

The Female Body in the Arab Muslim World: Historical and Sociological Analysis

Nadir Akrachi

Department of English studies, Mohamed Premier University, Oujda, MOROCCO

Corresponding Author: akrachinadir7@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to historically and sociologically analyze the image and perception of the female body in the Arab Muslim world. It explores how such views have metamorphosed over time, starting from the pre-Islamic era to today's global society, as a result of cultural, religious and socio-political factors. The research uncovers female identity and dynamics of its expression and is devoted to the analysis of literary, artistic and religious sources aimed at showing how tradition and modernity coexist. It also discusses the impact feminist movements and globalization have had on regional women's experiences and norms. Focusing on the prevailing problems and changes that women face in the world today, this detailed research intends to contribute to the broader debate on the issues of gender, culture and identity in the Arab Muslim context.

Keywords- female body, Islam, Muslim identity, feminism, sociology, the veil.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Arab Muslim context, the female body has always been an important sign and a place of struggle. Social institutions, ideologies and history have affected how people have conceptualized women and their bodies through the ages. Understanding the complexities of this relationship requires investigating how notions of femininity shifted between paganism and Islam and their modern realization. The status and image of women in pre-Islamic societies were often affected by tribal customs and economic activities. The onset of Islam in the seventh century introduced new ideologies that sought to redefine the role of women and establish a moral code for the society in general. Hadiths and Qur'an were foundational in the moral construction of women's concepts of modesty, marriage and motherhood and these ideologies set the basis for centuries long discourses on women's rights. There is high variability in womanhood interpretations across cultures and communities in the Arab Muslim world because these religious texts have been extremely versatile.

Women's voices now have new stores thanks to the increase of virtual media and international feminist actions, which are thinking mounted conventions and pushing for accelerated exposure and rights. Tensions between cultural identification and private company are nonetheless obvious in discussions about topics just like the hijab, body autonomy, and artistic depiction. Women's experiences and identification expressions are getting extra various and complex as they negotiate those demanding situations inside the Arab Muslim world. This study seeks to offer a nuanced perspective of the challenges and changes that women confront nowadays by way of setting the lady frame on the nexus of way of life and modernity. The scrutiny provides analysis about how ancient legacies and modern influences preserve to shape the perception of the female body.

1. Contextualizing and conceptualizing the body 1.1. The feminist perspective on the female body

The body has always been a complex issue and problematic in gender and feminist studies. Feminist scholars have determined the value of the body in the sense that it is characterized by its central role in shaping

and experiencing gendered identities, power dynamics as well and social inequalities. However, to understand the issue of the body from a feminist perspective, it is crucial to raise the following questions. Why is the body an object of analysis for feminists? Why does it matter? What are the ways and means in which one can break down this body in feminist understanding? What are the various kinds of bodies? And the very basic question is: why body? How is a woman to be distinguished unless it is taken into account her body? Therefore, an interest will be given to study the body in Western philosophy with the famous philosopher Descartes with what is understood as the body-mind dichotomy; one has a mind through which he controls the body. The body in such an understanding is an instrument to be directed. In other words, the popular saying of Descartes "I think, therefore I am" raises the question: Does one have a body? Or is one body? That is to say; I think, therefore, I think of myself as having a body or Am I a body? Do I have an embodied understanding of myself? Do I move through the world as if the body and mind are one? So, in such binary system, what is the status of a woman's body? Are there differences in these sorts of formulations of "I think, therefore I am" in relation to women's thinking of the body? Hence, in such binary opposition, the man is always the thinking animal whereas women's bodies are considered to be equal to nature. Consequently, in Western philosophy, there is a construction of a universal thinking mind and feeling body that maps onto thinking man and feeling woman. Therefore, it is of paramount importance for feminist theorists to deal with the question of the body. Elizabeth Grosz claims that women are in some ways more biological, physical, and natural than men in this particular situation (Grosz, 1994, p. 14). Using men's attitudes towards women and make-up as an example, many of them will always say, "You look so much better without make-up; you don't need to put on make-up." You look lovely and natural as you are. It seems like the truer you are to this pure conception of nature that men can appreciate, the more like you are to your own self. Corporeality, or the act of having a body, thus becomes a crucial set of concepts for feminist theory to consider.

Another crucial issue to consider when talking about the female body from feminist's stance is the idea of beauty, and how the female is related to the myth of beauty. Significantly in this context to mention Naomi Wolf's book (1990) "*The Beauty Myth*" which is considered a remarkable work about the beautiful body from a feminist perspective. Wolf writes:

"And they can no longer restrict to the subconscious their sense that this lack of freedom has something to do with apparently frivolous issues, things that really should not matter. Many are ashamed to admit that such trivial concerns-to do with physical appearance, bodies, faces, hair, clothes- matter so much. But in spite of shame, guilt, and denial, more and more women

are wondering if it isn't that they are entirely neurotic and alone but rather that something important is indeed at stake that has to do with the relationship between female liberation and female beauty" (Wolf, 1990)

After gaining so many rights from the second wave, women are found to adopt girly attitudes towards their bodies. Yet they don't feel free. In fact, Naomi Wolf (1990) addresses the issue of beauty and the beautiful and asks an important question about the relationship between female liberation and female beauty and she calls it the beauty myth. Naomi concludes that the beauty myth comes to serve men's power and interests and does not at all serve women, in this regard she says "It is actually composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression. Wolf (1990) states that the beauty myth in not about women at all. It is about the powerful institutions of men. These questions were the core of studying the female body for feminist scholars. Hence, feminist theory and literature comes to set itself as a source of knowledge and theoretical framework of study. The next section will be importantly addressing the concept of the body from philosophical and sociological perspective. Therefore, the section will give a deeper understanding of the concept and its foundations in history.

1.2. Historical overview of women in the Western and Arab societies

Through history, the female body has been under the oppression of the masculine domination. Either if we want it or not, there was an oppression that was exercised over women. Such oppression has pushed her to make changes on her body to please men; therefore, pleasing patriarchal society. Why a historical overview? Why the female body? And not the male body? Why always is the focus on the female body? In this context, it is important to cite and mention Norbert Elias, J. Claude Kaufmann, and F. Mernissi who studied a lot the concept of the body. With his works, notably "*la sociologie de la guerre des fesses*", and "*la sociologie des seins nus*", Kaufmann asserts that the evolution of the body or the evolution of uncovering the body is subvert to a historical process. Given the fact that the female body has witnessed a lot of changes in the Arab Muslim world, one may raise the following questions: How does the female body express these changes? How is the female body characterized throughout history? Can't we claim that male vision of the female body is responsible about pushing these women to reveal some parts of their bodies? Sociologists such as Max Weber, Dokheim, and N. Elias dealt with the concept of the body and they stressed their attention on studying the body as a subject of research such as dealing with issues of health, sickness, death, etc.. it is important to note that the social changes or the conditions of the institutional and normative powers make the female body been

constructed from a male dominated perspective. In this respect, Kaufmann, with his book entitled *Corps femmes, regard d'hommes* asserts that the female body is constructed from a man's perspective.

Talking about the Arab Muslim societies, one can find that there is a history behind the female body. Mernissi, A. Khatibi, Hassan Hanafi, and many scholars dealt with anthropological studies on the body. Such history is full of concepts and values that put a lot of pressure over women and limit their emancipation. In Agadir for example, some women are pushed to use some herbs and traditional treatment to become fat in order to look attractive for men. Going back to the history of Morocco, it reveals that the female body has been torn between being hidden and being appeared. During the period of Andalusians in 16th and 17th century, one finds this duality of hide and appearance. Moroccan history reveals that female body was used for entertainment. Women were used as "sabaya or Jawari" to amuse men and serve them. In this vein, Edmond Doutte describes women as "Chikhat" in his book *Marrakech*. The author spoke of dancers of Dokkala and Abda, two Moroccan tribes, who filled the joy of men. In another book entitled *Describing Africa*, Hassan EL Ouazzan described women as "having very large hips, and big breasts". Women were obliged to eat certain herbs and take prescriptions to create such desired body for men. Moreover, women in rural areas were dressed like men and the female body was absent. The female body was used to bring wood and do heavy housework. "Their smell is stinky, and they look like evils", as Hassan EL Ouazzan claims. In his book, *The history of poverty and the poor*, Mohammed Stitou claimed that women were even violated by men while going to their funerals.

Thus, the emancipation of the Arab world, as A. Khatibi states, necessitates emancipating the body and especially the female body. This is confirmed by Norbert Elias when he said "controlling men's desires leads to the emancipation of the female body to express itself as an entity that has identity. However, when the body is controlled by patriarchal society, freedom and emancipation are not discussed at all.

II. THE PERCEPTION OF THE FEMALE BODY IN THE MUSLIM CONTEXT

Understanding the Arab Muslim world's construction of the female body needs a deeper understanding of Arab Muslim culture and its relationship with women. In other words, one must examine women's engagement in social and political life in Arab Muslim culture. The study is not an easy undertaking because it necessitates a significant amount of time spent reading and analyzing religious and Islamic interpretations of books, as well as sociological views of Islamic society. The perception of the female

body in the Moroccan Muslim world has always been a complex issue because of the complexity of understanding female body as well as its contextualization in the Muslim world. In so doing, an initial section is given to the defining the female body in the Muslim world. That is to say, the section will be devoted to study the linguistic, historical, and social attributions given to the female body in the Muslim world. After that, contextualizing the Moroccan space as an arena of understanding the female body within society will be given attention as well. In other words, a whole section is devoted to study the socio-cultural components that constitute the Moroccan Muslim society and how it views and perceives the female body.

2.1. The female body in the Muslim context

To understand the female body in the Muslim context, it is of paramount importance to define the ways an Arab Muslim reader thinks and perceives things and the meaning of being a Muslim. In this respect, it is crucial to mention Mohamed Abid Al-Jabiri with his notable book *Tafkir Al Aql Al-Arabi (the process of the formation of the Arab thought)* in which he demonstrates how the Arab thought has problem with the present and always goes back to the past. The Arab reader, for Al-Jabiri suffers from the *mal du présent* (Al-Jabiri, 1980). Differently put, the Arab Muslim reader cannot build a way of thinking himself except going back the past for everything he lacks (Mernissi, 1991). The Arab thought is affected with censorship, and this is what Al-Jabiri claims by saying that Arab way of thinking is so influenced by censorship of politics and religion that reason (*Al-Aql*) is confused with such censorship (Al-Jabiri, 1980). Censorship, according to him, began with *asr al-tadwin* (the era of putting religious texts into writings) when savants started to make a catalog of the *Hadith (the recorded sayings of the Prophet Mohammad)*. In addition, the obsession of living in the past keeps the Arab reader from understanding it. Al-Jabiri (1980) says:

The contemporary Arab reader suffers from a poor adjustment to his times, to the times that we are fleeing from. In order to assure to ourselves that we exist, we seek escape in magic solutions for our many problems (Al-Jabiri, *Nahnu al Tharwa*, p.22).

To demonstrate this *mal du présent* that the Arab reader suffers from, Al-Jabiri draws attention upon the relation between religion and the imams who produce ideas that always end up in producing authoritative management of the present by using the past as a sacred standard (Mernissi, 1991). Therefore, it is clear that the Arab reader process of understanding and perceiving things in linked to his ways of proceeding the past, and not present times.

Speaking of the body and everything associated with it was regarded as evidence of faith in the early days of Islam. The body just alludes to society's

objectification. (Malek Chibel, 1999, p.16). A vital element that undergoes social and cultural conditioning is the body. (Malek Chibel, 1999, p.35). One of the most important feminist Moroccan sociologists who studied gender dynamics in Muslim communities is Fatima Mernissi. Mernissi's research highlights certain facets of gender dynamics within the Muslim community, wherein women were excluded from public life and viewed as inferior to men in private (Badissy, 2019). In addition to being denied the opportunity to grow as individuals, women were also expected to submit to their husbands in private. Men, who have authority, and women, who submit, are the two groups of citizens mentioned by Mernissi (1985) who are not treated equally. Social standards have determined the distribution of gender roles, which uphold patriarchy and thwart any attempts at change.

In her book, *The veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi (1991), provides deeper understanding of women in Islam through a historical and theological analysis. She investigates the interpretation of Islamic literature such as the Qur'an and Hadith, and how they have been understood and applied to women throughout history. Mernissi's book is centered on the historical environment in which Islamic teachings emerged, as well as the social dynamics that shaped women's treatment. While early Islamic cultures saw advances in women's rights and active engagement in public life, Mernissi (1991) contends that succeeding interpretations and practices eventually limited women's agency and confined them to subservient roles. Mernissi also criticizes patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, as well as misinterpretation of some Qur'anic verses that have been used to justify women's oppression. She investigates alternate interpretations and emphasizes the significance of understanding Islamic teachings in their social, cultural, and historical settings. Mernissi (1991) makes clear distinction between Islam as a belief and Islam as a law, and state religion. Being a Muslim according to her, is a civil matter, a national identity, and a family code of laws (Mernissi, 1991). In other words, the Muslim thought is imprisoned inside its way of thinking. Mernissi (1991) states that "The enemy is ingrained in our little calculator. He is in our head. He is our way of calculating, of consuming, of buying" (Mernissi, 1991, p.18). Hence, if this is the way a Muslim think when he processes things, then it wouldn't be surprising when the imaginations and perceptions that they have about women and the female body are stereotypical. Mernissi (1991) claims that women are deprived from their political rights. Because of the *mal du present*, female identity is transformed and understood from authors obsessed with the past. The Muslim was deprived as an individual and was submissive to 'the will of the group'.

The Pre-Islamic period has witnessed a mal treatment of women physically, verbally, and emotionally (Mernissi, 1991). Women were described as

cannibals (the case of Hind, daughter of Utba because she is supposed to have eaten the liver of the Prophet's uncle). Pre-Islamic women were not assured the rights to inheritance which was the right of only men. In this vein, Mernissi states: "A wife at a time of inheritance seemed to be nothing but an object to be claimed by men's hens" (Mernissi, 1991, p.121). Umm Kajja, an Ansari woman who claimed to the prophet that she was deprived from her right of inheritance after her husband's death. Another instance which is that of war, were subordinate and passive. In the case of defeat, they were reduced to the status of *sabaya* (prisoners of war). Women therefore, were seen as "second class citizens" in Mernissi's terms. Women were also treated violently and the object of sexual abuse.

However, it is during the leading period of the Prophet Mahammad that women have witnessed some democracy and equality as well as respect. The notion of having equal rights of inheritance appeared. It is during the Prophet's leading time that women were totally as equal as men in belief. They were treated as part of the community. (Mernissi, 1991). Khadija, the wife of the Prophet, was a great example as she had typical role in public life as well as private life. What is to be taken as important from Mernissi's analysis of the situation of women in Islam is that they were overall perceived as passive, and submissive. The use of the veil was used by leaders of hadith as a political weapon to captivate and impoverish women's body.

2.2. The Veil and the Muslim women

As stated previously, a great distinction should be made between Islam as a belief, and Islam as a law and state religion. This is said because the issue of veiling women has always been the ground for debates. Whether women should be veiled or unveiled and whether only parts of women's body that should be covered are always questions for debates since the era of putting religious texts into writings. Thus, raising discussions about this issue will enlighten and be fruitful to the understanding of the situation of women in Muslim context. In this vein, and as initial start one must clear up the vision of the different meanings attributed to the term 'veil'. Hence, linguistic, social, and historical perspectives will be the focus of the next section. Going back to Lissan Al-Arab Dictionary, veil or *hijab* means '*sitr*', and it means in Arabic literally 'curtain'. The verb '*satara*' or '*hajaba*' means 'hide'. This means that word *hijab* is meant to hide and separate something. Historically, *hijab* descended for the first time not as a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men. (The Prophet and Anas Ibno malik). The Quranic verse 53 of the sura 33 which was revealed during the year 5 of the Hijira (Mernissi, 1991). The event happened when the Prophet Muhammad married his wife, Zayneb. Everybody from the guests invited departed when finished food, except for three guests who forgot that they should go and give time for the Prophet with his wife. The Prophet's kindness and generosity kept him

from telling them to depart. It was in this time that his companion Anas Ibno Malik came to him to apologize on behalf of the guests. "The Prophet put one foot in the room and kept the other outside. It was in this position the Prophet let fall sitr (curtain) between him and Anas Ibno Malik, and the verse of the hijab descended at that moment". (Mernissi, 1991, p.87). From this context, it seems that the hijab was not meant to hide women in the first time, but it was meant to separate two men. Thus, the concept of the hijab is three dimensional. The first dimension is visual one: to hide something. The second dimension is spatial: to separate, and make border. The least dimension is ethical which is asking permission to enter space (Mernissi, 1991). In Sufism, one calls "*Mahjoub*" (veiled) for the person whose consciousness is determined by mental passion; meaning the veil blocks the knowledge of the Devine. Consequently, the hijab, as a piece of cloth, came to impoverish women and drain it from its meaning (Mernissi, 1991).

2.3. *The Moroccan Muslim Identity*

The monarchy of Morocco has always been founded on hybridity. Historical and sociocultural influences have shaped the components of Moroccan identity. The four main components of Moroccan Muslim identity are religion, language, tradition, and environment. The Moroccan state's geographic location is rich in diverse cultural regions. It is connected to the Atlantic Ocean from the West, to Europe from the North, to the Arab and Islamic countries from the East, and to Africa from the South. As a result, the neighboring nations and areas have an impact on Moroccan society, culture, and economics. This plays a part in the Moroccan identity's hybridity.

Language is a significant component that contributes to the Moroccan identity. The two main languages spoken in Morocco are Arabic and Tamazight, with Hassaniya in some southern parts as well. However, because Moroccan identity is multifaceted and influenced by sociocultural elements, it is more accurate to refer to Arabic and Tamazight as Arabic-s and Tamazight-s. First, Arabic: there are three varieties to consider: Standard Arabic, which is the official language of the country, but is not used in daily life, Moroccan Arabic, which is a dialect spoken in daily life, and Classical Arabic, which is the language of the Quran. Second, there is Tamazight, which is mostly split into three major dialects. The language in the Eastern South of Morocco is Tachelhit. Speaking Tamazight is common in the Southern Sahara and the suburbs of Taza, Fes, and Meknes. The language of the Riffi tribes, including Tamsaman, Ait Weryaghl, Ait Touzine, and Ait Said, is Tarifit. For political and historical reasons, Morocco also speaks English, French, and Spanish.

One of the key elements that shaped Moroccan identity is heritage. The history of Morocco is replete with the civilizations of the Pheonicians (12th century), the Carthaginians and the Romans, the Almoravids (1062-1147), the Almohads (1147-1258), and the first

Sharifian dynasty of the Saadians (1554-1660). Of these, the Ahmed Al-Mansor (1579-1603) period is considered the "golden age" of Morocco. Morocco is now a wealthy and diversified nation as a result of these dynasties and civilizations.

Regarding religion, Islam is recognized as the official religion of the kingdom. El-Jidi (1984) states that the Maliki Sunni sect, one of the four Islamic Sunni sects, adheres to the beliefs of Anas Ibno Malik, the Prophet Muhammad's companion. "The Kingdom of Morocco is an Islamic state with full sovereignty," as stated in the Moroccan constitution (the wording of the execution of the Dahir No 1.11.91, dated 27 Shaaban 1432/July 29, 2011). Moroccan Islamic law is founded on Islam as a guide and incorporates the Quran and Sunnah, not that Moroccan laws are exclusively derived from Islamic Shariaa.

III. CONCLUSION

In summary, the bodies of Arab Muslim women provide an important lens through which to view the complex relationships between identity, culture, and history. This study shows how women's development has changed from pre-Islamic societies to contemporary topics due to the formation of Islamic ideology. Aboriginal traditions and economic circumstances have shaped how women have been portrayed historically, and they have shaped current debates about women's rights and social standards. A major turning point was the advent of Islam in the seventh century when a new philosophy that sought to redefine women's responsibilities Centuries of gendered discourse were Shaped by foundational texts such as the Qur'an and Hadith this variability of Arab Muslim groups and cultures shows how while religious texts can provide guidance, social, cultural, and economic conditions affect women's lived reality.

This study has limitations, although it aims to provide a solid knowledge of female physiology. Experiences found in Arab Muslim communities as a whole may not be strongly represented adequately in some cultural contexts. Additionally, over-reliance on particular texts and texts can obscure other perspectives and voices, particularly those of underrepresented groups Future research can address this gap by examining the experiences of other groups and comparative analyzes have been conducted to identify common trends and differences.

Finally, this study of the female body in the Arab Muslim world highlights its importance as a symbol of strength, independence and transformation. In order to create a more inclusive and equitable future, it is important that we continue to examine women's experiences as they continue to develop their identities and establish their voices. This study highlights the importance of acknowledging the complexities of all expressions of femininity, providing a basis for future

discussions and insights If we look at the impact of both contemporary and historical legacies, we can gain a better understanding of perspective the changing nature of the female body and the broader effects of gender relations in the field.

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