Exploring Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society:
A Review of Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* (Revised Edition)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This is a review of Mernissi's Beyond the Veil, one of the most influential book discussing Islam and gender. I have to admit that I have not read Mernissi before I take a course called Anthropology and World Religions focusing in Islam in the University of Auckland. Later I know that the reason why her name rarely echoed in anthropological atmosphere in Indonesia (particularly in Sulawesi) is because Mernissi only well-known in gender studies (especially in Islam) and Islamic studies. I know it because the only colleague who knows Mernissi is my professor who studied anthropology and gender (and Islam). Beyond the Veil is an interesting book. It explores the relation and the dynamics within male-female Muslims which even I, as a Muslim, have not realised it before. Excluding the introduction (with three different versions) and the conclusion, Beyond the Veil is divided into two parts. Part one consists of three chapters which are more theoretic (or conceptual) background of the book and I think, it would be easier for the readers to understand the context and to grasp Mernissi's arguments briefly. Part two consist of six chapters which are more ethnographic oriented (fieldwork-based) since it tells the readers about the dynamics between men and women in modern Morocco (as a case or sample of modern Islamic society).

1. Introduction

Beyond the Veil is one of the influential books in the study of social sciences approach to Islam and gender that does not seem to age (Varisco, 2005:95). Indeed, it is also an interesting phrase. Veil is a symbol for female Muslim (*muslimah*) derived from pre-Islamic tradition (as far, from Hammurabi era in 1790 BC) even though according to Islamic prime source of laws (the Quran and the *hadith*), the 'compulsory' of veiling was in the era of Prophet Muhammad. Some non-Muslims perceive veil as the symbol of the backwardness of the Muslim society and the failure of modernisation (Kulenovic, 2006:714), yet this thesis is quite inappropriate. Veil, indeed, functions to separate the pre-Islamic way of life (known as *jahiliyah* or the era of ignorance; barbarism) when the promiscuity was practiced and people failed to control their desires. Thus, veil becomes the way of Islam to nurture the community by controlling those desires (Mernissi,

2011:14; 57). Veil is a metaphor of a 'boundary', something that separate women from 'the outside world'. But, why should women and not men? This has been my question since long time ago when I was still in *madrasah* (Islamic school). After I read this book, I do clearly understand (academically) that it is a social construction of archaic-patriarchal Muslim society. Women are seen as aggressive hunters, the source of power and lust, thus, to reduce the 'impact' of the women's power, women are imposed requirements such as veiling. Simply, veil is a 'seal' of women's 'dangerous' power.

Mernissi argues that we should not be hasty to claim veil as the negative way, but in contrast, it is the way of Islam (as a religion) celebrating female power. Even though veiling is a symbolic form of seclusion, Mernissi claimed that it depends on which perspective we use to see it. The 'West' sees seclusion as a source of oppression, meanwhile Islam perceives seclusion as a pride, a way to show piety and modesty as well as a submission of religious duty (Chapman, 2016:236). However, assuming the female Muslims are secluded is quite unfair in the first place since it is built upon the 'West' standard which often considered themselves as superior among the 'Other' (Wagner et al, 2012:521). The standard that the 'West' (particularly western women-rights activists) built then becomes their justification to 'save' or to liberate female Muslims even from themselves (and sometimes it is political issue, such as liberating Afghan women from Taliban), as if they did not understand cultural relativism (Abu-Lughod, 2002:783). Nevertheless, it can be argued that veil, by the same token, is also a symbol of 'deseclusion' since it is a 'ticket' that enables women to the street or public sphere, trespassing to the *umma* universe.

It is also interesting to know that the book already has three different editions with three different versions of introduction and cover (and we brought the three versions in the class). I do believe that cover of a (good) book (and I believe this book is considered not only as 'good' but also influential) is a mirror of the content. It is a compressed-message, embodied in a picture. Therefore, I would like to explain two of them in brief since I opine that the covers of this book. It is the cover from the first edition that impresses me. It is a depiction of woman eyes, metaphor of women's power. Eye, in Muslim society, according to Ghazali (cited from Mernissi) is the 'dangerous' and erogenous zone since it can give pleasure as the penis (2011:156). In some Muslim societies (or let say, those who are internalised by scriptural or puritanical understanding of Islamic ideas), eye is one of the small part of the body of female Muslims (the other is palm) that are possible to be look (or to be displayed) in public sphere which is dominated by male (exemplified by dressing such as *burqa*). Through eyes, evil could be delivered (evil-eye) (Khalifa et al, 2011) as well as a source of *fitna* (a fearful chaos provoked by sexual disorder and initiated by women) since the look is fornication of the eye. Therefore, lowering the gaze (for both genders) is considered as one of the solutions. I assume that Mernissi is impossible not to know such notion. With her reputation as a contemporary moderate (or liberal?) female Muslim cleric (*ulama*), she absolutely knew it. Thus, putting female eyes as cover in the first version of *Beyond the Veil* becomes the way Mernissi shares the idea of such 'female power'.

In addition, the cover from the latest edition depicts three unveiled women in a room staring at a window, looking at the 'outside world'. It is, again, a metaphor of women seeking for freedom (thanks to Christine Dureu, my supervisor, who brought this issue in the seventh week of the course I mentioned before). The dichotomy of Muslim world like what Mernissi explains, divides the world into the public universe (*umma*) dominated by the male, and the domestic universe of sexuality where Mernissi assumed that the members are the women only (2011:152). Therefore, Mernissi, clearly argues that female Muslims should be freed from 'the oppression' of male-constructed political doctrine (manipulation) within the Islamic history, pretended as the *shari'a* or 'the law of God' (for instance, Mernissi believes that women should be treated equal in sexuality). Moreover, she also insists that the *shari'a* today had to confront with 'the daily realities of the increasingly numerous and culturally diverse members' of the Muslim world (2011:30).

2. Discussion

The first part of *Beyond the Veil* clearly depicts the traditional Muslim view of women and their place in social order. This part is interesting since as a Muslim and as a student interested in anthropological approach of Islam, I got new insights from this book. Female Muslims are always describe as 'active' in terms of sexuality as explain by Ghazali and it is different from Freud (representing the 'West' view of women) who determined females as 'passive'. Therefore, the way of how society looking the position of women affects how women should be treated. Mernissi elaborates the argument from Ghazali that in Islam, since women are 'active' and considered as 'threat', they are segregated by arranging 'social structure that can be seen as an attack on and a defense against, the disruptive power of female sexuality' (2011:56). Thus, the social structure were embodied in specific laws that is regulated the relation of male and female Muslims for centuries.

Part two of the book discusses the anomic effects of modernisation on male-female dynamics, derived from Mernissi's fieldwork in Morocco. I found it interesting since in the beginning of the first chapter, Mernissi explains the methods that she used to conduct the research. For instance, the participants are female (hundreds), coming from traditional and modern families and mostly consisted of mother (born before World War) and daughter (born after the World War). Interestingly, Mernissi also gained data from analysing hundreds of counselling letters sent by Muslims across Morocco to a Muslim cleric known as Qadi Moulay Mustapha Aloui. The interviews and the counselling letters explored the present tensions in Moroccan society relating to sexual interaction. However, Christine[1] in seminars argued that we need more explanation and elaboration about the letters, for instance, to what extent the letters represent the cases of Moroccan Muslims? And how Mernissi chose particular cases and why not the others?

What is interesting from the book is how the sexual anomie is well-explained by Mernissi. As revealed by the data, a taboo situation is when someone (female) interacts between strangers of different sexes in the public sphere (like streets). So, the male

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[1] In week seven (September 16th 2019) and in week twelve (September 21st 2019)

should 'make way' (*amlu 'triq*) since public space is a male space. This relates to the concept of *mahram* or *muhrim* (relatives). Letter 88 depicts the story of a male who is in the anomie situation since he found out that both genders mixed in the beach and he confuses, stating that what happened with my place? Every woman was nude! (Interestingly, in Islam, a woman is nude if she does not wear veil). This situation then leads into sexual problems, both in rural and urban areas. For example, since there is no alternative for the young men to distribute their desires such as accessing or engaging in legal sexual practices, they sometimes conduct the 'illicit intercourses' (*zina*) or either another form of 'forbidden' sexual activity such as masturbation (which is condemned) but it is more accepted rather than commit the *zina*. People in rural areas were strictly controlled by the sexual segregation, thus some of them went to the city, a place providing many sexual liberties.

The 'traditional' Islamic way of life had been practiced since centuries by the Moroccan society, particularly the understanding of position and the role of women. Not until modernity took over Moroccan Muslim life. The Islamic moral system had started to shift and shake due to the introduction of modern institutions (school and office are the salient examples). Thus, the sexual segregation of male and female spaces has been overlapped. This, for some Muslims, is a good sign of openness, meaning that sexual segregation is broken down and Muslim society is in a negotiation process of capability for women to trespass the boundary. Therefore, these are the Muslims male-female dynamics.

However, it should be known that it is important for some other Muslims to distinguish themselves by building boundaries between 'Islam' and 'the West', constructing civilization where women's activities, status and visibility become the border between 'us' and 'them' (Deeb, 2009:120). Therefore, what happen if the border that they have built is collapsed? Mernissi explains such moment as anomie, a confusing situation where the traditional norms between sexes are violated every day (2011:110). Mernissi exemplified the anomie in many cases through the chapters, such as the sexual problems in rural and urban areas, even though mostly, the anomic-related problems occurred in the urban areas since the city provide more sexual liberty rather than the village. This is, indeed, horrified by Muslim fathers and husbands, since the idea of 'transformation' is considered as the way towards of 'western family patterns'. Ironically, the fear of this 'shifting' condition emphasises the argument of Marx and Engels about the existence of slavery in the conjugal unit (1976:52), where the wife(s) and children are considered as slave to husband since the husband hold the highest authority in the household and no family member dared to criticise him. Why Muslim men afraid of the 'change'? Is it a 'direct attack' on Allah's realm and order? Or, like what Mernissi wrote at the end of the book, it is mainly an economic issue?

Moreover, another interesting point that Mernissi stated is the sexual repression in a depressed economic condition. A sexually repressed Muslim is preoccupied with symbols such as 'purity' and 'honour'. Men are obliged to protect their women (wives, daughters, mother, and other married female relations), these people are the man's honours and most of the mothers expect her son to be this ideal type of man. Men grow

up with the expectation of having women (and some of them dream of doing polygamy) but then they realise the hard reality. They should marry first and pay the bride-price (which is pricy. Indeed, marriage needs money). If it fails, some of them will break the law and have illicit intercourse. In this case, a man should sacrifice his honour, his purity, and his pride. This is what Mernissi called as two kinds of pressure, economically and sexually (2011:178).

3. Conclusion

Despite all the interesting arguments, some scholars also criticise Mernissi. Varisco (2005), for instance, even though he appraises the book as influential and appreciates Mernissi for being vocal against the misogynist elements in 'her' Islamic tradition, Varisco argues that Mernissi at some points should be more careful since her arguments are polemical and her assumptions are shaky (2005:96). One of the arguments that Varisco criticised is when Mernissi writes the case of Muhammad seeing Zaynab in her tent accidently. Instead of writing 'Muhammad ran off and mumbling prayers' as a sign of self-control and strength, Mernissi writes 'Muhammad felt on irresistible passion for her' as a sign of weakness. Indeed, this is really matter because Mernissi writes this book not only for the Muslim readers but also for the 'Western' audience whose 'some of them' are quite skeptical, ethnocentric and liberal.

4. References

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