



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

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# Introduction

This paper:

- Represents a year's worth of research and self-reflection.
- Transformed my feminist praxis.
- Challenged my world view and forced me to question the origins of my beliefs.

Thank you for allowing me to share this with you!

# “Global Sisterhood?”

Enforces and idolizes Western model of feminism

Presumes a white, middle-class feminist subject, located in the Global North

Erases meaningful differences between women, locally and globally

*Transnational feminism offers a counter narrative*

# ***Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject* by Saba Mahmood**

- Piety: The quality of being religious
- Dr. Saba Mahmood, Sociocultural Anthropologist and scholar of modern Egypt
- Ethnography of Women's Mosque Movement of Cairo, Egypt
- Conducted fieldwork from 1995-1997
- Argues that pietists in this movement challenge the Western secular-liberal experience of modernity



# “Western Secular Liberal Feminism,” Defined

*Western:* situated in, or originating from the west, particularly Europe or the US

*Secular:* Attitudes that have no religious or spiritual basis; contrast with “sacred”

*Liberal:* willing to discard traditional values, favorable to individual rights or freedoms.

# What is the Women's Mosque Movement?

- Arose in 1970s, born out of the larger Islamic Revival of the same time period
- Wanted to study Islam in a more formal manner *inside mosques* rather than at home
- Goal is to inculcate values no longer available to devout Muslims in Egypt; combat “secularization” or “westernization”
- Movement altered the historically male-centered character of mosques and Islamic pedagogy
- First time in Egyptian history that women have held public meetings in mosques to teach one another Islamic doctrine.
- Movement regards “*subordination to a transcendent will* as a coveted goal” (Mahmood, 2005).

# Western Feminist Response

- Views devout Muslim women as “pawns in a grand patriarchal plan” (Mahmood 2005, 1-2).
- Romanticizes resistance; feel that the singular embodiment of resistance is “the human spirit[’s]...refusal to be dominated” (Abu-Lughod, 42).
- Collapses historically contingent distinctions between forms of resistance.
- Disturbed by the ideals of the Mosque movement because such ideals arise from a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status.

# Overview

*Politics of Piety* is an organic transnational feminist interpretation of the Women's Mosque Movement

I will:

- *Analyze* the confluence of the neo-imperial state and the politically prescriptive project of secular-liberal feminism
- *Interrogate* the supposed analytical certainties of secular-liberal feminism
- *Reimagine* the meaning of “agency”





# The Origins of Secularism



# Protestant Reformation and The Secular State

- The Protestant Reformation leads to secularization of Europe
- Reformation caused human capital to shift from religious to secular purposes
- Shift of human capital enabled the foundation of European capitalism—it *naturalized* the free market as a “secular” site in the Western imagination
- Lead to rise of capitalism in Europe and global exportation of secular ideal
- Set the groundwork for Western neo-imperial relations with non-secular societies, especially in the MENA region

## **The Secular State, Colonization, and the Neo-Imperial Project of Liberalism**

Colonizers insist modernity cannot exist without secularism

Non-secular cultures/peoples viewed as inherently anti-modern, and requiring colonial interference

Colonial project of modernity requires “the progress narrative of secularization” (Al-Ali, 23).

In independence, practices of colonialism replaced with neocolonial relations; “within the neocolonial also resides the imperial” (Alexander 82).

Colonial project is directly linked to neo-imperial practices of liberalism.

# Identity Politics

- “Everything and everyone else” who does not follow secular-liberal cultural imperatives is characterized in terms of distance from or proximity to this ‘ideal and model culture’
- European Christians & secular descendants defined their own identity by *differentiating themselves from Muslims* (Lockman qtd. in Hurd 50)
- Secular political ideology demarcated the religious-secular line to a “fixed marker of *civilizational* difference” (Hurd 126, emphasis added).
  - False equivalencies imply fundamentalism is singular alternative to secularism.
- West says any non-secular religion is dangerous, immoral and a threat.
- Incorrect representations of Islam are *directly linked* to progress narrative of secularization and neo-liberal imperial aspirations of the hegemonic West.

## **In Short:**

**Reformation—>Secular State—>Colonization  
—>Western Hegemony & Neo-Imperialism**

Soon I will connect this back to feminism, I promise

# Questions & Clarification

A photograph showing a group of women in various colored hijabs (white, orange, green, purple) sitting on a red carpet. In the foreground, a young girl in a blue hijab is crawling on the carpet, looking towards the camera. The text "Imperial Rescue Narratives" is overlaid in white on the image.

# “Imperial Rescue Narratives”

# Western Feminism & Neo-Imperialism

- “Imperial rescue narratives” (Alexander 184) crafted by combining the ethos of Western feminism and the “language of colonialism” (Ahmed 1992, 151)
- Now, the “modern” “rationalist” Western feminist becomes the logical savior of the “traditional” “irrational” Other woman.
- Non-secular religions, including Islam, are cast by the West as a threat to the rights of women.
- By masking neo-liberal project with the language of feminism, West “justified” their assault with quasi-secular *moral* imperative.
- Neocolonial feminism “directed against the cultures of colonized peoples... served and furthered the project of dominance of the white man[’s]... political and discursive domination (Ahmed 1992, 153; 129).



**“Imperial rescue narratives are neutral neither in intent nor in design” ( Alexander 185-6).**

- Colonial rationale based on “inferiority” of non-Western cultures—looked to patriarchal customs and practices
- Insisted non-secular women must to be rescued from Islamic fundamentalism with help from secular-liberal feminism
- “The state... [universalizes] liberal feminist political agendas that dovetail neatly with its own expansionist practices.” (Alexander 185-6).
- Western feminism aided “one of the most unabashed imperial projects of our time” (Mahmood 2005, 196-7).

Liberal feminism is so invested in binary of “tradition” and “modernity,” it cannot see how *both* traditional and modern interpretations of Islam have been central to the Mosque Movement.

## **In Short:**

**“The ideas of feminism” served as the  
“handmaid to colonialism” (Ahmed 1992,  
155).”**

# Questions & Clarification



# Agency Reimagined

# Western Misinterpretation of Agency

- Imagining how the gender relations supported by the Mosque Movement should be transformed is:
  - impossible for Western secular-liberal feminists to answer
  - a question which is not theirs to ask*
- Western “agency:” “the desire for autonomy and the ability to resist and subvert norms” (Mahmood 2005, 15).
- *This is a flawed definition*
- According to secular-liberal feminists, “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).

# Redefining Agency as “Modality of Action”

- What if definition of agency was expanded?
- Western definition of agency is not innate or universal. It is “profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions” (Mahmood 2005, 14).
- Agency can 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).

# **Amal:** **Synchronizing** **Outward Behavior** **with Inward Motives**

Piety involves daily cultivation of “bodies, behavior, and desires,” toward the ideal of “living in closeness to God”—ie. Amal’s efforts to simulate shyness

Amal coordinates her “inner states” and “outer conduct”

Amal’s practices show her as an agent in a specific, historical, political, and cultural context

Amal “finds purpose, value, and pride in the struggle to live in accord with certain traditionally sanctioned virtues” (Hirschkind, Mahmood 352).



# Agency: A Transnational Feminist Perspective

- Agency should reflect the emotional, embodied, and socially embedded character of women
- Is a *universal* definition of agency helpful or realistic?
- Without a historical and ethical context, “a universal category of acts—such as those of resistance” is impossible to imagine.
- Mosque movement encourages pietists to “interpret Islamic moral codes...to discover how she, *as an individual*, may best realize the divine plan for her life” (Mahmood 2005, 30-31).

Agency can be expressed by exploring and strengthening one's relationship to their pious ideals.

For the pietists, *religious sessions provide a sense of comfort, community, and mutual support.*

Transnational feminist theory shares these ideals; a sense of *mutual support*, spanning transnationally, which allows for feminists in different geographical, religious, and cultural contexts to *engage in another's worldview.*

## **In Short:**

**“Global sisterhood” is an intrinsically imperial project.**

**“Agency” is a multifaceted concept.**

A woman wearing a black hijab and glasses is sitting on a stone ledge, reading a book with a gold cover. She is holding a brown leather bag on her lap. The background is a large, open stone plaza with a grid pattern. The text "In Summary" is overlaid in white serif font on the right side of the image.

# In Summary

**“The failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson”**

**The Uses of Anger by Audre Lorde**

# My Whole Paper in 5 Bullet Points

- Mosque Movement challenges secular-liberal feminism by infusing Islamic virtues into daily life; this makes Western feminists uncomfortable
- Western secular liberal feminist ideology “dovetail[s] with imperatives that are most closely aligned with those of colonization” (Alexander 189).
- Western feminism depicts non-secular or religiously conservative women as Others to be “acted upon,” instead of as *agents* (Wekker 351).
- Western feminists must interrogate the biases within their own praxis & negotiate their view of feminist movements within specific social, historical, and geopolitical contexts.
- 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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