Scheherazade's achievement(s): Storytelling and agency in Fatima Mernissi's memoir *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* and *Scheherazade Goes West*

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Introduction

The narrative of merit and success is ubiquitous and powerfully scripts people's lives. It downplays and sometimes even blatantly denies structural inequalities by insisting that effort, skill, and hard work guarantee upward mobility (Littler 2018). Ideas of success shape everyday life from early childhood onwards and underpin both internal desires and dreams and fashion external expectations of fulfilment. Yet meritocratic scripts are staggeringly narrow in their definition of what the 'success' of a human life means. Meritocracy "facilitat[es] the atomization of individuals" by "extending competition and entrepreneurial behaviour" into the most ordinary practices of everyday life (Rottenberg 2018, 997). How then, do Western narratives of achievement shift and get challenged when they travel into African contexts? This is the question that this paper seeks to answer by considering two texts by the Moroccan feminist sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015).

Mernissi is best known for her pioneering work on gender equality in Islam. In this paper however, I wish to focus on her memoir, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, published in 1994 and her reflections on its Eurocentric reception, which culminated in the publication of *Scheherazade Goes West. Different Cultures, Different Harems* in 2001. Both texts deal with the way in which women's agency is circumscribed by particular horizons of constraint determined by their social contexts and thus the texts contrast local, particular forms of constraint with more diffuse forms of oppression that characterise Western modernity. I offer a (very brief) reading of her harem childhood to trace some of the alternative modes of enacting small freedoms that the memoir documents. As becomes apparent in Mernissi's reflections on the memoir's reception, these achievements seem to be largely illegible within a Western feminist paradigm in particular and a meritocratic rationality of development in general. In contrast, Mernissi asserts that such modes of communal sociality – storytelling, performance, artistic production, and care of self and other mark direct, albeit subtle, forms of resistance to the constraining cir-

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cumstances even if they are not necessarily recognised as such. The paper examines how the figure of Scheherazade emerges in the two texts as a role model of the kind of knowledge that allows women insight into their social context in order to carve out pockets of resistance.

Growing up in an urban harem

Mernissi's memoir *Dreams of Trespass. Tales of a Harem Girlhood* begins with the words:

> I was born in a harem in 1940 in Fez, a ninth-century Moroccan city some five thousand kilometres west of Mecca, and one thousand kilometres south of Madrid, one of the dangerous capitals of the Christians. The problem with the Christians start, said Father, as with women, when the hudud, or sacred frontier, is not respected. I was born in the midst of chaos, since neither Christians nor women accepted the frontiers. Right on our threshold, you could see the women of the harem contesting and fighting with Ahmed the doorkeeper as the foreign armies from the North kept arriving all over the city. (Mernissi 1994, 1)

For readers, this beginning raises expectations of national liberation from colonial oppression alongside women breaking free of the restrictions of confinement, demanding to be able to cross the threshold of the front door. It is that too, but much more subtly, Mernissi uses the real physical boundaries she experienced growing up in this house in Fez, to launch a nuanced interrogation of invisible boundaries, that keep structuring women's lives, even when they are supposedly completely free to move – or achieve – as they please. The strictures of physical confinement inherent in urban harem life become the grounds for honing skills of dissent that the women teach each other – largely through storytelling, performance, artistic production like embroidery, and by activating an ethics of care (for both self and other) which result in a kind of psychological acumen.

How do we need to imagine the domestic harem in this household? At the centre of it all lies a communal living arrangement, though in Mernissi's immediate family the men each only have one wife: Mernissi tells us that her own and her uncle's families live in the house, under the sharp eyes of the paternal grandmother (one of the staunch upholders of tradition and one of the women who actively upholds patriarchal structures). Mernissi's own family comprises only five members, her parents and two siblings. Her uncle's family numbered nine, the parents and seven children. The four ground-floor salons around the central courtyard of the house are occupied by Lala Mani, the grandmother, the two families, with the fourth one reserved as the dining room for the men. This is also the salon where the radio was kept (a secret key finds its way to the women who dance to the radio tunes when the men are out). The house has two more storeys, as well as rooftop terraces. Many female relatives who have fallen on hard times or were divorced and in need of shelter, have their living quarters on the higher floors. Men hardly ventured up

there and the terraces were largely the domain of the women and children where they told stories, staged elaborate performances, tended to their emotional needs, and administered beauty treatments. It is in the validation of these mundane activities that the narrative radically redefines notions of skills and achievements. I cannot do justice to all of these here, so I just want to focus on the achievement of storytelling.

Scheherazade's achievements

> I was amazed to realize that for many Westerners, Scheherazade was considered a lovely, but simple-minded entertainer, someone who narrates innocuous tales and dresses fabulously. In our part of the world, Scheherazade is perceived as a courageous heroine and is one of our rare female mythical figures. Scheherazade is a strategist and a powerful thinker, who uses her psychological knowledge of human beings [to entirely shift the fate of the kingdom]. (Mernissi 1994, 15)

The figure of Scheherazade in *Alf layla wa Layla* also known as *The Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights* was the courageous role model of a clandestine feminist rebellion in the Mernissi household. Movement and travelling became possible primarily through the practices of storytelling by activating the imagination of the listeners. Despite being confined to the harem space, the women travelled in their imagination "spellbound by the strange words being tossed out at the audience by Chama and Aunt Habiba, the high priestesses of imagination" (Mernissi 1994, 113). What Mernissi suggests here is that what could be perceived as an idle whiling away of time, actually becomes a space in which women hone their intellectual, psychological and imaginative skills that serve them in all sorts of tangible ways to navigate their daily lives. In storytelling, constraint and travelling are not oppositional but they coexist.

The genesis of the text of the *Nights* is itself constituted by travel, tracing "old and new maps and histories of people and [stories] in transit" (Clifford 1997, 2). It has no one author and no one source, its title a symbol of infinity – 1001 – "its stories are Indian, Persian, and Arabic, and were told in many forms many centuries before they were written down" (Byatt 2009, xiiv). Marina Warner points out that Egypt, India, and Persia supplied the "principle streams" flowing into the cycle of stories that took shape in Arabic, mixing it with other sources: "[they] contain traces of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, and of Indian, Egyptian, Greek, Latin, Russian and Turkish myths floating in the ocean of the streams of story" (Warner 2012, 7-8). Like a stack of Chinese boxes or nested matryoshka dolls, "a character in a story invokes a character who tells a story about a character who has a story to tell . . . Everything proliferates" (Byatt 2009, xiiv-xv). And Scheherazade is the frame character who holds all the threads of the multiple stories-within-stories in her capable and caring hands – this is the skill that keeps her alive and makes her into a powerful symbol of liberation.

In the frame story of the *Nights* King Shahryar is full of grief and hatred for women after the discovery of his wife's infidelity. In his mind, all women are to blame and he marries a succession of virgins only to execute them in the morning. Eventually the kingdom runs out of eligible virgins and it is then that Scheherazade, the vizier's daughter, offers herself as the next bride. Mernissi explains that

> She, unlike her father, was convinced that she had exceptional power and could stop the killing. She would cure the troubled King's soul simply by talking to him about things that happened to others. She would take him to faraway lands to observe foreign ways, so he could get close to the strangeness within himself. She would help him see his prison, his obsessive hatred of women. (Mernissi 1994, 15)

So, on the night of their marriage, she begins a tale and ends it at a moment of great suspense and, curious to hear how the story ends, Shahryar postpones her execution by a day. On the next night, when she finishes her story, she begins a new one and 1001 nights and three children later, the king declares that he is a changed man, who no longer wishes to execute his wife. The *Nights*, a story about storytelling, suggests that storytelling is not an idle occupation but a strategy of survival and deeply political. According to Mernissi, Scheherazade's intellectual achievement as a storyteller powerfully challenges male authority: "[s]he saves not only herself but also an entire kingdom" by changing the mind, the beliefs, and motivations of the king (Mernissi 2001, 49). Mernissi wonders why this crucial aspect has been rendered harmless in the Western reception of the *Nights*. This question underpins *Scheherazade Goes West* where Mernissi offers a sustained critique of androcentric Western philosophical and artistic traditions, which confine women to passivity and their appeal to sexual obsequiousness (and where brainy women's femininity becomes questionable). In this way, Mernissi highlights two very different scripts of women's achievement.

Conclusion

> With words alone, [Aunt Habiba] could put us onto a large ship sailing from Aden to the Maldives, or to take us to an island where the birds spoke like human beings. Riding on her words, we travelled past Sind and Hind (India), leaving Muslim territories behind, living dangerously, and making friends with Christians and Jews, who shared their bizarre food with us and watched us do our prayers, while we watched them do theirs. Her tales made me long to become an adult and an expert storyteller myself. I wanted to learn how to talk in the night. (Mernissi 1994, 19)

This cursory reading of Mernissi's narratives suggests that "while women inhabited and in some ways supported certain [patriarchal] structures that oppressed them, this did not

cancel the fact that they were simultaneously engaged in processes of resisting them" (Motsemme 2004, 919). Such enabling forms of power, even if they do not translate into the kind of success that is legible in particular meritocratic scripts, nevertheless carve out pockets of freedom and agency. I have shown how storytelling is such a space of asserting freedom and how Scheherazade represents a role model in this regard: "the story appears to be a story against women at first . . . [but] the woman ends up completely taking over" (Mernissi 2001, 49). This is why Aunt Habiba's storytelling sessions on Friday nights become the highlight of the week, eagerly anticipated by the children of the harem in Fez, including the young Mernissi. I don't think it is too far-fetched to assert that Mernissi's later academic career with its immense positive influence on a younger generation of Moroccan feminists (Sadiqi and Ouguir 2018) was fundamentally shaped during those childhood nights of storytelling.

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