

**Book Review: Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press.**

**Mahmoud Afifi**

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Corresponding author: Mahmoud Afifi

Author contact: m.a.afifi@lancaster.ac.uk

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## *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*

Saba Mahmood

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Reviewed by Mahmoud Afifi

MA candidate at Harvard University

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*Politics of Piety* presents an ethnographic work, conducted by Saba Mahmood and a group of pious women activists in the mosques of Cairo, hence giving their activism the name “the women’s mosque movement” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 3). In this book, Mahmood questions secular-liberal feminists about their critiques that religious movements are patriarchal and oppressive. She also attempts to extend feminist arguments to explore the conditions that form the feminist subject of movements such as the mosque movement in Cairo.

The mosque movement in question is not an organized movement; rather it is the name for women’s involvement in learning sessions taking place in the mosques of urban Cairo. The learning sessions are led and attended by women, and the participants belong to “a variety of socio-economic backgrounds.” The lessons focus on studying scriptural texts and how to apply their teachings through bodily practices. In doing so, the lessons are intended to cultivate an ideal form of the pious self. In their active involvement, participants voluntarily maintain a “discursive tradition” that is thought to promote patriarchy and women’s subordination (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 2–3). The women’s mosque movement is apolitical in the sense that the participants do not belong to an organized Islamist group, nor do they seek to partake in politics of identity and representation (Mahmood, 2005, p. 193). However, the movement does take religion “outside of the private space of individualized belief,” with the purpose of creating a certain moral and social order (Mahmood, 2005, p. xi). The public appearance of the movement’s activities also has

implications for Egyptians' social life, and has consequently brought the movement under State scrutiny (Mahmood, 2005).

Mahmood (2005) is emphatic that this book is not a hermeneutical or theoretical project; she insists that any discourse about change and transformation must start from lived realities (Mahmood, 2005, p. 154). The book is not a purely anthropological work that lies beyond the subject; Mahmood rather grounds her analysis in the different conditions from which the subject of the study is formed. Mahmood's prior commitment to liberal feminist ideas has led her to rigorously engage with these ideas, contrast them with her findings, and re-examine sources from religion, politics, gender, and ethics to buttress her final analysis. The significance of the book resides in the fact that it attempts to fill the gap between theory and practice, while giving practice the final authority to define/redefine theory. The book is intended to appeal to readers of feminist theory, Islamic feminism, contemporary Islamic studies, politics, and virtuous ethics.

In her reference to "liberal feminism," Mahmood uses the term "liberal" loosely, so that it refers to the broader context of liberal politics, which promotes individual rights and separates political/social life from moral/religious ethics. Yet, Mahmood (2006) acknowledges that feminism is not merely integral, but also critical to, liberal politics (Mahmood, 2006, p. 32). For example, Mahmood (2005) refers to the endeavor of some feminists to redefine the liberal understanding of autonomy so that it can accommodate the particular interests of race, class, and color (Mahmood, 2005, p. 13). Further, Mahmood (2005) conspicuously recognizes that her analysis is motivated by the post-structuralist feminist critique of autonomy; yet, she departs from such critique insofar as it still defines agency in terms of subversion and resistance, hence limiting gender discourse to the liberal binary of "subordination and subversion" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 14, pp. 41–42). To Mahmood, what brings liberalism and feminism together is their conceptualization of freedom as a normative claim, which both seek to apply away from the collective (traditional or religious) conditions under which the subject is formed. With this in mind, Mahmood describes the women's mosque movement as a non-liberal movement in the sense that participants, to the extent that they might practice agency, do so not necessarily by resisting, but sometimes by inhabiting and living tradition. To Mahmood, such movements are non-liberal from the liberal perspective. Otherwise, Mahmood agrees that participants can be also described as "liberal"

because their understanding of human agency is located in their having free choice of what is in their interest, according to the very conditions of which they are formed.

Mahmood uses her ethnographic work to question feminist secular-liberal assumptions about concepts of the self, freedom, and moral agency. Such liberal-secular assumptions generally hold religious movements, such as the women's mosques movement, responsible for perpetuating patriarchy and the subjugation of women. Before she carried out this research, Mahmood herself—as she explains in the preface of this book—used to project these secular assumptions widely on women of non-liberal communities.

Based on her work with the women of the mosque movement, Mahmood (2005) has radically changed her prior political commitment to secular-liberal sensibilities, which see religion as a threat to progressive feminist goals and lend liberal feminism a self-assured monopoly of predetermining “the best form of life” for “unenlightened” women (Mahmood, 2005, p. 3). While Mahmood (2005) continues to share with her fellow liberal feminists the struggle against gender-based injustices, she calls for them to question the hegemonic claims of liberal feminism regarding religion, thus exposing the possibility to remake and transform one's previous assumptions when one encounters the other's worldview (Mahmood, 2005, p. 199, p. 36).

As shown in Chapter One, Mahmood (2005) particularly condemns liberal feminists for 1) reducing non-liberal movements and their religiously prescribed bodily practices (such as wearing of the veil) to “a flat narrative” of subordination; and 2) taking a prescriptive approach to gender, according to which resistance to socially prescribed norms is mandated as the sole modality of agency that women need to use to liberate themselves from male oppression (Mahmood, 2005, p. 10, p. 159, p. 175, p. 198). To Mahmood (2005, 2006), it is superficial to understand women's religiosity as a means of subjugation, and to understand agency in terms of resistance. Both instances of understanding – as far as Mahmood's participants are concerned – ignore the elements of subjectivity, and the conditions that have made subordination a coveted (desired) goal for these participants (Mahmood, 2005, p. 18, p. 157). At this point, Mahmood extends women's freedom to situations in which women's subordination to tradition can itself be an act of free of will, as in the women's mosque movement. As Mahmood (2005) explains, liberal and post-structuralist feminists failed to study the role of bodily practices in forming the subject, and

this failure is embedded in their inability to move beyond the Enlightenment binaries of the universal/particular, doing/undoing, resistance/subversion, enactment/resignification, and so on (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 23–24). These binaries position feminist thinking within the philosophical trajectory of modernity and postmodernity, which sometimes seek to understand the world apart from human-lived realities, and the technologies of self-formation. Hence, the possibility of understanding a particular tradition in its own terms, and according to the effect a tradition creates in the self, is limited. Although Mahmood does not reject the philosophical concepts permeating feminist theory, she insists that these concepts must be understood, read, and modified in connection with the study of concrete human practice. What makes Mahmood’s work significant is her attention to the role that concrete examples play in constituting and modifying theoretical concepts. This approach has helped Mahmood to fill the gap between “philosophical generality” and “ethnographic particularity,” thus reaching a more informative and authoritative conclusion about her participants.

Chapter Two outlines the features of the women’s mosque movement and the historical developments against which the movement emerged. In her analysis, Mahmood (2005) challenges the modern anthropological understanding of women’s piety, particularly the notion that ritual affects one’s everyday life as an expression of a universal tendency of self-reflection. To clarify, Mahmood, here, is against the universalization of the human experience of ritual; if our self-reflection of ritual is universal, this means that ritual is regarded as an object sitting outside of ourselves, which can be judged universally. To Mahmood, the subject is part of history with its past, present and future. The subject is entrenched within this history and cannot stand outside it to be judged objectively. The process of reflection is attended by history, context and the subjectivity made possible through such history and its conditions. For a better understanding, we need to look into rituals and the arguments surrounding them, rather than assuming that such rituals are mere instances of universal modern processes, because such assumption turns habitual acts into objects of reflection (Mahmood, 2005, p. 55). Mahmood (2005) explains that reflection is not universal, but is a historical event tenuously connected with one’s subjectivity, which—as demonstrated by participants of the mosque movement—is only made possible through pedagogy, as well as history and its conditions (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 53–56).

Chapter Three presents the pedagogical activities of the mosque movement's participants and their keenness to ground their interpretation of Islam in the Islamic authoritative sources of the tradition. In this regard, Mahmood (2005) utilizes Foucault's concept of "discursive formations", and Asad's concept of "discursive tradition" (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 115–116). She attempts to showcase that while the participants of the mosque movement maintain continuities with the past, their interpretations remain influenced by their different contexts and their subjectivities (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 96–118).

With such sensibilities to tradition and history, Chapter Four questions the Kantian understanding of ethics as universals lying outside of the human self. Mahmood (2005) rather situates her analysis of the women of the movement within the concept of "positive ethics" (according to which outward bodily practices are entrenched within the interior subjectivity of the individual), and to the process of realizing the meanings of such practices in the individual's everyday life. With this argument, Mahmood (2005) questions the modern anthropological binaries separating ritual from its pragmatic action on one hand, and on the other, from the feelings ritual creates in the subject. Mahmood rejects this separation and instead utilizes the Aristotelian concept of *habitus*, according to which an iterative practice, and the feelings it creates (in the self), constitute the way in which the self (subject) spontaneously perceives and reacts to the social world (Mahmood, 2005, p. 128–140).

In Chapter Five, Mahmood (2005) continues her analysis of the women's mosque movement, focusing on agency as a modality of action through which norms are lived, inhabited, and consolidated, rather than merely subverted by the participants (Mahmood, 2005, p. 23, p. 163). Mahmood's critique extends to post-structuralist feminists as she draws on Judith Butler's account of performativity. Performativity, a term introduced by J. L. Austin and extended by Butler, is when the iterative performance of norms/practices contributes to the formation of the subject, provided the subject repeatedly performs such norms/practices. While Butler's account of performativity inspires Mahmood's own analysis and argument, Mahmood highlights several differences between the two accounts, not least of which is Butler's pursuit to limit agency within the bounds of such binaries as doing and undoing (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 162–168). Based on Mahmood's interviews, even though agency might include acts of transgressing norms, such

transgression by no means breaks from the tradition because it remains grounded in other sites within that tradition (Mahmood, 2005, p. 180). However, this does not mean that the mosque movement is apolitical; rather, Mahmood (2005) describes the movement's activities as "unusual politics", because the participants do not use religion to express political identity or to seek institutional recognition, but as a means of critically self-realizing and socially promoting a specific mode of virtuous life (Mahmood, 2005, p. 193).

Of significance is Mahmood's effort to construct her theoretical analysis of the piety movement mainly based on her own gathered data. This approach has allowed Mahmood to revise her prior commitment to liberal ideas, with which she approached the field at the outset of her research. Mahmood does not seek to embrace a wholesale appropriation of the philosophical framings that seem to conveniently accommodate her analysis of the mosque movement. Rather, she analytically engages with such framings, shows their inadequacies, and remakes them so they sit at ease with her findings. Mahmood further makes a caveat against the universality of any philosophical principles; a philosophical principle to be fully apprehended and meaningfully applied—if at all—must be particularized to, and evaluated against, a specific life example (Mahmood, 2005, p. 167). A philosophical principle is evaluated and remade according to the context in which it is understood. According to Mahmood (2005), a philosophical principle is not used as a hermeneutic tool, but as a frame to help analyze the role of practice in forming the subject (Mahmood, 2005, p. 188). As Mahmood might argue, this focus on praxis is a call to carefully understand the arguments surrounding a given practice before we characterize such a practice as provisional or extinct.

To conclude, *Politics of Piety* is an attempt to develop feminist theory to engage with and explore the feminist subject within women's movements of religious revival. In this book, Mahmood proceeds from the assumption that any theoretical concept must be tested and re-evaluated against concrete real life examples. This assumption has helped Mahmood to revisit her prior commitment to the secular-liberal theoretical concepts employed by liberal feminists to dismiss some religious practices, like veiling, as oppressive and misogynist. Through her ethnographic work with the women's mosque movement in Cairo, Mahmood has also shown how

the ethical and the political are tenuously linked as the women of the mosque sought to willingly live a tradition that subordinates them.

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