

FATIMA MERNISSI: A COMPLEX TRAJECTORY

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Abstract: Combining memory and reflection, in this essay I speak of the complex trajectory of Fatima Mernissi. I do this through evoking the parallel, yet distinctive, trajectories of Fatima and myself on the path of gender jihad from the late twentieth century into the twenty-first century in our different global locations. Though coming from different starting points, our visions for gender justice and equality merged.

Keywords: gender jihad, gender justice, Muslim women, human rights, Islamic feminism

I arrived in Rabat after work travel in Europe. I would return to Europe, so this break in a predominantly Muslim context in North Africa was much welcomed. First order of the day was a lunch date to finally meet Fatima Mernissi as arranged by our mutual friend Dr. Asma Lamrabet.

I could say I had waited over thirty years for this meeting but that would not be all together accurate. Perhaps it was more like Fatima and I had been on a path leading us to this moment. I was excited and Asma communicated similar sentiments from Fatima. Then her health took a turn for the worst. Because she could not breath without oxygen she had to send her regrets for not being able to join us for lunch. Four days later, she was gone. I never got to meet her in this lifetime.

The culmination of our life work and this just missed opportunity highlights the fragility of the women's movements in Islam. We are rarely presented with opportunities to form meaningful alliances across differences in this gender jihad. Jihad means struggle. In this case, it refers to the struggle for Muslim women to gain agency and transformation in their own lives, however diverse.

Looking back over four decades in my personal engagement for gender justice, I have seen Muslim women enter the new millennium at a new high. Still some might believe this has been one seamless journey. This is an illusion of past reflection. There were many bumps, false starts and wicked turns on the road alongside victories and scaled mountain tops. I often lived through changes without discernment. I never counted on my own life work having the impact it now seems to be allocated. I have also been impacted by the company and work of others along this road so well-traveled. Most of the names of gender justice advocates that I carried with me belong to women I have met. We have exchanged ideas and formed alliances even across vast differences. How could Fatima and I miss such an opportunity?

My participation in the gender justice movement is a faith journey. I entered Islam voluntarily in 1972 at the age of twenty. Two decades later, the dust would settle. On the way, I completed my Masters and Ph.D with a focus on hermeneutics: reading for gender in the Islamic primary sacred text, the Qur'an. I would also live in Muslim majority Arabic-speaking North Africa, twice.

My dissertation would be edited to become a small book *Qur'an and Woman*, first published in Malaysia, 1992. Its publication would coincide with the completion of my teaching contract at the International Islamic University (IIU) in Malaysia. Malaysia is another Muslim majority country but it is not Arabic-speaking. Here I would begin my second career as an activist for reform and justice. I spent three prosperous years in Malaysia forming life-time friendships in the gender jihad. However, the conservative faux-liberal institution of higher learning IIU did not provide any opportunity to share my intellectual work. It was my first real experience in living with the contradictions. Meanwhile, I enjoyed a high demand from the larger civil society and became a founding member of Sisters in Islam (SIS), a pro faith, pro-rights non-governmental organization. The relationship between my work and the development of SIS was mutually transformative. The scholarship behind *Qur'an and Woman* would be instrumental in building the confidence, agency and legitimacy of the SIS members. Working with SIS provided me with opportunities to move outside academic elitism to address the lived realities of Muslim women worldwide.

At IIU, I won a small grant for the project Search for Pro-faith Feminism in Islam. It was partially inspired by my encounter with Mernissi's work. When one is born a Muslim how much of what is understood as Islam was based on culture and ethnicity? How much of it could be methodologically linked to Islam's primary and sacred sources? However much

these sources were debated for their meaning and importance, gender asymmetry would prevail and remain largely uncontested.

In Fatima Mernissi's work, we encounter one of the most comprehensive challenges to the gender asymmetry in its time. Still, I would take issue with what seemed to be a collapse of Islam in Arab culture. I noticed Fatima's affirmation of her identity as an Arab went in tandem with the affirmation of her identity as Muslim. When I read her works, I could find no real distinction. The distinction between culture and Islam is an on-going concern and not just Arab culture.

In the Malay language, to convert to Islam was termed "*masuk Malayu*", literally: "enter (into being) Malay". I had spent two decades searching to find myself as a US born African slave-descendent who voluntarily entered Islam by living in Muslim cultures across Africa and Asia. It would take some time to unravel how Muslim cultures of long standing practiced many things that were simply a product of their cultural context and had no specific bearing on Islam, if we searched for some kind of a reference within the sacred sources. As a Muslim by choice, I had to determine if I was entering Islam or entering one or more of the various Muslim cultures. The tendency to collapse the two was problematic. Furthermore, to have "western" cultural origins would forever mean to be estranged from such cultural definitions.

In no small way, this would lead to a lifetime preoccupation with the power to define what is Islam. Taking agency to define what is meant by "Islam" also distinguishes the work of Sisters in Islam and the launching of a global movement for reform in Muslim personal status laws, called Musawah. Musawah identifies itself as a knowledge building project with paramount attention to defining key terms in the debates, including "Islam", "justice", "feminism" and "human rights".

My engagement with Sisters in Islam would lead me to the Beijing Conference on women in 1995. From that moment, SIS and I would work to forge a third voice of Islam and gender reform distinct

from the two dominant voices at that forum. Could we effectively participate in a larger, more global consideration or would it simply be the Malaysian version of the extended debates?

The two voices that dominated were telling. One voice I consider came from secular Muslim feminists. They advocated keeping religion, particularly, Islam out of the debates over gender justice. Religion/ Islam was irrevocably anti-women. The other voice followed the growing Islamist perspective. It opposed any strategy or program of action unless it confirmed or originated in a very patriarchal definition of Islam. Both sides agreed on one thing: one could not have both Islam and Human Rights, or identify as a feminist and be pro-faith. From the days of my research project in search of pro-faith feminism I found these locations indefensible.

The way to forge a third voice was becoming more coherent. In the end, it would wed both religion and feminism which is now known as Islamic feminism. If the women's movement was only subject to existing articulations of the major paradigms of the debate there would be no way forward. Islamic feminism took full agency in defining not only matters like feminism and human rights, but more importantly in constructing its own knowledge about what is Islam and taking it into the next millennium, Sisters in Islam would be one of the strongest global voices to advocate gender reform that affirmed both Islam and Human Rights. We were considered an oxymoron. In truth, we were at the forefront of the meeting between Islam and feminism in the formation of Islamic feminism.

In 2009, when Musawah, a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family was launched, I came out as an Islamic feminist. Meanwhile Musawah and SIS joined others to articulate more agency not only in how human rights were discussed and sought after but also how to take authority in defining Islam. In fact, an important component of this authority is constructing new knowledge in Islam; knowledge that was informed by women's lived realities. My research contributed to establishing gender as a category of thought in all Islamic intellectual traditions. These articulations would only then be put before us in the contexts of various Muslim cultures and in the rights of citizens under the nation-state.

Eventually, because of this critical engagement, we were no longer forced to choose between Islam and human dignity for women. Thus, Islamic feminism would become the basis for many Muslim women to reconcile anxiety from being made to choose. Some who previously had deferred to the more dominant western ideas of feminism would embrace this nuanced articulation and find solace in it. Meanwhile, as a theologian engaging law, policies and cultural reform I could better understand the journey of someone like Fatima Mernissi. With Musawah we continually forge networks with other women no matter their

perspective even as we provide the methodological means for creating and sustaining a complex circle of alliances.

Male dominance was happy to keep women divided in endless constructs of ‘us and them’: be it those of us who chose to wear the hijab or found solace in its practice against those who had struggled to get out from under the hijab or those who could find solace in embracing UN human rights agendas and those who could speak of liberation only within Islamic rhetorical means. All of us, are equally subject to the mandate for full human dignity and can come together across our differences to achieve greater dignity.

When the Musawah secretariat planned a move to Morocco, Fatima Mernissi in one of her last public events came out to greet them. I’d like to think this meeting was also for her a culmination of decades of work, sometime alone and in the trenches. I know she stayed longer than she had planned and that the Musawah members were thrilled to have her company. By the time I arrived a few days later, she was no longer mobile.

It is difficult for me even now to express how heartbroken I was to lose our only opportunity to meet. No single name do I recall in the duration of my work more than Fatima Mernissi’s. I have come to appreciate that the formation of Islamic feminism owes some debt to secular feminists who began the difficult focus on women’s issues as not necessarily resolved by nation-states that had fought for the end of empire. I better understand the complexity of coming up against a religion that has been dominated by male authority for so long. I still understand how Muslim identity is forged through culture, experience and interpretation. More importantly, I appreciate how much the previous generation was shaped by an unnecessary divide. Into this new millennium, we are forging more critically intersectional alliances to achieve the collective goal of social justice wedded to well-being.

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