



## EASTERN HORSEFLY: IMPLICATIONS OF FATIMA MERNİSSİ'S WORK ON THE ISLAMIC ETHOS

Doğu'nun At Sineği: Fatima Mernissi'nin İslami Ethosa Dair Değerlendirmeleri

Erhan KORKMAZ\*

### ABSTRACT

This study comprises Fatima Mernissi's discourse analyses on the Islamic ethos and examines how these narratives can be traced in history, providing an archaeological method of research. It explains the conditions under which Islamic normative attitudes, which are replicated through ancient narratives like *1001 Nights Tales*, *Hosrev and Shirin*, *Kerem and Aslı*, become effective. Mernissi challenges the mindset of Western Orientalists' understanding through her observations on the Islamic Middle East in Moroccan culture. The Islamic Middle East, with harem nights and concubines, has always been an element of fantasy for Westerners. However, when the harems are reconsidered through Mernissi's analyses, far beyond what is assumed, harems were a field of exchange where women were not passive but active agents displaying various forms of resistance. The Islamic Middle East defines male-female dynamics with reference to the holy book, the *Qur'an*, and hadiths of Islam while maintaining its close contact with modernity. Mernissi highlights the search for power resources within the context of gender roles by both men and women in their engagement with modernity. This study examines Mernissi's *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* through her arguments on how Scheherazade, the character of *1001 Nights Tales*, is instrumentalised to reproduce Islamic normative attitudes in the context of gender roles.

**Keywords:** Orthodox Islam, narrative, romanticism, symbolic violence, gender.

### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, *1001 Gece Masalları*, *Hüsrev ve Şirin*, *Kerem ile Aslı* gibi kadim anlatılar üzerinden yeniden üretilen İslami normatif tutumların, hangi koşullar bağlamında işlerlik kazandığını bizlere anlatan Fatima Mernissi'nin hem İslami ethos üzerine söylem analizlerini, hem de bir çeşit arkeolojik kazı edasıyla, bu anlatıların izinin tarihte nasıl sürülebileceğine dair örnekler içermektedir. Mernissi, Fas kültürü üzerin-

\* Graduate Student. Hacettepe University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Cultural Studies and Media, Ankara/Türkiye. E-mail: erhan.krkmzoglu@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0002-9744-6484.

den İslami Ortadoğu'ya dair genelleyici gözlemleriyle, Batılı oryantalistlerin şark anlayışlarına meydan okumaktadır. İslami Ortadoğu, harem geceleriyle ve cariyele-riyle Batılılar için hep bir fantezi unsuru olmuştur. Fakat tarihsel süreçte, harem-lerin, Mernissi'nin analizleri üzerinden tekrar düşünüldüğünde, sanılanın çok ötesinde, alan içindeki faillikleri açısından kadınların pasif değil, aktif olarak var oldukları ve çeşitli direniş biçimlerini de içeren bir mübadele alanı olduğunu görmekteyiz. İslami Ortadoğu, erkek-kadın dinamiklerini bir yandan İslam'ın kutsal kitabından ve hadis-lerinden referans alarak formalize ederken, bir yandan da sosyal coğrafyasının ge-reği, modernite ile dirsek temasını kesmemektedir. Mernissi, modernite ile kurulan bu ilişkide, kadının ve erkeğin, toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri bağlamında kendi güç alanları-nı yeniden-üreten kaynakların arayışında olduklarından bahseder ve yukarıdaki ka-dim anlatıların, erkek cinsiyeti lehine kadınlar üzerindeki tahakkümde nasıl araçsal-laştırıldıklarını gözler önüne serer. Bu çalışmada Mernissi'nin *Haremden Kaçan Şeh-razat* eserinde ele alınan *1001 Gece Masalları*'nın karakteri Şehrazat'ın nasıl toplum-sal cinsiyet rolleri bağlamında İslami normatif tutumları yeniden üretmek adına araçsallaştırıldığı, Mernissi'nin argümanları üzerinden ele alınmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Ortodoks İslam, anlatı, romantizm, sembolik şiddet, toplumsal cinsiyet.

## Introduction

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that human beings are “animals that exist within webs of self-woven significance” (2010: 19). If these webs of significance merge, we refer to it as *culture*. On the other hand, the concept of culture, rather than being a construction of significance as Geertz conveys, can also refer to that which contains objective values and is discovered not invented. Geertz's work suggests that culture is created by its practitioners on a dynamic basis while simultaneously being practiced on a static basis by the same agents. We see a similar perspective in Pierre Bour-dieu, whose approach to the structure-agent relationship draws attention to the cooperation between two agents, i.e. structure-agent, instead of marking culture as a fixed structure and making the agent passive (1992: 53; 2013: 72-73). While Bourdieu's structure impacts its agents, it is also influenced by the actions of those agents. The relationship here proceeds on a *fluid basis*. This situation creates serious questions on the genuine “whatness” of culture. The questions of which historical cultural stages humanity has passed through and how they affected today's discourses have always been central to this topic. Humans' conflict between ethical values and social norms suggests that the relationship between the struc-ture and its agent is fed through conflict. For instance, when a newborn is

standardized by family members, the baby is placed in “woven webs of meaning” by their family. All family members transmit culture to the baby. The baby, on the other hand, receives these cultural components passively. It means they have no control over them and are unquestionably accepted as usual.

Let us imagine that the baby matures and has a child in the future. In this case, what attitude will this person, who has had an infancy normalized by the transmitters of culture, have towards their own baby? Of course, they are considered to be the transmitters of culture as their parents do. When this person, who was taught to adopt the culture in which they are passively raised, attempts to make ontological inferences about their normative values, is this very person not making indirect inferences about the “webs of significance“ they have inherited from their parents? On the contrary, to what extent will someone who tests and scrutinizes social norms be able to exclude themselves as a *questioner* in the dichotomy of “society and me”?

The argument that answers all these questions is that culture is static, making babies passive in exchanging norms with their parents. However, the theoretical frameworks proposed by Geertz’s “web of significance“, and Bourdieu’s understanding of structure suggest that agents have the ability to construct and deconstruct the structure. The baby’s construction of dynamic meanings based on their immediate environments loses its constancy, while the outside environment has a similar dynamic structure. This situation is akin to the philosophy of Heraclitus, who said that “we cannot step twice into the same river.” Through the arguments of Fatima Mernissi, this study examines how cultural normative values have been historically transmitted and constructed in favour of those who consider culture as a fixed structure. Mernissi critically examined the gender norms prevalent in her society in her writings. The values inherent in Moroccan society are shaped by its predominant religious belief system, Islam. Throughout her 75-years of life (1940–2015), Mernissi attempted to reform the fundamentalist mindset of Islam by comparing it with the contemporary (1990s and post-2000s) understanding. She also contributed to the feminist movement by shaping her historical and current findings through women’s rights. It is undeniable that Mernissi is one of the most important sources in contemporary women’s studies. In her works, objective observation of chronology is apparent, and arguments are constructed without anachronism. According to Mernissi, comparisons between pre-Islamic and post-Islamic findings can only be interpreted by looking at the findings of that period in

their individual historical context. To illustrate, she argues that women and men had greater ease and freedom in their sexual relations before Islam than during the Islamic era. She posits that Islam facilitated men's dominance in the public sphere and gave them an upper hand in controlling it. As per Islamic norms, women had to obscure their presence in public and were only permitted to participate if they covered themselves with a veil.<sup>1</sup> In this instance, Mernissi argues that the veil functions as a symbol of men's control over women in the public domain. She asserts that while the "veiled woman vs. unveiled woman" debate is frequently cited as the cause of contemporary gender tensions, it can also be seen as a clear indication that men's wish to dominate the public sphere persists.

This study comprises two parts: The first part, which deals with what kind of changes the narrative of *One Thousand and One Nights* has undergone over time and what the ethical-political motivations underlying these changes are by placing *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* at its center, and the second part, which deals with what kind of behavioral sets Islam offers as an orthopraxis<sup>2</sup> religion in everyday life and how the ethico-political motivations underlying this offer have changed with the increase in modernization by placing the work *Beyond the Veil* at its center.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Several sources indicate that the practice of veiling existed before Islam and across different regions (Çiğ, 2013: 33-38; Narçın, 2013: 383-384). Mernissi cites the veil as an example to explore the impact of women's veiling in the public domain and the reasons behind this practice. However, she does not assert that veiling originated with Islam anywhere in her writings.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of "orthopraxy" here, taken together with its dichotomy "orthodoxy," is the definition given by sociologists or anthropologists studying religion as to whether a set of actions based on "right action" or a set of doctrines based on "right doctrine" constitutes the essence/foundation of religion (Ferg & Hall, 2023; Sutton, 2007). In Mernissi's arguments, Islam is understood to have an orthopraxy structure, which is what I think. However, we should not ignore the ideas of some thinkers, such as Talal Asad (2009: 21), that this distinction itself is problematic, that such a distinction cannot be made, and that it is problematic to treat Islam in this way.

<sup>3</sup> This expression, "horsefly" was expressed by Socrates while defending himself in the Athenian court in 399 BC: "...Like a gadfly that God has infested this state, I wake you up, move you, scold you and persuade you everywhere all day long..." (Plato, 2014: 73-74). Since then, the word "horsefly", in reference to Socrates, has been attributed to people who shake the values of the society they live in and cause unrest to people with their thoughts. I also consider Mernissi as a gadfly here.

## The Power of Narrative: The Changing Structure of Womanhood in Islam

In her book *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Har-ems*, Mernissi (2001) analyzes how oral narratives such as fairy tales, legends, and stories have reproduced Islamic discourses on gender. According to her, these literary narratives have constantly changed and have become the very materials of political interests. For example, Mernissi (2001: 43-48) argues that Scheherazade, the protagonist of the “One Thousand and One Nights“, is portrayed differently in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world than in the 8<sup>th</sup>-century world in which the work is supposed to have first appeared and that Eastern and Western interpretations of Scheherazade have marked differences when compared both synchronically and diachronically. Considering the recent emergence of written culture, we can understand how oral culture has been shaping societies for centuries and how its functions have not only been limited to this but also how it has been transformed into different ideological symbols periodically. The women in all past literary narratives, especially the Scheherazade character, offer an attitudinal spectrum of gender categories to the women and men of their time. For instance, while the Scheherazade character has a narrow range of action in 21<sup>st</sup> century narratives, her range of action is defined more broadly in the narratives of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Here, what is meant by the range of action is the limitation or width of Scheherazade’s possibilities. According to Mernissi, the image of Eastern women, especially by Western writers, as weak and passive characters with a limited range of action reflects the view of Western intelligentsia.

Mernissi argues that old narratives in Morocco, most notably the ones by fundamentalist scholars, have been selectively perceived and revised in favor of male interests and turned into a narrative of male perspective. In her same book (2001: 4-8), she also compares the characters and stories of Scheherazade as told by her friend Kemal and her grandmother. Kemal is a childhood friend of Mernissi, who has embraced Islam from a more fundamentalist point of view compared to her grandmother. Scheherazade, as told by Mernissi’s grandmother, managed to survive for 1001 days by telling a story every night to a king who kills the women he had coitus with, leaving the most exciting part of the story for the next morning, thanks to her quick wit. In Kemal’s narrative, on the other hand, Scheherazade is a character who tells tales in the presence of the king for his pleasure and entertains him. Beyond the question of who Scheherazade really was, we should pay

attention to the narrative differences here. It lies in the differences in ideological perspectives between Kemal and Mernissi's grandmother. According to Mernissi, Kemal advocates fundamentalism and would risk many things. In the ideological climate of Moroccan culture, she shows that many people like Kemal can freely express their opinions in the public sphere, and, more importantly, gain the respect of the society thanks to these opinions. What is surprising to Mernissi is that her grandmother, unlike fundamentalists like Kemal, idealizes Scheherazade from the Islamic feminist perspective as someone whose aim is not to entertain a king but to save the lives of her fellow women whom the king would kill in the future. This attitude of her grandmother is a concrete example of how the power of narrative manifests itself on a political ground in Mernissi.

The character of Scheherazade was not limited to Moroccan society as it reached many Western readers as well. However, Scheherazade in the West is very different from that in the Eastern one. As Mernissi states in her same book (2001: 27), she visited libraries and bookshops in Paris and searched artistic and academic texts on Scheherazade. According to these sources,<sup>4</sup> Scheherazade in the West does not have a quick wit and strong rhetoric as in her Moroccan counterpart, but instead is a passive character whose physical beauty, similar to Kemal's Scheherazade in some points, is more important than her intelligence. Mernissi argues that by emphasizing Scheherazade's physical beauty rather than her intelligence, the female image is regarded as a mere beauty. This situation was manifested not only in literary narratives but also in the art of painting. As we read in the same work (2001: 12-13), the idealized image of the "Eastern woman" in the works of painters such as Henry Matisse, Jean Ingres, and Pablo Picasso<sup>5</sup> reflect a latent reductionism towards *all* women in general, even if they seem to belong to the East in particular.

---

<sup>4</sup> Some of the sources utilized by Mernissi are 18<sup>th</sup> century orientalist Jean Antoine de Galland's 12-volume work, *Madame AR.*, and De Lenz's "Moroccan Harem Customs: Magic, Medicine and Beauty" by Madame AR. De Lenz, "La femme au temps des colonies" by Yvonne Knibiehler and Regine Goutalier.

<sup>5</sup> As examples of works, you can look at the following: *Odalisque with Tambourine* (1926) by Henri Matisse, *Grande Odalisque* (1814) by Jean Ingres and *The Women of Algiers* (1955) by Pablo Picasso. The works of Eugene Delacroix, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Jean Leon Gerome can also be consulted.

## Beyond the Veil: Countermeasures against the Destructiveness of Romanticism

In her second *Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi (1995) discusses the anomic effects of modernity on male-female dynamics and the regulatory functions that the Islamic institution of marriage performs to counteract these effects. The institution of marriage in Islamic communities is the reproducer of a background where men have the right to be polygamous and the power to dominate the public sphere, whereas women are restricted to the private sphere.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, they attempt to construct their power within these boundaries. Many attitudes towards marriage, especially sexuality, are stretched, and secondary forms of resistance are constructed with the manifestation of modernity, especially in consumption areas. Some social anthropologists argue that women in Eastern societies, contrary to popular belief, resist patriarchy and are not passive.<sup>7</sup> According to Mernissi, modernity first disrupted the perception of polygamy in the Islamic institution of marriage.<sup>8</sup> The polygamous men of the past cannot continue this tradition in the modern mentality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is because families no longer want their daughters to marry polygamous men. It can be considered an irony of the father of a religion where polygamy is considered legitimate, indirectly reducing the reproduction of polygamy. However, according to Mernissi, this situation is an indication of the inevitable change of the Islamic ethos in the face of modernity.

New forms of Islam have emerged in the face of modernity. Mernissi exemplifies this with Sufism. Contrary to orthodox Islam, Sufism is a *more innovative* belief system that considers the conditions and realities of its

---

<sup>6</sup> The concept of the “private sphere” here refers to the domestic living spaces associated with the institution of marriage as part of the dichotomy it shares with the public sphere.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that these descriptive statements about the institution of marriage are specific to Moroccan culture, as Mernissi mentions in the “Introduction” to her work *Women’s Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (1998: 7-18). With this kind of reflexivity, Mernissi refrained from generalizing her views to all Islamic structures.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to Mernissi, I was also influenced by Erika Friedl, who has worked on women’s power strategies in the East. Friedl has a fieldwork text titled *Being a Woman in an Iranian Village (Women of Deh Koh)* (2003), which has been translated into Turkish. Friedl conducted fieldwork in a village in Iran for nearly 25 years. As a result, in addition to the work mentioned above, she wrote *Religion and Daily Life in the Mountains of Iran* (2022), *Folksongs from the Mountains of Iran* (2018), *Warm Hearts and Sharp Tongues* (2015), *Folktales and Storytellers of Iran* (2013) and *Children of Deh Koh* (1997) on the socio-cultural structure of the region. In *Being a Woman in an Iranian Village* (2003), Friedl discusses how village women strategize to gain a share of the male hierarchy in the public sphere.

time. Mernissi's grandmother was also a Sufist whereas Kemal was a representative of orthodox Islam. Opposite to the understanding advocated by fundamentalists, Sufists syncretize more romantic elements to the institution of marriage. Mernissi argues that on the Sufist side, romance is not limited to the divine, rather including human love in contrast to orthodox Islam. In the orthodox Islamic understanding, however, romanticism is, and should be, directed only towards the divine. To the Islamic scholars, divine love is the only acceptable emotion permitted to be felt. If love is otherwise directed towards a human being, especially towards a woman<sup>9</sup> by a man, it is regarded as tainted. This is why Mernissi mentions in her work *Beyond the Veil* (1995: 150-151), that polygamy has the task of preventing this human love. A polygamous man must be fair among his wives and engage in equal emotional exchange with each of them. This, in turn, prevents the formation of human love for a specific person, since human love can only arise due to "transcendental emotional transmissions" between subjects. According to Mernissi, Orthodox Islam says that such profound intersubjective relationships would give rise to human desires that are distant from the divine. This, in turn, prevents the formation of human love for a specific person, since human love can only emerge thanks to emotional interactions between subjects. According to Mernissi, Orthodox Islam says that such profound intersubjective relationships would give rise to human desires that distract from the divine.

This destructive effect of romanticism is also evident in the literary narratives in history. For example, in the story of Farhad and Shirin, Farhad's piercing -through- mountains for Shirin and not caring about anything other than his longing for her is far outside the character of the believer idealized for him by orthodox Islam. In another example, in the story of Kerem and Aslı, Kerem and Aslı challenge social normative attitudes to come together. It leads to the idea that social rules are not important for deep relationships between lovers, which is not something that orthodox Islam approves. Therefore, according to Mernissi, such effects of romance are tried to be prevented by the polygamy of men.

Again in *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*, in addition to the domination of the public sphere by men, Mernissi (2001:

---

<sup>9</sup> In his work *The Islamic Middle East*, Charles Lindholm (2004: 329-330) mentions examples of love in Sufism between same-sex partners. The relationship between Rumi and Shams Tebrizi is one of the most well-known examples in this sense.

179-181) analyzes the men's methods in this process by making use of Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" In his *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu mentions that symbolic violence is engraved on human attitudes without any coercion, "like a kind of magic engraved on the skin of a person" (2015: 54), and he adds that it is difficult to identify the existence of such attitudes if their boundaries are not touched. In order to dominate the public sphere, men use symbolic violence against women. According to Mernissi, one of the symbols of this violence is the veil. Covering many bodily parts with the veil, including the face, minimizes the interactions in a relationship with an unfamiliar person. The lack of interaction reduces the possibility of strangers meeting each other. For her, this is one of the primary obstacles against organizing women in the public sphere (1995: 179).

Another example of symbolic violence is the gendered labor roles of men and women. As in the case of the veil, some gender-based division of labor are considered dogma by religious beliefs, thus imposing indirect violence. The restriction of women to the domestic sphere that does not provide any material gain, and the freedom of men to work in money-earning jobs outside the home, limits women's presence and visibility in the public sphere. Symbolic violence is such so that sometimes the perpetrators may not even be as aware of it as opposed to those who get exposed to it. For example, suppose you ask someone with an orthodox Islamic understanding the questions "Why do you cover yourself with a veil?" or "Why should a woman stay at home?". In that case, there is a high probability that their answers would be either "The Qur'an commands it this way," or "These are our customs and traditions." When you ask the same questions to those who have been exposed to symbolic violence, you are likely to get similar answers. This is why Bourdieu describes symbolic violence with the expression that "it is engraved on people's skin like magic".

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all fields, including literature, have produced their own specific narrative products. For example, during the Tanzimat Era at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we can observe the foundational elements of constructing the Republic of Turkey in the texts.<sup>10</sup> Both past and present

---

<sup>10</sup> This matter is subject to debate. Scholars such as Şerif Mardin, Halil İnalçık, and Kemal Karpat have differing conclusions regarding Ottoman history. For example, in his book *Yeni Osmanlı Düşüncesinin Doğuşu* (2015a: 16), Şerif Mardin describes literary figures such as Şinasi, Ali Suavi and Ziya Pasha as Neo-Ottomans and intellectuals who made harsh criticisms against the government. In his work *Türkiye, İslam ve Sekülerizm, Makaleler* (2015b: 26-27), he

ideologies have either changed the already-present narratives and formalized them in their favor or produced new narratives in various fields, especially in literature, to construct their discursive power. As we see in the case of Mernissi, the Islamic Orthodox understanding in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has also reproduced its own narrational values either by foregrounding narratives that fit its normative attitudes or by revising existing narratives, as we see in the example of “One Thousand and One Nights“. In this process, the narratives of fundamentalists, such as Mernissi’s friend Kemal, conflict with the narratives of “pro women’s rights“ people, such as Mernissi’s grandmother. The recent winner of this conflict is determined both according to which side the popular culture feeds and which side constitutes the majority in terms of narrative density. Narratives are not independent from the ideologies within the popular culture of the period. Especially when we come across the works of thinkers such as Ivan Krastev (2011), Margaret Canovan (2002), Jan-Werner Müller (2017), who explain how populist discourses spread to everything through the understanding of democracy in this period we live in, it would not be wrong to look for the traces of narratives in the rhetoric of today’s poor-loving politicians.

It is possible to say that today, with the ever-increasing impact of the internet and the media, we have transitioned to a visual culture instead of the written culture after oral culture. And just as the value of oral narrative has decreased in the written culture, the value of written narrative, too, has decreased in visual culture. In this case, there will be a change in the methods of creating narratives. I agree with this, but the decrease in the value of oral cultural elements against the written culture does not necessarily mean that the discourses narrated in that culture are ignored. In the same way, I think that some narratives in written culture, for example in literary works, which are adorned with discourses that feed certain ideologies, have manifested or will manifest themselves in the visual culture. Thus, Mernissi’s example of “1001 Nights Tales“ is valuable as it exemplifies how narratives are transmitted from the past to the present. These tales were origi-

---

defines the Neo-Ottomans’ contemporaries such as Mizancı Murad, Ahmet Rıza, Prince Sabahattin and Abdullah Cevdet as Young Turks, and states that they were inadequate in their political ideas and the works they produced compared to the Neo-Ottomans. Mardin further questions their ideological positions and roles within the Enlightenment movement (Karaaslan, 2021). The point I am trying to draw attention to here is not who, how or why produces discourses, but the fact that they use literature as a tool to produce discourse. I believe that today’s literary field, just like the Neo-Ottomans and Young Turks of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, provides a basis for idealist thinkers.

nally parts of an oral culture and have since been transferred to written form with various fragments. It is imperative that the character Scheherazade be perceived in divergent ways, depending on the socio-cultural structure of readers. When she encounters distinct ideologies, it results in the traditional norms being changed and transformed. This situation exemplifies both Geertz's concept of actors generating significance within an interconnected network and Bourdieu's notion of the structuring of structure by actors.

Although Mernissi builds her theory on a banal dichotomy such as East vs. West, it is striking that she argues that there cannot be an only male-female narrative on gender or that this narrative on gender does not emerge from only one region, rather each region forms intersectional narratives within its dynamics. Mernissi even further claims that Islam does not contain a monolithic narrative independent of both past and present conditions, like Foucault's genealogical studies<sup>11</sup>, so to speak. Taking the risk of being considered an Islamic occidentalist, Mernissi occasionally overdoes her criticism to break the Western perception of the "Eastern woman". Strikingly, she defines Western female aesthetics through the women she sees while walking on the streets of Paris and reduces the approach to women merely to aesthetic desires. I do not believe it is necessary to provide a negative evaluation of another culture when describing the dynamics between Moroccan women and men, nor is it appropriate to denigrate the perception of Parisian women whilst highlighting the attitudes of some Moroccan men. Each community possesses a unique culture based on its own internal dynamics, and an inter-community critique would be mistaken if it treated cultures as if they were a single structure. This attitude of Mernissi can be considered a self-orientalist attitude, which is often highlighted in recent orientalism studies, referring to "Self-Orientalization" (Durna, 2004: 263; cited in Bezci, Çiftci, 2012: 143). While Mernissi criticises the Western philosophers' approach to her culture from a world of fantasy and harem nights, their assumption of that there is only one form of Islam, and reducing the Islamic Orientals, especially Islamic women, willingly or unwillingly, she does what she criticises: not having an emic perspective

---

<sup>11</sup> Foucault's "genealogy" concept emphasizes the historicity of discourses representing things. Mernissi's narrative characters are examined in a similar way to Foucault's counterattack on the nature of things, traced layer by layer through history (Revel, 2012: 111-114; Foucault, 2001; Urhan, 2002).

towards the culture of the other. How do we reproduce the discourses we criticize today? This may be one of the questions that should be asked.

Mernissi (2001: 31-32) defines the romance between men and women in the Islamic tradition with the concept of “samar”, suggesting that this relationship occurs in the private sphere that is, when men and women come together alone at night, and that it breaks or reduces the inequality between men and women in the public sphere. In reaction to this relationship, some Islamic groups favored polygamy for men because the love offered to men should only be divine love. Mernissi’s interpretation of polygamy, while striking in the context of gender, is also reductionist. As ethnological studies have shown, the institution of marriage cannot be viewed only in terms of the romantic relationship between men and women, but also in terms of its economic and political functions. Since the historical periods exemplified by Mernissi, the institution of marriage has also functioned as a means of alliance between Islamic tribes.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the existence of expectations within the community that the polygamous person should have enough economic capital to support their wives points to critical implications regarding economic functioning. In this case, Mernissi’s approach to polygamy as a strategy to prevent romantic relationships ignores other social dynamics underlying polygamy. We can consider Mernissi’s approach as only one of the structural motivations for polygamy or the most effective one. Moreover, these discussions on polygamy are associated with the acceptance of monogamy as the norm. Normalising what has been accepted as the norm and attempting to explain what is marginal is insufficient, even though it provides indirect information about “the normal that does not need to be talked about“. First of all, I find it valuable to question marriage itself - monogamous or polygamous- within the Islamic tradition. Especially when we look at the history of the feminist efforts in which Mernissi is involved, the institution of marriage is addressed by thinkers such as Emma Goldman, Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millet, as an apparatus used by the male-centred states to oppress women by condemning them to the private sphere (Chambers, 2017: 13-

---

<sup>12</sup> There is even a sub-division of tribal marriages called Berdel, which is divided into two: exchange/reciprocal berdel and blood berdel (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2012: 327-333). Such marriages are characterized by the exchange of a bride from her family to another one when the groom is unable to pay for her, or to end inter-tribal wars, or to find allies in cases of inter-tribal problems. For additional sources, see Martin von Bruinessen’s (2013) field studies on tribal geography.

30).<sup>13</sup> In this regard, it might be useful to handle the polygamy debate through the functionality of marriage in order to understand polygamy and analyse the male-centred socio-cultural structure. Perhaps such an analysis may also show us that polygamy is widespread in some societies, but that it does not have the functions Mernissi refers to.

## References

- Asad, Talal (2009). "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam". *Qui Parle*, 17(2): 1-30.
- Bezci Bünyamin & Çiftci, Yunus (2012). "Self Oryantalizm: İçimizdeki Modernite ve/veya İçselleştirdiğimiz Modernleşme". *Akademik İncelemeler*, 7(1): 139-166.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1992). *The Logic of Practice*. Trans. Matthew Adamson. USA: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (2013). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. Richard Nice. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (2015). *Eril Tahakküm*. Trans. Bediz Yılmaz. Istanbul: Bağlam.
- Bruinessen, Von Martin (2013). *Ağa, Şeyh ve Devlet*. Trans. Banu Yalkut. Istanbul: İletişim.
- Canovan, Margaret (2002). "Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy". *Democracies and The Populist Challenge*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 25-44.
- Chambers, Clare (2017). *Against Marriage: An Egalitarian Defence of the Marriage-Free State*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Çiğ, İlmiye Muazzez (2013). *Kur'an, İncil ve Tevrat'ın Sümer'deki Kökeni*. Istanbul: Kaynak.
- Durna, Tezcan (2004). "Köşe Yazılarında Avrupa Birliği Tartışmaları: Helsinki Zirvesi 1999". Haber Hakikat ve İktidar İlişkisi. Ankara: Elips.

---

<sup>13</sup> Researchers such as Lewis Henry Morgan, Edward Burnett Tylor, Bronislaw Malinowski, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Meyer Fortes, and E. E. Evans-Pritchard who investigated family and kinship structures in the communities they conducted field research during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can be considered feeding the discussions on the family institution. In particular, the discipline of social anthropology offers important data in this field, even according to Robin Fox, "kinship is to anthropology what logic is to philosophy or nude art; it is the basic discipline of anthropology" (Fox, 1967: 10 cited in Holy, 2016: 29).

- Ferg, Erica & Hall, Bryan (2023). "Orthodoxy, Orthopraxy, and Locke's Arguments for Toleration". *Locke Studies*, 22: 1-26.
- Foucault, Michel (2001). *Kelimeler ve Şeyler*. Trans. Mehmet Ali Kılıçbay. Ankara: İmge.
- Fox, Robin (1967). *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Friedl, Erika (1997). *Children of Deh Koh: Young Life in an Iranian Village*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Friedl, Erika (2003). *İran Köyünde Kadın Olmak*. Trans. Barış Şannan. İstanbul: Epsilon.
- Friedl, Erika (2014). *The Folktales and Storytellers of Tribal Iran*. London: Tauris.
- Friedl, Erika (2015). *Warm Hearts and Sharp Tongues: Life in 555 Proverbs from the Zagros Mountains of Iran*. Wien: New Academic.
- Friedl, Erika (2018). *Folksongs from the Mountains of Iran: Culture, Poetics and Everyday Philosophies*. Vienna: International Library of Iranian Studies.
- Friedl, Erika (2022). *Religion and Daily Life in the Mountains of Iran: Theology, Saints, People*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Geertz, Clifford (2010). *Kültürlerin Yorumlanması*. Trans. Hakan Gür. Ankara: Dost Kitabevi.
- Holy, Ladislav (2016). *Antropolojinin Akrabalık Yaklaşımları*. Trans. Çağlar Enneli, Ankara: Heretik.
- Karaaslan, E. (2021). "Şerif Mardin'in Metinleri Bağlamında Yeni Osmanlılar ile Jön Türklerin Fikrî Derinliklerine Dair Bir İzah Denemesi". *Liberal Düşünce*, 104: 73-99.
- Knibiehler, Yvonne & Goutalier, Regine (1985). *La Femme Au Temps des Colonies*. Paris: Stock.
- Krastev, Ivan (2011). "The Age of Populism: Reflections on the Self Enmity of Democracy". *European View*, 10(1): 11-16.
- Lindholm, Charles (2004). *İslami Ortadoğu*. Trans. B. Şafak. Ankara: İmge.
- Mardin, Şerif (2015a). *Yeni Osmanlı Düşüncesinin Doğuşu*. Trans. F. Unan et al. İstanbul: İletişim.
- Mardin, Şerif (2015b). *Türkiye, İslam ve Sekülerizm, Makaleler 5*. Trans. E. Gen et al. İstanbul: İletişim.

- Mernissi, Fatima (1995). *Peçenin Ötesi*. Trans. M. Küpçü. İstanbul: Yayınevi.
- Mernissi, Fatima (2001). *Haremden Kaçan Şehzade*. Trans. Zehra Savan. İstanbul: Alfa.
- Müller, Jan-Werner (2017). *Popülizm Nedir?* Trans. Onur Yıldız. İstanbul: İletişim.
- Narçın, Ali (2013). *A'dan Z'ye Asur*. İstanbul: Ozan.
- Platon (2014). *Sokrates'in Savunması*. Trans. Furkan Akderin. İstanbul: Say.
- Revel, Judith (2012). *Foucault Sözlüğü*. Trans. Veli Urhan. İstanbul: Say.
- Sutton, Donald S. (2007, January). "Ritual, Cultural Standardization, and Orthopraxy in China: Reconsidering James L. Watson's Ideas". *Modern China*, 33(1): 3-21.
- Urhan, Veli (2002). *Foucault ve Bilginin Arkeolojisi*. İstanbul: Paradigma.
- Yalçın-Heckmann, Lale (2012). *Kürtlerde Aşiret ve Akrabalık İlişkileri*. İstanbul: İletişim.

The following statements are made in the framework of "COPE-Code of Conduct and Best Practices Guidelines for Journal Editors":

**Acknowledgments:** The seeds of this study were sown in the Anthropology of Religion course I took in the Department of Anthropology at the Faculty of Language and History-Geography, in the fall of 2021-2022. Within the polyphonic discussion environment created by Halil Çağlar Enneli, two or three weeks of reading and discussions on Mernissi with my classmates inspired me to write this article today. I would like to thank Dr. Enneli, who wishes to integrate all kinds of opinions in his lectures, pushes his students out of the conventional habitus, and encourages them to think. In other words, he is one of the *horseflies* of his faculty. I am grateful to Sebahat Gökçe Ağbaş, my life companion and colleague, for her support. Without her, you would probably be reading someone else's article right now. Finally, I would like to extend my sincere love and thanks to my friends Hakan Mutlu, Sibel Önal, Tuba Atay, Serkan Bulut, Büşra Karataş, and Kaan Ürker, whom I met in our journal club we established under the Anthropology Club at the same faculty, and which has been going on for three years. Their friendship has given me both a profound academic background and a spiritual refuge. I wish for us many more times to say *Fukoo* together.

**Ethics Committee Approval:** Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests:** The author has no potential conflict of interest regarding research, authorship, or publication of this article.