



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

**Review of Mernissi, F. (1975) Beyond the veil: male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society, 1975**

Bouras, N.

**Citation**

Bouras, N. (2024). Review of Mernissi, F. (1975) Beyond the veil: male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society, 1975. *History Of Humanities*, 9(2), 329-337. doi:10.1086/731860

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4214848>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, 1975

---

Nadia Bouras, *Leiden University, Netherlands*

Fatima Mernissi (1940–2015) stands as a prominent Moroccan sociologist, renowned feminist, and prolific author. Born in Fez, Mernissi's formative years in a harem profoundly shaped her scholarly trajectory, particularly her exploration of gender dynamics within Islamic societies. Her academic journey began with studies in political science and sociology at the University of Rabat, culminating in the attainment of a PhD in sociology from Brandeis University in the United States. Subsequently, she ascended to the position of professor of sociology at Mohammed V University in Rabat, where she embarked on extensive research endeavors delving into gender issues and the complex tapestry of Islamic culture. Although Mernissi's work is rooted in sociology, she ventured beyond disciplinary boundaries, exploring historical religious texts to understand contemporary gender dynamics. This interdisciplinary approach, blending sociological inquiry with historical analysis, rendered her work a timeless masterpiece deserving of homage in any collection celebrating African classics of the humanities. In addition to her scholarly contributions, Mernissi emerged as a prominent public intellectual, engaging in profound discussions on feminism, Islam, and democracy. Her influence transcended linguistic boundaries, with her works being translated into numerous languages, thus extending her impactful ideas to a global audience. Recognition for her exceptional contributions flowed in the form of several awards, acknowledging her pivotal role in feminist scholarship and her dedication to fostering cross-cultural dialogues.

In a fitting tribute to her enduring legacy, September 2022 saw the release of *Fatima, the Unforgettable Sultana*, a cinematic homage crafted by Moroccan director Mohammed Abderahman Tazi. This film intricately weaves the narrative of Mernissi's life, illuminating her legacy as a feminist trailblazer and intellectual powerhouse, ensuring that her profound ideas continue to resonate and inspire generations worldwide.

---

*History of Humanities*, volume 9, number 2, fall 2024.

© 2024 Society for the History of the Humanities. All rights reserved. Published by The University of Chicago Press for the Society for the History of the Humanities. <https://doi.org/10.1086/731860>

### INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

Fatima Mernissi's intellectual foundations are deeply rooted in her Moroccan and Islamic heritage, her experiences as a woman, and the broader sociopolitical landscape of the Arab and Muslim world. Growing up in Morocco during a time when the nation was predominantly under French rule, Mernissi was profoundly shaped by the effects of colonialism. The colonial legacy, with its impact on identity, nationalism, and cultural dynamics, played a pivotal role in shaping her understanding of the complexities of postcolonial societies.

Her academic training in sociology and political science, along with exposure to feminist thought, contributed to the development of her intellectual framework. Mernissi engaged with postcolonial theories and discourses, which were gaining prominence during her academic career. This intellectual framework provided her with tools to analyze the effects of colonialism on identity, culture, and power dynamics in the Muslim world. Mernissi lived through a period of significant social and political changes in the Arab world. Movements for independence, the rise of political Islam, and debates on modernity and tradition influenced her perspectives on the role of women in society. Her multicultural intellectual context, shaped by experiences in both the Islamic world and Western academia, equipped her to bridge cultural divides and contribute meaningfully to cross-cultural understanding.

### SCHOLARSHIP

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Mernissi dedicated her sociological work to amplifying the voices of underprivileged women in both rural and urban areas of Morocco. She delved into the exploration of how these women faced dual forms of discrimination based on both class and gender. In her 1988 work *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan women*, Mernissi undertakes the rewriting of postcolonial Moroccan history, offering a perspective from the vantage point of marginalized women—peasants, women laborers, clairvoyants, factory workers, maidservants, and the illiterate. In this endeavor, Mernissi assumes the role of a secular intellectual, employing a hybrid methodology that incorporates analytical tools from various Marxist and feminist theories. Importantly, she actively rejects religious or philosophical dogmas, emphasizing that her position is not to be misconstrued as antireligious.

With the release of *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* in 1975, Mernissi catapulted to international acclaim. This pivotal work marks Mernissi's secularist phase within her scholarship, particularly during the 1970s and early 1980s. Throughout this period, her focus was dedicated to the profound critique of conventional misogynistic Islamic interpretations and societal frameworks that perpetuated the marginalization of women. *Beyond the Veil* aimed to challenge deeply ingrained

patriarchal norms and advocate for gender equality within a broader social and political context. This influential work not only earned Mernissi recognition on a global scale but also laid the groundwork for her subsequent contributions to Islamic feminism.

In the late 1980s, Mernissi embarked on a profound reevaluation of the intersection between Islam and feminism. Rather than outright dismissing Islam, as she did in *Beyond the Veil*, she immersed herself in the depths of Islamic texts and traditions, endeavoring to reinterpret them through a feminist lens. Her argument posited that the inequalities experienced by women were not intrinsic to Islam but rather the outcomes of misinterpretations and cultural overlays onto the religion. This marked the onset of Mernissi's Islamic feminist phase, epitomized by the release of her trilogy on gender and Islam: *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1987), *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (1992), and *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993). For Mernissi, this period represented more than the mere incorporation of the female viewpoint; it was a concerted effort to reignite dialogues within Islamic thought—both ancient and contemporary, by introducing a novel element: the analysis of gender as a distinct category.

Mernissi's gradual transition from a secular feminist perspective to an Islamic feminist represents the organic evolution of her intellectual journey, characterized more as a dynamic process than a contradiction.<sup>1</sup> Several factors contribute to this transformation. First, the rise of political Islam in the postcolonial era, which acknowledged Islam as a central component of Moroccan identity, played a pivotal role. Additionally, Mernissi's personal commitment to Sufism and her admiration for prominent female figures in Islamic history, such as Aisha, the youngest wife of the Prophet, influenced her perspective. Crucially, in the late 1980s, Mernissi's work was inspired by the discourse of male and female Islamic progressives seeking to reform the Moudawana (family code) through a progressive interpretation of the Qur'an. Consequently, Mernissi's feminism did not emerge as an opposition to Islam; instead, it became integral to Islamic thought. This nuanced shift reflects the intricate interplay between Mernissi's personal beliefs, the socio-political context, and her engagement with evolving Islamic discourses.

In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi stood out as one of the initial scholars to tackle the challenge of delving into religious studies—a realm typically restricted to individuals with her academic background. She ventured beyond the confines of her primary discipline, sociology. In this work, she examines the authenticity of certain misogynistic hadiths. She advocated for a reinterpretation of Islamic texts that highlighted the principles of justice, equality, and women's rights inherent in Islam. Her demonstration of a women-friendly interpretation served as a model for upcoming generations of Muslim women, encouraging them to participate in *ijtihad* (reinterpretation of the Qur'an)

---

1. Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques*, 3–4, 8.

and reclaim Islam from the influence of misogynistic religious figures. Mernissi thus played a pioneering role in initiating an unprecedented national and transnational movement. This movement, commonly recognized as “Islamic feminism,” has progressively developed into a transnational force, evolving within academic spheres and transnational organizations since the 1990s. Mernissi applauds this movement in her work *Islam and Democracy*: “What we are seeing today is a claim by women to their right to God and the historical tradition. This takes various forms. There are women who are active within the fundamentalist movements and those who work on a reinterpretation of the Muslim heritage as a necessary ingredient to our modernity. Our liberation will come through a re-reading of our past and a reappropriation of all that has structured our civilisation.”<sup>2</sup> Venturing into the realm of theology and challenging the authority of male clerics was not without peril. Her defiance not only triggered a death fatwa against her but also resulted in the censorship of her book within Morocco.<sup>3</sup>

In the latter half of the 1990s, Mernissi transitioned away from producing scholarly works on gender in Islam. After her Islamic feminist period, she redirected her focus from academic books to fiction. Her first novel, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, was published in 1994. A shift back to scholarly pursuits occurred in 1997, marked by a study on local solidarity among villagers in the High Atlas.<sup>4</sup> In 2001, *Scheherazade Goes West* was released—a work prompted by the Western reception of her novel *Dreams of Trespass*. In this book, Mernissi addresses Western stereotypes and misconceptions about Eastern women, particularly the portrayal of harems as places of oppression and exoticism. She critiques the Orientalist lens through which Westerners often view the lives of women in the Arab-Muslim world.

Raja Rhouni, a Moroccan scholar, stands as the first academic within the Moroccan context to present an in-depth critique of Fatima Mernissi’s scholarship. According to Rhouni, Mernissi’s intellectual trajectory complicates the notion that she is uncomfortable with a faith-based stance or lacks dedication to an important endeavor like Islamic feminism. Instead, Rhouni argues, Mernissi’s primary commitment appears to be to social change. For this purpose, she demonstrates a readiness to venture into new realms, employ tools from diverse disciplines, and embrace new perspectives. In Rhouni’s words, “Mernissi has always been a rebellious intellectual, always on the move, refusing to be prisoner to one single area of research, breaking the boundaries of disciplines, and rejecting labels and theoretical confinements.”<sup>5</sup>

---

2. Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy*, 160.

3. Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques*, 210.

4. Mernissi, *Les Aït-Débrouille*.

5. Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques*, 10–11.

### MERNISSI'S IMPACT ON THE HISTORY OF HUMANITIES IN AFRICA

Mernissi's impact extends beyond the Arab and Muslim world, influencing broader discussions within North African humanities, particularly in the realms of women's experiences, cultural identities, and the legacies of colonialism. Her interdisciplinary approach and critical examination of historical and sociocultural issues establish her as a significant figure in the intellectual history of North Africa and the broader region.

First, Mernissi's engagement with Islamic thought, viewed through her feminist lens, contributes to the wider field of Islamic studies within the African intellectual context. Her reinterpretation of Islamic texts and traditions holds implications for understanding the intersections of religion, culture, and gender in African societies with substantial Muslim populations.

Second, Mernissi's sociological work, exemplified by the aforementioned *Doing Daily Battle*, offers valuable insights into the experiences of women in Moroccan society. By focusing on marginalized women in rural and urban settings, Mernissi provides a rich understanding of the social and cultural history of the Maghreb region. This documentation significantly contributes to African studies and women's history.

Third, Mernissi addresses issues of identity, class, and gender, making vital contributions to discussions on intersectionality within African humanities. Her exploration of the complexities of postcolonial identities in the Maghreb resonates with broader debates on identity and diversity in African contexts.

Furthermore, Mernissi's critiques of colonialism and its impact on identity and cultural dynamics engage with the postcolonial discourse relevant to many African nations. Her insights enrich discussions on decolonization and deepen our understanding of the enduring legacies of colonialism in shaping African societies.

Finally, Mernissi's ambiguous relationship with feminism reflects the specific trajectory of indigenous feminism. Engaging in a dual critique, she challenges stereotypes and misrepresentations of Muslim women from both within and outside the Islamic world. Mernissi critically examines traditional Islamic texts and jurisprudence that have contributed to the subordination of women, while simultaneously addressing and critiquing Western Orientalist portrayals. She argues against essentializing, exoticizing, or misunderstanding the experiences of women in the Islamic world, urging for a nuanced understanding that acknowledges the diversity and agency within Muslim societies. Through this double critique, Mernissi aims to foster a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the status of women in Islam. Her work encourages a dialogue that considers both the internal dynamics of Muslim societies and external influences shaping perceptions of Islam, particularly regarding gender issues. In doing so, Mernissi significantly

contributes to the emergence of Third World feminism, fostering pan-African and transnational feminist solidarity.<sup>6</sup>

### BEYOND THE VEIL

Mernissi's seminal work, *Beyond the Veil*, stands as a cornerstone in the realm of Islamic feminism, offering a profound exploration into the intricate interplay of gender, Islam, and societal norms within Muslim-majority societies. Initially published in 1975, this groundbreaking text challenges prevailing misconceptions about Muslim women, unraveling the complexities of their lives through meticulous oral history research, historical insight, and a keen sociological lens.

Mernissi delves into the views of the Islamic scholar Al-Ghazali concerning women's sexuality and marriage within the context of Islamic teachings. Al-Ghazali, a profoundly influential medieval Islamic theologian, philosopher, and jurist of the eleventh century, becomes a focal point in Mernissi's analysis. She references his perspectives to illuminate historical attitudes toward women's sexuality in Islamic thought.<sup>7</sup>

According to Mernissi, Al-Ghazali underscored the significance of women's chastity and modesty within the institution of marriage. He advocated for stringent gender segregation, asserting that women's interactions with men, even within marriage, should be limited to preserve moral order and social harmony. These views, deeply rooted in the sociocultural norms of medieval Islamic societies, reflect broader concerns within Islamic scholarship regarding the regulation of women's sexuality to uphold moral standards and family honor.

Mernissi employs Al-Ghazali's standpoint to illustrate historical attitudes toward women's sexuality within the framework of Islamic teachings. Critically analyzing these views influenced by the sociocultural context of medieval Islamic societies, she sheds light on their contributions to the shaping of gender roles and norms, particularly concerning marriage and female sexuality. By exploring and contextualizing the historical interpretations of scholars like Al-Ghazali, Mernissi provides invaluable insights into the evolving discourses surrounding women's rights and sexuality in Islamic history.

Furthermore, Mernissi meticulously dissects the historical context of practices such as veiling and gender segregation, contending that these traditions are rooted more in cultural and societal norms than in intrinsic Islamic teachings. She unveils the origins of these practices, shedding light on their evolution and demonstrating that they are not immutable aspects of Islam but rather products of social and historical contingencies.

---

6. See, e.g., Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle."

7. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 25–65.

A standout feature of the book is its exploration of female agency within the confines of patriarchal structures. Mernissi weaves a rich tapestry of stories and examples showing how women navigate and resist oppressive norms, highlighting their resilience, intelligence, and ability to subvert traditional gender roles. Through interviews and historical analysis, she portrays women not as passive victims but as active agents striving for change, even in the face of adversity.<sup>8</sup>

Mernissi engages critically with Islamic texts, particularly the Qur'an and Hadiths (The collected traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, based on his sayings and actions), offering a feminist interpretation that emphasizes the egalitarian principles inherent in Islam's early teachings. She challenges patriarchal readings of religious texts and advocates for a reevaluation of these interpretations, urging a return to the empowering essence of Islam for women.

Moreover, Mernissi delves into the intricate dynamics of power within Muslim households, examining the relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. In doing so, she illuminates the often overlooked power struggles within these familial structures.<sup>9</sup> Through this dissection of interpersonal relationships, Mernissi reveals how women can be complicit in perpetuating patriarchal norms, sometimes becoming enforcers of traditional gender roles themselves. Mernissi's prose is not only scholarly but also accessible, rendering her work compelling for both academics and general readers.

### IMPACT AND RELEVANCE

*Beyond the Veil* has had a significant impact on scholarship related to women and Islam. One of the notable strengths of Mernissi's work is her meticulous research and deep understanding of Islamic history and culture. She adeptly navigates complex historical and religious texts, offering insightful interpretations and contextualizing them within the social and political realities of the Muslim world. By delving into the historical origins of practices like veiling and gender segregation, Mernissi demystifies these traditions, revealing their cultural, rather than strictly religious, underpinnings. This approach dismantles Western misconceptions about Islam and fosters a more informed dialogue about gender issues in Muslim-majority societies.

Notably, Mernissi's analysis of power dynamics within Muslim households, especially in the context of polygamous marriages, emerges as a focal point in her work. This exploration into female agency within ostensibly oppressive structures adds depth to her narrative, challenging simplistic portrayals of Muslim women as passive victims. Her incisive critique of traditional Islamic interpretations regarding women's roles and rights calls for

---

8. Ibid., 87–148.

9. Ibid., 121–37.

a reexamination of religious texts. She emphasizes the egalitarian principles inherent in Islam, providing a vital foundation for contemporary discussions on gender equality within Islamic frameworks.

Scholars across disciplines continue to actively engage with Mernissi's ideas, building upon her foundational work to advance nuanced and critical perspectives on the complex relationship between Islam and gender. A noteworthy illustration of this ongoing discourse is found in the anthology *Gender and Islam in Africa: Rights, Sexuality, and Law* (2011), edited by Margot Badran and Amina Mama. This multidisciplinary work delves into the dynamic ways in which women in Africa are interpreting traditional Islamic concepts, strategically harnessing them to foster empowerment both personally and within their broader societies. The book contends that African women have become proponents of ideals such as equality, human rights, and democracy within the framework of Islamic thought, effectively challenging established notions that portray the religion as inherently gender-restrictive and patriarchal.

In essence, *Beyond the Veil* remains a groundbreaking work that shatters stereotypes, offering a profound understanding of the intricate gender dynamics in Islamic societies. Mernissi's contributions have become foundational in both women's studies and Islamic studies curricula, shaping subsequent generations of scholars. Her rigorous scholarship, coupled with her unwavering advocacy for women's rights within an Islamic framework, continues to inspire scholars, activists, and readers alike.

### WORKS CITED

- Badran, Margot, and Amina Mama, eds. 2011. *Gender and Islam in Africa: Rights, Sexuality, and Law*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- El Saadawi, Nawal. 1980. *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. London: Zed Books.
- Lamrabet, Asma. 2016. *Women in the Qur'an: An Emancipatory Reading*. Markfield, Leicestershire, UK: Kube.
- Mernissi, Fatima. (1975) 1987. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Rev. ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1988. *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*. London: Women's Press. Originally published as *Le Maroc raconté par ses femmes*. Rabat: SMER, 1984.
- . 1991. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Cambridge: Perseus Books.
- . 1992. *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*. New York: Addison-Wesley. Originally published as *La Peur-modernité: Conflit Islam démocratique*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- . 1993. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1994. *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. Boston: Addison-Wesley.
- . 1997. *Les Aït-Débrouille: Haut Atlas*. Casablanca: Le Fennec.
- . 2001. *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different harems*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. 1999. *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*. London: I. B. Tauris.

- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1991. "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Ann Russo Mohanty and Lourdes Torres, 1–50. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Rhouni, Raja. 2011. *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi*. Leiden: Brill.
- Wadud, Amina. 1999. *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.