

TO PUT OUR BRAINS TO SLEEP

**DREAMS OF TRESPASS:
TALES OF A HAREM GIRLHOOD,**
by Fatima Mernissi. New York:
Addison-Wesley, 1994, \$23, 242 pp.

**A WALNUT SAPLING ON MASIH'S GRAVE
AND OTHER STORIES BY IRANIAN WOMEN,**
edited by John Green and Farzin
Yazdanfar. Portsmouth, NH:
Heinemann, 1994, \$13.95, 208 pp.

by Saïdeh Pakravan



'Famous Sakineh,' from
PERSIAN PAINTING, edited by
Sheila R. Canby
(Thames and Hudson, 1993,
\$15.95, 128 pp.)

The nonjudgmental, politically correct stance often adopted by some Westerners toward the Islamic fundamentalist resurgence calls for a respectful endorsement of the traditional veiling of women. Some benighted souls actually don the garb (imagine shackling your own feet), presumably out of the same romantic notion that made T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) wear long, loose robes as he trekked Arabian deserts. In *Dreams of Trespass*, more charmingly but just as forcefully as she did in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Fatima Mernissi gives an incisive retort to anyone still harboring illusions about conservative Islam. Not only does it not represent a liberating force, but it enforces the veil, a symbol of oppression, and harem life, an abominable restriction.

The word *harem* generally evokes the part of a palace where in 9th-century Baghdad, for instance, a ruler such as the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid kept thousands of *jaryas* or slave girls for his pleasure. But in most Moslem countries, it is — or was until recently — simply the part of the house where women and children reside and no males except close relatives are allowed.

Mernissi grew up not in one but in two harems: a formal one in Fez, her home, and another one on a farm 100 kilometers away, where she visits Yasmina, her maternal grandmother. In both places, lives are defined by frontiers, physical as well as moral and sacred frontiers — the *huddud*.

To the child wondering about the life that she and her kinswomen lead, “a harem had to do with men and women — that was one fact. It also had to do with a house, walls, and the streets — that was another fact. All of this was quite simple and easy to visualize: put four walls in the midst of the streets, and you have a house. Then put the women in the house and let the men go out. You have a harem.”

Mernissi's grandmother also explains that:
the word “harem” 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 wife or wives, and children and relatives.... Mecca, the holy city, was also called Haram. Mecca was a space where behavior was strictly codified. The city belonged to Allah and you had to obey his shari'a or sacred law, if you entered his territory. The same thing applied to a harem when it was a house belonging to a man.... A harem was about private space and the rules regulating it. It did not need walls. Once you knew what was forbidden, you carried the harem within. You had it in your head.

To this view Mernissi's mother adds her own: “running around the planet is what makes the brain race, and to put our brains to sleep is the idea behind the locks and the walls.”

Harem life, strictly regulated by the invisible *huddud*, can also be extraordinarily festive. But whether celebrating weddings and births, staging plays about the life of the Lebanese singer Asmaha and the renowned Egyptian grande dame and feminist Huda Sharaoui, or going about their chores, the women remain keenly aware of the narrow confines of their lives, of how it feels to be “a woman intoxicated with dreams in a land that crushes both the dreams and the dreamer...,” of what it feels like to cry “over wasted opportunities, senseless captivities, smashed visions.”

Though Mernissi condemns the system she grew up in and escaped from, she does so in a gentle voice. She generously shares treasured moments from her childhood. Not least of the charms of *Dreams of Trespass* are the powerfully evocative photographs by Ruth Ward, a play of light in tiled inner courtyards where robed women glide by, their faces invisible, shadows among the living.

If the purpose of keeping women in harems was, as the author's mother puts it, "to prevent them from becoming too smart," it does not always work, as Mernissi demonstrates in these compassionate and intelligent memoirs.

THESE DAYS, books translated or written in bad, unedited English, with typos swimming throughout like fat on old broth, are becoming the norm. When the material is good, this indifference toward the reader can be overlooked. Such is not the case, unfortunately, with *A Walnut Sapling on Masih's Grave*, a collection of short stories by Iranian women. A wretchedly written introduction; a foreword in which the author, amid a string of platitudes, informs us — irrelevantly — that she will probably use one of the stories in a course she teaches; a table of contents that, for reasons best known to the editor, lists the titles of the stories but not the names of the authors; a preoccupation with transliteration that verges on the obsessive; and a string of poorly translated, mediocre tales (this reviewer could not visualize people "doing prostrations," nor standing in a graveyard chanting "anthems" — hymns? dirges? — and what can "earthen homes" possibly mean? Mud houses? Huts?) do not make for pleasurable reading.

The title story, "A Walnut Sapling on Masih's Grave," is totally incomprehensible. Whether the fault lies with the English translation or the Persian text is hard to tell without seeing the original. The story appears to be about graves, canaries, satin quilts, and someone called Nanny Masumah whose status as a dead or live character is never quite established. ("Nanny Masumah's face was filled with foreboding. Her new velvet coat was covered

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with grease stains [...] Her voice was broken just like the time Nanny Masumah died.")

Most of the stories in the collection are harmless, if slight. Some, such as "The Story of a Street," by the celebrated Simin Daneshvar, and "A Visit with the Children of the Upper Village," by historian Homa Nateq, are not stories at all. Others suffer from a surfeit of events or a bloated cast — "Peyton Place: Tehran 1972" by Mahshid Amir-Shady introduces 19 characters in the first three pages alone, surely besting *War and Peace*. As for the rest of the stories — except "Haj Barekallah" by Mihan Bahrami and the deservedly oft-published "Great Lady of My Soul" by Goli Taraghi — none should have seen the light of day, at least not in the present version.

Contemporary Iranian literature will not come into its own as long as it remains the fief of a handful of academics who know and love neither the English language nor the foreign culture that they profess to make accessible, and who add, year by year, badly chosen, badly translated, and badly edited books to the list of publications on their resumé with the sole purpose of attaining or maintaining tenure.

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