

Title—Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject

Author—Saba Mahmood

Year—2005

Categories: Islam, Feminism, Politics, Theory, Gender

Place: Egypt

Time: 1980-2003

Argument Synopsis:

Mahmood's book is focused on the intersection of religion and feminism, specifically in the context of Islam. She explores some of the conceptual challenges that women's involvement in the Islamist movement pose to feminist theory in particular, through an ethnographic account of an urban women's mosque movement that is part of the larger Islamic revival in Cairo, Egypt. She highlights how Islamization of the sociocultural landscape of Egyptian society is in large part the work of the piety movement, of which the women's movement is an integral part. The women's mosque movement emerged in the mid-to-late 1970s when women started to organize weekly religious lessons—the movement emerged in response to the perception that religious knowledge had become increasingly marginalized under modern structures of secular governance. Mahmood, in her words, claims: "despite its focus on issues of piety, it would be wrong to characterize the women's mosque movement as an abandonment of politics." The government has increasingly subjected the movement to state regulation and scrutiny and it has come to recognize the impact of the movement. She seeks to analyze the conceptions of self, moral agency, and politics that undergird the practices of this neoliberal movement, in order to come to an understanding of the historical projects that animate it. The book relies on her two years of field work in Egypt from 1995 to 1997 for a bulk of its evidence.

Mahmood emphasizes the ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on women's agency. Her book explores how the notion of human agency, most often invoked by feminist scholars, has been brought to bear upon the study of women involved in patriarchal traditions such as Islam. Her central question is: how do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject's own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of external authority is a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality? Mahmood argues for a broader conception of women's political agency than current feminist theory allows—this theory is insufficient for explaining women's participation in religious revival movements. She underscores that it is impossible to understand the political agency of the movement without a proper grasp of its ethical agency. To read the activities of the movement primarily in terms of the resistance it poses to the logic of secular-liberal governance is to ignore an entire dimension of politics that remains poorly understood. Mahmood demonstrates that women's participation in the urban mosque movement and their adoption of religious practices are means to new, empowered ends.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Feminism offers both a diagnosis of women's status across cultures and a prescription for changing the situation of women who are understood to be marginalized, subordinated, or oppressed
- The normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination & subversion
- The activities performed by the participants of the women's mosque movement are products of authoritative discursive traditions whose logic & power far exceeds the consciousness of the subjects they enable