

# Saba Mahmood

Nominated by Summer Qassim, M.Phil. Social Anthropology candidate



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Professor Mahmood was a sociocultural anthropologist whose work on secularism and religious life made significant, path-breaking contributions to anthropology, and by extension, feminist studies and political theory.

Mahmood was the single author of *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton University Press, 2015) and *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2005) which won the Victoria Schuck Award from the American Political Science Association. She co-authored *Is critique Secular?* (Fordham University Press, 2011) and co-edited *Politics of Religious Freedom* (University of Chicago, 2015). Her work has been translated into Arabic, French, Persian, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish, and Polish.

Born in Pakistan and raised Muslim with her own strong feminist inclinations, Mahmood's scholarly inquiries required a challenge to her own received assumptions about Islam as a lived tradition and a grapple with the apparent paradox of modern Muslim women who exercised the liberal virtue of choice to embody a tradition that appeared to subordinate their own agency. This challenge to her received conceptions of Islam ran parallel to the challenge her work made to prevailing anthropological scholarship of feminist theory and religious, particularly Muslim women. Through sophisticated analysis and rich ethnographic detail, Mahmood articulated a conception of pious women as agents within a religious tradition, as opposed to the predominant view that feminism necessarily entails resistance against patriarchy, and that religious women are necessarily objects needing reform. This contributed profoundly to anthropological notions of agency and freedom, and in the subfields of the anthropology of secular liberalism and Islam.

As a budding anthropologist with a Muslim background raised within a secular liberal society (the United States) and with a strong inclination to work in an under-researched part of the Arab world, Professor Mahmood encouraged me to explore these intersections in order to meaningfully contribute to anthropological knowledge. At her encouragement I obtained a grant to conduct research in Damascus, Syria, learned colloquial Levantine Arabic and gained long-term ethnographic experience in order to later carry out an anthropological project in Syria. When the tragic events of Syria unfolded and I re-located to Pakistan to teach and live, she checked in over the years asking "doing any anthropology?" and put me in contact with scholars passing through. When I was finally able to restart postgraduate studies, she assured her advisory role, regardless of my chosen university. Her untimely death means we will have to continue to be inspired by her books and commitment to challenging normative assumptions through elegant and nuanced anthropological scholarship.

*Diversifying Portraiture  
in Anthropology*