

“has built bi-, cross-, and transcultural bridges.”<sup>421</sup> Mernissi’s transformative work inspires us to continue promoting a much-needed dialogue between different cultures, religions, and societies.

## 2.6 Conclusion on the thought of Fatima Mernissi

The purpose of this first part has been to situate Mernissi’s thought within the framework of *feminist philosophy*. Feminist philosophy defends gender justice as equal rights for women. Mernissi’s feminist stance is based on a *transcultural approach* that introduces how feminism is practiced in other cultures. Mernissi’s approach to feminism is characterized by her commitment to communicating across cultures and by combining different approaches to feminism.

A notable contribution of Mernissi’s feminism is the combination of *secular and Islamic frameworks*. The *secular feminism* in most of the Muslim world emphasizes equality in the public sphere while retaining complementarity in the private sphere. This means that secular feminism does not advance equality in the religious domain, which is controlled by men, and the family law sphere, which is regulated by religion. This prevents women from participating in religious discourse. *Islamic feminism* aim at giving women more rights in both spheres through a full participation of women in the re-reading of Islamic religious texts for themselves in order to stand up for their rights. “Islamic feminism, which brings together interpretation and implementation, is a major force in the drive to move beyond patriarchy in Muslim contexts.”<sup>422</sup> Thus, the purpose of Islamic feminism is to free Islam from misogyny, sexism, and fundamentalism by reinterpreting Islamic scriptures within a framework of gender equality.

The contribution of Mernissi to Islamic feminism is characterized by her *transdisciplinary approach*. As part of her defense of women’s rights in Islam, Mernissi uses a variety of disciplines. She conducts linguistic research, for instance. She interprets the word ‘veil’ in Islamic legacy, and examines words such as freedom, innovation, and creation. Her linguistic study aims to correct false traditions and systemic beliefs that link words in Islamic corpuses and thought to their exact definitions without considering alternate meanings.

Another aspect of Mernissi’s transdisciplinary approach is her *empirical research*, which is based on interviews, field work, and statistical analysis. Mernissi reveals the situation of women workers in subaltern positions. Her empirical studies contributes to improving the economic and social wellbeing of women by providing data that justify their demand for decent work. In addition to her empirical study,

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421 Mahboub 2016: 6.

422 Badran 2010b: II.

Mernissi also conducts socio-political surveys to critique most despotic regimes in most Arab-Muslim countries. Her focus is primarily on religious extremism and religious interference in public life that stymie women's rights and other rights such as the freedom of thought and the right to pluralism and diversity.

Another element of her transdisciplinary approach is her historiographic study, which explores the pre-Islamic era, the period after the advent of Islam, and the history of Islamic civilizations. Mernissi examines various female figures who have made significant contributions to the history of Islam, presenting women as rebels, political leaders, deities, and intellectuals, to show that the Islamic heritage entails women with considerable abilities. The purpose of this approach is to reject patriarchal and orientalist clichés that aim to deny the significance of women in Islam. Thus, Mernissi offers a double critique of Western clichés and Islamic misogynist tradition.

In addition, her historiographical study is characterized by an analysis of the philosophical Arabo-Islamic heritage of the 8th to the 10th centuries, through which one can explore the meaning of the theories of justice, including: the concept of legal justice, which affirms the right to interpret the Islamic heritage and the pursuit of the common good for the individual; the concept of divine justice, which is based on the principle of self-determination and freedom of expression; and the concept of political justice, which requires that individuals be fully involved in decision-making, thereby limiting the power of the leader. Her historical research further underlines the humanist heritage of Islamic civilization characterized by an interreligious, transcultural, and multi-linguistic intellectual environment. Mernissi explored the crucial role played by intellectuals from different religions, cultures, identity positions, and ethnicities contributing to the improvement and flourishing of sciences. As for transcultural overtures, the method of translation is substantial for the opening up to other traditions of thought.

*Justice* plays a central role in Mernissi's thinking. Mernissi's claim that women and men should participate equally in political decisions is the foundation for her notion of political justice. For Mernissi, democracy enables equality between men and women, as well as respect for freedom of religion and freedom of thought.

Throughout Mernissi's conceptualization of gender equality across the public and private spheres, she advances a notion of legal justice, which applies both to the family (the private sphere) and to society (the public sphere of human interaction). Mernissi attempts to reform the patriarchal family law that limits the legal rights of women. Monogamy and unilateral divorce, for instance, are religiously sanctioned rights and fundamental entitlements for men, as is the concept of male authority over women. Throughout her writings, Mernissi challenges these patriarchal rules both by advocating international modern norms against religious tradition and, most importantly, by advocating women's rights using a renewed interpretation of the religious discourse.

The concept of social justice is understood from Mernissi's thinking through her advocacy for women's right to participate independently in the public sphere. To obtain economic independence, women must be able to work in favorable conditions. Mernissi advocated social and economic rights, such as the right to health insurance, a fair wage, and equal employment opportunities regardless of class or gender. The notion of social justice she advocated was based on a strong sense of egalitarianism, and thus was non-discriminatory.

According to Mernissi, the emancipation of women is primarily achieved through education. The education of women shall eliminate illiteracy and make them capable of exercising their rights and of fully participating in society. It is through education that women are able to achieve independence and develop their personalities. As a consequence, Mernissi's writing on equal access to education entails a plea for epistemic justice. A fundamental principle of epistemic justice is that everyone has access to the same knowledge and educational resources.

I conclude this part of the study as I began it, by noting the necessity of engaging with Mernissi's feminist thought in the present time. How is Mernissi's feminist stance to be located in this post-revolutionary context? What is the relevance of her feminism today for women's struggles in most Arabo-Islamic societies?

In 2011, the revolution overthrew oppressive and corrupt political regimes to establish a new democratic order based on equality and justice. Recent parliamentary elections, for example in Tunisia (2011, 2014, 2016), resulted in Islamist majorities. What are the implications of Islamist political ascendancy for equality and justice for women? As Islamists gain political power, some feminists worry that Islamists will roll back progress achieved by women's movements, especially in the sphere of personal status law. It is a particular danger in Tunisia that women will again be subjected to social restrictions in the name of Islam.

As this research revealed, religious and traditional rules continue to hinder women's aspirations for equality. In this sense, Mernissi's perspective on gender justice within an Islamic feminism framework does not undermine secular rights for women, but defends their rights within religious discourse. Thus, Mernissi's approach to Islamic feminism is essential for integrating women into the religious discourse in order to counter the hegemony of men.

The importance of Mernissi's advocacy of social rights cannot be overstated. In the post-revolutionary era, unemployment and social injustice have risen sharply for both women and men in most of the Arab world. Aside from that, religious traditions and patriarchal rules that protect men's 'honor' continue to oppress women, who are subjected to violence and social harassment as a result.

The renewed interpretation of the Islamic legacy is also a defining feature of Mernissi's thought. The goal is to rid Islam of extremist demands that impede the implementation of humanistic ideas within Islam and to purge Islam of patriarchal interpretations that deprive women of their rights. Through her writings, Mernissi

defends the rights to democracy and freedom of thought and expression, which are essential in today's world. Freethinkers of Islam are still at risk of being murdered for freely expressing their opinions and allowing a reinterpretation of Islamic discourse.

Mernissi advocates a transcultural approach to feminism through cross-cultural dialogue. As women around the world are affected by racism and injustice, a transcultural approach to feminism could be an effective way to unite women's voices and ensure that they fight together for their rights, regardless of their religious, national, and cultural backgrounds.