About Fatima Mernissi
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Translated from the Arabic by Lore Baeten

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If there is one title that represents Arabic culture and literature among all the other races it is “One Thousand and One Nights”. The book that we never wanted to be associated with, and that we still thought of as a foundling, a bastard child, a product of lies. Maybe the Arabs didn’t see the literary value of “One Thousand and One Nights” because it didn't fit with the illusion of literary purity and the myth of high-brow literature. Maybe we had to wait for Borges and others to look at the stories of Scheherazade with a different mindset, before the book of ‘one thousand and one nights’ regained its status.

We made the same mistake with Fatima Mernissi, the Moroccan sociologist whose work is looked down on disparagingly by some sociology professors at the University of Mohammad V and other Arab universities because her studies do not conform to a scientific research method or to strict academic standards.
I have always had the feeling that academics were bothered by the literary fervour in Mernissi’s studies. She was a passionate storyteller, fascinated by stories: her own stories, and the stories and lives of others. Now, after the passing of Fatima Mernissi, we realise that Arabic sociology has lost one of its most prominent and, worldwide, most widely-read names.

The same logic that Arab critics used to categorise “One Thousand and One Nights” as non-literary was used by academics to disregard the work of Fatima Mernissi. Just as “One Thousand and One Nights” stamped itself in the memory of the literary public and readers around the world as the predominant Arabic book, so Fatima Mernissi claimed her place in the Arabic world and beyond as the best-known Arabic sociologist and one of the most influential Arabic writers in the West.
But, aside from the common fate that exposed both of them to this injustice, is there another link between “One Thousand and One Nights” and Fatima, before they were pigeonholed by outsiders? Of course there is. That link is Scheherazade. Just as in her stories in “One Thousand and One Nights” Scheherazade excelled in resisting the tyranny of Shahryar, so the Moroccan Scheherazade fought her fight by telling stories. She encouraged others to tell their story to her and through her and then she dedicated herself to writing them down. She began with servant girls, women labourers, textile workers and Bedouin women. But because vague and universal stories were not enough to withstand the contemporary Shahryar, the Moroccan Scheherazade began to propagate writing. In 1984, she set in motion the first

writing workshops from within the university, by jointly setting up the first research group dealing with 'women and the family in Morocco'. She also organised a series of 'encounters for *rapprochement*' which she supervised personally. She called for the emancipation of the voice, the liberation of the pen and the deliverance of the language. Always by writing. When she realised that "the greatest enemy of writing is the academic – a university graduate – because he uses terms that are largely unintelligible to the ordinary reader", she made it her mission in life to make her language universally comprehensible. She moved her writing workshops out of the university and continued them in her modest apartment in Agdal in Rabat, from where she launched "writing workshops for democracy". This manoeuvre enabled illiterate women, carpet weavers, victims of rape and sexual intimidation and young people of both sexes to write down their stories. She is a modern-day Scheherazade, obsessed by writing: the writing of stories. She is a democratic Scheherazade who is convinced that she no longer has any claim on the sole right to speak. Others, women *and* men, must let their voices be heard and give expression to their dreams and ambitions through writing. In contrast to the old Scheherazade, who monopolised everything, the Moroccan Scheherazade insisted that intellectuals could no longer act in the name of the victims or the ordinary man, but that their role consisted of facilitating them and getting them to write. By means of the writing workshops that Fatima Mernissi tirelessly coordinated for years and thanks to the extremely bold collective works that she published, victims now began to assert themselves without the need for intermediaries.

It is impossible to categorise Fatima Mernissi. In her work, science overlaps with literature and academic studies are intertwined with imaginative power. She embodies diversity, and as such never allows herself to be limited in her actions. Her bold efforts on women's issues was an important source of inspiration for Arabic feminist movements. But she quickly turned her back on them, or at the very least baffled them by focusing henceforth on civil society. Fatima herself said: "I am not a feminist activist, focusing only on women's issues. I have focused on the dynamics of civil society because it is a playing field where the woman is not positioned opposite the man. On the contrary. They work there together and help each other." In order to make this dream come true, she set up a civilian convoy with which to force a number of intellectuals, artists and actors from the middle classes to come out of their ivory towers and interact along with her, with the villages and Bedouins of the forgotten and marginalised Moroccan interior whom she championed. In this way she taught a few left-wing intellectuals a thing or two about how the real intellectual, who expresses his commitment in deeds not in words, can lead his cultural fight and assume his role in society.

Just as Scheherazade charmed Shahryar, so the Moroccan Scheherazade impressed all of us. She continued to surprise and amaze her readers and she sprang up where she was least expected. Academics expected still more 'serious' research from her, after she returned from America, but she surprised them all with children's stories and her move towards literature. Feminist activists expected her to undermine the patriarchal mentality and the deep-rooted

patriarchal authority of the Arabic-Islamist culture. Instead, she explained to them in her writings how highly valued women were and how great their reputation was in the history of Islam, from the time of the "women of the Prophet" to the forgotten sultanas. Left-wing activists thought she should be more critical of the religious heritage, whereas, unexpectedly, she defended it as she saw fit. She was after all a Sufi jurist, a graduate of Qarawiyyin University. The West expected her to provide them with more stories about Eastern women and continue her analysis of the patriarchal structures in the Arab-Islamist world, but she turned against them and pilloried Western women for their remorseless restriction of and disdain for women. She is a modern-day Scheherazade, who knows how to use reason – rather than her body – to stand up to oppression, verbal aggression and symbolic murder.
How she surprised us all, friends and readers in the Arabic world and in the West, when she borrowed the character of Sinbad from her muse Scheherazade and compared him with a cowboy. Fatima Mernissi takes Sinbad out of the context of “One Thousand and One Nights”. In the story he comes from Baghdad, the city of the legend, and during his seven journeys he learns that speaking, either to people, birds or monsters, is beneficial for him and literally and metaphorically enriches him and makes him happier and wealthier. The cowboy, that Hollywood hero to whom films in the 1920s and 1930s are dedicated, had absolutely no need to travel because his kingdom stood before him: a herd of cattle. The only thing he had to do was care for them and protect them against strangers. In particular because there was only one role for those strangers in the Hollywood westerns: the role of the poacher whom the cowboy had to look out for and whom he usually ended up attacking, gun in hand. Using these two scenarios as a basis, Mernissi compared globalisation during the Abbasid dynasty with that of our time. The Abbasidic globalisation strived for openness towards the Persian, Indian and Ancient Greek cultures and translated writings from those cultures into Arabic. In contrast, one of the consequences of the new globalisation was that everyone turned into cattle herders armed to the teeth, ready at any moment to kill, whether on the attack, in defence or simply as a precaution.

Fatima Mernissi always had her own way of saying things, of analysing problems and explaining them. But the real value of her intellectual project is the dialogue. Again and again she uses dialogue as a solution for cultural dilemmas. The Koranic verse that she considered most precious for her soul and emotional life is “Repel (evil) by that which is better; and then the one who is hostile to you will become a devoted friend.”