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“My Name is Tawaddud”: An Arab/Muslim female intellectual challenges established gender epistemologies

This presentation attempts to explore the role of an Arab/Islamic intellectual in communicating and renegotiating knowledge across several generations and across cultures. It reads the socio – cultural critical work of the Moroccan feminist writer Fatema Mernissi (1940 – 2015) through the lens of Tawaddud, the famous slave – girl in the court of Harun Al Rashid who was known for her unmatched erudition and extraordinary sagacious mind. Mernissi marvels at how “in the medieval Orient, despots like Harun Ar – Rachid appreciated defiantly intelligent slave – girls” like Tawaddud while “in enlightened eighteenth – century Europe, philosophers like Kant dreamt of silent women” (Mernissi 1965:94). I will argue that by adopting Tawaddud as her role model, Mernissi seems to assert that in the Arab/Islamic tradition women have always been at the centre of the very structure of knowledge, where the preservation and circulation of cultural memory are made possible through different carriers of culture that include such forms as narratives, songs, texts and rituals. Mernissi's deployment of such female figures as Shahrazad and Tawaddud in the famous compendium of stories *The One Thousand and One Nights* has a two – fold role. First, it aims to deconstruct western Orientalist views of Arab/Muslim women in general. Second, it aims to promote and ultimately construct a sexually differentiated structure of the female speaking subject. Such a new speaking subject is no longer understood as an ahistorical object, but rather as a body linked to, and interwoven with, a plurality of systems: political, cultural, economic, and historical. The new feminine subject is a site of contestation where socio cultural and political struggles play out, are heard by all, refashioned and retransmitted on a woman's own terms. Mernissi's double role as social dramaturg and decolonial feminist attests to her profound and paradigm – shifting contribution to modern Arab production of knowledge.

Reference:

Mernissi, Fatema (1965) *Scheherazade Goes West: Different cultures, different harems*, New York: Washington Square Press.