



Lila Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

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THIS BOOK EXPANDS on a well-known op-ed of the same title written by the author in 2002 originating from her concern at how the situation of Muslim women was being used at the time of the American invasion of Afghanistan as a rationale for U.S. military and political intervention. Abu Lughod has authored a challenging and complex work that takes time to engage and absorb, in particular since it challenges so many facile assumptions and overriding stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women. In recent decades, cultural feminists have mounted incisive critiques of how women's issues have been used to promote Western imperialism since the colonial era. In addition, those of us who study and teach about women in Muslim societies face a constant need to dispel a range of sensational stereotypes regarding honor killings, disfigurement, and abuse while addressing a persistent set of ill-posed questions associated with Muslim women.

Lila Abu Lughod is a senior and respected American anthropologist whose career has focused on Middle Eastern women, beginning with her ground breaking dissertation and first book, *Veiled Sentiments* (1986), which analyzed codes of honor such as veiling practices and the expression of emotion in an Egyptian Bedouin society. Her continued fieldwork in the region has provided Abu Lughod with a wealth of lived experiences in a range of urban and rural contexts. On this basis she is able to critique the usual shallow, journalistic, and often ideologically motivated distortions of Muslim women's situations that inspire moral crusaders to call for rescuing such women from injustices blamed almost exclusively on a backward and patriarchal Islam or timeless and homogenized Muslim cultures.

The book is organized into six chapters with a continuous unifying sub-theme being the question of rights—are the West's neo-liberal assumptions about universal human rights a standard that must be applied to all cultures and societies and, as a corollary, should consent, choice, and freedom be the central criteria in evaluating human flourishing?

After an introduction reprising the problematic nature of the project of "saving" Muslim women and alerting us to the development of a particular discourse around Muslim women's rights, the next chapter challenges us to rethink this "new" common sense—in which an almost exclusive focus on culture as explaining all problems draws attention away from other salient factors in human and specifically female suffering including history, economics, globalization, or U.S. foreign policy.

The third chapter on authorizing moral crusades focuses on interrogating the general acceptance of the metrics of human "universal rights" coupled with analyzing how the representation of Muslim women's issues in public discourse defaults

to sensationalized tropes and affective language. How is a scholar and educator to challenge this common wisdom and guide students or readers in the process of unlearning and deconstructing the assumptions and half-truths purveyed by recent insider “experts” designated by cultural critic Hamid Dabashi as “native informers”? Such writings include Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), Irshad Manji’s *The Trouble with Islam* (2004), or Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *The Caged Virgin* (2004). These voices of “reform” have been embraced by the mainstream media and neo-con think tanks who join in the chorus promoting the idea of Muslim women longing to evade the strictures of Islam for the endless free choices offered by their Western liberators.

Gendered Orientalist fantasy further bombards us through the genre of popular tell-all accounts—often presented as nonfiction or memoirs—couched in sensualized escape narratives that verge on the pornographic in providing voyeuristic details of sexual and other abuse. Examples of this genre include Jean Sassoon’s pulp fictional works supposedly recounted by a Saudi princess, and Norma Khouri’s *Honor Lost*, a concocted story of honor killing in Jordan subsequently withdrawn by the publisher out of embarrassment at its fraudulence.

Abu Lughod’s fourth chapter considers the emergence of the category of the honor crime, demonstrating how “the popular concern with honor crimes solidifies certain violences as timeless cultural practices that are defined by their alien difference from us, rather than treating them as the perverse and diverse acts of individuals who sometimes work with a complex set of concepts linked to honor” (128). She points out how further elements as diverse as human rights reporting, the politics surrounding immigration, occupation, and the role of state institutions such as the police are often implicated in the framing, reporting, and in some cases even in the perpetration of honor crimes.

As an expert in honor coding, Abu Lughod is part of the cohort of anthropologists, including Saba Mahmood and Lara Deeb, whose detailed ethnographies have explored a culturally sensitive articulation of “agency” in which honor or the embrace of Islamic religious practice are not portrayed as emerging from the patriarchal repression of Muslim women but rather are analyzed within a cultural system of values that may equally sustain and even empower female participants.

In her penultimate chapter writing as “an anthropologist in the territory of rights” Abu Lughod discusses activist NGOs such as Musawah/Sisters in Islam (Malaysia) and Wise (Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality) led by Daisy Khan of New York City, largely comprised of privileged intellectuals sincerely trying to ameliorate the situation of fellow Muslim women, primarily by means of education and reinterpretation of gendered Muslim laws. While acknowledging and even appreciating this new liberal Muslim consensus that Islam and women’s rights must be reconciled, and that internal reform is necessary (185), Abu Lughod interrogates its local relevance by presenting two cases from her experience in rural Egypt. Here Abu Lughod points out how the concerns and strategies of urban elites often fail to address local realities such as the recent proliferation of institutes of Islamic learning that inculcate traditional patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law which are in their own way empowering to new cohorts of Islamizing females. In terms of liberal interventions toward addressing domestic violence—while reinterpretations of the

“beating verse” in the Quran attempt to delegitimize physical chastisement from an Islamic perspective, the underlying causes of violence and many other sources of female suffering, including shifting global and local economic structures, cannot be adequately addressed merely by reinterpreting authoritative texts.

The thesis and arguments within this work challenge many prevalent perceptions of Muslim women’s issues among both liberals and conservatives. While gender asymmetries are part of traditional Islamic legal regulations, systems of honor have diverse local and cultural contexts, while human actors are themselves situated within rapidly shifting global currents. Abu Lughod concludes with philosophical reflections on choice, consent, and freedom as the unparsed grammar of the cherished values of liberalism. Is our Western fetish around consent a fantasy of absolute autonomy—that we are in fact autonomous subjects? Does this authorize the demand that Muslim women renounce their faith? As for appeals to Western rescuers to intervene in Muslim women’s lives—she exhorts readers to instead make the effort to understand both complex local realities and who is producing and benefitting from promoting Western actors and ideals as their saviors.

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