

*Undergraduate Honors Thesis*

**Fatima Mernissi and The Ownership of The Female Body**

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## **Fatima Mernissi and The Ownership of The Female Body**

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Fatima Mernissi's memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, displays a young girl's inner struggles navigating feminism, heritage, and self-expression. Young Fatima grew up in a harem, a house where the patriarch keeps his wives, which presents its own physical and mental challenges. Set in the 1940s, this book depicts a world in which women seek to imagine their place in modern society as Morocco reconciles with its place in a changing world. This essay will investigate Mernissi's theory about the Muslim space split into two universes: the interior universe (the household) and the exterior universe (public area) (*The Veil and The Male Elite* 100). In part, this essay argues that the internal universe represents Mernissi wrestling with ideology and internalized patriarchy, while the exterior universe encompasses the harem and the rules she must obey to survive. Furthermore, the veil symbolizes a physical boundary between a woman and the world. This paper attends to the bifurcations with which young Fatima wrestles, between control of the body, in restricting its motions through space, and control of the mind, as in internalization of the patriarchy's rules and regulations. But there's another duality here as well: the hijab is considered a proxy for the garden walls which keep the women contained; therefore, women are controlled through their restrictions of movement because the Muslim system "fears [a woman's] growth and involvement" (Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 8). By looking at the narrative and theories of Fatima Mernissi, we can see that control of women comes down to regimentation of the body through attire and restriction of the movement of that body through space. As we see in the memoir of her childhood, women will find various ways to assert their autonomy that track with

this split, such as by controlling what they wear and practicing control over their own bathing rituals, and by defying the walls that keep them enclosed through acts of storytelling. The primary take-away for this research asks what American society can learn from reading Moroccan feminist literature. Young Fatima learns how to create a united force of women through watching her mother navigate her own identity. Yet, whereas the feminists of Mernissi's generation felt that progress could only come from abandoning the veil, recently, young women have embraced it. Fatima's mother, who considers herself a progressive feminist, struggles with the idea of the traditional veil: "No one knows why men force us to wear the veils. Something to do with difference maybe. Fear of the differences makes people behave in strange ways" (94). Nevertheless, Fatima Mernissi's opinion on the veil has changed over time.

In the revised introduction for *Beyond the Veil*, Fatima Mernissi engages in self-evaluation of her previous thoughts about the relationship between feminism and the hijab. The goal of this revised introduction is to "identify the most important changes that have occurred in women's situation since 1975 when the first edition came out" (Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, viii). Mernissi zooms out to see that this discussion isn't solely about the veil but "the entire fabric of social and individual life-- the split between acting and reflecting on one's actions" (ix). The preconceived assumption from the previous introduction was that there was a distinction between feminists and those who choose to wear the veil. This effectively divided women into "fundamentalists and unveiled women [who] are the two groups that have emerged with definite disturbing claims and aspirations in the postcolonial era" (xi). However, a shift happens in Mernissi's thinking because she did not foresee that "women [would] start to wonder about the law" and engage in politics (xiii). Part of this movement for knowledge began with mass access to universities; this constitutes "a total shift in the acclimation, distribution, management, and

utilization of knowledge and information. And of course, we know that knowledge is power” (xxii). Therefore, Mernissi did not foresee the fact that women would be given access to resources that were previously only allotted to men. Overall, Fatima Mernissi’s ideas changed from when she formerly believed that feminism involved women destroying the veil. In the new introduction, she realizes that there is a distinction between the mass movement of feminism and individual women. In short, it is the woman’s choice to decide what she wears on her body.

In the 1990s, Mernissi was writing a memoir about her childhood in a harem in Fez. In that book, young Fatima finds various ways to question the harem’s prescribed regulations and sees the profound symbolism and meaning behind these actions by uncovering the limitations placed on her gender. Among these strategies of resistance, as we will see, are the adoption of western attire, cross-dressing, story-telling, the staging of performances, and other acts of solidarity. This paper begins with a discussion of the works of prominent Moroccan author and self-described Islamic Feminist, Fatima Mernissi, whose own theories trace a shifting attitude to women’s oppression (Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 9). Then, this essay looks at other examples from Moroccan literature for instances where similar themes are raised. Finally, it proposes through its investigation of changing attitudes to the veil that the issue is fundamentally one of women’s autonomy and choice. As such, this study offers a model for feminists around the world: feminists from different generations may disagree about whether or not a behavior or item of dress is a tool of the patriarchy or a strategy of resistance (as in US contexts on revealing clothing, makeup, or even increasingly, sex work), but discussions of the hijab lead the way to our understanding that it fundamentally comes down to women choosing for themselves what they will wear and how they want to move through internal and external boundaries.

## Internal and External Boundaries

Modern Morocco navigates religion, tradition, and progression with consideration of feminist and queer theory developments. Many nations throughout the world categorize people through distinct gender roles, but the case study of Morocco becomes interesting to analyze because their feminist discussions balance religious traditions. Many countries oppress women and LGBTQ+ individuals in different ways. In Morocco, being queer is socially unacceptable and therefore hidden from mainstream media (*Queer Nations*, 20). This paper began with an interest in queer identity, but ultimately found its place in a rich discussion regarding feminism and the ways women take back agency of their bodies and spaces. Particularly, Morocco is an interesting space in which to measure changing attitudes to Muslim women's rights because of its divergence as a French protectorate<sup>1</sup> and the rapid turnabout on attitudes on the veil that occurred between 1970 and 1990. A longer study might look at the influence of political upheaval, cultural student movements, and the increase of globalization through the internet to theorize causality, but this essay is mainly concerned with analyzing feminist memoirs, fiction novels, and nonfiction accounts of the internal and external struggle between a woman's agency in relation to Moroccan society.

Before the 1940s in Morocco, many women lived in harems, the houses where the patriarch collected his many wives, and were not allowed to leave without permission. By the time that Fatima Mernissa is a child in Fez, the harem tradition is in the process of leaving popular society. To further situate the political context, Mernissi describes how her father was participating in the Nationalist movement, so he only had one wife because he wanted to modernize Moroccan culture. At the same time, there are many wives in her grandfather's rural harem in the countryside. Since this practice was outlawed in 1956, this story highlights the last

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<sup>1</sup> To read more about the French protectorate and political upheaval see Spencer Segalla's *The Moroccan Soul*

few years of the harem remaining the dominant structure (Venema). These gender struggles remain contextualized in Moroccan fiction. Precisely, many progressive writers parallel these conditions with their characters' modes of resistance. Fatima Mernissi and Laila Lalami showcase this struggle through relatable female protagonists.

The physical limitations placed on women in the harem protect the power of the patriarchy. Young Fatima says, "Women dreamed of trespassing all the time. The world beyond the gate was their obsession" (Mernissi 1-2). Besides the harem's physical boundaries, there were also other physical limits and rules within the walls, restricting the women from listening to the radio. Even though "Father was sure he and uncle had the only two keys to the radio... the women managed to listen to Radio Cairo regularly when the men were out" (7). Fatima finds this fascinating because she witnesses how women can break the patriarchy's rules through female unity. Furthermore, the men also fear the power of united women; young Fatima's father says, "If they made a copy of the radio key, soon they'll make one to open the gate" (8). The patriarchy fears the power women have when they unite to bypass the physical boundaries that the men use to control them; Mernissi recognizes that listening to the radio could make them feel free, even though they remain in place. Besides these physical limitations and rules, the patriarchy has also managed to place mental restrictions on women's liberty, creating what Fatima calls 'the invisible harem' (Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass*, 55).

The women are also held captive by the internal boundaries and rules that the patriarchy instilled in the women in the harem. When talking about the harem's physical limits, young Fatima simultaneously explains the patriarchal ideology. Yasmina describes this idea by saying, "[a harem] did not need walls. Once you knew it was forbidden, you carried the harem within. You had it in your head" (61). Young Fatima was troubled by the idea of having "a law tattooed

in the mind” (62). This conversation explains that outward limitations have infiltrated their minds. Some of these rules are taught, such as when Fatima’s mother teaches her to weigh her words carefully before speaking, to “turn each word around your tongue seven times, with your lips tightly shut before uttering a sentence” (10). Simultaneously, some of these internal limitations are ideas that she learned by watching people in her society. Even though watching women taught her how to behave under the patriarchy, her role models also taught her to dismantle limitations through critical thinking and questioning the prescribed norms. Young Fatima learns to take back her bodily autonomy by questioning her attire and learning about the societal connotations and deeper meanings behind the veil.

### **The Veil and its Restrictions**

In *The Veil and The Male Elite*, Mernissi also discusses the deeper meaning of the veil. More specifically, she mentions the three dimensions of the hijab: “to hide something from sight...to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold... and belonging to the realm of the forbidden” (95). Therefore, this is not just a piece of cloth but a loaded symbol that resembles “both a boundary and a protection” (96). Thus, this question of whether to wear the veil plagues many women’s minds; This idea is evident in Mernissi’s memoir where she explores her mother’s battle with tradition.

Fatima’s mother opposes the veil, so she was distraught after discovering her daughter playing with a scarf around her head. Young Fatima explained that she was wearing it because Hitler was killing people with dark hair, so the veil took away that problem by hiding her hair color.<sup>2</sup> Fatima’s mother responded by stating, “Hiding does not solve a woman’s problems. It just

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<sup>2</sup> Since Morocco was occupied by Vichy France during 1940-1942, these countries were linked during the war. This occurred until The North Africa Campaign, and then Morocco was joined with the Allied powers until the end of the war (Gilson).

identifies her as an easy victim” (100). By this point in the narrative, Fatima’s mother is a strong activist who is empowered by her choice, and her husband does not force her to wear a traditional veil; this was not always the case. A few years earlier, young Fatima remembers her parents arguing about her mother’s dilemma of whether to replace the traditional veil<sup>3</sup> with “a tiny rectangular black veil made of sheer silk chiffon” (118). Fatima remembers that this change “drove father crazy” because it was “so transparent” that it was like “going unveiled!” This shows that a younger version of her father wanted to control his wife’s attire, but a few years later, her father no longer argues as passionately with his wife; this is almost as if her persistence has led him to give up this argument. Fatima remembers hearing a progressive Arab feminist, Quacem Aminsaid<sup>4</sup>, discuss how “men veiled women because they were afraid of their charm and beauty” and that men needed to “develop strength within themselves and overcome their fears so that women could shed the veil” (121). The theorist believes the veil is a man’s issue, which is very distinct from the normalized rhetoric that it is a woman’s problem. This debate on whether to wear the veil spins into a deeper discussion explored by Rafia Zakaria, an attorney and journalist currently residing as a resident scholar at City College in New York, who discusses the correlation between the veil and a woman’s place in society.

Rafia Zakaria’s treatise, “Veil,” explores the physical curtain’s relationship to women’s social and personal wellbeing in Northern Africa. The veil entails sociocultural conditions that often go unspoken in society. For example, Zakaria explains that if an unveiled woman stares at a man, she suggests romantic interest. This understood cultural phenomenon of eye contact has led to many marriage proposals. For this reason, many women choose to look towards the ground when with male company. Marriage is a culturally accepted idealized norm in many Arab and

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<sup>3</sup> The Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité were a group of women in the 1990s who were trying to advance women’s rights (Abboud)

<sup>4</sup> Quacem Aminsaid is known for being one of the few prominent men in academia to oppose the veil



Western nations, and premarital sex remains taboo in Morocco<sup>5</sup>. The social ideal for marriage driven by family customs is nothing new to Zakaria. The veil was another socially conditioned idealized norm in her life ever since childhood. Zakaria remembers only wearing the veil at her all-girls school if they had male visitors, which is essential because it reinstates the fact that men are always involved in the concept of the veil. The ceremonious veil in American weddings remains a popular tradition. Nevertheless, the veil is primarily worn in Eastern nations.

There are several differences in culture when analyzing the veil in relation to Western and Eastern countries, such as the political and social conditioning associated with each place's veil. Zakaria notes that there is a political cost to wearing the veil in Western countries<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, the society where the veil is worn also matters contextually. The idea of whiteness and colonialism in this discussion of Western and Islamic nations leads to fruitful discussions. Zakaria points out the example of The First Lady Laura Bush and her speech about bombing "Afghanistan to free Afghan women from the burka" (67). This specific example leads to a discussion on idolized figures influencing opinions.

Celebrities influence many people's opinions in Western and Eastern nations<sup>7</sup>. The artist Shahzia Sikahzia, a famous Pakistani singer who sings Punjabi folk songs and Sufi poems, tried to "complicate the simplistic aesthetic in which all veiled women are oppressed and backward victims of coercion (82). She accomplished this task by wearing the veil as a symbol of power during her performances. This opinion spread to her broad follower base, which also extends into Western countries. The cross-cultural takeaway in this example centers around the fact that many

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<sup>5</sup> "Marriage is the bedrock of Egyptian and Arab society considered the natural and desirable state by more than 90% of Egyptians regardless of age, sex, or education" (El Feki ). "To drive to wed is in large part propelled by family pressure and fueled by religion," which is showcased in many quran verses and in the hadiths (El Feki ).

<sup>6</sup> "[the veil] increasingly exposes the wearer to harassment and religious profiling" (Zakaria 57).

<sup>7</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, a celebrity influencing a change in a character is a recurring theme in Maghreb literature. This is portrayed in the story *Infidels* by Abdellah Taia when the mother, Silma, dyes her hair blonde to mimic Marilyn Monroe as a way to find her strong feminine identity after her sexual assault.

women who decide to wear or not wear the veil are influenced by forces outside of religion. Today, factors such as feminism, fashion, and culture play a part in women's decision to wear or not wear the veil. At the same time, the veil inherits this historical context that lives today in some places where the veil is the law or is an explicitly accepted standard by a patriarchal culture. Nevertheless, this remains the stereotype in Western nations when the larger picture showcases a multitude of reasons for wearing the veil.

Nevertheless, the Quran does not directly command any woman to wear a veil. Zakaria also mentions, “There are no verses in the Holy Quran itself that specifically prescribe the veil for all women” (34). Instead, “the Holy Quran instructs men and women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts<sup>8</sup>” (34). Many Western countries use this to their advantage when banning the veil. The author notes explicitly Switzerland, and other places, that have forbidden burqas (57). The argument the government has cited is that the burka is not religiously required. These bans are “under the rubric of use of visibility and invisibility as a form of protest or subversion of a mainstream aesthetic ideal that excludes the minority other” (59). Nevertheless, the issue with these bans from a multicultural perspective are that governments are still declaring what women should do with their bodies. In contrast to the earlier portrayal of the veil as sexist and degrading, Zakaria’s stories of women and the veil bypass nations’ borders to explore a larger context for how the veil is seen in many socio-cultural arenas. For example, as a signal of the changing ways women think of the veil, some female characters in fictional Moroccan literature go so far as to claim the veil as empowering.

## **Empowerment From the Veil**

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<sup>8</sup> This quote is from Sura 24, verses 30 and 31.

The Moroccan-American author, Laila Lalami, begins her novel, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, with a group of asylum seekers on a “flimsy boat” escaping Morocco and into Spain (7). Published in 2005<sup>9</sup>, the story centers around five asylum seekers. One of these individuals is Faten, who sits on the boat with a headscarf, which the narrator thinks is strange because she will stand out in the crowd when arriving in Spain: “Does she imagine she can walk down the streets of Tarifa in a headscarf without attracting attention?” (8). Later in the book, we learn the backstory of Faten, a religious fanatic traditionalist woman. We hear about Faten’s story from the perspective of her friend, Noura, whose family is worried about Faten radicalizing their daughter. Throughout the story, the audience learns that Faten goes from being a religious zealot to a sex worker in Spain; this character evolution highlights how culture and survival tactics change how a woman must govern herself in society. The focus of this section will display women’s agency in the choice to wear the veil through the character of Faten because she displays an interesting example of transitioning from a religious zealot to a progressive sex worker.

When Faten is living in Morocco, she becomes friends with Noura, a student trying to study abroad at New York University. Noura’s father overhears a conversation between Noura and Faten in his daughter’s room: “the injustices we see everyday... is proof enough of the corruption of King Hassan<sup>10</sup>... if we had been better Muslims, perhaps their problems wouldn’t have been visited on our nation” (28). Faten critiques Moroccan society, and it is not only taboo for women to talk about politics but also a felony. Noura’s parents are both concerned about their friendship, but they take different approaches. Her father says, “I don’t think [their friendship] is

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<sup>9</sup> In Morocco in 2005, tension at border control was particularly high with “Hundreds of African migrants try to storm Morocco's borders with the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta. Morocco deports hundreds of the illegal migrants” (BBC world news Africa).

<sup>10</sup> Samer Abboud believes King Hassan was a moderate ruler because “he favored modernization” but “also was able to retain ancient traditions and culture and promote religious tolerance” (Abboud 76).

a good idea. I caught them talking about politics just now” (30). At first, the mother thinks it is beneficial for her daughter to think about controversial opinions and hear political topics: “Noura needs to know what’s going on around her” (30). Her mother’s opinion changes when she begins to see her daughter become more fanatic. Noura begins questioning many prominent aspects of her life, such as make-up: “Why should I paint my face to please other people” (32). Her mother is confused because “I thought you liked to do it for yourself” (32). Since makeup is a large part of many societies, her mother is concerned that she is becoming too invested in Islamic traditionalism. This idea is confirmed when Noura’s father starts snooping in her room and finds a political book on Islam: *Ma’alim fi Ttariq*<sup>11</sup>. Noura announces to her parents that she is going to start wearing the headscarf because “God commands us to do so. It says so in the Qur’an” (35). Her other reasoning is because “women are harassed on the streets in Rabat all the time. The Hijab is a protection” (36). Her father counters this argument by saying, “The men can’t behave themselves, so now my daughter has to cover herself? They’re supposed to avert their eyes. That’s in the Quran too” (37). As a contrast to the typical expectations of a parent and teen relationship, the young adults in this story are trying to follow traditional Islam while their parents are following trends of Western cultures. The contradiction of roles between Noura and her parents shows that young women can feel empowered by traditional, religious beliefs. Noura and Faten wear the Hijab because they studied the Qu’ran and decided how they wanted to present themselves in society. Noura’s father realized “he couldn’t keep her under lock and key,” especially since they are not living in a harem and Noura is free to go anywhere she desires. Therefore, these women have the bodily autonomy to decide on their own beliefs and appearance. Faten and Noura’s traditionalist beliefs show that women can feel empowered while

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<sup>11</sup> *Ma’alim fi Ttariq* (Milestones) by the Islamist author Sayyid Qutb is a book first published in 1964 about a plan to recreate the ‘extinct’ muslim world and recenter Morocco to live by the Quran and traditionalist ideals.

wearing the hijab. The readers also learn that she does wear the hijab in Spain because it makes her stand out. Faten wonders whether her friend Noura decided to keep wearing it: "She was rich; she had the luxury of having faith" (145). Nevertheless, "that was the thing with money. It gave you choices," so she probably took it off (145). Faten does not have the luxury of choosing her beliefs and clothing anymore, so she is envious of Noura deciding how she uses and presents her body. This choice was taken away from her due to her lower socioeconomic status that limited her career opportunities. This paper does not have the means to explore the entire problem of class but a small example can be seen in the relationship between Faten and Noura.

Another character in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Aziz, is a bystander to questions about the veil. When Aziz lands in Morocco after being away in Spain for a few years, he notices a resurgence in the number of young girls who choose to wear the veil. The first encounter he has with this realization is at the train station: "A group of teenage girls on their way to school crossed the street in Aziz's direction. Several of them had scarves on their heads" (157). Aziz is caught off guard with the realization that "these Islamic scarves seemed to multiply since he left" (168-169). Nevertheless, he does not begin the discussion until noticing that his sister-in-law, Samira, decided to participate in wearing a hijab. After being questioned on her decision, Samira says she made this choice "by the grace of God... because that is the right way" (169). Aziz asks his wife if she is going to follow the choices of her sister and she responds by saying, "I don't know if that's the life for me" (170). These two sisters learn the same religion and conclude two different decisions on their response to the veil and their autonomy. Besides the question of the veil, some women decide that they want to physically express themselves through Western attire.

## Western Dress in Response to the Veil

In *Dreams of Trespass*, the conversation around whether Fatima should adopt Western or traditional dress was a thought that plagued her parents' minds because a young woman's clothing symbolizes a deeper reflection of her culture and personhood. Fatima's mother always enjoyed dressing her daughter in Western fashion, like "short fluffy laced dresses in colored ribbons and shiny black shoes" (85). In contrast, Fatima's father insisted that her mother dress her in her caftan<sup>12</sup> sometimes. Nevertheless, if her father did not object, her mother wanted her to wear Western-style ensembles because "she was so anxious to see me escape tradition" since "dress says so much about a woman's designs" cautioning "if you plan to be modern, express it through what you wear, otherwise they will shove you behind gates" (85). For Fatima's mother, the outward Western dress symbolizes Fatima embracing feminism. She wanted her daughter to be able to live without the patriarchy restricting her choices, so she encouraged her to go against the tradition.

Fatima's upbringing influenced her internal correlation between clothing and a woman's place in society. She saw caftans, or traditional dress, as a source of "unparalleled beauty, but the western dress is about salaried work" (85). Therefore, she says, "I grew to associate caftans with lavish holidays, religious festivals, and the splendors of our ancestral past and western dress with pragmatic calculations and stern, professional, daily chores" (85). It is unclear which dress young Fatima decides to adapt in her adult life, but it is important that she became involved in these conversations in order to make an informed decision that was not predetermined by societal norms. Her father also seems to be influenced by his wife's opinions, as he later asks, "What good does our wearing traditional dress do?" (85). At the very least, this shows that his wife's independent thinking has infiltrated his own thoughts. Fatima's uncle raises another important

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<sup>12</sup> A caftan is a men's long suit with tight sleeves that looks like a robe or tunic.

question in this conversation when he says, “We will probably manage to throw the French out, only to wake up and find out that we all look like them<sup>13</sup>” (85). One place that her family can agree upon is not trying to fully adopt the culture of the French, but individual members of her family tackle this problem in different ways.

Women in this story disregard the patriarchal tradition, but none of them wants to fully adopt the progressive beliefs of the culture that they are trying to decolonize themselves from. One way that Fatima’s mother tackles the balance between traditional dress and not appearing too European is by replacing “the traditional women’s haik with the djellaba, or men’s coat<sup>14</sup>” (118). This allows the women to not be restricted by the rules of the patriarchy, but still, wear the clothing of their traditions. When discussing the outfits that the women were forced to wear through societal norms, Chama said, “it was probably designed to make a woman’s trip through the streets so torturous that she would quickly tire from the effort, rush back home, and never dream of going back outside again” (118). The outfit is like another layer of the walls keeping women restrained. This relates to how Western women adopted trousers in the early 20th century because their physical design allowed for more free flowing movement compared to the restricting skirts previously deemed socially acceptable. Nevertheless, this change in Morocco was difficult for the men to understand; Fatima’s father states: “If women dress like men it’s more than chaos, it’s fana (the end of the world)” (119).

### **Cross-Dressing as Resistance**

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<sup>13</sup> When the story takes place in 1940 and the midst of WWII in Morocco, the country was under protectorate status of the french; therefore, many families were considering the influence of Western nations and methods to protect their own traditions.

<sup>14</sup>The haik is a traditional white garment that covers a woman’s entire body except for her eyes. The djellaba is a long, modest gown-like dress that covers the body, arms and legs.

We return to the idea of women cross-dressing in a play Fatima watches: an adaptation of the traditional folk stories staged by her family members. In this play, *A Thousand and One Nights*, the main character, Princess Budur, cross-dresses as a man, is married off to a woman, and then must decide whether to tell her newfound lover about her identity before or after their marriage. *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*, by Sheeran El Feki, discusses the idea of women wearing traditionally masculine attire. This is a powerful way to confront the patriarchy because “attitudes today towards cross-dressing women are rather less tolerant, ranging from outright condemnation to attempting conversation” (El Feki 263). Therefore, Moroccan culture showcases disapproval with gender-bending, but this is also highlighted in the traditional folktales.

We see an example of cross-dressing in *A Thousand and One Nights* when the audience split into two camps about what to do with Princess Budur’s situation: half believed that she should tell the king the truth before marriage, and the other half said that she should accept the marriage and tell Princess Hayat in the bridal suite. Young Fatima noticed that “women’s solidarity was actually a highly sensitive issue in the courtyard since the women rarely sided all together against men” (141). Fatima’s mother notes that women who side with the patriarchy are “more dangerous than men... because physically, they look just like us. But they are really wolves posing as sheep” (141). This is an example of a larger problem that crossed borders into other societies: women who do not support the advancement of other women. Nevertheless, in this story, the women unite to protect each other.

In the end, the princess decides to tell her wife the whole story after the marriage in the bridal suite, and her wife sympathizes, so they stage a virginity ceremony, fool the town, and



pose as husband and wife. Virginity is a major aspect of many Islamic wedding traditions<sup>15</sup>. For young Fatima, she notices that “the bottom line of her story, after all, was that a woman can fool society by possessing as a man... the difference between the sexes is silly, only a matter of dress” (137). In this quote, we see Fatima solidifying her belief in feminism and equality as she genuinely cannot see a difference between the sexes except for the way society outwardly crafts their appearances. When the play finishes, women on the terrace discuss “fate and happiness and how to escape the first and pursue the second. Women’s solidarity, many agreed, was the key to both” (143). This shows how women’s unity is one of the most important aspects in dismantling the patriarchy. More specifically, cross-dressing, or a woman choosing to not obey the clothing styles dictated by society, is one way for them to take back power.

Fatima’s father sees the idea of women cross-dressing as destructive to their world. Fatima’s father, and other men in his position, fear that equality of the sexes will mean they will no longer hold power within their households, which is a feared outcome that equates to “the end of the world”. Therefore, women’s cross-dressing amounts to a rebellion against the traditional power structure. Young Fatima is influenced by the idea of cross-dressing when it is showcased in her cousin’s live-action play and elsewhere in Moroccan literature we see Ahmed from *The Sand Child* conflicted by gender norms.

### **Breaking Gender Norms in *The Sand Child***

Ben Jelloun’s 1985 novel *The Sand Child* investigates the social constructions of gender through its depiction of social and gender norms in Moroccan culture. The character Ahmed,

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<sup>15</sup> “Across the Arab world, female virginity, defined as an intact hymen, remains what could best be described as a fucking big deal” (El Feki 111). The Quran makes no mention of the hymen per se, but it does talk at length about private parts and the importance of protecting them from view” but virginity is gender neutral in the Qur’an (El Feki 112).

who was a female baby raised as a boy, demonstrates an interesting case-study for male privilege. After having seven daughters, Ahmed's father needed a male baby in his lineage because otherwise, his family would not be able to pass down financial assets. Therefore, when his youngest child was born, the father offered up his finger to be circumcised so he could prove to the town they have a son. Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child* threads similar ideas of gender that are also presented in Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*. Explorations of gender are showcased in both novels during scenes of the public bath scenes, the gated households, and the stereotypes of masculine and feminine clothing for the purposes of investigating the segregation of the sexes and the unequal opportunities afforded to people of both genders.

Similar to Mernissi's memoir, Ben Jelloun pays special attention to the spaces of the public baths as an expression of community. In Jelloun's *The Sand Child*, the bathing ritual is described as a different occasion for men and women. For Ahmed's mother, the bathhouse "was an opportunity to get out of the house, to meet other women, and to gossip while washing" (22). This is one of the only days of the week where the women can leave the gates of the harem; therefore, they treat it like a special occasion. This is also the place where they can use forbidden words like "night, back, breasts, and thumb" (22). Ahmed notes that these words "fell more often and more quickly" in the baths. There were other forbidden words that were used here that pertained to sex: "the women did not have the right to use them" in the household (23). In contrast, Ahmed also gets to see the men's baths where "they didn't talk much; they allowed themselves to be enveloped by the steam and washed fairly quickly" (24). Ahmed's father preferred to be in his workshop. He savored "explaining to me how the business world worked, introducing me to his employees and customers" (25). He developed a community among people

at work, which parallels the female bathhouse. On a larger scale, men don't need the escape of the bathhouse because they are free to move in different social and formal spaces.

Mernissi and Jelloun also discuss similar themes around descriptions of a gender division within the gated households. Jelloun's *The Sand Child* describes the gate as a place where "one has to stoop to go through it. It stands at the entrance of the medina and is linked with the one at the other end, which is used for leaving... throughout history there have been gates for entering and gates for leaving. Ahmed would often go back and forth between the two gates" (33). This is a description of the gates from the perspective of a person with male privileges. Ahmed sees the gate as a portal to somewhere new, while it is seen as a barrier for other characters like Fatima from *Dreams of Trespass*. Women are not given the opportunity to leave on their own accord. This idea is further explored more literally on the next page when Ahmed says, "I don't just accept my condition and endure it, I actually like it. It is interesting. It gives me privileges that I would never have known" (34). In this passage, Ahmed recognizes that the gate is only beneficial to him while he is being seen as a man. He would not be given the same privileges if he was raised as a girl. Ahmed recognizes that literally and figuratively it "opens doors for me" (34). Nevertheless, he seems to lose this recognition of his privilege later in the book as he becomes more comfortable with his male superiority. One example of this occurs when he talks with his seven sisters about the new structure of the household after their father dies. Ahmed says, "I have the duty and right to watch over you. You owe me obedience and respect" (46). Here, Ahmed takes on the prescribed role of the patriarchy and becomes estranged from his sisters. As Ahmed grows older, he becomes less likely to see himself in their position: "In our house, women are inferior to men not because God wishes it or because the prophets decided it thus, but because the women accepted this fate. So submit, and live in silence" (46). Towards the

end of this scene, Ahmed goes as far as to say that it is the fault of the women that they are treated as sub-human. Both *Dreams of Trespass* and *The Sand Child* provide inside perspectives, but one is a woman enclosed in a harem and the other is a female experiencing male privilege.

*The Sand Child* and *Dreams of Trespass* explore the theme of gender-bending with historically masculine and feminine clothing choices in different ways. *The Sand Child* is a narrative that explores transgender clothing through Ahmed, who was born a female but was raised as a male. He accomplishes the task of fooling society into thinking he was born a man by cross-dressing in male clothing and wrapping his breasts to conceal his birth sex. More than that, he also takes on a wife because he “intended to use her to perfect [his] social appearance” (57). For him, a wife is like a garment for the role of being a man. Having examined the implications of being a woman in Morocco, it is now necessary to consider the effects of a person assigned female at birth experiencing the privileges of being raised with male privilege.

Even though Ahmed can relate to being a woman in some scenes since he can imagine himself being raised as his birth sex, he still plays into the objectification of women for his benefit. On the list of what he must accomplish to be seen as a man, he must: wear masculine attire, hide his birth sex by wrapping his breasts, deepen his voice, and choose a quiet wife who won’t disobey and uncover his secret. While the last point might appear special to Ahmed’s condition, the submissive nature of his wife is not dissimilar from the other women in his family. At the beginning of the book, Ahmed’s mother is described as “growing thin and often fainting” (10). This characterization is not dissimilar from Ahmed’s wife Fatima who is described as “ill, she’s epileptic and has a limp” (36). Her physical ailments highlight his family’s patriarchal norm of choosing a submissive wife.

Furthermore, Ahmed's mother did not receive a choice in the decision to raise Ahmed as a boy; Ahmed's father made that choice and his mother "obeyed her husband as usual" (14). This quote might show that all men who are picking a wife to live in the harem favor qualities such as being quiet, decorative, and submissive because it will make the husband's life easier. Overall, the perspective of male privilege casts light on the plight of the female in society, which is further showcased in Mernissi's memoir. Ahmed's story contrasts from Mernissi and the women in the harem because of their different gender privileges. Ahmed is on his own for the majority of the story because many people cannot relate to his condition. These women are jealous of Ahmed's privilege and he feels distant from the biologically male characters. This relates to the women in the harem who feel disconnected from other groups in society. At the same time, they unite together for community strength.

### **Women's Solidarity**

To this point, the focus has been on the different kinds of self-autonomy through the lens of the veil, western attire, and cross-dressing. However, it is important to remember that building a community is a vital aspect of group autonomy to unify an oppressed group towards a common purpose. I will therefore now consider some examples of how women in the harem develop unity through storytelling, performances, and music.

### **Storytelling**

Young Fatima begins to find power as a feminist when she uses her childhood sense of curiosity to question the rules of society through fictional stories. One way she does this is by questioning the stories told by her mother. *A Thousand and One Nights* is the tale of how a

young bride, Shahrazad, persuaded the king, Shahryar, to grant her life by keeping him interested in her stories<sup>16</sup>. When Fatima found out that the king had killed every woman in the kingdom except for one, the young Fatima was scared for the safety of the bride, but met that fear for her safety by asking questions: “I kept asking for alternatives for the poor girl. I wanted other possibilities.” Fatima and the bride had a common trait; they would not accept their fate, so they used their critical thinking skills to question the scenario to try to find a way around the patriarchy. The bride eventually decided that she could use her stories to keep the king interested in her life, and thus, not kill her. This is how Young Fatima witnessed the power of storytelling.

The trope of feminist storytelling can also be seen in the Koran. Mernissi highlights this in her book, *The Veil and the Male Elite*. There are several strong female characters in the Koran that Fatima Mernissi points to in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite*, but some Muslim scholars have found a way around praising these characters. One example is A’isha who fought ‘Ali Ibn Ali Talin at the Battle of the Camel<sup>17</sup>. Mernissi points to a quote by Uhammad ‘Arafa who argues, “But this individual act of woman companion cannot be claimed to be legitimate the participation of women in political affairs” rather, some Muslim scholars see this story as a lesson for why women cannot rule. He further argues that “if A’isha had not intervened in the public affairs of the Muslim state, ‘Muslim history would have taken the path of peace, progress, and prosperity” (7). He warns his readers to “look how this endeavor failed in the very heart of our Muslim history! We don’t have to repeat it senselessly. To counter ‘Arafa’s claim, there hasn’t been enough of a historical tradition of the female rule to be able to say that it leads to unrest. Furthermore, one story of a woman leading cannot be the only representation of how all

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<sup>16</sup> *In the Country of Men*, which is Libyan writer Hisham Matar’s novel from 2006, the main character, Um Suleiman, sees Scherazade as a failure.

<sup>17</sup> A’isha fought ‘Ali Ibn Ali Talin at the Battle of the Camel. This is a story in the Qu’ran about a woman winning against a man, so some view it as a feminist tale and other view it as an abnormality that should be overlooked.

women would rule. This passion for fictional tales as a way to gain knowledge and power permeates into Mernissi's own life when young Fatima decides to put on plays with the other children.

## **Performances**

Fatima engages in performances as another way to unite the women in solidarity. One of the best actresses and storytellers in the harem, Chama, became a role model as young Fatima loved "watching her closely to learn how to put movements into words." The stories often centered around progressive critiques of the harem, so those older women influenced by the patriarchy often found the stories to be unsettling. One mother even ventured to say that her daughter is "attacking the caliphs again" and giving the younger children a "distorted view on their ancestors" (46). For children like Fatima, this became an important way to question the teachings and the structure of the harem because she saw her role models questioning the system. When the women unite to tell these stories and dissect the prescribed structure of the harem, they re-take their power. Aunt Habiba explains this to young Fatima when she says, "One good way for the weak to take power [is] to speak while others are listening" because this is "the expression of power itself" (41). Furthermore, Aunt Habiba asks, "What if the powerful speaker loses his audience?" (41). This is a central question for the solidarity of women throughout the book. In the past, the women were guided by the men of the household as the primary speakers; when the women put on plays, they have an audience to listen to their perspectives on questioning the rules of the harem. Through these plays, young Fatima envisions alternate realities in the harem, but she takes this concept further by studying the importance of music.

## Music

One of the only places where we see the women unified for a common goal is when they want to listen to music: “As soon as the men leave the house, the women would jump to the radio, unlock it with their illegal key, and start a frantic search for music and love songs” (103). Asahman and Oum Kelthoum<sup>18</sup>, the two singers discussed, are sparking an act of rebellion since the women are forbidden by the patriarchal rules of the house to simply turn on the radio to listen to their music. In some instances, the songs are transmitting rebellious themes in the lyrics, such as Abdelwahab who sang “I love the free, unshackled life” (104). These kinds of songs about love and release were hard to come by. She said it was much more common to hear Oum Kelthoum because she sang nationalistic anthems. Women singing about rebellious themes had the potential to be detrimental to the patriarchy since the radio spread messages to women in diverse areas who otherwise may not consider trying to bring down social structures. Asmahan not only sang about rebellious themes, but she also “practiced what she believed in,” as she could have “both love and a career and insist on living a full, congenial life” (106). These singers are powerful to young Fatima and the other rebellious women in the harem because they have a figurehead to emulate. This can be seen when Chama stages plays about her idol: “We all knew about Asmahan’s life in great detail because Chama would constantly stage the lives of all kinds of heroines” (105). Young Fatima believes Asmahan’s life is like a fairytale and the women describe Ashman as a “romantic princess” (105). Therefore, it is not surprising that young Fatima relates the radio and its love songs to a magical experience, saying that “Chama’s magic fingers” were the ones that could decode the French symbols to find songs on the radio. (104). Ashman has become a figurehead for many girls in the harem, and this legend continues even

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<sup>18</sup> Asmahan (1912-1944) and Oum Kelthoum (1924–1973) are both famous female singers who are popular in Northern Africa



after she dies because she “showed Arab women that a life filled with deliberate self-indulgence, as short and scandalous as it may be was better than a long and respectable one devoted to lethargic tradition” (107). Overall, the women in the harem use storytelling and music to transmit narratives, wisdom, and strategies of resistance. The women develop strength in unity, so it is important that they sustain a community, which is also displayed in their bathing and make up rituals.

## **Conclusion**

Today’s veiled and unveiled feminists alike remain cognizant of women’s choice and freedom of expression; this theme is shown both through the internal battle of oppression and ideology, and the external battle of restriction through public space and attire. In the 1990s it was powerful for women to decide to wear or not wear the veil. Several decades earlier, Fatima Mernissi experiences her mother’s disapproval of the veil in the name of feminism. In the discussion on Moroccan women’s attire, wearing the veil and reflecting on wearing the veil are two different entities. Furthermore, analyzing why an entire nation of women should stop wearing the veil differs from looking at an individual’s decision to not wear the veil. For the past century, “whenever women tried or wanted to disregard the veil, some men, always holding up the sacred as a justification, screamed that it was unbearable” (xviii). Moving forward, it seems that the choice simply needs to be removed from the man’s hands. Now, “women are taking part in the public feast [of information]” (xxvii). This is particularly powerful because “that is a definite revolution in the Islamic concept of both the state’s traditional relation to women and women’s relation to the institutionalized distribution of knowledge” (xxviii). Additionally, this essay analyzed the ways women’s solidarity assists in the effort to reclaim freedom. This can be

seen through storytelling, performances, and music as acts of resistance. Transnationally, this issue of women's bodies and public space can be applied to American society. In many Western nations, women are still minority groups in hundreds of industries. In addition, women are still policed and sexualized for their outfits and given preconceived assumptions based on appearance. The policing of women's bodies in America starts from a young age with dress codes and follows them through the work place where one out of eighteen women in America experience workplace sexual violence (Basile). If American society can learn anything from Moroccan feminism, it is that the veil on a woman's body is not the problem; the issue is telling women that they have to participate in self-regulation. Moroccan literature represents a larger discussion about a patriarchy that oppresses all of us.

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