

Submission as Agency: Repositioning The Role of Conservative Muslim Women in The Era of Gender Equality Discourse

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to analyze how conservative Muslim women in Lombok Island, Indonesia, interpret and practice obedience to their husbands as a form of piety and religious agency amid the growing discourse of modern gender equality. This phenomenon reveals a paradox between the demand for female autonomy in the public sphere and the deliberate choice of some women to reaffirm obedience as a sacred value. The study argues that obedience is not merely a symbol of subordination but can function as a form of moral consciousness, spiritual discipline, and existential strategy in negotiating the pressures of modernity. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions (FGD). The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model to identify themes that reflect the construction of meaning around obedience. The findings demonstrate three distinct forms of religious agency among conservative Muslim women in Lombok: (1) total domestic agency, emphasizing household devotion as worship; (2) semi-domestic agency, negotiating obedience with public engagement under the husband's approval; and (3) strict obedience agency, viewing total submission as the highest expression of piety. These patterns reveal that obedience serves as a moral and spiritual agency rather than passive conformity, providing new insight into the intersection of gender, religion, and modern Muslim women's identity.

KEYWORDS: conservative Muslim women, religious agency, obedience, piety, Islamic gender

A. BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Amid the rise of discourse on gender equality and the expansion of women's public roles in the modern era a dominant narrative in global modernity researchers have identified an intriguing phenomenon on the island of Lombok, particularly within the Salafi Muslim community. A group of Muslim women from IMISc (Ibnu Mas'ud Islamic School) who identify with Salafi teachings consciously choose to adopt conservative values that emphasize obedience to their husbands and prioritize domestic roles as an integral part of their pious identity. This choice, which on the surface appears to run counter to the spirit of the times, challenges common assumptions about female agency and requires a more nuanced analytical approach to understand it beyond the dichotomy of opposition versus oppression. These conservative Muslim women frame obedience to their husbands and commitment to domesticity as expressions of piety and respect for religious teachings. In broader societal perspectives, however, such a stance is often regarded as a form of women's subordination, oppression, and backwardness.

However, this study seeks to reinterpret this phenomenon from a distinct perspective. It argues that submission does not necessarily signify passive surrender but can instead constitute a form of spiritual agency grounded in religious consciousness and moral choice. The emergence of this phenomenon highly contentious among Muslim women more broadly renders it a compelling subject for scholarly inquiry. In response to such phenomena, Islamic feminist scholars have long engaged in deconstructing patriarchal structures within Islamic tradition. Thinkers such as Fatima Mernissi (Mernissi, 2002), with her critical work on *ḥadīth*; Amina Wadud (Wadud-Muhsin, 1999), with her alternative gender-hermeneutical approach; and Asma Barlas (Barlas, 2019), with her anti-patriarchal reading of the Qur'an, have collectively opened intellectual space for rethinking gender relations in Islam. The primary focus of this intellectual tradition has been to critique and reinterpret classical texts and interpretations perceived as marginalizing women, thereby often framing female agency within the context of resistance to established normative structures.

This conceptual limitation was later rigorously critiqued by Saba Mahmood in *Politics of Piety* (Mahmood, 2005). She proposed a revolutionary theoretical framework by problematizing the universal assumptions about freedom and autonomy that underpin liberal and secular feminist thought. Mahmood contends that agency cannot be reduced solely to acts of resistance

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against dominant norms; rather, it can also be manifested through the embodied and sincere inhabitation of those very norms. Thus, practices such as obedience and spiritual submission are not indicative of a lack of agency but instead represent a form of “spiritual agency” cultivated through deliberate self-discipline. A significant contemporary effect of this dynamic, when viewed through the lens of modern agency, is that amid today’s prevailing emphasis on gender equality, many individuals both men and women find it challenging to establish clear ethical boundaries in their lives. This tension, in turn, creates a potent arena for negotiation and contestation between differing conceptions of agency.

The context of Salafi Muslim women in Indonesia, particularly on the island of Lombok, offers a rich social laboratory for operationalizing Mahmood’s theoretical framework. Their intensive engagement in religious study and strong commitment to domestic life represent an active embodiment of the Salafi values they uphold. Research by Eva F. Nisa (2013, 2018)(Nisa, 2018) on the hijrah movement and women’s religious study groups (Bexley dkk., 2023), for instance, provides a comparative lens for understanding analogous phenomena. While such studies have successfully mapped the social contexts and motivations behind conservative lifestyle choices, the Salafi Muslimah community in Lombok exhibits unique local dynamics. Here, women maintain devout obedience and submission to their husbands and engage in sincere worship, even as they are exposed to feminist discourses that pursue similar ends such as happiness and self-fulfillment but through fundamentally different means (Putri & Poerwandari, 2023) .

Despite these empirical contributions, a significant analytical gap remains. Most studies on Muslim women in Indonesia, including those focusing on conservative groups, often remain confined to frameworks that measure agency primarily in terms of resistance to patriarchy. Consequently, the choice of obedience and submission made by Salafi Muslim women in Lombok is frequently interpreted as a product of social pressure rather than meaningful action. Few studies have rigorously applied Mahmood’s paradigm to interpret such obedience as a form of authentic and deliberate agency. To address this gap, this article proposes a novel perspective by explicitly advancing a paradigm of “obedience as agency” grounded in Salafi Islam. Its central argument is that, for Salafi Muslim women in Lombok, obedience is not a passive condition but an active and deliberate spiritual practice.

While certain forms of feminism embraced by some Muslim women today may also involve expressions of spousal obedience, adherents often encounter difficulty in upholding religiously defined boundaries and constructing coherent theological justifications. This is precisely where the Salafi community in Lombok distinguishes itself: it draws strength and clarity of identity from the explicit affirmation of these religious boundaries. By building a solid argumentation rooted in a specific theological understanding of duties to God and husbands, they consciously distance themselves from the growing Islamic feminist movement, which they perceive as having obscured these foundational obligations (Haryadi & Munandar, 2021).

Understanding this complexity carries significant academic urgency, as it can enrich gender and religious studies by deconstructing the secular-liberal biases inherent in much of feminist theory. Socially, within Lombok’s highly religious context, this research is vital for moving beyond simplistic narratives that uniformly label conservative groups as oppressed. By acknowledging the diverse expressions of agency, a more productive dialogue can be fostered one that respects the varied life choices of Muslim women. Consequently, this study focuses on the Salafi Muslimah community, employing a phenomenological qualitative approach aimed at uncovering the meanings derived from the actors’ own lived experiences. It seeks to answer, for instance, how values of obedience are reconstructed, internalized, and enacted in the everyday lives of Salafi Muslim women. Through the lens of Saba Mahmood’s theory of agency, this research argues that obedience, in this context, constitutes a complex ethical and spiritual accomplishment a form of agency that consciously embraces submission to divine authority as a path toward self-cultivation. This, in turn, furnishes them with a robust framework for theological argumentation and a profound sense of autonomy within obedience itself

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a phenomenological qualitative approach to understand the lived experiences of conservative Muslim women in communities on the island of Lombok, Indonesia, who practice the concept of obedience (*tā’ah*) as a form of piety and a source of spiritual agency. The phenomenological approach was chosen for its capacity to reveal how subjects interpret the meaning of obedience not merely as a social norm, but as a form of religious consciousness and reflective action rooted in Islamic values and morality (Maleong, 2011). Field research was conducted within the IMISc Muslimah community, a Salafi women’s study group established in 2018 with approximately 30 members. Using purposive sampling (Sandu Siyoto & M. Ali Sodik, 2015) , the researcher selected ten informants representing three primary categories: (1) women wholly focused on the domestic sphere, (2) semi-domestic women who work as teachers, and (3) women recognized for their strict adherence to obedience in daily life. The

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researcher's position as a participant-observer facilitated a deeper understanding of their daily dynamics, social interactions, and spiritual values (Abuddin Nata, 2016)

Data analysis employed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, encompassing three concurrent stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data were analyzed inductively to identify key themes that represent obedience as a form of spiritual discipline and moral strategy. Validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources and methods, alongside reflective journaling to minimize researcher bias. Theoretically, this study is grounded in Saba Mahmood's concept of religious agency, which posits that obedience and submission are not necessarily markers of passivity or regress but can constitute a form of moral consciousness and spiritual strength (Mahmood, 2005). Consequently, this methodology aims not merely to describe religious behavior but to interpret the structures of consciousness, moral frameworks, and meaning-making processes that shape the identity of conservative Muslim women amid modern discourses on gender equality (Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, 2015).

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of interviews and field observations within the Salafi women's community in Lombok revealed three distinct patterns in the interpretation and practice of obedience. These patterns represent a spectrum of religious agency, ranging from complete domestic devotion, through a negotiated balance of piety and public life, to a form of strict obedience that is fundamentally transcendental in nature. *The first pattern*, termed Devout Domesticity, is characterized by women who consciously embrace a comprehensive domestic vocation. For them, obedience is primarily framed as a direct act of worship and a core component of their religious identity, rather than a social imposition. This re-framing demonstrates a form of spiritual and moral agency exercised precisely within the private sphere of the household (Rinaldo, 2013). *The second pattern*, Negotiated Piety, is exemplified by semi-domestic women, such as teachers or lecturers, who maintain roles in the public sphere while diligently upholding principles of spousal obedience. Their agency manifests as an ongoing, adaptive negotiation between professional responsibilities, the requirement for spousal permission, and personal religious commitment. This results in a dynamic, context-sensitive form of moral agency. *The third* and most rigorous pattern is Sacred Submission. Here, women adhere to strict standards of obedience, conceptualizing total submission as the paramount path to spiritual peace and proximity to God. Their focus is on cultivating obedience as an inner source of strength and self-discipline, representing an affective and transcendental mode of agency that seeks fulfillment beyond social dimensions (Connell, 2020).

1. Obedience as a Construction of Piety: The Spiritual Agency of Conservative Muslim Women.

For conservative Salafi Muslim women, obedience to their husbands is understood not merely as a social obligation but as an integral component of individual piety and compliance with divine command. From this perspective, obedience is not viewed as a form of subordination but rather as a mode of worship and a direct pathway to attaining God's pleasure. This theological interpretation elevates domestic relations into a sacred spiritual domain, wherein the husband assumes a dual role: he is not only the structural head of the household but also functions as a spiritual figure responsible for guiding the family's religious well-being before God (Barlas, 2019). Consequently, obedience is transformed into a religious practice of profound spiritual significance. This conviction is clearly reflected in the informants' narratives, which consistently emphasize the direct correlation between spousal obedience and devotion to God. As one informant (R1) articulated, "Obedience to one's husband is proof of obedience to God." Another (R2) reinforced this view, stating, "The husband is the wife's gateway to paradise." Such empirical statements demonstrate that their obedience originates from a deep-seated religious consciousness rather than from external social pressure or coercion. This point was underscored by another participant who clarified, "I submit to my husband because I seek God's pleasure, not out of fear of my husband." This distinction highlights that their submission is fundamentally a conscious and deliberate spiritual choice (Christensen, 2009).

This perspective reveals a distinctive form of religious agency. Within the theoretical framework developed by Saba Mahmood (Mahmood, 2005), agency is understood not merely as resistance to norms but also as the capacity to cultivate the self within a specific normative tradition. The acts of submission and obedience performed by these women are, in fact, expressions of a conscious and deliberate agency grounded in transcendent values. Thus, obedience is not a symbol of passive subordination but a manifestation of spiritual agency the individual's ability to actively and consciously fulfill religious commandments as a mode of spiritual ascent (Zuhriah dkk., 2024).

Furthermore, obedience is internalized as a form of spiritual discipline that actively shapes religious identity. Concrete practices such as not leaving the home without the husband's permission (R2 and R4) and carrying out religious duties with disciplined regularity (R3) are understood as exercises in self-discipline, which themselves constitute expressions of piety. As

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Mahmood explains, such repetitive acts are not coercive but represent a deliberate means of internalizing core theological values until they become ingrained within one's habitus and character. In this context, obedience operates as a disciplinary agency, whereby self-regulation within a sacredly inscribed patriarchal structure becomes a source of virtue and moral dignity (Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, 2015).

Table 1. Obedience as Worship and Religious Identity

Focus of Finding	Empirical Description (Respondent Excerpt)	Theoretical Interpretation	Form of Agency
Obedience as a form of worship	"Obedience to my husband is proof of obedience to God." (R3)	Obedience is interpreted as an act of worship (ibadah), not a consequence of social pressure.	Spiritual Agency
Husband as a moral-spiritual figure	"The husband is the conduit for God's pleasure for the wife." (R4)	The patriarchal structure is viewed as a sacred religious system.	Moral Agency
Self-discipline as piety	"I do not leave the house without my husband's permission." (R2)	Obedience is practiced as self-control and a manifestation of piety.	

Based on this analysis, the patriarchal structure is not inherently perceived as oppressive but is instead interpreted as a sacred religious system. The acceptance of this structure is rooted in moral agency a conscious choice to submit for the sake of higher spiritual values aimed at attaining divine pleasure. Within this framework, the husband is regarded as the "conduit for God's pleasure," situating obedience within a theological rationale that sanctifies gender hierarchy. For the Salafi women in Lombok, submission to their husbands thus becomes a source of inner peace and moral dignity, distinguishing their worldview from modern gender discourses that prioritize individual autonomy and freedom. As observed in other conservative Muslim contexts, a steadfast commitment to religious values often furnishes an alternative framework for understanding equality and rights (Schielke, 2009). The obedience they embody is therefore seen as both a marker of religious identity and a manifestation of moral virtue actively cultivated and sustained through a deliberate "culture of piety" that reinforces their. (Putri & Poerwandari, 2023)

In summary, for conservative Muslim women in Lombok, obedience to their husbands represents a conscious and active enactment of faith. By integrating obedience conceptualized as *tā'ah* into their daily routines, they cultivate a distinct religious identity and reinforce their commitment to tawhid, both as a theological conviction and a social practice. Rather than a sign of coercion, this obedience is embraced as a deliberate spiritual practice that transforms the domestic sphere into a space for cultivating closeness to Allah (*taqwa*). In doing so, they reinterpret the patriarchal structure not as a system of constraint, but as a sacred pathway toward spiritual fulfillment a form of religious agency that aligns hierarchical marital relations with the pursuit of divine pleasure.

2. Obedience as Spiritual Agency: Moral Strength in Devotion

From the perspective of religious agency theory (Mahmood, 2005), the practice of obedience observed among women in this community represents a distinctive paradigm of strength. Here, obedience is not a reflection of oppression or passivity but an expression of religious consciousness that is actively and deliberately chosen. Through this lens, acts of submission are transformed from mere social obligations into spiritual projects of self-formation. Consequently, obedience is understood as a discipline that fosters spiritual autonomy, wherein individuals find a profound sense of freedom through sincere alignment with divine will. For these women, obedience yields deeply personal and tangible benefits: inner peace and moral fortitude. Empirical data indicates that they consistently associate obedience with feelings of tranquility and purpose. As R1 explains, "Obedience calms the heart," while R2 affirms, "Obedience brings me closer to God." These statements reveal that obedience functions as a psycho-spiritual mechanism, providing a sense of security and emotional stability by situating the self within a broader, divinely ordained cosmic order (Nisa, 2018).

Beyond fostering a sense of calm, obedience is further understood as a mechanism for character transformation and the cultivation of moral strength. This is exemplified by R4's reflection: "I used to be stubborn, but now I am more patient." This process of change demonstrates how religious discipline, enacted through obedience, functions as a form of ascetic practice

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exercise in refining self-control. Rather than negating the self, this practice molds it toward greater moral fortitude, transforming traits like “stubbornness” into valued virtues such as “patience” within their religious ethical framework. This orientation reflects a distinctive mode of spiritual agency that cannot be fully captured through the lens of liberal theories of freedom. As Saba Mahmood (Mahmood, 2005) contends, agency is not always manifested through resistance, rebellion, or autonomous choice; it can also entail the capacity to internalize religious norms so profoundly that they become a source of inner strength and subjective fulfillment. In this context, what external observers may perceive as constraint (“these women are unfree”) is experienced internally as a form of “freedom through submission” a liberation from the turmoil of personal desire, arrogance, and moral ambiguity.

Table 2. Negotiation Between Obedience and Public Activity

Focus of Finding	Empirical Description (Respondent Excerpt)	Theoretical Interpretation	Form of Agency
Obedience and Permission in Work	“I am able to work because my husband permits it.” (R1)	Public activity is regulated through religiously sanctioned spousal authority.	Negotiated Agency
Moral Boundaries in Public Participation	“Women may pursue careers as long as there is no mixing with unrelated men.” (R3)	Social participation is structured according to sharia-based ethical principles.	Moral-Religious Agency
Balancing Domestic and Public Roles	“I still prioritize my family even while working.” (R2)	Work is interpreted as an extension of service, not as a form of rebellion or autonomy.	Adaptive Agency

Beyond simply cultivating calm, obedience is also viewed as a means of character transformation and moral fortification. This is illustrated in R4’s reflection: “I used to be stubborn, but now I am more patient.” This shift demonstrates how religious discipline, practiced through obedience, functions as a form of asceticism training that sharpens self-control. Obedience is not about self-negation, but about shaping oneself toward greater moral strength, transforming a trait like “stubbornness” into a valued virtue such as “patience” within their religious ethical framework. This outlook exemplifies a distinctive form of spiritual agency that cannot be fully assessed through the lens of liberal freedom theory. As Saba Mahmood (Mahmood, 2005) argues, agency is not always expressed through struggle, rebellion, or autonomous choice; it can also entail the capacity to internalize religious norms so deeply that they become a wellspring of strength and subjective fulfillment. Consequently, what external observers may perceive as a limitation the notion that “these women are not free” is internally experienced as a form of “freedom through submission.” This represents a liberation from the inner turmoil of desire, pride, and ethical ambiguity (Hefner, 2008).

3. Negotiating Obedience and Social Participation: The Negotiative Agency of Conservative Muslim Women.

Field findings reveal that within this community, obedience is not a rigid or isolating construct but a dynamic principle enabling negotiation between domestic responsibilities and public participation. The conservative Muslim women studied demonstrate a notable capacity to navigate both spheres. They do not perceive obedience as a barrier to activities outside the home; rather, they regard it as an ethical prerequisite that must be satisfied before engaging in the public sphere. Thus, obedience functions as a “moral mechanism” governing their interaction with modernity (Christensen, 2009).

Variations exist in how this obedience is interpreted and practiced. While some women choose to focus entirely on the domestic realm as their primary form of worship, others particularly those working as teachers, lecturers, or social activists maintain active public roles. The crucial condition for this participation is spousal permission and approval, coupled with a commitment to uphold their primary duties as wives. As one informant explained, “I work because my husband allows me to, but I know my limits. I do not want my job to cause me to neglect my duties as a wife” (Nouraie-Simone, 2018). This illustrates how public engagement is carefully calibrated within a framework of religiously defined obligations. Public activities, including employment and career pursuits, are not necessarily interpreted as acts of rebellion against patriarchal structures or as endeavors for individual autonomy alone. Rather, they are reframed as a form of socially beneficial service endowed with religious legitimacy. As expressed by Respondent R3, “women can have careers, as long as it is in a women-specific environment and does not involve mixing with unrelated men.” This illustrates that public participation is accepted provided it remains within the boundaries defined

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by Sharia. Consequently, work itself can become an act of piety so long as it adheres to established moral and ethical guidelines (Falola, 2022).

This practice of negotiation gives rise to what can be termed “negotiated agency.” This concept describes the capacity of individuals to interpret, adapt, and utilize the spaces available within an existing normative framework without directly challenging its foundations. As Mahmood’s work suggests and as discussed by Wardatun (Wardatun, 2019) agency in religious contexts often entails not the rejection of norms, but the ability to act meaningfully within them. Thus, Salafi women actively negotiate Sharia-based boundaries to fulfill social and economic needs while preserving their religious standing as obedient and devout wives (Shah, 2020).

Table 3. Obedience as Spiritual Agency and a Source of Inner Peace

Focus of Finding	Empirical Description (Respondent Excerpt)	Theoretical Interpretation	Form of Agency
Obedience cultivates inner tranquility	“I feel calmer and happier when I am obedient to my husband.” (R1)	Submission is not experienced as suffering, but as a spiritual discipline that brings peace.	Affective Agency
Obedience as moral strength	“I used to be stubborn; now I am more patient.” (R4)	Religious discipline results in self-control and character transformation.	Self-Governed Agency
Obedience and spiritual closeness	“Being obedient brings me closer to God.” (R2)	Religious practice becomes a means of drawing nearer to the divine.	Transcendent Agency

This table outlines the relationship between obedience, inner peace, and spiritual transformation among Salafi Muslim women in Lombok, interpreted through the framework of religious agency. The identified forms of agency illustrate how subjective experiences of tranquility, moral growth, and transcendent connection are actively cultivated through the disciplined practice of *ṭā’ah*. Based on the findings presented in the table, it becomes clear that the husband's permission operates simultaneously as a control mechanism and a gateway to socio-religious legitimacy. Concurrently, adherence to “moral boundaries,” such as gender segregation, functions as a regulatory parameter that shapes the nature of public participation. The maintenance of role balance further demonstrates that the agency exercised is adaptive and integrative rather than disruptive to familial and religious values. This phenomenon illustrates that conservative Muslim women do not reject modernity in its entirety. Instead, they actively negotiate modern demands such as career aspirations and social engagement within the moral and ethical framework of Islam. They may assume roles as teachers, entrepreneurs, or religious activists, yet these pursuits are consistently framed within the principles of *adab* (proper conduct) and spousal consent.

As observed in studies of women in similar contexts such as Brenner’s analysis of Javanese women (cited in Baroudi, 1970) the choice to engage in public life often involves complex cultural negotiation rather than an outright rejection of tradition (Zia, 2017). Thus, it can be concluded that conservative Muslim women in Lombok are not passive subjects who merely submit to social structure. They are active agents who employ negotiative agency to create space for social participation. They construct moral frameworks centered on permission and religious boundaries to mediate the interplay between piety and modernity. Whether choosing to focus on domestic life or to engage in the public sphere, their decisions are made consciously within a paradigm of obedience and piety. This demonstrates that obedience and autonomy are not necessarily oppositional but can coexist within a nuanced framework of religiously informed agency.

D. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the obedience practiced by conservative Muslim women in Lombok is not merely a manifestation of patriarchal oppression but a complex expression of religious agency, grounded in spiritual consciousness and moral identity. Within this framework, obedience is not interpreted as subordination to male authority, but as an active performance of piety that affirms a transcendental relationship between the believer and God. The women in this study conceptualize obedience to their husbands as a form of worship, a discipline of self-cultivation, and a source of moral strength that provides life with meaning and inner peace. Furthermore, the research identifies three distinct patterns of religious agency.

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First, total domestic agency, where women focus exclusively on household roles and interpret obedience as worship that reinforces family spirituality. Second, semi-domestic agency, wherein women who work primarily as teachers negotiate their public roles through religiously sanctioned legitimacy working with their husbands' permission while consistently prioritizing family. Third, strict obedience agency, a mode of intense piety in which total spousal submission is viewed as the highest expression of faith and proximity to God. These three patterns reveal that obedience is not monolithic but varied, context-dependent, and continually negotiated across different social and spiritual spaces.

Theoretically, these findings extend Saba Mahmood's conceptualization of agency in Islamic gender studies, illustrating that actions which may appear passive within liberal feminist frameworks can, in fact, represent deliberate projects of ethical self-formation and subtle resistance to the hegemony of modern gender ideologies. This study affirms that, for conservative Muslim women, piety and obedience constitute contested spaces of identity, through which they construct notions of freedom via religious discipline and spiritual surrender. Thus, the research contributes not only empirically to the study of gender and contemporary Islam but also offers an alternative lens for understanding agency in Muslim societies. The obedience enacted by Salafi women unveils a compelling paradox between commitment and autonomy, between submission and moral fortitude a dynamic that reflects the broader interplay of religiosity, modernity, and the ongoing negotiation of Muslim women's identities within a global discourse on equality.

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