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Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival

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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. Although 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 in this scholarship. The vexed relationship between feminism and religious traditions is perhaps most manifest in discussions on Islam. This is due in part to the historically contentious relationship that Islamic societies have had with what has come to be called “the West,” but in part to the challenges contemporary Islamic movements pose to secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral (if critical) part. In particular, women’s active support for a movement that seems to be inimical to their own interests and agendas, at a historical moment when more emancipatory possibilities would appear to be available to women, raises fresh dilemmas for feminists.¹

In this essay, I will probe some of the conceptual challenges that women’s participation in the Islamic movement poses to feminist theorists and gender analysts through an ethnographic account of an urban women’s mosque movement that is part of the larger Islamic revival in Cairo, Egypt. In this movement women from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds provide lessons to each other that focus on the teaching and studying of Islamic scriptures, social practices, and forms of bodily comportment considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self.² Even though Egyptian Muslim women have always had some measure of informal training in piety, 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 one, 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 these associations entail of an enormously complex phenomenon; nor am I interested in recovering a redeemable element within the Islamist movement by recuperating its latent liberatory potentials. Instead, I want to focus quite squarely on the conceptions of self, moral agency, and discipline that undergird the practices of this nonliberal movement so as to come to an understanding of the desires that animate it.

My goal, however, is more than to provide an “anthropological account” of the Islamic revival; it is also to make this material speak back to normative liberal assumptions about freedom and agency against which such a movement is held accountable. Thus my ethnographic tracings will sustain a running argument with and against key analytical concepts in feminist studies through which movements such as the one I am interested in are often analyzed. In doing so, I hope to continue a conversation initiated by feminist critics that explores the tensions attending the dual character of feminism both as an analytical and a political project (Butler 1990; Mohanty 1991; Rosaldo 1983; Strathern 1987, 1988).³

Specifically, in this article, I will 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 on the study of women involved in patriarchal religious traditions such as Islam. I will argue that, despite the important insights it has enabled, this model of agency sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will 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 relations of subordination enable and create. The analytical purchase such a conception of agency accords will be explored in the second half of this essay through an examination of the cultivation and performance of gendered Islamic virtues among the participants of the movement I worked with in Cairo. In analyzing this material, I hope not only to parochialize the normative subject of feminist theory as desirous of freedom from relations of domination, but also to rethink the conceptual relationship between desire and self-making, performance and the constitution of the subject, and moral action and embodiment in feminist debates.

Topography of the Mosque Movement

This is the first time in Egyptian history that such a large number of women have mobilized to hold public meetings in mosques to teach each other Islamic doctrine, thereby altering the historically male-centered character of mosques as well as Islamic pedagogy.⁴ 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 postcolonial 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.⁵ Notably, even though 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 holds subordination to a transcendent will (and thus, in many instances, to male authority) as its coveted goal.⁶

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 (*taghrīb*) of Egyptian society, is understood to have reduced Islamic knowledge (both as a mode of conduct as well 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.⁷ Thus, among Egyptians, there are those who view Islam as constitutive of the cultural terrain on which the Egyptian nation has acquired its unique historical character, those who understand Islam as a doctrinal system with strong political and juridical implications for the organization of state and society, those, such as the women I worked with, for whom Islam consists first and foremost in individual and collective practices of pious living.⁸ 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 sociopolitical issues. On the contrary, the form of piety it seeks to realize is predicated on, and transformative of, many aspects of social life.⁹ 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.

Although at times the mosque movement has been seen as a quietist alternative to the more militant forms of Islamic activism, there are many ways in which this movement sits uncomfortably with certain aspects of the secular liberal project promoted by the state.¹⁰ These tensions owe in part to the specific forms of will, desire, reason, and practice this movement seeks to cultivate, and the ways in which it reorganizes public life and debate in accord 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.¹¹

Agency, Resistance, Freedom

The pious subjects of the women's mosque movement occupy an uncomfortable place in feminist scholarship: they pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status, and 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. Although 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 in which 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 that women may usefully redirect and recode to secure their "own interests and agendas," a recoding that stands as the site of women's agency.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ Although recognizing its ongoing importance, in this paper I want to examine the assumptions and elisions that attend this analytical framing especially insofar as they constitute a barrier to the exploration of the kind of movement I am dealing with here.

Janice Boddy's work is an eloquent and intelligent example of this approach. Boddy worked in a village in an Arabic speaking region of northern Sudan on a women's *zar* cult—a widely practiced healing cult that uses Islamic idioms and spirit mediums and is largely comprised of women (1989). Through a rich ethnography of women's practices in a Sudanese village,

Boddy proposed that in a society where the “official ideology” of Islam is dominated and controlled by men, the zar practice may be understood as a space of subordinate discourse, and “a medium for the cultivation of women’s consciousness” (1989:345). She argued that zar possession serves as “a kind of counter-hegemonic process . . . : a *feminine response to hegemonic praxis*, and the privileging of men that this ideologically entails, that ultimately escapes neither its categories nor its constraints” (1989:7, emphasis added). She concluded by asserting 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*” (1989:345, emphasis added).

The ethnographic richness of this study notwithstanding, for the purposes of my argument, what is most relevant is the degree to which 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.¹⁵ 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. 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 self-expression 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—central for liberal and progressive thought, and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes—to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination. This 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, and 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

In order to explore the notion of freedom informing feminist scholarship in greater depth it is useful to draw on a distinction used by some liberal theorists between negative and positive freedom (Berlin 1969; Green 1986; Simony 1993; Taylor 1985). Negative freedom refers to the absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, whether imposed by the state, corporations, or private individuals.¹⁹ Positive freedom, on the other hand, is understood as the capacity to realize 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. Although there continues to be considerable debate over the formulation and coherence of these entwined notions,²⁰ what I want to highlight here is the concept of individual autonomy central to both, and the concomitant elements of coercion and consent that are critical to this topography of freedom. In order for an individual to be free, it is required that her actions be the consequence of her "own will" rather than of custom, tradition, or direct coercion. Thus, even illiberal actions can arguably be tolerated if it is determined that they are undertaken by a freely consenting individual who acted on her own accord (cf. Christman 1991).²¹ It is important to note that the idea of self-realization itself is not an invention of the liberal tradition but existed in pre-modern history in various forms, such as the Platonic notion of self mastery over one's passions, or the more religious notion of realizing oneself through self-transformation present in Buddhism and a variety of mystical traditions, including Islam and Christianity. Liberalism's unique contribution is to integrally link the notion of self-fulfillment with individual autonomy insofar as the process of realizing oneself comes to signify the ability to realize the desires of one's "true will" (cf. Gray 1989).²²

Both these notions provide the ground on which much of the feminist debate occurs: for example, the positive conception of liberty seems to be operative in aspects of the project of feminist historiography (sometimes referred to as her-story) that seeks to capture historically and culturally specific instances of women's self-directed action unencumbered by patriarchal norms or the will of others.²³ The negative conception of freedom seems to undergird studies of gender that seek to delineate those spaces in women's lives that are independent of men's influence and possibly coercive presence, as the spaces truly pregnant with possibilities for women's fulfillment or self-realization.²⁴ Hence the attempts by many feminist historians and anthropologists of the Arab Muslim world 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), and even conferring a potentially liberatory

meaning to practices of sex segregation that had traditionally been understood as making women marginal to the public arena of conventional politics (Ahmed 1982; Wikan 1991).

My intention here is not to question the profound transformation that the liberal discourse of freedom and emancipation has enabled in women's lives around the world, but to draw attention to the ways in which its presuppositions have come to be naturalized in the scholarship on gender. 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 contrast to white middle class feminists who had called for dismantling the institution of the nuclear family as a key source of women's oppression, Native and African American feminists argued that for them freedom 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 families (see for e.g. Brant 1984; Collins 1991; A. Davis 1983; Lorde 1984).²⁵ Arguments such as this successfully expanded the notion of "self-realization/self-fulfillment" by making considerations of class, race, and ethnicity constitutive of its very definition such that individual autonomy had to be rethought in light of other issues. In this article, I would like to push further in the direction opened up by these debates, and argue for uncoupling both the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will, as well as agency from the progressive goal of emancipatory politics. Importantly, this appeal is not a rehearsal of arguments made by poststructuralist feminists, as it may seem at first glance. Rather, it is born out of the realization that despite the fact that poststructuralist critiques have been key in decentering liberal notions of autonomy, voluntarism, and the transcendental subject, the normative subject of poststructuralist feminist theory remains a liberatory one, her agency largely conceptualized in terms of resistance to social norms (see more on this below).

It is quite clear that the idea of individual liberty as *the* political ideal is relatively new in modern history, and many societies, including Western ones, have lived with aspirations other than this. Nor for that matter does the narrative of individual (and collective) liberty exhaust the desires by which people in liberal societies live. Indeed, if we accept the notion that all forms of desire are socially constructed (as much of recent feminist scholarship has argued), then it is important to interrogate the conditions under which different forms of desire emerge, including those for submission to a variety of goals, and not naturalize those that ensure the emergence of feminist politics.

Consider for example the women from the mosque movement with whom I worked. The task of realizing piety placed these women in conflictual relations with a variety of structures of authority: some grounded in instituted standards of Islamic orthodoxy, and others in norms of liberal discourse; some in parental and male kin authority and others in state institutions. Yet the *rationale* of these conflicts was not predicated on and, therefore, cannot be understood by reference to, arguments for gender equality, or resistance to male

authority, alone. Neither is it possible to read these women's practices as a re-inscription of traditional roles because of the significant ways in which they have reconfigured the gendered practice of Islamic pedagogy and the social institution of mosques. Of course it may be argued 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, thereby retaining the validity of the kind of analysis I discuss above. Although granting that such a reading is possible, I would submit that it 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.

The multiple studies produced on the resurgent popularity of the veil in urban Egypt since the 1980s are a case in point (El-Guindi 1981; Hoffman-Ladd 1987; MacLeod 1991; Radwan 1982; Zuhur 1992). The proliferation of these studies reveals the surprise many feel that, contrary to expectations, so many "modern Egyptian women" have turned to wearing the veil. Some of these studies offer functionalist explanations citing a variety of reasons why women veil (e.g. 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 analyses identify the veil as a symbol of resistance to the commodification of women's bodies in the popular media, and to the hegemony of Western values more generally. Although these studies have made important contributions, it is surprising that ideas of female modesty or piety as Islamic virtues receive such scant attention, especially given that it is precisely in these terms many of the women who have taken up this practice frame their decision.²⁶ Instead what is often made to stand in for "real motivations" are those authorized by the analyst's categories (such as social protest, economic necessity, anomie, utilitarian strategy), while terms like morality, divinity, and virtue are accorded the status of the phantom imaginings of the hegemonized.²⁷ I don't mean to suggest, of course, that our analysis should be restricted to terms used by the people we study. Rather what I want to emphasize is the importance of being attentive to the elisions any process of translation entails, especially when the language of social science claims a self-transparent universalism, and the language used by "ordinary people" is understood as a poor approximation of their reality.²⁸

The argument I am making here should be familiar to anthropologists who have long acknowledged that the terms people use to organize their lives are not simply a gloss over universally shared assumptions about the world and one's place in it, but are actually constitutive at times of very different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience.²⁹ In what follows, I want to attend to the specific logic of the discourse of piety that inheres not so much in the intentionality of the actor, but in the relationships that are articulated between words, concepts, and practices that constitute a particular discursive tradition. I would insist that an appeal to understanding the coherence by which a discourse is articulated is neither to justify it, nor to argue for some irreducible

essentialism or cultural relativism. It is, instead, to take a necessary step in the problem of explaining the force a discourse commands.

Docility and Agency

In trying to move beyond the teleology of emancipation underwriting many accounts of women's agency, I have found insights offered by post-structuralist theorists into power and the constitution of the subject useful in analyzing the women's mosque movement. Germane to this formulation is the reconceptualization of power as a set of relations that do not simply dominate the subject, but also, importantly, form the conditions of its possibility. In following Foucault, feminist theorist Judith Butler calls this the paradox of *subjectivation*, inasmuch as 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 1997b; Foucault 1980, 1983). Stated otherwise, one may argue that the set of capacities inhering in a subject—the abilities that define its modes of agency—are not the residue of an undominated self that existed prior to the operations of power but are themselves the product of those operations. Such a conceptualization of power and subject formation also encourages us to understand 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.

In order to clarify this point, we might consider the example of a virtuoso pianist who submits herself to the, at times painful, regime of disciplinary practice, as well as hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability—the requisite agency—to play the instrument with mastery. Importantly, her agency is predicated on her ability to be taught, a condition classically referred to as docility. Although we have come to associate docility with abandonment of agency, the term literally implies the malleability required of someone to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge—a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity and more that of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement.³⁰ Such a way of thinking about agency draws our attention to the practical ways in which individuals work on themselves to become the willing subjects of a particular discourse. Importantly, to understand agency in this manner is neither to invoke a self-constituting autonomous subject nor subjectivity as a private space of cultivation. Rather, it draws our attention to the specific ways in which one performs a certain number of operations on one's thoughts, body, conduct, and ways of being, in order to “attain a certain kind of state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1997:24) in accord with a particular discursive tradition.³¹

Although the above formulation draws on Butler's argument, it is important to point out that it departs from her work insofar as it urges us to consider agency: (a) more in terms of capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of acts (of which resistance to a particular set of relations of domination is *one kind of an act*); and (b) as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed. In order

to make this clear it is necessary to provide a brief account of Butler's conception of agency and its attendant notion of performativity. In contrast to those who had argued that gender differences are rooted in biological and/or culturally symbolic systems of meanings, Butler broke new analytical ground by proposing that gender is an effect of power secured through the repeated performance of norms. She maintained that "gender is not an inner core or static essence, but a reiterated enactment of norms, ones that produce, retroactively, the appearance of gender as an abiding interior depth" (1997c:14). According to Butler, in its iterability and repetition, each structure of norms (including gender norms), also simultaneously carries its own possibility of undoing insofar as the reiteration may fail, be reappropriated or resignified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms. Butler suggests:

The paradox of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) 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, emphasis added]

Crucial to Butler's analysis therefore are two simultaneous moves. First, she locates the possibility of resistance to norms within the structure of power itself rather than in the consciousness of an autonomous individual,³² second, she considers this act of resistance to be the paradigmatic instance of agency.³³ Although I am in considerable agreement with her first move, as must be clear by now, it is the second that I find more problematic. Despite Butler's acknowledgment at times that agency is not to be conceptualized as "always and only opposed to power" (1997b:17), her theorization of agency (as much as her demonstrations of it) are almost always derived from, and directed at, the articulation of resistance to social norms and the subordinating function of power.³⁴ Agency, in other words, is largely thought of in terms of the capacity to subvert norms (especially heterosexual norms) in Butler's work.

Although Butler's concern with locating possibilities of resistance to subordination is understandable in light of her commitments to progressive politics, I would argue that an inquiry into processes that secure such a desire for resistance—that are also processes of subordination pursuant to her own reasoning—is not irrelevant to the question of politics. Although the transcendental liberal subject undergirding the two notions of freedom discussed above is clearly questioned in Butler's analysis (as is the notion of the autonomous will), what remains intact is the natural status accorded to the desire for resistance to social norms, and the incarceration of the notion of agency to the space of emancipatory politics. Indeed, if the desire for freedom and/or subversion of norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, regardless of their pursuits, projects, cultural and historical conditions, but is profoundly mediated by other capacities and desires, then the question arises how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of desires, capacities,

and virtues that are historically and culturally specific, and whose trajectory does not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?

Simply put my point is this: 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 capacity by which it is effected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori, but allowed to emerge through an analysis of the particular networks of 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 very well be a form of agency—one that must be understood in the context of the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability (see my discussion of the virtue of *ṣabr* below)

In what follows I will elaborate on these points by analyzing two ethnographic examples 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 investments and agency. In the course of this argument, I hope to make us rethink the place accorded to religious embodiment and moral virtues in contemporary feminist debates, with particular attention to the notion of performativity as discussed by Butler.

Cultivating Shyness

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

Not unlike other devout women from the mosques I worked with, 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*). Although 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 as sites of discipline until the religious virtues acquired the status of embodied habits.

Among the religious virtues (*fadāil*) that are considered to be important to acquire for pious Muslims in general, and women in particular, is that of modesty or shyness (*al-ḥayāʿ*), a common topic of discussion among the mosque participants. To practice *al-ḥayāʿ* means to be diffident, modest, and able to feel and enact shyness. Although 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. 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-ḥayāʿ*—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:³⁵

Contemplating the word *istiḥyāʿ*, which is form ten of the substantive *ḥayāʿ*,³⁶ Amal said “I used to think that even though shyness (*al-ḥayāʿ*) 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 twenty-five in *Surat al-Qaṣaṣ* I realized that *al-ḥayāʿ* was among the good deeds (*huwwa min al-āʿmāl al-sāliḥa*) and given my natural lack of *al-ḥayāʿ* I had to make or create it first. I realized that making (*ṣanaʿ*) it in yourself is not hypocrisy (*nifāq*), and that eventually your inside learns to have *al-ḥayāʿ* too.” Here she looked at me and explained the meaning of the word *istiḥyāʿ*: “It means making oneself shy, even if it means creating it (*Yaʿni ya Saba, yaʿmil nafsuhu yitkisif ḥatta lau sanʿati*).” She continued with her point, “And finally I understood that once you do this, the sense of shyness (*al-ḥayāʿ*) eventually imprints itself on your inside (*al-shaʿūr yitbaʿ ʿala juwwaki*).” Another friend, Nama, a single woman in her early thirties, who had been sitting and listening, added: “It’s 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.”

It is quite possible to read this conversation as an enactment of the socialization of feminine norms that both reflect and reproduce women’s subordination. However, in what follows I will analyze this conversation in light of two somewhat different sets of issues that pertain to the conceptualization of agency I outlined above. In particular, I would like to draw our attention to: (a) the distinctive character of the disciplinary techniques by which the capacity

for shyness is being created, as suggested in this conversation; and (b) the conceptual relationship these practices articulate between memory, bodily acts, and the constitution of the self. To begin with, what is striking here is that instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determine one's desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but *creates* them. Furthermore, in this conception it is through repeated *bodily acts* that one trains one's memory, desire and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct.³⁷ 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 (captured in the oft repeated phrase: "how can I do something sincerely when my heart is not in it?"). Taking the absence of shyness as a marker of an incomplete learning process, Amal further develops this quality by synchronizing both outward behavior and inward motives until the discrepancy between the two is dissolved. 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 were *not* to 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 interactions with people (especially men)—do not serve as manipulable masks in a game of public presentation, detachable from an essential interiorized self. Rather they are the *critical markers*, as well as the *ineluctable means* by which one trains oneself to be pious. Thus while wearing the veil at first serves as a means to tutor oneself in the attribute of shyness, it is also simultaneously integral to the practice of shyness. In other words, one cannot simply discard wearing the veil once a modest deportment has been acquired because the veil is itself partly what defines that deportment.³⁸ This is a crucial aspect of the disciplinary program pursued by the participants of the mosque movement, one whose significance is elided when the veil is understood solely in terms of its symbolic value as a marker of women's subordination or Islamic identity. Although there is little doubt that the injunction about women's veiling is predicated on an entrenched logic of gender inequality, there is more at stake in this conception of veiling as a disciplinary practice.³⁹ Equally crucial is an entire conceptualization of the role of the body in the making of the self in which the outward behavior of the body constitutes both the potentiality, as well as the means, through which an interiority is realized.

Contrast this conception, for example, with the views of Adil Hussein, a key leader of the Egyptian Islamist political party Hizb al-'Amal (Labor Party)⁴⁰ who made the following remarks in the context of a discussion about the veil in a documentary on the Islamist movement:

At this period of [the Islamic] revival and pride in ourselves and our past, why should we not take pride in the symbols that distinguish us from others [like the veil]? So we say that the first condition is that clothing should be modest. But why can't we add a second condition that we would like this dress to be a continuation

of what we have created in this region, like the Indian sari? . . . Why can't we have our own dress which expresses decency, a requirement of Islam, as well as the special beauty that would be the mark of our society which has excelled in the arts and civilization? [York 1992]

While women's bodies are made to bear the burden of modesty by both Hussein and the mosque participants, the larger conceptualization of the body's relationship to the making of the self is quite different. For the women I worked with, the veil is not a matter of "civilizational choice" as it seems to be for Hussein: it is first and foremost a command from God. Neither does its importance lie in the symbolic meaning it carries as a marker of the Muslim/Arab identity (like the Indian sari). In fact, women mosque participants would often argue that those who don the veil for its symbolic significance have a deeply flawed understanding of the Islamic injunction: one veils not to express an identity but as a necessary, if insufficient, condition for attaining the goal internal to that practice—namely, the creation of a shy and modest self. The veil in this sense is the means both of *being* and *becoming* a certain kind of a person, whereas for Hussein the act of veiling is an expression of a preformed self instead of actually contributing to the making of that self.

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). The term *habitus* has become best known in the social sciences through the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who uses it as a theoretical concept to understand how the structural and class positions of individual subjects come to be embodied as dispositions—largely through unconscious processes (1977). My own work draws on a longer and richer history of this term, however, one that addresses the centrality of gestural capacities in certain traditions of moral cultivation. Aristotelian in origin and adopted by the three monotheistic traditions, *habitus* in this older meaning 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).⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.

A similar notion of habituated learning through practical knowledge is also found in the writings of medieval and late medieval Islamic thinkers such as al-Ghazali, al-Miskawayh, and Ibn Khaldun. In Ira Lapidus's study of the fourteenth century Arab-Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun, he argues that although the

Arabic word *malaka* has often been translated as habit, its sense is best conveyed in the Latin word *habitus* that he describes as an inner quality developed through outer practice until that quality comes to regulate and govern one's behavior without conscious deliberation (1984). In this conception, *malaka* is a necessary part of acquiring excellence in a range of practical crafts (like carpentry), but its highest degree of achievement is manifest in the practice of faith. As with other skills, Lapidus notes, achieving *malaka* in faith rises from practice, is perfected by practice, and then governs all actions and practices. Although *malaka* is not a term that I encountered in my work with the mosques, it conveys the sense in which much of the conversation about piety and virtue proceeds among the participants of the Islamic revival.

In the conception outlined above, the repeated performance of acts enacts a certain labor in the making of the self that may at first seem similar to Butler's notion of performativity discussed in the first part of the essay; both views emphasize the fact that it is in the repeated performance of practices (and/or norms in Butler's sense) that the subject's will, desire, intellect, and body comes to acquire a particular form. But there are significant differences entailed in the two senses of performance at work here that are important to spell out. In Butler's schema what is emphasized is the *paratactic character* of performances, where each performance is either a successful or failed repetition of the previous, and when it fails it is analyzed in terms of the performance's potentiality to resignify norms. In contrast, the model of performance I have discussed emphasizes the sedimented and cumulative character of reiterated performances, where each performance builds on prior ones, and a carefully calibrated system exists by which differences between reiterations are judged in terms of how successfully (or not) the performance has taken root in the body and mind. The mosque participants—no matter how pious they were exercised great vigilance in scrutinizing themselves how well (or poorly) their outward performance matched or reflected their inward dispositions (as do Amal and Nama in the conversation above).

Significantly, the question of disruption of norms is differently posed in the two economies of discipline discussed here. Not only are the standards different by which a performance is perceived to have failed or succeeded, but the practices that *follow* the identification of an act (as successful or failed) are also different. Secondly, the model operative among the mosque participants emphasizes the cumulative character of reiterated performances in the material formation of the embodied subject, whereas Butler's model is grounded in an analysis of power largely understood in terms of processes of signification whose disruptive potential lies in the indeterminate character of signs. In the model of performance operative in the mosques, insofar as the body is understood to be the "developable means" (Asad 1993:76) through which particular forms of being and action are realized, one would literally have to retutor the body to behave in a different way in order to destabilize or disrupt the solidity of norms. Rebellion and compliance both devolve on the docility of the body.

In delineating these differences my point is not to assert the superiority of one framework over another a priori. Rather, it is to point out that analytical frameworks have historical and cultural moorings, and when these are brought to bear on nonliberal social movements like the one I am discussing, it is worth pausing to reflect whether or not the constitutive elements of a particular analytics are adequate for what is being examined. It is not enough, therefore, to say that subjects are constituted through symbols because it is the practical context that determines the meaning a symbol carries, and the same set of symbols can articulate very different regimes of power and discipline. As my analysis of the practice of shyness and veiling reveals what is at stake in these symbolic practices is not only the regulation of the feminine body by male religious authority, but also the very concepts through which the mind and the body are articulated in shaping the disciplined self. This means that the question of reform of this tradition cannot start simply from an advocacy of women's emancipation from male control, but necessitates a much deeper engagement with the architecture of the self that undergirds a particular mode of living and attachment of which shyness/veiling are a part.

To Endure is to Enact?

In this part of the essay I want to turn to two contrastive conceptions of agentival action that I encountered in my fieldwork, a contrast that sheds light on how we might think of agency not only as the capacity for progressive change but also, importantly, as the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist. Talal Asad, in a recent article, has questioned the ways in which the idea of agency has become coupled with consciousness and responsibility in recent anthropological literature, a coupling that "serves to historicize social structures by according responsibility for progressive change to conscious actors" (2000:2). He contends that such an understanding presupposes a particular anthropology of the subject, one that he goes on to parochialize by exploring the role of disempowerment and pain in relation to forms of agency found in Muslim and Christian religious history. Similarly, Veena Das in discussing the violence inflicted on women during the partition of the Indian subcontinent urges us to consider women's ability to survive the ongoing presence of this pain not so much as dramatic transgression and defiance, but in terms of the "doing of little things" that does not have the sense of "passive submission but of an active engagement" (Das 1999:11–12; also see Das 1995). In different ways, both have shown that the experience of pain is not limited to passive suffering, but also enables certain ways of inhabiting the world that must be explored through an analysis of the languages in which the pain resides.

Inspired by these explorations, in what follows I will discuss the strikingly different ways in which two professional women dealt with the pressures of being single in a society where heterosexual marriage is regarded as a compulsory norm. One of them was a participant in the mosque movement, a self-acknowledged Islamist, and the second a woman whom I had come to know through my circle of friends at the American University of Cairo and who

identified herself as a “secular-Muslim.” In my analysis, I want to explore the distinct narratives of selfhood invoked by the two women in the course of discussing how they managed to survive what they considered to be painful situations encountered by unmarried women. In juxtaposing these two narratives, I will argue that even though it would be customary to consider one of these strategies “more agentival” than the other, such a reading would be reductive of the efforts entailed in the learning and practicing of virtues that might not sit well with humanist sensibilities but are nonetheless constitutive of agency in important ways.

The full extent to which single women are subjected to the pressures of marriage and finding a spouse in Egypt was revealed to me in a conversation with Nadia, a woman whom I had come to know through her work in the mosques. Nadia was in her mid-thirties and had been married for a couple of years but did not have any children; she and her husband lived in a small apartment in a lower-middle income neighborhood of Cairo. She taught in a primary school close to her home, and twice a week after work she would teach the Quran to young children in a mosque as part of what she considered to be her social responsibilities in the ongoing work of piety. Afterward, she would often stay to attend the lesson at the mosque delivered by one of the more well known woman teachers (*dā‘iyya*). Sometimes, after the lesson, I would catch a bus back with her and her friends. The ride back was long and we would often have a chance to chat.

During one of these rides back I observed a conversation between Nadia and her long-time friend Iman who was in her late twenties and also volunteered at the mosque. Iman seemed agitated that day and, once on the bus, spoke to Nadia about her problem immediately. She had apparently been approached by a male colleague who was married to another woman to ask her hand in marriage.⁴³ By Egyptian standards Iman was well over the marriageable age. Iman was agitated because although the man was very well respected at her place of work and she had always held him in high regard, he already had a first wife. She was confused about what she should do, and was asking Nadia for advice. Much to my surprise, Nadia advised Iman to tell this man to approach her parents formally to ask for her hand in marriage, and allow her parents to investigate the man’s background in order to ascertain whether he was a suitable match for her.

I was taken aback by this response because I had expected Nadia to tell Iman not to think about this issue any further, since not only had the man broken the rules for proper conduct by approaching Iman directly instead of her parents, but he was also already married. I had come to respect Nadia’s judgments on issues of piety because of her principled conduct: on numerous occasions I had seen her give up opportunities that would have accrued material and social advantages to her for the sake of her principles. So a week later, when I was alone with Nadia I asked her the question that had been bothering me: why did she not tell Iman to cut off any connection with this man? Nadia seemed a

little puzzled and asked me why did I think this was proper advice. When I explained, this is how the conversation proceeded:⁴⁴

Nadia said, “But there is nothing wrong in a man approaching a woman for her hand in marriage directly as long as his intent is serious and he is not playing with her. This occurred many times even at the time of the Prophet.” I interrupted her and said, “But what about the fact that he is already married?” Nadia looked at me and asked, “You think that she shouldn’t consider marriage to an already married man?” I nodded yes. Nadia gave me a long and contemplative look, and said “I don’t know how it is in the United States but this issue is not that simple here in Egypt [*al-mas’ila di mish sahla fi Maṣr, ya Saba*]. Marriage is a very big problem here. A woman who is not married is rejected by the entire society as if she has some disease [*al-maraḍ*], as if she is a thief [*ḥarāmi*]. It is an issue that is very painful indeed [*hadhahi mas’ila muzlima jiddan, jiddan ḥaḥqī*].”

I asked Nadia what she meant by this. She replied:

If you are unmarried after the age of say late-teens or early twenties—as is the case with Iman—everyone around you treats you like you have a defect [*al-naqṣ*]. Wherever you go, you are asked “why didn’t you get married [*matjawwaztish ley?*]?” Everyone knows that you can’t offer to marry a man, that you have to wait until a man approaches you. Yet they act as if the decision is in your hands! You know I did not get married until I was 34 years old: I stopped visiting my relatives, which is socially improper, because every time I would go I would encounter the same questions. What is even worse is that your [immediate] family starts to think that you have some failing in you [*al-‘aib*] because no man has approached you for marriage. They treat you as if you have a disease.

Nadia paused for a moment reflectively and then continued, “It’s not as if those who are married necessarily have a happy life. For marriage is a blessing [*na‘ma*], but it can also be a trial/problem [*fiṭna*]. For there are husbands who are cruel [*qāṣi*], they beat their wives, bring other wives into the same house, and don’t give each an equal share. But these people who make fun of you for not being married don’t think about this aspect of marriage, and only stress marriage as a blessing [*na‘ma*]. Even if a woman has a horrible husband, and has a hard married life, she will still make an effort to make you feel bad for not being married.”

I was surprised at Nadia’s clarity about the injustice of this situation toward women and the perils of marriage. I asked Nadia if single men were treated in the same way. Nadia replied resoundingly “Of course not! For the assumption is that a man, if he wanted to, could have proposed to any woman: if he is not married its because *he didn’t want* to, or that there was no woman who deserved him. But for the woman it is assumed that no one wanted *her* because its not up to her to make the first move.”

Nadia shook her head again, and went on: “No, this situation is very hard and a killer, O Saba [*al-mauḍū‘ ṣa‘b wa qātil*]. You have to have a very strong personality [*shakhṣiyya qawiyya*] for all of this to not affect you because eventually you also start thinking that there is something deeply wrong with you that explains why you are not married.” I asked her what she meant by being

strong. Nadia said in response, “You must be patient in the face of difficulty [*lāzim tikūni sābira*], trust in God [*tawwakali ‘ala Allah*], and accept the fact that this is what He has willed as your fate [*qadā’*]; if you complain about it all the time, then you are denying that it is only God who has the wisdom to know why we live in the conditions we do and not humans.”

I asked Nadia if she had been able to achieve such a state of mind, given that she was married quite late. Nadia answered in an unexpected manner. She said, “O Saba, you don’t learn to become patient [*sābira*] or trust in God [*mutawakkila*] just when you face difficulties. There are many people who face difficulties, and may not even complain, but they are not patient, enduring [*sābirīn*]. You practice the virtue of patience [*ṣabr*] because it is a good deed [*al-‘amal al-ṣāliḥ*], regardless of your situation: whether your life is difficult or happy. In fact, practicing patience in the face of happiness is even more difficult.” Noting my look of surprise, she said: “Yes, because think of how often people turn to God only when they have difficult times, and often forget Him in times of comfort. To practice patience in moments of your life when you are happy, is to be mindful of His rights [*haqqahū*] upon you at all times.” I asked Nadia, “But I thought you said that one needs to have patience so as to be able to deal with one’s difficulties.” Nadia responded by saying, “It is a secondary consequence [*al-nāṭija al-thānawiyya*] of your doing good deeds, among them the virtue of patience. God is merciful and He rewards you by giving you the capacity to be courageous in moments of difficulties. But you should practice *ṣabr* because this is the right thing to do in the path of God [*fi ṣabīl lillah*].”

I came back from my conversation with Nadia quite struck by the clarity with which she outlined the predicament of women in Egyptian society; a situation created and regulated by social norms for which women were in turn blamed. Nadia was also clear that women did not deserve the treatment they received, and that many of those she loved (including her kin) were equally responsible for the pain inflicted on her when she was single. Although polygamy is sanctioned in Islam, Nadia and other participants of the mosque movement would often point out that, according to the Quran, marriage to more than one woman is conditional on the ability of men to treat all their wives equally (emotionally and materially), a condition almost impossible to fulfill.⁴⁵ For this reason, polygamous marriages are understood to create difficult situations for women and the mosque participants generally advise against it.⁴⁶ Nadia’s advice to Iman that she consider marriage to a married man, however, was based on a recognition of the extreme difficulty entailed in living as a single woman in Egypt.

While Nadia’s response about having to make such choices resonated with other secular Egyptian friends of mine, it was her advocacy of the cultivation of the virtue of *ṣabr* (roughly meaning to persevere in the face of difficulty without complaint) that seemed most problematic for them. Insofar as *ṣabr* entails the capacity to endure in the face of hardship without complaint, it invokes in the minds of many the passivity women are often encouraged to cultivate in the face of injustice.⁴⁷ Sana, a single professional woman in her mid-thirties who

came from an upper-middle class family, concurred with Nadia's description of how difficult life progressively became for single women in Egypt but strongly disagreed with her advice regarding *ṣabr*. She said, "ṣabr is an important Islamic principle, but these religious types [*mutadayyintn*] think it's a solution to everything. It's such a passive way of dealing with this situation." While for Sana too a woman needed to have a "strong personality" (*shakhsiyya qawiyya*) in order to be able to deal with such a circumstance, for her this meant acquiring self-esteem or self-confidence (*thiqa fi al-nafs wa al-dhāt*). As she explained, "Self-esteem makes you independent of what other people think of you. You begin to think of your worth not in terms of marriage and men, but in terms of who you *really are*, and in my case, I draw pride from my work and that I am good at it. Where does *ṣabr* get you? Instead of helping you to improve your situation, it just leads you to accept it as fate—passively."

Although Nadia and Sana share their recognition of the painful situation single women face, they differ markedly in their respective engagements with this suffering, each enacting a different modality of agency in the face of it. For Sana the ability to survive the situation she faces lies in seeking self-empowerment through the cultivation of self-esteem, as a psychological capacity that, in her view, enables one to pursue self-directed choices and actions unhindered by other's opinions. Thus the usefulness of self-esteem lies precisely inasmuch as it is a means to achieve one's self-directed autonomously chosen goals.⁴⁸ For Sana one of the important arenas to acquire this self-esteem is through her professional achievements. Nadia was also a teacher, but she clearly did not regard her professional work in the same manner.

Importantly, for Nadia the practice of *ṣabr* does not necessarily empower one to be immune from other's opinions. According to her, one undertakes the practice of *ṣabr*, first and foremost, because it is an essential attribute of a pious character, an attribute to be practiced regardless of the situation one faces. Rather than alleviating suffering, *ṣabr* allows one to bear and live hardship *correctly* as prescribed by one tradition of Islamic self-cultivation.⁴⁹ As Nadia says, if the practice of *ṣabr* fortifies your ability to deal with social suffering this is its secondary, not essential, consequence. Justification for the exercise of *ṣabr*, in other words, resides neither in its ability to reduce suffering nor in helping one realize one's self-directed choices and/or goals. When I questioned Nadia about this, she gave me the example of the figure of Ayyub (Job) who is known for his exemplary patience in the face of extreme physical and social hardship in Islam (and Christianity). Nadia noted that Ayyub is known *not* for his ability to rise above pain, but precisely for the manner in which he *lived* his pain. Ayyub's perseverance did not decrease his suffering: it ended only when God had deemed it so. On this view, it is not only the lack of complaint in the face of hardship that counts as *ṣabr*, but it is the way in which *ṣabr* infuses one's life and mode of being that makes one a *sābira* (the one who exercises *ṣabr*). As Nadia notes above, while *ṣabr* is realized through practical tasks, its consummation does not lie in practice alone.

It should be noted that Nadia's conception of *ṣabr* was linked to the idea of divine causality, the wisdom of which could not be deciphered by mere human intelligence. Thus, not unlike Sana above, many secular oriented Egyptians regard Nadia's approach as defeatist and fatalist, an acceptance of social injustice whose real origins lie in structures of patriarchy and social arrangements, rather than God's will manifest as fate (*qadā'*).⁵⁰ In this logic, to hold humans responsible for unjust social arrangements allows for a possibility of change that a divine causality forecloses. Note, however, that the weight Nadia accords to fate does not absolve humans from responsibility for the unjust circumstances single women face. Rather, as she pointed out to me later, predestination is one thing and choice another (*al-qadr shai wa al-ikhtiyār shai ākhir*): while it is God who determines your fate (e.g. whether you are poor or wealthy) it is human beings who choose how to deal with their situations (e.g. you can either steal or use licit means to ameliorate your situation of poverty); ultimately God holds them accountable for the latter. What we have here is a notion of human agency defined in terms of individual responsibility that is bounded by an eschatological structure on the one hand, and a social one on the other. Importantly, this account privileges neither the relational nor the autonomous self so familiar to anthropologists (cf. Joseph 1999), but a conception of individual ethics whereby each person is responsible for her own actions.⁵¹

Just as the practice of self-esteem structured the possibilities of action that were open to Sana, so did the realization of *ṣabr* for Nadia: enabling certain ways of being and foreclosing others. It is clear that certain virtues have lost their value in the liberal imagination (like humility, modesty, and shyness) and are considered emblematic of passivity and inaction, especially if they don't buttress the autonomy of the individual: *ṣabr*, for example, may well mark an inadequacy of action, a failure to act under the inertia of tradition. But *ṣabr* in the sense described by Nadia and others marks not a reluctance to act; rather it is integral to a constructive project, a site of considerable investment, struggle, and achievement. What Nadia's and Sana's discussions reveal are two different modes of engaging with social injustices, one grounded in a tradition that we have come to value, and another in a nonliberal tradition that is being resuscitated by the movement I worked with.

To recognize this is not to undervalue the project of reforming oppressive social conditions, something neither Nadia nor Sana could pursue for a variety of reasons. In other words, the exercise of *ṣabr* did not hinder Nadia principally from embarking on a project of social reform any more than the practice of self-esteem enabled Sana to do so. One should, therefore, not draw any hasty correlations between secular dispositions and the ability to transform conditions of social injustice. Beyond this point, what I also want to emphasize is that to analyze people's actions in terms of realized or frustrated attempts at social transformation is to necessarily reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of domination. Just as our own lives don't somehow fit the demands of such a stringent requirement, it would also be important to keep this in mind when analyzing the lives

of women like Nadia and Sana, as much as movements of moral reform such as the one discussed here. As I suggested before, even though the field of Egyptian politics is being transformed undoubtedly by the activities of the women's mosque movement, its effects are quite distinct from those of the Islamist political parties that seek to control the state. Consequently, the analytical tools that attend them should also reflect the different projects each enables.

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 seminars and conferences. I am often asked if such a hermeneutical approach to analyzing the activities of the Islamist movement does not necessarily entail a suspension of political judgment, if not an outright "embracing" of a whole set of practices that are injurious to women? 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 inasmuch as no analytical undertaking is considered enough in and of itself unless it takes a position vis-à-vis the subordination of women. 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" (1988:28).

Although appreciating Strathern's astute comments about the enterprise of thinking/writing on the double edge of analysis and advocacy, I also think the argument I offer here has repercussions for the way we think about politics. In this article I have argued that the liberatory goals of feminism should be rethought in light of the fact that the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally 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 in different cultural and political locations, and not hold one particular model to be axiomatic as is often the case in progressivist narratives. 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, constitution of the body within structures of power.

If there is one thing that the feminist tradition has made clear, it is that questions of politics must be pursued at the level of the architecture of the self, the processes (social and technical) through which its constituent elements (instincts, desires, emotions, memory) are identified and given coherence. Although this interest in embodied politics has been used to explicate how gender inequality works differently in various cultural systems, far less attention has been paid to how an exploration of different “visceral modes of appraisal” (Connolly 1999) might parochialize left-liberal assumptions about the constitutive relationship between action and embodiment when discussing politics. Women’s embodied relationships to the world and themselves, once understood as an enactment of structures of inequality, often serve as the theatre in which already known projects, affects, and commitments are played out. Yet if it is conceded that politics involves more than rational argumentation and evaluation of abstract moral principles, and that political judgments arise from the intersubjective level of being and acting, then it follows that this level must be engaged to think constitutively and critically about what politics is or should be about.

To suggest that we attend to this visceral register is not simply a call for greater analytical precision. Rather, it responds to the need to take responsibility for the full implications of the political stances assumed by progressive scholars; to recognize the commitments, values, and modes of embodied existence that must be destroyed and remade in order for women to become the kinds of subjects such stances presuppose. One of the questions that emerges from this essay is how would one imagine the politics of gender equality when situated within particular life worlds, rather than speak from a position of knowledge that already knows what the undoing of inequality would entail? I have clearly not offered an answer to this question, but simply suggested some of the directions that I think are necessary to pursue in order to formulate an informed political judgment.

One of the problems that attends discussions of Islamist movements is that any situated analysis is necessarily seen by many secularists (radicals and liberals alike) as an endorsement tout court of all religious formations—theocracies, militant activism, patriarchal authoritarianism—and thus to undermine the possibility of political critique. I have seldom presented my work publicly without being asked if my analysis implicitly endorses a toleration for the injustices meted out to women in Iran, Pakistan, or by the Taliban government in Afghanistan. One of the results of such a stance has been to flatten out any nuanced analysis of the heterogeneous character of what is loosely described as Islamism, and important analytical and political distinctions are collapsed when state oriented Islamist politics are painted with the same brush as movements of moral reform. Far more problematic is the assumption undergirding this concern that a critical attitude toward secular politics and its humanist assumptions, especially one that does not engage in repeated denunciations of all

the harm done by Islamic movements around the world, is necessarily complicitous with their authoritarian practices. That an analysis of secular-humanist projects does not elicit a parallel demand for a denunciation of the crimes committed in their name, the unprecedented violence of the last century notwithstanding, is evidence of the faith that secular-humanism continues to command among intellectuals.⁵²

My argument simply is that in order for us to be able to judge, in a morally and politically informed way, even those practices we consider objectionable, it is important to take into consideration the desires, motivations, commitments, and aspirations of the people to whom these practices are important. Thus, in order to explore the kinds of injury specific to women located in particular historical and cultural situations, it is not enough simply to point, for example, that a tradition of female piety or modesty serves to give legitimacy to women's subordination. Rather it is only by exploring these traditions in relation to the practical engagements and forms of life in which they are embedded that we can come to understand the significance of that subordination to the women who embody it.

This is not simply an analytical point, but reflects, I would contend, a political imperative born out of the realization that we can no longer presume that secular reason and morality exhaust the forms of valuable human flourishings. In other words, a particular openness to exploring nonliberal traditions is intrinsic to a politically responsible scholarly practice, a practice that departs not from a position of certainty but one of risk, critical engagement, and a willingness to reevaluate one's own views in light of the Other's. In other words, this is an invitation to embark on an inquiry in which the analyst does not assume that the political positions she upholds will necessarily be vindicated, or provide the ground for her theoretical analysis. Instead, it is to hold open the possibility that one may come to ask of politics a whole series of questions that seemed settled when one embarked on an inquiry.

Notes

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1. This dilemma seems to be further compounded by the fact that women's participation in the Islamic movement in a number of countries (like 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.

2. I conducted two years of fieldwork (1995–1997) in five different mosques from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds in Cairo, Egypt. In addition, I also carried out participant observation among the leaders and participants 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.

3. For a parallel discussion of the tensions generated by the objectivist claims of social scientific inquiry and the moral position an analyst adopts vis-à-vis her topic of study, see Rabinow 1983.

4. 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 nongovernmental 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.

5. 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 woman teacher. The movement continues to be informally organized by women, and has no organizational center that oversees its coordination.

6. 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.

7. For recent studies of the Islamic movement in Egypt, see Hirschkind 1999, Mahmood 1998, Salvatore 1997, and Starrett 1998.

8. For a close ethnographic analysis of the ways in which civic and public debate in Cairo has been increasingly shaped by the piety movement, see Hirschkind 2001.

9. 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.

10. Secularism is commonly thought of as the domain of real life emancipated from the ideological restrictions of religion (cf. Blumenberg 1985; Connolly 1999). As Asad (1999) 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. This juxtaposition of secular and religious domains has been facilitated through the displacement of religious authority from the realms of 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 take particular forms; 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.

11. In 1996 the Egyptian parliament passed a law that would nationalize a majority of the neighborhood mosques (*al-masājid al-ahāli*) by 2001, 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 (al-Hayat 1997). In addition, women's mosque lessons are regularly recorded and monitored by state employees. In the last couple of years, the government suspended lessons delivered by two of the most popular women mosques teachers claiming that they had made remarks in conflict with the interests of the state.

12. In the Muslim context, see for example Hale 1986, 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.

13. For a review of this scholarship on the Middle East, see Abu-Lughod 1989.

14. In a sense, this trend within gender studies bears certain similarities to the treatment of the peasantry in the new-left scholarship that also sought to restore a humanist agency (often expressed metaphorically as a "voice") to the peasant in the historiography of agrarian societies—a project articulated against classical Marxist formulations that had assigned the peasantry a non-place in the making of modern history. The Subaltern Studies Project is a clear example of this scholarship (see for e.g. Guha and Spivak 1988). It is not surprising therefore that, in addition to the peasantry, Ranajit Guha, one of the founders of the Subaltern Studies Project, has called for a new historiography that should restore women as agents, rather than instruments, of various movements (1996:12).

15. For a similar reading of women's zar practices in Sudan, see Hale 1986, 1987.

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

17. Despite the debates within feminism, this is a premise that is shared across various feminist political positions including radical, socialist, liberal and psycho-analytic, 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 Hartsock 1983; MacKinnon 1989). For an anthropological argument about the universal character of gender inequality, see Yanagisako and Collier 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 classical 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 e.g. Bartky 1990; MacKinnon 1993; Rubin 1984; Samois Collective 1987).

20. See Hunt 1991, MacCallum 1967, Simhony 1993, and West 1993.

21. Acts of *sati* (widow burning) in India were tolerated by the British, despite their official opposition to the practice, in those cases where the officials could determine that the widow was not coerced but went "willingly to the pyre" (for an excellent discussion of this debate see Mani 1999). Similarly, some critics of sadomasochism in the United

States argue that the practice may be tolerated on the condition that it be undertaken by consenting adults who have a "choice" in the matter, and is not the result of "coercion."

22. The slippery character of the human will formed in accord with reason and self-interest is itself a point of much discussion among a range of liberal thinkers such as Hobbes, Spinoza, Hegel, Rousseau, and Freud (Heller, Sosna and Wellbery 1986; Taylor 1989). During the twentieth century, within liberal societies the disciplines of psychoanalysis and psychology have played a crucial role in determining what the "true inner" self really is, and what its concomitant needs and desires should be (see for e.g. Hacking 1995; Rose 1997).

23. For an illuminating discussion of the historiographical project of *her-story*, see Scott (1988:15–27).

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

25. Similarly *Black Women's Feminist Statement* in the Combahee River Collective in 1977 (Hull, Scott and Smith 1982) rejected the appeal for lesbian separatism made by white feminists on the ground 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.

26. See, in contrast, Abu-Lughod's interesting discussion of the veil as a critical aspect of the concept of modesty (*hasham*) among Egyptian Bedouins (1986:159–167).

27. For example, in one of the few sociological studies produced on the veil, although the majority of the interviewees cited piety as their primary motivation for taking up the veil, the author argues that "rather than the newfound piety" her informants claim, the real motivations for veiling inhere in the socio-economic incentives and benefits that accrue to veiled women in Egyptian society (Zuhur 1992:83).

28. For a thoughtful discussion of the problems entailed in translating matters pertaining to gods, spirits, or the "supernatural" into the language of secular time and history, see Chakrabarty 1997 and Ranciere 1994.

29. For an excellent exploration of this issue in regards to the use of language in the cultural construction of personhood, see Keane 1997 and Rosaldo 1982. Also see Marilyn Strathern's critique of Western conceptions of "society and culture" that feminist deconstructivist approaches assume in analyzing gender relations in non-Western societies, like Melanesia (1992).

30. One of the meanings the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives for docility is "the quality of teachableness, readiness and willingness to receive instruction, aptness to be taught, submissiveness to training" (OED, CD-ROM 2nd ed., s.v. "docility").

31. My analysis draws on Foucault's later work on ethics and "technologies of the self" (1988, 1997). See Ian Hacking's interesting discussion (1986) of how this aspect of Foucault's work contrasts with his earlier focus on the processes by which subjects are made into objects of discourse.

32. At another place Butler writes, "That no social formation can endure without becoming reinstated, and that every reinstatement puts the 'structure' in question at risk, suggests that the possibility of its undoing is at once the condition of possibility of structure itself" (1997c:14).

33. This is succinctly and clearly stated by Butler when formulating her theory of subjection: "an account of iterability of the subject . . . shows how agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned" (1997b:29).

34. See, for example, Butler 1993:121–166 and 1997a for an analysis of specific instances of agency.

35. The group conversation was tape-recorded by the author in Cairo, Egypt, 5 January 1997.

36. Most Arabic verbs are based on a tri-consonantal root from which ten verbal forms (and sometimes 15) are derived.

37. It is interesting to note that the body-mind distinction I use in this paper was not employed by the women I worked with. In referring to shyness, for example, they talked about it in terms of a way of being and acting whereby any separation between mind/body was difficult to discern. I have retained the mind-body distinction for analytical purposes so as to understand the specific relation articulated between the two in this tradition of self-formation. Also see footnote 42 below.

38. Contrast this with the disciplinary practice of dieting, for example, whereby having once lost the excessive weight you can quit dieting until you regain it. To say that systems of power mark their truth on human bodies through disciplines of self-formation is not to have said much unless one also explicates the conceptual relationship articulated between different aspects of the body and the particular conception of the self.

39. Although both women and men are urged to abide by standards of modest conduct, there is agreement among the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence that it is women who have to be ultimately more vigilant than men in their dress, speech, and conduct. This view is upheld by modern Muslim reformers as well (like Muhammed ‘Abdu and ‘Abu Shiqqa) based on the argument that women are physically more attractive than men, and it is the latter who are more naturally prone to sexual desire (‘Abu Shiqqa 1995, vol. 4).

40. Note that Islamist political groups, like *Hizb al-‘Amal*, often criticize the larger piety movement (of which the women’s mosque movement is an integral part) for its limited focus on issues of “religiosity” (*tadayyun*) at the expense of socio-political change.

41. See Neederman 1989–90 for the emphasis placed in the Aristotelian tradition on the conscious training of various human faculties and assiduous discipline in the cultivation of habitus. For Bourdieu, habitus is primarily imbibed through unconscious processes.

42. In retaining the distinction between inward motives and outward behavior, so often invoked by the mosque participants, I don’t mean to suggest that it is an appropriate description of reality, or an analytical principle. Instead, I am interested in understanding the different kinds of relationships posited between body/mind, body/soul, inner/outer when such distinctions are used in a tradition of thought. For example, the body/soul distinction as used by Plato suggested a metaphysical primacy of the soul over the body. Aristotle re-worked this relationship, seeing the two as an inseparable unity whereby the soul became the form of the body’s matter. The women I worked with seemed to regard the body almost as the material enactment of the soul whereby the latter was a condition of the former.

43. Islamic jurisprudence permits men to have up to four wives.

44. Excerpted from a tape-recorded interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, February 5, 1997.

45. Both Hanabli and Maliki schools of Islamic thought have traditionally permitted the wife to stipulate in the marriage contract that if the husband were to take a second wife, she has the right to divorce. What is quite clear is that none of the schools give the woman the legal right to prevent her husband from taking a second wife (for debates on polygamy among contemporary religious scholars, see Skovgaard-Petersen 1997: 169–170, 232–233).

46. This is further augmented by the liberal ideal of the nuclear family and companionate marriage that, as Lila Abu-Lughod points out (1998), has increasingly become the norm among Islamists as well as secular-liberal Egyptians.

47. I have retained the use of *ṣabr* in this article rather than its common English translation “patience” because *ṣabr* communicates a sense not quite captured by the latter: one of perseverance, endurance of hardship without complaint, and steadfastness.

48. In the language of positive freedom, Sana may be understood to be a “free agent” insofar as she is capable of formulating her projects in accord with her desires, values, and goals and not those of others.

49. I note the particularity of this tradition, followed by the piety movement in Egypt, that is quite distinct from other traditions of moral cultivation in Islam, such as the *shī‘i* or *sufī* tradition.

50. I use “secular oriented Egyptians” as shorthand to refer to those for whom religious practice has limited relevance outside of personal devotion. Generally, as footnote 10 above indicates, secularism has been used by scholars to gloss a set of somewhat interrelated historical changes (political, social, religious) that take European history as their point of departure. Secularizing processes in non-Western societies may resemble certain aspects of the European experience, but a more robust analysis of what secularism consists of in different historical and cultural contexts has, in my opinion, yet to be undertaken.

51. Notably, Sunni Islam, the tradition adhered to by the mosque participants, shares with Protestantism two central ideas. First is the assumption that that each follower of the tradition is considered potentially capable of inculcating the highest virtues of that tradition and is held responsible for the self-discipline necessary to achieve this goal. Second is the assumption that the highest virtues of the tradition must be pursued and practiced in a variety of social circumstances, while immersed in the practicalities of daily life, rather than through a seclusion in an enclosed community (of nuns, priests, or monks), or a predefined religious order (as is the case in certain strains of Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism). As a result, all of life becomes the stage on which these values and attitudes are to be shaped and expressed.

52. For an argument parallel to the one I make here, see Chakrabarty’s excellent response to his critics who called into question his commitments to progressive politics for applying critical scrutiny to the ideal of secularism in the context of Hindutva politics (1995).

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