

## Review

# A Woman First and Foremost: Fatima Mernissi's Dreams of Trespass

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In reading *Dreams of Trespass* through the lens of Simone De Beauvoir, the reader can interpret the “transitional” generation of women’s recognition of their own powerlessness as their recognition of womanhood: they are forced to be women first and foremost, as opposed to being individuals first, a luxury reserved for men. The novel illustrates the radical change in Moroccan culture through three generations of women in a harem: the traditionalist older generation, the modern generation of children, and the aforementioned “transitional” generation of women, who are aware of their low status as women, but are still unable to break out of the constraints of tradition, even though they do not benefit from it. The latter generation, exhibited with the characters such as the narrators’ mother, Aunt Habiba, and Chama, have to be continuously conscious of their womanhood, and by proxy powerlessness, however they cannot escape their position, which allows only for liberation through freedom of thought.

**Key words:** Simone De Beauvoir, Fatima Mernissi, marginalization, Islamic feminism, feminism, bildungsroman.

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## INTRODUCTION

The bildungsroman *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* follows the protagonist, Fatima Mernissi, through her childhood and early adolescence in a harem in Fez, Morocco. The protagonist in the collection of stories seeks to understand wide-scope ideas of gender-related and traditional frontiers by exploring the multitude of characters who cohabit the harem. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, prominent French feminist Simone De Beauvoir explores the definition of woman, be it a “not a man” (De Beauvoir 14) or the “imperfect man (De Beauvoir 15), drawing from a variety of sources

throughout history, including Dorothy Parker, Aristotle, and Bossuat. Additionally, De Beauvoir addresses that the definitions society imposes upon women create an “otherness”, a quality which marginalizes, even though women have never been a minority. The author comes to the conclusion that the lack of unity amongst women prevents resistance to this marginalization. Finally, De Beauvoir establishes her goal for the book: describing a world in which “women must live”, as they “aspire to full membership in the human race” (De Beauvoir 28).

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Simone De Beauvoir, the reader can interpret the “transitional” generation of women’s recognition of their own powerlessness as their recognition of womanhood: they are forced to be women first and foremost, as opposed to being individuals first, a luxury reserved for men. The novel illustrates the radical change in Moroccan culture through three generations of women in a harem: the traditionalist older generation, the modern generation of children, and the aforementioned “transitional” generation of women, who are aware of their low status as women, but are still unable to break out of the constraints of tradition, even though they do not benefit from it. The latter generation, exhibited with the characters such as the narrators’ mother, Aunt Habiba, and Chama, have to be continuously conscious of their womanhood, and by proxy powerlessness, however they cannot escape their position, which allows only for liberation through freedom of thought.

The women of the “transitional” generation are aware of their weakness as women in the harem tradition. Like the women in De Beauvoir’s argument, being a woman of this generation in a harem is the primary limitation for individual development of the women, as awareness of their limitations as women is ever-present, unlike “(men who) never begin by presenting (themselves) as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man” (De Beauvoir 15). One example is exhibited in the mother not obtaining the family council’s approval to attend school, questioning: “Who is benefitting from a harem? What good can I do for our country, sitting here a prisoner in this courtyard?” (Mernissi 200). The mother questions the relevancy of the harem tradition as it relates to her as an illiterate woman. Even though nationalist Morocco is advancing opportunities for the next generation to contribute to the country’s development, as a woman of the generation caught in between, she is unable to develop with modern Morocco. Likewise, Mernissi’s older cousin Chama is aware that “(she) can’t see a movie, because (she is) a woman” (Mernissi 116). Chama recognizes that being a woman above anything else is the hindrance for her life, even in an activity as trivial as going to the movies. Women in the harem have to attribute the negative consequences of being in a harem to womanhood, which is the root of their static position.

Inside the harem, the women of the mother’s generation are constrained by tradition, from both evolving and resisting to their position as women in the harem. Their status as women presses their decision-making to be well-planned and calculated, due to the very little impact the women have in the harem tradition. One example is the advice the mother gives to Mernissi as a child: “whenever you feel like flying, think about how and where you’ll end up” (Mernissi 60). In stating this, the mother advises the young narrator to be aware of the

women’s place in the harem and in a Muslim society of the time, one that impedes individual growth and progress. In order to break out of the powerlessness, the women must have a long-term goal in order to have enough motivation to withstand the reins of tradition. As the women have very limited rights in the harem and what rights they do have can be easily ignored by the power-holding men, even resistance has to be carefully orchestrated in order to make the most impact with what limited leverage women have. This is demonstrated in the mother’s advice to young Mernissi to “rebel when you know there is some chance you may win” (Mernissi 117). This advice indicates the very little agency that women have as part of the traditional generation, their voices are powerless to such an extent, that it is not worth the energy to resist or rebel against the prominent walls of tradition and womanhood unless there is opportunity for one’s voice to be heard and considered.

A hierarchical structure among women in the harem prevents all the women in the harem from resisting their marginalization by the tradition. As in De Beauvoir’s argument, women “have no past, no history, no religion of their own” to connect and unite them against their status as women in society. In fact “if (women) belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with the men of that class, not with the proletariat women” (De Beauvoir 18), which is the preventing factor of hierarchies amongst women. Mernissi addresses the discord among women in the example of Lalla Thor, Yasmina’s co-wife, who “was powerful, and she was the only aristocratic, city-born wife of Grandfather Tazi” (Mernissi 33). On multiple occasions Lalla Thor reinforced her opinion that she had superiority over the other co-wives because of her aristocratic upbringing, referring to Yasmina as “this woman (who) does not respect hierarchies” (Mernissi 31). Instead of supporting one another in their powerless situation, trapped in a harem, Lalla Thor perpetuates a disconnect and lack of solidarity among the women. Similarly, in the protagonist’s harem, “Deep down there was no cohesion at all. The split between the women was unbridgeable, with the conflict over the embroidery design emblematic of much deeper, antagonistic world views” (Mernissi 209). The two “camps” of the older generation and the mother’s generation represent the two bipolar opinions of the harem: the former benefit from it, while the latter are opposed to it. Ultimately, neither camp is willing to compromise to spark real change in the women’s status in the harem, however without complete unity among all the women in the harem, the focal problem becomes the disconnect among women, rather than the women’s general inferiority to men in the harem.

As women first and foremost, the women of the transitional generation cannot think of themselves as independent: their livelihood is only depends the men of the harem. De Beauvoir also claims that “humanity is

male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (De Beauvoir 15). In claiming this De Beauvoir highlights the attitude of many men, including the men of the harem: the wants and needs of the women of the transitional generation are not a priority, they are secondary to those of men. Women have to thus become dependent on men to fulfill their needs, in the marginalization of women in the harem. For this generation, the dependency on men stems not only from awareness of their situation, but also illiteracy, which was caused by a lack of access to education. This dependency and inessentiality is illuminated by the mother having "to beg Father to read her favorite passages to her... father made all kinds of requests" (Mernissi 121). The mother's "favorite passages" refer to Qacem Amin's feminist manifestos, one of which includes *The Liberation of the Women*; the passages intend to give the mother freedom of thought, which in itself is resistance to her position as a woman. However, she has to beg her husband for access to this information. Her husband, in turn, takes advantage of his powerful position in this instance by requesting favors of the mother, which encompasses the relationship paradigm in the harem: it intends to benefit men, while marginalizing women. To interpret, woman is defined in relation to man, as in the harem woman exists through her dependency on man. Additionally, De Beauvoir's claim brings to light the essence of the harem tradition: the women are kept together in a man's harem as property, to benefit him and his livelihood.

Women of the transitional generation can only liberate themselves through freedom of thought and expression. De Beauvoir, however, claims that "a degradation of existence in to the 'en-soi'- the brutish life of subjection to give conditions- ... brings liberty into constraint and contingency" (De Beauvoir 27). The significance of this statement lies in that the life of living 'en-soi', in one own's head, with freedom of thought being the only liberation, is precisely the only means for the women of the transitional generation to liberate themselves from the constraints of tradition and of their womanhood. In *Dreams of Trespass*, Aunt Habiba explains: "a woman could be totally powerless, and still give meaning to her life by dreaming about flight" (Mernissi 154). As a divorced woman who had to move back to her family's harem, Aunt Habiba has even less power than other women in the harem, dreaming about flight is her means of resistance to her circumstances. Furthermore, Aunt Habiba states that "the main thing for the powerless is to have a dream" (Mernissi 214): a dream allows the powerless to resist a system, such as the harem tradition, on a personal level with minimal risk that comes with opposition, but also with minimal change to the system and to one's position. Nonetheless, "dreaming" allows her

to remain happy enough to keep living. De Beauvoir on the other hand, claims that "the fortunes of an individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty" (De Beauvoir 27). This claim explains that even though a woman in Aunt Habiba's situation can find happiness in her low status and powerlessness, she is not allowed to live her life "traditionally" free: being able to live outside of the harem on her own terms. Nonetheless, for women of the transitional generation freedom of thought is the only means for resistance and liberation.

The position of the women between the traditional the modern harem prevents them from being individuals before being women, as cultural tradition constrains their personal growth. The only means for liberation for this generation of women is power of thought and resistance via mental freedom. Even though this metaphysical resistance forces no real change for the women of this generation, it allows them to transcend their negative experience being women first and foremost in a harem to the next generation in the face of their children. This in turn, allows this generation to live vicariously through the development of strong, modern Moroccan women, for example Fatima Mernissi herself, who earned a doctorate in political science, is a world-renowned Islamic feminist and author.

## REVERENCES

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