CHAPTER FIVE

REVISITING ISLAM FROM ‘WITHIN’

L’Amour dans les pays musulmans

*L’Amour dans les pays musulmans* (Love in Muslim countries), published in 1986, marks the turning point in Mernissi’s feminist trajectory. It is her first Islamic feminist text. The book’s thesis is in complete opposition to her previous studies *Beyond the Veil* and *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*. In it, she asserts that Islam is not against love. In contrast to her two earlier works, which rely on the misogynous discourse of some orthodox theologians, the present book sheds light on liberal Muslim scholars, who preach faithfulness in heterosexual relationships, like Andalusian scholar Ibn Hazm (born in 384 Hegira [994 AD]) and (surprisingly, one might say) Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. She treats al-Ghazali differently here than in her earlier works, showing the importance of the reader’s, or interpreter’s, perspective when dealing with (religious) texts. She also bases her claim on the Islamic tradition of Sufism, which has a more liberal attitude toward women than ‘orthodox’ Islam.

Although *L’Amour dans les pays musulmans* does not have the analytical rigor of her earlier books, since it is a collection of articles originally published in the magazine *Jeune Afrique* (Young Africa) in 1984, it does share their subversive style. In an irreverent tone that is reminiscent of Fatna Ait Sabbah’s derisive style, when describing her unorthodox methodology, Mernissi writes:

*L’un des privilèges de l’écriture, pour moi en tous cas, est d’écrire ce qui me passe par la tête, comme je le fais maintenant. Mais, quand je dis «ce qui me passe par la tête», je ne veux pas dire que c’est désordonné. Le processus d’écrire est très mystérieux. Mais ce qui est sûr, c’est qu’il n’est pas désordonné. Il obéit à un ordre qui n’est pas celui du lecteur, c’est tout. Souvent, dans certains genres d’écritures, les plus intéressantes selon moi, cet ordre échappe à l’auteur aussi.*

One of the privileges of writing, at least for me, is to write what comes to my mind, as I am doing now. But when I say “what comes to my mind,” I do not mean that it is disordered. The writing process is very mysterious. But what is certain is that it is not disordered. It obeys an
order that is not the reader's; that is all. Often, in some genres of writing, the most interesting [genres] according to me, this order escapes the author as well.1

To overthrow the male order/power, like Ait Sabbah, Mernissi claims a special order or disorder of writing and analysis. She is aware that she is involved in fabricating another narrative, one that does not claim 'objectivity' and 'order.' She aims to juxtapose her narrative to the male narrative, avoiding the latter's pretension to truth.

Though Mernissi's title announces a sociological study of love in Muslim countries, the book is a study of ancient religious texts. This focus raises the question of the problematic reliance on religious texts to explain and discuss emotion and affection in present-day Muslim societies. This shortcoming is overcome in the book's new edition, published in Morocco in 2007, through the use of a subtitle, A travers le miroir des textes anciens (Mernissi's Web site provides a translation for the full title as "Love in [the] Moslem world through the mirror of ancient literature"), that narrows the original title's scope.2 The feminist publishing house Le Fennec, led by Leila Chaouni, published the new edition.3 According to Mernissi, Chaouni wished to republish the more than twenty-year-old book in paperback to encourage young Moroccans to learn that Islam promotes love.4

What is the reason behind her shift with respect to Islam in L'Amour dans les pays musulmans? By 1984, the year in which she published articles in Jeune Afrique, Mernissi started mingling with a number of Moroccan male intellectuals, like Ahmed Khamlichi and Abderrazak Moulay Rachid, within the multidisciplinary research group Woman, Family and Child created in 1981. These male scholars, well versed in religious matters, advocated reform of the Moudawana using an Islamic framework. Their progressive Islamic thought might have started to shake Mernissi's secularist take on Islam.

By that time, Mernissi also became aware of the difficulty of using a secularist feminist discourse to advocate women's rights in the Moroc-

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1 Mernissi, L'Amour dans les pays musulmans, 9.
3 Chaouni founded Le Fennec in 1987. A number of its publications deal with women or gender, some of them initiated and edited by Mernissi, like the book series Approches.