



## Holding on to an Indispensable Part of Our History: Recollections of Fatima Mernissi\*

Nancy Gallagher and Sondra Hale, Co-Editors



*Fatima Mernissi, Chevy Chase, June 1993/4, photo taken by Ruth Ward*

With this issue we celebrate the amazing life of Fatima Mernissi (1940-November 30, 2015). She represents our heart and soul — a tireless writer of the earliest and some of the most original works in Middle East gender studies.

She was an intellectual with ideas to spare, an activist, a public intellectual, an artist, and a memoirist.\*\* She was brilliant, funny, vibrant, and imaginative. She loved Morocco and her life, which by all accounts, she lived to the fullest.

Her death stunned many thousands of people, and the members of the Association for Middle East Women's Studies (AMEWS) are prominent among them. We asked friends and colleagues who knew her to write brief essays on their memories of her or on the impact of her work on their own or on our field. Little did we know that they would rush to capture their memories of her and to express the importance of her work, making this edition of the usually brief *e-Bulletin* unusually rich and extensive. The contributors are a diverse group of scholars who taken together draw a clear portrait of Fatima's personality. As our readers will see, she

touched people in different ways -- cross-generationally and cross-regionally. She was acute and witty as are these essays. We think that she would have enjoyed reading them.

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\*Late in life Fatima changed the spelling of her name to "Fatema" to reflect more closely Moroccan colloquial pronunciation. Because her publications retain the "Fatima" spelling, we chose to let the contributors use either spelling.

\*\*For a wonderful example of Mernissi's artwork, see "Comment snober à l'africaine" ("How to Snub African Style"), *Jeune Afrique* n. 33, May 28, 1967, p. 51.



## **Our Own Memories of Fatima**

*Nancy* remembers being with Fatima at a conference in Washington, DC. During a morning session, a speaker had accused Western feminists of “poisoning the well.” “I happened to go through the lunch line with Fatima afterwards and seized the chance to ask her what she thought of that comment. She replied with her eyes shooting daggers, “I thought it was ... and used a word that will not be printed here but begins with “s.” I had to laugh and after a moment so did she.” She was nobody’s fool and was not afraid to take stands—even unpopular ones.

*Sondra* remembers being with Fatima and a group of wonderful, mainly “Global South” left feminists for an international conference (thanks to Val Moghadam): “We were together for a few days in Helsinki and then, after a long overnight ferry ride across the Baltic Sea, converged on Leningrad. Fatima, taller than most of us women, statuesque, outspoken, and often contrary, decided to stun us with a few statements about how we need to stop blaming colonialism for everything and rejecting absolutely everything associated with the West. You can imagine how this agitated many of the leftists there! I never forgot her, not because I agreed with her completely on every topic, but because she had that ability to shake up everyone in the room.”

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## Islamic Feminism in a Western Classroom: Fatima Mernissi's Powerful Model

Diya Abdo

Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* is deceptively simple. Told from the point of view of the very young girl, Fatima, its seemingly naïve perspective belies the intricate acts of rewriting, reclaiming and reinterpreting the text performs – both in its content and in its structure. This seeming simplicity makes it an ideal text with which to introduce American students to the complicated concepts of Islamic Feminism. In many ways, Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* indeed seems to have been designed for that purpose. Fatima's voice is inviting and accessible. In her anxieties and desires, she is powerfully and cross-culturally relatable. Her "older"-ego's voice, the scholarly one in the footnotes, fills in the gaps Fatima leaves behind, and educates by sleight-of-hand, surreptitiously; quite literally subterranean, it lurks under the lines of the page proper.

In a nutshell, this is not an intimidating book. Its effect on the students is not similar to, say, Assia Djebar's *Women of Algiers*, which I teach directly following *Dreams of Trespass* in my courses on Arab Women Writers and Arab and Islamic Feminisms. And while *Dreams* appears not to take itself too seriously, it is most certainly a serious text with a very serious message. At its core, *Dreams* is about how the objects of a narrative structure can manipulate it so as to become its subjects. This is fundamentally the work of Islamic Feminism: Islamic feminists engage, reclaim, reinterpret, investigate, and intervene in the various Islamic texts and Islamic discourses to transform woman's identity within them from the "other" to the "self." *Dreams* teaches this fundamental tenet of Islamic Feminisms creatively, ingeniously. The entire book is indeed an extended conceit, an elaborate metaphor for Islamic feminist's work with narrative structure rendered in the Mernissi women's engagement with their *architectural, physical, and topographical* spaces – in their Fez house and the city streets, the country house and its open spaces, the deserts and the mountains. This engagement is rendered brilliantly in a very early moment in the book where Fatima describes a game she would often play:

My childhood was happy because the frontiers were crystal clear. The first frontier was the threshold separating out family's salon from the main courtyard. I was not allowed to step out into that courtyard in the morning until my Mother woke up, which meant that I had to amuse myself from 6 A.M. to 8 A.M. without making noise. I could sit on the cold white marble threshold if I wanted to, but I had to refrain from joining in with my older cousins already at play. "You don't know how to defend yourself yet," Mother would say. "Even playing is a kind of war." I was afraid of war, so I would put my little cushion down on our threshold and play *l-msaria b-Iglass* (literally, the "seated promenade"), a game I invented then and still find quite useful today. You need only three things to play. The first is to be stuck somewhere, the second is to have a place to sit, and the third is to be in a humble state of mind, so you can accept that your time is worth nothing. *The game consists in contemplating familiar grounds as if they were alien to you. I would sit on our threshold and look at our house as if I had not seen it before.* (Mernissi 3-4; my emphasis)

At first, she is overwhelmed by the "square and rigid courtyard, where symmetry ruled everything." But slowly, her



meditations on this space remind her of the stairs “lodged in the four corners of the courtyard.” These “were important because even grownups could play a sort of gigantic hide-and-go-seek on them” (4, 5).

That is exactly what Islamic Feminism is – a pondering of normalized spaces and normalized narratives with new eyes, fresh eyes, the eyes of a child but the stamina and knowledge of a scholar (right behind her, or literally underneath her in this text). What is Islamic Feminism but a relooking, unfamiliarly as it were, at the normative discourses that have governed Muslim women’s lives for centuries – to reinterpret their meaning, reexamine their context, re-see their purpose, and most importantly to find in them the gaps, the fissures, the chinks in the wall, the stairways that will lead to the rooftops and terraces of freedom and creativity. Once students see this moment as an exemplary one in the text, it becomes easy to see how the entire text and its images are an example of this reinterpretation of space and place, of words and narratives.

Once we examine this section carefully and talk about the strategies and hermeneutics of Islamic feminisms, students are excited and eager to see the ways in which the women of the Mernissi household perform this manipulation of normalized and traditional “structures” in the simplest ways (rearranging their dresses to allow them more movement in the river) and the more complicated ones (growing a new kind of plant, an imported banana tree, for Yaya; or Mina’s control of her fear from her kidnappers). And they begin to see them in the book’s authorial moves as well – think of all of the images of doors, doorways, windows, passages that suggest architectural fluidity of boundaries. And what about Mernissi’s decision to end Princess Budur’s narrative with her homoerotic marriage to Princess Hayat rather than continuing on to include the actual ending of the story in *A Thousand And One Nights* where both princesses go on a quest and find Prince Qamar Al-Zaman only to live with him as co-wives?

*Dreams of Trespass* affords instructors an incredible opportunity to teach students new to Islamic feminism its intricate, complicated and high-stakes gestures and maneuvers in low-stakes ways that are both theoretical and embodied, scholarly and creative, educational and engaging.

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## Trespassing with Fatema

Mahnaz Afkhami



*Mahnaz Afkhami and Fatima Mernissi at the "Sisterhood Is Global Conference Beijing and Beyond: Implementing the Platform for Action in Muslim Societies," Washington, D.C., May 1996.*

Fatema and I began our work together in 1984 as contributors to Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*. She wrote the Morocco chapter and I, Iran's. We stayed in touch through the Sisterhood Is Global Institute that Robin founded with the seventy writers of the book, but we did not meet in person until the MESA conference in 1993, where Miriam Cooke had organized the plenary on women's human rights with Fatema, Nawal El Sadaawi, and me as speakers. Fatema and I immediately connected. We were similar in temperament and held shared views on status of Muslim women.

We regretted that there were so few Muslim women visible in international debates on the women's movement. We found

incomprehensible the nearly complete neglect of religion which to us was a powerful factor in shaping the values that impacted women's lives. We also shared a love for music and dance. Fatema's joy in life's pleasures, large and small, affected those around her. I remember how she led our groups of mostly Middle Eastern women who gathered regularly to discuss MENA women's issues—in impromptu singing and dancing, sometimes in public places such as restaurants. She loved making her own jewelry. She wore colorful, loose fitting chiffon vests on wool sweaters and long skirts or slacks. She gave me bright scarves and necklaces to counter my often dark, somber colored clothes.

I have fond memories of our first conference in September, 1994 on Religion, Culture, and Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World in Washington, DC, which Fatema helped conceptualize. I remember a long lunch at Sequoia in Georgetown overlooking the Potomac when she wondered at the size of the servings in America as we drank white wine and talked of many things, but came back to our work for and with women of our region. As I drove her home, I told her I planned an Anthology based on the papers of the conference focused on the themes we had discussed and would need one from her. "I have decided I will not do papers for anthologies," she said. "But you must. You have to, as they say here, 'put your money where your mouth is.'" She wondered over the expression for a while and tried it in French and Arabic and finally replied "o.k. ten pages." "I need 20 pages," I said, adding "do you see the pattern in this conversation—I mean 'the haggling.'" "Yes," she said. "In that spirit, we will settle for fifteen pages!" The conference was a great success and the book *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World* was published in record time for the Beijing Conference the following year. The book launch brought together all the major figures in the women's movement from



around the world who were in Beijing for the conference. The year after Beijing we organized a conference at George Washington University on “Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation: Implementing the Beijing Platform for Action” that became another Anthology published by the second anniversary of the conference. In the interim Fatema published *Dreams of Trespass* and launched it in Washington. Principled as she was, she refused a full profile in *The Washington Post* because she wouldn't be able to review the text and was, as we all are, afraid of misquotes.

Fatema thought of the US as the perfect place to have a secretariat for what became the Women's Learning Partnership (WLP). “Whether we like it or not,” she said, “this is where the major media is and it is also, often unfortunately, where decisions are made that impact all our lives.” She cajoled, argued, and encouraged me to arrange meetings, press conferences, and briefings with significant women policy makers and reporters. I would've normally not followed that route. I wasn't even sure I could make them happen. But she did push, and I did act, and they did happen. Our most pleasant and interesting meeting was with the then first lady Hillary Clinton in April, 1999. We did not know at the time that the two of us were the only guests at the White House. We were pleasantly surprised to also have with us her closest colleagues Melanne Vermeer, her Chief of Staff, and Theresa Loar, Executive Director of the President's Interagency Council for Women. The conversation was about our view of women's status in the Muslim world. We communicated our views stressing the importance of separation of religion and state for development of both democracy and religion in Muslim societies as it has been in societies that have already gone through the secular phase. The first lady was positive, optimistic, and supportive. At the end she asked us an unexpected question. She wanted to know what we thought would be a good role for her after she is no longer first lady. There were rumors then about her running for the Senate. We suggested, maybe more bluntly than protocol required, if she wanted to eventually end up back where she was just then—in the White House-- she should run for the Senate. If not, then we believed that the international women's movement would benefit greatly from her support. When we walked out, Fatema said “you see, it's not so hard. If you have something to say, there's always someone who will listen.”

She was right. Over the years, many who had ignored culture and religion began to listen carefully. Emphasis on human rights based on an individual's humanity rather than her other identities related to racial, gender, religion, nationality or any other category became the entry point for our theoretical context and strategic work. In effect we returned to the universality of rights expressed in the Declaration of Human Rights. This helped us point to the similarity of the condition of women within the family and in the community, in the private as well as the public sphere, and the structure of the relationships between men and women across the world and across history. We were able to emphasize the importance of solidarity across all divisions real and imagined to help us change what I called “the architecture of human relationships.”

Fatema was a solid friend, never ceasing to encourage, always ready to help. She made a point to validate my life choices as a Muslim woman fighting for women's human right. I believed that women's most powerful enemy was not the secular authoritarian government—not even the dictator. Our worst enemy formulated God into the conversation about the status



of women to empower the patriarchy with the legitimacy of religion. The Western feminist movement had shed the “white woman’s burden” of raising the consciousness of women from the global south, but in the process had shifted into a cultural relativism that often condoned or tolerated any atrocity committed against women as culturally mandated and therefore somehow both inevitable and sacred. I appreciated the deep understanding, street smarts, and sophistication of Fatema’s worldview and welcomed her genuine respect and solidarity. It was refreshing to converse with someone who had lived religion and culture as a force that shaped society’s concept of a woman’s place yet realized the dynamic nature of these forces and their responsiveness to history and the changes it wrought in context and circumstance. Here was a woman who believed that social structures that have taken shape and self-sustained throughout history and around the globe will substantially change not by eloquent statements or passionate complaints only, but by a comprehensive collaboration among activists, scholars, and policy makers across boundaries of nation, gender, religion, class and race. I believe she was instrumental in the emergence of a growing awareness of our issues.

***Mahnaz Afkhami*** is founder and President of Women's Learning Partnership and Iran's former Minister for Women's Affairs (1975-1978).



## To Fatima Mernissi

**Margot Badran**

Fatima how do we grasp you, hold on to you, keep you with us? As you slipped through our fingers you have re-entered our embrace. As we have lost you, we have found you again. You defied categories and transcended national and ethnic identities. You elided the secular and the religious. Without convenient boxes where can we find you? How can we *see* you? I think of a hologram enabling us to see all your sides at once.

You and I are of the same generation, coming of age in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and careening full steam into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I first heard your name in 1977 as I was leaving Oxford when the Middle East bibliographer said to me: we have just received a book which will be of interest to you called *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* by Fatima Mernissi. Not long after I gave a brown bag talk at Princeton speaking of your book which met with a quizzical reception. In 1982 when I heard you were visiting New York University at the invitation of Amal Rassam I sought you out to speak to my class at Hamilton College in upstate New York. Afterwards I showed you a few articles on the spread of Muslim fundamentalism, as it was called then, remarking that no one had written about fundamentalism and women. I marveled at your quick uptake and alacrity in moving from issue to issue and the connections you made on women and feminism. There were few people one could have such a conversation with in those days when women's studies was still being formed as a new academic discipline in the US and was either unknown to or anathema in Middle East Studies.

In the 80s, 90s, and into the new century we met at conferences and a variety of public events. I saw you enchant your audiences and rout your hecklers with superb panache (remember Montreal in 1985). Like so many others, I devoured your books, taught them, and found in them and your other publications inspiration and wisdom. I noted their impact far beyond the academy: in development work, in activist campaigns, in people's everyday lives. You could not be contained and you did not play by other people's rules. You offered critical creativity that excited so many and threatened many others. If we view the trajectory of your life and work we see how you kept trans/forming, we see the multiple Fatima Mernissi-es. We see the archeology of your life, sediments, traces co-existing.

We of the generation of feminist scholars of the 70s and 80s first encountered you Fatima through *Beyond the Veil*. You spoke as a secular feminist and sociologist explaining increasingly dysfunctional male-female relations in the youth of the day and looking for amelioration in the context of messy postcolonial modernizing with its weight of unquestioned cultural baggage. You grounded your argumentation, activism, and development work in 'commonsense principles' and universalist the language. You took a major new turn with your 1991 *The Veil and the Male Elite* (the US published English translation of the 1987 *Le Harem politique*) you offered a seminal text in what would soon be recognized as Islamic feminism. You did not, however, jettison your secular feminism in favor of Islamic feminism for you well knew the two were compatible, and even mutually constructive (as several of us would later affirm). You operated as a secular



and Islamic feminist at the same time. If others conferred upon you a singular or paramount identity you simply let it go. However, you were resolute in leaving behind what you came to understand as wrong-headed in your earlier stances. In *Beyond the Veil*, you painted Islam as a patriarchal religion. This was the way the *ulemah* portrayed Islam and was widespread in leftist circles and among mainstream feminists in the west. It was *not* the thinking of first and second wave feminists in Muslim majority countries like Egypt, although this has typically gone un-noticed. Raja Rhouni in her 2010 *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi*, distinguishes what she calls your “secularist” position implicating Islam in the thinking and practice of patriarchy from “the secular” which does not excoriate Islam as patriarchal but to the contrary recognizes an egalitarian Islam. When religious learning is not made available, especially to those with a gender sensibility it is no surprise that the widespread patriarchal understanding of Islam is seen as “Islam” (which is exactly what patriarchalists desire). When you took it upon yourself to investigate the Qur’an and other religious texts you came away with an egalitarian understanding of Islam and left your former secularist position behind.

The last time I saw you, Fatima, was in 2009 in Rabat. In reference to intellectual work we spoke of the presence and absence of accepting communities, communities not fenced in by identity and proprietary claims that often ensue. You urged me to come and research and write in Morocco. Over long years you gave us much to ponder, many possibilities to consider, many dreams to dream. You gave us your dazzling wisdom like flashes of the Sufi *lawwami* you liked to evoke. Remembering and paying tribute is a form of thanks.

**Margot Badran is an historian of women, gender, and feminism/s in the Middle East and Islamic world, a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center of Scholars, and a senior fellow at Georgetown University.**



*Photo taken at the Sisterhood Is Global Institute Conference at American University in 1994 titled "Religion, Culture, and Women's Rights in the Muslim World".*

## Fatema, the Generous Scholar-Activist

**Susan Schaefer Davis**

I first met Fatema in 1973 at a Princeton symposium on Morocco convened by the Geertzses, with their students, a few of us from the University of Michigan – and Fatema. She was usually in the right place at the right time. What I remember most about Fatema was her generosity, as both a scholar and an activist, with sometimes the two blending. She was also wonderful at networking, using it to advance those goals.

As a scholar, she shared her insights in her extensive writing, often on topics not addressed by others. But she went beyond that. She

was involved in groups of Moroccan scholars who discussed, wrote articles, and produced books on various topics – and she generously invited me as a young scholar to several such sessions in the early years in Rabat. It was in those small informal sessions, on campus or in homes, that I met author and later Ambassador Aicha Belarbi, and scholar, human rights activist and later Minister of Justice Omar Azziman among others. And the last time I saw her, in spring 2015, she took me to such a session in which Driss Ksikes, former editor of *Tel Quel* magazine, led a discussion of an article he had written for a collective book. Fatema was pressed to contribute to the upcoming volume too, but demurred.

In addition to working with established scholars, Fatema regularly taught writing workshops for young emerging scholars. She invited me to some of them too, once in her apartment over dinner. She insisted they write (and eliminated those who did not in a certain time), critiqued their work, and often found funding for the subsequent volume. I recall one on women in Islam (the book pragmatically had articles in French and Arabic) and another on prison writing. In this she combined scholarship with activism: she used her reputation and skills to actively produce more scholars. And then she encouraged some of those scholars to continue empowering others.

It always struck me as ironic that when at one point the government closed the sociology and philosophy departments, reputedly worried about the influence of their socialist professors, they assigned Fatema to the University Research Institute - where she had much more time to write. It reminded me of throwing Brer Rabbit into the briar patch.

Fatema was also very frank as a scholar – and person. At a meeting at Georgetown in 1986, scholar Margot Badran talked to her about comparing her biography of Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi to Mernissi's in *Dreams of Trespass*. Fatema said "Mine's not an autobiography – where did you ever see such a totally positive mother?"

As an activist, Fatema had many facets. She had worked with weavers in Tazenakht for years, and in 2006 hosted a conference in which many of them came to Casablanca to discuss, show and sell their work; I still have my rug creatively



made of fishnet fiber. One of these women led her to another activist project, requesting that Fatema put her grandson in touch with 'Mahjoub, the unemployed engineer' from a village north of Marrakesh. Not to get him a job, but for him to learn how Mahjoub had helped organize local civil society groups to help themselves. And she also wanted Fatema to let the rest of the world know that not all rural Moroccans were backward peasants. Once again combining activism with scholarship, Fatema produced a lively book on those topics, *Les Ait Débrouille*.

An excellent and ongoing example of Fatema's activism is the Caravane Civique, organized in the 1990s with Marrakesh bookseller and activist Jamila Hassoune. The Caravane began by bringing educated people like authors and doctors together with people in rural villages, two groups which rarely encountered one another. With Ms. Hassoune it has become a Caravane du Livre, bringing books and educational events to rural villages. I attended one at a junior high school outside Marrakesh which was wonderfully organized. Before it arrived, students had written essays and poems and been awarded prizes; winners were displayed on a table surrounded by candles. During the main event, there was a talk on stories to which mothers were invited; rugs were strewn on the floor so they did not have to sit on uncomfortable, unfamiliar chairs. A few girls were asked to read their stories, and then the teacher led a discussion of why and how stories were important, and drew from the unschooled mothers stories that they knew. Another session had a female and male lawyer speaking to 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls about the changes in Moroccan family law. They were transfixed, and eagerly took part in the exercises and discussion afterward.

On our last visit Fatema gave me another example of her scholarship serving as activism. It was after the Charlie Hebdo attack in January 2015, and she said she had been getting many invitations from Europe for speaking engagements. She wondered why, all of a sudden, until she received a new book brochure from Albin Michel titled 'Islam, d'autres visages' or 'Other faces of Islam.' It contained the books of many distinguished moderate Muslim authors, including Fatema.

Fatema always had her finger on the pulse of Morocco. She'd tell you, and write about, what she had just heard from the fish seller – and write it beautifully. And sometimes with touches of irony, like her title *Scheherazade was not Moroccan – or she would have had a paycheck*. I think she saw herself as Scheherazade, wielding the power of words – and we'll all miss her for that...and for much more.

**Susan Schaefer Davis is a social scientist and independent scholar who has carried out extensive research in Morocco, engaged in development work, held various university posts in the States and in the Middle East, and worked for a number of international agencies.**



*From left: Fatima Mernissi, Mahnaz Afkhami, Deniz Kandiyoti, Yasmeen Murshed - Offices of Sisterhood Is Global Institute in Bethesda*

## **The Sufi Wanderer and Women's Rights Pioneer**

**Doris H. Gray**

“Doris, you must meet this person this afternoon. It is a very important contact for your work. Can you come to my apartment in half an hour?” I was hiking in the Middle Atlas mountains when I received her call. “Fatema, I am at least four hours away from Rabat and am not able to come see you today nor tomorrow but I will call you when I am next in Rabat.” “But you must come now.” Had I known how gravely ill Fatema Mernissi was at that point, I would have made more effort to follow her request. Little did I know then that her frequent urgent requests were driven by

her awareness of limited time left.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AUI), the institution where I now teach and direct the Hillary Clinton Center for Women's Empowerment, colleagues and I discussed that the university should honor Mernissi with a lifetime achievement award. Never before had she been officially recognized in her own country. Sadly, she died before she could finally receive a long overdue honor in the country of her birth. Recognized worldwide as Morocco's most widely translated and read author, Mernissi was persistently under appreciated within this North African kingdom.

I first encountered Mernissi in 1999 when I was standing behind her in a travel agency in Rabat. While I was in awe, not even daring to address her, the clerk treated her travel requests with the same mix of polite indifference as those of all others. To him, Professor Mernissi was just another customer with annoying special wishes.

Several years later, I mustered enough courage to call her and to my surprise she invited me to come over that same afternoon. Once seated on the banquette in her Rabat Agdal apartment, she appeared with her ubiquitous oversize transparent plastic purse, containing documents and leaflets about current projects. Before retrieving a paper or a book or a manuscript, she inquired about my work and that of colleagues she knew or presumed I would be familiar with. Her interest in my work and in my life was disarming. People of such stature more commonly prefer to talk rather than listen but Madame Mernissi showered me - as all her guests - with curiosity. We soon fixed a next rendez-vous. The second time we met, again in her salon, decorated with paintings of local artists whose work she promoted, one of my daughters accompanied me. Again, to my surprise, Fatema engaged my then teenage daughter in a lengthy conversation. She wanted to know about the challenges of growing up black in the US, about her favorite activities with social media, her reading



preferences. As my daughter was then working with refugees from countries south of the Sahara, Mernissi quizzed her about the fate of these migrants and refugees and about the specific aid her country did – or did not – provide.

A true intellectual, Mernissi took as much interest in listening as in talking and when talking, her greatest pleasure derived from connecting people who would otherwise not meet.

Over the past six years, I remained in contact with her via email and visited her as often as possible. On one occasion, another daughter, at the time student at an Ivy League University, accompanied me. Again, Fatema inquired about her reading lists, the content of some of her courses and affirmative action programs – social justice issues always at the forefront of her mind.

This *grande dame* of Muslim Feminism spoke of how she had moved beyond from women's rights issues, as this now had become an almost common field of inquiry. The question of women's rights interested her primarily as part of her focus on social change. "I am an intellectual nomad," she told me. "I need to go to unknown places, cover new ground. I said and wrote what I had to say on women's rights issues decades ago." She said that she followed the Sufi tradition of a wanderer who takes inspiration from moving into unknown territories and from visitors encountered along the way. "In Sufism you learn about yourself by exploring that which is different." Nevertheless, in recent years, Mernissi had taken a keen interest in the Moroccan variant of Islamic Feminism and in particular the work of Musawah, a project started in Malaysia that focuses on challenging patriarchy and legal equality within Islam.

Mernissi's public appearances in the last decade of her life were less stoic imparting of ideas and knowledge than lively happenings. Hot pink turban atop her flaming red hair, attired in self-designed colorful purple and red tunics, she strode to the pulpit and started by rearranging the set up. "I want this to be like a communal meeting in the African tradition of consensus building." She would call on people from the audience to share the stage with her, began by asking questions and stimulating a dialogue, interspersing the discussions with her sharp wit, biting humor and provocative comments. So self-confident was she that she did not require the spotlight to be exclusively on her, she made her mark in short succinct comments. Switching intentionally between English, French, Dereja and Arabic, she made clear that monolingualism often also meant mono-culturalism, which to her was synonymous with unacceptable narrow-mindedness.

While Fatema – she had changed the spelling of her name from Fatima to the more common Moroccan pronunciation Fatema - displayed an intense personal interest in people, she remained steadfast in being evasive about revealing her own private life.

I never left Fatema's apartment without a head full of new ideas, potential projects, and a list of people to contact. Like her transparent plastic purse, Fatema Mernissi's mind remained open, filled with visible markers of interest. It is her curiosity, never waning exploration and keen analysis of the fast changing world around her, leading to pioneering ideas that will remain an inspiration.

**Doris H. Gray directs the Hillary Clinton Center for Women's Empowerment and is Associate Professor in the Gender Studies Program at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AUI), Morocco.**



## Living a Large Life

### Barbara Ibrahim

In 1991 I was newly-appointed to a research development post in Cairo, excited but still tentative in my new regional role. Everyone was reeling from the disastrous impact of the first Gulf War. It had divided long-standing partnerships and cross-regional work of all kinds. In that context, Fatima and I bumped into each other at a seminar where she told me passionately – that was her only register -- about her involvement in a women's collaborative across the Maghreb countries. Civic groups were just emerging and feminist initiatives, whether in Morocco, Algeria or Tunisia, faced plenty of suspicion. Fallout from the war meant that once-amiable collaborations across borders were fraught with distrust. It was impossible, however, not to be caught up in Fatima's energy and taken-for-granted assumption that the collective would prevail. We began corresponding that summer about outreach aspects of the program.

What developed was a two-year engagement with the *Femmes Maghreb 2002* collective. Up to that point, Fatima was known largely for her brilliant, often daring feminist writing. What I saw emerging in those years was an instinctive talent for activism of a kind that was always inclusive and nurturing of new leaders. Fatima managed to be a driving force in the collective while allowing others to take credit. She sought external help among those she trusted regardless of nationality, realizing that women's goals would be achieved ultimately through global as well as local alliances. She asked my help to address two major hurdles they faced – networking among feminist groups in different locations and reaching out to international sources of funding. The result was publication of *Carnet d'Adresses* – a directory of 35 contacts or associations – almost every one of which Fatima had a hand in encouraging and defending. But this was more than a directory. It included sections on recent publications, videos, seminars and writing workshops. There was an articulation of the methodology of *Femmes Maghreb 2002*, which she labeled, 'la chaine creatrice'. It ended with forward-looking plans for new initiatives and research. In one of my favorite photos of Fatima. We are sitting in her living room celebrating the arrival of printed copies of the *Carnet*.

Shortly after, she sent me draft chapters of the book that would become *The Haram Within*. It was a glimpse into her mind at work on an internal journey, grappling with the influence of a childhood spent in a social world that was rapidly disappearing. In the book she is brutally honest about the injustices of patriarchy as it was expressed in her upper-class family in Fes. But she also reflects on how some women used individual agency within those confines, either to expand the boundaries of freedom or to further oppress younger women. She gave us an intimate view into her formative years and the mind of a brilliant woman, processing the multiple threads of her life and deciding whom she would become in adulthood.



*Myriam Monkachi and Fatima Mernissi, co-editors of *Carnet* in Rabat, Morocco, 1992, photo taken by Barbara Ibrahim*

In 1993 Fatima turned her attention to a region-wide project to mobilize information in service of Arab women's advancement. To say that it was ambitious would be to underestimate the scope of Fatima's vision. In a draft of the concept paper she sent for my comment she is enlarging on her ideas for "Emergency Creative Chains" in every imaginable sector. These would mobilize data quickly in a usable format for feminist organizing, beginning with an opinion survey to establish the conditions of women across the entire Arab region.

She called this project DEEP: Democratization of Environment and Population Policies, clearly framed

within the UN flavor-of-the-year. But it contained wonderful ideas for international support of Arab regional initiatives: a pre-internet magazine to link progressive young women, creation of a chain of women's employment bureaus and policy lobbying centers, even a regional development bank for women. All written in Fatima's unique stylistic voice. In the first footnote she says: "Deciding to express myself directly in English means definitely taking huge risks. But my urge to share quickly these thoughts with international human rights organizations will hopefully redeem me and absolve my sins, of which bad grammar is but the least disturbing."

I treasure these glimpses into Fatima's mind at work. A typical run on sentence in the draft declares: "Any demographic reduction policy which does not create a legal infrastructure, and censor violence against women, and secure their free choice in marriage, birth planning and abortion, and grant them a status which enables them to sue their attackers, be they family members, extremists, or state officials -- is doomed to failure."\* Imagine the Arab region today if even one of her DEEP proposals had seen the light of day.

As Fatima's involvements took on a more international stature I lost touch with her on a regular basis but we would exchange greetings from time to time. I miss her now, knowing that her big heart and passionate mind are no longer with us. But for the thousands of women whose lives were touched by Fatima's writing or her activism, the light remains.

\*Excerpts from a personal fax dated January 12, 1993.

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## Remembering Fatema Mernissi

**Suad Joseph**

The Wellesley College International Conference on Women and Development in June, 1976 was the first international scholarly conference on the subject. The organizers planned for a couple dozen attendees. Instead, 117 participants from 32 countries showed up. I was preparing to move to Davis, where I had accepted a position as Assistant Professor at UC Davis in Anthropology. I was teaching a summer session graduate seminar at my alma mater, Columbia University on class and gender. I was becoming a feminist, having been forced by my fieldwork to confront the reality that most of my data was from and about women in the Borj Hammoud, Lebanon, neighborhood where I had lived for 2+ years. I had joined Marxist Feminist Group #3 in New York, reading with other young scholars everything we could circulate by mimeograph. I was reading in Urban Anthropology reading groups. A few colleagues and I had been rereading classics about the Middle East, such as Karl Wittfogel's Oriental Despotism. I was, that year, founding the Middle East Research Group in Anthropology, which later evolved into the Middle East Section of the American Anthropological Association. My plate was full, I had a job, and I was on my way to California! A farewell to the East Coast – a group of us from my Columbia graduate seminar drove to Wellesley to participate in conference.

Other than the 1975 Mexico City, International Women's Year Conference, I had not attended conferences specifically on women and certainly no other international conference on women. Wellesley turned the academic world of gender studies around. Thirty-two countries represented, by 117 scholars, overwhelmingly women. Immediately, the issue of "Third World Women" and "First World Women" was raised. I don't remember how the tension started, but it started early and heated up quickly. Numerous sessions outside of the regular panels were held to discuss women and colonial politics – in particular the under-representation of Third World women at the conference. I do not believe that Fatima Mernissi

launched these conversations, but what is clear in my memory is that she quickly became the main spokesperson for the "Third World Women" there. Tall – towering – stunning in Moroccan headdress, dignified, well spoken – and calm. I remember the calm, the self-possession. There was nothing hurried about her speech. There was no anger conveyed. Just conviction. It was the first time I had heard an Arab woman speak as an Arab woman at an American conference. She had already published *Beyond the Veil* (1975) and was being widely read. Another stunning voice at that conference was that of Deniz Kandiyoti, a Turkish social psychologist working in England at the time.

The heated discussion turned to the journal *Signs*, founded in 1975 under the editorship of Catharine R. Stimpson, then a professor of literature at Barnard College. I believe it was Fatema who directed the discussion to *Signs*. She pointed to the gaping absence of Third World Women on the editorial board and in *Signs'* publications. At that time, the editors were all white women; the "International Correspondents" were from Israel (2), France, Finland, Philippines, Italy, England (2),



*Photo exhibit initiated by Fatema at the Alef Gallery in Georgetown*

Brazil, Sweden, Singapore – none from the Arab world, none from Africa, none from South Asia. The Advisory Board and the Editorial Board were overwhelmingly white and American.

While the issue of the conference was not about *Signs*, Stimpson's presence at the conference and at those particular meetings, facilitated Fatima's focus on a possible concrete outcome. Stimpson acknowledged that having Third World women on the editorial board would be productive. She also agreed to do a special issue of *Signs* based on articles from that conference. By the Autumn 1976 issue of *Signs* (Vol 2. No. 1), the International

Correspondents included Deniz Kandiyoti and the Advisory Board included Nadia H. Youssef. The Editorial Board was still white and American, but a step had been taken. Autumn 1977, Vol. 3 No. 1 of *Signs* was titled "Women and National Development" based on the June 2-6, 1976 Wellesley conference, hosted contributions by Deniz Kandiyoti, Fatema Mernissi, Nadia H. Youssef, May Ahdab-Yehia and a number of feminist scholars from around the world. It was a first for any journal. And Fatema had led the way, with eloquent interventions by Deniz Kandiyoti. By Spring 1978 (Vol 3, No. 3) the first Arab woman based in the Arab world was added as an International Correspondent, Julinda Abu Nasr, Lebanese American University, the founding director of the first (and now oldest) women's studies center in the Arab World, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (ISWAW) – co-founded with May Rihani, who was also at that Wellesley conference in 1976.

I came away from Wellesley with a life-long friendship with Deniz and Fatima – and with many lessons learned about productive interventions. At numerous conferences, I watched Fatema (at times sitting with Deniz observing Fatema) strategically intervening with a target in mind. I was not always sure what her target was, but I was sure that her interventions were purposeful. She was a class act to watch.

I visited Fatema in her home in 1981 and a few times after. I reached out to her when I was seeking to adopt a child from the Arab world, in the early 1980's. She became very involved trying to help me. When I found my beloved daughter in Stanford, California, Fatema sent a gift. I sent her updates on my daughter, via my annual Christmas/New Year's letter. I must have missed sending one year – for the next time she saw me she chastised me for neglecting to send her a letter about Sara Rose. She was invested, she wanted to know.

That was Fatema – invested, caring, committed, thoughtful, inquiring, purposeful. That was Fatema, so eloquently and



movingly captured in *Dreams of Trespass*, which I taught in as many different classes as I could. That was Fatema, putting Moroccan women's voices up front in *Doing Daily Battle* (1989); taking in, while taking on, Arab and Islamic patriarchy in *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1987, trans. 1992), in *Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1990, trans 1993) and in *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (1993); confronting Western misconceptions about Muslims in *Scheherazade Goes West* (2001); and challenging political Islamists in *Islam and Democracy* (2002).

I sometimes feared for this brave and valiant friend. She did not seem to fear. In the midst of the Algerian Islamists' attacks on women in the 1990's, I asked her if she was afraid. She said no. I asked her why. She said, "I talk with them." That was Fatema.

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From left: Mahnaz Afkhami, dancer from India known as "Star of Mahabharata," and Fatima Mernissi. Fundraising campaign for Human Rights Watch, Chevy Chase, Maryland.

## A Cheerful Rebel: Remembering Fatima

**Deniz Kandiyoti**

My first encounter with Fatima Mernissi left an indelible memory. This was during the 1976 International Conference on Women and Development (organized by the Centre for Research on Women (CRW) at Wellesley College). Coming on the heels of the first UN Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975, this academic event attracted 117 women from 32 countries and led to a special issue of a newly established *Signs* and a

volume on Women and National Development. These were the pre-internet and pre-cheap international travel days when such encounters were fewer and possibly more memorable. Although I met Fatima on many occasions since, her loss takes me back to youthful memories and it is to my first impressions of her that I remain most attached.

With her kohl-lined eyes, high cheek bones and a rather severely tied black kerchief I first thought Fatima had a rather forbidding appearance until I noticed the expression in her eyes; they were twinkling with mischief and fun. She had just published the controversial book *Beyond the Veil* in 1975 that made her instantly famous. It is difficult to appreciate the shock value of this work nowadays when the study of gender and sexualities is well established in the scholarly canon. The notion that patriarchy in Islam was not dependent on theories of biological inferiority as in the West but centered on a fear of female sexuality or of sexuality *tout court*, seen as a source of chaos or *fitna* that needed to be controlled, was quite explosive. As a sociologist, she painstakingly explored all the mechanisms put in place to inhibit heterosexual intimacy such as polygamy, repudiation and the strong hand of mothers-in-law in claiming the primary loyalty of their sons. She also drew attention to the cultural defensiveness of Muslim societies vis-à-vis the West, manifesting itself in jealously guarding women's conduct. Some of these ideas were, of course, revisited and contested in time but their freshness and originality could not be denied. That was exactly what I found so arresting about Fatima's work: part Shahrazad, part scholar and part public intellectual she had a totally distinctive voice. Her combination of personal anecdote, searching analysis and social critique made for exciting prose- sometimes a rare commodity in social science writing.

Yet, at the time, I was unable to fully appreciate Fatima's unremitting preoccupation with Islamic textual sources. Working on patriarchy myself, but on a somewhat broader canvas, I was inclined to see Islam as but one variant of a much broader phenomenon. But that, of course, was not the real reason behind my initial lack of comprehension.

Raised in the urban secular milieu of Istanbul I was still tone deaf to Fatima's very different background, so beautifully



narrated in her biographical *Dreams of Trespass*. The harem and polygamy may have been history to me, but not to Fatima whose formative experiences ultimately inspired her intellectual passions. The reader must also remember that the corpus of work that is now well established under the rubric of Islamic feminism was barely in its infancy. In that respect, too, Fatima was a pioneer. Her attempt to turn the Muslim imaginary into a resource for the empowerment of women was ultimately political.

When I picked up *The Veil and the Male Elite* published in 1992 (*Le Harem Politique* in the original French), I was finally ready to tune into her wave length. I chuckled my way through the opening sections of the book where Fatima explained that she was inspired by a visit to her grocer who threw at her the hadith “those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity” referring to Pakistan’s Benazir Bhutto. In a country where people attacked you “*a coup de hadith*”, as she put it, you simply had to be equipped. She followed on with a meticulous inspection of all the misogynistic hadiths using the very techniques proposed by Al-Bukhari, the most authoritative compiler of hadiths. This was a daring move coming not only from a woman but someone who had no credentials as a religious scholar. She was attacking some of the foundational myths of Islam and potentially courting charges of apostasy. Younger generations of Muslim women would follow in her path and receive more rigorous theological training, forming networks of both study and activism. But she was without doubt a trail blazer.

When it came to social critique, Fatima could be angry and scathing about concepts of honour and virginity locating “the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman”. She was, at heart, a modernist who believed that the wounds of colonial encounters with the West had locked Muslim societies into a nostalgia of the past and of a utopic golden age. She was, in fact, inscribing herself in a long line of Muslim public intellectuals in both the Maghreb and the broader Muslim world. She had an unwavering belief in women’s capacity to resist oppression, to subvert male orders and to disobey yet she tempered her anger with humour and her passion with analytic clarity. We shall miss the voice of this cheerful rebel whose contribution remains unique.

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## **Fatima Mernissi: Scholar, Feminist, Humanist**

### **Valentine Moghadam**

When I discovered Fatima Mernissi's 1976 book, *Behind the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, in the late 1980s, I had just received a Ph.D. in sociology, with a concentration in development, and was beginning to acquire an interest in women, development, and social change. Like other Iranian leftists, I was also grappling with the Islamic revolution and how to approach the expansion of veiling. As I came to appreciate later, Fatima's book influenced a generation of scholars and set the stage for the fields of North African women's studies, Middle East women's studies, and the study of women and Islam. Mernissi's sociological insights and bold analyses laid bare some of the key contradictions in women's status and gender relations in Muslim societies generally and in Morocco in particular: The application of Sharia-based family law privileged men, subordinated women, and prevented companionate marriage. The second edition of her book appeared in 1987 in revised form with a new Introduction that now examined Islamic fundamentalist movements and found them to be the products of the contradictions of modernization, including changes in gender relations and women's roles. As she memorably noted in the Preface: "If fundamentalists are calling for a return of the veil, it must be because women have been taking off the veil." By then she had already published a number of other books in French and was waiting their English-language translations.

Having read both editions of the first book, I had the immense privilege of meeting her during my fellowship year at Brown University's Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women, where she was invited to a colloquium. I knew her as a feminist sociologist, the author of quite a number of books, and renowned in international development circles. And then I saw her. She was bold, opinionated, and flamboyant, and I found her witty remarks in Franco-English absolutely delightful. But she was serious on the subject of women's oppression and their resilience. Those years were the height of poststructuralism and a tendency in feminist circles had appeared with a distinct disinterest in "women" in favour of "gender". Fatima would have none of it. She held her own, talking about women, men, religion, patriarchy, imperialism, and power. I was hooked.

At around the same time, I was invited to apply for a position coordinating the Research Programme on Women and Development at the WIDER Institute of the United Nations University (UNU), in Helsinki, Finland. Another luminous feminist from the Global South (or what in those days was called the Third World) was Kumari Jayawardena, whose husband directed the WIDER Institute, and she encouraged me to apply while also putting me in touch with Fatima Mernissi, who was a member of the governing council of the UNU. By the time I had arrived at UNU/WIDER, Fatima had established a network of anti-fundamentalist activists – academics, artists, journalists, and teachers from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia – and I was able to take part in the conference she organized in Helsinki. Through Fatima, therefore, I was able to meet some of the activists that I went on to interview later in 1990 for my first book, *Modernizing*



*Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*; I also invited them to my first conference at UNU/WIDER, and they contributed to my first two edited books. Several of the members of that network went on to form the regional transnational feminist network, *Collectif Maghreb Egalité 95*, and over the years I have stayed in touch with some of them.

The first edition of *Modernizing Women* was therefore dedicated to Fatima Mernissi and Kumari Jayawardena, as well as to Afghan women, who by then had lost their chance for modernization because of the victory of the U.S.-financed Islamist Mujahideen. The Preface and Acknowledgements included the story of how the book had come about. And here I am drawing directly from the first edition: “The idea for the book originated in April 1990 over a delicious Moroccan meal at a restaurant in Paris with Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatima Mernissi. She asked me why, despite all the journal articles I had published, I had not yet written a book on the subject of women and Islam. She then pushed aside plates, bowls, and glasses, brought out a notepad and pen, and proceeded to list the subjects of my various articles in one column and suggestions for chapter headings in another. Fatima even proposed a title for my future book; all I can recall of it now is that it included the word ‘Islam’ and that balked at that. But I did promise to write a sociological account of women in the Middle East.”

Following that dinner in Paris and my first conference in Helsinki, Finland – with the participation of several North African women’s rights advocates to whom Fatima had introduced me – I took a month-long trip to Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia for interviews and observations in preparation of that first book. A highlight of the trip was dinner at Fatima’s home in Rabat, where I was treated not only to a delicious Moroccan meal and the gorgeous Moroccan décor of her flat, but also a scintillating discussion with Fatima and her friends about fundamentalism, development, and feminism, interspersed with Fatima’s incisive and witty comments.

On either that earlier visit to Paris or on another occasion, Fatima invited me to accompany her to a celebration of her latest book at Le Fouquet’s, sponsored by her French publisher. What I best remember is her conversation with the taxi driver, who turned out to be Moroccan. After the usual pleasantries and exchanges about what each was doing in Paris, the conversation turned to religion, and the driver made a comment about how the Middle East was Muslim. Fatima responded that there were many Middle Easterners who were Christian and indeed had been in the region long before it had become predominantly Muslim. The driver was incredulous and I wondered how he was taking in that particular piece of information while also pondering his status in France.

Fatima and I stayed in touch while I was at UNU/WIDER and she was on the UNU’s governing council. For a while I lost contact with her until I saw her at a conference in Washington DC. But I had kept up with her writings and artwork, and found the exhibition “The Harem Within” fascinating. In particular, I was delighted to serve as co-editor (with Margot Badran while we were both editors of Brill’s *Women and Gender in the Middle East and the Islamic World* book series) of Raja Rhouni’s book, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi* (Brill, 2010). The book is



an appreciation of Fatima's works, dealing as it does with "Mernissi as a point of entry into Islamic feminism"; Mernissi's "gendered subaltern history" of Morocco; demystifying the harem and revising Muslim history; and revisiting Islam from within. It is both a *tour d'horizon* of Mernissi's numerous writings and a *tour de force* of analysis. And if you have not already discovered it, check out <http://mernissi.net/>, which includes a listing of her various writings, exhibits, and tours. (Note that Fatima spelled her first name with an E – thus, Fatema.)

Moha Ennaji, Fatima Sadiqi, and Zakia Salime have written beautifully about Fatima and her legacy. Zakia is absolutely correct in noting that in Fatima's numerous books, it is women's claims to space and power that come across. The obituaries and celebrations of her life's work brought back memories of my early years as a feminist sociologist of the Middle East and North Africa, my meetings with Fatima and members of her network, and the force of Fatima Mernissi's personality and publications. Fatima Mernissi is the brightest star in the constellation that is Middle East Women's Studies and her contributions to our field will shine and inspire for generations to come.

***Valentine Moghadam, Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Northeastern University, Boston and director of the International Affairs Program.***



## Watching Fatima Mernissi

Fatima Sadiqi

It is difficult to write about what I saw, heard and sensed every time I watched Fatima Mernissi because I loved to watch her. Numerous personal and scholarly moments of magic come to mind but I have selected three such privileged moments in which I was met with a special visionary...

The first moment was when I encountered a “Berber” Fatima Mernissi. That happened on our very first meeting in person in 1993. One thing she told me then stuck in my mind like glue and is there to stay. She said when I introduced myself to her as a Berber who was teaching English at the Fez university: “You need to find a way of mixing your Berber and English and see what the combination yields when you approach women’s issues in Morocco.” I pretended I understood what she said but it took me years to really appreciate her words... She saw something that I did not see at the time. Today, her words speak to how I think when I reflect on the Berber dimension of the Moroccan feminist discourse. Later on I discussed the Berber issue with Fatima Mernissi and to my genuine surprise learned how proud she was of her Berber origin; she kept repeating that “Mernissa” where she came from was a Jbala Berber tribe that was Arabized and even ventured: “Arabs are newcomers in Morocco... but don’t say this to conservative Fassis (people from Fez).” As went along with the topic throughout the years that followed, I was completely taken by the width of her knowledge of Moroccan history, her intellectual charm, the way she said things, and by her powerful capacity to link what would seem “incoherent” at the surface level. I heard many people call her “an agitator” and it was during those discussions on Berber that I understood what they meant. A decade or so later, Mernissi invited me to some of her encounters with the Berber weavers of Taznakht, a remote Berber village in the southern Tafilalet region. I attended several of her sessions with these women and was each time amazed at how the Berber weavers and their menfolk interacted with Fatima Mernissi as if she were part of their community! She did not speak their language but shared their lives and they shared their dreams. I was amazed at her capacity to not only reach out to the weavers but to touch their hearts. She insisted on bringing some of these women to the Fez Berber Festival that my husband and colleague Moha Ennaji organized (and still does) every year. On two such occasions, Mernissi seemed excited like a child at the idea that “her aristocratic” and “conservative” Fez would organize a Berber festival and have rural women mix with academics in the Palais des Congres... In one of these festivals, Mohamed Chafik, a pioneer thinker on the Berber issue, was honored and she volunteered to pay him an homage not only because he was Berber but also because he was her high school teacher in Fez. She called him a “visionary.” She also said in her public speech that “Chafik gave [her] roots and wings.” Chafik was deeply moved when he recalled how the “conservative” Fez where he taught in the 1950s of the last century and where he found it difficult to say publicly that he was Berber, was honoring him. I was watching these magical moments with a mixture of awe and pride.



The second moment was when I encountered a “Sufi” Fatima Mernissi. This happened when I served as Director General of the Fez Festival of Sacred Music in 2007-9 during which Fatima Mernissi was the star of the parallel “Encounters” where political leaders and academics would discuss issues related to the themes of the festival. In each of these Encounters, Mernissi would captivate the Moroccan and international audiences with typical views on a tolerant and egalitarian Islam.. She would display a remarkable ease in engaging the great Sufis of Islam, particularly Ibn al-Hallaj, Rabea al-Adawiya, and Ibn Arabi. She would dwell on God as “mystic love” that resides in every believer’s soul, and how Islam has no less than 600 words to express “love.” She twice ended her presentations with a reflection (accompanied by her characteristic sarcastic smile) on why this kind of Islam was not taught to children in Moroccan schools.

The third moment was when I encountered a Fatima Mernissi that was understanding, but critical of, the West. On several occasions I watched her talk to international scholars and journalists who visited her from the four corners of the globe. Again I was taken by her capacity to address the West/East associated “fears” that each camp intensified. When addressing Western scholars she would recall the face of a humanist East and when addressing the East, she would put the blame on the religious-political order that opposed any change in the name of tradition. This navigation between the East and West was something Mernissi excelled in doing. I have never met anyone like her in this regard.

Many people will remember Fatima Mernissi as a pioneer of Muslim feminism who inspired generations of women not only in Morocco and the Arab world but across the globe to embark on the interpretation of the sacred texts, but few people know Fatima’s Berber, Sufi and mixed attitude to the West. In each of these “hidden” aspects of Fatima Mernissi resides an off the beaten track visionary whose legacy will long be carried into the future. The ideas of the Fatima Mernissi I knew are very much part of today’s dilemmas and fears of composite and multi-identity societies. The free and visionary woman I knew will be missed.

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