2019

Post Secularism and the Woman Question

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Post Secularism and the Woman Question (Review of Saba Mahmood’s book “Politics of Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject” (2005))

Lama Abu Odeh

I will discuss the “woman question in post secularism” by offering my critique of Saba Mahmood’s book “Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject”. But before I do so, let me just state that I am a legal academic and I am not a reader of the field of anthropology. I am unfamiliar with the theoretic jargon of the discipline - even less so of the jargon of the subfield, anthropology of religion from which Politics of Piety hails. Each discipline is autonomous more so fields of study within each discipline. Those fields usually coalesce around a celebrity figure of a theorist who originates a theoretic language that his or her mentees use to signal their affiliation with this field. Critique of the celebrity figures of the field usually occurs by way of addition, modification, and complexification and rarely in the form of radical critique. Radical critique is usually costly for those affiliated with a field because of the way academia is organized. One needs the reference letter, the invitation to a conference, and the book review. This is all to say that Politics of Piety may have already been subject to a great deal of critique-addition/modification/complexification, sadly being an outsider and missing the subtleties of exchange between mentors and mentees within the anthropology of religion, I am unaware of any of it.

The book: Politics of Piety was published in 2005 and has had a great and successful career in EuroAmerican academia. One sees it cited everywhere- and I mean everywhere- typically in the context of denouncing Western feminism-sometimes one sees the word “secular” inserted between “Western” and “feminism= or in asserting a counter and different kind of feminism to the Western one. The book, which anthropologizes the piety movement among women in the nineties of the twentieth century, namely, the women of the mosque in Egypt, has never been translated to Arabic. It has been more than a decade since its publication and has had a huge and formative effect on a whole generation of academics in EuroAmerican Academia especially among those interested in the study of Islam and Muslims and yet seems to have had a bare life in the Arab world. It appears that a book that talks about an Arab phenomenon has caused

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1 Talk presented at the conference “Religion, Politics and Critique: Comparative Political Theology”, the American University of Beirut (AUB), Feb 20-21, 2019

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an explosion in the West but has landed a DUD in the Arab world. The question is why?

I will try to present my critique of the book without falling into the trap Saba Mahmood, its author, laid out for the critic of her thesis. In the book, SM used the case of the Egyptian pious women of the mosque with whom she had repeated “ethnic encounters” in the 90s to critique the secular/liberal/feminist assumptions that undergird the critique of the Muslim revivalist movements in general and the female piety movements in particular. It is a trap because anything you say by way of critique can be returned back to you, by the author of the book, as a form of “secular/liberal/feminist” bias. For it is SM’s project in the book to show that the piety movement is an instantiation of a completely different epistemological grid from that of its critics that can only be comprehended on its own terms. To critique the movement by using terms from a counter epistemological grid—such as secularism/liberalism/feminism—is to be already guilty of misrecognition. To say for instance that the women of piety are submissive to patriarchal authority is to be already wedded to the epistemological grid of secular feminist liberalism and your critique instantly fails or rather slides unnoticed along the scaffolding of these pious women’s own way of knowing the world. At best you are ignored-unheard, unseen- and at worst you exemplify in your critique an error of judgment that is motivated by your own epistemological spectacles. The problem put simply is that you used YOUR terms to understand THEIRS and the goal is to get you to shed your bias by unknowing what you know in order for you to know what you need to know.

To avoid the trap I will instead try to show the internal incoherence of the argument made in the book. This goes back to my own training as a critical lawyer. One of the first inductions I received in being a crit: you need to show the internal incoherence of the argument not just that the representation doesn’t match the fact as you see them. And this is what I will try to do in this short presentation.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me first describe in my own words what the book is about.

According to Saba Mahmood the women who joined the piety movement she studied saw themselves as rebelling against, as they put it, the increasing Westernization and secularization of Egyptian culture. The lessons they received from the Daaya in the mosque was the medium through which they learnt to replace this knowledge, piece by piece, with an alternative Islamic one. In short the lessons helped these women to know the world, or rather re-know it, their
own private one that - included their men - and the public one, Islamically.

The lessons usually took place in a particular mosque in both upper and working class neighborhoods and included jurisprudential discussions that covered topics that were of interest to the women attending those lessons. Those topics included the proper way to dress, the proper way to be in male company at the university or the workplace, how to deal with an un-pious husband and whether to attend an establishment that served alcohol. When the lesson ended, prayers were held, often led by the Daaiya herself. Those lessons took place several times a week and women who attended them often found themselves in conflict with husbands or family who were disapproving of the transformation effected on these women and their bodies through the regular attendance of those lessons. Despite opposition, those women persisted, and how to resist family pressure became one of the regular topics raised in those lessons.

In the book Saba Mahmood proposes that we understand the piety movement as a discourse of ethics that produces its own subjects. More so, it is a discourse that produces the very body that performs its dictates. Through repeated performances of the dictates of this discourse, the body is produced over and over again.

By way of example of piety's ethical discourse, Mahmood describes two different ethical registers women are advised to use to resist adversity: one is the moral high ground, and the other is sabr, patience. Make the husband feel guilty and if that doesn’t work, be patient.

If we take the veil that the women of the mosque donned as an expression of their membership in the movement, SM proposes that it would amount to nonsense to say, by way of feminist critique, something like “The veil restricts the movement of these women”. That sentence would be one plucked out of a secular liberal feminist text in which the veiled subject precedes the discourse of the veil and in which the agency to move as one wishes is considered a precious right. To say that would be to understand it backwards according to Mahmood. Rather than “the veil restricts the movement of these women” it is that “the veil produces the woman or the body for whom restriction of movement is a desired pious goal.” And if one were hung up on “agency” what agency there is, is an agency to submit. Welcome to the world of social conservatism she seems to say, it has its own internal logic that you need to understand if you want to influence.
What is interesting about SM’s theory is that in its attempt to represent the piety movement as performative ethics it does so on the terms of this movement’s own idealistic terms. It reproduces the movement in theoretical terms ideally. There is no hint of critique. No sign of interest in noting failure of performance for the purpose of undoing the discourse of the piety movement. To the contrary, Mahmood posits that failure of performance can be remedied through more performances to master the ethics the discourse promotes. This Mahmood insists on to distinguish her reading of the piety movement as discourse from the reading of her mentor Judith Butler of heteronormativity as discourse. While Butler, also argues that heteronormativity produces its own subjects by creating a necessary link between sex, gender, and desire, she nevertheless, driven by the desire to undo heteronormativity, looks for failure of performance to signal the locus of this undoing.

But Mahmood entertains no such desire when it comes to the piety movement. Her theoretic framing rather than offering critique for the purpose of undoing, offers flattery- the discourse of piety is capable of producing perfect subjects, Mahmood asserts. No failure of performance is referred to by the theorist to show the discourse’s will to power.

Accordingly, SM’s refrain to feminists who might be tempted to do just that is to say either a) if you want to intervene in the discourse of piety you have to do it on this discourse’s own terms or alternatively b) and there she tightens the screws on feminist critique, the discourse of piety is so productive of its subjects that it becomes coded into the body- to undo it you have to “retune” the body itself. No easy task!

But turning a discourse theoretically into an epistemological closure, making interventions in it conditional on the discourse’s own term is to make intervention impossible. It is as if SM wants to say these women were tone deaf to feminist discourse.

A theoretic work that endows on its object discourse a closure so perfect that makes any serious change impossible is theoretic work that matches its object perfectly.

On the other side, interestingly, Saba Mahmood makes secularist discourse porous and open to change- after all that’s precisely what the women of piety were doing and quite successfully apparently-they used to be non religious and became so, they used to be non veiled and became so. By making secularism porous and open to change against the grain of her initial claim that secularism and piety form
two opposing epistemological grids, she signals her approval of the shift in these women’s lives.

The pious is closed to the secularist agenda of change but the secularist is open to the pious agenda of change. And this is where I think SM’s thesis is internally incoherent.

If I am right, and SM does more in theory than represent the movement but slides into complete identification with it so that she comes close to becoming its spokeswoman, the question is why?

It is important to note that the background thesis behind the study of women of piety is the claim-by Mahmood- that Western secular liberal discourses have reshaped the Muslim world and that is bad. Something precious, “Islam, Muslim” was lost and had to be changed. This background claim- diagnosis, assessment- corresponds with the claim of the women in the piety movement who see westernization and secularization all around them and who seek to undo it.

So one way to understand what Mahmood is doing is trading off a feminist agenda for a socially conservative one because of the latter’s Islamic revivalist effect- sacrificing women in order to salvage a lost authentic Islam and that is a project in the heart of identity politics.

A theoretic exercise that begins with proposing two mutual epistemological closures but once carried out in effect closes off feminist secular intervention by endowing the Islamic pious discourse with epistemological closure while opening up the secular liberal one to Islamist intervention is a theoretic exercise that merges with the claims of the Islamist revival.

This of course begs the question” if the liberal secular is open to Islamist intervention why not the Islamist one? Specifically as it relates to the women of piety, if they were unveiled before they were veiled, why can’t they be unveiled again? If they were non pious before why not become un-pious again?

And why is there a trade off of women to secure Islam as identity?

Academic feminism emerging from the ME studies complex is here in SM pushed to the breaking point. Those who write within this complex have often insisted that modernity has witnessed several attempts by Muslim women to engage their own religion feministically. To do so they sought to liberalize the hierarchical relationships of gender they were born into by appealing to concepts of justice and equality in the Quran against the grain of jurisprudential
wisdom that asserted otherwise and that were articulated in positive family laws throughout the Arab world in the twentieth century. If we were to follow SM’s theoretic formulation to its logical end, these attempts are either impossible or undesirable. Impossible because of conservative social mores are autonomous-unto themselves- can only be changed on their own terms, undesirable, because of the problem of inserting secularity unto religious discourse, which would be frowned upon on revivalist terms. And here we get to what I would call the Joseph Massad problematic. Asserting an authentic Islam that was despoiled by the West that polices any attempt at inserting rights-gay rights/women’s rights- as Euronormative intervention. Each gesture of liberality/secularity is denounced as inauthentic, which then turns the EuroAmerican academic into the self-appointed policeman/woman of feminist and gay activism in the Arab world.