Fatima Mernissi  
*Dreams of Trespass*

**I. My Harem Frontiers**

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. 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. In fact, foreigners were standing right at the end of our street, which lay just between the old city and the Ville Nouvelle, a new city that they were building for themselves. When Allah created the earth, said Father, he separated men from women, and put a sea between Muslims and Christians for a reason. 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. They fantasized all day long about parading in unfamiliar streets, while the Christians kept crossing the sea, bringing death and chaos.

Trouble and cold winds come from the North, and we turn to the East to pray. Mecca is far. Your prayers might reach it if you know how to concentrate. I was to be taught how to concentrate when the time was appropriate. Madrid’s soldiers had camped north of Fez, and 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. But the soldiers who stood outside our door were French, and of another tribe. They were Christians like the Spaniards, but they spoke another language and lived farther north. Paris was their capital. Cousin Samir said that Paris was probably two thousand kilometers away, twice as far away from us as Madrid, and twice as ferocious. Christians, just like Muslims, fight each other all the time, and the Spanish and the French almost killed one another when they crossed our frontier. Then, when neither was able to exterminate the other, they decided to cut Morocco in half. They put soldiers near ‘Arbaoua and said from now on, to go north, you needed a pass because you were crossing into Spanish Morocco. To go south, you needed another pass, because you were crossing into French Morocco. If you did not go along with what they said, you got stuck at ‘Arbaoua, an arbitrary spot where they had built a huge gate and said that it was a frontier. But Morocco, said Father, had existed undivided for centuries, even before Islam came along fourteen hundred years ago. No one ever had heard of a frontier splitting the land in two before. The frontier was an invisible line in the mind of warriors.

Cousin Samir, who sometimes accompanied Uncle and Father on their trips, said that to create a frontier, all you need is soldiers to force others to believe in it. In the landscape itself, nothing changes. The frontier is in the mind of the powerful. I could not go and see this for myself because Uncle and Father said that a girl does not travel. Travel is dangerous and women can’t defend themselves. Aunt Habiba, who had been cast off and sent away suddenly for no reason by a husband she loved dearly, said that Allah had sent the Northern armies to Morocco to punish the men for violating the *hudud* protecting women. When you hurt a woman, you are violating Allah’s sacred frontier. It is unlawful to hurt the weak. She cried for years.

Education is to know the *hudud*, the sacred frontiers, said Lalla Tam, the headmistress at the Koranic school where I was sent at age three to join my ten cousins. My teacher had a long, menacing whip, and I totally agreed with her about everything: the frontier, the Christians, education. To be a Muslim was to respect the *hudud*. And for a child, to respect the *hudud* was to obey. I wanted badly to please Lalla Tam, but once out of her earshot, I asked Cousin Malika, who was two years older than I, if she could show me where the *hudud* actually was located. She answered that all she knew for sure was that everything would work out fine if I obeyed the teacher. The *hudud* was whatever the teacher forbade. My cousin’s words helped me relax and start enjoying school.

But since then, looking for the frontier has become my life’s occupation. Anxiety eats at me whenever I cannot situate the geometric line organizing my powerlessness.

My childhood was happy because the frontiers were crystal clear. The first frontier was the threshold separating our family’s salon from the main courtyard. I was not allowed to step out into that courtyard in the morning until Mother woke up, which meant that I had to amuse myself from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. without making any noise. I could sit on the cold white marble threshold if I wanted to, but I had to refrain from joining in with my older cousins already at play. “You don’t know how to defend yourself yet,” Mother would say. “Even playing is a kind of war.” I was afraid of war, so I would put my little cushion down on our threshold, and play *l-msaria b-lglass* (literally, “the seated promenade”), a game I invented then and still find quite useful today. You need only three things to play. The first is to be stuck somewhere, the second is to have a place to sit, and the third is to be in a humble state of mind, so you can accept that your time is worth nothing. The game consists in contemplating familiar grounds as if they were alien to you.

I would sit on our threshold and look at our house as if I had never seen it before. First, there was the square and rigid courtyard, where symmetry ruled everything. Even the white marble fountain, forever bubbling in the courtyard center, seemed controlled and tamed. The fountain had a thin blue-and-white faience frieze all around its circumference, which reproduced the design inlaid between the square marble tiles of the floor. The courtyard was surrounded by an arched colonnade, supported by four columns on each side. The columns had marble at the top and the bottom, and blue-and-white tilework in the middle, mirroring the pattern of the fountain and floor. Then, facing one another in pairs, across the courtyard, were four huge salons. Each salon had a gigantic gate in the middle, flanked by enormous windows, opening onto the courtyard. In the early morning, and in the winter, the salon gates would be shut tight with cedarwood doors carved with flowers. In the summer, the doors would be opened and drapes of heavy brocade, velvet, and lace let down, so breezes could flow in while light and noise were kept away. The salon windows had carved wooden shutters on the inside, similar to the doors, but from the outside all you could see were silverplated, wrought-iron grilles, topped with wonderfully colored glass arches. I loved those colored glass arches, because of the way the rising morning sun kept changing their reds and blues to different hues, and softening the yellows. Like the heavy wooden doors, the windows were left wide open in the summer and the drapes were let down only at night or during afternoon naptimes, to protect sleep.

When you lifted your eyes toward the sky, you could see an elegant two-story structure with the top floors repeating the square arched colonnade of the courtyard, completed with a parapet of silver-plated ironwork. And finally, you had the sky – hanging up above but still strictly square-shaped, like all the rest, and solidly framed in a wooden frieze of fading gold-and-ocher geometric design.

Looking at the sky from the courtyard was an overwhelming experience. At first, it looked tame because of the manmade square frame. But then the movement of the early morning stars, fading slowly in the deep blue and white, became so intense that it could make you dizzy. In fact, on some days, especially during winter, when the purple and shocking pink rays of the sun violently chased the last, stubborn twinkling stars from the sky, you could easily have become hypnotized. With your head tilted back, facing the squared sky, you would feel like going to sleep, but just then people would start invading the courtyard, coming up from everywhere, the doors and the stairs – oh, I almost forgot the stairs. Lodged in the four corners of the courtyard, they were important because even grownups could play a sort of gigantic hide-and-go-seek on them, running up and down their glazed green steps.

Facing me across the courtyard was the salon of Uncle and his wife and their seven children, which was an exact reproduction of our own. Mother would not allow any publicly visible distinctions to be made between our salon and Uncle’s, although Uncle was the firstborn son, and therefore traditionally entitled to larger and more elaborate living quarters. Not only was Uncle older and richer than Father, but he also had a larger immediate family. With my sister and brother and my parents, we only numbered five. Uncle's family totalled nine (or ten, counting his wife’s sister who visited often from Rabat, and sometimes stayed as long as six months at a time, after her husband married a second wife). But Mother, who hated communal harem life and dreamt of an eternal tête-à-tête with Father, only accepted what she called the *‘azma* (crisis) arrangement on the condition that no distinction be made between the wives. She would enjoy the exact same privileges as Uncle’s wife, despite their disparities in rank. Uncle scrupulously respected this arrangement because in a well-managed harem, the more power you have, the more generous you ought to be. He and his children ultimately did have more space, but it was on the top floors only, well away from the highly public courtyard. Power need not manifest itself blatantly.

Our paternal grandmother, Lalla Mani, occupied the salon to my left. We only went there twice a day, once in the morning to kiss her hand, and a second time in the evening to do the same. Like all the other salons, hers was furnished with silk brocade-covered sofas and cushions running along all four walls; a huge central mirror reflecting the inside of the gate door and its carefully studied draperies; and a pale, flowered carpet which completely covered the floor. We were never, never supposed to step on her carpet wearing our slippers – or even worse, with wet feet, which was almost impossible to avoid doing in the summer, when the courtyard floor was cooled twice a day with water from the fountain. The young women of the family, such as my cousin Chama and her sisters, liked to clean the courtyard floor by playing la piscine (swimming pool), that is, by throwing buckets of water onto the floor and “accidently” splashing the person next to them. This, of course, encouraged the younger children – specifically, my cousin Samir and I – to run to the kitchen and come back armed with the waterhose. Then we would do a really good splashing job, and everyone would be screaming and trying to stop us. Our shouts would inevitably disturb Lalla Mani, who would angrily raise her drapes and warn us that she was going to complain to Uncle and Father that very night. “I will tell them that no one respects authority in this house anymore,” she would say. Lalla Mani hated water splashing and she hated wet feet. In fact, if we ran to talk to her after we had been standing near the fountain, she would always order us to stop where we were. “Don’t talk to me with wet feet,” she would say. “Go dry yourself first.” As far as she was concerned, anyone who violated the Clean-and-Dry-Feet Rule was stigmatized for life, and if we dared to go so far as to trespass on or dirty her flowered carpet, we were reminded of our wayward deed for many years to come. Lalla Mani appreciated being respected, that is to say, being left alone to sit elegantly dressed in her bejeweled headdress, and look silently out into the courtyard. She liked being surrounded by heavy silence. Silence was the luxurious privilege of the happy few who could afford to keep the children away.

Finally, on the right side of the courtyard was the largest and most elegant salon of all – the men’s dining room, where they ate, listened to the news, settled business deals, and played cards. The men were the only ones in the house supposed to have access to a huge cabinet radio which they kept in the right corner of their salon, with the cabinet doors locked when the radio was not in use. (Loudspeakers were installed outside, however, to allow everyone to listen to it.) Father was sure that he and Uncle had the only two keys to the radio. However, curiously enough, the women managed to listen to Radio Cairo regularly, when the men were out. Chama and Mother often would be dancing away to its tunes, singing along with the Lebanese princess Asmahan “Ahwa” (I am in love), with no men in sight. And I remember quite clearly the first time the grownups used the word *khain* (traitors) to describe Samir and myself: when we told Father, who had asked us what we had done while he was away, that we had listened to Radio Cairo. Our answer indicated that there was an unlawful key going around. More specifically, it indicated that the women had stolen the key and made a copy of it. “If they made a copy of the radio key, soon they’ll make one to open the gate,” growled Father. A huge dispute ensued, with the women being interviewed in the men’s salon one at a time. But after two days of inquiry, it turned out that the radio key must have fallen from the sky. No one knew where it had come from.

Even so, following the inquiry, the women took their revenge on us children. They said that we were traitors, and ought to be excluded from their games. That was a horrifying prospect, and so we defended ourselves by explaining that all we had done was tell the truth. Mother retorted by saying that some things were true, indeed, but you still could not say them: you had to keep them secret. And then she added that what you say and what you keep secret has nothing to do with truth and lies. We begged her to explain to us how to tell the difference, but she did not come up with a helpful answer. “You have to judge by yourselves the impact of your words,” she said. “If what you say could hurt someone, then you keep quiet.” Well, that advice did not help us at all. Poor Samir hated being called a traitor. He rebelled and shouted that he was free to say whatever he wanted. I, as usual, admired his audacity, but kept silent. I decided that if, on top of trying to distinguish truth from lies (which was already giving me a lot of trouble), I also had to distinguish this new category of “secret,” I was headed for a lot of confusion, and I would just have to accept the fact that I often would be insulted and called a traitor.

One of my weekly pleasures was to admire Samir as he staged his mutinies against the grownups, and I felt that if I only kept following him, nothing bad could happen to me. Samir and I were born the same day, in a long Ramadan[[1]](#footnote-1) afternoon, with hardly one hour’s difference. He came first, born on the second floor, the seventh child of his mother. I was born one hour later in our salon downstairs, my parents’ firstborn, and although Mother was exhausted, she insisted that my aunts and relatives hold the same celebration rituals for me as for Samir. She had always rejected male superiority as nonsense and totally anti-Muslim – “Allah made us all equal,” she would say. The house, she later recalled, vibrated for a second time that afternoon, with the traditional *you-you-you-you*[[2]](#footnote-2) and festive chants, and the neighbors got confused and thought that two baby boys had been born. Father was thrilled: I was very plump with a round face “like a moon,” and he immediately decided that I was going to be a great beauty. To tease him a little, Lalla Mani told him that I was a bit too pale, and my eyes were too slanted, and my cheekbones too high, while Samir, she said, had “a beautiful golden tan and the largest black velvet eyes you ever saw.” Mother told me later that she kept quiet, but as soon as she could stand on her feet, she rushed to see if Samir really had velvet eyes, and he did. He still does, but all the velvety softness disappears when he is in his seditious moods, and I have always wondered whether his inclination to jump up and down when rebelling against the grownups was not merely due to his wiry build.

In contrast, I was so plump then that it never occurred to me to leap when someone annoyed me; I just cried and ran to hide in my mother’s caftan. But Mother kept saying that I could not rely on Samir to do all the rebelling for me: “You have to learn to scream and protest, just the way you learned to walk and talk. Crying when you are insulted is like asking for more.” She was so worried that I would grow up to be an obsequious woman that she consulted Grandmother Yasmina, known to be incomparable at staging confrontations, when visiting her on summer vacations. Grandmother advised her to stop comparing me with Samir, and to push me instead to develop a protective attitude toward the younger children. “There are many ways to create a strong personality,” she said. “One of them is to develop the capacity to feel responsible for others. Simply being aggressive, and jumping at your neighbor’s throat whenever he or she makes a blunder is one way, and surely not the most elegant one. Pushing a child to feel responsible for the younger ones in the courtyard gives her room to build strength. Hanging on to Samir for protection could be okay, but if she figures out how to protect others, she can use that skill for herself.”

But it was the radio incident that taught me an important lesson. It was then that Mother told me about the need to chew my words before letting them out. “Turn each word around your tongue seven times, with your lips tightly shut, before uttering a sentence,” she said. “Because once your words are out, you might lose a lot.” Then I remembered how, in one of the tales from *A Thousand and One Nights*, a single misspoken word could bring disaster to the unfortunate one who had pronounced it and displeased the caliph, or king. Sometimes, the *siaf*, or executioner, would even be called in.

However, words could save the person who knew how to string them artfully together. That is what happened to Scheherazade, the author of the thousand and one tales. The king was about to chop off her head, but she was able to stop him at the last minute, just by using words. I was eager to find out how she had done it.

1. Ramadan, the sacred ninth month of the Muslim calendar, is observed by daily fasting from sunrise to sunset. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *You-you-you-you* is a joyous song women chant to celebrate happy events, from birth and marriage to simple ones, such as finishing an embroidery piece, or organizing a party for an old aunt. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)