

Veiled Powers: A Foucauldian Reading of Authority in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* (1994)

القوى الخفية (1994) "أحلام التعدي" قراءة فوكوية للسلطة في رواية فاطمة المرنيسي :

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the interplay of authority, power and resistance in Fatima Mernissi's memoir *Dreams of Trespass* focusing on the Moroccan harem as a locus where patriarchal power is imposed and subverted. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concepts of power, surveillance, and defiance, the research explores how spatial confinement and social norms function not merely through overt domination, but through internalized discipline and regulating behaviors. The narrative also foregrounds multiple forms of resistance highlighting that agency can be exercised even in enclosed spheres. In re-imagining the harem as a site of negotiation and female agency, the author demonstrates that power is not absolute and dominant, but it is disciplinary and productive, teaching self governing and regulation.

Keywords: Power; authority; surveillance; harem; resistance .

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1. INTRODUCTION

Power and authority are foundational concepts that have long occupied a central place in philosophical, sociological, and political discourse. In traditional thought, authority was associated with governmental and legal institutions and viewed as a hierarchical system of control imposed from above (the state). However, the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) re-framed this existing understanding by arguing that power operates not from a single centre, but through social relations and productive networks. According to Foucault, power permeates all levels of society, and is ever present in the environment of which human beings are subjects and agents. It functions through every day practices, discourses, and institutions, often forming individual behavior and social norms without overt coercion. Foucault's theories encourage a rethinking of authority as something that functions not only through visible institutions, but also through internalized forms of discipline, surveillance, and knowledge production.

Foucault's redefinition of power offers an insightful framework for understanding how individuals are shaped and constrained by the social environments they inhabit. Understanding power as a network of relations rather than a possession enables a deeper investigation into how authority functions subtly in everyday life. This research employs a Foucauldian framework to a literary and an autobiographical narrative that depicts controlled or confined spaces, with a focus on how power is experienced, internalized, and resisted by individuals, particularly women, within those domestic spaces. Literature, particularly when drawn from postcolonial and gendered contexts, provides a distinctive lens through which to examine the lived realities of the dynamics of power and authority. The interplay between personal narrative and theoretical critique allows for a nuanced exploration of how subjectivities are formed within systems of control by resisting the power structures that define what it means to be a woman in that society. This research uses Fatima Mernissi's memoir *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of Harem Girlhood* (1994) as a case study to

investigate how power, authority, and resistance are experienced, internalized, and challenged, particularly by women, in line with Foucault.

While Foucault's theories have been widely applied to institutional and political contexts, less attention has been paid to how his ideas illuminate the operations of power within private, domestic, and culturally specific spheres, particularly those defined by gender. This study addresses the gap by examining how Foucauldian notions of power and authority function a literary field in environments shaped by patriarchy, tradition, Islamic religion and postcolonial dynamics in a Maghrebian society. Hence, this research brings forward the following questions:

- 1- How do Foucault's notions of power and authority manifest in Fatima Mernissi's autobiography?
- 2- To what extent does resistance operate within defuse and decentralized culturally embedded systems of power?

It is hypothesized that

- 1- Foucault's concepts of power and authority are reflected in Mernissi's work through the subtle everyday ways women negotiate, resist and adapt to patriarchal structures that are culturally rooted in society.
- 2- Resistance often takes shape in women's everyday practices and actions rather than overt confrontations to achieve feminine agency.

This study contributes to enrich the field of literary and cultural criticism by demonstrating how theoretical frameworks can be used to unpack the nuanced experiences of individuals, mainly women, within systems of authority. By examining the intersections domestic space, and power, this research fosters a deeper engagement with the ways in which control and resistance are embedded in everyday life in postcolonial literature.

2. Michel Foucault and the Notion of Power

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Michel Foucault is widely regarded as a central figure in political and critical theory, not notably recognized for his theories on the concepts of power, knowledge, and discourse. His ideas have largely shaped a range of theoretical frameworks, including phenomenology, post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism, postfeminism, and postcolonialism. Foucault's influence extends across multiple disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and history. The thought provoking nature of his work has fueled vigorous and ongoing debates in sociology and philosophy since the 1960's. A distinguished trait of Foucault's ideas is its dynamic quality in embracing openness and changes.

One prominent influential figure that impacted Foucault's ideas was the German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche. From the outset, Nietzsche's philosophy played a key role in shaping Foucault's theoretical approach. He sees power not just as political or physical control, but a fundamental force driving human behavior and life. For Nietzsche, all beings are motivated by "a will to power" (Foucault, 1972, p180) that prompts them to make their voices heard and seek mastery. This will to power is demonstrated by overcoming obstacles which calls for continuous self challenge and a pursuit of perfection. Foucault builds on this view in his foundational works, where he explores the concept of power. He defines power as the capacity of one entity to control or direct the behavior of another. Such power dynamics, he suggests, are pervasive and operate at various levels of social interaction.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault defines power as the network of interacting forces that exist within a given sphere and shape their own structure or organization. He suggests that even the most fundamental elements of existence can be interpreted as stable patterns of energy and power. According to him, in medieval societies, power was primarily centralized in the hands of the sovereign/ruler, who sustained authority via explicit violence.

Nevertheless, in the modern era, power began to function through another lens. , New forms of power emerged, defined by unique methods of operation and systems of regulation.

More to the point, Power, in Foucauldian terms, is not complete control. It exists everywhere, not because it is actively practiced everywhere, but because it persists and is always prepared to reveal itself. Therefore, power, in itself, does not exist as an independent entity; rather as power relations. It is not something that can be possessed, taken, or distributed, since it is continuously present within the very context in which human beings live as both subjects and agents. Power operates through a twofold structure revealing that it operates on two interconnected levels: it is both pervasive or omnipresent in social relations, and inescapable in the sense that individuals are simultaneously shaped by it and participate in its operation This is to say that the modern exercise of power is not rooted in the acts of prohibition and suppression, but it functions through the formation of constructive ideas, and discourses that establish and reinforce the normative frameworks guiding human behavior.

2. From Authority to Surveillance

2.1 The Panopticon: Seeing and Being Seen

The journey of the Foucauldian notion of power and knowledge continued in 1975, when the book *The Birth of Prison (1975)* was published. Michel Foucault examines the social and ideological mechanisms behind the changes in the Western penal system over the digital age. In his book, Foucault discusses the shift of power between pre-modern societies and the modern ones. In traditional societies, power was sovereign, violent and visible. It permitted public display of punishment, frequently involving physical torture and execution (exercising power over the body). In modern context, however, power becomes disciplinary, invisible and totally exercised through institutions such as hospitals, schools and prisons (power requires less direct coercion). Through these concepts, Foucault sheds a light on the new form of prison that was created by the British jurist and social reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832).

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One point of departure for understanding surveillance can be found in Lyon's explanation of surveillance being about both caring and controlling (Lyon, 2006, p68). The subject of surveillance is being watched with a certain purpose, which can be controlling and disciplining the subject into certain behaviour or a set of norms.

Bentham's 'panopticon' was a circle prison with cells around an external wall with a watchtower erected in the center where a single guard could observe every prisoner, but the prisoners couldn't see the guard. The theory is that the inmates assume that they are being watched; hence, they would act accordingly without the need for force. He sets out:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded ... in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead—all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (Bentham, 1978, p 197).

According to the government, surveillance is a useful way to control and govern the prisoners in particular and the people in general. In a panopticon system, constant surveillance makes people internalize authority and begin to police themselves behaving as if they are being always observed and monitored. Foucault argues that the major effect of the panopticon is to create in the inmate a condition of constant and aware visibility, which guarantees the self-regulating operation of power. As a result, this mode would make surveillance efficient and self-regulating, encouraging good behavior and correction without constant punishment.

Equally important, Foucault draws on Bentham's architectural model (the panopticon) a metaphor for modern systems of power and social regulation designed to strengthen society,

enhance production, stimulate economic development, broaden access to education, improve public morals, and boost growth and proliferation. Hence, in this system, power and knowledge reinforce one another and observation produces knowledge about individuals, which in turn maintain the structures of authority.

Foucault argues that institutions such as schools, the military, hospitals, and factories have incorporated Panoptical mechanisms of observation, making surveillance a central part of everyday life and enabling the exercise of disciplinary power. Because anyone could potentially be under surveillance at any time, individuals internalize rules and self-regulation. In this sense, discipline functions as a form of power, a deliberate strategy, and a kind of technology. Foucault refers to this model as a disciplinary society, which in Western contexts has evolved and served as an ideal model of governance. (Lyon, 2003, p5).

3. Resistance

Just as surveillance has become a normalized aspect of daily life, resistance to it is equally pervasive (De Certeau, 2002). Yet, resistance is a fundamental and often hidden counterpart to surveillance and frequently goes unnoticed. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault states that “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault, 1978, p 95). This perspective allows us to consider that power struggle is not reduced to the relationship between oppressor- slave dynamics. Power always carries the potential for resistance, and in the absence of resistance, it cannot truly be considered a power relation. In Foucault’s conception of power, there is no single center of rebellion, no inherent spirit of revolt, and no universal law of revolution (Foucault, 1978, p95-96). Instead, resistance exists in multiple forms, each operating within the larger web of power relations. Far from being merely reactionary or marginal, these acts of resistance are central to how power functions, emerging within its structures and influencing its workings instead of existing entirely outside them. Again, Foucault emphasizes the notion that resistance is always immanent to power. This idea comes closer to Gabriel Marcel’s famous line in “*Outlines of a Phenomenology of Having*” (1949): “Power is something which I experienced by exercising it or by resisting it—after all, it comes to the same thing”. (Marcel, 1949, p158).

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For both thinkers, power is not held by one side and denied to another; it is circulated, negotiated, and experienced in all social relations.

Foucault's subjects are seen as constrained agents, heavily influenced by surrounding structural forces (Butin, 2001, p38). Within this Panoptic framework, deviants are expected to regulate themselves and conform to societal norms. The inmate's awareness of constant surveillance can lead to resistance (Lyon, 2003, p95). Foucault points out: "These power relations are thus mobile, reversible, and unstable" (Foucault, 1978, p 292). For him, in any system of observation, control, or discipline, individuals are never completely passive. The possibility of resisting is built into the exercise of power itself. asserts that the existence of power relations depends on the presence of resistance.

Foucault insists on the idea that power and resistance complement each other; they are hence thought to be coterminous. He commands that surveillance produces both compliance and defiance which are two sides of the same coin. Power extends across the social field only when it is countered or engaged by resistance. To Foucault, resistance can be hidden, subtle and performed with unseen acts to challenge authority. This can be for example through secret conversations or ignoring the rules to retain some autonomy. It can also be strategic which refers to finding gaps in the system of surveillance or discipline. This is to say that control and disciplinary systems create knowledge about individuals, and this knowledge can itself become a source of resistance, because individuals can learn to search, manipulate, or exploit the rules. Thus, knowledge of power is itself power since it allows for strategic defiance.

4. Whispers Behind the Harem Walls: Authority and Resistance in *Dreams of Trespass*

In the charming memoir "*Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*", Fatima Mernissi(1940–2015) a Moroccan Muslim feminist and sociologist transports readers into the intriguing world of a Moroccan harem in the mid-20th century, where both tangible and symbolic boundaries shape the daily lives of its residents. Seen through the perspective of a

young girl and framed within a postcolonial setting, Mernissi offers a rich mosaic of stories that challenge and reinterpret the idea of the harem, portraying it as more than just an isolated and private space for women, rather a layered and nuanced world filled with dreams and empowerment. In the light of autobiography, the work can act as an insistent record, a trace, a web, a veil for what cannot be openly expressed due to the constraints of patriarchy. (Friedman, 1989, p142).

Mernissi's memoir offers a real account of her early childhood within the confines of a harem. The analysis examines the harem as a social institution, focusing on the ways it has historically both constrained and, at times, empowered the women who lived in it. In this context, several key themes emerge through Fatima, the narrator of *Dreams of Trespass*, and that reveal the plight of women in the harem. These themes include the experience of confinement, seclusion and restricted freedom, the longing for education and intellectual awakening, the potential of dreams, the affirmation of personal agency in challenging established norms, and the endless resistance of power within the harem system.

Mernissi employs the harem as a space to frame the interplay of power and resistance in Morocco highlighting the two-sided nature they embody. In historical contexts, it refers to the isolated part of a household reserved for women, especially in Muslim palaces or royal households, where wives and female relatives lived. Associated with Arab and Muslim Maghrebian societies, the harem operates as an institution that upholds a physical separation between the two genders in domestic and public worlds. Beyond mere seclusion, and restricted access, the harem also carried cultural significance. It often symbolizes secrecy and protection, intended to preserve family honor and regulate social boundaries. Therefore, the literal meaning of "harem" is not just a place for women, gathering, but a , protected domain with social, moral, and legal implications.

In her narrative, Mernissi awakens the audience to the conditions of life within a traditional Moroccan harem, showing how this enforced seclusion is reinforced through societal rules and expectations as well . She states:

Our House gate was a definite *huddud*, or frontier, because you needed permission to step in or out. Every move had to be justified and even getting

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to the gate was a procedure. If you were coming from the courtyard, you had to first walk down an endless corridor, and then you came face to face with Ahmed, the doorkeeper, who was usually sitting on his throne-like sofa, always with his tea tray by his side (Mernissi, 1994, p3)

Portrayed as a prison-like, the harem is defined in multiple ways by strict rules and social codes that regulate every single aspect of Fatima's life. Its walls be it visible or not impose physical and behavioral regulations constraining women's freedom and impacting their creativity and inspiration. This milieu illustrates how power and authority function in a subtle way through direct control and supervision leading women to govern and regulate themselves.

In few line of the very beginning of her memoir, the young narrator presents a controversial and provocative perspective on the harem describing it as the *huddud* or sacred frontier that marks the division between what is *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden) as indicated in the following statement:

The word "harem", Yasmina said, was a slight variation of the word *haram*, the forbidden, the proscribed. It was the opposite of *halal*, the permissible. Harem was the place where a man sheltered his family, his wives, children and relatives. It could be a house or tent, and it referred both to the space and to the people who lived within it. One thing that helped me see this more clearly was when yasmina explained that Mecca, the holy city, was also called *Haram*. Macca was a space where behavior was strictly codified. (Mernissi, 1994, p 36)

Importantly, the narrator comes to understand, through her father's guidance, that these frontiers were designed to shield women from transgressing societal norms and preserving cultural identity . He warns that if Arab women adopted European practices, the diversity of culture would vanish. Through this description, the narrator conveys the as a meticulously ordered space, bound by prescribed laws, shaping her experiences and those of others. This symmetrical design reflects power hierarchies and binary distinctions, including gender and space,.

It is noteworthy to mention that Mernissi's depiction of life in the harem provides a vivid context for adopting Foucauldian ideas of power and authority. Foucault views power not simply as a hierarchical force, but as a net-like of relationships that circulates throughout, as a network of relations that permeates institutions, social norms, and everyday practices. Within the harem, power operates through rules, spatial restrictions, and social expectations, shaping women's behaviors and desires. By internalizing these rules, the women themselves participated in the enforcement of power, demonstrating Foucault's view that power is diffuse, reciprocal, and embedded in social practices rather than centred in a single authority.

Admittedly, The walls, locked doors, and screens function like a miniature Panopticon, where women are both observed and aware of potential surveillance. Fatima describes how even private spaces are regulated, and girls learn to monitor their own movements, speech, and behavior, anticipating judgment. the division of public versus private spaces enforces gendered separation, reflecting the Panopticon's ability to regulate bodies and behavior. Fatima narrates the restriction of girls to certain rooms or courtyards, which shapes their perception of freedom and autonomy. This idea is well illustrated through the following example:

"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" (Mernissi, 1994, p122).

Clearly, the highly structured harem environment offers generative governing norms women have to follow. At home, there are forbidden activities, places and obligatory daily rituals, and a rigid hierarchy based on sex and age, all of which are crystal clear.

5. Resistance and Female Agency

As stated above, throughout her story, Fatima keeps exploring the true essence and purpose of the harem, and what it means to trespass its the boundaries, a dream which had long been cherished by all women of the harem. It is their dream to have a glimpse of the

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world beyond the walls imagining themselves wandering in the street freely all day long. The yearning for freedom desired by the women of the harem inherently points to the world beyond their domestic confines. Women such as Yasmina (Fatima's paternal grandmother) and Fatima's mother consistently negate patriarchy, considering it both illogical and not Islamic. Fatima is instructed by her mother that the reason why men kept women in harems was to prevent them from being too smart. Confined within the harem, Fatima became aware of her own helplessness and questioned her maternal grandmother, Lalla Mani, about who truly benefited from the harem, what she could contribute to her country while remaining a prisoner in the courtyard, why they were denied education, who had established the harem, and for what purpose, wondering if anyone could explain it to her. (Mernissi, 1994, p197). This idea of education fills both Fatima and her mother with excitement, as her mother glimpses a ray of hope in her daughter, someone who might break the confines of harem and become a force for reform for all the women who dream of crossing the boundaries of confinement.

Even not given a name, Fatima's mother, a rebellious woman who never adjusts to communal harem life, represents a force of resistance in the memoir. She persistently asserts her own freedom and sense of self; she teaches her daughter to believe in crossing limits, imagining a world remade without walls or frontiers, where those who enforce the gates are granted a day off from their watch. Her successful endeavors include replacing the tradition white veil (*el Haiek*) with a colorful *djellaba*, *dinning* in the terrace with her husband and daughters which is not a female access in the harem and having late morning breakfast by herself. These small acts of resistance violates the prescribed rules and claim her agency against established authority. She notes that although she yields to tradition to keep life smooth, certain personal practices, like embroidery that give her a moment to breathe and provide her with a space for self-expression. Most importantly, the mother is determined to do anything to teach her daughter get out from harem life. She instills in her ideas of freedom and agency as she insists on her to reject unfairness and seek her own happiness, and to be a rebellious woman. "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." (Mernissi, 1994, p9). In fact, acting as a mentor in Fatima's journey of self-discovery and intellectual growth, the mother imparts her unfulfilled dreams into her daughters, wishing that they will enjoy greater opportunities, gain knowledge, travel, and eventually transform the world.

Another important instance of Fatima's mother resistant mood and her struggle for independence occurs in her opposition to the veil. So anxious is the mother when seeing little Fatima putting on a scarf around her head: "Don't you ever cover your head !" Mother shouted. "Do you understand me? Never! I am fighting against the veil, and you are putting one on?! What is this non sense?" . When Fatima tries to explain that she did it because of being afraid from the Hitler (in a story narrated by her cousin), her mother blames and opposes her saying: "even if Hitler- the Almighty king of the Allemane is after you", she said, "you ought to face him with your hair uncovered. Covering your head and hiding will not help. Hiding does not solve a woman's problems. It just identifies her as an easy victim" (Mernissi, 1994, p100).

Undoubtedly, the mother's character draws attention to the influence she has in fostering her daughter's empowerment and resistance to the disciplinary structures of the harem. She is indeed a catalyst for Fatima's life, nurturing her awareness of injustice and inspiring her to transcend the limits imposed by the harem's orders.

As the story progresses, another strong female character, Aunt Habiba, appears to share the same grounds of resistance as Fatima's mother. Aunt Habiba's storytelling and dreams become a subtle yet powerful forms of defiance. Fatima admires Aunt Habiba for her ability to empower the women of the harem through dreams, showing that each one harbors a unique magical potential of overcoming all the constraints they face. Fatima learns from her how to dream and assert her identity as a woman.

Aunt Habiba's most popular tale, which she narrates on special occasions, is about " that Woman with wings", who can fly away from the courtyard whenever she wants to. With her tales, she symbolically offers women an alternative vision of freedom through an imaginative resistance. She insists that anyone can develop wings, it only requires concentration and

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determination. Wings need not always be seen, as birds' are, yet their growth demands two essentials: first, the sense of being enclosed, and second, the belief that one can shatter the very circle that contains them. For Aunt Habiba, anyone has the potential to summon such wings, rising above the twisted interpretations of religious teachings that have long served to uphold patriarchal authority. Achieving this liberation needs focus and reflection as dreams necessarily provide a sense of direction. Little Fatima highlights the meticulous power of dreams by drawing on Aunt Habiba's words, showing how imagination and hope can transcend confinement and inspire liberation. Aunt Habiba firmly believes in the quiet magic that resides within each woman. She often reminds them that even in moments of confinement and powerlessness, when it happens to be fettered or trapped behind walls, and confined with a harem, women's imagination could become a force of liberation. In her eyes, dreams were not idle fantasies; Dreams possess the remarkable power to transform not only individual lives but, in time, the world itself. Hence, the narrator describes Aunt Habiba as one who accepts her fate, but continues to challenge the limited modes of self-expression, revealing her constraints with dreams and a flying bird when she herself cannot fly.

Notably, the female types surrounding Mernissi's protagonist are primordial in the development of the latter's awareness and maturity. Women like Fatima's grandmother, mother, aunts, and female cousins are represented as naive figures of empowerment who subvert the patriarchal constraints that fetter them, while nurturing a sense of autonomy from within the confines of this male social order.

A further essential point to consider is the females' trial to resistance through performing plays on Egyptian celebrities as a means of entertainment and empowerment at the same time. Fatima describes how her older female cousin Chama, references these famous figures who advocate women's rights in Egyptian society, but within the walls of their own harem who are : Asmahan (A Libanese singer), Oum Keltoum (An Egyptian singer) and Houda El Shaarawi (an Egyptian feminist and activist). Chama organizes and directs theatrical performances in which she transforms the younger girls into living echoes of these famous celebrities performing special scenes of singers, social reformers, revolutionary

activists and feminist pioneers for the other women in the harem. She describes these plays not only as a source of information of the lives of these historical figures, but also as entertainment for the women in the harem. As a case in point, one of the young girls embodies Asmahan on stage by projecting her voice boldly, filling the room with powerful songs that marked her career. The act of singing loudly with a commanding strength becomes a symbol of defiance and a refusal to be silenced by societal and patriarchal constraints and pressures. Each note asserts her independence, autonomy and refusal to be silenced. This inspires the other women in the harem to imagine their own voices breaking free. Through this performance, her music transforms from mere entertainment into an act of rebellion, demonstrating that even within confinement, one can assert identity, strength, and freedom.

Conclusively, Chama uses these theatrical performances to serve a dual purpose: they function as a medium for delivering knowledge about strong powerful revolutionary women while simultaneously offering a space for imaginative freedom inside the confinement of the harem. In Foucauldian words, these revelations and performances demonstrate the way resistance and knowledge work within power structures, changing the limited space (the panopticon) of the harem into a place where women can resist, negotiate authority through subtly challenging the social patriarchal order and asserting some agency.

6. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* furnishes a nuanced examination of power and authority as they function in an enclosed domestic sphere of the harem. Through a deep portrayal of definite borders '*huddud*', wall and social order and regulation, Mernissi reveals how power is both exercised and internalized, forming the behaviors, thoughts and attitudes of women. The harem transforms into a site of feminist resistance, exposing the deep-rooted cultural, historical, and ideological struggles of its society. In her autobiography, Mernissi suggests that liberation and asserting autonomy can be born within the very walls that imprison women, even when those walls are reinforced by culture and religion. Freedom, she implies, is not always a matter of escape; it can emerge quietly, from within, as

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women imagine, resist, and redefine the boundaries that seek to contain them. This naturally explains why Fatima can easily conform to the order. Nevertheless, what sets her different from those who surrender and submit to the established regulation are the women around her who, very late in their lives, recognize the possibilities of freedom that can be born for the future of Moroccan women. The memoir provides valuable insights from a child's point of view on the spectrum of power, surveillance and resistance the harem imposes on women. Hence, in *Dreams of Trespass*, Mernissi reveals how storytelling itself can reshape reality, turning everyday experiences into a means of negotiating and challenging power. In Foucauldian terms, the harem operates as a site of disciplinary power: surveillance, be it literal or symbolic teaches self governing and regulation urging women to behave according to the prescribed social norms. Yet, within these forms of control the author casts a spotlight on the possible forms of resistance. Figures like Fatima's mother, her grandmother her aunt and cousin show that rebellion can be subtle, and manifests through storytelling, imaginative plays, the pursuit of education and even slight transgressive boundaries. These acts highlight that resistance is always immanent to power, and exists with the system of that seeks to constrain it. Therefore, power is not binary between oppressor and oppressed, but it is employed and exercised through a net-like organization.

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