

BETWEEN FEMINISM AND ISLAM:FATIMA MERNISSI AND HER LEGACY

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Abstract: Fatima Mernissi (1940 - 2015) was a feminist scholar and activist without equal in the Arab World. Her work was concerned with identifying and critiquing the different structures that intersect to oppress women, ranging from colonialism, Islam (or the patriarchal interpretation of Islam), to capitalist development. But what has most retained the attention of her admirers and critics alike is her work on Islam and women's rights. The present paper focuses on this particular aspect of her work, distinguishing between two moments: a secularist feminist moment and an Islamic feminist moment. This feature makes Mernissi's work particularly interesting in understanding the nature and development of feminism in the region as it epitomises the two main trends in Arab feminism. In exploring these two trends in Mernissi's feminist trajectory, the paper explains both the major factors behind each feminist position as well as the major reactions each triggered. The paper particularly focuses on the strength of Islamic feminism and ends with a discussion of Mernissi's legacy in Morocco.

Keywords: feminist scholar, women's oppression, women's rights, patriarchy, capitalist development, Islamic feminism, Islamic democracy, human rights, religious texts' misinterpretation, sexual harassment, secularist position

Introducing Fatima Mernissi

Born in 1940 in the city of Fes, at a time when Morocco was still under French occupation, Mernissi had a rather unusual life course for a woman of her generation. At a time when few women had access to literacy or schooling, she had the opportunity to go to a nationalist school in the city of Fes, considered the capital of the Moroccan nationalist movement.¹

Mernissi left Fes for Rabat, the capital, to study political science at Mohammed V University (MVU). It was not long after Morocco had obtained independence in 1956 and MVU was host to a vibrant student movement, the Union National des Étudiants Marocains (UNEM), marked by strong leftist politics in the 1960s. Mernissi got involved in the movement which had a great impact on her political conscience. Later on, she realised that what she wanted to study most was sociology. Her main objective was to interview illiterate women who were denied a voice. This became a sort of lifelong obsession, having herself escaped this ancestral silence through a fortunate turn of fate, as she confesses (Mernissi 1996, 110-11). To study sociology, Mernissi went to the Sorbonne University in Paris, and from there to Brandeis University, obtaining a PhD in 1973. Her dissertation titled “Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society,” was published two years later under the title *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*. At the time, the American feminist movement was at its apogee and Mernissi frequented feminist circles from which she learnt a lot regarding cultural analysis, organising, and lobbying, as she recalls (Mernissi 1996, 110-11).

After her graduation from Brandeis, Mernissi turned down several lucrative opportunities abroad to go back to Morocco; her objective, as she expresses in one of the interviews she gave, was to remain rooted in Moroccan society to better observe its moves and to influence its course (Mernissi 1996, 102). Mernissi was hired as a sociology professor at MVU in 1974 and since then, she combined scholarship and activism becoming a veritable organic intellectual. In her research, she sought to identify and critique the various intersecting structures that subject women to marginalisation targeting colonialism, the postcolonial state, Islam or its androcentric interpretation, and capitalism or capitalist development. She also conducted pioneering interviews that highlighted the agency, power of resistance, and worldviews of marginalised women. Her writings and research activities marked a turning point in sociology in Morocco, introducing and institutionalising the study of women and gender in the country.

As an activist who believed in the power of communication and networking, Mernissi initiated research groups and writing workshops in Morocco and North Africa that produced edited volumes characterised by interdisciplinarity and multiplicity of topics varying from political prisoners, the dreams of the youth, child abuse, civic action, women's human rights, women carpet weavers, women and the media, and sexual harassment or domestic violence.²

But what has most retained the attention of Mernissi's admirers and critics alike was her work on Islam and women's rights. It is important to distinguish her feminist trajectory between a 'secularist' moment in which she adopts an anti-religious position, and a more religion-friendly moment. The latter has been identified as Islamic feminism which is in Margot Badran's words, "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm" (Badran 2009, 242). For Badran, one of the most important observers of this discourse, Mernissi is "one of the earliest to articulate Islamic feminism without taking on an Islamic feminist identity" (Badran 2002). Even though Mernissi has never self-identified as an Islamic feminist, Islamic feminism appears to be Mernissi's greatest legacy, inspiring women from all over the world to reclaim the faith and opening new avenues for doing feminism in the region beyond both patriarchal and orientalist discourses on Islam.³

Mernissi's Secular Phase

In her first book *Beyond the Veil* (1975, new ed. 1987), which explores the contradictory effects of both modernisation and Islam on gender dynamics in Morocco, Mernissi adopts a stringent secularist position. For Mernissi, the post-colonial Moroccan state is built on a contradiction. On the one hand, the state embarked on a project of modernisation built on "sexual equality" as it encourages women's participation in the public sphere through schooling and employment, and on the other, it codified a family legislation based on a religious reference that undermined this very project. Mernissi was especially targeting the conservative Personal Status Code, known as the Moudawana which governs areas of marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody. First promulgated in 1958, two years after independence, the Moudawana defined the husband as the head of the household in charge of providing for the family whereas it identifies the wife as essentially a housewife who owes him obedience. Among the discriminating provisions the Moudawana authorised are polygamy and unilateral divorce, even when the nationalist movement or its leaders had called for their abolition as early as the 1940s.⁴

Mernissi declares: “In this book, I want to demonstrate that there is a fundamental contradiction between Islam as interpreted in official policy and equality between the sexes” (Mernissi 1987, 9).⁵ Re-reading the Qur’an and revisiting the interpretative work of early authoritative exegetes, she concludes that Islam’s concept of gender is based on a fear of women’s sexuality and power; hence practices like polygamy, unilateral divorce and veiling are intended to curtail female power through weakening the couple, or women’s power over their husbands. “Sexual equality violates Islam’s premises,” she continues, “actualised in its laws, that heterosexual love is dangerous to Allah’s order.” (9) The book is a plea for the Moroccan postcolonial state to embrace modernity and universal human rights without ambiguity and to abandon Islam, understood as essentially fostering male supremacy as a source of legislation.

It is important to note that the secular modernist position displayed in a book written in the beginning of the 1970s was in tune with the times whether in Morocco or in the West. As mentioned earlier, Mernissi’s political consciousness was first formed in the Moroccan student movement of the 1960s and 70s, the UNEM, which was the breeding ground of the Moroccan (secular) left. Moreover, at the time she was writing her dissertation at a university in the United States, feminist and leftist ideas were hegemonic in the intellectual and academic circles she frequented. In an interview, Mernissi mentions how the university was home to important figures like Herbert Marcuse, considered the father of the student movement in the US and one of the finest theorists of the New Left, and Angela Davis, a radical African-American activist for human rights and Marcuse’s student (Mernissi 1996, 110). These biographical elements explain the secularist position expressed above and the Marxist feminist approach that characterised Mernissi’s critique in the 1970s up until the beginning of the 1980s.

From the late 1980s, Mernissi’s secularist stance towards Islam taken in *Beyond the Veil* easily lent itself to various criticisms. Her position was found guilty of a failure to distinguish between Islam as a divine message, and its patriarchal human interpretation, Islam and *fiqh*, Muslim jurisprudence, or Islam and the Moudawana (Majid 1998; Barlas 2005). The book was criticised as well for its selective, reductionist and ahistorical, literalist approach (Rhouni 2010). Also questioned was the solidity of the claim that purports to study “male-female dynamics in a *modern society*” (emphasis added), as the title announces, by referring to medieval interpretation of Islamic sources (Zayzafoon 2005).

It is important to note that in spite of her secularist position at this stage of her career, Mernissi does not single out Islam as the only explanatory factor behind women's oppression in Morocco. In writings of a little later period based on one of the first interviews with lower class women ever conducted in Morocco, Mernissi targets state capitalism and its exploitation of female labor. Mernissi's fieldwork studies written in the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s are among the first and the most invigorating feminist critiques of capitalism and the weakening of women's power with the integration of the various Third World countries into the capitalist world market. Her essays "The Degrading Effect of Capitalism on Female Labour in a Third World Economy" (1978-79), "Le Proletariat féminin au Maroc" (The Female Proletariat in Morocco, 1980), "Women and the Impact of Capitalist Development" (1982-3), "Zhor's World: A Moroccan Domestic Worker Speaks Out" (1982), and *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women* (1988) represent the first attempts in Morocco at the time, as well as elsewhere in the world, to make visible subaltern women's labor and its non-avowed importance for the economy.⁶ For Mernissi, the concept of gender or gender roles in Islam which is reproduced in the Moudawana, is a boon for capitalism because it makes female labor invisible and thus allows its exploitation without accountability.

In 1991, Mernissi surprised her readers, especially in the Anglophone world, by publishing a book whose thesis is in complete opposition to her earlier positions regarding "the Muslim ideology of the sexes," to use her phrase. In *The Veil and the Male Elite: a Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Mernissi argues that Islam came to establish a society based on social justice and equality, yet the strong male resistance that it encountered caused it to retreat from its revolutionary impetus.

Shift to Islamic Feminism

Although Mernissi never explained the process by which she shifted her perspective on Islam, an examination of her intellectual trajectory allows us to see the change as mainly the result of a gradual intellectual development. A major moment in this transition is her encounter and collaboration with a few male progressive Islamic scholars, who advocated the reform of the Moudawana using Islamic arguments. This collaboration took place within the framework of a multidisciplinary research group Mernissi created in 1981 on 'Woman, Family and Child,' contributing to the emergence of an intellectual debate on women's rights and the amendment of the Moudawana, which would turn to a public debate in the beginning of the 1990s and would continue into the beginning of the twenty first century, ending in significant reform of the law in 2004. The most important of these

reformist male scholars of Islam with whom Mernissi collaborated was Ahmed Khamlichi, a member of the National Council of Ulama (male religious scholars), one of the roles of which is to guide and support the King's decision in a would-be modification of the family law. Khamlichi was one of the religious scholars, who took part in the committee that was in charge of drafting the new law in 2004. On Khamlichi, Mernissi writes:

Ulama, such as Professor Khamlichi maintain today that we can find in the Qur'an arguments to justify a more egalitarian legislation in which woman enjoys all her rights and her dignity. The very foundation of misogyny in Arab countries, which present themselves as "sacred," is far from having unanimous support among the fuqaha (specialists in jurisprudence) and ulama, either in the beginning of the [twentieth] century or nowadays. (Mernissi, 1987, 88).⁷

In his writings, Khamlichi makes a clear distinction between *sharia* and *fiqh*; while *sharia* is divine, *fiqh* is human. *Sharia* is often-- erroneously--translated or defined as Islamic law, while the word *sharia* is mentioned in the Qur'an to refer to 'the right path' or 'the law of God' as revealed in both the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition. *Fiqh*, on the other hand, refers to the human interpretation of this *sharia* expressed in scholarship of Muslim jurists since the ninth century. Khamlichi explains that, since the Moudawana is inspired from one of the schools of *fiqh* (the Maliki School), it is not sacred and can be subject to change using *ijtihad*, independent reasoning. Khamlichi's insights no doubt served to shake Mernissi's secularist take on Islam. Significantly, Mernissi mentions his name in the acknowledgement page of *The Veil and the Male Elite* as her main source (Mernissi 1991, x).

Khamlichi's influence on Mernissi's feminist position vis-à-vis Islam would be felt from 1984, the year she published a series of articles in the magazine *Jeune Afrique*, which were collected and published in 1986 in a book entitled *L'Amour dans les pays musulmans* (Love in Muslim countries). With this book, Mernissi's feminist trajectory changed course. The book's thesis is in complete opposition to *Beyond the Veil*. Here Islam is not against heterosexual love as she once argued, but quite the contrary. The book sheds light on liberal theologians like the Andalusian scholar Ibn Hazm (born in 384 Hegira [994 AD]), who preached faithfulness in heterosexual relationships, in contrast to her earlier works which rely on androcentric interpretations of various orthodox male theologians. Mernissi also discovers how Sufi Islam grants women a more egalitarian status, allowing for the emergence of an important female mystic like Rabia al-Adawiya, considered one of the most important Sufi masters of all times.

The Veil and the Male Elite: A Cult Book

It is *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (the English translation of the 1987 *La Harem Politique* published in 1991 in the U.S. and in the U.K. under the title *Women and Islam: An Historical Inquiry*) that clearly marks Mernissi's shift to a position that many observers of feminism in the Arab world described as an example of Islamic feminism. In this book, Mernissi identifies the issue with women's rights in Islam as one of interpretation and male vested interests rather than Islam as a divine or prophetic project. She states in the introduction:

When I finished writing this book I had come to understand one thing; if women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic traditions. But simply because those rights conflict with the interest of a male elite. (Mernissi 1991, 8-9)

It is in these terms that she proposes to revisit the religious texts to disentangle them from misogynous interpretations. With *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi was one of the first scholars to take up the challenge of delving into the religious realm, usually closed to people of her training, going beyond the boundaries of her own formative discipline, sociology. *The Veil and the Male Elite* is the first book in a trilogy of books that strongly defend the idea that gender equality and democracy are not inconsistent with Islam as a social and political project. The trilogy includes *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* published in 1990, a historical investigation into Muslim queens and a critical analysis of the concept of power in Islam. For Mernissi, the existence of these queens attest to the idea that gender equality is not alien to Islam but that it represents its repressed memory. This book was followed in 1992 by *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, in which she distinguishes between what she refers to as "Islam-rissala" (Islam-message), that is, Islam as a divine revelation, and "political Islam," which is the outcome of a history of ideological and political manipulations. Mernissi argues that Islam has become hierarchical, elitist, and despotic because of the "political opportunism" of male elite groups and their vested interests (Mernissi 1992, 75). The originality of Mernissi's new scholarship on Islam greatly contributed to the theorisation and dissemination of this new feminist paradigm, inviting women to re-appropriate Islam and to challenge the monopoly of ulama on religious interpretation.

This new stance will reconcile Mernissi with the Islam of her childhood, which is not devoid of value for a Muslim woman who has been angry with one of the most important

components of her identity and psychological making. The weight of this internal conflict is clear in the following statement: "Throughout my childhood I had a very ambivalent relationship with the Koran. It was taught to us in a Koranic school in a particularly ferocious manner. But to my childish mind only the highly fanciful Islam of my illiterate grandmother, Lalla Yasmina, opened the door for me to a poetic religion." (Mernissi 1991, 62) The rest of the passage emphasises a central element of this reconciliation, her recognition of the importance of interpretation and the interpreter's worldview in the construction of meaning in Islam. She continues:

Depending on how it is used, the sacred text can be a threshold for escape or an insurmountable barrier. It can be that rare music that leads to dreaming or simply a dispiriting routine. It all depends on the person who invokes it. However, for me, the older I grew, the fainter the music became. In secondary school the history of religion course was studded with traditions. Many of them from appropriate pages of [Muhammad Ibn Ismail] al-Bukhari, which the teacher recited to us, made me feel extremely ill at ease. (64)

This statement in which she introduces her feminist revision of al-Bukhari's *al-Sahih*, further expresses her feeling of uneasiness toward Islam's androcentric side, common among many Muslim feminists. This enterprise is particularly audacious since al-Bukhari (810-870) is considered one of the most authoritative collectors of the Prophet's traditions and sayings, or hadiths, in Sunni Islam. Al-Bukhari is also the founder of the science of *isnad*, the chain of authorities attesting to the historical authenticity of a particular hadith, a methodology with remarkable precision that classifies the hadiths into *sahih* (sound), *hasan* (good), *da'if* (weak) and *maudu'* (forged). For Sunni Muslims, Al-Bukhari's collection significantly known as Al-Sahih, is considered to include only authentic hadiths, hence the originality and courage of Mernissi's endeavour in the history of Islamic thought.

In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi re-reads the Prophet's hadith and the Qur'an using a contextual approach that highlights the way the egalitarian or feminist aspects of the religion as preached by the Prophet were compromised, distorted or simply forgotten. She foregrounds the important public roles played by women especially Muhammad's wives like Aisha or Umm Salama. She also highlights how the new religion granted them spiritual equality with men in addition to inheritance and property rights. However, she continues, the revolutionary social project of the Prophet was subject to a strong male opposition that stopped its impetus and brought about a resurgence of pre-Islamic misogynous norms and values. Mernissi's book sets out to restore the original egalitarian aspect of the religion through a corrective revision of some texts of questionable authenticity in the Hadith corpus which support women's inferior social status in Islam. She offers a compelling

contextual and historical reading of some verses in the Qur'an dealing with women, especially the verses related to the *hijab*, placing them in their historical context and suggesting their prescriptive impermanence.

Mernissi opens her book with a simple question: "Can a woman rule a Muslim state?" which she asks her grocer, because he, as all grocers, is a "barometer" of public opinion in Morocco. The grocer answers in negative terms quoting a hadith which states "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity" (1-2). She decides to revisit this hadith considered *sahih*, or authentic, by al-Bukhari. Mernissi promotes this kind of revision by its relevance to contemporary politics and especially Moroccan women's political representation. Women's low political representation in 1980s Morocco or the Arab world, she argues, is not a sign of Arab Muslim societies' backwardness as much as a larger manifestation of the androcentrism of the male elite and their vested interests. Hence, she stresses the imperative of going back to Islam's founding period and to the founding texts to highlight the dark zones of resistance to women's access to power. She writes:

According to al-Bukhari, it is supposed to have been Abu Bakra who heard the Prophet say: "

Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity." Since this [h]adith is included in the *Sahih*—those thousands of authentic [h]adiths accepted by the meticulous alBukhari—it is a priori considered true and therefore unassailable without proof to the contrary, since we are here in scientific terrain.

So nothing bans me, as a Muslim woman, from making a double investigation—historical and methodological—of this hadith and its author, and especially of the conditions in which it was first put to use. Who uttered this hadith, where, when, why, and to whom? (49)

She thus inscribes her revisionist endeavor in conformity with alBukhari's tradition of verification and counter-verification rather than defying or disrespecting it.

One of the central ideas *The Veil and the Male Elite* stresses is the political and ideological manipulation of the religious: Not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies. Since all power, from the seventh century on, was only legitimated by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false hadiths (8-9), verifying the accuracy of the hadith, "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity," transmitted by a disciple, Abu Bakra, Mernissi asks new questions. She

questions, for example, the circumstances under which Abu Bakra remembered this statement, which al-Bukhari apparently did not pay attention to. Abu Bakra, she observes, remembered this saying twenty-five years after hearing it from the Prophet, which is suspicious to her. She first examines available biographical elements concerning this disciple. She finds out, for example, that Abu Bakra was an ex-slave, whom Islam had liberated and elevated to the rank of a notable, one of the dignitaries of the city of Basra, a position that he probably did not want to renounce. His position might explain the reason for his remembering such a hadith in the particular historical juncture that Mernissi unveils. According to Mernissi's discovery, Abu Bakra remembered this statement after Aisha's defeat in the Battle of the Camel against Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin. Ali tried to gain the sympathy of Aisha's supporters and gain potential allies in Basra including Abu Bakra, when the latter cited the hadith. Abu Bakra explained that he had refused to take part in Aisha's offensive act because he had heard the Prophet uttering this statement. Mernissi also reveals that Abu Bakra had already been accused of perjury and was flagellated during the rule of the second caliph, Umar Ibn al-Khattab. For Mernissi, these elements make Abu Bakra's reliability doubtful, according to the rules of isnad.

In the parts of her book devoted to the Qur'an, Mernissi focuses on the verses dealing with the hijab arguing that women's veiling was never meant to be mandatory but were dictated by forces of circumstances, and socio-military conditions more specifically. Mernissi first asks readers to "remember that the Koran (Qur'an) is a book rooted in the daily life of the Prophet and his community; it is often a response to a given situation." (Mernissi 1991, 87) One of the examples of this interactivity is Umm (mother of) Salama, one of the Prophet's wives, who dared to ask the Prophet a challenging question concerning women's status in the Qur'an, "Why are men mentioned in the Qur'an and why are we not?" God responded in verse 33:35 affirming that he equally addresses both men and women: "Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward."

Mernissi proposes to read the verse of the hijab taking into consideration the broad historical and social circumstances of the verse. Her methodology, here as well, is not alien to classical Islamic methodology of interpretation. She builds on the tradition of Muslim exegesis, *tafsir*, which itself relies on a historical approach known as *asbab al-nuzul*, the

circumstances of the revelation. But if classical Muslim exegetes stopped at looking at the immediate circumstances of the verse to reveal its meaning, Mernissi studies the historical, social, and psychological context of the whole period between year five and year eight after Hegira. Mernissi concludes that the Prophet was subject to harassment during these troubling years. At the end of his life, she explains, a growing opposition to his leadership by some people from his own community, whom the Qur'an calls "alMunafiqun" (hypocrites), saw light. The opposition was so tense that the Prophet's wives were subjected to sexual harassment. It is here that Umar Ibn al-Khattab, one of the closest companions to the Prophet and who would become his first successor or Caliph, urged him to impose veiling on his women, which the Prophet opposed in the beginning. With growing dissension and opposition, faced with the difficult choice between the survival of Islam and its unity, or the survival of the egalitarian project, she continues, Muhammad was forced to yield to Umar's pressures. Verse 33:59, which "advised the wives of the Prophet to make themselves recognised by pulling their *jilbab* (mantles) over themselves" settled the issue (180). Mernissi concludes that "the hijab incarnates... this official retreat from the principle of equality" (179). She adds: "If the hijab is a response to sexual aggression to *ta'arrud* (sexual harassment), it is also its mirror image" (182). She also states that "the veil represents the triumph of the hypocrites" (187) and that Islamists who impose veiling on women are the heirs of the hypocrites.

Reactions to *The Veil and the Male Elite*

The book sparked a heated debate and provoked some mixed reactions from all sorts of detractors, ranging from the religious fundamentalists to the secular fundamentalists. One of the first reactions at the time of its release was a death fatwa which an extremist group in Morocco issued against Mernissi. Probably wishing to appease the tension, Moroccan authorities withdrew the book from the bookshops, avoiding issuing an official ban. Mernissi faced three sorts of critics: the religious fundamentalists, the Islamic modernists, and the secular feminists. In the first category was Abdelkébir Alaoui Mdaghri, the head of the Ministère des Habous et des Affaires Islamiques (Ministry of Habous [land property legislation] and Religious Affairs) at the time. Mdaghri published a book entitled *Al-Mar'a bayna ahkam al-fiqh wa al-da'wa ila al-taghyir* (Woman Between the Laws of Fiqh and the Call for Change), in which he devotes a whole chapter to *The Veil and the Male Elite*. He declares that Mernissi has no expertise in religious matters which makes her analysis devoid of value. He mockingly calls her a "faqiha biduni fiqh" (a female faqih [specialist in fiqh] without fiqh). The mere use of the female noun 'faqiha' already stirs mockery because of the prevalent belief that fiqh is a male domain. His comment is indicative of the

difficulty of accepting a feminist reading of religious texts and, more generally, readings from specialists in disciplines other than religion. The main objective behind his criticism of Mernissi is to argue that women are not entitled to “*al-wilaya al-amma*,” leading the caliphate, or headship of the state. His main evidence is precisely the hadith “Those who entrust their affairs to women will never know prosperity,” the validity of which Mernissi attacks in her book. Mdaghri contends that the hadith is considered by Muslim jurists as “*sharif*” (sound) not “*da’if*” (weak). He also argues that no woman has ever held the position of head of state in Islam. He mentions the late Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (presumably for him the exception that proves the rule) to prove that even when a woman is elected as the head of the state, it comes to a bad end. He adds that Islam bans women from leading the prayer, or the imamate. But as if realising the weakness of his claim, Mdaghri goes beyond religious argumentation to invoke ‘scientific’ arguments. He alludes to ‘some medical views’ in general terms, which, according to him, confirm the existence of an opposition between women’s nature and political leadership. He mentions, for example, pregnancy, menstruation, breastfeeding, and emotions and the sensitivity of women.

A less androcentric and dogmatic criticism comes from the Moroccan-American Anouar Majid, a modernist scholar of Islam and the West who argues in his 1998 article, “The Politics of Feminism in Islam” for an “indigenous path” to women’s emancipation based on what he calls “progressive Islam.” Majid praises Mernissi’s criticism of clerical Islam, yet opposes her methodology in *The Veil and the Male Elite* which for him “desacralises the Qur’an by reducing it to a mere historical document” (Majid 1998, 329–30). Majid continues, “with the exception of a few rules in the Qur’an, one can negotiate any ideology within the wide and amorphous parameters of the faith” (332), implying that Mernissi transgressed those exclusive rules. This perspective, of course, leaves unanswered such questions as: “Who decides and How one decides What these exceptional rules are?” as Suad Joseph rightly contends in her critical response to Majid’s article (Joseph 1998, 367). She also writes: The solution he [Majid] offers, through the indigenous and progressive path charted by Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and his disciple Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im “based on Meccan Revelation” is, nevertheless, a recuperation of an earlier true version of Islam. His critique of “false Islamic orthodoxy,” refreshing as it is, raises the question of who and how one knows the “true Islam.” (366)

The tenets of a discourse like Majid’s, which suppose the existence of permanent rules that cannot possibly be changed, assume a position of authority and an implicit claim of orthodoxy that discard other readings as unorthodox and even heretical.

On the other side of the spectrum is Naima Chikhaoui, a Moroccan secular feminist, who criticises Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite* for its soft feminist politics. In an article entitled "La Question des femmes vue par Fatima Mernissi" [Women's issue as seen by Fatima Mernissi], Chikhaoui endeavoured to contrast Mernissi's two positions, dwelling most specifically on the flaws of Mernissi's second-stage feminism within a religious framework, which she perceives as lenient with respect to religion as opposed to her earlier intransigent secular feminist critique.

For Chikhaoui, the prominent role played by the first Muslim women in Islamic history, which Mernissi seeks to highlight in her book as an example of Islam's egalitarianism and as a model to be emulated by contemporary Muslim women, is not useful for feminists today since Mernissi is only dealing with a minority of women, the Prophet's wives, i.e. those close to power. Chikhaoui also criticises Mernissi's implicit argument for making religion a private matter in the beginning of her book. She wonders about the rationale behind claiming that religion should be a matter of personal choice while devoting an entire book to argue that a democratic and egalitarian religion had existed in early Islam (Chikhaoui 1997, 19-20). For Chikhaoui, the whole enterprise is contradictory in nature. However, Chikhaoui misses the point that what Mernissi aimed to do in this book is to argue that Islam is ideologically manipulated, that it is better protected under secular laws. However, since she realises that change is best attainable through gradual reform rather than abrupt revolution, or an overnight secularisation, she took upon herself to provide an example of a women-friendly interpretation of religious texts that is politically enabling for Muslim women and setting an example for future generations to engage in *ijtihad* and re-claim Islam, hijacked by misogynous men of religion. Mernissi thus succeeds in initiating an unprecedented national and transnational movement, which she herself celebrates in her *Islam and Democracy*:

What we are seeing today is a claim by women to their right to God and the historical tradition. This takes various forms. There are women who are active within the fundamentalist movements and those who work on a reinterpretation of the Muslim heritage as a necessary ingredient to our modernity. Our liberation will come through a rereading of our past and a reappropriation of all that has structured our civilisation. (Mernissi 1992, 160)

This movement has increasingly been referred to as 'Islamic feminism,' which since the 1990s, has evolved into a transnational movement that evolves within academic circles as well as transnational organisations such as Musawah for Equality in the Muslim Family

(Musawah), Sisters in Islam, and ‘KARAMAH – Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights.’

The Legacy of Mernissi’s Islamic Feminist Tradition

In Morocco, Mernissi’s work has inspired a new generation of Islamic feminists. The most remarkable heir of Mernissi’s legacy is Asma Lamrabet, who like Mernissi, is interestingly not trained in religious studies, yet dared to break the monopoly of male ulama over the interpretation of religious texts, producing refreshing women-friendly interpretations. A medical doctor by training, Lamrabet, nonetheless, authored six books and numerous articles on women’s rights in Islam. On the influence of Mernissi’s work on her career, Lamrabet writes:

Whenever I read her books, I was struck by her intellectual courage, her style, sometimes ironic but always deep and subtle, on a highly serious taboo topic, namely religion and women. Yet I have to say that I was touched mainly by three of her books: *Le harem politique (The Veil and the Male Elite)*, *Sultanes oubliées (Forgotten Queens of Islam)* and *Islam et démocratie (Islam and Democracy)*. In *Le harem politique* - a book that I consider Fatima (Mernissi)’s masterpiece - I remember being deeply touched by her sincerity, her intellectual honesty and above all by how she formulated problems in an open and direct way. It was undoubtedly she who broke through the first locks of religious interpretation concerning women. ... In this book, Fatima Mernissi started a work that has since been taken up by very many women academics and Muslim researchers, namely, deconstructing the patriarchal reading of Islam through a critical rereading of its commentaries (*tafassirs*); a work that distinguishes between the spiritual message (*elwahy/rissala*) and the normative and interpretative tradition resulting from human understanding. (Lamrabet 2016)

Lamrabet is undoubtedly one of the finest examples of this movement of women who endeavoured to reclaim Islam in Morocco. In 2008, she became the head of the International Research Group on Women and Islam, GIERFI, which aims to provide a platform for Muslim scholars and activists interested in promoting an alternative discourse on Muslim women, one based on the egalitarian spirit of Islam. In the tradition of Mernissi who sought the collaboration of male ulama, Lamrabet and her group partnered in the same year with Al-Rabita al-Muhammadiyah (the Muhammadian League), which groups liberal state theologians. Three years later, she accepted a position within the Rabita as director of the Center of Women studies in Islam, which seeks to revisit Islamic heritage with respect to women’s issues from ‘a Qur’anic vision that supports equality between the sexes.’⁸ This engagement demonstrates that Lamrabet, like Mernissi, believes that change requires

“talking to the [Ideological State Apparatuses] ISAs,” to borrow the phrase used by British scholar of Cultural Studies, Tony Bennett (Bennett 1992). Although Mernissi refrained from being part of any sort of institution, Lamrabet took it upon herself to work within the confines of a religious state institution, pushing back its limits a step further everyday. In the face of continually spreading religious fanaticism and its corollary, Islamophobia, as well as entrenched religious and cultural conservatism, Islamic feminism writ large represents Muslim women’s highly needed voice today, a voice which Fatima Mernissi greatly contributed to liberate.

NOTES

¹ On her childhood, see her semi-autobiographical novel *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994).

² In an interview, she declared that she got the idea to organise these workshops after a trip to India where she met Devaki Jain who worked for the United Nations and who organised a writing workshop in Bangalore. Mernissi recalled that to her surprise, the workshop was organised in a garage where Jain’s sister was weaving carpets. Jain had explained, that in order to know India, the participants had to leave their hotel rooms and meet the people. Mernissi concluded that for organising a writing workshop, it is not necessary to have a lot of money but it is necessary that people come together around a common goal (Mernissi 2015).

³ Many obituaries written in tribute to Mernissi emphasise her Islamic feminist profile and legacy. See for instance the article in The New York Times, entitled “Fatima Mernissi, a Founder of Islamic Feminism, Dies at 75,” by Margalit Fox, Dec. 9, 2015. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/world/middleeast/fatema-mernissi-a-founder-of-islamic-feminism-dies-at-75.html?_r=2 (Accessed, 6 September 2016) See also the AMEWS E-Bulletin Special Issue March 2016, titled “Holding on to an Indispensable Part of our History: Recollections of Fatima Mernissi. Nancy Gallagher and Sondra Hale, Co-Editors, Available at: <http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb/publications/amews/amews-ebulletin-2016March.pdf> (Accessed, 6 September 2016) and the Musawah Vision Issue 20, March 2016, Special Issue, titled “Honouring a Fierce Feminist Foremother.” Available at: <http://www.musawah.org/sites/default/files/MusawahVision20EN.pdf> (Accessed, 6 September 2016)

⁴ The Moudawana falls within the prerogatives of the king, who has the religious title of ‘*Amir al-Mu’minin*’ (Commander of the Faithful). It was modified only twice, once in 1993, with very minor changes, and a second time in 2004, with a reform considered by many women’s organisation as revolutionary.

⁵ I am using the 1987 revised edition of *Beyond the Veil* (Mernissi 1987, 9).

⁶ Mernissi’s important work on women’s labor was part of a growing literature on women and work, and women in development from the 70s and 80s onwards. She was certainly influenced by the pioneering work of Ester Boserup, especially her 1970 book *Woman’s Role in Economic Development*, concerned with the fate and contribution of women in countries undergoing modernisation or development. The work of Maria Mies was also influential in this respect, especially her book *The Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (1982). For other writing at this time on women and work see Margot Badran, “Islam, Patriarchy, and Feminism in the Middle East,” *Trends in History*, 4, 1, (Fall 1985) 48-71. Reprinted in *Women Living under Muslim Laws*, Dossier 4, (1988) Montpellier, France; and Badran “Women and Production in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Trends in History*, 2, 3, (Spring 1982), 59-88.

⁷ My translation. See Rhouni, 2010, 207-208.

⁸ See the mission statement of the center at <http://www.annisae.ma/Article.aspx?C=5583>

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