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### Saba Mahmood's Transnational Feminist Framing of The Women's Mosque Movement

The notion of a “global sisterhood” of women has been in prominence since the 1960s, largely circulated in “global” and “international” feminisms and framed in “*comparative approaches* to women’s issues in the Global South” (“Transnational Feminism,” emphasis added). The latent assumption in such “global” feminisms, as alluded to in its’ description as a *comparative* framing, is that a specifically Western model of feminism is the norm to which all other feminisms should aspire. Postcolonial scholars and feminists of color were understandably critical of this monolithic rendering of “global sisterhood,” and argued that it “presume[s] a white, middle-class feminist subject located in the Global North” and “ignore[s] the meaningful differences between women both locally and globally” (“Transnational Feminism”). Transnational feminism, then, offers a counter narrative to “global sisterhood” by making central to its’ analysis the lifeworlds of those excluded from the politically prescriptive project of secular-liberal feminism, and by questioning how we might begin the radical work of reconstructing feminist politics.

*The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, is an ethnographic account of the women’s mosque movement—sometimes referred to as the piety movement—of Cairo Egypt. Author Saba Mahmood, Sociocultural Anthropologist and scholar of modern Egypt, conducted fieldwork from 1995 to 1997, wherein she detailed the emergence of the movement

and the experiences of its' pietists ("Obituary: Dr. Saba Mahmood"). The piety movement began in the 1970s and was born out of the larger Islamic Revival of the same time period (Mahmood 2005, 3), and came about as a response to Egyptian women's desire to study Islam in a more formal manner. The weekly religious sessions attended by pietists were initially held in the home, but the mosque participants felt that these sessions should be held within the mosque itself; with time and persistence, these sessions were eventually relocated. This move is no small feat; in their deliberate choice to enter a traditionally male-dominated place of worship, the women of the piety movement altered the historically male-centered character of mosques and Islamic pedagogy. This marks the first time in Egyptian history that such a large number of women have held public meetings in mosques to teach one another Islamic doctrine (Mahmood 2005, 2-3). By 1995, the movement was so popular that there were few neighborhoods in Cairo that did not offer lessons for women (3).

Although Mahmood states that her work is not concerned with making the piety movement "more palatable to liberal sensibilities" (Mahmood 2005, 5), it is clear her that intended audience is composed of secular-liberal feminists. The author notes the conceptual challenges that this non-secular movement poses to not only to feminist theory, but to secular-liberal thought more broadly. As Mahmood notes, "one of the most common reactions [of the women's mosque movement by secular-liberals] is the supposition that women Islamic supporters are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan, who, if freed from their bondage, would naturally express their instinctual abhorrence for the traditional Islamic mores used to enchain them" (Mahmood 2005, 1-2). Pietists of the mosque movement pursue ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status, a status which is sure to

perturb the most “progressive” of secular-liberals (Mahmood 2005, 37). However, this does not mean the women of the mosque movement are “pawns” by any means; the pietists’ movement is structured by a discursive tradition that regards “*subordination to a transcendent will* as a coveted goal” (Mahmood, 2005).

Moreover, the goals of mosque movement participants do not exist within a vacuum: they have “emerged in response to the perception that religious knowledge, as a means of organizing daily conduct, [has] become increasingly marginalized under modern structures of secular governance [in Egypt]” (Mahmood, 2005). The focus of the piety movement is to re-instill religious principals in daily life: to combat the ways that Islamic knowledge has been “reduced to an abstract system of beliefs with no direct bearing on the practicalities of daily living” (Mahmood 2005, 4). The pious subjects of the movement feel that they “have had to create new structures of learning—in the form of mosque lessons—to inculcate values that were previously part of a social and familial ethos in Egypt, but which are no longer available in those arenas;” a socio-cultural and political shift which participants described as “secularization” or “westernization” (Mahmood 2005, 56). At the core of the ideological challenges that female participation in the piety movement poses to secular-liberal feminist ideology is the tendency of feminist thought to “*romanticize resistance:*” to understand the singular embodiment of resistance as “the *human spirit[s] ...refusal to be dominated*” (Abu-Lughod, 42, emphasis added). Yet, in reading agency this way, secular-liberal feminists collapse historically contingent distinctions between forms of resistance, and in doing so “[foreclose] important questions about the workings of power” (Mahmood, 2005). Throughout her ethnography, Mahmood points out the ways that secular-liberal feminism “has ignored other modalities of agency whose meaning

and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and re-signification of hegemonic terms of discourse;” it is only when such hegemonic constructions of power are opened up for intellectual inquiry that “a whole set of questionable assumptions, anxieties, and prejudices embedded in the notion of Islamic fundamentalism” are revealed (Mahmood 2005, 153; Hirschkind and Mahmood 340-41).

In order to fully understand the significance of non-secular movements within the present historical moment, Mahmood advocates for a culturally nuanced and historically specific analysis of movements which may be considered by the West as “the antithesis of modernity” (Mahmood 1996, 1). By culturally and historically contextualizing this movement and its’ supporters, Mahmood poses that we might “parochialize” the Western secular-liberal experience of modernity and its’ “attendant assumptions of the constitutive relationship between action and embodiment, residence and agency, self and authority” (Mahmood 2005, 38). The goal of Mahmood’s work is to challenge its’ readers to consider how we might recognize instances of women’s resistance without “misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience”(Abu-Lughod, 47; Mahmood 2005, 8). I understand *Politics of Piety*, then, as an authentically transnational feminist perspective.

The first section of this paper situates the creation of secularism, the notion of the secular-liberal neo-imperial state, and its’ influence on Western relations with the Middle East within their respective historical and political contexts. The second section analyses the ways in which “the languages of colonialism and feminism” (Ahmed 1992, 151) were weaponized to craft “imperial rescue narratives,” (Alexander 184) wherein the “modern” secular subject becomes morally justified in “saving” the “traditional” Muslim woman from “fundamentalist”

brown men, from “irrational” non-secular patriarchy, and ultimately, from a culture secular-liberals view as inherently anti-Western. In the third and final section, I will compare the secular-liberal understanding of “agency” to an Islamic conception of the same term. The aim of this final section is to illustrate the transnational feminist framework within which Mahmood’s view of agency is situated.

### **The Origins of Secularism**

Here, I will describe the “multifarious and changing manifestations of secularism” within Western society, and the secular West’s reductive interpretations of Muslim societies (Al-Ali 229-30). I pose that the Protestant Reformation was the catalyst of the secularization of Europe, and that it is this specific event which set the stage for the rise of capitalism in Europe and the eventual global exportation of the economic policy. The global incursion of the secular-liberal capitalist class, coupled with the Enlightenment-justified project of colonialism, set the groundwork for Western neo-imperial relations with non-secular societies, particularly those in the Middle East.

“A first order consequence of the Reformation,” Cantoni et al. contend, is “an immediate and large *secularization* of Europe’s political economy” (Cantoni et al.). After the Reformation, “human capital... shifted sharply from religious to secular purposes” and foregrounded the “widespread growth of economic activity in Western Europe” (Cantoni et al.). This shift of human capital, maintains German sociologist and political economist Max Weber, enabled “the foundation of European capitalism” (Weber). This is especially significant because it points to a

concrete historical moment that served to, in effect, *naturalize* the free market as a “secular” site in the Western imagination (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2).

Colonial rhetoric charges the “rational” secular citizen with the task of dragging unenlightened, non-secular Others into the era of modernity. “Modernity,” however, “is not simply the name of a time period... it names a set of social relations and their legitimation: Enlightenment;” the Enlightenment, then, provided the moral justification for the project of colonialism (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 3). According to the logic of colonization, modernity *cannot exist* without secularism; consequently, non-secular cultures and peoples are understood as inherently anti-modern, and thus requiring colonial interference. The colonial project of modernity, Al-Ali states, is incumbent upon “the progress narrative of secularization” (23). When formerly colonized nations, such as Egypt, gained independence from colonial rule, the “official” practices of colonialism were simply replaced with neocolonial relations. However, Jaqui Alexander poses that “within the neocolonial also resides the imperial” (Alexander 82). Thus, the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which justified the colonial project, is directly linked to neo-imperial practices of liberalism; the neo-imperial “rationalist, self-authorizing” subject is central to the liberal tradition because it was *created by* Enlightenment thinkers (Mahmood 2005, 13).

Western powers have maintained hegemony primarily through their economic, military and political might. With this power, the West maintains the ability to “impose their visions and practices” and, perhaps even more importantly, “the firm belief that their values [and] ideas... constituted the only possible vantage point” (Al-Ali 228). According to Al-Ali, the logic of Western hegemony follows that “everything and everyone else” who does not live in accordance with secular-liberal cultural imperatives “[is] characterized in terms of distance from or

proximity to this ‘ideal and model culture’” (228). The secularized religion of Christianity, then, which American sociologist Robert Bellah terms “beyond belief,” enforces a sense of moral order through the “progress narrative of modernity” (Bellah qtd. in Jakobsen and Pellegrini 5). According to the progress narrative of modernity, “history” becomes reduced to a set of positions that can be lined up horizontally and compared along a path of development. The particular meaning *ascribed* to this narrative, observe Jakobsen and Pellegrini, is “what provides the *moral* framework for secularization,” which “funded the colonial project” (6). When such a narrative becomes weaponized for colonial purposes, it legitimizes the imposition of colonial administration as “functionally helpful” and “morally beneficial” to societies deemed in need of secular enlightenment (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 6). Thus, Jakobsen and Pellegrini continue, secularization is a process which effectively produces “scattered hegemonies” which are deeply entangled in orientalist, colonialist and eurocentric positions (2). The character of the “rationalist Western subject” presupposed by the Enlightenment and upheld by liberal tradition, performs “secularist political authority,” because, of course, the ability to frame non-secular belief systems such as Islam in a particular way is, in itself, an exercise of power and political authority (Mahmood 2005, 13; Hurd 49).

Under the auspices of morality, the secular is thus framed as a defense against “irrational, regressive aspects of religion,” and perhaps even as a bulwark against those who follow non-secular belief systems (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 1). The West, then, as a political entity, positions itself in opposition to the Other; a psychological process theorists such as Jaques Lacan term “identity politics” (Feldstein et. al). Indeed, it was in part by *differentiating themselves from Islam*,” claims Zachary Lockman “that European Christians, and later their nominally secular

descendants, *defined their own identity*” (Lockman qtd. in Hurd 50, emphasis added). Western political and cultural identity, then, is understood as morally righteous, democratic, and modern only by representing Islam as “the epitome of anti-christian darkness and political tyranny<sup>1</sup>” (Hurd 59). Moreover, “those who have increasingly come to see Islam as important to their lives, their politics, and their forms of public expression,” such as the pietists of the mosque movement, are understood by secular-liberal political ideology as “destined to live within authoritarian, intolerant, and misogynist societies” (Hirschkind and Mahmood 350). Yet not only have identity politics affected non-secular *subjects*, but the secular political ideology has similarly demarcated the religious-secular line to a “fixed marker of *civilizational* difference” (Hurd 126, emphasis added). False equivalencies such as this are especially dangerous because they carry the latent implication that fundamentalism is the singular alternative to secularism. Consequently, in the eyes of the secular West, *any* public religion is dangerous, and any departure from Western cultural and religious norms is a threat to all aspects of both political life, and private pleasures.

In the globalized era, all aspects of human life—from family, education, worship, and welfare, to commerce, birth, and death—have been “brought under the regulatory apparatus” of Western cultural hegemony (Mahmood 2005, 193). As follows, secular-liberalism cannot be understood as simply a doctrine of the hegemonic West, but rather as something more closely resembling *a form of life*, to be exported globally. Hence, the pietists’ aim to imbue their daily

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood elaborate this point, arguing that “the variety of ideas, images, and fears that Islam... evokes in the [Western] imagination” are what give the Western invention of Islamic fundamentalism its’ explanatory power. This is because such an invention “collapses a rather heterogeneous collection of images and descriptions [and links] them together as aspects of a singular socio-religious formation.” They continue, “what allows this reduction is the idea that all of these phenomena are expressions of Islam in its dangerous and regressive form, its fundamentalist form” (348).



acts with Islamic virtues “will necessarily have political consequences,” because they pose a direct threat to the secular-liberal “form of life” (Mahmood 2005, 193).

In summary, pejorative representations of Islam, of indeed all non-secular religions, are directly linked to the progress narrative of secularization and the neo-liberal imperial aspirations of the hegemonic West. Politically convenient narratives of Islam imply that democratic secular order is a unique Western achievement, and that Islam poses a significant threat to the very foundations of secular-liberal ways of life.

In the mid-nineteenth century, these secular-liberal notions of Islam were combined with Western feminism in order to further the West’s neo-imperial project. Therefore, transnational feminist theory can be understood as an anti-imperial praxis, because one of its central aims is critiquing Western hegemony and the violence done in its name (“Transnational Feminism”).

### **“Imperial Rescue Narratives:” Secular-liberal Co-optation of The Language of Feminism**

Here, I will expand upon my argument in section one by positing that, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, Western powers have crafted “imperial rescue narratives” (Alexander 184) by combining the ethos of Western feminism and the “language of colonialism” (Ahmed 1992, 151). Imperial rescue narratives cast the “modern” “rationalist” Western feminist as the logical savior of the “traditional” “irrational” Other.

Scholar Leila Ahmed notes that “the issue of women” was framed as the “centerpiece of the Western narrative of Islam” beginning in the nineteenth century, as “Europeans established themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries.” (Ahmed 1992, 150). The Western narrative of Islam facilitated “the new centrality of the position of women in the colonial discourse,” and

weaponized “the language of feminism, which was also developed with particular vigor during this period” (Ahmed 1992, 151). Non-secular religiosity, particularly Islam, was painted by the West as a threat to the rights of “women and political dissidents” (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 12). This depiction is not caused by benign ignorance, of course: it is a strategic narrative created to prop up the facade of the modern, secular state, and its’ duty thwart perceived fundamentalist Other cultures. The misrepresentation of Islam as strictly and exclusively fundamentalist serves to legitimize Western political interests. It is not unlike the self-assumed role of the colonial state, which tasked itself with “protect[ing] various Others, like “women,” from other Other [Men]” whose “backwards” ways threatened her” (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 12). By ensconcing the neo-liberal project in the language of feminism, Western hegemony could justify their assault as some type of quasi-secular moral imperative. Ahmed points out that when this neocolonial feminist gaze was “directed against the cultures of colonized peoples, it could be promoted in ways that admirably served and furthered the project of dominance of the white man[’s]... political and discursive domination (Ahmed 1992, 153; 129). The idea that Other men “beyond the borders of the civilized West” oppressed women was an idea created out of the rhetoric of colonialism which had the effect of “[rendering] morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples” (Ahmed 1992, 151). Because colonialism rationalized itself “on the basis of the “inferiority” of non-Western cultures most manifest in their patriarchal customs and practices,” the rationale continues that in the case of contemporary secular-liberal feminist discourse, non-secular women “*had to be rescued*” from Islamic fundamentalism with the aid of secular-liberal feminism (Mahmood 2005, 173-74, emphasis added). Thus, there is “nothing essential or timeless behind Western representations of the

Muslim woman;” rather, they are the product of liberal feminisms’ political alignment with first colonialism, and ultimately with the secular, neo-imperial West (Hurd 53). As Alexander affirms, such a rendering:

positions [Western] intervention in the name of democracy as devoid of the violences of capital’s imperialisms, thereby underscoring a politic in which neoliberal streams of feminism succeed in melding their interests with those of the neoliberal state. This move reveals why the state... [universalizes] liberal feminist political agendas that dovetail neatly with its own expansionist practices. Imperial rescue narratives are neutral neither in intent nor in design (185-6).

Whether in the hands of Western patriarchy or in the hands of ostensibly well-intentioned feminists themselves, Ahmed writes that “the ideas of Western feminism essentially functioned to morally justify...and support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe” (154). Ahmed concludes with the biting observation that “feminism, or the ideas of feminism,” served as “the handmaid to colonialism” (Ahmed 1992, 155). The long-standing Western feminist demand that their ilk “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” (Mahmood 2005, 196-7). Such a partnership places secular-liberal feminists in the company of strange bedfellows, indeed.

It is important to recognize that just as Western hegemonic powers have co-opted the language of feminism, the co-optation goes both ways; Western secular feminism upholds the false equivalency produced by the colonial project, wherein “modernity” and “secularism,” on the one hand, and “tradition” and “religion” on the other, are understood as two inseparable

political categories<sup>2</sup> (Barbara Metcalf qtd. in Hurd 51). In a claim reminiscent of the work of Gayatri Spivak, Alexander explains that Western secular feminists mobilized to ingrain a set of:

implicit and explicit assumptions that *located violence in tradition only*, demarcating “primitive” and “modern” patriarchy in a way that *gave modernity the power to automatically dissolve traditional patriarchy*...since modernity presumably had no patriarchal requirements of its own. The singular manifest of modern Western feminism, then, was to save [Other] women from [Other] men, to save them from tradition, and ultimately, to save them from themselves (185, emphasis added).

Cultural differences across *space*, then, become differences in *time*. In the logic of Western feminism, “all those living in the unenlightened world become the history of those who live in the enlightened world” (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 9-10). Alexander calls this a dangerous type of cultural relativism, which is latent within secular-liberal feminisms’ “apparently neutral rendering of the practices within different social formations [that is understood as being] based on simple observations of difference,” and ostensibly *not* based on “hierarchies of moral judgment or cultural handicap” (Alexander 184). And yet, this form of cultural relativism *is itself* a product of the demarcation of so-called “traditional” non-secular practices and “modern” secular ones.

The effect of the modern/traditional dichotomy, Alexander continues, is that “in the case of the Third World, “culture” stood in for values which almost arithmetically added up to

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<sup>2</sup> In his book *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner expanded this argument by arguing that world cultures were of two varieties: ‘savage/wild’ and ‘cultivated/high.’ Predictably, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East were representative of Gellner’s ‘savage culture’ typology. Whereas the ‘cultivated’ were intrinsically equipped to carry out the project of statehood in their ‘complexity and richness, most usually sustained by literacy and specialized personnel,’ the wild cultures tended to get mired in ethnic or nationalist conflicts in their attempts to emulate the process of statehood (Gellner 1986, 50-1).

*tradition*, whereas in the case of the First World, “culture” operated as proxy, not for values but for constructs such as class, wealth, and intelligence” (188). Thus, not only are Islam and modernity considered incommensurable world views: Islam is also portrayed as *devoid of culture altogether*. When depicted in such a way, secular-liberal feminisms’ use of the modern/traditional dichotomy renders women of the Islamic faith as incapable of agency, and accordingly in need of salvation from the ills of Islamic patriarchy by their “sisters” in the West. In short, the confluence of neocolonial political ideology and secular-liberal feminism pits modernity and tradition ever at odds with one another, and “recuperate[s] the members of the mosque movement either as “subaltern feminists” or as the “fundamentalist Others” (Mahmood 2005, 154).

The consequence of this framing is that it leaves absolutely no room for secular-liberal feminists to understand the “contextual asymmetries” of “women’s engagement with fundamentalism, patriarchy, or their various collusions” (Alexander 184). “Descriptively speaking,” Mahmood elaborates, “many aspects of the mosque movement resonate with key aspects of [the] notion of tradition” (116). However, “tradition” and “modernity” do not exist within the vacuum of Western ideology. Rather,

the women [of the mosque movement] understood their activities in terms of a *recuperation of a set of traditional practices* they saw as grounded in an exemplary past and in classic notions of Islamic piety... yet, while certain continuities with earlier practices were evident, it was also clear that the *modern adaptations* of classical Islamic notions did not mirror their historical precedents, but *were modulated by, and refracted through, contemporary social and historical conditions*” (Mahmood 2005, 116-117, emphasis added).

Thus, because the strain of liberal feminism is so wedded to the binary of “tradition” and “modernity,” it has blinded itself to the inventive ways that *both* traditional and modern interpretations of Islam have been enacted by the women of the mosque movement.

### **A Rendering of Agentival Pietists Firmly Rooted in the Transnational Feminist Perspective:**

Now that the women’s mosque movement in Egypt—as well as the rise of Western secular-liberal ideology—have been fully situated within their respective historical and political contexts, we can begin to analyze the specific embodiments of agency that Mahmood documents in her ethnography. Furthermore, this section will highlight the ways in which Mahmood’s analysis of these ethnographic accounts is demonstrative of a truly transnational feminist theoretical framework.

Mahmood insists that the question of the ways in which the hierarchical system of gender relations upheld by the mosque movement should be transformed is both impossible for Western secular-liberal feminists to answer, and moreover, it is *a question which is not theirs to ask*. The Western secular view of the women’s mosque movement, Mahmood observes, is primarily flawed in its reading of “agency” as “the desire for autonomy and the ability to resist and subvert norms” (Mahmood 2005, 15). Mahmood finds that “liberal presuppositions of the normative subject of feminism as a liberatory one” are reductive, and indeed dangerous, as they “rid [participants] of any claims to agency” because the normative subject of secular-liberal feminist theory is one whose “agency is [solely] conceptualized on the binary model of subordination” (Mahmood 2005, 14). The fact that this is the singular conceptualization of agency in the Western secular-liberal feminist imagination illustrates “the profound inability

within current feminist political thought to envision valuable forms of human flourishing<sup>3</sup> outside the bounds of a liberal progressive imaginary” (Mahmood 2005, 155). Under secular-liberal feminist eyes, “a Muslim woman can only be one of two things; “either uncovered, and therefore liberated, or veiled, and thus still, to some degree, subordinate” (Hirschkind and Mahmood 352-53). This perspective summarily rids mosque movement participants “of any claims to agency such as those conferred on their distant counterparts in the West” (Alexander 188). For this reason, it is imperative that the secular-liberal feminism separate its conception of agency from the goals of progressive politics.

Mahmood asks her reader if perhaps “the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times,” but is actually “profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions” (Mahmood 2005, 14, emphasis added). The normative liberal assumptions that underlie Western feminism construct bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities who do not ascribe to liberatory politics as fundamentally Other. Mahmood, in an authentic expression of transnational feminist theory, challenges these assumptions by demanding that we begin the work of “detaching conceptions of self-realization and agency from the ideal of freedom” (Mahmood 2005). Furthermore, Mahmood compels her reader to ask *whether agency necessarily includes the desire for autonomy*; perhaps agency could be embodied “not only in those acts that *resist* norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms” (Mahmood 2005, 15, emphasis added).

A transnational feminist understanding is one in which “agency” is “not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms, but as a *modality of action*” (Mahmood 2005, 157,

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<sup>3</sup> Hirschkind and Mahmood offer a telling example of the normative subject of secular-liberal feminist theory, who, they observe, contests social norms by “wearing torn jeans and dying her hair blue” (53).

emphasis added). Mahmood finds ethnographic evidence that attests to agency as a “modality of action” in her ethnographic account of Amal, a mosque participant who “was particularly outspoken and confident” (157). Mahmood writes that she would not normally have “described her as shy,” because Mahmood understood her personality as “antithetical” to shyness. Yet “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” (Mahmood 2005, 157). The author elaborates, commenting that:

Notably, Amal does not regard simulating shyness in the initial stages of her self-cultivation to be hypocritical, as it would be in certain liberal conceptions of the self where a dissonance between internal feelings and external expressions would be considered a form of dishonesty or self-betrayal (as captured in the phrase: “How do 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 is dissolved (Mahmood 2005, 157).

In short, Mahmood believes that it is through “daily practices of cultivation of their bodies, their behavior, and their desires, toward the ideal of... living in closeness to God”—in this case, Amal’s efforts to simulate shyness—that the women of the mosque movement coordinate their “inner states” such as desires and thoughts, and “outer conduct,” such as gestures, actions, and speech. Thus, this anecdote, understood from a transnational feminist perspective, is an example of Amal as an agent situated within a specific, historical, political, and cultural context, who “finds purpose, value, and pride in the struggle to live in accord with certain traditionally



sanctioned virtues” (Hirschkind, Saba Mahmood 352). Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod asks whether “it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts—such as those of resistance—outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular meaning” (Abu-Lughod qtd. in Mahmood 2005, 9). Indeed, within her specific ethical and political context, Amal found a way to articulate her subjectivity “within a native, vernacular, Islamic discourse” (Ahmed 1992 174-75). Furthermore, Mahmood notes that the movement encourages “a strong individualizing impetus that requires each person to adopt ascetic practices for shaping moral conduct;” “there are no centralized authorities that enforce the moral code and penalize infractions,” thus “each individual must interpret Islamic moral codes in order to discover how she, as an individual, may best realize the divine plan for her life” (Mahmood 2005, 30-31).

Although the women's mosque movement does not claim to be a feminist movement, a transnational feminist analysis of it might lead toward a reconceptualization of all that “agency” can truly mean. The piety movement suggests that agency can be expressed by exploring and strengthening one's relationship to their pious ideals. For the pietists, their religious sessions provide a sense of comfort, community, and mutual support. Transnational feminist theory poses a similar ideal of feminism; a sense of mutual support, spanning transnationally, which allows for feminists in different geographical, religious, and cultural contexts to be “remade in the process of engaging another’s worldview” (Mahmood 2005, 36). When we *embrace* differences of geographical, religious, and cultural contexts, rather than view it as a threat to our culturally-specific ideals, we might come to learn things that we did not already know (Mahmood 2005, 36). This is a sentiment echoed by the American writer, poet and activist Audre Lorde, who

eloquently states that “the failure of academic feminists to *recognize difference as a crucial strength* is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson” (Lorde 2). To view difference pejoratively, Lorde continues, “is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be... seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic” (Lorde 1-2). Such “necessary polarities” allow for an interdependency which is unthreatening: an “interdependency of difference” which generates “the power to seek new ways of being in the world” as well as “the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters” (Lorde 1-2). “By [redefining] autonomy so as to capture the emotional, embodied, and socially embedded character of women,” secular-liberal feminists are forced to reconsider whether a universal definition of agency is advantageous or even realistic (Mahmood 2005, 13).

In her reflection of the vital importance of difference, Lorde concludes by stating: “In our world, divide and conquer must become *define and empower*.” (Lorde 2). By *defining* the specific context in which the women’s mosque movement arose, and working to fully understand the life-worlds of pietists, Mahmood encourages her reader to move towards a transnational feminist perspective rooted in authentic and mutual *empowerment*.

### **Conclusion:**

The practices of mosque movement participants have challenged secular-liberal feminism by infusing specifically Islamic virtues and conduct into their daily lives. The piety movement makes Western feminists uncomfortable, because at the root of Western secular-liberalism are modernist discourses which eviscerate divergent ways of being into a seemingly irreconcilable binary of “tradition” and “modernity.” Hegemonic Western feminism often depicts non-secular or religiously conservative women as “frozen in history,” (Mohanty 1992) or as those who are

“acted *upon*,” rather than as agentival actors in their own right. (Wekker 351). A perception which can only exist within an ideological universe whose “boundaries dovetail with imperatives that are most closely aligned with those of colonization” (Alexander 189). As the secular-liberal feminist condemnation of the piety movement demonstrates, “feminists have not always escaped the imperialist heritage” (Wekker 351).

When the women’s mosque movement is only analyzed “from the progressivist point of view,” it may appear to be “a case of deplorable passivity and docility:” a group of oppressed Others desperately in need of “rescuing” by their “sisters” in the West (Mahmood 2005, 14). Yet, if one views the piety movement through the lens of transnational feminist theory, a fully legitimate expression of agency is easily recognized. Mahmood concludes by noting that “if there is one lesson we have learned from the machinations of colonial feminism and the politics of “global sisterhood,” it is that any social and political transformation is always a function of local, contingent, and emplaced struggles whose blueprint cannot be worked out or predicted in advance” (Mahmood 2005, 36).

At a fundamental level, secular-liberal feminism continues to be wholly unwilling to challenge the imperialism embedded within their ideology. Until Western feminists are willing to interrogate the biases within their own praxis, a transnational feminist perspective will continue to elude them. For a truly transnational feminism, ones’ view of feminist movements must be continually negotiated within specific contexts. We need to reconsider what feminist politics really mean, and how they have been misrepresented by the secular-liberal political project of feminism. In the process of exploring non-liberal movements through a transnational feminist

lens, we make space for the possibility that our analytical certainties might be radically transformed.

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