REIMAGINING WESTERN FEMINIST NOTIONS: A CONVERSATION WITH

AMERICAN AND EGYPTIAN ISLAMIC FEMINISTS

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Introduction: Muslim Women and Feminism

In the past 50 years, several scholars have dedicated their work to the job of dissecting a common sentiment, mostly among Westerners, of the desire to "save Islamic women". This sentiment has emerged due to many factors, such as globalization, the War on Terrorism, and rising feminist discourses. Scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Miriam Cooke and Saba Mahmood were troubled with portrayals of Muslim women in the media and a growing concern as to the need to liberate Muslim women of oppressive practices. Due to their skepticism regarding a collective feeling of "oppression" among these women, many scholars have set out to talk to and study the lives and practices of Muslim women across the world in order to understand first-hand the varied intentions, beliefs, and goals of their subjects of study. Abu-Lughod, in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving* (2013), writes of her concern with the common desire to "save" Muslim women: "Just as we need to be suspicious when neat cultural icons are plastered over messier historical narratives, so we need to be wary when Lord Cromer in British-ruled Egypt, French ladies in Algeria, and First Lady Laura Bush, all with military troops behind them, claim to be saving or liberating women."[1]

This mission which has emerged across many countries may potentially be due to the overlap between liberal discourses of feminism and secular democracy. "…contemporary concern for Muslim women is paradoxically linked with and deeply informed by the civilizational discourse through which the encounter between Euro-America and Islam is being framed right now. Feminist contributions to the vilification of Islam do no service either to

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[1] Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 34.

Muslim women or to the cause of gender justice. Instead they reinscribe the cultural and civilizational divide that has become the bedrock not only of neoconservative politics but of liberal politics as well in this tragic moment in history."[2] The goal of this thesis, therefore, is to show through case studies of different Islamic women, that current Western notions of feminism cannot be simply exported into other cultures and used to make judgments regarding the supposed oppression or amount of agency possessed by a woman. Instead, I suggest that we must observe the ways in which women engage with the specific and unique cultures in which they are positioned to redefine the terms that comprise feminist theory – a bottom up approach.

There are several voices which must be considered in this discussion regarding the scope and implications of women's agency in specific cultures. This paper will bring several perspectives into conversation with the feminist discourse. The voices at play are: the Western feminist discursive tradition; Foucault's theories of power and agency; the plurality of authority inherent in the Islamic tradition; the work and intentions of American Muslim feminists; and the endeavors of the female Egyptian participants of the mosque movement. Each of these voices plays a crucial role in the story and justification for reframing the feminist discourse in order to account for forms of feminism which are not currently considered in the Western version. The implications of bringing these aspects together in one conversation will be the necessity to redefine the ways in which we think about feminism in order for it to remain a productive discourse for those which it aims to serve; in fact, it will become apparent that imagining feminism is only possible by conjoining the perspectives of the etic observer and the edic

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[2] Mahmood, Saba. "Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War of Terror." In *Women's Studies on the Edge*. Ed. Scott, Joan Wallach. 81.114. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 97.

participant in order to conjure a feminism that is completely relative to the culture, situation and values in which it resides.

In 1975 the United Nations defined feminism as, "the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds…There is and there must be a diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, and defined by them for themselves."[3] According to Margaret Walters in Oxford's, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction,* one can trace the roots of feminism to the 17th century through notions such as the desire to speak out, preach, go to battle, obtain education, participate in pilgrimage, vote, alter notions of femininity, reshape familial roles and participate in government. Feminism, as it exists today, has been transformed and institutionalized, its theory providing structure to subjects of contention both academic and non-academic. It often serves as a totalizing method for approaching any range of gender issues. Feminist writers have become renowned for their subversive ideas and global conferences have taken place in locations such as Mexico City, Nairobi and Copenhagen in an attempt to define and redefine what feminism means and how it should serve to effect change in global communities. Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer, conceptualized perhaps one of the more universal definitions of feminism; she was less concerned with the issue of women's rights versus men's and more concerned with deconstructing limitations for women. She wrote, "For women it is not a question of asserting themselves as women, but of becoming full-scale human beings."[4] It is this idea that illustrates the feasibility of expanding traditional conceptions of feminism as demonstrated by Muslim women, as it has the capability of encompassing a more

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[3] Walters, Margaret. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 97.
[4] Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction,* 99.

broad range of sentiments regarding gender; de Beauvoir's statement allows applicability in a

variety of different contexts and cultures.

Limitations of Western Feminism

Consequent to gaining an international agenda, feminism has inspired individuals to

observe other communities and make judgments regarding women's rights. Walters points to the

1960's and 70's as the years during which women in Britain began to adopt an international

focus.[5] The proliferation of this discourse among Westerners has likely played an important role

in common sentiments regarding the "plight" of Muslim women often viewed as "others"

through Western eyes. As a result, many feminist theorists, concerned with blind exportation of a

theory, have begun to take issue with the rhetoric involved in this movement. Often feminist

discourse is composed of the terms "rights", liberation", "emancipation", and "freedom" – all

terms which many Westerners value and identify with. Each of these terms has an additional

implication; with them comes an insinuation of resistance. The development of the feminist

movement has typically revolved around the subversion of norms, power, and structures, and its

modern popular form is characterized by this dynamic. Saba Mahmood wrote in 2005 in her

book *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*,

> When women's actions seem to reinscribe what appear to be "instruments of their
> own oppression," the social analyst can point to moments of disruption of, and
> articulation of points of opposition to male authority – moments that are located either
> in the interstices of a woman's consciousness (often read as a nascent feminist
> consciousness), or in the objective effects of women's actions, however unintended
> these may be. Agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize
> one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other
> obstacles (whether individual or collective).[6]

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[5] Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, 3.
[6] Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.* (Princeton: Princeton Universtiy Press, 2005), 8.

Therefore, naturally many Western feminists have become concerned with others who do not seemingly share the same amount of freedom and liberation as themselves and who cannot exercise their autonomy against authority or culture, as this has been considered a violation of basic human rights. However, the current model that Western feminism is composed of does not allow for etic observers to recognize certain forms of agency that do not conform to their own culturally situated assumptions.

Some are beginning to realize that there may be communities with which these terms of feminism do not resonate. Miriam Cooke, writing in *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (2001), quotes Saba Mahmood on this point, "The desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject."[7] In other words, Cooke is suggesting that this rhetoric that revolves around principles such as freedom and liberation is of value to some due to historical, cultural and personal backgrounds; however, it cannot be assumed that such ideas would be of value to all individuals or communities. In some societies terms such as freedom and liberation have gained value due to the historical context out of which they became important, however it becomes problematic when the context of these values is forgotten and they are applied as self-evident, universal norms. Mahmoud attempts to prove a point similar to Cooke's that there is, "a profound inability within current feminist political thought to envision valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of a liberal progressive imaginary."[8]

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[7] Cooke, Miriam. *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 45.

[8] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 155.

Due to the universal application of seemingly shared values, hence, other illustrations of human prospering have become quite unrecognizable to Western feminists. It has thus come to the attention of several scholars that the feminist discourse which has emerged in Europe and North America, may not necessarily be a productive agenda when applied to all women's situations.

In fact, many scholars who have attempted to evaluate the applicability of current definitions and sentiments associated with feminist discourse to diverse communities have found it actually excludes many individuals and groups. Only by taking into account the culture, history, location and religious convictions of an individual may one determine his or her relationship to feminism. A movement focused on increasing freedom and rights for women, in other words, may not represent the desires and motives of many women. Mahmood contends that the importance of creating an autonomous individual is intricately tied to the history of liberal and emphatically secular thought and, thus, unable to be separated from the Western feminist discourse. She writes,

> This secular conception of religiosity…embeds a number of presuppositions about autonomy and freedom that resonate with liberal feminist thought. The most obvious is the powerful trope of the autonomous individual – capable of enacting her own desires free from the force of transcendental will, tradition, or custom – that continues to animate many strains of feminism despite trenchant philosophical and anthropological critiques of such a limited conception of the subject.[9]

In other words, the liberal thinker inspires to be a self-governing, free entity regardless of and unrestricted by any traditions or customs they may be associated with. However, Mahmood and Abu-Lughod adamantly suggest that this view of the individual is inadequate, as it is shaped by situational and cultural factors. "What does freedom mean if we accept the fundamental premise that humans are social beings, raised in certain social and historical contexts and belonging to

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[9] Mahmood, "Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War of Terror", 105.

particular communities that shape their desires and understandings of the world?"[10] Feminism is evidently not a one-size-fits-all theory. If not all individuals can identify with current designations of the popularized feminist rhetoric, then it may be possible that different versions of feminism exist. Re-imagining the feminist actor and space would allow for new forms of feminism to become visible to Westerners which were not previously. Instead of approaching feminism from a top down perspective, feminist theory must begin from the bottom – the cultural and situational factors – and build a theory based on the specific characteristics of each unique situation.

A Spectrum of Islamic Feminisms

Scholars of Islam have demonstrated through anthropological work, that Muslim women across varying communities enact varying forms of feminism, some of which identify with popularized Western values, and some of which do not follow the traditional discourse of freedom and emancipation or resistance and subversion. Saba Mahmood asks the question, "…does the category of resistance impose a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms?"[11] Mahmood further suggests that all human-initiated change is historically, culturally and personally specific, therefore agency emerges through specific modes of being that do not necessarily take the form of subversion. She explains, "Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its

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[10] Abu-Lughod, Do Muslim Women Need Saving?, 40.
[11] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 9.

enactment."[12] By understanding, therefore, the intentions, goals, and actions of Muslim women across the world first, rather than preemptively employing a blanket theory, one can begin to see the intentional or unintentional restructuring of gender norms that constitute a type of Islamic feminism.

In an attempt to examine from an emic perspective, this paper will consider Egyptian Muslim women and American Muslim women as representations of different types of "Islamic Feminists". In no way does this paper intend to suggest that women in these two categories who label themselves as "Muslim Women" are all the same or have the same intentions. Rather, the intention is to draw parallels and contrast different women's movements originating in distinct parts of the world in order to propose new terms for a more inclusive feminist discourse. The plurality of the Islamic discursive tradition has allowed for these multiple and varying types of Islamic feminism. The concept *embodied Tafsir* which Hammer explains in *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority and Activism* (2012) as, "interpretive encounters with the Qur'an" which "can and do take place in many forms other than textual engagement that produces new texts, namely, in shaping the understanding and application of such understanding in ritual, social, and political acts."[13] is what I argue to be the basis for Islamic feminism. *Embodied Tafsir* is central to my analysis of these two cultural constituencies; and it is the idea that women engage with the Qur'an in various ways in order to achieve various ends. By comparing American Muslim women and Egyptian women of the mosque movement, it is evident that Islamic feminism, driven and supported by *embodied Tafsir*, exists in many different forms.

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[12] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 15.
[13] Hammer, Juliane. *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 56.

For American Muslim Women, *embodied Tafsir* is shaped and motivated by a common desire to create gender equality and improve religious rights for women. The academic, religious and political acts of these women are often framed as a "gender jihad" and evidently influenced by a liberal discourse centered on rights, freedom and equality. The acts of American Muslim women are normally intended to be public and often have qualities of resistance and protest, consistent with other aspects of American culture. However, for Egyptian women of the Mosque Movement – a movement to "preserve the spirit of Islam" which I will describe in more detail later – the type of feminism which they enact, is inspired almost solely by a desire to become better, pious Muslims.[14] Their acts are not always motivated by notions of gender equality, emancipation or subordination of cultural authority, yet they have the effects of agency and changing gender norms; it is for this reason that I argue for another type of feminism that begins from the bottom and takes into account the specific characteristics of a situation. A striking similarity exists between these two groups of women: both position themselves within their own societies and strategically engage cultural norms, laws, discourses etc. in order to alter gender norms and redefine themselves as Muslim women. This is noted by Hammer: "The [Egyptian] women in Mahmood's study participated in religious education and transformation through increased levels of piety and religious practice. The [American] women authors I studied situated themselves as part of American society, however critical they may have been of it, and employed decidedly liberal frameworks to position themselves within their communities and the larger society."[15] Therefore, though engaging different frameworks and sources of authority, American and Egyptian Muslim women engage their own societal positions and create alternative models of Islamic feminism.

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[14] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 43.
[15] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 7.

Finally, I would like to suggest that feminism, as exemplified by the women in this study, exists on a spectrum rather than in two distinct and impermeable categories. Margot Badran, an activist and scholar at Georgetown University and the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim Christian Understanding, in her book *Feminism in Islam* (2009) posits two types of Islamic feminism against one another, each of which are characteristically distinct. She writes, "Historically, Muslim women have generated two major feminist paradigms, which they have referred to as "secular feminism" and Islamic feminism." It is important to immediately observe, however, that these two feminisms have never been hermetic entities. Nor, comitantly, have those known as "secular feminists" and "Islamic feminists" operated strictly within the separate frameworks that the designations of the two feminisms might suggest."[16] For Badran, secular feminists insist on implementing gender equality in the public sphere, while Islamic feminists use *ijtihad* or "independent intellectual investigation of the Qur'an and other religious texts"[17] to alter notions of familial gender justice and notions within the private sphere.[18] However, the diverse methods and intentions of the American feminist scholars and activists I have identified as well as the participants of the Mosque movement of Mahmood's study demonstrate that the categories of Islamic and secular feminisms may not be as useful as Badran suggests. Mir's participants illustrate a clear permeation between the two polarities and seem to move quite freely between them. Some women such as Wadud and Hassan clearly represent the liberal feminist side of the spectrum and others such as Mahmood's participants represent what Mahmood presents as "different modalities of agency" which "require different kinds of bodily

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[16] Badran, Margot. *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 2.
[17] Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, 3.
[18] Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, 5.

capacities."[19] However, these groups are neither solely public or solely private in their actions, nor are they fully secular or fully Islamic in their strategies as noted by Badran. It is more productive, therefore, to take each case for its own situational characteristics and qualities rather than attempting to group seemingly similar displays of feminism together.

American Muslim Women: Feminist Embodiments and Tensions

The work of American Muslim women scholars could be the focus of an entire paper with its different goals, focuses and methods. Hammer, in *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority and Activism* (2012), attempts to lay out these various strategies among the discourse: "And even the drawing of boundaries around the group 'American Muslim Women' was not quite as self-evident as expected. The authors are Muslim women because they identify as such in their writings regardless of whether they perceive this identity as primary or more significant than other markers of identities."[20] She continues with regards to the varied topics with which they occupy their writings:

> …they write for the sake of formulating, negotiating, and sometimes saving their faith and religious identities as Muslim women; they address intra-Muslim and communal audiences in an attempt to generate discussions about gender discourses, attitudes, and practices in those communities; and they are acutely aware of and directly involved in media representations of Muslims and Islam and/or the dynamics of authority and scholarship in the secular American academy.[21]

This paper aims to use the category of American Muslim women in order to show the broader way in which these women engage with the liberal feminist discourse regardless of their individual identities, intentions or techniques.

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[19] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 188.
[20] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 2-3.
[21] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 3.

Hammer uses a certain event to introduce the topic of American Muslim women which will also be useful for this paper. This event is a woman-led mixed-gender Friday prayer which took place on March 18, 2005 in New York City led by scholar of Qu'ran exegesis, Amina Wadud; the gathering gained widespread renown and has been considered by some as an historical event.[22] "Traditionally, only men are required to attend Friday prayers, but women at least in some geographic locations have also participated in them…The Friday prayer on March 18, 2005, differed from established Muslim practices in several ways: the imam was a woman, Amina Wadud, who also delivered the khutbah; the congregation she addressed and led in prayer was not separated by gender; and the *adhan* (call to prayer) was pronounced by a woman."[23] Amina Wadud is considered a scholar of "progressive Islam" born in Maryland; she has thus been raised her entire life influenced by values of autonomy and freedom of the individual. Her reasoning behind the prayer event was evidently impacted by the environment in which she developed her value system. Regardless of the history of Islamic feminist manifestations in the United States preceding this event or of Wadud's precise intentions, the views and reactions to this event by scholars demonstrate the various ways in which they frame Islamic feminist arguments. Some women used Qur'anic justifications for the prayer, some situated it within the larger framework of a "gender jihad" and some used historical-critical approaches.

The leader of the 2005 mixed-gender prayer, Wadud, is a scholar with several works focused on gender and Qur'anic exegesis. Using her own interpretations of the Qur'an and Islamic values, she argues for equality among men and women – it is not surprising that the rhetoric she applies in her work includes words such as equality, justice and fairness. One of Wadud's arguments for gender equality is based on the Islamic notion of *taqwa* or moral

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[22] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 13.
[23] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 14-15.

excellence. She relies on a verse from the Qur'an which reads: "Oh human kind, We created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you might know one another. Verily the most noble of you in sight of Allah is the one with the most *taqwa*. (*Al-Hujurat 49:13*)."[24] She argues that *taqwa* is equally as important as expressed in the public space as in the private space or the home, however she says, "…but women are often socially conditioned to demonstrate *taqwa* by being subservient and silent, while men are encouraged to demonstrate *taqwa* through social activism, intellectual contributions and formation of the laws". [25] She claims, based on evidence from the Qur'an, that this notion should be reformed so that there is equal importance placed on men and women to demonstrate *taqwa* in the home and in the public sphere.

Wadud also uses verses from the Qur'an to demonstrate the inherent equality of men and women in creation and in piety. For example she cites this verse which outlines the exact same expectations for women as for men:

> Indeed, men who surrender to Allah and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who obey, and men who speak the truth, and men who persevere in patience and women who persevere in patience, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give in alms and women who give in alms, and men who observe the fast and women who observe the fast, and men who guard their modesty and women who guard their modesty and men who remember Allah much and women who remember Allah much, Allah has prepared them a forgiveness and a great reward. (*Al-Ahzab* 33:35).[26]

By providing examples such as this one, Wadud highlights Qur'anic discourses of gender equality. Because of the prominence of a liberal feminist discourse which resides in the minds of many Americans, Wadud's woman-led mixed-gender prayer, as framed through this lens of

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[24] Wadud, "Islam beyond patriarchy through gender inclusive Qur'anic analysis", 97.
[25] Wadud, "Islam beyond patriarchy through gender inclusive Qur'anic analysis", 98.
[26] Wadud, "Islam beyond patriarchy through gender inclusive Qur'anic analysis", 104-105.

gender equality, gained widespread positive and negative publicity.[27] The event can be seen as a public, symbolic resistance to alternative patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an. Wadud asserts another argument for gender equality centered on "a fundamental idea in Islam that Allah is the greatest. *Allahu akbar*."[28] Her argument is that there should be equality between men and women because, in comparison to Allah, they exist on the same plane. She writes, "As long as Allah is the greatest and is unique, according to *tahwid,* then there can be no other relationship between any two persons except the one of horizontal reciprocity. The horizontal plane is mutually cooperative because the role of the one can be exchanged with the role of the other with no loss of integrity."[29] Therefore, Wadud uses Qur'anic evidence based on creation, equal pious mandates and Allah as the greatest, to fight for gender equity within the tradition.

Riffat Hassann, a female American Muslim theologian and scholar of the Qur'an is among many scholars who believe that inequality among men and women is due to men's hegemonic interpretations of the Qur'an. She lists three main misinterpretations as the fundamental issues: "that women were created out of and later than men (the Adam and Eve paradigm); that Eve on behalf of all women was responsible for the fall from paradise; and that women were created for men."[30] She then refutes these fundamental beliefs and, according to Hammer, claims that the Qur'an ensures rights to life, respect, justice, and freedom for all human beings regardless of gender."[31] Hassan is another example of a female American Muslim scholar arguing for gender equality in Islam through textual reinterpretation and feminist rhetoric. These scholars are certainly engaging with a Western feminist discourse in order to frame their

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[27] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 31-35.
[28] Wadud, "Islam beyond patriarchy through gender inclusive Qur'anic analysis", 108.
[29] Wadud, "Islam beyond patriarchy through gender inclusive Qur'anic analysis", 108.
[30] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 64.
[31] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 65.

arguments for gender equality. In the words of Mahmood, they are exercising agency in order to act "against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles."[32] They are using *embodied tafsir* to subvert the authorities which they believe are causing gender injustice.

Shabana Mir, an American-born scholar, recently studied Muslim women's agency through the lens of negotiating identities among women in college as exemplified in her book *Muslim American Women on Campus* (2014). She is concerned mainly with the ways in which the women she studied engage with the American culture in which they are situated. What she ultimately found in her anthropological study was that the varying natures of each of these women's Islamic identities was almost completely a product of the cultural and political factors influencing them. " 'Actively produced, reproduced, and transformed through a series of social processes…Muslim female identity is essentialized by global and local political and cultural powers, both Muslim and non-Muslim."[33] These women who have to navigate the complicated pressures of college life, including dress, social functions and sexuality, seemed heavily influenced by the Western sentiment of resistance. What these American Muslim college students exemplify is a tension which exists among American Islamic feminists due to the necessity to balance the inherent values of freedom and authority they have developed as citizens of the United States and the Qur'anic values they yearn to observe.

Many of the responses Mir received in her interviews contained elements of the desire to be seen a certain way or not appear a certain way, thus illustrating a concern for the public arena. Interestingly, regarding the topic of male-female interaction, a Muslim Student Association

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[32] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 8.
[33] Mir, Shabana. *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 170.

(MSA), set the precedent that male-female interaction was okay in the private sphere but should be avoided in public. Mir notes, "On campus, MSA operated as the public official face of Islam. Many Muslims wished to see an objective, timeless, text-based Islam govern MSA practices, irrespective of the members' practice. Such Islamic behavior, moreover, should be displayed at MSA events."[34] When asking one of the MSA officers about the disjuncture between her personal and public behavior she responded, "[Although] I'm really close with brother Jamal…obviously, I'm not going to act stupid with him in public as I do [in private]…[impressions] can produce misconceptions about certain things…[as an MSA officer] you have to be so patient, simply because you're a *representation* [to] Muslims who are struggling [with religious practice] and to non-Muslims."[35] It seems, therefore, that these women construct their identities under a guise that is very much influenced by values of choice and freedom; in public they are devout Muslims, but in private they mesh socially with non-Muslim Americans.

Additionally, one can see a tension in the desires of these women; they are conflicted between the desire to adhere to typical, pious Muslim notions of gender or to act according to American notions of freedom and follow their own desires and the pressures of their social lives to be close with and interact with males. It is evident that a liberal feminist discourse is at play here. On one hand, these college students want to perform what they believe to be "exemplary 'Islamic' behavior"[36] and on the other they want to conform to the social standards they are faced with. Therefore, these women fall into the category of Islamic feminists by exerting their agency in conforming to "American" or "Islamic" norms and identities, as they feel fit according to the

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[34] Mir, *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity*, 159.
[35] Mir, *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity*, 164.
[36] Mir, *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity*, 164.

demands of each situation. "Muslim American women's complex navigation of college spaces defied simple stereotypes. They maneuvered to remain safely suspended between 'mainstream American normal' and 'Muslim normal,' feet planted in both worlds, shifting back and forth according to the demands of the situation."[37] It seems that the agency of these women must be viewed through what Foucault deems a "juxtaposition" or a "liaising" of a hierarchy of powers. This type of agency may be blind to a Western feminist eye in that it does not follow "traditional" feminist notions – on the one hand the women of Mir's study displayed qualities of an autonomous individual, free to act according to personal desires, however on the other they desired a certain subordination – for lack of a better term – to the cultural and ideological beliefs of Islam. Nonetheless, these women are transforming gender norms, not by resisting powers but by redefining what it means to be a Muslim woman in the United States. Therefore, the tension which exists among these women demonstrates the variability of Islamic feminism; there are not two types as suggested by Badran, rather feminist manifestations exist on a spectrum.

Foucault and Alternative Forms of Power

American Muslim women demonstrate the ability to move freely within the Western feminist discourse, oftentimes using textual interpretations to argue for gender equality and subvert patriarchal structures, and sometimes using their Muslim identities and cultures to create the identities they desire. Foucault proposes a theory of power that conceptualizes yet another type of Islamic feminism not encompassed by current Western feminist discourse. Much of the work of Michel Foucault has centered on his concern regarding Western conceptions of power. He believes this conception, which has developed as a factor of Western historical events, is

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[37] Mir, *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity*, 172.

insufficient and does not encompass all forms of power. In his essay, "The Meshes of Power",

Foucault writes, "In these circles, they still continue to consider that the signified of power, the

central point, that in which power consists, is still prohibition, the law, the fact of saying no, once

again the form, the formula 'you must not'. Power is essentially what says 'you must not'. It

seems to me that this is – and I will speak more of it presently – a totally insufficient conception

of power, a juridical conception of power that would allow us without doubt better to understand

the relations that have established themselves between power and sexuality in Western

societies."[38] It is this perception of power that informs Western feminist discourse; by speaking

and acting out against the institutions and individuals who seemingly repress women's power,

Western feminists have earned their identities. The women in Mir's study, for example, illustrate

a certain desire to subvert authority, yet they also exhibit a certain desire to adhere to certain

structures. Therefore, this perception of power Foucault describes is clearly not all

encompassing. If an understanding of power is dependent upon historical background, as

suggested by Foucault, then the way in which feminists view the rights of women in other

societies is likely tainted by their own personal values and inability to make adjustments based

on historical and cultural context.

According to Foucault, when we look at power in other societies, we conduct an

ethnology of prohibition.[39] In Foucault's view, the West has never had a system for

representation, formulation or analysis of power other than the system of law and he notes, "We

are thus always doing a juridical sociology of power for our society and, when we study societies

different from our own, we do an ethnology that is essentially an ethnology of rules, an

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[38] Crampton, Jeremy W. and Stuart Elden, ed., *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 153-154.
[39] Crampton, *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, 154.

ethnology of prohibition"[40] Foucault's suggestion is that our historical framework only allows us

to view power in a very rigid manner that is not sufficient or perhaps even productive when

viewing other societies. He proposes a different formula for viewing power that does not rely on

the vocabulary of resistance and prohibition. He writes,

> A society is not a unitary body in which one power and one power only exercises itself, but in reality it is a juxtaposition, a liaising, a coordination, a hierarchy, too, of different powers which nonetheless retain their specificity. Marx continually insists, for example, on the simultaneously specific and relatively autonomous, in some way impermeable, character of the *de facto* power that the employer exerts in a workshop, in relation to the juridical type of power that exists in the rest of society. Thus the existence of regions of power. Society is an archipelago of different powers.[41]

It is the non-juridical types of power, those which are generally unrecognizable to the Western

eye, which are executed by Muslim women across the world. Mahmood outlines this

reconfiguring of power using the concept of agency:

> I have insisted that it is best not to propose *a* theory of agency but to analyze agency in terms of the different modalities it takes and the grammar of concepts in which its particular affect, meaning, and form resides. Insomuch as this kind of analysis suggests that different modalities of agency require different kinds of bodily capacities, it forces us to ask whether acts of resistance (to systems of gender hierarchy) also devolve upon the ability of the body to behave in particular ways. From this perspective, transgressing gender norms may not be a matter of transforming "consciousness" or effecting change in the significatory system of gender, but might well require the retraining of sensibilities, affect, desire, and sentiments - those registers of corporeality that often escape the logic of representation and symbolic articulation.[42]

For Mahmood, transforming consciousness is the typical goal among Western feminists whereas

the "retraining of sensibilities, affect, desire and sentiments" constitute another type of agency –

that which is exemplified by Mahmood's subjects. Foucault, therefore, encourages us to reframe

our conceptions of power and try to locate forms of agency that are not framed against resistance

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[40] Crampton, *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, 154.
[41] Crampton, *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, 156.
[42] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 188.

and subordination. The subjects of Mahmood's anthropological study, participants of the Egyptian mosque movement, demonstrate how agency may prosper in the midst of different bodily capacities, desires and sentiments.

The Mosque Movement: An Enactment of Non-Western Feminism

Recent historical events pertaining to the non-Western Muslim world have created room and urgency for women to claim Islam as their own; non-Western Muslim women in a variety of communities have been developing new ideas and fostering inspiration in the hopes of achieving the vision of a new Islamic community. While many women share in the hope of refiguring Islam, these visions are not consistent across communities or the women who imagine them. Muslim women are taking action to reread texts and eliminate widespread blind adherence to remarks of the Prophet or verses of the Quran; they are leading and teaching other women regarding proper practices imperative to living piously; they are creating and shaping their own rules and norms for living as devout Muslims, all the while navigating gender norms, feminist discourses, Islamist agendas and general misconceptions.

According to Miriam Cooke, there was one event which singlehandedly affected Muslim women the most; this was Ayatollah Komenei's Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. This revolution, which entailed an attempt to create an Islamic state and enforce Islamic ideals, gave women an important role. Cooke writes, "Beyond its obviously militaristic dimension, Islamic global prominence has assumed a special guise: women as embodiments of this newly powerful religion, or as cultural symbols demarcating public and private spaces."[43] Women became representatives and symbols of Islamic piety through regulation of dress, sexuality and roles –

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[43] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*, xi.

many facets of which became religious mandate. In her introduction, Cooke writes, " During the twenty years following the revolution in Iran, religious extremists everywhere have stressed the role of women in their ideologies and plans of campaign. Newly pious men have arrogated to themselves the right to monitor women's appearance and behavior. Looked at from afar and often through the lens of a television camera, it seems that women have no choice but to obey."[44] Regardless of positive or negative sentiments towards this fact by women themselves or from passive onlookers, the roles of women as representatives of Islamic ideals grew in importance with the widespread effects of the Islamic revolution.

The Islamic revival is another "event" which Mahmood asserts as an important catalyst of the Mosque movement. It has taken the form of a resistance movement against the influence of western values, trends and institutions, has brought about change in certain Islamic countries such as the proliferation of neighborhood mosques, a dramatic increase in mosque attendance by men and women, adoption of the veil, consumption of religious media and literature and a growing circle of religious intellectuals.[45] The proliferation of religious texts along with the desire to suppress the influx of western ideals has created an opportunity for women to take piety into their own hands. The women's mosque movement emerged within the Islamic revival piloted by women, for women, with a vision to transform their Muslim communities. According to Mahmoud, "it emerged twenty-five or thirty years ago when women started to organize weekly religious lessons – first at their homes and then within mosques – to read the Quran, the *hadith* (the authoritative record of the Prophet's exemplary speech and actions), and associated exegetical and edificatory literature."[46] The nature of the Islamic tradition emphasizes orthopraxy

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[44] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*, xii.
[45] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 3.
[46] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 3.

and is widely adaptable to the desires of the practitioner due to the extensive number of varying

ahadith – written accounts of things the Prophet Muhammad said or did during his lifetime – and

a lack of authority which has been a theme throughout the development of the tradition.[47]

Mahmood writes, "According to participants, the mosque movement had emerged in response to

the perception that religious knowledge, as a means of organizing daily conduct, had become

increasingly marginalized under modern structures of secular governance…In response, the

women's mosque movement seeks to educate ordinary Muslims in those virtues, ethical

capacities, and forms of reasoning that participants perceive to have become either unavailable or

irrelevant to the lives of ordinary Muslims."[48] It is perhaps due to this multitude of religious

manifestations that has occurred over centuries that has urged women to re-imagine what piety

looks like and this has taken shape as the Mosque movement in Egypt.

Embodied Tafsir, or the concept of "interpretive encounters with the Qur'an" which can

take the form of ritual, social, and political acts, encompasses the varied actions of women

participants of the mosque movement. Overall, this movement, spearheaded by women, has

allowed for the manifestation of women's agency throughout Islamic countries; they began to

seek out the ways in which they could be successfully pious in the midst of a modernizing world

and they are doing so by embracing their religious tradition and culture.[49] Mahmood found,

through her anthropological work studying the geography of the mosque movement in Egypt,

that the common sentiment among women was the fear of a loss of the integration of Islamic

principles in daily life. Mahmood writes, "This trend, usually referred to by the movement's

participants as 'secularization' ('*almana* or '*almaniyya*) or "westernization" (*tagharrub*), is

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[47] Bulliet, Richard W. *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
[48] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 4.
[49] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 43.

understood to have reduced Islamic knowledge (both as a mode of conduct and as a set of principles) to the status of "custom and folklore' (*'ada wa fulklur*)."[50] The movement, therefore, has been the effort to create and instill a set of norms - a conduct training - by which everyone can live their lives. The term *da'wa* is used to describe the duty to urge greater piety among Muslims; this is often seen as the principle of the Islamic Revival.[51] "The da'iyat [one who practices *da'wa*] and the mosque attendees want to ameliorate the situation through the cultivation of those bodily aptitudes, virtues, habits, and desires that serve to ground Islamic principles within the practices of everyday living."[52] Women have taken *da'wa* upon themselves by becoming educated and involved in the Muslim discursive tradition and also by becoming *da'iyats* or female teachers.

The women participating in the mosque movement encompass a wide variety of backgrounds and socio-economic status' and they hold diverse interpretations regarding different aspects of the Qur'an. Each da'iyat Mahmood observed and studied taught varying lessons and emphasized distinct aspects of Islamic piety. For example, some da'iyat focus on the importance of involving young women susceptible to Western influences in "Islamically-oriented" activities, some teach strategies for adhering to separation from men in public despite lack of government support, and some discuss the particularities of women's dress. For many participants of the Mosque Movement, the ritual of praying five times daily is a crucial testimony of true piety. In fact piety is obtained through a type of cultivation that is enacted through everyday activities. Mahmood explains, "…they not only carried out their religious duties (al-fara'id) diligently, but also attested to their faith (iman) by continuously doing good deeds (al-a'mal al-sliha) and

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[50] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 44.

[51] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 57.

[52] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 45.

practicing virtues (al-fada'il). As the following exchange makes clear, these women pursued the process of honing and nurturing the desire to pray through the performance of seemingly unrelated deeds during the day …until that desire became part of their condition of being."[53] The cultivation of this type of piety is of utmost importance to these women that often they must navigate difficult patriarchal structures and engrained Qur'anic interpretations in order to carry out their pious actions.

The struggles they endure are what provide them with powerful means of agency. By being persistent in participating in ritual acts despite obstacles posed by husbands, laws, or social constraints, women of the mosque movement are acting as feminists by restructuring gender norms. "One common dilemma the mosque participants faced was the opposition they encountered to their involvement in da'wa activities from their immediate male kin, who, according to the Islamic juristic tradition, are supposed to be the guardians of women's moral and physical well-being."[54] For example, Mahmood recounts the story of a woman, Abir, who was a participant of one of the low-income mosques she studied. Abir, who used to dress in western, non-modest clothes and was not concerned with issues of da'wa, began donning the full-body and face veil and started going to regular da'wa classes and training to become a da'iyat. Her husband did not approve of his wife's new behavior as it detracted from typical wifely duties; he attempted to control her from participating in these activities and threatened her with things such as taking a second wife. However, Abir remained persistent in her pious actions and used Qur'anic convictions to leverage her argument that she should participate in them. Mahmood writes, "When confronted with the moral force of Abir's arguments, Jamal could not simply deny their truth. As Abir once explained to me, for Jamal to reject her moral arguments

[53] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 124.
[54] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 175.

would be tantamount "to denying God's truth, something even he is not willing to risk.""[55] This example is one of several which demonstrates the power pious adherence provided to the women of the mosque movement. This form of agency is not exemplary of qualities of freedom and autonomy Westerners value. "…different ways of understanding ritual obligations among Egyptian Muslims actually reveal radically different conceptualizations of the role bodily behavior plays in the constructions of the self, a difference that in turn has consequences for how the horizon of individual freedom and politics is imagined and debated." (Mahmood 121) It is, rather, by adhering to her perceived structure of Islamic values, and by cultivating a true, pious Muslim self, that Abir influences her husband's perceptions of gender roles.

Contrary to what many Western feminists may speculate, the teachings and justifications of these women are not grounded in traditional feminist ideals; their beliefs regarding daily practices and comportment are varied and often seemingly contrary to Western notions of freedom and equality. For example, Hajja Faiza, a da'iyat at an upper-middle class mosque in Umar "does not ground her justification for leading women in prayer rituals in an argument for gender equality, or women's equal capacity to perform such a task. Instead, she locates it within the space of disagreement among Muslim jurists about the conditions under which women may lead the prayer ritual."[56] Mahmood states that her goal is to "speak back to the normative liberal assumptions about human nature against which such a movement is held accountable – such as the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them, and so on."[57] In other words, the

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[55] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 178.

[56] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 88.

[57] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 5.

women's piety movement challenges post-enlightenment notions of agency, feminism, freedom, subordination and resistance. What Mahmood refers to as behaviors that appear as "deplorable passivity and docility" to Westerners, are actually forms of agency to these women. For this reason, current Western notions regarding women's rights and treatment are clearly not encompassing of all cultures and beliefs.

The women Mahmood studied do not attempt to subvert authority or to act autonomously against the weight of custom. In fact, custom and cultural norm are precisely what they use to leverage their struggle. A look into the lives of women in the mosque movement suggests that a broadening of Western notions of resistance, freedom, and rights may render the term feminism appropriate to describe what these women are doing. Miriam Cooke has already decided that the word feminist is suitable to describe the women writers whom she discusses in her book, *Women Claim Islam*. She describes Islamic feminists as those who are: "refusing the boundaries others try to draw around them so as to better police them…They are highlighting women's roles and status within their communities, while at the same time declaring common cause with Muslim women elsewhere who share the same objectives." Essentially, for Cooke Islamic feminists are those women who are critiquing the global, local and domestic institutions which they consider damaging to themselves as women, Muslims and citizens.[58] Often these behaviors "can only be understood from within the discourses and structures of subordination which create the conditions of its enactment" and therefore, only recognizable from a bottom up approach. The women of the Mosque movement are exactly this: Islamic feminists.

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[58] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*, 61.

Plurality of Authority in the Islamic Tradition

The ability for Muslim women to apply *embodied tafsir* as dictated by their own unique

interpretation of texts can be attributed to a lack of religious authority throughout the

development of the Islamic tradition. Hammer writes, "The question of who has authority to

interpret and judge actions according to Islamic law is the underlying theme not only of the

debates about woman-led prayers but also of larger questions of gender and interpretation."[59]

The ambiguity of authority in the history of Islamic textual interpretation has allowed for the

proliferation of gender debates in the tradition. Hammer refers to the history of authority in the

tradition which transitioned from a reliance on "Divine Inspiration of the Prophet Muhammad"

to an emerging class of scholars – the ʿulama – which began the plurality of interpretive

traditions we see to this day. Another important event which took place, according to Hammer,

was the introduction of print culture which "democratized access to traditional texts."[60] With no

mandate of formal training in order to read the texts, this meant the ability for uncontrolled and

diverse readings. Richard W. Bulliet, in his book *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization,*

also associates the implementation of the printing press to the decline of religious authority: "The

new technology enabled *authors* to become *authorities* simply by offering the reader persuasive

prose and challenging ideas."[61] The frail nature of the history of Islamic textual knowledge,

therefore, has actually caused textual engagement to require interpretation as "the text is silent"

as outlined by Wadud.[62]

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[59] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 100.
[60] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 101-102.
[61] Bulliet, Richard W. *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 81.
[62] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 107.

For Bulliet this characteristic "open-for-interpretation" nature of the Islamic tradition has allowed for it to develop in a unique way. He proposes a theory of "edge situations' in which the tradition flourished along the edges rather than in the center. He writes, "Edge situations, which have parallels in other religions, have been unusually creative in the history of Islam because answering questions raised by prospective converts to Islam, and by Muslims in spiritual quandary, exposes underlying ambiguities about the sources of spiritual authority."[63] It is these edge situations, according to Bulliet, which have allowed for remarkable diversity within the tradition. This theory can serve as an explanation for the emphasis on orthopraxy which is evident across Muslim communities. Bulliet comments on this: "…uncertainty about what is authoritative can foster tenacious adherence to practices and beliefs that specific communities consider to be the truest version of Islam. When there is no church acting as the guardian of faith, after all, the duty falls to the individual believer."[64] Therefore, the individual believer is provided with a space through which to create their own personal, unique, "authentic" version of Islam.

Throughout Islamic history, many scholars see a disconnect between values of equality which are outlined in the Qur'an and the way society has prescribed gender roles. Scholars such as Leila Ahmed have set out to reconcile where and how this fundamental difference occurred. "There appear, therefore, to be two distinct voices within Islam, and two competing understandings of gender, one expressed in the pragmatic regulations for society… the other in the articulation of an ethical vision."[65] In other words, Islamic cultural norms have often privileged the male voice in culture, community, politics, and education even when there seems to be a prescription for egalitarian values, at least in terms of the spiritual. Leila Ahmed, in her

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[63] Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization.* 140.
[64] Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization.* 141.
[65] Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 65-66.

book *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), sites the remarks of two Harvard scholars on this

subject:

> A considerable step – a process of juristic development extending over more than two centuries – separates the Qur'an from the classical formulations of Islamic law…the modicum of Quranic rulings naturally observed, but outside this the tendency was to interpret the Quranic provisions in the light of the prevailing standards….In particular, the general ethical injunctions of the Quran were rarely transformed into legally enforceable rules, but were recognized as binding only on the individual conscience.[66]

Consequently, just as the Qur'an was interpreted in light of prevailing standards then, women

[and men] are interpreting these texts in light of prevailing standards now too. In other words, the

same opportunity for multiple versions of textual interpretation which is allowing women to

leverage gender equality arguments today also provided men with the authority to interpret texts

in patriarchal manners. Hassan asserts that "…these sources have been interpreted only by

Muslim men who have arrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological,

sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women."[67] The result of space for textual

interpretation which has existed throughout the Islamic tradition, therefore, has served as a mode

of support for Islamic feminists attempting to reframe gender norms.

Hence, it is the plurality of textual authority which serves to inform American Islamic

feminist scholars and activists as well as the subjects of Mahmood's study. After Amina

Wadud's woman-led mixed-gender prayer she opened up to a question and answer session.

When challenged on her stance regarding the authority of a female to lead prayer she responded,

"the basis of my articulation of the mandate to acknowledge Muslim women as spiritual equals

and therefore competent not only in the realm of political and economic leadership but also, and

more important to me, competent in the realm of spiritual and public ritual leadership will be on

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[66] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam,* 92.
[67] Hassan, Riffat. "Feminism in Islam." In *Feminism and World Religions.* Arvind, Sharma and Katherine K. Young, ed., 248-278. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 250.

the basis of the Qur'an…"[68] Wadud's assertion was clearly a controversial one, however it is the plurality of authority within the greater Islamic tradition which enabled her to assert her claim. The women of the Mosque movement also debate proper interpretations of Qur'anic verses and how to apply these in their everyday lives in order to be pious Muslims. Without the possibility for multiple interpretations of texts, Islamic feminists would perhaps not have the same means of support for their varying arguments and methods.

Discussion: The Role of Feminism in the Future of Islam

The differences between American and Egyptian Muslim women are many. American Muslim feminists who are scholars, activists, or women attending college are navigating the various pressures of being a Muslim in the United states and what this identity means socially, as a woman and religiously while at the same time exploring how and when to assert their piety in private and in public. They must face the countless stigmatizations and stereotypes placed upon them due to historical events such as 9/11 and they are inevitably influenced by values such as freedom and equality which are deeply engrained in the minds of so many citizens of the United States. Each of these players reveal themselves in what exists as Islamic feminism in the United States; often women make public stands to assert their piety or protest for gender equality by reinterpreting the Qur'an as a text which asserts fundamental equality between all human beings. Each of their acts illustrate agency within their societies, their culture and their religion to elect a particular identity, interpretation and way of living and these acts themselves are publicly and privately altering gender norms within the Islamic tradition and in the greater context of the American feminist movement.

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[68] Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*, 22.

Egyptian women are taking personal responsibility for reimagining the way they interact with sacred texts by become da'iyats or attending classes, choosing to become more pious in their dress or prayer ritual and choosing to become more modest in the ways in which they interact with the opposite sex. The goal of these actions and behaviors, as well as the Mosque movement as a whole, is to recreate the Islamic communities in which they live as prescribed by the Qur'an. Although these women do not frame their movements in terms of fighting for equality with men, each of their individual stories, as recounted by Mahmood, illustrate that they are in fact altering gender norms. They are not doing so by making public statements of protest, by rejecting certain norms, or by arguing for gender equality through reinterpretation of text. Rather they are reinterpreting text in terms of reviving piety and fighting for their right to act as devout Muslims. By embodying the ideals of Muslim piety, as illustrated in the Qur'an – the structure supposedly responsible for their oppression through Western eyes – Egyptian women are challenging traditional gender norms. Mahmoud sites Foucault on this point: "Central to his formulation is what Foucault calls *subjectivation:* the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent….Stated otherwise one may argue that the set of capacities inhering in a subject – that is, the abilities that define her modes of agency – are not the residue of an undominated self that existed prior to the operations of power but are themselves the products of those operations."[69] According to Foucault's theory, therefore, Islam is the operation of power through which Egyptian women have gained their capacity as self-conscious actors. In other words, contrary to feminists notions of resistance against oppressive powers, Egyptian women embody those exact powers which give them agency.

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[69] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 17.

Thus, the fundamental difference in Islamic feminism between these two groups is as follows: American Muslim women often engage with Islamic discourse through reinterpretation and rejection of various prescriptions in calling for gender equality while Egyptian women, in an attempt to embody all that it means to be a pious Muslim, employ the Qur'an through *embodied Tafsir*. However, what is noteworthy – and the relationship between the two – is their ability to engage each of their unique cultures, goals and discourse in a way that gives them agency and allows them to become what Beauvoir terms as "full-scale human beings". If her definition of feminism is correct, then these two strategies, backed by the Islamic tradition, are two very different, yet perfectly valid versions of feminism. According to Karl Marx, human consciousness is contingent upon the social structures which inform each individual's understandings. He writes,

> …history does not end by being resolved into "self-consciousness" as "spirit of the spirit," but that in it at each stage there is found a material result: a sum of productive forces, a historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor; a mass of productive forces, different forms of capital, and conditions which, indeed, is modified by the new generation on the one hand, but also on the other prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite development, a special character. It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances.[70]

The women in this study, therefore, exemplify the ways in which individuals employ their unique forms of consciousness, as formed by religion, culture, history and social circumstances, to interpret texts and achieve diverse goals.

The re-examination of the terms and values which comprise feminist theory should be located within the topic of women in a modernizing Islamic tradition. As previously mentioned, the issue of women's rights has gained prominent and widespread concern and the structures

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[70] Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology Parts I & II*. (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 29.

existent in evaluating these issues are crucial to those involved. While I have demonstrated that many Western conceptions regarding the "plight" of Muslim women are false, I am not suggesting that all Muslim women are free from oppression. In fact, instances of oppression exist throughout the world. It is for this reason that, a feminism which is encompassing of a diverse range of situations and conceptions of agency is necessary in order to be a productive discourse. Without knowledge of all forms of power and agency, one cannot make a sound judgment upon the supposed autonomy of another individual. In her conclusion of *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction,* Walters writes, "If feminism is to be something living and evolving, it will have to begin by re-inventing the wheel – which in this case means finding not just new issues, but a new language. In spite of everything, I still have faith that feminism *will* take us by surprise again, that it will re-invent itself, perhaps in unforeseen ways, and in areas we have thought little about. It will almost certainly come from outside the academy, and will probably – hopefully – challenge us in ways that – as yet – we cannot even glimpse."[71] The Islamic tradition, in all of its forms, is in the midst of modernizing and adapting to the circumstances of today's world just like each other religious tradition. The influential discourses which frame this theory, therefore, are essential in guaranteeing that the voices of every individual are heard and taken into consideration as the tradition continues to evolve.

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[71] Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, 141.

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