

**Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite:*
A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam,
translated by Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Basic, 1991)**

The question of the role of women in Islamic public life has provoked debate both within and without the community since the earliest days of the Prophet. Even as modernity and democracy begin to emerge in Muslim nations, there remains considerable resistance to women's participation in that process. Citing the Qu'ran and the Hadith, opponents of change might appear to have an unassailable position. Yet Fatima Mernissi, in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, argues that calls to religious validation of misogyny are at odds with the original egalitarian intent of the Prophet.¹ Analyzing these hadith and Qu'ranic sura, she notes that they emerged out of a particularly critical point in the history of Islam, when internal and external pressures threatened Muhammad, his wives and the fledgling religion. Examining the context of the writing of these passages, especially the relationship between Muhammad and his wives, she argues that these forces brought about the diminution of the original Islamic principle and created a rift between truly Islamic attitudes to women and those descended instead from pre-Islamic tribal traditions.

Much of the current internal friction regarding female participation in political debate arises, Mernissi claims, from the crisis of identity besetting a Muslim society that struggles to come to terms with modernity. As the West looks to the present and to the future, she avers that Muslims obsess instead with the past, turning to tradition and especially the apparent certainties of sacred texts for strength in a changing world. Born out of the earliest days of Islam in Medina, the hadith emerged as a "formidable political weapon" in times of crisis.² Despite the "science" of hadith interpretation, she maintains that the elite continued to use false hadith to serve their

political and economic ends. This included the disenfranchisement of women and the embedding of pre-Islamic tribal misogyny within the fabric of Islamic tradition.

Mernissi identifies two hadith in particular as critical weapons in the male arsenal in continuing debates against female equality. The first, transmitted initially by a Companion called Abu Bakra, states, "Those who entrust their affairs to women will never know prosperity."³ The second, originated by Abu Hurayra, both places women in the same polluting category as animals as well as excluding them from sacred space.⁴ According to hadith science, the transmitters of hadith must be both qualified and reliable for their hadith to be valid. For both these originators, Mernissi argues, this is not the case. Examining the history and the reputations of both Abu Bakra and Abu Hurayra, she argues that both had personal reasons for the origination of anti-female hadith. Moreover, both men had reputations as liars. Nevertheless, these hadith became part of the tradition and men continue to rely upon them. This runs contrary to the duty of Muslims to question everything, even "authentic" hadith. Mernissi thus justifies her examination of these hadith and of the tradition in which they became entrenched not as counter to Muslim practice but as part of it.

Mernissi thus continues by examining the emergence of the misogynist tradition that validated such hadith and allowed their continued currency. Such a tradition, she claims, was not the original intent of the Prophet Muhammad but rather the result of forces, internal and external, acting upon Islam in the very earliest days of the community in Medina. Muhammad, she argues, never intended the hijab – or veil – that "fell"

¹ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Basic, 1991).

² Ibid., 33.

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ Ibid., 69.

upon women both literally and metaphorically, to separate them from both the divine and from public life. Indeed, analyzing the life of Muhammad and his relation to his wives, Mernissi notes that the Prophet initially included his wives both in public discourse and in public space. Moreover, Muhammad attempted to break with a misogynist tribal past, in which women were nothing more than possessions, with revelations concerning women's rights to inheritance. In particular, Mernissi notes that sura 33 of verse 35 of the Qu'ran acknowledges the equality of all believers, male and female, before God, thus asserting their individual sovereignty.⁵

Muhammad's egalitarian idea had potentially profound implications for the Islamic community, implications that most men were unwilling to accept. Loss of inheritance rights and the ability to prostitute out female slaves would strike at their economic interests while women's political and sexual rights challenged traditional male identities. Perhaps had the political and military context been more stable, men would have been able to accommodate these changes, but given the precarious situation in Medina, it was too much, too soon. The Muslim community was on the military defensive and Muhammad needed the fighting strength of the conservative tribal forces if Islam was to survive. Moreover, dissent within Medina itself was growing and the dissenters – known as Hypocrites – focused upon Muhammad's wives as a weakness, targeting them in the street. Reaching the end of his life and beset by these problems, Muhammad bowed to pressure from the conservative and misogynist `Umar to not only veil his wives for their protection but to allow the diminution of women's rights and the reassertion of male dominance as a means of ensuring the survival of Islam.

Mernissi asserts then that the descent of the hijab runs counter to the egalitarian ideals of Muhammad. The Prophet envisioned a polite society in which violence was illegitimate and supervision superfluous, in which individual self-control made the veiling of women

⁵ Ibid., 118.

unnecessary. The resistance and incomprehension of Companions such as `Umar to this principle of individualism thus diluted the true Islamic message, substituting the law of tribal violence as the cornerstone of the Islamic community. This misogynistic principle was then entrenched within the sacred literature and enforced through manipulation of the texts both within and after Muhammad's lifetime. Only by studying the context in which these texts emerged can Muslims truly begin to understand the original Islamic principles supposedly contained within the hadith but shrouded in centuries of bias and begin to reassess the position of women within Islam.

Using a variety of traditional sources, Mernissi interprets the hadith and the Qu'ran using traditional Islamic science as well as modern sociological methods to reach some interesting and powerful conclusions. Her use of the former, in particular, is presumably an attempt to address not only academic audiences but also practicing Muslims who might otherwise reject her arguments. Her analysis and interpretation of these sources is often acute and very revealing. However, the range of her sources could have been wider. It pales in comparison, for instance to that used by Fred Donner in his study of early Islamic history.⁶ Unfortunately, this leads to Mernissi making some rather sweeping and unattributed statements in the course of the book.⁷ In addition, by overlooking the differences in interpretation by Sunni and Shia scholars, Mernissi ignores potential nuances in the feminist argument. As argued by the historian D.A. Spellberg, analysis of the differences and similarities between Sunni and Shi'ite interpretations of A'isha bint Abu Bakr can provide important understanding of women's position in

⁶ Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 14 (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998) 61.

⁷ Her assertion that the tribal armies of Islam were "strongly homosexual" (163) is a particularly egregious example of this tendency.

Islam.⁸ Mernissi's tendency to generalization along with a rather confused structure that often repeats itself thus speaks to her writing a "call to arms" for Muslim women as much as a purely academic work. This does not make *The Veil* and *the Male Elite* of no value to scholars, as historians of the early Islamic period and feminist theorists, as well as a more general readership, should find it interesting and provocative. However, for scholars, it should be read within a context of a deeper and more subtle examination of the texts and of the milieu in which they were written to truly appreciate the complexities of the role of women in the Islamic world.

⁸ D.A. Spellberg. *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of `A'isha bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia Uni. Press, 1994)