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Edit item: Women's moral agency and the politics of religion in the Gaza Strip

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WOMEN'S MORAL AGENCY AND THE POLITICS OF RELIGION IN GAZA STRIP

Aitemad Muhanna

This essay analyzes empirical data compiled in Gaza Strip between November 2011 and March 2012. The author examines how Nariman, an Islamist woman who at the time of the interviews on which this article is based held a powerful position in both the Hamas government and the local community, connects her ideal virtues to her social and political practices and how this dynamic contributes to developing a more articulated, critical, and creative form of agency. Although the model of moral agency developed in this essay does not claim to deconstruct discursive gender norms, it resignifies these norms from the social and cultural domain to the divine domain (in other words, women act as equal agents of God and do not fear anyone except God), which allows Nariman to liberate herself from the control of the discursive gender norms.

In this essay, I aim to explore the model of women's moral agency in the particular context of the Gaza Strip. I focus on the analytical narration of a Muslim woman named Nariman,¹ who has succeeded in powerfully positioning herself in Hamas Islamist movement institutions as well as wider social institutions. Nariman is thirty-one years old and hails from Rafah, south of the Gaza Strip. She grew up the eldest daughter in a wealthy family with no sons; she experienced almost no social or cultural constraints based on her gender. Her parents supported their daughters' education and did not put pressure on any of them to conform to certain gendered norms. Nariman lived her childhood and teenage years in comfort and managed her life in a relatively free family atmosphere as compared with many

¹ A well-known figure in Gaza society, Nariman gave me permission to use her real name and information I gathered through several interviews with her.

other women in Gaza. She is a wife with five children but was able to continue her education after she was married. She completed her undergraduate study in information technology at Al-Aqsa University in Gaza, her master's in Islamic education at the Islamic University in Gaza, and was pursuing her PhD in philosophy of education at Zaqazeeq University in Egypt. She is an active member of Hamas, and in 2008, the Hamas government appointed her head of the Women's Police Unit.

I did not select Nariman's case for the sake of generalization or theorization of women's moral agency. Rather, I use the narration of her life story as an individual example of a religious woman who challenges the dichotomist, singular, or harmonic conception of women's moral agency that almost demonstrates a singular political or theoretical setting, whether it is liberal or nonliberal. Yet the specific model of moral agency I study here remains rare, and its replication among other women in Gaza is not predictable. Religious, like unreligious, Gazan women reflect on their diverse individual experiences to continuously reshape their own subjectivity, responding to not only the changing context but also the changing knowledge, interests, and desires they accumulate throughout their interaction with the social world.

I intentionally focus on this one self-reflective and creative Muslim woman who bases her creative and critical agency on moral and religious arguments stemming from her deep knowledge and practice of Islam. This model of moral agency is characterized by a combination of rationality, morality, and discursive, reflective, and creative practice for meeting the changes she desired at the personal and societal level—to personally satisfy her desired subject to be an ideal Muslim woman, as well as to be socially and politically recognized, by transferring the message of Islam into social institutions and people's patterns of life.

The Context of Islamization in Gaza

Since the early 1990s, Hamas leaders realized that the strategy of resisting Israeli occupation through military action was no longer possible under the enormous Israeli and international pressure against Hamas. As a result, Hamas shifted its attention to Islamizing Palestinian society by intensifying its social and ideological interventions into the local communities.² Hamas established numerous charities, developed a network that surpassed in both size and efficiency those of other Palestinian factions, and established a reputation of accountability and transparency against the corruption of the secular-based governing institutions, thereby ensuring enduring grassroots support and donations. Hamas used the charities not only to provide social services but also to propagate its project of Islamizing social institutions. For Hamas, mosques were, and are still, the major sites of popular religious and political mobilization. People's involvement in religious activities at mosques was used widely to build strong networking skills and connections between the people and Hamas organizations.³

The strategy of Islamizing society gained massive popular support for Hamas and encouraged more people, particularly educated women, to get involved in Hamas mobilizing activities. The central role women played in managing community-based organizations affiliated with Hamas and in leading the religious educational circles in the mosques, brought numbers of educated women from the local communities into more public spaces to act as religious mobilizers or preachers.⁴

According to the articles in Hamas's charter, Muslim women's role is no less than men's in the war of liberation against the enemy of Islam (Israel): women bear and raise male

² Meir Litvak, "The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Case of Hamas," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (1998):149–63; see also Sara Roy, "The Transformation of Islamic NGOs in Palestine," *Middle East Report* 214 (2000): 24–26.

³ Jeroen Gunning, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence* (London: Hurst & Co., 2009).

⁴ Islah Jad, "Between Religion and Secularism: Islamist Women of Hamas," in *Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, ed. Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone (New York: Feminist Press, 2005), 36–40.

children, play an important role in guiding and educating the next generation of men, and are equally agents of God..⁵ Consequently, some religious women have moved beyond the guiding role as presented in the charter to undertake leading positions in the public domain and have been able to gain social and political legitimacy without calling specifically for gender equality.

According to Islah Jad's 2005 study, Hamas has shown an increasing tendency to integrate women in the movement and its institutional structure. After the establishment of Hamas in 1987, the Salvation Party—Hamas's political wing—was keen to bring women into the party structure at all levels. As one of thirteen departments in the party, the women's department was represented in the General Conference, which is elected among the party members. The General Conference elects the central Consultative Council—consisting of men and women—which shapes the party's general policy. In 2000, eight out of fifty-two members of the Consultative Council were women.

In addition, as a means by which to add to their constituency, Hamas paid more attention to the idea of women's political participation during the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections and integrated women's issues in their electoral programs. Hamas focused on supporting women's status away from Western social and cultural norms, instead assuring women's legal rights through fair implementation of family laws; mobilizing women around Islamic values and educating them in sharia; emphasizing the role of family; and strengthening relationships among its members as the basis for the persistence of Islamic values and morals. The Hamas electoral program also emphasized that the Palestinian woman is a partner in struggle, resistance, and building society and needs to be protected from all types of social abuses. In the 2006 legislative election, Hamas won the majority of seats (77

⁵ See Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000). I refer in my analysis to one of the Quranic verses cited in article 19 of the Hamas charter: "Lo, men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who obey, . . . has prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward," Sura 33 (Al-Ahzab, the Clans), verse 35.

out of 132 total seats), five of which went to Hamas women's candidates. Hamas women had a good chance of becoming elected officials.

Hamas attitudes toward women's role in society can appear fluctuating and contradictory, and depending on the changing political context. On the one hand, Hamas has been calling for sex segregation and veiling and rhetorically mobilizing for male guardianship over women and women's economic dependence on men; on the other hand, it has been encouraging its female members to work in the public sector and take leadership positions in the movement's institutions (government and nongovernment).⁶ While Hamas leadership positions remain restricted to educated and professional women, a large number of uneducated poor women have been actively engaged in Hamas community-based organizations located in camps and villages. Hamas female members and supporters have become willing to complete their education and to search for employment in the public sector and in nonstereotypically female domains such as media and university lecturing. Similar to Nariman, many educated and professional Hamas women have succeeded in gaining powerful autonomous positions within Hamas institutions and displacing some of the institutional social and gender norms. This has occurred either by challenging the dominant discourse of male religious authority, as appears in Jad's earlier study of Hamas women, or by instrumentalizing the male dominant discourse, as Nariman's example illustrates.

In Jad's study, Hamas women succeeded in shifting their discourse from a focus only on family issues to one that also considers issues related to women's rights. Islamist women activists in Hamas admitted that Hamas had no vision or agenda for women's issues, and they encouraged the reinterpretation of religious texts in order to allow new readings more relevant to modern society. Jad concluded that among Islamist women's activists, there is no

⁶ In the first week of November 2013, Hamas appointed a young woman, Isra Al-Modallal, to be the Hamas government's spokesperson. As stated in an article published by the *Independent*, 20 percent of public servants working for Hamas are women (Simon Osborne, "A Move in the Right Direction? After Years of Restricting Women's Rights Hamas Hires Isra Al-Modallal as Its First Female Spokesperson," *The Independent*, November 12, 2013).

singular model of agency, and there is no possibility for homogenization due to differences in class, education, employment, geographic location, religious, and daily practices. I would add to this list different individual capacities and personal characteristics.

Building on Jad's earlier argument and drawing upon empirical data gathered in 2012, I explore here how the moral agency of women in Gaza has developed, reflecting a longer experience of dynamic interaction between the ideal virtues of Islam, as articulated by religious women in Gaza, and their actual social and political practices. Furthermore, I explore how one religious woman's experiences within an Islamic ethical framework of Gazan context have contributed to developing a more articulated form of agency that is critical and creative and, in some cases, counterhegemonic. The woman I discuss here is not fighting exactly the same battle as were the Hamas women Jad studied, despite similar educational and professional backgrounds.

Narrating the Process of Becoming Religious

Nariman began becoming religious through questioning the meaning of her life and choosing to correct her life by becoming submissive to God and his commands:⁷

Although my mother-in-law was teaching religious lessons and memorizing the Qur'an in mosques and my father-in-law was very religious, I was not religious, and religion was not a substantive part of my life. I lived with parents who did not restrict my movements or deprive me from doing whatever I wanted to do. My parents practiced Islam in a traditional way like most people in Gaza in the period of the 1970s and 1980s. In my first year of marriage, my father-in-law used to encourage me to practice Islam. I listened to him out of love and respect, but I was not in circumstances that provided

⁷ I conducted several interviews with Nariman in January and February 2012. All interviews were held in her office in Gaza and were organized and recorded by my research assistant in Gaza, Andaleeb Udwan. I transcribed and translated the recorded interviews into English.

me with strong reasons to think seriously about religion until my father-in-law (my uncle) died suddenly despite being very strong and very healthy. That was the most shocking moment in my life. I loved him so much and I did not imagine he would pass away. He was the person who made my life meaningful. At that shocking moment, I started to ask about the meaning of the real life we live and the meaning of death. Is that the end of a human being—to be buried in a grave? What we are crying for as we all have the same destiny. We all die. This made me rethink life after death, consider the ultimate reality of our existence, and ponder what should I do in my real life to meet the other life satisfactorily. I woke up the second day with a strong desire to pray to God. I read surah *Al-Fateha* (the Opening Sura in the Qur'an) for the first time in my life in great depth and from my heart. I felt like I was *kafera* (atheist) before I discovered the truth of God. I felt for the first time what standing submissive to God, the creator of all, means. I spent days and days unable to sleep, staying up praying to my God and asking him to forgive me for my previous life. I want to be sure that my spiritual connection to God is real and determined.

Unlike many other Palestinian religious women I know in Gaza (including relatives and friends), however, Nariman's spiritual awakening resulted from an unexpected event not an authoritative process experienced at home or in wider society. Talal Asad has argued that power produces religiously defined knowledge and practices.⁸ Nariman's spiritual awakening (following Peter Berger's social constructionist argument⁹) was also not an attempt to create a social base for her existence—she was neither socially nor economically threatened by her

⁸ Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conception of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *MAN*, 18, no. 2 (1983): 237–59, esp. 237.

⁹ Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

previous life style or by the sudden loss of her uncle. It also does not appear that Nariman's religious awakening reflected an interest in having more power in her life as humanist theorist such as Raymond Firth have argued in other cases.¹⁰ Pursuing a psychological analysis, Nariman's narration does not show that her religious awakening was a reflection of depression, anxiety, or fear of death.¹¹ Her moment of spiritual awakening was linked to questions about the meaning and purpose of her life.

Hamas religious authority and discourse have influenced the context in Gaza, where a large number of women practiced Islam to meet certain socioeconomic and political purposes and interests. Nariman's religious awakening was primarily the result of an intersubjective contingency, which created a subjective emotional response reflective of her critical personality. It was a deep spiritual moment that provoked her to consider the meaning of life. I argue that the amalgamation of emotion and cognition in Nariman's case is what shaped her agency differently from that of many mainstream Hamas women. This unique personal amalgamation enabled Nariman to expand her religious ideation and genuine feelings toward God into an earthly social model of life.

Nariman did not feel satisfied in her religion simply by becoming a pious woman: only veiling, praying, and fasting and ideally practicing her gender within the normative views presented by the religious authority, as was the case of the mosque women Saba Mahmood described in her 2005 *Politics of Piety*.¹² Nariman spent time worshipping God, which solidified the strength of her religious beliefs, yet worshipping by itself did not satisfy her socially constituted innate freedom as a modern subject. She started to question the relationship between divine reality and social and political life: How could she turn her deep

¹⁰ Raymond Firth, *Religion: A Humanist Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹¹ Ya-Hui Wen, "Religiosity and Death Anxiety," *Journal of Human Resource and Adult Learning* 6, no. 2 (2010): 31–37.

¹² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

beliefs in God into action in real life? she wondered. What practical knowledge was behind spiritual submission to God? What were the proper Islamic practices she would need to learn in order to live a meaningful life based on Islamic virtues?¹³ To answer these questions, Nariman explained:

I decided to terminate my work with Al-Aqsa University, and dedicated myself for three years praying to my God, visiting the mosque and memorizing the Qur'an like many other religious women in Gaza. I spent all these years searching for convincing answers to my questions in life based on the Islamic knowledge as it is presented by well-versed Muslim women and men. I did not suffice with what is said. I used to go back home and read books about the interpretation of Islam from different sources: read the writings of Egyptian Islamist theorist Syed Qutb,¹⁴ Egyptian Islamic philosopher Hassan al-Banna, and many other books on Islamic interpretation. I realized after years of listening to preachers and reading about Islam that the real believer has not to stay only in the mosque for worshipping. This would not create a good Muslim. The real believer in Islam has to be integrated into social life to change it based on Islamic beliefs. The real Muslim is the one who is able to reflect on the effects of her practice of Islam on her social actions and relations at home, in the workplace, and in the wider society.

Nariman states that she critically created her own understanding of women's role in Islam by referring to Hassan al-Banna, the Islamist theorist and the founder of the Muslim

¹³ Daniel M. Varisco, *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

¹⁴ Syed Qutb was an Egyptian author and Islamist theorist and was a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s. Qutb advocated overthrowing unjust rulers who pursue Western modernity and replacing them with Islamic rulers committed to Islamic ethics (see Ahmed El-Kadi, "Sayyid Qutb," *Islam 101*, <http://www.islam101.com/history/people/century20/syedQutb.htm>).

Brotherhood in Egypt.¹⁵ However, Hassan al-Banna did not invite Muslim women to play the role that Nariman plays in the public domain. In his 1980 “Message to the Muslim Women,” al-Banna noted that women should work when necessary but not in principle. For al-Banna, women’s noble and significant role in Islam should be childbearing and motherhood; involvement in social and political activism would divert women’s attention from their principal role in the family.¹⁶

As she attempts to prove that her goal of transferring the message of Islam goes beyond sexual differences, Nariman’s religious rhetoric contradicts her actual practice. She believes that Muslim men and women are equally responsible for Islamizing their society. I attribute the gender impartiality of Nariman’s reading and practice of Islam to her specific individual history. That is, she has not herself experienced gender bias or subordination and she was socially nurtured not to be constrained by her gender, which is reflected in the interpretation of her readings. On most occasions, Nariman refers to her path in life as one that any real Muslim—man or a woman—should follow:

My ultimate goal since I chose to become religious has been to make my God satisfied with my practices and with what I achieve in real life following His commands. The mundane life is just a passage for *al-akhira*, so it is the setting for both women and men to practice the proper Islam. I determined my views toward my religion and my religiosity, after I read the works of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. After all my readings, I developed my own vision that women have to play a key role in building a real Muslim society: go out from home to spread the message of Islam and to

¹⁵ See Mariz Tadros’s discussion of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamist discourse based on the religious philosophy of Hassan al Banna, the founder of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, in “The Muslim Brotherhood’s Gender Agenda: Reformed or Reframed?” *Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (2011): 88–98.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

liberate Muslim people from all forms of fears they experienced in real life, and only to fear God. Only with this state of faith in God, will women not be a source of *fitna* (chaos) and will not be humiliated by any human. They rather become an important source for constructive change in their society.

Nariman, unlike her intellectual reference Hassan al-Banna, asserts that a Muslim woman must occupy a good position in public life, not for the sake of competing with men but rather to join them in spreading the divine message of Islam. She decided to go back to work again, but only after she finished her master's in Islamic studies, when she felt equipped with authentic Islamic knowledge and interpretation. She selected how and where to work: as a lecturer's assistant at the Islamic University where she could contribute to spreading the message of Islam. During her work in the Islamic University, Nariman started to read about the Muslim Brotherhood in more detail, focusing on their ideology and politics. When she heard that Hamas adopts the Muslim Brotherhood religious and political approach, she started to look for its members (women and men) and talked with them to confirm that they shared her way of thinking: "I decided to see what is written in the books I read in real life," she said.

Nariman realized early on that involvement in Hamas would not be an easy task. She would have to go through an educational process and commit to Hamas's public mobilization activities:

I spent a year attending every religious and political activity Hamas organized. Whenever I heard about religious lessons in a mosque, even if it was far from where I live, I attended and participated in it. When I felt that I had become intellectually and emotionally attached to Hamas movement, I proposed my interest in becoming a member of Hamas. Their reply was so

encouraging, as well as so friendly and kind. Being a member of Hamas as a political party was a great challenge to continuing my journey as a Muslim woman with double goals: Islamic mobilization for the sake of God and political and social mobilization to help strengthen Hamas's goal of constructing an Islamic state.

Nariman admits that her intellectual and political loyalty to Hamas and her commitment to follow the orders of Hamas leaders was because she considered the organization and its leaders to be the successors of God on earth. Nevertheless, her narration shows that many of her decisions and actions were self-initiated and based on her capacity to communicate and negotiate her moral arguments at her home, in the workplace, and in the wider community. According to Nariman:

When I decided to become a member of Hamas, none of my family members belonged to Hamas. They were all moderately religious. It was I who decided to restructure the family based on my religious and political beliefs. My belief in Hamas, as the holder of God's message in earth, inspired me to transform my family members, and helped them (men and women) to become not only aware of Islam and committed to its commands but also members of Hamas. God bless them, they are all Hamas supporters now, and they (men and women) are actively involved in all Hamas activities.

Nariman ended her discussion about joining Hamas by referring to her subjectivity before she became religious—the one nurtured by her father—and presented it as a strong base for the distinctive shaping of her religious subjectivity: “I know that I am a powerful

woman, the daughter of my father, *Al-Haj Fadel*.¹⁷ I learned in my life that when I want to do something, I just do it. You imagine this power accompanies submission to God and His commands. It becomes perfect.”

In 2008, Nariman was offered a senior job with the Hamas government to head the Women Police in the Gaza Strip. Nariman’s appointment represents the first time under Islamist rules that a woman has held a position whose major responsibilities are enforcement of both civic and sharia laws. According to the Islamic tradition, such a position does not match with women’s biological and psychological nature, which, following al-Banna’s philosophy, lacks firmness. Nevertheless, Nariman notes that she was offered the job for two reasons: her knowledge of Islamic laws and rules and her strong personality and ability to enforce laws and regulations to protect the security of people, especially women.

Although Nariman was offered the job, not everyone in Hamas lauded her appointment, which created tension among the more conservative and reformist male leaders of Hamas. Female leaders of Hamas pressured the government, arguing that having an independent Women’s Police Unit was important to preventing the sexual harassment of women that is often common in a mixed-sex police force controlled by men. Nariman did not hesitate to accept the position, but not because she had concerns with gender equity or equality in Hamas institutions. Rather, she wanted to meet the challenge of transferring the Islamic message to her society’s institutions. In Nariman’s mind, the purpose of the Women’s Police Unit is not to equalize men with women but rather to preserve the dignity of Muslim women based on the Islamic virtues of sex segregation in the workplace and in the field. With regard to her position as the head of the Women’s Police Unit, she excitedly and proudly described her contribution to changing negative societal stereotypes toward policewomen:

¹⁷ Al-Haj Fadel is Nariman’s father. He is a well-known trader with a good reputation among his family and in the wider community.

Comment [HLM1]: Better?

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I accepted this position with an aim to challenge the negative social and cultural image of Muslim police women. I succeeded in managing this institution on a professional basis and achieving recognition from Hamas, from Gazan society, and even from abroad. Many Muslim brothers from Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt came to visit us and they were impressed with our pioneering experience. The common idea that the veil restricts women from being a policewoman is not true. We were trained in the use of weapons while veiled. During the three-month training, we used the more practical Pakistani dress style (long *salwar* shirt with a flowing trouser). In order not to avoid mixing with men, two women first got intensive training by men and then they became responsible for training other women. We also received education on sharia and international laws and their implementation. Although policewomen are only responsible for enforcing those laws that pertain to women's affairs, in some cases, policewomen join policemen for home inspections to ensure that women's privacy is maintained inside their homes. Nevertheless, police women follow the same rules and regulations as policemen.

With regard to how decisions are made in the Women's Police Unit, Nariman said:

All decisions related to the day-to-day operations of the Women's Police Unit are made by me. Supreme decisions are usually made in consultation with the general director of police. We still live in a society where men make most of the decisions, but my position has allowed me to go beyond these cultural norms. When I agree with the general director on a decision, I implement the decision, even if other male officers disagree with it. A large proportion of my

work is done in consultation with men but is based on the moral virtues of Islam.

The Kantian liberal conception of the morally autonomous agent treats the individual as the end of a virtuous moral life, which is shaped by individuals' use of reason and exercise of will and not forced by external metaphysical or human forces,¹⁸ Nariman's moral actions, however, are not necessarily fully initiated on her own away from any external forces. Rather, she has shaped her moral actions within the moral boundaries of the external religious authoritative forces, justifying that those external forces represent the highest good—the word of God. Within the Islamist authoritative process, Nariman talked confidently about how she set up a separate managerial system for the Women's Police Unit, as well as her capacity to communicate and negotiate work problems and decisions with men in power, including general directors and ministers.

Nariman's ambitious desire to apply her Islamic virtues to her social life has moved beyond her activism in the Hamas movement and commitment to her job responsibilities as the head of the Women's Police Unit. She expanded her activism to the humanitarian field separate from the direct authority of Hamas, stating that this would increase her rewards from God. She established and heads the board of trustees of a community-based organization in Rafah that provides child care and vocational training for women in order to become economically independent. She asserts that this organization is independent from Hamas, serving people regardless of their political and religious affiliation. Nariman asserts that she searched for funding to operate the charity organization from different sources and to ensure a secure job for around thirty-five female employees. Religious virtues provide Nariman with

¹⁸ Elizabeth M. Bucar, "Dianomy: Understanding Religious Women's Moral Agency as Creative Conformity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 3 (2010): 662–86, esp. 667.

the wider framework on which she can weave deep connections between the politics of her religion and her social and personal life.¹⁹

Nariman concluded her discussions with me by talking about her marriage and family life. She married during her first year of university at eighteen. She was reluctant to marry, assuming that doing so would restrain her personal freedom and mobility. Before she became religious, Nariman believed Western modernity was a good model for liberating women. She considered the social and cultural constraints imposed on women, including the veil, as meaningless. Nariman described herself as rebellious, demanding, and ambitious, which are atypical characteristics of Palestinian women living in a patriarchal society. Some might argue that perhaps Nariman's parents had cultivated some more traditionally masculine traits in their eldest daughter to compensate for their inability to have a son. However, Nariman conveyed that her parents love and respect each other and regard their daughters as equally as valuable as if they had been sons. Nariman asserts that she lived in a female-empowering family atmosphere, which I argue contributed considerably to the formation of her unique contradictory and critical model of moral agency.

According to Nariman, her husband has not been introduced to any liberal thoughts toward women and he follows the mainstream combined modern-traditional sociocultural norms that have historically characterized Palestinian society under the Israeli occupation.²⁰ His understanding of gender is obviously influenced by his relationship with his wife, whom he loves very much. He was influenced by her choice to turn to religion and has since been committed to the practice of Islam. Nariman's husband is a businessman, and their family does not rely on Nariman's economic contribution. According to al-Banna's Islamic

¹⁹ Janice Boddy, "Who is the Human in Humanitarianism?" (paper presented at the Conference on Faith, Religion, and Humanitarianism, Cairo, Egypt, May 23–25, 2008).

²⁰ Frances Hasso, "The Women's Front: Nationalism, Feminism and Modernity in Palestine," *Gender and Society* 12, no. 4 (1998): 441–65.

interpretation, the work Nariman does is not economically necessary; ideally, she should stay home to support her husband and children. Nevertheless, Nariman asserts that her husband strongly supports her professional work and her involvement in social and political activism, which takes her outside the home and away from her family for long hours. Her husband financially supports her work and activism by paying for their children's education, which is supposed to be the mother's role in the Islamic tradition. He also performs some traditionally female domestic responsibilities. According to Nariman,

My husband does not interfere with how I manage between my work and my home's responsibilities. Instead, he has helped me because he supports my divine message in life. I am so lucky to have a husband that makes things so easy for me. He meets all the needs of the house, including shopping for my children and myself. He is a responsible husband and father, and our relation is not marred by any defects.

She adds:

You can't imagine how my religiosity affects our marriage relations. Before I became religious, things were always tense between my husband and me. I was a spoiled girl before and after marriage. I couldn't obey my husband's orders like other women in Gaza. In the early years of marriage, I was very demanding and arrogant. After I became religious, my personality fundamentally changed; I got rid of my arrogant behavior and became calm and tolerant with my husband. He responded by becoming more loving and supportive. I go to Egypt several times a year to work on my PhD and I leave my children under his responsibility. He never complains about what I am doing and he is happy to see me successful.

This is an example of conjugal relations influenced by Nariman's religiosity that complies with neither the patriarchal cultural norms in Gaza nor the traditional Islamic rhetoric adopted by Hamas.

The Moral Agency of Women in Gaza: A Unique Example

Nariman's model of agency does not fit neatly with the three main theories of feminist moral agency: liberal, which considers individual autonomy as the determinant of women's agency²¹; nonliberal, which views women's self-realization and autonomy as an outcome of their subordination by patriarchal culture and religion and does not confine it to resistance against patriarchy²²; or poststructural, which views gender as contextually and historically constructed, as well as resisted and de-essentializing women's agency as a universal singular model.²³ Nariman's agency can be seen as a combination of all three. Casting herself as an equal agent of God, her nontraditional gender performance is not framed to gain political power or to reconstruct societal gender norms. Rather, she instrumentalizes the gender discourse of the religious authority to meet her strategic goals in life, to consolidate her ideology—to transfer the commands of God on earth. As she explains, "I am happy to follow any orders from Hamas politicians, being a minister or sitting at home, as long as what I do is serving my goal of raising the banner of Islam. If I ever feel that Hamas leaders deviate from the practice of true Islam, I will leave, even if I am a minister."

Nariman's model of religious agency confirms gender theorist Judith Butler's view that "using non-normative gender practice for the purpose of mobilizing normative gender

²¹ Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Susan Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

²² Marie R. Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of Columbia Press, 1997).

²³ See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Henrietta Moore, *The Subject of Anthropology: Gender, Symbolism and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

norms is a dynamic used by agents to legitimize the authority of a certain ideology.”²⁴ Thus the gender of Nariman, according to Butler, “is not exactly what (she) ‘is.’ It is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of performative that gender assumes.”²⁵ Although Nariman’s performance of her moral agency does not operate within the poststructural framing of resistance adopted by Butler for the “deidealization and divestiture” of discursive gender norms,²⁶ it successfully contributes to resignifying gender norms from the social and cultural domain to the divine domain, which is considered by nonliberals as a source of empowerment for women.²⁷

Nariman resignifies and redefines her gender in relation to God but not in relation to men, emphasizing that God is the super power that both women and men have to submit to equally. At the same time, she insists, in her religious rhetoric, that she is committed to the Islamist interpretation of women’s role in Muslim society. For example, she supports principles of men’s *qawamah* (men’s leadership and guardianship), even though it is not practiced in her personal and professional life. She supports men’s right to polygamy, while she believes that this will never happen in her own marriage. And she advocates for sex segregation despite her continuous connection and interaction with men in her workplace and in the public.

Despite the autonomous and voluntary efforts Nariman has undertaken through her social, political, and religious activism, she emphasizes her obedience to the orders of Hamas leaders as long as she believes that those leaders are the representatives of God’s word on earth. Her specific conception of obedience does not distract from the autonomy and the

²⁴ Ibid., 42.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 48.

²⁷ Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); and Amy Hollywood, “Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography,” *Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004): 514–28.

freedom of agency that is only authorized by its submission to God and His commands. Obedience to God and the exercising of one's free will do not appear contradictory in Nariman's assertion of agency, as long as her obedience to God is a "consciously willed action."²⁸ Nariman's disregard of her obedience to men can be socially perceived, according to Butler, as a mechanism that provides her particular nonnormative gender practices with "a grid of legibility" and recognizability, but also creates the possibility and potential to deconstruct gender norms in social life through the agent's capacity of resignification of bodily performance.²⁹

The contradictory aspect of Nariman's agency, or according to Butler, her failure to approximate the ideal gender within the discursive Islamic tradition, is a reflection of Nariman's capacity to question herself and to shape her own understanding of the ideal, whether based on Islamic or non-Islamic ideology. This capacity is not only a by-product of the temporality of her choice to become religious and its resulting bodily performance but also substantially influenced by her previous gendered subjectivity as a nonreligious woman, which was "not governed quite as much."³⁰ Her critical and rebellious personality and her refusal to be fully controlled by others are the authentic features of her subjectivity. Her willingness and desire to be an ideal Muslim woman does not uproot these personal characteristics, which she has constituted over the course of her life. She rather dynamically invests in them to act differently. She acts with multiple subjectivities created and developed in different contexts with different discourses, through which she has habituated her gender by using contradictory modalities of actions. Her genuine personality is evoked to create a critical model of religious subjectivity that transcends the mainstream gender Islamist structure and discourse for which she herself advocates. Nariman's opposition to dominant

²⁸ Phyllis Mack, "Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism," *Signs* 29, no. 1 (2003): 149–78, quotation on 152.

²⁹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 42.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?," in *The Political*, ed. D. Ingram (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 193.

social gender norm occurs within normative Islamic ideology, which allows her to liberate herself from the control of the norm.³¹ This is illustrated by Nariman's continuous persistence that she acts as an agent of God and does not fear anyone (humans) except God.

Same Discursive Tradition but Different Habituation of Moral Agency

Despite the same discursive tradition that frames the moral agency of both Nariman and the mosque women in Saba Mahmood's *Piety of Politics*, the dynamic exercise of agency in each operates differently. Unlike mosque women, Nariman's ideal practice of religiosity does not operate in harmony with "the socially prescribed forms of behaviors."³² Nariman insists in her narration that she wants to be unique in her practice of religiosity. She rejects being compared with uneducated women who orient their religiosity to signify masculine representation of society or harmonize their bodily gender performance with the discursive tradition. Nariman reflects on her education and upbringing, which have both allowed her to shape her own understanding and practice of religiosity. She challenges the Kantian theory of the irrationality of religious beliefs by emphasizing that God's commands are the "highest good" that has the quality to make a better life for her and for all moral agents. Her belief in Islam as the "highest good" inspired her to learn more about the religion and to strategize her social and political acts as a real Muslim woman responsible for transforming the society to be governed by the word of God but not by the religious authority and its traditional discourse, unless the latter actually represents the word of God.

The model of agency I pursue in this essay is not merely a result of the abstracted divine ideation and truth and the habituation of normative Islamic virtues for the sake of personal happiness and purity as it is shown in Mahmood's model of pious agency. It is also a

³¹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 49.

³² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 149.

political model of agency shaped by the agent's capacity to negotiate the ideal with the real not only to achieve self-realization but also, and perhaps more important, to reflect the newly constituted subject centered on religious virtues into a recognizable and valuable social and political position in her wider society. Unlike Mahmood's model, Nariman's religiosity is not just subjective, aiming to harmonize her conduct with her innate desire to be submissive to God. It is also political, through which she contributes to shaping and reshaping the politics of her religion in the wider society. Although she does not claim that she seeks social and political recognition and value based on the liberatory feminist approach, she achieves a political outcome as a result of the dynamic connection between her ideal Islamic virtues and real social and political life.

Nevertheless, Nariman's model of agency appears consonant with Mahmood's model of moral agency at the early phase of the self-making process. During that period, Nariman was mainly concerned to habituate her religiosity to be determined about her willing and desired subject as a pious woman. Yet her agency had not taken a singular form, nor did it remain constant and harmonic as in its early phase. Her experience goes beyond the harmonic subjective model and has shifted gradually from being purely spiritual and moral—concerned about the consistency between the ideal and the bodily practice—to becoming socially and politically connected to everyday life. Through this shift, her gender performance has gradually been deidealized in relation to socially prescribed forms of behavior. The process of shifting, which includes continuous encounter with her social world, fosters a contradiction between the Islamic ideal and its actual practice, not because, as stated by Mahmood, she failed to adequately form her pious self. On the contrary, Nariman's pride in the fact that her practice of piety is unique and sometimes inconsistent with mainstream religious practices is demonstrated in her argument that there is no perfection in women's practice of Islam unless it's reflected in their day-to-day life.

Another critique of Mahmood's model of pious agency regards the dichotomous relationship between virtuous performance and will, emotions and desire—one necessarily produces the other. Mahmood challenges the liberal notion of agency by emphasizing that women's virtuous performance is not "manifestation of their individual will but more as actions that produce the will in its particularity."³³ In Nariman's case, her virtuous performance has taken multiple and contradictory forms throughout the process of learning and practicing her Islamic virtues. According to her life story, it is primarily her desire, emotions, and will that constitute her choice of becoming religious; reshape her cognition and rationalization of religion; and motivate her capacity to reshape her particular bodily performance—not to suffice with worshipping but to be widely connected with social life. At the same time, her experience of shifting from a spiritual to a social and political agent contributes to create different forms of desire, as well as capacities that are reflected in continuous changes in her bodily performance—dislocating gender segregation in the work place and traveling on her own. In Nariman's case, the interconnection of her desire, personal characteristics, cognition, and reiterated performances shape her specific multiple and contradictory model of agency.

Moreover, for Mahmood, religious women operate "neither to invoke a self-constituting autonomous subject nor subjectivity as a private space of cultivation," but to realize a certain kind of state of happiness, purity, wisdom, and perfection in harmony with a particular discursive tradition.³⁴ The subject of this essay has rather pragmatically demonstrated her religious agency by breaking down stereotypical stasis based on the embodied patriarchal culture and gender norms that meet her wider political goal of Islamizing the society. She invoked her autonomy and inner freedom to cultivate space in politics and remains certain that this space brings her God's rewards. Although Nariman's autonomy operates within

³³ Ibid, 162.

³⁴ Ibid, 210.

sociopolitical and cultural norms and discourses governed by Islamic ideology, she shows high individual capacity to critique these norms without distracting the dominant Islamic ideology.

The subject of this essay is consistent with Elizabeth Bucar's innovative model of moral agency and Judith Butler's conceptualization of the gendered subject that arises through normative social norms but also creates possibilities and potential for deconstruction and subversion. Bucar combines liberal and nonliberal models of agency to conceptualize women's agency using the concept of *dianomy*, which for Bucar means the "dual law" that includes both autonomy (self-law controlled by individual agent) and heteronomy (external law exemplified in religious authority) as sources of the moral agency.³⁵ According to Bucar and as revealed in Nariman's narration, moral agency is shaped not only by the discursive habituation of tradition but also by a woman's individual capacity to shape her own understanding of religion and to habituate it inconsistently with the discursive tradition. Nariman embraced her Islamic virtues in a critical way that enables her to question the limit of the existing traditional gender norms in order to meet her goal to Islamize society.³⁶ She wanted to be a unique model of the ideal Muslim women. Her model of agency is, however, shaped within the discursive dominant Islamist discourse. Its performance is contingent and yet not completely compliant with the gender categories of the given discourse.

Arguably, all women—religious and nonreligious—are social beings, dynamically interacting with social environments, responding to multiple discourses, and reflecting on diverse individual histories. This interaction and reflection generate possibilities for creative acts of agency, including within discourses that are drawn from the subordination of women

³⁵ Bucar, "Dianomy," 678.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2007), 41–82

pursuing male dominant religious interpretations.³⁷ Unlike Butler's thought of agency, creative and critical moral agency does not always serve resistance against tradition but it can also operate to confirm it, which Bucar terms "creative conformity."³⁸

Nariman's moral agency is not just spiritualist, focusing on worshipping God. Rather, it confirms her connections with her individual and collective history and with the dynamic social environment in which she lives. Her willing subject becomes a by-product of the dynamic interconnection between divine beliefs and real social life. If we assume that change in women's agency is not merely contextually specific but also self-reflective, self-creative, and based on each individual's capacities and experiences, then it makes no sense to consider change based on singular models, including moral ones. It is not possible to perceive women's agency as purely a moral or purely a rational subjectivity, as uniquely ideal or uniquely real just because the morals and the ideal—religious or nonreligious—are also not fixed.

Yet Nariman's multifaceted and contradictory form of agency has not been formed in a vacuum. It has been influenced by several objective and subjective factors: the motivating sociopolitical and institutional context under the control of Hamas, where religious agency is exercised relatively freely and its autonomous voluntary actions centered on religion are legitimized; the multiple discourses a woman experiences in her lifetime and how she negotiates them in her day-to-day practice; the diverse individual history and personality of the agent; and the individual capacity and skills attained through the negotiation of religious knowledge and beliefs with material, professional, and social life.

³⁷ McNay, *Gender and Agency*, 186; and "Hollywood, Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography."

³⁸ Bucar, "Dianomy," 680–82.

My analysis also shows that the relationship between religious subjects and religious institutions of power and between religious rhetoric and actual practice is more dynamic and critical where there is a possibility for individual religious women to build on their social and political engagement to resignify the dominant religious meanings and practices. The moral agency of women involves a reflection on how to operate the relationship between moral motivations and everyday life, and how much the practice of Islamic virtues and their ideological and political goals contribute to changing social relations of power.

Nariman's unique model of agency illustrates one of many diverse models of religious women's agency, which result from the differences in women's individual histories and capacities to connect the ideal with the social and political. Feminist scholars should therefore consider the diversity in the dynamic relationship between the ideal and social and how women differently engage with religion in their social and political lives in order to uncover the ambiguity of moral agency.