POLITICS OF PIETY
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THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL AND THE FEMINIST SUBJECT

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Dedicated to my father and other spirits who have watched over me....
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Agency, Gender, and Embodiment

While in the earlier chapters of this book I explored how the ethical practices of the mosque movement have been shaped by, and in turn transformed, the social field of Egyptian secularity in unexpected ways, here I want to focus on how we might think about these ethical practices in the context of relations of gender inequality. Given the overwhelming tendency of mosque movement participants to accept the patriarchal assumptions at the core of the orthodox Islamic tradition, this chapter is animated by the following questions: What were the terms the mosque participants used to negotiate the demands of the orthodox Islamic tradition in order to master this tradition? What were the different modalities of agency that were operative in these negotiations? What difference does it make analytically if we attend to the terms internal to this discourse of negotiation and struggle? And what challenges do these terms pose to notions of agency, performativity, and resistance presupposed within liberal and poststructuralist feminist scholarship?

In chapter 1, I argued for uncoupling the analytical notion of agency from the politically prescriptive project of feminism, with its propensity to valorize those operations of power that subvert and resignify the hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality. I have argued that to the extent that feminist scholarship emphasizes this politically subversive form of agency, it has ignored other modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse. In this chapter, I want to attend not only to the different meanings of agency as they emerge within the practices of the mosque movement, but also to the kinds of
analytical questions that are opened up when agency is analyzed in some of its other modalities—questions that remain submerged, I would contend, if agency is analyzed in terms of resistance to the subordinating function of power.

I should make clear that my exploration of the multiple forms agency takes is not simply a hermeneutical exercise, one that is indifferent to feminism’s interest in theorizing about the possibility of transforming relations of gender subordination. Rather, I would argue that any discussion of the issue of transformation must begin with an analysis of the specific practices of subjectivation that make the subjects of a particular social imaginary possible. In the context of the mosque movement, this means closely analyzing the scaffolding of practices—both argumentative and embodied—that secured the mosque participants’ attachment to patriarchal forms of life that, in turn, provided the necessary conditions for both their subordination and their agency. One of the questions I hope to address is: how does the particularity of this attachment challenge familiar ways of conceptualizing “subordination” and “change” within liberal and poststructuralist feminist debates?

Finally, since much of the analytical labor of this book is directed at the specificity of terms internal to the practices of the mosque movement, I would like to remind the reader that the force of these terms derives not from the motivations and intentions of the actors but from their inextricable entanglement within conflicting and overlapping historical formations. My project is therefore based on a double disavowal of the humanist subject. The first disavowal is evident in my exploration of certain notions of agency that cannot be reconciled with the project of recuperating the lost voices of those who are written out of “hegemonic feminist narratives,” to bring their humanism and strivings to light—precisely because to do so would be to underwrite all over again the narrative of the sovereign subject as the author of “her voice” and “her-story.”

My project’s second disavowal of the humanist subject is manifest in my refusal to recuperate the members of the mosque movement either as “subaltern feminists” or as the “fundamentalist Others” of feminism’s progressive agenda. To do so, in my opinion, would be to reinscribe a familiar way of being human that a particular narrative of personhood and politics has made available to us,

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1 I am in agreement with anthropologists such as Jane Collier, Marilyn Strathern, and Sylvia Yanagisako who have argued that all cultures and societies are predicated upon relations of gender inequality, and that the task of the anthropologist is to show how a culturally specific system of inequality (and its twin, equality) is constructed, practiced, and maintained (Collier 1988, 1997; Collier and Yanagisako 1989; Strathern 1988). My only caveat is that I do not believe that there is a single arrangement of gender inequality that characterizes a particular culture; rather, I believe that different arrangements of gender inequality often coexist within a given culture, the specific forms of which are a product of the particular discursive formation that each arrangement is a part of.
forcing the aporetic multiplicity of commitments and projects to fit into this exhausted narrative mold. Instead, my ruminations on the practices of the women’s mosque movement are aimed at unsettling key assumptions at the center of liberal thought through which movements of this kind are often judged. Such judgments do not always simply entail the ipso facto rejection of these movements as antithetical to feminist agendas (e.g., Moghissi 1999); they also at times seek to embrace such movements as forms of feminism, thus enfolding them into a liberal imaginary (e.g., Fernea 1998). By tracing in this chapter the multiple modalities of agency that informed the practices of the mosque participants, I hope to redress the profound inability within current feminist political thought to envision valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of a liberal progressive imaginary.

ETHICAL FORMATION

In order to begin tugging at the multiple twines that hold this object called agency in its stable locution, let me begin with an ethnographic vignette that focuses on one of the most feminine of Islamic virtues, al-ḥayāt (shyness, diffidence, modesty), a virtue that was considered necessary to the achievement of piety by the mosque participants I worked with. In what follows, I want to examine the kind of agency that was involved when a novice tried to perfect this virtue, and how its performance problematizes certain aspects of current theorizations within feminist theory about the role embodied behavior plays in the constitution of the subject.

In the course of my fieldwork, I had come to spend time with a group of four working women, in their mid- to late thirties, who were employed in the public and private sectors of the Egyptian economy. In addition to attending the mosque lessons, the four also met as a group to read and discuss issues of Islamic ethical practice and Quranic exegesis. Given the stringent demands their desire to abide by high standards of piety placed on them, these women often had to struggle against the secular ethos that permeated their lives and made their realization of piety somewhat difficult. They often talked about the pressures they faced as working women, which included negotiating close interactions with unrelated male colleagues, riding public transportation in mixed-sex compartments, overhearing conversations (given the close proximity of their coworkers) that were impious in character and tone, and so on. Often this situation was further compounded by the resistance these women encountered in their attempts to live a pious life from their family members—particularly from male members—who were opposed to stringent forms of religious devotion.
CHAPTER 5

When these women met as a group, their discussions often focused on two challenges they constantly had to face in their attempts to maintain a pious lifestyle. One was learning to live amicably with people—both colleagues and immediate kin—who constantly placed them in situations that were far from optimal for the realization of piety in day-to-day life. The second challenge was in the internal struggle they had to engage in within themselves in a world that constantly beckoned them to behave in unpuious ways.

On this particular day, the group had been reading passages from the Quran and discussing its practical significance for their daily conduct. The Quranic chapter under discussion was “The Story” (Surat al-Qaṣaṣ), which discusses the virtue of shyness or modesty (al-ḥayā‘), a coveted virtue for pious Muslims in general and women in particular. To practice al-ḥayā‘ means to be diffident, modest, and able to feel and enact shyness. While all of the Islamic virtues are gendered (in that their measures and standards vary when applied to men versus women), this is particularly true of shyness and modesty (al-ḥayā‘). The struggle involved in cultivating the virtue of shyness was brought home to me when, in the course of a discussion about the exegesis of “The Story,” one of the women, Amal, drew our attention to verse 25. This verse is about a woman walking shyly—with al-ḥayā‘—toward Moses to ask him to approach her father for her hand in marriage. Unlike the other women in the group, Amal was particularly outspoken and confident, and would seldom hesitate to assert herself in social situations with men or women. Normally I would not have described her as shy, because I considered shyness to be antithetical to qualities of candidness and self-confidence in a person. Yet, as I was to learn, Amal had learned to be outspoken in a way that was in keeping with Islamic standards of reserve, restraint, and modesty required of pious Muslim women. The conversation proceeded as follows.

Contemplating the word istihyā‘, which is form ten of the substantive ḥayā‘, Amal said, “I used to think that even though shyness [al-ḥayā‘] was required of us by God, if I acted shyly it would be hypocritical [nifāq] because I didn’t actually feel it inside of me. Then one day, in reading verse 25 in Surat al-Qaṣaṣ (“The Story”) I realized that al-ḥayā‘ was among the good deeds [huwwa min al-a‘māl al-ṣalihā], and given my natural lack of shyness [al-ḥayā‘], I had to make or create it first. I realized that making [ṣana‘] it in yourself is not hypocrisy, and that eventually your inside learns to have al-ḥayā‘ too.” Here she looked at me and explained the meaning of the word istihyā‘: “It means making oneself shy, even if it means creating it [Ya‘ni ya Sapa, yi‘mil nafsu yitkisif ḥatta lau ṣana‘ā‘il].” She continued with her point, “And finally I under-

1 Most Arabic verbs are based on a triconsonantal root from which ten verbal forms (and sometimes fifteen) are derived.

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stood that once you do this, the sense of shyness [al-ḥayā‘] eventually imprints itself on your inside [as-shū‘ūr yitḥā’ ala guwūaki].”

Another friend, Nama, a single woman in her early thirties, who had been sitting and listening, added: “It’s just like the veil [hijāb]. In the beginning when you wear it, you’re embarrassed [maksūfa] and don’t want to wear it because people say that you look older and unattractive, that you won’t get married, and will never find a husband. But you must wear the veil, first because it is God’s command [ḥukm allāh], and then, with time, because your inside learns to feel shy without the veil, and if you take it off, your entire being feels uncomfortable [mish rādī] about it.”

To many readers this conversation may exemplify an obsequious deference to social norms that both reflects and reproduces women’s subordination. Indeed, Amal’s struggle with herself to become shy may appear to be no more than an instance of the internalization of standards of effeminate behavior, one that contributes little to our understanding of agency. Yet if we think of “agency” not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action, then this conversation raises some interesting questions about the kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm, between performative behavior and inward disposition. To begin with, what is striking here is that instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one’s desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them. Furthermore, pursuant to the behaviorist tradition of Aristotelian moral philosophy discussed in chapter 4, it is through repeated bodily acts that one trains one’s memory, desire, and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct. Notably, Amal does not regard simulating shyness in the initial stages of her self-cultivation to be hypocritical, as it would be in certain liberal conceptions of the self where a dissonance between internal feelings and external expressions would be considered a form of dishonesty or self-betrayal (as captured in the phrase: “How can I do something sincerely when my heart is not in it?”). Instead, taking the absence of shyness as a marker of an incomplete learning process, Amal further develops the quality of shyness by synchronizing her outward behavior with her inward motives until the discrepancy between the two is dissolves. This is an example of a mutually constitutive relationship between

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1 It is interesting to note that the women I worked with did not actually employ the body-mind distinction I use in my analysis. In referring to shyness, for example, they talked about it as a way of being and acting such that any separation between mind and body was difficult to discern. I have retained the mind-body distinction for analytical purposes, the goal being to understand the specific relation articulated between the two in this tradition of self-formation.
body learning and body sense—as Nama says, your body literally comes to feel uncomfortable if you do not veil.

Secondly, what is also significant in this program of self-cultivation is that bodily acts—like wearing the veil or conducting oneself modestly in interactions with people (especially men)—do not serve as manipulable masks in a game of public presentation, detachable from an essential interiorized self. Rather they are the critical markers of piety as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious. While wearing the veil serves at first as a means to tutor oneself in the attribute of shyness, it is also simultaneously integral to the practice of shyness: one cannot simply discard the veil once a modest deportment has been acquired, because the veil itself is part of what defines that deportment. This is a crucial aspect of the disciplinary program pursued by the participants of the mosque movement, the significance of which is elided when the veil is understood solely in terms of its symbolic value as a marker of women's subordination or Islamic identity.

A substantial body of literature in feminist theory argues that patriarchal ideologies—whether nationalistic, religious, medical, or aesthetic in character—work by objectifying women's bodies and subjecting them to masculinist systems of representation, thereby negating and distorting women's own experience of their corporeality and subjectivity (Bordo 1993; Göle 1996; Mani 1998; E. Martin 1987). In this view, the virtue of al-ḥayā' (shyness or modesty) can be understood as yet another example of the subjection of women's bodies to masculinist or patriarchal valuations, images, and representational logic. A feminist strategy aimed at unsettling such a circumscription would try to expose al-ḥayā' for its negative valuation of women, simultaneously bringing to the fore alternative representations and experiences of the feminine body that are denied, submerged, or repressed by its masculinist logic.

A different perspective within feminist theory regards the recuperation of “women's experience” to be an impossible task, since the condition for the possibility of any discourse, or for that matter “thought itself” (Colebrook 2000b, 35), is the rendering of certain materialities and subjectivities as the

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4 This concept can perhaps be illuminated by analogy to two different models of dieting: an older model in which the practice of dieting is understood to be a temporary and instrumental solution to the problem of weight gain; and a more contemporary model in which dieting is understood to be synonymous with a healthy and nutritious lifestyle. The second model presupposes an ethical relationship between oneself and the rest of the world and in this sense is similar to what Foucault called “practices of the care of the self.” The differences between the two models point to the fact that it does not mean much to simply note that systems of power mark their truth on human bodies through disciplines of self-formation. In order to understand the force these disciplines command, one needs to explicate the conceptual relationship articulated between different aspects of the body and the particular notion of the self that animates distinct disciplinary regimes.
constitutive outside of the discourse. In this view, there is no recuperable ontological “thereness” to this abjected materiality (such as “a feminine experience”), because the abject can only be conceived in relation to hegemonic terms of the discourse, “at and as its most tenuous borders” (Butler 1993, 8). A well-known political intervention arising out of this analytic aims to demonstrate the impossibility of “giving voice” to the subalterity of any abject being—thereby exposing the violence endemic to thought itself. This intervention is famously captured in Gayatri Spivak’s rhetorical question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak 1988).

The analysis I have presented of the practice of al-ḥayā’ (and the practice of veiling) departs from both these perspectives: I do not regard female subjectivity as that which belies masculinist representations; nor do I see this subjectivity as a sign of the abject materiality that discourse cannot articulate. Rather, I believe that the body’s relationship to discourse is variable and that it seldom simply follows either of the paths laid out by these two perspectives within feminist theory. In regard to the feminist argument that privileges the role representations play in securing male domination, it is important to note that even though the concept of al-ḥayā’ embeds a masculinist understanding of gendered bodies, far more is at stake in the practice of al-ḥayā’ than this framework allows, as is evident from the conversation between Amal and her friend Nama. Crucial to their understanding of al-ḥayā’ as an embodied practice is an entire conceptualization of the role the body plays in the making of the self, one in which the outward behavior of the body constitutes both the potentiality and the means through which interiority is realized (see chapter 4). A feminist strategy that seeks to unsettle such a conceptualization cannot simply intervene in the system of representation that devalues the feminine body, but must also engage the very armature of attachments between outward behavioral forms and the sedimented subjectivity that al-ḥayā’ enacts. Representation is only one issue among many in the ethical relationship of the body to the self and others, and it does not by any means determine the form this relationship takes.

Similarly, I remain skeptical of the second feminist framing, in which the corporeal is analyzed on the model of language, as the constitutive outside of discourse itself. In this framework, it would be possible to read al-ḥayā’ as an instantiation of the control a masculinist imaginary must assert over the dangerous supplement femininity signifies in Islamic thought. Such a reading is dissatisfying to me because the relationship it assumes between the body and discourse, one modeled on a linguistic theory of signification, is inadequate to the imaginary of the mosque movement. Various aspects of this argument will become clear in the next section when I address the notion of performativity underlying the Aristotelian model of ethical formation the mosque partici-
pant[s followed]. Suffice it to say here that the mosque women's practices of modesty and femininity do not signify the abjectness of the feminine within Islamic discourse, but articulate a positive and immanent discourse of being in the world. This discourse requires that we carefully examine the work that bodily practices perform in creating a subject that is pious in its formation.

To elucidate these points, it might be instructive to juxtapose the mosque participants' understanding of al-ḥāyā' with a view that takes the pietists to task for making modesty dependent upon the particularity of attire (such as the veil). The contrastive understanding of modesty or al-ḥāyā' (also known as iḥtiṣām) that results from such a juxtaposition was articulated forcefully by a prominent Egyptian public figure, Muhammad Said Ashmawi, who has been a leading voice for "liberal Islam" in the Arab world. He is a frequent contributor to the liberal-nationalist magazine Rāz al-Yūsuf, which I quoted from earlier. In a series of exchanges in this magazine, Ashmawi challenged the then-mufti of Egypt, Sayyid Tantawi, for upholding the position that the adoption of the veil is obligatory upon all Muslim women (fard) (Ashmawi 1994a, 1994b; Tantawi 1994). Ashmawi's general argument is that the practice of veiling was a regional custom in pre-Islamic Arabia that has mistakenly been assigned a divine status. His writings represent one of the more eloquent arguments for separating the virtue of modesty from the injunction to veil in Egypt today:

The real meaning of the veil [ḥijāb] lies in thwarting the self from straying toward lust or illicit sexual desires, and keeping away from sinful behavior, without having to conjoin this [understanding] with particular forms of clothing and attire. As for modesty [iḥtiṣām] and lack of exhibitionism ['adām al-tāḥarrūj] in clothing and outward appearance [mazhar], this is something that is imperative, and any wise person would agree with it and any decent person would abide by it. (Ashmawi 1994b, 25)

Note that for Ashmawi, unlike for the women I worked with, modesty is less a divinely ordained virtue than it is an attribute of a "decent and wise person," and in this sense is similar to any other human attribute that marks a person as respectable. Furthermore, for Ashmawi the proper locus of the attribute of modesty is the interiority of the individual, which then has an effect on outward behavior. In other words, for Ashmawi modesty is not so much an attribute of the body as it is a characteristic of the individual's inte-

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5 Ashmawi served as the chief justice of the Criminal Court of Egypt and as a professor of Islamic and Comparative Law at Cairo University. For an overview of his work on Islamic legal theory, see Hallaq 1997, 231–54.
riority, which is then expressed in bodily form. In contrast, for the women I
worked with, this relationship between interiority and exteriority was almost
reversed: a modest bodily form (the veiled body) did not simply express the
self’s interiority but was the means by which it was acquired. Since the
mosque participants regarded outward bodily markers as an ineluctable
means to the virtue of modesty, the body’s precise movements, behaviors,
and gestures were all made the object of their efforts to live by the code of
modesty.

**performativity and the subject**

It might seem to the reader that the differences between these two perspec-
tives are minor and inconsequential since, ultimately, both understandings of
modesty have the same effect on the social field: they both proscribe what
Ashmawi calls “illicit sexual desires and sinful behavior.” Disagreement about
whether or not one should veil may appear to be minor to those who believe
it is the moral principle of the regulation of sexuality, shared by Ashmawi and
the mosque participants, that matters. The idea that such differences are mi-
nor accords with various aspects of the Kantian model of ethics discussed in
chapters 1 and 4; however, from an Aristotelian point of view, the difference
between Ashmawi’s understanding of modesty and that of the mosque partic-
ipants is immense. In the Aristotelian worldview, ethical conduct is not sim-
ply a matter of the effect one’s behavior produces in the world but depends
crucially upon the precise form that behavior takes: both the acquisition and
the consummation of ethical virtues devolve upon the proper enactment of
prescribed bodily behaviors, gestures, and markers (MacIntyre 1966). Thus,
an act is judged to be ethical in this tradition not simply because it accom-
plishes the social objective it is meant to achieve but also because it enacts
this objective in the manner and form it is supposed to: an ethical act is, to
borrow J. L. Austin’s term, “felicitous” only if it achieves its goals in a pre-
scribed behavioral form (Austin 1994).

Certain aspects of this Aristotelian model of ethical formation resonate
with J. L. Austin’s concept of the performative, especially as this concept has
been conjoined with an analysis of subject formation in Judith Butler’s work
(1993, 1997a), which I touched upon briefly in chapter 1. It is instructive to
examine this resonance closely for at least two reasons: one, because such an
examination reveals the kinds of questions about bodily performance and sub-
jectivity that are important to foreground in order to understand the force this
Aristotelian tradition of ethical formation commands among the mosque par-
ticipants; and two, because such an examination reveals the kind of analytical
labor one needs to perform in order to make the ethnographic particularity of
a social formation speak generatively to philosophical concepts—concepts whose anthropological assumptions are often taken for granted.

A performative, which for Austin is primarily a speech act, for Butler includes both bodily and speech acts through which subjects are formed. Butler, in her adoption of Derrida’s interpretation of performativity as an “iterable practice” (Derrida 1988), formulates a theory of subject formation in which performativity becomes “one of the influential rituals by which subjects are formed and reformulated” (1997a, 160). Butler is careful to point out the difference between performance as a “bounded act,” and performativity, which “consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’” (Butler 1993, 234). In Excitable Speech, Butler spells out the role bodily performatives play in the constitution of the subject. She argues that “bodily habitus constitutes a tacit form of performativity, a citational chain lived and believed at the level of the body” (1997a, 155) such that the materiality of the subject comes to be enacted through a series of embodied performatives.

As I discussed earlier, Butler’s conception of performativity is also at the core of her theory of agency: she claims that the iterable and repetitive character of the performatives makes the structure of norms vulnerable and unstable because the reiteration may fail, be resignified, or be reappropriated for purposes other than the consolidation of norms. This leads Butler to argue: “That no social formation can endure without becoming reinstated, and that every reinstatement puts the ‘structure’ in question at risk suggests the possibility of its undoing is at once the condition of possibility of the structure itself” (1997b, 14). In other words, what makes the structure of norms stable—the reiterative character of bodily and speech performatives—is also that which makes the structure susceptible to change and resignification.

Butler’s notion of performativity and the labor it enacts in the constitution of the subject may at first glance seem to be a useful way of analyzing the mosque participants’ emphasis on embodied virtues in the formation of a pious self. Both views (the mosque participants’ and Butler’s) suggest that it is through the repeated performance of virtuous practices (norms in Butler’s terms) that the subject’s will, desire, intellect, and body come to acquire a par-

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6 An important aspect of Butler’s formulation of performativity is its relationship to concepts in psychoanalytic theory. On this relationship, see the chapter “Critically Queer” in Butler 1993.


8 While Butler remains indebted to Derrida in this formulation, she also departs from him by placing a stronger emphasis on the historically sedimentering quality of performatives. See Butler 1997a, 147–50.
ticular form. The mosque participants’ understanding of virtues may be rendered in Butlerian terms in that they regard virtuous performances not so much as manifestations of their will but more as actions that produce the will in its particularity. In this conception, one might say that the pious subject does not precede the performance of normative virtues but is enacted through the performance. Virtuous actions may well be understood as performatives; they enact that which they name: a virtuous self.

Despite these resonances between Butler's notion of performativity and the mosque participants’ understanding of virtuous action, it would be a mistake to assume that the logic of piety practices can be so easily accommodated within Butler's theoretical language. Butler herself cautions against such a “technological approach” to theory wherein “the theory is articulated on its self-sufficiency, and then shifts register only for the pedagogical purpose of illustrating an already accomplished truth” (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000, 26). Such a perfunctory approach to theory is inadequate, Butler argues, because theoretical formulations often ensue from particular examples and are therefore constitutively stained by that particularity. In order to make a particular theoretical formulation travel across cultural and historical specificities, one needs to rethink the structure of assumptions that underlies a theoretical formulation and perform the difficult task of translation and reformulation. If we take this insight seriously, then the question we need to ask of Butler's theorization of performativity is: how does a consideration of the mosque participants’ understanding of virtuous action make us rethink the labor performativity enacts in the constitution of the pious subject?

To address this question, I believe that it is necessary to think through three important dimensions of the articulation of performativity in regard to subject formation: (a) the sequencing of the performatives and their interrelationship; (b) the place of language in the analysis of performativity; and (c) different articulations of the notions of “subversion,” “change,” or “destabilization” across different models of performativity. One of the crucial differences between Butler's model of the performative and the one implicitly informing the practices of the mosque movement lies in how each performative is related to the ones that follow and precede it. The model of ethical formation followed by the mosque participants emphasizes the sedimented and cumulative char-

* Butler argues this point eloquently in her recent work: “no assertion of universality takes place apart from a cultural norm, and, given the array of contesting norms that constitute the international field, no assertion can be made without at once requiring a cultural translation. Without translation, the very concept of universality cannot cross the linguistic borders it claims, in principle, to be able to cross. Or we might put it another way: without translation, the only way the assertion of universality can cross a border is through colonial and expansionist logic” (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000, 35).
acter of reiterated performatives, where each performative builds on prior ones, and a carefully calibrated system exists by which differences between re-
iterations are judged in terms of how successfully (or not) the performance has
taken root in the body and mind. Thus the mosque participants—no matter
how pious they were—exercised great vigilance in scrutinizing themselves to
gauge how well (or poorly) their performances had actually taken root in their
dispositions (as Amal and Nama do in the conversation described earlier in
this chapter).

Significantly, the question of the disruption of norms is posed differently in
the model governing the mosque movement from how it is posed in the model
derived from the examples that Butler provides. Not only are the standards by
which an action is perceived to have failed or succeeded different, but the
practices that follow the identification of an act (as successful or failed) are
also distinct. Consider for example Butler’s discussion of drag queens (in
“Gender Is Burning”) who parody dominant heterosexual norms and in so-
doing expose “the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself pro-
duced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality”
(Butler 1993, 125). What is significant here is that as the drag queen becomes
more successful in her approximation of heterosexual norms of femininity, the
challenge her performance poses to the stability of these norms also increases.
The excellence of her performance, in other words, exposes the vulnerability
of heterosexual norms and puts their naturalized stability at risk. For the
mosque participants, on the other hand, excellence at piety does not put the
structure that governs its normativity at risk but rather consolidates it.

Furthermore, when, in Butler’s example, a drag queen’s performance fails to
approximate the ideal of femininity, Butler reads this failure as a sign of the in-
trinsic inability of the performative structure of heteronormativity to realize
its own ideals. In contrast, in the model operative among the mosque partici-
pants, a person’s failure to enact a virtue successfully is perceived to be the
marker of an inadequately formed self, one in which the interiority and exte-
riority of the person are improperly aligned. The recognition of this disjunc-
ture in turn requires one to undertake a specific series of steps to rectify the
situation—steps that build upon the rooted and sedimented character of prior
performances of normative virtues. Amal, in the conversation cited above,
describes how she followed her initial inability to simulate shyness success-
fully with repeated acts of shyness that in turn produced the cumulative effect
of a shy interiority and disposition. Drag queens may also expend a similar
kind of effort in order to better approximate dominant feminine norms, but
what is different is that they take the disjuncture between what is socially per-
formed and what is biologically attributed as necessary to the very structure of
their performance. For the mosque participants, in contrast, the relevant dis-
juncture is that between a religious norm (or ideal) and its actual performance: their actions are aimed at precisely overcoming this disjunction.

One reason these two understandings of performative behavior differ from each other is based in the contrastive conceptions of embodied materiality that underlie them. Butler understands the materiality of the body on the model of language, and analyzes the power of bodily performatives in terms of processes of signification whose disruptive potential lies in the indeterminate character of signs. In response to those who charge her with practicing a kind of linguistic reductionism, Butler insists that the body is not reducible to discourse or speech, since “the relationship between speech and the body is that of a chiasmus. Speech is bodily, but the body exceeds the speech it occasions; and speech remains irreducible to the bodily means of its enunciation” (Butler 1997a, 155–56). So how are we to understand this chiasmus? For Butler, the answer lies in formulating a theory of signification that is always operative—whether acknowledged or not—when one tries to speak about this chiasmus, because in speaking one renders discursive what is extra- or nondiscursive (Butler 1993, 11). The discursive terms, in turn, become constitutive of the extra-discursive realms of the body because of the formative power of language to constitute that which it represents.10 Butler remains skeptical of approaches that leave the relationship between discursive and extra-discursive forms of materiality open and untheorized, and seeks to demonstrate the power of an analysis that foregrounds the significatory aspects of the body.11

It is important to point out here that there are a range of theorists who may agree with Butler about the chiasmic relationship between the body and discourse, but for whom a theory of signification does not quite address a basic problem: how do we develop a vocabulary for thinking conceptually about forms of corporeality that, while efficacious in behavior, do not lend themselves

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10 Note that Butler’s focus on the formative power of discourse posits a strong critique of a representational model of language. Her objections are twofold: one, that this model incorrectly presupposes that language is anterior to the object it represents, when in fact constitutes the object as well; two, that this model presumes a relationship of exteriority between language and power, when, in essence, language is not simply a tool for power but is itself a form of power. On these points, see Butler’s critique of Bourdieu’s representational theory of language in Butler 1997c; also see Butler and Connolly 2000.

11 In response to a question posed by William Connolly about the nondiscursive character of bodily practices, Butler argues: “To focus on linguistic practice here and non-linguistic practice there, and to claim that both are important is still not to focus on the relation between them. It is that relation that I think we still do not know how to think. . . . It will not be easy to say that power backs language when one form that power takes is language. Similarly, it will not be possible to look at non-discursive practices when it turns out that our very way of delimiting and conceptualizing the practice depends on the formative power of a certain conceptual discourse. We are in each of these cases caught in a chiasmus relation, one in which the terms to be related also partake of one another, but do not collapse into one another” (Butler and Connolly 2000).
easily to representation, elucidation, and a logic of signs and symbols (see, for example, T. Asad 1993; Connolly 1999; Grosz 1994; Massumi 2002). For these scholars, a theory of linguistic signification does not quite apprehend the power that corporeality commands in the making of subjects and objects. These scholars, of course, speak from within a long philosophical tradition that extends from Spinoza to Bergson to Merleau-Ponty and, more recently, to Deleuze.

In light of this ongoing debate, a consideration of the mosque participants’ understanding of virtuous action raises yet another set of interesting questions regarding Butler’s emphasis on the significatory aspects of bodily performative. As I mentioned earlier, the mosque participants do not understand the body as a sign of the self’s interiority but as a means of developing the self’s potentiality. (Potentiality here refers not to a generic human faculty but to the abilities one acquires through specific kinds of embodied training and knowledge, see p. 147.) As described in chapter 4, the mosque participants are in fact strongly critical of the nationalist-identitarian interpretations of religiosity because these views treat the body primarily as a sign of the self rather than as a means to its formation. One might say that for the mosque participants, therefore, the body is not apprehensible through its ability to function as a sign but encompasses an entire manner of being and acting in which the body serves as the developable means for its consummation. In light of this, it is important to ask whether a theory of embodied performativity that assumes a theory of linguistic signification (as necessary to its articulation) is adequate for analyzing formulations of the body that insist on the inadequacy of the body to function as a sign?

The fact that the mosque participants treat the body as a medium for, rather than a sign of, the self also has consequences for how subversion or destabilization of norms might operate within such an imaginary. Note that the mosque participants regard both compliance to and rebellion against norms as dependent upon the teachability of the body—what I called the “docility of the body” in chapter 1—such that both virtuous and unvirtuous dispositions are necessarily learned. This means that the possibility for disrupting the structural stability of norms depends upon literally retutoring the body rather than on destabilizing the referential structure of the sign, or, for that matter, positing an alternative representational logic that challenges masculinist readings of feminine corporeality. Thus, anyone interested in reforming this tradition cannot simply assume that resignifying Islamic practices and virtues (like modesty or donning the veil) would change the meaning of these practices for the mosque participants; rather, what is required is a much deeper engagement with the architecture of the self that undergirds a particular mode of living and attachment, of which modesty/veiling are a part.

The recalcitrant character of the structure of orthodox Islamic norms
contrasts dramatically with the politics of resignification that Butler’s formulation of performativity presupposes. Butler argues that the body is knowable through language (even if it is not reducible to language); corporeal politics for her often ensued from those features of signification and reference that destabilize the referential structure. In Butler’s conception, insofar as the force of the body is knowable through the system of signification, challenges to the system come from interventions in the significatory features of that system. For example, Butler analyzes the reappropriation of the term “queer,” which was historically used as a form of hate speech against lesbians and gays, but which has now come to serve as a positive term of self-identification. For Butler the appropriation of the term “queer” works by redirecting the force of the reiterative structure of homophobic norms and tethering the term to a different context of valences, meanings, and histories. What is notable for the purpose of my argument here is that it is a change in the referential structure of the sign that destabilizes the normative meaning and force of the term “queer.” In the case of the mosque movement, as I have argued above, a change in the referential structure of the system of signs cannot produce the same effect of destabilization. Any attempt to destabilize the normative structure must also take into account the specificity of embodied practices and virtues, and the kind of work they perform on the self, recognizing that any transformation of their meaning requires an engagement with the technical and embodied armature through which these practices are attached to the self.

My somewhat long foray into Butler’s theory of embodied performativity elucidates, I hope, the range of productive questions that are generated through an encounter between philosophical “generality” and ethnographic “particularity”—an encounter that makes clear the constitutive role “examples” play in the formulation of theoretical concepts. Moreover, an analysis of the historical and cultural particularity of the process of subjectivation reveals not only distinct understandings of the performative subject but also the perspectival shifts one needs to take into account when talking about politics of resistance and subversion.

TO ENDURE IS TO ENACT?

In this section I would like to return to the exploration of different modalities of agency whose operations escape the logic of resistance and subversion of norms. In what follows I will investigate how suffering and survival—two modalities of existence that are often considered to be the antithesis of agency—came to be articulated within the lives of women who live under the pressures of a patriarchal system that requires them to conform to the rigid de-
mands of heterosexual monogamy. Given that these conditions of gender inequality uniformly affect Egyptian women, regardless of their religious persuasion, I am particularly interested in understanding how a life lived in accordance with Islamic virtues affects a woman's ability to inhabit the structure of patriarchal norms. What resources and capacities does a pious lifestyle make available to women of the mosque movement, and how do their modes of inhabiting these structures differ from women for whom the resources of survival lie elsewhere? In particular I want to understand the practical and conceptual implications of a religious imaginary in which humans are considered to be only partially responsible for their own actions, versus an imaginary in which humans are regarded as the sole authors of their actions. It is not so much the epistemological repercussions of these different accounts of human action that interest me (cf. Chakrabarty 2000; Hollywood 2004), but how these two accounts affect women's ability to survive within a system of inequality and to flourish despite its constraints.

In what follows, I will juxtapose an example drawn from the life of a woman who was part of the mosque movement with another taken from the life of a woman who considered herself a "secular Muslim," and who was often critical of the virtues that the mosque participants regard as necessary to the realization of their ability to live as Muslims. I want to highlight the strikingly different ways in which these two women dealt with the pressures of being single in a society where heterosexual marriage is regarded as a compulsory norm. Even though it would be customary to consider one of these strategies "more agentival" than the other, I wish to show that such a reading is in fact reductive of the efforts entailed in the learning and practicing of virtues—virtues that might not be palatable to humanist sensibilities but are nonetheless constitutive of agency in important ways.

The full extent to which single women in Egypt are subjected to the pressure to get married was revealed to me in a conversation with Nadia, a woman I had come to know through her work in the mosques. Nadia was in her mid-thirties and had been married for a couple of years, but did not have any children; she and her husband lived in a small apartment in a lower-middle-income neighborhood of Cairo. She taught in a primary school close to her home, and twice a week after work she taught Quranic recitation to young children in the Nafisa mosque as part of what she considered her contribution to the ongoing work of da'wa. Afterward, she would often stay to attend the lesson at the mosque delivered by one of the better-known da'iyyat. Sometimes, after the lesson, I would catch a bus back with her and her friends. The ride was long and we would often have a chance to chat.

During one of these rides, I observed a conversation between Nadia and her longtime friend Iman, who was in her late twenties and who also volunteered
at the mosque. Iman seemed agitated that day and, upon getting on the bus, immediately spoke to Nadia about her dilemma. A male colleague who was married to another woman had apparently approached her to ask her hand in marriage.\(^\text{12}\) By Egyptian standards Iman was well over the marriageable age. Iman was agitated because although the man was very well respected at her place of work and she had always held him in high regard, he already had a first wife. She was confused about what she should do, and was asking Nadia for advice. Much to my surprise, Nadia advised Iman to tell this man to approach her parents formally to ask for her hand in marriage, and to allow her parents to investigate the man’s background in order to ascertain whether he was a suitable match for her.

I was taken aback by this response because I had expected Nadia to tell Iman not to think about this issue any further, since not only had the man broken the rules for proper conduct by approaching Iman directly instead of her parents, but he was also already married. I had come to respect Nadia’s ability to uphold rigorous standards of pious behavior: on numerous occasions I had seen her give up opportunities that would have accrued her material and social advantages for the sake of her principles. So a week later, when I was alone with Nadia, I asked her the question that had been bothering me: why did she not tell Iman to cut off any connection with this man?

Nadia seemed a little puzzled and asked me why I thought this was proper advice. When I explained, she said, “But there is nothing wrong in a man approaching a woman for her hand in marriage directly as long as his intent is serious and he is not playing with her. This occurred many times even at the time of the Prophet.”

I interrupted her and said, “But what about the fact that he is already married?” Nadia looked at me and asked, “You think that she shouldn’t consider marriage to an already married man?” I nodded yes. Nadia gave me a long and contemplative look, and said, “I don’t know how it is in the United States, but this issue is not that simple here in Egypt [il-mas’ila di mish sahla fi masr]. Marriage is a very big problem here. A woman who is not married is rejected by the entire society as if she has some disease [il-marad], as if she is a thief [harâmî]. It is an issue that is very painful indeed [hadhahi mas’ila mu‘zlima jiddan, jiddan haqiqi].”

I asked Nadia what she meant by this. She replied: “If you are unmarried after the age of say late teens or early twenties—as is the case with Iman—everyone around you treats you like you have a defect [al-naqṣ]. Wherever you go, you are asked, ‘Why didn’t you get married [ma‘gawwaztish ley]?’ Everyone knows that you can’t offer to marry a man, that you have to wait until a man

\(^\text{12}\) Islamic jurisprudence permits men to have up to four wives.
approaches you. Yet they act as if the decision is in your hands! You know I
did not get married until I was thirty-four years old: I stopped visiting my rela-
tives, which is socially improper, because every time I would go I would en-
counter the same questions. What is even worse is that your [immediate] fam-
ily starts to think that you have some failing [il-żib] in you because no man has
approached you for marriage. They treat you as if you have a disease.”

Nadia paused reflectively for a moment and then continued: “It’s not as if
those who are married necessarily have a happy life. For marriage is a blessing
[na’mā], but it can also be a trial/problem [fitna]. For there are husbands who
are cruel [qāšil]: they beat their wives, bring other wives into the same house,
and don’t give each an equal share. But these people who make fun of you for
not being married don’t think about this aspect of marriage, and only stress
marriage as a blessing [na’mā]. Even if a woman has a horrible husband, and
has a hard married life, she will still make an effort to make you feel bad for
not being married.”

I was surprised at Nadia’s clarity about the injustice of this situation toward
women and the perils of marriage. I asked Nadia if single men were treated in
the same way. Nadia replied resoundingly, “Of course not! For the assumption
is that a man, if he wanted to, could have proposed to any woman: if he is not
married it’s because he didn’t want to, or there was no woman who deserved
him. But for the woman it is assumed that no one wanted her because it’s not
up to her to make the first move.” Nadia shook her head again, and went on,
“No, this situation is very hard and a killer [il-mauḍtu’ sa’b wi qātil], O Saba.
You have to have a very strong personality [shakhṣiyya qawwiyyy] for all of this
not to affect you because eventually you also start thinking that there is some-
thing deeply wrong with you that explains why you are not married.”

I asked her what she meant by being strong. Nadia said in response, “You
must be patient in the face of difficulty [lāzim tikūn ṣābir], trust in God
[tawwakal ilā allāh], and accept the fact that this is what He has willed as your
fate [qadā’]; if you complain about it all the time, then you are denying that it
is only God who has the wisdom to know why we live in the conditions we do
and not humans.” I asked Nadia if she had been able to achieve such a state of
mind, given that she was married quite late. Nadia answered in an unexpected
manner. She said, “O Saba, you don’t learn to become patient [ṣābir] or trust
in God [mutawakkila] only when you face difficulties. There are many people
who face difficulties, and may not even complain, but they are not ṣābirin [pa-
tient, enduring]. You practice the virtue of patience [ṣabr] because it is a good
deed [al-ʾamal al-ṣāliḥ], regardless of your situation: whether your life is diffi-
cult or happy. In fact, practicing patience in the face of happiness is even
more difficult.”

Noting my look of surprise, Nadia said: “Yes, because think of how often
people turn to God only when they have difficult times, and often forget Him in times of comfort. To practice patience in moments of your life when you are happy is to be mindful of His rights [haqqahu] upon you at all times." I asked Nadia, "But I thought you said that one needs to have patience so as to be able to deal with one’s difficulties?" Nadia responded by saying, "It is a secondary consequence [al-natîja al-thânawîyya] of your doing good deeds, among them the virtue of patience. God is merciful and He rewards you by giving you the capacity to be courageous in moments of difficulty. But you should practice ṣabr [patience] because this is the right thing to do in the path of God [fi sabîl lillah]."

I came back from my conversation with Nadia quite struck by the clarity with which she outlined the predicament of women in Egyptian society: a situation created and regulated by social norms for which women were in turn blamed. Nadia was also clear that women did not deserve the treatment they received, and that many of those she loved (including her kin) were equally responsible for the pain that had been inflicted on her when she was single. While polygamy is allowed in Islam, Nadia and other participants of the mosque movement would often point out that, according to the Quran, marriage to more than one woman is conditional upon the ability of a man to treat all his wives equally (emotionally and materially), a condition almost impossible to fulfill.\(^\text{13}\) For this reason, polygamous marriages are understood to create difficult situations for women, and the mosque participants generally advise against it.\(^\text{14}\) Nadia’s advice to Iman that she consider marriage to a married man, however, was based on a recognition of the extreme difficulty entailed in living as a single woman in Egypt.

While Nadia’s response about having to make such choices resonated with other, secular, Egyptian friends of mine, her advocacy of the cultivation of the virtue of ṣabr (roughly meaning “to persevere in the face of difficulty without complaint”) was problematic for them.\(^\text{15}\) Ṣabr invokes in the minds of many the passivity women are often encouraged to cultivate in the face of injustice. My friend Sana, for example, concurred with Nadia’s description of how diff-

\(^{13}\) Both the Hanbali and Maliki schools of Islamic jurisprudence permit a woman to stipulate in her marriage contract that if the husband takes a second wife, she has the right to seek divorce. What is quite clear is that none of the schools give the woman the legal right to prevent her husband from taking a second wife. For recent debates on polygamy among contemporary religious scholars in Egypt, see Skovgaard-Petersen 1997, 169–70, 232–33.

\(^{14}\) This is further augmented by the liberal ideal of nuclear family and companionate marriage, which, as Lila Abu-Lughod points out (1998), has increasingly become the norm among Islamists as well as secular-liberal Egyptians.

\(^{15}\) I have retained the use of ṣabr in this discussion rather than its common English translation, “patience,” because ṣabr communicates a sense not quite captured by the latter: one of perseverance, endurance of hardship without complaint, and steadfastness.
cult life could be for a single woman in Egypt, but strongly disagreed with her advice regarding šabr.

Sana was a single professional woman in her mid-thirties who came from an upper-middle-class family—a self-professed “secular Muslim” whom I had come to know through a group of friends at the American University in Cairo. In response to my recounting of the conversation with Nadia, Sana said, “Šabr is an important Islamic principle, but these religious types [mutâdâyyînîn] think it’s a solution to everything. It’s such a passive way of dealing with this situation.” While Sana, too, believed that a woman needed to have a “strong personality” (shakhshîyya qawiyya) in order to be able to deal with such a circumstance, for her this meant acquiring self-esteem or self-confidence (thîqa fil-nafîs wal-dhât). As she explained, “Self-esteem makes you independent of what other people think of you. You begin to think of your worth not in terms of marriage and men, but in terms of who you really are, and in my case, I draw pride from my work and that I am good at it. Where does šabr get you? Instead of helping you to improve your situation, it just leads you to accept it as fate—passively.”

While Nadia and Sana shared their recognition of the painful situation single women face, they differed markedly in their respective engagements with this suffering, each enacting a different modality of agency in the face of it. For Sana the ability to survive the situation she faced lay in seeking self-empowerment through the cultivation of self-esteem, a psychological capacity that, in her view, enabled one to pursue self-directed choices and actions unhindered by other people’s opinions. In this view, self-esteem is useful precisely because it is a means to achieving self-directed goals. For Sana one of the important arenas for acquiring this self-esteem was her professional career and achievements. Nadia also worked, but clearly did not regard her professional work in the same manner.

Importantly, in Nadia’s view, the practice of šabr does not necessarily make one immune to being hurt by others’ opinions: one undertakes the practice of šabr first and foremost because it is an essential attribute of a pious character, an attribute to be cultivated regardless of the situation one faces. Rather than alleviating suffering, šabr allows one to bear and live hardship correctly as prescribed by one tradition of Islamic self-cultivation. As Nadia says, if the practice of šabr fortifies one’s ability to deal with social suffering, this is a secondary, not essential, consequence. Justification for the exercise of šabr, in other

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16 In the language of positive freedom, Sana may be understood to be a “free agent” because she appears to formulate her projects in accord with her own desires, values, and goals, and not those of others.

17 For contemporary discussions of šabr among leaders of the Islamic Revival, see M. al-Ghazali 1990; al-Qaradawi 1989.

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words, resides neither in its ability to reduce suffering nor in its ability to help one realize one’s self-directed choices and/or goals. When I pressed Nadia for further explanation, she gave me the example of Ayyub, who is known in Islam for his exemplary patience in the face of extreme physical and social hardship (Ayyub is the equivalent of Job in the Judeo-Christian tradition). Nadia noted that Ayyub is famous not for his ability to rise above the pain, but precisely for the manner in which he lived his pain. Ayyub’s perseverance did not decrease his suffering: it ended only when God had deemed it time for it to end. In this view, it is not only the lack of complaint in the face of hardship, but the way in which ṣabr infuses one’s life and mode of being that makes one a ṣābir (one who exercises ṣabr). As Nadia notes in the conversation reported earlier, while ṣabr is realized through practical tasks, its consummation does not lie in practice alone.

Importantly, Nadia’s conception of ṣabr is linked to the idea of divine causality, the wisdom of which cannot be deciphered by mere human intelligence. Many secular-oriented Muslims,\(^{18}\) like Sana above, regard such an approach to life as defeatist and fatalist—as an acceptance of social injustice whose real origins lie in structures of patriarchy and social arrangements, rather than in God’s will manifest as fate (qaḍā). According to this logic, holding humans responsible for unjust social arrangements allows for the possibility of change, which a divine causality forecloses. Note, however, that the weight Nadia accords to fate does not absolve humans from responsibility for the unjust circumstances single women face. Rather, as she pointed out to me later, predestination is one thing and choice another (al-qadr shai’ wal-ikhtiyar shai’ akhîr): while God determines one’s fate (for example, whether someone is poor or wealthy), human beings still choose how to deal with their situations (for example, one can either steal or use lawful means to ameliorate one’s situation of poverty). What we have here is a notion of human agency, defined in terms of individual responsibility, that is bounded by both an eschatological structure and a social one. Importantly, this account privileges neither the relational nor the autonomous self so familiar to anthropologists (Joseph 1999), but a conception of individual ethics whereby each person is responsible for her own actions.\(^{19}\)

\(^{18}\) As I indicated in chapter 1, I am using “secular-oriented Muslims” as shorthand to refer to those for whom religious practice has limited relevance outside of personal devotion. See chapter 2 for my discussion of how the term “secularism” is used by the mosque participants in Egypt today.

\(^{19}\) Notably, Sunni Islam shares with Protestantism two central ideas. First, they both share the assumption that each follower of the tradition is potentially capable of inculcating the highest virtues internal to the tradition and is responsible for the self-discipline necessary to achieve this goal (even though divine grace plays a central role in both traditions). Second, they both share
CHAPTER 5

Just as the practice of self-esteem structured the possibilities of action that were open to Sana, so did the realization of ṣabr for Nadia, enabling certain ways of being and foreclosing others. It is clear that certain virtues (such as humility, modesty, and shyness) have lost their value in the liberal imagination and are considered emblematic of passivity and inaction, especially if they don’t uphold the autonomy of the individual: ṣabr may, in this view, mark an inadequacy of action, a failure to act under the inertia of tradition. But ṣabr in the sense described by Nadia and others does not mark a reluctance to act. Rather, it is integral to a constructive project: it is a site of considerable investment, struggle, and achievement. What Nadia’s and Sana’s discussions reveal are two different modes of engaging with social injustice, one grounded in a tradition that we have come to value, and another in a nonliberal tradition that is being resuscitated by the movement I worked with.

Note that even though Nadia regarded herself as only partially responsible for the actions she undertook (the divine being at least equally responsible for her situation), this should not lead us to think that she was therefore less likely to work at changing the social conditions under which she lived. Neither she nor Sana, for a variety of reasons, could pursue the project of reforming the oppressive situation they were forced to inhabit. The exercise of ṣabr did not hinder Nadia from embarking on a project of social reform any more than the practice of self-esteem enabled Sana to do so. One should not, therefore, draw unwarranted correlations between a secular orientation and the ability to transform conditions of social injustice. Further, it is important to point out that to analyze people’s actions in terms of realized or frustrated attempts at social transformation is necessarily to reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of domination. Just as our own lives don’t fit neatly into such a paradigm, neither should we apply such a reduction to the lives of women like Nadia and Sana, or to movements of moral reform such as the one discussed here.

THE PARADOXES OF PIETY

As I suggested in chapter 1, it is possible to read many of the practices of the mosque participants as having the effect of undermining the authority of a va-

the assumption that the highest virtues of the tradition must be pursued while one is immersed in the practicalities of daily life, rather than through seclusion in an enclosed community (of nuns, priests, or monks), or a predefined religious order (as is the case in certain strains of Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism). Consequently all of life is regarded as the stage on which these values and attitudes are enacted, making any separation between the secular and the sacred difficult to maintain.

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riety of dominant norms, institutions, and structures. Indeed, my analysis of the overall aims of the mosque movement shows that challenging secular-liberal norms—whether of sociability or governance—remains central to the movement’s self-understanding. Moreover, regardless of the movement’s self-understanding, the objective effects that the movement has produced within the Egyptian social field de facto pose stiff impediments to the process of secularization. Despite this acknowledgment, as I suggested before, it would be a mistake to analyze the complexity of this movement through the lens of resistance insomuch as such a reading flattens out an entire dimension of the force this movement commands and the transformations it has spawned within the social and political fields.

This caution against reading the agency of this movement primarily in terms of resistance holds even more weight when we turn our attention to the analysis of gender relations. In what follows, I want to show why this is the case through ethnographic examples in which women may be seen as resisting aspects of male kin authority. While conceding that one of the effects of the mosque participants’ pursuit of piety is the destabilization of certain norms of male kin authority, I want to argue that attention to the terms and concepts deployed by women in these struggles directs us to analytical questions that are closed off by an undue emphasis on resistance. The discourse of the mosque movement is shot through, of course, with assumptions that secure male domination: an analysis that focuses on terms internal to the discourse of piety must also engage the entire edifice of male superiority upon which this discourse is built. Indeed, my analysis of the mosque participants’ practices of pedagogy and ritual observance (in chapters 3 and 4) is in part an exposition of this point. But the fact that discourses of piety and male superiority are ineluctably intertwined does not mean that we can assume that the women who inhabit this conjoined matrix are motivated by the desire to subvert or resist terms that secure male domination; neither can we assume that an analysis that focuses on the subversive effects their practices produce adequately captures the meanings\(^\text{20}\) of these practices, that is, what these practices “do” within the discursive context of their enactment. Let me elaborate.

The pursuit of piety often subjected the mosque participants to a contradictory set of demands, the negotiation of which often required maintaining a delicate balance between the moral codes that could be transgressed and those that were mandatory. 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. In

\(^{20}\) Obviously, my use of the term “meaning” here goes well beyond mere sense and reference.
order to remain active in the field of da’wa, and sometimes even to abide by rigorous standards of piety, these women often had to go against their male kin, who exercised tremendous authority in their lives, authority that was sanctioned not only by divine injunctions but also by Egyptian custom.

Consider for example the struggles a woman called Abir had with her husband regarding her involvement in da’wa activities. I had met Abir during one of the lessons delivered in the low-income Ayesha mosque and, over a period of a year and a half, came to know her and her family quite well. Abir was thirty years old and had three children at the time. Her husband was a lawyer and worked two jobs in order to make ends meet. Abir would sew clothes for her neighbors to supplement their income, and also received financial help from her family, who lived only a few doors down from her. Like many young women of her class and background, Abir was not raised to be religiously observant, and showed me pictures from her youth when she, like other neighborhood girls, wore short skirts and makeup, flaunting the conventions of modest comportment. Abir recounted how, as a young woman, she had seldom performed any of the obligatory acts of worship and, on the occasions when she did, she did so more out of custom (ʿada) than out of an awareness of all that was involved in such acts. Only in the last several years had Abir become interested in issues of piety, an interest she pursued actively by attending mosque lessons, reading the Quran, and listening to taped religious sermons that she would borrow from a neighborhood kiosk. Over time, Abir became increasingly more diligent in the performance of religious duties (including praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan). She donned the headscarf, and then, after a few months, switched to the full body and face veil (niqāb). In addition, she stopped socializing with Jamal’s male friends and colleagues, refusing to help him entertain them at home.

Abir’s transformation was astonishing to her entire family, but it was most disturbing to her husband, Jamal. Jamal was not particularly religious, even though he considered himself a Muslim—if an errant one. He seldom performed any of his religious obligations and, much to Abir’s consternation, sometimes drank alcohol and indulged his taste for X-rated films. Given his desire for upward mobility—which required him to appear (what Abir called) “civilized and urbane” (mutahaddir) in front of his friends and colleagues—Jamal was increasingly uncomfortable with the orthodox Islamic sociability his wife seemed to be cultivating at an alarming rate, the full face and body veil (niqāb) being its most “backward” (mutakhallif) sign. He was worried, and let Abir know in no uncertain terms that he wanted a more worldly and stylish wife who could facilitate his entry and acceptance into a class higher than his own.

Things became far more tense between them when Abir enrolled in a two-
year program at a nongovernmental institute of daʿwa so she could train to become a dāʿīya. She had been attending the local mosque lessons, and felt that she would make a more effective teacher than the local dāʿīyat if she had the proper training. Jamal did not take her seriously at first, thinking that she would soon grow tired of the study this program required, coupled with the long commute and daily child care and housework. But Abir proved to be resolute and tenacious: she knew that if she was lax in her duties toward the house, her children, or Jamal, she did not stand a chance. So she was especially diligent in taking care of all household responsibilities on the days she attended the daʿwa institute, and even took her son with her so that Jamal would not have to watch him when he returned from work.

Jamal tried several tactics to dissuade Abir. He learned quickly that his sarcastic remarks about her social “backwardness” did not get him very far: Abir would retort by pointing out how shortsighted he was to privilege his desire for worldly rewards over those in the Hereafter. She would also ridicule his desire to appear “civilized and urbane,” calling it a blind emulation of Western values. Consequently, Jamal changed his tactic and started to use religious arguments to criticize Abir, pointing out that she was disobeying Islamic standards of proper wifely conduct when she disobeyed the wishes and commands of her husband. He would also occasionally threaten to take a second wife, as part of his rights as a Muslim man, if she did not change her ways. On one occasion, when he had just finished making this threat in front of her family and myself, Abir responded by saying, “You keep insisting on this right God has given you [to marry another woman]. Why don’t you first take care of His rights over you [haqq allāh ‘elaik]?” It was clear to everyone that she was talking about Jamal’s laxity in the performance of prayers, particularly since just an hour before, Abir had asked him, as the man of the household, to lead the evening prayer (ṣalāt al-maghrib)—a call he had ignored while continuing to watch television. Abir had eventually led the prayers herself for the women present in the house. Jamal was silenced by Abir’s retort, but he did not refrain from continuing to harass her. At one point, after a particularly harsh argument between the two of them, I asked Abir, when we were alone, if she would consider giving up her daʿwa studies due to Jamal’s opposition. She answered resolutely, “No! Even if he took an absolute stand on the issue [hatta lau kān itmassik il-mauqif], I would not give up daʿwa.”

In response to Jamal’s increasing pressure, Abir adjusted her own behavior. Much to her family’s surprise, she became uncharacteristically gentle with Jamal, while using other means of persuasion with him. In particular tense moments, she would at times cajole or humor him, and at times embarrass him by taking the higher moral ground (as in the scene just described). She also
started to pray regularly for Jamal to his face, pointedly asking for God’s pardon (maghfira) and blessings (baraka), not only in this life but in the Hereafter. The phrase “rabbīnna yihdik, ya rabb!” (“May our Lord show you the straight path, O Lord!”) became a refrain in her interactions with Jamal. Sometimes she would play tape-recorded sermons at full volume in the house, especially on Fridays when he was home, that focused on scenes of death, tortures in hell, and the day of final reckoning with God. Thus, in order to make Jamal feel vulnerable, Abir invoked destiny and death (reminding him of the Hereafter when he would face God), urging him to accord these their due by being more religiously observant.

All of these strategies eventually had a cumulative effect on Jamal and, even though he never stopped pressuring Abir to abandon her studies at the da’wa institute, the intensity with which he did so declined. He even started to pray more regularly, and to visit the mosque occasionally with her. More importantly for Abir, he stopped indulging his taste for alcohol and X-rated films at home.

What is important to note in this account is that none of Abir’s arguments would have had an effect on Jamal had he not shared with her some sort of a commitment to their underlying assumptions—such as belief in the Hereafter, the inevitability that God’s wrath will be unleashed on those who habitually disobey His commands, and so on. Abir’s persuasion worked with Jamal in part because he considered himself to be a Muslim, albeit one who was negligent in his practice and prone to sinful acts. As an example of this, even when he did not pray in response to her repeated enjoiners, he did not offer a reasoned argument for his refusal in the way an unbeliever might have when faced with a similar situation. Certain shared moral orientations structured the possibilities of the argument, and thus the shape of the conflict, between them. 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 would be tantamount “to denying God’s truth, something even he is not willing to risk.” The force of Abir’s persuasion lay partly in her perseverance, and partly in the tradition of authority she invoked to reform her husband, who was equally—if errantly—bound to the sensibilities of this tradition. In other words, Abir’s effectiveness was not an individual but a collaborative achievement, a product of the shared matrix of background practices, sensibilities, and orientations that structured Jamal and Abir’s exchanges.

Secondly, it is also important to note that Abir’s enrollment in the da’wa institute against the wishes of her husband would not be condoned by majority of the da’iyāt and Muslim jurists. This is because, as I explained in chapter 2, while da’wa is regarded a voluntary act for women, obedience to one’s hus-
band is considered an obligation to which every Muslim woman is bound. Abir was aware of the risks she was taking in pursuing her commitment to da’wa: Jamal’s threats to divorce her, or to find a second wife, were not entirely empty since he was within his rights as a Muslim man to do so in the eyes of the sharī’ah. Abir was able to hold her position in part because she could claim a higher moral ground than her husband. Her training in da’wa had given her substantial authority from which to speak and challenge her husband on issues of proper Islamic conduct. For example, as she learned more about the modern interpretation of da’wa from the institute where she attended classes, she started to justify her participation in da’wa using the argument, now popular among many Islamist thinkers (see chapter 2), that da’wa was no longer considered a collective duty but an individual duty that was incumbent upon each and every Muslim to undertake—a change that had come about precisely because people like Jamal had lost the ability to know what it meant to live as Muslims. Paradoxically, Abir’s ability to break from the norms of what it meant to be a dutiful wife were predicated upon her learning to perfect a tradition that accorded her a subordinate status to her husband. Abir’s divergence from approved standards of wifely conduct, therefore, did not represent a break with the significatory system of Islamic norms, but was saturated with them, and enabled by the capacities that the practice of these norms endowed her with.

It is tempting to read Abir’s actions through the lens of subordination and resistance: her ability to pursue da’wa work against her husband’s wishes may well be seen as an expression of her desire to resist the control her husband was trying to exert over her actions. Or, from a perspective that does not privilege the sovereign agent, Abir’s use of religious arguments may be understood as a simultaneous reiteration and resignification of religious norms, whereby patriarchal religious practices and arguments are assigned new meanings and valences. While both analyses are plausible, they remain inadequately attentive to the forms of reasoning, network of relations, concepts, and practices that were internal to Abir’s actions. For example, what troubled Abir was not the authority Jamal commanded over her (upheld by divine injunctions), but

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21 Even among those writers who argue that da’wa in the modern period has acquired the status of an individual duty (fard al-‘ain) rather than a collective duty (fard al-kifaya), da’wa is still considered, for women, an obligation secondary to their duties as wives, mothers, and daughters. This position is upheld not only by men but also by women, like Zaynab al-Ghazali, who have advocated for women’s increased participation in the field of da’wa (see Z. al-Ghazali 1996a, 39; al-Hashimi 1990, 237).

22 Jamal could have countered this argument by pointing out that most proponents of da’wa consider it to be a woman’s duty only if da’wa does not interfere with her service to her husband and children (see note above). But since Jamal was unfamiliar with these debates about da’wa, he was unable to make this argument.
his impious behavior and his attempts to dissuade her from what she considered to be her obligations toward 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 toward goals whose sense is not captured by terms such as obedience versus rebellion, compliance versus resistance, or subversion 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. Abir’s defiance of social and patriarchal norms is, therefore, best explored through an analysis of the ends toward which it was aimed, and the terms of being, affectivity, and responsibility that constituted the grammar of her actions.  

\textit{dā’wa and kinship demands}

The significance of an analysis that attends to the grammar of concepts within which a set of actions are located may be further elaborated through another example, one that is well known and often cited among those who are familiar with the figure of Zaynab al-Ghazali. As I mentioned in chapter 2, Zaynab al-Ghazali is regarded as a pioneering figure in the field of women’s dā’wa in Egypt; she is also well known for having served as a leader of the Islamist political group the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s. Given her public profile and political activism, al-Ghazali has been seen as a paradoxical figure who urged other women to abide by their duties as mothers, wives, and daughters, but lived her own life in a manner that challenged these traditional roles (Ahmed 1992; Hoffman 1985). An often-cited example of this seeming contradiction is al-Ghazali’s account of how she divorced her first husband whom she claimed interfered with her “struggle in the path of God” (jihād fi sabil lillāh), and then married her second husband on the condition that he not intervene in her work of dā’wa (Z. al-Ghazali 1995; Hoffman 1985, 236–37).

In her well-known autobiographical account, \textit{Days from My Life} (Ayyām min ḥayāṭī), al-Ghazali reports an exchange with her second husband, who,

\footnote{My insistence throughout this book that we attend to the terms and concepts informing the actions of the mosque participants does not aim to simply reproduce “folk categories.” Rather, my argument is that attention to these terms and concepts is necessary to rethinking analytical questions about regnant notions of agency in the social sciences and feminist theory. In this sense, my approach to the analysis of concepts is informed by the philosopher Ian Hacking who notes, “a concept is nothing other than a word in its sites. That means attending to a variety of types of sites: the sentences in which the word is actually (not potentially) used, those who speak those sentences, with what authority, in what institutional settings, in order to influence whom, with what consequences for the speakers” (Hacking 2002, 17).}
upon seeing the frequency of her meetings with male members of the Muslim Brotherhood increase, had inquired about the nature of her work. According to al-Ghazali, since the Brotherhood was under strict government surveillance, with many of its leaders in Egyptian jails, her work with the Brotherhood had to be performed clandestinely, and she refused to share the exact nature of this work with her husband. When he probed, she conceded that her work with the Brotherhood could endanger her life, but reminded him of the agreement they had come to before their marriage:

I cannot ask you today to join me in this struggle [jihād] but it is within my rights to stipulate [ashurāt 'alayka] that you not prevent me from my struggle in the path of God [jihādi fi sabīl lillāh], and that the day this [task] places upon me the responsibility of joining the ranks of the strugglers [mujāhidîn] you do not ask me what I am doing. But let the trust be complete between us, between a man who wanted to marry a woman who has offered herself to the struggle in the name of God and the establishment of the Islamic state since she was eighteen years old. If the interests of marriage conflict with the call to God [al-da'wa 'ila allāh], then marriage will come to an end and the call [to God] [da'wa] will prevail in my whole being/existence. . . . I know it is within your rights to order me, and it is incumbent upon me to grant you [your wishes], but God is greater in us than ourselves and His call is dearer to us than our existence. (Z. al-Ghazali 1995, 34–35)

In commenting on this passage, feminist historian Leila Ahmed points out that al-Ghazali’s own choices in life “flagrantly undercut her statements on the role of women in Islamic society” (Ahmed 1992, 199–200). This contradiction is most apparent, in Ahmed’s view, when al-Ghazali gives herself permission to place her work above her “obligations to raise a family,” but does not extend the same right to other Muslim women (Ahmed 1992, 200).24 While I do not deny that al-Ghazali’s life has entailed many contradictions,25 I think it is possible to understand her prescriptions for Muslim women as

24 Hoffman (1985) offers a similar reading of these passages.
25 In her two-volume book addressed to Muslim women in Egypt, al-Ghazali calls on women to enter the field of da’wa (Z. al-Ghazali 1994a, 1996a). However, she advises a woman da’iya to concentrate her efforts on other women because “she can understand their temperaments, circumstances and characteristics, and therefore will succeed in reaching their hearts and solving their problems, and [be able] to follow their issues” (1994a, 2). While al-Ghazali conducted da’wa among women for a period of thirteen years, she also worked with men when she joined the Muslim Brotherhood as part of what she considered her work in da’wa. She rose to a position of leadership among the Muslim Brothers during a period when the majority of its top leaders were in jail and played a key role in coordinating the activities of the Brothers, a role for which she was later imprisoned. Clearly, her advice to women da’iyāt—to primarily focus on other women—was not something she followed in her own life.
consistent with the conditions she stipulated in her own marriage. Notably, al-Ghazali does not argue that the pursuit of any kind of work in a woman's life permits her to excuse herself from familial duties (as Ahmed suggests): only her work “in the path of God” (fi sabil lillah) allows her to do so, and only in those situations where her kinship responsibilities interfere with her commitment to serving God. According to al-Ghazali, had she been able to bear children, her choices would have been more complicated because, as she expressed to me in one of my interviews with her, this would not have left her “free to devote herself to the path of God” (Cairo, 22 July 1996). She also talks about this in an interview that was published in a Saudi women’s magazine called Sayyidati (Hindawi 1997). In this interview, al-Ghazali explains her decision to seek divorce from her first husband by saying, “It was God’s wisdom that He did not divert me from my [religious] activities by endowing me with a son, or blessing me with children. I was, however, and still am, a mother to all Muslims. Thus, confronted with the treasure and ardor of this call [to da’wah], I was not able to keep myself from responding to it. When my [first] husband refused to let me continue my da’wah activities, I asked him for a divorce and this was how it happened” (Hindawi 1997, 72).

Two doctrinal presuppositions are at the core of Zaynab al-Ghazali’s argument. One is the position within Islamic jurisprudence, and commonly espoused by contemporary da’iyat and the ‘ulama’, that a woman’s foremost duty is to her parents before marriage, and to her husband and offspring after marriage, and that this responsibility is second only to her responsibility toward God. Only in situations where a woman’s loyalty to God is compromised by her obligations toward her husband and family is there space for debate on this issue, and it is within this space that al-Ghazali formulates her dissent against her husband.

Zaynab al-Ghazali’s argument also turns upon another important distinction made by Muslim jurists between one’s material and spiritual responsibilities toward one’s kin—both of which are organized along lines of age, gender, and kinship hierarchy. In this moral universe, while women are responsible for the physical well-being of both their husbands and children in the eyes of God, they are accountable only for their own and their children’s moral conduct—not that of their husbands. Husbands, on the other hand, by virtue of the authority they command over their wives and children, are accountable for their moral conduct as well as their social and physical well-being. Thus, while inferiors and superiors have mutual material responsibilities toward each other (in the sense that wives, husbands, and children are obligated to care for one another’s material comforts, albeit in different ways), it is husbands who are accountable for their wives’ virtue, while wives are accountable only for the moral conduct of their children. This distinction allowed al-Ghazali to argue
that her inability to bear children had “freed her” to pursue da’wa activities, something she would have been unable to do if she were encumbered by the responsibility for her children’s moral and physical well-being.

Al-Ghazali’s ability to break successfully from traditional norms of familial duty should be understood, as I suggested in chapter 2, within the context of her considerable exposure to a well-developed discourse of women’s rights at the turn of the twentieth century, a discourse that had been crucial to her formation as an activist. Indeed, it is quite possible to read al-Ghazali’s ability to stipulate conditions in both her marriages as a function of the opportunities that were opened up for women of her socioeconomic background in the 1930s and 1940s in Egypt and the new consciousness this had facilitated regarding the role women had come to play in the public domain.

While this social and historical context is undoubtedly important for explicating al-Ghazali’s actions in her personal and public life, it would be a mistake to ignore the specificity of doctrinal reasoning and its governing logic that accorded her actions a particular force—a force whose valence would be quite different if her arguments had relied upon the claim that women should be granted rights equal to those enjoyed by men within Islam in regard to marriage, divorce, and other kinship responsibilities. Al-Ghazali’s actions and her justifications for her actions did not, in fact, depend on such an argument for equal rights. Instead her argument pivoted upon the concept of “moral and physical responsibility” that she as a Muslim woman owed to her immediate kin. In al-Ghazali’s reasoning, her ability to break from these responsibilities was a function of her childless status. Whether we agree with the politics this reasoning advances or not, the discursive effects that follow from her invocation of this concept of moral responsibility explain both the power she commands as an “Islamic” (rather than a “feminist”) activist in the Muslim world today and the immense legitimacy her life story has accorded juristic Islamic discourse on kinship—particularly for those who want to pursue a lifestyle that breaks from the traditional demands of this discourse while at the same time abiding by its central tenets and principles.

Here I do not mean to suggest that the effect of al-Ghazali’s abidance by the terms of juristic discourse is best understood in terms of the lifestyles it has legitimized; rather, my point is that her narrative account should be analyzed in terms of the particular field of arguments it has made available to Muslim women and the possibilities for action these arguments have opened and foreclosed for them. It is this dimension of al-Ghazali’s reasoning that I have wanted to emphasize, particularly because it is often ignored and elided in accounts that explain her actions in terms of the universal logic of “structural changes” that modernity has heralded in non-Western societies like Egypt. While these “structural changes” provide an important backdrop for under-
standing al-Ghazali’s speech and actions, they have little power when it comes to explicating the force her life story commands in the field of Islamist activism.

doctrinal (ir)resolutions

While many of the problems that al-Ghazali and Abir faced in their pursuit of piety were related to their goal of becoming trained da’iyyat, women who did not have such ambitions also encountered structurally similar problems. Given that Islamic jurisprudence regards men to be the moral and physical guardians of women, participants in the mosque movement often complained that living with male kin who were not as religiously devout compromised their own standards of piety. The problem seemed to be particularly acute for a woman who was married to what the mosque participants called “al-zauj al-‘āşi” (a disobedient husband)—this concern was widely discussed not only in the mosque circles but also in religious advice columns in newspapers. In the eyes of the shari’a, even though a woman is not responsible for her husband’s moral conduct but only her own and her children’s, her husband’s behavior nonetheless profoundly affects her own pursuit of a virtuous life, given the moral authority he commands over her and his offspring as their custodian. Faced with such a situation, it is not easy for a woman to challenge her husband’s conduct or to seek divorce, given the stigma of being a divorcée in Egyptian society and the restrictions Islamic law places on a woman’s right to divorce. It was, therefore, very common during the mosque lessons to hear the audiences ask the da’iyyat what a woman should do if she was married to a husband who lived a sinful existence by the standards of virtuous Muslim conduct.

There is no simple doctrinal resolution to this problem. The responses of the da’iyyat varied and the women were urged to pursue a variety of means to come to terms with the contradictions posed by the conflicting demands of loyalty to God versus fidelity to one’s (sinful) husband. Most da’iyyat, whether at the upper-middle-, middle-, or lower-income mosques, argued that since men are the custodians (auliyā; singular: wali) of female kin in Islam, and not the other way around, women are not accountable in the eyes of God for the actions of their adult male kin. They advised women to try persuading their “disobedient husbands” to reform their behavior, and in the event they failed, to continue living with them with the understanding that they would have to be extra vigilant in monitoring their own conduct.

The Quranic verse often cited to support this position states, “Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter” (al-rijāl qawwāmūn ‘ala al-nisā, verse 34 from Sūrat al-Nisā’ ["The Woman"]).

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I questioned some of the dā‘iyyāt and the mosque participants about the contradictions this advice generated in a woman’s life, since living with an impious husband would force her into situations that compromised her ability to live by acceptable standards of virtuous conduct. Most of them acknowledged that their recommendations did not constitute the best solution to the problem at hand, but insisted that most women had no choice. Some of the dā‘iyyāt said, “If we advised women to seek divorce from disobedient husbands, we would de facto be asking half the population of married Egyptian women to be divorcées!”—implying that they thought a large number of Egyptian men were impious. Some argued that the fact that women are not held accountable for their husband’s conduct is a blessing God has bestowed upon women—one that frees them to pursue piety without having to worry about the conduct of male kin—while men are burdened with having to account for their wives’ actions as well as their own.

Other dā‘iyyāt, such as Hajja Asma, who had been Zaynab al-Ghazali’s student and now served as a dā‘iya in a local mosque, answered the question very differently.27 During an afternoon lesson, when Hajja Asma was presented with this question by a woman in her mid-thirties from among a group of twelve middle-class housewives, she started by inquiring about the nature of the husband's sins. Once it was established that they were “grave sins” (al-kabā‘ir)—such as refusing to pray regularly (qaṣr al-ṣalāt qāṣiran), engaging in illicit sexual activity (zīnā‘), and drinking alcohol—she advised the woman to employ a variety of strategies to convince her husband to change his conduct. She said:

The first step is to cry in front of your husband, and make him realize that you are worried for him because of what God will do to him given his conduct. Don’t think that this crying is in vain [mafit fā‘īda bi] because crying is known to have melted the hearts of many. One of my neighbors convinced her husband to start praying regularly this way. She also brought other pressures to bear on him by having me talk to him, because she knows that he respects me and would be embarrassed [maksūf] if I were to question him about prayers. But if you find that crying does not seem to have results, then the next step you can take is to stop sharing meals with him [baṣāli it-ta‘m ma‘a‘]. Eventually this is bound to have an effect, especially because men usually have stronger willpower than women and when a man sees a woman stronger than him he is moved by her persistence and strength [istimrārīha wi quwwatīha].

27 Hajja Asma was the only dā‘iya I worked with who talked openly about her sympathies with the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, she often had to move from mosque to mosque under government pressure and was only able to offer lessons sporadically.
At this point one of the women listening to Hajja Asma asked, “What if none of this has an effect on him [mati‘īšīrīsh bi’i]?” Hajja Asma replied, “The final and last thing you can try is to refuse to sleep with him [battalī al-ishr’a ma‘a].” There was a palpable silence among the women at this point, and then a woman in her early thirties said in a low voice, “What if that doesn’t work?” An older woman in her late sixties added loudly in response, “Yes, this happens a lot! [aiwa, da ḥāṣal kātir].” Hajja Asma nodded in agreement and said, “If none of this works, and you are certain that you have tried everything—and only you can judge how hard you have tried—and he still does not change his ways, then you have the right to demand a divorce from him [‘alayqi ḥaqq tultubi it-talāq minnu].”

Some of the women gasped in surprise: “Yā!” ("Yā!") is an expression of surprise women often use in Egyptian colloquial Arabic). Noting this reaction, Hajja Asma responded, “Of course—what else can you do [haṭîmlī ‘ēh]? Live with a sinning husband, raise your children in a sinful atmosphere—who will then grow up to be like him? How can you be obedient to God if you are living with a man like this [tiṣāmi fi-t-ṭā’at allāh izāy lamma tiṣāmi ma‘a rāgil ẓayyyu].” She continued, “If it was only a matter of him being harsh with you [la‘ū kān qāṣī ma‘ak], or having a rough temperament [ṣabī‘atu kān khitṣīn], then you could have endured it [tiṣāshbīri ‘ālēy]. But this is something you cannot be patient about or forebear: it is an issue between you and your God.”

Hajja Asma’s words were received with somber silence, since divorce is not something that is easy for Egyptian women to contemplate given the social taboos associated with it, the bias against women in Egyptian law regarding child custody, and the economic hardship a divorcée must face in raising her children. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, Islamic law does not make it easy for a woman to seek divorce, even in such a situation. In talking to Hajja Asma later, it was obvious to me that divorce was not something she took lightly either. Notably, Hajja Asma emphasized (as she does above) that if a woman was faced with a husband who had a harsh temperament, it was her obligation to be patient, given that patience (ṣabr) is an Islamic virtue that she should cultivate as a pious Muslim. But to practice forbearance in a situation where God’s claims over her were being compromised, was to place her own interests (in terms of the security and marriage provision) above her commitment to God. When I asked the other da‘iyāt and their audiences what they thought of Hajja Asma’s response, they argued that not all women would have the courage and strength to risk the scorn and hardship a divorcée would be subjected to in Egyptian society in order to uphold high standards of virtuous conduct. Among the da‘iyāt who took such a position, some of them said that women like Hajja Asma “were true slaves of God [humma ʿibād allâh ḥaqiqyynan]!”

As is clear from these disparate answers, the choice between submission to
God's will and being obedient to one's husband did not follow a straightforward rule, and at times placed contradictory demands on the mosque participants. As a result, women were called upon to make complex judgments that entailed an interpretation of the Islamic corpus as well as their own sense of responsibility in the situation. The questions the audience members posed, and the answers the da'iyyat provided, assumed that a woman is responsible for herself and her moral actions; the anguish underlying these queries was a product of both the sense of moral responsibility these women felt and the limited scope of choices available to them within orthodox Islamic tradition.

Within the moral-ethical framework articulated by Hajja Asma, a woman must, prior to asking for divorce, have a clear understanding of the order of priorities entailed in God's commands so that she challenges her husband only on those issues that compromise her ability to live as a dutiful Muslim. According to Hajja Asma's framework, if husbands interfere with matters pertaining to voluntary, rather than obligatory, acts (such as praying in a mosque instead of at home, practicing supererogatory fasts, undertaking da'wa, or wearing the full face and body veil), then women are advised to give up these practices and to not disobey their husbands' wishes and commands. Similarly, a husband's harsh treatment of his wife is not regarded as sufficient reason to seek a divorce (although Egyptian women have been known to do so). Only when the nature of a husband's conduct is such that it violates key Islamic injunctions and moral codes, making it impossible for a woman to realize the basic tenets of virtuous conduct in her own and her children's lives, is she allowed to resort to divorce.

When viewed from a feminist perspective, the choices open to the mosque participants appear quite limited. The constraining nature of these alternatives notwithstanding, I would argue that they nonetheless represent forms of reasoning that must be explored on their own terms if one is to understand the structuring conditions of this form of ethical life and the forms of agency they entail. Note that the various paths followed by the women do not suggest the application of a universal moral rule (in the Kantian sense), but are closer to what Foucault calls ethics: the careful scrutiny one applies to one's daily actions in order to shape oneself to live in accordance with a particular model of behavior. Thus, Hajja Asma's advice entails a variety of techniques of introspection and argument, including: examining oneself to determine whether one has exhausted all possible means of persuading one's husband prior to ask-

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28 To make informed decisions about such an issue, Muslims often turn to a mufti (juricounsel) who, after consulting various established opinions and evaluating the individual situation, issues a fatwa that is legally nonbinding. In the context of the mosque lessons, the da'iyyat, though not trained to be muftis, in practice enact this role by helping women interpret the shari'a in light of their personal situations. For more complex issues, the da'iyyat often refer their audiences to a qualified mufti.
ing for a divorce; being honest with oneself in such an examination, since no one else can make such a judgment; and employing a variety of techniques of persuasion, both oral and embodied, to change the immoral ways of the husband. This stands in contrast to the kind of self-scrutiny applied by a woman who chooses to stay with an impious husband: such a woman must constantly watch that she does not use her husband’s behavior as an excuse for her own religious laxity, assess her intentions and motivations for the actions she pursues, make sure she does everything in her capacity to raise her children in accord with standards of pious conduct, and so on. In both situations, moral injunctions are not juridically enforced but are self-monitored and entail an entire set of ascetic practices in which the individual engages in an interpretive activity, in accord with shari’a guidelines, to determine how best to live by Islamic moral codes and regulations.

Only through attention to these kinds of specificities can we begin to grasp the different modalities of agency involved in enacting, transgressing, or inhabiting ethical norms and moral principles. The analysis I have presented here should not be confused with a hermeneutical approach, one that focuses on the meanings that particular utterances, discourses, and practices convey. Rather, the framework I have suggested analyzes the work that discursive practices perform in making possible particular kinds of subjects. From this perspective, when assessing the violence that particular systems of gender inequality enact on women, it is not enough to simply point out, for example, that a tradition of female piety or modesty serves to give legitimacy to women’s subordination. Rather it is only by exploring these traditions in relation to the practical engagements and forms of life in which they are embedded that we can come to understand the significance of that subordination to the women who embody it.

Finally, in respect to agency, my arguments in this chapter show that the analytical payback in detaching the concept of agency from the trope of resistance lies in the series of questions such a move opens up in regard to issues of performativity, transgression, suffering, survival, and the articulation of the body within different conceptions of the subject. 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. In so much 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.