

Through an analysis of the Egyptian women's mosque movement, Saba Mahmood points out that the western liberal model of emancipatory politics is premised on a particular understanding of freedom and agency. Specifically, Mahmood writes that "[l]iberalism links the notion of self-fulfillment with individual autonomy insofar as realizing oneself comes to signify the ability to realize the desires of one's 'true will'" (207). By understanding agency primarily or exclusively in relation to the freedom from/resistance of oppressive norms, that this model limits our understanding of the agency of nonliberal subjects – specifically, Mahmood says, the women of the mosque movement whose actions serve to re-establish and promote the virtues that have historically been a condition of their subordination, such as passivity and submissiveness, or piety.

Following Judith Butler, Mahmood argues that power has a dual function, allowing for the domination of the subject to take place while also creating the conditions of possibility for the subject to emerge. Here, writes Mahmood, "[a]gency is considered more in terms of the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of acts" (210). While the women of the mosque movement are viewed in the Western tradition as lacking agency because of the passive, submissive qualities of their pious actions, it is through this very practice of piety (in terms of behaviour, dress, etc.) that they become pious subjects within Islamic discourse. Although structurally similar to Butler's notion of performativity, Mahmood departs from Butler to the extent that she criticises Butler's focus on the resistance of social norms; she believes that each iteration of a performance is not distinct, as it must be in order to have such subversive potential, but cumulative, building on that which comes before it.

Although Mahmood is speaking particularly to nonliberal contexts, such as that of the Egyptian women's mosque movement, she suggests that "[c]ertain values have lost their value in

the liberal imagination and are considered emblematic of passivity and inaction” (222). Thus, there is a sense in which her argument ought to be considered in liberal contexts as well. I am wondering if there is not a sense in which the models of agency that Mahmood is describing are, in a symbolic sense, gendered. It seems obvious to me that an agency conceived of in terms of the formal subversion of social norms would be gendered masculine and also that an agency conceived of in terms of “continuity, stasis, and stability” (212), “the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist” (217) would be gendered feminine. Do you agree with this observation? If so, does it make sense that the ‘masculine’ model would be valorised in Western societies while the ‘feminine’ model would be denigrated or ignored? Does it make sense that a non-Western model would be both feminised and denigrated?