



Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems

By Fatema Mernissi

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Fatema Mernissi, the world-renowned Islamic feminist, has shed unprecedented light on the lives of women in the Middle East, in works hailed as "enchancing" (*The New York Times Book Review*), "exuberant" (*Elle*), and "remarkable" (*The Washington Post Book World*). Now, in *Scheherazade Goes West*, Mernissi reveals her unique experiences as a liberated, independent Moroccan woman faced with the peculiarities and unexpected encroachments of Western culture. Her often surprising discoveries about the conditions of and attitudes toward women around the world -- and the exquisitely embroidered amalgam of clear-eyed autobiography and dazzling meta-fiction by which she relates those assorted discoveries -- add up to a deliciously wry, engagingly cosmopolitan, and deeply penetrating narrative.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Fatima Mernissi's unclassifiable book, at turns scholarly, playful, watchful, and admonitory, perfectly juxtaposes the relations between men and women in Europe with those in the Muslim world. In *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*, there is a studied casualness in Mernissi's observations, which she presents as a series of discoveries reached through conversations with friends, through reading and travels, and through her own lived experience as a liberated Moroccan woman, a feminist professor of sociology at a Moroccan university. In 1994, Mernissi traveled to 10 Western cities to promote her bestselling book, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, a luxury not available to her illiterate grandmother Yasmina, to whom the harem was a prison, rather than the idealized sanctuary of Western myth.

The contrasts Mernissi discovered between East and West were not as simple as one might imagine. In Berlin, for example, she leafed through pornographic German photo books of "harem women," produced for an eager audience of Western men, and in Paris, she accompanied a male friend on a walking tour of his favorite odalisques, from Ingres to Matisse, while he explained how comforting an insecure man found these nude, silent women. While the medieval caliphs tended to prize intelligence and erudition among the women of their harems, Western writers have lauded beauty over every other quality; as Kant put it, a learned woman "might as well even have a beard." In deceptively light prose, Mernissi introduces the sexual politics of Islam to a Western audience, while pointing out the inconsistencies and illogic in the Western tradition. --
Regina Marler

From Publishers Weekly

For Western men, the very word harem typically provokes voluptuous sexual fantasies in which men have their way with vulnerable women who are happy to satisfy their needs, observes Mernissi, feminist sociologist and Koranic scholar. In Islamic culture, by contrast, the harem is seen as the site of a dangerous, sexual power struggle in which powerful women resist male domination. The mythical Scheherazade, who recounted enough tales to fill *One Thousand and One Nights*, models this female power, Mernissi (*Beyond the Veil*) argues. In a cerebral rather than physical seduction, Scheherazade recounted complex tales to her king, using her nutq her ability to penetrate a man's brain by using the right words. So subversive was that power that her stories were published in Arabic only a century after appearing in French, and they remain a target of Muslim censorship. Using a wide range of Islamic sources etymology, art, religious law, cultural history Mernissi develops a nuanced analysis of the sexual power of Islamic women. By probing Western representations of Scheherazade in ballet, Hollywood movies, painting she also reveals the West's tendency to misconstrue the harem. Unfortunately, Mernissi's navet, about the West mars the book. After a few casual chats, some skimming of peculiar or derivative sources and a trip to a designer's shop in New York, she concludes that Western women are as tyrannized by the pressure to be a size 6 as Islamic women are by the veil. Additionally, Mernissi's stream-of-consciousness style of storytelling can be irritating. More troubling, she never returns to her initial mission to understand the Western image of the harem.

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From Library Journal

When Moroccan sociologist Mernissi went on tour to promote her 1994 book, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of*

a Harem Girlhood, she was perplexed when Western audiences reacted to the word harem as though she had uttered something salacious. Eager to understand this phenomenon, she began to study European and American art, dance, and literature. Her queries revealed that the non-Arab world sees the harem as a "peaceful pleasure-garden where omnipotent men reign supreme over obedient...sexually available women." Western translations of *The Thousand and One Nights* further prove the point. Unlike Arabic renderings, the versions Mernissi uncovered depict women as brainless. This shocked her, since the stories she grew up with focused on Scheherazade as a woman whose passionate rhetoric swayed a king. "The Oriental Scheherazade is purely cerebral," she writes. "In the original tales, Scheherazade's body is hardly mentioned but her learning is repeatedly stressed." Mernissi's research exposes an array of misrepresentations and misunderstandings and reveals the ways misogyny both Eastern and Western limits human imagination and stifles communication. Brilliant and convincing, this is a provocative multicultural critique. Highly recommended for all libraries. Eleanor J. Bader, Brooklyn
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