

Gender

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The Science Question in Arab-Islamic Feminist Knowledge

Women's production of scientific feminist knowledge in Arab-Islamic¹ society is rarely systematically addressed. The available literature reflects preconceptions and misconceptions about women's feminist scientific production of knowledge in the Arab world. In response to this, it is necessary to provide a systemic view of women's scientific production of knowledge in Arab-Islamic education and society.² The focus then shifts from the 'woman question' in Arab-Islamic society to the more radical 'science question' in feminism, education and society in general.

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The question of women's feminist productions of scientific knowledge in contemporary Arab-Islamic society is complex and raises two fundamental and interlapping issues: the historical process of women's involvement in science, and feminism² within Arab-Islamic society. To answer these two questions adequately, investigating education is central.

Research conducted by the author is based on the rationale that different world systems of education have culturally specific socio-pedagogical practices that shape both the process of knowledge production

within culture and regulate the relations between the individual/society and individuals/groups. It offers an epistemological study of women's scientific productions in Arab-Islamic education and society. Furthermore, it presents a reflexive model that reconciles particularism and universalism in the cross-cultural analysis of feminist knowledge; hence avoiding the traps of cultural relativism and scientism.

The author's thesis examines the process involved in the production and construction of al-Sa'dawi's (Egypt) and Mernissi's (Egypt) scientific feminist knowledge in its systemic relation to Arab-Islamic education and society from 1970-1990. The aim is twofold: to situate al-Sa'dawi's and Mernissi's scientific feminine mode in its systematic relation to the power structure of scientific practice in education and society from 1970-1990; and to examine and evaluate al-Sa'dawi's and Mernissi's feminist research in view of the power-structure that governed scientific practice in education and society from 1970-1990. Theoretical and empirical works of both authors from 1970 to 1990 were selected in order to discover their respective articulations of gender from their perspective as women.

From a pro-active perspective that maintains the systemic link between scientific knowledge and social action in a dialectic relation to culture, the methodology combines a theory-praxis approach for the epistemological analysis of al-Sa'dawi's and Mernissi's feminist research and its related contexts of scientific discovery. For the sys-

temic investigation and evaluation of al-Sa'dawi's and Mernissi's feminist scientific perspective, the study provides a reflexive three-leveled model of analysis, drawing selectively from Bourdieu's reflexive sociology (1992), Dorothy Smith's feminist sociology of knowledge (1990 a,b), and Stanley and Wise's feminist epistemology (1990). In this manner, the study captures the tensions between determinism and agency contained in al-Sa'dawi's and Mernissi's feminist discourses, and delineates how communication and co-optation of information take place in their feminine scientific mode.

The findings indicate that al-Sa'dawi's and Mernissi's feminist scientific perspective is marked by an ambivalent feminist consciousness, and is therefore inadequate to represent the plural socio-political reality of Arab-Muslim women, or the diverse reality of women's scientific practices. Also, on the basis al-Sa'dawi's and Mernissi's appropriations of the disciplines in the social sciences, the thesis describes how the authors' scientific feminist paradigm is anachronistic with respect to the Islamic post-modernist scientific practices in higher education and mainstream culture; hence lacking scientific validity and moral authority in women's studies in the region. Moreover, the thesis discusses why the authors' respective scientific approaches and epistemologies fail to offer sustainable egalitarian societal projects that make realistic progress in the status and rights of Arab-Muslim women, or contribute to the advancement of Arab-Islamic women's studies in the region.

The thesis concludes that these findings show the need for a change of paradigm in favour of a systemic scientific paradigm that combines the particularism of the Arab-Islamic identity with the universalism of feminist egalitarian goals derived from women's concrete social experiences. Finally, the study illustrates with the example of Morocco how local feminist post-modernist projects, affiliated with the Islamic tradition of political governance, and scientific practice have yielded to both the scientific development of women's studies and to the advancement of women's status and rights in Arab-Islamic society since the 1980s. ◆

Notes

1. The author's PhD thesis, *Al-Sa'dawi's and Mernissi's Feminist Knowledge With/in the History, Education and Science of the Arab-Islamic Culture* (1999), deals specifically with this issue.
2. Feminism is defined as 'an international socio-political movement with plural origins, multiple cultural historical manifestations, and diverse epistemologies that shape the discursive feminist practices in the world community'.

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