deepen the analysis of subject formation and also address the problem of reading agency primarily in terms of resistance to the regulating power of structures of normativity. In particular, I would like to expand Butler's insight that norms are not simply a social imposition on the subject but constitute the very substance of her intimate, valorized interiority. But in doing so, I want to move away from an agonistic and dualistic framework – one in which norms are conceptualized on the model of doing and undoing, consolidation and subversion – and instead to think about the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated. As I will argue, this in turn requires that we explore the relationship between the immanent form a normative act takes, the model of subjectivity it presupposes (specific articulations of volition, emotion, reason, and bodily expression), and the kinds of authority upon which such an act relies. Let me elaborate by discussing the problems a dualistic conception of norms poses when analyzing the practices of the mosque movement.

Consider, for example, the Islamic virtue of female modesty (*al-iḥtishām, al-ḥayāʾ*) that many Egyptian Muslims uphold and value. Despite a consensus about its importance, there is considerable debate about how this virtue

³² Butler argues, for example, that Foucault's notion of subjectivation can be productively supplemented with certain reformulations of psychoanalytic theory. For Butler, the force of this supplementation seems to reside, however, in its ability to address the "problem of locating or accounting for resistance: Where does resistance to or in disciplinary subject formation take place? Does [Foucault's] reduction of the psychoanalytically rich notion of the psyche to that of the imprisoning soul [in *Discipline and Punish*] eliminate the possibility of resistance to normalization and to subject formation, a resistance that emerges precisely from the incommensurability between psyche and subject?" (Butler 1997a, 87.)

should be lived, and particularly about whether its realization requires the donning of the veil. A majority of the participants in the mosque movement (and the larger piety movement of which the mosque movement is an integral part) argue that the veil is a necessary component of the virtue of modesty because the veil both expresses “true modesty” and is the means through which modesty is acquired (See Tantawi 1994). They posit, therefore, an ineluctable relationship between the norm (modesty) and the bodily form it takes (the veil) such that the veiled body becomes the necessary means through which the virtue of modesty is both created *and* expressed. In contrast to this understanding, a position associated with prominent secularist writers argues that the virtue of modesty is no different than any other human attribute, such as moderation or humility: it is a facet of character but does not commit one to any particular expressive repertoire such as donning the veil (Ashmawi 1994a).³³ Notably, these authors oppose the veil but not the virtue of modesty which they continue to regard as necessary to appropriate feminine conduct. The veil, in their view, has been invested with an importance that is unwarranted when it comes to judgments about female modesty.

The debate about the veil is only one part of a much larger discussion in Egyptian society wherein political differences between Islamists and secularists, and even among Islamists of various persuasions, are expressed through arguments about ritual performative behavior. The most interesting features of this debate lie not so much in whether the norm of modesty is subverted or enacted, but in the radically different ways in which the norm is supposed to be lived and inhabited. Notably, each view posits a very different conceptualization of the relationship between embodied behavior and the virtue or norm of modesty: for the pietists, bodily behavior is at the core of the proper realization of the norm, and for their opponents, it is a contingent and unnecessary element in modesty’s enactment.

³³ For an argument between these two groups about the veil and the virtue of modesty, see the exchange between the then-mufti of Egypt, Sayyid Tantawi and the prominent intellectual, Muhammed Said Ashmawi who has been a leading voice for “Islamic liberalism” in the Arab world. See Ashmawi 1994b and Tantawi 1994.

Some of the questions that follow from this observation are: How do we analyze the work the body performs in these different conceptualizations of the norm? Is performative behavior differently understood in each of these views and, if so, how? How is the self differently tied to the authority the norm commands in these two imaginaries? Furthermore, what sorts of ethical and political subjects are presupposed by these two imaginaries, and what forms of ethico-political life do they make possible or impossible? These questions cannot be answered as long as we remain within the binary logic of the doing and undoing of norms. They require, instead, that we explode the category of norms into its constituent elements – to examine the immanent form that norms take and to inquire into the attachments their particular morphology generates within the topography of the self. My reason for urging this move has to do with my interest in understanding how different modalities of moral-ethical action contribute to the construction of particular kinds of subjects, subjects whose political anatomy cannot be grasped without applying critical scrutiny to the precise form their embodied actions take.³⁴

In what follows I will elaborate upon these points by analyzing an ethnographic example drawn from my fieldwork with the Egyptian women's mosque movement. The ethnographic here stands less as a signature for the "real", and more as a substantiation of my earlier call to tend to the specific workings of disciplinary power that enable particular forms of investment and agency.

Cultivating Shyness

Through my fieldwork, I came to know four lower-middle class working women, in their mid to late thirties, who were well tutored and experienced in the art of Islamic piety. Indeed, one may call them virtuosos of piety. In addition to attending mosque lessons, they met as a group to read and

³⁴ My analysis of the work different conceptions and practices of norm perform in the constitution of the subject draws heavily upon Foucault's later work on ethics. See Foucault 1990 and 1997. For my elaboration of this approach to understanding Islamist politics, see Mahmood 2005, especially chapters 1 and 4.

discuss issues of Islamic doctrine and Quranic exegesis. Notably, none of these women came from a devout family, and in fact some of them had had to wage a struggle against their kin in order to become devout. They told me about their struggles, not only with their families, but also, and more importantly, with themselves in cultivating the desire for greater religious exactitude.

Not unlike other devout women I worked with from the mosques, these women also sought to excel in piety in their day to day lives – something they described as the condition of being close to God (variously rendered as *taqarrab allah* and/or *taqwa*). While piety was achievable through practices that were both devotional as well as worldly in character, it required more than the simple performance of acts: piety also entailed the inculcation of entire dispositions through a simultaneous training of the body, emotions, and reason until the religious virtues acquired the status of embodied habits.

Among the religious virtues (*faḍāil*) that are considered to be important to acquire for pious Muslims in general, and women in particular, is modesty or shyness (*al-ḥayāʾ*), a common topic of discussion among the mosque participants. To practice *al-ḥayāʾ* means to be diffident, modest, and able to feel and enact shyness. While all of the Islamic virtues are gendered (insofar as their measure and standards vary when applied to men and women), this is particularly true of shyness and modesty (*al-ḥayāʾ*). The struggle involved in cultivating this virtue was brought home to me when in the course of a discussion about the exegesis of a chapter in the Quran called “The Story” (*Surat al-Qaṣaṣ*), one of the women, Amal, drew our attention to verse twenty-five. This verse is about a woman walking shyly – with *al-ḥayāʾ* toward Moses to ask him to approach her father for her hand in marriage. Unlike the other women in the group, Amal was particularly outspoken and confident, and would seldom hesitate to assert herself in social situations with men or women. Normally I would not have described her as shy, because I considered shyness to be contradictory to qualities of candidness and self-confidence in a person. Yet as I was to learn, Amal had learned to be outspoken in a way that was in keeping with Islamic standards of reserve,

restraint and modesty required of pious Muslim women. Here is how the conversation proceeded:

Contemplating the word *istihyāʾ*, which is form ten of the substantive *ḥayāʾ*,³⁵ Amal said “I used to think that even though shyness (*al-ḥayāʾ*) was required of us by God, if I acted shyly it would be hypocritical (*nifāq*) because I didn’t actually feel it inside of me. Then one day, in reading verse (*aya*) twenty-five in *Surat al-Qasas* (“The Story”) I realized that *al-ḥayāʾ* was among the good deeds (*huwwa min al-āʾmāl al-saliha*) and given my natural lack of shyness (*al-ḥayāʾ*), I had to make or create it first. I realized that making (*sanaʿ*) it in yourself is not hypocrisy (*nifāq*), and that eventually your inside learns to have *al-ḥayāʾ* too.” Here she looked at me and explained the meaning of the word *istihyāʾ*: “It means making oneself shy, even if it means creating it (*Yaʿni ya Saba, yaʿmil nafsuḥu yitkisif ḥatta lau sanʿati*).” She continued with her point, “and finally I understood that once you do this, the sense of shyness (*al-ḥayāʾ*) eventually imprints itself on your inside (*al-shaʿūr yiṭbaʿ ʿala juwwaki*).” Another friend, Nama, a single woman in her early thirties, who had been sitting and listening, added: “Its just like the veil (*ḥijāb*). In the beginning when you wear it, you’re embarrassed (*maksūfa*), and don’t want to wear it because people say that you look older and unattractive, that you won’t get married, and will never find a husband. But you *must* wear the veil, first because it is God’s command (*ḥukm allah*), and then, with time, your inside learns to feel shy without the veil, and if you were to take it off your entire being feels uncomfortable (*mish rādī*) about it.”

To many readers this conversation may exemplify an obsequious deference to social norms that both reflects and reproduces women’s subordination. Indeed, Amal’s struggle with herself to become shy may appear to be no more than an instance of the internalization of standards of effeminate behavior, one that contributes little to our understanding of agency. Yet if we think of “agency” not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action, then this conversation raises some interesting questions about the relationship established between the subject and the norm, between performative behavior and inward disposition. To begin with, what is striking here is that instead of innate human desires eliciting outward

³⁵ Most Arabic verbs are based on a tri-consonantal root from which ten verbal forms (and sometimes fifteen) are derived.

forms of conduct, one's practices and actions determine one's desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but *creates* them. Furthermore, it is through repeated *bodily acts* that one trains one's memory, desire, and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct. Notably, Amal *does not* regard simulating shyness in her initial self-cultivation to be hypocritical, as it would be in certain liberal conceptions of the self, according to which a dissonance between internal feelings and external expressions is a form of dishonesty or self-betrayal (as captured in the phrase: "How can I do something sincerely when my heart is not in it?"). Instead, taking the absence of shyness as a marker of an incomplete learning process, Amal further develops the quality of shyness by synchronizing her outward behavior with her inward motives until the discrepancy between the two dissolves. This is an example of a mutually constitutive relationship between body learning and body sense – as Nama says, your body literally comes to feel uncomfortable if you do *not* veil.

Second, what is also significant in this program of self-cultivation is that *bodily acts* – like wearing the veil or conducting oneself modestly in social interactions (especially men) – do not serve as manipulable masks detachable from an essential interiorized self in a game of public presentation. Rather they are the *critical markers* of piety as well as the *ineluctable means* by which one trains oneself to be pious. While wearing the veil serves at first as a means to tutor oneself in the attribute of shyness, it is simultaneously integral to the practice of shyness: one cannot simply discard the veil once a modest deportment has been acquired, because the veil itself partly defines that deportment.³⁶ This is a crucial aspect of the disciplinary program

³⁶ This concept can perhaps be illuminated by analogy to two different models of dieting: an older model in which the practice of dieting is understood to be a temporary and instrumental solution to the problem of weight gain; and a more contemporary model in which dieting is understood to be synonymous with a healthy and nutritious lifestyle. The second model presupposes an ethical relationship between oneself and the rest of the world and in this sense is similar to what Foucault called "practices of the care of the self". The differences between the two models point to the fact that it does not mean much to simply note that systems of power mark their truth on human bodies through disciplines of self-formation. In order to understand the force these disciplines command, one needs to explicate the conceptual relationship articulated between different aspects of the body and the particular notion of the self that animates distinct disciplinary regimes.

pursued by the participants of the mosque movement, the significance of which is elided when the veil is understood solely in terms of its symbolic value as a marker of women's subordination or Islamic identity.

The complicated relationship between learning, memory, experience, and the self undergirding the model of pedagogy followed by the mosque participants has at times been discussed by scholars through the Latin term *habitus*, meaning an acquired faculty in which the body, mind, and emotions are simultaneously trained to achieve competence at something (such as meditation, dancing, or playing a musical instrument). While the term *habitus* has become best known in the social sciences through the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1997), my own work draws upon a longer and richer history of this term, one that addresses the centrality of gestural capacities in certain traditions of moral cultivation.³⁷ Aristotelian in origin and adopted by the three monotheistic traditions, this older meaning of *habitus* refers to a specific pedagogical process by which moral virtues are acquired through a coordination of outward behavior (e.g., bodily acts, social demeanor) with inward dispositions (e.g., emotional states, thoughts, intentions).³⁸ Thus *habitus* in this usage refers to a conscious effort at reorienting desires, brought about by the concordance of inward motives, outward actions, inclinations, and emotional states through the repeated practice of virtuous deeds.

This Aristotelian understanding of moral formation influenced a number of Islamic thinkers, foremost among them the twelfth-century theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), but also al-Miskawayh (d. 1030), Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), and Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406). Historian Ira Lapidus draws attention to this genealogy in his analysis of Ibn Khaldun's use of the Arabic term *malaka*.³⁹ Lapidus argues that although Ibn Khaldun's use of the term *malaka*

³⁷ As a pedagogical technique necessary for the development of moral virtues, *habitus* in this sense is not a universal term applicable to all types of knowledges, and neither does it necessarily serve as a conceptual bridge between the objective world of social structures and subjective consciousness as it does in Bourdieu's formulation.

³⁸ In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues, "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.... By doing the acts we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly," in McKeon (ed.) 1941, 592–593.

³⁹ See O. N. Leaman 1999 for a discussion of the term *malaka* in the Islamic tradition.

has often been translated as “habit”, its sense is best captured in the Latin term *habitus*, which Lapidus describes as “that inner quality developed as a result of outer practice which makes practice a perfect ability of the soul of the actor”.⁴⁰ In terms of faith, *malaka*, according to Lapidus, “is the acquisition, from the belief of the heart and the resulting actions, of a quality that has complete control over the heart so that it commands the action of the limbs and makes every activity take place in submissiveness to it to the point that all actions, eventually, become subservient to this affirmation of faith. This is the highest degree of faith. It is perfect faith”. (Lapidus 1984, 55–56.) This Aristotelian legacy continues to live within the practices of the contemporary piety movement in Egypt. It is evident in the frequent invocation of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali’s spiritual exercises and techniques of moral cultivation, found in popular instruction booklets on how to become pious, and often referred to among the participants of the Islamic Revival.⁴¹

Recuperating the Feminine Subject?

A significant body of literature in feminist theory argues that patriarchal ideologies – whether nationalist, religious, medical, or aesthetic in character – work by objectifying women’s bodies and subjecting them to masculinist systems of representation, thereby negating and distorting women’s own experience of their corporeality and subjectivity. (Bordo 1993; Göle 1996; Mani 1998; Martin 1987.) In this view, the virtue of *al-ḥayāʾ* can be understood as yet another example of the subjection of women’s bodies to masculinist or patriarchal valuations, images, and representational logic. A feminist strategy aimed at unsettling such a circumscription would try to expose *al-ḥayāʾ* for its negative valuation of women, simultaneously bringing to the

⁴⁰ Lapidus 1984, 54. Consider, for example, Ibn Khaldun’s remarks in *The Muqadimmah*, which bear remarkable similarity to Aristotle’s discussion: “A habit[us] is a firmly rooted quality acquired by doing a certain action and repeating it time after time, until the form of that action is firmly fixed [in one’s disposition]. A habit[us] corresponds to the original action after which it was formed.”

⁴¹ See, for example, Farid 1990 and Hawwa 1995. On A. H. al-Ghazali’s reworking of Aristotle’s theory of virtue, see Sherif 1975 and the introduction by T. J. Winter in al-Ghazali, 1995, xv-cii. For A. H. al-Ghazali’s seminal work on practices of moral self-cultivation, see al-Ghazali 1992.

fore alternative representations and experiences of the feminine body that are denied, submerged, or repressed by its masculinist logic.

The analysis I have presented of the practice of *al-ḥayāʾ* (and the practice of veiling) departs from this perspective. It is important to note that even though the concept of *al-ḥayāʾ* embeds a masculinist understanding of gendered bodies, far more is at stake in the practice of *al-ḥayāʾ* than this framework allows, as is evident from the conversation between Amal and her friend Nama. Crucial to their understanding of *al-ḥayāʾ* as an embodied practice is an entire conceptualization of the role the body plays in the making of the self, one in which the outward behavior of the body constitutes both the potentiality and the means through which interiority is realized. A feminist strategy that seeks to unsettle such a conceptualization cannot simply intervene in the system of representation that devalues the feminine body, but must also engage the very armature of attachments between outward behavioral forms and the sedimented subjectivity that *al-ḥayāʾ* enacts. Representation is only one issue among many in the ethical relationship of the body to the self and others, and it does not by any means determine the form this relationship takes.

Finally, since much of the analytical labor of this article is directed at the specificity of terms internal to the practices of the mosque movement, I want to clarify that the force of these terms derives not from the motivations and intentions of the actors but from their inextricable entanglement within conflicting and overlapping historical formations. My project is therefore based on a double disavowal of the humanist subject. The first disavowal is evident in my exploration of certain notions of agency that cannot be reconciled with the project of recuperating the lost voices of those who are written out of “hegemonic feminist narratives”, to bring their humanism and strivings to light – precisely because to do so would be to underwrite all over again the narrative of the sovereign subject as the author of her voice and her-story.

My project’s second disavowal of the humanist subject is manifest in my refusal to recuperate the members of the mosque movement either as “subal-

tern feminists" or as the "fundamentalist Others" of feminism's progressive agenda. To do so, in my opinion, would be to reinscribe a familiar way of being human that a particular narrative of personhood and politics has made available to us, forcing the aporetic multiplicity of desires and aspirations to fit into this exhausted narrative mold. Instead, my ruminations on the practices of the women's mosque movement are aimed at unsettling key assumptions at the center of liberal thought through which movements of this kind are often judged. Such judgments do not always simply entail the *ipso facto* rejection of these movements as antithetical to feminist agendas; they also at times seek to embrace such movements as forms of feminism, thus enfolding them into a liberal imaginary.⁴²

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to clarify the implications of this analytical framework for how we think about politics, especially in light of some of the questions posed to me when I have presented this essay in public. In pushing at the limits of the analytical project of feminism, I am often asked, have I lost sight of its politically prescriptive project? Does attention to the ways in which moral agency and norms function within a particular imaginary entail the suspension of critique? What, I am asked, are the "implicit politics" of this essay?

In some ways these questions bespeak the tension that attends the dual character of feminism as both an analytical and political project in that no analytical undertaking is considered enough in and of itself unless it takes a position vis-à-vis the subordination of women.⁴³ While I appreciate the difficulties entailed in any project located at the double edge of analysis and

⁴² On the former, see Moghissi 1999. On the latter, see Fernea 1998.

⁴³ Marilyn Strathern observed as much when she wrote about the "awkward relationship" between feminism and anthropology. She argued, "Insofar as the feminist debate is necessarily a politicized one, our common ground or field is thus conceived as the practical contribution that feminist scholarship makes to the solution or dissolution of the problem of women [...]. To present an ethnographic account as authentic ('these are the conditions in this society') cannot avoid being judged for the position it occupies in this particular debate. By failing to take up an explicit feminist position, I have, on occasion, been regarded as not a feminist." Strathern 1988, 28.

advocacy, I also think the argument I offer here has repercussions for the way we think about politics. In this essay I have argued that the liberatory goals of feminism should be re-thought in light of the fact that the desire for freedom and liberation is historically situated and its motivational force cannot be assumed *a priori*, but needs to be re-considered in light of other desires, historical projects, and capacities that inhere in a discursively and historically located subject. What follows from this, I would contend, is that in analyzing the question of politics we must begin with a set of fundamental questions about the conceptual relationship between the body, self, and moral agency as constituted within different ethical-moral traditions, and not hold any one model to be axiomatic as progressive-feminist scholarship often does. This is particularly germane to the movement I am discussing here insofar as it is organized around self-fashioning and ethical conduct (rather than the transformation of juridical and state institutions), an adequate understanding of which must necessarily address what in other contexts has been called the politics of the body – namely, the constitution of the body within structures of power.

For a scholar of Islam none of these issues can be adequately addressed without encountering the essential tropes through which knowledge about the Muslim world has been organized, especially the trope of patriarchal violence and Islam's (mis)treatment of women. The veil, more than any other Islamic practice, has become the symbol and evidence of the violence Islam has inflicted on women. I have seldom presented my arguments in an academic setting, particularly my argument about the veil as a disciplinary practice that constitutes pious subjectivities, without facing a barrage of questions from people demanding to know why I have failed to condemn the patriarchal assumptions behind this practice and the suffering it engenders. I am often struck by my audience's lack of curiosity about what else the veil might perform in the world beyond its violation of women. These exhortations to condemnation are only one indication of how the veil and the commitments it embodies, not to mention other kinds of Islamic practices, have come to be understood through the prism of women's freedom and

subjugation such that to ask a different set of questions about the practice is to lay oneself open to the charge of indifference to women's oppression. The force this coupling of the veil and women's freedom commands is equally manifest in those arguments that endorse or defend the veil on the grounds that it is a product of women's "free choice" and evidence of their "liberation" from the hegemony of Western cultural codes.

What I find most troubling about this framing is the analytical foreclosure it affects and the silence it implicitly condones regarding a whole host of issues – issues that demand attention from scholars who want to think productively about the Islamic practices undergirding the contemporary Islamic Revival. I understand feminism's political demand for vigilance against culturalist arguments that seem to authorize practices that underwrite women's oppression. I would submit, however, that our analytical explorations should not be reduced to the requirements of political judgment, in part because the labor that belongs to the field of analysis is different from that required by the demands of political action, both in its temporality and its social impact. These two modalities of engagement – the political and the analytical – should not remain deaf to each other but they should not be collapsed into each other either. By allowing theoretical inquiry some immunity from the requirements of strategic political action, we leave open the possibility that the task of thinking may proceed in directions not dictated by the logic and pace of immediate political events.

Wendy Brown has written eloquently about what is lost when analysis is subjected to the demands of political attestation, judgment, and action. She argues:

It is the task of theory [...] to "make meanings slide", while the lifeblood of politics is made up of bids for hegemonic representation that by nature seek to arrest this movement, to fix meaning at the point of the particular political truth – the nonfluid and nonnegotiable representation – that one wishes to prevail [...]. [L]et us ask what happens when intellectual inquiry is sacrificed to an intensely politicized moment, whether inside or outside an academic institution. What happens when we, out of good and earnest inten-

tions, seek to collapse the distinction between politics and theory, between political bids for hegemonic truth and intellectual inquiry? We do no favor, I think, to politics or to intellectual life by eliminating a productive tension – the way in which politics and theory effectively interrupt each other – in order to consolidate certain political claims as the premise of a program of intellectual inquiry. (Brown 2001, 41.)

I read Wendy Brown here as insisting on the importance of practicing a certain amount of skepticism, a suspension of judgment if you will, toward the normative limits of political discourse. “Intellectual inquiry” here entails pushing against our received assumptions and categories, through which a number of unwieldy problems have been domesticated to customary habits of thought and praxis.

This argument gains particular salience in the current political climate, defined by the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent war of terror that the United States government has unleashed on the Muslim world. The longstanding demand that feminists stand witness to the patriarchal ills of Islam has now been enlisted in the service of one of the most unabashed imperial projects of our time. Consider, for example, how the Feminist Majority’s international campaign against the Taliban regime was essential to the Bush administration’s attempt to establish legitimacy for the bombing of Afghanistan – aptly called “Operation Enduring Freedom”.⁴⁴ It was the burka-clad body of the Afghan woman – and *not* the destruction wrought by twenty years of war funded by the United States through one of the largest covert operations in American history – that served as the primary referent in the Feminist Majority’s vast mobilization against the Taliban regime (and later the Bush administration’s war). While the denial of education to Afghan women and the restrictions imposed on their movements were often noted, this image of the burka, more than anything else, condensed and organized knowledge about Afghanistan and its women, as if this alone could provide an adequate understanding of their suffering. The inadequacy of this knowledge has today become strikingly evident as reports from Afghanistan

⁴⁴On this subject, see Hirschkind & Mahmood 2002.

increasingly suggest that the lives of Afghan women have not improved since the ousting of the Taliban and that, if anything, life on the streets has become more unsafe than it was under the old regime due to conditions of increased sociopolitical instability. (Amnesty International 2003; Badkhen 2002; Human Rights Watch 2002.) Perhaps we need to entertain the possibility that had there been some analytical complexity added to the picture that organizations such as the Feminist Majority presented of Afghan women's situation under Taliban rule, had the need for historical reflection not been hijacked by the need for immediate political action, then feminism might have been less recruitable to this imperial project.

The ethical questions that imperialist projects of this proportion pose for feminist scholars and activists are also relevant to the more sedate context of the women's mosque movement that has been the focus of this essay. To the degree that feminism is a politically prescriptive project, it requires the remaking of sensibilities and commitments of women whose lives contrast with feminism's emancipatory visions. Many feminists who would oppose the use of military force would have little difficulty supporting projects of social reform aimed at transforming the attachments, commitments, and sensibilities of the kind that undergird the practices of the women I worked with, so that these women may be allowed to live a more enlightened existence. Indeed, my own history of involvement in feminist politics attests to an unwavering belief in projects of reform aimed at rendering certain life forms provisional if not extinct. But what I have come to ask of myself, and would like to ask the reader, as well, is: Do my political visions ever run up against the responsibility that I incur for the destruction of life forms so that "unenlightened" women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I want so passionately to remake? Would an intimate knowledge of lifeworlds that are distinct from mine ever question my own certainty about what I prescribe as a superior way of life for others?

It was in the course of the encounter between my own objections to the form-of-life the piety movement embodies and the textures of the lives of

the women I worked with that the political and the ethical converged for me again in a personal sense. As I conducted fieldwork with this movement, I came to recognize that a politically responsible scholarship entails not simply being faithful to the desires and aspirations of “my informants” and urging my audience to “understand and respect” the diversity of desires that characterizes our world today. Nor is it enough to reveal the assumptions of my own or my fellow scholars’ biases and (in)tolerances. As someone who has come to believe, along with a number of other feminists, that the political project of feminism is not predetermined but needs to be continually negotiated within specific contexts, I have come to confront a number of questions: What do we mean when we as feminists say that gender equality is the central principle of our analysis and politics? How does my being enmeshed within the thick texture of my informants’ lives affect my openness to this question? Are we willing to countenance the sometimes violent task of remaking sensibilities, life worlds, and attachments so that women like those I worked with may be taught to value the principle of freedom? Furthermore, does a commitment to the ideal of equality in our own lives endow us with the capacity to know that this ideal captures what is or should be fulfilling for everyone else? If it does not, as is surely the case, then I think we need to rethink, with far more humility than we are accustomed to, what feminist politics really means. (Here I want to be clear that my comments are not directed at “Western feminists” alone, but also address “Third World” feminists and all those who are located somewhere within this polarized terrain, since these questions implicate all of us given the liberatory impetus of the feminist tradition.)

As for whether my framework calls for the suspension of critique in regard to the patriarchal character of the mosque movement, my response is that I urge no such stance. But I do urge an expansion of a normative understanding of critique, one that is quite prevalent among many progressives and feminists (among whom I have often included myself). Criticism, in this view, is about successfully demolishing your opponent’s position and exposing her argument’s implausibility and its logical inconsistencies. This,

I would submit, is a very limited and weak understanding of the notion of critique. Critique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another's worldview, that we might come to learn things which we did not already know before we undertook the engagement. This requires that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter.

The questions I have posed above about politics should not be seen as a call for the abandonment of struggle against what we consider to be unjust practices in the situated context of our own lives, or as advocating the pious lifestyles of the women I worked with. To do so would be only to mirror the teleological certainty that characterizes some of the versions of progressive-liberalism that I criticized earlier. Rather, I suggest that we leave open the possibility that our political and analytical certainties might be transformed in the process of exploring nonliberal movements of the kind I studied, that the lives of the women with whom I worked might have something to teach us beyond what we can learn from the circumscribed social scientific exercise of "understanding and translating". If there is a normative political position that underlies this essay, it is to urge that we – my readers and I – must embark upon an inquiry in which we do not assume that the political positions we uphold will necessarily be vindicated or provide the ground for our theoretical analysis, but instead hold open the possibility that we may come to ask of politics a whole series of questions that seemed settled when we embarked upon the inquiry in the first place.

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