

Book Review: Mernissi, F. (1987). *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*

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To cite this article: Abdul-Rahim, Y. (2020). Book Review: *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. *Al-Raida*, 44(2), 84-86

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Article type: Article

Published online: 15th December 2020

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

This is a first online version of the manuscript. It will be replaced with the final version once the production version is ready.

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Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society

Fatima Mernissi

Indiana University Press, 1987

ISBN 0253204232

Reviewed by Yusra Abdul-Rahim

In *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, Mernissi (1987) explores the impact of modernization in the early 1970s on the social order in Morocco, which was traditionally built on segregation and a patriarchal understanding of shari'a 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. Referring to Imam Ghazali's conception of sexuality, Mernissi illustrates how it resulted in inequalities between the sexes and the belief that the social order is dependent upon women due to active female sexuality: "Social order is secured when the woman limits herself to her husband and does not create fitna, or chaos, by enticing other men to illicit intercourse" (Mernissi, 1987, p. 39). The first part of the book then analyzes the changes in the social order from practices in pre-Islamic Arabia, when women were given sexual self-determination, through 1970s Morocco, where the new social structure is based on male dominance and the seclusion of women. Mernissi explores the traditional Muslim conception of female sexuality based on Ghazali's ideas about marriage. Ghazali argues that female sexuality is active, and if left unattended might become aggressive and disrupt the social order; therefore, it is a male's duty to manage and control it. Mernissi argues that this understanding resulted in inequalities between the sexes and the belief that the social order will collapse if women are given any semblance of self-determination

Mernissi then applies this framework to understand male-female dynamics in Morocco and the sexual anomie that emerged from the disruption of the traditional Muslim social order. Her data consists of 14 women from the “urban petty-bourgeoisie,” made up of eight traditional and six modern women, as well 400 letters (by both men and women) sent to a governmental religious counseling service. She finds that the disruption of the traditional Muslim social order was a result of modernization, which brought about the dissolution of traditional spatial boundaries and the desegregation of women’s domestic world of sexuality and the family. The traditional Muslim ideas about marriage and female sexuality clashed with modernity and the desires of younger generations: women increasingly took up public spaces traditionally occupied by men, without the veil, and determined their own lives (Mernissi, 1987, p. 98).

Despite this, it is understandable why *Beyond the Veil* is a classic text in Islamic feminism. Mernissi manages to translate the concept of shame and illustrate how the onus is on the Muslim woman to continue the Muslim social order, insofar as there is a fear that female self-determination will lead to fitna. While Muslim women in many urban cities today are given more freedom than in the 1970s, the concept of shame is still prevalent. It is a universal concept forced upon Muslim women regardless of geographical location and often used as a tool to guilt-trip 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 male strangers, for wearing clothes that are too tight (BBC News, 2017), while in Aceh, Indonesia, there is a strict dress code imposed on women by the state (Izharuddin, 2018). Confining honor and morality to women’s bodies causes Muslim men to believe they have the right to dictate how Muslim women should present themselves in public (Abbas, 2015; Badran, 2005; Pereira & Ibrahim, 2010). This further highlights Mernissi’s argument that the restrictions imposed upon women are the result of a distorted view of female sexuality as inherently corrupting and in need of control.

One critique of *Beyond the veil* is its use of the term “Muslim society” to reference male-female dynamics in Morocco and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Firstly, Muslims are ethnically diverse and heterogenous. Using the MENA region to represent “Muslim society” erases the varied experiences of Muslims outside the region and groups together the experiences

of Muslims who are similar to those in MENA. Secondly, it might distort the views of Western readers, who already see the East through an Orientalist gaze. Instead, Mernissi could have used the term “Arab Muslim society.” She acknowledges that culture and religion are intertwined, so it is important to make the distinction between the experiences of Arab Muslims and those of Indonesian Muslims, due to cultural differences.

Mernissi’s interpretation of religious and juristic texts from a feminist perspective exposes the difference between the authentic message of Islam and the one being practiced. While *Beyond the veil* was written in the early 1987 and women have since occupied spaces that are traditionally male-dominated, whether in education or in the workforce, Muslim women still face inequalities, and self-determination is an ongoing issue for Muslim women worldwide. As suggested earlier, the rise of social media has highlighted the issue of Muslim women being policed online. The idea that women need to be controlled and should not be “seen” in public spaces is still 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 a feminist interpretation of religious texts.

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