

## **Feminist Politics in Autobiographical Fiction of Fatima Mernisi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood***

by  
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### **Abstract**

The social and cultural life of Arab women in Morocco is viewed to be that of subjugation. The issues of women's right, identity and recognition have, therefore, come to be a major preoccupation of Mernisi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of A Harem Girlhood*. In this novel, Mernisi assumes the role of a social visionary who could pass for a 'watch-dog' in her society. The paper employs liberal feminist criticism to analyze the thematic thrust of the work. Equipped with an avowed commitment to promote the right of women, the paper examines how her autobiography strives to fertilize the ideological thrust of feminism in Arab literature and through an appropriate deployment of narrative technique, style, theme and characterization; it projects an artistic vision that reveals the deplorable condition of Arab women in Morocco. In conclusion, the study shows that she explores persuasive strategies to effect social change. In this way, her work aptly demonstrates the interrelatedness of arts and society.

### **Introduction**

Mernisi's autobiographical fiction critically examines the patriarchal assumptions about womanhood in the Arab society of Morocco. It delineates the Arab world along gender line as defined by culture and religion. The text shows that Arab society perpetuates oppression of women by denying them equality with men. According to Ngocobo (2003, p.533) in nearly all societies, the crime against women stems from one fundamental principle- the social and sexual subordination of women. 'There is an old-age fear that the independence of the female spirit will destroy the pillar of society. Mernisi, through her autobiographical text, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of A Harem Girlhood* enhances the Arab culture by writing about women. She also succeeds in enriching a feminist tradition of writing and at the same time giving Arab gender discourse a boost in its emancipatory and empowering struggle against oppressive phallogentric tradition. This essay, thus, evaluates Mernisi's work as a further step towards female autobiographical writing in the Arab world. Mernisi's work is firmly rooted in the colonial Moroccan as well as the Arabian past. The author shows the Pre-independent Morocco which was bound together by the colonial presence of the French.

The paper studies how life writings have re-configured feminist discourse in the Arab society of Morocco. The author grapples with the conflict that social change and identity crisis have generated in the life of women. In consonance with the emerging modern culture of the Post independent Morocco, women attempt to break into the bounded territories that men exclusively enjoy. Arab women are shown to be conscious of the impediments imposed by the socio-cultural and religious traditions. The author employs two sets of mutually irreconcilable characters to reflect on the conflict between traditionalism and modernism. Through characterization, the author shows the reverent and irreverent reaction to the age-long tradition of 'hudud', which, to large extent, imposed considerable restrictions on the aspirations and emancipation of the female gender. The author engages in a critical, self-reflexive appraisal of a wide range of issues. She recalls salient historical antecedents that have remained motivational to the production and criticism of the emerging social order in Morocco.

### Autobiography in Arab Literature

Mernisi is undoubtedly one of the notable Afro-Arab writers who have successfully utilized the human dimension of historical events in her artistic effort to explore her society. Chinua Achebe, cited in Ohaeto (1991, p.125) comments that "the writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them...In Africa, he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history". It is this historical sense that Mernisi aesthetically explores through an exegesis of the female characters in *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of Harem Girlhood*.

Life writing, according to Tsiga (2012, p.69) has remarkably recorded tremendous growth, making it one of the most vibrant literary traditions in the recent time. This writing includes self-reflective narratives, comprising autobiography, biography and memoirs. It is intellectually productive to study self-reflexive literature that examines history from a defined self-perspective taking into cognizance that it is a product of specific socio-political, economic, sexual and racial circumstances. The writing of autobiographies had brought a wealth of information and insights into how issues were seen, perceived and experienced by the marginalized, which in this case is the female gender. According to Ibrahim (2004, p.21) the first Arab woman to have written a biography was Maryam Nahhas Nawful (1856-1888). Her work was entitled *Mithali Kitab Mar'id al-Hasna fi tarajim Maohahib al-nisa* (1879). Her work was followed by that of Zaynab Fawaz (1850-1914) who compiled a biographical dictionary of women entitled *Al-Durr al-Manthour fi Tabaqat*

*Rabibat al- Khodur* (1894). Fawaz laments that even though al-Ghazal and a few other male authors included women's accomplishments in their collections of people of notable achievement, there is still a substantial lack of scholarship on Arab women. By early 1990s, biographies in the Arab literature were conspicuously associated with feminist politics. The views that biographies are capable of shaping other people's lives led writers to explore the use of discourse morality to propose ways of achieving social and political change. Because biographies presuppose a mutual context in which reading has the power to transform the readers, the biographies serve to articulate the experience and aspiration of the Arab women. Mernisi's autobiography, *Dream of Trespasses: Tales of A Harem Girlhood* reveals the problem of oppression that Arab women contend with in Morocco.

### Feminist Theory

This paper employs liberal feminism as the theoretical thrust of Mernisi's autobiographical fiction. Liberal feminism canvasses the idea that in nearly all societies, men and women are treated based on their sex. It also posits that social injustice against women should be castigated and amended. Mernisi's work reflects the dominant concern of the liberal feminist critics. The text does not advocate extreme radicalism in addressing the plight of women.

Feminism is originally a French word. It refers to what in the 19th century's United States called the women's movement. This movement was a diverse collection of groups with a common goal; that of advancing the position of women. In the contemporary period, the movement has broadly become divergent. Feminism today refers to all those who seek, no matter what grounds, to end women's subordination. The ideology of feminism varies to a considerable degree in meaning, scope and goal. It advocates women's liberation. According to Molar (1994, p.547) culture is dynamically evolving since it is certainly not static. She argues that culture should not be immobilized at all time to the advantage of male as the African man wants it to be. Feminism is therefore, an ideology about women and any social philosophy about the female gender. This all-encompassing definition gives an ample leeway to accommodate various categories of women movement : right wing, left wing, centrist, left of center, reformist, separatist, liberal, socialist, Marxist, non-aligned, Islamic, indigenous, etc.

Feminism, according to Orjinta (2013, p.208) refers to an ideology that has tremendously influenced many spheres of academics. It is a

theoretical perspective that exploits the available theories to advance its goal, prominently to redress male injustice. Feminism is an ideological movement that encompasses divergent social arrangement that calls for different levels of approach. Women's struggle features in almost all the fields of human endeavours. In sociology, feminism denotes a social struggle for gender equality; in politics; it involves a political movement and ideology that promote the socio-political roles of women. Historically, scholars have taken for granted the fact that men are superior to women.

### **Mode of Characterization**

Through aesthetic devices of characterization, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of A Harem Girlhood* revolves around the life and experience of a young girl, Fatima, in a traditional harem of her household. Fatima develops a curious attitude of interrogating her mother and aunts on a day to day experience of the trivialities of her life. At the beginning, her mother feels the questions are not important and that they are merely things that any young girl would ask as she becomes conscious of her environment. At a later stage, she understands that no one answers her questions because traditionally "in harem, you don't ask questions to get answers. You ask questions just to understand what is happening to you"(p.22). Through constant curiosity, Mernisi reveals the life that women behind the walls of the harem contend with. The situation is complicated and conflict ridden beyond what one would imagine. The story depicts how the confined woman of each household in the Arab society of Morocco is premised on the historical events of the time. The idea of *hudud* i.e barrier that exists between men and women is predominant everywhere. The obvious barrier is that of a harem which affects all women characters in the text. Fatima declares succinctly that "Our house gate has 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". (p.21) The frontier is a well-established barrier such that for Yasmina, Fatima's maternal grandmother, their farm house may not have gates, the women know and feel the invisible boundaries which restrict their movement and actions. The women's activities were heavily curtailed to prevent them from having any form of contact with events outside the wall.

Yasmina tells the painful experience of women seclusion when she asserts that "sometimes, she said that to be stuck in a harem simply meant that a woman had lost her freedom of movement. Other times, she said that harem meant misfortune because a woman had to share her husband with many others".(p. 34) From this declaration, the narrator

shows how painful polygamy is harmful to women. She points out that the custom of traditional rotation among several wives makes women suffer. Such a round can also be a dreadful routine. A situation where the wives live together in one harem brings a lot of problems. Wives living in full view of each other can see clearly how the husband relates preferentially with another. The jealous may arise from economic inequalities and any other secondary factors. The narrator also reveals that polygamy is harmful to woman because it hinders not only the growth of a real personal commitment and companionship between husband and wife but also their individual emotional wellbeing.

The experience of Yasmina is one of the numerous examples of how a female character battles with the frontiers. She explains to Fatima what harem really connotes and how those who live in it contend with it. Harem refers to the private space and the rules guiding it. Accordingly, she asserts that harem can be stretched to give freedom, but it can also take it away. Ultimately, there is no definite answer as to who sets the boundaries of the frontier. The explanation which follows is that Mecca is an example of harem under Allah. It is a place that one had to obey its laws if ones enter it. The same applies to a harem when it is man's household. One lives there in accordance with the rules set by the owner.

To aesthetically illustrate the conflict of social identity, Mernisi further employs contrasting characterizations to reveal the crisis generated by cultural dilemma in the post independent Arab society of Morocco. She creates two major classes of character who related differently to the barriers that women grapple with. The characters fall broadly within traditional and modern elements. One of such characters who represent traditionalism is Lalla Mani. She is a character who pitches tent with cultural practice of pre-independent Islamic society of Morocco. She is an avid defender of *hudud*. There are many instances in the text where she condemns women who intend to violate the frontiers. She always shows disaffection for any attitude that violates the teachings of the religion. She predicts hell for any woman who desired to abandon the veils and take to dancing, singing and making fun. She considers such conducts as serious transgression against Allah's injunctions. Lalla Mani posits that "theatre is a sinful activity because it is not mentioned in the Koran and no one ever heard about it in either Mecca or Madina" (p. 109). She believes that only bad or half crazy, possessed men and women danced in public.

Fatima's father is another character who supports tradition of his society because of the need to safeguard its identity. He upholds the tradition not because he is conservative, power hungry or wishes to oppress his

women. He is a man who patiently listens and accommodates the views of women. He confesses to have been torn between his duty towards the tradition and his desire to make his household free and happy. He knows too well that living together as one big family with a lot of barriers for women and harem life in particular are fast become outdated. Most of his reasons for supporting the tradition are to protect the cultural identity of Morocco. He believes that when Arab women began to imitate their counterparts in Western Europe and America by dressing provocatively, smoking cigarettes and running around with their hair uncovered, there would be only one culture left in the world. Ours would be dead. His reason for supporting tradition stems from preserving the cultural identity of the Arab.

On the other hand, there are characters like Asmahan, Chama and Fatima's mother who strongly despise the *hudud*. These characters are revolutionary in their worldview. Asmahan, for instance, wants to break loose from the oppressive tradition of *hudud*. She detests the whole clan and its senseless, cruel tradition. She always wants to drift away into bubble-like moments of happiness and sensual bliss. (p.110) Chama is also another female character who normally preaches against traditional practices. She demands to be set free. Chama does not only attack the *hudud*, she also voices her feminist thought. She always puts on plays that challenge the harem and despise traditional mores. Chama usually dreams of freedom when she listens to Radio Cairo on the progress of women's right in Egypt and Turkey. She argues that "My generation is being sacrificed. Revolution is liberating women in Turkey and Egypt and we are left out here up in the air" (p. 148).

Fatima's mother like Chama challenges her husband on a series of issues concerning traditional practices. One particular way in which harem becomes a burden for her is that all the families have to live together. She dreamt the need to live alone with her husband and children without interference from the larger family set up. She challenges her husband and demands to know whether he heard of ten birds living together squashed into a single net. She insists that "It is not natural to live in a large group, unless your objective is to make people feel miserable" (p.77). Through vary experiences, Mernisi shows the form of living pattern that woman behind the wall of harem endures. She gives an account of how the secluded women of her household are conditioned by the traditional practice of her society.

Throughout the narration, Mernisi does not take a position as to whether she agrees or despises the practice of harem. She creates divergent form

of characterization to reflect the crisis of identity and social evolution between the pre-colonial Moroccan society and the emerging French civilization. She depicts traditional practices in contrast with the modern civilization to show how women fair in the emerging new society. This episode is well illustrated when Fatima reveals that her young male cousins wore western clothes and haircuts, only the older uncles and her father hold fast to traditional attire. This new attitude makes her uncle to jokingly observe that "One day, we will probably manage to throw away the French out, only to wake up and find out that we look like them" (p.85). It is ironical that women do not enjoy the same degree of freedom as men change their life style from traditional dressing. On account of this discrimination, Chama protests against the culture of depriving women the right to dress in western style since the younger males were allowed to do so. The narrator condemns the assertion that making "women dress in a western fashion will destroy Moroccan culture and infringe its identity while the male cousins run around like so many imitations of Rudolph Valentinos and no one screams at them that the culture is about to disappear". (p.181)

It is noteworthy that harem women display intelligence and innovation in trying to establish for something more practical but not too radical. In numerous cultures, status and personality are strictly based on gender role. Male sexes control the society and had the higher status while the female sexes have less and are expected to be submissive and obedient. In addition, the cultural ethics that are embedded within the patriarchy system supports and perpetuates female discrimination. This gives a picture of the female gender in male dominated society. Many writers reflect the plight of female gender in various societies.

The text shows a deep concern for feminist politics and cultural identity. It reveals the plights of women in its narrative form. The author shows the typical life of the urban harem women at the time of Morocco's independence. The narration reveals that women have magic idea in them woven into dream. Dreams can change life and eventually the world. Liberation, according to the text, starts with images dancing into one's little head and such can be translated into words and actions.

Mernisi gives an account of a Moroccan childhood experience of the narrator in *Dreams of Trespass*. She discusses feminist politics and establishes women's liberation as an appendage of the nationalist struggle. The text shows that the attainment of independence of Morocco from the French ushered some degree of identity and gender crisis. Women are denied the same level of freedom that men enjoy as younger

males take western tradition without caution. To defend the right of women and assert their self-actualization, Fatima's mother joins the nationalist march for independence and removes her veil both symbolically and physically forever. Yasmina tells Fatima that men violated the right of women but that times were changing. The new era comes with hope and that Fatima should look forward to the future with optimism. The future promises independence and greater freedom for women in Morocco. Yasmina feels satisfy that her granddaughter will grow up in a city where women's right are guarded. The narrator envisions new Morocco where women were to enjoy the same right to education as men. The text promises the women their right to enjoy exclusive relationship with their husband as against the tradition of polygamy. The future portends for women the promise to abolish slavery which continues to exist after the French had pronounced it illegal. The author illustrates Moroccan women reliance on nationalist struggle to pave way for their self actualization and self determination.

## Conclusion

Women writers in the Arab world have written in widely divergent styles but in most instances have treated common themes. The fictional autobiographical text of Mernisi focuses on the transition of her society from traditional framework to western imposed model of the so-called 20<sup>th</sup> century civilization. The work deals with the consciousness of women resulting from this transition. The author reveals the crisis of identity and sexism through the use of contrasting technique of characterization. She also shows how gender conflict is being confronted by Arab women in Morocco. The writer is vocal in her demand for removal of the apparent barriers and restrictions against women. She takes to task the injustice of the frontiers and illustrate the brutal treatment some women suffer. The women accuse men of consciously refusing to remove the predicaments caused and perpetuated by the practice of *hudud* in the guise of preserving the cultural identity of the Moroccan Arab. The indication of feminist concern reflects in the veil, the harem, seclusion, polygamy and experiences of women in their world of forced domesticity. The author engages in one form of feminist issue or the other. The text avails the historical explanation of the oppressive tradition and practice against women in Morocco.

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