Islamism and the Fashioning of Muslim Selves
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Over the past three decades, the rise of Islamist movements and responses to it, have turned on the projects of society and the visions of the polity these movements have advocated. In scholarly analyses and media writings, explanations for this rise have tended to focus on the ideologies of Islamist groups, on the socio-economic backgrounds of actors and on the contexts of their emergence. More recently, research has turned its attention to the wider processes of re-Islamisation entailing social practices and disciplines that constitute individuals as Muslim selves active in the public sphere. These selves do not necessarily endorse the Islamist project of the Islamic state, nor do they necessarily advocate militant or violent action to actualise a program of reforming the self and the social body of which they are members. However, the engagement of individual and collective projects of self-transformation in matters of ethics and morality has a bearing on the public sphere and on public space. As such, these projects engage others who may have varying, competing and conflicting projects. In the context of secular and western societies, they disrupt and destabilise modes of thinking and ways of being long thought to be the subject of consensus and closure.

My purpose in this presentation is to reflect on the varying constructions of Muslim subjects in the public sphere, in particular, on how different projects of self are guided by varying understandings of religion and personal faith. In undertaking these reflections, I will engage with current debates on the nature of the public sphere and the boundaries between the public and the private. In this respect, I want to address the implications of adopting a critical questioning on the neutrality of the public sphere in terms of the subjectivities inhabiting it and in terms of the signs and symbols that populate it. In questioning this presumed neutrality, I examine the historical situatedness of the visibility or invisibility of Islamic markers in the public sphere. Following from that, I underscore the ongoing dialogue in which Muslim public selves are engaged. Finally, I turn to an examination of the dynamics of power and contestation underpinning projects of self-presentation in the public sphere.

Islamism, re-Islamisation and the Construction of Muslim Selves

The various projects of self that are pursued by contemporary Muslims are tied up with Islamist politics and the ongoing processes of re-Islamisation. Before I proceed further, I will briefly define what I mean by Islamist politics and re-Islamisation. I use Islamist politics to refer to activities of organisations and movements that mobilise and agitate in the political sphere while deploying signs and symbols from Islamic

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traditions. I use re-Islamisation to designate the processes whereby various domains of social life are invested with signs and symbols associated with Islamic cultural traditions (Ismail 2003, 2). I have argued elsewhere that Islamist politics and re-Islamisation are not mutually exclusive (Ismail 2003). Rather, they have points of both convergence and divergence. I also think that both forms of activism fall under the wider rubric of Islamism.

At the ideological level, there is a wide range of articulations constituting the discursive field of Islamism. These articulations are neither coherent nor homogeneous. For example, they do not all necessarily buttress the idea of an Islamic state. Further, the field does not have fixed boundaries but rather overlaps with popular articulations of religion and differing productions of Muslim identities. Popular preachers, shaykhs associated with official Islam, religious figures of moderate Islam, lay religious intellectuals, Islamist activists, and ordinary Muslims all engage in the production of Muslim and Islamist identities. They are all party to the process of re-Islamisation. We do not have a straightforward equation for organising the manner in which this discursive field shapes Islamist movements. While it is safe to argue that re-Islamisation does not equate with Islamist politics, it is simplistic to see in re-Islamisation a negation of Islamism. There are stakes in the competing interpretative frames. Simply put, diverse actors, from secularists to militant Islamists, aim to claim ownership of “true Islam”. At this stage, we do not have a comprehensive view of the various discourses and their interaction (Ismail 2004a, 398-99).

For the purposes of this discussion, I want to focus on the individual level of engagement in the production of Muslim and Islamist identities, paying particular attention to projects of self and the kind of politics that they represent. Some projects of self make clearly-stated political claims, while others renounce and reject an explicit political stance. While I accept this distinction, inasmuch as the agents themselves make it, I argue that there may be different kinds of politics at stake and therefore projects of self are almost always, in some sense, political.

To illustrate, let us look at the examples of two Muslim women activists and their constructions of Islam and of their Muslim identity. I begin with a well-known activist, writer, and professor of political science at Cairo University, Heba Raouf. Raouf’s political vision is captured in her approach to the *shari’a* as a political ideology and her view that religion has an emancipatory role to play in society (see exchange between Raouf and Emran Qureishi on the website *Qantara*). This premise appears to guide Raouf’s approach to social, cultural and religious practices of self-presentation in the public space. In her discourse, Raouf is critical of what she calls *al-muhajaba al-mutaharira* (the liberal veiled woman). Under this rubric, Raouf has in mind a *muhajaba* who wears a pure silk veil and speaks to her children in English (Haenni & Füger 1996, 121). The critique here cannot be said to issue from any religious strictures in Islamic traditions. Rather, it is an improvisation necessary for the evaluation of proper adherence to a political project that, in the terms enunciated, has nationalist and cultural overtones, expressing the desire to draw distinctions from “the Other” through styles of dress, language, etc.

I pose, in contrast to Raouf, Mrs. H., an activist who volunteers for an Islamic charitable association in Cairo. Mrs. H. holds a doctorate in the sciences and is
engaged in fundraising for poverty relief, sponsorship of orphans, religious preaching and Quranic teaching. In discussing her activism, Mrs. H. rejected any reading of her engagement in political terms (interview with author, Cairo, April 2004). She explained that her activities in the charitable organisation expressed a personal desire to please God, *li-wajh allah* (literally for God’s face). She denied that she was guided by a sense of social responsibility or that she was motivated by a desire to assume an “alternative moral citizenship” (as one analyst has suggested). To prove the strictly religious nature of her engagement, Mrs. H. invoked her apprenticeship in the ritual of washing the body of a deceased person. She explained that she learnt the ritual because it was recommended by the Prophet and because its rewards in the afterlife were high. In her view, she was undertaking practices that would make her a better believer. Is Mrs. H.’s piety private? I venture to answer in the negative. No, her piety is publicly practised and asserted. Though she denies having any political project, her ethic of self or project of Muslim self is socially imbricated. What are the political implications of this?

Mrs. H.’s rendering of her engagement in terms of religious self-formation has parallels with the terms used by Cairene women in mosque piety circles studied by Saba Mahmood (2003). Mosque circles are concerned with teaching scriptures, social practices and forms of conduct that are “considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self” (Mahmood 2003, 840). The statements of these women allow me to draw out some of the political implications of ethical self-formation I am concerned with. As noted by Mahmood (Ibid, 842), in the construction and presentation of the ethical, virtuous self, the subject makes a distinction between practices that are conducive to the realisation of the pious self and practices that are not. One of Mahmood’s informants goes further to identify practices that are Islamic in form and style, but not in substance. There are a number of observations to be made here. First, the distinctions drawn with respect to Islamic practice are internal to the discourse. They articulate claims to knowledge and truth and, in this sense, are not neutral. The evaluations and judgements made in these distinctions implicate others as bad practitioners or non-practitioners. Such judgements can carry weight beyond the statements made.

Second, the discourse expresses a link between a project of self and a project of society that we find in many of the piety movements. In her work on Moroccan women’s pietist groups, Christiansen (2003) crystallises the link. Further, Rasmussen (2004) analysing a novel by an Islamist woman writer, underlines that the narrative of self-transformation presented in the novel links this self-project to the integrity of society. In other words, reforming of self is tied up with reforming the social body. From this perspective, we are dealing with political projects. The political here has many dimensions. We cannot isolate the moral selves from the political selves. This is one of my central arguments. The project of re-Islamisation should not be constructed as apolitical because of its social and cultural orientation (as argued by Olivier Roy (1999) for instance). Further, re-Islamisation and Islamist politics converge and diverge and there is no benefit to be gained from seeing them as contradictory forces.

The range of normative and political issues that arise in relation to religious practices shaping the self and its public presentation covers issues such as freedom and autonomy. In her work with mosque-circle women, Mahmood poses the following question: Are these women cultivating a certain Muslim self through practices that are
socially prescribed, free and autonomous? (Mahmood 2003). The political implications that I am concerned with are somewhat different. They turn on the kind of citizen positions these selves occupy in relation to others and how others position themselves vis-à-vis these Muslim selves. The normative concerns that guide this question have to do with values of toleration, respect for difference, and so on — values that are conventionally viewed as essential to democratic civility. The subject cultivated through practices - whether religious or profane - is an active subject, a member of a community or communities. Her project of self has a bearing on her co-citizens. I am, of course, speaking about public selves whose ethical formation has a bearing on the public sphere and public space.

Now, I want to interject with my own ‘secular’ reflections on the matter. It would seem that the Muslim and Islamist projects of self are the ones that get closer scrutiny by a supposed neutral public subject, who, because of this presumed neutrality, feels comfortable or at ease in not just critiquing them, but in disqualifying them. Notwithstanding the multitude of justifications such illiberal positions deploy, I would argue that these positions are informed by the perceived distance that separates these projects of self from what is considered as “our own” already-validated projects. This may be done in the name of defending women’s rights, individualism, democracy, ‘our values’, ‘the things we stand for’, etc. Underlying all of this is a claim to universalism and superiority in normative terms, a claim to having a better vision of society and the position of the individual in it. I want to turn now to a critical discussion on the notion of neutrality in the public sphere focusing on how the secular public sphere operates by marginalizing forms of Islamic self-presentation in public.

Muslim Selves in the Public Sphere

Drawing on Nilüfer Göle, I want to underline the idea that self-presentation takes place in context, in particular places with histories. Göle suggests that by scrutinizing how Islamic practices are “… problematized in the public sphere, we become aware of the unspoken, implicit borders and the stigmatizing, exclusionary power structure of the secular public sphere” (Göle 2002, 178). I use the term “public sphere” to mean not only the space or domain of debate and deliberation (the classical Habermasian understanding) but, also, in the sense of a field of the construction of public subjects through techniques of marking, differentiation and identity-category formation. Critiques of Habermas’ conception of the public sphere argue that the construction of modern, rational subjectivities rests on the gendered distinctions of the public and private (Benhabib 1992, Fraser 1992). In the formation of the liberal public sphere, the rational subject was presumed to be male, white and middle class (Warner 1992). This was the taken-for-granted, the self-evident that needed no justification. Yet, subjects of the liberal public sphere were also presumed to be non-marked, equal and universal (Ibid.). In this sphere, impartial reason stands above and against differentiated moral subjects. However, this normativity is accomplished precisely by exclusion, stigmatisation and repulsion of subjectivities falling outside its confines (the female, poor, non-white, religious subjectivities).

Drawing on Michael Warner (1992), Alev Çinar points out that the public sphere is constructed not only through debate and deliberation, but also through visual displays and performances of subjectivities (Çinar 2005, 40). In this respect, the production of
identity and difference is an ongoing process that entails power and resistance and, as such, it is not fixed and does not achieve closure. The manner in which signs and symbols of identity markers are produced and circulated express power and contestation. Naming, marking and identifying are means through which subject positions of privilege and under-privilege are demarcated. For example, an item of clothing, a style of speech or a territorial association could enter into the identification of a subject in particular terms— as Islamist or secular, as progressive, conservative or liberal, as belonging to a particular class and so on (see Çinar 2005, 41-2). An examination of the processes of identity formation in the public sphere helps inform us of the inclusionary and exclusionary practices at work. It is important to pay attention to the fact that the dynamics of identity and difference in the secular public sphere play out in terms of neutral unmarked subjectivities and identities: the taken-for-granted public subject (perhaps male, middle class, educated, secular) and those who stand out because they bear signs of difference from the neutral, public subject (female, poor, uneducated, religious, for instance).

If we consider the development of the secular public sphere in Turkey, Iran and Egypt we find that the banishment of certain signs and markers, like the veil, was enacted as a form of a secularising and modernising rite of passage. As Göle argues, women became a ‘sign/site’ in the construction and projection of the public sphere (Göle 2002, 184). In the same vein, forced unveiling in Iran, as pointed out by Minoo Moallem, constituted ‘a corporeal inscription of modern citizenship’ (Moallem 2005, 69). Following a similar logic, the taking off of the veil by Huda Sha’rawi (Egypt’s pioneer leader of the women’s movement in the early-twentieth century) upon her return from Europe, was one of those performative acts marking the passage or entry of Egypt into the space and time of modernity. Later in the twentieth century, forced veiling in Iran punctuated another moment of state intervention in the perpetuation of particular forms of femininity (Moallem 2005, 70). In contrast, in Turkey and Egypt, the propagation of veiling and the various modalities of its adoption serve to remap old and new subjectivities in the public sphere.

Imbued with the meanings invested through secular practices, the veil appeared as the sign of backwardness, a regression in the civilizing process with its associated styles of dress. The social imaginary that articulates these views and projects them into the public gaze, then, necessitates banishment and exclusion. Such was the case with the Turkish Parliamentarian who, in 1999, was run out of Parliament before she could give her oath of allegiance because she wore a veil on the day of her swearing-in ceremony (Göle 2002). Through a particular historical construction, the unveiled woman was an affirmation of the modern self. The invisibility of signs of Islamicity, or their absence, was the evidence of modernizing society, indeed, of civilizing. To this day, many secular Egyptians point to videotapes of Um Kulthum concerts in the 1960s as the proof that Egypt was progressing: “Not a single veiled woman in the audience, rather all were elegantly dressed in fashionable evening wear following the latest western trends”.

In a poignant reflection on her journey to America in the 1960s (in the film Four Women of Egypt by filmmaker Tahani Rached), Safinaz Kazem, a contemporary Islamic writer and literary critic, and a former Marxist, notes how she engaged in outbidding her western interlocutors regarding the modernity of Egypt in matters of personal ethics and morality. To win Egypt the credentials of a modern nation, she
asserted to her interlocutors, that Egyptian women wore short skirts and were just as liberal, if not more, as their American counterparts on matters of gender-mixing. This public self was thought of as the ticket to modernity.

We do not need to go over what has unfolded between the drive to emulate and the drive to authenticate in Safinaz Kazem’s personal journey or in the wider public transformation of Muslim women and men in which the adoption of certain practices and not others and the rendering of personal and collective ethics became grounded in Islamic idioms. My interest here is to think out the issues with which we are confronted in and by Islamic self-presentation in public.

It has been argued that Islamism, through visible, embodied practices, reintroduces the corporeal investment of the public sphere (Göle 2002). This development is thought to fundamentally alter the nature of the western public sphere since it had been dematerialised and decorporealised. I am not sure if this ever happened, but the fact is that today in the western public sphere, we can point to secular or non-religious practices of self-fashioning that involve corporeal modelling and design such as tattooing and body piercing. These practices represent an individualising aesthetic of self-presentation in public aimed to mark difference and perhaps elicit recognition of sorts. They may also make for uncomfortable encounters in certain spaces. For example, “old fashioned” university professors who find themselves disoriented in the face of male students sporting blond-pink Mohawk hair style, multiple facial piercing, and wearing camouflage army fatigues to class. We can all identify instances of difference that disrupts conventional images and unsettle pre-conceived ideas.

**Islamism and Muslim Selves in Dialogue**

The construction of Muslim selves is dialogic, that is, it is undertaken in dialogue with others. Mrs. H. constructed a true Muslim self as engaged *li wajh allah* in contradistinction from a politically motivated construction or a politicized Islamic self as represented in Raouf’s construction. With a degree of individualization, we have a proliferation of the ways and signs of imagining the Muslim self in public—proliferating, in a sense, the selves in dialogue. Today, we find a wide range of representations in cultural products such as film, novel, fashion, and music. Iranian cinema has contributed greatly to the ongoing dialogue.

Films such as *Sarah, The Colours of Paradise, The Circle* and *The Day I Became a Woman*, interrogate what it means to be Muslim in particular contexts. In these films, we see the Muslim in self-reflection on faith, and on the image of self. In *The Day I Became a Woman* (directed by Marzieh Meshkini), one of the three interconnected short films and the one bearing the title of the triptych, we see a reflection on the social and cultural disciplines constitutive of gendered subject formation. Upon turning nine, Hava, a child, is ushered into the space of the feminine. She is informed that she can no longer play outside with the boys, she will have to wear a veil, and her movements will be marked, timed and monitored. Hava resists the transformative-performative acts assigned to her, revealing desires that motivate a different subjectivity than the one prescribed by the socially and religiously sanctioned code of femininity. The desire to escape this code is pursued in the second film when the young Ahoo, a married woman, defies all her kin to join a cycling competition.
Through these characters and the narrative of non-compliance with mores of gendered subjectivities, a critical reading of subject formation is put on display (Moallem 2005, 137).

If we look at the variety of Islamically inflected music production, from hip hop in the US, to green pop in Turkey, to Islamic bands in Egypt, we discern the care of the self involved in this production. In explaining to me his decision to join an Islamic band in Cairo, Sayyid, a young university graduate residing in a Cairo popular neighbourhood, outlined a personal mode of cultivating a pious self, motivated by the desire to do good-- a desire that guides his choices and actions. In taking this decision, he was influenced by a friend to attend mosque lessons, participate in prayers, and join the band (Ismail 2006). The band’s Islamic character is invested through the exclusion of electronic instruments, by beginning performances with Quranic recitations and religious chants, and by forbidding belly dancing. These performative acts in the realm of cultural production are embedded in other sites: the youth male fraternities, the public space and public sphere the youth are engaged in reshaping, etc. I will return below to the matter of the disciplines of self that are pursued by the pious youth and how they embody power relations in the context of everyday life in Cairo’s popular neighbourhoods. The Cairene youth’s engagement in self-fashioning through music has parallels with green pop in Turkey (see Saktanbar 2002).

Islamic practices are subject to “the gaze” from within the community and not just from without. In other words, what the practices signify is subject to a critical evaluative, normative and normalizing look – an examination and scrutiny of one another. Judgements of the practices’ accordance with the rules governing practice are issued from all directions. So, the Muslim Mohajaba blog features columns and chats on veiling as a personal choice, while strict Muslim cultural commentators are critical of “rocking the veil” (reference being to African-American female rap singers who combine hijab with exposed midriff). Hisham Aidi (2003) observes that “Many Sunni Muslims have also criticized the style of some female Muslim hip-hoppers of wearing a headscarf (hijab), and then a midriff top and the low-riding jeans”. He adds that this style of dress has provoked heated cyber-debates about Muslim women’s modesty, personal freedoms, and the future of Islam in America. Aidi quotes hip-hop journalist Adisa Banjoko saying: "Our deen (religion, in Arabic) is not meant to be rocked! … I see these so-called Muslim sistas wearing a hijab and then a bustier, or a hijab with their belly button sticking out. You don't put on a hijab and try to rock it!” (in Aidi 2003). In Cairo, young men judge the veil to have been transformed into a cover for non-Islamic practices such as gender mixing and smoking water pipes. No doubt, there is reflexivity in all of this, but there is much else going on as well: claims to power and the desire to regulate in the face of efforts to liberate, challenge, or change. Actors who want to homogenise, face off against others seeking self-expression of their faith and identity.

The desire to regulate images and practices and to attain coherence is expressed in the reaction to Arab video clips featuring veiled women. One such clip elicited much reaction: it featured a young male singer – a rising star - walking along the Nile Corniche in Cairo with a veiled woman. The insertion of an attractive veiled young woman into this scene was viewed as inappropriate by some. Yet this scene is one of the most common occurrences in Cairo. The Nile Corniche is mostly frequented by young couples, and the majority of the women in these couples are veiled. Yet the
publicity of the image unsettled some. Newspaper articles commented and critiqued the image. Meanwhile, al-Jazeera online posed a question to its readers on the suitability of featuring a *muhajaba* in a video clip.

This public dialogue about Islamic practices is plural and layered. On al-Jazeera satellite channel, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi responds to questions not only raised by devout Muslims seeking further enlightenment, but also thrown up by challenges to Islamic “orthodoxy”. As such, he was called upon to formulate a position on the permissibility of women leading the Friday prayer, an issue thrown into the open when Professor Amina Wadud did just that and in response some Muslims issued a condemnation. In his Friday commentary that follows the prayer at al-Zahra’ mosque in Damascus, Dr. Muhammad Habash, a self-declared member of the enlightened trend in Islamic thought, answers questions posed by worshipers, improvising and thinking of his audience as he formulates replies. On his personal website, the Egyptian preacher-cum-social reformer, Amr Khaled is asked about spousal relations and must strive to find an Islamic frame for his answers. In this public sphere, Muslims seek advice to resolve moral dilemmas, or to gain a better understanding of the meaning of an event or happening. In some ways, their requests do not differ fundamentally from those of American viewers of day-time TV who seek advice from ‘pop psychologist’ and ‘life-style-manager’ Dr. Phil, and the host of other specialists appearing on talk shows. Like Dr. Phil, Amr Khaled is expected to have answers to issues arising in relation to self-fashioning. His pedagogical techniques are similar to those found in the self-help books and manuals in such wide circulation in North America and elsewhere.

**Ethic of Self: Power and Resistance**

The self-practices that are aimed at self-improvement and that are part of individual programmes of piety cannot be isolated from the wider context in which they are inserted. Further, as pointed out above, these practices are aimed not only at self-reform but also at societal change. Inquiring into the connection between self-practices and social reform, Christiansen finds that among Moroccan women’s piety groups a link between self-improvement and social transformation is postulated (2003, 153). Christiansen notes that the relation between bodily conduct and society is highly theorised in these women’s discourses. Indeed, she notes that the body is conceived of as a means or instrument of social reform (Ibid., 155).

Studies of specific forms of feminine religious embodiment, such as the adoption of the veil, note that such practices discipline the self while also opening up spaces for resistance. Studies of veiling point out that wearing the veil is associated with modification in general conduct (thought of as reform). In principle, adopting the veil associates with modesty, regulated gender mixing and so on. Critical views of the wearing of the veil identify it as a practice that subjugates women because it defines them in limiting normative terms—as a sexualised presence, as sources of *fitna* (in this context used to mean seduction) to be controlled (we may say not different from the images of women found in fashion magazines though the ideals are different). However, in the process of subjection, the subject is formed. As Judith Butler (1997) argues, subjection is instrumental to subject formation. Practices of subjection are also practices of empowerment: going to the mosque and adhering to community norms permit the formation of a public self. Women becoming learned in the sciences of
interpretation and hadith-s acquire the tools to argue different readings and to make claims for differently situated subjectivities. In doing so, they break the male monopoly over religious authority. However, for some women activists, empowerment is not the goal, but a means of achieving closeness to God and of becoming better persons (Hafez 2003).

Subject-forming processes are power laden. In fashioning a self there is subjection and empowerment. We are only able to see the power relations underpinning subject formation and subjectivities, if we situate them in their socio-historical context and take account of the complex interplay of what is at stake for individuals in subject formation. We should recall Foucault’s (2003) argument that practices of power may overlap, reinforce or annul one another. What obtains at any given moment is a constellation or configuration of practices in interaction with one another. I want to zoom in on one of these constellations of practices.

In my work with youth in a popular quarter of Cairo, I found competing and conflicting programmes of self-fashioning that invoked patriarchal relations, class positions and relations to the state. Pious young men participated in religious fraternities of sorts (Ismail 2006). They joined groups like al-tabligh wa al da’awa and al-sunna al-muhammadiya or study circles and musical bands. Through this engagement, they cultivated an ethic of Muslim self. They learnt about matters of religion and informed themselves of religious rulings, recommended conduct etc. They sought self-discipline through extended prayers (tahajud), reading religious pamphlets, listening to sermons on audio-cassettes and some of them ventured into the classics. Further, they projected this Muslim self into their daily activities and chores. An important modification in practice and conduct was that of abstaining from ‘idly chatting to women’ and from shaking hands with them. This introduces a change into the existing norms of civility in the everyday life of alleyways in popular neighbourhoods of Cairo where gender mixing within the norms of propriety was accepted. The devout youth’s self discipline entails avoiding the gaze. Further, they take on the role of preachers to their mothers, sisters and female neighbours counselling the veil and admonishing immodest dress.

To read these young men’s practices in the area of gender relations, public morality and the management of sexuality in reference to a programme of piety that works on the inner self would be too limiting. To integrate the idea of social reform will broaden our view. Yet we must also bring into view other dynamics. I interpret the practices as implicated in male efforts at recovering positions of authority lost as a result of changing socio-economic and cultural conditions. Women as workers in the public space undermine constructs of the masculine self as provider. Women’s own self-fashioning through education and work entail greater self-assertion. To complicate the picture a bit further, young men occupy antagonistic positions in relation to state agents (Ismail 2006). In this conflictual and potentially confrontational situation, women have stepped in as mediators with state authority. Male piety and civility is imbricated in this socio-political setting and cannot be understood outside it.

My point is that religiosity and piety are informed by one’s social and political positioning. Religiosity and piety do not equate with militancy, nor do they inevitably lead to activism. This does not make the forms they take less political or apolitical.

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Rather we are dealing with a different kind of politics. In some sense, the pious male youth deploy disciplinary practices that reproduce the terms of dominant masculinity, monitoring and surveillance of women, construction of women as potential transgressors against the moral code, and so on. Women challenge these constructions by taking on employment outside the home, becoming visible in public space and articulating a different view of their roles in family and society.

The selves that are formed and shaped through personal and collective programmes of piety are deeply embedded in social relations. Class, gender, age and lifestyle are factors that influence the processes of formation of Muslim selves (Ismail 2004 b). Projects of self bear the weight of history. Muslims as self-fashioning agents do not stand outside history. They are not moved by something abstract called Islam, often projected as a puppeteer working behind the scenes moving Muslims to act in one way or another. Yes, Muslims reflect on their faith and on their lives in light of their understanding of their faith. They seek to use principles derived from Islamic traditions to guide them. But they are touched by competing frames of reference and registers. Their ethical formation is shaped by their historical location. The agency they aim to recover is historically bounded.

I want to end by invoking a fictional Muslim and his program of self-fashioning. In Zadie Smith’s novel White Teeth, Millat Iqbal, a British born Muslim, a resident of Willesden-Northwest London, a rebellious youth, a bit of a chauvinist, and a fan of Hollywood movies, elects to join an Islamist group KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal Victorious Islamic Nation) partly because “[i]t's got a wicked kung-fu kick-arsee sound to it” (Smith 2000, 295). His choice is influenced by a long-standing desire to fashion himself in a manner of a gang member. His desire is also motivated by a quest for respect and recognition of a historical self, a Muslim Bengali British entangled in the history of British imperialism and minority society.

Concluding Remarks

Contemporary Muslims’ engagement in projects of self and in the production of Muslim identities must be understood in relation to the social and political factors shaping the positions they occupy in various settings. Muslims, as social actors, occupy different positions in their social settings and in relation to local and global processes of change. Their projects of self and the subjectivities they project into the public sphere are informed by their historical location at any given place and time. It follows that they do not engage, in a uniform manner, in the construction of Muslim selves. Nor do they produce a monolithic Muslim identity. By situating Muslims’ engagement in projects of self in relation to local material conditions and in relation to global processes, we can discern the power relations which underpin subject formation and public self-presentation. We also need to pay attention to the ongoing public dialogues that the visual displays and performances of Muslim and Islamist subjectivities bring to the public sphere. Around and within these displays and performances lie constellations of power practices in interaction.
References


