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Sexual Politics

Fatema Mernissi: A Pioneering Arab Muslim Feminist

- Features - Feminism -

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Zakia Salime is associate professor in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University. This tribute is to Fatema Mernissi: mentor, insightful teacher, organic intellectual, incisive feminist, powerful voice, charismatic presence, craftswoman, generous host, and friend. It appeared on [Jadaliyya](#) and is reprinted here with the permission of the author and Jadaliyya.

Fatema Mernissi, writer, professor, sociologist and a central figure of Arab feminism, passed away at the age of 75 on Monday, 30 November, in Rabat, Morocco. Mernissi was a professor at the Mohammed V University of Rabat and a research scholar at the Institut Universitaire de Recherche Scientifique (IURS) in the same city.

Fatema Mernissi will remain an inspirational figure to many of us whose lives she marked with her warm presence, ample generosity and hilarious sense of humor. Mernissi lived in her apartment in Rabat surrounded by generations of scholars, activists, artists, musicians and visitors from across the globe. She inspired them and in turn found inspiration in their struggles, their voices, lives and creativity.

In particular, Fatema Mernissi will remain an inspirational figure for generations of women whose lives were marked by a convergence of colonialism, nationalism, nation-state formation, modernization, feminism, Islamism, neocolonialism and revolution. Her navigation of these legacies and political currents were prominent themes in her scholarly research, public sociology, books and novels.

As she consistently reinvented herself through her small roles as an actor, her writing style and her ideals she generated new audiences. As she traveled across ideological currents, she always wrote against the grain, broadening the scope of creativity and debate from center stage as well as behind the scenes.

Fatema Mernissi celebrated "new talents" by transforming her home into a platform for workshops and gatherings for intellectuals, activists, and policy makers. Her feminist practice did not grow out of specific partisan politics, or out of gender segregated feminist spaces. Rather, it grew from her embrace of Islamic philosophy and its articulation of the Qur'anic principle of communicative *jadal* (debate and argumentation), and most recently, from her encounter with Sufism and its nexus of love and compassionate knowledge.

Powerful Feminist Legacy

Bridging, inventing, subverting and always transcending are terms that condense the great intellectual legacy and human print of Fatema Mernissi, a crossing most expressed in her world-renowned novels *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1995) and *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Harems, Different Cultures* (2002).

Since the publication of her first book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* in 1975, Mernissi documented specific turning points in the history of political and intellectual debates that Muslim societies generated in their relationship to Western modernities, in all their colonial interventions and aggressions.

The first Gulf War was one of these turning points. In Morocco, this war was lived as a major wound generating a protest that drew an estimated one million to the streets of the capital city. Mernissi's 1992 book *Islam and*

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Democracy: Fear of the Modern World reads as a powerful reaction to the U.S. war on Iraq, and to the Arab leadership's complicity in it.

The book presents an incisive critique of "fundamentalism," autocratic rule, and deep "fears" of Western modernity by revisiting the Islamic intellectual tradition of political debate and rational thinking.

Mernissi was a pioneering voice in redefining sharia and the Islamic textual tradition of prophetic rhetoric hadith as interpretive, contingent, and subject to human scrutiny. Her loving incursion into the life of the Prophet Muhammad, exemplified in her book *The Veil and The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991), generated one of the most powerful paradigms in feminist studies by widely opening the realm of hadith and Islamic studies to feminist scrutiny.

This book challenges the perception of the mosque as an exclusive male space for prayer, by claiming that the mosque had initially been an open platform of political debates and feminist contestation of Qur'anic revelations, Islamic jurisprudence, and established patriarchal practices.

The centrality of Islam as a tradition of knowledge production, knowledge seeking, border crossing, and trespassing by women is best represented by Mernissi's use of Sinbad and Scheherazade. These were emblematic figures in her writing and understanding of voice, border crossing, and knowledge production.

Mernissi was a cornerstone for a series of debates, notably on women, Islam, democracy and modernity.

Mernissi's work reads as a powerful account of women's fields of power and agency, rather than oppression. In her work and despite her powerful incisive voice, it is indeed all the other women that we hear the peasant, the factory worker, the homemaker, the activist and the writer.

Her impact on feminist theory and gender studies stems from this paradigm shift. Mernissi never claims space or rights for women. Rather, and throughout her writing, Mernissi shows that women have always been taking that space, and without asking permission.

This was also her understanding of the rise of the most conservative forces in political Islam. Political Islam is not to be viewed solely as an utterly patriarchal interpretation of sharia, but as a fear of women's massive presence in public spaces and of their irreversible engagement with the structures of knowledge acquisition and production, and with the institutions of the modern state.

She put these conservative forces in dialogue with Muslim women's early reflection, debates and contestation of the foundational texts of Islam, as well as with the West's truncated view of Muslim women's lives and lack of power.

Though Mernissi inaugurated a new phase of feminist research and writing in the Muslim world, she never entered controversies. She was a federating force that brought men and women together in service of feminist projects. Mernissi was the founder of several influential collective book series, including *Approches*, *Humanistic Islam* and *Profile de Femmes*, all of which were written by male and female scholars.

Open Doors

Al Jazeera, in a recent interview with Mernissi, asked her if she was constantly in conversation with "the street vendor, the city dweller, the underground artist, and the marginal factions of the Moroccan population?" Her answer:

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"I was born in Fes, in the same neighborhood where the University of al-Qarawiyyin (founded in 859 CE by Fatema El-Fihriyya) is located. The University of al-Qarawiyyin has seventeen doors that were constantly open to the neighborhoods and surrounding markets. The street vendor, the shop keeper, and the ordinary person could engage in business for part of the day, and enter al-Qarawiyyin to perform prayer and seek knowledge at various times of the day. Teachers ('ulama) were lecturing throughout the day and everyone was free to choose from whom to seek knowledge. My grandmother used to take us with her to listen to her favorite lectures. When she was not happy with what she heard, she simply moved to the next one. So, I was born in a world in which there was no rupture between the street and the intellectual elite. Knowledge was not privatized, and its doors were always open to all." (Author's translation)

Mernissi's own doors are now closed. But her memory will remain with many of us whose paths went through her open doors. Thousands of us learned, in the intimacy of her company, how to value a woman's intellect in addition to the ways of seeing and of being in the world. She has elicited a range of tributes, if the numerous responses to my post about her death on Facebook, are any indication.

"She was an incredible force of nature and a wonderful human being."

"It is through her work that I got introduced to gender studies in the late '80s."

"She was the first feminist I read in my youth (not Greer, not Friedan, but her!) and she has stayed with me since then...may her ruh (soul) be received in jannat (paradise)."

"Many of us would not have been here without her."

"My condolences for the loss of such a treasure."

"Rest in power."

"Let us read her and re-read her."

"If you have not read her before, get a copy of her beautifully written memoir *Dreams of Trespass*, which among other things, recalls the arrival of American GIs in Morocco during World War II, and deconstructs the western idea of the harem. Rest in Peace."

I cannot end without recalling Fatema's love for handcrafts and jewelry gift making, during the long summer evenings in Rabat. You would know that you were embarking on a long journey of friendship with Fatema when she brought her beads, stone, and silver pieces, asking you to choose the ones she would use to make you a gift.

Fatema shaped the modern fashion style of professional women by adopting traditional Moroccan self-made jewelries and the two main Moroccan garments worn by women for centuries: the caftan and the fuqiyya. She made these garments her own by shortening and wearing them on top of European-style shirts and pants, giving new life to them as well as to the thousands of jobs related to their hand crafting.

Fatema Mernissi will be missed. But her rich legacy, her visionary work and powerful impact will continue to inspire generations. As one of my U.S. students put it in a condolence email to me:

"While I feel deeply mournful, I also feel very proud to know of Fatima Mernissi's work. And I have you to thank for that. Thank you so much for bringing her ideas to my attention; I genuinely look forward to doing my part to make sure that her legacy is not forgotten or under-appreciated."

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