THE ROAD NOT TAKEN TO ARABO-ISLAMIC FEMINISM. DEFAULTING THE *DIFFERAND* OF A DISLOCATED EPISTEMOLOGY

NAJIB MOKHTARI[*]

This chapter aims to explore the way feminine scholarship on nascent Islamic Feminist trajectories aspires to "construct intercultural relations across (dislocated) communities and nations across the Arabo-Islamic world. The literature in the field does transgress language barriers, trespass ideological tensions and cross conflicting paradigms to push back inherited orthodoxies in order to redesign new exits towards reconstructing a beyond position to reframe the perspective and draw new lines of discrepancies, draft codes of disruptions to bridge asymmetrical old differences and create hybrid moments of new hudud/*encounters. Crafting transpositions of a "synthetic difference" in what may be qualified as the intellectual trajectory of a Moroccan feminist enlightenment, Fatema Mernissi's bulk of publications, invoked the necessity to scrutinize the "theological unconscious" within Moroccan post-colonial male,* grand *narratives with the objective to pre-view a rhetoric of adjacent feminist theories, which might be held accountable for the drafting of a poetics of feminist cultural politics. Drawing from a theoretical paradigm from within, this chapter will then focus on three Moroccan women activists and scholarly advocates, who have helped push the debate a step further in the right direction to implement synthetic conditions of epistemological encounters glocally and suggest strategic plans of applicable social reform projects to enhance women's rights in the MENA post Arab-spring region and beyond. Crafting transpositions of difference in what may be qualified as the intellectual trajectory of a Moroccan feminist enlightenment, three lead figures, each with her own weight, have invoked the necessity to scrutinize the "theological unconscious" within Moroccan post-colonial male,* grand *narratives with the objective to review a rhetoric of adjacent feminist theories, which might be credited for the drafting of a poetics of feminist cultural politics. Re-examining power relations in the Moroccan post-colonial society, Fatema Mernissi's bulk of works consistently strive to ascribe a new status to discarded local feminist activism, edging imported theories as inappropriate paradigms of a sustainable feminist authorship. Again, contesting existing inherited discourses, Asma Lamrabet would argue that the historical legacy of an Arabo-Islamic feminism remains a misunderstood and mishandled corpus unable to prescribe an epistemological hegemony among its newly "thinkable" subjects. Eventually transcending contested borders of a dismantled, albeit conducive, pseudo-Islamic feminist*

---

[*] Université Internationale de Rabat.

theories, from without, Fatima Sadiqi's research projects aspire to imple-
ment the tools of a "re-Islamization process" liable to foreground an author-
ship of an indigenised feminism, adopting a homo-gendered, decolonized
perspective/reflection from within.

> If women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Quran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite [...] not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but the manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies[1].
>
> <div align="right">Fatema Mernissi</div>

> Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor [...] the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature [...] of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity[2].
>
> <div align="right">T. S. Eliot</div>

Introductory Notes and Contexts.
Ambivalent Trans-Positions of Subjectivity: Gendering Narratives of a Synthetic Difference

For many advocates of contemporary Islamic feminism, women agency within traditional Arabo-Islamic societies is symptomatic of a consistent intellectual discrimination and a persistent theological marginalisation. Though its formal valorisation may have been a concern of primary significance among academics and social activists, tempering issues related to a shadow gendered epistemology still disclose an anxiety of function and a deficit of

---

[1] Fatema Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, translated by Mary Joe Lakeland, Addison-Wesley, Reading (MA) 1987, p. 24.

[2] T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, in Id., *Selected Essays 1917-1932*, Harcourt Press, New York 1938, p. 2.

application of appropriate social theories with respect to the role of a sociologically correct women citizenship within Morocco and across Arab societies and cultures. Articulating these perplex inferences and probing many other complex references, most related studies agree that the cultural politics of Islamic feminism is a pending project that is difficult to formulate precisely due to discarded attitudes, conflicting views and corrupt politics of post-colonial, local neo-tribalists, and partly because it has hardly been a point of departure for any home-grown feminist theory and delocalised/decolonized gender politics, predicating "answerable" determinants of a better appreciation of women's tributes and a more objective assessment of their roles within their respective contemporary societies. Undecided and disoriented at a crossroad of ethical and ideological epistemes, tenants of a dysfunctional house of gender trajectories and a divided school of Islamic exegeses are hardly able to indicate tangible conditions for a re-drafting of a renewed social theory and readjusted practice from women's attributions to implementing structural paradigms able to construct a clear road map for that theory. Nevertheless, as an allusive concept prescribing a coherent hermeneutics of Arabo-Islamic feminism, it remains radically problematic precisely for women feminists because the pending poetics of its praxis is crowded with the overdeterminations of a bumpy and dusty road, tracing shady footprints of a complex history of religious exegeses and patriarchal traditions that had, over long historical periodicities, prompted a dominant male supremacy, invoking in every formulation and in every form the limits of women agency as a disparate Other or implying an implicit self-reflection of a borrowed matriarchal culture, which is conceived of and constructed from the relatively new control from unbound female governing power relations.

In attempting to reinvent a discursive intellectual space for women to be able to speak for/as women, proponents of the idea of an Islamic feminism often seem to presuppose that such a privileged position, adopting a pluridisciplinary "archaeology of knowledge", to borrow Foucault's phrase, could help them "know" the history of women's discarded powers, and understand the challenges at stake to recapture that lost status/privilege. Such an assumption, one is inclined to think, proclaims that every indicative source of knowledge about Arabo-Islamic women has been contaminated with a simulating Western misogyny and conspiring advocacy agendas of imported gender-apartheid discourses. No matter where we turn to male-stream resources – whether to theological traditions, textual histories, philosophical constructions, social-scientific statistics, empirical introspections, or daily life practices – the very mediation of female bodies into newly constructed agents of women subjects is narrowly viewed as dominated to some degree by a misogynist discourse, to say the least. For Islamic feminists, who strive effortlessly to transcend the adjacent ideology of what Linda Alcoff calls a

"dislocated discourse"[3], it appears they have nowhere to turn but transgress newly technologized creed where traditionally bred subjects have so far feared to tread.

Viewed in this perspective, the challenge which Moroccan Islamic feminist theorists are faced with over the last couple of decades is that their very self-definition as such is grounded in a number of cross-cultural boundaries and multi-disciplinary paradigms, theocratic *hudud* (*ḥudūd*) in Fatema Mernissi's (Fāṭimah al-Marnīsī) terms, indicating cases of, first, a set of fossilized stereotypes, which they ought to deconstruct, and then stigmatized cultural spaces, which they have to trespass in order to redesign novel gender roles to be able to de-essentialize in many an aspect. For centuries to go, the dominant Arab male discourse theorists have, unconsciously or not, constructed a *grand* masculinist narrative of their own proclaiming that their female subject-half is abjectly demarked-delineated, commending that her body be physically captured-controlled, her heart be emotionally defined-diagnosed, and her mind be epistemologically described-explained – an acculturation of a disruptive subject position of anti-determination never accorded to man him-self, whose instructive status is matter-of-factly articulated as a rational mind, naturally blessed with free will and innate power.

Read in retrospect, Moroccan/Arab women's trans-position of subjectivity inspires fits of misconduct, perspires bits of mistrust and prescribes wits of conduct where man's power is viewed/prescribed as pre-determined, comfortably able to construct his own status along the course of his rational choice, and where woman's docile nature has not only overdetermined her highly-mannered role and socially constructed function in society, but also conditioned the performance of her natural capacities and confronted the "answerabilities"[4] of her intellectual rite of passage throughout the discriminatory stages of any social development projects. Whether she is construed as ethically immoral and irrational or essentially sentimental and benevolent, she has always been construed as an essential object inevitably accessible to direct intuited apprehension by her male partners. Regardless of the variety of ways in which man has canvassed her essential portrait, she remains the privileged, pleasurable object of a male gaze and the staged, tractable wonder of a patriarchal maze – a conglomeration of pre-defined attributes to be predicted and premeditated along with other natural possessions – while the place of the free-willed subject, who can transcend nature's mandates, is reserved exclusively for a male "superior" cast.

---

[3] See L. Alcoff, *Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory*, in "Signs", 13, 3 (1988), pp. 405-436.

[4] For more on the concept of "answerability" see M. Bakhtin, *Arts and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, edited by M. Holquist and V. Liapunov, translated by V. Liapunov, K. Brostrom, University of Texas Press, Austin (TX).

Defaulting the cultural politics of most Arab male social theorists, Mernissi's writings suggest that a common-sense preview of cultural feminism could detect a twofold assessment of this abject situation, which is indicative of a transit feminist movement, advancing firmly in spiking heels over the last three decades. The first assumption invokes the claim that a group of social activists and solidarity groups, enacting a self-declared feminist agenda, have earned the exclusive right to prescribe women's ought-to-be capacities and evaluate their potential roles in society. In this regard, a new "movement" of locally motivated women activists would conclude that the prevalence of a male supremacist culture in a traditional country like Morocco is the result of a process in which women's status and agency have always been defined by a system of patriarchy; that is, by a group of orthodox fold clerics and neo-colonial bold critics who maintained a conspiring attitude and a biased set of interests away from their female partners, not to mention a possible fear of their tributes and an inherent hatred of their attributes. As a result of this saturated trans-position in disguise, a complicit distortion of tradition has paved the way to a systemic devaluation of feminine agency, which until recently could not be refracted by a more accurate feminist denial of male entity, nor promoted by a more courageous dismissal of gender alterity. Thus, the emerging cultural feminist reappraisal condemns woman's "passivity" as partly the outcome of her peacefulness, her inherent sentimentality as her proclivity to nurture, her subjectivism as her faint self-worth. In this staged scenario, Mernissi would contend, a number of alternate feminist associations[5] have inadeptly failed to challenge the traditional defining of woman as such, and instead managed to maintain a certain complicity that keeps feeding on a perpetuation of that definition as a taken-for-granted cultural episteme advocated by a surrogate cultural politics.

The second major position imparts enough grounds for a total rejection of the very possibility of defining woman as dysfunctionally subordinate, physically weak, intellectually passive and/or submissive. The few women academics and intellectuals[6] (later on to be – or not – qualified as locally immersed cultural feminists) who take this position seek to deconstruct all degrading concepts of women and argue that both Westernized feminist and

---

[5]   Cfr. https://ihlouchn9.blogspot.com/2015/10/adresse-des-associations-pour-les.html. The link includes contact info of the most active and influential associations in different major cities of Morocco.

[6]   To pay credit to both groups of social activists/solidarity groups and academics/professionals I am referring to a number of committed feminists to the cause of Moroccan women predicament over the last three decades such as Asma Lamrabet, Fatima Sadiqi, Fatema Mernissi, Soumaya Naamane-Guessouss, Zhor Gourram, Rahma Bourkia, Sanaa El-Aji, Hayat Dinia, Fouzia Assouli, Saida Menebhi, Aicha Ech-Chenna, Farida Belyazid, Zakiya Daoud, Farida Bennani, Souad Dibi, among other many academics, professionals, artists and social activists across disciplines, languages, races and genres.

misogynist agendas that sought to define 'indigenous' women beyond their cultural paradigms proved to be politically incorrect, ethically wrong and ontologically inappropriate. Redesigning new roles of Moroccan women-as-independent females, super mothers or smart professionals is utterly unfit and all too often untimely. Adapting analytical tools of a post-structuralist theory, most advocates of this *glocally* bred feminism agree that such misreading occurs because not all Moroccan women activists are culturally disciplined enough to think in fundamental ways and therefore tend to duplicate willy-nilly misogynist strategies when they try to define women's status, or speak for women, even though, on the surface, their adopted narratives of action spell out a structuralist grammar of thinking that does theoretically allow for a range of emancipatory positions, empathetic attitudes and participatory roles within the gender project yet to be re/defined[7].

Indeed, to be able to implement a politics of local gender awareness asserting a fixity/unity of sexual difference, Asma Lamrabet (Asmāʾ al-Murābiṭ) would argue, requires an intellectual displacement of male-dominated discourse and a strategic relocation of the debate over gender politics to a new subject position to be able to consider a plurality/disparity of sameness where a new gender role is likely to lose its re-position of in-significance. A case in point, while Lamrabet admits that the initiative of training women preachers could help readjust perspective on a number of issues, and eventually promote the idea of a Moroccan model of female *murshidat* (*muršidāt*), pioneering religious roles in preaching a moderate Islam, she consents that having women circumstantially trained as messengers does not in reality warrant any radical change if the deliverable message itself remains essentially patriarchal at its core. She went even further into claiming that by assigning them small tasks of prescriptive preaching roles, these *murshidat*/women preachers may be able to provide dubbed answers to the scattered immediate needs of a certain contentious kinship, but they can in no way help advance women's complex and multi-dimensional cause. «These preachers don't advance women's cause. Judicial equality, dignity, liberty and emancipation. These are the keys to feminism»[8], Lamrabet contends, calling for a commitment to a broader, universal human code of women's rights as advocated by a glocalised hegemony, which she is quick to disparage because it "speaks for all women" locally and across the globe[9].

---

[7]   I am referring here to directors of the different Gender Studies Master and Ph.D. programs across a number of universities in Morocco, whose work, research and activism prompted a rich production of knowledge on issues related to women's predicament and empowerment prospects in Morocco and the Arab world.

[8]   *Asma Lamrabet: Morocco's Muslim feminist polymath*, in "The Guardian", 12/01/2017, https://guardian.ng/art/asma-lamrabet-moroccos-muslim-feminist-polymath/.

[9]   The pertinence of Asma Lamrabet's writings is that they could be read like enlightening conversations with practising Muslims, non-academic readers as well

Briefly put, then, to adapt an "indigenized"[10] cultural feminist perspective, inviting a reaction to Simone de Beauvoir's question, «Are there women [in society]?»[11], would require a positive answer and hence define women as free subjects doing their daily survival battles, to impact change and implement attributions to the production of tributes to their own cultural identity. To stick to a Western, post-structuralist reading is to answer in the negative and attack a recurrent women predicament, suggesting the necessity to draft the new role of women through a deliberate problematization of their ambivalent subjectivity. Drawing on a synthetic epistemology of the Arab thought, Mernissi would argue that both responses pose serious limitations, and it is becoming increasingly legitimate to conclude that a peaceful transcendence of these limitations, while redesigning the theoretical framework from which they have emerged, ought to be prioritized as the major concern of a newly designed epistemological feminist project, she advises. The successive reviews of the Moroccan family code, known as *Moudawana* (*Mudawwanah*)[12] is a case in point. As a result of endless gender struggles, a few brave social activists are persistently rejecting the relative rights and scarce choices, which were "theoretically" guaranteed to women by the 2004 and then 2011 redrafted Family Code texts[13], attempting to outline a new course of action that will poke into the sustained inconsistencies and review the persistent gaps in the earlier versions. An updated draft of the *Moudawana* is not only a legitimate step to take, but also a must move to make, she forewarned.

Complementing Mernissi's position, Lamrabet consents that the problem with the cultural feminist response to a number of women's urgent issues and

---

as mainstream religious scholars offering a corrective insight into the Quran as a text that has for so long been interpreted/read to meet certain misogynist and masculinist agendas.

[10] I am borrowing the term from Fatima Sadiqi, *The Impact of Islamisation of Moroccan Feminisms*, in *Signs*, 32, 1 (Autumn 2006), pp. 32-40. Sadiqi's approach brings in a democratisation of the debate, including orality sources and minorities into the debate, whether as subjects of abuse and misogyny or advocates of struggle and change.

[11] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H.M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, London 1953, p. 13.

[12] The first reform draft of the *Moudawana*, also known as the Family Code, was in 1993 but since then updated in 2004 and 2011 when a number of its articles, laws had to be upgraded to meet the growing needs of more empowered women and commit to newly gained rights as their awareness of those rights became legitimate.

[13] Known also as the Islamic Family Law, an elaborate of Moroccan course of actions towards amending this law is found in Fatima Sadiqi, Moha Ennaji, *The Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, the Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco*, in "Journal of Middle East Women's Studies", 2, 2, Special Issue: *Women's Activism and the Public Sphere* (Spring 2006), pp. 86-114.

basic rights remain abstracted as paper laws, hardly, if ever, implemented, because many of such laws, i.e. criminalising violence against women, gender equity, inheritance rights, under-age marriage, domestic rape, child custody and polygamy, proclaimed in successive Family Code texts since 1957, have been designed and drafted exclusively by male clerics; a fact which reinvokes the prevalence of a mechanism of power referred to here as the construction of women subjectivity by a traditional, male discourse that weaves "sacred" knowledge and "natural" power into a coercive family structure that forces women back on their own and ties them up to "profane" social duties that condition their individual rights, shape their social roles, limit their freedom of choice and condition their agency. On this view, to advance essentialist formulations of womanhood, even when advocated by modernist feminists, tends to "tie" the individual female to her frail portrait as a chaste wife and a submissive mother within the Family Code canvas and thus cannot come up with realizable solutions to the dictates of universal human rights and legitimate body politics as experienced in their everyday life needs and practices.

To make a necessary theoretical digression and try to tie the dots of the contextual premises described above, it is worth noting that the theoretical articulation of women's problem in a male dominated society as such has been schematised by lead theory authors from a number of recently influential, Western (mostly French) thinkers; namely Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault – to name but these two –, whose bulk of work built a post-structuralist base taken to lay the foundations of post-humanist and post-essentialist readings of feminist agendas beyond their cultural geographies. Their counter-part in Morocco was the late Mohammed Abed al-Jabri (Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Ǧābirī), a prominent thinker/philosopher, with strong humanist dimensions, whose work presented an ambitious project of rereading Arabo-Islamic history and tradition, which was meant to help define an epistemological base able to uproot the conditions and reproduce an upgraded Arab mind/thought that could trace "answerabilities" to the changing nature of their arts, crafts, aesthetics, ethics and politics. His substantial volumes of work have impacted most contemporary Moroccan and Arab thought, shaping reflection on a number of social determinants, including the role of tradition in implementing a new method to addressing the role, function and status of women in Muslim societies.

Complementary as these authors' backgrounds might seem to the sociology-trained Fatema Mernissi and her younger peers from across adjacent social sciences, religious studies and other related applied disciplines, their common outlook is that any self-contained, authentic and fully independent subject-knowledge is actually conceived by universal humanism to be recoverable below a socially constructed stage of cultural and ideological overlay of secular and religious socialisation factors transcribed by a com-

mon, universally humanist discourse. In their respective views, Derrida and Foucault agree that the female subject is not an idealized locus of individual rights, personalized needs and intentions or natural attributes of free will and creativity or even a privileged state of consciousness. Taken at their face value, both Derrida's grammar of thought and Foucault's history of social discourse suggest tools and advise ways to "deconstruct" "discipline" and teach in order to re-historicise the concept of women subjects as having culturally knowledgeable pleats of identity, aesthetically designed modes of production and ethically archived representations of self that has been historically staged/constructed by a male-dominated society. The idea here is that individual social entities have really little role/enough space in making the choice of what/who they are, for as long as they are social constructs, enacting the experience of their very subjectivity is also a construct, which is proportionately mediated by and/or ideologically grounded on a powerful patriarchal system assigning a social discourse, schooling women citizens into adhering to a social contract beyond their individual control. As Foucault puts it, we are bodies totally imprinted by history[14]. Assigned a minimal representation in that discourse, post-colonial Moroccan women find out that they have no histories of their own. The imprint of their history spells out a loud silence of tensions, overbearing a void/silence that they are brought up to apprehending, absorbing and grasping, completely denied their say in texting their own narrative/voicing their forced silence/absence from/within that history.

It is that distortion of the Arabo-Islamic history's imprint that Mohammed Abed al-Jabri repeatedly rejected in his work. He diagnosed a dying tradition, distorted and opaque, full of gaps, incoherencies and contradictions that need to be refilled, recaptured, rethought and amended, and blames its recurrent mis-readings on an outdated methodology of analysis of Arab reason and mind that handed over the idea of tradition as fundamentally sacred and epistemologically final – a surgical tool-kit of knowledge, which al-Jabri's in-depth analysis will find out, has proved to be unfit and unproductive and therefore unable to provide a well-designed approach of handling the pressures of a pre-mature Arab modernity[15]. Relocating the debate from religion

---

[14] For further readings into the Michel Foucault's idea of how history has destroyed the idea of the body and constructed a subject commodity, read Michel Foucault's *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by C. Gordon, The Harvester Press, Brighton 1980.

[15] Viewed from a scientific and philosophical perspective, al-Jabri believes that the Arabo-Islamic school of thought's current problems in entertaining a harmonious and balanced relationship with the demands of the contemporary Arab world depend on the progressive loss of a rational and scientific dimension that had instead inspired philosophers such as Ibn Rušd, Ibn Ḥazm and Ibn Sīnā to offer new readings of tradition, only to discover that the Islamic religion is, in their assessment, intimately permeated. al-Jabri maintains that the "rationalist" and methodologically scientific philosophy of these three thinkers – the ardent advocates of

to philosophy, al-Jabri strives to free religion from politics and aspires to promote the legal practice of "gender justice" within the framework of universal ethical values in conformity with the humanitarian idea(l)s of Islam. In al-Jabri's paradigm, the supremacy of Islamic philosophy over the centuries has resulted in that "irrational obscurantism" that exhilarating power and undisciplined politics exploited to their own advantage, distorting the original universal humanism of Islam as a modernist religion and preventing a methodologically rigorous exegesis to author cross-cultural literacy across disciplines, genders and races[16].

   In contention with Taha Abderrahmane (Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān)[17], another prolific advocate of the urgency to use "religious decency" to a revised Islamic tradition, al-Jabri concludes that Arab thought, randomly ever since the fall of al-Andalus in 1492, and more structurally since the middle of the nineteenth century (a historical era generally called *nahḍah*/renaissance), has often been diagnosed as presenting a degrading inferiority complex of contemporary Arab and Islamic thought, when seen in the light of and in contradistinction to the two models of the modern West, on one hand, and the forlorn classical "golden" period of the Arab-Islamic Empire, on the other. In retrospect, the road not taken by Arab thinkers and intellectuals, who were culturally immersed in the East, but mostly trained and educated in the West, led them astray between a vehement attraction to Western paradigms, lured into this dependency by an adamant superiority in the economic, scientific, technological, and military capacities while still religiously addicted to a lingering Arab glorious, but lost past, since it provided them with an umbilical authenticity and a purist creed that Arabs and Muslims are capable of upholding a leading position in world socio-spiritual ascendance and ethno-cultural transcendence. New beginnings to a past reimagined would indeed

---

science's autonomy from religion, and convinced preachers of the impossibility of applying human cognitive methods to re-examine a novel transcendence of tradition – did not manage to gain the upper hand over an inclination for a blithering gnosticism and "spiritualist irrationalism" of the Islamic philosophy developed in/across the Middle East, since the fall of al-Andalus in 1492.

[16] al-Jabri's broad trilogy project called *Critique of Arab Reason*, subdivided into four epistemes (*The Development of Arab Reason*, 1984, *The Structure of Arab Reason*, 1986, *Arab Political Reason*, 1990, and *Arab Ethical Reason*, 2001) is a huge anthology of Arab mindset studies and represents one of the most complete authored attempts of an epistemological investigation of Arab and Islamic philosophy's historical-theoretical evolution in its various articulations (methodological, theological, ethical, and political).

[17] Named professor of multiple modernities, Taha Abderrahmane critiques the material deviations of modernity from tradition and defines the Arab modernist deficit of expansion, qualifying it as the "age of the return". His "philosophical" project aspires to set the foundations of an "ethical humanistic modernism" with reference to what he qualifies as the "ethical basics and values of Islamic Religion".

provide them with a reassurance that they were not theoretically inferior in all spheres, but rather perpetuated the strong faith in a recoverable past where Arabs used to hold the upper ground in developing moral, literary, aesthetic, ethical and social economies of knowledge.

The only way out of this untethered ideological *impasse*, according to al-Jabri, is a long and oblong ethnohistorical growth of an ascending epistemological paradigm, for which the author identifies the leading foundations from a rereading of the Qur'anic text itself as well as in a reappreciation of the theological insight of the *ḥadīṯ/tradition* – a repetition *in medias res* of the provisions, acts and styles of the prophet's symbolic representation of an ideal state performing the needs and responding to the aspirations of all subjects, races, classes, genders and creeds. Read more in detail, al-Jabri's tūrilogy concludes that the "indigenous pathways" to a new epistemology in the Arabo-Muslim world, preferable to importing or imposing a theocracy with clearly assigned Western characteristics, is to be found precisely starting with the Qur'anic principle of the *šūrà*, or "consultation" that offers Muslims a way of taking possession of an ethical line of cultural hegemony, democratic governance, and political ascendance by referring methodologically to a deeper understanding and a better appreciation of their religious texts, the prophet's tradition and the Arabo-Islamic cultural heritage at large[18].

Though prevalent reactions and proposed solutions to this crossroad of knowledge diverged among subsequent Arab scholarship, most of them remain committed to a common agenda of easing this teasing tension between the two models, i.e. Western and Islamic. The main concern for the absent denominator in this new point of departure is what Mernissi commends as a "synthetic difference" tracing the footsteps of a "third way"[19], implementing a new course of action to be taken by women and women supporters in order to catch up and rebuild epistemologically forged identities while repeating ontologically historicized authenticities. Albeit there were a few lead voices[20] that proposed remapping ethical and cultural borders, identifying transits to

---

[18] al-Jabri is here critiquing Arab intellectuals' lack of understanding of the ever-evolving dimensions that a renewed history could play to drafting a discursive dialogics between the modern demands of human rights, social justice and technological expertise in perfect harmony with Islamic sources in perpetuating an upgraded form of tradition. It is to this objective that he addressed much of his work, inviting contemporary (state) intellectuals to uphold a progressive attitude, addressing all areas, and social casts, including gender issues, and advising not to adhere to corrupt and undemocratic politics, which according to him, instated a neo-colonial power system feeding on social tensions across the Arab-Muslim world since independence till the fringe debuts of the Arab uprising/Spring (2011).

[19] "Third-way" is a term coined by Doris H. Gray identifying a humanistic approach to reunite religious sects, which she explains «presuppose the existence of a basic set of human values that reaches across borders and cultures». Cf. D.H. Gray, *Feminism, Islamism and a Third Way*, Routledge, London-New York 2012.

trespassing into the modern world by completely shedding the past, empowering evolutionary voices and movements and ultimately advocating one type or another of eclecticism that combined what was deemed morally correct in the two models. Instructing a "double critique", Abdelkebir Khatibi (ʿAbd al-Kabīr al-Ḫaṭībī)[21] advised a third tongue (*une langue tierce*) suggesting an approbation of a third cast of voices advocating a return to a state of universality of the early past, which was, according to his predecessors, the only way for the Arab and Muslim societies to regain their prestige and privilege status in the modern world. Khatibi's "double critique" outlook prescribes a "beyond position", to borrow Homi Bhabha's terms, suggesting the hybrid options of the two trends mentioned earlier: the traditionalist's call for emblematic purity, and the liberal's concorded a radical deviation to what he calls "*l'orientalisme désorienté*"[22].

Following suit of this brave new endeavour to dare revisit Arabo-Islamic sources, Fatema Mernissi, Asma Lamrabet and Fatima Sadiqi's (Fāṭimah Ṣadīqī) accumulated bulk of writings show that Arab women's problems do not «come from religious texts», but instead derive from «the interpretation of these texts by men», as Lamrabet explains[23]. Backing up this position, Mernissi condones that feminism and Islam can co-exist, despite centuries of "male-dominated dogma"; and therefore, a call to a "re-Islamisation of religious discourse", in Sadiqi's terms, invites a closer re-reading of the Qur'anic text in its historical context, which is deemed a pivotal point of departure for any social reform project. It is within such enlightening intellectual contexts that Mernissi lead the crowd as a pioneer Arab Islamic feminist able to produce receptively correct gendered narratives tracing the percepts of a "synthetic difference", within the auspices of an "ascending knowledge"/epistemology. A longtime colleague and ardent disciple of Khatibi, Abderrahmane and al-Jabri[24], she battled with, trained, coached and inspired generations of youth to commit to a common social project to usher impacting contributions to the on-going debate on women's status and rights in Morocco and beyond.

---

[20] Such as Ǧamāl al-Dīn al-Afġānī, the Egyptians Qāsim Amīn and Muḥammad ʿAbduh, and the Moroccans ʿAllāl al-Fāsī and Muḥammad ibn al-ʿArabī al-ʿAlawī.

[21] Abdelkebir Khatibi (1938-2009) bears over 30 books to his credit, including volumes of poetry, theatre, novels and essays. I strongly recommend the following: *Plural Maghreb (1983)*, *Rethinking Maghreb (1990)*, *Tatooed Memory* (1971), *Love in Two languages (1983)*, *Le corps oriental* (2002) among many other texts.

[22] For more on this, read Abdelkebir Khatibi's chapter *L'orientalisme désorienté*, in Id., *Le Maghreb pluriel,* Denoël, Paris 1983, pp. 117-145.

[23] *Asma Lamrabet: Morocco's Muslim feminist polymath*, cit.

[24] Mernissi, Khatibi, Abderrahmane and al-Jabri worked together as senior professors in the Department of Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology at Mohamed V University in Rabat.

Before I try to disseminate some of Mernissi's and her peers' spaces of interaction with the ideas sketched in these introductory notes, it is worth mentioning that my briefing of the gist of their sociological project falls into the category of analysis/reading that al-Jabri calls "one-dimensional", i.e. an attempt to provide a so-called detached and objective summary of their ideas that tries to reproduce the original line of a structural, feminist "ascending knowledge" from their respective works. Such readings are necessarily selective, deliberately leaving out the unspoken criteria of exclusion/inclusion to turn them into proportionate interpretations of Arabo-Islamic epistemology at large. Bearing this in mind, I hope that the subsequent and more succinct analysis of the controversies identified above will prompt potential Arabist readers to appreciate Mernissi, Sadiqi and Lamrabet's works, as synecdochic representations of Islamic feminism highlighting some of the issues that they have raised and probing into the questions that their catalysing thoughts invite for discussion rather than on a summary that functions as a substitute for the reading of their writings, *per se*.

 "Faithful and feminists", – each in her respective empirical style, powerful position, and academic maturity – they invite a national debate on ways to reread the sources, towards drafting a potential social project able to redesign new paradigms of correcting history and reconstructing women subject's ability; not aimed at rejecting tradition, but rather meant to redesign new positions and suggest a better insight/visibility to help reflect on its limitations, locate gaps and distortions, deconstruct the archaic tools of its social discourse and assign analytical strategies to challenge its dictates in order to affirm a new agenda of religious mediation to implement society's macro reform projects of gender equity, social justice and political governance. Applied to the concept of woman subjectivity within the Arabo-Islamic tradition, Morocco's gender-shaped project's view does indicate a pre-agenda of what these feminist humanists would call an indigenised "cultural feminism", enacting Foucault's idea that the category "woman" is a particular social construct inspired by specific "historical imprint(s)", and that appropriate epistemological efforts could prescribe a method/theory to dismantle that construct.

In the same line of thought, Derrida's inherent declaration of the "undecidability" of individual identities must inevitably incite Moroccan women feminists to reread Julia Kristeva's ambivalent trans-positions of radical difference, implying that they can give only negative answers to the question "(W)hat is a woman?". If the category "woman" in Moroccan society is still fundamentally "undecidable", in Derrida's terms, then it is unlikely to consider a positively customized conception around it that is immune from deconstruction from without. Women are then left with a locally bred feminism that can be only constructive and, eventually, edging on allegories of applicable essentialist practices. Tracing the thread of women's narrative historicities would lead to the conclusion that the women "Subject" cannot be a topo-

logized Cartesian, *soliloquy* act performing a subject agency/role engaging in a detached communicative action, struggling to convert her "outlaw ethics" to assert her Self as a "subject-on-trial", to repeat Kristeva's phrases. Instead, acting as an "abject stranger", for an unprepared social base, Moroccan women battle to regain a new power position that defines their status as "reborn citizens" who engage intersubjectively, contingently, historically, culturally and aesthetically through a renewed language of common meaning and usage. The post Arab-Spring myth of the birth of the Arab (female) citizen here declares its emerging presence as the outcome of the historically shaped subject born of an upgraded tradition, refashioned as a transient modernity; that is, producing a woman subject-in-process who, however tagged as marginal, subordinate and "undecided", presupposes that she could impart a subversive positionality of a new nominal voice featuring traits of an autonomous, self-transparent and unified subject position.

To take on an essentialist position on subjectivity implies the deleterious effect of de-gendering any re-reading of a given system of thought without making the gender issue invisible all the same. Notorious for not including gender in their analyses of the universal "ascending knowledge" (al-Jabri) and "archaeology of knowledge" (Foucault) in their respective ontologies, their micro projects could hardly suggest any indications to what Adrienne Rich calls "a politics of location"[25] of a visible woman agency; prescribing instead only histories of female conspiring bodies and complicit pleasures. If women subjectivity is simply a "social construct", as Foucault reminds us, the strategic need for and even the possibility of previewing a feminist politics from within the existing social discourse becomes immediately diacritical. What can men demand in the name of women, in their absence/invisibility, if the very making of such demands in their name cannot but utterly reinforce the myth that they ought to be able to make up their own demands? How could Muslim men demand equal rights of inheritance, adequate childcare, or even fair wages, based on "undecidable" gender equity law and incompatible worth, Lamrabet forewarns, without invoking both respect of accredited individual choices and adherence to amended religious sources? A consistently unalloyed supporter of an *Islaist* system, (blending the sacred with the profane/*Islamicité et laicité/*) she advises that it is the only way of truly protecting individual freedoms while also protecting religious choices.

An assessment of a de-localised, cultural feminism from within Western post-structuralist theories[26], may undercut women's ability to not only be

---

[25]   A. Rich, *Notes towards a Politics of Location*, in Ead. *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, Norton, New York 1986, p. 17.

[26]   H. Eisenstein, *Contemporary feminist thought*, Unwin paperbacks, London-Sydney 1984; J. Donovan, *Feminist theory: the intellectual traditions of american feminism*, Frederick Ungar, New York 1985; L. Alcoff, *Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism*, cit.

able to oppose such dominant trend, but also, one might argue, to undermine the inherent risk of perpetual marginalisation and subordination in a resurgent popular, secular thought; that is, the insistence on reclaiming individual rights to be part of a universal, (neutral) epistemology, gendered anthropology and ethical metaphysics. Despite scarce cases of disparate, rhetorical rumblings from within, proponents of contemporary Arabo-Islamic epistemology strive to equally train its public recipients to ascribe to the idea(l) of a universalizable, "apolitical methodology", in al-Jabri's terms, and thus imparting a set of transhistorical basic truths unfettered by empirically modernist agendas with particular, emancipatory reform projects on class, gender, and identity. The unintentional but nevertheless ideological rejection of subjectivity colludes with this "generic human" thesis of classical liberal/secular thought that certain particularities of individuals act as irrelevant and improper influences on a contingent, structural pattern of a refined tradition, ascending from a revisited tradition/archaeology of knowledge. Adopted to the urgent call for a Moroccan moderate and liberal feminism, subject agency translates, in fact, women's desire to topple this commitment to the possibility of a recaptured Islamic world view – purported in a matter-of-fact fashion, as the best of all possible world views – grounded in a generic humanist project that motivates much of the cultural feminist glorification of subjectivity as a valid specificity legitimately foregrounding the need for an appropriate indigenized feminist theory.

Derrida needs no credits for his assumption that women have always been defined as a subjugated *differand* within a binary opposition of man/woman, self/other, culture/nature, intellectual/emotional, analytical/intuitive. To assert an unbound gender *differand*, as cultural feminists would argue, is to rethink the very essence of this oppositional dichotomy, knowing that the only way to break out of this structure, and in fact to subvert the grammar of that structure itself, is to maintain the essence of difference to be/to mean that which cannot be identified as a new signification and/or subjugated within what he calls a "dichotomous hierarchy". Ironically, as long as a traditionally bred woman is besieged within her own highly codified social structures, in order to be, she is suppressed to mean; i.e. to read her own poem/story as "equal to not true", to borrow Archibald MacLeish's witty lines; that is, a story line narrated by her patriarchal author. Unprepared and untrained to draft their blurred subjectivity, women have to battle in order to recover their voice, rewrite their own story and simulate a *differand* that will help them reinvent what they are not and struggle to be not what they are claimed to be by the writerly male discourse.

In a similar fashion, Foucault's genealogy of (human) knowledge[27] rejects any construction of oppositional subjects – be that of the "proletariat", the "subaltern", "the slave", "the silenced", "the oppressed", or barely the feminine – as mirror positions that merely recreate/reflect and/or sustain dormant discourses of power. Read in this respect, Mernissi's writings clearly point out that the position from which the Islamist male discourse envisions gender roles is an "off-center" perspective, *hareeming* women within socially constructed *hudud*/boundaries[28], totally out of line, apparently unaligned with a minimal dictum of religious ethics, individual/human rights, social justice, political governance and democratic practices. Outcast and marginalised in that dominant male space/discourse, women find themselves cast out not only at the point of an imagined absolute otherness, and at best socially constructed as an "alterity" which discards their identity as an internal exclusion. Transcending such a position, she advises, requires a "transgressing (of) the visions" of this discourse, to borrow George Bataille's concept. Mernissi concludes that hardly any (Arabo-Islamic) feminist theory has so far managed to demarcate a definitive category of a newly born "woman" without eliminating all possibilities for the de-feat of logocentrism and its oppressive power, without courting the idea of reproducing a new form of counter-power. In a recent study on Mernissi's Islamic feminist readings, Najib Mokhtari argues that her work «[…] marks a decisive direction of sociocultural orientations, designing "visions of transgressions" in George Bastille's terms, as moments of transits not only from history and tradition, but also from the canonical codes of writing and modes of production, (thus) prescribing instrumental guidelines of aesthetic and social reform agendas»[29].

Deconstructing Derrida's "*differand*", and decentering Foucault's "off-center" positions may not be as appropriate a solution for the Moroccan feminist project as it may sound. One could argue that an effective feminist alternative could only be a wholly dialogic cultural feminism, "defaulting the boundaries" of religious texts, transgressing the constraints of male discourse, deconstructing past paradigms of difference, yet refusing to construct new roles of sameness. «Taking on a third option», Mokhtari argues, Mernissi commends this new consciousness to lead to a remedial system of adjustment aspiring to «[…] new notions of textual and cultural modernities»[30]. It

---

[27] For more details, see Michel Foucault's *Why Study Power: The Question of the Subject*, in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics: Michel Foucault*, edited by H.L. Dreyfus; P. Rabinow, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1983².

[28] For a good analysis of the concepts of and *harem* and *hudud*, read her metanarrative novel *Dreams of Trespass*: *Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, Addison-Wesley, Reading (MA) 1994.

[29] For more details, see Najib Mokhtari; Ginger Feather (eds.), *Fatema's Dreams of Transgress: Defaulting the Boundaries of Islamic Feminism*, Université International de Rabat Publication Series, Dar Al-Maarif, Rabat 2017, pp. 28-29.

[30] *Ibid*, p. 28.

follows then that any form of a "third way" feminism, in Doris H. Gray's terms, can only be pedagogical and corrective, rereading what already exists so that we may redraw lines of assessment and be able to say: "that cannot be it", "that is not good enough" and "that's not yet it". To address the problematic character of subjectivity does not mean, then, that there can be no political struggle to implement a new agenda for social reform and make cultural readjustments, as one might surmise from the fact that the best a post-structuralist reading could offer is to suggest tools to deconstruct the "position of the evolutionary" in the same breath as it suggests ways to decenter "the position of the reactionary". Viewed in this respect, Moroccan women's political struggle can have only a "mediated function", questioning everything that has been historically uploaded as perfect, structured, and finite, ethically loaded with fairness, equity, justice and good-will, in the transient post Arab Spring state of a traumatised society at the brink of a moral collapse, so as not to say an epistemological decline.

A coming to authorship of al-Jabri's project of revisiting tradition as a point of a new departure to remap an epistemological exit to redefining the Arab mind and thought – aimed to redesign a perpetual mode of modernities to meet the challenges of social, ethical, economic, and political reforms within Arabo-Islamic societies –, I contend that this methodological attraction to the post-structuralist critique of subjectivity for Moroccan feminists, as a case in point, is two-fold. First, it seems to hold out the promise of an increased pace of broader rights and stronger power structures for women, to enjoy the "free play" of a plurality of voices; and deploy the less "free will" of asymmetrical differences, unhampered by any predetermined gender authorship as formulated by either patriarchy or religion. Second, it transgresses decisively beyond the idea of an innovative, alternative feminism as well as a gendered Islamism to further theorize what they are both inclined to leave untouched; that is, the gradual construction of subjectivity within a "reinvented tradition", in Edward Said's terms. It is only by assigning an accurate rereading of tradition, and an unbiased historicising of Islamic culture, Mernissi, Sadiqi and Lamrabet alternately consent, that we can learn a great deal about the inherent mechanisms of deconstructing women's oppression and eventually constructing their modernist, gender categories of emancipation. That could be achieved by relating reactionary reviews to the dominant social discourse and by conceiving of the feminine subject as an inclusively gradable cultural product. Certainly, too, Sadiqi's strategic insight into a culturally correct feminism could methodologically help us draw the limits of exclusively secular/Westernized Moroccan feminists, assess the con-text of a borrowed cast ideology, and understand the radical mechanisms that might have hindered social development agendas at large, including that of a gender-friendly cultural politics.

Adopting the position of a gendered culturalism could indeed create significant challenges for a moderate feminist minority with respect to other radical feminist peers. Lamrabet advises that this position could suggest other alternatives than repeat what Kristeva describes as a plan for only "negative struggle"? As lead advocates of the new post Arab spring women/youth empowerment agendas for social reform should have learned by now, society cannot and should not mobilize a "third woman"[31] movement that is entirely and consistently against genderless, mainstream practices. Instead, they are pressured to adopt an ideology-free alternative and inspire the projection of brighter prospects that can motivate people to sacrifice part of their idea(l)s and affinities toward achieving a broader agenda of social reform. Just the same, a socialist adoption of gendered culturalism will have to face up to the same challenges that upgraded theories of existing male discourse have; that is, why has man's radical consciousness been constructed via social discourse while a moderate feminist's consciousness cannot? It is precisely here where the epistemological location of the cultural construction of gender politics for a Moroccan feminist's agenda lies: How are they to proceed to a grounding of the cultural politics of a feminist poetics that can assign new tools and offer a better methodology to help construct the female subject within the dominant social discourse? A highly customised, gendered culturalism could indeed be viewed as an implicit thread to sewing design, manner, and style, as well as production codes of "home girls", in Barbara Smith's terms, entertaining the idea of a fashionable Islamic feminism *per se*. Acting as "women of reason", women of taste and fashion, they are aware of the imminent risk that the (Foucauldian) challenge to traditional categories, if taken to a "logical" contention, could make the question of everyday practices of women's oppression sound irrelevant, so as not to say, obsolete.

In line with his contention that the meaning of women as texts/histories is ultimately undecidable, Derrida offers us, in *Spurs*[32]*,* critical but equally tangible directions on how to read Nietzsche(an) texts as theoretical paradigms to construct and position subject agency within a social structure, which could, if applied by analogy to a Moroccan context, locate exits of apprehension of similar cultural feminist spaces to advocate women agency and function in society. Conjuring up her articulation of the problem with women's constructed narrative/texts/stories, Mernissi argues in this regard, that the recurrent movement of Moroccan women activists are left hopeful that a moderate Islamic feminism could provide tangible tools and lay out practical strategies to prescribe a solution that could transcend the limits of women's entangled, interdependent subjectivity, which, she admits, poses a serious challenge, because it is densely woven in a multi-dimensional social fabric

---

[31] For more on the idea of a "third woman", see E.L. Berg, *The Third Woman*, in "Diacritics", 12, 2 (Summer, 1982), pp. 11-20.

[32] J. Derrida, *Spurs*, translated by B. Harlow, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978.

of contradictory recognitions. Similarly, in their repeated requests to reread the sources, both Sadiqi and Lamrabet tend to undermine the undecidability, ambiguity, and elusiveness of religious references and explain that it is only by a clear understanding of the practical "answerability" of the Qur'anic texts to women's needs and rights that we can produce a new meaning of the source/texts from which feminists acting as social humanists can usefully learn and dutifully teach. However, admitting the possibility that source texts are undecidable on certain matters and ambiguous on many others cannot be useful for a gender-friendly reading of tradition. While the preceding charac-terizations of a surrogate cultural feminism, adopted strategically from within an adjusted post-structuralist perspective, might raise the eyebrows of a few Islamic feminists by assuming its imparting too much homogeneity and by blithely pigeonholing unlit "thick descriptions" and unfit complex theories, it is very likely to confirm that the moderate positions, and meas-ured tendencies, which I have tried to outline above – toward an adopted version of a performative essentialism and toward a constructive nominalism – could represent the main, recurrent responses of a customized *gendocracy* theory to the task of reconceptualizing woman subjectivity within Moroccan society and across the Arab world.

Such synthetic approach to creating a hybrid theory of a gendered social discourse entails significant advantages and warns of serious shortcomings. An Islamic cultural feminism could provide a useful, corrective probation of the "generic human" thesis of a transcendental universalism and as such help pro-mote social justice and assert self-affirmation; nonetheless, it cannot provide a long-range, homogeneous course of action for a mandated feminist theory or endowed praxis, while it is founded on a claim of an empowered essentialism that a striking majority of Moroccan women are far from having the tools and methodology to justify, use and practice. Again, admitting that a feminist ap-propriation of a post-structuralist paradigm does provide suggestive insights on a fair construction of female and male subjectivity, it could also send a cru-cial warning against creating an imported feminism that reinvokes the mech-anisms of adjacent forms of disruptive, oppressive powers. Nonetheless, ap-plying it as an abstract theory could limit local feminist actions to the negative tactics of sheer controversy and ephemeral deconstruction and question the at-tack against mainstream discourse by discrediting the notion of an epistemolo-gically in/significant, subjectivity-on-trial, to borrow Kristeva's phrase.

The question to ask at this stage is: what prospects can a Moroccan/Arabo-Islamic feminism suggest in the absence of a structural social theory or a belated understanding of an outdated, unprocessed epistemology? Obviously, we cannot simply embrace the historical irony of displacement, nor ascribe to the ethical paradox of "dismemberment", to borrow Ihab Hassan's term, to reach immedi-ate conclusions. In order to avoid the serious disadvantages of a (Derridean) grammar of humanism and adopt appropriately the ambivalent patterns of

post-structuralist empiricism, Moroccan (Islamic) feminism will have to transcend the delusions and inconsistencies of its dormant epistemology, – remedying the crisis of the Arab Mind/Reason in al-Jabri's terms – by developing a third course; that is, an alternative, generic theory of the subject that avoids both essentialist references and nominalist inferences. This new alternative, inviting a hybrid scripture acting as a "beyond position", in Homi Bhabha's terms, might share the post-structuralist insight that the category "woman" needs to be theorized through an exploration of a new signification/intelligence and a deeper understanding of the random experiences of women subjectivity, as opposed to a description of her grammatically fixed attributes. This approach needs not concede that such an exploration will necessarily result in innovative, nominalist positions on gender from within, or a dissemination of a biased subjectivity from without. Asserting a new female position within their own society could help Moroccan women redefine patriarchy as directly causing the subjugation and subversion of their subjectivity-on-trial, out of male greed and need, and then suggest a solution that revolves around redefining their own power position and striking back as strong "third women" agents, prescribing a counter narrative, celebrating the unsaid of other silenced voices, subaltern subjects and marginalised groups.

As the following nominative recap will explain, defaulting Arabo-Islamic narratives of dominance, Moroccan feminists need to explore the possibility of a synthetic, hybrid theory of the gendered subject that does not slide unnecessarily into imported repeats of empirical epistemes, nor build its authorship from within recycled radical orthodoxies.

Unveiling Women Subjectivity:
Fatema Mernissi's Transpositions of Gender

Taking on Mohammed Abed al-Jabri's recommendation to review the Arab mind in deficit of an epistemology that is incapable of implementing a social project within the Arab world from the Islamic tradition, which has over centuries proclaimed authority in offering a universal, world view of social peace, ethical justice and individual rights, Mernissi's borrowed concept of "synthetic difference" stems from her belief, in compliance with al-Jabri's idea of an "ascending knowledge", that woman's subjectivity may represent a remedial rupture in the disfunctional discourse of what Derrida would call a logocentrism; that is, an essentialist discourse that entails a restructuring of the hierarchies of difference and, to some degree, a re-approbation of a (Kantian)[33] "hermeneutics of sameness", constructing a social base of what Fou-

---

[33] For more on Kant's de-ontology of duty-based ethics, I suggest reading *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by P. Guyer; A. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998.

cault calls the "archaeology of knowledge". Because Arab women have in a sense been discarded from al-Jabri's de/construction of the Arab mind, it is possible to expect that their unwarranted marginalization could generate elements of empowerment and become a real source of aspiration and a legitimate cause of conspiration aimed at recovering credits for their contributions to a re-coverable past/history of glory, honour and pride of women from within the Islamic tradition. Paradoxically, women's expected resistance may not be at all effective if they opt solely for a repeat of the mechanism of a biased logocentrism to redefine their-self from without that tradition. They would be able to advance an affective reformist project only if they could drift and dodge all attempts to capture the conditions of their own lost subjectivity, designed in their own style of writing, performed in their own mode of production and enacted in their own code of conduct. It is only then, Mernissi hopes, that following a visionary dream of trespassing historical boundaries of distortions, denial, subordination and ignorance will come true: "Out of the depths, endless and unfathomable", a newly thinkable woman will stand up, absorb and distort all vestiges of essentiality, unfold all pleats of identity and dismantle all agents of subjectivity.

Granted that a mediated cultural feminism is, to some extent, a rhetorical mix of a re-invented Islamic tradition and an extension of Western feminist theories, Mernissi points out that it can barely provide a homogeneous agenda across gender, aesthetics and norms, unless it implements a deliberately ambivalent position that is compatible with local contexts, home-grown aspirations and complacent agendas. Nonetheless, the key link between adjunct groups of feminists across breeds and creeds is their tendency towards invoking universalizing conceptions of womanhood and motherhood designed in a relatively delocalised essentialist fashion. Therefore, despite the lack of a complete homogeneity within a Moroccan/Arab feminist theory, it seems still justifiable and important to identify, assess (and eventually criticize) within existing Moroccan feminists' agendas disparate actions and discarded stories/works showcasing women's projections to offer a customized essentialist response to misogyny and sexism through adopting a homogeneous, unproblematized, and ahistorical conception of woman subjectivity.

Questioning orthodox complicities with misogynist and sexist discourses, Mernissi goes on to assert that quite a few male, religious culprits tend to believe that they have been brought up to believing that it is part of their masculinity/manhood to "hide, confine and oppress" the very women they love, implying that it is up to state authorities to implement an educational system to draft social projects of mass training programs across gender, age groups, political affiliations, religious orientations and social status to secure a liberating and secular gender equity awareness via a sustainable program of gender literacy. It is commonly claimed that the innateness of gender differences in character, personality and role is factually undeniable and philo-

sophically inadvisable, to say the least. There are, nevertheless, scores of divergent ways gender divisions are manifest in different societies, Mernissi argues, suggesting that the differences that might appear to be structural and universal can be explained in non-essentialist ways to be bracketed as cultural, assigned as local and therefore handled as national priorities.

Prefacing a country project of the sociology of gender studies ever since her early academic career in the 1980s, Mernissi was quick to distinguish a contextually, moderate feminism from extroverted radical feminist trends from both within and without. As she consented, there is a tendency within many radical feminists' works toward setting up an ahistorical and essentialist conception of a secular/modernised identity and body politics in the Moroccan society, but this tendency, she insists, is counterfeited and should be inflated by locally trained feminists, thus rendering their activism and work significantly different from imported radical feminists. However, although moderate feminist views tend to sharply separate female from male traits, she explains, they certainly do not all give explicitly essentialist formulations of what it means to be a woman agent of change in that respect. It may seem then, that Mernissi's characterization of a locally constructed, moderate feminism makes it sound too homogeneous, it is equally sound to argue that the charge of essentialism is therefore resting on safe ethical grounds, coming from informal sources, street power and civil society's alternative actions. https://twitter.com/fmythinktank[34] is but one example where Mernissi invited scores of female youth, academics, professionals and active feminist associations to draw a road map of actions to reflect on and reproduce moderate cultural assumptions about single mothers, sexually abused women, social drop outs and illiterate rural girls, with the objective to help them regain basic individual rights of literacy, freedom of choice, honour, self-assertion and respect within their communities, and by extension promote individual empowerment, dignity, self-esteem and pride – practically answerable tributes to society's call for a social reform agenda with respect to women's rights, gender equity and social justice.

The articulation of her traditionally based views into action plans have now become part of a growing trend within a more and more empowered Moroccan feminist movement and can be taken as a logical extension toward trans-essentialism as has been developed most extensively and consistently by her earlier, extensive field work and later on her selective social activism. She prefers the name bottom-up feminism for this movement, because it equates "women's daily battles" for subjectivity and dignity with the development and preservation of a female counterculture of individual liberty and social status. Her youth-think-tank initiative ambitions to coach both young Moroccan men and women, training them to write their own stories of mar-

---

[34] fmyouthinktank.com was launched at ILCS, Rabat, about a year after she passed away in 2015.

ginalisation, denigration and subordination much more as a way of debasing masculinity than a dumping ground for keeping silent and admitting male supremacy and control. Her ultimate social development agenda projects to first raise awareness and produce knowledge to eventually call for political action to implement legislation procedures capable of securing women's rights, promoting gender equity and maintaining social peace by a steering valorisation of female natural skills, and by instructing them to commit to preserving rather than diminishing (egalitarian) gender differences.

On the issue of the transplant of Western essentialism unto locally inspired Islamic feminism, Mernissi states that this preoccupation with defining the Arab female sensibility could not only lead women activists to indulge in dangerously erroneous generalizations about all women across the board, but also inform that this essentialist identity is to be revalued much more as naturally instructed than devalued as socially constructed. At best, there has been a curiously common disregard for whether these differences are biological or cultural in origin. Mernissi points out that the importance of the differences varies tremendously according to their source of apprehension. In the absence of a clearly stated position on the ultimate source of gender difference in school curricula and other alternate sources of learning, she infers from their emphasis on building a feminist free-space among the different social premises, could help build a woman-centred culture that a lead moderate Islamic feminists hold a malleable version of essentialism. Certainly, she forewarns, it is difficult to render the views of a borrowed essentialist theory into a coherent whole without supplying a missing assumption that there is a recoverable, innate female essence as inspired by state-led reforms of a modernised Islamic tradition.

Mernissi's idea of a feminist movement cannot be thought of in isolation from a national, social movement of change. The state persists on keeping its role and status as the "leading moderniser" of tradition, and therefore commends a "State Islamic Feminism" position. Abdicating the age of postmodernity as a postponed modernity in deficit, unable to move to a minimum of intellectual decency of development, Taha Abderrahmane contends that we live in an "age of the return", a time where old ideas ought to be reviewed, source texts are to be reread, and workable practices could be recycled, so as to become today's inspiration for a future episteme of stimulating governance, good will and inspiring actions/practices. Proponents of a highly indigenised cultural feminism, Mernissi's political *harem* entertains the idea of enchanted "home girls" dreaming of trespassing the constraints/*hudud* of a male deconstructive discourse to construct a newly born women/citizen as a "third woman", agent of change, from within. Theologically immersed in this problematic understanding of what Taha Abderrahmane calls a common sense, "religious decency", Mernissi argues that recaptured body politics and cultural emancipation are set as transits that would empower women to dis-

seminate all types and degrees of ignorance, bigotry, oppression, and dis-crimination. Recovering the intellectual addendum of "women of reason" in al-Jabri's redeemable Arab epistemology, Mernissi envisions a gendered tra-dition to be set at a stage of "beginnings", looping around exits where wo-man as a newly historicised citizen is constantly re-born. In this paradigm, women are epistemologically trained, ethically qualified, and intellectually empowered to handle ideological tensions, advance cultural governance, prompt social peace and secure political stability within the country and beyond. Again, interrogating legal procedures and administrative policies, Mernissi's social project speculates, along al-Jabri's reformist epistemology, a depoliticization of religion, a liberation of thought and a demystification of the sacred, detaching religion away from private orthodox spaces and taking it to reachable public spheres in order to be able to address real issues in a simple vernacular language of common interaction, meaning and use. In this new role, she invites women to be aware of the implications of these new categories and learn how to use new concepts to describe such complex and contradictory relations of subordination and marginalisation.

Transparent Texts, Opaque Contexts:
Fatima Sadiqi's Indigenizing of Feminist Theory

Reading through Fatima Sadiqi's bulk of writings one cannot but condone her consistent aspiration to a similar historicist exploration of a modernised Islamic feminism aimed at recovering the conditions to reconstructing a new conception of women's faint positionality as agents. Her on-going field-work research commends women's renewed roles to be arising out of the contro-versy over whether the concept of "woman" is viewed as a new "social con-struct" or transcribed as a renewed traditional, historical product. Sadiqi's contention is that the relation between women as historical subjects and the notion of woman as she is produced by a contested hegemonic discourse is neither a direct relation of identity – a one-to-one correspondence, that is – nor is it a relation of simple implication. Like all other relations expressed in/via language, it is an arbitrary and symbolic one; that is to say, discurs-ively articulated and ideologically manipulated. The strength of Sadiqi's ap-proach is that she never loses sight of the cultural imperative of an "indigen-ized" feminist theory and, thus, never forgets that any attempt to theorise women's episteme must seek not only to understand this relation in which women's subjectivity is grounded, but also to detract ways to upgrade it. And yet, given her view that women are constructed via a semiotic discourse, the cultural politics of her research mandates a crucial challenge: paradoxically, the only way to position oneself out-side of traditional discourse is to be able to displace oneself within it; that is to say, to refuse woman's subjectivity as formulated, is to react deviously – though in her own brand new name –, so

as not to say to comply conspicuously, though against the grain of a collective mind, all the same. The contradiction, or rather limitation of a moderate feminist theory itself, is that it is at once excluded from discourse and imprisoned within it. Likewise, within a cultural feminist theory, so too, is the female subject: at once unacknowledged/excluded from tradition's evolutionary tactics and yet imprisoned within its reactionary ethics. Constructing a theory of the subject that both concedes these re-covered truths and yet allows for the possibility of an adapted Islamic feminism is the problem Sadiqi tackles throughout her work. Armed with "powerful tools" inspired directly from genuine reading of the Quranic text, she argues that «[…] Islamization for liberal feminists was a continuous rethinking process in which their voices needed to be well positioned in order to be heard. These feminists knew that they had to continuously negotiate their position in Moroccan Islamic discourse and package their demands with the right dose of Islamic intensity»[35].

Enhancing the idea of a revised tradition, within the spirit of Islamic modernity, she embraces what Taha Abderrahmane condones as the Islamic right to be intellectually different. To concede the construction of women's enlightened subject via a readjusted Islamic discourse, Sadiqi argues, entails that the Moroccan "liberal feminist" project cannot simply spare ways to "make visible the invisible" as if the essence of a passively processed, gendered identity were out there waiting to be recognized and equally/fairly treated by the dominant discourse. Reconciling what might seem like contradictory positions, views and practices, she concludes that

> Today's feminists, liberal or conservative, veiled or unveiled, are genuinely interested in revisiting the sacred texts with the aim of gaining more public power and voice. [...] Women are more and more conscious that they have been deliberately excluded from the sacred, not because Islam prescribed it but because Islam was revealed in a heavily patriarchal society that managed to engrave a specific picture of women in the Muslim unconscious[36].

Sadiqi's confident optimism strongly aspires to the possibility of historicizing tradition, rereading history "revisiting the sacred texts" and producing appropriate conditions of visibility for woman as a more prolific social agent. In her view, an essentialist position of women can be amended by linking their subjectivity to a Peircean notion of the practices and individual conduct of "intellectually different" women and a further theorized semiotisation of cumulative patterns of their life experiences into a unity of subject identity. Women subjectivity, one must underline, is produced not only by external ideas, values, or material causes, but also by women's personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend sig-

---

[35] Fatima Sadiqi, *The Impact of Islamisation of Moroccan Feminisms*, cit., p. 35.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

nificance – value, meaning and impact – to their actions and the events within and around their own spaces. In the process, Sadiqi would completely agree with Simone de Bouvoire's conclusion that if «One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman»[37] then by extension, Moroccan women's subjectivity is socially constructed and therefore becomes culturally entrusted to produce an emancipatory women agency.

Here again, Sadiqi's approach points out the inherent paradox between a post-structuralist genderless subject and a cultural feminist essentialized Self. Her applied research repeatedly reminds us that the latter alternative is constrained in its conceptualization of the female subject by the very act of distinguishing male from she-male subjectivity. This appears to produce a strategic dilemma, for if we de-gender subjectivity, we are inclined to commit to a generic agency and thus confirm its close association with Islamic feminism, which advocates a clearly gendered subjectivity; while, on the other hand, if we define the subject in terms of social constructs, articulating female subjectivity in a space clearly distinct from male subjectivity, then we become caught up in an oppositional dichotomy controlled by a misogynist discourse. For all her insistence on women's subjectivity constructed through a process of male-controlled power structures, Sadiqi is clear that this conception of subjectivity is not what a home-grown feminist theory in-the-making fights for but is unable to deliver/propose. Lost in this impasse of theory-as-process, a subjectivity that is fundamentally shaped by typically gendered theories appears to lead irrevocably to new roles and explicit meanings, celebrating the posing of a male/female opposition as ambivalent and therefore *a*historical. All the same, Sadiqi maintains that a subjectivity that is not fundamentally shaped by newly adjusted gendered positions appears to lead to the conception of a generic human subject, as if women could peel away their immediate "cultural" layers/roles and get to the larger core of crude human nature, which turns out to be genderless, and universal in essence.

Tradition and the Female Talent:
Asma Lamrabet's Anxieties of Authorship

Are these really women's only anxieties/choices? Embracing tradition while celebrating individual talent, Lamrabet's position prescribes an insightful observation that can serve as a critical starting point for a newly born woman within the Arabo-Islamic tradition; i.e. the specificity of a perpetually revised feminist theory may be explored not in performative practices of femininity as a privileged nearness to nature, nor a celebration of the Self, nor a nurturing of a new consciousness; it is rather recognized as a newly designed epistemological base, which aspires to acknowledge women's acquired talents as tributaries of an empowering feminist discourse within a revised tra-

---

[37] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, cit., p. 273.

dition, thus imparting a social reform agenda, to which a selection of males too now should/could lay a claim, she asserts. Lamrabet's activism aspires to draw Doris Gray's "third way" feminist theory/position apprehended as the outcome of a certain degree of socio-cultural development remapping the "Cultural (Un)conscious" as it is epistemologically generated by society at large – not in a female tradition simply understood as private, marginal, and yet intact, outside of History, but in the one that is fully there in every history to be recast or recovered; not transplanted from the ribs, the chinks and cracks of masculinity, nor cloned from the fissures of male identity or the fragments of a phallic discourse; but rather in that theological reviving, de-politicised positioning, and practical self-analysing by which the relations of woman subject in social reality can be appreciated, valued and rearticulated from a historicised experience of women as newly enlightened citizens. This newly authored feminism presupposes the influence/presence of a hermeneutics of ethical values to be recaptured and appropriated across epistemes, disciplines, genders, cultures, spaces and borders.

In compliance with her peers' positions discussed above, the female essence for Lamrabet is not simply spiritual or barely biological; it is and should be assigned as a synthesis of both. Though the key position among cultural feminists remains that it is women's specifically female character that is the primary constituent of their identity and the source of their female essence, Lamrabet stipulates that a repossession by women of a new awareness of their femininity will bring far more essential change to a modern type of society than the seizing of the means of production by their gendered partners. In such a society, women's subject-in-process, to apply Kristeva's idea, will truly promote their new life experiences, creating tangible conditions, which will not only praise domestic roles, but also instruct family planning, implement political governance, promote global values of democracy and human rights. In other words, it will prescribe a new position tempered with a transcendental cognitive semiosis, necessary to sustain social harmony, educate new norms, cherish a new consciousness and feed on new relationships to other genders, faiths and cultures. Eventually, repositioning theirself *vis-à-vis new* recovered identities, redesigned gender roles, revised traditions, prompted power positions, and amended politics will teach women how to develop new roles, and train them to become thinkable subjects – where thinking itself will locate epistemological transits and build novel tracks of redesigning updated paradigms. Taking cultural feminism as a "beyond position", to repeat Homi Bhabha's terms, imparting a remedial strategy, Lamrabet assigns women new tasks of drafting reform projects of an agenda of their own choice, able to secure individual rights and sustain religious dialogue as a leap of faith to promote social peace, secure political stability and incite sustainable development plans.

And here, Lamrabet warns, much work, ample concessions, lots of patience in a much longer time span, still lie ahead. She explains that the way out of the totalizing imprint of history and weight of tradition is to read women's histories and appreciate their achievements through an empirical, theoretical, self-critical approach to tradition. The outcome of this project should not be taken to imply that only an elite of academics and intellectuals can do and ought to construct a dialogic narrative or lay the grounds for concrete action, but rather, that the whole society can (and should) think about and review unbound social reform movements in order to create a new understanding and construct a new awareness; in other words, women's historic anxieties, behold a tributary choice of authoring a revised, new discourse that could articulate ways women subjectivity could be reconstructed through the process of a renewed reflective assessment and an upgraded collective action.

The key component of Lamrabet's formulation is the dialogic dynamics she requires at the heart of a gender-less citizen subjectivity: a fluid interaction in constant social motion and open to alteration by self-analysing processes. Blending her highly engaged writing with a career in applied (biology) medicine, her activism dictates a pre-requisite assumption that an individual's identity is constituted from a historical process of an upgraded consciousness, a process in which one's history/tradition is generated or reconstructed by each member of society within a stimulating plan of actions, a consistent range of ideas/meanings and a sustained bulk of homogenous knowledges traceable within the mainstream culture, and discovered at given historical moments – projecting an aesthetically inspiring horizon that also inspires modes of creativity, agendas of resistance, logistics for power struggle and tools for political governance. The cultural unconscious of society transmutes a fluid process and becomes a generating movement, which is never fixed, never attained once and for all, because discursive boundaries of any society are liable to author a new consciousness contingent with the change of historical conditions. «The priorities and demands of women may change», she argues, «depending on the context […] the principles remain the same»[38]. As a result, the agency of women subjects is made possible through this process of an upgraded political governance of a sustained social reform project. Any novel identities that might emerge are but multiple and shifting, rather than prefigured in an unchangeable symbolic order, or merely fragmented, dormant or intermittent. Detracting the anxiety of authorship of a Moroccan feminist project as a process, Lamrabet theorises women subjectivity as a pending signifier that gives agency to a plurality of society's significations placing her within particular discursive configurations and ultimately conceives of the process of cultural consciousness as a strategic positioning towards a new departure.

---

[38] *Asma Lamrabet: Morocco's Muslim feminist polymath*, cit.

The position-as-process of women may be opaque and relative, and yet neither is it "undecidable", to repeat Derrida's term. Through a practical social critique and objective, empirical analysis, the doctor feminist argues, we can identify women via the fluid configurations of their renewed position relative to an evolving cultural paradigm and complex social network. It may sound all too familiar to say that the history-long oppression of women, in Morocco and elsewhere, has involved their minimal position within a society that misunderstood its mission and lost its way without women. Entrusting the Qur'anic text as a user-friendly reference to women's rights in society, Lamrabet's "emancipatory reading" of women's narratives of liberation and equality rights in the Qur'an unveils the text's anti-patriarchal thesis. Lamrabet's claim goes further than this. Her method seeks to empower Muslim women through a reclamation of their "original Qur'anic" status, which has been distorted by conservative Islamic orthodoxies and troubled other male scholars instigating a dire fear of women's intelligence and fits of Islamophobia[39]. Performing the most noteworthy balancing act of her being both as a «faithful Muslim and a committed feminist»[40], she repeatedly asserts that the very subjective experience of growing up as faithful women and the very social tasks of acting as committed feminists have always been constituted by Moroccan women's transient dis-positions. However, this view should not imply that the concept of "woman" is determined solely by internal elements and that the woman subject herself is merely a passive recipient of an identity created by these conditions. Rather, women subjectivity should be part of the historicized, ascending movement, where she could actively contribute to supplementing the conditions/context within which her relative position ought to be delineated. Fully embracing Lamrabet's point here, I would presume that the identity of any woman is socially constructed as the product of her own interpretation and reconstruction of her own history, as mediated through the cultural discursive con-text that only she can understand as a location for the construction of meaning of her femaleness, of her Self…; that is, a fertile place from where multiple meanings and roles could be constructed, rather than simply the arid place where a single meaning can be transplanted.

Concluding Notes.
Repetition and Difference: Tracking Epistemological Exits in Arabo-Islamic Tradition

While I have tried to discuss some of the pioneer feminist activism being performed by three Moroccan Islamic feminists, whose work compile a certain degree of consistency in developing what I am tempted to define as the

---

[39] Asma Lamrabet, *Women in the Qur'an: An Emancipatory Reading*, translated by
      Myriam François-Cerrah, Square View, Markfield 2016.
[40] *Asma Lamrabet: Morocco's Muslim feminist polymath*, cit.

poetics of a cultural politics of Arab-Muslim feminism, I tend to conclude that their project strongly and clearly denounces consistent inadequacies of Arab male discourse and biased attitude to the problem of woman subject position and offers a re-reading of some of what has wrongly been cultivated as a normative tradition, which has historically been feeding on fixed exegesis that could allow for anything but the production of a relative hermeneutics of an Islamic/cultural feminism. The idea of a moderate cultural feminism, which projects its theory on tributaries of overlapping ideologies texting a de-colonized form of female agency, is unconditionally re-appropriated by these "faithful and committed" feminists themselves, in an effort to revalidate undervalued female subject positions. As argued above, the real enemy of women in Arab societies, for these lead feminists, is not merely a biased and undemocratic political system, nor does it come solely as the outcome of a failing economic institution, nor is it even congested selfishly by a set of backward mindsets. It is rather conspired by an inherently established masculinity power structure itself – albeit in some cases, ushered into a mainstream practice whereby female passivity, absence and/or and incompetence is also held accountable. The cultural politics of an emerging moderate Islamic feminism revolves around creating poignant conditions and maintaining a healthy social environment to help promote women's talent, aspiration and impact – revisiting masculinist values and amending all of their offshoots. Crafting a cultural feminist theory contends that a radical reform of an educational system redefining the meaning of biased sexism and gender inequity and drafting an inventory of a new feminist acculturation could all be "grounded securely and unambiguously", in Linda Alcoff's terms, on an understanding (a new consciousness) of the concept of the essential women's subjectivity and a reshifting focus on female strategic positionality.

Thus, the dynamics of repetition and difference within a trendy Islamic feminism across post Arab spring societies aspires to a decisive perception of a generic, home-grown humanist thesis and an elaborate methodology of a moderately de-politicised, de-Westernised feminist discourse. The rhetorical doxing of the latter commends that a cultural feminist approach to a complex political (Islamic) theory must act through a shield of ethically prescribed tasks where the feminist/theorist's ideological visions and political ambitions ought to be hypothetically synthetic, at first. The ultimate goal then is to join the precepts of a homogeneous theory of "universal humanism" to which all ideally rational, depersonalised and referenced agents would acquiesce if given sufficient intelligence, skills, conditions, credibility, support and time. Stripped of their generic particularities, these founding agents are considered to be potentially visible, culturally answerable and strategically decidable. The best Islamic feminist theory will not be the one ascertained solely through a veil of inconsistencies, contradictions and deficiencies, understood as a gendered epistemology that is impossible to unbound, reconstruct and/or

produce. Rather, an Islamic feminist theory ought to base its agenda on the initial premise that all citizens/individuals, including the theorist-on-trial, have acquired both the knowledge, material, capacity and social status that will help them author a clear vision of a fair society and pull together strategic competencies to produce its mission's political, social and religious reform projects. Taking part in this utopic endeavour, the best ontological base for the Islamic feminist theorist herself will be one that acknowledges the role and position of the storyteller in the narrative and prescribes the poet's duty and role in the city.

Psyching up the Cultural Unconscious of their crowded squares, Mernissi, Sadiqi and Lamrabet's writings stage a therapeutic crowd trance, performing a street dance of an enchanted resistance, where the concept of a feminist identity politics does not presuppose a pre-packaged set of objective needs or political implications; rather it seeks to support the uprising of a mass base redirecting awareness about identity and politics and introducing an innovative manuscript project of women subjects, texts and critics[41] as tributary factors to inspire and impact any political amendment, or social project reform. It is then that if/when women manage to combine the concept of identity politics with a re-appropriation of their subjectivity as positionality, they can conceive of their subject position as non-essentialized and emergent from a historical experience and yet be able to retain their political knowledge to take the gender issue as a crucial point of departure beyond themselves unto street-based politics empowering new gender positions able to negotiate a democratisation right from within a sustainable development plan. Thus, though an upgraded form of Islamic feminism may consent that gender is not natural, biological, ahistorical, or essential, it can still claim that an update of a bottom-up gender praxis proves to be not only relevant, but also necessary because it is taken as a strategic position from which it could act politically and react ontologically.

A preview of the works of the three women feminists discussed here clearly helps define the concept of woman subjectivity as positionality to show how women use their newly acquired positional perspective as a hybrid, unbound place from which religious dictates are constantly deconstructed and social values are incessantly constructed rather than as a fixed locus pre-maturely designed with an already determined set of highly politicised ideology. When Moroccan/Arab women decide to go feminists, the crucial fringe of demarcation in their position is not that they have learned any new facts about them/eir self, nor acquired new meanings about their history and/or society/or the world at large, but rather that they have come to view those same facts from a different position, i.e. from their own new awareness as thinkable subjects. This difference in positional perspective does not ne-

---

[41] See N.K. Miller (ed.), *The Poetics of Gender: Gender and Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York 1986.

cessitate a change in what are taken to be facts, although a new understanding of these facts may come into view from the new position, but it does necessitate a new awareness, backed up with a political will to change perspective since the point of departure, the location from which all things are measured, ought to be constantly refashioned.

For a female, individual talent to be able to detect an epistemological exit from tradition, without holding hostage the conditions of change, each one of the three ascending women of reason has directed a great deal of her own research towards uncovering the underlying truths about the "Cultural Unconscious" of contemporary Moroccan/Arab societies and eventually managed to engage with the historicist paradigms that helped shape probative forces, which condoned the order of Arabo-Islamic thought's timelines in weaving modes of a transcendent repetition and redrawing circles of asymmetrical difference within the normative epistemology of Arabo-Islamic tradition. In the dire absence of any contingent continuity, Mernissi, Sadiqi and Lamrabet, each in her own line of thought, code of writing and mode of action, would argue, only a "synthetic difference", detecting fluency in a "third tongue", and trafficking through a "third way" will have to be relayed through a rereading of tradition with new tools and by means of a new method, in order to be able to trace down an epistemological exit that would redesign an empirical equivalent of forlorn pasts.

Viewed in this respect, their academic works, social activism and ontological teachings remind us that a linear reading of Arabo-Islamic history has been disrupted, at times traumatically, by different colonial periodicities, during which Arab and Muslim identities, peoples and traditions have been subjected to decades of backwardness, obscurantism and decline. Successive, "unfaithful" male rhetorical discourses have detoured architextured epistemological closures that helped perpetuate a consistent historicity of a gender-biased tradition. It is high time, to release a strategic return to a distorted history that has to be rewritten and a tradition that ought to be reinvented partly through a newly enchanted feminist narrative. In the process, the Arabs' glorified past, catalysed as a myth, has gyred up into a circle with two dynamic functions in a constantly asymmetrical discursivity, bound to liberate thought and free women's subjectivity, ascribing a turning (repetition) and a returning (difference). In other words, the glorious past remains a malleable model of a partial circulation in which a suitable grounding reappears as a set of purist ideas, highly codified epistemes and simulated *grand* narratives – some inherent, some borrowed, a few recycled – on which to base a *differand*, to repeat Derrida's term, and by which to measure the methodological tools of new meanings, recovered roles, reappropriated claims and transplanted veins of change. Challenging such strategic probation, adopting al-Jabri's paradigm of "ascending knowledge", no longer matters since an inherent predicament could prevail, the three women would consent, because a

gendered epistemic dialectics is unlikely to question its true method, which once confirmed in a tractable diversity could attract a synthetic difference frame to include women in the design.

Put differently, in accordance with the principles of the old moral and religious scriptures, the circular myth-narratives of Arab Muslim epistemology stage multiple exhibits of the story-repetition of tradition as it transits into an innovative, modernist foundation climaxing at a breakthrough plot of synthetic difference. Rereading most of the works of Moroccan women literature, in this respect, I have ventured to incite alert researchers to explore how such foundation demands trajectory adversity with bracketed mediation as it unfolds the state of difference in the very centre of that which needs to be rewritten. The epistemological designation of a revived Arabo-Islamic Cultural Unconscious beholds a set of new tracks that foreground the foundations of a simulacrum of a genealogical tradition in the making. Since the new intellectual authorship as a claimant of ethnographic heritage is urged to act within an order and in a certain degree of disciplinary hierarchies to engage with difference in action, it is then clear that the stigma of division/difference is not a broad detachment from histories and traditions, but the establishment of a complicit dialectics of a series of lines of descent into an incoherently transcendental and renewable past/tradition; not to trace sheer excess of repetition, but rather to discover the esoteric dialogic circles of *ad hoc* pleats of self that once redesigned and put together could yield a mirrored image of difference, and strategically affirms an asymmetrical otherness[42].

Immersed in their theological readings of tradition, and disciplined, to varied degrees, in their empirical analysis of their culture/society, Mernissi, Sadiqi and Lamrabet, each in her own newly-empowered position, came to the conclusion that the concept of positionality allows for a determinate, though fluid, identity of women that falls short of essentialism: to be a woman is to take a position from which a cultural feminist politics can emerge, instead of merely contributing with a set of sheer attributes that are "objectively identifiable". Viewed in this way, being a "woman feminist" in contemporary Moroccan society is allegedly taking up a position within a changing historical context and being able to choose what every woman can make of that position and how she can alter her past to produce a better future. From the perspective of that fairly determinate, though fluid and mutable position, women can themselves articulate a set of new values and ulti-

---

[42] Such was the main objective of this outstanding thinker/philosopher (before his untimely death), whose inspiring career has, for many years, been centred on teaching practical thoughts, rather than preaching a solid theory, inspiring and impacting many of the disciple female authors featured here. Master of controversy in consistency with complementarity and in/sufficiency, al-Jabri sought to dialogize authorship/tradition and redefine change/modernity in the contemporary Muslim world and philosophy.

mately foreground the conditions of a moderate feminist politics. Thus, the concept and the position of women in this refashioned tradition is not doomed to be undecidable after all, nor can it be deemed to be unreliable. It is therefore not advisable to interpret Moroccan post-colonial society in such a way that a modern brand of women have snatched extra power or have gained abject authority relative to the inconsistencies and contradictions discovered within the discourse of their male partners. The conception of woman that a moderate, cultural feminism may be able to draw the aesthetically correct construction of women by defining their newly gained subjectivity as positionality within a revised/refined context.

Likewise, by highlighting women's commitment to social movements and considering their ability to impact the pedagogical aspect of their ethical mission, the concept of positionality helps avoid falling into relative essentialist determinism. It further avoids compiling women to a rigid structure of a gendered politics that is deliberately conceived as historically infinite. It might be legitimate to ask the question whether we ought to perceive of a future of women in which oppositional gender categories are not fundamental to one's self-assertion. Even if we cannot, the theory of subjectivity discussed above should not preclude, nor prevent an eventual possibility of new departures. Crafting the concept of woman subjectivity as an empowered civility exit within tradition, then, needs to locate her in an open-bound position ready to absorb future radical alteration, else we will pre-empt the possible forms that eventual stages of an updated feminist theory could inspire the whole society to a new *naḥḍah*/renaissance.

Abstracting transpositions of difference in what may be qualified as the intellectual trajectory of an Arabo-Islamic feminist enlightenment, the writings, activism and research of the three Moroccan lead figures discussed here have invoked the necessity to scrutinize the "theological unconscious" within Moroccan post-colonial male, *grand* narratives with the objective to revisit the grounding epistemology of an Islamic feminism, on one hand, and review the unbounding rhetoric of adjacent masculinist theories, on the other hand, to ultimately draft a synthetic transit, which might be accountable for a poetics of feminist cultural politics. Re-examining power relations in the Moroccan post-colonial society, Mernissi's lead initiatives to setting the basis for a customized feminism, inspired a number of committed disciples and faithful peers, whose works strive to ascribe a discursive diacritics to discarded local feminist activism, edging imported theories as supplementary paradigms of a sustainable Islamic feminist authorship. Again, contesting existing inherited discourses, Lamrabet would argue that the historical legacy of an Arabo-Islamic feminism remains a misunderstood material and a mishandled corpus unable to prescribe an epistemological hegemony among its newly "thinkable" subjects. Eventually transcending contested borders of a dismantled, albeit conducive, pseudo-Islamic feminist theories, from

without, Fatima Sadiqi's research projects aspire to implement the tools of a "re-Islamization process" liable to foreground an authorship of an indigenised feminism, adopting a homo-gendered, decolonized perspective/reflection from within.

Acting as key representatives of Moroccan Cultural Feminism, Mernissi, Lamrabet and Sadiqi respectively strive to review the conceptual historiographies of a feminist cultural politics constructing an exit from male-dominated paradigms, exploring the various ways that women activists, writers, artists, academics and professionals have re-engaged with tradition and disengaged with modernity in order to inscribe new prospects of change from within the post-colonial, patriarchal Moroccan society. It bears repeating that a locally anchored feminism's history as an ontological category is very specific and relatively recent in post-colonial Moroccan society in particular, and most Arab societies, in general, whose progress has been intricately hampered not only by the poor governance of socio-economic development projects and biased political agendas, but mostly by a persistent abstraction of women in technologized development plans and a chronic bias of existing, male-crafted economies of knowledge. Adopting a dialogic, "double critique" position, their respective projects prescribe a dislocation from both the post-colonial, Westernized dictates of modernity and the neo-colonial, conservative patriarchal orthodoxies of tradition to track the imprints of inherent epistemological conditions able to produce a hybrid, counter social theory discourse empowering society's local voices, re-reading its histories and re-inventing its traditions in an attempt to trans-gender development strategies that could draw up scriptures for a new cultural praxis able to ease social tensions and praise political stability by securing individual freedom, gender equity and social justice.

References
Primary Readings

Lamrabet, Asma, *Musulmane tout simplement*, Tawhid, Lyon 2002.

Ead., *Le Coran et les femmes : une lecture de libération*, Edition Tawhid, Lyon 2007.

Ead., *Femmes, Islam, Occident: chemins vers l'universel,* Séguier, Paris 2011.

Ead., *Femmes et hommes dans le Coran: quelle égalité?*, Albouraq, Ozoir-la-Ferrière 2012.

Ead., *Women in the Qur'an: An Emancipatory Reading*, translated by Myriam François-Cerrah, Square View, Markfield 2016.

Mernissi, Fatema, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1987.

Ead., *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*, translated by M.J. Lakeland, Women's Press, London 1988.

Ead., *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, translated by M.J. Lakeland, Addison-Wesley, Reading (MA) 1991.

Ead., *Women and Islam: A Historical and Theological Enquiry*, translated by M.J. Lakeland, Blackwell, Oxford 1991.

Ead., *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, translated by M.J. Lakeland, Addison-Wesley, Reading (MA) 1992.

Ead., *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, translated by M.J. Lakeland, Polity Press, Cambridge 1993.

Ead., *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, Addison-Wesley, Reading (MA) 1994.

Ead., *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*, Washington Square Press, New York 2001.

Sadiqi, Fatima, *Morocco's Veiled Feminists*, in "Project Syndicate", 25 May 2006, http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/sadiqi1/English.

Ead., *Women, Gender, and Language in Morocco*, Brill, Leiden 2009[2].

Ead., *Gender at the Heart of the New Moroccan Constitution*, in "Common Ground News Service (CGNews)", 6 September 2011, www.common-groundnews.org.

Ead., *Moroccan Feminist Discourses*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2014.

Selected Readings

Bhabha, H.K. *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, in Id. *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London; New York 1984.

Beauvoir, S. de, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H.M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, London 1953.

Bullock, K., *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical Stereotypes,* The International Institute of Islamic Thought, London 2007.

Culler, J., *On Deconstruction*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) 1982.

Derrida, J., *Of Grammatology*, translated by G. Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1976.

Id., *Spurs*, translated by B. Harlow, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978.

di Leonardo, M. (ed.), *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, University of California Press, Berkley 1991.

Donovan, J., *Feminist theory: the intellectual traditions of american feminism*, Frederick Ungar, New York 1985.

Eisenstein, H., *Contemporary feminist thought*, Unwin paperbacks, London-Sydney 1984.

Fausto-Sterling, A., *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Women and Men*, Basic, New York 1986.

Foucault, M., *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Random House, New York 1973.

Id., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by C. Gordon, The Harvester Press, Brighton 1980.

Id., *Why Study Power: The Question of the Subject*, in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics: Michel Foucault*, edited by H.L. Dreyfus; P. Rabinow, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1983[2].

Id., *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by P. Rabinow, Pantheon, New York 1984.

al-Ğābirī, Muḥammad ʿĀbid, *Naḥnu wa ʾl-turāṯ. Qirāʾāt muʿāṣirah fī turāṯinā al-falsafī*, Dār al-Ṭalīʿah li ʾl-Ṭibāʿah wa ʾl-Našr, Bayrūt 1980.

Id., *Iškāliyyāt al-fikr al-ʿarabī al-muʿāṣir*, Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-ʿArabiyyah, Bayrūt 1989.

Hall, S., *Old and New Identities Old and New Ethnicities*, in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, edited by L. Back; J. Solomos, Routledge, London; New York 2000.

al-Jabri, Mohammed Abed, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy: A Contemporary Critique*, translated from French by A. Abbassi, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Austin (TX) 1999.

Id., *Democracy, Human Rights and Law in Islamic Thought*, I.B. Tauris, London; New York 2008.

Id., *The Formation of Arab Reason: Text, Tradition and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York 2011.

Jameson, F., *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) 1981.

JanMohamed, A.R.; Lloyd, D. (eds.), *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, Oxford University Press, New York 1990.

Jardine, A.; Smith, P. (eds.), *Men in Feminism*, Methuen, New York 1987.

Khatibi, Abdelkebir, *Maghreb pluriel*, Editions Denoël, Paris 1983.

Id., *Love in Two Languages*, translated by R. Howard, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1990.

Kelly, O., *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double-bind*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington; Indianapolis 1993.

Kilito, Abdelfattah, *The Author and his Doubles: Essays on Classical Arab Culture*, translated by M. Cooperson, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse (NY) 2001.

Kristeva, J., *Strangers to Ourselves*, translated by L. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York 1994.

Mokhtari, Najib (ed.), *Decentering Patterns of Otherness: Towards an Asymmetrical Transcendence of Identity in Postcolonial MENA*, UIR Publications Series, Rabat 2016.

Mokhtari, Najib; Feather, Ginger (eds.), *Fatema's Dreams of Transgress: Defaulting the Boundaries of Islamic Feminism*, Université International de Rabat Publication Series, Dar Al-Maarif, Rabat 2017.

Ortner, Sh.; Whitehead, H. (eds.), *Sexual Meaning: The Cultural construction of Gender and Sexuality*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1981.

Pearson, E.; Winterbotham, E., *Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation. A Milieu Approach*, in "The RUSI Journal", 162, 3 (2017), pp. 60-72.

Rich, A., *Notes towards a Politics of Location*, in Ead. *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, Norton, New York 1986.

Rutherford, J., *A Place Called Home: Identity and the Culture Politics of Difference*, in Id. (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1990, pp. 9-27.

Said, E., *Intellectuals and the Post-Colonial World*, in "Salmagundi", 70/71, *Intellectuals* (spring-summer 1986), pp. 44-64..

Id., *Culture and Imperialism*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1993.

Ṭāhā, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, *Fī uṣūl al-ḥiwār wa taǧdīd ʿilm al-kalām*, al-Markaz al-Ṯaqāfī al-‘Arabī, al-Dār al-Bayḍā’-Bayrūt 1987.

Id., *al-ʿAmal al-dīnī wa taǧdīd al-ʿaql*, al-Markaz al-Ṯaqāfī al-‘Arabī, al-Dār al-Bayḍā’-Bayrūt 1989.

Id., *Suʾāl al-aḫlāq. Musāhamah fī ’l-naqd al-aḫlāqī li ’l-ḥadāṯah al-ġarbiyyah*, al-Markaz al-Ṯaqāfī al-ʿArabī, al-Dār al-Bayḍā’-Bayrūt 2000.

Id., *al-Ḥaqq al-ʿarabī fī ’l-iḫtilāf al-falsafī*, al-Markaz al-Ṯaqāfī al-‘Arabī, al-Dār al-Bayḍā’-Bayrūt 2002.

Id., *al-Ḥaqq al-islamī fī ’l-iḫtilāf al-fikrī*, al-Markaz al-Ṯaqāfī al-‘Arabī, al-Dār al-Bayḍā’-Bayrūt 2005.

Id., *al-Ḥadāṯah wa ’l-muqāwamah*, Maʿhad al-Maʿārif al-Ḥikamiyyah li ’l-Dirāsāt al-Dīniyyah wa ’l-Falsafiyyah, Bayrūt 2007.

Id., *al-Ḥiwār ufuqᵃⁿ li ’l-fikr*, al-Šabakah al-‘Arabiyyah li ’l-Abḥāṯ wa ’l-Našr, Bayrūt 2013.

Id., *Buʾs al-dahrāniyyah. al-Naqd al-iʾtimānī li-faṣl al-aḫlāq ʿan al-dīn*, al-Šabakah al-‘Arabiyyah li ’l-Abḥāṯ wa ’l-Našr, Bayrūt 2014.