

A Response to Fatema Mernissi's article
"Digital Scheherazade; The Rise of Women as Key Players in the Arab Gulf Communication Strategies"
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One idea that was emphasized during the lecture portion of the “Gender and Arab Pro-Democracy Movements” event of the Global Women’s Health Project conference by both Manal Hamzeh and Dr. Young, was the idea of creating room for important and progressive conversations to occur. This concept was reinforced by the Global Café conversations that followed this presentation. The article by Fatema Mernissi, “Digital Scheherazde; The Rise of Women as Key Players in the Arab Gulf Communication Strategies” embodies and exemplifies this concept.

Mernissi opens the article by recalling a press conference she had in Spain while promoting her new book. The questions that were asked by the Spanish journalists, mimicked many of the concepts, concerns and focal points that are stressed in most Western countries. Questions stressing the importance of the veil, and terrorism exemplified that they were unaware of a major movement that was causing upheaval in many Arab nations. That movement is al-fitnaraqmiya, which translates to digital chaos. This digital chaos refers to the incorporation of the internet and satellite TV into everyday life and how their presence has destroyed the hudud. Mernissi explains that hudud, refers to “the space frontier which divided the universe into a sheltered private arena where women and children were supposed to be protected and a public one where adult males exercised their presumed problem-solving authority” (2005, p.1). That explanation puts the fear and anxiety experienced by elites and male heads of state perfectly into perspective.

In her attempts to deter the Spanish journalists from focusing purely on the veil and terrorism, Mernissi tried to illustrate the impact of the digital revolution by citing the emergence of a promising and prominent female historian named Mai Al-Khalifa, who over the past decade has created museums and cultural centers designed to promote conversation and insightful

thinking regarding their collective history between sexes and generations. This brief introduction aids Mernissi in segueing into the focal point of her article, how the digital revolution has aided the emergence of women as prominent public figures, and how this emergence has started to generate a new mentality among Arab states. Mernissi ends this segment of the article with a fabulous quote stating “I tried to explain that focusing on this unexpected emergence of women in the oil-rich Arab Gulf is more significant an indicator than the veils of the Moslem migrant community, but the Spanish journalists were trapped in their own veil and terror” (2005, p. 2)

At this point, Mernissi transfers the articles setting from her press conference in Spain to a café near her University in Rabat. While in the crowded café the previously mentioned Mai Al-Khalifa, appeared on the satellite channel Al-Arabia, a new rival station of Al-Jazeera, which is the primary source of information in the satellite TV world. The conversations in the café slowed and the owner of the café turned up the volume so those in the café could hear what was being said. Mernissi takes this moment in the article to reminisce that when she was growing up the only women in the movies or on TV were belly-dancers and singers, that intellectual women had no chance. My personal reaction to this statement was one of being beyond impressed that Mernissi emerged from an environment with so few female intellectual role models to become one of the most ideal examples of a progressive thinking and intelligent role models for the young girls of this generation. I can only imagine the battle’s she’s had to fight along the way to get to this point. Her sense of resiliency is one to be admired. This quick insight into the world that Mernissi grew up in provided me with more of an understanding as to why what was happening in the café itself meant as much to Mernissi as what was occurring on the screen.

The interview that was taking place on the screen had to do with the controversy that was arising due to projects being promoted by Mai Al-Khalifa. She had recently been promoted as

the first woman to be appointed in Bahrain as the Assistant Under-Secretary for Culture and National Heritage. This position is one that is centered on “innovative strategic planning” yet many of her new proposals were being met with resistance. Was this because she was a woman or due to incompetency, since she comes from an academic background that is not generally conducive to pragmatic action? This was the question that was being asked of Al-Khalifa on the program. Her response was sharp and to the point “That intellectuals are unable to invent effective cultural strategies is a totally wrong assumption...such statements are typical of bureaucrats who are in fact totally unfit to design the dynamic cultural strategies the Arab World needs to face the new technologies challenge and this for the simple reason that they lack vision” (as cited in Mernissi, 2005). Al-Khalifa proceeds to state that she in “an intellectual with a clear vision (ru’ya) of the future and the capacity to go ahead and act by undertaking successful innovative projects” (as cited in Mernissi, 2005).

The idea of ru’ya or a clear vision becomes a very central point in the rest of Mernissi’s article. She proceeds to cite a concept supplied by Egyptian expert Nabil Abdel-Fattah that a lack of a clear ru’ya for the future of Arab states is a primary contributing factor to “the dangerous political disengagement of the youth and their confusion, which makes them extremely vulnerable to the violence spread on the internet” (as cited in Mernissi, 2005). The idea makes complete and total sense. By not providing the Arab youth with a clear vision and understanding of the importance of their role in maintaining an ethical world, and giving them a mission and purpose in this world, it leaves them wide open to be manipulated by people with violent and ulterior motives. This is a failure of the elite and bureaucrats who are currently running things, and there was Al-Khalifa standing there on TV calling clear attention to this failure and what

needs to be done to rectify it. It's no wonder that the intellectual students and teachers present in that café reacted so strongly and positively to her statements.

The question remains what was Al-Khalifa's ru'ya exactly and why was it aggravating so many bureaucrats and elites? What she proposed was the development of school targeting museums and cultural centers designed to teach the youth about the importance the role of diversity has played in the root of their identity. It is my opinion that establishments such as these are the pathways to peaceful co-existence. The mentality that is fueling this vision is that to reunite the youth and provide them with a positive political experience is to start by providing them with historical access to their cultural past. One positive that comes from reintroducing historical fact into the lives of the youth is it encourages true and factual understanding and reduces opportunities for historical manipulation and exploitation. The issue with the development of these museums and cultural centers is that over the course of history art productions and collections were primarily monopolized by the ruling elite and to revisit that time would place emphasis on the unfair controlling of the arts and cultural artifacts. The other issue that carries even more weight is that in order to emphasize the idea of tolerance and promote understanding of the Islamic culture people would have to have an understanding and appreciation for pre-Islamic culture which focuses on the concept that we as a human race face a common problem which is to continue to invent adequate technology. This focus point would provide evidence behind the benefits of globalization and merging of different cultures, a concept that has not necessarily been welcomed with open arms by many of the ruling elite of the Arab world.

The youth of the Arab world have been fed so much censorship and fanaticism it's no wonder why the digital revolution and increased exposure to satellite television, such as the

channel being watched in the café, has been received in such a positive manner. This brings me back to my point of the importance of creating space for conversation. Much of the remainder of Mernissi's article included excerpts from her conversation with her male colleague, who was extremely pleased with Al-Khalifa's stance on intellectual issues. Many of his statements perfectly exemplified the progressive male thinking and conversing that was taking place throughout the café. Both Mernissi and her colleague emphasized the need for new progressive visionaries to replace the "vision blind bureaucrats" that currently have control. I felt the entire article re-emphasized that the power of conversation should never be under-rated. Utilizing modern day technology for information sharing is conducive to creating the ideal atmosphere for conversation, and conversation is without question the first and most important step to make the necessary changes to create a peaceful environment.