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Understanding the misinterpretations in Qur'anic hermeneutics through Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite*

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Abstract

Understanding the Misinterpretations in Qur'anic Hermeneutics through Fatima Mernissi's 'The Veil and the Male Elite' provides an insightful analysis of the misinterpretations of Quranic texts regarding women and highlights the importance of a contextual and critical approach to reclaiming gender equality within Islam.

By delving into the cultural and historical contexts of the Quranic revelations, Mernissi challenges the prevailing male interpretations and exposes their biases. She argues that early Islamic societies were more egalitarian than later periods, and the subjugation of women was a result of societal and cultural changes rather than the inherent teachings of Islam.

Keywords: Quranic hermeneutics, misinterpretations, women's rights, patriarchy, gender equality, Islam, Fatima Mernissi, cultural and historical context, societal oppression

Introduction

Fatima Mernissi was a Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist, who was born in Fez in 1940 in a middle-class family and died in 2015. She grew up in a sex-segregated household with her affluent paternal grandmother. She wanted to change the world for the betterment of everyone concerned. In her works, she critiqued the traditional authorities and exposed the misogyny that Muslim scholars have spread regarding the interpretations of the Prophet's actions and words. According to Mernissi, Prophet Muhammad was a revolutionary man, and he loved and respected women. Mernissi is recognized as an Arab-Muslim feminist in her own country and internationally. She was well known in her feminist circle, especially in France. Her books have been translated into many languages, including English, Japanese, Dutch, and German. She used to write regularly on the issues concerning women. Her work delves into the relationship between gender identity, the status of women in Islam, sexual ideology, and sociopolitical organization. But her work primarily focuses on Moroccan culture and its society. Her work as feminist attempts to represent the elements of the society that silences and oppresses Muslim women. She challenges the patriarchal Muslim male addresses that primarily concern women and she tries to give voice to Muslim women's difficulties.

Her book, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (first published in 1987 in French) analyses the historical background of Muslim Law and tradition and she claims that the Prophet Muhammad's original message was equality between the sexes and that message has been altered by later religious scholars and leaders. Her argument is still relevant today in the Muslim world.

This book is divided into two parts. Part one, *Sacred Text as Political Weapon*, consists of four chapters and it primarily focuses on the concerns of Muslims of that time, the history of the early period of Islam, and Islam's basic beliefs, and it also analyses the ahadith (sing. Hadith) by Abu Bakra and Abu Hurayra which is somewhat considered as misogynistic by Mernissi. Part two, *Medina in Revolution: The Three Fateful Years*, consists of six chapters and mainly deals with the Prophet Muhammad's life after *Hijra* in Medina this part also talks about how during this period the Hijab (veil) was introduced into Islam.

The two main aims of Mernissi's book are: first, Mernissi tries to say that whilst looking at ahadith, all its sources need to be looked at to find its authenticity because a lot of detrimental statements about women are made and without any proof, they are taken as a fact and to remove them a careful vetting needs to be done of all the ahadith. Second, Islam reached its full potential during the first three years of the Prophet's life in Medina, at that time it was the religion that believed in equal rights between sexes. But later, this equality began to crumble under the weight of democracy.

One of the many goals of Mernissi in writing this book was to investigate the misogynistic *ahadith* against women. The two main aims of Mernissi's book are: first, Mernissi tries to say that whilst looking at ahadith, all its sources need to be looked at to find its authenticity because a lot of detrimental statements about women are made and without any proof, they are taken as a fact and to remove them a careful vetting needs to be done of all the ahadith. Second, Islam reached its full potential during the first three years of the Prophet's life in Medina, at that time it was the religion that believed in equal rights between sexes. But later, this equality began to crumble under the weight of democracy.

My aim in writing this paper is somewhat similar to that of Mernissi, which is to clarify the ambiguities that are surrounding the topic of women's rights in Islam. In her book, Mernissi analyzed why Muslim women are made to veil and ultimately how they are caged in their own "*chardiwari*". According to Mernissi, Islam as a religion is going through an "identity crisis", and to protect it veiling their women becomes the most important element and this is thought of as symbolically protecting their religion from the West. Mernissi says in the preface that, "Muslim women can walk in the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, Stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition" (p. viii).

According to Mernissi, Islamic tradition is "it is neither because of the Koran, nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite" (p. ix). She says that the male elite manipulated the "sacred texts" in order to fabricate the false Islamic traditions, especially when certain attitudes or actions were in need to be made legitimate. She even went ahead and said that "not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies" (p. 8-9).

In this book, Mernissi puts in writing that this tradition shows an image of inequality that was not present during the Prophet's time. Mernissi took the help of two religious scholars and they guided her throughout the writing of her book she went through all the religious texts in order to reinterpret the Qur'anic verses and other religious texts and she showed all the misinterpretations and how time-limited the meanings are.

In her book, Mernissi makes her argument for the benefits of Muslim women and their rights and against the veiling tradition. She clarifies the verses that made veiling compulsory for Muslim women and says that those verses cannot be implemented in the lives of Muslim women of present times because those verses came from heaven to protect the Prophet and his wives during a turbulent time of civil war. She points out that the Prophet was very disappointed when he realized that the ideal Muslim society

that he envisioned where all the sexes have equal rights was an impossible ideal. Mernissi says that it's now time for Muslims to realize that the ideal version of Islam was the Prophet's plan for the future because even though he could not achieve his idealistic Islam in the Muslim society of the time but he followed it in his household.

Mernissi's "Male Elites" are the Prophet's companions or the early male supporters of Islam. She says that they were the ones who were who had patriarchal beliefs and not the Prophet himself. The Muslim women in Prophet's time had far more rights than they have today because the women of the time used to participate in political matters, argue for their basic rights, follow their husbands into war zones and encourage them, they were courageous enough to ask questions to the Prophet about why God did not include them in certain verses and their questions were answered in new verses. This shows that God answered to women also, the Prophet loved and respected them, and even the pre-Islamic *jahiliyya* society have given them immense rights and freedom. By mentioning all this, Mernissi is trying to make aware today's Muslim women of how privileged the women in the Prophet's time were.

Muslim women gained many rights through Islam like inheritance and property rights, and the right to reject or accept a marriage proposal, but they were also imposed with some restrictions by including the veil into their daily public life which was not a part of their lives earlier. Mernissi says that the earlier verses of the Qur'an give rights to women and somewhat preach equality but the later verses are a bit patriarchal. The later verses were revealed to calm the anger of the patriarchs of the society of the time. Qur'an is considered as God's revelation to his Prophet by the Muslims, hence all the verses will have to be accepted and respected.

In the second part of the book, the author tries to conceptualize the concept of the veil or *hijab* in Islam and says that it has spatial and visual aspects. In the eyes of the author, the separation of the public and private domain represents male supremacy and Mernissi considers this as backing away from the principle of gender equality.

Through this book, Mernissi has contributed to a "feminist reading of women's rights in Islam". Through it, she relates the Muslim past and present. She concludes her book by saying that even Orientalist and colonial discourses silenced Muslim women through veiling. So there is an urgent need for Muslim women to understand the rights given to them by the Qur'an itself and educate themselves about it and fight their own fights if need be.

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