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Feminist Exegesis and Muslim Women's Agency: A Critical Analysis of Fatima Mernissi and Saba Mahmood's Perspectives for Contemporary Times

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Abstract: This paper explores the institutionalization of women's subordination in Muslim countries, primarily through the selective interpretation of Quranic exegesis and Hadith. Focusing on the works of Fatima Mernissi and Saba Mahmood, the study highlights their arguments on the importance of continuous reinterpretation of Quranic texts and Hadith to ensure their relevance in contemporary contexts. By examining the ways in which Muslim women scholars challenge patriarchal exegesis, the paper investigates how women reclaim agency and assert resistance within the religious framework. In doing so, these scholars reveal moments of agency in Muslim women's social and political lives. Key texts discussed include Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite: The Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991) and Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2011). I argue that although Mernissi and Mahmood emerged from different temporal and geographical contexts, Mernissi in postcolonial Morocco and Mahmood in late 20th-century Egypt, both scholars continue to offer critical insights into contemporary feminist and political discourse. Through distinct intellectual frameworks, each reimagines the concepts of women's agency, freedom, and subjectivity within Islamic traditions. Reading them together allows for a more layered understanding of Muslim women's lived experiences, revealing how divergent approaches, reformist and poststructuralist, can both challenge and expand dominant narratives around Islam, gender, and power.

Keywords: Quranic Exegesis, Women's Rights in Islam, Resistance, Agency, Feminist Interpretation.

Review Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The urgency of this research becomes starkly evident when situated within the current climate of rising femicides and deepening misogyny across many Muslim-majority countries. In places like Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, and others, the murder of women, often by family members or intimate partners, is not simply a product of individual pathology but is symptomatic of entrenched systems of gendered oppression legitimized through selective and patriarchal interpretations of Quran and Hadith. These interpretations are often presented as divine and immutable, leaving little room for contestation or reform. This paper's focus on the institutionalization of women's subordination through Quranic exegesis and Hadith interpretation offers a critical lens for understanding how religious authority has historically been constructed and monopolized by male scholars. The works of Fatima Mernissi and Saba Mahmood provide valuable and contrasting interventions into this legacy. Mernissi's reformist critique challenges the authenticity and motivations behind key Hadith used to restrict women's autonomy, while Mahmood's analysis of piety movements complicates Western liberal feminist assumptions about agency, instead showing how women negotiate power within religious frameworks.

Considering contemporary femicides, these frameworks are not merely academic, but they offer tools for resistance. For example, the reinterpretation of scripture by Muslim women scholars and activists undermines the religious justification often used to excuse or normalize violence against women. In countries where state law and religious doctrine are deeply intertwined, such reinterpretation can directly influence public policy, legal reform, and grassroots

activism. Mernissi's insistence on re-reading Islamic history and texts to foreground women's rights resonates in contemporary movements demanding justice for victims of honor killings, domestic violence, and legal disenfranchisement. Similarly, Mahmood's exploration of how women assert moral and religious agency in conservative settings highlights the diverse forms of resistance often invisible to secular feminist models. The persistence of femicide and misogynistic norms in Muslim societies cannot be understood or addressed without grappling with the religious narratives that underpin them. Therefore, this study is urgent and necessary—not only because it documents how patriarchal interpretations are institutionalized, but because it highlights how Muslim women are actively challenging these structures from within. In doing so, it moves beyond a victim-centered narrative and instead illuminates how agency, reform, and resistance are being forged in complex and meaningful ways. By reading Mernissi and Mahmood together, the paper offers a layered understanding of how Islamic feminist thought can both confront the ideological roots of gender-based violence and offer pathways for transformative change. In a time when women's lives are under threat across Muslim-majority countries, this kind of scholarship is not only relevant but is essential.

In *Covering Islam*, Edward Said writes, "Underlying every interpretation of other cultures—especially of Islam—is the choice facing the individual scholar or intellectual: whether to put intellect at the service of power or at the service of criticism, community, and moral sense" (Said 64). This observation frames the work of many Muslim feminist scholars who challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts. Instead of relying on male-dominated exegetical traditions, some reinterpret the Qur'an and Hadith to recover egalitarian visions of womanhood, while others examine how women engage with religious norms within patriarchal structures. This paper focuses on two foundational thinkers, Fatima Mernissi and Saba Mahmood, who despite operating from distinct intellectual and historical contexts offer vital critiques of gender, power, and authority in Islamic societies. Mernissi, writing in postcolonial Morocco, grounded her work in Islamic reformism, seeking to reclaim the liberatory potential of early Islamic teachings through feminist reinterpretation of sacred texts. Mahmood, working within a poststructuralist and anthropological tradition in early 21st-century Egypt, questioned secular-liberal assumptions about agency and resistance, highlighting how women's participation in Islamic piety movements could be a form of ethical self-cultivation rather than submission. While Mernissi viewed agency as resistance to patriarchal structures, Mahmood expanded the concept to include religious adherence as a meaningful form of subjectivity. In doing so, both scholars interrogate the relationship between knowledge, power, and gender. They examine how authority is constructed and maintained whether through religious texts or modern ideologies, and how women navigate and sometimes subvert these structures. Despite their differing methodologies, textual in Mernissi's case and ethnographic in Mahmood's, both are deeply engaged with the ethical and political stakes of their work. For Mernissi, reinterpreting the Qur'an is a form of feminist activism aimed at social and legal reform. For Mahmood, documenting women's religious lives expands the conceptual vocabulary of feminism and ethics, making space for non-liberal forms of subjectivity. In both cases, their scholarship is not only analytical but also interventionist, contributing to ongoing debates around gender, religion, and modernity. Against this background, this article will examine the works of both scholars as part of a linear progression in feminist thought, where their contributions both complement yet critically engage with each other—revealing the evolving and contested nature of Muslim women's agency within Islamic contexts in different geographical locations and times.

This paper argues that reading Mernissi and Mahmood together allows for a more nuanced understanding of Muslim women's agency, one that accounts for both textual reform and lived religious practice. Through their divergent approaches, both scholars challenge simplistic binaries of oppression and liberation, offering complementary frameworks for analyzing how Muslim women negotiate gendered power. Drawing on Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite* and Mahmood's *Politics of Piety*, this article explores how their scholarship collectively expands the scope of Islamic feminism, urging a rethinking of what counts as resistance, empowerment, and ethical action within Islamic contexts.

A Counter-Narrative

Fatema Mernissi's scholarship emerged from the postcolonial context of mid- to late-20th century Morocco, a period marked by the nation's transition from French colonial rule to independence and the consolidation of conservative religious and political structures. As one of the first Moroccan women to be formally trained in sociology and Islamic studies, Mernissi wrote at the intersection of Islamic tradition, feminist theory, and sociopolitical reform. Her work was deeply shaped by the rise of political Islam in the Arab world, the entrenchment of patriarchal norms in both state and religious institutions, and the global feminist movement's often Eurocentric frameworks. Mernissi sought to challenge the dominant male interpretations of Islamic texts from within the tradition itself, offering a feminist re-reading rooted in historical and textual analysis. Writing primarily for a Muslim audience but also engaging with Western feminist and academic discourse, her work reflects the complexities of negotiating gender, modernity, and Islamic identity in a rapidly changing North African and global context.

Mernissi's work was groundbreaking in its insistence that feminist inquiry could emerge from within Islamic frameworks, and she resisted both Western secular feminism's assumptions about Muslim women and conservative Islamist efforts to fix women's roles within rigid traditionalist norms. Her scholarship ultimately advocates for an Islam that is dynamic, historically conscious, and compatible with gender justice.

In the history of Islamic states, the power to interpret Quran has been in the hands of male scholars, and consequently, the law and decision making has remained mainly a patriarchal preoccupation through *Ijma, Qayas and Ijtehad* [*1*]. However, the subject matters upon which female scholars focus include treatment of the gendered division of space, appearance of hijab in the verse dealing with curtain, and retrieval of stories of empowered women that have been systematically erased from the books and memories of Muslims, and discussion of political rights of Muslim women. To retrieve the egalitarian spirit of Islam, Mernissi chooses certain issues and verses that have constantly been distorted by exegetes in the past and revisit the traditions to further explicate with clarity the counter-narrative to such traditions that are taken as facts. There are many instances where women have been excluded from the public spheres by repeating and applying a few Hadith that illustrate how having a woman leader can be damaging to a nation's prosperity. Out of the most oft-repeated Hadith, this Hadith has been quoted frequently to delegitimize Muslim women leadership: 'Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity' [[2]]. This hadith has been invoked against several prominent Muslim women leaders to challenge their legitimacy or discourage their leadership. For instance, Benazir Bhutto, the first woman to lead a Muslim-majority country as Prime Minister of Pakistan, faced strong opposition from conservative clerics who used this hadith to argue that her leadership was un-Islamic. Jamaa't-e-Islami, which is a radical Islamist political party in Pakistan, used this Hadith against Bhutto to bar her from coming to the forefront and lead the country in any capacity. In her memoir *Daughter of Destiny*, Bhutto writes about contesting elections in 1988 and the opposition she faced during this time: 'The leaders of Zia's Muslim League have publicly declared that they will not accept a Bhutto as leader of the government, regardless of the outcome of the November 16th elections. The fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami party is trumpeting that leadership by a woman is un-Islamic, although they declared it Islamic in Zia's constitution of 1985' (324). Policy making and changes in the constitution regarding women's role in the governmental positions has always been contingent on political alliances and conspiracies by the virtue of manipulating the religious discourse. Similarly, in Bangladesh, both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, who have alternated as Prime Ministers for decades, were frequently criticized by Islamist parties using this same hadith to claim that female political authority defies Islamic teachings. In Indonesia, when Megawati Sukarnoputri became president, religious conservatives cited the hadith to argue against a woman ruling the nation. Beyond political office, this hadith has also been used to bar women from serving as judges or holding senior religious positions in countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, where religious establishments often lean on such interpretations to justify excluding women from leadership and decision-making roles. Quoting such Hadith has led Muslims to discriminate against women and accept the discourse of women being lesser beings with inconsequential intelligence, and not worthy of being considered eligible to handle any serious affairs, whether they pertain to matters of state or otherwise.

Mernissi writes that there has been a tendency to distort Hadith more than Quran, or to relate a false Hadith stating that Prophet did or said such and such, which then legitimizes misogyny. According to Mernissi, 'Since all power, from the seventh century on, was only legitimated by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false traditions' (9). The practice of telling false traditions compelled scholars to create a science for the detection of fabricated traditions, which included the authentication of Hadith through interview and fieldwork techniques, and this is why Al-Bukhari, the ninth century Islamic scholar, established the science of *isnads*[3], that was meant to trace the chains of transmission from the time of the Prophet. The fuqaha (Islamic jurists) and muhaddithun (Hadith

[1] Ijma means consensus. It occurs when consensus is reached on a particular point of law. Qiyas is often translated as analogy or analogical reasoning. Ijtihad tends to occur on new issues (e.g. genetic engineering), and/or where the Islamic evidences can lead to divergent interpretations.
https://www.islamicboard.com/-ilm-knowledge/134316084-ijtihad-qiyas-amp-ijma.html

[2] This Hadith is on p. 46 of vol. 13 of Al-Matba edition, and has been taken from Sahih Bukhari, which is a compilation of those traditions that Imam Bukhari, the renowned Persian eighth century Islamic scholar, catalogued as authentic.

[3] 'Isnād, (from Arabic *sanad*, "support"), in Islam, a list of authorities who have transmitted a report (*ḥadīth*) of a statement, action, or approbation of Muhammad, one of his Companions (Ṣaḥābah), or of a later authority (*tabīʿ*); its reliability determines the validity of a *ḥadīth.* The *isnād* precedes the actual text (*matn*) and takes the form, "It has been related to me by A on the authority of B on the authority of C on the authority of D (usually a Companion of the Prophet) that Muhammad said.…"'. Read more: *https://www.britannica.com/topic/isnad*

scholars) have laid down a detailed and structured methodology for the verification and authentication of Hadith. These methodological rules form the backbone of the science of Hadith criticism (ʿilm al-ḥadīth) and have been carefully developed to ensure the accuracy, reliability, and authenticity of reports attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. Imam Malik Ibn Anas, who, along with Shafi'i and Abu Hanifa, was considered one of the three most famous imams in Islam because of their contribution to the knowledge of authentic Hadith. According to him, religion is science, and it was not just enough for a person to have lived at the time of the Prophet to become an authentic source of Hadith. It was necessary to judge the person's intellectual capacity and moral credibility to judge the circumstance of reliability of any Hadith. According to Imam Malik: 'Knowledge *[al- 'ilm]* cannot be received from a *safih* [mentally deficient person] nor from someone who is in the grip of passion and who might incite *bid'a* [innovation] nor from a liar who recounts anything at all to people… And finally one should not receive knowledge from a shaykh, even a respected and very pious one, if he has not mastered the learning that he is supposed to transmit.' (Mernissi 59)

While recounting his criteria for authentic Hadith, Imam Malik said that he also rejected as narrators of Hadith those people whom he saw lying in their daily relationships. Mernissi writes that if Abu Bakra, who narrated the Hadith about women '*not being entrusted with leadership of a country'*, were to be judged according to these criteria, he would be immediately disqualified, as one of his biographies reports that he was convicted and flogged for giving false testimony in an adultery case that never occurred. However, investigation leads us to conclude that many *fuqaha* have kept on repeating this misogynistic Hadith without considering it dubious, and only a few took a position against it for not finding enough basis for depriving women of their social and political rights using this Hadith as a justification. Mernissi urges caution in accepting claims made in the name of the sacred as absolute truth. After tracing the historical chain of narrators behind a politically charged Hadith, she warns believers to remain vigilant when such religious arguments are used to promote damaging political ideas. She notes that this misogynistic Hadith is not an isolated case, but part of a broader pattern. (61)

According to Mernissi, depending on how it is used, the sacred text can be a threshold for escape or an insurmountable barrier; 'it can be that rare music that leads to dreaming or simply a dispiriting routine. It all depends on the person who invokes it' (64). In *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots to a Modern Debate,* Leila Ahmed writes that 'Discourses shape and are shaped by specific moments in specific societies' (10), and underscores the need to investigate the discourses on women and gender in Islamic societies by observing and studying the societies in which they are rooted and the way in which gender is articulated socially, institutionally, and verbally in these societies.

Veiling, Control, Culture, and Coercion

The interpretation of verses about women covering themselves up (24:31) [4], has been contested for a long time since these verses are deemed by male scholars of Islam as the acme and culmination of final orders from Allah about women and their status in society, restricting her in the veils, both tangible and imperceptible. Qur'anic verses such as Surah An-Nur (24:31), which instruct believing women to "draw their veils over their bosoms" and "guard their modesty," have often been manipulated by patriarchal authorities in various Islamic countries to enforce rigid, state-controlled dress codes that go far beyond the original intent of the verse. In Afghanistan, under both the Taliban's past and present regimes, the verse has been used to justify extreme interpretations, mandating full-body coverings like the burqa and severely restricting women's presence in public life. In Iran, the state has institutionalized compulsory hijab laws since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, criminalizing women who refuse to cover their hair and using religious justification for surveillance, arrests, and harassment. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, until recent reforms, women were required to wear the abaya and hijab in public, with religious police enforcing these rules under the guise of preserving Islamic morality. In all these cases, male-dominated religious and political establishments have used selective and literalist readings of the Qur'an to exert control over women's bodies and mobility, often ignoring the broader ethical and contextual messages of the verse—such as modesty, dignity, and personal piety.

Mernissi believes that veiling in the seventh century was just a culturally and economically determined demonstration of modesty and revelation about veiling metaphorically indicated the virtue of modesty to maintain a certain ethical decorum in Muslim culture and society. Because only women from financially and economically secure households could afford to sit in cloistered shelters of their homes unhinged by the madness of external challenges during that period, the revelation about the veil and modesty was a manifestation of respect that all believing women deserved, no matter whether they had the privilege of being economically advantaged or not. 'Modesty is beneficial for maintaining a certain moral fiber in various cultures and should therefore be maintained—but on the basis of faith: not economics, politics or other forms of access and coercion' (Wadud 10). Mernissi also dwells

[4]https://quran.com/24/31?translations=95,17,18,19,20,22,85,84,101

on the etymology of the word *hijab* (veil) and writes that one cannot fully explore the meaning of the word without mentioning the way Muslim Sufis used it, which had nothing to do with a visible curtain. Mernissi refers to Titus Burckhardt's book *Introduction aux doctrines esoteriques de I Islam,* in which he writes that in Sufism, one calls *mahjub* (veiled) the person whose consciousness is determined by sensual or mental passion and 'who as a result does not perceive the divine light in his soul' (Mernissi 60). In this usage it is man who is covered by a veil and is thus ignorant and oblivious of truth. For mystics, the opposite of *hijab* is the *kashf,* the discovery.

Enforcing *hijab* on women by patriarchy has been thus equated to an attempt at concealing the potential of women by these Muslim women exegetes, and they contend that *hijab* never played any role in 'saving' women from harassment. 'The veil, which was intended to protect them from violence in the street, would accompany them for centuries, whatever the security situation of the city. For them peace would never return. Muslim women were to display their hijab everywhere, the vestige of a civil war that would never come to an end' (Mernissi, 190). To problematize the perception of a veiled woman as the only legitimate traditional symbol of a true *Muslima*, Mernissi finds precedents for resistance to *hijab* in the classical tradition of Islam. She argues that the very architecture of Prophet Muhammed's private home, which was adjacent to the mosque to such an extent that the doors of several private rooms where his wives lived would open into the mosque, suggests that the Prophet was not in favor of gender segregation and *hijab.* Reading into subtler nuances, Mernissi contends that using the symbol of *hijab* as the only authentic image of Muslim female identity is a disgrace to her since concealing women in *hijab* and putting on them the garb of sacredness is a ploy to banish Muslim women from the public arena to the secrecy of the private harem.

Esotericism, Eroticism and Obliterating Memories of Empowered Muslim Women

In the Muslim societies, the occultation of the feminine is practiced by situating the essence of sexual modesty in women and assuming that women must be modest since through women, men will be modest and through them children will be born with a disposition of modesty. In many Muslim societies, the notion of sexual modesty (*haya*) has been used to obscure the autonomy and agency of women thus effectively situating the burden of communal virtue on their bodies. As illustrated by the recent viral honor-killing video in Balochistan [5], Pakistan, where a woman and her husband were executed for marrying without familial approval. A tribal elder ordered the killings, and the state responded only after the footage sparked outrage, revealing how religious, tribal, and state systems collude to sustain patriarchal control over women's bodies. Women are often considered the carriers of family honor; their behavior is strictly policed under the assumption that through controlling women, men and children will internalize modesty. These acts of violence, commonly referred to as "honor killings," are often perpetrated by family members or local authorities who perceive that a female relative has tarnished the family's reputation. Such perceptions may be triggered by actions as personal as choosing one's spouse, seeking a divorce, or rejecting prescribed gender roles. This occultation of the feminine reduces women to symbolic guardians of morality, stripping them of autonomy while legitimizing brutal enforcement in the name of tradition. In this logic, women become both the locus and the scapegoats of virtue, controlled through veils both literal and metaphorical, while male agency remains unaccountable and unquestioned.

Islamic culture in this way is completely made dependent on enclosing feminine potency within the spatial boundaries that are defined exegetically through the holy scriptures and Hadith. The phenomenon of secrecy that is attached to the presence and exposure of women by attributing to their objecthood a compelling sense of seductive irresistibility has further contributed to their objectification. The fascination with secrecy and the female body has led male Islamic scholars to believe that the value of the feminine needs to be harnessed through compartmentalization of the female, to diminish her representation to an entity that needs to be concealed from the male gaze. It is because a women's physical presence or concealment is connected to male honor or dishonor that confining her presence to the cloistered seclusion of domestic space is perceived as the sole means of preserving the hidden nature of her secrecy.

In 'Occultation of the feminine and body of secrecy', Elliot R. Wolfson writes that there's a compelling link between esotericism and eroticism. Muslim patriarchy's obsession with the concealment of the feminine, which is fenced securely within spatial boundaries, has more to do with cultural perceptions than religion itself, as in most Islamic cultures, the sexual modesty of the male is made dependent on the contingency of female enclosure within private spatial boundaries. In contrast, his licentiousness is related to exposure to the feminine. This phenomenon of secrecy, where information is 'closed in its disclosure', can be applied to both the transmission and implementation of sacred knowledge. In the context of Wolfson's elaboration of secrecy, it has been contended by women exegetes that male Islamic scholars who have a monopoly over the interpretation of the sacred texts have

[5]https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/21/asia/pakistan-balochistan-honor-killing-video-intl-hnk

been manipulating the sacred texts and regulating the power of discourse in Islamic ideology to shape Muslim women's subjectivity in accordance with hermeneutics that is constrained by exclusive and restrictive interpretation. Throughout Islamic history, narratives of empowered women were often suppressed. Mernissi highlights Sukakyna bint al-Hussein, the Prophet's great-granddaughter, as a bold figure who defied patriarchal norms—rejecting the hijab, confronting political authority, and insisting on autonomy in marriage. She openly criticized the Umayyad regime and advocated for personal freedom. Mernissi recounts how empowered women like Sukayna have been erased from Muslim memory, facing resistance even in modern discourse. She reflects on this "selective amnesia," where tradition rewrites the past to uphold submissive ideals of womanhood, sidelining figures like A'isha, Umm Salama, and Sukayna in favor of more docile, veiled archetypes.

Compatible and mutually supportive functional relationships between men and women can be seen as part of the goal in the Quran regarding Muslim society since the Quran does not support a singular role or single definition of a set of roles exclusively for each gender. To assert that the Quran has proposed peculiar functions for men and women would be an imposition that would reduce the Quran from a universal text to a culturally specific text, 'a claim that many have erroneously made' (Wadud 37). According to Amina Wadud, 'Qur'an is not confined to, or exhausted by one society and its history, therefore, each new Islamic society must understand the principles intended by the particulars. Those principles are eternal and can be applied in various social con5texts' (9). It would be wrong to assume that the gender position and hierarchy that inform the initial Islamic societies entail that gender politics in Muslim societies is reducible to a single implication that is absolute and unchangeable.

Language of Islam Apprehends the Aspirations of Muslim Women

While resistance can be seen as a reactionary stratagem in the narratives of Mernissi, Saba Mahmood, in her book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, salvages the marginalized perspectives of Egyptian Muslim women who are part of the Women's Mosque movement, and identifies resistance as diagnostic of power. Mahmood's identification of resistance as diagnostic of power is deeply informed by Michel Foucault's [6], theories on power, particularly his notion that power is not merely repressive but also productive as it shapes subjects, norms, and possibilities for action. Mahmood draws on Foucault to challenge the liberal assumption that resistance must always take the form of overt defiance against authority. Instead, she argues that acts which appear compliant, such as the pious practices of women in Egypt's mosque movement, can be understood as forms of agency that emerge within, rather than outside of, power structures. For Mahmood, resistance is not always a counterforce to domination but is a way to trace how power operates through norms, institutions, and everyday practices. This Foucauldian lens allows her to view the cultivation of piety as a site where ethical self-formation takes place, not in opposition to power, but through its intricate workings. Resistance then becomes a diagnostic tool revealing the subtle ways in which power shapes subjectivity, desire, and social relations.

The difference between Mernissi and Mahmood lies in their conceptualization of resistance and its relationship to power and agency within Islamic contexts. Mernissi often frames resistance as a reactive response to patriarchal constraints, portraying Muslim women's agency as largely oppositional to dominant structures of religious and cultural authority, and her work tends to align with liberal feminist ideals that view autonomy and emancipation in terms of challenging or escaping restrictive norms. In contrast, Mahmood, in *Politics of Piety*, challenges this framework by arguing that resistance need not always be oppositional; rather, it can emerge through embodied religious practices that are often seen as forms of submission. For Mahmood, such practices reveal a more complex understanding of power as they are not merely something to be resisted, but something that shape the conditions of subjectivity and agency. Thus, while Mernissi sees resistance as a strategy against oppression, Mahmood redefines it as a diagnostic tool that unveils how power operates through everyday forms of piety and ethical self-cultivation.

While their feminist interlocutions appear opposite to each other, reading Mernissi and Mahmood together is important since it illuminates the diverse and sometimes conflicting ways feminist theory can engage with Islam, gender, and agency. Mernissi, writing from a postcolonial and secular feminist standpoint, critiques Islamic patriarchy by recovering egalitarian elements within Islamic history and arguing for reform. Her work is essential for understanding how feminist critique can emerge from within an Islamic framework while still aligning with liberal notions of autonomy and emancipation. Mahmood, however, complicates this view by refusing to treat agency solely as resistance to religious norms and practices. She emphasizes how religious piety can itself be a site of ethical agency, even when it appears aligned with patriarchal structures. Comparing the two helps challenge monolithic ideas of Muslim women's oppression and agency. It reveals how

[6] Read: Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage, 1990. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage, 1995.

feminist analysis can vary dramatically depending on the epistemological lens: whether one views power as something to be resisted or as something that constitutes subjectivity itself. By reading them together, one gains a richer, more nuanced understanding of the intersections between feminism, religion, and postcolonial critique and an understanding that avoids simplistic binaries of submission vs. resistance or tradition vs. modernity. In an era when many feminists tend to view Islamist movements with doubt and suspicion and as a gambit of social conservatism and rejection of liberal values, Mahmood is intrigued by how the language of Islam has come to apprehend the aspirations of so many women around the Muslim world and attempts to explore the dynamic and complex relationship between female agency and religion.

Mahmood grew up in Pakistan at a time when the military dictator Zia-ul-Haq was strengthening his brutal hold on power. By turning Pakistan into a frontline state for the United States' proxy war with the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Zia used the top-down policy of 'Islamization' of the country through the educational and judicial systems to tighten his grip on authority. During this time, no one in Pakistan felt discriminated against as much as the progressive feminists, who felt that lawmaking in the context of Pakistan's Islamization project and Islamic forms of patriarchy was responsible for the bias that women faced in Islamic countries. The Iranian revolution that erupted in 1979 was an event that further reemphasized Islamic doctrines as the only form of social stability, while also constituting a sharp critique of the emulation of Western lifestyle and habits. In this scenario, progressive leftists like Mahmood frequently dismissed this upsurge of religiosity as superficial and realized that feminist politics required a resolute and uncompromising secular stance. According to Mahmood, where progressive leftists explained the turn of the masses towards radical Islamism in terms of lack of education or a result of conservative Saudi Islam that was brought back by immigrant laborers who had returned to this region from Arabian Gulf states; they were also intrigued by the way Islamist movements were not only attracting the marginalized or dispossessed but also found active allies and support among the middle classes.

Mahmood's reflection and research on Middle Eastern Muslim countries led her to claim that Islamic movements cannot be viewed only as disruptive agendas, since, in many countries, Islamic political parties have been influential in questioning the status quo, demanding the democratization of the political arena, and stressing the end of single party hegemony in regional politics. Islamic welfare organizations around the Muslim world have been stepping up to fill the vacuum that was 'left by postcolonial states as these states, under neoliberal economic pressures, have withdrawn from providing social services to their citizens' (Mahmood xi). As an example, we can consider the case of Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan (JI), that has actively promoted women's participation in politics and public life through its institutional structures such as the Women's Commission, Islami Jamiat Talibāt (girls' student wing), and its use of reserved parliamentary seats since the early 2000s. This strategy includes fielding women candidates, hosting training workshops, issuing a comprehensive "women's rights charter," and integrating women into the party's high-level decision-making body (*Markazi Majlis-e-Shura*) by 2015 [7]. These initiatives reflect a model of empowerment framed firmly within an Islamic framework—advocating education, political representation, and social services for women, albeit tightly bounded by doctrinal constraints.

Viewed through the conceptual lens of Saba Mahmood's Politics of Piety, JI's women activists represent what Mahmood terms a "pious subject" who embraces religious rituals and moral codes as means of self-formation. Rather than being passive bearers of patriarchal norms, these women actively appropriate the party's ideology and institutional tools (mosque classes, dormitories, study circles) to carve out public agency *within* the moral abstractions of Islam. As Mahmood argues, women in Islamist movements often pursue a kind of embodied ethical self-fashioning: they see socially prescribed conduct not as oppression, but as scaffoldings for the self to be realized through pious practice [8]. Nevertheless, there is a tension between JI's empowerment discourse and secular feminist norms. As Mahmood's critique highlights, these women's agency is framed not in terms of liberation from patriarchal structures, but rather their alignment with a moral order in which "women's rights" are conceived via Islamic revival and obedience. Their activism contests secular or "western" feminist narratives, positioning themselves instead as modern, but authentically Muslim, actors shaping patriotic and Islamic citizenship (e.g. nation-building, political participation) while rejecting feminism as foreign or ideologically suspect [9].

[7] Ahmad, Humaira & Rafi, Dr. (2021). Negotiating Modernity with Caution: Women of Jama'at-e- Islami Pakistan: Jamat-e-Islami Pakistan and Women. ĪQĀN. 4. 64-79. 10.36755/iqan.v4i01.342.

[8] Haider, Nafis. *Book Review: Saba Mahmood, Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject | Centre for Studies of Plural Societies*. cspsindia.org/book-review-saba-mahmood-politics-of-piety-the-islamic-revival-and-the-feminist-subject?

[9] "Gender Ideology and the Jamaat-e-Islami." *Hudson Institute*, 15 July 2025, www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/gender-ideology-and-the-jamaat-e-islami.

Comparison of Perspectives on Agency and Individual Autonomy

Comparing Mahmood's perspective with that of Mernissi, considering the critique that Islamic movements should not be seen solely as disruptive, reveals a fundamental difference in how each scholar interprets the role of Islam in political and social transformation. Mernissi, while deeply invested in reforming Islamic thought, tends to view Islamic movements, especially those that assert a return to tradition, as potentially regressive forces that reinforce patriarchal norms. Her work often frames secularism and liberal reform as necessary conditions for gender equality and democratization, positioning Islamism as a challenge to these ideals. In contrast, Mahmood's analysis, especially in *Politics of Piety*, offers a more nuanced and less binary view. She does not romanticize Islamic movements, but she critically challenges the assumption that their rise represents only a setback for women's rights or democratic progress. Mahmood's research demonstrates that, in various Middle Eastern contexts, Islamic political and religious movements have played complex roles, including opening spaces for political participation, contesting authoritarian regimes, and pushing for pluralism. Rather than seeing Islamic activism as uniformly oppressive or anti-democratic, she shows how these movements can mobilize people in ways that challenge the status quo and promote political engagement—albeit through religious and ethical frameworks rather than liberal secular ones. Thus, while Mernissi approaches democratization largely through the lens of secular feminist critique, Mahmood broadens the lens to consider how religious forms of life and Islamic political agency can also generate meaningful political and social change. This comparison underscores the importance of context-specific analysis and challenges reductive readings of Islamic activism in the Middle East.

While Mernissi views freedom as something to be attained through resistance and liberation from constraints, Mahmood sees freedom as emerging within power structures, through the formation of desires and ethical selves, even when such desires may seem contrary to feminist sensibilities. The concepts of agency and individual autonomy stipulate that one's actions are an outcome of one's own will. 'Thus, even illiberal actions can arguably be tolerated if it is determined that they are undertaken by a freely consenting individual who is acting of her own accord' (Mahmood 9). According to Mahmood, therefore, it is not resistance or substance of desire but the origin and one's ability to choose one's desire, no matter how illiberal that desire is, that determine the conception of freedom and the possibility of women's fulfillment or self-realization. Negating the liberal notion of autonomy, Mahmood underscores the importance of thinking about resistance and autonomy by making considerations of class, race, and ethnicity central to the concept of women's self-realization and self-fulfillment and suggests that it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics. For her, 'if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific, then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity' (14).

Through her anthropological account of Egyptian women of the mosque movement, Mahmood sets side by side western liberal feminism, which is mostly associated with imperial intervention in Middle Eastern Muslim countries, and women of the recent Islamic piety movement, who consider the reaffirmation of Islamic practices as a restoration of their traditions and part and parcel of their agency. Her exploration of these two antithetical frameworks of subsistence for women thus problematizes the notions of freedom and agency, as she underscores how the women's mosque movement poses a dilemma for feminist analysis of women's resistance to oppressive religious patriarchal structures. Egyptian women who affiliate with the mosque movement do not feel the need to challenge the patriarchal structures through exegesis, and this makes their mosque movement characteristically distinctive from the women's movement in Iran and other places where women resort to feminist exegesis in the pursuit of women equality. In this scenario, women from the mosque movement display approval of embodied religious construction and do not feel the need to resist as they do not recognize such structures as patriarchal or oppressive but instead identify within this structure of ethical practices as a means of articulating their agency.

Story of Abir

The story of Abir that Mahmood discusses in her book is interesting in this context. Like many young women of her class and background, Abir was not raised religiously but was now a member of the Egyptian mosque movement and was actively pursuing the performance of religious duties. Abir's transformation was very disturbing for her whole family but was extremely astonishing to her husband, who, according to Abir, although Muslim, seldom performed any religious duties, sometimes drank alcohol, and watched X-rated films. For him, his wife's increasingly orthodox Islamic sociability and her full face and body veil were alarming and backward, and he would let his wife know on many occasions that he wanted a worldly and fashionable wife who could afford him access to a higher class. Abir had to face a brazen threat of divorce, a taboo in Egyptian culture. However, she refused to give up *da'wa*. She attended religious teachings at the mosque even when she was told by her family that, Islamically, she was a bad wife since good wives listened to a husband's commands. Her ambition was to be a teacher to preach Islamic teachings herself, and she was ready for the

consequences but was not willing to give up her passion for *da'wa*. Her strategy to deal with her husband was to claim a higher moral ground and then to pray to Allah to give him *hadayat* (guidance). Ultimately, she was able to hold her position in part because her training in *da'wa* school had given her substantial authority and knowledge with which to challenge her husband on issues of Islamic conduct. She would retort by reminding him that he was going for short-lived pleasures of life by disregarding the commands of Allah and rejecting the chance to get into heaven by his desire to emulate Western values and appear 'civilized and urbane' in front of the world. She would play recordings of sermons at full volume that focused on scenes of death and torture in hell when her husband was home. Gradually, she also became gentler to him, and the husband started saying a few prayers and going to the mosque with her.

Abir's ability to break from the norms of what it meant to be a dutiful wife and successful with her husband was not an individual but a collaborative achievement, 'a product of the shared matrix of background practices, sensibilities, and orientations' (Mahmood 178) that structured their relationship. Mahmood, however, discourages her readers from interpreting Abir's motives and achievements through the lens of subordination and resistance, because although Abir's ability to pursue *da'wa* can be seen as resistance against her husband and her use of religious arguments can be seen as 'reiteration and resignification' of religious norms that further coalesce with patriarchal religious practices. Yet, all these approaches remain inadequately attentive to the internal reasoning surrounding Abir's actions. Abir was not troubled by Jamal's authority over her. However, she was challenging him over his impious behavior towards a divine authority and his dissuading her from what she thought of as her obligations towards God. For Abir, the demand to live piously required the practice of a range of Islamic virtues and the creation of optimal conditions under which they could be realized. 'Thus Abir's complicated evaluations and decisions were aimed towards goals whose sense is not captured by terms such as *obedience* versus *rebellion, compliance* versus *resistance,* or *submission* versus *subversion*. These terms belong more to a feminist discourse than to the discourse of piety precisely because these terms have relevance for certain actions but not others.' (Mahmood 180) Abir's defiance of social and patriarchal norms is, therefore, best explored through analysis of the ends towards which it was aimed, and the terms of being, affectivity, and responsibility that constituted the grammar of her actions.

It is crucial to investigate the strategies that women who are part of the mosque movement in Egypt adapt to articulate their relationship with structures of religious authority and the challenges of feminist critique in dealing with their narrative within an emancipatory framework of challenging the patriarchy. Similar movements have emerged across the contemporary Muslim world, often in response to modernity, secularization, and perceived moral decline. In the contemporary Muslim world, several grassroots women-led religious movements are thriving that are parallel the Egyptian mosque movement studied by Saba Mahmood. For instance, Majlis Ta'lim in Indonesia consists of informal religious study groups where women gather, often in mosques, homes, or community centers, for Qur'anic study, prayer, and moral instruction. These circles are central to the religious and social life of Indonesian Muslim women and emphasize pious self-cultivation rather than political activism. Similarly, in Iran, post-revolutionary women's religious circles operate in homes and mosques, focusing on ethical instruction, modesty, and Islamic education under the guidance of female religious scholars or wives of clerics. These gatherings mirror the Egyptian mosque model in their emphasis on piety, moral reform, and the cultivation of a devout self. In Pakistan, the rise of institutions like Al-Huda International, founded by Farhat Hashmi, represents a significant equivalent. Though not always mosque-based, Al-Huda's programs attract middle- and upper-class urban women who engage in structured religious education focused on the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic ethics. Likewise, Tablighi Jamaat's women's wing in South Asia involves women in home-based or mosque-adjacent religious gatherings focused on preaching, modesty, and spiritual refinement. In Malaysia, women in da'wah groups like JIM (Jemaah Islah Malaysia) and IKRAM also conduct halaqahs (study circles) to promote Islamic values in everyday life. Like the Egyptian mosque movement, these examples highlight how women, through religious spaces and discourse, pursue empowerment and agency within the framework of Islamic piety rather than through secular feminist paradigms.

Women's Voluntary Adherence to Religious Norms In *Women and Gender in Islam:*

Historical roots to a Modern Debate, Leila Ahmed writes that the reaffirmation of indigenous customs relating to women and the restoration of the customs and laws of past Islamic societies with respect to women are the centerpiece of the agenda of political Islamists through which they control women, as well as counter the colonial discursive assault on Islam and Arab culture (236). If that is so, how can women's voluntary adherence to religious norms within the mosque movement simultaneously serve as an expression of agency while also reinforcing gender subordination? Pierre Bourdieu's use of the term *habitus* [10], helps us

[10] "Why did I revive that old word? Because with the notion of habitus you can refer to something that is close to what is suggested by the idea of habit, while differing from it in one important respect. The habitus, as the word

to understand the complex dynamics and hierarchies involving unequal power relations in communal life. His theory of action revolves around the concept of *habitus*, which he defines as a socially constituted system of dispositions that orient 'thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions' (Bourdieu 55). In Bourdieu's attempt to define the hegemonic social structures that are embodied in human thought and behavior, he explains how humans exist in a system ridden with manipulation that allows limited freedom of thought and action, and how the identity of an individual is neither completely determined by relations of power, nor completely free. Moreover, the structures of power are maintained not by groups of people directly, but instead through power that flows indirectly via institutions and practices, working through the complicity of individuals that help reproduce power relations by repeating patterns of behavior that are shaped by societal norms. Bourdieu introduces the idea of 'regulated improvisation' (Bourdieu 57) as a theory of practice, which implies that individuals learn to want not what they can have, but instead how to work through what is already available to them.

Seen through the framework of the 'regulated improvisation' of human behavior, one can ask if the women of the mosque/ dawah movements [11], find possible articulations of resistance and improvisation within the regulated structure of religious performance that is practiced around the concept of mosque. If *habitus* is a recursive social function that calls upon itself the help to reproduce it by virtue of the self-perpetuating nature of practice, it looks like the probability of individual or collective struggle diminishes as comfort with regulated practice dominates. Can one attribute women's comfort with the mosque movement to their acquiescence and submission to the religious and patriarchal structures, within which they retrieve those instances of empowerment that are legitimate modes of domination to them, without completely threatening the traditional structures of power? While freedom is typically understood as a normative cornerstone of feminism, and agency is often framed through acts of resistance to patriarchy, Mahmood complicates this view by suggesting that autonomy should not be judged by the content of one's desires but by their origin. In her formulation, freedom lies in the capacity to autonomously choose one's desires even when those desires appear illiberal (Mahmood 12). Bourdieu outlined a strategy for resistance in his explanation of social relations within a *habitus* and writes: 'The specific efficacy of subversive action consists in the power to bring to consciousness, and so modify, the categories of thought which help to orient individual and collective practices and in particular the categories through which distributions are perceived and appreciated' (Bourdieu 141). Similarly, the women who are part of the mosque/ dawah movements aim for piety and modesty as an ethical formation of self, and Mahmood writes that 'the proper locus of the attribute of modesty is the interiority of the individual, which then influences outward behavior. Modesty is not so much an attribute of the body as it is characteristic of the individual's interiority, which is then expressed in bodily form' (Mahmood 160–161).

Women belonging to the mosque/ dawah movements aim to work towards 'piety' through 'interiority consciously', and Mahmood implies that the women of these movements come to recognize themselves against the traditions they are in, and their collective endeavors need to be measured against the similar ideals that are furnished by these traditions. 'Self-reflexivity is not a universal human attribute here but, as Foucault suggested, a particular kind of relation to oneself whose form fundamentally depends on the practices of subjectivation through which the individual is produced' (Mahmood 32). Western liberal formulations of agency cannot be taken as an exclusive yardstick with which to gauge the politics of being within which the community of mosque women would place themselves. Instead of placing the women's mosque/ dawah movements in the feminist liberatory and emancipatory framework, Mahmood suggests that we consider their interrelationship with the religious milieu in which they are situated and recognize that they are taking charge of religious knowledge by manipulating it as an instrument of authority that renders them power and enables them to question patriarchy at home.

Mernissi and Mahmood for Our Times

Despite emerging from distinct temporal and geographical contexts, Mernissi in postcolonial Morocco and Mahmood in late 20th-century Egypt, both scholars remain profoundly relevant in today's complex feminist and political landscapes. Each offers a radical rethinking of women's agency, freedom, and subjectivity within Islamic contexts, yet through contrasting intellectual pathways.

implies, is that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions. So, the term constantly reminds us that it refers to something historical, linked to individual history, and that it belongs to a genetic mode of thought, as opposed to essentialist modes of thought (like the notion of competence which is part of the Chomskian lexis). Moreover, by habitus the Scholastics also meant something like a property, a capital. And indeed, the habitus is a capital, but one which, because it is embodied, appears as innate." Pierre Bourdieu, Sociology in Question (1993)

[11] Syarifudin, Amir, et al. "Exploring the Contribution of Women in Da'wah: Case Study of Women's Community on Thousand Mosque Island." *Path of Science*, vol. 10, no. 5, May 2024, pp. 3094–102, doi:10.22178/pos.104-33.

As Minoo Moallem writes in *Fatema Mernissi for Our Times* (2025)**,** Mernissi's scholarship is timeless, since she foregrounded women as 'builders of civil society'(Moallem 4) emphasizing their role in reconfiguring both social and epistemic structures. Her scholarship challenged 'the coloniality of knowledge through decolonial insight' (4) critiquing Western feminist universalism while reclaiming Islamic traditions as spaces for justice, gender equity, and political imagination. Her insistence that 'Muslim women are powerful subjects' (5) has continued to inspire feminist movements that resist binary categories of Western/liberal and Islamic/traditional paradigms. 'Her impact on activism reaches far beyond those borders' (5), extending to feminist organizing in contexts such as France, India, and Pakistan. This global circulation and reception of her work, particularly among Muslim women activists, attest to her continued significance in shaping both theory and praxis. A defining feature of Mernissi's oeuvre is her dual critique of Eurocentric feminism and Arabo-Islamic patriarchy. Unlike feminists who reproduce colonial discourses by exporting Western liberal ideals to non-Western contexts, Mernissi consciously resists epistemological imperialism. 'Mernissi challenged the coloniality of knowledge through decolonial insight', (Moallem 6) offering a feminist methodology that is rooted in localized histories and vernacular epistemologies. Her approach aligns with broader currents in decolonial and postcolonial theory that interrogate how colonial modernity has replaced diverse epistemes with hierarchical, binary categories such as "modern/traditional" and "civilized/barbaric." Mernissi's literary and scholarly interventions are also remarkable for the way they render visible the voices of subaltern women in Muslim societies. By narrating from the perspective of marginalized subjects, she disrupts dominant narratives about Muslim women's passivity or victimhood. In the current global context, where interventions in countries like Iran are often justified through the rhetoric of 'saving' women, Mernissi's scholarship remains highly pertinent, as she critically interrogates how Western democracies perpetuate modern forms of patriarchy and reinforce Orientalist stereotypes about Arab men and women.

Her ability to convey her thoughts and make them appealing to particular audiences was crucial in challenging geopolitical power relations. In contrast to many feminists who export Eurocentric ideas to other parts of the world and thereby continue to invest in hegemonic Western epistemologies, Mernissi challenged the coloniality of knowledge through decolonial insight. (Moallem 4)

Mernissi's intellectual and activist legacy continues to resonate in contemporary feminist and decolonial discourses, particularly as global feminist movements contend with the intersecting challenges of postcolonial inequality, epistemic marginalization, and the politics of knowledge production. Mernissi's work constitutes a critical intervention against both Western hegemonic feminisms and patriarchal structures embedded within Muslim-majority societies.

Saba Mahmood, on the other hand, dismantled the liberal feminist presumption that agency must manifest as resistance. Instead, she provocatively asked whether agency could be located within practices of piety and religious obedience—thereby destabilizing secular definitions of autonomy. Her question, 'Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I want so passionately to remake?' [12]. (2006) encapsulates her call for epistemic humility and ethical engagement, particularly in a world where feminist discourses are frequently mobilized in service of imperial violence and state power. She calls on scholars and activists to practice epistemic humility and resist projecting their own values onto others' lifeworld. This remains a particularly urgent reminder as liberal feminism and human rights discourses are co-opted to justify wars, state violence, and settler colonialism.

In *Remembering Saba Mahmood:*

Twenty years of Politics of Piety (2025), Giulia Macario writes that the historical moment in which *Politics of Piety* (2004) was published is significant to perceive. It was the time when Anglo-American coalition was entrenched in the *Global War on Terror*, 'one of the bloodiest and most imperialistic campaigns of recent history waged under the guise of exporting democracy and imposing it through violence' [13]. Saba's book published during the time when the invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) were justified through the language of women's rights and human rights, becoming central to the narrative of liberal imperialism. At the same time, this discourse oversimplified and racialized the complex realities of the Second Intifada in Palestine (2000–2006), framing it largely through associations with Islamic militancy. In Europe, 2004 marked a turning point: France implemented a ban on the veil in public schools, while the murder of Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands escalated anti-Muslim and civilizational tensions, fueled by public figures like Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Together, these developments signaled a critical rupture, illustrating Europe's uncritical embrace of American cultural and political paradigms and revealing growing tensions

[12] Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt', *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 42:1 (2006), 61.

[13] https://criticalmuslimstudies.co.uk/remembering-saba-mahmood-twenty-years-of-politics-of-piety/

between secularism, multiculturalism, and Muslim identity in the West. If we draw a comparison between the early 2000s and the present moment, it becomes clear that the rhetoric of human rights, women's liberation, and secular "freedom" continues to be weaponized to justify state violence and geopolitical domination. Just as the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were framed as missions to "liberate" Muslim women and bring democracy, contemporary Israeli actions, including the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians (2023) are often veiled in the language of security, civilization, and Western values. Similarly, Israeli attacks on Iran (2025) are increasingly framed within gendered humanitarian discourses, suggesting that intervention is necessary to "save" Iranian women from oppression. This mirrors what Mahmood critiqued in *Politics of Piety*: the instrumentalization of women's rights to justify militarism and the flattening of complex political struggles into simplistic binaries of oppression and liberation. Her question, 'Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I want so passionately to remake?' (Mahmood 2006) makes even more sense in this contemporary political scenario. Her call for epistemic humility resonates today, especially as feminist language is co-opted to legitimize imperialist agendas, rather than to foster genuine solidarity with women on the ground.

Mahmood's critique of secularism as a political—not neutral—framework is especially timely. In a global moment marked by rising Islamophobia, veil bans, and state-led efforts to reshape religious identities, Mahmood's insights help expose how secular regimes often marginalize religious women under the guise of liberation. As Macario's article notes, she laid the groundwork for a generation of scholars, like Nadia Fadil and Hussein Agrama, who continue to examine how secularism, migration, and gender intersect in complex ways.

Importantly, Mahmood's influence extends beyond theory into methodology. She foregrounded embodied practices as central to ethical life, showing how women's everyday actions in religious settings are political and meaningful. This focus on practice over ideological labels (e.g., avoiding terms like "Islamism") has shaped how researchers approach gender and religion in non-Western contexts. 'Politics of Piety ventured into territories considered off-limits in leftist politics and taboo within feminist circles' (Macario 2025). Mahmood disrupted comfortable narratives and forced a rethinking of concepts like freedom, autonomy, and justice.

In today's world, marked by military occupation, racialized surveillance, and feminist complicity in global power, her critique of liberal secularism, feminist universalism, and ethical violence feels more urgent than ever. Her legacy compels scholars and activists to resist dogmatism, remain attentive to context, and imagine feminist futures that are truly inclusive and decolonial.

Together, Mahmood and Mernissi offer vital frameworks for understanding the layered experiences of Muslim women that transcend reductive narratives of oppression or resistance. Mahmood's interrogation of secularism as a political regime and Mernissi's deconstruction of patriarchal and colonial knowledge systems both reflect a commitment to feminist praxis grounded in lived realities, historical consciousness, and intellectual plurality. As we navigate a global context marked by resurgent Islamophobia, the politicization of women's bodies, and the instrumentalization of human rights discourse, their insights remain indispensable. Their legacies challenge scholars and activists alike to reimagine feminism not as a singular project of liberation, but as a plural, contested, and contextually situated field of ethical inquiry.

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