



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Muslim women in the western media: Foucault, agency, governmentality and ethics

Vintges, K.

**DOI**

[10.1177/1350506812443476](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812443476)

**Publication date**

2012

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

European Journal of Women's Studies

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Vintges, K. (2012). Muslim women in the western media: Foucault, agency, governmentality and ethics. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 19(3), 283-298.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812443476>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*

# Muslim women in the western media: Foucault, agency, governmentality and ethics

European Journal of Women's Studies

19(3) 283–298

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1350506812443476

ejw.sagepub.com

**Karen Vintges**

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

**Abstract**

This article compares the ways in which Saba Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety* (2005) and Cressida Heyes' *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalization* (2007), unlike current governmentality studies, employ the later Foucault's ethical theory. By explaining the theoretical framework of the 'middle' Foucault (governmentality and agency) and the 'later' Foucault (ethics and agency) and then comparing Mahmood and Heyes' use of Foucault's work, it is argued that Mahmood and Heyes' analyses, though thought-provoking and incisive, overlook aspects of Foucault's later work, ultimately preventing them from offering productive 'feminist strategies'. The author seeks to link this discussion to contemporary debates and analyses of agency, freedom and Muslim women in the media. The article concludes with an assessment of how Foucauldian feminist perspectives might be drawn on to establish effective 'cross-cultural feminist strategies', and closes by presenting a case of a cross-cultural media strategy aimed at countering the stereotypical images of Muslim women in the media.

**Keywords**

Agency, beauty culture, cross-cultural feminism, feminist (media) strategies, Foucauldian ethics, freedom practices, governmentality, Cressida Heyes, Saba Mahmood, media, Muslim women

It is increasingly acknowledged that the media play an important, if not decisive, role in current politics, so that we can even speak of the media's 'restyling of politics' (cf. Corner and Pels, 2003). As our television age sees an intermingling of politics and show business, we see politicians become pop stars, through a mediation which transforms them into 'celebrities'. Correlatively, film, TV and pop stars, are increasingly portrayed

**Corresponding author:**

Karen Vintges, University of Amsterdam, Department of Philosophy, Oude Turfmarkt 141–147, NL 1012 GC Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Email: k.v.q.vintges@uva.nl

as, or behave like, politicians, and have political impact (cf. Corner and Pels, 2003: 86). Authors, too, seem to be progressively *mediated celebrities* with political influence, as is clearly the case with some ex-Muslim female writers who left behind their Islamic country and religion, and who are hyped in the media (Vintges, 2005).<sup>1</sup> Testifying from their own experiences, these high-profile writers present Muslim women as victims of religious and cultural oppression and posit western secularism as the only road to women's emancipation. As such, the dominant media presentations and self-presentations of these invariably beautiful women contribute to the current framing in the western world of Islam as being inherently misogynist, installing an antagonism between 'unattractive and oppressed, since veiled' Muslim women, on the one hand, and western women as attractive, free agents, on the other. Saba Mahmood in her 2008 article 'Feminism, democracy, and empire' argues that the autobiographical genre of these ex-Muslim women is 'significant not only for its extensive reliance on the most exhausted and pernicious Orientalist tropes through which Islam has been represented in Western history but also for its unabashed promotion of the right-wing conservative agenda now sweeping Europe and America, particularly in regard to Islam' (Mahmood, 2008: 83).

Mahmood, however, seems to dismiss any mediated feminist critique on 'Islamic edicts and practices [which] uphold gender inequality' (Mahmood, 2008: 95). She for example repeatedly criticizes Irshad Manji, who in press and on television presents herself as a feminist *and* believing Muslim, in one breath with these ex-Muslim women writers. Manji in particular is targeted by Mahmood for her endorsement of 'Empire', i.e. America's project of establishing its geopolitical hegemony in the non-western world (Mahmood, 2008: 89). Manji's book *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in her Faith* (2002) is described by Mahmood as 'breathtaking in its amplification of neoconservative policies and arguments – all told in the voice of a purportedly self-critical and reformist Muslim woman who wants to bring her lost brethren to the correct path' (Mahmood, 2008: 89). In this article I evaluate Mahmood's overall critical stance towards mediated feminist critiques on behalf of Muslim women. I do not go at length into the stereotypical images of Muslim women in the western media as such (for this see, for instance, the works of Myra Macdonald and Amina Yaqin). Instead the issue serves as a port of entry into a complex set of theoretical questions about feminism and religion, women and beauty, women's agency and feminist strategies, the answer to which I hope to contribute.

To better understand Mahmood's overall critical stance towards feminism, we have to take a close look at her earlier study, *The Politics of Piety* (2005). Drawing from interviews with women from the Egyptian women's mosque movement, Mahmood's study concludes that these Islamist women are active agents, practising through 'self-techniques' an 'ethical formation' that engages their entire way of life. Western feminism, with its key assumptions of freedom and autonomy, should stop wanting to rescue Islamist women like these, as they strive for completely different values. Mahmood's account applies the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault, especially his later work on ethics. However, as I argue in this article, she works selectively, obliterating the later Foucault's normative clues, from which feminism as such and mediated feminist critiques on behalf of Muslim women come forward in a totally different light.

To discuss another ingredient of this complex set of issues, namely women and beauty, I delve into another study, namely Cressida Heyes' *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalization* (2007). In this study Heyes demonstrates how western women are 'disciplined' and 'normalized' to undertake the never-ending task of reaching perfection as sexual bodies. Self-techniques of dieting and cosmetic surgery are examples in case. Heyes, like Mahmood, applies the theoretical framework of Foucault's later, ethical work. Contrary to Mahmood, however, Heyes proposes certain feminist strategies on the basis of Foucault's later work. To critically examine and assess both studies, bottom-up, so to speak, I first analyse the theoretical framework of the later Foucault, focusing on his concepts of governmentality, agency and ethics, especially in relation to his concept of self-techniques. I then delve into the two aforementioned studies and argue that they use Foucault's later work selectively, to the effect that an adequate perspective is missing for feminism. In the last section I discuss the possibility of 'cross-cultural feminist strategies'. In returning to the issue of Muslim women in the media, I close by proposing a cross-cultural feminist media strategy through a case study.

## Governmentality and agency

Throughout his work Foucault tracks the ways in which power, knowledge and subjectivity are interrelated in western history. Who are we? What types of subjects have we become? How have we become who we are? Foucault approaches these questions by tracing practices of power – often in relation to knowledge practices – that have constructed our subjectivities through the ages.

In his middle work, especially in *Surveiller et punir [Discipline and Punish]* (1975) and *La Volonté de savoir [The Will to Knowledge]* (1976), he conceives of power as a strategic force that permeates the whole of social life. From this perspective he focuses on power and knowledge techniques of 'discipline' and 'normalization' that survey and mould people's bodies and behaviour, which on an individual as well as on a collective – biopolitical – level conform to the standards of Normality as set by the human sciences. Foucault labels these fine-tuned techniques as a 'microphysics' of power, and situates them outside the state, in all kinds of institutions, e.g. penal, medical, welfare, educational.

But what about the macrophysics of power, many critics asked Foucault. What about state power? Foucault answered this question in his 1978 lecture on 'Governmentality' (Foucault, 2007a). He argues that the question of 'how to govern' becomes increasingly central from the 16th century onwards in many fields, varying from self-government, the government of souls and lives, of children, of a household, a convent, a family, to the government of the state. At stake in all cases is the correct way of managing individuals, goods and wealth, i.e. a general form of management. Later, starting in the 18th century, a process of 'governmentalization of the state' took place. Through the development of knowledge practices such as statistics and political economy, and the installing of institutions and practices of police, a management of the population became possible. Next to the 'microphysical' disciplining of the population – and to juridical forms of sovereignty – we thus find the state managing the population (Foucault, 2007a: 108).

In later lectures Foucault discusses liberalism and neoliberalism as two governmental regimes (Foucault, 2008). Liberalism comes down to a dual programme of limiting the state on the one hand, and governing through multiple institutions and procedures oriented to 'the management of freedom' on the other (Foucault, 2008: 63). Liberalism needs free buyers and sellers; it needs freedom of the market, of property rights, of discussion and 'possible freedom of expression and so on' (p. 63). Therefore it must produce and organize freedom. 'Liberalism is not acceptance of freedom; it proposes to manufacture it constantly, to arouse it and produce it' (p. 65). Neoliberalism as well comes down to the governmental production and management of freedom. Its characteristic feature, however, is the production of the homo oeconomicus as 'entrepreneur of himself' (p. 226), as the basic element of the new governmental reason. Nowadays not only do we have to be individuals, but we have also to be autonomous, enterprising individuals, deciding for ourselves what we want from life and how to get it.

All these concepts of Foucault, and especially that of 'the entrepreneurial self' have been of major inspiration to what is now known as the governmentality school, with prominent social theorists like Nikolas Rose, Peter Miller and Jeremy Walters in the UK, Mitchell Dean in Australia and Thomas Lemke in Germany. Interestingly, these authors focus on how neoliberalism governs 'at a distance' (Miller and Rose, 2008: 16), namely insofar as it is 'governing through freedom', through the installing of capacities for self-control in 'autonomous individuals' (Dean, 2002: 131; Lemke, 2001: 201; Rose, 1999).

To track the specific ways in which 'free choice' is managed, many of these studies employ the concept of 'self-techniques' that Foucault developed from 1980 onwards, in relation to governmentality. Introducing the concept of self-techniques for the first time in a 1980 lecture entitled 'Subjectivity and truth', Foucault argues that in all societies we find 'techniques which permit individuals to perform, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in such a way that they transform themselves, modify themselves, and reach a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on' (Foucault, 2007b: 154). He further contends that governing people is all about 'a subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies' (2007b: 155).

In another article written in 1980, 'The subject and power' (Foucault, 1982), Foucault argues along similar lines that power is always 'a way of acting upon an acting subject' (1982: 220). Freedom is at stake here, but not in the sense of 'an essential freedom': 'it would be better to speak of an "agonism" – of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle' (p. 222). However, when he moves in the same article to explain 'the modern state and the political management of society' (p. 210) in terms of a 'government of individualization' (p. 212) he argues that this at the same time entails a totalizing form of power: 'Never, I think, in the history of human societies – even in the old Chinese society – has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques, and of totalization procedures' (p. 213).

What should we make of Foucault's 1980 (re)formulations concerning the governing of people? Some have argued that these two articles on self-techniques imply 'a major shift in Foucault's whole orientation' (Tully, 2008: 1), amounting to a new approach of power as always dynamic power relations (cf. Senellart, 2007: 387–388). However, as

is most clear from the article ‘The subject and power’, coercion and freedom in 1980 are still two sides of the same coin, interrelated in a way which Kevin Thompson to my mind adequately captures: ‘[In the governmental model] power relations necessarily presuppose that all parties involved in such relations have the ability, even in the most extreme cases, to choose amongst a range of structural options. This sort of minimal freedom is, in turn, only possible in a field defined precisely by the structuring work of governance’ (Thompson, 2003: 122). In Foucault’s original introduction of the concept self-techniques in 1980, agency, embedded in agonistic struggle, is at stake in the form of a ‘minimal freedom’.

It is this limited type of agency that is analysed in current governmentality studies, which explore the way neoliberalism ‘conducts the conduct’ of people in an indirect way, namely through *proposing or imposing* self-techniques to or upon them, such that they can act as self-entrepreneurs, as managers and designers of their own lives who choose their behaviour, lifestyle and opinions. Miller and Rose (2008) use the concept ‘self-techniques’ to analyse mechanisms of coercion and domination.<sup>2</sup> Their approach, to my knowledge, exemplifies the one prevailing in current empirical governmentality studies, that self-techniques are overdetermined all along by governing practices, which mould the population according to narrow biopolitical standards and to the subject form of the entrepreneurial self.

Markus Stauff in a similar vein discusses how television lifestyle programmes such as talk shows belong to modern society’s normalizing governmental techniques, aiming for an arousal of individuals’ self-management (Stauff, 2010). In what follows I argue that Foucault’s concept of self-techniques allows for a yet more dynamic approach to social practices that construct our subjectivities – e.g. the mass media, especially television lifestyle programmes – insofar as their production and reception can be overdetermined by ethical ‘freedom practices’ instead of techniques of domination.

## Ethics and agency

From 1980 till 1984 Foucault develops a new perspective on self-techniques, complicating the study of governmentalities in a way which is as yet under-theorized (cf. Gros, 2005: 512). Between 1980 and 1984,<sup>3</sup> he namely focuses on a specific type of ethical self-techniques, to be found especially in western antiquity. In Greek and Roman antiquity we find a type of ethics which mainly consists of vocabularies which offer self-techniques aimed at attaining ethical self-improvement. Through asceticism, applying self-techniques such as writing exercises (the keeping of notebooks/*hypomnemata*), meditation, dialogue with oneself and others, one tries to create an ‘ethos’ so as to be a good politician, a good citizen, friend, leader of the *oikos* [house]. Ethics is at stake here, in the sense of a good relationship with our fellow humans, with ‘as little domination as possible’ (Foucault, 1997c: 298).

But most important for Foucault is the relatively autonomous status of these ancient ethical self-techniques, with moral codes or rules only functioning in the background. As such an ethical self-invention, or self-creation, is at stake, indicated by Foucault as a ‘care of the self’, an ‘aesthetics of existence’ or ‘practices of freedom’: a freedom to create oneself was offered through vocabularies that provided the tools and techniques to

acquire an ethos. Foucault seems to be suggesting that we are dealing with a type of ethics that could count as a modern attitude *avant la lettre*, since it comes down to making freedom the foundation of one's existence.<sup>4</sup>

Foucault contends that the ethos is not totally invented by individuals themselves, but concerns models that are proposed, suggested, imposed by one's culture, society and social group (cf. Foucault, 1997c: 291). In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005), Foucault refers in this respect to several philosophical schools and – notably – to some religious groups in antiquity, such as 'the Therapeutae' (2005: 91, 114, 116).<sup>5</sup> Through models, tools and techniques developed and shared in these collective settings, one could freely create a personal ethos, visible in one's actions and way of life and as such involving not only one's thought but one's mind, body, heart and soul as well.<sup>6</sup>

To further complicate matters, Foucault argues in several places that practices of ethical self-formation are to be found throughout history and in all cultures (cf. Foucault, 1997b: 277). Every moral system implies 'the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rappor à soi*, which I call ethics, and which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions' (1997b: 263).

The ethical relationship to oneself has four major aspects, which we can coin as the answers to the questions what, why, how and to what purpose. *What* is the material that should be worked over in the ethical self-practices, i.e. 'the ethical substance'? *Why* should this work on the self be done, on behalf of which instance, i.e. what is 'the mode of subjection'? *How* should this work be done, i.e. what are the 'techniques of the self'? And, finally, *to what purpose* should it be done, i.e. what is the 'telos'? (cf. Foucault, 1997b: 263). Where Foucault conceived of self-techniques up until 1980 in the context of (neo)liberal governmental regimes, he thus now argues that ethical self-techniques are present in every moral system.

Besides launching this heuristic framework for the study of ethics in general, Foucault, however, always returns to the specific free relationship to the self that he finds in Greek ethics.<sup>7</sup>

Ethical self-formation in most moral systems is dictated and determined by the moral system and its moral rules (Foucault, 1990: 25–32). As with agency through self-techniques in the context of a neoliberal governmental regime, here we deal only with forms of minimal freedom. Foucault's preference, however, lies with the relatively autonomous type of Greek ethical self-formation that he coins as a freedom practice. When asked whether the care of the self in the classical sense should be updated, Foucault answers: 'Absolutely', adding that in modern times this will, of course, lead to something new (Foucault, 1997c: 294–295). Whereas in antiquity the care of the self was linked 'to a purely virile society with slaves, in which the women were underdogs' – 'all that is quite disgusting!' – Foucault asks: 'couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?' (Foucault, 1997b: 257, 258, 261).

The 'growth of capabilities' of modern humankind should be disentangled from the dominant power regime (cf. Foucault, 1997d: 317). Our impoverished self-techniques, which are overdetermined by surveillance and scrutinizing disciplines and governing practices, should be transformed – most effectively in collective settings – into ethical self-practices that are relatively autonomous in regard to the statist and broader governmental strategic programming of our activities.

But how, then, should we proceed? Repeatedly, Foucault argues that we are never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. No pure exit is available, as if there would be a pure space from which we can create freedom practices. How then can the present governmental self-techniques be transformed into freedom practices, which, as such, involve a transformation of our basic societal institutions as well (cf. Thompson, 2003: 131; Vintges, 2004: 293)? Foucault's answer to this question is to be found in his discussion of the critical attitude, which he articulates as a critique of domination through a critical examination of the current goals and features of present self-techniques (cf. Thompson, 2003: 131), and a testing of limits through step-by-step changes. Freedom practices are about a collective and individual 'work on the limits' of one's culture, inventing new subjectivities and self-techniques by critically reworking the present ones.

As we noticed, in articulating antiquity's freedom practices, Foucault not only refers to philosophical schools but to religious groups as well, such as 'the Therapeutae'. In several other instances he refers to the presence of freedom practices in Christianity and Islam, and in Asian religions.<sup>8</sup> Foucault's normative perspective – that freedom practices should be preferred above techniques of domination – can be said to be a *cross-cultural* one, comprising a model of the self which, as we have seen, integrates body, mind, heart and soul and, as such, differs from the one of western liberalism, which is grafted to a Cartesian dualism of body and mind and a separation of public from private life.

We can conclude that Foucault's concept of agency varies from 1978 to 1984 between a subject's minimal freedom in governmental or other authoritarian power relations and a type of agency which can count as freedom practices, where it concerns relatively autonomous practices of ethical self-formation. Agency in his work is never understood in terms of an intentional subject, origin of action and meaning, but always in terms of practices of power which constitute subjectivities, through repeated practices and techniques.<sup>9</sup> But in the case of freedom practices these are transformative instead of affirmative vis-a-vis the codes and rules of the prevailing moral system.

Foucault's normative, strategic perspective holds that the minimal freedom of the governmentalized or otherwise overruled agent should be transformed into freedom practices, not by rejecting present techniques of the self but by changing their goals and features, placing them in service of the aims of a relatively autonomous ethical self-formation, i.e. an ethical care of the self. Whereas most governmentality studies take on board Foucault's concept of agency in the sense of a minimal freedom of the governed, his concept of ethical freedom practices is thoroughly under-theorized. Foucault's argument that self-techniques can comprise freedom practices is neglected in analytical and normative respects. As Colin Gordon remarked in 2008, the full implications for current governmentality studies of the final Foucault's ethics are not yet understood (Donzelot and Gordon, 2008: 53).

## **A Foucauldian 'goes to Weight Watchers'**

In light of our discussion of Foucault's concepts of agency we can now more easily 'crack the code' of the two studies focused on in this article: *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (2007) by Canadian feminist philosopher Cressida Heyes, and *The Politics of Piety* (2005) by Saba Mahmood. Contrary to most

governmentality studies these two remarkable books explicitly take on board the final Foucault's ethics, albeit in different ways.

Like most governmentality scholars, Cressida Heyes uses Foucault's concept of self-techniques to analyse current oppressive (gender) regimes. However, she also discusses how his ethics provides a clue for an exit. Heyes' main argument is that, especially for women, 'the language of autonomy, individuality, and pursuing one's own authentic ends (values taken to be at the core of freedom in the West) is implicated . . . with intensely regulative forms of disciplinary power' (Heyes, 2007: 120). Self-techniques of dieting and undergoing cosmetic surgery function in this context, i.e. they are overdetermined by normalizing and disciplinary power.

In a superb chapter on dieting, entitled 'Foucault goes to Weight Watchers', Heyes analyses the tricky ways in which current weight-loss dieting has taken over and exploits what used to be ethical self-practices (Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure* [Foucault, 1990], which analyses the realm of relatively autonomous ethical self-formation in antiquity, contains a chapter about dieting as one of the self-techniques in this context). The Weight Watchers programme is an extreme example of what Foucault coined as surveilling, 'watching', disciplining power. The internalization and self-control of the 'micro-management of food and weight' go together with the cultivation of docility, to the point where the author concludes: 'I have never been in an another adult milieu where discipline was applied to such tiny behaviors, and deviance greeted with such serious and inflexible responses from the staff' (p. 74).

Throughout her book, Heyes, in reference to other feminist authors such as Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo, emphasizes the debilitating, normalizing aspects of dieting. 'Normalization makes us "self-absorbed." It fosters insecurity, self-doubt, anxiety, and *ressentiment*' (p. 116). 'There is, in reality, no perfection, only failure to achieve it' (p. 121). However, through her approach to dieting in terms of self-techniques and self-practices, Heyes can, at the same time, conceive of its enabling functions as well. She recalls 'the paradox Foucault highlighted so well', i.e. that normalizing disciplinary practices 'are also enabling of new skills and capacities that may exceed the framing of the original activity' (p. 67). However overdetermined by disciplinary technology, dieting can offer a sense of empowerment and satisfaction (p. 78). The self-techniques used in this dieting programme, such as the keeping of notebooks (compare the *hypomnemata* Foucault mentioned), 'have a resonance and potential that could exceed the regime of normalization that generated them' (p. 79). Usually the enabling aspects of the Weight Watchers dieting process enhance normative femininity (p. 83). But Heyes, drawing from Foucault's ethics, especially his concepts of care of the self and ethos, explicitly mentions the possibility of uncoupling dieting's enabling aspects from docility and of recruiting those new capacities to a care of the self (cf. p. 87), 'without ever dieting again', in the context of a 'diet-resisting not-for-profit feminist organization' (p. 88). Heyes thus seems to imply that dieting is inherently oppressive.

In a chapter on cosmetic surgery, Heyes, referring in passing to the work of Bordo, Debra Gimlin, Sheila Jeffreys, Meredith Jones and Kathryn Morgan, extensively discusses Kathy Davis's work on the subject (Davis, 1995). From Davis's interviews with women who have had cosmetic surgery, it turns out that, for them it was not a beauty practice but rather a project of identity transformation so as to alleviate unbearable

psychological suffering. Rather than being beautiful, the women's motive was to be 'ordinary', 'just like everyone else'. But wanting to be ordinary is precisely what normalization is all about, Heyes counters. Davis' women view themselves as agents who take control over their bodies and lives. But 'the tropes of self-determination and control . . . are endemic to disciplinary power, not outside it' (Heyes, 2007: 95).

Davis' conclusion that cosmetic surgery is practised by these women in the context of an identity project can be interpreted in line with Foucault's concept of ethical freedom practices, comprising self-techniques aimed at acquiring a personal ethos, i.e. a way of living according to certain values. Alleviating suffering, or being more able to cope with ageism and other discriminatory practices, or stylization to conform to an artistic or creative trajectory, can all be part of such an ethical project. As with dieting, Heyes' study rejects the possibility that cosmetic surgery can be practised by women in the context of an ethical care of the self.

In a concluding chapter entitled 'Somaesthetics for the normalized body', she discusses Foucault's concept of ethics for its exit-potential, i.e. for its offering an alternative to the practices of cosmetic surgery and dieting. In line with Foucault's viewpoint, she argues that it is necessary for feminists not only to offer critique, but to develop constructive ethical practices as well. 'We need to substitute a new solution for the psychic needs that cosmetic surgery both generates and claims to meet' (p. 110). Heyes suggests yoga, and other practices 'with potential for integrating the body-mind' such as 'martial arts', 'the Feldenkrais method', or 'the Alexander technique' (p. 128). She especially considers yoga a pleasurable counterattack against 'the mental anguish and dis-ease caused by corporeal normalization' (p. 121) that could move us into freedom (cf. p. 129).

However, the introduction of a framework from an Eastern background as a total exit and pure space from which we could develop feminist freedom practices seems rather at odds with her own Foucauldian approach. Instead Heyes could have more aptly concluded that the meaning of dieting and elements of cosmetic surgery can be changed by altering their goals and features. Why can't these practices be used as tools in the service of one's own ethos, aiming at living up to certain values (imagine the case of dieting in antiquity as a relatively autonomous ethical self-technique) instead of as a normalized bodily creature?

We can conclude that where Heyes' work, unlike current governmentality studies, integrates Foucault's ethics in a normative way, it overlooks its analytical potential. Her approach of women's agency in the context of practices of dieting and cosmetic surgery merely comprises the minimal freedom that is at stake in current governmentality studies. Second, Heyes also overlooks the strategic normative implications of Foucault's ethics, which entail that what one should aspire for is a transformation of the goals and features of current self-techniques, not pure counter-culture. In the end, Heyes denies that dieting and cosmetic surgery can be overdetermined by practices other than normalizing ones, such as freedom practices.

## Islamist women's ethical self-formation

Like Heyes, Saba Mahmood, in *The Politics of Piety* (2005), takes on board the final Foucault's ethics, albeit with different purposes and results. As we have observed,

Foucault's normative perspective of freedom practices for all can be coined as a cross-cultural one, encompassing an alternative model of the self compared to the (neo)liberal one.

Mahmood in her study implicitly and partially builds on this normative perspective of the final Foucault. Drawing from his ethics, she analyses the lives of the Islamist women she interviewed in terms of practices of 'ethical formation' that engage their entire way of life. As such their lives pose a challenge to 'secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral (if critical) part' (Mahmood, 2005: 1). Western feminism, in its wish to impose the liberal model of the free, autonomous self on a global level, has not recognized that individual autonomy and self-realization are two different things, and that western liberalism's linking of both is too limited a view on what human flourishing can be (p. 11). The women of the Egyptian women's mosque movement do not wish to be free from structures of male domination. Nonetheless, they are active agents, applying corporeal techniques and spiritual exercises in a project of ethical formation (cf. p. 29).

Mahmood considers Foucault's approach to ethics 'particularly helpful for conceptualizing agency' (p. 29) since it allows us to conceive of multiple forms of agency. In reference to the works of Janice Boddy, Kevin Dwyer and Lila Abu-Lughod, Mahmood argues that their approaches to – especially Arab and Muslim – women as active agents have been extremely useful as a corrective to the dominant conceptualization of them as passive victims of oppression. However, Mahmood contends, these studies remain grounded in a binary framework of either consolidating or resisting norms. Instead, norms are 'performed, inhabited and experienced in a variety of ways' (p. 22). The four aspects of the ethical relationship to the self that Foucault distinguished (formulated by us as the answers to the questions: what, why, how and to what purpose) allow us to conceive of many forms of moral agency, each depending on the grammar of concepts which cover the four aspects of the ethical self-relation. It is from this perspective that Mahmood concludes, in a discussion of Judith Butler's concept of agency, that the notion of agency should be uncoupled from the progressive goal of emancipatory politics, which is based on the binary logic of either consolidation or subversion of norms, (cf. pp. 20–22).

Discussing the four aspects of moral agency of the women of the Egyptian women's mosque movement she concludes that the movements of the body comprise the ethical substance of their ethical self-practices. The divine plan for human life – embodied in the Qur'an – is their mode of subjection. The means are 'ritual practices, styles of comporting oneself, dress and so on'. And the telos is to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self of the Prophet and his Companions (cf. pp. 30–31).

Mahmood explicitly values Foucault's approach to ethics as being something to be exercised and practised through self-techniques (cf. pp. 27–34, 120–122). She especially appreciates his ethical approach for its emphasis on 'the *work* bodily practices perform in crafting a subject' (p. 122). Using this approach, Mahmood throughout her book analyses how piety in Islam must become an embodied habit by simultaneous exercise of the body, the emotions and reason, through the practising of self-techniques. At stake is not a transforming of consciousness as such, but a training of sensitivities, affects and sentiments.

As one of her respondents phrases it:<sup>10</sup> ‘I used to think that even though shyness was required of us by God, if I acted shyly it would be hypocritical because I didn’t actually feel it inside of me. Then one day, in reading verse 25 [in “The Story”] I realized that shyness was among the good deeds, and given my natural lack of shyness I had to make or create it first. I realized that making it in yourself is not hypocrisy, and that eventually your inside learns to have shyness too’ (p. 156).

Acting and practising are ethically crucial. Reading Mahmood we see that this also applies to the wearing of the veil. Another respondent of hers comments: ‘It’s just like the veil. In the beginning when you wear it, you’re embarrassed, 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, 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 about it’ (p. 157).

Throughout her study, Mahmood emphasizes that the women she interviewed practise ethical self-formation, within a collective setting, and through bodily practices in such a way that body, mind, heart and soul are all involved. She contrasts this situated and integrated notion of the self with western liberalism’s model of the freely choosing, autonomous self. Thus, she partly capitalizes on Foucault’s normative perspective, i.e. the cross-cultural model of the self that he puts forward as an alternative to the entrepreneurial, normalized self of western (neo)liberalism. However, Mahmood works selectively. She completely obliterates Foucault’s concept ‘freedom practices’ and his clear preference for this relatively autonomous type of ethical self-formation.

It makes all the difference for Foucault that ‘[i]n antiquity, this work on the self with its attendant austerity is not imposed on the individual by means of civil law or religious obligation, but is a choice about existence made by the individual’ (Foucault, 1982: 244). Ancient ethics in Foucault’s view did not impose metaphysical truths on people that should be obeyed through self-practices, but to a large degree consisted of vocabularies that offered the tools and techniques to freely create a personal ethos, in collective settings such as philosophical or religious schools. Foucault proposed this type of ethics as a way out of power regimes, which impose themselves upon people in the name of Truth. However, Mahmood obliterates Foucault’s distinction in his final work between an ethical self-formation which is overdetermined by moral rules on the one hand and ethical freedom practices on the other, a distinction that gives a new impetus to the progressive goal of emancipatory politics, something Mahmood overlooks in her work.

The way she makes use of Foucault’s heuristic framework regarding the analysis of multiple forms of ethical self-formation – and as such of moral agency – is innovative. Her study is convincing in that it brings a moral agency to the fore of Islamist women which was as yet under-theorized.

Mahmood shows how the Islamist women she interviewed practise ethical self-formation that conforms with the patriarchal limits and rules (sex segregation, subordination to men) imposed on them, without their wanting to challenge them. Her work in this respect rests on Foucault’s conceptualization of forms of moral agency which we – together with the type of agency in western neoliberal governmental regimes – can characterize as ‘minimal freedom’. However, although Mahmood wants to keep away from the binary terms of resistance and subordination and for this reason refuses the

concept of freedom altogether, her study repeatedly discusses whether or not the Egyptian women's mosque movement can be said to have 'latent liberatory potentials' (p. 5). Time and again one meets with the question of whether the movement not only challenges western liberal models of the self – as is 'central to the movement's self-understanding' (p. 175) – but male authority in Islam as well – which is not claimed by the movement itself. The movement is clearly 'altering the historically male-centered character of mosques as well as Islamic pedagogy' (p. 2, cf. p. 15), to the effect that it is 'undermining the authority of dominant norms, institutions, and structures' (pp. 174–175; see also pp. 34, 89, 175, 179). As such, the final Foucauldian normative horizon seems to resonate in Mahmood's ambivalent approach to her subject(s).

### **Cross-cultural feminist strategies**

Whereas Heyes' study disregards the analytical implications of Foucault's ethics – denying the possibility that dieting and cosmetic surgery can take place in the context of a freedom practice – it does point to its normative horizon, proposing a certain feminist strategy, especially the practice of yoga as a feminist counter-culture. However, pointing to such a pure exit from the framework of an Eastern background is hardly convincing when we take into account the full implications of her own Foucauldian point of view that power permeates the whole of life. From this perspective there is no beach under the paving stones, so to speak. We cannot but work on the limits of where and what we are.

In contrast to Heyes, Mahmood does employ Foucault's ethical theory analytically, exploring the lives of the Islamist women she interviewed in terms of ethical self-formation. However, she obliterates the final Foucault's main normative clue, i.e. his preference for ethical freedom practices. Since freedom is too limited a view on what human flourishing can be, and since '[f]reedom is normative to feminism, as it is to liberalism' (Mahmood, 2005: 10), she unsurprisingly keeps a distance from feminism and from the issue of positive feminist strategies in particular. In her 2008 article 'Feminism, democracy, and empire', she warns 'that feminism runs the risk of becoming more of a handmaiden of empire', and of a 'collusion of empire and feminism in this historical moment' (Mahmood, 2008: 82, 84).

Mahmood rightly warns us of a type of feminism that has turned into the equivalent of a neoliberal lifestyle of sex, success and career, and as such into a propaganda vehicle for the western 'superior since free' ways of life to be imposed on a worldwide level. But apart from the fact that feminism in the West is more plural – something Mahmood refers to only in a footnote (2008: 109, note 2) – we have been witnessing the emergence of Muslim feminist movements in the last decades – again referred to by Mahmood only in a footnote (Mahmood, 2005: 3, note 3).

Rather than considering these new, emerging discourses of Muslim feminisms as a liberal type of feminism, or a neoliberal western import – as Ong (2006) does with regard to the Malaysian women's movement Sisters in Islam – Leila Ahmed, Barlas, Mir Hosseini and Fatima Sadiqi convincingly argue in their works that these discourses are endemic to local and religious sources (cf. Vintges, 2005).

Muslim feminisms can be analysed, in terms of Foucault, as ethical freedom practices that work on the limits of western normalizing as well as of Islamic fundamentalist

regimes of Truth. Through these discourses, Muslim women are transforming themselves, creating new subjectivities as modern, believing, Muslim women who adhere to values like piety and the importance of the family, and also aim at women's full participation in all societal domains. Other strands of Muslim feminism are more secular, without, however, copying the western type of feminism.

Thus, in speaking of feminism nowadays it is important to recognize that there are more models than the western liberal one. With this in mind, ideal feminist strategies should be cross-cultural, based on horizontal dialogue and support, rather than unilateral, imposing 'women's freedom from above' – something that has 'often produced spectacular socio-political disaster', as Mahmood rightly argues (Mahmood, 2008: 95). From a Foucauldian perspective, cross-cultural feminist strategies come forward as taking place within current governmental and authoritarian regimes by working on their limits, changing the goals and features of current self-techniques, and thereby of current social and political institutions, albeit through 'babysteps', as is the preferred phrase used by many Muslim feminists.

### **Cross-cultural feminist media strategies: An example**

Coming back finally to the issue of Muslim women in the media we can now evaluate Mahmood's overall dismissal of mediated feminist critiques on behalf of Muslim women. Mahmood rightly warns against a unilateral feminist mission that comes down to global supremacy of the West. However, she overlooks the possibility of cross-cultural feminist strategies. What would such a strategy come down to regarding the issue of Muslim women in the media? In what follows I answer this question by discussing an example.

Briefly, the case in point is Dutch film maker Bregtje van der Haak's documentary *Satellite Queens*, broadcast on Dutch television in 2008. *Satellite Queens* covers the Saudi satellite channel's MBC talk show *Kalam Nawaem* – 'sweet' or 'soft talk' in English. Featuring four hostesses from four different Middle Eastern countries, the talk show *Kalam Nawaem* purportedly reaches 45 million (male and female) viewers in 22 countries. Its hostesses clearly function and present themselves as role models. If we take gender relations as a political issue, we can readily see them function as political role models, despite their claims of avoiding political subjects. Their talk show discusses lifestyle issues, in a reinterpretation of the Islamic heritage, from a women's empowerment point of view – without using the term feminism as such. Their self-presentation is one of being average, believing Muslim women who fully participate in society, and who are self-conscious, modern and beautiful.

Bregtje van der Haak presents, in interviews in the press and on television, her documentary to the western world as an antidote to the image of Muslim women, especially women from the Middle East, as being all-passive victims of male domination. Both the maker of the documentary and the producers of the weekly talk show *Kalam Nawaem* are aware of the power of television. They both understand, as it is phrased in the documentary, that 'television is part of the family' and is thus extremely influential. The four talk show hostesses also seem to be aware of their impact as celebrities. They let the documentary have a look into their personal lives, and give interviews to the press inside and outside the Islamic world. The talk show has been broadcast weekly on an Amsterdam

television channel, and the hostesses increasingly appear to have celebrity status in the Netherlands as well, thanks also to interviews in prominent Dutch newspapers.

In my view, this example of a cross-cultural feminist media strategy shows that freedom practices can develop even in collective settings in the media like television talk shows. Moreover, it shows that beauty can be overdetermined by freedom practices, and that Mahmood wrongly equates feminism with liberalism.

In Morocco, Islamist women of a similar movement to the one Mahmood describes were involved in the struggle for the reform of the family law. In the words of Sadiqi, this struggle was 'a unique combination of activism by secular and religious women, the calculations of political parties, and a significant role for the King [which] has led to real progress', i.e. 'a new Family Law in 2004 that mandates full equality between men and women as "head of household," full authority for state courts in matters of divorce, creation of special family courts, and the possibility of maternal custody in the event of divorce' (Sadiqi, 2006). We could argue, in Heyes' terms (cf. Heyes, 2007: 67), that Moroccan Islamist women's self-practices exceeded the framing of their original activity, making them participants in a freedom practice. It is through the latter concept that cross-cultural feminist strategies are best conceptualized.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research for making this research possible. Furthermore, I want to thank Huub van Baar, Yolande Jansen, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and the two anonymous reviewers from the *European Journal of Women's Studies* for helpful comments and discussions.

### Notes

1. Notable examples include Chahdortt Djavann, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Azar Nafisi. For an overview see Mahmood (2008).
2. They for instance speak in terms of a 'therapeutic machine' that operates in consonance with advanced liberalism's 'implantation of certain norms of self-promotion' (Miller and Rose, 2008: 172). In another chapter of the same volume the authors, in a similar vein, discuss advertising as 'consumption technologies', which 'along with other quite different narrative forms such as television soap operas . . . offer new ethics and techniques of living' that allow individuals to shape 'a style of life through participation in the world of goods' (2008: 141).
3. In the second and third volume of his *History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1990, 1986), in interviews, and especially in his 1981/1982 lecture series *The Hermeneutics of the Self* (Foucault, 2005).
4. See Foucault (1997c: 301), Dreyfus and Rabinow (1986: 117), Vintges (2004). Dreyfus and Rabinow (1986), among others referring to Athens at the time of Socrates, state: 'Modernity is not a specific historical event, but a historical conjuncture which has happened several times in our history, albeit with different form and content' (1986: 117). Foucault comments on antiquity's relationship between writing and the narrative of the self: 'I would not deny it is modern' (Foucault, 1997b: 277).
5. Along a similar line, he later refers to a social movement as well (Foucault, 1997a).
6. This also being the reason why Foucault occasionally, in line with Hadot (1995), uses the term 'spirituality' (Vintges, 2004, 2011).

7. 'I am not saying that ethics is synonymous with the care of the self, but that, in antiquity, ethics as the conscious practice of freedom has resolved around this fundamental imperative: "Take care of yourself" (Foucault, 1997c: 285).
8. See Foucault (1997b: 278) on Christianity's freedom practices. For Foucault's articles on Iran see Afary and Anderson (2005). Foucault (1999) discusses Asian religion. See also Vintges (2004, 2011).
9. Katherine Frank (2006) in my view wrongly contends that the concept agency *always* draws on a psychological base. While she also compares feminist studies on beauty culture and Saba Mahmood's study *The Politics of Piety* (2005), she only mentions Foucault's theoretical framework in passing, thereby missing some of Mahmood's essential insights.
10. In the quotes that follow I have omitted the Arab terms.

## References

- Afary J and Anderson K (eds) (2005) *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Corner J and Pels D (eds) (2003) *Media and the Restyling of Politics*. London: Sage.
- Davis K (1995) *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery*. New York: Routledge.
- Dean M (2002) Powers of life and death beyond governmentality. *Cultural Values* 16(1–2): 119–138.
- Donzelot J and Gordon C (2008) Interview: Governing liberal societies – the Foucault effect in the English speaking world. *Foucault Studies* 5: 48–62.
- Dreyfus H and Rabinow P (1986) What is maturity? Habermas and Foucault on 'What is Enlightenment?' In: Hoy D (ed.) *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp. 109–121.
- Foucault M (1982) The subject and power. In: Dreyfus H and Rabinow P (eds) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 208–226.
- Foucault M (1986) *The History of Sexuality, Volume III: The Care of the Self*. New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault M (1990) *The History of Sexuality, Volume II: The Use of Pleasure*. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault M (1997a) Sex, power, and the politics of identity. *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. I, ed. Rabinow P. New York: New Press, pp. 163–173.
- Foucault M (1997b) On the genealogy of ethics: An overview of work in progress. In: *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. I, ed. Rabinow P. New York: New Press, pp. 253–280.
- Foucault M (1997c) The ethics of the concern for self as a practice of freedom. In: *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. I, ed. Rabinow P. New York: New Press, pp. 281–301.
- Foucault M (1997d) What is enlightenment? In: *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. I, ed. Rabinow P. New York: New Press, pp. 303–319.
- Foucault M (1999) Michel Foucault and Zen: A stay in a Zen temple (1978). *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*, ed. Carrette J. London: Routledge, pp. 110–114.
- Foucault M (2005) *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Gros F. New York: Picador.
- Foucault M (2007a) Governmentality. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, ed. Senellart M. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 87–115.

- Foucault M (2007b) Subjectivity and truth. *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Lotringer S. Los Angeles: Semiotexte, pp. 147–167. (Orig. published: About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self. *Political Theory* 21(2), 1993: 198–227.)
- Foucault M (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Senellart M. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frank K (2006) Agency. *Anthropological Theory* 6(3): 281–302.
- Gros F (2005) Course context. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Gros F. New York: Picador, pp. 507–550.
- Hadot P (1995) *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Plato*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Heyes C (2007) *Self-Transformations*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lemke T (2001) 'The birth of bio-politics': Michel Foucault's lecture at the Collège de France on neo-liberal governmentality. *Economy and Society* 30(2): 190–207.
- Mahmood S (2005) *The Politics of Piety*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mahmood S (2008) Feminism, democracy, and empire: Islam and the war of terror. In: Scott J (ed.) *Women Studies on the Edge*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Miller P and Rose N (2008) *Governing the Present*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ong A (2006) *Neoliberalism as Exception*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Rose N (1999) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sadiqi F (2006) Morocco's veiled feminists. Available at: [www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/sadiqi1/English](http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/sadiqi1/English).
- Senellart M (2007) Course context. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, ed. Senellart M. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 369–401.
- Stauff M (2010) The governmentality of media: Television as 'problem' and 'instrument'. In: Jäger L et al. (eds) *Media, Culture, and Mediality: New Insights into the Current State of Research*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Thompson K (2003) Forms of resistance: Foucault on tactical reversal and self-formation. *Continental Philosophy Review* 36(2): 113–138.
- Tully J (2008) The question of the subject in the later Foucault: Course summary. Available at: [web.uvic.ca/~polisci/people/faculty/Tully/courses/Heremeneutics%20of%20the%20Subject%20Seminar%20\(2008\).pdf](http://web.uvic.ca/~polisci/people/faculty/Tully/courses/Heremeneutics%20of%20the%20Subject%20Seminar%20(2008).pdf).
- Vintges K (2004) Endorsing practices of freedom: Feminism in a global perspective. In: Taylor D and Vintges K (eds) *Feminism and the Final Foucault*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 275–299.
- Vintges K (2005) Some hypes and some hope: Women and Islam in the western media. *Concilium* 5: 41–48.
- Vintges K (2011) Freedom and spirituality. In: Taylor D (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*. Durham: Acumen Press, pp. 99–110.