

Western Hermeneutics in the Feminist Writings of Fatima Mernissi

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ABSTRACT

Fatima Mernissi, in her literary and academic writings about women in Islamic communities, draws on Western hermeneutics to advocate for a more egalitarian reading and interpretation of Islamic texts of varying levels. She employs techniques such as historical/contextual approach, textual analysis, comparative study, and linguistic examination to uncover overlooked meanings and possibilities within Islamic scriptures. Through this process, she seeks to reclaim the agency and voices of women within religious traditions, challenging the dominant androcentric readings and interpretations that have marginalized women's perspectives and demystified their interpretive authorities. Throughout her academic and literary journey, Mernissi engages with Western philosophical hermeneutics, particularly the works of thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Paul Ricoeur, to develop her feminist insights and her hermeneutical methodologies regarding the issue of women in Islam. She explores concepts such as the fusion of horizons, hermeneutics of suspicion, and the hermeneutical circle to enrich her analysis of Islamic texts and feminist discourse. This paper endeavors to investigate how Fatima Mernissi's feminist writings incorporate Western hermeneutical methodologies and insights in her feminist writings. These analytical tools have shaped her feminist project, which seeks to critique and reassess traditional interpretations of Islamic texts, dismantle patriarchal systems, and promote an egalitarian and inclusive approach recognizing women as equal and dignified beings in Islamic communities.

Keywords: feminist hermeneutics, Islamic texts, Western philosophy, gender equality, interpretive authority.

INTRODUCTION

Fatima Mernissi, a prominent Moroccan sociologist and Islamic feminist, utilized a hermeneutical approach in her work that blends traditional Islamic scholarship with feminist critique. Her approach is distinctive in that it seeks to re-examine and reinterpret Islamic texts—particularly the Qur'an and Hadiths—to uncover and challenge the patriarchal interpretations that have historically dominated Islamic jurisprudence and scholarship. Mernissi emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical and socio-political context in which Islamic texts were written and compiled. She argues that many interpretations of these texts reflect the patriarchal biases of the periods during which the interpretations were developed, rather than the essence of the texts themselves. Mernissi's work seeks to highlight the contrast between the original divine intentions of the Qur'an and the way it has been interpreted over time by male religious scholars. She argues that these interpretations are often colored by the specific historical and cultural contexts in which they emerged, leading to views that may not fully align with the Qur'an's intended message.

A significant part of Mernissi's work involves a critical examination of the *Hadiths*, which are sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. She scrutinizes the authenticity of certain *Hadiths* that appear to support gender inequality. She then investigates their origins, the reliability of their transmitters, and the circumstances under which they were recorded. Her analysis often reveals that many *Hadiths* used to justify restrictions on women do not meet the basic criteria of authenticity required in Islamic jurisprudence. Mernissi applies feminist insights to her reinterpretation of Islamic texts with the aim to recover what she perceives as the original egalitarian spirit of Islam that was prevalent during the formative era of Islamic community. She

highlights narratives and interpretations that demonstrate the active participation and leadership of women in early Islamic public space.

Mernissi's approach is characterized by a dialogue between traditional Islamic teachings and contemporary feminist values (Rhouni, 2009). She does not seek to discard Islamic traditions but rather to engage with them critically and constructively (Ali, 2006 ; Sadiqi, 2016). Her goal is to show that Islam, when interpreted with an awareness of its foundational commitment to justice and equality, supports the empowerment of women rather than their oppression. Mernissi advocates for interpretative pluralism within the Islamic tradition (Sadiqi, 2014). She encourages the inclusion of diverse voices, particularly women, in the interpretation of Islamic texts. Mernissi's approach suggests that a more inclusive interpretative community can lead to richer and more varied understandings of the texts, which in turn can foster a more just and equitable Islamic practice.

Mernissi's Feminist Approach to Islamic Texts

Fatima Mernissi's feminist approach to Islamic texts is grounded in a critical reexamination of how these texts have been interpreted throughout history, especially by male scholars (Mernissi, 1987, 1991a, 1991b). Mernissi believed that the oppression of women in Muslim societies was not rooted in the Islamic faith itself, but in the patriarchal interpretations of Islamic scriptures, particularly the *Qur'an* and *Hadiths*. Her feminist approach was not about rejecting Islam, but about reclaiming it in a way that highlights the religion's inherent principles of justice, equality, and human dignity.¹ She argued that the early Islamic community, under the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad, embraced egalitarian values, which were later obscured by male-dominated societies that sought to control women's roles and sexuality. Her feminist project was based on three hermeneutical endeavours as shown below.

Historical Investigation of Gender Roles and Women's Sexuality

Mernissi extensively researched the role of women in early Islamic history. She tried to challenge the notion that Islam inherently assigns stereotyped gender roles. She argued that the rigid gender segregation prevalent in many Muslim societies was a historical development that diverged from the more fluid and equitable gender dynamics during the Prophet Muhammad's time. In her influential book *Beyond the Veil* (1987), Mernissi analyzes the role of women in Muslim societies and challenges the traditional interpretations of Islamic texts that are used to justify gender inequality. She explores concepts like *hijab* and the sexual ethics in Islam. She, therefore, endeavours a critical examination of how these have been used to control women's sexuality (Ibid.).

One of the central concepts Mernissi explores is the notion of *hijab*, both as a physical veil and a metaphorical barrier that hampers women visible actions in the public sphere. The *hijab*, she argues, has been used as a tool to regulate women's sexuality by confining them to private spaces and limiting their public participation. Mernissi (1987) highlights the tenets of Islamic sexual ethics. She shows how the emphasis on controlling women's bodies is connected to broader concerns about social order and moral purity. She contends that these practices are less about religious mandates and more about male anxiety over female sexuality, which is perceived as disruptive to societal harmony. She states that 'Islam as sexual practice unfolds with a very special theatricality since it is acted out in a scene where the *hijab* (veil) occupies a central position.'² In her critical analyses of these themes, Mernissi highlights the need to reinterpret Islamic texts through a more egalitarian lens that aligns with the religion's core principles of justice and equality.

Through her work, Mernissi calls for a reevaluation of Islamic sexual ethics, advocating for a reading of Islamic texts that empowers women rather than restricts them (Mernissi, 1987, 1991a, 1991b). Her feminist critique challenges the use of religion as a justification for gender inequality. She thus encourages a more inclusive understanding of Islam that respects the rights and autonomy of women. This critique opened new

¹ Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy : Fear of Modern World*.

² Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, p. 81.

dialogues within both feminist and Islamic thought, calling for scholars to revisit the religious foundations of gender roles and power dynamics in Muslim societies (ibid.).

Critique of Patriarchal Interpretations

Another important theme in Fatima Mernissi's work is her critical analysis of how male scholars and interpreters have historically shaped Islamic thought in a way that distorts its original messages to align with patriarchal values. In her seminal works, including *Beyond the Veil* (1987) and *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), Mernissi argues that male religious authorities have influenced the interpretation of foundational Islamic texts, such as the Hadiths and the Qur'an, in ways that subordinate women's rights and status. She emphasizes that these interpretations are not inherent to Islam itself but rather reflect the biases of male scholars who, over centuries, have selectively emphasized certain verses and *Hadiths* while marginalizing others that advocate for gender equality. The stand of Mernissi is supported by the hermenitical assumption of Kecia Ali (2006) regarding sexual ethics in Islam. She succinctly demonstrates that :

....egalitarian sexual ethics cannot be constructed through pastiche, a methodology of picking-and-choosing. Combining isolated elements in expedient ways will prove insufficient to resolve the core issue at stake. We need, instead, a serious consideration which makes sex lawful in the light of God.³

In *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), Mernissi particularly focuses on the *Hadith* tradition. She figures out how patriarchal influences have shaped which Hadiths were deemed authentic and which were rejected. She argues that many *Hadiths*, especially those relating to women's roles, were either fabricated or manipulated by male elites to justify the exclusion of women from positions of authority and public life. One of the central ideas of the *Veil and Male Elite* (1991), and other Mernissi's writings, stresses the political and ideological manipulation of the religious :

Not only the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structured characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies. Since all power, from the seventh century on, was only legitimated by religious, political forces and and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false Hadiths.⁴

Mernissi uses historical and textual analysis to demonstrate that early Islamic society was far more egalitarian than later generations of interpreters allowed it to appear. For example, she points to historical figures like Aisha, the Prophet's wife, who played an active role in political and religious life, but whose legacy was overlooked in favor of more conservative, male-centric narratives. She thus reveals that:

Aisha, who often used to accompany the Prophet on military expeditions, knew the procedure of negotiations that took place before the military occupation of the city and had conducted matters correctly.⁵

In her critique of Qur'anic interpretation, Mernissi challenges the traditional exegesis that promotes gender hierarchy. She states that the Qur'an itself contains numerous passages that advocate for justice, equality, and the dignity of all believers, including women. However, male interpreters have historically emphasized verses that seemingly place women in subordinate roles, often taking them out of context or ignoring the broader egalitarian message of the text. In *Beyond the Veil* (1987), Mernissi explores how these interpretations have been used to justify the control of women's sexuality and restrict their participation in public life.

Mernissi's work shows the need for a more inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to Islamic jurisprudence (Wadud, 1999). Wadud elaborates on the hermenitical project of Mernissi in asserting the necessity of a feminist reading of the religious corpus. They both inaugurated a new consciousness and a new way of

³ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence*, p.151.

⁴ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, pp 8-9.

⁵ Mernissi, *Women and Islam : An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, p.54.

thinking that trespass the artificial boundaries between feminism and theology. Mernissi and Wadud attribute the subordination of women and the intimidation of feminist voices in Islamic communities to the literal readings and orthodox interpretations of the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*.

Empowerment Through Reinterpretation

Fatima Mernissi's feminist writings go beyond merely critiquing patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts; she also sought to actively reinterpret these texts in ways that align with Islam's egalitarian principles. In her works, such as *The Veil and the Male Elite* and *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Mernissi points to the aspects of the *Qur'an* and *Hadiths* that affirm the dignity, rights, and equality of women. She argued that these often-overlooked verses and Prophetic traditions hold immense significance for contemporary discussions on gender equality, especially in Muslim societies.

In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi emphasizes the Qur'anic verses that reflect an egalitarian ethos, particularly those that stress the spiritual and moral equality of men and women. She points to verses such as Qur'an 33:35, which mentions the virtues of believing men and women in parallel, and shows their equal status in the eyes of their creator. Mernissi argues that the Qur'an's focus on justice, equality and the dignity as ethical values that need to inspire the interpretive act in Islamic communities. In her analysis, she demonstrates that the exclusion of women from political, social, and religious spheres is not rooted in Islam itself, but in cultural practices and interpretations that arose after the Prophet's time.

Mernissi also engaged with the *Hadiths* in a way that reclaims their feminist potential. In *Women and Islam*, she examines *Hadiths* that celebrate women's roles in early Islamic history, such as the prominent public and political positions held by women like Khadija, the Prophet's first wife, and Aisha, a scholar and political leader. Mernissi argues that these women were integral to the formation of the early Muslim community and that their leadership was consistent with the egalitarian message of Islam. She contends that the marginalization of these narratives by later male interpreters reflects more about the patriarchal societies that emerged than about the true teachings of Islam.⁶

By reinterpreting these texts, Mernissi sought to contribute to modern debates on gender equality from within an Islamic framework. She believed that Islamic theology could serve as a powerful source for women's empowerment if it were interpreted through a lens that recognized the full humanity and rights of women. Her work encouraged Muslim women to engage with their religious tradition in ways that challenge oppression and affirm their roles as equal participants in society.⁷ This reimagining of Islam's egalitarian ethos offered a counter-narrative to conservative interpretations, providing a framework for feminist activism in Muslim contexts.

Mernissi's scholarship thus represents a dynamic fusion of feminist thought and Islamic theology, positioning her as a leading figure in the movement to reinterpret Islam in ways that respect and uphold women's dignity. Her work continues to inspire those advocating for gender justice in Muslim-majority countries and beyond, as it offers a deeply rooted, religiously grounded argument for women's equality.

Impact of Western Hermeneutics on Mernissi's Feminist Writings

Fatima Mernissi, in her literary and academic writings, draws on Western hermeneutics to advocate for a more egalitarian reading and interpretation of Islamic texts of varying levels. She engages with Western philosophical hermeneutics, particularly the works of thinkers like Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, to develop her feminist insights and her hermeneutical methodologies regarding the issue of women in Islam. She explores concepts such as the fusion of horizons, hermeneutics of suspicion,

⁶ See also Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*.

⁷ The writings of Fatima Mernissi constitute a seminal ground for the intellectual and hermental contributions of several Islamic feminsits such as Amina Wadud, Kecia Ali, Asma Barlas among many others.

dialogical understanding, and the hermeneutical circle to enrich her analysis of Islamic texts and feminist discourse. Through this process, she seeks to reclaim the agency and voices of women within religious traditions and dismantle the dominant androcentric readings and interpretations that have marginalized women's perspectives and demystified their interpretive authorities.

The Historical/Contextual Approach

In her exploration of Islamic texts, Mernissi draws heavily on the principles of Western hermeneutics, particularly the concept of historical context. Hermeneutics, in its Western tradition, has long been concerned with how texts should be understood within their specific historical, cultural, and social milieus. Thinkers like Friedrich Schleiermacher and later Hans-Georg Gadamer argued that no text can be fully comprehended without appreciating the historical conditions of its production. In alignment with this reasoning, Gadamer (2004) assumes that:

When our historical consciousness transposes itself into historical horizons, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; instead, they together constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness.⁸

Schleiermacher (1998), often regarded as the father of modern hermeneutics, introduced the idea that understanding a text requires placing oneself in the mind of the author, which involves an appreciation of the historical and cultural conditions that shaped the author's thought. He believed that to interpret a text properly, one must reconstruct the historical circumstances in which the text was produced and recognize the author's intentions.⁹ This process involves not just understanding the language but also engaging with the psychological and socio-political context of the time. According to Schleiermacher (1998), texts are products of their time, and their meaning cannot be fully grasped if divorced from the historical moment that gave rise to them. In this way, interpretation becomes an act of historical empathy, where the reader seeks to bridge the gap between their own context and that of the text.

Gadamer further expanded on Schleiermacher's ideas by emphasizing the concept of the 'fusion of horizons,' where the reader's present understanding and the historical context of the text meet. Gadamer argued that the meaning of a text should not remain frozen in the past but should continuously be formed through an ongoing dialogue between the text and the interpreter's present context. This dynamic interaction requires a conscious recognition of the historical conditions of the text's production while also being aware of the interpreter's own biased pre-understandings¹⁰ and preconceptions. Gadamer saw interpretation as a historically situated process, one where understanding is shaped by the ever-changing circumstances of both the text and the reader. Therefore, he rejected the idea that a text has a single, timeless meaning, emphasizing instead that meaning evolves over time as it is interpreted by different people in different historical periods.

Gadamer posited that 'understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event.'¹¹ This assertion underlines the idea that our comprehension of texts, particularly religious texts, is deeply rooted in our historical context and influenced by our preconceptions and cultural background. Gadamer (2004) rejected the notion of objective, neutral, or value-free readings, arguing instead that interpretation is an active and dynamic process.

⁸ Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p.303.

⁹ For more details see Richard E. Palmer, 'Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer.' In *Hermeneutics*. Northwestern University Press, 1969.

¹⁰ According to Gadamer (2004), pre-understanding, a central concept in hermeneutics, refers to the background knowledge, assumptions, and experiences that an interpreter brings to the act of reading or understanding a text. This concept is essential for recognizing the inherent subjectivity of interpretation and is critical in the field of hermeneutics.

¹¹ Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 298.

This process is informed by the interpreter's historical situation and the evolving nature of tradition. Understanding, in this sense, is always situated and never detached from the interpreter's temporal and cultural horizon.

Together, Schleiermacher and Gadamer laid the foundation for a hermeneutical approach that insists on the importance of historical context. Their work suggests that interpretation is never purely objective or decontextualised but is always determined by the historical and cultural horizons through which both the text and the interpreter consider the world. This perspective highlights the fluidity of meaning and the necessity of approaching texts with a deep awareness of the temporal and contextual factors that shape both the author's intentions and the interpreter's understanding. In this view, texts become living documents, whose meanings shift and adapt as they are continuously re-read and reinterpreted across time and space.

Mernissi applies this insight to Islamic religious texts to deconstruct the traditional assumption that these texts contain timeless, unchanging truths. Instead, she asserts that understanding the socio-political context in which the *Quran* and *Hadith* were revealed is crucial to their interpretation. This approach aligns with the hermeneutical view that meaning is not static but evolves as it is re-read in different contexts. Through her remarkable focus on historical context, Mernissi shows how patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts were often shaped by the political and cultural environments of the time, rather than by any inherent religious truth. For example, she critiques the traditional readings of certain Hadiths that have been used to justify the subordination of women. She opines that these interpretations are the product of a male-dominated society. In her book, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi reexamines the lives of women during the Prophetic time. She examines the historical contexts of the *Hadiths* and the *Quran* through a feminist perspective to revisit the established interpretations of these texts. Her approach reveals the active roles women played in early Islamic society as compared with their often marginalized roles in contemporary Muslim societies. This method not only revises the historical understanding but also challenges the contemporary Islamic perspective and includes a broader horizon where women's rights and participation are seen as inherently celebrated in Islamic religion.

Similar to Western hermeneutics, which recognizes the subjective pre-understanding of interpreters and the power structures that colour the nature of interpretation (Gadamer, 2004), Mernissi highlights the role of patriarchal power in shaping Islamic scholarship. In doing so, she not only delineates the fluidity of religious interpretations but also opens up the possibility for reinterpreting these texts in a way that is more inclusive and just. Through this methodology, Mernissi advocates for a more dynamic and critical engagement with religious texts, one that resists the rigidity of traditionalist readings and embraces the fluidity of meaning over time.

The Fusion of Horizons in Textual Understanding

The fusion of horizons¹² in Mernissi's work facilitates a dialogue between the past and the present, the East and the West, and between Islamic tradition and modern feminist ideals. It provides a richer, deeper understanding of texts and traditions, offering new possibilities to reinterpret these sources in ways that advocate for gender equality and women's rights. Her approach is an indication to the power of hermeneutics in bridging gaps between different cultures and time frames, emphasising how historical texts can be relevant and useful in contemporary contexts. Through this methodology, Mernissi not only provides a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings but also empowers Muslim women by offering them historical precedents and religious validations for claiming their rights and challenging oppressive structures within their societies. This 'fusion of horizons' has made her works seminal in the fields of both Islamic studies and feminist theology.

¹² For Gadamer, 2004, p.301, the horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage.

Gadamer's concept of the 'fusion of horizons' is pivotal to understanding how readers engage with texts, particularly when there is a significant gap between the historical context of the text and the contemporary perspective of the reader. When a reader approaches a text, he brings with him own pre-understanding—shaped by his/her cultural, historical, and social experiences. This is their 'horizon,' a term Gadamer (2004) uses to describe the limits of an individual's understanding based on their position in history. At the same time, the text itself is a product of its own horizon, reflecting the ideas, values, and circumstances of the time in which it was created. The challenge in interpretation, as Gadamer sees it, is to bridge these two horizons: the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the text. In this sense Gadamer argues that :

....the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.¹³

This engagement is not merely a passive reading of the text but an active and dynamic process. The reader must recognize the distance between their own contemporary context and the historical context of the text. This involves examining concepts, language, and assumptions that may seem foreign or outdated from a modern perspective.¹⁴ Yet, rather than considering this distance as a barrier, Gadamer views it as an opportunity for pertinent and meaningful understanding. The process of interpretation entails the readers to reflect on their own preconceptions and allow them to be challenged by the text.¹⁵ Simultaneously, the reader must seek to understand the text on its own terms in resonance with the historical conditions that shaped its meaning. This back-forth interaction creates what Gadamer calls a dialogue between the past and the present.

Gadamer's idea of the 'fusion of horizons' rejects the notion that there is a single, definitive interpretation of a text. Instead, he views understanding as historically situated and contingent upon the interaction between the reader's horizon and that of the text. This process transforms both the text and the reader, as each brings something to the interpretive act that reshapes the other. The fusion of horizons, therefore, is not the elimination of difference between past and present but the creation of new understanding that honors the complexity and fluidity of meaning across time.

Gadamer's idea of the 'fusion of horizons' appears to enrich Mernissi's approach by providing a methodological framework for connecting the historical context of Islamic texts with the contemporary context of feminist issues. This concept advocates for understanding historical texts by merging the historical horizon of the text with the contemporary horizon of the interpreter (Arkoun, 1999). Mernissi, in her critical engagement with Islamic texts, seeks to bridge the gap between their historical context and contemporary feminist concerns. By applying Gadamer's idea, Mernissi's work gains depth in understanding how traditional interpretations can be re-examined to create a dialogue between the past and present. Gadamer's hermeneutics, with its emphasis on the dynamic interaction between the interpreter and the text, offers a way to explore how Islamic texts can be reinterpreted in light of modern concerns about gender justice and equality, without losing sight of their historical significance.

In Mernissi's feminist writings, she critiques the patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts that have historically been used to ensure the marginalization of women. Her approach aligns with Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' by showing that understanding these texts requires not only engaging with the context in which they were revealed but also recognizing how the contemporary reader's perspective influences interpretation. Mernissi, following Gadamer, acknowledges that the meaning of a text is not fixed and can evolve as it is re-read in different spatial-temporal contexts. She highlights the fact that patriarchal readings of Islamic texts are

¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.305.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

not eternal truths but are sociopolitical fabrications of the male-dominated societies in which they were interpreted.

Mernissi's application of this methodological framework is particularly evident in her analysis of *Hadiths* that have been used to subordinate women. Instead of accepting these interpretations at face value, she critically examines the socio-political conditions in which these *Hadiths* were recorded and interpreted. In doing so, she challenges the notion that such readings are divinely mandated, but rather reflect the biases and interests of their historical interpreters. Gadamer's concept of the 'fusion of horizons' supports this process by allowing Mernissi to engage with the historical context of these texts while simultaneously bringing her contemporary feminist perspective into the interpretive act. This engagement is not an imposition of modern values on ancient texts, but a productive dialogue that respects the historical horizon of the text while enhancing new alternatives for understanding its relevance in the modern time.

Through this process, Mernissi is able to offer alternative readings of Islamic texts that are more inclusive and women-friendly.¹⁶ Gadamer's framework legitimizes this reinterpretation, as it recognizes that meaning is not static but continuously evolves through the interaction between the reader's horizon and that of the text. For Mernissi, this means that the rigid, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts can be rethought in a way that honors the spirit of Islam while promoting gender equality. Her feminist writings exemplify the 'fusion of horizons' by demonstrating how historical Islamic texts can be reinterpreted to address contemporary feminist issues in an attempt to enrich the theological legacy rather than discarding it.

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion in Textual Analysis

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion was influenced by the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, who all sought to uncover hidden meanings and ideological manipulations behind cultural artifacts, behaviors, and texts. Ricoeur (1970, 1974) adapted this to textual analysis, suggesting that texts often carry underlying power structures that need to be exposed to understand their full meaning and implications. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion is a profound approach to textual analysis, deeply influenced by the critical philosophies of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. These thinkers, often termed the 'masters of suspicion,' aimed to unveil the concealed motivations and power dynamics underlying cultural phenomena, social behaviors, and ideological constructs. Ricoeur integrated their critical stance into his own hermeneutical framework, emphasizing the necessity of suspicion in interpreting texts to reveal hidden power structures and ideological manipulations.

Marx's critique of ideology plays a pivotal role in Ricoeur's hermeneutics. Marx argued that cultural and social artifacts often serve to mask the real conditions of existence and the exploitation inherent in capitalist societies. Ricoeur adopted this perspective, recognizing that texts can function similarly, perpetuating dominant ideologies and concealing the true nature of social relations. As Ricoeur states, 'the function of ideology is to justify, through a symbolic system, the structure and practices of power.'¹⁷ This critical stance urges interpreters to look beyond surface meanings and examine how texts support or challenge existing power structures.

Nietzsche's philosophy further enriches Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion. Nietzsche's genealogical method deconstructs moral and cultural values, exposing them as products of power struggles rather than inherent truths. Ricoeur draws on this approach to suggest that texts, like moral values, are imbued with the power dynamics of their creation and reception. He encourages interpreters to uncover these dynamics, arguing that interpretation must struggle with suspicion and work to unravel the illusions that distort understanding.¹⁸ This

¹⁶ Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, p. 33.

¹⁸ Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*.

perspective highlights the importance of questioning the origins and purposes of textual elements, revealing their contingent and constructed nature.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory also profoundly influences Ricoeur's hermeneutics. Freud's exploration of the unconscious mind and the symbolic meanings of dreams and behaviors provides a model for understanding texts as multi-layered and often repressed in their true significance. Ricoeur integrates this approach, suggesting that texts can be seen as manifestations of deeper, unconscious desires and conflicts. He asserts that hermeneutics involves uncovering deeper, concealed meanings beneath surface-level interpretations, similar to how psychoanalysis aims to bring unconscious content to light from beneath conscious expression.¹⁹ This analogy underscores the necessity of delving beneath the surface of texts to uncover the repressed or unacknowledged aspects of meaning.

This act of reinterpretation is a fundamental element of what scholars call the 'hermeneutics of suspicion.' It involves not just questioning existing interpretations but actively reconstructing historical narratives by considering evidence that has been marginalized or suppressed. For Mernissi, this means reclaiming a past where women were not merely bystanders but active participants in both the public and private spheres. In doing so, she not only critiques patriarchal readings of Islamic history but also reclaims a sense of empowerment for Muslim women today. Her work serves as a bridge between the past and present, which enables contemporary women to connect with a legacy of female leadership and participation that has often been erased from historical memory.

Mernissi's approach to reinterpreting Islamic texts is deeply rooted in her commitment to recovering the voices and contributions of women that have been historically overlooked. She interrogates the traditional readings of early Islamic history, which tend to marginalize or diminish women's involvement in shaping the religious and social fabric of the time. Through careful examination of both Qur'anic texts and Hadiths (the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), Mernissi brings to light examples of women who played crucial roles in early Islamic society. Figures like Aisha, the Prophet's wife, who was a prominent scholar and political figure, or Khadijah, his first wife and a successful businesswoman, are reclaimed in Mernissi's works as models of female empowerment and leadership within the Islamic framework.²⁰

In addition to specific figures, Mernissi also revisits the broader social dynamics of early Islamic communities. She challenges the notion that women's roles were inherently restricted by Islam, arguing instead that such limitations were the result of later interpretations shaped by patriarchal structures. By tracing the historical evolution of these interpretations, Mernissi demonstrates that the subordination of women is not intrinsic to Islamic doctrine but rather a product of sociopolitical developments. This distinction is critical because it opens the door to reinterpretations that can align more closely with the egalitarian principles present in the foundational texts of Islam.

The hermeneutics of suspicion, as applied by Mernissi, is not only an intellectual exercise but also a transformative act. It seeks to recover a history that empowers women, challenging contemporary Muslim societies to reconsider their own assumptions about gender roles.²¹ By reconstructing historical narratives to include the active participation of women, Mernissi reclaims a sense of dignity and agency for Muslim women that is often denied by traditional interpretations. Her work thus serves as a powerful tool for reimagining both the past and the future of women in Islam, offering a more inclusive and just vision of gender relations within the faith.

¹⁹ For more details, see Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009.

²⁰Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*.

²¹ See Wadud, 1999 ; Barlas, 2002.

By employing a hermeneutics of suspicion, Mernissi offers a vital methodological framework that has significantly influenced Muslim feminist discourse. This approach invites critical engagement with religious texts, encouraging readers—especially women—to scrutinize the historical and cultural contexts in which these texts were interpreted. Mernissi challenges the notion that traditional interpretations of Islamic texts are fixed and unchangeable. Instead, she argues that they have been shaped by patriarchal biases over time, which have led to the marginalization of women's voices and contributions. Her work thus empowers other Muslim feminists to question the validity of these interpretations and explore alternative readings that are more inclusive and reflective of the original egalitarian spirit of Islam.

The hermeneutics of suspicion provides a structured way for Muslim feminists to approach sacred texts critically, without rejecting them outright. It allows them to engage with their religious heritage while also challenging the historical misinterpretations that have limited women's roles. Mernissi's method is particularly powerful because it opens up a space for reinterpretation, encouraging feminists to reexamine not only the Qur'an and Hadith but also centuries of commentary and jurisprudence. By questioning the established interpretations, they can identify where patriarchal assumptions may have influenced the way religious texts have been understood and applied in society. This process helps uncover alternative understandings that highlight gender equality and justice, which may have been obscured by dominant readings.

Mernissi's hermeneutical approach also equips Muslim feminists with a tool for reclaiming agency within their religious communities. By critically engaging with religious texts, they are able to challenge the structures and interpretations that have historically silenced them. This method empowers Muslim women to participate actively in theological debates and to demand a place in the shaping of religious discourse. It also provides a path for reform, as it encourages a rethinking of religious practices and laws that may have been influenced by male-centric readings of the faith. In this way, Mernissi's hermeneutics of suspicion not only fosters intellectual and spiritual liberation but also lays the groundwork for broader social change within Muslim societies, advocating for gender justice grounded in a critical yet faithful reading of Islamic traditions.

Through her work, Mernissi demonstrates that engaging critically with religious texts is not an act of defiance but an essential step toward reclaiming the inclusive and empowering aspects of Islam. This approach resonates with other Muslim feminists, who see it as a method for connecting their feminist beliefs with their religious identities, showing that Islam's core principles of justice, equity, and dignity can and should apply to women.

Understanding and Interpretation Through the Hermeneutical Circle.

The hermeneutical circle is a concept within the field of hermeneutics, which deals with the theory and methodology of interpretation, particularly in texts. The hermeneutical circle suggests that understanding a text involves a back-and-forth movement between the parts and the whole. In simpler terms, to understand the meaning of a particular section of a text, one must comprehend the whole text, and to grasp the meaning of the whole, one must first understand its parts. This process is not linear but circular, as each part of a text continuously informs the whole, and the whole reshapes the understanding of the individual parts. The concept of the *hermeneutical circle* is deeply connected to the work of both Schleiermacher (1998) and Gadamer (2004), who made significant contributions to hermeneutics, albeit with differing emphases and goals.

Schleiermacher's approach to the hermeneutical circle revolved around the idea that understanding a text is a process of moving between its parts and the whole. Schleiermacher saw this as essential not only for textual interpretation but for all forms of communication. He argued that interpretation involves two dimensions: grammatical and psychological. Grammatical interpretation refers to understanding the linguistic structures within a text, where each word, sentence, or phrase gains meaning in the context of the whole language or system of grammar. Psychological interpretation, on the other hand, focuses on understanding the author's intent or inner thoughts that led to the creation of the text.²² He believed that to truly understand a text, the

²² Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*.

interpreter must alternate between these two dimensions—moving from an analysis of individual parts (words, sentences) to the larger context of the text, and back again. This constant back-and-forth process of refinement is the essence of the hermeneutical circle.²³ The interpreter begins with a preliminary understanding of the whole text, which is then revised and tested through deeper engagement with its parts. Thus, understanding is not linear or complete; it is always evolving through this circular movement.

For Gadamer (2004), the hermeneutical circle is not just about understanding parts and wholes in a text but about recognizing how our own historical context and preconceptions influence our interpretation. He states that :

The movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to expand the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed.²⁴

According to him, every interpreter brings their own biases and pre-understandings, which shape how they engage with a text. This creates a circular process where the text reshapes the interpreter's perspective, and the interpreter's perspective influences how they interpret the text. Gadamer saw this as a productive and necessary tension, as it enables a deeper understanding that goes beyond the original author's intent to include the broader significance of the text in contemporary contexts.²⁵

In essence, while Schleiermacher viewed the hermeneutical circle as a technical tool for reconstructing the meaning of a text by moving between its parts and the whole, Gadamer saw it as a more dynamic and philosophical process.²⁶ Gadamer emphasized that understanding is a historically situated dialogue where the interpreter's own perspective is constantly evolving through the interaction with the text, reflecting the endless and circular nature of interpretation.

Mernissi provides an interesting case for applying the hermeneutical circle. Mernissi's work, particularly her critical examination of Islamic texts, can be viewed as an example of how understanding the whole and the parts interact dynamically. Mernissi sought to reinterpret key religious texts, especially the Hadith, to challenge traditional gender roles in Islamic societies. In her reading, she employed the hermeneutical circle by looking at specific Hadiths that had been used to justify the subjugation of women, while at the same time contextualizing these sayings within the broader framework of Islamic law, historical conditions, and the Prophet's general teachings on equality and justice.

One key example of Mernissi's use of the hermeneutical circle can be found in her analysis of the *Hadith* that asserts women's inferiority or places restrictions on them. For instance, she critically examines the *Hadith* that suggests the Prophet Muhammad declared that women's leadership would lead to societal ruin. Traditionally, this Hadith has been used to justify the exclusion of women from political and public leadership. Mernissi delved into the historical and political contexts surrounding the transmission of this Hadith, suggesting that it might have been shaped by the socio-political needs of the time rather than an immutable religious command.

Through the hermeneutical circle, Mernissi interpreted this individual Hadith in relation to the broader principles of Islam, particularly its emphasis on justice and equality. She argued that the Prophet's overall message cannot be reconciled with the idea that women are inherently inferior or unfit to lead. Her reading of the parts (individual Hadiths) and the whole (Islam's overarching values) allowed her to critique these isolated

²³ Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*.

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.291.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*.

texts and demonstrate how a more just interpretation of Islam could emerge by re-reading these sources holistically.

Another example is her critical reading of the veil in Islamic tradition. In her book *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi questioned the traditional association of the veil with modesty and piety, arguing that the veil historically emerged as a tool to control women's mobility in patriarchal societies. By applying the hermeneutical circle, Mernissi moved between the *Qur'anic* verses discussing modesty and veiling and the broader ethical framework of Islam, which stresses equality and the dignity of both men and women. This method allowed her to highlight the historical conditions that shaped the veil's adoption and reinterpret it as a socio-political practice, rather than a divine mandate intended to confine women.

In both cases, Mernissi's feminist hermeneutics used the hermeneutical circle to reinterpret Islamic texts, challenging the patriarchal interpretations of isolated passages and advocating for a more holistic understanding that aligns with Islam's core values of justice, equality, and dignity for all. Through this circular movement between parts of texts and the whole tradition, Mernissi's work exemplifies how re-reading sacred texts can be a powerful tool for feminist critique and social reform.

Through commitment to interpreting specific *Hadiths* within their broader socio-historical contexts, Mernissi re-evaluated their meaning and their implications for gender relations. For instance, she questioned the authenticity and authority of certain *Hadiths* that were cited to limit women's rights. In so doing, she highlighted how a more holistic understanding of Islam's core values—such as justice, equality, and the dignity of human beings—could shift the way specific texts were understood. This method reflects the hermeneutical circle: Mernissi's analysis of individual texts was deeply influenced by her larger interpretation of Islam as a faith committed to justice, and her interpretation of Islam as a whole was continually informed by her critical analysis of specific texts.

In this way, Mernissi's work exemplifies how the hermeneutical circle is not only relevant to religious or philosophical texts but can also serve as a powerful tool for rethinking societal norms. Through this process of mutual interpretation between the parts and the whole, Mernissi was able to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts, opening new pathways for the empowerment of women in Muslim societies. Thus, the hermeneutical circle becomes not just a method of textual interpretation, but also a way of transforming understanding and practice.

CONCLUSION

Mernissi's work represents a transformative engagement with both Islamic traditions and Western hermeneutical thought, giving birth to a unique feminist methodology that reclaims the voices and agency of women within Islamic texts and communities. through the employment of techniques such as historical and contextual analysis, linguistic examination, and comparative studies, Mernissi illuminates the interpretive gaps and androcentric biases that have historically marginalized women in Islamic hermeneutics. Her approach is not merely an academic exercise but a profound challenge to the patriarchal systems entrenched in traditional readings of Islamic texts. Through her feminist hermeneutics, she upholds an egalitarian vision of Islam that recognizes the inherent dignity and equality of women as integral participants in the faith and its interpretive traditions.

Mernissi's incorporation of Western hermeneutical theories, particularly those of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, reveals the depth and interdisciplinary nature of her work. Concepts such as the fusion of horizons, the hermeneutics of suspicion, and the hermeneutical circle empower her critique of dominant interpretations and provide a framework for establishing alternative meanings within Islamic scriptures. Gadamer's idea of the 'fusion of horizons' helps explain the dynamic interaction between the historical context of the text and the interpreter's contemporary context. This perspective opens up new pathways for Mernissi to reinterpret Islamic texts in ways that resonate with modern calls for gender justice. Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion', meanwhile, equips her to critically interrogate patriarchal narratives and expose their socio-political underpinnings. Schleiermacher's emphasis the hermeneutical circle provides her with a methodological foundation for uncover alternative and egalitarian meanings through the examination of

the intricate relationship between the specific linguistic and historical details of Islamic scriptures and the broader cultural and theological frameworks in which they were developed.

Through these hermeneutical tools, Mernissi's feminist project not only deconstructs patriarchal readings but also reconstructs an Islamic interpretive tradition that celebrates women as equal and empowered beings. Her work challenges the notion that patriarchal interpretations are inevitable or immutable. She rather demonstrates that the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*, if approached through a feminist perspective, can support a vision of justice and gender equality. This reconstruction is particularly significant in its potential to inspire Muslim women and men alike to reengage with their faith in ways that affirm inclusivity and mutual respect.

Indeed, Mernissi's integration of Western hermeneutical methodologies with a deep commitment to Islamic principles exemplifies a groundbreaking approach to feminist scholarship. Her work transcends cultural and disciplinary boundaries. It really recombines Islamic and Western intellectual traditions to advance a compelling vision of gender justice. Her permanent focus on re-examining traditional interpretations and mainstreaming an inclusive and egalitarian Islam, Mernissi has left a profound legacy that continues to inspire feminist discourse within and beyond Islamic communities. Her methodologies and insights serve as a model for future scholars to highlight the intersections of faith, gender, and interpretive authority, and recognize the transformative power of hermeneutics to reimagine traditions in ways that affirm human dignity and equality.

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