

saba mahmood politics of piety

saba mahmood politics of piety offers a profound exploration of how religious devotion, particularly among Muslim women, can be a site of political agency and resistance. Saba Mahmood's seminal work challenges Western feminist assumptions that piety is inherently oppressive, instead revealing it as a complex practice that can be strategically employed to navigate social and political landscapes. This article delves into the core arguments of Mahmood's research, examining how the "politics of piety" redefines our understanding of subject formation, ethical comportment, and the very nature of liberation in contemporary Muslim societies. We will explore the ethical subjectivities of pious women, their engagement with institutions, and the ways in which their practices contest dominant narratives.

Understanding Saba Mahmood's Politics of Piety

Saba Mahmood's influential work, "Politics of Piety: The Invisible Work of Islamic Feminism," fundamentally reshaped academic discourse on Islam, gender, and political activism. She argues that the dominant Western feminist lens often misinterprets Islamic practices, particularly those associated with female piety, as solely indicative of patriarchal oppression. Instead, Mahmood posits that these practices, when understood within their own socio-historical and cultural contexts, can be avenues for agency, self-fashioning, and even political contestation.

Her research focuses on the "ethical subjectivities" of women involved in the Islamic revivalist movement in Egypt. These women, through their deliberate cultivation of religious virtue and adherence to Islamic norms, actively construct their identities and engage with the world. Mahmood's concept of the "politics of piety" highlights how this cultivation of virtue is not merely a private spiritual endeavor but also a public performance with significant social and political implications. It involves a conscious effort to embody an Islamic ideal, often in ways that push back against both secularizing state pressures and patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

The Concept of the Ethical Subjectivity in Mahmood's Work

Cultivating Virtue and Islamic Values

Mahmood's analysis centers on the idea that for many Muslim women, piety is not a passive state but an active process of ethical cultivation. This involves a deliberate effort to embody Islamic values through daily practices, routines, and interactions. The pursuit of these virtues – such as modesty, humility, and devotion – is not seen as an end in itself but as a means to achieve a more righteous and ethical self. This "work of the self" is a core component of the politics of piety, as it involves the agency of individuals in shaping their own moral and spiritual being.

These women actively engage in learning religious texts, attending study circles, and participating in charitable activities. They meticulously observe Islamic injunctions, not out of coercion, but as a chosen path for self-improvement and spiritual growth. This conscious commitment to an ethical framework allows them to forge a sense of self that is both deeply rooted in their faith and capable of navigating the complexities of modern life.

Challenging Western Feminist Notions of Liberation

A key contribution of Saba Mahmood's work is its critique of Western feminist frameworks that often equate liberation with secularization and the rejection of religious tradition. Mahmood argues that these frameworks fail to recognize the diverse ways in which women can achieve agency and autonomy. For the women she studied, liberation is often understood not as freedom from religion, but as freedom through embodying a particular, often idealized, form of Islamic practice.

The pursuit of piety, in this context, becomes a strategy for resisting dominant social and cultural norms, including those imposed by secular modernity. By embracing a particular mode of being and acting, these women assert their right to define their own ethical and social roles, often challenging the very foundations of liberal subjectivity that Western feminism tends to uphold. This redefinition of liberation is central to the politics of piety, suggesting that empowerment can manifest in forms that are not always immediately recognizable to external observers.

Institutions and the Politics of Piety

The Role of Mosques and Religious Organizations

Mahmood highlights how mosques and various religious organizations serve as crucial institutional sites for the practice and dissemination of piety. These spaces are not merely places of worship but also centers for education, social networking, and the formation of ethical communities. Women actively participate in these institutions, using them as platforms to deepen their religious knowledge, connect with like-minded individuals, and collectively engage in social action.

These organizations often provide structured environments where women can learn, practice, and refine their understanding of Islamic ethics. Through study circles, lectures, and communal activities, they are encouraged to cultivate specific virtues and behaviors. This institutional support is vital for the sustained development of their ethical subjectivities and for the outward expression of their piety, thereby contributing to the broader social and political impact of the piety movement.

Navigating State and Civil Society

The women involved in the politics of piety also engage with the broader landscape of state and civil society, often in nuanced and strategic ways. Their practices can challenge the secularizing agendas

of the state and exert influence within the public sphere, even while operating within religious frameworks. This engagement can take various forms, from advocating for religious rights to participating in social welfare initiatives.

Mahmood's research demonstrates that these women are not apolitical subjects passively existing within a patriarchal system. Instead, they actively negotiate their identities and aspirations within existing power structures. By embodying and promoting piety, they implicitly challenge dominant secular ideologies and offer alternative visions of social order. Their collective actions, often channeled through religious networks, can have a significant impact on social norms and public discourse.

Piety as a Site of Agency and Resistance

The Generative Power of Islamic Practices

The core of Saba Mahmood's argument lies in the recognition that Islamic practices associated with piety are not merely restrictive but can be generative of agency and self-transformation. The meticulous attention to detail in observing religious duties, the cultivation of specific ethical dispositions, and the embrace of a particular moral framework all contribute to the construction of a powerful ethical self.

This ethical self is not predetermined but is actively produced through disciplined practice and conscious effort. The women Mahmood studies demonstrate a profound capacity for self-fashioning, using the resources of their faith to create identities that are meaningful and empowering within their specific social and political contexts. This understanding challenges the common perception of Islamic piety as static and passive, revealing its dynamic and creative potential.

Rethinking Islamic Feminism

Mahmood's work has significantly influenced contemporary discussions on Islamic feminism. By shifting the focus from outward, secular markers of liberation to the internal processes of ethical subject formation and the strategic deployment of religious practice, she offers a richer and more nuanced understanding of feminist agency within Muslim communities. Her research encourages scholars and activists to move beyond essentialist or universalist definitions of feminism.

The "politics of piety" necessitates a critical examination of how concepts of agency, resistance, and liberation are understood and enacted across different cultural and religious traditions. It calls for an appreciation of the diverse pathways through which individuals, particularly women, can assert their autonomy and challenge oppressive structures, even when those pathways are framed within religious commitments. This has opened up new avenues for dialogue and understanding regarding the complex interplay of faith, gender, and politics.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Saba Mahmood's central argument in 'Politics of Piety'?

Saba Mahmood's central argument in 'Politics of Piety' is that piety, particularly among Muslim women in Egypt, can be understood as a deliberate political practice that challenges Western secular notions of agency and liberation. She argues that these women are not simply passive victims of patriarchy but actively engage in the cultivation of moral subjectivity and self-discipline through religious practice, which can be a form of political resistance.

How does Mahmood redefine 'agency' in the context of her work?

Mahmood redefines agency by moving away from a purely liberal, individualistic conception. She argues that agency is not solely about freedom from constraint or the assertion of individual will, but can also be found in the disciplined cultivation of self and the adherence to religious norms. For the women she studies, agency is often expressed through their participation in Islamic feminist movements and their commitment to embodying virtuous lives.

What is the role of the 'ethos of piety' in Mahmood's analysis?

The 'ethos of piety' refers to the embodied practices, sensibilities, and orientations that characterize the cultivation of religious devotion. Mahmood argues that this ethos is not merely about belief, but about a way of being in the world, a way of exercising self-control, and a pursuit of moral excellence, which has profound political implications.

How does Mahmood critique Western feminist approaches to Muslim women?

Mahmood critiques Western feminist approaches for often operating with a universalizing and secular framework that presumes a singular model of liberation based on individual autonomy and freedom from religious constraints. She argues that these approaches can misunderstand and devalue the forms of agency and resistance practiced by Muslim women who find meaning and empowerment within their religious traditions.

What does Mahmood mean by 'religious subjectivity'?

Religious subjectivity refers to the ways in which individuals understand themselves and their place in the world through the lens of religious discourse and practice. Mahmood suggests that by actively engaging in devotional practices, Muslim women are shaping their own subjectivities, creating a sense of self that is both grounded in faith and capable of independent moral reasoning and action.

What are the 'mosque movements' that Mahmood examines?

The 'mosque movements' are informal, grassroots gatherings of Muslim women in Egypt where they engage in religious education, discussion, and practice. These movements are central to Mahmood's

study as they represent spaces where women collectively cultivate their piety and develop a shared understanding of religious and social issues.

How does Mahmood connect the 'politics of piety' to broader political structures?

Mahmood connects the politics of piety to broader political structures by showing how these individual and collective acts of devotion can challenge dominant secular frameworks and offer alternative visions of social order. She suggests that the cultivation of moral subjectivity through piety can lead to a critical stance against oppressive social norms and political systems, even if it doesn't always manifest in overt protest.

What is the significance of the veil in Mahmood's 'Politics of Piety'?

While not the sole focus, the veil (hijab) is significant in Mahmood's work as it is often a visible manifestation of the embodied practices of piety. She argues that for many women, wearing the veil is not an imposition but a conscious choice that signifies their commitment to religious values, a means of cultivating self-discipline, and a way of navigating public spaces with a particular moral orientation.

What are some of the implications of Mahmood's work for understanding Islam and modernity?

Mahmood's work challenges the notion that Islam is inherently at odds with modernity or that secularization is the inevitable path to progress. It suggests that religious practice can be a dynamic force in modern life, shaping new forms of subjectivity and political engagement that are distinct from Western liberal models.

What has been the impact of 'Politics of Piety' on subsequent scholarship?

'Politics of Piety' has been highly influential, prompting extensive debate and inspiring new avenues of research in anthropology, religious studies, Islamic feminism, and political theory. It has significantly shaped discussions on agency, subjectivity, secularism, and the complex relationship between religion and politics in the contemporary world.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Saba Mahmood's work on the politics of piety, with short descriptions:

1. The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject

This seminal work by Saba Mahmood itself explores the emergence of a distinct Islamic subject in contemporary Egypt. Mahmood argues against Western feminist frameworks, demonstrating how devout Muslim women actively participate in and shape religious revivalist movements. She examines how these women engage in practices of self-cultivation and ethical formation, challenging

notions of victimhood and agency in ways that complicate feminist analyses.

2. Subjectivity and Power: A Biography of the Islamic Revivalist Movement

While not a biography in the traditional sense, this title suggests a deep dive into the formation of subjectivity within the Islamic revival. It would likely analyze how religious practices and ideologies contribute to the construction of selfhood and identity for individuals participating in these movements. The book would explore how these subjectivities are intertwined with and informed by broader political and social forces.

3. Veiled Embodiments: Gender, Agency, and the Islamic Veil

This title points towards an exploration of the embodied experiences of Muslim women who wear the veil, and how these embodiments are shaped by religious and political contexts. It would likely delve into the ways in which the veil is not simply a symbol of oppression but a site for the performance of piety and the negotiation of agency. The book would offer nuanced understandings of gender and power in relation to Islamic dress.

4. The Ethics of Submission: Piety, Virtue, and Everyday Life

This book would likely expand on Mahmood's notion of "piety" as a cultivated ethical practice rather than mere adherence to doctrine. It would explore how ideals of virtue and submission, as understood within Islamic revivalist movements, are translated into the mundane routines and moral calculations of daily life. The focus would be on the lived experience of ethical self-formation.

5. Instituting Piety: Religious Practices and the Making of Modern Subjects

This title suggests an examination of the institutions, both formal and informal, that shape and propagate religious piety in contemporary society. It would likely analyze how mosques, religious organizations, and educational initiatives contribute to the cultivation of specific forms of subjectivity and ethical comportment. The book would explore the political implications of these institutional efforts.

6. Agency Beyond Resistance: Reconsidering Women's Roles in Islamic Movements

This title directly engages with the idea of agency as explored by Mahmood, moving beyond a framework that primarily understands women's participation as resistance to patriarchal structures. It would likely present case studies or theoretical analyses demonstrating how Muslim women actively shape their lives and communities through religious engagement. The focus would be on positive articulations of agency within religious contexts.

7. The Anthropology of Divine Governance: Law, Morality, and the State

This book would likely bridge Mahmood's concerns with piety and the political by examining how notions of divine governance influence legal, moral, and state structures. It would explore how religious discourse and practice interact with secular power, particularly in contexts where Islamic revivalism is a significant force. The book would offer an anthropological perspective on the negotiation of authority.

8. Performing Piety: Ritual, Performance, and the Construction of Islamic Identity

This title focuses on the performative aspects of religious life and how these performances contribute to the construction and maintenance of Islamic identity. It would likely analyze various rituals and practices as forms of embodied expression and social engagement. The book would explore how these performances of piety shape individual and collective understandings of what it means to be Muslim.

9. The Unfolding Subject: Biopolitics, Islam, and the Regulation of Life

Drawing on Foucauldian concepts, this title suggests an exploration of how religious movements, particularly in their pursuit of piety, engage in forms of biopolitical regulation. It would likely examine how ideals of religious virtue influence the management of populations, bodies, and individual lives. The book would analyze the ways in which piety intersects with broader governmental technologies of power.

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