



musawah

For Equality in the Muslim Family

This is a translation of a talk that Asma Lamrabet delivered in “A Tribute to Fatima Mernissi” – at the Villa des Arts, Rabat, on 6 January 2016: <http://www.fondationona.ma/fr/nos-activites/rencontre-hommage-fatima-mernissi>

Fatima Mernissi As I Knew Her

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I would like to talk about Fatima as I knew her.

Actually I have known two Fatimas - one through her books and the other since our first meeting a few years ago.

At first, I knew her as an academic icon and thought she must be inaccessible, like any other icon.

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 (Women and Islam)*, *Sultanes oubliées (Forgotten Queens of Islam)* and *Islam et démocratie (Islam and Democracy)*.

In *Le harem politique* - a book that I consider Fatima'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. From the very beginning, her aim was, to quote her mythical book, *Le harem politique*: “to shed light on those obscure zones of resistance, those entrenched attitudes” - a remarkable expression. She undoubtedly opened the way to the necessity for: “a study of the religious texts that everybody knows but no one really probes” (*Women and Islam*, Blackwell, 1991, p 2).

To reread *Le harem politique*, published in 1987, is to find oneself in almost the same sociological setting as that of the Muslim world today, apart from some new features. The book is still up-to-date, nearly thirty years later! That's the power of Fatima the visionary.

In fact, when she talks of the “Sacred Text as a political weapon” (title of the first part of her masterpiece), she is reminding us of the painful history of the Muslim world, and how the current reality of the Muslim world is only repeating this title.

When she asserts, “Muslims suffer from a *mal du present* ... we Muslims experience it as a desire for death, a desire to be elsewhere, to be absent, and to flee to the past as a way of being absent. A suicidal absence” (*Women and Islam*, p.15), she expresses this constant refusal to live and to

confront the numerous challenges of our time, such as this tendency of Muslims to lock themselves into a tirelessly idealised and repeated past, the better to forget their bitter reality.

Or when she affirms a postulate that is still sharply relevant: to “grasp what impels al-Afghani and other scholars to take up their pens and write books about the necessity of excluding women from politics as a condition for safeguarding Muslim identity” (*Women and Islam*, p.21). Yes, women are, as always, the last and ultimate banner of a fragile identity and a scapegoat for our disillusionment.

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.

In this way, she highlighted the spirit of liberation initiated by the Qur’anic revelation that was soon diverted by the *Fuqaha* (not all of them, as she says). She describes the prophet’s life as “a key dimension of Islam: the total revolution it represented *vis-à-vis* the Judeo-Christian tradition and the pre-Islamic period with regard to women.” She adds, “very quickly the misogynistic trend reasserted itself among the *fuqaha* and gained the upper hand. We will see the resurgence in many Hadith of that superstitious fear of femaleness that the Prophet wanted to eradicate” (*Women and Islam*, p.75).

I cannot understand how some people harshly criticized Fatima Mernissi’s writings, declaring them as against the religion and disrespectful towards the Prophet of Islam. Let’s not forget that she was censured and attacked because some people asserted that she had challenged the sanctity of the text and the Prophet! I think that those people, who still hold that view, simply have not read Fatima Mernissi. How can that be said of a person who described herself in [an interview](#) as: “totally imbued by the prophetic example”?

When she writes about the prophet, she describes his life and struggles in such a beautiful way: historic memory tells us of a Prophet who was proposing strange things – non-violence and equality – to a fiercely proud elite, intoxicated by archery. “Mohammed’s mosque, unlike in other religions, is not a building, a construction, but a perspective. The mosque is everywhere: ‘The whole earth became my mosque’ (*wa juilate li elard masjidan*). Excluding women from the *qibla*, then is excluding them from everything – from the sacred dimension of life, as from the nationalist dimension, which defines space as the field of Arab and Muslim ethnocentrism” (*Women and Islam*, p.69).

Talking of equality, she asserts: “It is in order to evaluate the depth of the contemporary Muslims’ amnesia, which sees equality of the sexes as an alien phenomenon, that we must return to Medina, to its narrow streets where the debate on equality of the sexes raged and where the men were obliged to discuss it, and refused to accept it, although God and His Prophet demanded it” (*Women and Islam*, p.129).

This is the language of a woman who talks from the heart of Islam ... Yes, Fatima was at the heart of this requirement of Islam, that is the intellectual probity and legitimate right to criticism in the name of the struggle against all forms of injustices, irrespective of their causes.

I think that some people refused to admit that she dared, at the time of the emergence of political Islam, to pinpoint something very painful but extremely important: how, in the name of the sacred

text, was blind submission to unjust human-made laws imposed, and from there, how did patriarchy distort women's role within Islamic civilisation in the name of an erroneous reading of the sacred text?

Through the issue of Muslim women, she was actually making a more serious and more general criticism of Arab and Muslim societies. In "Islam and Democracy", she states in a profound passage: "Islam is probably the only monotheistic religion whose scientific investigation is systematically discouraged if not forbidden, because a rationally analysed Islam is hard to put at the service of despots ... It's the fear of the Imam."

Hence, she later moved away from the specific issue of women. She quite simply realized that if the issue of Muslim women was central to the Muslim tradition, it would, first, be tied to the condition of Muslim men, and secondly, it would be inseparable from the rest, that is democracy, space for freedom of expression, and the whole sensitive issue of the political instrumentalisation of religion.

When I subsequently met Fatima Mernissi, the whole dimension of this intellectual greatness was confirmed to me. Two people played a key role in our meeting: the first was my friend the Moroccan filmmaker Farida Benlyazid who started talking to her about me and giving her some of my first books to read. From that time on (without my knowing her personally) she copied me into emails when responding to invitations relating to the question of Islam and women, asking them to contact me: "I no longer work on this subject, please contact Dr A Lamrabet". I remember the first time I received such an email, I passed it on to all my friends saying how surprised and pleased I was to be mentioned by FM!

The second person was Ziba Mir-Hosseini, a British-Iranian academic, and Fatima's friend. She was surprised to hear that although we lived in the same city we had never met!! I still remember, as if it happened yesterday, how Ziba, on a visit to Morocco, called me from Fatima's place, and Fatima spoke to me for the first time on the telephone: "But where are you? (her famous *faynek*). We must meet, it's urgent!" From that call onwards, it was as if we'd known each other all our lives.

This was the beginning of a friendship that I can't find the words to describe, a meeting of hearts and souls. I discovered an endless generosity of heart, a unique inner strength, an unshakable love for this country, for the youth, for the oppressed and marginalised, whom she went to meet, with her loyal Karim, several times a month in the streets and popular quarters. She never stopped talking of this social reality that pained her; yet she would go to seek and experience life in the popular quarters of Rabat, because it was there that she felt at home, because, despite the precariousness of life there, there was hope. She had hope and a boundless optimism for these young people who were desperate to find a way out. She marveled at their creativity and hidden potential. This is what gave her the strength to keep dreaming of a better world. She was never negative or pessimistic but had a profound belief in change from 'below', from the youth, the people. She also had an enormous concern for the Arab world and its rebellious intellectuals whom she followed through TV channels, Arab magazines and newspapers. She had an endless curiosity about international geopolitics, and a desire to find solutions and alternatives for every problem.

Fatima was proud to be Moroccan. She loved her country passionately and was also proud to belong to the Arab world and the World. Citizen of the world, she contested the restricted universality of the West. [In a rare interview with an Arab journalist](#), she introduced herself as follows: "I am Fatima Mernissi. I belong to Arab society through which I belong to a wider world. This earth is not the exclusive property of the West, because I belong to a civilisation that

contributed to the rise of human civilisation. I have had enough of the East-West debate. The problem is not to be with or against the West, the real question is: how can we find a place in the world in which we live today?"

I also understood that she went through many stages in her intellectual and personal life; one that I had the chance and the honor to discover and experience closely with her, and another, her inner spiritual path that she did not talk about. This was expressed in her new intellectual preferences, her way of being with the world, her love and admiration for the mystical Islam and Sufis.

The last three years, when I was with her during her illness, I discovered this woman's decency, her refusal to yield to interventionist therapeutic treatment. She did not give up but she was realistic. She refused to complain about her health. She refused to talk about it to anyone except to her close doctors and to me – she talked to me as a physician. She concealed her illness out of decency and respect for those people who loved her, and whom she did not want to worry or be concerned about her; and also simply because she did not have the time to be sick and to take care of her ailing body. The urgency of a world to be changed was greater and more important than her tired body. In the interval between two sessions of palliative care, she scheduled meetings and appointments to create workshops, working groups. She was bursting with ideas. She needed 100 more years to achieve what she longed for.

That eternal wonder that she had was a gift of God, which taught me many things; the first is to be able to be filled with wonder at the simple little things of life, never to give up, always to see the positive side of things, to love others whoever they might be – because she was always convinced that others had something more to bring us. I'll never forget her words of encouragement for the modest work that I was doing and in which she took a great interest because I believe she wanted that it should be in some way a continuation of what she had started.

The last time I talked to her on the phone was three days before she went into a coma. We had a lunch meeting with an important Muslim academic from Musawah (Amina Wadud) who was visiting Morocco and wanted to see her. Fatima apologised for not being able to come. From her voice, I sensed that she was breathing with difficulty. But she did not want to talk about it and asked me to tell Wadud that the world would be better thanks to Muslim women researchers like her: "they are pioneers." When I asked to see her, she said: "no not now. When I feel better I will call you." These were her last words to me, words that still ring in my ears; the words of a woman, who knew she was dying but kept with dignity the strength to hope and above all to dream of better tomorrows, where all would be well. Dreaming - as she so aptly puts it at the end of her book *Harem politique* - "of a mirror time that will entrench its future in a memory – freedom." Fatima was a free woman and she passed away with dignity and freedom. *Allah yherhamha ... Amen.*

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