

The Three Women of Fes

Sara Hadaoui

Istanbul Aydin University, Istanbul, Turkey

Abstract: *This article is on two texts: Dreams of Trespass by Fatema Mernissi, The Sand Child by Tahar Ben Jelloun, and the TV series The Clone by the script writer Glória Perez dealing with themes of colonialism in Morocco and its effect on people, especially women. It talks about slavery and the Harem culture and the traditional Moroccan household, examining themes of witchcraft and western men fetishizing women. The aim of this research is to show the effect of the violence implied by the colonizer on people and the women's rights and slaves rights statue in a post-colonial Morocco to shed light on the reality of women conditions in that period.*

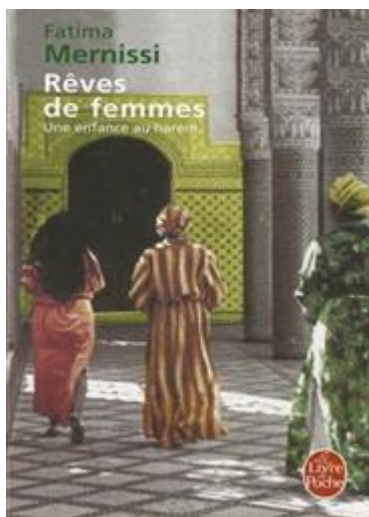
Keywords: colonialism, Morocco, Fes, Fez, Dreams of Trespass, Fatema Mernissi, The Sand Child, Tahar Ben Jellou, O Clone, slavery, women, feminism, gender troubles, gender, violence, magic, harem, colonize

Whenever there is conflict, war, fight, or even if aliens come to earth, it is always women who are the victims or at least they are the ones who suffer the most. It seems people tend to forget or everyone is deliberately trying to distort the reality that has always been there. Whoever you wish to blame women are always powerless.

"Then a cosmic frontier splits the planet in two halves. The frontier indicates the line of power because wherever there is a frontier, there are two kinds of creatures walking on Allah's earth, the powerful on one side, and the powerless on the other" (p. 242). Mernissi asks which side women are on. Mina's reply is instant: "If you can't get out, you are on the powerless side" (p. 242). "

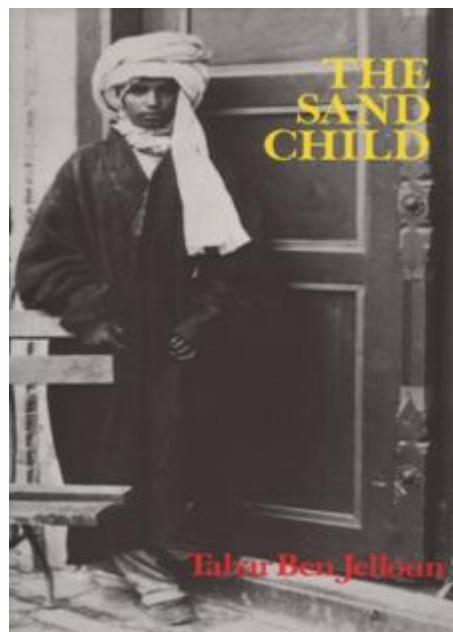
(Jeffrey, p765)

You can blame religion which says women are inferior or society that blames them for anything and everything that ever happens. You can blame the colonizers who claimed that they invaded the countries to free women and protect them and ended up fetishizing on their pain. Morocco has always been at the borders of the modern world, some miles away from Europe, as it had its fair share of colonialism and it was painted with its colors; you will be able to see its effect in every trace of its modern history. I invite you to take a promenade with me, in the old city of Fes and get introduced to the story of three different female characters, from the colonial period, the 40s, until what might be called the modern era of Morocco, through different eyes, and using the words of different authors.



The Texts in Question,

Our first character is Fatima, a child living in the Harem in the novel, *Dreams of Trespass* written in 1994 by Fatima Mernissi. The novel is about the author's childhood in the 40s and living in the Harem¹. The novel takes place in the old part of the city of Fes, where young Fatima was born to a wealthy family, a strong and open-minded mother, and a traditional but loving father. Mernissi describes the life in the Harem, stories of those who lived there and the change they were waiting for. In the Harem, there are two parties the modern women which are mostly younger women, Fatima's teenage cousin, her mother and a divorced childless aunt all of which are waiting for the day, when they will be to go out freely, and the traditional women who believes, that they are living a great life and there is no need for change. Through this novel we are taken on a journey with Fatima and how she perceived her life in this place as a child and the historical impact of the colonialism and the revolution on the women inside the Harem.



¹The harem is a section of an old traditional house, where the women live, they are mostly family members, maids, relatives, and slaves. All of which are confined to this place and must have permission and male accompaniment to go outside.

A few years later Ahmad / Zahra was born and it was The Sand Child. *The Sand Child* by Tahar Ben Jelloun 1985, is a novel describing the conflicts and problems that came along with the birth of a baby girl, in an Islamic post-colonial society in Morocco. The story probably takes place in the city of Fes, the author does not specify the city, but from the description and the fact that Ben Jelloun is from Fes, we can assume that the story takes place there. In *The Sand Child* we follow the life of Ahmed a young man who was born as a female, but his father after having 7 girls decides to treat his 8th child as a boy, regardless of its gender. Ahmed was treated, dressed, and educated as a boy. With this change in gender identity, Ahmed got to experience male privilege in the Moroccan society. He had proper education, freedom, respect, power and wealth. He grows up to be confused sexually, in a society where s/he cannot confess his/her true identity. He grows up hating and undermining women and always in fear of being discovered and losing his privilege, which means he will be minimized to a woman just like his sisters that he despises and look down on.



In 2001 Jade came to existence, when the screenwriter Glória Perez decided to create *O Clone* (the clone) a Brazilian telenovela about a love story that takes place in the 80s in the Moroccan city of Fes. The love story is between Jade a Moroccan, Muslim girl that was living in Brazil and just moved back to Morocco. She is not used to the Moroccan / Islamic culture, therefore, faces issues, and a young Brazilian man she falls in love with Lucas, who came to visit Fes as a tourist. They cannot be together because of the difference in culture and religion between them. This TV series follows the love story of two young people through the cities of Fes and Rio de Janeiro showing the difference between the two cities and cultures, through a very sexualized lens of the Moroccan women.

This article will be analyzing three Moroccan female characters (Ahmad / Zahra, Jade and Fatima) and how they were portrayed in deferent ways according to their writers. Also it will discuss the effect of colonialism on the characters, their claim of salvation and the women's life in the Harem. This paper will shade some light on the statues of slavery in Morocco and the culture of the Harem that no one talks about.

Violence in the air

One of the ways in which colonialism affected the people in Morocco was violence. When looking at the novel *The Sand Child* a lot of examples of self-inflicted violence can be found, like Ahmed's mother who hits her belly because she cannot have a boy, Ahmed's father who cuts his own finger to make sure no one realizes that the baby is a girl in the circumcision celebration. There is also a lot of violence, when it comes to Salem's account, regarding what happened to Lalla Zahra. His story included violence, sexual assault, and death, the whole story is disturbingly detailed, especially the way Lalla Zahra died and killed Abbas her rapist. The story and the way of killing, is heavily influenced by the stories of how women, who were raped by the soldiers in the war died and killed their rapists with them.

The same can be said in *The Clone*, one of the few things they got right in that TV show was the violence. So they show in the series, self-inflicted violence, when Said, Jade's husband discovers in their wedding night that she was not a virgin which is a death penalty if discovered by her family, but because he loves her and he has to present a napkin with her virginity blood as a proffer of her purity to his family, he draws blood from his own hand by cutting it with a knife to give them the blood they wanted. We also have Ali Jade's uncle beating her for refusing to get married to a man she does not love, Said beating Jade for wanting to get a divorce.

In *Dreams of trespass*, a very colonial, bloody example of violence is shown, when the king asked for independence in 1944. The French spread their soldiers all over the city, People were scared so they started repeating the single prayer Ya Latif, so the soldiers felt trapped in the narrow streets and the continued repetition of the same prayer got them even more scared so they fired at the people in the streets.

"They started shooting at the praying crowds and within minutes, corpses were falling on top of each other on the mosque's doorstep, while the chants were still going on inside. Mother said that Samir and I were barely four at the time and no one noticed us watching from our gate as the blood-soaked corpses, all dressed in the ceremonial white prayer djellaba, were carried back home."

(Mernissi, p 16)

Those examples clarify that the violence started in the colonial period and its impact surrounded the Moroccan people till this day and it is still visible in their mindset and stories. Even though the colonization is far gone and no more a threat, the violence they planted in the minds of the Moroccans is still there.

In *The Wretched of the Earth's* introduction, Sartre explained that, the more violence you practice on the colonized people the more immune they become to it. The violence becomes part of their identity, part of their everyday life. Sooner or later they will realize that not only can they practice it among each other but they can implement it on the colonizer. The people realize that they too can hurt the colonizer, inflict pain upon its troops and torture them in the same way they did.

"You said they understand nothing but violence? Of course; first, the only violence is the settler's; but soon they will make it their own; that is to say, the same violence is thrown back upon us as when our reflection comes forward to meet us when we go toward a mirror."

(Jean-Paul Sartre, pp.17)

Women and their magic

Colonialism impacted the lives of the people by keeping them in the dark, under old superstitions and strange ideas like witchcraft and marabouts tambalas. Frantz Fanon wrote, "we must remember that colonialism has often strengthened or established its domination by organizing the petrification of the country districts. Ringed round by marabouts, witch doctors, and customary chieftains, the majority of country-dwellers are still living in the feudal manner, and the full power of this medieval structure of society is maintained by the settlers, military and administrative officials."

(Frantz Fanon, pp.110)

The colonizer wanted to keep the people under these superstitions, so that they can control them. This effect can be seen in all of our chosen texts starting with young Fatima who used to watch the women run away to the roof in full moon to light a candle or to cast a spell and she herself was interested in this magical event. She said defending them,

"when you burnt talismans, musk, or saffron, or recited magic spells during full moons to heighten your sex appeal, grow longer hair, become taller, or enlarge your breasts, that was all right. Allah was sensitive (Latif) and full of tenderness and forgiveness (Rahim) for his fragile and imperfect creatures. He was generous enough to understand such needs."

(Mernissi, p 84)

Going back to *The Sand Child*, Ahmed's mother, tried several things to get pregnant with a boy, like sleeping for seven nights at a marabout's temple and eating with the hand of a dead man.



For Jade, they used magic from a different perspective, the magic was more sexual, we see that when they, focus on Jade's eyes when she looks at Lucas her love interest or at her husband Said, as if she is hypnotizing them. Also, her great ability to get whatever she wants by belly dancing and having sexual intercourse with the person. For instance, Said her husband divorced her after he realized that she still loves Lucas and is meeting him in secrete. Jade changes her mind and wants to stay with her husband for her child's sake, so she performs the dance of the sword, supposedly an erotic dance leading to him taking her back.

All these can be considered as types of witchcraft which, Eva Rosander, referred to in her study,

"men do not dare to eat the food or drink the tea or coffee prepared by women they do not trust. For food, drink and sex - three of the most essential physical needs of a human being - men are dependent on women and at the mercy of their magical potential" (1991: 250). This fear is so extensive and men's dependence on women so great in exactly these three areas that some say, 'Women are relatives to Shaitan [Satan], ' as Mohammed, an illiterate labourer, "

(Conway-Long said, pp.151)

Witchcraft and allusions did not only keep the colonized people in the dark to serve the colonizer but also split the society and the family in half. Women as witches not to be trusted, and men as victims, housemasters, who need to control the wild witches at home. This made things much worse for women in the post-colonial society in Morocco.

White Men Are Here to Save you,

"White men are saving brown women from brown men, " a sentence that runs like a red thread through today's "gender and development."

(Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, pp.72)

One of the excuses that the colonizers (the white men) gave themselves when colonizing a country or spreading their control over it, is defending women against the barbaric traditions of their culture, or (the brown men). I am not here to defend those traditions, as mostly they are barbaric, but are the white men really here to save us?

Jade's story is all built on this concept. Jade is a young helpless, extremely beautiful and knows how to dance, living in an uptight Islamic society. Meets Lucas (the white man) young, in love, ready to fight the world for her and would do anything to be with her. It is true that Brazilian people are not considered "white" but they wanted to play that role in the story. Lucas left Jade when he knew his ex was pregnant and she was all alone even though he is playing the role of the white man, the protector-lover. If anyone knew she was not a virgin she would have been killed. She cannot run away as she does not have a job or a proper education and her family insists, that she gets married. Twenty years later, they meet again. Now she is married, doing well, and has a young daughter. He reappears and he wants her to get a divorce and be with him and she does, yet he leaves her all alone again, because his daughter becomes a drug addict. Jade has no home, no money and has to go beg her husband to take her back. The problem is that this series is still being sold as, a romantic TV show and Lucas as a loving man.

The same concept was introduced in Ben Jelloun's novel, with the story of the blind old man, who came all the way from Buenos Aires to save a Moroccan woman. The woman visited him just once in his office and she was scared but it was not mentioned what she was scared of. He is in this case trying to bring back the whole saving the brown women concept to life.

In Mernissi's book, there was no white man to save them. On the contrary, they were waiting for the nationalists to save them as they promised, after they get rid of the colonizer they will make life better for everyone or that's what they used to say. There will be equal rights, schools for girls, and monogamy.

"The nationalists, who were fighting the French, had promised to, create a new Morocco, with equality for all. Every woman was to have the same right to education as a man, as well as the right to enjoy monogamy-a privileged, exclusive relationship with her husband. In fact, many of the nationalist leaders and their followers in Fez already had only one wife, and looked down on those who had many. Father and Uncle, who espoused the nationalist views, each had only one wife. "
(Mernissi, p20)

Unfortunately, that never happened. Till this day there is no law enforcing monogamy in Morocco. Women and men are not equal in the eyes of law and women are looked down upon from society.

The Harem

According to Laurel Main her article, *The Real and Imaginary Harem*, she said describing the two types of Harem according to the orientalist painters were,

"Two mutually reinforcing myths about the harem were constantly evoked. One version of the harem was the opulent quarters of the Turkish palace where a plethora of female concubines and slave anxiously awaited the return of their master-husband, the Sultan. The second was of a prison in a Muslim household where women were subject to their husband's absolute control against their will "

(Ma, p13)

But in which one, did our characters live? In fact, both of them are true in our case. As what Ma said the Turkish palace kind of Harem, where everything is luxuries from furniture to food and clothes, that goes with the description of the places where our characters lived. As the three narratives are in the old city of Fes, with large houses (castle-like) and all women are from wealthy families, so they are living luxuriously.

Were women waiting for their 'sultan' to return? Women, in fact, were awaiting the return of their (slaves master, sultan, or husband) all are names for the same person " the person in power" because he is the one in control. If they need anything he is the one to approve or to decline. Were our characters imprisoned in a Muslim household? Absolutely yes, all of which wanted to get out. Jade had to cover her face to go out and meet her lover as she was not allowed out of the house alone. Fatima explains with details how no one can go out or in to the Harem without the approval of a male guardian her father or uncle. Ahmed as a man could do whatever he wants and has full freedom and mobility to go out and in the house without any supervision.

On the description of the Harem Mernissi said in her novel, *"The courtyard was surrounded by an arched colonnade, supported by four columns on each side. The columns had marble at the top and the bottom, and blue-and-white tile work in the middle, mirroring the pattern of the fountain and floor..... silver plated, wrought-iron grilles, topped with wonderfully colored glass arches."* (Mernissi, p4)

Mernissi provided us with a beautiful and colorful description of her Harem something that suits the description of the luxurious castle. She also states, how everyone goes on with their chores of cooking and cleaning before the men come home. This also fits the first type of the Harem. The novel was situated in the 40s, slavery was banned and all slaves were freed, but as they had nowhere to go, they were kept as maids. Still they were not allowed out without a man's permission. Ahmed the doorkeeper was always sitting on the sofa making sure no one gets out or in, but in this Harem lived Chama, Fatima's seventeen years old cousin, who had a strong will for life, every time her male brothers went out to the cinema she would beg them to take her along, they would always say, father did not give us a permission to do so. As a result, she would walk to the gate and get out.

"Chama, " he would say, "Please don't force me to run after you in the street again today. I have no instructions to let women out. " But Chama would just keep on walking, as if she did not hear, and sometimes she did manage to slip out, so fast was she. Then all the courtyard women would flock to the hall to see what would happen next. A few minutes later,

you saw Ahmed panting and puffing very loudly as he pushed Chama through the door. "I have not been instructed that women were going to the movies, " he would repeat firmly. "So, please, don't create trouble for me, don't force me to run at my age. "

(Mernissi, p52)

They were not allowed out to go to the market so they had to tell Ahmed exactly what they need, types of cloth, certain colors, and herbs, and most of the time he does not get the colors right and the threads do not match but they had to make do with what they have.

In *The Sand Child*, Ben Jelloun does not provide us with details of the house but we can assume it looks pretty much the same as the other households, as Mohamed, Ahmed's father was a well-known merchant and their home was in the old city of Fes with two floors. Not much can be said of the lives of Ahmed's mother and sisters as the novel is not from their perspective, but Ahmed talks about the hammam and how women had no other place to be themselves and talk freely. This description of the hammam experience matches that which Marnissi's described in her novel, also we have what Ben Jelloun said about Ahmed's relationship with his mother and sisters,

"He had decided that his world was his own and that it was superior to that of his mother and sisters-very different, in any case. Actually he thought they had no world. They were content to live on the surface of things, without making many demands, in accordance with his authority, his laws, and his wishes. Without really talking among themselves"

(Ben Jelloun, p.3)

Jade's story was in the 80s and it is ridiculous to believe that women were confined to the house in this way, but that was what Glória Perez decided to do. So in *The Clone*, we see a luxurious house with lots of women. Four of which are uncle Ali's wives and there are maids, and family members, who had nowhere to go and Jade was one of them. They show everyone looking happy, except Jade. Women do not have any problem with not being educated or them having to do all of the cooking and cleaning. They actually had parties, sang and danced whenever they could. They wore dancing costumes and revealing clothes. The show is portraying Jade as the strange one with the foreign ideas because of her Brazilian background. Uncle Ali's wives love each other and they have no issues. Latifa Jade's cousin, a girl of her own age, is very excited about the arranged marriage and is scared of getting in trouble because of Jade's actions. In *The Clone's* Harem, women were allowed out but they had to take an older lady with them. In fact, Jade's foreign ideas goes only to the extent of going out and meeting her lover. She is not concerned with education or work. That is also clear in the way she talks to her daughter Khadija, teaching her how to dance and telling her how someday she is going to fall in love. They are saying in this way, that Moroccan women are just for romantic relationships and dancing. Some are traditional who get married in an arranged way and others prefer to choose their own husband. This way of portraying Moroccan women is unrealistic, fetishized and offensive. After the release of the TV show, the Moroccan ambassador criticized the show, saying it is offensive.

"Morocco's ambassador to Brazil, Abdelmalek Cherkaoui Ghazouani, appeared to be more deeply offended, complaining in an article published by *Folha de Sao Paulo* about the "Orientalist" depiction of Morocco in *O Clone* and alleging the show ignored his country's more liberal approach to women's rights, as well as its technological and cultural achievements (Ghazouani, 2002). " (Ribke, 571)

The Forgotten Women

Mina, Malika, Zoraide, are three female characters that no one pays much attention to, those three ladies are described as older women who are loving and helpful. In Mernissi's description, Mina is an old slave, that was abducted and sold as a child from Sudan, After the abolishment of slavery, she had nowhere to go. She never got married or had kids, so she was kept as a cook and when she got older she asked Mernissi's older uncle Ali, if she can retire upstairs, because she got old and wanted to pray in peace. She lives in an upper room, the kids love her and she always saves them when something bad happens. She works in the narrative as the wise person who tells Fatima stories, to teach her how to be strong and brave by recounting the story of her abduction.

"Mina said that you always had a choice, when stuck in a pit, between pleasing the monster by looking down and screaming, or surprising him by looking up. If you wanted to please him, you looked down, and thought about all the snakes and other cold, slow-moving creatures crawling around on top of each other down there and waiting to get a hold of you. If, on the other hand, you wished to astonish the monster, you fixed your eyes up high on that little drop of sky and avoided uttering a sound. Then, the torturer who was watching you from above would see your eyes and get scared. "He'll think you are either a djinni, or two little stars twinkling in the dark. " "

(Mernissi, p.73)

Likewise, we have Zoraide from *The Clone*. She is an old lady who never got married, she has no kids nor family and she is not described as a maid. As she seems superior to the maids, but also not a family member. She is also wise, helps Jade, tries to get her out of trouble and covers for her. We do not have much information about her, but what we know is that she has always been in love with uncle Ali. In fact, he marries her at the end, after one of his four wives dies. I am assuming that Zoraide was one of the old slaves or the daughter of one of them.

Unfortunately, for Malika we only know few things. She was old, has been working for the family for a long time, Silent and she just understands what is Ahmad going through. Ben Jelloun clearly states that she is a maid, but I cannot stop wondering, was she really a maid or an old slave with nowhere to go. As we saw the same traits over and over again with older unmarried ladies who have been in the family forever. To be logical slavery was banned in Morocco in 1925, so it's logical that those old ladies go back to that period.

To conclude we have compared between the three narratives in hand in which we saw the similarities and the differences between them. We have tapped into the colonial effect that was there in the three narratives, even though it varies in its

effect. We have seen how the violence caused by the colonizer, changed to be violence against one's self and then against others. How witchcraft was a way of relief and a way to get those wishes that the women in Harem could never get. We also looked at the white saviors in each of our narratives and did not find any saving done. We crossed the gates entering the Harem, seeing how beautiful and luxurious they were, but in the end, they were just a prison, like a gilded cage for a bird, that just wants to get out. In this journey, we got introduced to Ahmed who was forced into a gender he did not want, Fatima a child looking out to the world, Chama, who just wants to go to the cinema, Mina that struggled a lot in her life, Jade who should have been written better, and a lot of stories for female characters, that I did not cover but deserves to be studied closely.

I would like to end this article with Mernissi account of what happened after the end of colonization. Fatima's mother eventually got rid of the Haik², and got to wear the modern men attire the Djellaba. This small act of freedom can be seen as the beginning of modern society of women and them being able to gain the freedom they always wanted, starting with freedom of mobility just by using lighter attire.

"One day, Mother appeared wearing Father's djellaba, the hood neatly folded up on her forehead, and a tiny triangular black litham made of sheer silk chiffon hanging loosely over her nose. Of course, anyone could see right through that veil, and Father angrily warned her that she was destroying the family honor. But family honor suddenly seemed to be in serious jeopardy all over Fez, because the Medina streets were flooded by women wearing the men's djellaba with coquettish chiffon veils. "

(Mernissi, p. 53)

References

- [1] Anzaldua, Gloria, Borderlands. Published by Aunt lute books SAN FRANCISCO, 1987, pp. 19. 80.
- [2] Ben Jelloun, Tahar, The Sand Child. Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press Baltimore and London, 1987.
- [3] ChakravortySpivak, Gayatri, CAN THE SUBALTERN. Published by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS New York, 2010, pp.72.
- [4] Conway-long, Don. " Gender, power and social change in Morocco", Islamic Masculinities. Published by Zed Books, 2006, pp.151.
- [5] Fanon, Frantz, THE WRETCHED DF THE EARTH. Published by JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, 1961, pp.17.110.
- [6] Imperialism beyond the Anglo-Saxon Axis, or Negotiated Hybridity? Neo-Orientalist Telenovelas and Transnational Business in Brazilian Television." Journal of Consumer Culture, vol. 17, no. 3, Nov. 2017, pp. 562-578, doi: 10.1177/1469540515602303
- [7] Jeffrey, Patricia. Contemporary Sociology, vol. 24, no. 6, 1995, pp. 764-765. JSTOR, www. jstor. org/stable/2076677. Accessed 27 June 2021.
- [8] Ma, Laurel, The Real and Imaginary Harem: Assessing Delacroix's Women of Algiers as an Imperialist Apparatus, University of Pennsylvania (2012).

²The very heavy 7 meters long outer wear fabric for women

- [9] Mernissi, Fatima. Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harlem Girlhood. Perseus Books, 1994.