

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Beth Hubble, Professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Montana. Regular listeners may recognize Beth from previous episodes about transgender histories, the French medieval writer Marie de France, Italian-French feminist writer Christine de Pizan, and the 17th century Ethiopian nun Walatta Petros. So yes, she is a frequent flyer, and please go listen to those episodes once you're done with this one, because today she's back to tell us about someone quite a bit more recent, Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist Fatima Mernissi. So first, could you introduce us to this woman and her work?

Listen to Beth's previous episodes on:
[Trans histories \(transcript\)](#),
[Marie de France \(transcript\)](#)
[Christine de Pizan \(transcript\)](#)
[Walatta Petros \(transcript\)](#)

BH: Fatima Mernissi was born, I believe, in 1940 in Fez, Morocco. Because of the way that she writes, it's very autobiographical, even in her more academic works. And so, know quite a bit about, she was born into a Muslim family in Fez, Morocco, and grew up there with her mother and her father, and an extended family that all lived in one compound that known as a domestic harem. And so, her grandparents were there, and her grandfather had more than one wife. Her mother and her father, that was their only other spouse, because the mother didn't want him to marry more women. But it was a family where they still grew up with different models of how families were changing in the mid-20th century in some parts of the vast Muslim world. And she writes about those tensions of growing up as an obviously brilliant child, but seeing these constraints placed on the women in her lives and on her mother, and how that influences her way of seeing and thinking about the world. And she has a beautiful, it is somewhat fictionalized, but a beautiful memoir called *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. I read it because it was on a syllabus I had to teach, but it is one of my favorite books, pleasure or otherwise, that I've ever read, because it's just taught me about a part of the world I knew very little about, while also really engaging with things that resonated in terms of the struggles that women had when she was in her childhood. So just someone who's very relatable in her writing and in her scholarship.

AT: It's always interesting because when we talk about universal books and works, people tend to point at folks like Shakespeare, right? It's typically from what I call CHAWM perspective: cis het abled white men, I'll also throw Western in there for an extra W. But I feel like this idea that plenty of people who don't fit into the CHAWM mold can also write universally doesn't occur to people. And I think that comes back to the empathy gap, of people with privilege have difficulty relating to the experiences of people who are not like them. And so they might see something like this and be like, "well, this doesn't match my personal experiences, therefore, I struggled to connect with it," which is unfortunately ironic, because the best way to close the empathy gap is to consume the stories of people who are not like you.

BH: With this book, probably 17 years ago, I inherited a syllabus from a previous faculty member. And it was for a class that is a great books by women class, essentially. And I was familiar with many of them. There's almost no non-Western stuff on it. Anyway, it was still a very white, upper class list of readings, except for Fatima Mernissi. And so I saw them like, "well, I'll get the book, let's see what I think." And read it and went, "oh, this is never coming off my reading list again." And now I own most of her books just overall. *Dreams of Trespass* is a memoir, and it is fictionalized. But I thought, "oh, this must just be for a broader audience, this must be how she writes." And so she has a book she wrote as a follow up to that called *Scheherazade Goes West*, that's actually about the book tour in Europe and the United States, about *Dreams of Trespass*, because it was such a problematic book tour with how she was treated by white male journalists in Europe and the United States. And so I got that and I went, "oh, that's just how she writes. She just writes in this accessible yet smart, all those things." And the thing I found with teaching it now at least 15 times, and I teach her in multiple classes, because I teach her theory stuff in other classes, is students have the same reaction. At the end of the semester on their final exam, I always for extra credit, I actually say, "what was your favorite book you read and why? And what book would you add to the syllabus?" And so they have to answer that. And a good half of

them almost every year say that it's Mernissi's memoir, was their favorite book. Because, exactly with what you said is that here's this book that says it's about a harem. And we have ideas, and she plays with this beautifully in the book, we have ideas in the west of what a harem is. And so you see this book and you think, "what is this professor making me read?" And you get into it, you're like, "oh, this is just a girl growing up like I did, and struggling with a lot of the similar things." And so you find that. So for me, if I think back to the mid-2000s, when I would have first read this, read anything by Mernissi, it was one of the first real big wake-up calls to me that I was a white feminist. Because finding those connections in Mernissi, I was like, "yeah, I need to start shutting up and letting these people talk" because the rest of the syllabus is largely white. It was all white women at the time. So Mernissi, for me, what you said about that empathy and finding those connections and really giving ways to say that I need to focus on the local issues. Because people like Mernissi have got their issues covered. I don't need to be an American feminist going, "I need to go save those women in the veils."

AT: This actually came up before in a conversation that I had with Ellie Woodacre, who is another frequent flyer. She talks about royals and royalty. And so we were chatting about queen mothers and like maternity and how in polygamous societies, a harem as this sexualized image, say from the Disney film *Aladdin*, for example, that is very much the Western perspective on this idea of a harem. Whereas, as we discussed in that conversation, it's really a family compound. This is a family home situation. You've got kids running around and all of that. And I find it really interesting that as you're talking about, this is a story of a girl growing up, how it's really Western white biases that would look at a story like that and think, "oh, it says harem, therefore it must not be something I can relate to." But when you compare that to like *The Diary of Anne Frank* or Laura Ingalls Wilder, does a contemporary white American woman really have much more in common with a girl growing up on the American frontier or a girl hiding from the Nazis during World War II? These are all experiences that are going to be very different from what most of us are experiencing today. And I think we're just coming back to that question of what do we think of as universal versus what actually is relatable if you give it a chance?

[Listen to Ellie Woodacre on the power of queen mothers](#) or [read the transcript](#).

BH: Yeah. Just because you also named two books that have been very important, or not just books, I mean, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and I have a newer biography of her that my sister told me to read that I'm going to be reading soon. And so I think what you say is exactly right. And I think that the reason that I connected with *Little House on the Prairie*, that I connected with *The Diary of Anne Frank*, that I connected here with fictional books with *Anne of Green Gables*, is that you can see yourself, here's another little girl growing up and struggling with how to fit into the world around her. And the time and the place kind of sinks to the background. And you kind of just have that both learning about the differences in her family life, while also seeing those connections and seeing her asking the same questions that little girls who love to read were asking, which was one of the things that she struggled with when she was little. She was allowed to go to school outside of the home and things like that, but there were tensions within her house about that schooling.

AT: I do feel like it's also just much more effective to teach history through individual lenses, to get this sense of a time and place from people who were actually there through that personal narrative. Because so often it can feel like history is just a collection of dates and places and names that you don't really connect with. But a story has the power to be so much more impactful in how we internalize history.

BH: That's one of the beautiful things with the book *Dreams of Trespass*. And I'm actually going to, at least chronologically, make a connection to Anne Frank here, because she references in the book, the backdrop of World War II, because this is North Africa. And so having seen soldiers at the end of the streets and things like that in Morocco at that time. And, for me, I've used that with the students to say, "what soldiers are these if it's the 1940s?" And then, sometimes taking a while and going, "it's got to be World War II, right?" But to them,

they're not making that connection because World War II is framed in a certain way in the United States compared to thinking about the North African campaigns and all the other things. So she situates the book geographically, historically, and in all these ways, because Morocco is way closer to Spain than it is to Mecca. And that's kind of how she starts the book is to say, "we're only 1000 kilometers from Madrid and 5000 from Mecca" or something like that. And so talking about those tensions and the borders and all of that. And then just us today talking, she's writing it retrospectively, but she was growing up as a little girl in, in the same time that Anne Frank was. I've been to Anne Frank's house, the house in Amsterdam, and it is one of the more difficult things I've done as a visitor to a country, because it's those connections to those little girls growing up and what it would have been like.

AT: I would imagine if any Americans have any awareness of how World War II was impacting Morocco, it would be through the movie *Casablanca*. And that's if you like old movies, because there are plenty of people who haven't even seen *Casablanca*.

BH: So, one of the things I do when I teach anything about Africa is first of all, I play a clip from the West Wing that shows how wrong our maps are, and how big Africa is, because we know it's big. But it is so small in the Mercator projection maps compared to its actual size, that we diminish it and all this, and we do that to the global South overall. But I give them a blank map with the country outlines, and then a list of the countries in Africa and have them fill it in. In general, they get three: they get Egypt, South Africa and Madagascar, because of the cartoon. When we talk about Morocco, I always say, "you know at least one city name from Morocco, and they just stare at me. And I'm like, "no, you really do. You do." And I say Casablanca, and they're like, "that's in Morocco?" We just don't teach geography. And so trying to bring that and try to really emphasize, because I talked to you another time about Walatta Petros, Morocco and Ethiopia are really far from each other. And very different experiences. And so that's why when I teach Mernissi, I try to be really careful with the students to say that the Islam of North Africa is different from the Islam of Saudi Arabia is different from the Islam of Indonesia. We don't know something universal about Islam from reading Mernissi. We know Mernissi's experiences of it and her take on it. And to emphasize that with people, that this is the perspective of an academic. And she taught at the University of Rabat and was a sociologist. She was trained in the United States. She went to Brandeis and got her PhD, which is fairly common in the French-speaking parts of Africa that their PhDs are from either Europe or the United States for women, from the authors that I've studied. And so she is an academic, but one who does an amazing job of making her writings accessible.

AT: Well, to bring it back to her writings, you briefly mentioned her feminist theory work, because we've mostly talked about her more autobiographical works like *Dreams of Trespass* and *Scheherazade Goes West*. But could you tell us more about the feminist theory books like *The Veil* and *The Male Elite* and *Beyond the Veil*?

BH: I show my students a political cartoon that has a woman in a bikini and a woman in a veil and they're looking at each other and, "everything covered but her eyes," "nothing covered but her eyes" because she's got sunglasses on, "What a patriarchal culture." And it really for me wasn't until I read *Beyond the Veil* and *The Veil* and *The Male Elite* that I started to see that relativity of feminism and how we view how we're set up. And with Islam, to go back in time in the ways that a number of Muslim feminists do and say, these are all Abrahamic religions and they're all coming from a part of the world where patriarchy existed. And a lot of what gets manifested in conservative parts of Islam is more a reflection of either that historical tradition that predates Islam or other influences coming in. And so, Mernissi kind of opens that door, especially for someone like me who's teaching undergraduate students, to say "we don't need to be looking at how women are oppressed in another part of the world. We can and we should and we should acknowledge those things but not at the expense of looking at the ways that these same systems just manifesting differently are impacting us." And so, having Mernissi's writings about dissecting the history of the veil and how imposition of it is done differently in

different parts of Islam and how it's not mandated either in the Quran or in the Hadiths, the sayings of Muhammad and looking at that historically and adding that texture in for students to understand that for us in the West, especially since 9/11, we see a veiled woman and we immediately have this reaction to it as opposed to taking a step back and trying to understand what the complexities of the veil as a choice. And so, the conversations that we can have around that can get to be really rich because it is a really complex question. And I've drawn this analogy with it before with veiling, which is done in many different ways in many different contexts and countries and historically. Mernissi writes about it in some places in a very nuanced, smart way as a choice. But then one of the questions that her thinking follows that up with, is that choice being made freely? Similar to more a decade ago in American feminism, it's attenuated somewhat now, an idea of sex workers choosing to be in that profession and asking the question, "under what constraints is that choice being made?" And so with Mernissi, seeing how the patriarchal system's coming from a really similar place, it's coming from the same place. We're all coming from Abraham in these religious ways of thinking. We're asking theoretically some really similar questions about, in terms of gender, under what constraints are we able to be the agents of our own lives?

AT: Interestingly, the big parallel that popped into my mind as you were talking is that there's a section in my book about people freaking out about what female athletes wear. And I believe in the book, I juxtapose things like hijab bans, where Muslim girls are less likely to be involved in sports, not just for other reasons going on, I'm sure, but specifically because if you can't cover up in a way that you feel comfortable with, then you're less likely to engage in that sport. But it's not just specifically about Muslim girls, because there was a study that actually found that women athletes performed better when they didn't have to wear white shorts. (BH: Ohhhh.) Yeah, and you're making the connection that presumably anyone with a vagina also made, which is if you're not worried about, if you're on your period, is a stain showing? Then you are more able to focus on playing the sport that you're meant to be playing. And when we're talking about the right to modesty, that is not specific to Muslim women. There have been a lot of instances of pushback from female athletes in recent years, including at the Olympics and stuff, where it's, say, women volleyball players saying, "actually, we don't want to have to compete in a bikini when the guys get to wear shorts and shirts." In 2025, the national camogie tournament got cancelled, because the women athletes said, "we don't want to have to wear a frickin' skort." There was a whole debate when boxing was added to the Olympics, where all these, presumably mostly if not all men were sitting around like, "should we make women wear skirts while they punch each other?" And so this idea of trying to force women either into what I believe one track and field runner called skimpy kit, she was British. But there are just so many situations where just to engage in a sport, girls and women are forced to wear clothes that make them uncomfortable, either because your shorts are white, you're being forced to run around in a frickin' skort, or because maybe you don't want to have to wear a bikini to work.

BH: I absolutely think that that is the case. My niece is a competitive swimmer. And one of the things that's become more popular in swimming is more full-body suits, or at least thighs-up suits. Obviously, this is more what I call anec-data. But so many of the girls, as soon as they turn 13, they're allowed to wear those suits instead of a bathing suit. And my sister's like, "you think? When you're a middle school girl, that you're being told you can wear something that covers more, where you don't feel like you're on display," all those things. And so seeing that happen, there was, not a big blow up, and it didn't go anywhere. My child competed in taekwondo nationally in the United States. And at one point during his competitive years, there was a proposal that the women's uniforms were going to be different. Because until then, they all wore the same thing. And it got shot down. But everyone's like, "this works. This is what we've always competed in. What are you talking about, 'women need a separate'?" not to mention the fact, I think that taekwondo is split into men and women because the skilled women can beat the men.

AT: Did you know that, I believe it was shooting as an Olympic sport was co-ed until a woman won, and then

suddenly, women weren't allowed to compete against the men anymore.

BH: Yeah, all those. But in terms of clothing, with what you brought up with athletes and with other questions of modesty, I think that that is absolutely a question. If I teach about Muslim feminism, they're not surprised to talk about veils. But what you bring up is something where I don't think they're always expected to go and see how profoundly it connects to their own lives. That if you're always having to worry about your veil coming undone, if you're late to class because of some clothing thing or because you had your period or something like that, seeing those connections, seeing how you can relate to the experiences, a woman who veils in Missoula, Montana, where I live, absolutely does stand out. I've had students who wear the veil who've talked to me about it. I'm not going to speak on their behalf, but for my non-Muslim students, that ability to build that empathy that you talked about before by seeing how the experiences of these girls growing up in a Muslim household parallels them as opposed to them seeing it, "oh my God, can you imagine having to wear a hijab?" But if you can make the connection, which now the next time I teach it, I'm totally teaching it this way, making the connection to, "but do you remember when you had to be the away team and wear your white basketball uniform in high school? And the way in which that impacts your ability to participate in these things on such a profound level when you're having to worry about it all the time."

And so for me, teaching about Mernissi's life, but also about the way that she helps us helps me interrogate our Western assumptions about gender and our Western assumptions about any way in which the way that American feminists are somehow doing it better, the ability to use her writings to not just talk about the veil, not just talk about women in Islam, but to see how it can be used as a lens to talk about things that are important to American students too, is that's one of the things that she's done in part because even her academic writings are so accessible compared to someone like Judith Butler, who I teach in the same class. I teach Butler and Mernissi in the same class, and students much prefer the one they don't need a dictionary. (AT: To translate?) To translate. And Mernissi was trilingual as she grew up speaking French and Arabic, wrote a lot of her books in English to reach the broader audience. So some of her books were written in French, I think *The Veil in the Male Elite*, which I think is the book version of her dissertation, I think that might have been in French. But *Dreams of Trespass* was written in English for an English market to reach that broader market. And then she didn't translate them, but she oversaw the translations into French and Arabic and other languages. She wrote in English as much as she could to reach a broader audience.

AT: And there is also plenty of evidence to support that, for example, the Nobel Prize for Literature rarely goes to works that are not in, shall we say, the languages of predominantly white countries, or colonialist languages, or however you want to consider that. But a work in Arabic, or any Indigenous languages, any African languages, those works are almost never even really seriously considered for Nobel Prizes in literature. But with that in mind, I'd like to come back to this question of the Western perspective exoticizing and treating non-Western countries as so much worse for women, right? So even with the harem, the idea of how we see the harem versus what it actually looks like in most contexts, that's part of this same idea as demonizing the hijab, or the burqa, or any other kind of religious-focused veil, shall we say. Never mind that Orthodox Jews also cover their heads, but somehow that's rarely seen in the same way.

BH: Timothy says all women are supposed to cover their hair in church in the New Testament. And the hijab is not gendered. It's just modest dress, and it's not gendered in Islam. It's only been applied that way. Men are all supposed to dress modestly.

AT: I think you do have the same issue with Islam that you have with Christianity, and I presume any other religion, where if you actually look at the root text, the way that it is applied rarely matches what the source material is telling you to behave like. So it's funny when I look at so many American Christians in particular, and it's like, "what would Jesus do? Not that!" We can separate what the Quran says, for example, from the way

that many, particularly men, apply the religion, right? So, distinguishing what Islam, shall we say, is meant to be if you look at the Quran versus how particularly men weaponize it, because Christians do the same. But with that in mind, when we look at this Western perspective, that predominantly Muslim countries, Arab countries, however they are categorizing countries like Morocco or families like Mernissi's, this idea that women are so much worse off in that area. To me, there may be situations where yes, that is factually true, like from a legal rights standpoint, from a statistical standpoint. Yes, there are certainly ways that those things may be true. But I do wonder how much of that belief is also not just xenophobia, but patriarchal misdirection. This idea that, "oh, you white American feminists are upset? Well, look how bad those women have it. And be grateful."

BH: I 100% agree with what you're saying. One of the reasons that I wish more people were reading authors like Mernissi is because she opens that door up for us to find an individual voice, but also someone speaking from that place who's aware of those tensions, has lived in the United States and has lived in Europe, but chose to live in Morocco and work at the University of Rabat. That idea of, things have changed in the last nine years in the United States. But I started teaching in women's studies with people talking to me about, "isn't it time for post-feminism? Isn't it time? What more do you want?" I used to have a bumper sticker that said, "I'll be post-feminist in the post-patriarchy." But if you can distract people, and we see there's rising Islamophobia in the United States again now, and just overall racism and xenophobia, all of those things. But actually, there's been a lot of really shocking Islamophobia. I mean, it's always bad. But there has been a rise in it. And I think it is with that idea of misdirecting us from the fact that we're actively having our rights taken away in the United States now. "But at least we didn't," well, Saudi Arabia does let women drive now, "but at least we let women go to sports games." That kind of, as you see different things play out in other parts and using the worst examples of oppression in certain Muslim countries as a universal for all of those experiences.

AT: I think we saw a lot of that with the New York mayoral election in 2025, with Zohran Mamdani first becoming the candidate and then winning. But he is just conservatives' absolute worst nightmare: a charismatic person of color, Muslim socialist. If they had a checklist of things that they hate. There's a couple where, if he was a queer woman or something, that might have the full list, but he checks so many of their boxes.

BH: That is exactly right, of saying we need to distract with that kind of identity stuff away from the policies and the different, those things, the places where we do agree. With Mernissi, women being allowed to have an education, women being allowed to wear what they want. And my understanding is she went back and forth in her life. Her mother fought really hard within their extended family about what the women were allowed to wear. They were required to all be veiled when they left the familial compound that they lived in. But the policy things that can be changed, if we can distract away from all those things and just get people mad about what someone's religion is or all the gross misinformation in America, about what we think socialism is.

AT: Now to switch focus a bit, I'd like you to tell us a bit more about the recurring use of Scheherazade in her work. So for anyone who's not familiar, could you explain the character of Scheherazade and then how Mernissi uses that in her work?

BH: I've actually been kind of shocked in teaching this, that students will tend to know what *1001 Nights* is. They'll have heard of that. They'll have heard of Aladdin. They'll have heard of Sinbad. They'll have heard of stories that are connected, all this stuff. And then I say, "well, and Scheherazade," and they'll say, "who?" And I'm like, "well, she's the teller of the stories!" And so this story falls into almost like a mythological story. It's very echoing of the Bible in some places and story of Esther and things like that. This king who is betrayed by his wife. And so then he can never trust women. And so he keeps going through all the women and one of his counselor's daughters, Scheherazade, it's her turn to marry him and she starts telling him stories. For Mernissi

and for women in the Muslim world, it's her ability to use words and tell a story. It's her mind, Scheherazade's mind. When I make connections like with the West, I think of St. Catherine of Alexandria, who debates pagan philosophers, a woman who uses her mind, uses her intellect to tell this king stories, and then almost get to the end and leave him on a cliffhanger. So she has to finish the story the next day for a thousand and one nights. And so ultimately stops his femicides. So the story itself is horrific. But this idea for Mernissi of a woman using stories, using words and using intellects to find freedom and hope. And I think in particular, it's that idea of telling our stories and getting stories out there that is what resonates. And that in tellings of that story that I think my students reaction shows the centrality of a woman narrator gets lost in terms of how we see the Islamic world. And so wanting to emphasize to them, Mernissi is a woman writing about a woman telling stories. And we don't always think of women as being the narrators of stories. We don't get stories told through women's points of view. And so that for Mernissi is the key here, is this amazing example from the Islamic world of a woman who used stories to find freedom and save at least some women.

AT: Well, it's kind of the ultimate position of power, isn't it? To be the one who gets to tell the story. Anyone who's heard the Hamilton soundtrack will know the line, "who lives, who dies, who tells your story?"

BH: Yeah, that story is so powerful. My biblical reference to like Esther or to Saint Catherine of Alexandria, those are not figures that are always focused on within either a Jewish or a Christian church, Esther is maybe a little bit more. But that idea of, we lose these examples of women and their intellect from these traditions and Scheherazade for sure serves that purpose. I have like this list in my head and I think this is kind of what drove your book and your website and your YouTube channel and all of that is my education. I was in honors classes, I got the good grades, I got into great graduate schools, I had amazing instructors (so I thought), and then more in my teaching career and in my own time being introduced to these authors like Mernissi where I went, "why is this the first time I'm hearing of her? How could I have a degree in French from the University of Michigan?" This is a woman who taught in French in a French-speaking country, and the first time I heard of her was I inherited a syllabus from a BIPOC woman who was retiring and Walatta Petros is in that list, all these things of this list of people of going, why was I never taught this? Because I think that with Mernissi, like with a number of BIPOC American feminists and things like that, I can do a lot of the analysis of literature and media and culture using Mernissi in ways that I think are just as rich if not richer than the kind of traditional American feminists that get taught. That to me kind of in my mind of going, Mernissi was one of the really first times where I went, "boy that was a lot of college to never get taught these people." Mernissi was just one of those first moments where I went, "oh wow, I went to college for 12 years and there is so much that I don't know."

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women Podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.