



FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS OF FATIMA MERNISSI AND A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF AURAT IN THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of women's aurah in Islam through the thought of Fatimah Mernissi by placing it within the framework of Michel Foucault's discourse analysis. This research aims to analyze how Mernissi reconstructs the understanding of aurat through a hermeneutical-feminist approach and examine the relevance of her thinking in the context of Indonesian Islam. The method used is a qualitative approach with library research, through systematic discourse analysis, including the identification of the formation of the discourse of the interpretation of the aurat, the analysis of the power-knowledge relationship, and the reading of Mernissi's thought as the object of discourse. The results of the study show that aurat can be understood as a discursive construct created through the legitimacy of religious interpretation and negotiated in the dynamics of the Islamic women's movement in Indonesia. Therefore, the concept of aurah not only serves as a theological standard, but also as a place where meaning is created and resolved in modern Islamic discussions.

Keywords: *'Awrah, Fatimah Mernissi, Power, Feminism*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji konsep aurat perempuan dalam Islam melalui pemikiran Fatimah Mernissi dengan menemukannya dalam kerangka analisis wacana Michel Foucault. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana Mernissi merekonstruksi pemahaman aurat melalui pendekatan hermeneutik-feminis serta mengkaji relevansi pemikirannya dalam konteks keislaman Indonesia. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan studi kepustakaan (*library research*), melalui analisis wacana secara sistematis, meliputi identifikasi formasi wacana tafsir aurat, analisis relasi kuasa-pengetahuan, serta pembacaan pemikiran Mernissi sebagai objek diskursus. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa aurat dapat dipahami sebagai konstruksi diskursif yang diciptakan melalui legitimasi tafsir keagamaan dan dinegosiasikan dalam dinamika gerakan perempuan Islam di Indonesia. Oleh karena itu, konsep aurat tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai standar teologis, tetapi juga sebagai tempat di mana makna dibuat dan diselesaikan dalam diskusi keislaman modern.

Kata Kunci: *Aurat, Fatimah Mernissi, Kekuasaan, Feminis*



A. Introduction

The issue of 'awrah (intimate parts of the body that must be covered) in the Islamic tradition has become one of the important aspects within theological discourse, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), and religious ethics. Historically, the concept of 'awrah in Islam has been understood as parts of the body that must be covered in order to preserve modesty and honor. However, this understanding has often been normative and tends to overlook the social and cultural contexts surrounding it. In social reality, the concept of 'awrah becomes a field of debate between patriarchal interpretations and Islamic feminist movements that call for a re-reading of religious texts (Aslam et al., 2025). 'Awrah is frequently positioned as a symbol of women's morality and a tool for controlling their bodies (Aslam et al., 2025). In classical perspectives, the concept of 'awrah is constructed based on Qur'anic texts and hadith, in which verses such as QS. An-Nur [24]:31 are interpreted literally as an absolute command for women to cover their entire bodies except for the face and hands. Classical scholars such as Imam al-Ghazali and al-Qurthubi associated 'awrah with the control of desire and moral purity, making it both a religious symbol and a social mechanism for regulating women's bodies and behavior (Mukaromah, 2024).

The meaning of 'awrah has evolved along with social and cultural developments. In the modern context, 'awrah is not only a religious symbol but also a social and political identity (Tantowi, 2023). It has been revealed that during the second period, 'awrah transformed into an issue of Islamic politics, where it was used as a symbol of Islamic political struggle. Revivalist movements emphasize the importance of a literal understanding of religious texts concerning 'awrah, while progressive thinkers such as Fatima Mernissi attempt to reconstruct the traditional notion of 'awrah through a critical approach (Mernissi, 1991). In her work *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), Mernissi demonstrates how certain social structures contribute to the formation of norms that restrict women's mobility in public life. She argues that although Islam guarantees spiritual equality between men and women, the concept of 'awrah has often been used as a tool of social control over women.

In line with this view, (Iqbal, 2023) asserts that Islamic feminism opens new interpretive spaces that integrate the principles of equality and justice in understanding religious texts. This approach allows 'awrah to be understood not merely as a symbol of morality, but also as an expression of women's freedom and spiritual awareness. (Amboy & Basid, 2024) apply Michel Foucault's theory of power to develop the concept of cyberfeminism, explaining how Muslim women debate the meaning of 'awrah in digital spaces as a form of resistance against social control. (Ustiashvili, 2023) also employs Foucault's approach to analyze the politics of sexuality in post-revolution Iran and finds that religious power regulates women's bodies through discourses of purity and sin. The findings indicate that 'awrah is a discursive construction shaped by networks of power, rather than solely a transcendental command.



This study does not empirically examine clothing practices; instead, it analyzes the discursive construction of 'awrah and its relevance within the dynamics of Islam in Indonesia through a discourse analysis approach. Through this approach, attention is directed toward how scholarly authority, interpretive structures, and power relations shape the meaning of 'awrah in the Islamic tradition. Although many studies have discussed 'awrah from social and political perspectives, only a few have examined how interpretations of 'awrah are shaped by masculine viewpoints within the Islamic scholarly tradition. This research seeks to fill this gap by presenting a critical reading of the concept of 'awrah through the thought of Fatima Mernissi. By employing Foucault's discourse theory, this study aims to develop a perspective that is more just, contextual, and responsive to the realities of contemporary Muslim women. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of feminist critique and Islamic studies within the Indonesian context, which remains relatively rare in academic literature.

The focus of this study is formulated through two main research questions: how does the socio-political construction of the concept of 'awrah shape patriarchal practices within Muslim societies, and how relevant is Fatima Mernissi's thought in reconstructing the concept of 'awrah within the context of Indonesian Islam? The objective is to analyze the social and political construction of the concept of 'awrah and to examine the relevance of Mernissi's ideas in shaping a more egalitarian Islamic discourse. Theoretically, this research contributes to enriching Islamic studies and gender studies through an interdisciplinary approach, particularly by utilizing Foucault's theory to deconstruct patriarchal perspectives in understanding 'awrah. Practically, the findings of this research are expected to provide input for educational institutions and policymakers to become more sensitive to issues of gender justice, as well as to serve as a reference for society in developing a critical understanding of 'awrah that respects freedom and equality.

Previous studies indicate that 'awrah is often used as a tool to control women. (Swastini et al., 2025) view 'awrah as an instrument of power that restricts women's mobility in public spaces through the legitimization of moral values. (Maudina, 2024) highlights how school uniform policies in Indonesia often impose the use of the hijab without considering the diversity of religious interpretations, resulting in discrimination from an early age. Meanwhile, (Putri & Poerwandari, 2024) show that 'awrah has also functioned as a social symbol for evaluating women's level of piety, which ultimately strengthens mechanisms of surveillance over their bodies. However, unlike previous studies, this research attempts to explore more deeply how interpretations of 'awrah themselves are shaped by masculine perspectives deeply embedded within the intellectual heritage of Islamic scholarship.

In this study, the analysis of interpretations of 'awrah is not limited to differences in content but focuses on the epistemology of how religious knowledge about 'awrah is produced, who holds the authority to interpret it, and which social values are recognized as truth. Foucault argues that knowledge always originates from a particular subject position and is always dependent on relations of power. Therefore, classical



interpretations of 'awrah are examined as scholarly products shaped by social experiences, masculine horizons, and the importance of moral stability within patriarchal societies of their time.

As an initial step in understanding this issue, it is necessary to examine how Qur'anic exegetes interpret the concept of 'awrah within the context of Islamic law and ethics. In classical exegesis, Ibn Kathir and al-Qurtubi provide important foundations for understanding women's 'awrah in Islam. Through *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Ibn Kathir explains QS. An-Nur [24]:31 by referring to the social context at the time the verse was revealed, when women would go out without covering certain parts of their bodies. He interprets the command for women not to display their adornments except what is ordinarily visible as an obligation to cover the entire body except the face and hands (Artiyanto et al., 2024). This view is reinforced by the opinion of Ibn Mas'ud, who stated that what is meant by "what is apparent" refers to outer garments that cannot be concealed. According to Ibn Kathir, the command in this verse constitutes an important basis for the concept of women's 'awrah that must be protected comprehensively.

Al-Qurtubi, through his monumental work *Al-Jami' li Ahkam al-Qur'an*, interprets the same verse with a more rational and contextual approach. He compares various scholarly opinions, including those of Ibn Abbas and Qatadah, who allow the exposure of the face and hands, as well as Ibn Mas'ud, who interprets "adornment" as clothing. Al-Qurtubi asserts that the exposure of the face and hands may only be justified under certain conditions, such as during prayer or pilgrimage (Ma'arif, 2020). He interprets the word *juyub* as referring to the chest area that must be completely covered in accordance with the command of the verse (Herliani, 2024). Based on this, al-Qurtubi argues that the entire body of a woman is considered 'awrah, except the face and hands, unless there is concern that it may lead to temptation.

Meanwhile, Quraish Shihab, as a contemporary Qur'anic exegete, presents a more contextual interpretation through *Tafsir al-Misbah*. He interprets the term *zinah* as parts of a woman's body that may attract male attention, and the verse primarily emphasizes the command to cover the chest rather than the head. According to him, the use of *khimar* during the Prophet's time only covered part of the body, so the command to cover the chest served as a moral correction to that practice. Quraish Shihab argues that hair is not explicitly mentioned as 'awrah in the Qur'an, and covering the head is more of an ethical recommendation than an absolute obligation (Shihab, 2002). He also emphasizes that the hijab is a product of Arab culture that does not necessarily have to be universally applied in modern Muslim societies.

Muhammad Syahrur, on the other hand, proposes a progressive and hermeneutical interpretation in understanding the concept of 'awrah. He uses the term *as-saw'ah*, which means something shameful or something that must be covered, and divides women's 'awrah into two categories: what is ordinarily visible and what must be concealed (Mahfud et al., 2024). According to Syahrur, the minimum limit of 'awrah refers to parts of the body that would cause a woman to feel embarrassed if exposed, while the maximum



limit encompasses the entire body except the face and hands. He rejects the standardization of women's clothing and emphasizes the importance of individual freedom to adapt to different cultural contexts. For Syahrur, the essence of the teaching of 'awrah lies in preserving dignity and avoiding actions that provoke sexual desire (Parwanto, 2021).

It must be emphasized that the tradition of Qur'anic interpretation in Islam possesses methodological and historical diversity. The critical reading presented in this research is not intended to delegitimize the intellectual heritage of Islam, but rather to understand the dynamics of knowledge production surrounding it. Within this framework, the analysis of exegetical works is not directed toward judging them as right or wrong, but toward examining the methodological tendencies and historical contexts that shape their interpretive patterns. From these four interpretations, it becomes evident that there are fundamental differences between classical and contemporary perspectives in understanding the concept of 'awrah. Ibn Kathir and al-Qurtubi focus on normative and legal dimensions, emphasizing obedience to textual authority and tradition. Meanwhile, Quraish Shihab and Muhammad Syahrur view 'awrah as a dynamic social phenomenon that must be understood according to its historical context. Classical exegesis emphasizes the physical boundaries of 'awrah as a form of religious obedience, whereas contemporary interpretations highlight the moral dimension and spiritual awareness behind the command. Thus, 'awrah in Islam can be understood as a symbol of purity, honor, and women's freedom whose meaning continues to evolve alongside social change and developments in religious thought.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research method. The analysis is conducted using Michel Foucault's discourse analysis framework, particularly the concepts of power/knowledge relations, normalization, and subject formation. The operationalization of the analysis is carried out through several stages: (1) Identification of discursive formations, namely tracing how the concept of *aurat* is defined in both classical and contemporary Qur'anic interpretations; (2) Analysis of power/knowledge relations, which examines the position of the interpreting subject and the mechanisms through which religious authority is legitimized; (3) Analysis of normalization and subjectivation processes, in order to see how interpretations of *aurat* construct the notion of the "ideal woman"; (4) Identification of counter-discourse, namely examining the thought of Fatimah Mernissi and the Indonesian Muslim women's movement as forms of the production of alternative discourses. Thus, Foucault functions as the analytical framework, while Mernissi's thought is positioned as a discursive subject that is critically analyzed.



C. Results and Discussion

1. Biography of Fatimah Mernissi

One of the most influential Muslim female thinkers of the 20th century was Fatimah Mernissi, whose full name was Fatimah Mernissi. She was a Moroccan sociologist, feminist, and writer born in Fez, Morocco, in 1940 into a religious middle-class family. Mernissi was born at a time when Morocco was controlled by nationalists who were striving to provide equal education for men and women and promised to abolish polygamy as well as elevate the status of women to be equal with men. Her childhood was spent in the environment of a traditional harem, a separated space designated for women in Moroccan culture at that time (Rahmatunnur et al., 2023). Her father was a devout civil servant, while her mother was a strong and broad-minded woman, although she did not receive formal education. Mernissi also learned from her grandmother, receiving informal education from Lalla Yasmina, her grandmother. In her grandmother's house, Fatimah Mernissi gained experiences related to equality among human beings, the meaning of confinement within the harem, and the cause-and-effect relationship between the political defeat experienced by Muslims and the decline experienced by women (Wijayanti et al., 2018).

Her grandmother provided many lessons about Islamic history and also taught Mernissi stories about the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the condition of women before and after the coming of Islam. Mernissi acknowledged that her grandmother described how beautiful Medina was and how equality was appreciated there by the Prophet. From this point, Fatimah Mernissi became fascinated with the Islam of Medina. She also explained that her grandmother was different from most Moroccan women at that time; her grandmother did not worry about the way men treated women. Her grandmother was the first person who made her aware of the unjust treatment toward women. Because of her grandmother's teachings, Mernissi later became interested in women's studies.

Mernissi began her education at a Qur'anic madrasa in Fez. During her childhood, she had an ambivalent relationship with the Qur'an. The traditional school established by the nationalists taught the Qur'an through a harsh learning system. This was very different from the education she received from Lalla Yasmina, who had opened the door to a more poetic understanding of religion. According to Mernissi, this dual attitude toward the sacred text remained with her for many years. Depending on how it was approached, the sacred verses could become either a gateway to liberation or an obstacle that could not be overcome. Mernissi later studied political science and sociology at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco. She then taught at the same university from 1974 to 1980. After working in England and France, she arrived in the United States with a scholarship to pursue a doctoral degree (Rhouni, 2025). She also served as a visiting lecturer at Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley. In addition, she worked as a consultant for international institutions and was active in the Pan Arab Women



Solidarity Association, a social organization that advocates for women's rights in the Arab region (Roibin et al., 2023).

Based on her biography and brief intellectual career, it is clear that Mernissi was deeply interested in studying religious doctrines concerning the relationship between men and women. Her intellectual concerns began in her childhood, both within her family and at the Qur'anic school, and continued until she obtained her doctoral degree. Her works demonstrate her concern about patterns of relations between men and women and the dominance of men within patriarchal social systems.

2. Works and Thoughts of Fatima Mernissi

Regarding her works, Fatima Mernissi produced numerous books and articles that have been translated into various languages, including the following:

- a. Her doctoral dissertation, later published as *Beyond the Veil* (translated into Indonesian as *Seks dan Kekuasaan: Dinamika Pria-Perempuan dalam Masyarakat Muslim Modern*).
- b. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991) (*Jilbab dan Elit Laki-laki: Interpretasi Feminis tentang Hak-Hak Perempuan dalam Islam*).
- c. *Women and Islam: A Historical and Theological Enquiry* (*Perempuan dalam Islam*).
- d. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (*Ratu-Ratu yang Terlupakan*).
- e. *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (*Islam dan Demokrasi, Antologi Ketakutan*).
- f. *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994) (*Teras Terlarang: Kisah Masa Kecil Seorang Feminis Muslim / Perempuan-Perempuan Harem*).
- g. *Scheherazade Goes West* (2001) (*Scheherazade Pergi ke Barat*).
- h. *Islam and Gender* (1987) (*Islam dan Gender*), and others.

Judging from her works, Mernissi's feminism is clearly reflected in her thought. This is largely influenced by her personal experiences, her concerns about the conditions of her time, as well as political and social factors (Wijayanti et al., 2018). Several of her works have even been translated into Indonesian, indicating that many modern Islamic thinkers have paid attention to her ideas. Mernissi employed a distinctive approach in each of her writings. She is understood as a thinker who utilized critical discourse analysis to examine the structures of power hidden behind social systems and religious knowledge (Rofifah et al., 2025). In her first work, *Beyond the Veil* (1975), Mernissi explains how social norms construct gendered spaces. In her view, the concepts of aurat (modesty) and spatial segregation are not merely moral regulations, but practices that reproduce patriarchal power structures and restrict women's mobility and participation in public life. This statement aligns with sociological analyses that place the phenomenon of the "veil/aurat" within broader social and political structures (Shahin, 2024).



In developing her arguments, Mernissi later turned to historical-critical analysis of hadith sources and Qur'anic interpretations. In *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), she employed feminist hermeneutics to re-examine the historical background of hadiths that have often been used to justify limitations on women's roles. By analyzing the chains of transmission (sanad) and the political context surrounding these hadiths, she challenged the authority of classical male scholars. One of her most well-known analyses concerns the hadith stating that “*a people who entrust their affairs to a woman will never prosper.*” According to Mernissi, historical research shows that this hadith emerged within a political context of power during the rule of Caliph Muawiyah (Bouras, 2024). Therefore, it cannot be used as a theological basis to prohibit women from participating in public activities or leadership, nor can it be considered a core teaching of religion (Fikriana & Mulyani, 2023). Patriarchal interpretations place women as objects of surveillance and control, whereas feminist hermeneutics allows women to become subjects of knowledge who interpret religious texts for the purpose of equality and social empowerment (Ruslan, 2025).

Viewed from her body of work, Mernissi demonstrates a consistent integration of spirituality, scholarship, and social activism in her way of thinking. She sought to present a liberating face of Islam through hermeneutical and historical approaches (Syah, 1970). From this perspective, sacred texts are used as sources of justice and equality rather than as instruments for the oppression of women. Mernissi attempted to build critical awareness so that Muslim women would have the courage to reread and reinterpret their own traditions. For Mernissi, being Muslim and being a feminist are not contradictory; rather, they are two complementary paths toward the realization of humanity and social justice. She argues that true Islam is an Islam that upholds the principles of 'adl (justice) and ihsan (humanity and benevolence), principles that cannot be separated from the struggle for gender equality.

3. The Concept of *Aurat* in the Perspective of Fatimah Mernissi

The thought of Fatima Mernissi, a Muslim sociologist and feminist from Morocco, begins with her critique of classical interpretations of the Qur'an that place women under control. In her work *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), Mernissi emphasizes that interpretations of Qur'anic verses concerning women often originate from patriarchal social structures in the post-prophetic era that attempted to control women's bodies and their social space (Mernissi, 1994). She argues that the Qur'an itself is open and contextual, yet its interpretation was restricted by scholars who projected the social values of the medieval period onto the text (Rhouni, 2010). As a result, women came to be regulated not only in terms of morality and sexuality, but also constructed as symbols of *fitnah* that must be controlled through seclusion and bodily covering (Bouras, 2024).

Verses such as, “*And let them draw their head coverings over their chests...*” (Qur'an 24:31) and “*O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the*



believers to draw their cloaks over themselves...” (Qur’an 33:59) were historically interpreted within classical scholarship as normative constructions regarding the boundaries of women’s bodies, associated with maintaining the moral stability of society. However, according to Mernissi, such interpretations have moved away from the historical context of these verses. During the Prophet’s time, these verses functioned primarily to protect women from violence and harassment rather than to restrict their participation in public space (Fidhayanti et al., 2024). In classical interpretations, gender bias often appears due to the neglect of historical context, which reduces the meaning of the Qur’an to issues of sexual morality. This has significantly influenced Islamic social structures, where women were ultimately marginalized from public life because they were perceived as lacking moral and rational capacities equal to those of men (Agbetola, 1989).

On the other hand, within the tribal culture (*‘ashabiyyah*) of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arab societies, women’s bodies were often regarded as symbols of family honor, while a man’s dignity was measured by the purity and seclusion of the women within his environment (Köse, 2024). In certain historical developments, the concept of *aurat* can therefore be understood as a normative category that functions to regulate gender relations in Muslim societies (Meliasari, 2024). The meaning of *aurat* in Islam has frequently shifted depending on specific social and political contexts. Consequently, the command to cover the *aurat* may sometimes be interpreted as a symbol of moral and social control rather than purely as a religious command (Nikmatullah, 2023).

In this regard, Mernissi rejects the claim that women must be secluded in order to “preserve honor.” She argues that “the logic of seclusion actually reveals men’s fear of themselves: that they are unable to control their feelings and emotions when confronted with the female body” (Mernissi, 1994). To uncover the ideological layers behind interpretations that appear neutral, Mernissi employs a hermeneutics of suspicion to expose hidden power interests within these interpretations (Rhomari & Edderaouy, 2025). Through this approach, Mernissi demonstrates that interpretations requiring women to “wear the veil” or “hide behind a curtain” do not necessarily reflect Islamic piety (Sahar, 2025). Instead, she argues, “If what men fear is that women might surrender to masculine attraction, why do they not impose the veil upon themselves? Preventing women from appearing unveiled reveals men’s fear of losing control over their own minds” (Mernissi, 1991).

Mernissi’s work emphasizes the need to revisit these texts in order to reveal their original egalitarian ethics, which she believes have been obscured by male-centered interpretations (Shahin, 2024). Her approach is not only academic but also practical, aiming to empower Muslim women by giving them a renewed sense of agency and challenging exclusionary discourses. Mernissi’s feminist hermeneutics advocates the reinterpretation of verses traditionally used to limit women’s rights while promoting a vision of gender equality consistent with Islamic principles (Zain et al., 2023). Through her critical scholarship, Mernissi has made a significant contribution to the discourse of



Islamic feminism by advocating a transformative approach that aligns religious teachings with contemporary ideas of gender justice (Karoui, 2023).

This study suggests that the real fear within Islamic discourse is not women's sexual attraction, but rather the fear within patriarchal societies of losing symbolic power over women (Fidhayanti et al., 2024). Mernissi frames the discourse of *fitnah* not as a moral phenomenon but as a social mechanism used to justify gender inequality (Meliasari, 2024). By reinterpreting this concept, Mernissi seeks to demonstrate that alternative readings of religious texts can enable the articulation of values of justice and equality that differ from dominant interpretations.

4. Research Analysis

Within the framework of this study, the thought of Fatima Mernissi is not positioned as a normative theory intended to replace classical Islamic exegesis. Rather, it is approached as a representation of internal critical discourse within the Islamic tradition. Mernissi is read as a discursive subject who negotiates with classical scholarly authority. Accordingly, this analysis does not aim to replace one authority with another, but instead seeks to trace the dynamics of meaning production within the tradition itself.

The concern underlying this research begins with a recurring reality: women are often positioned as objects of interpretation within religious discourse. Their bodies are discussed, regulated, and even controlled through texts and norms that claim to represent religious teachings (Shaikh, 2004). One of the most powerful concepts binding this phenomenon is *aurat*, a term that, on the surface, appears theological but in fact contains deeper layers of social and political meaning (Mustafa, 2024). Through an examination of Mernissi's thought alongside the theory of power knowledge developed by Michel Foucault, this research explores *aurat* not merely as a moral doctrine but as a socio-political construction that shapes the identity and position of women in Muslim societies, including Indonesia (Foucault, 1978).

In this context, Mernissi's thought finds its analytical relevance through Foucault's framework. If Foucault explains how power operates through the production of discourse and the normalization of bodies, Mernissi reveals the ideological content embedded within such discourse in the Islamic tradition. Thus, this study combines an analysis of power structures (Foucault) with Mernissi's internal critique of the exegetical tradition, without positioning Mernissi as a theory itself, but rather as a discursive field to be analyzed. Through this approach, Mernissi argues that the boundaries imposed on women's bodies did not emerge directly from revelation but from interpretive processes developed by male scholars after the prophetic period (Aryal, 2025). She maintains that early Islam actually presented women as active agents in both public and spiritual spheres (Shahin, 2024). However, after the prophetic era, religious interpretation gradually shifted toward reinforcing a social order that positioned men as guardians of the public sphere, while women were directed toward maintaining family morality (Roibin et al., 2023). According to Mernissi, it is at this point that *aurat* changed its function from merely



defining bodily boundaries to becoming an ideological instrument that restricts women's mobility and normalizes their subordination within masculine social structures (Handini Listyani et al., 2018).

Mernissi's perspective resonates with what Foucault describes as disciplinary power. For Foucault, power does not primarily operate through repression but through mechanisms of knowledge production and social normalization that appear natural. Religious interpretation, in this sense, becomes a form of power because it determines what is considered true, legitimate, and moral. When verses or hadith concerning aurat are interpreted through patriarchal perspectives, an "ideal female subject" is produced: obedient, covered, and compliant with male-dominated social structures. In this context, interpretations of aurat function as a force that regulates the body through social surveillance, the internalization of shame or guilt, and the formation of compliant female subjects (Aryal, 2025). As Mernissi notes, within certain historical configurations, prevailing interpretations tend to place women within a rigid framework of public morality (Mernissi, 1994).

Through this perspective, the second dimension of this research becomes clearer: the relationship between Mernissi's thought and Islamic women's movements in Indonesia. Within movements such as Salafi communities, women demonstrate a complex dynamic of power through the discipline of aurat, which fosters solidarity and spiritual authority (Agustina, 2024). From a Foucauldian perspective, this disciplined body generates new forms of power, where the symbol of aurat becomes a means of constructing moral authority in digital spaces and local communities (Dwi Nugroho et al., 2024). This analysis demonstrates that Foucault's theory of power-knowledge provides a valuable lens for understanding the transformation of Mernissi's ideas and their relevance to Indonesia. While Foucault offers analytical tools to examine how discourses of aurat are produced, internalized, and transformed into instruments of empowerment, Mernissi's work reveals the ideological content embedded within these discourses.

In the Indonesian context, aurat does not function as a static or singular norm. Instead, it becomes a discursive arena where various religious authorities, women's organizations, and religious communities produce and negotiate its meanings. Differences in interpretation do not merely indicate theological disagreement but reflect distinct social, ideological, and historical configurations. Ideas similar to those advanced by Mernissi can be observed in Islamic women's movements in Indonesia, such as Aisyiyah and Muslimat NU, which interpret aurat as an ethic of public piety that encourages women's active participation in society (Jati et al., 2024). Within Aisyiyah, the symbol of aurat is understood as a spiritual expression that builds social integrity rather than restricting women's mobility (Rinaldo, 2014). Through education, preaching, and social services, Aisyiyah has successfully transformed Islamic discourse on women from the domestic sphere into the public arena. This aligns with Mernissi's argument that early Islam was egalitarian and encouraged women's participation in socio-political activities. Consequently, Aisyiyah interprets the hijab as a symbol of social agency and



as a form of resistance against systems of power that attempt to marginalize women in the name of piety (Qibtiyah, 2012).

Similarly, within Muslimat NU, *aurat* is interpreted through the framework of social fiqh and the principle of *maslahah*, rejecting literalist readings that restrict women's participation in public life. Muslimat NU understands *aurat* as part of a moral responsibility that does not negate women's rights to participate in public roles and leadership (Dewi, 2017). According to Rinaldo (2014) many female activists within NU use symbolic piety as a strategy to gain social legitimacy while continuing to advocate for gender equality. This dynamic resonates with Foucault's theory that power not only represses but also enables new forms of resistance through religious symbols that may be strategically reinterpreted (Muhammad Rizwan et al., 2025). A similar dynamic can be observed among Salafi women who, despite adhering to stricter interpretations of *aurat*, utilize social and digital spaces to build moral authority and new forms of agency. In this sense, *aurat* becomes a site of negotiation between religiosity and social power across movements such as Aisyiyah, Muslimat NU, and Salafi communities (Rinaldo, 2014). Mernissi interprets such transformations as a form of epistemic resistance: women do not reject religious symbols but reinterpret them in ways that align with justice and spiritual freedom (Roibin et al., 2023).

The movement Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI) provides perhaps the most significant evidence of the relevance of Mernissi's thought in Indonesia (Kloos & Ismah, 2023). Through the interpretive approach of *tafsir al-tajribah al-nisa'iyah*, which centers women's experiences, KUPI legitimizes religious interpretation grounded in women's lived realities. This approach resonates strongly with Mernissi's critique of the monopoly of interpretation by male scholarly elites and her insistence that women possess epistemological authority in interpreting Islam. In this framework, the choice to wear hijab becomes an ethical decision and a form of spiritual consciousness that should not be used to judge women's morality or social capacity. KUPI also develops what can be understood as a Foucauldian counter-discourse to challenge dominant patriarchal narratives (Rohmaniyah et al., 2022). KUPI's interpretive approach positions women as subjects of knowledge, in contrast to conventional interpretations that often treat women merely as objects of legal regulation (Junaidi, 2023). Indonesian Muslim women, in their own ways, have redirected the course of discourse: they do not merely interpret texts but also create new spaces of knowledge that challenge existing structures of power (Nuronyah & Maula, 2025). The differences among these movements do not represent a simple opposition between liberation and control; rather, they reflect diverse strategies for producing the meaning of *aurat* in accordance with each movement's social and ideological configuration.

D. Conclusion

This study addresses both research questions comprehensively. First, Fatimah Mernissi argues that the concept of *aurat* in Islam is the result of a social construction



that reflects patriarchal dominance rather than a fixed theological principle. Second, these ideas are connected to the struggles of Muslim women in Indonesia who seek to negotiate piety and social participation through more egalitarian interpretations of *aurat*.

By employing Foucault's discourse theory, this research emphasizes that *aurat* functions not only as a representation of morality but also as a site of power relations in which Indonesian Muslim women are positioned as subjects of knowledge and agents of social change. The practice of reinterpreting *aurat* by Islamic women's movements such as KUPI, Aisyiyah, Muslimat NU, and Salafi women's communities demonstrates the relevance of Mernissi's thought. This indicates that religious discourse is dynamic and open to reinterpretation in response to social change.

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