

Feminism and Islamic Tradition

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Reflecting on the election of Benazir Bhutto to the office of Prime Minister of Pakistan in November 1988, the Moroccan feminist critic Fatima Mernissi wonders how it is possible for Bhutto's male conservative rivals to launch a campaign to discredit her on charges of blasphemy: "Horrors! Never has a Muslim state been led by a woman" (SO 7).¹ "What political territory are we in?" (8), Mernissi asks. In response to this question, posed in the introduction to *Sultanes oubliées: Femmes Chefs d'Etat en Islam*, Mernissi replies that people in most Muslim societies today are located in a divided, contradictory space, "double scene, double calendar, double identity, sovereign citizens here, obedient and faithful Muslims there. In order to survive, we are forced to learn to dance to the dislocated rhythm of what could be called the 'medina-democracy' " (256).² In this essay, I want to explore the territory mapped by Mernissi in *Sultanes oubliées* and *Le Harem politique: Le Prophète et les femmes (The Veil and the Male Elite)* in relation to that charted by Assia Djebar in her latest novel, *Loin de Médine*, in order to see why Maghrebian feminists as different as Mernissi and Djebar—a liberal democratic sociologist and a postmodern writer—have begun to move into Arab-Islamic cultural-political spaces that, until recently, have been occupied mainly by various Islamic fundamentalist factions and other right-wing groups such as conservative nationalists in the Maghreb.

Mernissi's *Le Harem politique* and *Sultanes oubliées* show how the Koran, the Hadiths (the record of what the Prophet Mohammed said and did), and the histories of various Muslim peoples challenge the notion, dear to Muslim conservatives, that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with modern assertions of women's rights. At the same time, these studies challenge the conservative claim that Islam is incompatible with parliamentary democracy, a political form which, in principle at least, affirms the equality of all citizens regardless of sex, race, class, religion, or ethnic origin. Mernissi's strategy is to provide compelling evidence of Islam's egalitarian dimensions and to grant them priority, in thinking about the function of Islam in today's world, over the faith's complicity with the oppressive practices of male aristocrats in seventh-century Arabia. She argues persuasively that

the Prophet actively strove to promote more equitable social relations in the society in which he lived, a tribal society based on slavery and a war economy of capture. For example, he encouraged warriors not to fight for their tribe and their religion merely with an eye to capturing women and men as valuable booty, but rather "to see in a captive something other than booty, especially, to see a captive as a believer like [themselves]" (V 137). In this connection, Mernissi quotes Mohammed as saying, "Vous en avez le droit [de réclamer le butin], mais ceux de vos hommes qui abandonnent leur part des captifs recevront de moi six brebis pour chaque tête" (HP 174) 'You have the right [to claim booty], but those of your men who give up their share of captives will receive from me six sheep for each captive' (V 137).

Even as she applauds Islam's egalitarian ideals, however, Mernissi acknowledges the contradictions between those ideals and the material relations from which Islam arose. She says, for example, that insofar as the survival of the new religion depended on a war economy of capture, the Prophet was forced to comply with the practice of taking booty. His compliance was subsequently used to rationalize male aristocrats' reversion to pre-Islamic practices such as the disinheritance of women, who were not allowed to make war and were assumed to be particularly vulnerable to capture. Emphasizing Islam's encouragement of critical reflection, Mernissi enjoins her readers to "question everything and everybody" (V 76) and to embrace the Islamic traditions that can support modern democracy while eschewing those that enforce anachronistic social hierarchies and forms of domination.

Mernissi has little patience with religious conservatives who long to restore the unitary community presupposed by the scene of the caliphate, "that of an *Umma* [community of believers], concentrated in a divine will that is necessarily unique and unified" (SO 256). She stresses the modernity of the dilemmas confronting Muslim peoples today and focuses her analyses on the contradictions in their lives.³ It is true that she sometimes stages those contradictions in terms of two internally coherent but irreconcilable social spaces—the medina (the traditional Arab city) on the one hand, and parliamentary democracy on the other—thus downplaying the conflicts within each of those spaces. This is the case, for example, in the introduction and conclusion to *Sultanes oubliées*. It can even be said that at certain moments Mernissi rejects the essentialism of the *Umma*, only to reintroduce it at the level of the modern individual, who is cast as a free agent interacting with other individuals on equal terms in democratic society, "a parliamentary scene where sovereignty is atomized among

millions of individuals each of whom is as important as the others'' (SO 256). Most of the time, though, Mernissi's analyses of Muslim societies, particularly those of the past, confront the conflicts and contradictions between religious ideals and political Islam.

Djebar's concerns in *Loin de Médine* are similar to Mernissi's in many respects. The Algerian writer presents early Islam as a set of social and poetic practices fraught with unresolvable ambiguity and contradiction, practices that irremediably fissure subjectivities and the social body. Like Mernissi, she underscores the progressive dimensions of the new religion—its prohibition on making freeborn women objects of men's inheritance, for example, and the anti-authoritarian aspects of the Prophet's relations with believers. She also shares Mernissi's concern to disclose the resistance of women, slaves, the Muslim underclass, and religious and ethnic minorities to the temporal authority of the first caliphs, the Prophet's successors as representatives of god on earth. Both writers are critical of the caliphs' imposition of an increasingly rigid, oppressive law, and of the fact that their autocratic rule has been used for centuries to justify authoritarian regimes in Muslim societies. More systematically than Mernissi, though, Djebar calls attention both to the irreducible instability of a community of believers rent by conflicts of sex, class, and ethnicity, and to the contradictions and ambiguities of faith itself as manifested by the Prophet, by his favorite wife Aïcha, and by Aïcha's father, Abou Bekr, Mohammed's successor as the temporal and spiritual guide of Muslim peoples. In short, rather than seeking models of modern democratic behavior in seventh-century Arabian society, she stages the history of early Islam in such a way as to call attention to processes by which social relations and subjective configurations, including those of Mohammed and the people around him, may be put into question again and again.

In *Loin de Médine*, Islam is figured as "parole vive" 'the living word' (247) bodied forth in the poetry of Aïcha and other transmitters of the faith who return to the "passé vivant" 'the living past.' In Aïcha's case, this means returning to her nine years of marriage to the Prophet "pour que toutes [ces années], pour que chacune s'élançe, à son tour, dans l'avenir" 'so that all [these years], so that each one may spring, in turn, into the future' (294). Of course, Aïcha's "parole plurielle" 'plural word' (299) serves organized religion, remaining anchored as it does in Medina, the city to which Mohammed and his followers migrated in the first year of the Muslim calendar, AD 622, fleeing persecution in Mecca, the Prophet's birthplace. But, according to Djebar's narrator—and this is the sense of the book's title—one can

imagine Aïcha traveling far from the holy city of Medina, “retrouver le vent, le vertige, l’incorruptible jeunesse de la révolte!” ‘to retrieve the wind, the vertigo, the incorruptable youth of revolt!’ (301). This would be possible, she says, if the figure of Aïcha, who transmits Islamic tradition, could merge with that of Fatima, the Prophet’s favorite daughter, who contests tradition as soon as it is instituted, that is, after her father’s death in the caliphate of Aïcha’s father Abou Bakr. “Si la voix douce, si le flux continu du timbre de Aïcha faisait confluent avec l’éloquence en crue [de Fatima]” ‘if the gentle voice, if the continual flow of Aïcha’s timbre converged with the flood of eloquence [of Fatima]’ (300), the result would not be death and mystical union with the father, as in the case of Fatima who quickly followed Mohammed to the grave, but rather a process of continual recreation that necessarily moves beyond the bounds of Medina and every other locus of power.

For Djébar, the “living word” of Islam is voiced not just by male theologians and rulers but also by generations of women. Like Aïcha’s poetic practice and Djébar’s own practice of writing in *Loin de Médine*, the “living word” is above all a search for “forme” ‘form’ (300) rather than a cultural-political practice allowing unfettered communication between spiritual equals, as in what Mernissi refers to as “l’idéal du khalife au début de l’hégire, celui d’un imam éclairé par la *Shari’a*, attentif à son peuple, proche de lui dans une mosquée sans barrières” ‘the ideal of the caliph at the beginning of the Hejira [the migration to Medina in the first year of the Muslim calendar], that of the imam [leader in prayer] enlightened by the *Shari’a* [Islamic law], attentive to his people, close to them in a mosque without barriers’ (SO 252). In *Loin de Médine*, the search for form is presented as an instance of *ijtihad*, defined as an “effort intellectuel pour la recherche de la vérité—venant de *djihad*, lutte intérieure, recommandée à tout croyant” ‘an intellectual effort to seek truth—deriving from *djihad*, inner struggle, recommended to every believer’ (6, n. 1).⁴

Before looking further at the recent work of Mernissi and Djébar that concerns me here, I want to situate it in relation to some of their earlier work and propose a frame within which it might be read. The books I have mentioned so far mark a departure from Mernissi and Djébar’s previously published writings insofar as they engage systematically and positively with Islamic texts and cultural traditions, however much they may contest today’s hegemonic versions of those traditions. In order to see the change in Mernissi’s position, one has only to compare her celebration of “the ideal of the caliph at the beginning of the Hejira” in *Sultanes oubliées* (an ideal never attained by political

Islam as a practice of power) with her angry denunciation of Islamic tradition in the introduction to her earlier study, *Le Maroc raconté par ses femmes (Doing Daily Battle)*, where she writes: "Our heritage, as I have experienced it as a child, adolescent, and adult is an obscurantist and mutilating heritage" (DDB 13). The cultural heritage, she maintains, has been cynically exploited by male elites in Morocco in order to justify the subordination of Moroccan women and the masses of Moroccan men. By the time *Le Harem politique* is published in 1987, however, the cultural heritage is no longer cast primarily as a weapon of repression but as a source of pleasure to be reclaimed. It is in affectionate terms that Mernissi characterizes the work of memory she has undertaken in her study: "to go poking around in the vast areas of the Muslim heritage that is mine" (V 10). Moreover, she now wants to persuade her readers that knowledge of that heritage is indispensable to progressive movements in Muslim countries, particularly feminism, if they are to prevail against the religious right and conservative nationalists, the self-proclaimed managers of memory and history.

In Djébar, too, the way of engaging her cultural heritage changes significantly. With the publication of *L'Amour, la fantasia* in 1985 and *Ombre sultane* in 1987, Djébar produces two volumes of a projected quartet which "when complete will constitute an authentic, many-faceted portrait of the Maghribi woman of the past and present," according to the jacket copy of the English translation.⁵ In her next book, *Loin de Médine*, however, Djébar does not deal with the Maghreb at all (apart from a brief reference to the rebellious Berber queen Kahina [37]), but focuses instead on Arabian women at the time of Mohammed. She is less concerned than she was in *Ombre sultane* to interweave the voices of heroes like Scheherazade and her unsung servant with those of contemporary Muslim women, or to express the fear that women in Maghrebian societies may again find themselves "entravées" (OS 172) 'in chains' (SS 160) because of the resurgence of seclusion and veiling in the name of tradition. Instead, her principal aim is to place impassioned, articulate, perceptive women at the center of tradition, or more exactly, at the center of an avowedly imaginary reconstruction of the "living past" of Islam, one that contests all fundamentalist reconstructions of that past (including Christian ones), thus enabling the liberating transformation of every society in which Muslims and people of Muslim heritage live.

It is worth noting too in what ways Djébar's training as a historian comes into play differently in *Loin de Médine* as opposed to her earlier work, especially *L'Amour, la fantasia*, where she was concerned

primarily with Algerian history. In the latter novel, she uses the writings of Arab historians, women's oral histories, and autobiographical sequences to critique orientalist representations of the conquest of Algeria in history, literature, and painting. In *Loin de Médine*, however, where the focus shifts from Algerian history to the history of the Arab-Muslim world, she deftly interweaves historically informed fictions about the first decades of Islam with references to the Koran, the Hadiths, and authoritative commentaries on the Koran such as that of al-Tabari (who died in the year 310, or 922 A.D.), with an eye toward unsettling various conservative views of what an authentic Muslim society is or might be.

Indisputably, Djebar's most recent work, like that of Mernissi, comes in response to the growing power of fundamentalist forces throughout the Muslim world where, according to the Algerian critic Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas:

the search for a transcultural and transhistorical "Muslim identity" that characterizes Muslim countries and Muslim communities today completely denies cultural differences . . . and the way Islam absorbs indigenous cultures and assimilates itself to their practices. But the constant remains the choice to reinforce the subordination of women and the masses. (40)

In the face of these developments, Arab and Muslim feminists have analyzed the meaning and function of Islam in particular historical and cultural configurations in order to resist the homogenizing, repressive force of fundamentalisms while also countering orientalist imperialisms.⁶ At the same time, they have constructed an international network that includes a range of feminist organizations such as the Arab Women Solidarity Association and Femmes Sous Lois Musulmanes / Women Living Under Muslim Laws, which coordinate their efforts with those of other opposition groups in Muslim countries. Emphasizing the flexibility of the network structure and the autonomy of local organizations, Hélie-Lucas says:

Fluid, perhaps precarious, but certainly energizing, the network meets our present needs. The difficulty of winning our inner struggle against nationalist and fundamentalist lies invites us to respect each woman's rhythm of ideological liberation. The forces we confront are so powerful and so dangerous that we must gather all our strength and exclude no one who is working for change that is favorable to us. (55)

It seems to me that the writing of Djebbar implicitly legitimates contemporary Muslim women's "inner struggle against nationalist and fundamentalist lies" by linking it to the notion of *ijtihad*, the "inner struggle recommended to every believer." Yet Djebbar by no means enjoins women to limit their struggle to their inner being or to their local context, for by shifting the focus of her writing from Algerian national history to the history of the Arab-Muslim world, she creates a symbolic space in which women from different Muslim cultures may construct political identities that enable them to work together effectively. Because Djebbar's insistence on the search for form allows only for provisional, strategic identities, the latter are quite distinct from the essentialist Muslim identity that religious and other conservatives want to assign to Muslims in every historical period and every culture. Where Mernissi's work is concerned, the critical account of the Prophet's relations with women, like the recovered histories of forgotten sultanas in many different Muslim societies, illuminates the possibilities of drawing on Muslim traditions in order to strengthen international feminist networks.

The work of Djebbar, Mernissi, Hélié-Lucas and other Arab and Muslim feminists is supported by the work of legal scholars critically reflecting on the nature and foundations of Islamic traditions. One such scholar is Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, a Sudanese practicing Muslim who argues that it is imperative "to develop a new version of *Shari'a* based on a modern interpretation of the sources of Islam," that is, the Koran and the Sunna, the customs attributed to the Prophet Mohammed or to the early Muslim community ("Kinder" 11).⁷ An-Na'im claims that certain passages in the Koran and the Sunna justify, and even require, the subordination of women and non-Muslims; he argues that these passages must be seen as directives arising from historical circumstances that do not pertain to modern life, and so must be rejected. In order to reject them, the concept of *ijtihad*, defined as "independent juristic reasoning" (11), must be historicized and revised so as to allow for reform that goes beyond the framework of *Shari'a*, which in its present form disallows the abrogation of texts in the Koran and the Sunna. Such a reform would "enable Muslim peoples to exercise effectively their right to self-determination in accordance with the principle of reciprocity. This would require, for example, the elimination of institutionalized discrimination against women and non-Muslims and the authoritative repudiation of hostile and aggressive conceptions of international and intercommunal relations" (12-13). Only under these conditions, says An-Na'im, can colonized peoples "recover from the colonial

intrusion" (4) that imposed the nation-state model and integrated their local economies into a global capitalist economic system. "As clearly shown by the Sudanese situation," he writes, "the transformation of tradition is an essential and urgent condition for the immediate alleviation of untold human suffering, never mind achieving the goals of political stability, economic development, and social justice in many parts of the world" (16).

It seems to me that An-Na'im's critical legal studies complement Mernissi's attempt to discredit anachronistic passages in the Koran and the Hadiths by calling into question the authority of the source of the saying about the Prophet's words and deeds, or altering their significance by carefully examining the historical context in which they emerged. An-Na'im's work also complements Djebbar's attempt to underscore the ambiguities of sacred texts and the critical, productive function of reading and writing as social practices. An-Na'im's legal studies, Mernissi's socio-historical studies, and Djebbar's literary writing all enter into the international political network signaled by Hélielucas.

Readers might conclude from the foregoing remarks that Djebbar and Mernissi's recent emphasis on tradition must be seen as a strategy that has been forced upon them by powerful fundamentalist factions in various Muslim countries and communities: their task now is to beat the traditionalists at their own game, perhaps at the price of compromising the secularist, cosmopolitan stance they had adopted in the past. In fact, judging by the title of a recent book by the Beur journalist Florence Assouline, *Musulmanes: Une Chance pour l'Islam*, it may appear that the feminist critique of cultural politics in the Maghrebian communities of France must now be legitimated by respectful reference to religious tradition, even when the study at hand does not address the question of women as a resource for Islam or for Islamic reform. I want to suggest, however, that the defensive dimension of these feminist writers' work is attributable not just to the pressure of Islamic fundamentalisms, but to a global context in which Islamic fundamentalisms are seen as a monolithic threat to the "civilized" world—the major threat, perhaps, now that communism is dead. Moreover, Islamic fundamentalisms tend to be viewed as the only ones that pose a threat, despite the fact that in the United States, for example, Christian fundamentalisms are eroding abortion rights, the secular education system, and the freedom of artistic and scholarly expression. Arab feminists' affirmation of Islamic culture must be seen, then, as a response to a hostile global environment, as well as an attempt to deflate the power of conservative factions in Muslim

societies by generating learned and nuanced counterinterpretations of an Islamic tradition that these factions claim as their own.⁸

While feminists' attention to gender issues has been crucial to their revaluation of Islamic tradition, it should be noted that the power of Mernissi's arguments stems largely from the fact that gender never functions in isolation as an analytic category that has special importance for women. Instead, gender is seen as an effect of dividing the social world into discrete political territories. In *Le Harem politique*, for instance, Mernissi analyzes the Prophet's call for a *hijab*, or curtain, separating himself and his family from the faithful in terms of a public/private distinction. Her discussion makes clear that there was no question of veiling women or excluding them from public manifestations of the *Umma*, such as collective prayer in the mosque or participation in political debates. What was at stake was setting a limit on the Prophet's accessibility to the faithful, who took advantage of his openness to the point of imposing on him in his home at inconvenient times. Verse 53 of sura 33, revealed in year 5 of the Hejira (AD 627) when Mohammed was celebrating his marriage to Zaynab Bint Jahsh, reads as follows:

O vous qui croyez / N'entrez pas dans les appartements du Prophète / Sauf si vous y êtes autorisés à l'occasion d'une invitation pour un repas. / Et dans ce cas-là, n'y entrez que lorsque le repas est prêt et servi. / Si vous êtes donc invité [à y prendre un repas] entrez-y, mais retirez-vous dès que vous avez terminé de manger, sans vous oublier dans des conversations familières. Un tel laisser-aller fait mal [yu'di] au Prophète qui a honte de vous le dire. Mais Dieu n'a pas honte de dire la vérité. / Quand vous venez demander quelque chose [aux épouses du Prophète] faites-le derrière un Hijab. Cela est plus pur pour vos coeurs et pour les leurs. (HP 109)

O ye who believe! Enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless permission be granted you. But if ye are invited, enter, and, when your meal is ended, then disperse. Linger not for conversation. Lo! that would cause annoyance to the Prophet, and he would be shy of [asking] you [to go]; but Allah is not shy of the truth. And when ye ask of them [the wives of the Prophet] anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts. (V 85)

Asking how the Prophet's minor irritation on this occasion could have had the drastic effect of splitting Muslim space in two, Mernissi closely examines the historical context in which this sura was uttered. She points out that the sura emerged at a time when Muslims were at war with the people of Mecca—people of Mohammed's own tribe—and had suffered a terrible defeat in the Battle of Uhud in year 3 of the Hejira. The ensuing military crisis was not overcome until year 8 when the Prophet won a decisive victory over the Meccans and was in a position to conquer all of Arabia. In short, Mernissi shows that the Prophet was responding defensively to extreme circumstances and that the sura on the descent of the *hijab* has been given a different and far greater significance than it deserves.

Moreover, by looking at the range of meanings the term *hijab* has acquired in Islamic tradition, she is able to show that the fixation on its sense as a veil for women is unjustified. Mernissi tells us that the root of the related verb *hajaba* means "to hide" and thus gives the term a visual dimension that goes beyond concealing the female body. It also has a spatial dimension, since it marks a threshold or border; in the realm of abstract ideas, it means a forbidden space (HP 119-20). To have the *hajaba* of the sacred shrine, the Ka'ba, is to be in charge of protecting it. And for Muslim Sufis, the *mahjub*, or veiled person, is one who is dominated by sensual or mental passion and thus does not perceive the divine light (120-21).

Mernissi shows too that the establishment of the *hijab* as the practice of veiling women in public space comes in response to renewed military trials and civil war in Medina at the end of the Prophet's life. Contrary to the Prophet's wishes that all Muslims respect the prohibition on *fitna* (violence among Muslims) and on *zina* (illicit sexual relations), 'Umar, one of his Companions, advocated the *hijab* for women who were being accosted in the street, that is, for freeborn women whose protection by a covering would safeguard freeborn men's certainty about paternity. This solution was proposed because the men who had accosted the Prophet's wives explained that they had taken them for slaves. There was no question of protecting slave women from *ta'arrud* (abduction) for, according to Mernissi, the men in power were determined to preserve their prerogative of taking women at will, and would only go so far as to ban violence against elite women. Mernissi is at her finest disclosing the interconnection of gender and class oppression in 'Umar's policy:

The female Muslim population would henceforth be divided by a *hijab* into two categories: free women, against whom violence is

forbidden, and women slaves, toward whom *ta'arrud* is permitted. In the logic of the *hijab*, the law of tribal violence replaces the intellect of the believer, which the Muslim God affirms is indispensable for distinguishing good from evil. (V 187)

Mernissi's nuanced discussion of the *hijab* in *Le Harem politique* is taken up again in her conclusion to *Sultanes oubliées*, where she emphasizes the need to link the *hijab* prescribed for freeborn women to another *hijab*, that of the caliph. The caliph used the *hijab* to protect himself both from the profane gaze of the common believer and from the 'amma, the ignorant, disorderly, rebellious masses who, from the standpoint of the rulers, obstructed the constitution of the *Umma* as a unified and coherent body (SO 247-54). Playing on the sonorous similarity and semantic divergence between the terms 'amma and *Umma*, Mernissi underscores the disparity between the ideal of the caliph at the beginning of the Hejira, and the arrogance and brutality of the ruling elites. Moreover, by focusing on gender in terms of political territories, she is able to demonstrate how women's subordination, which takes various class-related forms, is inextricably tied to that of underclass men.

Like Mernissi's *Le Harem politique* and *Sultanes oubliées*, Djébar's *Loin de Médine* attends to political territories and social conflicts within the *Umma* and between it and other communities. In Djébar, the rebelliousness of women and other groups often signals their right to occupy the territory that male aristocrats try to reserve for themselves, as in Fatima's demand to receive an inheritance from her father. At other times, it marks their capacity to lead the community of believers into new territories "far from Medina" where greater social equality is possible across classes, ethnic groups, and religious groups. Yet the most important function of rebelliousness in this text is to signal "une liberté incontrôlée" 'an uncontrolled freedom' (43), which by definition has no limits, occupies no identifiable territory, and thus is regarded as a "menace" 'threat' (43) by Muslims. Noting triumphantly that in Arab-Muslim history the threat of uncontrolled freedom is often "concrétisée par une femme" 'embodied in a woman' (43), Djébar's text celebrates numerous rebellious women whose poetic prowess rivals Mohammed's and endows them with a power that they consider to be divine. Consider, for example, the sequence on the prophet Sadjah, an ambitious rival of Mohammed who left her native Moussoul in Mesopotamia to lead an army into Arabia. Her language and culture are Arabic; she has been raised as a Christian:

A Moussoul, avant qu'elle ne parte, on a dû lui parler du prophète Mohammed, lui dépeindre sa beauté d'homme, ses vertus de croyant, sa douceur de mystique, son courage de chef guerrier. Elle a rêvé de lui, elle a désiré le rencontrer, certainement pas en femme prête pour son harem. Non, en égale; ne possède-t-elle pas, elle aussi, le Verbe? Elle crée des images, elle invente des rythmes, elle débite, sans qu'elle fasse effort, des grappes de stances obscures mais étincelantes. . . . Dans de telles trances, elle est vraiment possédée: elle a décidé d'appeler, elle aussi, "Dieu," ce feu de poésie dévoratrice qui la brûle. (46)

In Moussoul, before she left, she must have been told about Mohammed, his male beauty, his virtues as a believer, his mystic gentleness, his courage as a warrior chieftain. She dreamed about him, she wanted to meet him, certainly not as a woman ready to take her place in his harem. No, as his equal. Does she not possess the Verb, too? She creates images, she invents rhythms, she effortlessly generates clusters of obscure but brilliant stanzas. . . . In such trances, she is truly possessed: she too has decided to give the name "God" to this fire of consuming poetry burning in her.

Sadjah's rebellion is undone when she is forced to ask for a dowry in marrying Mosailima, another prophet and rival of Mohammed. Abandoned by her people, she ends by converting to Islam.

Along with Sadjah, one can cite Selma as a woman who embodies "le lien dangereusement troublant de la féminité avec la rébellion armée" 'the dangerously disturbing link between femininity and armed rebellion' (37). The daughter of a rebel chief, she is taken prisoner and converted to Islam. Subsequently, however, Selma renounces her new religion and takes up arms against the Prophet on learning that her brothers have been martyred. Her struggle is waged not in the name of religion but as a way of avenging her captivity and, like Sadjah, she wants to challenge Mohammed, "combattre face à lui, en égale" 'to fight against him as an equal' (37). On the eve of her battle against the Prophet's armies, she camps by a spring called 'Hauab, whose name recalls the accursed "chiens de 'Hauab" 'dogs of 'Hauab' (38), mentioned by Mohammed as he enters Aïcha's apartment one evening: "Comme si, près d'une source, en plein désert, Selma rencontrait . . . les chiens invisibles de la malédiction [avant de rencontrer les armées ennemies]" 'As if, near a spring in the middle of the desert, Selma met the invisible dogs of malediction [before meeting the enemy armies]' (38). The Prophet's general, Khalid,

defeats Selma, though not, perhaps, without her subjugating him in her own way by demanding that he put her to death—"Tue-moi!" 'Kill me' (39)—rather than return her to captivity.

The pattern of female rebellion and defeat is no less evident inside the *Umma*, notably in the life of the Prophet's daughter Fatima, than in the lives of Sadjah and Selma who momentarily threaten the *Umma* from without. Disputing the elites' decision to choose a successor to Mohammed without consulting her or her husband Ali, Fatima "va dire 'non' ... en plein coeur de Médine" 'is going to say "no" ... in the heart of Medina' (75). Fatima's refusal to pledge allegiance to the caliph Abou Bekr stems not just from her exclusion from the political process, however. It stems also from the fact that Abou Bekr has decided to disinherit her. The caliph makes this decision after much urging from 'Umar (the same Companion who had advocated the *hijab* for freeborn women), on the basis of a literal interpretation of the Prophet's pronouncement that "Nous, les Prophètes, nous ne donnons pas en héritage ce qui est laissé derrière nous, car ceci est un don" 'We, the Prophets, do not bequeathe to our children what is left behind us, for this is a gift' (83). Despite Fatima's insistence that the term "gift" refers to the gift of prophecy, and that the Prophet's declaration is intended to prohibit the establishment of a dynasty, the hesitant caliph finally rules that the Prophet's daughter must not inherit any of her father's possessions. Abou Bekr's decision sets a precedent which, for centuries, will have disastrous consequences for Muslim women:

Fatima, la dépouillée de ses droits, la première en tête de toute une interminable procession de filles dont la déshérence de fait, souvent appliquée par les frères, les oncles, les fils eux-mêmes, tentera de s'instaurer pour endiguer peu à peu l'insupportable révolution féministe de l'Islam en ce VII^e siècle chrétien! (79)

Fatima, the woman stripped of her rights, the first in an interminable procession of daughters whose de facto disinheritance, often imposed by brothers, uncles, and even sons, will be established [as a precedent] in order to contain little by little the intolerable feminist revolution of Islam in the 7th century of the Christian era!

Fatima's "no," which echoes the "no" uttered by Mohammed himself when Fatima's husband Ali asked if he might take a second wife, establishes the rebel daughter as the embodiment of doubt

haunting the people in power: "Oui, elle commence à sentir que, elle vivante, ils ne pourront en tant que gens de pouvoir . . . avoir aucun repos, nulle tranquillité d'âme!" 'Yes, she begins to sense that as long as she is living, they, as people in power . . . will have no rest, no peace of mind!' (85). The doubt instilled in Abou Bekr and his supporters bears on the legitimacy of their rule, that is, on their capacity to act according to their faith or even to know what their faith is—hence the torment of Abou Bekr, who regrets having accepted the position of caliph. Moreover, the doubt haunting Abou Bekr is linked to the doubt raised by Djébar's narrator regarding the certainty with which the Prophet's sometimes contradictory pronouncements can be used to settle matters of dispute. On the one hand, in forbidding Ali to take the daughter of his former enemy as his second wife, Mohammed insists that he is not prohibiting the polygynous marriages that God has permitted: "Certes est licite pour tout croyant le fait d'avoir quatre épouses" 'Certainly it is licit for every male believer to have four wives' (75). But on the other, in addition to his obvious concern that Fatima "se sente troublée dans sa foi" 'feel shaken in her faith' (74) if the daughter of God's enemy becomes a co-wife, Mohammed acts on the basis of an identification with his daughter ("une partie de moi-même" 'a part of myself' [74]), an identification which casts doubt on the right to polygyny: "Ce qui bouleverse Fatima me bouleverse!" 'what upsets Fatima upsets me!' (75). These doubts, valorized in a novel celebrating "l'espace de notre foi interrogative" 'the space of our interrogative faith' (63), displace another experience of doubt that has been granted legitimacy in Muslim culture, the doubt about women's fidelity in marriage, which is said to weigh "une fois, mille fois, sur chaque Musulmane, aussitôt qu'elle prend époux" 'once, a thousand times, on every Muslim woman as soon as she takes a husband' (288).

If Fatima embodies doubt as a force that challenges male domination, she also embodies doubt bearing directly on female empowerment. The source of doubt is Fatima's uncompromising refusal to accept Abou Bekr's caliphate, coupled with her refusal to see the caliph's daughter Aïcha (or anyone else outside her immediate family) as she is dying. This double refusal leads the reader to wonder whether Fatima saw herself as Abou Bekr's rival for temporal power, a power to which Aïcha herself aspires: "Se tenant derrière son père, et souvent face à lui, elle commence sa formation politique. Aïcha au coeur de Médine" 'Standing behind her father, and often face to face with him, she began her political training' (292). Aïcha will later say of Fatima that she most resembled the Prophet "par son langage" 'in her speech' (80), and it is women's speech that most empowers them in *Loin de Médine*.

Fatima's capacity to sow doubt often has productive effects, then, insofar as it deprives the people in power of peace of mind and encourages critical scrutiny of many aspects of social life. Fatima is a daughter and not a son, a non-son who exemplifies the impossibility of the unitary *Umma*, the impossibility of an unbroken line of authority, much as the Prophet's many marriages exemplify the multiple sites from which a unitary instance of power may be contested. Yet Fatima does not always embody the militant, aggressive power of doubt. However ambiguous a figure she may be as a beloved child blessed with a power of speech that rivals her father's, her status as non-son prevents her from becoming the guide of the Muslim peoples or even fulfilling the function of scribe, noting the father's choice of a guide as he is dying. Because Mohammed has refused to say anything about his succession in the absence of a son, uncertainty reigns after his death. And the result of this uncertainty is violent contests for power, rather than acceptance of an irreducibly "interrogative faith" (63). Thus, as the non-son who casts the *Umma's* unity in doubt, Fatima symbolizes violent conflict among Muslims which will culminate in the schism between Sunnis and Shiites. And as we saw in the discussion of her disinheritance, her status as non-son casts doubt, for many Muslims, on her legitimacy as an heir.

Fatima, then, is both rebel and outcast, a woman who questions the legitimacy of power hierarchies while simultaneously being subject to political exclusion and economic dispossession. Certainly, she is one of the "filles d'Ismaël" 'daughters of Ismael' named in the novel's subtitle, at once an outcast and one at war with society. Ismael, son of Hagar and the patriarch Abraham, is cast out with his mother at the insistence of Abraham's jealous wife Sarah: Hagar must leave "parce que la servante, parce que la première accouchée" 'because [she is] the servant and the first to give birth' (302). The Arabs are said to be descended from Ismael; but they are also descendants of Hagar, and it is the significance of Hagar that is elaborated in Djébar's epilogue.

Hagar and Ismael are abandoned by Abraham in the desert "au site de La Mecque" 'at the site of Mecca' (302) where the Ka'ba, a shrine sacred to Muslims, will later be built: "Les voici seuls . . . la mère et l'enfant. . . Ismaël a soif; Ismaël va mourir" 'The mother and child are alone. . . Ismael is thirsty; Ismael is going to die' (302). Hagar goes into a trance and begins a mad dance which finally causes water to spring from the ground: "enfin une source, enfin une musique de commencement" 'at last a wellspring, at last music of a new beginning' (303). Unlike the desert spring by which the unfortunate Selma had camped, which proved to be a source of malediction, the spring brought forth by

Hagar ensures her son's physical survival as well as her own. Moreover, its music, like Hagar's dance, provides psychic and emotional sustenance. In Djébar's text, Hagar's multifaceted preservation of life has priority over the founding of a new patriarchal religion in Mecca.

In the epilogue, all Arab women are said to be daughters of Hagar, "filles de l'expulsée" 'daughters of the outcast' (303). Yet they are also daughters of Aïcha, "la mère des Croyants . . . [qui va] nourrir la mémoire des Croyants" 'the mother of Believers . . . [who will] nourish the memory of Believers' by preserving the living word (293). In establishing this parallel between Hagar and Aïcha, Djébar's *Loin de Médine* forges a bond between the servant and the elite woman, between Arab women of different social classes. In linking the figures of Hagar and Aïcha, the text also establishes a vital connection, for women, between physical survival and symbolic production. And finally, it links literal mothering to the nurturing of liberating communal ties between "filles d'Agar et fils d'Ismaël" 'daughters of Hagar and sons of Ismael' (305).

Without question, one finds in Djébar's text echoes of some problematic moments in 1970s French feminism, for instance her reference to "femmes en mouvement 'loin de Médine'" 'women in motion "far from Medina"' (5), which recalls the title of the magazine *Femmes en mouvements* published by *des femmes*. This seems to be a vestige of the notorious reluctance of most Parisian writers and theorists to identify themselves as feminists or as participants in feminist movements, which they see as power-seeking ventures. Since feminist movements have all but disappeared in France today, it is hard to see why they are still perceived as threatening. In any case, it is clear that despite her emphasis on movement away from power centers like Medina, Djébar does not shy away from issues of female empowerment (Fatima's inheritance, Aïcha's political training by her father, the caliph). Another problem that has its roots in 1970s French feminism is the presentation of female rebelliousness as an "uncontrollable freedom" articulated in a "parole féminine" (292). Here we encounter the familiar association of femininity and poetic language with an intractable alterity that necessarily challenges power and eludes formulation in a politics. But because female rebelliousness takes a variety of interrelated forms in *Loin de Médine*—"uncontrollable freedom," but also action and speech directed toward economic justice and political empowerment for women—its figuration in fact challenges the relegation of poetic practice to a sacred space divorced from politics. In a new and provocative way, Djébar's novel restructures

relations between poetics and politics, calling into question French critical norms while simultaneously revaluating Islamic tradition.

Notes

1. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted in the text. In the eyes of conservatives, charges of blasphemy are justified by the Hadith (tradition, or record of what the Prophet said or did): "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity!" (qtd. in Mernissi, V 1).
2. The term "medina," from the Arabic *madina*, means "town." In French, it is used to refer to the old Arab cities in North Africa around which the colonizers built modern European cities.
3. See the introduction to the most recent edition of Mernissi, BV.
4. Djebar's use of the term *djihad* offers a critical perspective on the western media's frequent references to *djihad* as a crusade against infidels waged by Muslim "fanatics."
5. I discuss these novels in *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and Literatures in French*, forthcoming.
6. See for example Kandiyoti for feminist analyses of Islam's effects in various social configurations in Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, and other Muslim societies. H lie-Lucas' "Les Strat gies des femmes" has a good list of references on this subject.
7. "A Kinder, Gentler Islam?" is distilled from the author's recent study, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law*. His methodology is adapted from that of the late Sudanese Muslim reformer *Ustadh* Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, whose major work, *The Second Message of Islam*, he has translated into English.
8. It should be noted too that the feminist revaluation of Islam is important in light of the frequency with which gender issues are ignored in religious studies, both in France and in the U.S. I'm thinking, for instance, of the massive study edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*. Though it is careful to deal with a range of fundamentalisms in widely varying geopolitical contexts, including Protestant, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, and Islamic fundamentalisms, it in no way addresses gender or sexuality in the discussions of Islam.

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