

## **Understanding Women in Islam: A Review of Fatima Mernissi's *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry***

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Fatima Mernissi's *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* analyses the significant role of women in Islam and how the religious patriarchy has become successful in sabotaging such a significance. Mernissi conducts an authentic historical study by verifying and counter-verifying Prophet Mohammed's hadiths and uncovering the dominant role played by the Muslim patriarchy which rules the Umma after the Prophet's death. The article theoretically analyses Mernissi's work which remains one of the foundational texts in Islamic feminism. Islamic feminism is a significant stream of feminism in Islam, another one being secular feminism. This paper evaluates feminism in Islam as a corollary of postmodern feminisms that originated in various parts of the world. The major focus of the article is Mernissi's work which presents an explicit study of various hadiths from a feminist point of view.

**Key words:** islamic modernity, islamic feminism, secular feminism, ijthad, hadith

Postmodernism inaugurated a new phase of academics in the western world. However, the reverberations of postmodernism were not limited to the western academia but shook the entire world and further catered for the dissemination of new and innovative thoughts in different parts of the world. In the new scenario, theoretical perspectives evolved out to unsettle the concept of singularity and ques-

tioned the monopoly of the western metaphysics. The lecture “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” delivered by Jacques Derrida in 1966, the publication of *Orientalism* by Edward Said in 1978 and *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by Jean-Francois Lyotard in 1979 respectively mark the beginning of the postmodern era in the fields of academics and social theories.

With the advent of postmodernism, the whole world apparently began writing back to the Western academia from multiple perspectives as opposed to the idea of a unified, single entity. The incorporation of new social theories had their influence upon the ideas and thoughts connected with the years-long struggles led by women in parts of the world other than the Western countries. As opposed to the western singular idea of feminism relying on heterosexual relationships only, there emanated plural, multi-layered feminisms from various parts of the world. It was powerfully argued that whereas Western feminism quarrel with sexism and other social and political inequalities prevalent in the society, the women of the third world which usually designate the Asian, African and the Latin American countries need to journey through myriads of additional, often inexplicable problems of their own. These third world women must combat sexism in a society which represents a complex structure embedded with deep rooted rituals, traditions and customs, again made complicated with class, caste and ethnic clashes. Most often, women’s struggles in many of these countries go parallel with struggles to establish democratic governments and attain basic rights and freedom. Third world feminism as a movement got inaugurated after rejecting the universalism propagated by the white feminists of the West. The origins of feminism in Islamic nations should be analysed in such a political context.

Most importantly, the emergence and growth of feminism in Islam must be read as a response to the stereotypical views about Muslim women generated in the west as well as an answer to many Muslims who attack the West for imposing its ideology over the Islamic nations and thereby discredit the existence of Muslim women’s feminism. Several studies and analyses state that the feminism propounded by Muslim women is unique in every sense. The presence of

religion as an integral element provides it a distinct status when compared to the west where religion is often considered to be a private matter. The eminent theoretician Margot Badran differentiates between secular feminism and Islamic feminism as two streams that are active in the Muslim world. The emergence of secular feminism in various Muslim countries of Asia and Africa run parallel to the modernisation programmes that took place between the latter part of the nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. The active participation of Muslim women in the nationalist and anti-colonial struggles in these countries led them to the public sphere where they toiled along with men to build independent nation states. One of the distinct features of such movements was the coming together of women belonging to different ethnic and religious identities into national spaces. Thus, in nations with strong religious affiliation, women found secular grounds to take part in the nation building processes.

However, the strand of Islamic feminism stands different from secular feminism. Margot Badran, the theoreticians of Middel Easten studies in many of her works, initiated serious academic discussions about the Islamic feminist movements that originated in nations like Morocco and Iran. In “Engaging Islamic Feminism”, Badran traces the origin of Islamic feminism which goes in parallel with the debates concerning the growth of modernism in Islam in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Islamic modernity can be defined as a vital change that modernised the Islamic thought patterns after getting exposed to various western political ideologies. This further resulted in widespread transformations in the Muslim intellectual outlook and activities. The American political analyst and writer Graham E. Fuller in *The Future of Political Islam* opines that many of these changes were adorable enough to make several Muslim intellectuals ponder upon the Islamic rational climate of the times (Fuller, 2003, p. 7). Islam, which had been going through several ups and downs in its intellectual journey until then, was put to serious examination by a group of modern reformists. The political and intellectual works done by several nineteenth century activists like Jamal-al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abdu and Muhammad Rashid Ridha paved way for Islamic modernism that catered to the

broad exposure to “the extremes of European political ideology, which included socialism, Marxism, communism and fascism, all of which were implemented in one state or another” (Fuller, 2003, p. 8). In this regard, the modernist thoughts deployed by the Egyptian religious scholar Muhammad ‘Abduh in the nineteenth century gained world-wide significance.

The pioneering endeavours undertaken by ‘Abduh influenced the progressive thinkers within the religious circles to initiate *ijtihad* and *tafsir*. Ijtihad denotes the independent critical examination of religious texts and *tafsir* means Qur’anic interpretations. Even though the feminists of the earlier phase failed to engage fully with the religious texts due to the lack of proper training and education, they gathered proficiency to read various hadiths and do *ijtihad* and their own *tafsir* by the end of the twentieth century. Influenced by the new insights given by the religious texts, the women activists who felt an urgent need to fight against the strengthening resurgence of patriarchal political Islam not only clamoured for amendments in the personal status codes, but also asked for reservations in significant religious positions like the judge and the mufti.

Academic research and studies conducted by eminent theoreticians had a great role in facilitating various feminist uprisings in several Islamic nation states. Establishment of numerous women’s organisations as well as academic publications in many Muslim countries openly debated issues related to male-centredness and offered readings of the Qur’an and other Islamic scriptures founded upon gender equality and justice. Fatima Mernissi’s *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* becomes a milestone in the paths of Islamic feminism. It is considered to be one of the key texts which examines various hadiths related to Prophet Muhammad’s life and shows how the religious patriarchy became successful in manipulating various holy scriptures and transforming them into misogynistic writings.

In *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* published in 1991, Fatima Mernissi undertakes a historical journey through the life of Prophet Mohammad and the development of Islam as a world religion. Mernissi’s major concern here is the critical

examination of various hadiths which have evolved through generations and continue to influence the religious and social lives of Muslims. Mernissi, after going through a number of historical documents, successfully substantiates how Islam attained a patriarchal face after the death of the Prophet in 632 AD. She identifies Islam as a stagnant religion whose followers unceasingly gaze into the dead past instead of travelling into a progressive future. Mernissi quotes the Moroccan thinker Muhammad al-Jabiri who perceives this obsession with the past as a device which has aided the Muslim patriarchy to sway its power and authority over the public. According to al-Jabiri, the Muslim elite in the past made successful collaborations with religion and politics and thereby brought about a censorship in the religious texts. After building a tradition erected upon this illicit relationship, these religious elites efficiently took control over the social, political and private selves of the people of the Muslim community. Mernissi writes,

Al-Jabiri gives copious historical examples to prove that in Islam the politicians quickly realized that they could only authoritatively manage the present by using the past as a sacred standard. According to him, the famous *asr al-tadwin* (the era of putting the religious texts into writing) was the beginning of an institutionalization of censorship. It began in year 134 of the Hejira (eighth century AD) when the Muslim savants began to make a catalog of Hadith (the recorded deeds and sayings of the Prophet), *fiqh* (religious knowledge), and *tafsir* (explication of the Koran) at the express order of the Abbasid state and under its supervision. This took place during the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur, who ruled from year 136 of the Hejira to 158. (Mernissi, 1991, p. 16-17)

Mernissi further claims that the caliphate that roused as an answer to the political and legislative questions after the Prophet's death transformed itself into an authoritative theocratic state which manipulated the sacred law by elaborating upon a body of religious knowledge known as *fiqh*. "This consisted of, on the one hand, controlling the interpretation of the Qur'an, the text revealed by God, and, on the other hand, establishing the Sunna (tradition) of the Prophet by putting into writing hadith, everything that the Prophet said in order to

illuminate the way of Islam” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 32). Throughout the book, Mernissi presents the Prophet as an ideal ruler who toiled to bring the various discordant Arabian tribes under a monotheistic religion. She also testifies that the death of the Prophet paved the way for political uncertainties taking Islam “through a process in which only the elite was involved” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 39).

Using these historical events as a background, Mernissi begins her study of some of the oft-quoted misogynistic hadiths. A hadith can be considered as a collection of “all the pertinent information attributed to the Prophet” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 34). It is a written record of everything that is supposed to be said or done by the Prophet and is used by the Muslim community as a holy reference to differentiate the right from the wrong. The word ‘hadith’ evolves from the Arabic word *haddatha* which means ‘to tell’. Authenticity plays a key role while collecting hadiths related to various aspects of life. Hence, someone who used to be the Prophet’s companion, either a man or a woman, a prominent person or a slave is perceived as a faithful source of a hadith. This companion can be his wife, his relative, secretary or a follower. The companion’s personal qualities, reputation, and skill to memorise events also become crucial in recounting hadiths. These sacred hadiths which have been followed by generations of believers were collected by religious experts of various periods after gathering direct or indirect testimonials of “those who had heard the hadith directly spoken by the Prophet” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 35). However, several studies conducted in this field bear testimony to the fact that many of these hadiths, particularly those concerning women, were manipulated by the male elite in various stages of history.

Mernissi elaborates upon how the religious scholars who did researches to formulate hadiths were caught between the twin poles of academic faithfulness and political manipulation. Recognizing the prominence of religious scholars, historians, poets and storytellers who play significant roles in recording memory and writing religious histories, princes and caliphs of earlier periods tried either to influence them or to get rid of them by force. These acts were part of the rulers’ strategies to gain control of recorded religious history. Mernissi quotes Muhammad Abu Zahra, an Egyptian public intellectual who is seen

reiterating the viewpoints of the ninth century Imam Qadi Ayad regarding fake religious scholars.

Many sold themselves for a few dinars to politicians who were trying to pressurize the collectors of religious knowledge to fabricate traditions that benefited them. There were so many liars who tried to put into the mouth of the Prophet words that would benefit them, Abu Zahra tells us, that Qadi Ayad undertook to set up a classification of them. According to him, the first category is those who attribute to the Prophet remarks that he did not make. This category is subdivided into two groups: those who lie for material advantage and those who lie for ideological advantage. The second category is those who did not fabricate the content of the Hadith itself, but simply falsified the chain of transmitters. (Mernissi, 1991, p. 45)

However, the ninth century Persian Islamic scholar al-Bukhari's collection of hadiths known as Sahih al-Bukhari is generally deemed to be the most authentic text of hadiths. While collecting the hadiths, al-Bukhari took utmost care to avoid subjectivity and write the history of the Prophet faithfully, thereby considering the whole process as a scientific endeavour. Like other scholars, Bukhari was also made an object of political pressure, but he was keen enough to keep his knowledge away from the clutches of power politics. Bukhari collected testimonials from 1080 persons and gathered 6000,000 hadiths which he later perfected to 7257 authentic ones. From among these, Fatima Mernissi scrutinizes three popular misogynistic hadiths which are generally used against women by the patriarchal elite with an eye to keep them away from the social spheres of life. She also verifies the authenticity of these hadiths generally used to attack women. One of the hadiths reads thus: "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity" (Mernissi, 1991, p. 49). This hadith has been used against women to make false claims about their inefficiency and lack of leadership quality. Mernissi uses a major part of her text to direct arguments against this particular hadith and proves its hollowness. She examines a number of noteworthy but less popular historical documents and makes a profound study about the origin of the hadith. al-Bukhari attributes this misogynistic hadith to Abu Bakra,

one of the close companions of the Prophet. Abu Bakra supposedly reported about it twenty-five years after the Prophet's death, exactly after the Battle of the Camel. The Battle of the Camel fought between the Prophet's widow, 'A'isha and Ali, the fourth caliph in the seventh century, infamously speaks about 'A'isha's failure and incapability as a warrior. 'A'isha, who led the war with an aim to uncover the murderers of the third caliph 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, later turned to become a notorious figure who, as a result of her indecisiveness and over confidence, apparently inaugurated an era of unending civil wars in the history of Islam. Mernissi finds it curious that Abu Bakra pronounces the aforementioned hadith precisely after 'A'isha's defeat. Her deep excavations into history with an aim to comprehend the genuineness of the saying reveals that al- Bukhari reports Abu Bakra's words authentically but the legitimacy of Bakra as a source of the hadith is tricky. She validates her argument by quoting Imam Malik Ibn Anas, the eighth century religious scholar who is regarded as one of the three most famous imams in Islam. According to Imam Malik, the most significant quality needed to transmit a hadith is moral goodness which Abu Bakra lacks. Mernissi comments,

Knowledge [al- 'Um] cannot be received from a safih [mentally deficient person] nor from someone who is in the grip of passion and who might incite bid'a [innovation] nor from a liar who recounts anything at all to people. And finally, one should not receive knowledge from a shaykh, even a respected and very pious one, if he has not mastered the learning that he is supposed to transmit. (Mernissi, 1991, p. 59)

Mernissi opines that Abu Bakra needs to be eliminated from the list of genuine sources “since one of the biographies of Abu Bakra tells us that he was convicted of and flogged for false testimony by the caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 60). She also claims that the elite members who constituted the patriarchy stamped 'A'isha as the harbinger of civil disorder and they deliberately failed to project instances of her valorous doings. Despite her failure in the Battle of the Camel, 'A'isha may be considered as a crusader who fought for justice and righteousness which the Muslim caliphate failed to fulfil. In the beginning of her text, Fatima Mernissi states history to be “a group's

language, the official narrative that is pressed between covers of gold and trotted out for ritual ceremonies of self congratulation” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 10). This turns out to be true in the case of 'A'isha who is comfortably obliterated from history written by the elite class. Nevertheless, myriads of scholars have attested that 'A'isha's contributions as an intellectual have enriched the religious knowledge system. “The Prophet recognized 'A'isha's importance to such an extent that he said: 'Draw a part of your religion from little al-humayra” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 78). He called 'A'isha al-humayra referring to her very white skin. 'A'isha is believed to have contributed as many as 1210 hadiths and has also revised a number of wrong sayings attributed to Prophet Mohammad. She was, “among all the people, the one who had the most knowledge of fiqh, the one who was the most educated and, compared to those who surrounded her, the one whose judgement was the best” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 70). She often used to accompany the Prophet on military expeditions which testifies her valour and experience as a fighter on warfronts. Throughout the study of 'A'isha, Mernissi reiterates her statement that the Battle of the Camel truly projects the gallantry of 'A'isha which the patriarchy failed to acknowledge. Also, the hadith which seemingly originated after the Battle of the Camel became a key reason to keep women locked within the homely space.

Fatima Mernissi, after going through several such misogynistic hadiths, arrives at a conclusion that the imams and other religious leaders through their deliberate attempts to distort history wiped out women from the entire social scene. She enlists a handful of sayings which picturise women as weak and impure. Prophet Muhammad supposedly said: “Three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse”. (Mernissi, 1991, p. 75), “I do not leave after me any cause of trouble more fatal to man than women” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 76), "I took a look at paradise, and I noted that the majority of the people there were poor people. I took a look at hell, and I noted that there women were the majority” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 76). These are numbered as other important authentic hadiths collected by al- Bukhari. The source of the first hadith is Abu Hurayra, the Prophet's companion and the second and third hadiths are testified by 'Abdallah Ibn 'Umar, the

second caliph's son. As in the matter of Abu Bakra, here too, Mernissi interrogates the authenticity of Abu Hurayra and 'Abdallah Ibn 'Umar. She directs our attention to the studies undertaken by the fourth century Imam Zarkashi of Turkey and verifies the ethical background of Abu Hurayra. Imam Zarkashi who did a genuine study about 'A'isha's contributions to religious knowledge, describes several encounters which the Prophet's wife had with Abu Hurayra and thus uncovers his immoral nature. Hurayra is presented as a liar whose hadiths are weakly based and whose authenticity is repeatedly suspected by a group of members close to the Prophet. Mernissi quotes from Imam Zarkashi's Collection of 'A'isha's Corrections to the Statements of the Companions and states how 'A'isha contradicted Abu Hurayra's hadiths with the aid of her knowledge and memory power. "He is not a good listener, and when he is asked a question, he gives wrong answers, says 'A'isha" (Mernissi, 1991, p. 78).

Mernissi also finds fault with al-Bukhari who failed to provide multiple versions of the same hadith. Varied readings of a particular hadith offer opportunities of plural interpretations. Supported by the arguments raised by Imam Zarkashi in his *Al-Ijaba*, she vehemently criticises al-Bukhari.

al-Bukhari did not include other versions of this Hadith, although the rule was to give one or more contradictory versions in order to show readers conflicting points of view, and thus to permit them to be sufficiently well informed to decide for themselves about practices that were the subject of dispute. However, there is no trace in al-Bukhari of 'A'isha's refutation of this Hadith. 'They told 'A'isha that Abu Hurayra was asserting that the Messenger of God said: 'Three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse.' 'A'isha responded: 'Abu Hurayra learned his lessons very badly. He came into our house when the Prophet was in the middle of a sentence. He only heard the end of it. What the Prophet said was: 'May Allah refute the Jews; they say three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse.' Not only did al-Bukhari not include this correction, but he treated the Hadith as if there was no question about it. (Mernissi, 1991, p. 75-76)

Mernissi then goes on to elaborate upon the multiple guises in which misogyny intruded into Islam. One such pretext is the taboo attached to women's menstruation. Religious controversies in connection with women's menstrual cycle have been discussed and debated since a long time. Mernissi in *Women and Islam* affirms that Islam is no different and menstruation and women's impurity have always been topics of conflict in the religion. The imams who talked extensively about purification rituals after the death of the Prophet propagated images of menstruating women as sullied beings whose presence during prayers can be sources of negative energy. Mernissi, on the other hand, cites that 'A'isha and the other wives of the Prophet "never lost any opportunity to insist that the Prophet did not have the phobic attitude of pre-Islamic Arabia on that subject" (Mernissi, 1991, p. 73). She also adds that the notions of menstruation as impure existed in the pre-Islamic periods and the Prophet fought against such wrong notions.

Pre-Islamic Arabia regarded sexuality, and the menstruating woman in particular, as a source of pollution, as a pole of negative forces. This theory about pollution expressed a vision of femaleness that was conveyed through a whole system of superstitions and beliefs that Muhammad wanted to condemn. He saw it as, on the one hand, the essence of the jahiliyya (the era of ignorance) and, on the other hand, the essence of the beliefs of the Jewish community of Medina.... According to the meticulous al-Nasa'i, Maymuna, one of the wives of the Prophet (he had nine at the time that concerns us here, the last years of his life in Medina), said: 'It happened that the Prophet recited the Koran with his head on the knee of one of us while she was having her period. It also happened that one of us brought his prayer rug to the mosque and laid it down while she was having her period.' (Mernissi, 1991, p. 73-75)

Nonetheless, the customs and rituals associated with purity and strict body cleanliness apparently neglected the enlightening ideas deployed by the Prophet. During her analysis, Mernissi provides instances from her own experiences to show how she was refused admittance at the doors of mosques in Penang, Malaysia, Baghdad

and Kairwan.

In *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry*, Fatima Mernissi adopts the methodology of a historical analysis to demonstrate how women have deliberately been silenced by the patriarchy after the Prophet's demise. For this purpose, she makes use of various historical documents and proves the errors of a number of misogynistic hadiths. After the publication of Mernissi's work, several theoreticians did serious inquiries into the theological fields to prove that Islam is not against women and the existing misogynistic face was attributed by the religious patriarchy which still controls the theological, social and political lives of various Muslim communities.

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