INTRODUCTION

MERNISSI AS A POINT OF ENTRY INTO ISLAMIC FEMINISM

Mernissi and Her Critics

Mernissi’s work has rarely been extensively (with a few exceptions, of course) examined or deeply analyzed, even when widely cited in works dealing with gender in Islam or Muslim majority societies. The few critics who have attempted such an endeavor typically have addressed only one aspect of her work at the expense of another, which, most of the time, results in major inaccuracies. For instance, some scholars have criticized Mernissi’s alleged lack of addressing issues of class disparities and global capitalism, founding their arguments exclusively on her work on gender and Islam. These critics have often ignored her more sociological work, mostly published in Morocco during the 1970s and 1980s, which primarily strived to criticize development policies and global capitalism and their impact on subaltern women. With respect to her work on Islam, some scholars have criticized her unsympathetic position toward Islam, basing their arguments exclusively on her earlier books. Indeed, in feminist scholarship dealing with Islamic

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1 One of the few scholars interested in her work is Jonas Svensson, who analyzes Mernissi’s work along with work by Riffat Hassan and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, as examples of what he terms an “accommodation-position” within a contemporary international debate on women’s human rights in his *Women's Human Rights and Islam*.


3 For example, see Mervat Hatem, “Class and Patriarchy as Competing Paradigms for the Study of Middle Eastern Women,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, no. 4 (1987): 811–18; and Asma Barlas, “Qur’anic Hermeneutics and Women’s Liberation” (paper presented at the International Congress on Islamic Feminism, Barcelona, Spain, October 29, 2005), http://www.asmabarlas.com/TALKS/Barcelona.pdf. In defense of Hatem, at the moment that she wrote her article, the English translation of Mernissi’s *Le Harem politique* was not yet available. Mernissi’s other book, which inaugurates her second-stage feminism, *L’Amour dans les pays musulmans* [Love in Muslim countries] (Casablanca: Editions Maghrébines, 1986), has never been translated into English.
feminism, Mernissi’s work is either highly praised or categorically crit-
icized, but rarely deconstructed with some rare exceptions, like Lamia
Ben Yousef Zayzafoon’s excellent study of Mernissi’s publications.4
However, despite Zayzafoon’s interesting deconstruction, her analy-
sis does not distinguish between the ‘secularist’ and ‘Islamic’ feminist
moments in Mernissi’s scholarship, which represents another limita-
tion into which some critics fall when discussing Mernissi’s work.

Zayzafoon devotes her first chapter, “A Semiotic Reading of Islamic
Feminism: Hybridity, Authority, and the Strategic Reinvention of the
‘Muslim Woman’ in Fatima Mernissi,” to Mernissi. As the title suggests,
she examines Mernissi’s construction, or “reinvention,” of the category
‘Muslim woman.’ She observes the way this category appears as a plu-
ral signifier in Mernissi’s work, which contradicts both Orientalist and
conservative Muslim monolithic constructions. She praises Mernissi’s
double project to protect the rights of ‘Muslim women’ against the
rising Islamism, on the one hand, and to respond to the increasingly
anti-Islamic feeling in the West, on the other hand. Yet Zayzafoon
also sheds light on some major flaws in Mernissi’s work, such as the
continuity of her discourse with those two discourses. She argues that
by presenting “her reinvention of early Muslim society and the ideal
of gender equality in Muhammad’s time as the truth that has been
hidden or ‘veiled’ by the Muslim male elite,” Mernissi reproduces and,
therefore, reinforces the conservative position by espousing the logic
of religious truth. For her, Mernissi “paradoxically endorses the notion
of truth from which the [H]adith derives its authority and hence rein-
forces the power of tradition to reinscribe and perpetuate itself.”5 This
criticism is in line with the one presented here with a major difference:
I do not espouse Zayzafoon’s (Islamic feminist) position that refuses to
engage the Hadith,6 and her concentration on the Qur’an on grounds
that the latter is more authentic and represents God’s authorial intent

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5 Zayzafoon, *Production of the Muslim Woman*, 22.

6 I will be writing ‘Hadith’ with a capital letter to refer to the whole corpus of hadiths or Prophet’s sayings. When spelled with a lowercase, ‘hadith’ means a narra-
tive record of the sayings and customs of the Prophet.