

The Unearthing of Islamic Feminism in Bosnia and Herzegovina through Fatima Mernissi's Work

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Abstract – Islamic feminism was barely known before 1990s in the Balkans region and Muslim women started discovering religiously based feminism after the war (1991-1995) when the first books by Fatima Mernissi were translated to Serbian and Bosnian language. Although Muslim women were engaged in public life and politics in Socialist Yugoslavia, the mainstream teachings of Islam repeated the famous *hadith*: «those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity». In the secular sphere, Muslim women could participate in politics, but in religious circles they kept receiving the message that politics is not for women and that their primary role is in the family. The paper discusses how Mernissi's work helped Muslim women unearth Islamic feminism in Bosnia and Herzegovina and disclosed new horizons for the deconstruction of the history of Islam that was shaped and constructed by male scholarship with patriarchal lenses on gender roles.

1. Introduction

Reading *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* was a revealing experience to me and to many of my female and male colleagues and friends, as well as to many teachers, artists and politicians. In speaking of this book, I will provide personal reflections on how Mernissi's work helped many of us in a post-socialist democratic context of Bosnia and Herzegovina find arguments to pursue gender equality within the framework of Islamic tradition. Muslim women and politics became a riveting subject when Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007) became the first woman appointed the prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988, the first woman to hold this position. It was a big shock for many Muslims because they did not expect a woman to lead the state. She was viewed by many not as a role model for other women but as a rebellious bourgeois woman¹.

Many Muslims know and repeat the famous *hadith* (a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad): «Those who entrust their affairs to a woman

¹ F. Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993, p. 1.

will never know prosperity»². Therefore, any attempt to bring women into positions of power has been considered heretical and not in line with the mainstream teachings of Islam. Women were expected to raise families and teach but not to interfere in state affairs. Although the story of Queen of Sheba in the Qur'an (27, 22-44) reveals that there was a woman ruler, in medieval exegetes such as Ibn Kathīr (11c.) did not paradigmize this example in their interpretations of the sacred book. On contrary, Ibn Kathīr quoted the above-mentioned hadith from Bukhari, which is weak in the hadith classification that denies women to be political leaders. Barbara Freyer Stowasser explains that the reason might be because «Qur'anic story deals with events prior to her acceptance of Islam»³ Muslims in Bosnia Herzegovina also did not use the Qur'anic story to support women's political leadership. Imams scarcely mentioned her and when they did their interpretations goes to say that a «real» Muslim woman submit to a man as Queen of Sheba did to the prophet Suleyman when she accepted faith in one God.

Women's history was hidden and forgotten because modern historians omitted data about women queens collected by the first Muslim historians who included the data and information that they might found disturbing. Thanks to their intellectual honesty, Fatima Mernissi was able to write *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993), and her other books⁴. This book was revolutionary for me and many other women and men not just because of its rigorous historical research but also because of the powerful statement it made regarding the visibility and power of women in the Muslim world, including especially women as heads of state.

Although there has been some attention in the literature to Muslim women as rulers⁵, thanks to Mernissi's book many of us learned for the first time that sixteen Muslim women had been, in fact, political leaders, and that they had seized power, with or without support of their fathers, sons, and husbands, between the eleventh and seventeenth century across the Islamic world from Spain to the Maldives. We learned that women had led battles, made major political decisions, and enjoyed the same marks as sovereign rulers that men held: their names were proclaimed in the mosque during Friday prayers and their portrait engraved on the coinage of the realm.

² Al-Bukhari, *Al-Sahih* (Collection of Authentic Hadiths), Beirut, Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1978, vol.4, p. 6.

³ B. Freyer-Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretations*, Oxford - New York Oxford University Press, 1994.

⁴ F. Mernissi, *Women in Muslim History: Traditional Perspectives and Strategies* in S. J. Kleinberg, (ed.) *Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society*, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1988, pp. 338-355.

⁵ A. Asrafuddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory*, Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2007.

2. The context of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Two divergent secularist formations marked the social and political context of the Balkans and Bosnia Herzegovina in the second half of the twentieth century: the socialist government that was in power between 1945 and 1990 and the democratic ethno-national governments that brought back religion into the public domain from 1990 onward, after the former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia split up. While the socialist Marxist ideology that marginalized religion in public life promoted the notion of a modern and emancipated working class woman who was simultaneously active in politics (the socialist period saw the highest participation of women in the parliament, with 24% of the seats occupied by women), the succeeding ethno-nationalist democratic governments brought religion back to the public sphere advocating a re-traditionalization of gender roles. Even though the post-socialist democratic political system was theoretically secularist, because historically national identity in the Balkans has been inextricably linked to religious identity, the rise of ethno-nationalism accompanied by the war from 1992 to 1995⁶ and the post-war period inevitably brought religion – Christianity and Islam – to the fore in public and political discourse. The shifting political landscape greatly affected the issue of women's rights. Post-socialist democratization has therefore not led to further emancipation of women but to resurgence of patriarchal norms cloaked in ethno-religious garments⁷. Women went from being «comrades» in the former Yugoslavia, upholding the ideal of standing in the workforce shoulder-to-shoulder with men to being mothers, sisters, and daughters ideally quietly guarding family values within their own four walls⁸.

⁶ In 1991, Bosnia Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia together with Croatia and Slovenia, which triggered a civil war that lasted four years. Bosnia's population was a multiethnic mix of Muslim Bosniaks (44%), Orthodox Serbs (31%), and Catholic Croats (17%). The Bosnian Serbs, well-armed and backed by neighboring Serbia, laid siege to the city of Sarajevo in early April 1992. They targeted mainly the Muslim population but killed many other Bosnian Serbs as well as Croats with rockets, mortars, and sniper attacks that went on for 44 months. As shells fell on the Bosnian capital, nationalist Croat and Serb forces carried out horrific «ethnic cleansing» attacks across the countryside. Finally, in 1995, UN air strikes and United Nations sanctions helped bring all parties to a peace agreement. Estimates of the war's fatalities vary widely, ranging from 90,000 to 300,000. To date, more than 70 men involved have been convicted of war crimes by the UN. See more on: <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2012/04/20-years-since-the-bosnian-war/100278/>.

⁷ Z. Spahić Šiljak, *Women, Religion and Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina* in L.E. Cady - T. Fessenden (eds.), *Religion, The Secular and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 121-138.

⁸ S. Leinert-Novosel, *Žene politička manjina: perspective sudjelovanja žena u javnom životu, (Women Political Minority: Perspectives of Women's Participation in Public Life)*, Zagreb, NIRORadničke novine, 1990, pp. 22-30.

Although the constitutional legal framework of the secular Bosnia Herzegovina state guarantees gender equality and there are state mechanisms called state gender «state equality centers» to oversee implementation of laws, gender equality is not adequately translated into public and political life. One of the reasons is that religious and cultural norms suppressed under socialism re-emerged with recovered prestige, protection, and deference under democratic rule⁹. Stepping over the threshold between influence in the private sphere and influence in the public sphere by women was seen not merely as a gender issue but as something that could damage the integrity of the revival of tradition.

In the first democratic election in the former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia in 1990 when only two percent to maximum four percent of the women was elected for the parliaments in all the republics, which will soon become independent states, including Bosnia Herzegovina, in sharp contrast to the high 24 percent during the socialist period¹⁰. In 1996, after the war, there was only one woman in the parliament of the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina entity¹¹. The next year, under pressure from the international community, mainly the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) a quota of a minimum of thirty percent of women on the political party's lists of candidate list was imposed¹².

The post-war period from the end of 1995 was a time when women from civil society organizations found themselves working hard to regain the very political rights that they had previously taken for granted. The women's movement was secular, with women who were both religious and non-religious in it, fighting for the same cause: to bring women back to politics and public life. Feminist initiatives were driven and supported by international aid (Elissa Helms 2003)¹³, although secular feminism began flourishing earlier, in late 1970s, in former Yugoslavia, but mostly among women

⁹ Ibid. p. 122.

¹⁰ J. Bakšić-Muftić, *Ženska prava (Women's Rights)*, Sarajevo, Magistrat, 2006.

¹¹ Bosnia Herzegovina has been divided into two entities since the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995 that stopped the war and imposed the new Constitution and administrative divisions: Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, which is divided into ten cantons with Bosniak Muslim, and Croat Catholic majority; Republic of Srpska entity, with Serb Orthodox Christian majority; and District Brcko with Serb and Bosniak majority. Each of these levels of governance has its own constitution and parliament with exclusive jurisdiction over education, culture, social and health affairs.

¹² OSCE Report: *Bosnia and Herzegovina, Municipal Elections 13-14 September 1997*, <https://www.osce.org/odhr/elections/bih/14025?download=true> (accessed on June 29, 2017).

¹³ E. Helms, *Women as Agent of Ethnic Reconciliation? Women's NGOs and International Intervention in Post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina*, in «Women's Studies International Forum», 26, 1, 2003, pp. 15-33.

intellectuals at universities. Islamic feminism found fertile ground within the broader framework of secular women's organizations after 1990s rather than in religious communities and churches where conversations about women's political rights and involvement were not encouraged¹⁴.

Finally, in 2003, after years of lobbying and advocacy, women managed to achieve passage of the Gender Equality Law of Bosnia Herzegovina, which guarantees 40 percent of women on political party election lists, protection from sexual harassment, family violence and all forms of discrimination. The Law was just one of the steps in achieving gender equality, so women's organizations continued their efforts to empower women and to encourage women to enter the political arena and seek political leadership. The Gender Equality law was a big win for women's rights activists but while the law affirmed equality, it could not eradicate the systemic marginalization that plagued women and discouraged them from seeking political opportunities. Quotas and rules could be done away with as technicalities, because major political parties put women on the election lists just formally and most of these women are not highly profiled public figures and also not among the first four of five candidates on the lists. This means that women would have fewer chances to get elected. Therefore, even today women comprise from 17 to 20 per cent in state parliament, entity, cantonal and district parliaments.

It was widely understood that women had a 'proper' place reserved for them by tradition and norms. For a woman, to win a political place was to lose her original place and to attempt to straddle both seemed to many women to be either inconceivable or risky: Benazir Bhutto's case was a good example of the reason why.

3. Encountering Mernissi's work

While growing up in Bosnia in 1970s as well as during the time I spent as undergraduate at the Faculty of Islamic studies of the University of Sarajevo in the late 1980s, all I learned about Muslim women was that they were revered mothers, daughters, and wives whose highest purpose was to sacrifice everything for their families and communities. «Women

¹⁴ Religious women in the first NGO Medica Zenica that was established in 1993 with the support of Medica mondiale from Germany started to use Islam for empowerment of women, trauma healing and latter many other organizations such as: Women to Women from Sarajevo, International Multireligious and Intercultural Center IMIC Zajedno from Sarajevo, Transcultural Psycho-social Educational Foundation-TPO from Sarajevo, Small Steps from Sarajevo and many other organizations and individuals.

are to be respected» decreed the religious leaders and the textbooks but this respect was awarded strictly on the basis of their roles within the family. Even women who were important figures in Islamic history such as Khadija and 'Aisha (wives of the Prophet) were discussed in the biographies, or more precisely hagiographies, of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. There were no available books about prominent Muslim women. There was no information regarding how they lived historically, or how they interpreted social, political, and cultural aspects of Muslim communities. Nobody in Bosnia Herzegovina and the Balkans dared to claim that there had been historically Muslim women leaders in politics. Imams tried to skip the discussions about Aisha's role in the battle at the Camel in Basra (in 656) and emphasized that she regretted to be dragged into it and that caliph Ali forgave her and, that she remained revered mother of believers (*umm al-mu'minin*).

The mere question of female political leadership carried a tinge of blasphemy. It was feared that these kinds of questions would undermine traditional Islam and its legacy that barely survived during the socialist period.

If Islam and Muslims were as strong and grand as I had always been told, it did not seem reasonable that they could be threatened simply by questions about women's roles in public life and politics. Every time I brought up the subject during my studies, I felt genuine discomfort coming from my professors. They appeared not to know how to respond except by repeating the worn-out mantras about the importance of women as mothers, sisters, and daughters.

Unfortunately, the program of Islamic studies at the University of Sarajevo did not provide any information about Muslim women's history: their contributions to education, knowledge production, and leadership in politics. As a young woman who just graduated at the beginning of the 1990s, I felt that something was missing, that there was no gender justice, and that women were marginalized, but I did not know how to articulate this. When I asked my professors about women in the history of Islam, they answered briefly with a few passing references to progressive Muslim reformer thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935) in Egypt, Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) in India or Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) in Pakistan. Such reform thinkers dedicated time to dealing with the question of women, yet there were no women in their ranks.

The subjects of feminism and gender were missing in the public discourse of Bosnia Herzegovina except among small groups of female intellectuals at universities until they became buzzwords during the war, brought in by international human rights organizations that came in to provide aid to the civilian population, including women who were victims of rape. With some fellow women theologians I started to work for the NGO Medica Zenica, which was established by Medica mondiale from Germany for the purpose of counseling women victims of wartime rape in 1993. Muslim women had not previously been acquainted either with feminism or counseling but we learned a great deal on the job. We soon realized that most of the women we spoke to needed guidelines for coping and recovery within the framework of their religion, which was important to many of them. What women needed was not provided by our donors's educational materials nor by religious community mainstream teachings. Therefore, we had to come up with new strategies to help them believe that they were not alone. We contextualized the interpretation of the Qur'an on God's mercy (90, 17), forgiveness (2, 263-286), righteousness (2, 177; 3, 134), peace (25, 63; 28, 55), and hope (39,53) to lessen shame and guilt that wartime rape survivors felt. They needed to hear that God still loved them and they were not guilty for rape they experienced but the perpetrators were. What we did was feminist theology from scratch¹⁵, but at that time we did not know what feminism or Islamic feminism or gender was¹⁶. Only after the war, when we continued our education in human rights and gender studies, we learned what feminism and in particular Islamic feminism was as theoretical concept, idea, and movement. Doing and then naming our work was a reality for many women who engaged in feminist activism during this time, and this was doubly true for Islamic feminism, whose existence at the time was not only unknown but seemed inconceivable.

After the war, from 1996, I was part of the growing women's movement to fight for women's political rights. I started thinking more profoundly about how to reconcile my religious and civic identity. My experiences had shown me the need to take an intersectional approach not just to myself but to my work with people as well. What was the path to being a good believer and at the same time a responsible citizen? How was one to avoid the trap of «Medinah democracy», a term Mernissi coined to

¹⁵ Z. Spahić Šiljak, *Do it and Name It. Feminist Theology and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, in «*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*», 29, 2013, 2, pp. 176-184, here pp. 178-180.

¹⁶ Z. Spahić Šiljak, *Confluence of Islamic Feminism and Peacebuilding: Lessons from Bosnia*, in «*Samyukta: A Journal for Gender and Culture*», 17, 2017, 1, pp. 165-181, here p. 179

refer to the tension between secular and religious worlds that permeated her own life and work and the lives of many Muslim women who have to dance to two beats¹⁷.

In 2003, a friend visited me from the Netherlands bearing a gift: It was the English edition of *Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993) by Fatima Mernissi. I was thrilled, at first being unable to believe what I had found on the pages in front of me, and later being unable to put it down. I read for a whole day and night. Then I read it again, piece by piece, trying to digest all the information and data. I was finally able to convince myself to my full satisfaction that this book was not fiction but a piece of genuine historical research that was grounded in facts, revealing the existence of women rulers of Muslim history in different periods and different political and cultural circumstances. Here was the information and answers I had been seeking. Here was a Muslim woman scholar who had painstakingly dug up what modern male thinkers and historians had buried. Here was a way to find my place in the community with full regard to all aspects of my identity and ambition. I thought how so many women in Bosnia Herzegovina had been struggling with the same questions I had. And wanted to shout my newfound discovery from the rooftops. I settled for translating the book into Bosnian. I could not stop talking about my discovery for a couple weeks after, and most people I shared my idea with liked it and wanted to know when they would be able to read the book in Bosnian. This made me even more determined to do a good job translating the book to make it available to Bosnian audiences.

At that time, in early 2000s, many Muslim women were eager to learn about women's history in Islam and my late friend Farah Tahirbegović who was working in the publishing company Buybook in Sarajevo, along with the professor of Slavic Literature at the University of Sarajevo Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać, suggested I publish my translation of *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, which I titled it in Bosnian: *Zaboravljene vladarice u svijetu islama*, with the new Buybook feminist literature initiative called «buyFEMINAbook». We all were lucky to get funding from the Gender Center of Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina for the printing, thanks to the director Samra Hadžiabdić Filipović, who was also keen to support Muslim feminists. The book was published in 2005.

¹⁷ F. Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, pp. 179-189.

4. Public reflections on the book

The first launch of the book took place in 2005 in the Café Carabit¹⁸, an extension of the Buybook store, which was popular with those who wanted to hear engaging debates and read books with subjects that were less well-known to the post-socialist public. Three of my colleagues and professors wrote a blurb for the translated book: Enes Karić, professor of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo, who teaches *tafsīr* (commentary of the Qur'an); Jasna Bakšić-Muftić, a professor at the Law school with expertise in human rights and feminism, and Jasminka Babić-Avdispahić, a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy with expertise in ethics and feminism. Both Jasna Bakšić-Muftić and Jasminka Babić-Avdispahić as well as Nirman Moranjak Bamburać spoke at the book's launch. Marko Oršolić, a Franciscan friar and a pioneer of interreligious dialogue in the Balkans also participated to the book's launch, because he was the first to support the Women's Studies Program back in 1998 and had encouraged research on gender and religion.

At the launch I spoke with colleagues, scholars, artists, and activists whose work would come to be inspired by Mernissi's book. Now, twelve years later, they shared with me their comments and reflections on how hungry the Bosnian public had been for Muslim feminist knowledge and is still in need to learn more.

Mernissi's name had become a synonym for Muslim women's political leadership around the world, and in Bosnia was no exception. Women politicians were few. There was no encouragement for younger women to get involved in politics, and a lot of public vitriol for those who dared to do so. Besima Borić, a prominent politician, activist, and peacebuilder told me that she wanted to let the whole world know how immensely significant the book was for her, and how fortunately timed the translation was coming as it did when many dilemmas faced Bosnian women regarding political involvement. Borić organized a book's launch in her local community Vogošća, one of the municipalities of the city of Sarajevo with women from political parties and local NGOs. She explained:

«I admire the courage Fatima Mernissi showed that helped me dispel my own prejudices and reaffirm my commitment to bravely walking the political arena while mindful that my achievements would not be properly assessed just because I am a woman and that true equality will constantly be met with resistance»¹⁹.

¹⁸ A. Šimić, *Drugačiji način vrednovanja: Predstavljeno prvo djelo iz nove biblioteke buyFEMINA-book, Zaboravljene vladarice u svijetu Islama Fatime Mernissi, (Different way of valorization: first book from the edition buyFEMINAbook, The Forgotten Queens of Islam by Fatima Mernissi was presented)*, in «Oslobođenje», May 16, 2005.

¹⁹ Interview with Besima Borić, conducted in Sarajevo on May 29, 2017.

Most of the people who provided the reflections on the book *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* reported initial shock, disbelief, and even some internal turmoil over the contents of the book; so groundbreaking was it within the context of their preconceived notions of history, women, and Islam. During socialist time, religion was marginalized from public domain and being religious was not welcome and especially being a Muslim woman who exhibits her faith publicly was not well-received. Religion in general, and Islam in particular, was perceived as an element of backwardness that keeps women at home, covered, uneducated and submissive to their husbands. If a woman wanted to be engaged in public life and politics, she was not expected to show her religiosity; therefore, many Muslim women who were politically active in the socialist time did not reveal their religiosity. After the war, when more women started wearing *hijab* and became active in public life, and some of them, including myself, with clear Muslim feminist identity, it was a surprise and it was received with disbelief.

Feminism and Islam was widely regarded as an oxymoron, therefore the translation of Mernissi's book was so important for Bosnian Herzegovinan context to provide historical evidences about Muslim women leaders.

Aldijana Sadiković, one of my students and activist, said that the book had been an «accidental discovery» for her and that she was stunned to discover that there was scholarship out there way beyond the teachings of male religious authorities, adding that she noticed that

«regardless of the modern trends of intersectional feminism, many (including liberal feminists and Muslim women alike) believe Islam and feminism to be antonyms. She went on: «It will certainly come as a shock to many even today that Islam and feminism do not actually conflict»²⁰.

The professor of Religious Studies Nermina Baljević said that the book brought her:

«intense delight, but one that was accompanied with some anxiety because she had been forced to thoroughly re-examine the previous knowledge she had gained and conclusions she had reached», – adding –«although people have a hard time letting go of old notions, the new ideas and facts I was reading about definitively emerged victorious for me in this particular struggle»²¹.

Recent years have seen a surge of conversations about representation, particularly that of marginalized groups, in media, arts, academia, and

²⁰ Interview with Aldijana Sadiković, conducted online on May 10, 2017.

²¹ Interview with Nermina Baljević, conducted in Sarajevo on May, 10, 2017.

many other areas. It is widely understood that not only children but also adults find encouragement in their personal development and a sense of belonging when they see role models with which they can identify. One area where this is lacking is religion. In the Muslim community in Bosnia Herzegovina things looked discouraging to women who were enthusiastic about religion and spirituality, and who wanted to belong to the community. To foster inclusion, it is necessary to have more than general guidelines about equality – said Amra Pandžo, a faith-based peace activist who has struggled with her religious community.

«I was determined to practice Islam in every facet of my daily life but kept stumbling on absurd limitations and instructions I was being given as a woman. On the one hand, I was reading the Qur'an, listening to trusted teachers, feeling within me the concepts of a unified world, full of universal equality and freedom and individual rights for every human being in it. On the other hand, verbal remarks, commentaries, and numerous 'handbooks' that I came across contained an Islam that was a crippling one that encouraged me to give full authority to my brother, man, or husband so he could rule over the world, the state, the family, even over me»²².

Indeed, the prevailing sentiment that echoes through reflections on the book is that *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* aimed to help women understand the intersection of their female and Muslim identities. Nermina Baljević emphasized that when she said: «As happy as I was that [this knowledge from Mernissi's book] liberated me, I was far happier that my faith, my Islam, was also finally made accessible in an engaging way. For this I am very grateful [...] » A key and revolutionary insight for her and the women around her was that the question of women political leaders could indeed be raised without a hint of blasphemy:

«There is absolutely no conflict or opposition between women's roles in Islam and their feminist activism. Mernissi was firm on this: if women's rights are problematic for some male Muslims, that is neither due to the Qur'an nor the prophet nor Islamic tradition in general. What women's rights conflict with are the interests of the male elite»²³.

Mernissi's fresh perspective on women and political leadership provided the bridge many women needed to be able to approach religion and tradition critically. Damir Imamović, a young musician who sings traditional ethnic songs, said that a close woman friend had been intimidated by Islam because it felt like a «boy's club» had drawn closer to her religion, Islam, after reading Mernissi's book²⁴.

²² Interview with Amra Pandžo conducted in Sarajevo on May 12, 2017.

²³ Interview with Nermina Baljević conducted in Sarajevo on May 10 2017.

²⁴ Interview with Damir Imamović, conducted online on May 18, 2017.

What made Mernissi's book special was not just that it was a resource to help women to redefine their identities but that it was also a solid work of scholarship regarding feminism, Islam, and history. An intersectional perspective on feminism Islam and politic was sorely needed in the Balkans region in terms of scholarship and knowledge production that would fuel genuinely impactful activism. When the translation came out, Ajla Demiragić, who presently teaches feminist theories at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Sarajevo and who was student of professor Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać: «The *Forgotten Queens of Islam* greatly inspired the work of many of my fellow women scholars and activists in Bosnia Herzegovina in the period of post-war transition»²⁵. In countries like Bosnia Herzegovina, Western discourses of feminism often fail to resonate with women and the society as a whole because their perspectives and contexts are so different. «When we [women in Bosnia Herzegovina] read about the definitions and practice of Western feminism we cannot identify with some aspects of it» explains Aldijana Sadiković, praising Mernissi for expressing her unique perspective in her academic and activist work «in contrast to merely attempting to blindly copy-paste solutions from Western scholarship, activism, and historical practices»²⁶. Nermina Baljević emphasized how Mernissi situated her arguments within the context of a deep study of classic Islamic scholarship on the Qur'an and the *hadith* (the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) as well as in her study of history. Baljević disclosed that she had also been struck by Mernissi's «bravest, strongest invitation [...] for a more responsible, critical, and scholarly approach to the history of Islam and Muslims that invites us all to reject all our previous assumptions»²⁷. Baljević pointed out that Mernissi saw «the history of Islam with its many associated misuses as the most dogmatic and efficient weapon for subjugation and marginalization»²⁸.

That emphasis on Mernissi's courageous and at the same time socially conscious scholarship has been inspiring to many in both their academic and activist pursuits. Ajla Demiragić said that she wished to call attention onto «a hugely significant aspect of Mernissi's impact: her passionate work in strengthening the civil society network in Morocco, especially as a cofounder of *Caravane Civique*»²⁹. In post-war society of Bosnia Her-

²⁵ Interview with Ajla Demiragić, conducted in Sarajevo on June 06, 2017.

²⁶ Interview with Aldijana Sadiković, conducted online on May 10, 2017.

²⁷ Interview with Nermina Baljević, conducted in Sarajevo on May 10, 2017.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ J. Hassoune, *Comment la caravane civique a commencé*, http://www.mernissi.net/civil_society/portraits/jamilahassoune.html (accessed 28.07.2018)

zegovina, fostering dialogue and overcoming divisions was crucial and referring to another Mernissi's work *Sheherzade Goes West*³⁰, Ajla Demiragić found unfailing conviction that:

Fully inclusive dialogue is the only way that we can solve existing problems and build a better society. Mernissi wrote about new *Scheherzades* who not only speak when they please but also form their own spaces for dialogue with other women, as well as with other men, all within society that had been divided for such a long time. This kind of division inevitably, Mernissi always repeated, goes hand in hand with violence and injustice³¹.

Ajla Demiragić observed that Mernissi's excellence as a narrator was «particularly enriched by her ability to carefully listen to silenced voices of both the past and the present»³². Finally, Aldijana Sadiković believed that Mernissi was successful in shattering the image of the Muslim woman as The Other because of «her ability to convey the full complexity of the human condition»³³.

The reference to Scheherazade brings to mind the fascination that Mernissi revealed in her semi-autobiography with the storytelling of her aunt Habiba³⁴, as well as with the narrating prowess of the character of Scheherzade herself, who had used this talent to trick the king into not executing her. This book and other works of Fatima Mernissi is known to the Bosnian Herzegovinan audience in English.

It is evident that the lessons which Mernissi took from her aunt regarding the impact of words and empathy for the oppressed shaped her own journey, but it is interesting to see that the readers in Bosnia Herzegovina recognized this in her as well, viewing her not just as a great scholar and activist, but also as a mentor, role-model, defender of the weak and marginalized, a storyteller, and even something of an artist.

«Actually, more than anything else, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* showed me that history is in fact a story-telling strategy that can preserve or completely erase whole groups of people from our awareness» – said

³⁰ F. Mernissi, *Sheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*, New York, Washington Square Press, 2002.

³¹ Interview with Ajla Demiragić conducted in Sarajevo on May 06, 2017.

³² Ibid.,

³³ Interview with Aldijana Sadiković conducted online on May 10, 2017.

³⁴ F. Mernissi, *Dream of Trespass: Tales of Harem Girlhood*, New York, Persus Books, 1994.

³⁵ Interview with Damir Imamović, conducted online on May 18, 2017.

the musician Damir Imamović – «Mernissi’s lessons have been very relevant in my own daily work performing, teaching and writing about the traditional music of Bosnia and the Balkans, which is itself both an art form and a vehicle for preservation of Bosnian oral history»³⁵.

5. Final thoughts

The Forgotten Queens of Islam was a turning point for my colleagues and me. It will continue to be significant for the coming generations who will not have a chance to meet her. We can only imagine what would happen if Muslim women were taught from an early age that women who shared their faith led entire countries. They might raise their daughters to be leaders who are comfortable with their religious and civic identities.

Nermina Baljević insisted,

«It is crucial for everyone, especially for women, to learn to shout and protest as soon as they learn to walk and speak. Mernissi never stopped doing this herself. Although she passed the shouts and protests from the pages of her books seem louder than ever»³⁶.

Mernissi’s love of knowledge and scientific rigor made her a highly respected scholar, unprecedented and unmatched in her field. Her passion for addressing injustice wherever she saw it thrust her to the frontlines of the battlefield against injustice and made her a personal hero to many. Her courage in breaking down conventions and boundaries made her a ‘queen’ in her own right. Permeating her work was her humane and creative side that not only helped make her writing enormously engaging and accessible to a wide audience but also gave a warmer, more intimate dimension as an inspirational trailblazer.

Ajla Demiragić described Mernissi as an adventurer who «rushed bravely to meet The Other and The Unknown». I can only hope that women in Bosnia will have the courage and vision, like Mernissi, to step into the unknown and discover new horizons of knowledge and empowerment for new generations to come.

As much as Mernissi’s work contributed to Islamic feminist thought in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans region, young women should continue paving the path for new female leaders who should not be afraid to freely exhibit their religious and feminist identities.

³⁶ Interview with Nermina Baljević conducted on May 10, 2017.