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Mernissi, F. (1987). *Beyond the veil: Male–female dynamics in modern Muslim society*

Yusra Abdul-Rahim

In *Beyond the veil: Male–female dynamics in modern Muslim society*, Mernissi explores the impact of modernization on the social order in Morocco in the early 1970s, which was traditionally built on segregation and patriarchal understandings of Shariah law. Divided into two parts, the book begins with the traditional Muslim view of women and the social order through an analysis of the Qur’an and hadiths. Using Imam Ghazali’s concept of sexuality, Mernissi illustrates how this concept, and our understanding of it, resulted in inequalities between the sexes, as well as the belief that the social order is dependent upon women as a consequence of their active female sexuality. Social order is described as being “secured when the woman limits herself to her husband and does not create fit, or chaos, by enticing other men to illicit intercourse” (Mernissi, 1987, p.39).

The first part of the book analyzes historical societal changes. It begins with pre-Islamic practices in the Arabian Peninsula, where women enjoyed sexual self-determination and the right to sleep with men other than their husbands, and continues up until the 1970s in Morocco, where social structure was based on men’s dominance and the seclusion of women.

Mernissi explores the traditional conceptualization of women’s sexuality using a theoretical model, based on ideas of Muslim marriage in Imam Ghazali’s (n.d.) book, *The revivification of religious sciences*. Ghazali theorizes that female sexuality is active, and if left unattended, could become aggressive and disrupt the social order. Therefore, it is a man’s duty to manage and control female sexuality (Mernissi, 1987, p. 39). Mernissi argues that this belief in the need for women to be controlled is a result of a distorted outlook on female sexuality as inherently

corrupting and requiring control. The belief that women have an active sexuality is embedded in Moroccan folk culture in the form of a female demon (Mernissi, 1987, p. 42), and in Moroccan society through sexual segregation (p. 91). Consequently, this affects ideas around marriage and results in a clash of ideologies (p. 94–99). The belief that the social order will collapse if women are given any form of self-determination is still prevalent in many parts of Morocco (Mernissi, 1987, p. 99).

Mernissi applies this framework to understand and highlight the contrast between the situation in 1970s Morocco with Ghazali's ideas of male–female dynamics. Mernissi's study comprised 15 women of the "urban petty-bourgeoisie" (p. 90); eight traditional, and six modern women. The traditional women were brought up during a period in which sexual segregation was strictly imposed, and this was reflected in their views of women's sexuality. The modern women, meanwhile, held more liberal beliefs in sexual desegregation. Additionally, Mernissi analysed 400 letters, submitted by both men and women, sent anonymously to a government religious counselling service.

Mernissi discovered that the disruption of traditional Muslim social order was a result of modernization, which brought about the desegregation of traditional spatial boundaries; specifically, women's domestic world of sexuality and family. Traditional Muslim ideas about marriage and female sexuality clashed with modernity, and the desires of the younger generations: "more women are using traditionally male spaces, going without the veil, and determining their own lives" (Mernissi, 1987, p.98).

In *Beyond the veil*, Mernissi challenges Ghazali's concept of active female sexuality, and highlights that distorted understanding is an effect of this belief. In turn, this distortion has led to wider social impacts; for example, the segregation of public spaces, and public expression of heterosexual love in both urban and rural areas. It is easy to understand why *Beyond the veil* is considered to be a classic text in Islamic feminism. Mernissi successfully translated the concept of shame, and illustrated how the responsibility falls on Muslim women to stabilise the Muslim social

order, such that the fear of female self-determination will lead to *fitna*. Today, while many Muslim women in urban cities have more freedom than they would have had in the 1970s, the concept of shame remains prevalent. It is a universal concept forced upon Muslim women, regardless of geographical location, and is often used as a tool to guilt women into submission. It is not uncommon for Muslim women to be told to wear the veil and dress ‘properly’, and the veil is often intertwined with respectability (Abbas, 2015). Muslim women in Malaysia are increasingly being bullied and abused online, often by men not known to them, for wearing clothes that are too tight (BBC, 2017); while, in Aceh, Indonesia, the state has imposed a strict dress code on women (Izharuddin, 2018). Confining honor and morality to women’s bodies causes Muslim men to believe they have the right to dictate to Muslim women how they must present themselves in public (Badran, 2005; Pereira and Ibrahim, 2010; Abbas, 2015).

One critique of *Beyond the veil* is the use of the term ‘Muslim society’ with reference to the male–female dynamics in Morocco, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Muslims are ethnically diverse and heterogeneous; using the MENA region to reference ‘Muslim society’ erases the varied experiences of Muslims outside of this region, and groups together the experiences of Muslims similar to those in MENA. Additionally, it could distort the view of the Western reader, who already views the ‘East’ through an Oriental gaze. Instead, Mernissi should have contextually and historically grounded her use of the term ‘Muslim society’ to reflect her case study, Morocco, and its relation to the broader Middle East, Arab, and Asian Muslim populations. Mernissi herself acknowledges that culture and religion are intertwined, so it is important to distinguish between the experiences of Arab Muslims from those in culturally different Indonesia.

Mernissi’s interpretation of the religious and juristic texts from a feminist perspective exposes differences between the authentic message of Islam, and the one being practiced. While *Beyond the veil* was written in the early 1970s, and women have since made several critical advances (in relation to education, or the workforce, for example), Muslim women continue to face inequalities, and self-determination is a continuing problem for Muslim women worldwide.

The rise of social media has highlighted the issue of Muslim women being policed online. The idea that women must be controlled and not 'seen' in public space remains prevalent. This highlights the importance of *Beyond the veil*, in that it is still relevant in today's context. *Beyond the veil* provides a good starting point to understand Islamic feminism and reiterates the need for feminist interpretation of religious texts.

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