



musawah

For Equality in the Muslim Family

What Fatima Mernissi Means To Me

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I was a college student when a family friend presented a copy of *Women and Islam: A Historical and Theological Enquiry* to me. I just put it aside as I was taken up by other pursuits at the time. Nearly fifteen years later I read it for the first time when a lot had changed in my life. I became an instant admirer of Fatima Mernissi. All of what she was saying was so much connected to me and my life.

We may be divided by continents and belong to different age groups but the realities we face as Muslim women are so similar. Mernissi's account of life in a harem in Morocco rings so many bells with scores of Muslim women in the Indian sub-continent with their lives behind *chilmans* [curtains]. Allah is *Rehman* and *Rahim*; we are followers of a kind and compassionate God and yet remain unequal. Islam is a religion of peace and justice and yet violence is intrinsic part of our lives as female Muslims. We are confined physically, socially and emotionally thanks to the tradition of misogyny.

The *hadith* "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity" from Abu Bakr is in many ways at the root of this misogyny. Mernissi thoroughly investigates and delightfully demolishes the truthfulness of this *hadith*. She puts together scientific evidence from different sources to elucidate the ethical character of a Muslim and a Companion at that! She puts forth ample corroboration to question the authenticity of this mischievous and mala fide statement. What is most important for me is that in the process, she elaborates some of the key Islamic ethics and principles for any reader to easily comprehend! I cannot help but contrast this with the ambiguity and obfuscation that marks the writings of so many scholars of repute. We learn that for a Muslim, just and moral conduct is more important than position and power. And good conduct is not the prerogative of any one gender! This is abundantly illustrated through the tribulations and actions of A'isha following the Battle of the Camel.

The consultative process she painstakingly undertakes stresses on what we know today as the modern values of democracy, justice and peoples' participation in decision-making. The diversity of views as expressed by different people in those *kissas* [accounts or stories] is yet another example of mutual respect and tolerance that our religion teaches. And that this process of elaborate social debate was initiated and led by a woman speaks volumes for the place of woman in Islam. And that most of these debates took place in mosques is something that appears unbelievable in today's world! Indeed, the loss of that spirit and social milieu is sad for all - not just Islamic feminists and fellow Muslims but the whole of humanity.

I find Mernissi's work on the *hijab* particularly illuminating. The painstaking manner in which she has traced the origins, the distortions, the practices have inspired many thinkers to write volumes on the contentious subject of segregation and gender politics. As a south Asian Muslim woman the Sufi perspective on *hijab* is my personal favourite. Many of us have been confronted with situations in our lives when we have thought of the *akal pe purdah* [curtain on the mind] that dictates the conduct of so many of our family members and friends in matters such as women's position in

society in general and marriage and divorce in particular. The *hijab* in the form of a closed mind blinds us to the beauty of Allah's creations. It becomes a barrier between a human and the creator. It generates hatred instead of love; it creates divisions of man and woman; it privileges one over the other; the message of love and peace is totally lost to those whose minds are under a *hijab*!

My relationship with Fatima Mernissi is intimate and personal though I did not have the good fortune of meeting her in person. She learnt about the poetic religion from her grandmother as I did from mine. For scores of Muslim women like me Fatima Mernissi signifies love and life's splendor; she will live on forever.

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