ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN MOROCCO: A GENERATIONAL COMPARISON BETWEEN FATIMA MERNISSI AND ASMA LAMRABET

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Abstract: This article aims to analyse Islamic feminism in Morocco through the exegetical work carried out by two Moroccan activists, Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015) and Asma Lamrabet (b. 1961). Through a study of the traditional Islamic theories and texts translated by them, these two scholars illustrate a generational change in Moroccan activism. Using a theoretical framework such as the one proposed by anthropologist Talal Asad regarding Islam's discursive tradition, it can instead be seen that, rather than a true generational change, what is occurring is a normal evolution of the primary theory attributable to Mernissi. With Lamrabet's generation this theory is becoming completely global, following specific historical and political events that have characterised Moroccan history.

Keywords: *Islamic feminism, reinterpretation, feminist hermeneutics, Moroccan and African activism, human rights*

Introduction

For several decades now Morocco has had a prominent position in Islamic Feminism, thanks to a less conservative view on women pursued by the monarchy, compared to other Muslim-majority countries. The purpose of this article is to analyse Islamic Feminism in Morocco by studying the exegetical work carried out by Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015) and Asma Lamrabet (b. 1961).

The theoretical framework on which this work is based is the notion of "Islam as a Discursive Tradition" suggested by anthropologist Talal Asad (1986). Viewing the Islamic religion as a discursive tradition that is enriched

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over time by different interpretations allows us to study the phenomenon from a global point of view. Thanks to Talal Asad's work, we can understand that there is an anthropology of Islam because, in Islamic societies, religion features at every stratum and level. Therefore, religion should be studied as a component of Islamic communities rather than as beliefs and rituals isolated from each other. The anthropology of Islam must be approached as a connection that creates discourses and political power plays over time, but also resistance to these (Ibid. 10). Discourses and reinterpretations within Islam change over time, but they do so because religion is an integral part of society. It thus not only has anthropological value, but also creates mechanisms and modifies power games. On the one hand, it becomes instrumental to the state and government; on the other, it resists these drives by constructing new interpretations (Ibid. 12-15).

An example of these dynamics can be found in the way theories of Islamic feminism have undergone modification during the period studied in this article. The exegesis of Mernissi and Lamrabet are proof of this. Since these two women's activism is centred on a religious framework pivotal to Morocco, the support provided by Asad's theory allows us to examine the development of feminist hermeneutics from a broader point of view while also keeping in mind that the phenomenon in question is constantly changing, especially in recent years with the introduction of the Internet.

The article is divided into four sections: the first section provides a contextualization of what is meant by Islamic and African feminism. The second aims to emphasize the specificities of the case of Morocco. The third highlights the exegetical work of Fatima Mernissi and Asma Lamrabet by comparing them, while the last section offers some conclusions.

Islamic Feminism and African Feminism: A Contextualization

Although Fatima Mernissi and Asma Lamrabet situate themselves within the framework of Islamic feminism, the fact that Morocco is a North African region cannot be overlooked. Despite the fact that the Moroccan monarchy has strong Arab roots (Loimeier 2013: 35-54), a contextualization of African activism is necessary in order to study this effectively.

Islamic feminism is a heterogeneous phenomenon that has its origins in the activism of women claiming their rights in Islamic countries. This form of human rights activism takes shape in a post-colonial dynamic. The emergence of Islamic feminism can be traced back to 1990 (Eyadat 2013: 359), where it

can be argued that the discourse focused mainly on the prospects of women receiving an adequate education and having equal social emancipation through religion and its interpretation (Moghadam 2002: 1143). From the late-twentieth century onwards, groups of increasingly meticulous women have engaged in this type of debate (Pepicelli 2010: 33-38). These causes arise firstly, due to many Islamic majority states seeing the creation of coercive forms of government, which relegated women to domestic roles during the Iranian revolution (1979). Secondly, the development of worldwide feminist dialogue increases the will of Islamic feminists to find their own specific voice (Najmabadi 1998: 60). This global movement, which includes the Middle East, Africa and Asia connects with the West (Pepicelli 2010: 22). There are a number of reasons for these initial claims, the first of which is the expansion of conservative Islamist movements, with Islamist groups proposing reforms that are particularly traditionalist and patriarchal (Tibi 2013: 7-10). Then there is the idea that Islamic states have had a sort of civilizational downgrade. This is reflected in the lack of democratization in post-independent states, in that there is no real collective representation by the government of certain individuals. Finally, the weight of a colonial past means that there is a willingness on the part of some actors to detach themselves from it completely. Women will propose a distinct form of emancipation that differs from that of the West (Grami 2013: 103-104).

The term Islamic feminism was first coined in the 1990s (Pepicelli 2010: 13), and it is difficult to provide a definitive definition of the concept. It concerns the desire of Muslim women to claim their rights through religion. However, even this description is too simplistic and trivialises a complex realm of internal and external forces. This phenomenon relates to not only Muslim women, but also non-Muslim women living in Muslim countries, women from the diaspora, Muslim women from Western countries, Islamists, and men. Religion is the unifying factor that binds all these actors together. It is identified as the perfect realm to ensure rights for all within the state. This means that a critique is established that is not directed towards the religion of Islam as such, but rather what is supposed to be the fallacious reinterpretations of sacred texts. For this reason, the instrument of vindication used by these activists is the *ijtihad* (Ibid. 45-58) – namely the reinterpretation and rereading of sacred texts of Islamic tradition. This aspect is crucial, because it highlights the need to enable everyone to possess religious knowledge. The reactions to Islamic feminism vary. In some cases, the phenomenon is not accepted because it is perceived as a westernization. At other times, even if tolerated, there is disagreement with many of the

theories that this process has brought about. An alternative is to accept the phenomenon as an international one that promotes a pure form of Islam (Grami 2013: 108). The truth is that the emergence of Islamic feminism has opened a debate. One example is post-1979 Iran. Here, Islamic feminism was strongly criticised by human rights activists who argued that it was impossible to obtain rights within a non-secular state. On this basis they asserted that the limited rights secured for women merely served to perpetuate an undemocratic form of government. Conversely, there were those who advocated for Islamic feminism, arguing that it was the most effective means of achieving reforms, particularly with regard to the family code, which was first amended in Iran in 1992 (Moghadam 2002: 1142-1143).

Given the complicated nature of this phenomenon, it is appropriate to examine its development in the contemporary era. It is clear that the demands of these activists have been driven by the use of new technologies and historical processes. Initially, one of the tools used by these women was the press – an interesting example is *Zanan* in Iran, a newspaper in which feminist debate in the religious sphere has been strong since the early 1990s (Najmabadi 1998: 64). The first factor that has enabled progress is the use of the Internet. The second is the belief of these activists that by establishing international connections they will facilitate their struggles with their governments (Pepicelli 2010: 84). The most recent initiatives being used by these activists are moving in three directions. Firstly, activists are creating their own websites, which highlight the theories and biographies of the personalities in question, and they are also spaces where opinions can be exchanged. The second tool is the creation of conferences with international scope in which both men and women who share the same demands participate in drafting new demonstrations. Finally, the creation of new networks between important associations has been central in enabling this type of activism to become international (Ibid. 85-88). This leads to the consideration that Islamic feminism is indeed participating in the phenomenon of globalization. This should not be downplayed as an isolated event, because it is the Muslim religion that is digitizing itself (Ospazi 2011: 22). The technological development described above has not only enabled these women to expand their activities from a local scale to a global one, but it has also changed the current relation of demands between two specific actors, men and the West. Since the 2000s the involvement of men has intensified further (Pepicelli 2010: 88-92). With regard to the relations with the West, the discourse is undoubtedly more complex. Globalization has

contributed to easing tensions. The flow of communication has allowed for the creation of a different vision of activism, which goes beyond religion.

In light of the above, it is my intention to focus on an aspect that I consider to be crucial in this context: It is misguided to view Islamic feminism as inherently opposed to the West. Instead, it seems to be a desire to undermine the Western ideology that democracy can only be achieved by following Western models. The critique of Islamic feminism should perhaps be interpreted as a need to open a new path to achieve gender equity in contexts in which religion plays a fundamental role (Lamrabet 2012). Today, the confrontation with the West is open and changes according to historical processes. This whole mechanism has resulted in different responses from governments. For the Islamic states these women are seen as a significant problem, accusing them of abandoning Islamic religion and Muslim culture and of degenerating westernization (Pepicelli 2010: 117). Islamic feminism is often somewhere in the middle. It is difficult to give it a true definition, and this creates several problems. On the one hand, it is criticized by both the most coercive and Islamic governments, because it is seen as an unforgivable transgression. On the other hand, it is criticised by activists who think that Islamic feminism is merely a continuation of Shari'a laws, and cannot guarantee any rights. Despite these criticisms, Islamic feminists have contributed to the advancement of some reforms and rights. It becomes important to emphasize that Islamic feminists reject the most orthodox forms of government; instead they support an approach to the Islamic religion that is accessible to all (Moghadam 2002: 1144-1146).

The examination of Islamic feminism in Morocco forces us to consider the dynamics relating to African feminism. It is widely acknowledged that these trends emerged around 1960 and are characterised by their radicalism (Mama 2019: 1). Post-colonial theories regarding a liberation of the African continent play a key role. There is a desire to also liberate African women from the European structures that have sought to control every aspect of society (Fanon 1963: 283). It is important to recognize that African feminism is inextricably linked to left-wing political agendas. This provides an insight into the ways in which these agendas shape the political landscape of the continent. This is a story that goes beyond the concept of feminism and is part of a political and cultural landscape that in the post-colonial era seeks to find its own voice (Badran 2011: 70-72). These movements emerge from a desire to define oneself in order to establish a sense of identity. This last assumption becomes relevant when considering women in the diaspora; in

this context, African feminism takes on transnational traits in order to be able to accommodate realities that extend beyond Africa (Mama 2019: 2-4).

Here lies a first relevant difference with Islamic feminism. Whereas Islamic feminists are at first reluctant to find a global dialogue, African feminists are, in a sense, obliged to do so. This is something that goes beyond the African continent, because the diaspora has profoundly altered the debate within African countries. Despite the fact that these women fought for the liberation of their own countries, their battle today is conducted along two different paths. Their own definition in relation to Europe is a key issue while their relation with their own governments is also a significant factor. The wars of independence played a predominant role, because they allowed women to view themselves from a different perspective, having actively taken part in the fighting (Ibid. 5-8). The establishment of post-independent states marks the beginning of a new chapter for these movements. On the one hand, it is possible to highlight how the prerogatives and balance of the female population are changing – which becomes evident when studying how women begin to demand equal rights from the male population. On the other hand, these movements have become integrated into the international landscape, in part due to the global spotlight on issues such as human rights and climate change. This has led to a heightened focus on the African continent, with the women's issue one of the first to be raised. From this moment on, African feminism adopts anti-imperialist traits with the aim of protecting women from the lower social strata, and this is a discussion deeply linked to socialist theories. Criticism of the West is not solely confined to economic considerations; rather, it is based on the view that the patriarchal structure of Western societies cannot allow real female emancipation (Pepicelli 2010: 15). This assumption prompts African women to view their governments in a different light. They engage in struggles to challenge the Western form of government, which they perceive as patriarchal, and which persists within their own countries (Mama 2019: 9-11). These movements have initiated legal reforms to safeguard equality.

It is only fair to provide some insight into North African activism. Even this context is not easy to describe as the sources available are from male perspectives during the French colonial period (Ait Mous, Bendana, Vince 2020: 1). It is important to consider the political aims of the colonial apparatus when examining the female issue in North Africa. The desire to exclude the indigenous male population from colonial politics brings out new female narratives, with the aim of inserting European particularities into any social level (Fanon 1963: 283). This analysis demonstrates how the sponsorship

of women's education was instrumental in achieving this objective. The rationale behind this approach was to educate women, thereby educating their families, with the ultimate goal of reproducing certain forms of government. It is worth noting that after the First World War this mechanism was also used by African cultural groups and reformist Arabs. A new group of educated women emerged and began to take an active part in politics (Ait Mous, Bendana and Vince 2020: 2-7). This activation of female knowledge led women, during the Second World War, to participate in the nationalism of the North African nations. These groups of women began to demand new laws to protect the female population in anticipation of the creation of post-colonial states. For these women, the fight against colonialism also implied the struggle of gender. Their ability to engage in dialogue with local government made it possible for some parties to create special sections for women. After independence, the gender issue was mostly abandoned. From 1970, feminist activism was only allowed in official structures or political associations (Ibid. 15-17). Following the 1970s, the situation underwent further change. The gender issue assumed global prerogatives and gender equality began to be sponsored by international bodies such as the United Nations. From 1980, the first women's associations created by North African activists began to emerge. These associations required social changes and were particularly close to left-wing parties. Between 1980 and 1990 the landscape of North African feminism became plural, and a great deal of literature began to be produced (Ibid. 18-20). The plural term refers to activism that is not solely African. In the case of North Africa, all ethnic, religious and cultural specificities that characterize these countries must be taken into consideration.

The multiculturalism of North Africa requires a focus on the development of activism concerning the Islamic religion (Shankar 2022). It is appropriate to implement a division between the colonial and post-colonial periods in these studies. In colonial times there is a tendency to emphasize the role of women in Islam with the aim of creating identification. During colonialism, the purpose was to detach oneself from the European judgement of Islamic religion. This judgement saw the woman as either homogeneous in her religious beliefs, or as a woman crushed by her creed. After the colonial era, a significant body of literature emerged that gave way to new female religious narratives. Furthermore, the issue can be attributed to the considerable heterogeneity that characterises Islam in this region. It is implausible to suggest that the Islamic religion can be perceived indifferently throughout North Africa (Ibid. 1-4).

It is fundamental to emphasize here that the analysis of these feminist waves highlights two important aspects for this article. The first is the confirmation of the theory of the anthropology of Islam proposed by Asad; the fact that the female figure has often been used by Muslim communities supports the fact that religion is immersed in any social stratum, and that it can almost always be used for, or against, governmental power. The second aspect is that these feminisms are intersectional. This means that there is a continuous exchange, despite initially trying to avoid it, between the various theories. This is corroborated by the fact that, in relation to the African continent, Islamic feminism has over time become a fundamental component of new theoretical frameworks. The definition of the various feminisms has left room for influences between one another. These two aspects are fundamental to understanding the specific case of Morocco.

Previous Studies

As previously outlined, Islamic feminism is a topic that has been extensively researched. This study will focus on the case of Morocco. Although research on the thoughts of Mernissi and Lamrabet has already been carried out, this article will not limit itself to a simple re-reading of the volumes they wrote – as has already been done extensively by scholars such as Moha Ennaji (Ennaji 2020) – but will go further by searching for a comparison between these two points of view.

Although Islamic religion has often been seen as the main cause of women's subordination in Muslim countries, many studies such as Sara Borrillo's (2017) and Renata Pepicelli's (2010) attempt to debunk this idea by analysing the activism of a number of Muslim women committed to gender equality in these countries. Renata Pepicelli suggests that these studies often focus on the analysis of Islamic feminists and relate their thinking to the time and history of their country of origin. This type of research has proved effective in demonstrating how since the mid-20th century people were engaged in the reinterpretation of traditional Muslim texts with the aim of fighting for equal rights in Islamic countries.

In the context of the Moroccan case, a number of studies have been conducted with the objective of gaining insight into the relations between Islamic feminism and Muslim religion. In this regard, Ennaji's theoretical contributions are fundamental pillars. In light of the above, my work will build upon the existing bodies of work. An attempt will be made to expand

the state of research by implementing a study based mainly on the texts translated by Mernissi and Lamrabet.

The Moroccan Case

Despite the North African region of Morocco's historical Arab roots and long Islamic tradition, the dynamics of feminist hermeneutics in this country are notably distinct when compared to previous contextualizations of Islamic and African feminism. This can be explained by the vitality of Moroccan Islam, also with respect to the female population (Bazzaz 2003: 76). The religious discourse in Morocco is distinguished by two factors: the country's multiculturalism and the prevalence of Sufi[1] brotherhoods in the region. Sufi groups are factions that seek a transcendental vision in prayer with the aim of being able to create a direct connection with God through the act of prayer. This ascetic call cannot exclude any of the faithful, which is why in these groups even women have always been provided with religious knowledge (Nicholls and Riddell 2020). In Morocco, Sufi groups have a strong identifying character, both because they were among the first to create real resistance in colonial times, and because they are groups that have always been present in the land spreading the Islamic religion (Ibid. 90-93). This demonstrates how the dynamics of the female population are directly linked to the state due to the dynasty claiming its position through religious knowledge that Moroccan women possess from the beginning. Women's long-standing connection to the state has also allowed them to choose a form of semi-secular government, which appears to be more liberal and supportive of women's rights (Ennaji 2016: 2-3).

It is crucial to keep in mind that Morocco is a multicultural country and that its multiculturalism stems from a history of various colonizations. Not only the French colonization (1912-1956) must be taken into account, but also the Arab component that led to the Islamization of the region between the 8th and 16th centuries and the presence of the Berber population (Robinson 2004: 91-95). This discourse enables us to comprehend how cultural mixing also gives rise to multilingualism, which is reflected in the position of women. This is an important aspect and should not be overlooked. Firstly, the use of certain languages is reflected in the social stratification of belonging. Secondly, the use of these languages is characterised by grammatical and dialectal differences that have an impact on the position of women in that

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1   Sufism is an Islamic mystical movement which emphasizes the spiritual view of the world.

culture (Ennaji 2009: 58-60). All these cultural and linguistic dynamics have created a specific female narrative within society over time, because languages are handed down through the generations and construct specific social dimensions. This ultimately leads back to Asad's theory of the discursive tradition of Islam. It is a fundamental feature of both religion and discourses relating to Islamic feminism in Morocco that language is instrumental to maintaining power and social order.

However, French influence has had a significant impact on the urban-rural divide and has changed the role and vision of women in these two realms. It has increased the willingness of women in the cities to participate in modernization, leaving those in the countryside on the sidelines; which is also one of the reasons why North African feminism is closer to left-wing political ideals. The distinction between rural and urban areas is not the only one present in Moroccan culture. There is also a division between the public space – male – and the private space – female – which has its roots in an Arab-Muslim tradition (Ennaji 2008: 180). These mechanisms have influenced and laid the foundations for the emergence of a feminist hermeneutics that has become the pioneer of what is conventionally called Islamic feminism.

Ennaji's research demonstrates that the birth of feminism in Morocco can be dated back to 1947, when the *Akhawat al-Safa* association published a document outlining several legal demands for women (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006: 96). The women in question requested to be included in the modernization process and to be acknowledged in the public sphere, while maintaining their Muslim identity. In this context, newspapers played a fundamental role (Ibid. 97-98). In the 1980s, a new movement emerged as a result of the expansion of mass education, which included the participation of women. These women broadened their discourse in the public sphere and became involved in politics. From the 1990s, these women took part in the battle against Islamism, and they became part of the international scene until the 21st century with the *Mudawwana* reform (Ibid. 99-102). It is undeniable that Morocco has been more liberal in terms of women's policies. However, the lack of democratization and modernization have caused evident problems regarding the progress of human rights policies that these women advocate for. The process of political liberalization has not resulted in greater democratization of the state, as evidenced by the continued underrepresentation of certain actors (Badran 2011: 234-235).

It is no coincidence that women's associationism in the country reached its peak with the rise of Islamist parties, and it is here that religion is claimed

by women (Ennaji 2013: 4). This phenomenon was also established in Iran following the 1979 revolution (Moghadam 2002). While Islamists have been proposing a return to a pure Islam, in which women are relegated to the private sphere, feminists are trying to feminize the public sphere even more through religion. In this context, not only was the process of *ijtihad* established, but new religious roles for women were created. This dynamic is made possible by the ancient religious knowledge that is typical of Moroccan women and also by their capacity to be able to engage in dialogue with a range of actors in the public space (Pepicelli 2010: 92-95).

These historical processes resulted in two fundamental stages in contemporary Morocco. Firstly, the *Mudawwana*, the Moroccan family code, was reformed in 2004. Secondly, a religious reform led to the creation of the *murshidat.* The *Mudawwana* reform was a gradual transformation emerging in 1957, involving extraordinary diplomatic efforts between the various political forces. In 1957, the first Personal Status Code was drawn up, which covered the themes of marriage, divorce, child custody and polygamy. These developments were driven by a specific political objective: the globalization that had also affected Morocco required a modernization of society. Consequently, the subject of the family presented itself as the optimal starting point for establishing the foundations of the independent state (Zoglin 2009: 965). Nevertheless, the commission that drafted the code in 1957 proved to be particularly traditionalist. The outcome of this work was a code that was profoundly linked to Islamic law (Chafi 2015: 5). This is further evidence that religious discourse is instrumental to power, as Asad claims. The advent of human rights discourse during the 1990s rendered this kind of family code unsuitable for Morocco in the context of a global policy landscape. In 1999, with the changeover from Hassan II to Mohammed VI, and his more democratic and liberal policies, negotiations began to amend the code. From the 2000s onwards, Islamist groups began to oppose these proposals, seeing them as westernization. For this reason, in 2001 king Mohammed VI set up a commission, which was also made up of female members. Islamic feminists have played an important role in this process, employing the method of *ijtihad* to search the Qur'an for passages that could be used to change the code. This not only pleased the more conservative factions, but also claimed the right of re-reading the texts for all Muslims (Pepicelli 2010: 95-96). Following an attack in Casablanca in 2003, blamed on Islamist forces, the government was able to continue its work, which ended in January 2004 with a new *Mudawwana* (Zoglin 2009: 969). The new code profoundly differed from its predecessor in that women were guaranteed various familial rights.

The implementation of this reform permitted the introduction of a religious reform that enabled women to participate fully in the religious sphere of the state. This was achieved through the creation of new roles, namely *murshidat* (Ennaji 2007). Before 2004, the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs supervised all councils of the *Ulama*. In 2004, the king extended his power in order to have control over these councils. In 2005, he established the Supreme Religious Council with the intention of consolidating his authority over this institution, which had been directly under his control. Consequently, a predominantly male legal narrative was established due to the consolidation of religious power under the patriarchal figure of Mohammed VI (Hoover 2015: 17-20). Despite this male-dominated religious make up, it should be kept in mind that since the 2000s, Mohammed VI's policy has been part of a global human rights landscape in a dynamic of equity policies (Amghar 2007: 1-2). For this reason, it should be stressed that since 2004 measures have been created for the public incorporation of women in religion. Women participate as officials in the Ministry of Islamic Affairs; in the *Ulama* Council; and in research centres (Hoover 2015: 142-143). After two years of university training, women were able to take on religious roles. In 2006, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs set up a prayer corps in mosques made up of fifty women (*murshidat*), and thirty-two theologians ('*alimat*) (Eddouada and Pepicelli 2010: 94. This mechanism should be understood in a broader dynamic. The aim of female inclusion was to create a more modern religious discourse that could include previously excluded sectors of the population, with the intention of maintaining social order. The term *murshidat* means Muslim women preachers, and it is a typical Moroccan element. King Mohammed VI had the idea of training these figures following the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attack, thinking that the use of women would promote an Islam of peace and integration (Borrillo 2017: 177-181). The role of the *murshidat* is varied: they must guide women on religious matters; take care of the religious conduct of women and children; and be promoters of a positive Islam. Morocco appears to be a vanguard in this sense as it is the first Muslim country to promote such a programme. Among other benefits, this initiative promotes female education. The women involved are all university graduates, and in addition to their knowledge of the Qur'an, Hadiths and Shari'a, they also possess knowledge of economics, law and sociology (Ennaji 2007: 83-87). The religious discourse was modified over time, but it was not accidental. There was a very specific objective which, in order to be achieved, needed a specific interpretation of religion, as Asad claims.

Fatima Mernissi and Asma Lamrabet: A Comparison

This analysis of Morocco allows us to fulfil the objective of this article: to examine Islamic feminism in Morocco through the exegetical work conducted by Mernissi and Lamrabet. It is important to note that this is a development, rather than a true generational change. In the latter case, a generational change is often interpreted as an opposition of new theories to previous ones. However, in this instance, it should be highlighted that Mernissi's theorizations were preparatory to Lamrabet's generation. This awareness can be achieved by examining the Islamic religion as a global phenomenon that is enriched over time through the various interpretations, which have been modified by taking into account the specific political and historical transformations of the country in queston (Asad 1986: 7-8).

Fatima Mernissi's theorizations were embedded in the political context of Morocco (Borrillo 2017: 61-62.). With the help of ethnographic research, Mernissi's work was the first to highlight the connection between the lack of democracy in Muslim countries and the centrality of the male vision in jurisprudence. She also examined how the deficiency of modernization lay in this relationship (Ibid. 63-65). Fatima Mernissi was born in 1940 in Fez and died in 2015 in Rabat. She was brought up in a harem with her mother and grandmother and was the first woman to be able to attend a school created by the nationalist movement during the French protectorate. She studied in Rabat and Paris before gaining a doctorate in the United States and returning to Rabat as a sociology professor. Her presence fit into that first generation of educated African women who actively took part in both nationalism and the political landscape of their country (Mama 2019: 4). Her evolution can be divided into three distinct phases: the secular, the activist, and the Islamic feminist (Ennaji 2020: 2). She argues that Islam guarantees women their rights. According to her, the problem lies in interpretations of sacred texts that are considered fallacious. Mernissi went even further by criticizing the West. She pointed out that Western women were not free, but rather were slaves to ethical and aesthetic parameters and canons. For this reason she was convinced that the West could not even understand the complexity of the Muslim world (Pepicelli 2010: 70-74).

It is important to consider some of Mernissi's works. One of her earliest publications is entitled *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*, which was published in 1975. Mernissi researched female subordination in Islamic societies within Muslim jurisprudence, arguing how there are laws that allow for this, such as the *Mudawwana* (Mernissi

1975: IX-4). Mernissi commenced her research in a secular manner, as evidenced in the analysed text, in which she sought to identify the factors that led to the subordination of women in Morocco with the advent of the Islamic religion.

In 1987, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* was published. This text could be considered as the accomplishment of the activism phase. From this moment on a sort of openness towards religion began. The introduction was dedicated to the prophet and his wife Aisha, and the proposition that the sacred texts had been manipulated was established (Mernissi 1987: 1-11). The Islamic religion was presented as a defining characteristic, which is why it can be agreed that this work laid the foundations of what is now considered Islamic feminism. It initiated a critique of interpretations of Islamic texts and jurisprudence that were considered misogynistic (Ibid. 21). Another book, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), presents "A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam."

The text *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* was published in 1993. The book was presented as a criticism of Islamic states for their lack of democratization, specifically the role of religion and its relation with the West was examined (Mernissi 1993: 13-21). Further reading revealed how the author's analysis moved from a critique of the state to a critique directed at the interpretation of Islamic law (Ibid. 22-41). The conceptualization of Islamic feminism posits that female subordination emerged as a consequence of civil involution within Muslim states. Additionally, the conventional tenets of African feminism suggest that the legacy of colonial political structures persists within the new governments. The genesis of Mernissi's publications explain the birth of Islamic feminism, they also highlight debates between Muslim feminists and activists that Moghadam talks about in her writing (Moghadam 2002). The crux of the matter is that Mernissi's interpretations change depending on the role that religion is perceived to have played over time (Asad 1986).

In order to further implement the analysis, it is crucial to include some passages from the Qur'an translated by Mernissi.

Qur'an, *Surah* 4, *An-Nisa* ("Women"), verse 19

> O ye who believe! It is not lawful nor [that] ye should put constraint upon them that ye may take away a part of that which ye have given them, unless they be guilty of flagrant lewdness. (Mernissi 1991: 122)

The author explains how before the advent of Islam only men could inherit in Arabia, and women were often part of this inheritance. Following the revelation of this verse the Prophet wanted to grant the same right to women. Mernissi argues how men, unhappy with the new laws, opposed the revelation, using interpretations to maintain their privileges (Ibid. 120-125). Asad's theory on the interpretation of sacred texts returns. In fact, according to Mernissi the religious interpretation of the sacred text was instrumental to social construction, and for this reason a woman cannot inherit.

Qur'an, *Surah* 33, verse 53

> 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. (Ibid. 85)

Through the translation of this verse, Mernissi explains the origin of the *Hijab*. She tells of how the *Hijab* was created to defend the intimacy of the prophet who, as a newly married man, wanted to have a moment of intimacy with his new wife. The veil symbolises a cover to a community that had become excessively intrusive. In fact, the prophet was unable to have his intimate moment due to the chatter of a group of companions. For this reason, the prophet became greatly annoyed and Allah expounded this verse. Mernissi emphasises that the *Hijab* was meant to be a solution to a period of conflict and tension. She stresses how the word *Hijab* has three dimensions: visual, spatial, ethical. For these reasons, she explains how limiting the *Hijab* to a woman's garment is meaningless, because the term has had a long tradition for Muslims (Ibid. 85-97). Mernissi's interpretation clashes with those who argue that Islamic feminism is a continuation of the misogynistic laws of Islamic states. She regards the veil as a simple cultural construct, separate to the defining characteristics of women (Moghadam 2002: 1142).

One intriguing question is whether Fatima Mernissi can indeed be identified as one of the creators of Islamic feminism. According to Margot Badran, Fatima Mernissi was an Islamic feminist. The rationale lies in the fact that Mernissi carried out her theorization within a religious framework.

This mechanism implies the beginning of a dialogue within the Islamic tradition itself (Badran 2011: 74). It is possible to agree with this view, but it is important to consider two other aspects, the first of which concerns the refusal to be identified as feminists (Pepicelli 2010: 70). This process is part of a post-colonial framework that needs to be explored in this context, although it is a distinctive characteristic of Islamic feminists to refuse to be identified as feminists. The second aspect is the methodology used by Fatima Mernissi; through her projects she gave a voice to people from different social strata, and this coincides with the need, on the part of African feminism, to propose a social change (Ennaji 2020). If we refer to Islamic feminism as a conventional terminology of the new feminist hermeneutics, then Mernissi can be said to be a pioneer of Islamic feminism. Mernissi is an example of how Asad's theory is correct: her religious discourse changes depending on what her purpose is at that moment, both from an interpretative and from a social point of view.

In examining the discourse surrounding Asma Lamrabet, it becomes evident that the complexity of the study increases when the activist is still alive and actively engaged in research. Lamrabet was born in 1961 in Rabat. She comes from a family that gave her an education inspired by traditionally conservative Muslim values, which prompted her to investigate Islam and its message in her adult life (Borrillo 2017: 95-96). This vision of a post-colonial culture sees female education as a tool to foster a correct Muslim society in which religion is a strong identifying trait. Initially, Lamrabet was not particularly close to religion, but she followed a path of worship that led her to veil herself, with the aim of regaining her faith (Pepicelli 2010: 75-76).

Lamrabet's theories are based on the conviction that women experience the reality of discrimination, yet this is not a direct consequence of Islamic teachings. For her, merely reading the Qur'an is insufficient to prove this (Ibid. 78). This is why Lamrabet proposes a new form of activism that investigates the Qur'anic and religious message in depth. Convinced of the fact that Islam guarantees women all rights, the feminist detaches herself from the Western model, proposing a third way which is based on the rediscovery of a spiritual Islam. All this is reflected in Lamrabet's conviction that female subordination is to be found in the classical interpretations of Muslim jurisprudence, which have built a patriarchal society legitimised by laws and thus connects this to the decline of modern Islamic society. Lamrabet stresses the idea that Qur'anic interpretation is closely related to the historical period it refers to, which is why it should be constantly updated (Rddad 2018: 22). It is a vision similar to that of Asad whereby the

anthropology of Islam inserts religion into every social stratum, making its interpretation instrumental to various purposes. Of course, the difference between the two is that Lamrabet talks as a believer, while Asad speaks as a scholar.

In one of her first publications in 2002, *Musulmane tout simplement*, Asma Lamrabet emphazises how Islam for her is an identity, and at the same time argues that she has been westernized by force of circumstance and therefore began to question religion (Asma Lamrabet's website, 2024). Religion is seen as an autochthonous trait, yet it is only manifested in its most superficial forms, namely tradition. This text identifies the first difference between Mernissi and her post-colonial generation that rejects the West. The new generation fights for the same causes in a globalised world and brings with it an awareness of Western-style education. She seeks to go further by also accommodating those who claim that Islamic feminists have achieved nothing.

In 2012, *Femmes et hommes dans le Coran: Quelle égalité?* was published. The first chapter focuses on the superficiality of identifying *une seule femme musulmane.* In this sense, the author not only fits into a global panorama, but broadens the discourse by rediscovering the vastness of Muslim cultures and the impossibility of this categorization (Lamrabet 2012, Chapter 1). The text goes on to examine the parts of the Qur'an that urge the construction of an egalitarian society. These themes make it possible to perceive the novelty of a new global generation of activists. It is here that terms such as woman or Islam can no longer be used in the singular, and this is what most sets Fatima Mernissi apart. The year of publication is important because it was in the midst of the Arab Spring where the Internet played a fundamental role.

Les Femmes et l'Islam: une vision réformiste was published in 2015. The text proves to be a rediscovery of the history of Islam that is considered to be pure. The author proposes an analysis of a historical framework of revelation in order to stress that it is not the Islamic message that places women in a condition of subordination; rather, it is the interpretations that are considered misogynistic (Lamrabet 2015, 12-16). What emerges is the author's definition who, as a secular Muslim, criticises the categorization of women and Islam because the Qur'anic discourse is unique and universal (Ibid. 16).

I find it significant to examine Lamrabet's own translated passages from the Qur'an.

Qur'an, *Surah* 4, verses 19-21

> O believers, it is not permissible for you to inherit women to yourselves against their will. Do not coerce them in order to take back some of what you have given them, unless they have committed proven adultery. Maintain good relations with your wives, based on the common good. And if you have any aversion to some of them, you may have aversion to something that God bowed good into. If you want to marry a woman in place of another, and you have given a quintal of gold to the one with whom you are separating, do not take anything back, for that would be a flagrant infamy and a manifest injustice. Besides, how dare you take anything back from them, after the intimate union that bound you together, and the solemn commitment you have made? (Lamrabet 2012: 46-48).[2]

Lamrabet explains how the verse refers to a pre-Islamic tradition in which the woman was unable to inherit. She examines the verses and highlights how the man cannot possibly take back all that he has given to the woman. Lamrabet stresses the idea that the verses express both a responsibility of the spouses, and unconditional respect for the woman's possessions. Lamrabet goes further by arguing that the Qur'an highlights its general character with these verses, and explains the concept of dowry in the Arab world, which takes on a religious meaning because it is the basis of the marriage contract. The author explains how through the insertion of the dowry into the Qur'an women become subjects worthy of inheriting, and for this reason women's rights are supported (Ibid. 69-75). Also, in this instance Asad's theory prevails because the interpretation of the sacred texts was instrumental to a social construction.

Qur'an, *Surah* 33, verse 53

> O believers do not enter the dwellings of the Prophet unless you are invited! When you ask something from the wives of the Prophet, do it behind a veil [Hijab] (Lamrabet 2012: 162).[3]

Lamrabet begins by explaining the historical conditions of this verse, which coincides with Mernissi's translation. Lamrabet argues that there are several interpretations of this verse. The first invites the faithful to respect good education and privacy. Another interpretation claims that Aisha was also

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2   Author's translation from French.
3   Author's translation from French.

present at the wedding, and this would have upset the more conservative guests, and for this reason God would have advised the prophet to put a veil on his door. Lamrabet stresses that these are sufficient reasons to understand that the *Hijab* is not a feminine garment to hide the prophet's wives, rather a means given to the prophet himself to protect his privacy. Lamrabet concludes by arguing that the *Hijab* has nothing to do with the female headscarf as it is understood today (Ibid. 162-164).

I find it fascinating to wonder whether Lamrabet's view can be categorised as Islamic feminism. It is essential to refer to the words of the scholar, who defines herself as a secularist Muslim, a faithful who calls for the creation of a state with state institutions separate from religious institutions (Borrillo 2017: 105). In order to contextualize the discourses surrounding her theorizations, I suggest that two central elements be considered. The first is the aversion to Western activism, not so much from a post-colonial perspective, but rather because of the necessity to conceptualize reform for Muslim women, a motivation that is distinct from the events of Mernissi. The second element is specifically a religious reform: Islamic feminism represents the best way forward as it proposes a social and political reform that is based on a religious interpretation (Pepicelli 2010: 80). For these reasons, I believe that Asma Lamrabet can be considered an Islamic feminist. It is, however, important to stress that this was made possible by a generational and historical shift. Mernissi was a pioneer of Moroccan feminism, while Lamrabet represents a broader panorama due to the Kingdom of Morocco's efforts to modernize since the 1990s and to globalization processes worldwide.

I propose the comparison of the texts translated by both activists. The first text refers to *Surah* 4 of the Qur'an and was chosen because it deals with a relevant issue in Muslim societies, namely the inheritance of women, and the obligation of men to respect this economic heritage. The second text, verse 53 of *Surah* 33 of the Qur'an, was chosen to highlight the tradition of the *Hijab* in Islamic countries.

With regard to the first text from *Surah* 4 of the Qur'an, I find it essential to emphasize that both scholars adopt a perspective that underscores the manner in which Islam has sensitised society with regard to the issue of women. This perspective is representative of Islamic feminism. Interestingly, Mernissi focuses on how men responded to the prophet's new law and tried to change it. It is crucial to clarify that when Mernissi wrote her text prior to the *Mudawwana* reform, the family code in force in 1957 placed women

in a state of complete subordination to men in economic terms (Zoglin 2009: 970-974). It emerges that Mernissi's objective is to identify a female voice that had not yet been afforded certain rights. In this context, men are perceived as the cause of this condition. The participation of North African women in nationalism and the wars of independence must also be taken into consideration. Mernissi emphasizes the need to reassert those rights that women have had and that have been denied over time. In her commentary on the same verses, Lamrabet speaks of the joint responsibility of the spouses (Lamrabet 2012: 69-75). After the *Mudawwana* reform, women were granted certain rights, but with the inclusion of the *murshidat* from 2006, women in Morocco also assumed religious rights. This aspect is not to be underestimated, as it explains why Lamrabet's discourse on the common good goes beyond the mere emancipation of women. We see that interpretation is instrumental both to the governmental construction of the Moroccan state and to the emergence of the theories of these feminists who seek to resist. Asad's theory helps us to go further, because the interpretation of religion changes from generation to generation depending on what the purpose is (Asad 1986: 6).

The second text is verse 53 of *Surah* 33 of the Qur'an. Both scholars agree on the historical account of the episode given. Mernissi makes a detailed analysis of the terminology concerning the *Hijab* and investigates its different meanings (Mernissi 1991: 85-97). In Mernissi's pages, one can feel her need to reiterate as often as possible that the Qur'an does not require women to wear the veil, and she emphasizes how this has been a male interpretation in the centuries following revelation. Lamrabet agrees with Mernissi that the Qur'an does not command women to veil themselves, but she focuses more on the different interpretations given to this verse (Lamrabet 2012: 162-164). This approach can be found within the political history of Morocco: in 1991 Mernissi lays the foundations for women's rights; in 2012 Morocco adopts a more open attitude towards foreign policy, with an Islam of tolerance. Lamrabet implements a path of faith that leads her to veil herself (Pepicelli 2010: 75); for her, wearing the veil is a choice, whereas Mernissi could not chose. This framework makes us realize how much influence it has had that Mernissi was part of that first generation of educated women in Africa. Lamrabet represents a generation of modern women with greater freedoms of expression. This factor is central in understanding the two different interpretations (Borrillo 2017: 169). Initially, interpretation was confined to Morocco; over time, it expanded to encompass a broader range of contexts (Asad 1986: 4). In addition to employing a distinct interpretative approach

to the texts, we also engage with the intersectionality of Islamic feminism. Since the Arab spring, this has become a global phenomenon, facilitated by the advent of the Internet, and it engages with other trends.

Conclusion

It seems pertinent to concentrate on the underlying motivations that lead to two distinct lines of thought. If we consider Fatima Mernissi as a common ground from which the discourse on Islamic feminism in Morocco has taken hold, it is evident that an activist like Lamrabet was influenced by it. This appears true if we refer to the theory of the discursive tradition of Islam. The modification of Islamic feminism from generation to generation in Morocco takes place in response to various needs via different interpretations of the texts. It is an evolution that gives rise to specific social demands for that particular historical moment in question. However, rather than a mere choice between the different approaches, it is more accurate to describe this as a normal change of thought due to the evolution of the discourses themselves. This is because there is no opposition of ideas between one generation and the next, but rather a development. From this perspective, it is possible to avoid focusing on specific mechanisms and instead analyze the dynamics that are inevitably modified by the passage of time. I believe that an initial examination of the evolution of Islamic feminism is essential.

The categorization of Mernissi as an Islamic feminist is a complex issue, given that her conceptualization of religion takes on a different importance. It is worth noting that a woman presented these arguments in the post-colonial period, under the reign of King Hassan II. For Lamrabet, Islamic feminism identifies a third way to achieve justice for all; religion assumes a superior role due to its search for a message that is true and pure. The purpose of the requests appears to change. Mernissi calls for female emancipation and this approach has to be set out before the *Mudawwana* reform. Lamrabet argues for democratization for all and her work should be situated after the *Mudawwana* reform. Her politics demonstrate clear links to global developments in Islamic feminism studies, which differs from Mernissi's approach. It is reasonable to conclude that the distinctive traits of African feminism, as exemplified by Mernissi's thoughts, are less pronounced in Lamrabet's approach. This can also be seen in the plurality of African activism, which is shaped by the interplay of diverse currents. These currents, as articulated by Lamrabet, exemplify traits that are characteristic

of the post-colonial era and inform a global discourse. This discourse is characterized by intersectionality between feminist movements.

A key aspect to consider is that all these theorizations could not have taken place in a context other than the Moroccan one. This is due to a less restrictive policy towards women than in other Muslim-majority states, which has allowed women access to religious knowledge in some cases. I find that the proposed analysis overwhelmingly emphazises this, particularly if one focuses on the fact that Mernissi is able to produce her theories as early as the 1990s, and that following the Moroccan legal reforms Lamrabet has the tools to engage in an even broader discourse. This serves to reinforce Talal Asad's theory that religion is constantly subject to new interpretations, and that these are particularly influenced by political factors.

In the course of the present article, it has been explained how various studies on Islamic feminism in Morocco have been developed. In spite of this, I believe that the article goes a long way towards progressing these theoretical foundations. It has emphazised that the development of feminist hermeneutics in Morocco should be studied as a dynamic phenomenon. Furthermore, it has demonstrated how phenomena both internal and external to the state of Morocco have shaped this process. Consequently, the development of exegesis cannot be regarded as a phenomenon in its own right, as Asad asserts with regard to Islam. Finally, the article presents itself as a first generational comparison of Islamic feminism in Morocco, because a study based on the comparison of texts translated by Mernissi and Lamrabet has never before been conducted.

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