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Samira Mahboub | Nachruf | 27.10.2016

Fatima Mernissi

Moroccan scholar and pioneer of Islamic feminism

Biography and context

How does one pay tribute to a scholar who is referred to as producing “ground-breaking scholarship”², labelled a “superstar”³ and a “marvelous philosopher, a creative spirit, and one of our era’s most important feminists and Muslim intellectuals”⁴ at the same time? All those praises describe the internationally renowned scholar and writer Fatima Mernissi. Iconic within global feminist discourses and recognised as a key figure in the emergence of *Islamic Feminism*,⁵ the Moroccan feminist and sociologist – who was born in Fez (1940) and died on November 30th 2015 in Rabat – grew up in a middle class family and was part of the first generation to attend a national school for girls in Morocco.⁶ Mernissi’s aim was to make the voices of Muslim women audible throughout the globe, not only as a scholar, but also as an activist.⁷ In the 1980s, she became a professor of sociology at the Mohammed V University in Rabat after having studied political science at the Sorbonne in Paris and sociology at Brandeis University in the U.S. (where she also earned her PhD).



Fatima Mernissi in 2004, Photo: Courtesy of the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation / Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 4.0

While she typically wrote in French and English, her books have been translated into over thirty languages.⁸ In 2003, Mernissi – along with U.S. writer Susan Sontag – received the Prince of Asturias Award for producing “literary works in different genres that are of outstanding quality from an aesthetic point of view, and which confront the essential issues of our times with profound depth of vision; they provide complementary perspectives in a dialogue between cultures”.⁹ She has left us a legacy of significant scholarship, and her loss was mourned by numerous scholars and admirers of her work.¹⁰

Academic work and Islamic Feminism

Mernissi’s body of work reflects her location and cultural background through the ways in which she theoretically and empirically examines questions around Islam, gender, sexuality, human rights, and democracy within the Muslim and Arab worlds. Thanks to her academic focus, Mernissi emerged as one of the pioneers of Islamic Feminism engaging with “new gender-sensitive Qur’anic interpretation”.¹¹ While Fatima Mernissi would not label herself as an Islamic Feminist, her body of work is understood as crucial for the field of Islamic Feminist discourse.¹²

Mernissi's first book originated from her PhD dissertation and is now recognised as a classic. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (1987) compares ideological discourses on sexuality and gender in oriental and in occidental societies. For Mernissi, the different forms of sexual regulation in Islamic vs. Western societies are the result of opposing understanding of female sexuality. In order to explain what notion of female sexuality is implicitly embedded in Islamic and Western societies respectively, she contrasts the positions of Islamic scholar al-Gazali and Western psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. She concludes that oriental societies tend to consider female sexuality to be active, whereas in occidental societies it is generally believed to be passive. Since active female sexuality is seen as a threat to the oriental social order, these societies attempt to externally regulate it by means of traditional or cultural practices such as veiling and segregation.¹³

With this argument, Mernissi implies that the practice of veiling is the result of external control and thus denies agency to veiled women within and outside of oriental societies via the homogenisation of women's motivation to wear the veil. In addition, her conclusion also relies on the reproduction of the 'West' vs. 'East' binary that allows the 'West' to emerge as modern and progressive as opposed to its backward and traditional 'other' (the East) regarding questions on gender equality and sexual freedom. This argument is found and explored in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2003) in which he problematises said dichotomies and criticises the West for having a "positional superiority"¹⁴ towards the East. While I do think that Mernissi's analysis fails to dismiss and/or to reduce existing binaries that hierarchically structure societies, her exploration of gender and sexuality within various cultural and traditional contexts is a very fruitful undertaking.

Mernissi's *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan women* (1989) examines the daily struggles and complexities of Moroccan women based on interviews as a qualitative research study.¹⁵ In her memoir *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994), she narrates her own childhood growing up in a harem¹⁶ – a cultural institution which is also discussed in Mernissi's later work *Scheherazade goes West* (2001). In this book, she critically reflects on Western phantasmatic projections about the harem in order to desexualise as well as demystify the harem as a social space.¹⁷ *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993) is an historical study on powerful female rulers and politicians who played a significant role during early Islamic times. Their stories demonstrate that female political participation and Islam do not always exclude each other.¹⁸

Politics and Religion

In an interview with the U.S. National Public Radio (1993), Mernissi stated: “No one can mutilate me by telling me I cannot have the mosque or the Quran. Someone else is going to read for me or go at my place to the mosque...”.¹⁹ By highlighting the fact that the access to and use of religious sources and texts is reserved for a very particular audience (the male elite), she simultaneously reclaims said religious space for her own sex. Accordingly, Mernissi’s book *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991) discusses this exclusivity. It also sheds light on another problem while rhetorically asking: “But can one ever ‘simply’ read a text in which politics and the sacred are joined and mingled to the point of becoming indistinguishable from each other”?²⁰ While admitting the inevitable enmeshment of politics and religion (the latter comprising the production of knowledge, texts, content etc.), Mernissi emphasises that religion may be distorted by (mis)interpretations. Evidently, texts and knowledge production are not merely descriptive, innocent or free from interpretations; their interpretations are unavoidably products of subjectivity. Mernissi problematises the (academic) rhetoric of objectivity which suggests that readings of (religious) texts must be ‘truth’-delivering and unbiased. She revisits religious sources such as the Quran and the *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), “employing classic Islamic analytical methods, exposing spurious, perennially circulating, female-hostile *hadiths*, and brilliantly deconstructing the misogyny masquerading as Islam that so blatantly ‘inferiorized’ women”.²¹ Mernissi offers a feminist re-reading of Islam while highlighting that demands for gender equality and social justice are an inherent and structural element of Islam. Within this complex and interdisciplinary endeavor that is normally undertaken by religious scholars, she reconstructs the ‘authentic’ message of Islam in order to liberate it from its distorted male elitist (mis)interpretations and instrumentalisations.²²

Impact and implications

In an interview, Mernissi said: “I mean, when I write something in the press, the day after in the fish market, people will be discussing it. Either they’re attacking me or they like what I’ve written, and then two men will get into a fight with each other. One is for me and the other against me”.²³ Considering that she critically addressed socially taboo questions at a time when Islamic feminism was still emerging, it is no surprise that her work was widely read and encountered strong criticism. *The Veil and the Male Elite*, for example, has been banned in Morocco as well as other countries due to its scandalous character.²⁴ Reflecting on Mernissi’s work, I would argue that her theoretical focus on feminism and Islam has immense implications for two distinct contexts of debate.

Following the logic of postcolonial scholarship, the era of *postcolonialism* is inherently shaped by *neo-colonial* discourses.²⁵ The latter do not only export the Western hierarchy of values along with ideas about right and wrong to non-Western countries,²⁶ they also infiltrate knowledge production, particularly in the academic realm.²⁷ If we keep in mind that Mernissi examines religious sources with feminist eyes, her approach may encourage a rethinking of the Western feminist theory tradition. After all, Mernissi's bridging of feminism and religion overcomes the dichotomy of 'secular feminism' vs. 'religious feminism' in which the former seems to determine the latter. In other words, Mernissi challenges the authority of knowledge production²⁸ as well as the seemingly rigid idea that feminism and religion cannot be reconciled. Said argument constitutes an epistemic tackle and can be reflected upon with questions such as 'Who owns feminism?' or – as it has been asked in the *Middle East Eye* journal – "Is western feminism Islamophobic"?²⁹

Moreover, reading the Quran and the *hadith* through a feminist lens and revealing Islam as an explicit advocate of gender equality and social justice, Mernissi challenges universalising and homogenising ideas about Islam (which seem to dominate both the media and public discourses) as well as its relationships to gender, human rights, social justice, and politics. As Mernissi's work questions these hegemonic discourses, it may help to remove the stigma particular (Muslim- and Arab-looking) bodies carry³⁰ in an era which is shaped by increasing Islamophobic sentiments.³¹ The stigma (manifesting itself in hypervisibility, marginalisation and/or discrimination) that the Muslim community faces nowadays is mainly caused by homogenising (media) discourses and representations.³² Certainly, the discursive construction that Islam is an enemy to Western values is difficult to overcome due to its strategic and political usefulness. After all, it legitimises military presence or interventions and development projects in many regions by means of a rhetoric of saving or liberating the locals.³³ However, Mernissi's work brings terms back together (Islam and peace, justice, equality) that have been and still are deliberately separated, thus allowing for a better understanding and, ideally, less violence between 'Eastern' and 'Western' traditions. By challenging the *epistemic violence*³⁴ inherent in both academia and 'actuality', Mernissi as an interdisciplinary scholar has built bi-, cross-, and transcultural bridges. Her transformative work encourages us to further promote very much needed dialogues between cultures, religions, and societies.

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Samira Mahboub

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<https://www.sozopolis.de/fatima-mernissi.html>