

## Whose Frontiers are They Anyway?

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**Abstract.** It is a given fact that with culture comes language, but the concept that language carries a certain culture and its entire body of values has not been given enough emphasis in postcolonial discourse. In the memoir *Dreams of Trespass*, Mernissi recounts her childhood experiences in Morocco using English as her language of choice. The process of transferring the traditions and lore of one culture by using the language of another creates an unbalanced text that fails to convey many of the positive images related to Moroccan culture while at the same time confirming negative stereotypes attributed to the world of the Orient. This is particularly relevant to narratives of space which are strongly imbedded and work through cultural traditions. By analyzing the difference in the connotative meaning of the English word ‘frontiers’ and comparing it to its Arabic equivalent ‘hudud’ which is also referred to in the text, and then interpreting incidents in light of the meanings of these two words, it will be possible to show how choice of language affects meaning. In having chosen to recount her memoir in the English language, Mernissi has allowed the Anglo-phonesystem of values to take prominence and to impose its own set of attitudes and biases on the meanings of the text. The critical method used in this paper will be an eclectic approach that mixes between postcolonial and semiotic analyses.

**Keywords:** Culture, Frontiers, Language, Mernissi, Post-Colonial.

### 1. Introduction

Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* ascribes particular importance to the phenomenon of language within the colonizing mission. “A man who possesses a language,” Fanon observes, “possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language” [1]. The insinuation here is that choice of vernacular brings with it the customs and traditions pertaining to the culture of that particular discourse. Fanon, Ngugi, Kachru and Ashcroft, amongst others, have argued that language has the ability to function as a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse and that control over the vernacular can ultimately lead to control over system of values. This is particularly relevant to narratives of space where center/periphery, inside/outside, self/other vary enormously according to the precepts of the culture in question rather than to some universal norm applicable to all.

One of the most relevant examples of this difference in the cultural insinuations of language is to be found in the process of translating and interpreting the meaning of the Arabic word ‘hudud’ into the English vernacular. Though the literal translation of ‘hudud’ is ‘frontiers,’ the difference in the connotative meanings of this word with its different gendered and colonialist implications will show how language is closely linked to the culture it represents and how inadequate it can be when called upon to describe and transfer traditions and lore from one language to another. This article aims to investigate the difference in the connotative meanings of the two words ‘hudud’ and ‘frontiers’ in order to show how choice of a particular language can alter the images and discourses of the text creating in the meanwhile tensions where there are none and disregarding issues of a more important nature.

AzarNafisi, Fatima Mernissi, and Salman Rushdie are but a few of those writers who have chosen to tell accounts of their foreign homelands in the English language and in the process have created a lop-sided text that fails to convey some of the positive associations related to that culture, while at the same time managing to re-confirm some negative stereotypes attributed to the world of the Orient. In this article, Fatima Mernissi’s memoir *Dreams of Trespass* will be analyzed to highlight the inconsistencies that may arise from the transference of a concept from one culture to another. The connotative meaning of the word ‘frontiers’ will be discussed in light of historical and cultural precepts of the Anglo-phone speaking culture and then

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compared to its Arabic equivalent 'hudud' with its multi-layered cultural and religious implications to show how choice of language can alter meaning. Though Mernissi often interchanges one word for another, it is actually the English word 'frontier' and the Orientalist attitudes that accompany it that pervade much of the memoir.

Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Dreams of a Harem Girlhood* recounts the story of Mernissi's childhood in her hometown of Fez. The plot revolves around her adventures at home as she approaches her teen-age years and she is introduced to the dynamics of male/female power equations. Refusing to take any of the patriarchal or colonial 'qaida' or rules for granted, Fatima tests her frontiers and finds ways to overcome them. The use of the word "Trespass" in the title reveals the presence of frontiers and the importance of finding ways to surmount them. In creating a direct association between boundaries and harems in the title, 'frontiers' are aligned with negative Orientalist connotations of places that limit and confine. With the introduction of the first chapter entitled "My Harem Frontiers," fears are confirmed as to the oppressive situation this child must find herself in. It is only with the use of the Arabic word 'hudud' in this first chapter that alternatives to the negative connotations of the word 'frontiers' are introduced in the text. Though Mernissi tries to incorporate positive cultural insinuations of the word within her account, it is only by making a comparison of the different cultural meanings of the Arabic word 'hudud' to the English word 'frontiers' that major differences can be highlighted and positive insinuations related to the Orient can be explored.

## 2. Frontiers

In the *Oxford Dictionary*, the word 'frontiers' is described in a general sense as "a line or border separating two countries," while a more specific definition is given as "the extreme limit of settled land beyond which lies wilderness, especially in reference to the western U.S. before Pacific settlement" [2]. The association of the word 'frontiers' with a specific period in American history in the 18<sup>th</sup> century reveals the significance of this era to subsequent generations and the sense of opportunism it brought to the age as a whole. During this period, settlers from France, Britain, Spain and Germany came to the eastern part of the US in search of new lands and a better life. As the population grew in New England, settlers also started to expand eastward into 'unknown frontiers' in search of even greater opportunities and more riches. 'Frontiers' thus became associated with this particular economically-driven phase in human history where opportunity and riches seemed open to all.

This fever of adventurism also extended beyond U.S. territories as powerful nations colonized weaker countries and took advantage of their natural resources and cheap labor force. The fascination with extending borders and gaining sovereignty over the world turned 'frontiers' into politically tense borders where the colonizer used physical force as well as psychological abuse in order to keep the colonizer under his control and influence. Geographic lines were stringently drawn and enforced to protect the sovereignty and power of the colonizer while mind games were used to keep the colonizer feeling inferior and powerless to fight against his master and so called 'savior.' Terms like self and 'other,' center and margin, western and eastern, with all the connotations that they may entail, became widely used to maintain monopoly over the weaker 'other.' Everything that was of Anglo-Saxon origin was pronounced acceptable and central and everything else was considered unacceptable, subaltern and marginal. As geographical and psychological frontiers were put into place to protect and maintain Anglo-Saxon codes of knowledge and values, deviations from the norm were deemed as unfit, less, marginal and inconsequential [3].

In *Dreams of Trespass*, the imperialist version of 'frontiers' as geographical borders that keep the powerful protected and at the center can be easily detected in the text. In terms of physical borders, two different sorts of frontiers seem to be prominent, those based on gender differences and those built on racial diversity. As to frontiers built to separate the races, the narrator explains that Morocco had to be split in half, part Spanish and part French, because both countries wanted some monopoly over it. Arabaoua became the spot where a huge gate was built to separate these two nations. In Fez itself, "the French had to build a new city for themselves," separate from the old Medina because "they were afraid to live" amongst the natives. Having forcefully taken Moroccan land and coerced people to be submissive to their authority, the French are described as being too "afraid to walk" in the streets or to mingle with the natives [4]. They kept to

themselves and whenever they had to travel inside the old town, they would use cars and carry their rifles with them. The frontiers between the French and Moroccans seemed to be so precarious that they had to be maintained at all times. When one day a group of soldiers found themselves lost in one of the small streets of the old Medina and realized that they were surrounded by natives, these French soldiers became so nervous that they started shooting randomly until most of the natives were killed.

The other kind of geographic border that seems to exist in the memoir is one based on gender differences. As the title of the memoir and consequent subtitles of the chapters reveal (“My Harem Frontiers,” “The French Harem”), the women in the narrative seem to be captives of the ‘harem’ frontiers. In *Scheherazade Goes West*, Mernissi explains that most Orientalist literature describe ‘harems’ as places where “women are kept locked up for the sole pleasure of a single master . . . in an atmosphere of heavy perfume, cool fountains, soft music and over-indulgence in every conceivable kind of vice” [5]. These harems were believed to be so abominable in their restriction of women’s rights that they were pronounced as “the ultimate locus of female oppression and subordination” reducing women to pure sensuality and eroticism [6].

The fact that the women of *Dreams of Trespass* are kept under surveillance by Ahmad the doorman, unable to leave the gates of the ‘harem’ until they get permission from one of their male relatives seems to confirm the bleak picture drawn by Orientalists. For instance, when Chama in chapter thirteen tries to follow her brothers out of the house without first getting the permission of her father, Ahmad brings her back telling her that he has no instructions to let the women out. The narrator describes the frontiers at home as: “Our house gate was a gigantic stone arch with impressive carved wooden doors. It separated the women’s harem from the male strangers walking in the streets” [7]. As Scheherazade and *The Tales from a Thousand and One Nights* are introduced into the text further Orientalist images of superfluity and excess are brought to the surface so that the Fez household with its grandeur appears to be no different than any other Orientalized harem.

If women are shown to reside on the inside of harems, men are presented as inhabiting the other side of the frontier, the public space, where the rules and regulations are set forth and enforced by them. No woman was allowed to trespass the boundaries set forth so that even “the buying and selling of goods in the harems was controlled by the adult males” [8]. Chapter five, which is dedicated to Harun al-Rashid, is an attempt by Chama to guess at how the first harem came into being. Her theory is that men’s power used to be “measured by the number of women” they could imprison [9]. Since Harun Al-Rashid had been able to imprison as many as one thousand ‘jarya’ at one point in time, he was thus appointed sultan. This lewd picture drawn about Harun’s harem confirms Orientalist representations and reinforces the concept of absolute male hegemony over the female.

### 3. ‘Hudud’

In contrast to the word ‘frontiers’ which is used in the context of politically and economically driven interests of powerful countries, the Arabic word ‘hudud’ is situated in the religious and cultural practices of the Islamic world. The *Wordnet* defines the word ‘hudud’ as “Islamic laws stating the limits ordained by Allah and including the deterrent punishments for serious crimes” [10]. In the Arabic dictionary ‘*Almaany*’, five out of the seven meanings provided are somehow related to the limits decreed by Islamic law, while the other two are concerned with secular issues, such as territorial boundaries and limitations in time [11]. What this reveals is that though the word is often used to mean physical frontiers, the origin of the word and its more wide use is concerned with Islamic teachings that place restrictions on what is right and wrong behavior, what is permissible (‘halal’) and forbidden (‘haram’).

In *Dreams of Trespass*, the headmistress of the Koranic school teaches Fatima that “Education is to know the hudud, the sacred frontiers.” Throughout the narrative, Fatima tries to find physical evidence of these boundaries so as to stay out of trouble. She confesses that “Anxiety eats at me whenever I cannot situate the geometric line organizing my powerlessness” and that as a child she was happy because the frontiers were crystal clear [12]. She believed that by staying within the private space allotted to women, the ‘harem,’ and following the rules thereof she could avoid getting into trouble. However, after she goes to visit her grandmother Yasmina in her farm where all the women are free to come and go as they please with

no walls hindering them, her grandmother introduces her to the real concept of 'hudud' as those laws and regulations you had in your head, "inscribed under your forehead and under your skin" [13]. As laws enforced from within, these sacred boundaries constituted an internal system of values that regulated and monitored right and wrong behavior rather than territorial frontiers that limited movement.

In Mernissi's narrative, the word 'harem' is closely associated with the word 'haram.' El Guindi in her study of Muslim cultures draws attention to how these two words 'harem' and 'haram' actually share the same root 'h-r-m' which can mean forbidden or sacred [14]. In *Dreams of Trespass*, Fatima's grandmother points out how the word 'harem' is actually a "slight variation of the word haram, the forbidden, the proscribed," and that it is actually "the opposite of halal, the permissible." She also explains that "Mecca, the holy city, was also called Haram" and since it was a place "where behavior was strictly codified," the minute "you stepped inside, you were bound by many laws and regulations" [15]. As a private place that observed the rules of halal and haram, 'harems' exemplified the visual and metaphysical manifestation of the Islamic 'hudud,' and maintained its sacred quality. Thus, when analyzing the text in view of the more positive insinuations of the word 'hudud' and its visual signifier 'harems,' it is no surprise how the text reveals a different set of attitudes. No longer standing for geographic borders that limit and confine, 'hudud' becomes representative of internal rules and laws that regulate both men and women's behavior and keep society in order. In light of this difference in meaning and due to the fact that most of the incidents and themes in the text have been interpreted in relation to Anglo-phone paradigms of 'frontiers,' it then becomes necessary to re-read incidence from within a different type of discourse, one which emerges out of the cultural and religious fabric of the culture at hand.

With 'frontiers' now standing for the internal limitations on what is right and wrong, precepts, like the 'harem,' are no longer representative of the restrictions forced on women, but are indicative of an internal desire for "sanctity- reserve-respect" and for the unique privacy that Muslim women are entitled to within society [16]. The scene when Chama is brought back inside the house by the doorman is then not an attempt to oppress her and keep her locked up, but an endeavor to protect her from the strangers lurking in the streets, including those foreign French soldiers standing in close vicinity to their house. As the narrator explains, these soldiers were dangerous because "They had power and could hurt us" [17]. Chama's young age and naivety cause her to misunderstand her position within the private space as an exclusion from the public one and deny her insight into her privileged position of "honor and prestige" [18]. Even the visual pictures in the text which capture the women always in motion and in-between doorways stand as testament to these women's freedom of movement and sense of empowerment disparaging any stagnancy or submissiveness that might have been implied otherwise. The control that Fatima's father has over the goods that enter the house also turns out to be an attempt to protect his family from unhealthy products, such as cigarettes. The narrator informs us that he organized "a crusade against chewing gum and Kool cigarettes" because "as far as he was concerned, smoking a tall, thin, white Kool cigarette was equivalent to erasing centuries of Arab culture" [19]. He also feared that if everyone dressed, talked and ate the same things without any regard for sacred boundaries, then Arab culture would disappear and there would be nothing left except European culture.

The inclusion of such characters as Scheherazade from *The Tales from a Thousand and One Nights* if considered from within the precept of 'hudud' as internal laws regulating human behavior, then Scheherazade's story turns out to be a lesson in female empowerment. In using her wit and "intellectual capacity to read her husband's mind," she is able to change Schahraiar from a revengeful king to a loving partner and to single-handedly re-institute order in society by preventing the killing of any more innocent victims [20]. The fact that she offered to take the place of her sister as the king's next victim shows courage and a pro-active personality that is not afraid to take initiative and lead the way towards change. Her ability to appease the king and make him trust others again, re-balances his mental state so that he is able to implement the Islamic concept of 'hudud' and bring peace back into his kingdom.

Chama's opinion about Harun al-Rashid's infamy being the result of holding at one single point in time about one thousand jarya in his harem must also be considered as her own naïve attempt at finding answers for historical incidents she is ignorant about. Her theory that the man who catches the most women will be appointed sultan and that this is what Harun precisely did to become king is nothing more than a comic

interlude in the narrative. Harun is celebrated in Muslim history for his chivalry and power in having been able to defeat the Roman Emperor in 798 A.D. and not because of the large number of jaryas he had in his harem [21]. Harun's wisdom and his ability to justly rule his land by implementing the laws of Islamic religion re-affirms the importance of reading this memoir in light of the cultural and religious precepts of Muslim 'hudud' rather than according to politically infused and Orientalist insinuations of the word 'frontiers.'

#### 4. Conclusion

After looking at the different incidents and examples from Mernissi's narrative, it becomes obvious that when these occurrences are read in light of the political implications of the word 'frontiers,' the images associated with the Orient appear as boundaries and unjust rules imposed over women while men are allowed to indulge in every pleasure and vice. The function of these 'frontiers' would thus seem to ensure that the powerful remain dominant and the weak continue to stay under the mercy and power of their masters. As the narrator states, "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" [22]. Whether it is women who are kept subservient under men's monopoly or it is the colonized 'other' who is left at the periphery shunned from the main stream politics or codes of knowledge, 'frontiers' come to represent insurmountable physical and psychological boundaries imposed on the weak by the powerful to keep them entrapped with no reprieve in sight.

On the other hand, when reading the incidents in the memoir against the meaning of cultural nuances of the word 'hudud,' boundaries emerge as internal laws regulating right ('halal') and wrong behavior ('haram') put in place to protect the community as a whole from chaos and pandemonium. In preserving man against committing bad acts, these laws protect both the weak and strong, first and foremost, from themselves as well as from others. If 'frontiers' are there to divide space and fortune between people so that the marginal stay in the shadows and the strong enforce their own opportunistic rules, 'hudud' are the limits that monitor our internal motivations and regulate our external behavior in such a way that people's rights and private matters are protected and honored. If frontiers encourage a distorted view of the private place as one of "seclusion-shame-modesty," 'hudud' places the private within a coveted category of "sanctity-reserve-respect" [23].

After having exhibited the differences in the connotative meaning of the words 'frontiers' and 'hudud' and compared their effect on the interpretation of incidents in the text, it becomes obvious how important choice of language is to the message intended and to the system of values that the author wants to bring forth. Bill Ashcroft explains this powerful aspect of language simply as "To name reality is therefore to exert power over it"[24]. It is a given fact that with culture comes language, but the concept that language carries a certain culture and its "entire body of values" has not been given enough attention or importance in postcolonial discourse [25]. In continuing to ignore this phenomenon, influential writers, such as Mernissi, allow dominant power discourses to impose their own set of 'frontiers' on the text and on the precepts and values of their own culture. Fatima's comment in the text that "The frontier is in the mind of the powerful" clearly points to this fact, but the question that we need to ask ourselves is if we have consigned our culture and traditions under the auspices of the English language, why is it then any surprise that we find our cultural identities and our discourses relegated to the periphery? Or that our geographic frontiers are being drawn by everyone else but ourselves?

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