

The Forgotten Queens of Islam

by *Fatima Mernissi*

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Reviewed by *Lina Alameddine*

In *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, Fatima Mernissi presents us with a scrapbook of historical facts, word analysis, valuable questions, personal view points, and various exotic anecdotes of Arab queens, who once reigned supreme. Her attempt is to uncover the story of women who were leaders in the patriarchal political, social, and religious world of their time. Why have these women been effaced from history? Who were they? And how did they attend this power? These are all questions that Mernissi battles with throughout her account, in the hope of challenging our perceptions of Islam as a misogynist religion.

Mernissi begins her account with "How Does One Say 'Queen' in Islam?" She starts off with the word analysis method. 'Caliph' and 'Imam' are the two most specific titles of power in Islam. Her description of what these titles entail is specific — No woman that she has encountered in her research has ever borne the title of caliph. In order to bear such a title, one needed to be male and Arab. While the latter has been challenged on numerous occasions, no one has ever dared to question the former criterion, for "it would be a blasphemy", she tells us. She asks: "How could Islam reconcile these two points: the principle of equality among all believers and the very restrictive criteria for the 'caliphate'?" (p.23). Although her answer to such an essential question is not clear, she skirts around the gap which exists between the 'Caliph' himself and the 'amma, which is the masses. Indeed, women were viewed as being a mere part of the masses with no right to exercise divine power.

This latter chapter, in many ways, sets the precedent as to how this book unfolds: a string of questions; historical information; anecdotes of former queens and certain key notions, which are integral to our understanding of the Islamic societies of the past.

On one level, it seems that Mernissi's goal in this book is to unveil and re-educate her readers to a past that has been neglected. Queens and any other type of leadership positions, held by women, have failed to be the focus of historians and academicians. Thus, she undertakes the task herself. With time, and the ever-constantly evolving societies, it is very easy to assume that the notion of a woman in power could never have been allowed to exist. This is due to the common belief that society is always changing for the better.

On another level, one needs to consider what the author was hoping to achieve in producing such a work. Unveiling the stories of such rebellious women is educational but what does one gain from this? I, myself, was surprised to find such a number of respectable women in Islamic history. Although the stories are essentially captivating, one cannot help but question Mernissi's direction with these repetitious anecdotes. Did a woman need to be beautiful and manipulative in order to gain public support? Or were these coincidental characteristics forgotten because history has been recorded from a male perspective? And is Mernissi afraid of re-writing history as it had once been perceived? The answer is left ambiguous throughout the account. We are never sure of the precise and underlying thesis of this book and are, therefore, never allowed to find out whether Mernissi is, in fact, achieving her objective.

We also need to consider Mernissi's process of selection. Whenever a decision is being made to analyze the past or re-discover history, one is already being subjective, because that decision emerges from a personal interest to prove a certain notion. This account is permeated with the author's personal viewpoint but, even within the historical information that she provides for her readers lies a certain subjectivity, as it is only serving in constructing Mernissi's personal argument. Therefore, the several cases of women who were successful in transcending their social limits could very possibly be only a handful of examples amongst a much larger group of women who may have attempted to rise above their confinements, but failed.

One question that Mernissi tackles throughout this book is that of amnesia which affects all historians regarding these forgotten queens. Mernissi's method of investigation entailed going to libraries, leafing through out-dated books and talking to historians. "No one remembers them!" (p.116), she cries, but why? She surely has not overlooked the fact that all the

sources she uses were written by men. However, it is precisely this amnesia that helps support Mernissi's argument, be it when she is dealing with the queens or developing key historical notions.

Islam is a dual concept which merges the divine law of *Allah* with the secular, political, earthly world. Neither of these two worlds has room for female leaders. Women could not lead prayers in the mosques and, therefore, could not be heads of state. A woman's place was in the 'private' space, either within the walls of her home or in a harem. Thus, whenever a woman fought her way into a leadership position, either by strategic manipulation or through her relations with certain men, it was immediately perceived as a threat and a symbol of a faltering society. Mernissi calls this '*fitna*' or social chaos. Perhaps, one of the reasons these women were able to acquire power are the unstable regimes which they may have been living under. And no one, especially no male historian, is willing to remember and record such unhappy times.

Mernissi suggests that another incentive for this "amnesia" can be explained in terms of geo-cultural factors. Yemen is an exceptional area in the Arab world, because two women "enjoyed the privilege and unquestioned criterion of head of state ..." (p. 115). They were Malika Asma and Malika Arwa. They held the right to have the Friday '*khutba*' pronounced in their name. So why then, have they been forgotten?

Mernissi believes that "the fearful ghost that the memory of Asma and Arwa raised is that of the shi'ia" (p. 118). Asma and Arwa were both shi'ia Muslims during an era of heavy sectarian conflict. Mernissi's proposal is not far fetched when she claims that Asma and Arwa are forgotten because no one wanted reminders of political disputes. It is no longer a gender issue, but rather one of religious belief. This raises the question: "does Shi'ite Islam distinguish itself from / Sunni Islam when it comes to the political rights of women?" (p. 149). This latter question carries us to the concept of race: "did the queens of Yemen have the right to the '*khutba*' issued in their name because they were Yemenis?" (p. 150) Does one explain their case by arguing that it was their form of religion which enabled them to be heads of states, or was it their "cultural specificity"? Mernissi raised this issue several times. The notion of religion is quickly erased, seeing that the one agreement that the shi'ites and the Sunnis hold is their similar attitude towards women in politics. Mernissi's conclusion is that their accessibility to queenhood was due to "regional cultural factors" (p. 176). This may be her final word on the issue, though, as she does not fully expand and

clarify this point.

Although Mernissi states her aim in the "Introduction", it is not until the chapter entitled "The Criteria of Sovereignty in Islam", that we are able to discern a more lucid sense of what she is really trying to achieve. The hierarchical system is scrupulous in its treatment of both its women and the '*amma*, the masses. Women like the masses, are perceived as a threat to the system. Thus, the desire to "veil women is really the desire to veil resistance" (p.85). Mernissi tells us that history has also been hidden by a veil which needs to be torn down. She points to the importance of studying the desires of both, the masters and their "supposedly weak, defenseless subjects" (p. 84), in order to understand the dynamics of a particular civilization. It is time to begin to rewrite the history of the Muslims ..." (p. 84). It is in this latter sentence, where Mernissi's genuine thesis lies, undercover, hiding behind the plethora of information and sarcasm that she has presented us with throughout her entire work. Unfortunately, she fails to develop it adequately and leaves us thirsty for more information and argument. The technique she employs is a quasi-stream of consciousness technique incorporating ideas, discussion, and details. She continues by challenging history and demonstrating a need to probe into "the swampy, dark areas of the marginal and the exceptional," to discover the history of resisters: "This is the only history that can give back the Muslims their glorious humanity" (p.85). Furthermore, she believes in the need of "admitting that there are several historical truths" in order to get beyond the Islam of the cliches and thus acquiring a more complete image of the past. She ends this chapter with yet another thesis for this confused book. This time she asserts the need to move away from the notion that these queens of the past were exceptional and extraordinary females. They were ordinary women who were able to make the most of their resources and capabilities, without fearing the constraints that society imposed on them. She does not expand on what these 'constraints' may have been. I fear that Mernissi aspired towards several 'aims' in writing this account and failed in answering them.

The Forgotten Queens of Islam is an important account which should not be overlooked despite its repetitiveness and despite the fact that it appears to be a story book of erotic, beautiful women from the past. Mernissi raises many valuable points and questions. She also helps clarify historic details of relevance to the issues. However, I do not think that Mernissi succeeded in putting across her real objective perhaps because of a certain fear of the consequences of raising certain sensitive issues that, she felt, had better remain untouched.