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Abigail Averill April 10, 2015

# Vernacular not Secular: An Examination of Islamic Feminism as a "Homegrown" Movement Through the Works of Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud

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Abstract
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Feminism is a word which has become entrenched in American lexicon thanks to the long existence of women's activism in this country. However, this association of feminism with the West has plagued gender equality activists working in different social, cultural, and religious contexts. One such group that has been challenged by their supposed "western" sympathies is the Islamic Feminist movement. These women, whose work utilizes Islam as the primary proof of gender equality, are themselves divided by the controversy over their identity. This thesis seeks to understand the relationship of "Western" feminism with the activism practiced by Islamic feminists and, in the process, show that while the term "feminist" may have Western roots, it can and does grow most effectively in local soil. In order to perform this examination, this work analyzes the activism of two prominent Islamic Feminists, Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi, as a case study for the movement as a whole.

# Vernacular not Secular: An Examination of Islamic Feminism as a "Homegrown" Movement Through the Works of Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud

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## Introduction

*"Feminism is much more than an ideology driving organized political movements. It is, above all, an epistemology. It is an attitude, a frame of mind that highlights the role of gender in understanding the organization of society."*
*~Miriam Cooke author of* Women Claim Islam[1]

Feminism is by no means a new concept in today's world, having been in existence since even before it was given a name in 1837. Because the term describes an ideology and an epistemology considered entrenched in "the West,"[2] it has not necessarily translated well to other cultures around the world. As the word feminism travels from one place to the next it carries with it connotations that in some cases can lend power, but in others, can inhibit women from achieving their goals within the framework of gender activism.

One specific example of this controversy arises with the term "Islamic Feminism," which was coined by Margot Badran to describe a movement she witnessed arising among Muslim women of the Middle East to situate ideas of gender equality primarily in an Islamic context. However, in naming, power can be connoted or taken away, and in the case of the Islamic Feminist movement, the question of acceptance of a title imposed by a Western woman is only one of the many internal conflicts. While it would be impossible to fairly examine the many voices of the Islamic Feminist movement in the span of a paper rather than a book, this research seeks to use two particular female scholars and activists as a case study for examining the larger movement. Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi have both become highly controversial figures through their dual identities as scholars and activists. And yet, while they both work within an Islamic framework, their particular methods and areas of focus differ greatly. It is my aim in

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[1] Cooke, Miriam. *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*. (New York: Routledge, 2001), viii.
[2] Here, "the West" is used to refer to developed European countries and the United States—the regions traditionall lumped into this category in scholarship. However, the controversies over this term will be explored further on in this introduction through the lens of orientalism.

examining their work, backgrounds, and the larger movement to which they, at least tangentially, belong, to show that the many fragmentations of the Islamic feminist movement result from the differing backgrounds of its members. I also aim to show how the notion that feminism is an import from the West continues to play a major role in that fragmentation—whether through the individuals taking part in the movement themselves or from the critiques that they face in the course of their work.

Much scholarship exists on the concept of "Third-World Feminism" which will be examined below, and scholarship on "Islamic Feminism" as a movement began to flourish in the 1990s to early 2000s. However, a gap remains in that scholarship when it comes to an in-depth examination of methodological differences, and the fissures that result—particularly in relation to the background of the women involved in the movement. By attempting to understand why the Islamic feminist movement has failed to find a sense of cohesion, I aim to fill that gap. My methods lie mainly in the analysis of my two foci—Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi. I engage directly with their complete written works as well as their modes of activism and also incorporate previous scholarly analyses of their works to form my own opinion about the influence of their backgrounds on their methods—and by extension on the location of their ideas in the spectrum of export, import, "East," and "West." Additionally, in order to situate their works, and the larger Islamic feminist movement in the history of global feminism, I look at that history, specifically as related to the idea of export of Western thought.

Before proceeding to an analysis of where Islamic feminism fits into the history of feminism overall, a note must first be made of the previous scholarship in this area that has influenced my own work. The seminal, survey-style works on Islamic feminism come primarily from Miriam Cooke and Margot Badran, who have studied the activisms of Muslim feminists,

whether secular or overtly religious, in order to better understand the formation of a feminism which can have potency in the Muslim world. Scholarship on specific trends in the Islamic feminist movement has also come from American academics such as Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzadeh who have questioned the effectiveness of the Islamic feminist movement. Likewise, Hibba Abugideiri and Juliane Hammer have examined the practice of an American Islamic feminism, in the process mentioning Wadud's dual identity as both an Islamic feminist and an American woman. Finally, the work of other Islamic feminists and scholars, contemporary to Wadud and Mernissi, has played a role in this examination. In particular, the works of Leila Ahmed, one of the most prominent scholars of women and gender in Islamic history and societies, and Asma Barlas, an American Islamic feminist who has been largely influenced by Wadud, will feature more prominently. Thus, through an examination of the existing scholarship surrounding both Wadud and Mernissi, if not always directly related to their immediate works, each woman's methodology can be better understood.

## A Brief History of Feminism

In order to understand the concept of "Islamic Feminism" as well as the controversy that the name has evoked, one must first understand the concept of "feminism" itself. In particular, the aspect of feminism that has made it so distasteful to some women working within an Islamic context for gender equality is the idea that feminism is inherently western and an import associated with colonialism and imperialism.

While feminist ideas have existed since before the 19th century, the term was first coined by Charles Fourier, a French philosopher, in 1837, just before the beginning of what, in academia, is commonly referred to as the "first wave" of feminism. This wave, which began

with the organization of small, target groups campaigning specifically for issues related to women, began to swell in the 1850s and 1860s, lasting until the 1910s. The participants were largely white and middle class and their goals reflected their social setting—with a focus on female right to property rather than concepts of racial struggle or economic equality. The idea of suffrage was, at this point, still considered too radical to include in mainstream feminist movements. In fact, in some early feminist writings, an undertone of what Marlene Legates, author of *Making Waves: A History of Feminism in Western Society,* calls "the scientific, imperialist, and racist values of the period"[3] could be felt, as the members of the movement sought to make their case for equality within the social constructs of their time.

Between the two world wars, there was less unified nationalist feminism, likely in part due to the change in political, social, and economic environment in the wake of the First World War. While the first wave of feminism arose in what Legates calls an "optimistic climate," resulting from the economic success of the industrial revolution and the increased prosperity associated with it, the First World War left the societies previously more supportive of feminist movements, such as the United States and France, hurting economically—and by extension less willing to consider the social change which feminists pushed for. However, in the 1960s and early 70s, as prosperity and stability began to return to Western society, women once again began to organize themselves towards political activism to begin the "second wave" of feminism. This wave was made up of two currents—one largely similar to first wave feminism and another differing in several key ways. The first of these currents, sometimes known as "equal rights feminism," was similar to first wave feminism in that it "assumed the goal of equality between women and men, but with an emphasis on combating discrimination and sexist attitudes rather

[3] LeGates, Marlene. *Making Waves: A History of Feminism in Western Society*. (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996), 259.

than on gaining political rights."[4] The second current on the other hand, sometimes known as "radical feminism," because of its differences from first wave ideology, "identified patriarchy as the root cause of male dominance and focused on the family and personal relationships rather than on the world of politics or paid employment."[5] By beginning to address what was commonly seen as the private space of the home, as opposed to the public sphere of employment, these women took on fundamental ideas of total equality for women. This change in their ideology also reflected a change in the demographics of the women taking part in each current of second wave feminism. The less radical current was made up of educated, white, middle class women—a background largely similar to the feminists of the first wave. In contrast, the women of the more radical current, while still largely white and middle class, were much younger, perhaps reflecting an increasingly liberal viewpoint among the younger generation.

It has been argued that this second wave of feminism slowly transformed into a third wave that today's feminist movements fall into. This wave is made up of many more currents emerging from various cultures and societies around the world in a globalized age, and has had a direct impact on the increased level of debate and engagement between different movements. Uma Narayan, editor of *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives*, calls this a "dual aspect," in which both "an ongoing commitment to challenging mainstream political theory" as well as increased "debate with and critical responses to other feminist positions" both exist.[6] Out of this increased engagement has risen the question of whether global feminism is in fact a plausible reality. However, the construction of feminism as a single international movement risks losing sight of each individual feminism's own unique social, cultural, and

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[4] Ibid, 329.
[5] Ibid, 329.
[6] Shanley, Mary Lyndon, and Uma Narayan. *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives.* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997), xx.

religious context. In her introduction to the book *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that the idea of a global sisterhood is "premised on a center/periphery model" that places all women who are not white, western women on the periphery, combining their many different societal positions into one lump group and in the process effectively implying that their needs as women are all the same despite their differing races, economic classes, and cultural contexts.[7] Thus, according to the monolithic model of a globalized sisterhood, these "third-world" women, by virtue of not being Western, share the same predicament and needs as one another.

Here a short discussion of the idea of "orientalism," or the qualifying of the East as an entity in opposition to, and generally backwards in relation to, the West is necessary to fully understand the situating of these feminisms. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* centers on this idea of Western cultural creation of the division of "East" and "West," with the idea of "west is best" at its core. It is out of this legacy that so many of the divisions evidenced between feminisms in the third and first worlds seem to stem.[8] As Islamic feminism began, it did so in opposition to certain feminist practices that included an "adulation of the West and disparagement of the native," such as that practiced by the Egyptian Doria Shafik in the mid 20th century.[9] For these women, who grew up in an environment in which learning and empowerment was, thanks to orientalism, associated with the West, a movement away from their native culture was seen as necessary to create any kind of lasting change. Thus, the stage for division among Muslim feminists between those working within a local, religious, cultural and social context and those working with ideas of first and second wave western feminism, was set

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[7] Alexander, M. Jacqui., and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures.* (New York: Routledge, 1997), xvii.
[8] Said, Edward W. Orientalism. (New York: Vintage, 1979)
[9] Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate.* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 207.

by the legacy of orientalism. And, the critique of Islamic feminism as a western import can be seen as a backlash against this orientalist pattern of thought. With the negative heritage of Western colonialism and the orientalism which accompanied it, calling a woman like Mernissi or Wadud "Western" was to label them as the other, the enemy.

In attempting to differentiate between different feminisms in different locations around the world, some have used the terms "first-world" and "third-world" feminisms. To clarify, many use the term "third-world" to refer to the "colonized, neocolonized or decolonized countries (of Asia, Africa, and Latin America) whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process."[10] While this title is a difficult one to negotiate because it groups all third world women together despite their many differences, I will use it in this history of feminism outside of the West as it has been used so widely in the existing scholarship. However, in my use of "third world feminisms"[11] I do not aim to intimate that all third world women are the same in their needs or demands as feminists, but rather agree with Geraldine Heng when she says that third world feminism is "a chimera, hydra-headed creature, surviving in a plethora of lives and guises."[12] By this I mean that because of the differing cultures and backgrounds in which feminisms outside of the developed west have arisen, the individual feminisms themselves must vary correspondingly and are only described together here because they do share several key differences with ideas of "western" feminism.

In large part, the similarities that can be found between different third world feminisms arise from their similar political climates at the time of their origins. Many third world feminist

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[10] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), ix.

[11] I will continue to use "third-world feminisms" in the plural to signify the plurality of the movement and distance myself from the concept of one, monolithic feminist practice in opposition to Western, first-world feminism.

[12] Heng, Geraldine. "A Great Way to Fly," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 30.

movements arose in coincidence with nationalist movements, as previously colonized countries strove to achieve independent identities. This however, has created problems for third world feminist movements because the investment of those nationalists in the ideas of feminism was often transient—high when it was politically advantageous and fading after the immediate political goals of independence were achieved. Additionally, in the wake of many of those nationalist movements, a strong centralized power took over, leading to relatively high amounts of government intervention in feminist movements, a practice which often kept them from achieving their goals. When this political and social context is contrasted with the wealth and success that led to early feminist movements in the West, it is a bit clearer why some third world feminisms have faced such challenge. And yet, a common accusation faced by feminists operating in the third world is that they are inherently "western." This in turn can lead them to work more closely with their local culture, as they seek to avoid connotation with the legacy of colonialism.

The colonial process left a clear imprint on the shape of not only political movements in post-colonial societies, but also on the status of women within those societies. Chandra Mohanty argues that "colonial states created racially and sexually differentiated classes conducive to a ruling process fundamentally grounded in economic surplus extraction."[13] Thus, by operating fully with the goal of increasing wealth extraction from colonized nations, the colonizers, largely Western powers, created or exacerbated previous social stratifications, whether between genders or otherwise. Practical stratification aside, colonialism also left a new picture of the oppressed woman behind, as women became a focal point for struggle, whether among nationalists or among those seeking to "help" bring Western ideas of freedom or equality to the Middle East

[13] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism.," introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 18.

and other colonized areas. As Uma Narayan points out, many of the "'cultural conflicts' between Western colonizing cultures and colonized indigenous cultures involved issues pertaining to women's roles and female sexuality, rendering the figure of the 'Colonized Woman' an important site of the political struggles between 'Western Culture' and the 'Culture' of the colony."[14] Thus, it was through conceptions of women that many of these conflicts manifested, often without taking into account the actual standpoint of the women.

Instead, early activism regarding the status of women in the third world tended to take an approach similar to the narrow focus of western feminism—looking at gender discrimination with a willful ignorance of race and class difference. This serious blind spot however, led to a series of failures because it attempted to address the status of women without addressing the status of the countries or societies in which they lived. It simply transposed methods that had been successful in the West into totally different social, political, religious, or cultural climates. Additionally, it failed to account for the difference in resources between first world and third world women activists, a problem which, in some cases, led to a limiting of the ability of third world women to participate in a large-scale feminist movement.[15] Thus, each feminism must arise from its own particular location, and as Margot Badran argues, in her book *Feminism in Islam*, this should combat the accusation of feminism as a western construct. "American Feminism is not French," she says, "Egyptian feminism is not French and it is not Western."[16]

Working within this idea of feminisms arising from their own "identity (with its experiential and cognitive components) and social location (the particular nexus of gender, race,

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[14] Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 17.
[15] Johnson-Odim, Cheryl. "Common Themes, Different Contexts: Third World Women and Feminism," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 324.
[16] Badran, Margot. *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 243.

class, and sexuality)" then, we can begin to examine the rise of the Islamic feminist movement. However, before delving into that history, the rise of fundamentalism also merits a brief mention because of the impact it has on methods of feminist activism. In the wake of the nationalist movements that freed much of the third world from colonial power, socialist or strong centralized national governments often took over. However, if they failed, as they often did, to bring about the desired level of prosperity, freedom and stability, fundamentalism arose.[17] And, these fundamentalist movements, such as the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in recent years, often, according to Mohanty, take a "deeply heteropatriarchical" form "in suggesting the control and regulation of women's sexuality as the panacea for. . .failures."[18] This rise of fundamentalism, then, as we will see, contributes largely to the changing political and religious landscape of the MENA region and has direct implications for the pattern of feminism practiced therein.

History of Islamic Feminism

Within this larger history of feminism then arose a new pattern of women's activism, which Margot Badran called "Islamic feminism." This term, which I will continue to use because of its scholarly applications, refers to the form of scholarship and activism that "uses Islamic discourse as its paramount—although not necessarily its only—discourse in arguing for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice."[19] This should be differentiated from "Muslim feminism" which is a term referring to gender activism carried out by Muslim individuals. Muslim feminism may employ some support from Islamic texts and traditions, but does not rely on them in the same heavy manner that "Islamic feminism" does. In fact, early

[17] Alexander & Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies,* xxv.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Badran, *Feminism in Islam,* 246.

"Muslim feminism" often utilized more secular methods similar to early Western feminisms in the United States and France. In contrast, Islamic feminists look to Islamic tradition as the primary proof for gender equality often through Qura'nic interpretation or interpretation of the Hadith. By thus targeting their argument within the direct context of the Islamic holy texts or history, women working as Islamic feminists seek to escape the label that has so often plagued third world feminists—that of being Western. Badran goes so far as to argue that all Middle Eastern feminisms, whether overtly Islamic or secular, do not originate in the West. Instead she says, "like feminisms everywhere, they are born on and grow in home soil."[20] This is particularly applicable to Islamic feminism, as it seeks to distance itself from Western interpretation and work directly within the religious discourse that its target audience, members of largely Muslim societies, is fluent in.

However, by using the term Islamic feminism, I do not claim that there is a coherent movement working with that name. Instead, it is more a group of scholars whose work only shares the similarity of primary focus on Islamic discourse as proof of gender equality. As Miriam Cooke points out in her book *Women Claim Islam*, "Islamic feminism is not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning" that celebrates "multiple belongings."[21] Among these women who take part in what we are calling Islamic feminism, aside from differences in method, one of the largest controversies centers on whether to actually accept the label of "Islamic feminist." Badran, who coined the term, argues that it should be accepted because "to name is to recognize, to bring attention to, to stimulate engagement."[22] Thus, she feels that by giving women working within an Islamic framework for

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[20] Ibid, 307.
[21] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 59.
[22] Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 325.

gender equality a name, she is simultaneously empowering them and bringing them the attention necessary for success on an international level.

However, some members of the Islamic feminist movement have felt limited by the name. Asma Barlas, a Pakistani-born gender activist for example, has been one of the term's most vocal opponents, even engaging in direct debate with Margot Badran. She says that by ignoring "how people choose to name themselves, their work, and their struggles, we necessarily do some epistemological violence to them."[23] For Barlas, the title Islamic feminist was not one she chose, and thus not one that she felt comfortable with—largely for a reason commonly cited by other opposition to the name—that the term feminist for them means something Western. For Fatima Seedat, another Islamic feminist scholar, the "genealogical heritage of European modernity" will forever be equated with the term feminist.[24] She also argues, much as other third world feminists had before her, that by naming all the women working within the Islamic context "Islamic feminists," "sameness" is more likely to be produced than the "diversity in the cultural contexts and intellectual paradigms" which she feels should be encouraged.[25] However, as the movement has gained more attention, certain members have found themselves embracing the title for the way that it allows them "to situate their praxis in a global political landscape."[26] Thus, for some members of the movement, the connections they can gain by labeling are more important than the possible connotations with Western imperialism that they are libel to inherit. This debate is one that both scholars I will focus on have approached, if in different ways.

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[23] Barlas, Asma. "Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provincializing Feminism as a Master Narrative," *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives* 96 (2008): 22.
[24] Seedat, Fatima. "Islam, Feminism, and Islamic Feminism: Between Inadequacy and Inevitability," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29.2 (2013): 30.
[25] Ibid, 27.
[26] Safi, Omid. *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 155.

Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi: A Case Study

In an attempt to fill the aforementioned gap in research into the reasons for fragmentation within the Islamic feminist movement, I use two prominent members of the movement, Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi in a sort of case study analysis. This choice was purposeful for several reasons. Firstly, Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi have both acted as scholars as well as prominent activists—meaning that they seek to translate their theoretical findings into action. Secondly, both women have written largely in English (whether originally or through translation) but also incorporate Arabic into their analysis. This linguistic choice was important for my scholarship because of my lack of knowledge of French, another language in which many Islamic feminists have written, but also because it has allowed for my developing knowledge of Arabic to play a role in my examination of Islamic Feminism. Thirdly, and most importantly, Wadud and Mernissi have approached their overarchingly similar goal of gender equality in very different ways. Wadud has focused almost entirely on the Qur'an while Mernissi utilizes the Hadith and the history of early Islam, with a focus on the life of the Prophet himself. This difference in method as well as the path that each woman has taken to their current mode of activism is directly linked to their very different backgrounds—one an African American convert to Islam and one born into a somewhat conservative Muslim Moroccan family. In this way, they function as a study of not only the idea of fractionalization within the Islamic feminist movement, but also as a case study for the export of ideas from the west.

## Chapter 1: Amina Wadud and Qura'nic Hermeneutics

> *"I often feel that although I entered into a tradition whose holy prophet required Muslim males and females to seek knowledge until the grave, that as a woman, of African origin, and an American convert to Islam, I was not supposed to seek beyond what others hand down to me." ~Amina Wadud,* Quran and Woman[27]

Early Life and Education

In order to understand Wadud's approach to Qura'nic interpretation and her particular variety of Islamic feminism, one needs to first understand her early life, education, and first encounters with Islam. Born Mary Teasley on September 25, 1952 in Bethesda Maryland, Wadud did not take her current name until her conversion to Islam while in college. With a father who worked as a Methodist minister, she was however raised with religion as a major part of her life. From her writings, it is clear that her father was her main role model as a child,[28] and that his faith, which she calls an "awesome light of belief," had a huge impact on her later approach to Islam.[29] She credits his faith and confidence in God's ability to provide relief from "the context of racist America" with her ideas of divine justice, arguing that because of her father's supreme confidence in God's fairness, she links "conceptions of divine with justice, but also [links] notions of justice with the divine."[30] Thus, from her father, she inherited the idea that God's will is inherently linked with fairness—an idea which seems to drive her own interpretation of the Qur'an and the fairness towards women which she finds evidence of among its pages.

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[27] Wadud, Amina. *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective.* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), xviii.
[28] As is made clear through her writings, Wadud's mother was largely absent for her childhood.
[29] Wadud, Amina. *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam.* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 4. For reference, the full quote is as follows: "for me the origin of three decades of work on Islam, justice, and gender was the awesome light of belief that I inherited from my father, a man of faith and a Methodist minister who was born and died poor, black, and oppressed in the context of racist America."
[30] Ibid.

Wadud's education also had a direct impact on her approach to Islamic feminist theory and activism. While attending college at the University of Pennsylvania between 1970 and 1975[31], she first began to explore the idea of conversion to Islam. In 1972 she took the *shahada* and converted to Islam, at the same time changing her name from Mary Teasley to Amina Wadud to reflect her new identity as a Muslim. However, her study of Islam leading up to this conversion, and immediately following it, was largely carried out independently. In part, she chose this path of study because of what she cites as a "reductionism" in the study of Islam in an American university context—a phenomenon that she sees as a direct cause of stereotyping of Muslims in America.[32] However, this independent study of Islam was also a path of necessity according to Wadud because of the lack of resources available to her as a transitioning Muslim woman. Instead of studying Islam in some sort of academic context, she was forced to check out books from her university's library and read them on her own, "with no ability to argue for their benefits or merits relative to the macro-context of Orientalist agendas."[33] This lack of discussion then led her to an insulated view of Islam—one which allowed her to imagine that Islam might be the panacea for the oppression she felt surrounded by as an African-American woman.[34] She did not experience patriarchal traditions or practices of Islam in this early study,

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[31] A sampling of the events both in America and abroad during this time range is as follows: the United States continued to fight in the Vietnam War despite protests until the peace treaty was signed in 1975; relations with Communist China opened up; the Watergate Scandal led to Nixon's leaving office as U.S. President; the Supreme Court ruled that busing of students was constitutional if its goal was to end racial segregation in American schools; the Yom Kippur War became the largest conflict yet between Israel and Egypt and Syria; the Supreme Court legalized abortion in *Roe v. Wade*; Black Power, the Nation of Islam, and similar movements continued to gain popularity in the United States in the wake of Malcolm X's death; writer Tom Wolfe dubbed the baby boomer generation that was coming of age during the 70s the "Me Generation" because of their desire for self-realization; second wave feminism in the United States led by women like Betty Friedan fought for women's workplace rights and suffrage; thus the political and social climate at the time of Wadud's education at Penn, and self-realization, was one of change and exploration

[32] Ibid, 58.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Wadud explains this further with this quote: "Islam offered me an escape from the overwhelming phenomenon of double oppression as an African-American woman. Part of Islam's mystique for females in

but rather was allowed to develop what she calls a sense of optimism and female empowerment, which she then claims in performing her own *tafsir* or interpretation of the Qur'an.

However, this early optimism does not mean that she did not soon become exposed to the misogynistic current of Islam through her scholarship and greater practice of the religion. She cites her disappointment with the lack of manifestation of what she, from the beginning, understood to be elevated respect for women within Islam.[35] And, it is this disappointment, along with the conviction based on her early independent study of the religion that drives Wadud to begin her work on Qur'anic interpretation. When she learned the "significant distinction between 'Islam' and 'what Muslims do,'" she began the process of trying to reconcile her own ideas of Islam with a new type of Muslim practice that centered on equality for women.[36]

Her first book, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, actually began as her dissertation. After getting her BS from the University of Pennsylvania, Wadud went on to get her MA in Near Eastern Studies and her PhD in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Michigan in 1988. She then continued her education in Egypt where she studied advanced Arabic at the American University in Cairo, *tafsir*, religious interpretation, and Qur'anic studies at Cairo University, and philosophy at Al-Azhar University. In this way, she attempted to complement the secular education she had received in the United States with some religious education along with a deeper understanding of the Arabic

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larger groups of oppressed people, struggling for collective survival, is the appeal that they have been unable to experience: masculine honor and protection of the raised pedestal." (Ibid.)

[35] In *Gender Jihad* Wadud explains this with the quote: "After more than three decades as an African American Muslim woman, I have never experienced that honor, but I have faced the (external and sometimes internalized) humiliation of its absence." (Ibid, 59).

[36] Ibid, 21.

language—a component of her education that would become absolutely necessary for her interpretive methodology.[37]

This process of writing her dissertation continued after her education in Egypt when she moved to Malaysia in 1989 to take a position as an assistant professor in Qur'anic studies at the International Islamic University in Malaysia—a position that she held until 1992. It was in Malaysia that Wadud first published her dissertation. When *Qur'an and Woman* was published, its approach to Qur'anic interpretation was entirely new in that while past scholars looking at the role of women in Islam had examined passages of the Quran, they had never done what Wadud had undertaken—to interpret the whole holy text with women in mind.

Wadud partly credits her time in Malaysia for her confidence to publish her controversially novel work. She says that her teaching there exposed her to the possibility of "relatively peaceful coexistence of religious diversity" and the "mutual respect for religion as an essential characteristic of human well-being" that such coexistence and multiculturalism can encourage.[38] Her time in Malaysia and Egypt also made her feel more comfortable with her identity as a Muslim woman and as a scholar of Islam than she had ever felt in the United States. It was also while she was in Malaysia that she began her activist career, helping to found the organization Sisters in Islam.

In 1992, after the publication of her first book, Wadud returned to the United States and accepted a position as a professor of religion and philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University. However, her level of comfort with teaching was tested by her return to the American academic system, which she found "hostile towards Islam."[39] This did not stop her

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[37] Alongside her knowledge of Arabic, her study of tafsir also was necessary to have any source of legitimacy in writing *Qur'an and Woman*.
[38] Ibid, 63.
[39] Ibid.

from teaching and pursuing the writing of her second book, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, which she published in 2006. She also continued to work as an activist and speaker on women's rights within Islam throughout the world. After retiring from her position at Virginia Commonwealth in 2008, she became a visiting professor at the Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada Universtiy in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Controversial Actions

Aside from her written works, which have in of themselves gained both positive and negative attention, two particular instances of Wadud's actions have incited high levels of controversy. In 1994, she delivered a sermon entitled "Islam as Engaged Surrender," at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa. At the time, the idea of a woman delivering a sermon at a mosque was largely unheard of within Islam, not only in South Africa, but also around the world. This direct challenge, within a sacred space, to the patriarchal practices of some Muslims led to attempts to discredit Wadud both within and without American academic circles. Some of her opponents even worked to have her fired from the faculty at Virginia Commonwealth. However, just as in her work, Wadud remained confident in the justness of her actions and took her activism one step further.

On March 18, 2005 Wadud led Friday prayers in Manhattan. Generally, within Islam, male imams are the norm and Wadud's actions as an *imama*, leading prayers in a mixed gender congregation of about 100 people without the usual gender segregation, was seen by many as an affront to tradition. The event was sponsored by the Muslim Women's Freedom Tour and had faced challenges even before taking place. While Wadud and the Tour were searching for a location at which to hold the service, three separate mosques turned them down and a bomb

threat was issued. Ultimately, the service was held at Synod House, affiliated with the Episcopal Cathedral of Saint John the Divine on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, a choice of location which Wadud approved of because of its connection to sacred space, albeit the sacred space of another religion. The level of response to Wadud's actions as an *imama* in the United States was exponentially higher than the response to her actions in South Africa years before. Not only did people try to discredit her in this case, but she was branded a heretic.[40] And yet, Wadud did not back down, but continued to defend her actions. In her activism, as in her writing, the persistence of her early optimism, and her faith that Islam is fully compatible with gender justice, are in full evidence.

Major Works and Analysis

The majority of Wadud's writing is either found in her two books, *Inside the Gender Jihad* and *Qur'an and Woman*, or comes from those books in the form of excerpts adapted for scholarly publications. While the two books have different foci, with *Quran and Woman* engaging with the Qur'an systematically and exhaustively and *Inside the Gender Jihad* taking a more personal, almost autobiographical approach, they will be examined herein together in order to explore her total methodology.

Overall, Wadud's method is three-pronged consisting of the study of the grammatical composition of the Qur'an, the context in which the text was written, and the whole text itself—what Wadud calls its, "Weltanschauung" or world-view. Her focus is decidedly on the Qur'an itself, a choice which she says was "easy" because "it enjoys and overwhelming consensus among Muslims—however variously understood—as the word of Allah, revealed to the prophet

[40] Being named a heretic is not a light threat, and in Wadud's case was accompanied by calls for her death.

Muhammad for the purpose of guidance to all humanity."[41] Thus, she chooses to tackle the most influential work within Islam precisely because of its centrality—believing that by proving that the Qur'an shows gender equality she will be able to show that treating women fairly is God's will. And, unlike the Hadith, which she claims are fraught with "historical contradictions,"[42] the Qur'an, she says, is unerring because it is understood to be the word of God.[43] Additionally, she chooses to focus on the Qur'an almost exclusively because it allows her to delve deeper into one source, the one she believes most pertinent, without spreading her ideas too thinly.[44] By focusing her energy on the Qur'an rather than the Hadith, she makes herself an expert in one area—directly identifying what she can contribute to the larger picture of a progressive Islam that empowers women.

Within this broader framework of Qur'anic hermeneutics, Wadud's examination of the text focuses both on the language and grammar of the Qur'an and its images of women and their rightful roles in society, attempting to debunk sections of the holy text that have historically been used to prop up the patriarchy. In doing this, she takes inspiration from the prominent scholar of Islam, Fazlur Rahman, whose practice of Qur'anic interpretation was also based on a similar method of both placing the text in its context and analyzing the language and grammar found within it.[45] Wadud chooses a method so similar to his because of the fluidity of interpretation that a text can inspire, and in doing so, she attempts to delve deeper into the hermeneutics

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[41] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman,* ix.
[42] These contradictions, are as will be shown in Chapter 2, a major tenant of Mernissi's thought.
[43] Ibid, xvii.
[44] When she says "Each specialty must be developed distinctly before they can be combined together to gain a fuller picture. Hence, the special focus on the Qur'an for the issue of women and gender is appropriately restricted for optimal efficacy in this consideration" (Ibid.)
[45] The Pakistani-born scholar Rahman discusses the general relationship of men and women within the Qur'an in his book *Major Themes of the Qur'an.*
Rahman, Fazlur. *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*. (Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica 1980), 49-52.

itself—in other words, her interpretation of the text aims at understanding how we know what we know about the Qur'an.

The first major prong of Wadud's approach to interpreting the Qur'an is her examination of its language and grammar. Her overarching goal with this study is to show that not only are historically misogynistic concepts like *nushuz*, commonly taken to mean obedience to the husband, in fact not misogynistic, but also to show that prominent stories in the Qur'an give women just as much agency as men—a task which she accomplishes by examining the gender of terms in the Quran.

Before even diving into her analysis, Wadud acknowledges the limitations of language both for rhetorical use and in bridging the gap between human concepts and concepts of the divine.[46] [47] Not only does she recognize that she is analyzing similar passages to those analyzed by scholars of the Qur'an for centuries before her, but she understands that "language can be intentionally ambiguous" and that "one can use rhetoric to manipulate double or variant meanings."[48] This ambiguity of the Qur'an, or any text for that matter, is what Wadud recognizes as the facet of text which allows the reader to make his or her own interpretation based on prior text or experience.[49]

Additionally, as she writes mostly in English, studies texts written in Arabic, and carries out her activism in both languages, Wadud faces the added challenge of articulating concepts that have been normalized in one language into another that may or may not have words with

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[46] When she says "a divine text must overcome the natural restrictions of the language of human communication." (Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman,* 7); Wadud also discusses this in the light of the ability of an all-knowing, all-powerful God and what she perceives as the necessity of his ability to speak languages other than Arabic.

[47] In this belief, Wadud is influenced by Toshihiko Izutsu, a Japanese-born scholar of Islamic philosophy

[48] Wadud, *Gender Jihad,* 25

[49] For a more in depth analysis of how each reader interprets a text see Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, Hans-Georg, and Joel Weinsheimer. *Truth and Method*. (London: Continuum, 2006).

similar meaning. One of the major challenges for Wadud in grammatical analysis of the Qur'an is working in a gendered language. Because Arabic, unlike English, uses gendered verbs and adjectives, Wadud is forced to find a solution to the high incidence of male gender found in the Qur'an. To surmount this barrier, she argues that "every usage of the masculine plural form is intended to include males and females, equally, unless it includes specific indication for its exclusive application to males."[50] It is true that in Arabic there is no plural form exclusively for males, while there is a plural form exclusively for females. For instance, if one were to discuss a group of all-male students, one would use the term *tulaab*, the very same term one would use to discuss a group of mixed gender students. In contrast, if one wanted to describe a group of all-female students, the term *taalibaat* would be used. Thus, it is clear that when reading the Qur'an with women in mind, terms using what might be traditionally called the "masculine plural" could actually be describing a group made up of both genders. This grammatical analysis, quite different from previous ways of interpreting the Qur'an, is the primary leverage on which Wadud can then argue for equality of men and women within the Qur'an. Without the inclusion of women in this way, there are very limited explicit references to women, and many of those are the controversial passages such as those on inheritance, polygamy, etc which Wadud also attempts to debunk, but which do not get to the root problem of giving women agency within the larger text.

There are three major terms that Wadud points out as essential to her interpretation of the Qur'an as a whole because of their repeated use throughout the text. The first of these is *tawhid*, which she says is "the principle theoretical or foundational term underlying my use of the term Islam to claim that it does not oppress women."[51] The term *tawhid*, commonly understood to

[50] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman,* 4.
[51] Wadud, *Gender Jihad,* 24.

mean the "oneness of God"[52] is so integral to Wadud's analysis because she argues that the divine presence makes creating a social hierarchy impossible.[53] In essence she argues that when patriarchal interpretations argue that men are inherently above women, husbands above wives, etc, they challenge the place of God as the true one above all else. This challenge, in Wadud's point of view, is fundamentally anti-Islamic then because the idea of *tawhid* is one of the most central of the religion's concepts, and in her opinion unity is complimentary to equality.

The next term that Wadud analyzes is *khalifah*, meaning trustee or moral agent.[54] This "moral agency" is given to humans by God in a sort of trust or pact, which Wadud argues involves "the responsibility of each human being to establish social justice, as a representative of the divine will or cosmic harmony."[55] By looking at the term *khalifah* in this way, and analyzing the grammar surrounding it, Wadud argues that both men and women can gain this agency according to the Qur'an. And thus, if both men and women are equally capable of being moral human beings and fulfilling this trust with God, she argues that the Qur'an is explicitly stating that the two genders should be treated equally.

The third, and final term that Wadud claims is essential to her understanding of the Qur'an is *taqwa*, a term she translates loosely to mean piety.[56] [57] This term, she argues, is the pre-eminent way to differentiate between individuals within Islam—in contrast to differentiation

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[52] Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 83

[53] Wadud argues this point by saying, "when a person seeks to place him or her self above another, it either means the divine presence is removed or ignored, or that the person who imagines his or her self above others suffers from egoism of *shirk*" (Wadud, *Gender Jihad*, 32.)

[54] Ibid, 33.

[55] Ibid, 35.

[56] Wadud defines *taqwa* as "a pious manner of behavior which observes constraints appropriate to a social-moral system; and consciousness of Allah that is observing that manner of behavior because of one's reverence towards Allah" (Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman,* 37.)

[57] Fazlur Rahman defines *taqwa* as "to protect oneself against the harmful or evil consequences of one's conduct" (Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an,* 29.)

based on race, gender, or social status.[58] She quotes the Qur'an "the most noble of you from Allah's perspective is whoever (he or she) has the most *taqwa*" arguing that this clearly states that men and women can gain the same level of value through their spiritual practice and belief. When her analysis of these three terms is taken together then, Wadud paints a picture of a Qur'an which gives women agency and the ability to find equality with men through their piety, keeping in mind that while men and women can be equal to one another through their actions, they can never equal God.

The next major prong of Wadud's analysis is her look at what the Qur'an says about the proper place of women in society and the roles that they should fill. This is much less of a grammatical analysis and more of a content analysis, which serves as both a supplement to and a refutation of previous interpretations of the text. While the grammar gives a picture of the larger place of women in the Qur'an, only by also addressing the specific instances of women in the text as well can Wadud effectively combat entrenched patriarchal interpretations.

The first of these interpretations that Wadud attacks is that of the creation story—a story used in all three major monotheistic religions to show the superiority of men over women. Citing verse one of sura four, Wadud claims that the Qur'anic account of creation does not begin with a male, "nor does it ever refer to the origins of the human race with Adam."[59] While the versions of the creation story found in the Bible and the Torah describe the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, Wadud argues that because the Muslim version of this fundamental story does not describe that process, but rather pairs the man and woman in their creation from one soul, the origins of Islam are literally less misogynistic. Additionally, in her examination of creation in

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[58] When she says "One might attribute greater or lesser value to another on the basis of gender, wealth, nationality, religion or race, but from Allah's perspective, these do not form a valuable basis for distinction between individuals (or groups)—and His is the true perspective" (Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 37.)
[59] Ibid, 20.

the Qur'an, Wadud points out that things are created in pairs—that it is not just man and woman who are created together, but also night and day. All these single entities within these pairs then, are complimentary and by extension equal to each other, just as night is no lesser than day, so too woman is no lesser than man, but rather each needs the other to exist.[60]

Finally, in her account of creation, Wadud points out that the temptation and expulsion from the Garden is not explicitly blamed on the woman in the Qur'an as it is in the Torah or the Bible. Integrating her grammatical analysis here, she argues that the use of the Arabic dual form "to tell how Satan tempted both Adam and Eve" allows the Qur'an to "overcome[] the negative Greco-Roman and Biblical-Judaic implications that woman was the cause of evil and damnation."[61] Thus, Wadud attempts to use one of the root religious stories to show how Islam differentiates itself in terms of treatment of women from the other major monotheistic religions.

Once she has discussed the place of women in the creation story, Wadud then goes on to interpret the Qur'an's descriptions of individual women—which are few and far between. This relative scarcity is cited by Wadud as another reason that the Qur'an is actually friendlier to women than it may appear at first glance. Because women are rarely discussed, and even more rarely named, Wadud argues that the Qur'an implies that the two genders can be examined together. And, she argues that the few specific examples to be found in the Qur'an that describe the women in their "proper" place in society do not imply that these roles are universal.[62] Instead the few examples are simply a tool to ground the Qur'an in the reality of the time, rather than keeping it as an entirely theoretical text—essentially, in her view, specific examples were used to make the Qur'an relatable to its earliest audience.

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[60] When she says "the existence of one in such a pair is contingent upon the other in our known world. These are the Quranic pairs. Night flows into day; the male is irrevocably linked with the female" (Ibid, 21)
[61] Ibid, 25.
[62] Ibid, 32.

Within these specific examples, Wadud's the belief that Islam ultimately holds such high respect for women that it places them on a pedestal, is reflected in her interpretation of the pattern of naming—or lack there of—the women mentioned within the Quran's pages. The fact that only three women are named within the Qur'an is, she argues, "a important cultural idiosyncrasy which demonstrates respect for women."[63] Instead of naming women by their first names, the Qur'an often names them based on their relationships with the men in their lives—husbands or fathers. This apparent mandate to link women with the prominent men around them could be interpreted negatively, as a denial of women's right to stand on their own, rather than as as sign of respect, as Wadud argues. However, it is her own prior text[64] and private study of Islam away from patriarchal cultural traditions that we see reflected in her opinion here.

As the women mentioned specifically still remain the minority, Wadud spends more time examining roles of women as compared to roles of men within the Qur'an to examine whether ideas of separation of private and public spheres is supported within the holy text of Islam. The root of Wadud's argument in this matter is the idea of the non-gendered individual in the Qur'an. Women, just like men, are individuals who are differentiated by their relationship with Allah alone. "Whatever the Qur'an says about the relationship between Allah and the individual is not in gender terms," she says.[65] Instead, she argues that according to the Qur'an "with regard to spirituality, there are no rights of a woman distinct from rights of a man."[66] Wadud is able to take this approach in her argument because of the Qur'an's frequent use of the term *nafs*,[67]

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[63] Ibid, 32.
[64] Prior text refers to the previous experience and learning which each reader brings to an interpretive process. As Wadud says, "at the level of a 'reading', every reader interprets while in the act of reading. This level of interpretation is shaped by the attitudes, experiences, memory, and perspectives on language of each reader: the prior text." (Ibid, 94)
[65] Ibid, 34.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Rahman, *Major themes of the Qur'an*, 17.

[68]literally meaning same or self, to describe the individual. It does not traditionally have a gendered form, and thus, Wadud argues that it does not only apply to men but to women also. And, within this system of individuals, because there is no "pre-ordained and eternal system of hierarchy," the roles of women then are not clearly delineated or given any inherent value in relation to the roles of men according to Wadud.[69] Instead, Wadud argues that because the Qur'an remains general in its descriptions of the roles of women in society, it does not "propose only a single possibility for each gender (that is woman must fulfill this role and only this one, while men must fulfill that role and only men can fulfill it)."[70] The only role explicitly given to women in the Qur'an is motherhood—a function which only the female body can perform. However, Wadud argues that while this role is given reverence and importance by the Qur'an as a special task that women are able to perform, "there is no term in the Quran which indicates that childbearing is 'primary' to a woman."[71] Thus, by using a combination of grammatical analysis of terminology used to describe the individual, *nafs*, and by examining specific women and specific roles for women within the Qur'an, Wadud attempts to show that the lack of specificity in the Qur'an actually provides freedom for women because there is no explicit exclusion of them from any type of activity—nor is any type of activity delineated as their only appropriate method of participating in society.

Wadud's next prong of interpretation of the Qur'an is to attempt to debunk patriarchal interpretations of certain commonly used terms in the text, which have historically been used to repress women. The first of these, *darajah*, meaning step, level or degree, is used in the Qur'an to describe how people can change their status based on their actions. However, Wadud claims

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[68] For further exploration of the idea of the female soul see "Soul of a Woman Was Created Below" by Rkia Cornell
[69] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman,* 63.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.

that while this could create a sort of valuation of individual worth in a society, the Qur'an does not distinguish which deeds are more valuable than others, but "leaves each social system to determine the value of different kinds of deeds at will."[72] Thus, she argues that if patriarchal norms have valued men's work more then women's, it is because of a social system external to the Qur'an itself—such as the social system at the time of revelation (which she examines briefly as well). Instead, the differentiation between deeds is based on *taqwa* alone.[73] In order to support this claim she cites verse 32 of sura 4 which says, "unto men a fortune from that which they have earned, and unto women a fortune from that which they have earned."[74]

A term often used in conjunction with *darajah* to substantiate claims for male superiority is *faddala*, translated to mean to prefer or preference. The Qur'an uses this term to state that Allah has preferred some aspects of creation over others, and unlike *darajah*, *faddala* cannot be earned but is bestowed by Allah alone. However, Wadud argues that while the Qur'an discusses preference, it does so in regards to many aspects of history and life—certain prophets are described as being preferred over others, certain groups of people receive Allah's preference, and humankind itself is described as being preferred.[75] Thus, here by examining the Weltanschauung of the Qur'an, and placing this term in its larger context, Wadud hopes to refute the idea that preference is only referring to men over women.

It is in connection with this argument that she discusses one of the most important verses with regards to the relationship between men and women—verse 34 of sura 4. This verse has such high importance because it says that "men are *qawwamuna 'ala* women"—classically

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[72] Ibid, 66.
[73] Fazlur Rahman says that "in the darkness of the earth there are no distinctions and that while in the light of heaven there are distinctions, *their* basis is that intrinsic worth which is called *taqwa*." (Rahman, *Major Themes of the Quran,* 46)
[74] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman,* 66.
[75] Ibid, 69.

translated to mean that men have power over women. In order to debunk patriarchal interpretations of this verse, Wadud approaches it in several ways. First, she says that the "superiority" is conditional—related to preference from Allah and the ability of the man to provide for the woman.[76] In terms of preference, she points out that the only reference to material preference of men over women in the Qur'an is inheritance,[77] and thus, she argues that the first condition is murky in terms of its fulfillment—especially because it is in her mind directly linked to the idea of men providing for women. Men receive a greater portion of the inheritance according to the Qur'an, she argues, because they "have the responsibility of paying out of their wealth for the support of women."[78] Thus, the granting of material preference is based on the responsibility of men to provide for women—making it not really preference at all, but fairness based on societal norms at the time of revelation. Adding to this murkiness is the use of plurals in verse 34 of sura 4. According to Wadud preference cannot be unconditional because "verse 4:34 does not read 'they (masculine plural) are preferred over them (feminine plural).' It reads *'ba'd* (some) of them over *ba'd* (others)."[79] Here Wadud brings her grammatical analysis into play to show once again that gender is in fact not differentiated since, in Arabic, the term *ba'd* has no gender. Thus, while there may be one reference to material preference of men over women in the Qur'an, Wadud argues that this one point cannot outweigh the larger themes within the text of a lack of preference based on gender.

After addressing this idea of male superiority in the Qur'an, Wadud then addresses the idea of female obedience, particularly to the husband—a concept often linked to the idea of male superiority. Here she analyzes the two key terms *qanitat* and *nushuz* that are most commonly

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[76] Ibid, 70.
[77] This preference is based on the fact that verse 7 of sura 4 says that the share for a male is twice that for a female (Ibid.)
[78] Ibid, 71.
[79] Ibid.

used to support ideas of female obedience. She cites a controversial verse of the Qur'an that says: "so good women are *qanitat*, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear (*nushuz*), admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them."[80] Addressing each term separately, Wadud once again applies the idea of examining the world-view of the text in her refutation of patriarchal interpretation. The term *qanitat*, she says, appears many times in the Qur'an not just to refer to women, but to men as well. And, she says that rather than describing obedience of women to men, it actually refers to a "characteristic or personality trait of believers towards Allah."[81] Thus, just as she did when examining whether the Qur'an as a whole established an idea of hierarchy between men and women, Wadud again here brings the idea of a relationship with Allah into the picture—arguing that the importance of obedience is only in relation to him, but not to mortal man. And, by extension, she argues that by applying this obedience to male-female relations, the patriarchal interpretation negates Allah's importance and power. In terms of *nushuz*, she argues that once again it is used throughout the Qur'an for both men and women and thus cannot only mean "disobedience to the husband."[82] Here she interestingly cites Sayyid Qutb, one of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood, who explained the term as marital discord rather than disobedience of the wife.[83] Thus, by citing a prominent, fairly recent, and fairly conservative Muslim thinker here—Wadud adds power to her argument.

The final prong of Wadud's approach is her attempt to contextualize the Qur'an by analyzing society at the time at which it was revealed. Pre-Islamic Arabia, she argues, imbued Islam with many of the patriarchal customs that came to be equated with the religion itself over

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[80] Ibid, 74.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid, 75.
[83] Ibid.

time.[84] However, she argues that these vestiges of pre-Islamic culture that can be found in the Qur'an should not be applied to Muslim society today, when she says, "to restrict future communities to the social shortcomings of any single community—even the original community of Islam—would be a severe limitation of that guidance."[85] Citing examples of polygamy, women as witnesses, and inheritance (as discussed briefly above), Wadud argues that all three of those major examples of preference of men over women were simply appropriate to the time of revelation. Polygamy, she says, had to do with the economics of marriage, as in many ways did inheritance. [86] In terms of needing two women or one man to serve as a witness, Wadud claims that this had to do with the male-female power dynamics at the time of revelation and the relative ease of coercing women which resulted.[87] Thus, Wadud's analysis of pre-Islamic Arabia is used as a supplementary support structure for the grammatical and linguistic in-depth analysis of the Qur'an that makes up the majority of her work. She stays away from relying too heavily on this historical analysis, instead preferring to rely on what she sees as the infallibility of the Qur'an.

Limitations and Responses

Wadud's work possesses some undertones of absolute belief in the superiority of her interpretation of the Qur'an over all others, an absolutism which some scholars take issue with, but she does recognize the limitations of her work. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, she understands that the Qur'an itself has limitations in terms of being her primary source of proof

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[84] When she says "the words used in the Qur'an were part of the existing language and culture of seventeenth-century Arabia. Yet sometimes the Qur'an incorporated them in a different manner to reflect its greater intent and purpose of guidance to humanity. . .other negative terms, if used at all, in the Qur'an are neither directly nor exclusively associated with women." (Ibid, 97.)

[85] Ibid, 81.

[86] Since Rahman's methods influenced Wadud, his interpretation of polygamy in the Qur'an is as follows: "the truth seems to be that permission for polygamy was at a legal plane while the sanctions put on it were in the nature of a *moral ideal towards which the society was expected to move*, since it was not possible to remove polygamy legally in one stroke." (Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 48)

[87] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman,* 84-86.

for gender equality. The primary limitation that she cites is its generality—which while often leading to Wadud's ability to make her interpretations (for instance about gender inclusive grammar structures), also leads others to the same freedoms in their own interpretations. "The Qur'an does not develop a single uniform ethical system," she says, "it contains ethical principles and values," and therefore, she argues that "the development of a system must be formulated through human beings."[88] By maintaining generality the Qur'an should, in Wadud's eyes, ideally be used to then help each society, in its time, formulate its own suitable social structure. However, she recognizes that this same generality is what has allowed patriarchal practices, which were perhaps based on pre-Islamic society, to continue through today. She also acknowledges that interpretation can only be taken so far—and that the limit to that distance often coincides with concepts of divinity. She labels these intangible concepts "the Unseen," and points out that because these concepts do come up in the Qur'an, and because interpretation is limited to human language that cannot effectively describe divinity, ultimate knowledge of the text's true meaning must then also be limited.[89]

This acknowledgement of flaws is not enough however, for some other scholars of feminism, Islam, or Islamic feminism, who argue that Wadud's work, at its core, exhibits an absolute belief in its ineffability. Julianne Hammer, author of "Identity, Authority, and Activism" argues that while Wadud "theoretically accepts other, equally 'true' interpretations, her work has the strongest subtext of right and wrong, which is intimately linked to her discourse on justice in the Qur'an."[90] On the other hand, Asma Barlas, who admits to having been influenced by Wadud's work, says that Wadud's position is not "contradictory," but instead that

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[88] Wadud, *Gender Jihad,* 38.
[89] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman,* 11.
[90] Hammer, Juliane. "Identity, Authority, and Activism: American Muslim Women Approach the Qur'ān." The Muslim World 98.4 (2008): 450.

"the Qur'an itself. . .establish[es] both that it is open to multiple readings and that not all readings may be equally good."[91] Thus she argues that in recognizing the subjectivity of reading—in that each reader brings their own experiences to the interpretative table—as well as the superiority of certain interpretations, Wadud is simply working within the Qur'anic instruction.

It is indeed true that Wadud's work has a subtext of right and wrong, and whether or not it makes her work more or less in line with the Qur'an's instructions, it undoubtedly makes her argument more powerful. Wadud is energizing her work with her absolute belief in its truth—and as she is coming up with an interpretation that is in the vast minority as compared to the many patriarchal interpretations to have been made before her, that energy is necessary to get her point across. Additionally, the influence of Wadud's background, both in family life, faith, and education can be felt in this conviction. Her faith in the linkage of the divine with justice, which she says she inherited from her father, is clearly evident in her confidence that Islam is at its heart a just religion. Her self-education in Islam, and the sort of vacuum which it allowed her to then develop her ideas in, is also evident in the sheer strength of her convictions.

Where She Is Now

Wadud's activism, being largely linked to her interpretation of the Qur'an, an act which in of itself was revolutionary for a woman to take part in, has allowed her some respect, particularly within feminist circles, and yet that respect is still limited. It is her desire to fundamentally alter the interpretation of the Qur'an that seems to make her so dangerous—she is straying outside of the realm of identifying woman's place in society alone, and attempting to

[91] Asma Barlas, 107

cause lasting societal change. In her article "The Renewed Woman of American Islam: Shifting Lenses Toward 'Gender Jihad?,'" Hibba Abugideiri describes this phenomenon of fearing to let women become leaders outside of a female population when she says, "in those situations in which a woman becomes a Muslim leader in a Muslim community, she is a leader largely, if not solely, because of her activism in relation to women's issues, and is very rarely accepted as contributing to larger issues of Islam."[92] However, by bucking this trend, and attempting to give women the ability to do something traditionally done by men, interpret the Qur'an, Wadud is taking the agency which she claims the Qur'an gives women into her own hands—she is acting on the ideals just as she writes about them.

And this power has made her successful—or at least gotten her attention. In 1994, her book *Qur'an and Woman* made it to number one on a bestseller list in a South African Muslim newspaper. Her influence has extended to other prominent Islamic feminists who have worked in her wake like Asma Barlas, who has called her "a pioneer" and "the most influential" member of the Islamic feminist movement.[93] However, her identity as an American has at times stymied her ability to gain influence in the Muslim world in a political climate with increasing anti-American hostilities.[94] As an African-American, Christian-born, convert to Islam, some of her critics, such as the prominent Islamic theologian, Yusuf al-Qaradawi,[95] have claimed that she has no right to perform her *tafsir*, let alone lead prayers. Thus, not only does her position as a woman put her at a disadvantage for creating lasting change, but her identity as a convert and an American have also impacted the ways in which her work is received. And yet, she continues to

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[92] Abugideiri, Hibba. "The Renewed Woman Of American Islam: Shifting Lenses Toward Gender Jihad?'" The Muslim World 91.1-2 (2001): 2.
[93] Barlas, 118
[94] Julianne Hammer also argues though that this American identity is what "empowers [her] to undertake [her] intellectual inquiries" (Hammer,"Identity, Authority, and Activism," 452.)
[95] al-Qawdari has gained much of his prominence from his program "Shariah and Life" or *Sharia wa al-Hayah* on Al-Jazeera

work as an activist for women's rights, not only through her writing and speaking but also through her own personal goals—such as becoming an *imama* and breaking the glass ceiling for women as religious leaders within Islam.

## Chapter 2: Fatima Mernissi: Identity, Writing, and Activism

*"The subjugated, scorned and humiliated Arab will be transformed into an autonomous, self-governing person the day he is suckled by an autonomous mother."* ~Fatima Mernissi

Background and Education

Born in the city of Fez in Morocco in 1940, Fatima Mernissi grew up in a middle-class, traditional, and fairly conservative Muslim family. Her home was made up of her immediate family—her father, mother, sister, and brother—and her uncle's family.[96] In her semi-autobiographical work, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, Mernissi describes her childhood home as a "harem," a term which warrants a moment of discussion. While her home did involve separation of gender roles and some sense of seclusion of women, it does not necessarily mean that it was a harem in the traditional sense of the word.[97] In the book, she says that her "house gate was a definite *hudud*, or frontier, because you needed permission to step in or out."[98] This idea of the separation of women in the home or private space from the public space, traditionally the domain of men, was still fairly common, especially among the upper or middle class, when Mernissi was a child.

Her coming of age, however, coincided with vast political changes for Morocco as it sought its independence from France. Nationalist movements, both in Morocco and in other North African countries, were often inclusive of women who worked hard to attempt to gain freedom for their nations, believing all the while that that freedom would translate to greater

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[96] This is basic information from her semi-autobiographical, but still at times fictional, work *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*

[97] A harem traditionally referred to the explicitly separate part of a Muslim household reserved for the women and while Mernissi's house did involve separation of gender roles there was not an explicit "harem" as the genders did mix. However, in her book the term is used for effect—to emphasize the way in which women in the family were often kept secluded from public life if not from life in the home.

[98] Mernissi, Fatima. *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub., 1994), 21.

autonomy for the female sex as well. Mernissi was likely exposed to the idea of women's liberation during her childhood whether it was through the exact measures she describes in *Dreams of Trespass* or simply through talk in the streets.

In the book however, she claims that she was exposed to ideas of feminism from a very early age as the women of the household put on plays and told stories of early Egyptian Muslim feminists to entertain themselves. These plays are only one example that she cites of the dissatisfaction of the women in her household with their situation in life. Her mother especially is painted as bucking the trend of female submission. She not only rebels against her husband in family matters, but also supposedly tells Mernissi that she "want[s] [her] daughters to stand up with their heads erect, and walk on Allah's planet with their eyes on the stars."[99] While this quote itself is most likely fictionalized, the idea of her mother's restlessness and dissatisfaction may well be true. And this dissatisfaction, along with that of her maternal grandmother, Yasmina, whom she cites in multiple books, likely led to some of Mernissi's drive to pursue women's rights.

Also a contributing factor to this ability to even think about women's rights was the fact that Mernissi's family was middle to upper class. Just as early American first wave feminists came from largely middle or upper class families so too did many early Muslim feminists, because while the men of the family might have held traditional views, the family wealth allowed for the free time and relative lack of other worries (on necessities like food and shelter) needed to even contemplate women's rights. Thus, both the social standing of Mernissi's family and the dynamics within her home, perhaps including some strong female personalities like her mother, both likely influenced her drive to pursue gender equality activism. And, the political

[99] Ibid, 100.

circumstance of her country, such as the nationalist movements she saw around her, likely also had a large impact on the basic level of her exposure to ideas of feminism.

Aside from her family life and political circumstances, her education also had a large impact on the particular method of Mernissi's feminism. Her initial schooling took place in the neighborhood Qur'anic school in Fez, an experience which Mernissi does not recall with fondness. Instead, she remembers not only the strictness of the teacher but the lack of actual learning and comprehension which was involved. Rather than seeking to understand the Qur'anic verses, Mernissi and the other children were simply directed to memorize the words. And while, once again, whether or not the actual details and phrases which Mernissi recounts in *Dreams* are accurate, the overall sense of the Qur'anic school as a place of pure memorization rather than true comprehension of the verses seems to be likely. This early Qur'anic education, and the negative feelings which Mernissi seems to associate with it, likely influenced her initial desire to work largely outside of an Islamic framework in her feminist methodology.

This desire may was likely increased by her attraction to the secular education which she was able to begin after Morocco gained its independence from France in 1956. Independence initially brought along with it a decrease in religiosity—including the switching of the Moroccan national schooling system to a secular, French model. This system accepted both men and women so that Mernissi was able to enroll and leave her Qur'anic school behind. Describing this switch in *Dreams* she says that "the change was incredible" and that the new environment fostered her argumentative nature as well as her spirit for inquiry.[100] After completing her secondary schooling in this secular environment, Mernissi went on to study first at Mohammad V University in Rabat before traveling to Paris to study at the Sorbonne and work briefly as a

[100] Ibid, 197-198.

journalist.[101] She then pursued her graduate education at Brandeis University in the United States, receiving her PhD in sociology in 1973.[102]

With her education complete, Mernissi returned to Morocco to live and work in Rabat. She joined the sociology department at her alma mater, Mohammad V University, as a lecturer and simultaneously held a research appointment at the Moroccan Institut Universitaire de Recherche Scientifique (the Moroccan Institute of Scientific Research). Her education in both France and the United States, then, not only exposed her to a secular system of thought, but also allowed her to experience the cultural differences between Western Europe, the United States, and her homeland of Morocco. This comparative experience, I would argue, allowed her to better understand how to approach working towards gender equality in a way that would appeal to the people of Morocco. And, while her time in both the US and France likely exposed her to the ideas of second-wave feminism in both of those countries, the influence of which can easily be seen in her early work, it also likely allowed her to gain an appreciation for the differences between her home culture and the culture she encountered abroad—a cultural contextualization which she would later have to navigate in her own work for gender equality.

Written Works

When examining Mernissi's works, a different approach must be taken than with Wadud's works. Because of the shift in her rhetoric (from a overtly secular standpoint to an "Islamic feminist" one), which can be seen around 1991, Mernissi's works must be examined chronologically. However, despite this shift, certain themes persist from her first book, *Beyond*

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[101] Rassam, Amal, and Lisa Worthington. "Mernissi, Fatima." Oxford Islamic Studies Online. The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World. <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0527>.
[102] The timing of Mernissi's education is similar to that of Wadud and as such she was also exposed to prominent second wave feminist ideology in the United States.

*the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, through to her more recent ones. Published first in English in 1975, *Beyond the Veil* argues that fear among Muslim men is the largest driver of repression and the continuation of a patriarchal social order. Mernissi delineates the various types of fear that have the most influence over Muslim society—with the largest influence coming from fear of change, fear of the power of female sexuality,[103] and fear of loss of love for Allah.

Situating herself as a "passionate and partisan observer-participant in Muslim society," Mernissi clarifies that her aim is to rebel against the tendency to passively accept Muslim tradition (in its patriarchal form) that has been handed down in the past.[104] While she does distinguish between Islam and Muslim society and stays away from being overtly critical of Islam at its core, she also refrains from using religion in her rhetoric. Instead, the extent of her argument in favor of Islam in this first book can be seen when she says that "the democratic glorification of the human individual, regardless of sex, race, or status, is the kernel of the Muslim message."[105] Thus, in Mernissi's earliest work we do see hints of the importance of Islam which will appear so heavily in her later work, but these hints are vastly outnumbered by her general pattern of willfully ignoring Islam in her rhetoric—instead focusing on the key fears which she says motivate Muslim patriarchy.

The first of these fears, and one which she continues to cite through all of her works, is the fear of the power of female sexuality. This fear, according to Mernissi, has the largest impact on patriarchal norms because it drives men to repress women as a form of protection from "the

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[103] Contributing to this fear is the legend in Morocco of Aisha Kandicha, a female spirit whose beauty was dangerously alluring for men.
[104] Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), xiv.
[105] Ibid, 19.

disruptive power of female sexuality."[106] Citing Imam Ghazali, a Persian theologian, philosopher and jurist who lived from the mid 11th century to early 12th century, she says that historically men within Islam have believed that the "social order is secured when the woman limits herself to her husband and does not create *fitna*, or chaos, by enticing other men."[107] Thus, in Ghazali's work, Mernissi finds evidence of her belief that Muslim men fear female sexuality for its disruptive potential. And, it is this potential to change social order that Mernissi believes drives the persistence of patriarchal practices such as polygamy and repudiation, or divorce. These practices, she argues, are the man's way to keep the dangerous temptation of the woman in check—and by extension maintain societal stability.

Mernissi explicitly relates this fear to the ideas of repudiation and polygamy. She first argues that polygamy, which is mentioned in verse 129 of the Qur'an, is only allowable if the man is able to treat all of his wives justly. Thus, she argues that by allowing polygamy, Islam does not necessarily allow for unequal treatment of wives, but she says that the idea was so popular because it kept women in check. While they might share their husband with other women, they had an object for their sexual energy—thus taming the perceived danger of women. Similarly, she looks at mentions of divorce within the Qur'an—commonly believed to be hostile to women. Here, she comes closest to an explicit criticism of Islam. Because the Qur'an gives men the right to divorce their wives without stating what reasoning is necessary to do so, she argues that the fear of female sexual power has allowed men to read and interpret the text to fit their own purpose—usually to the detriment of women's rights.[108] Thus, here it can be clearly

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[106] Ibid, 45.
[107] Ibid, 39.
[108] Verse 20 of the Qur'an says: "and if ye wish to exchange one wife for another and ye have given into one of them a sum of money take nothing from it; it is this verse which Mernissi has the largest issue with when she says "the words 'wish' and 'exchange' are the key elements in the Muslim institution of verbal repudiation,

seen that Mernissi's primary concern in *Beyond the Veil*, her earliest work, was not to show that Islam itself was friendly to women, but rather to argue for women's rights within a social, cultural, and secular context. This methodology then was not that of an Islamic feminist but one of a Muslim feminist—her shift in method several years later is what leads her to be included in the Islamic feminist movement.

Aside from fear of the female sexuality, Mernissi also discusses the fear within Muslim society that love between a couple would take away from love for Allah. She says that "heterosexual involvement, real love between husband and wife, is the danger that must be overcome" in the eyes of Muslim patriarchal society.[109] This is such a danger, then, because the ultimate love in Islam is supposed to be between oneself and Allah and any other type of intimacy would challenge that relationship. She extends this idea of male female relationships and the fear of real love between the sexes/between individuals to working relationships between men and women as well. In this instance, Mernissi points out that the separation of private and public spaces is due to the fear of mixing of the sexes and the love that could result.[110] Mernissi's focus on these fears within Muslim society could easily result from the fears she may or may not have witnessed during her childhood in Morocco. Her own family, at least as she represents it, had distinct separation of women and men, with strong restrictions placed on the female family members. This in turn may have influenced her understanding of the motivation of such separation.

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whose characteristic is the unconditional right of the male to break the marriage bond without any justification and without having his decisions reviewed by a court or a judge." (Ibid, 49.)

[109] Ibid, 111.

[110] "whenever cooperation between men and women is inevitable, as between the members of a couple, an entire array of mechanisms is set in motion to prevent too great and intimacy from arising between the partners." (Ibid, 140.)

Finally, in *Beyond the Veil*, she begins a practice which she continues to utilize in her later works as well—the method of looking back at pre-Islamic Arabian society for understanding of the patriarchal practices which were inherited by early Islam. Before Islam, Mernissi says that women had more freedom to take part in different types of marriages or sexual acts.[111] By extension then, before Islam women were actually more free to express their sexuality—perhaps having an influence on the power which Muslim patriarchal practice has given it. And yet, this point of Mernissi's is difficult to rely on too heavily because the freedoms she cites were so narrow. They did not extend to women's general place in society. Instead, women were a part of a tribal unit—a system which was also disrupted by the advent of Islam and the switch to family units. Here, Mernissi touches on an argument which features more prominently in her later books arguing that "many of Islam's institutions were a response to the new needs that emerged with the disintegration of tribal communalism, a means of absorbing the insecurity generated by such disintegration."[112] By allowing for patriarchal practices like polygamy in particular, early Islam was, she argues, attempting to give women a surer chance at a place in the new societal structure. While tribal communalism would have given women a defined and protected place within their tribe, the new family units included no such assurances. This idea, as mentioned previously, is one which Mernissi explores further in her later works, but is used in *Beyond the Veil* as a supplement to the major theme of fear as a motivating factor.

Following *Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi published her next book in 1988—a collection of interviews with Moroccan women from many social classes entitled *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*.[113] This work once again focuses on a secular approach to

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[111] Mernissi cites al Bukhari here, saying, "the general picture that emerges from Bukhari's description is a system characterized by the coexistence of a variety of marriages, or rather sexual unions." (Ibid, 77.)
[112] Ibid, 80.
[113] *Doing Daily Battle* was also published in French in 1984

women's rights—this time Mernissi employs a sociological approach, utilizing her specialty in family sociology to better understand the actual position of women across Morocco. She says that she chooses this method because she feels that the silence of the woman's voice contributes largely to the continuation of patriarchal practices within Muslim societies.[114] She also acknowledges her limited understanding of the position of women throughout her country in the process. Because of her own middle class upbringing, Mernissi possesses a greater understanding of the position of women of her own social class than that of those who belong to the true lower class or upper class. Thus, by interviewing women from those classes, Mernissi sought to expand her understanding.

While *Doing Daily Battle* does not have any undertones of Islamic feminism or of traditional first wave or second wave feminists ideas, it does contribute to Mernissi's attempt to debunk the idea of man as a protector. The women she interviews often assert that their husbands are more of a drain on their lives than a protective force. And, those in the lower classes, in particular, find themselves fighting not only oppression based on their sex, but the need to work to gain enough income to survive. Thus, the major contribution of *Doing Daily Battle* to Mernissi's overall goal of achieving gender equality is an understanding of the actual interactions between men and women in Morocco and the lack of protection which husbands provide for their wives. This is an important contribution because a frequently cited argument in favor of polygamy and unequal inheritance between men and women is the male role as provider and protector. So, by proving that men in fact do not fulfill those roles, Mernissi makes a case for female equality.

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[114] Mernissi describes her intention with the book thus: "the interviews contribute to our knowledge about Morocco on two levels. The first is that of perception. The lack of correspondence between men's perception and women's perception of the world has always been impossible to get a grip on in our society because of women's silence." (Mernissi, Fatima. *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989), 3.)

In the same year, 1988, Mernissi also published an essay entitled "Muslim Women and Fundamentalism" in the *Middle East Report*. Here she once again returns to her theme of fear as the primary causation for the repression of women in Muslim society. However, in this essay Mernissi addresses the changing religious and social contexts she sees developing in Morocco—in particular the rise in fundamentalism. In contrast to the nationalist sentiment of Mernissi's childhood, and the progressive and/or secular attitudes which accompanied it, by the 1970s and 1980s a conservative backlash movement was taking hold. Mernissi identifies this rise in conservative Islam in her essay as a "defense mechanism against profound changes in both sex roles and the touchy subject of sexual identity."[115] Thus, while the social, religious, and political landscape changes, Mernissi still cites the same fear of change and of female sexuality as the cause of the oppression of women.

In 1991, Mernissi's methodology makes a significant shift. Rather than arguing for gender equality from a secular, sociology-based standpoint, she begins to argue from an Islamic perspective. This change seems to be a practical shift—a response to the changing social context she addresses in "Muslim Women and Fundamentalism." With the rise of conservative Islam and the increasing role of religion in society, Mernissi's shift in rhetoric may have stemmed from a belief that it would aid in her ability to disseminate a message of gender equality to a larger audience in Muslim countries. By working within an Islamic context, she makes an unfamiliar and in some cases offensive topic, that of gender equality, more understandable because the passages and persons she cites are at least in some way familiar. Some critics of her work have argued that this shift was a shift backwards, a limiting one.[116] I would argue, however, that it is

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[115] Kamrava, Mehran. *The New Voices of Islam Reforming Politics and Modernity: A Reader*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 210.

[116] Rebecca Barlow is one such critic. She has claimed that "Mernissi's choice to revert back to the Islamic framework imposes significant restrictions on the implementation of her vision. An approach to establishing

an opening—a change in approach which allows Mernissi to reach an audience previously off-limits to her—the conservative Muslim population who viewed her secular feminist approach as explicitly Western.[117] While this continues to be a critique of her work, it is less viable when she works within an Islamic context. And thus, by shifting her rhetoric, Mernissi does not limit herself, but rather makes a practical shift that allows for greater understanding of her message.

Mernissi's first, and still most influential, work which demonstrated this change in rhetoric was *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Published in 1991, in English, the book takes an entirely different approach to gender equality—focusing on looking at the sacred texts of Islam, particularly the Hadith, and the history of early Islam. This shift in rhetoric does not mean, however, that Mernissi abandons her belief in the power of the male fear of female sexuality and social change. Instead, citing the belief of some fundamentalists in the perfection of early Islam at the time of the Prophet, Mernissi argues that looking back constantly hinders living in the present.[118] She supplements this argument with her own analysis of the Prophet's life and early Islam—in which she asserts that the claims made by fundamentalists about social structure at the time, as well as the intentions of the Prophet, are falsely based. She says that "the journey back in time then is essential, not because the pilgrimage to Mecca is a duty, but because analysis of the past, no longer as myth or sanctuary, becomes necessary and vital."[119]

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women's human rights that remains within the Islamic framework could have adverse effects." (Barlow, Rebecca, and Shahram Akbarzadeh. "Women's Rights in the Muslim World: Reform or Reconstruction?" *Third World Quarterly* 27.8 (2006): 1492.)

[117] A discussion of these viewpoints can be found on page 58-59

[118] Mernissi exemplifies this when she says "by invoking our ancestors at every turn we live in the present as an interlude in which we are little involved. At the extreme, the present is a distressing contretemps to us." (Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil,* 20.)

[119] Ibid, 24.

Mernissi's primary proof for gender equality in *The Veil and the Male Elite* comes from debunking patriarchal Hadith and examining the life of the first and most important Muslim—the Prophet Muhammad. When analyzing particular Hadith, Mernissi looks not only at what is explicitly said, but how it has been applied to Muslim society as well as the *isnad*, or chain of transmission, to determine its reliability. Her general analysis of reliance on Hadith is that such an approach is dangerous because of the doubtful truthfulness of so many of them. To prove this point, she cites the fact that even early Islamic scholars studied them with a degree of skepticism which she believes is lacking today. Additionally, she refers to the 596,725 false Hadith that al-Bukhari had already identified at the time when he was compiling his *Sahih*—a book of Hadith which he deemed to be reliable accounts of the Prophet's deeds and words. However, Mernissi takes her own skepticism further and questions even Hadith that appear in the *Sahih*, for instance the Hadith in which Abu Bakr recalls the Prophet saying that "those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity."[120]

Each of the specific examples of her analysis discussed herein must be considered individually for its own strengths and flaws, but at the same time it must be contextualized in her overall methodology as well. The difficulty with doing this, however, lies in the fact that Mernissi's work lacks a comprehensive quality. Instead, she chooses to target her work—focusing on the most controversial hadith and suras with regards to gender equality. For instance, when Mernissi analyzes the hadith on women in positions of power, she does perform an in-depth analysis, but only of that one passage, largely skimming over any explanation of other possible interpretations. And, while she does clearly point out many areas of weakness in the tradition, her lack of acknowledgement of other viewpoints and contextualization makes the

[120] Ibid, 49.

argument less powerful—a trend that persists throughout her works (and which will be explored further in Chapter 3).

While Mernissi's overall methodology may be fragmented, her analysis of each individual hadith has a very clear aim—to prove doubtful authenticity. As an example, it is useful to return to Mernissi's analysis of the hadith which forbids women to hold power. In this case, she attacks the authenticity from several angles. First, she cites the amount of time between when Muhammad was supposed to have said the phrase, and when Abu Bakra recalled it. Not only was the period of time over 25 years, an amount of time which would test anyone's memory according to Mernissi, but Abu Bakra's recollection also coincided with a political situation for which the hadith was expedient. Because Abu Bakra remembered the hadith at the exact time which the Caliph 'Ali retook the city of Basra after defeating A'isha in the Battle of the Camel, Mernissi argues that the Hadith was "politically opportune" and thus should be questioned.[121] And, she adds that the events of Abu Bakra's own life should also lead the questioning Muslim to doubt the hadith's authenticity. Referencing Imam Malik Ibn Anas, leader of the Maliki school of Islam, Mernissi argues that anyone who has been shown to have lied in daily life is not a trustworthy source for hadith. One biography of Abu Bakra tells of his public flogging for false testimony, and thus Mernissi claims that he is not a reliable source. Finally, Mernissi justifies her argument for the unreliability of this particular hadith by pointing out that it was questioned by early scholars of Islam like al-Tabari. She argues that such a long-contested hadith should not be allowed to have a prominent influence over society and its structure. Thus, Mernissi makes a convincing argument for why this hadith should not be

[121] Ibid, 58.

considered reliable, and yet were she to situate the hadith in its context or further discuss other interpretations, she could easily increase the staying power of her points.

Similar problems exist with her analysis of the hadith on veiling women, when she again argues that its use in repressing women was not its original intent. Looking to the state of Islamic society to support her argument against this hadith, Mernissi examines the social and political situation at the time when the Prophet was supposed to have endorsed the veil. Because of the "doubts and military defeats that undermined the morale of the inhabitants of Medina" at the time when the hadith was recounted, Mernissi says that not only was the prophet likely on edge, but that the streets of Medina themselves may not have been a safe place for women. Because of harassment of women in the streets, Mernissi argues that by allowing the hadith on veiling of women to take up a place of prominence, the Prophet was not attempting to oppress women but rather to simply secure their safety.[122] Thus, here Mernissi utilizes knowledge of the society at the time of the revelation of Islam to substantiate her claims that veiling was not meant to denigrate women. She also begins her practice of placing the Prophet in a position of superiority verging on infallibility. The few instances when he allows for a patriarchal practice to begin, Mernissi argues, are flukes, which occur because of the social context and necessity for either political or religious gain.

In particular Mernissi relates this to the Prophet's need for male followers. Because Islam was still new during the Prophet's lifetime, he needed soldiers to help him spread the religion beyond his immediate, early converts. These soldiers were, by necessity and pre-Islamic Arabian norms, male, and thus the Prophet, argues Mernissi, could not afford to upset their loyalty. They were his tool to spread Islam—the overall purpose of his life. With this in mind

[122] When she says "At this point the Prophet's problem was no longer freeing women from the chains of pre-Islamic violence but simply assuring the safety of his own wives and those of other Muslims in a city that was hostile and out of control." (Ibid, 180.)

then, she argues that the sura on inheritance was in fact a sort of compromise created by the Prophet.

While in pre-Islamic Arabia Mernissi says that women had no economic rights but were instead inherited like goods, the Qur'an at least gave them some share of material goods. The verse on inheritance then, according to Mernissi "had the effect of a bombshell among the male population of Medina" because they were suddenly having to share the family wealth with women.[123] Thus, while today the verse is used to perpetuate ideas of male superiority and preference (materially), according to Mernissi it was seen as progressive by the men of Medina at the time of the Prophet. And, this progressiveness on the part of the Prophet had to be carefully regulated so that he did not run the risk of too greatly alienating his soldiers.[124] Because "the men were prepared to accept Islam as a revolution in relations in public life, an overturning of political and economic hierarchies" but not a change in anything "concerning relations between the sexes," Mernissi says that the Prophet had to take their views into account. Additionally, because women were so often treated as possessions in a war-based economy, the idea of giving them material goods rather than treating them as said material goods was, according to Mernissi, revolutionary. But by asking Islam to change that situation, the Prophet threatened to bring down "the whole structure of the economy of capture" and thus he tempered his actions.[125] By examining the social context of the Prophet's life, Mernissi gives a viable argument for the economic factors which influenced his decisions. A problem arises, however, when one looks at the Qur'an as the word of God, and thus something which its transmitter, the

[123] Ibid, 120.
[124] When she says "without military success there would be no Islam. The prophet's margin for maneuver in a city dominated by a war economy was very limited." (Ibid, 138.)
[125] Ibid, 134.

Prophet, has no influence over. However, her points about the ideals of the Prophet himself remain strong because of the prominence of the Prophet as an example for all Muslims.

Thus, it is important to understand the full extent of Mernissi's analysis of the Prophet's life, including his relationships with women. Through her examination of the Prophet's marital relations, Mernissi makes a somewhat persuasive argument that the Prophet possessed a strong personal belief in gender equality. While Muhammad did practice polygamy, Mernissi argues that he individually valued each of his wives, and even listened to their advice.[126] She adds that he rejected the idea of separation of space by organizing his home in an open plan and allowing his wives to enter areas where business took place.[127] She cites a story that tells of the influence of the Prophet's wife Umm Salama whose question about why the Qur'an did not mention women supposedly influenced the inclusion of the verse 35 of sura 33 which states, "men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe. . .Alllah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward"[128].

Overall then, Mernissi seems to view the Prophet as infallible, a conception which becomes even more clear when it is compared with her treatment of his Companions. Not only does she cite Abu Bakra's public flogging, and the lack of trustworthiness which she believes it results in, but she also discusses the misogynistic tendencies of Umar, including his belief in beating his wives. These examples are clearly in contrast to the peaceful and respectful image of the Prophet which she paints. In fact, she even goes so far as to say that Muhammad's convictions endangered his relationship with his followers when she says that "his determination to live his relationship with women as a constant and privileged experience was used by his

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[126] Mernissi claims that "he listened to their [his wives] advice, which was sometimes the deciding factor in thorny negotiations." (Ibid, 104.)
[127] Ibid, 111.
[128] Ibid, 118.

political enemies to attack him, to wound him, to humiliate him, and finally to make him give up his aims for equality of the sexes."[129] Thus, through her analysis of the Prophet's relationships with his wives and the men around him, as well as the general social structure in the Arabian Peninsula at the time, Mernissi aims to show the aspirations for gender equality held by the Prophet.

This choice of intense focus on the Prophet himself can be linked to Mernissi's background. Having experienced negative, conservative, and patriarchal interpretations of Islam during her early life and education in the Qur'anic school, it seems likely that Mernissi may have felt a need to search for a form of Islam which could be agreeable for her. The Prophet serves as just that focus because of his important position as the founder of the religion, but also because of the existence of textual documentation of his belief in gender equality. Even if certain Hadith seem to show that he did not hold such a strong belief in women's rights, Mernissi's need for a specific center for her argument, combined with the influence of her early negative experiences with Islam have led directly to her method seen in *The Veil and the Male Elite*.

While *The Veil and the Male Elite* is arguably Mernissi's seminal work, she has written many works since its publication which serve to supplement and strengthen her position on gender equality within Islam. In 1992, she published *Islam and Democracy*, a book focusing once again on fear as a factor that shapes Muslim society. In this book, however, unlike in *Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi does argue that these fears, and the actions which result, are in direct conflict with Islam. The three main fears that she cites are fear of the foreign west, fear of the imam, and fear of democracy. These fears, she says, have combined to allow the patriarchal

[129] Ibid, 163.

practices to continue, and have hindered the ability of contemporary Muslims to look at the Qur'an and Hadith with fresh eyes for more equality-based interpretation.

In her book *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, published in 1993, Mernissi further refutes the Hadith which states that women should not hold power by citing historical instances of successful female, Muslim leaders. Pointing out the hypocrisy in assuming that the only title which can signify power is caliph, Mernissi says that many of the most revered male Muslim leaders have in fact lacked that title, being referred to as *malik*, meaning king, instead.[130] She also uses some Arabic grammar to support this argument, pointing out that feminine versions of *malik* and *sultan* do exist. And finally, the majority of her argument is the enumeration of the many women leaders in the history of Islam. Beginning with examples of women behind the scenes of the Abbasid Caliphate, then exploring Mamluk sultanas, Mongol Khatuns, sultanas in the Indies, Maldives, and Indonesia, and the Shiite dynasty in Yemen, she gives a prolific account of successful female rulers—these specific examples from history proving her point, expressed in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, that the hadith on women holding power should not be given weight in Muslim society.

In 1994 and 1996 Mernissi published *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* and *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, respectively. The two books are very different—*Dreams* is a semi-autobiographical account of Mernissi's early life, but incorporates definite elements of fiction, while *Women's Rebellion* looks at the larger issue of feminism in the Arab World. Each book contributes to her overall vision of gender equality within Islam in its own way, however. *Dreams* pains a portrait of what is to Western eyes a stereotypical, repressive childhood within a Muslim context and which allows for some understanding of Mernissi's own

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[130] Mernissi, Fatima, and Mary Jo. Lakeland. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1993), 10.

background. *Women's Rebellion* allows the reader to understand Mernissi's choice of method by citing issues with western feminism and colonialism in Arab countries. While studying in France and the United States Mernissi was exposed to second-wave feminists whose thought did indeed influence her own, however in *Women's Rebellion* she argues that such "western feminism" should not be exported abroad. Her reasoning is that the upper-class, western, white feminist who spearheaded second-wave feminism in the United States and France is, in spite of her "claimed desire to change the system and make it more egalitarian for women" still in possession of "the racist and imperialist Western *male* distorting drives," so that "when faced with an Arab woman who has similar diplomas, knowledge, and experience, she unconsciously reproduces the supremacist colonial pattern."[131] Thus, through her tone and choice of language, it can be extrapolated that Mernissi may have experienced some racist treatment at the hands of Western feminists. What is certainly clear though, is that she does believe in articulating feminism in a local, specific, and cultural context.

Finally, in 2001, Mernissi published her book *Scheherazade Goes West*, to link popular culture with ideas of gender equality. Looking at the story of Scheherazade who used her wits to stay alive in the palace of a murderous king, Mernissi says that a lesson can be learned from her plight and her response to it.[132] Rather than sitting idly back, she asks women to take action using their strengths and intelligence. Because "the basis of misogyny in Islam is actually quite weak, resting only on the distribution of space,"[133] Mernissi asks women to use their intelligence, just as Scheherazade did in order to stay alive, to take agency back for themselves in the public sphere. Thus, here not only does she include elements of Islamic feminism in her argument, but

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131 Mernissi, Fatima. *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory*. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed, 1996), 16.
132 When she says "Scheherazade teaches that a woman can effectively rebel by developing her brain, acquiring knowledge, and helping men to shed their narcissistic need for simplified homogeneity." (Mernissi, Fatima. *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*. (New York: Washington Square, 2001), 52.)
133 Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West,* 192.

by incorporating elements of popular Arab culture, she also situates the context of her feminism even more clearly. Just as working within Islam makes her arguments for gender equality more familiar to Muslims, so too does working within a popular Arab context make her arguments more approachable for an Arab audience. Thus, Mernissi's developing determination to situate her work in a context which could be understood in her homeland of Morocco in particular, but in Muslim countries in general, can be seen through her developing methodology. And this methodology, as has been shown by this analysis, depends directly on her own background because her early experiences with education, faith, and family all led her to her own form of Islamic practice and her own way of understanding how the religion advocates for gender equality—an understanding which is quite different from Wadud's as will be explored in Chapter Three.

Popular Responses:

Mernissi's prolific writing and willingness to enter the public spotlight have garnered a mixed response. It is unquestionable that her work has had a large readership and that she holds an influential position among female, Muslim intellectuals and writers, particularly in Morocco, largely thanks to her ability to adapt her work to the changing times. As she witnessed a changing religious, political and social context around her, she adapted her method of gender equality activism. As Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzadeh point out in their essay "Women's Rights in the Muslim World: Reform or Reconstruction?," her switch from rejection of "the patriarchal status quo and its foundations in Islamic sources" to a rejection of "the historical, misogynous practices that have evolved *in spite of*[134] Islam" has been one which has

[134] emphasis mine

allowed her work to find greater readership within a changing Muslim dynamic.[135] Additionally, scholars of her work have cited her ability to overcome Orientalist thought as one of her greatest strengths. In her essay "Gazes, Targets, (En)visions: Reading Fatima Mernissi Through Rey Chow," Foriana Bernardi argues that Mernissi's status as a "postcolonial, polygot, female subject who has lived, studied and worked across the East and West" allows her to not only understand the diversity of opinion she must navigate in her writing, but to "embody cultural complexity" herself.[136]

And yet, while Bernardi sees Mernissi's work as an effective counter to Orientalism, other scholars have claimed, on the contrary, that Mernissi perpetuates Orientalist thought by allowing for the persistence of certain stereotypes, particularly in her controversial "memoir," *Dreams of Trespass*. Of all of Mernissi's works, this one has garnered in some ways the largest amount of public criticism, largely due to the controversy over its authenticity. While the original English version of the book claimed that the story in its pages was a memoir, and thus an important insight into Mernissi's origins of feminist thought, Mernissi's admittance of embellishment and even some fictionalization in her publication of the French translation caused scholars to question how much of the book could be trusted.[137 i] And, this question of mixing of fact and fiction is one which extends to some of her other works as well, when she mixes in personal anecdotes with factual, sociological writing. However, it must be kept in mind that Mernissi's books are written for a wider audience—they are meant for laypeople not just academia. And thus, when she writes, her goal of keeping the reader, who is not necessarily familiar with academic terminology, engaged in her points must be kept in mind.

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[135] Barlow and Akbarzadeh, "Women's Rights in the Muslim World," 1489.
[136] Bernardi, Floriana. "Gazes, Targets, (En)visions: Reading Fatima Mernissi through Rey Chow." Social Semiotics 20.4 (September 2010): 411-23.
[137] Bourget, Carine. "Complicity with Orientalism in Third-World Women's Writing: Fatima Mernissi's Fictive Memoirs." *Research in African Literatures* 44.3 (2013): 30-49.

Another major criticism of Mernissi's work is that her approach to analysis is too fragmented—a critique which I have made of her work in my own research. In her article "A Contextual Approach to Women's Rights in the Qur'an: Readings of 4:34," Rachel Scott of Virginia Polytechnic and State University argues that Mernissi's selective use of sources, particularly to distinguish between the prophet and his Companions such as 'Umar, leaves a serious gap in explanation because of its failure to discuss "the historical challenges involved in arriving at this picture, particularly regarding 'Umar's supposed influence over Muhammad."[138] Scott here then takes issue with the gaps in Mernissi's analysis when it comes to acknowledging opposing interpretations both of texts and of historical accounts. Similarly, and much as I have pointed out earlier in this chapter, she cites Mernissi's seeming distinction between what is written in the Qur'an and what the Prophet may have hoped for in the future of Islamic practice. When Mernissi makes claims about the social structure of early Islamic society influencing the Prophet to allow certain patriarchal practices and their revelation and inclusion in the Qur'an, she seems to make a distinction between what God and Muhammad wanted—and this, according to Scott, is something which "need[s] to be explored."[139] And, at the root of this theological question of the differences in opinion of the Prophet and God is Mernissi's heavy reliance on historical accounts of the Prophet himself to justify how Islam supports gender equality.

Some scholars of Mernissi's work have argued that this reliance is too heavy and that Mernissi runs the risk of coming across as using "idealist apologetics" to explain her points rather than tangible evidence.[140] Within this group, some have said that by looking back at the

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[138] Scott, Rachel M. "A Contextual Approach to Women's Rights in the Qur'an: Readings of 4:34." *The Muslim World* 99 (January 2009), 68.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Brumberg, Daniel. "Review of Islam and Democracy." Rev. of Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World. Contemporary Sociology Sept. 1994: 680-81.

history of early Islam, Mernissi runs the risk of ignoring contemporary events.[141] This does not negate the overall value of an analysis of pre-Islamic Arabia and the social context at the time of revelation to Mernissi's work or to the field of gender equality in Islam. It is in fact an important element, largely due to the role that it plays in combating fundamentalist, patriarchal accounts of the same time period. However, because of Mernissi's clear rhetorical stance and exclusion of other viewpoints on the time, her points are not as convincing. And, at times, her work seems to contradict itself or bring up questionable ideas about the cause and effect of Islam on Arabian society and vice versa. Once again, however, this does not negate the importance of her work in the larger context of analysis of gender equality in Islam. These criticisms do however elucidate the reasoning behind understanding her work through her education, family life, and understanding of Islam and faith. It is only through understanding her relationships in these areas of her life that her particular articulation of Islamic feminism can be understood.

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[i] Further discussion of Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* can be found in:

Abdo, Diya. "Sacred Frontiers: Looking for Fissures to Construct an Alternate Feminist Subjectivity in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*." *Womanhood in Anglophone Literary Culture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Perspectives*. Ed. Robin Hammerman. (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), 269-308.

Donadey, Anne. "Portrait of a Maghrebian Feminist as a Young Girl: Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*." *Edebiyaî* 11 (2000): 85-103.

Gauch, Suzanne. *Liberating Shaherazad. Feminism, Postcotonialism, and Islam*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007).

Golley, Nawar Al-Hassan. *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies*. (Austin: U of Texas P 2003).

Lebbady, Hasna. "Fatima Mernissi's Dreams of Trespass: Self Representation or Confinement within the Discourse of Otherness." *North-South Linkages and Connections in Continental and Diaspora African Literatures*. Ed. Edris Makward, Mark Lilleleht, and Ahmed Saber. (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2005), 129-39.

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[141] Anne Menely argues in her book review of *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* that "missing from Mernissi's account is a sustained linking of colonial and postcolonial legacies, nationalist policies, images of militarization, and gendered practices in particular contexts." (Meneley, Anne. "Review of Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory by Fatima Mernissi." Signs 25`.2 (Winter 2000): 614-17.

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Turhan-Swenson, Filiz. "Voices across the Frontier: Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*." *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity through Writing*. Ed. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley. (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2007), 111-28.

## Chapter 3: Fragmentation, Methodology, and Identity

With an analysis of each author's individual work complete, it is now necessary to look at the methods of Mernissi and Wadud in relation to one another. In doing so, my aim is to show that the many differences, and few similarities, between their methods are a direct result of their backgrounds—in particular their family life, education, and exposure to both faith in general and Islam specifically. By thus proving that each woman creates her own form of Islamic feminism based on her background, I aim to prove that the Islamic feminist movement is in fact not a western export—but at its very core is the ultimate homegrown movement.

Methodologies:

Wadud and Mernissi, have, while both frequently included in the group of the most prominent Islamic feminists, very different foci for their work. Wadud is the less prolific writer of the two, with only two books, *Gender Jihad* and *Qur'an and Woman*, as analyzed in Chapter 1. In her own words, her method is one of hermeneutics broken into three main strategies. She seeks to combine grammatical interpretation with the social and cultural context of the Qur'an's revelation, all the while keeping the overall *Weltanschauung*, or world-view, of the text in mind. In doing this, she situates each specific passage she analyzes in the larger context of the Qur'an—a method which helps the reader, especially a reader without exposure to Qur'anic study, to better understand her points. When *Gender Jihad* is taken into account her larger methodology expands to a three-pronged practice made up of an examination of the language and grammar of the Qur'an, an examination of Qur'anic images of women and their rightful

roles in society, and attempts to debunk terms commonly used to support patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

Wadud's primary source for all of her discourse on gender equality within Islam is the Qur'an. She rarely discusses Hadith or Sunnah, and only uses a discussion of pre-Islamic Arabian society as structural support for her understanding of and interpretation of the Qur'an. Thus, her overarching focus is on the purity of Islam as it is found within the pages of its most holy text. It is this purity which Wadud believes supports gender equality, however, she argues that it has been perverted by the overwhelming tendency for patriarchal interpretation. This tendency is a result, according to Wadud, of the legacies of pre-Islamic Arabia and the men in power who have aimed to maintain a social order through their interpretation.

Mernissi, on the other hand, has written many books and essays with different foci both within and without Islamic feminism. When working outside of the context of Islamic feminism, Mernissi's main argument is based on the fears she sees as inherent among Muslim men. The foremost of these is the fear of female sexuality which drives a fear of change as well. Using her background in sociology, she analyzes the different responses to female sexuality in both Islam, and what she categorizes as traditional "Western" thought. While in the West, she says that the female sexuality is viewed as weak, it is, in Islam, instead seen as a powerful force which men fear for its very active nature. And the power of this fear is so great that men feel they must subjugate women to keep from upsetting the social order and by extension society as a whole. This idea of fear of the female sexuality as a motivator for patriarchal practice of Islam is a theme which continues through all of Mernissi's work, even within an Islamic context. She does not however use it as her primary argument in her later books, instead employing it as a supplement to explain why Islam, despite its original inclusivity and gender equality, is no longer

practiced in such a way. Her sociological research also supplements her arguments in the Islamic context through her practice of interviewing Moroccan women. Her book *Doing Daily Battle*, is just this, a collection of interviews with Moroccan women, and it is the primary example of her training in sociology permeating her activism.

Mernissi's work within the Islamic context has two primary methods. Firstly, she looks at specific hadith which are the most controversial on the topic of women in Islam. By examining the *isnad* of each hadith, as well as historical examples contradicting them, she aims to prove that the hadith most commonly used to repress women are of doubtful trustworthiness. Her second main method of working within an Islamic context is to look back at the society in Arabia at the time of revelation. In doing so, Mernissi not only examines the cultural legacies of pre-Islamic Arabia, as does Wadud, but also spends large portions of her argument on the practices and beliefs of the Prophet himself. In the Prophet she finds an example of an ideal Muslim, characterized by his fair treatment of women, particularly as compared to the men around him. Additionally, she argues that the Prophet's need for followers dictated those actions which could be seen as patriarchal—for instance the inclusion of suras on unequal inheritance and divorce. In these she sees the Prophet acting out of necessity so as to not completely overturn the economy of capture, traditional for the tribes of pre-Islamic Arabia, and in the process alienate the male followers who helped him spread Islam militarily.

Thus, the only real similarity between the methods of the two women is their discussion of the social and cultural context at the time of revelation. Even this method varies however, because Mernissi focuses almost exclusively on the Prophet himself, and it plays a major part in her argument for gender equality, while analysis of pre-Islamic Arabian society acts as supplementary scaffolding for Wadud's Qur'anic analysis. Mernissi also argues that her look

back at the Prophet's life is so important because of the almost deification which she sees fundamentalists giving him. By proving the founder of Islam to be in favor of gender equality rather than patriarchy as fundamentalists have argued, Mernissi believes that she can make a more powerful argument. It is important to note, however, that Mernissi also seems to outline a possible difference between what God wanted and what Muhammad wanted in terms of the position of women. Wadud never questions the perfection of the Qur'an as the word of God, but Mernissi, by attempting to explain the societal factors which seemingly pushed the Prophet to include suras which have been used to promote patriarchy, intimates that the Prophet did not agree with the message found in those suras. This point, in of itself, is one which warrants further exploration—an exploration which Mernissi's argument lacks.

Overall, Wadud's analysis is more complete in several ways. Firstly, Wadud explicitly acknowledges some of her weaknesses. In particular she recognizes that her background, and her independent study of Islam, led her to a sort of naiveté about the patriarchal practice of Islam. This innocence, in turn has led her to a different stance toward Islam, I would argue, than has Mernissi's background with Islam. Wadud also does a better job acknowledging the existence of points of view different from her own—an acknowledgement which is so important not only because it provides context for Wadud's arguments, but because it allows her to more powerfully refute those points of view. This does not mean that Wadud's work is free of a sense of absolutism. Instead, she does still fall into what some scholars have argued is a trap of belief that her work is the only right interpretation. I would argue, however, that while there are definite overtones of right and wrong in Wadud's work, these are many ways necessitated by the revolutionary nature of her work. Formally interpreting the Qur'an as a woman with women in mind is an entirely new practice, and thus Wadud must show absolute belief in her interpretation

to even begin to hope to convince a doubtful audience—it is a rhetorical skill that she must employ by the very nature of her field.

Wadud's argument is also more complete because of her method of analyzing the Qur'an as a whole rather than in fragments as Mernissi does with the Hadith (and some sections of the Qur'an). Mernissi admittedly chooses the hadith and suras that she does because they are directly applicable to the idea of gender equality as they are the most controversial passages when it comes to women in Islam. She also likely makes this choice because of the sheer volume of Hadith. To analyze the entire compendium would be a lifelong process, and, since the vast majority of the hadith do not discuss women, would not be applicable to her feminist goals. However, the fragmentary nature of her work does make it harder for any reader, and particularly a reader lacking a deep knowledge of Hadith, to fully appreciate her points. In this way her work assumes greater prior knowledge of Islam than does Wadud's. Wadud also explicitly argues that the practice of looking at the text as a whole is key to her overall method. It is certainly instrumental for her grammatical and linguistic analysis—which is one of the most compelling parts of her interpretation of the Qur'an. Her method of looking at the use of plurals and duals as well as the reoccurrence of certain terms throughout the text to argue against their use specifically for the purpose of subjugating women would not be possible without her focus on the text's *Weltanschauung*.

Finally, Wadud includes a discussion in her work of the role which each reader's prior text, or past experiences, plays in the interpretation of a source—particularly a written one. By acknowledging this role, Wadud not only admits to the influence of her own background on her interpretation of the Qur'an, but also recognizes the difficulty in finding an interpretation that can be accepted by people with differing backgrounds. Mernissi includes no such discussion in

her work, choosing instead to spend her time explaining her own interpretations. With these vast differences in mind then, it is necessary to attempt to understand how the two women have come by their own methods, and yet still work toward the same goal of gender equality within Islam.

Differing Backgrounds

Each woman's approach to Islamic feminism can be directly linked to not only their family life and education, but also, and perhaps more importantly, their early encounters with Islam itself. Born into a religiously Methodist African-American family, Wadud grew up with a strong belief in the linkage of the divine with justice—if not in the divine as conceptualized in Islam. This belief, according to a statement in *Gender Jihad*, was inherited from her father's own strength of belief. Thus, when she began to study Islam in college at the University of Pennsylvania, Wadud went into her learning with the belief that Islam was an inherently fair religion because God himself was inherently just. In light of this belief and the fact that she studied Islam independently, she was able to retain a sort of idealized view of the religion. She was not immediately exposed to its patriarchal practice, instead learning of it with time. And, this exposure was a primary motivator for her work—in reinterpreting the Qur'an she sought to show and share the Islam which she understood to be proven within its pages. This positive early exposure to Islam, however, also led to her desire to focus so exclusively on the Qur'an as the word of God. Her belief in God's justness, as inherited from her father, combined with her lack of patriarchal influence when first exposed to the Qur'an, imbued her with the belief in the text's infallibility—a belief which Mernissi seems to lack.

Born in a conservative Muslim family, but with, at least as she describes it, women around her who were discontented with their restricted position, Mernissi grew up in a very

different family dynamic. She was exposed to Islam from a much earlier age then Wadud, and while Wadud's early experiences with the religion lacked any sense of patriarchal practice, Mernissi's centered around those practices. Outside of her family, Mernissi was also exposed to Islam through her early education in a Qur'anic school. This experience, was as she describes it, a disheartening one because of the pure memorization of the Qur'an which she and the other students were forced to engage in. As she tells it, rather than being encouraged to think independently or question the verses of the Qur'an, the students were told to simply memorize their lines without any deeper thought. And, when she entered a secular education system, the contrast was one that seems to have only solidified her negative viewpoint on the Qur'anic schooling system. Thus, while Wadud was exposed to an extremely positive form of Islam in the early stages of her exposure to the religion, Mernissi was exposed to the exact opposite—a form of Islam which discouraged independent thought and encouraged the continuation of patriarchal practice.

Mernissi's methodology can then be understood in light of this exposure to Islam. Her desire to work towards gender equality seems likely to have come, at least in some part, from the women around her and the political and social context of her childhood, in particular the Moroccan nationalist movement. Her education in sociology in France and the United States gave her not only the training to perform sociological research and support her arguments in this secular way, but also an understanding of the need to articulate feminism in a culturally appropriate context. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the difficulties she faced in her early experiences with patriarchal Islamic practice seem to have dictated her desire to spend so much of her argument on the Prophet himself. The Qur'an for Mernissi, while still the word of God, is not as infallible as it is for Wadud because of her early experiences in Qur'anic school. Wadud

on the other hand, comes from a position of ultimate belief in the justness of all divinity, including the Qur'an and Islam as a whole. Thus, her decision to focus on the Qur'an can be seen as the logical progression of her belief system, combined with her lack of exposure to patriarchal practice. And, just as Mernissi's time in the United States and France allowed her to understand Western cultures and by extent the different cultural contexts of feminism as articulated in those countries, Wadud's time studying in Egypt and working in Malaysia allowed her to understand the cultural differences between her home country of the United States and the cultures of the predominantly Muslim countries whom she hoped to reach as an audience. Thus, not only did both women's backgrounds lead them to their own specific methodologies, but they also both allowed them to realize the importance of working within a culturally appropriate context, and by extension an understandable one, for their target audience of Muslim society.

If then, the individual backgrounds of these women are the direct cause of the methodologies they choose as activists and writers arguing for gender equality within an Islamic context, the next major question to examine is how their ideas of feminism can be considered "western." Because the idea that Islamic feminism is a western import is one of the most common critiques of the movement, even from some of its members who refuse to call themselves "Islamic feminists," this inquiry is an important one.

Amina Wadud herself has long resisted the title of "Islamic feminist," preferring instead to call herself a "gender jihadist." This in part comes from her strong belief in articulating ideas of gender equality fully in an Islamic context. By avoiding the word "feminism" and working with "gender" instead, she overtly declares her distance from Western feminist thought. She also states her discomfort with American academia, in particular its study of Islam, and claims that she feels more comfortable abroad, in places like Malaysia or Egypt, than she does in her home

country. Thus, to call Wadud a "western" feminist would go against her core values and her own personal comfort—while she may have been born in America, she is more comfortable in countries where she feels she can fully express her identity as a Muslim. Wadud has then self-positioned herself explicitly away from America and "the West," despite it being the place of her origins.[142]

Mernissi, on the other hand, draws some of her legitimacy from her national identity as a Moroccan and her Muslim identity since birth. She, however, chose to study abroad in both France and the United States, taking what could be seen as the opposite educational path of Wadud. And yet, even with her Western education, and the criticism of Muslim society found in her early works (which sometimes verges toward criticism of Islam as explored in Chapter 2), she still self-positions herself as a Muslim and, even more than that, as a Moroccan. She finds strength in her identity and her home country, and argues explicitly that her feminism must be articulated in a way which fits her cultural context. Thus, in designing her activism, even before working primarily within an Islamic context, Mernissi worked to ensure that the voice of her feminist authority was that of a Moroccan woman. By interviewing Moroccan women of all social classes in *Doing Daily Battle*, Mernissi endeavored to understand the actual needs of the women of her country. And this specificity of her activism makes even her secular projects decidedly un-Western. When her argument for Islam's promotion of gender equality is added to her overall activism then, it only strengthens her position as a non-Western feminist. Just as she sought in her sociological research to show the unique position and needs of women in Morocco, and other Muslim societies, so too in her overtly Islamic works does she frame all of her arguments in a context which is culturally appropriate. Thus, while Mernissi readily accepts the

[142] It is also interesting to examine the ideas of import and export with Wadud in mind because one might argue that her place of birth, America, necessitated her import of the ideas of Islam which she then supposedly has "exported" back out of the United States.

title of feminist, unlike Wadud, she is not also embracing a western colonial legacy. Instead, she is stating her belief in the malleability of feminism—in its ability to be contextualized and grown out of each unique culture's soil.

When these patterns of not only self-positioning, but actual methodology as based on their backgrounds, are then taken into account, Mernissi and Wadud cannot be seen as "Western" feminists. And yet, they have been accused of exporting Western thought. These accusations have taken a different form for each woman, however. Mernissi, more than being called overtly "Western," a title which might be refutable due to her Moroccan nationality, is more often accused of what might be a more serious crime—perpetuating Orientalist discourse. Her most controversial work in this regard has been *Dreams of Trespass*. In her analysis of Mernissi's work, Carine Bourget of the University of Arizona argues that Mernissi's use of the term "harem" to describe her home life and the restriction of the women in the family perpetuates "the stereotype of the imperial harem that dominated Western Orientalism in the nineteenth century."[143] Bourget is not alone in this opinion. Raja Rhouni, a Moroccan academic points out, "Mernissi's reductionist thesis [in *Beyond the Veil*] reproduces the Orientalist discourse on Islam, even when she sets out to demystify some of its assumptions in the beginning of her book."[144] Thus, the most common critique of Mernissi is this perpetuation of an Orientalist narrative—which, as a consequence, accuses her of portraying the West as somehow better than the East.

In contrast, Wadud is accused of being overtly Western, an accusation which sometimes gains traction from the fact that she is American. She, however, sees no issue with being labeled "Western" because to her the title simply means that she is "a daughter of the West, born and

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[143] Bourget, "Complicity with Orientalism in Third-World Women's Writing," 36.

[144] Rhouni, Raja. *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi*. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 173.

raised American of African descent."[145] The more pernicious and in fact dangerous accusations have come in the wake of Wadud's activism. Her desire to act as an *imama* has led the prominent shaykh Yusuf Qaradawi, of the Al-Jezeera program "*al-Shari'a wa al-Hayah*," or "Sharia and Life," to label her as a heretic and issue a fatwa against her. His statement that "my advice to [Wadud] is that she should revert to her Lord and religion and extinguish this unnecessary strife," displays fully his contempt and his dismissive attitude toward her.[146] In offering this "advice", he attempts to push her out of the religion of Islam, in essence arguing that she was never a true Muslim, but rather a heretic, who should return to her Methodist roots.

Thus, both Mernissi and Wadud have faced criticism for their writing and Wadud in particular has faced criticism for her activism. Both, whether through associations with the perpetuation of Orientalist thought or through their physical citizenship, have been accused of some form of Western association. In order to further refute this claim, and use Mernissi and Wadud as an example of the fact that Islamic feminism is not a Western import but intrinsically homegrown, the work of each of these women must also be situated in the ideas of so-called first versus third world feminism as discussed in the introduction.

When Geraldine Heng looks at the development of feminism in the "third world" she specifies three factors which differentiate third world iterations of feminism from those in the first world. They are the "historical origins" of third-world feminist movements which often coincided with nationalist liberation movements, the intervention and role of the state in feminist activism, and the "ambivalence of third-world nations. . .to the advent of modernity."[147] First world feminism, on the other hand, largely refers to movements originating in the United States

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[145] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman,* xviii.
[146] "About the Friday Prayer Led by Amina Wadud." Abdennur Prado. N.p., 10 Mar. 2005. Web. 08 Apr. 2015. <https://abdennurprado.wordpress.com/2005/03/10/about-the-friday-prayer-led-by-amina-wadud/>.
[147] Heng, "A Great Way to Fly," 33.

and France, particularly during both the first and second waves of feminism. And these waves, which originated mostly in white, upper-middle class society, had essentially different goals because of the different status of their members. In *Making Waves*, Legates argues that these women in fact held "imperialist and racist values" precisely because of the cultural context and time period in which they operated.[148]

It is with this in mind then, that we can understand Paula M. L Moya's argument in her essay "Postmodernism, 'Realism,' and the Politics of Identity," that each feminism must be articulated within the "identity (with its experiential and cognitive components) and social location (the particular nexus of gender, race, class and sexuality)" of the women participating in it.[149] This is exactly what this project has intended to accomplish when analyzing the Islamic feminisms practiced by Mernissi and Wadud. By investigating their experiences with faith, Islam, education, the West, and treatment of women in contemporary Muslim societies, as well as an analysis of their individual situations (such as Wadud's identity as an African-American Muslim woman and Mernissi's identity as a Moroccan middle class woman), I have sought to understand the exact relationship between their feminism and their background. Because, just as Moya points out, the two are inextricably linked. And, just as Moya argues against the postmodernist idea of a worldwide feminist practice, I would also argue that through this case analysis of Wadud and Mernissi, it can be seen that that each woman's desire to work within a context which makes sense to her—and by extension then perhaps not to someone living in a different cultural, religious, or social background somewhere else around the globe, is a driving factor in the actual fragmentation of feminism today. Its third wave iteration is made up of an infinite number of small currents originating from the unique needs of women within their

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[148] LeGates, *Making Waves,* 259.
[149] Moya, Paula M. "Postmodernism, Realism, and the Problem of Identity." Diaspora 11.1 (2002): 135.

particular contexts. And, thus, because as Chandra Mohanty argues in "Cartographies of Struggle," "ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as they have to do with sex,"[150] the idea of linking feminisms practiced by white upper class American women with those practiced by black, lower-middle class, Muslim-American women like Wadud or those practiced by Moroccan women like Mernissi is not possible. While the movements and activisms may share a global title of "feminism," and in that way feel some strength from the knowledge of other women fighting for their rights around the world, they need not bear the burden of association with western colonial heritage for it is not theirs to inherit.

[150] Mohanty, *Cartographies of Struggle*, 13.

## In Conclusion

As the Islamic feminist movement has taken shape over the past almost three decades, patterns of growth have often been stymied by accusations of "Western" thought. In countries where America and Europe have a legacy of heavy-handed imperialism, this criticism holds a strength that can be difficult to comprehend. And yet, using the term "Western" as a derogatory adjective is not a phenomenon faced by Islamic feminists alone. In her book *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*, Uma Narayan points out the global nature of the problem when she says, "many feminists from Third-World contexts confront voices that are eager to convert any feminist criticism they make of their culture into a mere symptom of their 'lack of respect for their culture,' rooted in 'Westernization' that they seem to have caught like a disease."[151] And, if the critics of feminists are to be believed, then the disease is pervasive and infectious. Its danger lies in its element as a contagion—a destroyer of "traditional" society.

One of the primary challenges to the Islamic feminist movement then is not one that it alone faces—but rather a challenge which women working towards gender equality in countries of many different religious, cultural, and social contexts must battle in order to create a change to the patriarchal social order they exist in. And it follows then that because these feminists or organizations operate in individual, non-Western societies, each of their methods must be carefully tailored to their context for the very reason of avoiding accusations of "westernization."

The method chosen by Islamic feminists is a powerful one, not only because it relies on a religion which is at the core of the existing social order, and by extension holds a lot of sway

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151 Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 397.

over any changes to be made, but also because they are targeting the reasoning used by fundamental, patriarchal Islam to oppress them. When a woman like Mernissi looks back at the time of the Prophet and argues for his belief in gender equality by citing numerous examples from not only his household but the influence of society around him, she takes the man whom fundamentalists have elevated to a position of great power and makes him the animator of the beliefs she is fighting for. Likewise when Wadud interprets the Qur'an and finds that it does not in fact aim to oppress women but rather to, at least in some cases, elevate them, she takes the holiest text within Muslim societies and turns it into her proof. And, by working within a familiar discourse, that of Islam, the members of the Islamic feminist movement are able to articulate an unfamiliar change, that of gender equality, in an approachable manner.

The root of my argument in this analysis has been, however, to show that the critique of being "Western" is simply not applicable to Islamic feminists. By analyzing the complete works of Mernissi and Wadud, I have delved into their individual methodologies of working for gender equality. In the two women the fragmentation endemic to the Islamic feminist movement is easily apparent, precisely because their methods are so different and their beliefs on certain topics, like naming, do diverge. While this fragmentation may be difficult for the Islamic feminist movement to surmount, and thus keep it from building the network needed to truly make headway, it does point to perhaps a more interesting phenomenon. The reason for the fragmentation within the movement is a precise refutation of the accusation of "Westernization."

With Wadud and Mernissi as a case study, it can be seen that the fragmentary nature of Islamic feminism is based on the way in which each individual member of the movement interacts with her ideas based on her background. The education, family life, faith, and early interaction with Islam that each activist experienced directly impacts her method of practice.

She is then, practicing a homegrown feminism. It is not a Western export, but a direct reflection of her interaction with her context—social, political, cultural, and religious. Mernissi's method of directly engaging with problematic Hadith and looking to the Prophet as an example for how Islam was meant to be practiced is reflective of the oppressive Muslim society she grew up in. Because her early encounters with Islam, through Qur'anic schooling and the restricted movement of women in her family, were repressive, Mernissi has had to approach her understanding of how Islam supports women in a way that circumnavigates the negative memories she retains. In contrast, Wadud's independent learning of Islam imbued her with a positive understanding of Islam's view towards women, and she only learned of its patriarchal practice with time and exposure. Thus, her method of Islamic feminism is based on her full belief in the religion's support of her cause and, as a result, we see her take a much more general and all-encompassing approach to interpretation.

While Wadud and Mernissi are only two members of a much larger trend of Islamic feminism, they are representative of many of the issues which face the movement and their prominent positions within it make them appropriate for a case study. By finding a deeper understanding of their individual cases, we can attempt to then begin to understand the overarching issues within the movement as a whole. By understanding that they are not "Western" feminists, but rather operate in their own particular context, we can see how the larger Islamic feminist movement is also not "Western." It is made up of individual methods based on individual backgrounds. Members from Egypt will have a different method than those from Morocco who will have a different method than those from Iran. The point of which is to say that while these many different ideas of how to best present gender equality in an Islamic context

have fragmented the movement, they have also shown that it is homegrown, and in this way have combatted what is perhaps its most pernicious criticism—that it is a Western export.

While analyzing members of the movement may combat the idea of "westernization", this analysis also raises questions that can only be answered with time. The most prominent of these is whether the ability of Islamic feminism, which I have shown here, to combat the criticism of "westernization" will outweigh its fragmentary nature. While the members of the Islamic feminist movement continue to work with a lack of unity, it is difficult for them to make significant headway. And yet, if they effectively show that they are not Western, and find the places where their works can supplement one another, it may be enough to outweigh their lack of unity. What is certain though is that women like Mernissi and Wadud have taken giant strides to work within a context that is decidedly non-Western in articulating their goals for gender equality. And, as they and others within the Islamic feminist movement continue to work towards these goals, they must articulate clearly what has been shown by this paper—that they are a part of their culture, not an import or an export.

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