

Harem, Frontiers and Feminist Thought in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Childhood*

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Abstract

One of the leading figures in feminist thought and Muslim feminism is the Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi. In her writings, gender equality, female emancipation and freedom can be considered the feminist thoughts that Mernissi portrayed through her major characters. In her memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, Mernissi narrates her childhood along with her female relatives in the historic city of Fez in late 1940s. As a young girl, Mernissi reacted to world around her—Harem—in poignant and courageous manners. Additionally, in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi was blatant in her views about the connotations and symbolism of the veil as a practice in Muslim communities. Mernissi sees the veil as a symbol of unjust male practices and authorities over women. As a result, she tries to go beyond the veil as a cultural and religious symbol to investigate its origins in the first Islamic community.

Introduction

No doubt that when it comes to the Arab and Muslim feminism the name of the Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi figures at the heart of the list. In her memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, Mernissi narrated her childhood stories and her experiences with the idea of Harem, frontiers and spaces in the historic city of Fes in the late 1940s. As a young girl, Mernissi reacted to world around her—Harem—in poignant and courageous manners. Additionally, in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi was blatant in her views about the connotations and symbolism of the veil as a practice in Muslim communities. Mernissi sees the veil as a symbol of unjust male practices and authorities over women. As a result, she tries to go beyond the veil as a cultural and religious symbol to investigate its origins in the first Islamic community.

In her memoir, Mernissi discussed many themes in relation to her childhood and what she experienced when she was a young girl. However, in this paper the focus will be on two of major themes that Mernissi has discussed in her memoir such as Harem frontiers and the theme of the feminist thought. The memoir started with the biography of Fatima Mernissi as a way of contextualizing her major themes and what she is going to inspect and examine. The memoir started with the following quote: “I WAS BORN in a harem in 1940 in Fez, a ninth-century Moroccan city some five thousand kilometers west of Mecca, and one thousand kilometers south of Madrid, one of the dangerous capitals of the Christians. The problems with the Christians start, said Father, as with women, when the hudud, or sacred frontier, is not respected. I was born in the midst of chaos, since neither Christians nor women accepted the frontiers”. (Mernissi, 1994, P. 1)

The above extract gives a clear insinuation that it is a memoir and more importantly her personal stories that she has gone through during her childhood. Through the quote, one can see clearly the fact that Mernissi linked her experiences with her location and the place where she grew up. The central points of her memoir are the concepts of Harem, frontiers and gender equality. For Mernissi, one of the major obstacles that she was facing is the frontiers and how

she can trespass them. For her, there had been a fight between the women inside the Harem and the doorkeeper: “Right on our threshold, you could see women of the harem contesting and fighting with Ahmed the doorkeeper as the foreign armies from the North kept arriving all over the city”. (Mernissi, 1994, P. 1)

A. Harem and Frontiers

Harem frontiers has been one of the major themes that have been examined by Mernissi in her memoir *Dreams of Trespass*. So, trespassing the borders was one of her major aims as a young girl. She adds: “Harmony exists when each group respects the prescribed limits of the other: trespassing leads only to sorrow and unhappiness. But women dreamed of trespassing all the time. The world beyond the gate was their obsession”. (Mernissi, 1994, P. 1) As it can be seen clearly, going beyond the borders was a priority for her as a rebellious young girl in the historic city of Fez.

Mernissi goes on to theorize the concept of “the frontier” from the perspective of the power relations and colonial domination. She referred to her uncle and father as very powerful men, but they need to learn what type of frontiers they are trespassing and sometimes they need permission from the Spanish colonizers. Mernissi put it clearly through the following lines: “Even Uncle `Ali and Father, who were so powerful in the city and ordered around everyone in the house, had to ask permission from Madrid to attend Moulay Abdesslam's religious festival near Tangier, three hundred kilometers away”. (Mernissi, 1994, P. 1)

Additionally, *Dreams of Trespass* concentrates on the concept of Harem more than the frontiers, though there are some close relationships between the two. Mernissi began with the idea of the French Harem and the unbelievable restrictions that the female family members were facing. She stated that: “OUR HOUSE GATE was a definite hudud, or frontier, because you needed permission to step in or out. Every move had to be justified and even getting to the gate was a procedure. If you were coming from the courtyard, you had to first walk down an endless corridor, and then you came face to face with Ahmed, the doorkeeper, who was usually sitting on his throne-like sofa, always with his tea tray by his side, ready to entertain”. (Mernissi, 1994, P. 20) This is a very vivid depiction of the daily routine of the Harem women. Their mobility was restricted and in most cases they can't dare to step out without permission.

She went further to make an analogy between children and women in terms of mobility and permission to go out. She says that:

(Uncle's and Father's honor and prestige depended on that separation, we were told.) Children could step out of the gate, if their parents permitted it, but not grownup women. "I would wake up at dawn," Mother would say now and then. "If I only could go for a walk in the early morning when the streets are deserted. The light must be blue then, or maybe pink, like at sunset. What is the color of the morning in the deserted, silent streets?" No one answered her questions. In a harem, you don't necessarily ask questions to get answers. You ask questions just to understand what is happening to you. (Mernissi, 1994, P. 20)

Clearly, grown women were not allowed to go out without permission. Unlike children, women are prohibited from stepping out the gate. Mernissi argued that women were not allowed even to ask questions. She says that in Harem context, questions are not asked for answers, but rather for giving an idea about what is happening around the person. This means that there was no space for women to get involved and give their opinions such as to agree or disagree.

Furthermore, Mernissi talked about what she was facing in the city of Fez. She gave a very clearly description of the physical Harem as well as the Harem within. She says: "OUR HAREM in Fez was surrounded by high walls and, with the exception of the little square chunk of sky that you could see from the courtyard below, nature did not exist.... You could not, for example, open a shutter to look outside when you wanted to escape. All the windows opened onto the courtyard. There were none facing the street". (Mernissi, 1994, P. 57) Through this quote, it becomes clear that trespassing the frontiers of the Harem was not an easy task. What needs to be taken into account is the fact that Fatima Mernissi has gone through this experience and the idea of trespassing the Harem and frontiers was always in her mind. Mernissi dreamed like any young girl to have a passport, travel outside and explore the world on her own. This experience has inspired Fatima Mernissi throughout her writings.

B. Feminist Thought

Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* is a very good example of the notion of feminist thought. For example, gender equality and freedom were among the major feminist thoughts discussed in the memoir. She stated:

Rules were made in such a manner as to deprive them in some way or another. For example, she said, both men and women worked from dawn until very late at night. But men made money and women did not. That was one of the invisible rules. And when a woman worked hard, and was not making money, she was stuck in a harem, even though she could not see its walls. "Maybe the rules are ruthless because they are not made by women," was Yasmina's final comment. "But why aren't they made by women?" I asked. "The moment women get smart and start asking that very question," she replied, "instead of dutifully cooking and washing dishes all the time, they will find a way to change the rules and turn the whole planet upside down." "How long will that take?" I asked, and Yasmina said, "A long time." (Mernissi, 1994, P. 61)

The above quote is dominated by the feminist thought particularly the idea of gender equality. This can be seen clearly when she compared men and women and the fact that women work hardly, but they are not paid like men. She argued that this is one of the invisible rules.

So, the invisible rules and Harem were among the major themes that Mernissi tried to discuss as an attempt to introduce the concept of the feminist thought such as the idea of gender equality. Her characters in the memoir were trying their best to figure out the invisible rules. She says: "I asked her next if she could tell me how to figure out the invisible rule or qa'ida, whenever I stepped into a new space. Were there signals, or something tangible that I could look for? No, she said, unfortunately not, there were no clues, except for the violence after the fact. Because the moment I disobeyed an invisible rule, I would get hurt". (Mernissi, 1994, P. 61)

Conclusion

All in all, Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* is an example of Arab and Muslim feminism. She discussed many important themes such as gender equality, freedom, emancipation and societal rules. The notion of the feminist thought is omnipresent in Fatima Mernissi's writing, particularly her main books such as *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female dynamics in Modern Muslim Societies* and *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* which are widely cited as authoritative sources for scholars in the West.

Mernissi in her discussion of the veil tried to discuss the idea of segregation. For Mernissi, ordering women to veil outside home is not fair since it leads to the invisibility of women. She claimed: "Veiling is a symbol or form of seclusion... and expression of invisibility of women on the street, a male space par excellence". (Mernissi, 1991, P. 147) The point that

Mernissi was trying to make is the fact that there is gender inequality when it comes to the public space, the male sphere where women were discriminated against.

More significantly, reading these three books from a feminist perspective, one can argue that Mernissi has talked very extensively on women`s rights and other major themes such as male dominance. (Mernissi, 1987, P. 61.)

References

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