

***Islamic Feminist Thought: The Contributions of Fatima Mernissi 1940-2015***

**Pemikiran Feminis Islam: Kontribusi Fatima Mernissi 1940-2015**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the dynamic and diverse Islamic feminist movement, which aims to promote justice and gender equality by challenging patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts and customs. Through the work of scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, this research highlights how Islamic feminism seeks to reinterpret Islamic theology and practice to uphold the rights and dignity of women. Using exploratory and historical qualitative methods, this research evaluates the significant contribution of Islamic feminists in challenging existing discourse and improving the status of women. This study examines the contributions of Islamic feminists in Morocco and the Arab world, focusing on their efforts to promote gender equality within an Islamic framework. By investigating Fatima Mernissi's work which emphasizes the need to re-read Islam's sacred texts and expose false and misogynistic hadith. Apart from that, the influence of Kecia Ali's thoughts in "Sexual Ethics and Islam" as well as the critical views of Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, and Amina Wadud regarding misinterpretations of the Koran enrich this research so that it provides a comprehensive view. She argues that Fatima Mernissi's works, by offering alternative readings of Islamic discourse on women, have advanced feminist debate and practice in the Arab world, enriching understanding of faith, gender, identity and culture in Islam.

**Keywords:** Islamic Feminist, Gender Justice, Patriarchal Interpretation, Sacred Texts, Reinterpretation of Islamic Texts

**Abstrak**

Studi ini mengeksplorasi gerakan feminis Islam yang dinamis dan beragam, yang bertujuan untuk mempromosikan keadilan dan kesetaraan gender dengan menantang interpretasi patriarki terhadap teks-teks dan adat istiadat Islam. Melalui karya para sarjana seperti Fatima Mernissi, penelitian ini menyoroti bagaimana feminisme Islam berusaha menafsirkan kembali teologi dan praktik Islam untuk menegakkan hak dan martabat perempuan. Menggunakan metode kualitatif eksplorasi dan historis, penelitian ini mengevaluasi kontribusi signifikan feminis Islam dalam menantang wacana yang ada dan meningkatkan status perempuan. Studi ini meneliti kontribusi feminis Islam di Maroko dan dunia Arab, dengan fokus pada upaya mereka untuk mempromosikan kesetaraan gender dalam kerangka Islam. Dengan menyelidiki karya Fatima Mernissi yang menekankan perlunya membaca kembali teks-teks suci Islam dan mengekspos hadits palsu dan misoginis. Selain itu, pengaruh pemikiran Kecia Ali dalam "Etika Seksual dan Islam" serta pandangan kritis Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, dan Amina Wadud mengenai salah tafsir Alquran memperkaya penelitian ini sehingga memberikan pandangan yang komprehensif. Dia berpendapat bahwa karya-karya Fatima Mernissi, dengan menawarkan pembacaan alternatif wacana Islam tentang perempuan, telah memajukan perdebatan dan praktik feminis di dunia Arab, memperkaya pemahaman tentang iman, gender, identitas dan budaya dalam Islam.

**Kata kunci:** Feminis Islam, Keadilan Gender, Penafsiran Patriarki, Teks Suci, Reinterpretasi Teks Islam

## INTRODUCTION

Islamic feminism is a dynamic and diverse movement that strives to improve gender justice and equality by challenging patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts and customs. It seeks to reinterpret Islamic theology and practice in ways that uphold women's rights and dignity.

In the early 20th century, women in Morocco and across West Asia demanded political rights in the context of national movements. Since the 1940s, feminism in Morocco has played a crucial role in the country's development, modernization, and political progress. It has contributed significantly to advancements in women's rights as well as economic, social, and religious reforms. However, the movement has faced challenges due to its perceived incompatibility with dominant Islamic ideologies that heavily influence West Asian region, including Moroccan culture and government policies.

During the 1960s and 1970s, feminist organizations in West Asia were adversely affected by political repression and authoritarianism, limiting their freedom and ability to advocate for women's demands. Consequently, women's organizations were often confined to political parties and state-sponsored entities. In recent decades, in West Asia Islamic feminism has gained momentum, drawing from contemporary feminist theory, Islamic jurisprudence, the Quran, and Hadith. Prominent Muslim women scholars like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Fatima Mernissi, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini have been instrumental in promoting gender equality based on Islamic principles. These scholars advocate for reinterpreting the Quran and Hadith to emphasize equality, compassion, and justice, challenging patriarchal views that have historically marginalized women.

Islamic feminism aims to integrate feminism and faith, providing a framework to combat both religious and secular injustices while promoting gender justice within an Islamic context. By reinterpreting sacred texts and pushing for legislative and social reforms, Islamic feminism offers a pathway to greater equality and empowerment for Muslim women.

Islamic feminism is a movement where Muslim women challenge the subjugation of women justified by misinterpretations of Islam. Emerging prominently in the late 20th century, its roots can be traced back to early advocates like Qasim Amin (1865-1903), who criticized the oppressive treatment of Egyptian women by Muslim men. Amin (2011) argued that the Quran supports women's rights and criticized practices that demean women, such as men eating separately from women and confining them to the home. He also highlighted the ignorance of women due to lack of education and social isolation, which kept them as virtual prisoners in their homes, dominated by male relatives.

In the last four decades, feminist scholars like Fatima Mernissi, Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, Margot Badran, Sadiya Sheikh and Amina Wadud have furthered the cause. Asma Barlas (2002), in her book "Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran" argues that the Quran is inherently anti-patriarchal and advocates for complete gender equality. She emphasizes the need to reinterpret the Quran to remove patriarchal biases that have been historically imposed on it.

Leila Ahmed (1992), in "Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate" provides a historical perspective, arguing that Muslim women suffered under the worst interpretations of Islam, particularly during the Abbasid dynasty (749-1258). She critiques the cultural infiltration that brought misogynistic practices into Islamic societies and questions the assumption that patriarchy is the natural social order.

Amina Wadud (1999), known for her feminist hermeneutics of the Quran, contends that negative attitudes towards women in Muslim societies are due to misinterpretations of the Quran. In her works, she challenges the view that men are inherently superior to women and asserts that social relations in Muslim communities are influenced by cultural and historical factors, not just the Quran. Wadud's personal journey highlights the struggles faced by women striving for equality in male-dominated contexts.

Kecia Ali (2006), in her groundbreaking work "Sexual Ethics and Islam," addresses sensitive issues such as wives' sexual duties, divorce, homosexuality, and sex outside marriage.

She critiques medieval and contemporary commentators for failing to provide a balanced and comprehensive study on sexual ethics. Ali (2008) argues that conservative traditions have wrongly incorporated medieval *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *tafsir* (exegesis) into modern interpretations, thus limiting the scope for further interpretation. She asserts that the necessity of equality as a component of justice must be actively defended rather than merely asserted. Ali also points out that feminist Quranic scholars often avoid questioning the universality and timelessness of specific points in the Quran and hadith, and they do not address the male-centric discourse in these texts. She highlights the "general silence" on the implications of the Prophet's actions for today's world and the extent to which his precedent is binding.

Sadiyya Shaikh (2003) underscores the importance of integrating various Islamic feminist views for the benefit of Muslim women. She describes Islamic feminism as a broad term encompassing the activities and goals of Muslim women aiming to transform masculine social structures. Islamic feminism, according to Shaikh (2004), is rooted in the original message of the Quran to ensure justice. It promotes critical analysis of patriarchal elements within religious communities and biased interpretations of the Quran. Additionally, Islamic feminists consider how women have been victimized by politics and war.

Margot Badran (2011), in her book "Feminists, Islam and the Nation," provides a detailed account of various feminists and their approaches towards gender equality. She highlights the diverse strategies and goals of Islamic feminists in promoting gender justice within an Islamic framework. Badran's work enriches the understanding of the multifaceted nature of Islamic feminism and its impact on gender discourse.

Together, these scholars advocate for a reinterpretation of Islamic texts to promote gender justice, arguing that true Islamic teachings support women's rights and equality. Islamic feminism seeks to harmonize faith with feminist principles, aiming for legislative and social reforms that empower Muslim women.

The political significance of religious identity has gained significance in the Arab world since last four decades. Social, economic, military and political failures have compelled counter-religious responses to Western cultural imposition and globalisation. There have been many external as well as internal attack on Islam regarding the status and the poor conditions of women in the Arab region that by stating that Islam mistreated women and denounced their status. Many Muslims argue that the Islam gives women a real status and claim that it has improved their situation. According to Arab/ Islamic feminist, Fatima Mernissi, both are right to some degree. The most important thing to understand when looking at the position of women is the difference between theory and practices.

By bringing the issue of faith, gender, identities and cultures, Fatima Mernissi linked every concept with the subject of women's identities, conditions and status within Islam. She has made very substantial contribution to the enrichment of feminist thought and by bringing the question of belief and thus she encouraged the growth of Islamic-feminist thought. Being a Moroccan by birth, her primary focus was the position of women in rapidly changing Muslim communities in the Arab world in general and Morocco in particular. The study analyses Mernissi's central arguments regarding the situation of women, identifying roots of the problem and her contributions in evaluating the misogynist approaches to Muslim women. The study has been also divided into sections and subsections to give a clear understanding of her works in different approaches regarding faith and gender.

## **METHOD**

The works of Islamic feminists like Fatima Mernissi have compelled us to seek answers to a number of predominant questions. This research will discuss a few important questions: how far Islamic feminists have contributed to improving the status of women in the Arab World? How did Islamic feminists challenge the existing discourses on Islam? How significant is Fatima Mernissi's works in Islamic feminist discourses? How does her scholarship critically analyze patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts, particularly the Quran and Hadith, and argue that traditional readings have been influenced by historical and cultural contexts that perpetuate gender inequality? How does Mernissi, by questioning traditional interpretations, highlight the

need to return to the fundamental egalitarian principles of Islam that promote gender justice? This research was conducted using explorative qualitative methods to explore the topic of discussion more broadly. This research is an history analytical study of works of Islamic Feminists and it uses both primary and secondary works for the purpose. Fatima Mernissi's works will form the major sources for this study. The present research proceeds with the hypothesis that by providing an alternative reading of Islamic discourses on women, Fatima Mernissi's works contributed to the advancement of feminist debates and practices in the Arab world.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Biography Fatima Mernissi

Fatima Mernissi was a prominent Moroccan feminist, sociologist, and writer, known for her influential work on gender, Islam, and the Arab world. She was born on September 27, 1940, in Fez, Morocco, and she passed away on November 30, 2015, in Rabat, Morocco. Fatima Mernissi was born into a middle-class family in Fez, a city known for its rich intellectual and cultural history. Her family valued education, which significantly influenced her path. Mernissi pursued her higher education at the Sorbonne in Paris, where she studied political science. She later earned a PhD in sociology from Brandeis University in the United States.

Upon returning to Morocco, Mernissi began teaching sociology at the Mohammed V University in Rabat. Her academic work focused on the intersections of gender, power, and Islam. She was particularly interested in how Islamic traditions and texts have been interpreted to justify gender inequalities (Kroll, 2020).

Fatima Mernissi produced works which became the core texts of Islamic feminism. It is important to mention from the outset that Mernissi has never self-identified as 'Islamic feminist'. In fact, as Margot Badran points out, Mernissi is "one of the earliest to articulate Islamic feminism without taking on an Islamic feminist identity (Badran & Cooke, 1990). Identify her as Islamic feminist is a significant analytical category that serves to describe a particular "speaking position," in Miriam Cooke's sense, to engage in this new area of feminism called 'Islamic feminism,' which Mernissi's work serves to initiate. Scholars like Miriam Cooke (2011), Abdellah Labdaoui (2014) and Badran (2005) identify Mernissi's works on Islam as exemplifying an 'Islamic feminist' position.

Fatima Mernissi was concerned with Islam and the status of women in it. She focussed much of her career on analysing the historical development of the Islamic thought and its modern manifestation of roles of women within the religion. Mernissi has recognised public figure in the Arab world as well as others part of the world, especially in France, where she is well known in the circles of feminist. Her major works have been translated into many languages including English, German, Dutch and Japanese.

### Major Works

In 1975 she published her first book entitled as "Beyond the Veil: Female Dynamics in the Modern Muslim Society", this book is the result of her first field work. Her book raised significant issues in feminist thought. Mernissi discusses that Islam acknowledges women sexuality, Islamic sexual ideology is presumed on a belief that women's inherent sexual power, if left uncontrolled, would cause destruction. Hence, the patriarchal society considered women as "Fitna" which can distract men from achieving the knowledge which can lead them to the God. They considered humanity is constituted by the men only and women are recognised as not only outside the humanity but a threat to it as well. So, they imposed veil, segregation, and the legal subordination is necessary to protect the Fitna. Today, all of the traditionalist Muslim attitudes towards the women have been challenged. Modernisation has brought women into the schools, universities and to the offices to work. They are becoming self-independent and able to take a decision by themselves, this is something that the traditionalists are desperately fighting. On the one hand, they are doing it because they regard these changes as the Western

imposition of Islam; but they are also doing it because they fear the disorder that strong, self-aware women can create. It is clear that the status of women in Islam is not as clear-cut as many of us believe- it is not inferior or inadequate, as claimed by the critics, and it is not equal or good, as claimed by apologists. There is instead a complicated interaction of culture, religion, and politics which results in a status that should be good in theory but ends up being bad in practice.

Mernissi major concern was the position of women in the rapidly changing Muslim society in the Arab world in general and Morocco in particular. She raised significant issues in feminist thought. She challenged the Western stereotypes about Islam. She tried to reinterpret Islamic history and theology along the gender-sensitive line and feminism. One of the central contributions of Mernissi was on “feminist theology”, an attempt to re-interpret Islam along the feminist line, as a source of women’s empowerment. That led to her rewrite the history of Islam, highlighting Mohammad’s wives as the elaboration of faith. In her influential book, *Women and Islam: A Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Mernissi emphasizes the role of women in the spread of Islam, and more importantly, the articulation of Islam. The book also highlights the rights of women in Islam and makes a controversial argument that men have deliberately mutilated Sharia and if it appears as an instrument of patriarchy today, it is because women have never had the chance to interpret it in a gender sensitive context. She considered Mohammad wife Khadija as a strong woman and influential lady of the Makka. His wife Ayesha was praised for her sharp memory and also the narrator of the so many Hadith. She also said so many different Hadith against Abu Huraira misogynist Hadith. Umme Salama as the one who was a very influential political figure and presented as the one who raised voice for the women. She raised a question on the revelation of the Quran that why Allah mention only men in His message, Moreover her questioned was answered, and both the gender was referred in Quran afterward. Mernissi (1991) critically explores the historical context of Muslim Law and traditions and argues that that the original message of the Prophet Mohammad, which is called for equality between the sexes has been misrepresented by the religious scholar and the political leaders. She also wrote about the women who have erased from history by the male dominating society. In her another book, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, she explores how women in the Muslim reign had a political power and ruled the Muslim Umma. She highlights the power and agency of the queens in the Islamic World, intending that to exercise of political authority in the Islamic world was never an exclusive male prerogative. Women did also exercise political authority, but their contribution has, unfortunately, been erased from history and popular consciousness.

Figure 1. Fatima Mernisi



### **Situation of Women in Islam**

Fatima Mernissi was concerned with the Islam and the status of women in it. For most of her career, she focused on analysing the historical development of the Islamic thought and its modern manifestation in reference to the roles of women within the religion. Mernissi's works mostly explore the relationship between sexual ideologies, gender identities and the status of women in Islam. Although, her focus was on Moroccan society and culture, however as a feminist, her works represent the subjugation of Muslim women in the name of Islam. She continuously worked against the ideological and the political systems that silences and oppresses Muslim women. She did her work in two ways-first, by challenging the domination of Muslim male over discourse regarding women and their sexuality and second, by providing a voice to the abused and silent women.

According to Mernissi, the wrecking conditions of women in Muslim societies are the result of the laws and customs which are biased and cause subjugation of the women. Some Muslim countries signed the United Nation Declaration of Human rights (Russell 2012), which states that men and women have equal rights. However, traditional Muslim Law (sharia) does not grant equal rights to women in marriages, divorce, and others. Moreover, traditional Muslim societies saw modernisation as synonymous with westernisation and consider it as a threat to Islam. Modernisation has brought women into the schools, universities and offices. They are becoming self-dependent and increasingly are being able to take decisions by themselves, something which the traditionalists are deeply resenting and fighting back. On the one hand, they are doing it because they regard these changes as a Western imposition on Islam, on the other hand, they are skeptical and fearful of the disorder a disorder a strong, self-aware woman can create.

### **Root of Women's Subjugation in Islam: Tradition of Misogynist Hadith?**

Mernissi highlights that the roots of the female subjugation in the Muslim society do not lie in Islam, but in the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic hadith (Prophet Muhammad's sayings and deeds) and beliefs. She argued that the Islamic texts have always been interpreted by men, with long commentaries and theological classes on the Quran and hadith. They talk about the equality of women in Islam. However, they tactfully side-lined women and always defended patriarchy. During the Prophet's time, Muslim women in Medina had the status of companions (sahabi) to the Prophet like men and could converse freely with him on issues of faith and morality (Mernissi 1987). Mernissi points out one of the ways through which men have turned Islam patriarchal is through the manipulation, and more than manipulation, the very mode of collection of the hadith is also questionable. To know the tradition of hadith, one should be aware of the birth of hadith.

She analysed the situation after the death of Prophet Muhammad. After his death, the process of choosing his successor began. In this process, the sunnah of the Prophet was elaborated, it started in the time of Amir Muawiya (first Umayyad Caliph), to legitimise his rule. After the death of the 3rd Caliph, Uthman civil war broke out. Ali who was chosen as the successor faced opposition from many notable people. Prophet's Muhammad's wife Ayesha, raised sword against him, demanding him to punish the murderer of the Uthman but was defeated in the battle of Camel. Muawiya instigated a civil war against Ali and fought the battle of siffin (sword) against him. However, the fight was long and very bloody. Neither of the two forces was able to defeat the other. The dead numbered about 70,000 men. Finally, an arbitration was decided, which happened in February 658 AD and designated Muawiya as Caliph. There was no unanimity on the result and this brought the split of Muslim community into three groups, one group supported Ali and the other goes with Muawiya. The first section was called sunni (accepted the result of arbitration) and the other was shia who refused

Muawiya as Caliph, for them the sole legitimate Caliph was remained Ali. The third group was of 'Kharijites' who were against both Ali and Muawiya. They blamed both Ali and Muawiya for dividing the Muslim community and planned to get rid of both the leaders. However, they succeeded to kill Ali, but Muawiya was only injured. After the death of Ali, Muawiya tried to get legitimacy for his rule against the grandsons of Prophet Muhammad and sons of Ali, who were extremely supported by people of Medina.

Mernissi concludes that after the death of Prophet, it had become essential to seek legitimacy in and through sacred texts. The elaboration of hadith happened because first, politicians manipulated it to legitimise themselves and in counter, the Islamic scholars opposed them through the development of fiqh. The most reliable ahadith are those that were compiled by al-Bukhari. Al-Bukhari (194-250 hijri) travelled all the way from his native place Bukhara to Medina. He stayed in Syria, Iraq, Hijaz and Egypt. He recorded and collected 600,000 hadith. However, among the 600,000 ahadith that he collected only 7,257, on verification, were found to be authentic. It excludes nearly 4000 ahadith which were in repetition. He applied a reliable method which is also known as the 'scientific method' of collecting hadith. The measure was to check the narrators and the chain of the transmitters. He did not stop there and also wrote an impulsive study on the life of transmitters of hadith. Mernissi points that if there were nearly 596,725 false hadith in circulation during Bukhari's time, which is in less than two centuries after the Prophet's death, one could easily imagine how many fabricated and canonical ahadith would be in circulation today. She also applied the same method as Al-Bukhari to check reliability of hadith and found that some narrators were extremely misogynist. She also raised the problem that while collecting hadith, Bukhari neglected the point of misogynist characters of the narrators.

Much of Mernissi's works have centred on the historical analysis of the Muslim scriptures. Rather than questioning the validity of the Quran, she casts her doubt on the validity of some hadith, claiming that some of the narrators of hadith were misogynist. In one often cited hadith, the Prophet Muhammad is quoted saying "Three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse" (Mernissi 1991: 75). Abu Huraira narrated this hadith. However, Mernissi pointed that Bukhari did not include the alternate version of this hadith, which is contradictory to that and narrated by Ayesha.

They told 'A'isha that Abu Hurayra was asserting that then Messenger of God said: "Three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse." 'A'isha responded: "Abu Hurayra learned his lessons very badly. He came into our house when the Prophet was in the middle of a sentence. He only heard the end of it. What the Prophet said was: 'May Allah refute the Jews; they say three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse' (Mernissi 1991: 76).

Mernissi in her argument said that not only Al-Bukhari did not include the correction from Ayesha, but he treated this hadith as if there was no question about it. He cited this hadith three times and each time he referred it with a different chain of transmission. This procedure strengthens a hadith and gives the impression of perfection in consensus. He did not mention the dispute between Ayesha and Abu Huraira on this subject.

Fatima Mernissi attacked Bukhari and said that he followed this hadith with another misogynist one, which reflected the same idea that considered women as ill-luck and cause of destruction. The Prophet said: "I do not leave after me any cause of trouble more fatal to men than women" (Mernissi 1991: 76). This hadith was narrated by Abdallah Ibn Umar (the son of the second orthodox Caliph, Umar Ibn al-Khattab). The other hadith, which is also narrated by him "the dog, the ass and woman interrupt prayer when they pass between the believer and the Qibla" (Mernissi 1991: 64). Mernissi reported that when people heard this hadith, they came to confirm it from Ayesha for verification of the same, which they heard from Abu Huraira and others. They relied on her judgment, not only because she was the wife of the Prophet but because of her ability. She was known for her sharp memory.

Ibn Ata said: "A'isha was, among all the people, the one who had the most knowledge of fiqh, the one who was the most educated and, compared to those who surrounded her, the one whose judgment was the best" (Mernissi 1991: 70). Prophet was reported of saying "Draw a part of your religion from Ayesha" (Mernissi 1991: 78).

Even the most prominent companions of Prophet asked questions to Ayesha concerning the *jaraid* (the daily duties of the Muslim, the rituals). Despite her words of caution, Al-Bukhari included above-mentioned hadith without any reference of correction by Ayesha. Fatima Mernissi also made an argument that Imam Malik (founder of Maliki School of jurisprudence) also doubted the transmitters of hadith and emphasising the necessity for Muslims to be on their defence and advised the *umma* (Muslim community) to consider the daily behaviour of the narrators and transmitters of the hadith as criteria for their reliability. Considering the above statement of Imam Malik, Al-Bukhari has also rejected some people as narrators of hadith. This act was not because they recounted false hadith that the Prophet did not say, but he saw them lying in their daily relationship with other people. Applying these rules, Mernissi also casts her doubt on the narrators of hadith even mentioned in *sahih*. She eliminates Abu Bakr (not to confused with first Caliph Abu Bakr) because he was punished by Umar bin Khattab on a charge of lying. He had given a false testimony against a woman regarding adultery and was punished by Umar. She also pointed on Abu Huraira, who was contradicted by Ayesha many times and accepted his mistakes. Abu Huraira was also once warned by Umar bin Khattab on the narration of so many ahadith and Umar threatened him to send to Yemen, which happened to his land if he would not stop saying so many hadith. Umar also said “the worst liar among the *muhaddithun* (narrators of hadith) is Abu Hurayra” (Mernissi 1991:79). Abdullah Ibn Umar, who was the source of so many misogynist’s hadith, was much known for his asceticism and spent nights in prayer was also rejected by Mernissi because of his phobic nature towards women. Therefore, Mernissi rejected all the three above-mentioned narrators of hadith. She refused to accept Abu Huraira, Abu Bakra and Abdullah Ibn Umar hadith regarding women because of their male chauvinist and women phobic behaviour.

### **Women and Politics**

When the Benazir Bhutto became the Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988, Nawaz Sharif and other opposition leaders raised the question of blasphemy and created the havoc that women have never governed a Muslim state. Fatima Mernissi has taken a very challenging task and claims to resolve the issue of political rights of the women which are considered blasphemy by some religious authorities as well as Muslim political leaders. She conducted deep historical and analytical research on this matter.

Fatima Mernissi argues that Aisha’s revolt against Ali which is known as the ‘Battle of Camel’, was considered as the first *fitna* in Islam. Women’s leadership in Islam has been associated with the disaster. The hadith, “Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity” (Mernissi 1991:01), it is from the book of “*sahih hadith*” (six authentic hadith collection) and has been treated as authentic with those thousands of ahadith collected by the meticulous Imam-al-Bukhari. Above-mentioned hadith is cited as evidence that women’s leadership is against the *sunnah*. Prophet Muhammad was supposed to say this hadith on the succession of a woman to the throne of Persia. Mernissi makes a point that Abu Bakra (not to be confused with the first Caliph), first mentioned this hadith, only when Ayesha lost the Battle of the Camel. Moreover, 25 years after the event on which Prophet was assumed to said those words. Mernissi reported that Abu Bakra had also punished by Umar bin al-Khattab (second orthodox Caliph). He was punished because he gave a false testimony against a woman and alleged her for the commitment of *zina* (illicit sex). Later she was proved innocent and Abu Bakra was punished for the false accusation. Therefore, according to Mernissi, he should not have regarded as the true transmitter of hadith, especially those which are related to women, she also questioned that why this particular hadith came to his mind after the defeat of Ayesha. Why Abu Bakra did not confront her when she approached him for the battle. When she contacted him, he simply responded to her that he was against *fitna*. He was supposed to have said to her that particular hadith (mentioned above) accordingly to the way he said after the battle. One of the other elite, Abu Musa also chose not to take part in combat and consulted his people (he was governor of Kufa at that time). He decided to involve his people and called them



in the mosque and informed them about the position of the Prophet Muhammad on the subject of civil war and recited to them hadith condemning fitna. Abu Musa recited many ahadith at that time, all of them against fitna, against the civil war. Mernissi made a point that all the ahadith which were narrated by Abu Musa and collected by Al- Bukhari in the chapter of fitna, did not raise the issue of the sex of the leader.

Mernissi also pointed out that many queens were erased from the pages of history. They were the ones, who constantly fought battles with sultans for the thrones or sometimes opposed the Caliphs. In one or two cases women also assumed the role of Caliph. Mernissi made a point here that the Arabic language is also misogynist in nature as there is no word equivalent to Caliph and imam for the female head. So she used queen or other titles for them. She preferred queen because in Quran this word is used for a woman ruler of Sheba (Mernissi 2006).

Fatima Mernissi recognised that there should be no objection for the female head in Islam. She justifies her argument through the Quran. In Quran, chapter 26, the- Ant (Al- Naml), 20 verses are regarding Queen of Sheba (Verses 23-43). Quran does not say her name in these verses. However, she was shown as a strong leader and was loved by her people. They used to worship the sun. When she received a message from Prophet Suleiman to worship Allah, she decided to test him, if he is a Prophet or not. In Quran, she is praised as a ruler and also for her intelligence. The Quran does not consider her a lesser ruler because of her sex. Fatima Mernissi also raised the issue that some historians are not able to digest her capability as a female ruler. They are suggesting that politics should not be the arena of women and raised doubt about the Queen of Sheba (Bilqis). According to them, she was not a common human being, for example, Masudi (died in 346 hijri) referred to the doubt regarding the lineage of the queen of Sheba by stating that her father was a human, but her mother was among the jinns. She was the ruler and everyone considered her superior, otherwise it is impossible for a mere woman to rule. He argues, because of her extraordinary potential that she could not be entirely a human. Mernissi argued that the Quran did not consider its worthy to mention about the parental genealogy of the Queen of Sheba, Bilqis. It was Masudi's personal opinion or weakness that he was not able to bear that a woman was accepted as a ruler, even in the Quran. So, very diplomatically he attacked her lineage and tried to give the message that a woman is not worthy to rule (Mernissi 2006).

Fatima Mernissi has given a detailed account of the women who ruled directly or under the name of their close relatives such as brother, husband or son. She highlights the power and supremacy of the queens in the Islamic World, stressing that it was never a prerogative of the male alone to exercise the political authority in the Islamic world. Women also exercised the political authority, but their contributions, unfortunately, have been erased from history and popular consciousness. To enjoy her right, a woman does not have to be perfect, superb, etc. It is a patriarchal idea that women have to be exceptional to be equal to the men. Mernissi stated that all the female rulers too were women who were not perfect and they had defects just as all other human beings. They also made mistakes. However, they had been very ambitious and able personalities.

Fatima Mernissi also talked about the criteria of eligibility for being a Caliph –an Arab male. Non-Arab people have repeatedly challenged the criteria of ethnic Arab as being discriminatory. Some of them died while defending the idea that any Muslim can become a Caliph. Over the period, no one ever challenged the idea that only a male can be a Caliph. No one even contended the idea that relating the position of Caliph only to the maleness is also violating the principle of equality. Associating the word Caliph and women seems blasphemous. Moreover, Caliphs always opposed women's power as mulk or sultana. However, some women managed to get power and ruled. Some were denied such opportunities by male leaders and male relatives.

Fatima Mernissi took up the challenge and she devoted her book *Forgotten Queens of Islam* to the women rulers. She analysed the history of Muslim rule and left no stone unturned in praising the great power of women. Apart from the wives and female members of Prophet's family, she gave the detailed account of women rulers who marked Islamic history with their courage and intelligence. Mernissi mentioned that one of the first women who ruled Muslim

was Turkan Khatun, wife of the Malikshah who was a Seljuk Sultan who challenged the Caliph of Baghdad. He reigned between 1072 and 1092 AD. He made Caliph and his capital Baghdad tremble. The Baghdad Caliph gave him the title of Caliph in exchange for his capital's protection. At that time, the Caliph was not in a position to defend his territory. Mamud, the son of Malikshah, was only four years old when he died, so his wife Turkan Khatun tried to get power. Mernissi argues that in order to defend the succession of Malikshah, approval of Abbasid Caliph Al-Muqtadi was needed. He was 27th Abbasid Caliph, who ruled between 1070 and 1094. Turkan Khatun kept her husband's death a secret and started negotiating with the Caliph. The Caliph was not ready to give the power to a child, because a child is not entrusted with the throne in Islam. However, Turkan Khatun was able to manage a fatwa (decree) saying a child can be in power under the guardianship. Hence, she was able to claim the throne (Mernissi 2006). Turkan Khatun was opposed by the eldest son of Malikshah from another wife and his brother Tutush I. She and her son Mamud were assassinated in 1094 AD by the family of the vizier (Mernissi 2006).

Another woman, Shajarat-al-Durr, the wife of Malik al-Salih Naim al-Din Ayyub, faced opposition from Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mustasim. Shajarat-al-Durr succeeded her husband after his death in 1250. She won the military victory against the crusaders and captured the King of France Louis X. At that time, the Egypt was under the control of Baghdad, and the Caliph Al-Mustasim refused to recognise her as the head of the state. The Caliph even sent a humiliating message to the Emirs saying that he was ready to provide a 'man', if Egyptian lacked the capacity to rule or no capable men existed in Egypt, since they reduced to choose a woman to rule over them (Mernissi 2006).

Mernissi stated that Shajarat al-Durr tried to be in power without the reorganization from the Caliph. She believed that she had the support of a great Army. However, Caliph's refusal proved very fatal to her, and as soon as the news of Caliph's refusal became known, the disputes started. The administration of Syria, which was under the control of Egypt, refused to recognise Shajarat al-Durr as their ruler and the army got divided. Hence it was decided to dispose of her. To keep the power in her hand, she married another man Izz al-Din Aybak as-Atabeg (commander in chief). Her name was recited during the Friday sermons as malikat al-Muslimin, (Queen of the Muslims) and coins were minted with her name. The relationship between Izz al-Din Aybak and Shajarat-al Durr was very disputed and suspicious. She wanted the sole control of Egypt while her husband wanted to make an alliance with other strong Emirs to strengthen his position and decided to marry the daughter of the Ayyubid Emir of al-Mousil, Badr ad-Din Loaloo. Shajarat-al-Durr felt the risk and killed Aybek with the help of a servant. In the same year 1257, she was murdered by Aybek supporters and thus met a very tragic end. In both the above cases, Mernissi analysed the queens' situations and recognised that it was not the question of a woman's ability to rule. It was the Caliph, who was not ready to give authority to women. They had to rule in the name of their son or husband (Mernissi 2006).

In another case Fatima Mernissi observed one of the exceptions. It was the case of Radiya Sultan. She did not face refusal from the Caliph. However, she faced opposition from her own countrymen or family members. She took power in Delhi, India in 1236 AD. The Sultan Iltutmish, who was the father of Radiya Sultan, made her the heir, despite the fact that he had three sons. Even the religious leaders, who were very near to Sultan and very influential in the country, did not keep Radiya from accepting the power. The opposition was led by their rivals in the name of God during her reign. Mernissi pointed that in the cases of Shajarat al-Durr and Radiya Sultan, the Caliph's reactions were very contradictory. The Egyptian ruler faced opposition from the Caliph while later was supported by religious authority (Mernissi 2006).

Mernissi highlighted that the people of Yemen were very accommodative of the idea of women's rule. They took pride in their history (Queen of Sheba, belonged to them) and matriarchal nature of their society before Islam. In Yemen, several queens bear the title of "Malika", Asma and Arwa were among them. They ruled over San'a near the end of 11th century.

Arwa ruled beside her husband, Ali Muhammad al-Sulayhi. He was the founder of the Sulayhi dynasty. After that Asma, the wife of her son al-Mukarram and the daughter in law of Arwa was the head of the state about a half century until her death in 1138. These two queens had the same royal title “al-sayyidaal-hurra”. Being a shia ruler, she needed the approval from Fatimid, the shia Caliph, who was the sole person in a position to recognise her. Asma shared power with her husband, but after the death of Mukarram, his wife Arwa faced opposition from Caliph al-Mustansir. Fatima Mernissi argued that one might think that in shiism there would be more respect for women, considering that they claimed their descent from the daughter of Prophet Muhammad Fatima, who has a very prominent place in Ismaili shiism. She contended that one would normally expect a more liberal attitude and support from a Shiite Caliph. However, Caliph al-Mustansir acted exactly like a sunni Caliph toward the queen Arwa, after the death of her husband al-Mukarram. He strongly opposed her conjecture as a ruler. He even sent messengers to her and strongly advised her to get married and remain in the background behind her spouse. Arwa consented to marry her husband’s cousin Saba Ibn Ahmad (Mernissi 2006).

Mernissi highlights that the local and cultural dimensions, especially in Yemen, is very important. They accepted women as their leader because of their traditions. She argues that although shia and sunni are in oppositions about everything, they agree about the place of women in politics. Shia Caliphs just behaved like sunni Caliphs and find the idea of women governing the Muslim community as repugnant” (Mernissi 2006: 158). Mernissi also highlights that the dispute between shia and sunni on Fatima and Ayesha is one of the best examples to draw a picture that political opportunists only used the women question for serving their interest. She also argues that the politics of Islam changes its ‘colours’ according to the circumstances. The Caliphs and qadis were merely politicians. They used to bend risala of Islam (message of Prophet Muhammad in hadith and Quran) to suit their interest. Shias legitimated their rule through the succession by women (Khadija and Fatima, wife and daughter of the Prophet respectively) and their religious authorities set to work to prove it. While in sunni tradition, the Caliph of Baghdad needed to contradict women as the transmitters of legitimacy so they sought help from the hadith, which can be interpreted according to their interest. They use hadith because it is very difficult for religious authorities to always get what they need through interpreting Quran (Mernissi 2006). Mernissi also highlights the two contradictory positions which were taken by Fatimid Caliphs concerning women and politics. On the one hand they accepted Fatima (a woman) as their foremother to legitimise their rule, but on the other hand, they refused the presence of women as partners in politics.

Fatima Mernissi investigated one of the extraordinary circumstances in which Fatimid princess Sitt al-Mulk assumed the position of Caliph to fulfill the duties for four months. In the year 1020 Caliph, Imam al-Hakim Ibn’ Arnri Allah, who declared himself as God, had disappeared mysteriously.

Mernissi found the story of Sitt al-Mulk as fascinating and exemplary. It is the story of a woman, who was forced by the circumstances to claim the place of a Caliph to save the millions of the shia believers from the madness of their Imam. Mernissi held that the case of Sitt al-Mulk was an exceptional case, in which a woman had managed to assumed the Caliph’s throne. She was in the position of Caliph for four months. She also pointed out the duality of the system that they completely refused to accept the existence of Sitt al- Mulk.

In addition to this duality, Mernissi gave an example of the other female rulers of Spain who were titled as Al-Hurra. One of them was Ayesha al Hurra. She was known as one of the most notable and fascinating persons of the history of Spain. Ayesha played a very heroic role in overthrowing her husband and replaced him with their son Abu Abdullah. She did it on the call of people of Andalusia who were very concerned about their future because the then Sultan, Husband of Ayesha married a war captured Catholic slave Isabella. After Isabella had born Sultan a child, she started strengthening her position, used her ascendancy over the Sultan and started favouring her people.

So, at this time, the elite of the Granada decided to overthrow the Sultan with the help of his Arab wife. From the examples of Al- Hurra, Fatima Mernissi raised the issue of Muslim

historian biases towards the women. She made a point that Ayesha al- Hurra and another ruler of Spain, Sayyida al- Hurra, were neglected in the Arab sources while they got their place in the Spanish and Portuges historians' writings and documents (Mernissi 2006).

Mernissi concluded that there are a number of women who ruled Muslims. Quran does not oppose the queen of Sheba nor did it consider women rulers as inferior or incapable. So by saying, Islam does not allow women to be in politics is a distorted truth, it is just Muslim leaders for their interest are opposed to the rule of women (Mernissi 2006).

### **Female Sexuality**

Muslim male discourse regarding women and their sexuality has been challenged by Mernissi. She became the voice of the abused and silent women. She rejected the imposition of veil. For her, veil is not a headscarf but it is the inability of women to speak for their rights. Mernissi took an approach which opposed the veil. Going beyond the issue of the veil, however, she focused on the oppression of women rationally. Mernissi cited the verses of Quran and hadith and argued that Islam recognises female sexuality; it is not viewed as bad or inferior. However, patriarchal interpretations have degraded their position and represent that the situation of men in Islam is superior than that of the women (Malik 2015).

Mernissi argues that the main difference between the struggle of women's movements in the Islamic world and the west is rooted in the different perceptions regarding female sexuality. Western patriarchy traditionally considered women as passive and inferior sexual partner while in Islam female is considered as an active partner (Noon 2008). While comparing the west and Muslim notions of female sexuality, Mernissi has given the example of the explicit and the implicit theories regarding women sexuality.

The explicit theory is the contemporary belief that men are aggressive and active while women are a passive partner. Male desire is considered strong and gratified in the legal context of marriage which kept him away from the zina. Implicit theory considered both male and female as dynamic sexual nature and proposes that the female desires should be gratified (Mernissi 2011: 44).

According to Mernissi, Islam recognises women as powerful sexual beings. There is no notion of women inferiority in Islam. It recognises the equality between men and women. Mernissi compares the sexual dynamics between Freud and Al-Ghazali and argues that the gender polarisation is the character of Freudian psychoanalysis. However, it is absent in Ghazali's works (Mernissi 2011:44). Both thinkers represented different intellectual trends of explicit and implicit theory. Modern western thought maintains that the gender difference is essential to human survival and the differences between male and female is of nature, and this is represented by Freud. In contrast, the Islamic world's view of the gender gap, represented by Ghazali, is social and the differences between men and women are not indigenous, but a result of the socialisation process and the acceptance in the latter of the inherent equality of sexuality. Mernissi argues that the implicit in the religious discourse was epitomised in the classical works Imam Ghazali (twelfth century). Women are feared for their potential of creating destruction and fitna (chaos) provoked by the sexual disorder. "The erotic discourse is mainly centered on the aggressive nature of female passion, if women are not sexually satisfied; they create fitna by enticing other men than their husband" (Mernissi, 2011:42). Therefore, it is the man's duty to keep the virtue of women and the man has the power to decide the women sexual needs. It is their responsibility to keep her satisfied to preserve her virtue (Nieuwkerk 1998).

Mernissi affirms that Islam recognises the enticing power of female over the male. Therefore, the imposition of gender segregation in Muslim communities was not emerged because of subordinate position of women but from the realisation of their strong potential. The belief in the potential strength of female is the main reason of institutionalised the gender segregation in the Muslim societies. Traditional Muslims believed that women are threats due to the possibility of fitna. They also have a perception that the heterosexual love is dangerous to God's command. It takes men away from God. Women's unrestricted sexuality distracts men

from their religious as well as social duties. There are two ways through which rebellious nature of female sexuality is shown. The first is *quaid*, means “cunning”. It always refers to women’s decision to commit adultery, seeking reference from Quran (chapter 12). The second is *nushuz*, meaning rebellion nature of women against male authority. Mernissi argued that Quran (chapter 4, verse 34) refers to women refusing to obey their husband in the matter of the sex act. It is considered so severe that it gives men charge to use violence against women when “all violence between believers is formally forbidden” (Mernissi 1996:156).

According to her, three sources restrict the intimacy in a heterosexual unit: polygamy, men’s unilateral right to divorce, and the authority of the mother-in-law in the family.

#### Polygamy

Fornication (*zina*) is considered sin in Islam and the main purpose of polygamy is to satisfy the sexual needs of a man. However, it gives privilege to men to satisfy their sexuality and considered women as agents for that purpose (Noon 2008). Mernissi considers polygamy as a significant impediment to the development of marital intimacy. It keeps women’s sexuality under control, while it gives men the authority to have multiple sexual relationships. The psychological impacts of polygyny are two-fold. First, the practice of polygamy humiliates womanhood and renders women inferior and subordinate to men. On the other hand, men’s unilateral rights in marriage disrupt marital intimacy, because it upholds a sense of insecurity among women. It also obstructs the development of the meaningful relationship between spouses.

In traditional Islam, there is a clear division between male and female spaces, and this too enables men to restrict and control women’s sexual behaviour. Mernissi argues that Quran limits the condition of a second marriage by fearing of injustice and the verse 129 in chapter 04 says, “you will never be able to equal between wives, even if you desire (to do so)”. She further says that Quran does not provide justification of polygamy, but traditional Muslims like Ghazali justified it by saying that polygamy is based on instinct (Mernissi 2011). Mernissi made a point that Ghazali also considered that males and females have similar kind of instinctual drives. Therefore, he unintentionally failed to provide the justification for second marriage. She argues that there is need to reinterpret Islam to let it become an instrument for gender equality and empowerment of women. Mernissi emphasised that in polygamy, there is a lack of love between a husband and wife. Male usually plays the role of a master within this type of marriage. The sexual act is controlled by many dos and don’ts and now it is considered polluted.

#### Repudiation

Mernissi refers to repudiation as the absolute authority of a man to divorce his wife without any justification. Even the judge cannot question the decision of the husband. Women do not have the similar right to repudiate. A woman who seeks divorce is subject of judge’s decision and approval. In the Quran (chapter 4, verse 20), men have been given the permission to replace the wives if they want.

But if you desire to give up a wife and to take another in her stead, do not take away anything of what you have given the first one, however much it may have been.<sup>21</sup> Would you, perchance, take it away by slandering her and thus committing a manifest sin? (4:20) {Asad n.d}

In other verses of Quran also warned “the believer entrusted with the power to break the marriage and do not make the verse of Allah as a jest” (2:231) {Asad n.d}. However, verse 20 of chapter 4 has given the full authority to the husband to nullify the bond of marriage without any justification. The divorce law also ensures the dominance of the husband over the wife. Moreover, the problem of repudiation is also similar to that of polygamy.

Whereas polygamy deals with the intensity of the male’s sexual drive, repudiation deals with its instability. Repudiation prevents the man from losing his sexual appetite through boredom. It aims at supplying a new set of sexual objects, within the framework of marriage, to protect him against the temptation of *zina* (Mernissi 2011:61).

The institution of polygamy and divorce perceived male need placed above that of the female. It supports the idea that a woman is merely the agent of sexual pleasure and reproduction. Mernissi argues that our social structure is like that in which men are expecting

a thorough satisfaction of sexual desire while in the case of women, they, from the early age, are socialized to accept the limitations.

### **Veil and Gender Segregation**

Fatima Mernissi argues that hijab, which means curtain, descended in the verse of Quran to put a barrier between two men, not between a woman and a man. Verse 53, of chapter 33 of the Quran is regarded as the basis of the institution of hijab, the veil. It was the first of a series of verses which led to the splitting of Muslim sphere into private and public spaces.

The verse of hijab was revealed for the situation where Prophet invited people to celebrate his marriage with the Zainab bint Jaiysh. Everyone left, but three people were not ready to go and they alleged that the Prophet got so irritated, came out into the courtyard and took a round of his other wives' room. He returned to his newly wedded wife's chamber but again left it because the guests still occupied it. According to traditional exegesis, in response to the Prophet's irritation at the guests that the verses of hijab revealed. Mernissi argues that the irritation of Prophet was only the cause of such quick and momentous decision to the installation of hijab. She makes a point that the situation of revealing this verse was of very unusual speediness. She also mentioned that every verse has its *asbab-ul-nuzul* (causes and context of revelation). There is always a period of gestation or time of waiting for the issue and its revelation. However, in the case regarding verses of hijab, "rather unusual rapidity of the revelation does not tally with the normal psychological rhythm of revelations and especially with what we know of the character of the Prophet" (Mernissi 1991:87).

Fatima Mernissi describes that the hijab as having three-dimensional meaning and all are often blend into one another. The first is 'visual' meaning to hide something from the sight. Two verses of Quran deal with the hijab- verse 31 of chapter 24 and 59 of Chapter 33. According to Fatima Mernissi, these verses of visual hijab are over exposed and became the basis of veiling. The second dimension of hijab is 'spatial' meaning to separate and to make a border between the private and public life. According to her, it is not to say that women are separated and invisible (fully covered) from the public sphere.

The third one is 'ethical' which means Muslims dressed modestly. It does not apply only to women. The Prophet was attacked and threatened by the *munafiqun* (hypocrites) at that time. They always tried to attack Prophet Muhammad by attacking his wives; they spread rumours about his wives especially Ayesha. They linked Ayesha with one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad and alleged her with infidelity. The ethical verses were revealed at that situation and asked the Prophet wives to be more reserved.

The traditional Islamic world is divided into the two spheres of male and female and they impose hijab to ensure that if a woman intrudes the space of another gender, they should be fully covered. Mernissi highlights that the Prophet had no desire to make hijab compulsory for women. It was imposed by the political opposition to his leadership at the end of his life. The sexual harassment of his wives, rumours about them and the continuous pressures of his companions like Umar bin Khattab, who is known for his misogynist nature, led to imposition of hijab as a solution (Rhouni 2010). According to Mernissi, hypocrites who harassed women could not relinquish their *jahiliya* (pre-Islamic period) customs that Islam came to eradicate. She says that the Islamist call for hijab is a call to be to go back to *jahiliya* customs (Rhouni 2010:115).

### **Critique on Fatima Mernissi's Works**

Mernissi's works, as a pioneer of the Islamic feminism, has been analysed by many scholars and widely cited in works dealing with gender or women in Islam. One of the scholars who is interested in her work is Jonas Svensson. He analyses Mernissi's work along with works by Riffat Hassan and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim. He gave a detailed account of her works and believed that her reinterpretations of Islamic source and history are overtly aimed at facilitating a gradual move in Muslim societies towards women's human rights (Svensson 2000).

Some scholars have criticised Mernissi's works. They questioned her silence on the issues of class divergence and global capitalism. They based their arguments exclusively on her work on gender and Islam. These critics have usually ignored her sociological works, which were published in Morocco during the 1970s and 1980s and which primarily charged to criticise development policies and global capitalism and their negative impact on subjugated women (Rhouni 2010).

Anouar Majid criticised Mernissi for being guilty of treating the Quran as historical document. He considered it as disrespect and commented that in Islam, the boundaries of freedom of an individual are determined by the divine decree (sharia), not by secular law (cited in Mayer 1998). Majid discredited Mernissi for circulating "a bourgeois notion of democracy and individual liberties" (Majid 1998:328). He also opposed feminist movements, which are struggling for the human rights and democracy in West Asia and North Africa. Majid also characterised these movements as "civil rights" and insisted that "civil rights cannot be a reliable basis for a legitimate feminist movement in the Islamic world today" (Mayer 1998). He stated, "civil rights dismiss the tradition and culture of Arab World" (Majid 1998:345). He argues that the actual fight should oppose the imposition of "global revolution of Westernisation" on the third world countries. Majid expects women to accept his opinion of tradition and culture compassionately. He strongly opposed the idea of feminism, which was discussed at Vienna human rights conference in 1993. The conference also witnessed the battle between the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which supported feminism in Iran and other conservative countries. Feminists from all over the world were supporting the idea of human rights while the Islamic countries emphasised on the superiority of religion and culture.

Leila Ahmad questioned the conception of veil as understood by Fatima Mernissi. According to her, veil was not the symbol of backwardness. It was a western attack on the Muslim world. During colonial times, the veil became the symbol of shame in the face of Western criticism. Therefore, Muslims campaigned for the abolition of the veil (Ahmed 1992). Katherine Bullock shares the opinion of Leila Ahmed, and like her, she also disputes the idea of the veil as a symbol of women's oppression. Bullock (2002) accuses Mernissi of failing to contextualise the practices of Islam which are different in different time and place. It is only the case of being reductive if one is not able to recognise the multiple discourses around hijab. Bullock suggests that the Islam that Mernissi represents, is harsh. Furthermore, Claire Noon (2008) stated that Bullock is right in her accusation of Mernissi because Mernissi generalised the idea about the state of women in Islam. She made this generalisation as universally true. It is not desirable to universalise things because Islam with its different sects and schools of jurisprudence is not monolithic in its practice. She also stated that an acknowledgment of the background, theological position and culture of Mernissi are necessary factors to understand her works. She stressed that Mernissi's writing is more or less focused on her homeland, Morocco. Her research on the Muslim women's subjugation is shaped by and based on that particular area and one can also see that her works have especially focussed on one school of jurisprudence which is the Maliki school, commonly practiced in her native land (Noon 2008).

Mernissi's work is either highly praised or categorically criticised, but very rarely deconstructed (Rhouni 2010). Mernissi faced different types of comments for her works. Scholars like Miriam Cooke and Margot Badran praised her for such a milestone scholarly feminist work. On the contrary, author like Asma Barlas gave a critical analysis of her work. Lastly, writer Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon gave a more balanced view on Mernissi works.

Miriam Cooke stated that the Islamic feminists, Fatima Mernissi along with Assia Djebar, Nawal al-Saadawi, and Zaynab al-Ghazali, are learning how to take advantage of the transnationalism of Islam to empower themselves as women and as Muslims (Cooke 2001:61). Cooke stated that Mernissi speaks with the tongue of her mother and grandmother to protest against the traditional interpretation of the patriarchal text. Mernissi defended women against detractors and tried to balance national, transnational and feminist agendas to construct a society which is cordial to them (Cooke 2001: 80). Mernissi engaged herself in Islamic discourse to empower women.

Zayzafoon devotes the first Chapter, “A Semiotic Reading of Islamic Feminism: Hybridity, Authority, and the Strategic Reinvention of the ‘Muslim Woman’ in Fatima Mernissi”, in her book “Production of the Muslim Woman,” to Mernissi. She examines the works of Mernissi on Muslim women as a construction or reinvention. She praises Mernissi’s double project to protect the rights of Muslim women against Islamism and to respond the anti-Islamic feelings of the West (Zayzafoon 2005). On the other hand, Zayzafoon sheds light on some major faults in Mernissi works. She argues that Mernissi reinforces the conservative position by accepting the logic of religious truth. She came to this conclusion because of Mernissi works of “reinventing the early Muslim society and the ideal of gender equality in Muhammad’s time as the truth that has been hidden or ‘veiled’ by the Muslim male elite” (Zayzafoon 2005:22). For Zayzafoon, Mernissi “paradoxically endorses the notion of truth from which the hadith derives its authority and hence reinforces the power of tradition to reinscribe and perpetuate itself” (Rhouni 2010: 02).

Mernissi’s also faced very harsh criticism from a very prominent Islamic feminist scholar Asma Barlas, who criticised Mernissi for her first work. She blamed Mernissi for considering Islam as misogynist and viewing God as oppressive. She also included Mernissi in the category of those feminists who do not believe in the divine. Barlas further stated that “many Muslim feminists don’t believe in the divine, they do not find it meaningful to engage the Qur’an, or even to read it. But this doesn’t keep some of them from making false claims about it.” (Barlas 2002:11).

Fatima Mernissi's contributions to Islamic feminist discourse have been both groundbreaking and contentious. While her work has significantly advanced feminist interpretations of Islam, it is sometimes perceived as more critical than constructive in its engagement with traditional Islamic thought. Critics contend that her methodologies and conclusions occasionally lack rigorous adherence to classical Islamic scholarship, suggesting that her interpretations may be selectively shaped to align with a feminist agenda. Despite these criticisms, Mernissi's scholarship remains influential and continues to provoke important debates within the field of Islamic feminism.

## CONCLUSION

Fatima Mernissi through her writings tried to discover the status of women in Islam beyond many patriarchal mystifications. She not only challenged the patriarchal notion about women by giving the examples of Prophet Muhammad but also cast her doubt about misogynist ahadith and provided their counter narratives. She also did painstaking tasks of re-discovering the queens of Islam who were forgotten and were limited only to the sidelines of history. She also tried to justify Islam as an anti-patriarchal religion and criticised caliphs and scholars of the Muslim world for preaching a distorted ‘truth’ against women. She recognises that Islam asserted the potential equality of male and female and observes that there is a basic contradiction between Islam at the time of Muhammad and the later interpretation of the religious texts. She confirmed that there is an inequality between the sexes that has been the outcome of the social and legal structures of Islam as it has been practiced. Mernissi claims that every Muslim has the right and even the duty to scrutinise the hadith. She also stated that no one has a monopoly over the God’s words. The practice of interpretation which was common in early ages of Islam can be done now also, by reopening the doors of ijtihad. Mernissi is of the view that the status of women in Islam is not as low as many believe it to be. It is not inferior or inadequate as claimed by the critics, and it is not equal or good as claimed by apologists. There is instead a complicated interaction of culture, religion, and politics which results in a status that should be good in theory but ends up being bad in practice. The study analyzed how Mernissi tried to change the perception of the world regarding the female sexuality. Women are personified as dangerous individuals and seen as a barrier between God and a believer. Traditionalists and conservatives considered free spirited and independent women as a challenge to the sacred order. She gave the example of earlier Muslim women to get rid of this



phobic notion regarding women. Mernissi's work influenced many Muslim women belonging to different backgrounds. Those women and scholars make it a point to signify their Islamic identity while criticising the patriarchal views. Their aim is to restore the humanitarian aspect of Islam which constructs the Islamic principle of social justice for all human beings irrespective of race, class, gender or religion. Mernissi's efforts are crucial if one has to present a balanced approach to women's rights in Islam. The research concludes that Mernissi's work had altered not only the traditional Islamic views on women but also the contemporary feminist understanding on Muslim women. Her work represents a gracious venture which is taking place within the context of the current Islamic debate on gender issues. Her work represents a new dimension of feminism which could take the contemporary Islamic debate regarding women's status to newer heights. Mernissi's legacy lies in the fact that one can now confidently challenge misogynists approaches towards women from within the Islamic tradition. She through her pioneering works inspires a whole new generation of scholars to take up such a challenge

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