

Towards a Feminist Interpretation of Islam: Faith and Gender in the Work of Fatima Mernissi.

Dr. Shazia Malik

Ph.D in Women's Studies, India

Abstract: *Most recently, religious identification has taken on political significance in post-colonial Arab Countries. Social, economic, military and political failures have galvanised, reactionary religious responses to western domination and globalization. This paper is concerned with Islamic/ Arab feminism, and seeks to analyze its contributions, with the focus on the work of one Arab feminist, Fatima Mernissi. By bringing in issues of faith, identities, colonialism and culture to feminism, she has made a substantial contribution to the enrichment of feminist thought. To analyse Fatima Mernissi's thought I shall go through her sociological and feminist works. A Moroccan by birth, Mernissi's primary concern has all along been with the position of women in the rapidly changing Muslim communities in the Arab world, in particular, Morocco.*

Keywords: *Feminist Theology, third world feminism, Islamic Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender and Islam.*

I. Introduction

Western feminism has been challenged, and modified, from a variety of perspectives by the third world feminists. Third world feminism is, indeed, very complex, differentiated as it is by class and region. Scholars usually treat third world feminism as divided into black feminism, South Asian feminism, Islamic/Arab feminism, etc. This paper is concerned with Islamic/ Arab feminism, and seeks to analyze its contributions, with the focus on the work of one Arab feminist, Fatima Mernissi. She represents an important voice in third world feminism, and has brought in issues of colonial occupation, orientalist representation, identity politics, intersectionality and tolerance of difference to feminist thought.

II. Survey of Mernissi's work

Before I begin to analyze her thought, let me first briefly enumerate her major works. A Moroccan by birth, Mernissi's primary concern has all along been with the position of women in the rapidly changing Muslim communities in the Arab world, in particular, Morocco. In 1975, she published the result of her first field work entitled, *Beyond the Veil: Female Dynamics in the Modern Muslim Society* [1]. The book instantly established her as a leading Arab feminist scholar, and in many respects raised significant issues in feminist thought. She challenged the western stereotypes about Islam, which, as she pointed out, were shared by the European feminists as well. Western representations of Islam, she argued, served to de-legitimize the cultural categories and cognitive elements that shaped the lives of Arab women. The other significant departure in her book was an attempt to reinterpret Islamic history and theology along feminist, gender-sensitive line.

The other important book authored by Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy* [2] makes a vehement plea for the restoration of democracy in the Arab world. She has in the book unraveled the complex process through despots use Islamic symbolism to subvert democratic processes. More importantly, she sees religion as a symbolic resource that can both buttress and subvert the legitimate democratic aspirations of the common people.

One of the central contributions of Mernissi has been in the articulation, and elaboration of what is now generally referred to as, "feminist theology", an attempt to re-interpret Islam along feminist line, as a source for women's empowerment. It is this that led her to re-write the history of Islam, highlighting the agency of Muhammad's wives in the elaboration of faith. In her influential book, *Women and Islam: An historical and theological enquiry* [3], Mernissi highlights the role of women in the spread of Islam, and more importantly, the articulation of Islam. The book also discusses the 'rights' of women in Islam, and makes an interesting, if controversial, argument that *shari'a* has been deliberately mutilated by men, and, if it appears as an instrument of patriarchy today, it is because women have never had the chance to interpret it in a gender sensitive context.

In another book, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* [4], Mernissi highlights the power and agency of the queens in the Islamic world, with a view to suggest that exercise of political authority in the Islamic world was never an exclusive male prerogative. Women did also exercise political authority, but their contribution has, unfortunately, been erased from history and popular consciousness.

III. Emergence of Islamic/Arab feminism

As a feminist, what does Mernissi represent? As against Euro-Atlantic feminism, she claims to represent Arab/Islamic feminism. Islamic feminism might seem to some a contradiction in terms, and, indeed, to many feminists in the western world, Islam and feminism inhabit mutually exclusive realms. Nayereh Tohidi describes Islamic feminism as a movement of women who have maintained their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using the female-supportive verses of the Quran in their fight for women's rights [5]. Islamic feminists argue that there can be a feminist reading of Islamic theology, and patriarchal interpretations of the Quran and the *Hadith* can be validly interrogated with a feminist counter-interpretation. Various Arab feminists like Liela Ahmad, have consistently asserted that egalitarianism inherent in the ethical voice of Islam. They hear and read in its sacred text, justly and legitimately, a different message from that heard by the makers and enforcers of orthodox andocentric Islam [6]. These Muslim women are working within systems that marginalize them, and in the process they are becoming publically visible and audible [7].

Islamic feminists have come to insist that the gender discrimination has a social rather than a natural or/and a religious basis and this could open the door to new possibilities for gender equality. Sherkat, a scholar of Arabic, well versed in the Quran, has raised the issue of the right to women to interpret Islamic law, and has argued that this could pave the way for the development of a version of Islam that is non-patriarchal, one that serves the interests and aspirations of women [8]. Mernissi's contribution precisely lies within this realm, the realm of feminist theology. Like the other Islamic feminists, she offers a woman-oriented, gender-sensitive interpretation of Islam.

According to Cooke, Islamic feminists like Mernissi are learning to take advantage of the transnationalism of Islam to empower themselves as women and as Muslims. Mernissi situates herself as an Islamic feminist in order to study the lives of women during the formative years of Islamic history. Most of the Mernissi's works concentrate on the period immediately after the Prophet's Death in 632. She questions the reliability of a 'sound' tradition or sayings attributed to the Prophet. Fatima Mernissi is, perhaps, the most influential Arab feminist, and has, indeed, by bringing in the issues of faith, identities, colonialism and culture to feminism, made a substantial contribution to the enrichment of feminist thought.

IV. Mernissi's feminist reading of Islamic texts:

One of the most courageous efforts of Fatima Mernissi has been to challenge the orthodox interpretations of Islam. Given the significance she attaches to religious beliefs, it is difficult to agree with Claire Noon that she is a liberal feminist [9]. It is indeed true that she strongly believes in equal rights for women, but her perception of 'rights' do not emerge exclusively from European, liberal thought, but from an avowedly Islamic framework. In reinterpreting Islam, she begins by offering a very radical, and indeed, unconventional, view of Islam. Islam, she says, is "a set of psychological devices about self-empowerment and making oneself at home everywhere around the globe, in unfamiliar as well as familiar surroundings." Mernissi argues that when the Arab countries were defeated by the west, the colonizers used all the available means to persuade the vanquished Arabs of their inferior, even primitive status, and related their alleged inferiority to their religious beliefs. In the orientalist discourse, Muslims were seen as promiscuous, and their women, victims of male oppression. The western colonizers took up the issue of women's degraded condition in Arab society as a rhetorical tool for legitimating imperial domination. In doing so, they not only challenged the Arab culture, but also their faith, locating in Islam the reasons for the 'intolerable' condition of women in the Islamic world. Mernissi clearly locates the prevalent stereotypical perceptions of Islam in the orientalist writings, and seeks to deconstruct that discourse, to recover Islam within a sensitive, human context, sensitive to the concerns of women, and seeking to create a society based on gender equality.

Mernissi begins by making a comparative assessment of women in the western and the Arab world, and comes to the conclusion that at both places, the position of women is clearly inferior and subordinate to men. At the same time, she points out the social, cultural and intellectual basis of gender inequalities is different in both civilizations. In the west, she argues, gender inequality, which she terms, 'sexual inequality', is based on the assumption of women's biological weakness. A woman, in the western world, is perceived to be inferior to men, both physically and mentally. In the Islamic world, gender inequalities do not emerge from a belief in their weakness, but, quite the contrary, in their power, and dangerous potential. Sexual segregation should, she suggests, be seen as a strategy for containing the power and potential of women. Throughout, Mernissi is addressing several audiences simultaneously, alternately blaming and praising Arab readers, then Muslims and then western readers.

V. Mernissi on Sexuality

Citing the Quran, and re-interpreting its verses, Mernissi argues that sexuality is not an evil in Islam, and, therefore, even as women in the Islamic world is viewed as sexual, it is not with a view to degrade her, nor even to render her inferior to men. However, patriarchal interpretations have, from the representation of women as

sexual, jumped to the conclusion that women in Islam are inferior and subordinate to men. Inverting the patriarchal ethos, Mernissi asserts that Islam recognizes women's irresistible power over men. The emphasis on gender segregation in Muslim societies, therefore, emerges not from the faith in women's subordinate position, but from the realization of their potential strength. Belief in women's potential strength has, argues Mernissi, led to the institutionalization of sexual segregation in the Islamic world. According to her, there are three sources that restrict the intimacy in a heterosexual unit: polygamy, men's unilateral right of divorce, and the authority of the mother-in-law in the family.

Mernissi considers polygamy as a great impediment in the development of conjugal intimacy. It keeps women's sexuality under control, while it gives men the authority to have multiple sexual relationships. This humiliates womanhood and render women inferior and subordinate to men. Similarly, men's unilateral rights in marriage impede conjugal intimacy, because it fosters a sense of insecurity among women, and obstructs the development of meaningful relationship between spouses. In traditional Islam there is a clear division between male and female spaces, and this too enables men to restrict and control women's sexual behavior. There is, therefore, a need to reinterpret Islam to let it become an instrument for gender equality and the empowerment of women. On the basis of her field work in Morocco, she argues that Islamic societies, in particular the women in these societies, represent a classic case of an anomic incompatibility between social norms and real life experiences. The influence of Durkheim is obvious here, and Mernissi borrows the Durkheimian term, 'anomie'¹ to refer to the lack of faith in the ethical system and the values in the contemporary Islamic societies. This anomie, she believes, can be overcome, not by rejection of culture (and faith), but, instead, by its gender sensitive re-interpretation.

According to Mernissi, the roots of female subjugation in the Islamic world do not lie in Islam, but in the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic ethics and beliefs. Islam was always defined and interpreted by men, and theological class that provided lengthy commentaries on the Quran and the hadith were all men, interested in defending patriarchy. She points out that during Prophet's time, Muslim women in Medina had, like men, the status of companions (*sahabi*) of the Prophet, and could converse freely with him on issues of faith and morality. One of the ways, she argues, through which men have turned Islam patriarchal is through the manipulation, and more than manipulation even manufacture of the hadith literature. The most reliable hadith are those that were compiled by al-Bukhari, but among the 600,000 hadith that he actually collected only 7,257 were, on verification, found to be authentic. She points that if there were as many as 596,725 false hadith in circulation during Bukhari's time, which is in less than two centuries of the Prophet's death, one can easily imagine how many fabricated and apocryphal hadiths would be in circulation today.

According to Mernissi, Islam recognizes women as powerful, sexual beings. There is no notion of female inferiority in Islam. It, therefore, recognizes the potential equality between men and women, and if this is not the case today, it is, for feminist believers, simply because that potential has not been realized. While comparing the conceptions of sexual dynamics in Freud and Ghazali, Mernissi comes to the interesting argument that gender polarization is a characteristic of Freudian psychoanalysis, but is totally absent in Ghazali's thought. Both thinkers actually represent different intellectual trends. In the modern western thought, represented by Freud, gender difference is innate to human existence and the differences between men and women belong to the realm of nature. In contrast, in the Islamic world view, represented by Ghazali, gender difference is social, and the differences between men and women are not innate, but a result of the socialization process. There is then, concludes Mernissi, an acceptance in the latter of the potential equality between men and women. If this has not happened yet, it is because that potential has not been realized.

VI. Conclusion

As a level of thought Islamic feminism brought in issues of cultural identity, crucial to quest for gender equality. Since patriarchal thought has so far justified the denial rights of women on the grounds that the difference between men and women are natural. Fatima Mernissi claims Islam recognizes men and women potentially same. Like other Islamic feminists, she offers women oriented gender-sensitive interpretations of Islam.

References

- [1] Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim society*, (Schenkman Publishing Co., Inc. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1975)
- [2] Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern world*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland, (New York Addison-Wolsey Publishing Co., 1992)

¹ In his book, *The Division Of Labour*, Emile Durkheim introduced the concept of 'anomie' as a state of normlessness, which results in higher rates of crime suicide and deviance. He used anomie to describe a condition of deregulation that was occurring in society. In the situation of Anomie, Durkheim argues, individuals cannot find their place in society without clear rules to guide them.

- [3] Mernissi Fatima, *Women and Islam-An historical and theological enquiry*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland, (Kali for Women, Women Unlimited New Delhi, 2004)
- [4] Mernissi Fatima, *the Forgotten Queens of Islam*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997)
- [5] Tohidi Nayereh, "The Issues at Hand" In Herbert Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi (ed.), *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*, (Boulder Colo; Lynne Rienner, 1998).
- [6] Ahmed Leila, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1992)
- [7] Mariam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam; Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, (Routledge, New York, London, 2001)
- [8] Najmabadi, Afsaneh, *Feminism In an Islamic Republic; Years in Hardship, Years of growth*, in Yvonne, Y.Haddad and John Esposito (ed.), *Islam, Gender and Social Change in the Muslim World*, (New York Oxford University Press, 1998)
- [9] Claire Noon, 'Islamic feminism as articulated by Fatima Mernissi and its implications for Christian mission'
<http://docs.google.com/gview?a=v&q=cache:KHMsqDMWczol:www.redcliffe.org/documents/download.asp%3Flibraryversionid%3D2745%26nodeid%3D5426+fatima+mernissi,+claire+noon&hl=en&gl=in>