

Synopsis

Convinced that the veil is a symbol of unjust male authority over women, in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi aims to investigate the origins of the practice in the first Islamic community. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Fatima Mernissi's book is a fascinating excursion through her own journey of discovery. She takes us from a man's put-down of her with the Hadith "those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity", to an enlightened understanding of the historical context in which the oppressive traditions of Islam arose. After explaining her background in the introduction she deals with the above hadith and how it came about, she analyzes the role of women in early Islam and especially the prophet's apparent view of women and a very in-depth and detailed discussion of how the veil, or hijab, came into being for Muslim women. She shows that the denial of women's rights was not the intention of Allah, as the source of Holy Law, nor of Mohammed, but arose in the context of the pre-existing social values of the Arab world of the time, and of the vested political interests and power struggles of the period following Mohammed's death. The study is very detailed and quite arcane, and although Ms Mernissi takes a lot of care to explain terminology and context, it really requires some background knowledge of Islam and Arabs. The book's main target audience is Moslem women, to show they do have rights within Islam, and possibly Moslem men. I believe westerners can learn from it, but are probably better served by reading more general books on Islamic history and culture. In particular non-Moslems need to understand that Islam is not a single

culture, but in reality many traditions under one umbrella, in much the same way that Christendom encompasses many religious and cultural traditions.

I find it interesting that another reader found, within the pages of this book, justification for a Muslim woman wearing a piece of cloth to cover her head. My perception of Ms. Mernissi's views is quite the opposite. What she was trying to say throughout the whole book can be summed up in one of the final questions she asks in her conclusion: "How did the tradition succeed in transforming the Muslim woman into that submissive, marginal creature who buries herself and only goes out into the world timidly and huddled in her veils?" Mernissi then questions why a Muslim man needs such a "mutilated companion." These ideas are what make this book so important. Mernissi clearly reveals the reasons why the tradition of hiding under a veil came about. Many Muslim women feel honored to wear a hijab (head covering) because, for one reason, they feel it earns them greater respect. Mernissi's view is that when the tradition first started, most (if not all) women were considered slaves. The covering of the head signified a woman was not to be considered a slave, but someone who had converted to Islam. I highly recommend this book to every woman, Muslim and non-Muslim, (and man, for that matter) who questions the present treatment of women in the Islamic religion.

I used this book 6 years ago for my thesis on Islam and feminism. It cleared up many preconceptions I had about Muslim women and the religion of Islam itself. I never revisited my research about Islam until September 11, 2001. This book shows the historical reasons behind oppressive interpretations and explain Muhammad's egalitarian vision. I use this book to educate people and show that the violent, woman-oppressing Islam is a product of history and culture and not religion. This is not a time for merciless overreaction; it is a time to learn about those things few understand.

I found the first half of this book to be very well researched, with her logic based on solid foundations. I very much liked her conclusions about Muslim women in politics, and felt that she backed her case up well with her research. However, this 'fell apart' in the second half of the book where she relied on many common traditions without subjecting them to the same vigorous research process she did those in the earlier part of the book. I respect her conclusion that Islamic law regarding women was unable to reach the ideal the Prophet (sas) would have liked to see in his community, due to the patriarchal society which existed at the time, and that as Muslims we should be striving to achieve that ideal as we have progressed from the ignorance and patriarchy of those

times. Unfortunately I found her evidence to be somewhat lacking in authoritativeness, and I hope to find another work which expands upon that point with a proper academic foundation.

I have to reiterate: the reviewers which condemn this book because they don't agree with it are crazy. If you buy one book on Islam, let this be it. That said, Fatima Mernissa, a Muslim herself, has certainly left no stone unturned with her analyses of the Hadith's. This woman has done her research. From explaining why it's not "un-Islamic" to check on the veritableness of a Hadith, to picking apart two Hadith's with a fine toothed comb, to explaining just why wearing a veil is not only unrequired by the Koran, but is unislamic in itself, she covers just about everything in this book. Having grown up in a Muslim family myself, I've obviously been subjected to the mindframe of your typical Muslim male - that women are inferior for, well, being women. It's the sole reason I renounced the religion at a young age. The rest of the females in my family remain Muslim, and with this book, I can finally explain to them just why it is that, as I had always suspected, the "words of God" have been twisted by men for their own agenda - mainly to remain the dominant gender in the Middle East.

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