

Fatema Mernissi and the Hadith: Agent of Social Change

**A Lecture by
Nimat Hafez Barazangi@**

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Introduction

Today, I emphasize that Muslim women will not fully emancipate without rethinking the authority of Hadith in relation to the Qur’an. **Being a central concept in my recent book, *Woman’s Identity and Rethinking the Hadith* (2015),** I am exploring the consequences of Mernissi’s re-opening the door for Muslim feminists discourse on the Hadith by asking: “How binding is the authority of Hadith for Muslims?” In other words, if the purpose of Hadith, as the genre of reported narratives attributed to the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, was to extrapolate on the Qur’an as the only divine and primary textual source of Islam, why do most of the reported narratives concerning gender and Muslim women’s role present a negative picture, contrary to the Qur’anic principle of justice?

Although Mernissi was among the first contemporary Muslim feminists to investigate the authenticity and authority of some narratives attributed to the Prophet (in her 1986, 1989, 1991a, 1993 a, 1993b, 1994, 1996, 2002), the issues of authenticity and authority of these narratives have been with us since the Prophet’s wife, ‘A’ishah questioned early narrators’ claims of what they heard from the Prophet (Barazangi, 2015; Zarkashi [1344-1392], 2001). **Ibn Khaldun** [1332-1406] was one of few scholars during the Middle-Ages to address the subject of Hadith authority in his *Muqaddimah* (1967). Other scholars did raise these issues, but their work was either overlooked or denounced because Muslims were not ready to separate their pious respect for the Prophet from the necessity to rethink the authority of the narratives. Contemporary Muslim scholars and leaders, from **Muhammad Abduh** ([1849-1930] 1964), to **Zaynab Fawwaz** ([1860-1914] her letters of 1892 cited in Belhachmi, 2008), **Mahmood Muhammad Taha** (1987), **Jamal al Banna** (2005, 2008), **Kacia Ali** (2006, 2010), **Jonathan Brown** (2009),

Muhammad Shahrur (2009), Asma Sayeed (2013), and Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2013) presented some examples of how we can hold Hadith authority at bay when it contradicts the Qur'an. With the exception of *Ahl al Qur'an*, represented more recently in Ahmed Subhi Mansour's work (<http://www.ahl-alquran.com/English/main.php>), who do not accept Hadith as an authentic source of Islam, I know of no other scholars questioning the totality of Hadith. So, I decided to investigate the authority of Hadith from within the Islamic framework, which led me to the *conclusions that Muslim societies will not reform, nor would Muslim women fully emancipate without rethinking the Hadith.*

Mernissi's Approach to Gender justice and Woman's Agency in Hadith

In this presentation, I complement my rethinking Hadith by exploring the consequences of Mernissi's studies of Hadith in order to build a position that enables social change in Muslim societies and communities. Often we are told that Mernissi resisted those who try to evaluate her work or try to persuade her of the opposite (Rhouni, 2010: XV), but my goal is to synthesize the pedagogical ramifications of her work toward gender justice and woman's leadership/agency. As she frequently focused on leadership, I am exploring her eclectic approach in critiquing the contexts of Hadith so to utilize some of her strategies.

Even though Mernissi never missed an opportunity to explain how a tradition attributed to the Prophet is misused and how political, social, and religious institutions have fabricated the existing inequalities between men and women, both women's liberation advocates and conservative Muslim critics perceived her earlier writings to be bashing Islamic teachings and/or propagating secular agenda. Actually, early on, she wrote (in *Beyond the Veil*, first published in 1975, 1987): "*Paradoxically, and contrary to what is commonly assumed, Islam does not advance the thesis of women's inherent inferiority. Quite the contrary, it affirms the potential equality between the sexes.*" She goes on "*[t]he existing inequality ...is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her [woman's] power*" (p. 19).

It seems that because Mernissi was criticizing the male elites who built the biased Muslim institutions, people who accessed her work may have judged her views as secular and perhaps against Islam. For example, in October 1998 during a symposium, in which I also participated, at Cornell University on "Feminist Perspectives on Women in the Arabo-Islamic Cultures," she was asked to elaborate on her views of Islam. Her answer was to the effect that since the practice of traditional Islam for the past 14 centuries have not been able to restore justice to women, she would prefer to keep Islam in a 'china closet'. Such a statement, no doubt,

steered some thinking away from what could have been her intention, particularly so because she loosely uses the expressions, “traditional” or “Islamic” without defining them.

Mernissi constantly reminds us that Muslim women’s emancipation is not difficult and it does not need special advocacy, even men’s advocacy, since “*traditional Islam recognizes equality of potential*” (*Beyond the Veil* 1987: 19). Since she was questioning the validity of some narratives in comparison with the message of the Qur’an--that gave full ontological equality of man and woman--it is obvious that by “traditional Islam” here she intended the basic text in the Qur’an, and not the traditional interpretations of the text nor the traditionally practiced Islam. This is evident in basing her critique mainly on the Hadith literature that was attributed to the Prophet.

For example, in her well-known book (*the Veil and the Male Elite*, 1991b: 34) she states: “(H)adith emerged as a formidable political weapon,” elaborating further on the historical backgrounds of such misogynistic narratives in her book *Women and Islam* (1993b: Chapter 3). Unfortunately, because these narratives were validated by referencing a largely-circulated, most-referenced and most-respected source of Hadith, *Sahih al Bukhari*, instead of rejecting these misogynistic narratives, some Muslims are still using them, such as “*Women are inferior in faith and reason*”

My research indicates that as the Hadith was documented in a written form and institutionalized in about 200-300 years after the Prophet’s death, **these written reports also became formidable and unquestioned social weapons especially against women**. Despite such evidence, I was amazed by how few contemporary scholars of Hadith made a reference to Mernissi work. Even as she devoted an entire book, *Can We Women Head a Muslim State* (1991a) to the issue of woman’s leadership refuting a narrative by bin Abi Bakara, few Muslim scholars paid attention to her synthesis of the related historical facts as did Jamal al Banna (2005: 63). As one of those few scholars who cited her work, and who differs 180 degrees in his views from his elder brother Hasan, Jamal al Banna also explained why the Prophet frequently prohibited his companions from documenting in writing his words and actions, so as not to confuse the prophet’s reflections with the text of the Qur’an. He states that despite the Prophet’s as well as the first four Caliphs’ warning against narrating on the authority of the Prophet, less than 30 years after the Prophet’s death, bin Abi Bakara fabricated the narrative: “*Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity*” (Bukhari 1991: 1610) to serve some political ends. Al Banna also questioned the reliability of another claim that because a woman was allowed to lead, Muslims were inflicted with *fitna* (chaos/division/social unrest). He asserts that this narrative contradicts the Qur’anic concept of justice as well as the fact that Queen of Sheba was praised for sparing her people the tragedies of war {Qur’an, al Naml 27: 22}.

I am sure that bin Abi Bakara and those few men who accepted his narrative, did not realize that they had also stripped all women of their right to present their own perspective on Hadith. Not being

aware that the Prophet was reflecting on the Qur'an in the social context of the time, Muslims often perceived the actions attributed to the Prophet as a divine source. Despite the evidence that bin Abi Bakara was not a trustworthy man because he committed a false witnessing for adultery (J. al Banna 1998: 80–81; Mernissi 1993b: 53), no Muslim today dares to question his narrative because it is reported in *Sahih Al Bukhari*. That is why I also ask: How is it possible for a Muslim woman to identify with the Prophet's sunnah as a way of life without rethinking the contents of those narratives and the authority of Hadith as a whole since they were documented mainly by men under similar circumstances? Perhaps Muslim women often accepted Hadith at its face value because of their belief in the message of the Qur'an, and in its messenger, Prophet Muhammad. Muslim women, and men for that matter, often accepted the sunnah as a divine source (Barazangi 2015: 20, quoting Van Doorn-Harder 2006), and, sadly, Ibn Katheer uses a narrative on the authority of Abi Hurayra as evidence of Hadith being a divine order (Barazangi 2015: 65). Abi Hurayra, as we know, was also frequently critiqued by Mernissi (1991a).

Yet, some other contemporary scholars of Hadith, such as **Muhammad Ayoub** (2012), **'A'isha Musa** (2008), **Muhammad Nadwi** (2007), and **Gautier Juynboll** (1996), were demure of acknowledging Mernissi's work on the subject. Why? Perhaps Mernissi's work was not considered of significance by most traditional scholars of Hadith, because she did not use the traditional methods in discussing the authenticity and authority of certain narratives, or because, as Belhachmi (2008: 185) suggests, when discussing ideology on sexuality and male-female dynamics, "she [Mernissi] compares Western and Islamic theories of the individual's instincts in a monolithic way."

By questioning the authority of Hadith genre as a whole, it became clearer to me that the basic problem in Muslims' use and abuse of Hadith is not limited only to the few narratives or to the authenticity of the narratives. Rather, the main issue, as I concluded, is their perception of the authority of Hadith in its totality, overlooking the fact that most of these narratives contradicts the Qur'an. This is particularly important, because such perception works as an obstacle for scholars like Mernissi to make the full argument against *the use of Hadith as a primary source of Islam*, ending up looking for an argument somewhere else. Furthermore, we should realize that the abuse of Hadith not only restrained women's sexual power, as Mernissi emphasized, but it also restrained *women's equal potential*, something that Mernissi herself affirmed to be in the Qur'an. What made Hadith restrain such potential, *in my opinion*, is the exclusion of women from participating in shaping Islamic thought from the time of the Prophet, particularly from developing the premises of reinterpreting the Qur'an and documenting the authenticity and the authority of Hadith. It also became more obvious how institutionalized jurisprudence rulings on

gender and women's role in society, represented in the personal status codes that are being practiced in Muslim-majority societies, were *relying on Hadith more so than on the Qur'an*.

Consequences of Mernissi's Reopening the Door for Women's Rethinking Islamic Texts

It is important to understand Mernissi's eclectic approach and its pedagogical ramifications in order to reopen the way for women's rethinking Islamic "primary" texts as a strategy that will lead to social and attitudinal change. As long as scholars and activists continue to analyze her work within one academic category or another, with few exceptions, her overwhelming personal and professional commitments to social change will also be either forgotten or misused. In addition, the focus on sexuality and gender relations vis-a-vis religious texts, important as it may, may blind us from understanding the legacy of Mernissi as an agent of change for the political and social systems as a whole, not only from a feminist position and/or for gender relations. She basically was researching Hadith to uncover its misuse and abuse against Muslim women's "emancipation," and not to promote a feminist view of Islam or a "religious" vis-vis secular view and approach. This is evident in her book *Beyond the Veil* (1987: 20), and also expressed in most of her scholarly/activist work, in which she affirms her exploration of the discrepancy between Muslim ideology and Muslim reality as embodied in the family system and the male-female dynamics in Morocco and other Muslim societies. When Jamal al Banna cited her refutation of the fabricated narrative by bin Abi Bakara concerning women's leadership, he presented the evidence from the Qur'an about the permissibility of woman's leading in general, especially in a Muslim congregational prayer of the two sexes, emphasizing as well the importance of Amina Wadud's leading the 2005 co-ed congregation in New York City. His elaborate discussion of the un-trusted narrator, bin Abi Bakara (2005: 63), was not only to support Mernissi's rational refutation of such narrative, but also to show the process by which we can change the Muslims' general attitude of woman's leadership from within the Islamic framework, not from Muslims' perceptions and practices, nor from Western rationalization of Islam.

In summary, let me say it clear and say it loud. There will be no reformation in Muslim societies the world over until Muslims accept the urgent need to rethink the authority of the Hadith and to reassess its role in their daily affairs. I am re-iterating the need for the Muslim woman to acquire Islamic higher learning, to re-interpret the Qur'an, and to rethink the Hadith in order that she become an agent of change. These strategies, however, are challenging, and the struggle will be difficult, long, and uncertain, but it must continue with Mernissi's reopening the door for us. I, myself will continue on the road that I began fifty years ago in order to keep the windows of faith open as well.

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