

## *An Islam of Her Own*

By Sherine Hafez.

New York: New York University Press, 2011.

Sherine Hafez's "An Islam Of Her Own" is an outstanding account of the subjectivities of Muslim activist women in Egypt. Picking up where Sabah Mahmood's "Politics of Piety" left off, Hafez chooses to focus on the inconsistencies, disruptions and multiplicities in the subject position of Muslim activist women. Hafez's conclusions are based on an extended ethnographic study of women activists in the Cairo-based Islamic voluntary organization Al-Hilal. The first three chapters of the book outline Hafez's theoretical position and historical contextualization of the growth of Islamic movements in Egypt. The following few chapters of the book contain the insightful ethnographic account of the subjectivities of the activist women of al-Hilal. The ethnographic account also contains field work in the village of Mehmet close to Cairo, where al-Hilal is active in charity work.

Hafez suggests that examining religious subjectivities requires a historical and contextual analysis. According to Hafez religion cannot be seen as a category that is distinct from history, or separate from other aspects of social life. Both cultural and historical forces produce and shape desire and subjectivities. Like Mahmood, Hafez challenges the binary representations of subjectivities between piety and secularism, otherwise common in the scholarly work on modern Muslim subjectivity; but Hafez claims to go further than Mahmood by questioning the consistency in Mahmood's non-liberal agency. Hafez suggests that subjecthood and desire are varied, heterogeneous and unstable and are often shaped by contradictory constructions. Hafez's exploration of inconsistencies within subjectivities is, however, not entirely new. Mahmood's ethnographic study of activists in a women's mosque did indeed already mention the ambiguities that lie within the subjectivity formation of Islamic activist women (Mahmood 2005, 158). However, the strength of Hafez's book lies in the dedicated focus on these ambiguities.

Hafez's analysis is based on several ethnographic accounts. Through these she depicts how the women of al-Hilal present their own subjectivities as a consistent and homogenous whole, but that these are in fact not as consistent as claimed. One of Hafez's key arguments is that the woman of al-Hilal claim that Islam is a way of life that permeates all aspects of their lives, while asserting that they separate their activities from their and political objectives. Hafez wonders how the women of al-Hilal can assume that Islam permeates all aspects of their lives, while at the same time obeying a secular Egyptian legal system. Hafez explains this dilemma by suggesting that the activist women of al-Hilal are choosing this position because their desires and subjectivities are partially influenced by the secular notion of the separation of the public and private sphere. The way Hafez solves this dilemma is, however, somehow problematic as

Hafez fails to explain why the influence of secular ideas has caused the women to separate their activist work from their political aspirations.

While the central contribution of Hafez's "An Islam Of Her Own" is nuancing the subjectivity of the Muslim activist women by explaining how the subjectivity of these women are shaped by different interiorities as well as exteriorities, Hafez overlooks a key structural factor that could potentially explain why the women of al-Hilal view Islam as part of every aspect of their lives except the political one: the impact of authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is an important factor to take into consideration as it could possibly explain both why the women of al-Hilal are avoiding official participation in politics and why they are instead engaging in activist voluntary work. Taking into account the high corruption rates within the Egyptian state, the Muslim activist women could be choosing to take matters into their own hands and offer welfare services to less privileged citizens instead of 'waiting around' for the state to perform the same duties. Islamic activism could therefore be viewed as a way of escaping the tough realities resulting from decades of authoritarian structures and acting independently while at the same time avoiding confrontation with the state.

Hafez's "An Islam Of Her Own" is, without a doubt, a significant contribution to the scholarly work on Muslim subjectivities and Islamic activism. Its sole focus on unravelling the different aspects that shape the desire and subjectivities of Muslim activist women is important. Hafez, however, misses an excellent opportunity to broaden her approach to studying subjectivity by including important social structural factors, for instance, the aforementioned authoritarian structures. An inclusion of such factors could possibly contribute to a more convincing argument on how the subjectivities of the Muslim activist women are shaped.

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### REFERENCES:

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.