

4.1 The common approach to theorizing justice by Fatima Mernissi and Mohammed Arkoun¹

Based on what has been explained in the previous parts of this study, I first argue that the thought of Mernissi and Arkoun is characterized by the critique of Orientalist discourse and method in order to free Islamic thought from a distorting, pejorative, and essentializing account.

In her plea against Orientalist discourse, Mernissi directs her critique at the symbolic representations of a monolithic Arab Islamic identity and religion. She claims that Islam is not only linked to Arab ethnicity, but that there are different ethnicities within Islam. She further notes that Arab ethnicity encompasses different religions, so that not all Arabs are necessarily Muslims, and not all Muslims are Arabs. Furthermore, Mernissi seeks to deconstruct the myth of the passive Muslim woman who lacks intellectual capacity. She refers to the figure of Scheherazade, who saved the lives of other women from a murderous and authoritarian man through the use of her knowledge and her intellectual abilities as a storyteller. Mernissi also deconstructs the Orientalist representation of the harem as a place of mere sexual desire. For example, she recounts her experiences as a child born in the harem, to show that women who lived in the harem were not always submissive, but aspired to emancipation. In this way, Mernissi promotes a critical examination of Western prejudices against Islamic culture, aiming to liberate women in Islam from stereotypes and Orientalist clichés and a patriarchal position that precludes women's access to basic rights.

While Mernissi's main criticism is directed against the Orientalist discourse, which represents a stereotypical image of the women of the Global South, Arkoun criticizes the Orientalist method used by some European historians. Arkoun conceives that the Orientalist method studies Islamic texts without critically analyzing them. According to him, Orientalist historians do not study Islamic texts in relation to the socio-cultural needs of Muslims in their contemporary societies. They do not problematize, for example, the socio-political conditions, in which certain verses of the Qur'an were revealed or by whom and under what circumstances certain Hadith (sayings of the prophet) were transmitted. Based on his methodological critique of Orientalist methods, Arkoun strives to critically examine and analyze Islamic discourse and not to view it merely as a form of monotheistic discourse.

Second, the contemporary intellectual project of Mernissi and Arkoun is characterized by the application of transdisciplinary approaches to liberate Islamic

1 This sub-chapter is based the following article: Karoui, Kaouther (2020): "Relektüren des Klassisch-islamischen Erbes für eine Gerechtigkeitsgrammatik der Gegenwart". In: *Transkulturelle Perspektiven auf Gerechtigkeit*, Special Issue for: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, (Vol. 68, No. 6, pp. 915–927), Berlin: De Gruyter.

thought from hegemonic, fundamentalist, and patriarchal constructions. In this sense, both scholars plead for a reason-based critical-deconstructive analysis of the religious scriptures. Arkoun argues that 'Holy Scripture' such as the Qur'an should be open to historical, sociological, and anthropological analysis. Likewise, Mernissi aims to open Islamic discourse to new interpretations by using the methods of Islamic feminism such as the critique and deconstruction of classical Qur'anic exegesis, the historical contextualization of some Hadith and some Qur'anic verses through the use of linguistic analysis and grammatical explanations. Her approach to Islamic feminism is directed against prototypical traditionalist, misogynist scholars.

Using poststructuralist and hermeneutical approaches, both scholars emphasize the importance of cultivating the human intellect (*aql*) and independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) in modern Islamic societies. Hence, both call for a rational new interpretation of Islamic corpuses and for opening up the Islamic intellectual discourse to dialogues with differing religious and cultural traditions. However, Arkoun's methods for reinterpreting the religious Islamic scriptures, however, are more critical than the methods used by Mernissi. Arkoun, for instance, uses Foucault's analysis discourse and Derrida's deconstructive approach to texts in order to address the question of how the Qur'an evolved from speech to text.

Third, Mernissi's and Arkoun's reactivation of early Arabo-Islamic philosophy can help contemporary Arabo-Islamic societies to overcome the orthodox traditional and patriarchal understanding of Islamic normativity by raising Muslims' and non-Muslims' intellectual awareness of the diversity and rationality of early Arabo-Islamic thought. Their reinterpretation of early Arabo-Islamic thought reveals Islamic thought as a combination of Greek philosophy and Islamic religious ethics to show that there is no contradiction between the two registers. In this regard, Mernissi's and Arkoun's reinterpretations of early Islamic thought reminds Muslim readers that early Muslim thinkers were open to the Greek-Western philosophical tradition. Both scholars refer to pre-existing written intellectual heritage – particularly from the early flowering of Arabo-Islamic philosophy – which is interpreted as a transcultural fusion between Greek philosophy and Islamic thought.

Mernissi and Arkoun also seek to transmit the rationalism and humanist ethics of early Muslim scholars to Western readers, challenging their often narrow understanding of Islamic culture by asserting that there was a fruitful, well-reasoned, and inspiring debate between different philosophical traditions in the early stage of Islam. Arkoun and Mernissi have drawn inspiration from this rationalist and humanist ethos that characterized early Arabo-Islamic thought to make Islam an ambivalent point of reference to be subjected to a critical re-reading – and to adapt it to the challenges and living conditions of Muslims today.

As a point of divergence, Mernissi and Arkoun use different methods to renew early Arabo-Islamic philosophy. While Mernissi rediscovers marginalized positions

in the history of thought in Islam and affirms them positively to justify her call for gender justice and democracy in contemporary societies from an Islamic perspective, Arkoun takes a critical approach to established religious texts and seeks to deconstruct and reinterpret religious discourse on the question of revelation. He aims at encouraging self-criticism and calls for a critical reappropriation of theological rationalism. Arkoun sees the production and reading of texts as political acts, and texts as instruments of power.

Finally, Mernissi and Arkoun illustrate the theorist-strategic possibility of limiting the discourse of religion as a patriarchal and fundamentalist discourse and its influence on political control by using secular and modern expressions of equality. One can assume that “the post-Enlightenment secularism and modernity have habitually been seen in Islamic sectarian discourses as Western diseases, spread by colonialism, infecting and weakening the once great Islamic civilization”.² In response to this assertion, Mernissi and Arkoun evaluate this discourse, which was shaped in most post-independence Arab-Islamic countries, by pointing to the richness of early Islamic thought and civilization, as mentioned earlier, and by examining both critically the concepts of secularity and modernity as used in Western discourses.

What is interesting about Arkoun’s writing is that his assessment of modernity and Islam is not based on traditional religious arguments, but on postmodern theory. Arkoun is a Francophone North African who has studied and taught in Paris for most of his life. Postmodern theory has played an influential role for both Northern and Southern scholars in critiquing colonialism.³ On the one hand, Arkoun sees the use of the rational attitude of Enlightenment thought as central to the emancipation of Islamic thought from dogmatism and obscurantism. He describes Enlightenment thought as emancipatory and insists on freedom of thought and freedom of religious belief in order to create pluralistic democratic societies within the Islamic world. On the other hand, Arkoun criticizes French secularism, as it evolved, which leads to the alienation of religion from society and contributes to an Islamophobic discourse. His criticism is also directed at Euromodernism, which promotes neo-colonial structures based on political, military, and economic control of the Global South.

Alike Arkoun, Mernissi is a Muslim intellectual with a Western education, able to analyze and criticize Western thought on its own terms. Like Arkoun, she has written for a Western audience and for those Muslims who read Western languages and are familiar with Western critical theories. Therefore, her critique of traditionalist, male-oriented interpretations of Islam has more influence among Western non-Muslim intellectuals than among Muslim intellectuals. Moreover, like Arkoun,

2 Martin, Richard C., Mark. R. Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja 1997: 204.

3 Martin, Richard C., Mark. R. Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja 1997: 204.

Mernissi is a Francophone North African Arab who is also familiar with postmodern criticism as well as Islamic social movements.⁴ Her critique of the colonial structure is based on the denial that French colonization served to create social and educational rights for native Moroccan women. During the colonial system in Morocco, women did not exercise their right to education, a fundamental right promoted by France. As a male-patriarchal interpretation of Islamic legacy overrode women's rights, native Moroccan women remained trapped in their private spheres. The Enlightenment-critical thinking that France advocated did not serve as an effective tool to challenge this patriarchal system. Thus the French protectorate in Morocco did not aim to liberate, civilize, and modernize the native population, as it claims. For Mernissi, however, secular thought could be emancipatory for Muslim women, so that religion does not intrude into the public sphere of human interaction. She repeatedly emphasizes that secular humanism is not against religion, but against the intrusion of religion into the public sphere, and that humanism promotes the right to use human reason for critical thinking.

Mernissi and Arkoun thus choose a secular and modern humanistic approach to defend human rights and to establish democracy. In this way, both scholars offer alternatives to Eurocentric and colonial conceptions of secularism and modernity. Indeed, they understand these concepts from a humanistic and cosmopolitan perspective. Their notion of secular humanism encourages critical thinking vis-à-vis any traditional and orthodox framework. Their notion of modernity is fostered by a transcultural fusion between the Global South and the Global North in various fields of knowledge. In their works, they analyze the demands for equal rights to political participation, gender equality, overcoming social discrimination (nationally and transnationally), and emancipating human reason from religious dogma as manifestations of secular humanist ideals.

For Mernissi, theorizing gender justice needs to be based on a cosmopolitan and transcultural debate between women from the Global South and the Global North. Mernissi argues persistently that openness to debate and new ideas is a necessary stance for Muslims in a late modern world increasingly characterized by cultural pluralism and political contestations.

Arkoun believes that Islamic thought needs to be renewed to promote a cosmopolitan ethos that emphasizes interreligious dialogue and detaches the canon of thought from a hegemonic discourse. In addition, his conception of a cosmopolitan ethos defines a dialogue between different philosophical perspectives and aims at a transcultural debate between different schools of thought.

Mernissi's and Arkoun's contemporary intellectual projects culminate in a call for a new humanism based on transcultural debate and a cosmopolitan horizon that puts forward a new grammar of justice, especially as a contribution to the discourse

4 Martin, Richard C., Mark. R. Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja 1997: 206–207.

strands of transnational political justice, economic justice, and postcolonial gender justice.

4.2 On the relevance of a cosmopolitan theory of justice based on a transcultural approach

This research presented the contemporary intellectual projects of the Moroccan feminist thinker Fatima Mernissi and the Algerian philosopher Mohammed Arkoun to broaden the hermeneutical horizon for the normative discourse on justice by incorporating Arabo-Islamic philosophy. The research was divided into two main parts. The research began with a study of Mernissi's and Arkoun's thought, outlining and explaining their biographical and intellectual trajectories and presenting the meaning and characteristics of their ethico-political projects. It brings to light a detailed analysis and study of their engagement with the early and contemporary context of Arabo-Islamic thought, focusing on the cultural and socio-political context of the Maghreb countries to develop a philosophical thought that condemns orthodox hegemonic constructions.

Through a cosmopolitan ethos and the demand for religious freedom, the research challenges orthodoxy and fundamentalism. It promotes a better understanding of human rights and gender equality to combat patriarchal, discriminatory and racist structures. A key characteristic of Mernissi's and Arkoun's thinking is their blend of positive and negative views about the concepts of modernity and secularism. On the one hand, they criticize the modern Western thought for its hemogenic constructs formed in the discourse and methods of Orientalism, the discourse of Euromodernism, and the discourse manifesting neo-imperialism. On the other hand, based on their analysis, they find that modern secular thought contributes to the emancipation of humanity from orthodox religious beliefs. Importantly, secular thought serves the purpose of liberating women from the manipulation of religious discourse under patriarchal power. The secular thought defended in this study preserves the place of religion in societies as a spiritual and cultural sphere that can be criticized and evaluated, but does not use religion as a means to intervene into politics.

Mernissi's and Arkoun's re-reading of early Islamic thought is characterized by an exploration of the rational and humanistic approaches that shaped the ideas of early Muslim thinkers. A rational approach inherited from Greek thought as well as humanist ideals link Islamic ethics to Greek philosophy. The research confirms that the reevaluation of early Islamic thought is an ongoing task that not only challenges the established interpretations within Islamic orthodoxy, but also corrects the Western world's misinterpretations and generalizations about the rich Islamic intellectual heritage.