

Nationalist Didacticism in Fatima Mernissi's "*Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*"*

Fatima Mernissi'nin "Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood" Başlıklı Eserinde Milliyetçi Öğretiler

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Abstract: Running counter to the imperialist claim of Children's literature as a European invention and manifestation, this article goes a step further by reading into the ideological interpellation of Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. Published in 1994, *Dreams of Trespass* is explored as an African children's text that reads into national education as a means to and a backbone of childhood education. Mernissi's text undermines the child-adult binary (and beyond it the personal/political split) in the process of exemplifying the formative impact of Moroccan nationalism on the Mernissi children and *vice versa*.

Keywords: Mernissi, Dreams of Trespass, icon, national heroism, children as citizens

Özet: Çocuk edebiyatının Avrupa'nın bir buluşu ve dışavurumu gibi emperyalist bir söyleme karşı bir duruş sergileyen bu makalede Fatima Mernissi'nin *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* adlı eseri incelenmektedir. 1994 yılında yayımlanmış bulunan bu eser Afrikalı çocukların milli eğitimin çocukluk eğitiminin belkemiği olarak kabul ettiği bir metni olarak incelenmiştir. Fas milliyetçiliğinin Mernissi'nin çocukları üzerindeki etkilerini örneklendirirken eserde Mernissi'nin çocuk-yetişkin zıtkutup-luluğunu reddetmekte olduğu görülmektedir. Bu reddediş bireysel-siyasi ayrımını da reddetmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Mernissi, Dreams of Trespass, ikon, milli kahramanlık, vatandaş olarak çocuklar

"To assert that only our conception of childhood can result in children's literature, a literature that only we are able to judge as literature in terms of its literary value (which for some reason must include 'entertainment'), is the kind of cultural imperialism and ideological colonialism that modern critics --- often seek to avoid" (sic. qtd. in Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, 83).

"I was very proud to have a role to play, even though it was a silent and marginal one [...] it did not matter what role you played, as long as you were useful. The essential thing was to have a role, to contribute to a common goal" (Mernissi, 1994, 126).

Ideological Interpellation

To the extent that the conception that children's literature is a European invention in origin and should remain so is a common view, the category African children's literature could sound a bit

* In my analysis, I will refer to the considered text as either *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, or just by writing either part of the title.

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attire, and with their short hair uncovered and cut above the ears, they looked very much like the French soldiers standing at the end of the street. "One day, we will probably manage to throw the French out, only to wake up and find out that we all look like them", added uncle (85).

In so saying, the Mernissi advocates for Moroccan nationalism to show their preoccupation with the questionable adherence to Europe as a model for rebuilding a modern Moroccan identity. They are closer rather to a form of nationalist leadership which "*based its ideology of social reform, and especially its ideas about women, not on European models but rather on the Salafiya Islamic reform movement,*" coming through Syria and Egypt (Baker, 1998, 21). According to the Salafiya movement, "*Islam and the Koran provide guidance for all times and places. If the Muslim world is stagnant, it is because Muslim populations have either neglected or misinterpreted Islam. What is needed is ijihad, an established method of going back to sources in order to interpret the general principles of Islam in the light of the current situation*" (21). Part and parcel of this standpoint is that independence requires modernization without effacement.

As a noticeable development in the nationalist movement in Morocco, the latter perspective reflects itself in *Dreams of Trespass* in powerful ways. In fact, the tales make reference to the encouragement of "*the youth to read the classic treatises of Avicenna and Al-Khwarizmi, 'just to have an idea about the way their minds functioned. It always helps to know that our ancestors were fast and precise'*" (Mernissi, 1994, 87). This brings to mind Zin, Fatima's cousin whose appeal lies in his French education besides his religious knowledge. Indeed, he "*worked very hard at becoming the ideal modern nationalist, that is, one who possessed a vast knowledge of Arab history, legends, and poetry, as well as fluency in French, the language of our enemy, in order to decode the Christian press and uncover their plans*" (87). Even the Mernissi family respect him "*as one of the new generation of Moroccans who was going to save the country. He led the procession to the Qaraouiyyine Mosque on Fridays, when all the men of Fez, young and old, turned up in the traditional white djellaba and fine yellow leather slippers to go to public prayer*" (88). The notion that Zin takes up leadership in the mosque makes him loom larger for Fatima, given that it is during the Friday gatherings in this place of worshipping "*that many important political decisions of the Maglis Al-Baladi, or City Council, were in fact settled*" (88). At this level, *Dreams of Trespass* hinges back to Fanon's statement that "*[i]n the colonial context, culture, when deprived of the twin supports of the nation and the state, perishes and dies. National liberation and the resurrection of the state are the preconditions for the very existence of a culture*" (177).

Childhood and Adulthood: A False Split

Although Mernissi sets the first pages of her memoirs in the 1940s, that is, "*in the midst of chaos*", meaning the apex of national resistance against the French-Spanish colonization of Morocco, yet, the remainder of her life-writing narrates the different convulsions before the birth of an independent nation (Mernissi, 1994, 1-2). In one respect, her personal tales feature the conception that she "*has indissolubly linked feminism and anti-colonialist nationalism in the Arab world*" (Donadey 151). Consequently, they represent an attempt "*to heal a false split [not only] between political and private life*" but also between the child and the adult worlds (Matthe 1999, 84). This way, *Dreams of Trespass* is in no way the autobiographical story of Mernissi's own singular childhood. It even amounts to a national allegory "*where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole labourious telling of the experience of the collective itself*" (qtd. in Hefferman, 2000, 472).

Through all this, Fatima Mernissi's *Tales of a Harem Girlhood* best exemplifies the notion of children as future citizens of a New Independent Morocco. One of the main messages that it imparts for these potential citizens is that "*[t]o live in a combination of two worlds was much*

more appealing than living in just one. The idea of being able to swing between two cultures, two personalities, two codes, and two languages enchanted everyone! Mother wanted me to be like Princess Aisha (the teenage daughter of our King Mohammed V who made public speeches in both Arabic and French) who wore both long caftans and short French dresses” (Mernissi, 1994, 180). Thus, although the Mernissi children have served as an indispensable complement to the political scenery, yet, much of their receptive role is quite informative at the level of emphasizing the harmonious existence of tradition and modernity (91).

In another respect, *Dreams of Trespass* stands out as a chronicle of the military and political activism against the French-Spanish encroachment on the Moroccan nation, with a considerable narrative space allocated to Moroccan women’s role in the national struggle for liberation. To this end, it is a recuperation of Fanon’s (2004) view that “[t]he restoration of the nation must [...] give life in the most biological sense of the term to national culture” (177) and that one “cannot divorce the combat for culture from the people’s struggle for liberation” (168). At the same time, its representation of nationalism during colonization reminds us that “the conscious, organized struggle undertaken by a colonized people in order to restore national sovereignty constitutes the greatest cultural manifestation that exists” (Fanon, 2004, 178). In both forms of national struggle during the Spanish/French colonization of Morocco, Mernissi’s text re-emphasises, rather than de-emphasizes, the active participation of Moroccan women. Although this national resistance is harvested by the younger generation in the Moroccan society, still “each generation must discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it, in relative opacity” (145).

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