Research paper

Women and Power: From the Harem to the Public Space : A Gendered Reading of the Book "The forgotten queens of Islam"

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to approach the topic of women's strategies from within the harem, as a private space, to influence the public sphere through a reading of the book Forgotten Sultans. The importance of revisiting the sociological heritage of Fatima El-Mernissi lies in the fact that she highlighted the leadership roles of women in the political space and their ability to influence the public sphere despite their presence in the private sphere of the Harem. EL-Mernissi presented examples of women who owned both material and symbolic power, such as Shajar al-Durr, and Zubayda's wife of Harun al-Rashid, who employed various strategies as wives or mothers of kings to make decisions despite the cultural and spatial constraints that limited them. These historical experiences can help us understand the modern transformations of the Moroccan family, where women's roles in social and political fields have expanded, reflecting a continuity with the experiences of women in the past. This also highlights women's ability to influence even from within private spaces (the house). The Moroccan family is undergoing significant changes due to the technological advancements in the world, such as the increased presence of women in the real and digital public sphere, reaffirming the ongoing presence of women despite the obstacles they face. Based on this, the central question of this reading is: What are the new challenges that women face in both private and public spaces in the current period, and how do they confront them compared to the strategies they employed in the past? In our attempt to address this issue, we will approach the topic in two phases. The first part of the paper will be dedicated to analyzing El-Mernissi's thesis within its theoretical framework and historical context, focusing on the cultural and spatial factors that presented challenges to women, according to El-Mernissi's perspective. The second part will offer a contemporary sociological reading, through which we aim to explore strategies for acquiring power in both the public and private spheres, but with a new understanding and different interpretation that seeks to uncover the gaps left by the study, in light of the modern objective changes shaped by the current context of globalization, digitization, and human rights rhetoric that characterize today's world.

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1 Introduction

In *The Forgotten Sultanas: Women Rulers in Islamic Lands∗*, Fatema Mernissi offers a profound analysis of gender and power by shedding light on the historical, social, and cultural contexts that have shaped women's strategies both within the private sphere (the harem) and the public (political) realm. She demonstrates how women were able to access positions of decision-making and exert influence over public affairs. While the work adopts a historical perspective, it engages with many contemporary issues that remain relevant today, despite the changing objective conditions that produced them. What persists is the enduring desire to break free from a deeply entrenched history of male dominance and to intervene in a chronological trajectory marked by female resistance and defiance of that same history. Drawing on this historically rooted dynamic, Mernissi examines the status of women in the past and reveals the methods and pathways through which they acquired power. These women held positions of authority and made political decisions that significantly shaped the public spheretraditionally viewed as male-dominated. Despite the passage of time and the transformation of conditions brought about by technological progress, understanding the present still requires a return to the past. Analyzing current realities compels us to look back toward history.

Historical Context: Women's Strategies in the Face of Social and Spatial Challenges
Fatema Mernissi's theoretical framework and intellectual outlook are grounded in an analysis of the cultural and social structures that have entrenched an unequal distribution of power between men and women. Her perspective on gender conceptualizes it as a system that reproduces male dominance, intricately intertwined with religious and societal contexts in Islamic societies. In this section, we highlight the historical context and the cultural and spatial factors that posed challenges to women's access to power, as analyzed by Mernissi. We also examine the strategies that women adopted to gain and exercise authority.

2 Social Challenges: The Intersections of Religion and Culture

As a first step, we approached the text within its historical and ideological context. Mernissi links power relations to religious and political heritage, showing how positions of authoritywere historically monopolized by men. She provides examples from Islamic history of women like Shajar al-Durr, who climbed the ranks of the harem and asserted herself first as a concubine and then as the wife of a Mamluk leader. Her case reveals the strategies she employed to access political power from within the private sphere. These strategies, as we argue, were not limited to seduction or charm but were grounded in intelligence, courage, strength, and the capacity for governance. Similarly, women like Al-Khayzuran reached influential positions, but they encountered fierce resistance, as society was not ready to accept a woman in a formal leadership role. Mernissi explores the institution of the caliphate as a historical construct where religious and cultural norms intersect. She notes that access to the caliphate was governed by two essential criteria: being male and of Arab descent.

While the Arab origin requirement was contested by some, such as the Kharijites the gender requirement went largely unquestioned. This underscores how power was monopolized by men, with religion serving as an ideological tool in their hands. Mernissi also delves into the roots of Shi'a thought

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from a gender studies perspective to explore the relationship between the feminine and the religious. She concludes that religion, in itself, is not the primary factor behind the allocation of titles and roles. Instead, cultural factors played a more decisive role. For instance, the local culture in Cairo strongly influenced women's rejection of unjust caliphal decrees even preferring death over compliance.

Ultimately, women faced opposition from the caliph, who denied them access to decision-making roles, even when their aspirations were limited to managing earthly affairs. Religious justification was often used as a means to block and exclude women from the political sphere. Gender and politics were closely linked, representing both power relations and identity structures. Masculinity, in this context, was often defined by the man's ability to dominate or suppress the feminine*. In addition, Mernissi undertakes a conceptual exploration of the semiological dimensions associated with women's titles, attempting to uncover the symbolic meanings of these designations throughout history, which, according to her, reflect the prevailing mentalities of their times. She connects these titles to women's exercise of power for instance, the title "Caliph." She argues that "Arabic grammar has structured and directed the distribution of political power between men and women." According to the lexicon *Lisan al-Arab*, the term *caliph* (khalifa) is not correctly used in the feminine form, unlike the terms *king* (malik) and *sultan*, both of which have feminine versions.

Mernissi interprets this linguistic distinction as arising from the overlap between the worldly and the otherworldly meanings embedded in the term *caliph*. Women, she argues, can only aspire to temporary worldly authority. This explains why women might hold positions of rule and sultanship, as these titles do not signify a sacred divine mission. Here lies the reason for women's exclusion from the public sphere, making their appearance in politics inherently an act of protest. Moreover, Mernissi contends that the title alone does not negate the authority women exercised from within the harem or behind the name of a man. The idea emerges that titles such as "Caliph" are linked to spiritual and religious roles, thus male dominance finds support in religious interpretations rooted in culture, which reproduces this dominance. This has led to the exclusion of women from these positions despite their ability to govern indirectly.

Mernissi explains this from the standpoint that patriarchal systems have entrenched representations that associate women with the private sphere (family and harem), while men control the public sphere (politics and economy). Male culture marginalized women's roles through religious discourses that reinforced obedience and submission, making women's rejection of these traditions difficult but not impossible. Although prevailing customs in most societies regulated women's presence in the public sphere, what remains constant and shared is women's capacity to exert influence, whether from within the harem as a private space or in the political arena. Generally, the elite women who made decisions and held power sought strategies that would make them visible in the most male-dominated public sphere: the pulpit, where earthly and divine authorities intertwine. The Friday sermon reflects the dynamics of the political field and serves as a measure to distinguish between women who exercised power and those who accepted exercising it only as wives or mothers. Understanding the relationship between the feminine and the religious helps clarify the ambiguity surrounding women's status within the mosque, which varies according to place, culture, and historical period. The mosque is primarily a political space before being a place of worship. Although it is subject to sexual segregation, women

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* Mernissi draws a comparison between the rejection faced by women in the past and the opposition encountered by Benazir Bhutto in the present, following her success in the 1988 parliamentary elections in Pakistan, where she became the first female Prime Minister of a Muslim-majority country.

have managed to claim their rights through and within it. For instance, it is reported that when the payment of the *Jamikiyya** was delayed, many women gathered at Al-Azhar Mosque, protested loudly to the religious scholars, and disrupted their lessons repeatedly until the scholars were compelled to intervene and redress the injustice[1]. Women thus practiced resistance and struggle to assert their rights despite religious and cultural constraints that impeded them.

In addition to addressing power as a material political force associated with positions of authority and decision-making, Mernissi also treated power as symbolic capital. Through this lens, she demonstrated how women exercised power behind the scenes in the harem, often under the names of men or nominal posts, reflecting dynamics of social intelligence and negotiation. These strategies manifested in resistance against patriarchal systems, as seen in cases such as Lady Al-Hurra, who exercised power in northern Morocco after the fall of Al-Andalus, alongside the example of Al-Khayzuran, who wielded political influence from within the harem. However, Mernissi points out in several places the historical erasures women have faced as central figures in historical narratives. School textbooks, for example, often present the political field as exclusively male. Historians have obscured women's virtues to the extent of portraying the Queen of Sheba as the daughter of a human father and a jinn mother. This symbolic denial reveals that their rejection of a woman's rule led them to portray such female leaders as exceptions or anomalies highlighting the intersection of political and social factors depending on context and orientation.

3 Spatial Challenges: Constraints of the Public Sphere and Strategies for Presence and Visibility

The division of tasks was determined by the spatial division, where "the harem means both the place and the women who live in it at the same time, and this conflation between people and place is fundamental to the entire Islamic political structure[2]" Boundaries were set and two interconnected yet distinct spheres were delineated: the private sphere and the public sphere. The harem was not merely a physical space but a structural tool that divided the private from the public. This made women's participation in the public sphere restricted and governed by patriarchal determinants, within a traditional structure that conflicts with the spirit of modern democracy, which assumes that all spheres belong equally to everyone. Returning to the issue of the public and private spheres, Mernissi reveals a crucial aspect of women's history: the concubines influenced the caliphs from within the harem, meaning women exercised political influence from the private sphere over decisions that defined the public sphere. Women did not dwell on the barriers blocking their access to power; rather, with their intelligence and culture, they shared governance with the caliphs and resorted to strategies of seduction, bargaining, and negotiation, not limiting their influence to the harem alone.

However, we confront the limits imposed on women, as they did not possess authority independently but only through a man and with his consent. Women could not appear in the political arena "except when hidden behind a man's presence.[3]" To illustrate her point, Mernissi cites Khayzuran's strength, intelligence, and managerial capacity, yet notes that "she accepted the division of the world into two parts: the harem for women and public life for men." She governed the public realm through the

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* A word of Turkish origin meaning a monthly wage, gift, or allowance.

[1] Al-Marrakbi, M. (2018). The Islamic public sphere before modernity: Toward a different narrative. *Magharib Journal*, p. 63.

[2] Mernissi, 2010, p. 98

[3] Mernissi, 2010, p. 78

private, without contemplating breaking the barrier or formally positioning herself in the other sphere where power resides—in the public domain where the individual is recognized as an agent. Mernissi adds that the obstacle that hindered Khayzuran's political practice was not that she was a woman or a concubine, "but that she belonged to the harem as a woman—that is, to the sphere of obedience. Initiative and decision-making in all matters, especially political ones, were confined to a space forbidden for her to penetrate: the public sphere[4]." In Mernissi's analysis, the public sphere is closely tied to power, and women's presence within it is seen as an attempt to transcend imposed boundaries. She provides examples of women's protests in Al-Azhar Mosque, where they transformed the mosque from a male religious space into a public arena of dissent and resistance, reflecting their ability to challenge traditional spatial arrangements.

Fatema Mernissi expresses this idea differently when she states that "the division of social space into domestic and public spaces is an expression of hierarchical power relations[5]." Arab societies, she argues, construct a social architecture that links the public sphere to the world of men and the *umma*, a duality that mirrors religion and power. In contrast, women's world is rooted in the private sphere, defined by the binary of gender and submission. This very submission can be understood as a preliminary strategy for acquiring power. Since gender determines the world of women, they submit to men and resort to seduction as a means to achieve their goals. However, Mernissi emphasizes that women's participation in public spaces has historically been tied to moments of social or political crisis. Women were compelled to leave the private sphere out of necessity, as occurred after the fall of Granada. In such moments, women deployed a variety of strategies to gain access to power and influence both the private and public domains. Through these processes, they shaped decisions and held positions of authority. Women exercised both material and symbolic power under different titles and participated in shaping the public sphere[*]. Furthermore, women emerged in the political field during major historical events as a sign of their resistance and ability to share responsibilities with men. For instance, during the historical moment of the fall of Granada—the last Andalusian city—Christians expelled Muslims from southern Spain. This forced many elite women into the public sphere, pushing them from the domestic realm into the political domain, where "they proved to be shrewd and strategic planners[6]." One such figure was Sayyida al-Hurra, ruler of the city of Chefchaouen and wife of the governor of Tetouan.

A Contemporary Reading of Women's Strategies for Acquiring Power

In the second part of this paper, we offer a contemporary and current reading of the text, as the same fundamental questions persist—albeit with different interpretations and understandings—prompting us to explore the gaps left by earlier works, in light of new objective conditions shaped by digital technology, globalization, and the rhetoric of democracy that defines the world today. From the same historical perspective through which Mernissi examined how women developed strategies to overcome

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[4] Mernissi, 2010, p. 97

[5] Mernissi, F. (1988). *Gender as social engineering* (F. Z. Azrouil, Trans.). Al-Fanak Publishing. (First edition). Morocco. p. 121.

[*] *As was the case in the Mongol Empire, where Islamic culture adapted to the traditions of the Asian steppes, and women were regularly present in the public sphere.*

[6] Mernissi, 1988, p. 22

social and spatial constraints we aim in this section to offer a contemporary analysis of these strategies, and how they have evolved and changed in the present era.

4 Space as a Social Construction of Gender Differences

Mernissi asserts that "women belong entirely to the domestic world, and their presence outside it is considered unusual—a transgression into a world that is not theirs... Women, whose identities are primarily defined by their association with the domestic space, find themselves stripped of authority in the world in which they are placed, since men hold power within the family[7]." She explains that "every physical environment, every room, every space in which social encounters occur necessarily contains elements used for sexual display and for reinforcing gender identity[8]." For example, the bedroom is associated with sexuality in the popular imagination, while the kitchen is intrinsically linked to women. Despite the social changes that have affected Morocco since the 1970s—particularly the shift from the extended family to the nuclear family—this argument remains relevant. It not only serves as a comparative methodological tool, but also reveals a hidden reality that persists through various socio-spatial practices.

Mernissi points to this issue in her discussion of space as a central axis in structuring social relationships between men and women. She argues that "spatial organization is a significant material foundation of these relationships. A wealthy person's use of space in a given society differs from that of a poor person. Entire neighborhoods in a city may be accessible to the wealthy but never trodden by the poor—not because of legal exclusion, but due to an unspoken, hierarchical distribution of space.[9]" Women are particularly subject to harassment depending on the socio-economic and political characteristics of the space in which they move. Such harassment intensifies or diminishes depending on the class affiliation of specific neighborhoods. In this way, the boundaries between masculine and feminine continue to manifest in social practices reflected through spatial arrangements.

Additionally, Mernissi views sexual life as spatial in nature. The regulated and meaningful distribution of space among individuals of different genders who do not belong to the same family constitutes one of the main mechanisms for organizing sexuality. In this sense, daily practices produce space, just as space in turn produces those practices. Thus, movements within space represent social transformations in both the structure of space and existing power relations, since individuals interact through their occupation of shared spatial environments. The gendered division of space has resulted in multiple forms of resistance. Mernissi addresses this through a precise understanding of what she calls the "dynamics of civilization," asserting that its comprehension requires "an attempt to grasp the desires of the masters on one hand — laws, values, culture — and the resistance of their subjects, who are assumed to be powerless and weak, on the other[10]." This means examining counter-resistance and studying exceptions and marginalized cases, essentially the history of refusal and resistance. This stance is supported by Oscar Negt through his work on the concept of the counter-public sphere. From

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[7] Mernissi, 1988, p. 123

[8] Goffman, E. (2019). *The social construction of sexual identity* (H. Krimli, Trans.; 1st ed.). Mu'minun Bila Hudud Publishing and Distribution, p. 84.

[10] Mernissi, F. (1988). *Gender as a social structure* (F. Zrioul, Trans.). Al-Fannak Publishing. (Original work published 1988), p. 126.

the same socio-historical perspective through which Mernissi approaches the issue of women, she acknowledges that what disturbs men is women's intrusion into politics and their encroachment upon their realm. Mernissi points out that "what disturbs is a woman's decision to exist as a free will. There is a significant difference between will and intelligence. A woman's intelligence can always be placed in the service of whoever owns her, but will never submits to anyone. Will either exists or does not, and if it exists, it inevitably competes with another will, especially the will of the person to whom one must obey[11]."

The definition granted by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to citizenship corresponds to the emergence of the individual's free will. Every discourse about women today is a discourse about the future of the individual citizen and their place in society, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or social class. This is because what affects women as a gender also affects men as a class. It is worth noting that Mernissi refers to the fact that "the sphere into which Muslim women have managed to infiltrate strongly until the present time is the university, as an educated woman does not threaten the system, whereas women politicians shake its foundations.[12]" But what does it mean to be educated? Is it not possible for an educated woman to influence the public sphere to shape the political field? We believe that access to the political must pass through the cultural — represented in raising gender awareness. Otherwise, politicians emptied of gender culture will only reproduce traditional authoritarian patterns that perpetuate masculine culture on one hand and elitism on the other. Thus, we do not consider them anything more than mere fronts for states that have ratified international agendas related to human and women's rights.

5 Penetrating the Public Sphere: Between the Real and the Virtual

Women have historically used negotiation and seduction as tools to influence political decisions from within the harem, especially in environments that barred their direct appearance in the public sphere. In the contemporary context, these same strategies can be observed in women's roles within the family or their use of digital space as a means to cross from the private to the public, to assert their presence, express themselves, or negotiate to achieve their goals—thus reproducing old strategies with new tools. In the past, women utilized spaces like mosques and markets to protest, turning male-dominated arenas into platforms for struggle. Mernissi discussed women's resistance in history, such as the protests of women in Al-Azhar over delayed salaries, considering these acts as evidence of the possibility of using religion and the public sphere as tools of resistance.

Today, women continue this struggle by participating in demonstrations and sit-ins, as seen in contemporary feminist movements demanding equality in civil and political rights. The digital space plays a crucial role as it has become a means to overcome spatial and cultural restrictions, allowing women to create free spaces for expression and advocacy. While Mernissi pointed out that some women in history managed to ally with political elites to gain power—like Shajar al-Durr, who relied on military support—contemporary women activists and politicians similarly seek political and civil alliances to expand their influence. However, they face challenges related to the reproduction of male dominance within these alliances.

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[11] Mernissi, (1988), p. 271-270.
[12] Mernissi, (1988), p. 127

Therefore, achieving genuine equality requires profound cultural change, as laws alone are insufficient to eliminate discrimination. This challenge highlights the necessity to democratize the private sphere alongside the public. True democracy cannot be achieved if women continue to face discrimination within the family. Modern experiences indicate that the struggle for equality must also involve reforming educational curricula and religious discourse to reinforce values of equality and justice.

6 Dual Identity: Challenges of Tradition and Modernity

El Mernissi discussed the issue of duality in Arab societies between modernity and tradition, affirming that "the democratization of the public sphere cannot be achieved without the democratization of the private sphere." The distribution of power is linked to the division of space between men and women according to a silent social dominance. Therefore, it can be said that "modern democracy opens a new horizon for women, as universal suffrage provides an opportunity for political participation." In this regard, she considered parliamentary democracy as a new horizon for women because universal suffrage opens the doors of political practice for them and makes them essential actors, no longer obliged to hide behind the veil of the harem. However, caution is advised because women who participate in the political field without gender awareness may end up reproducing the same masculine culture or exploiting its gaps and shadows. Women resort to religion as a mechanism to cross from the private sphere to the public sphere; in Islamic societies, men may allow women's presence in the public and political fields on condition, for example, that they wear the hijab. Yet, this remains an example open to criticism and refutation, especially since women are not a homogeneous category but have diverse and intersecting historical and social characteristics.

El Mernissi compares the rejection women faced in the past with the opposition faced by Benazir Bhutto in the present after her success in the 1988 legislative elections in Pakistan as the first female prime minister in a Muslim country. According to El Mernissi, we live in a state that is sometimes caliphal and sometimes parliamentary *a double daily life, a dual identity, with women caught between the public and private spheres, tradition and modernity, facing a blurry democracy. She notes that "the change imposed by the conditions of a transitional society moving towards economic modernity, but not accompanied by appropriate modern socialization for social actors or suitable legal reforms, may lead to conflicting and dysfunctional roles[13]." In this sense, we belong to countries that experience duality, where individuals fluctuate and lose their identity as the scale tips, yet it never ceases to tilt again.

Therefore, El Mernissi's socio-historical study should not be seen as mere intellectual luxury driven by special interests, but rather as a social and political necessity. This is because any impact of women in the public sphere and the direction of public opinion depends on historical knowledge of women's participation in decision-making and its processes. The historical knowledge of women's participation in decision-making and its processes is crucial. From a sociological perspective, according to Fatema Mernissi, these views point to the duality experienced by individuals in Arab societies, where tertiary societies are fragmented and oscillate between tradition and modernity without having the capacity to form a unified cultural identity or to effectively implement legal texts. This is because "the democratization of the public sphere does not become achievable without the prior democratization of

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* This oscillation observed in Arab and Islamic societies indicates the difficulty of transferring the public sphere in its purely Western sense to an environment with its own historical and cultural particularities.
[13] Abdelsalam Haymar, *Ibid*, p. 100.

the private sphere[14]." By democratization of the public sphere, it is meant the broad participation of all members in the formations of the public space, with particular emphasis on social groups whose identities intersect across gender, religion, ethnicity, culture, and economic status, such as women.

7 Conclusion

Fatima Mernissi has notably illuminated the often overlooked chapters of history by offering an objective analysis through the lens of gender. She approaches the shared human past, shaped by two beings, men and women, without bias or theoretical distortion of Islamic culture. Mernissi's gendered reading of history brings new perspectives grounded in contemporary concerns such as human rights and justice. Historical events are not merely recounted but interrogated to question modern society's structures, powers, and interwoven institutions. Mernissi's analysis reveals that women's strategies to access power are not novel; they have existed throughout Islamic history in various forms. While these strategies have evolved over time, women continue to face deep-rooted structural and cultural challenges. Today, digital spaces and cultural transformations offer new tools for women's empowerment. However, genuine equality demands ongoing struggle across political, social, and spatial realms, in direct continuity with the legacy of women in the past.

This critical perspective highlights the historic role of women in transforming societal constraints into means of negotiation and authority. Amid contemporary social changes, there is an urgent need to contextualize these strategies within globalization and democracy, where private and public spheres intersect in novel ways. Ultimately, this analysis calls for a critical, historically informed, and sociological approach to understanding women's roles not only as historical actors but as active shapers of a more inclusive and just future. It urges moving beyond singular gender identities toward broader participation in the public sphere.

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[14] Al-Khalil, R. A. J. M., & Majid, H. A. (2022). *In feminist political theory: Intellectual structures and contemporary trends*. Alam Al-Ma'rifa, (493), p 148