Lila Abu-Lughod
Do Muslim Women Need Saving?
Reviewed by Prathim-Maya Dora-Laskey, 2017
Included in the Contested Terrains: Women of Color and Third World Women, Feminisms, and Geopolitics Special Issue, edited by Ranjoo Herr and Shelley Park

With its origins in a 2002 article first published in *American Anthropologist* (Abu-Lughod 2002) and subsequently anthologized in a variety of gender readers, Lila Abu-Lughod's provocative inquiry--*Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*--has had a long evolutionary history. In this monograph-length version, she provides both a sequenced challenge to the assumption of monolithic Islam that results in the circulation of the distressed Muslim woman trope across the Western world and an erudite and rational takedown of Western arrogance and the false binary Western/Islamic.

By turns charming and cautionary, Abu-Lughod interrogates the homogenized interpretations of "Muslim" in the West with humor, sympathy, and logic. She structures individual autonomy and universal human rights as constructions installed by prevailing geopolitical contexts and linguistic formulations rather than innate universalism. While acknowledging that the impetus to save (Muslim) women stems from reasonably decent impulses, Abu-Lughod deconstructs how the liberationist narratives are akin to ideological crusades that re-create the medieval othering of Islam and Muslims. These crusading enterprises--which, as Abu-Lughod points out, yoke feminists and nonfeminists, liberals and conservatives alike--may be legalistic, as in the burqa ban in France, or military, as in the US invasion of Afghanistan (both measures ostensibly undertaken to liberate Muslim women), but in reality they cause extensive hardship and actual harm.

Abu-Lughod's present work can be connected to her earlier work *Veiled Sentiments* (Abu-Lughod 1986/1999) and *Writing Women’s Worlds* (Abu-Lughod 1993/2008). Both earlier works capture the lived experiences of particular women in Egyptian Bedouin communities; this ethnographic investment of the individual with subjective agency worked to allay the easy stereotypes and challenges of anthropological objectification. In this mode, which Abu-Lughod terms "writing against culture" (6), she counters the Western imaginary in which Muslim women are continually subjected to sensationalistic crimes and therefore require Western intervention and "saving" since they are perceived to be lacking in agency.

Abu-Lughod uses a global scope, moving beyond her ethnographic expertise in Egypt, to draw examples from Germany, Pakistan, and Indonesia (to name a few examples)--thus the book's chief arguments move from the ethnographic to the ethical. Because of this global view, Abu-Lughod's work is able to counter stereotypes of Islam as an undifferentiated historiographical and cartographical reality, a phenomenon Abu-Lughod terms "IslamLand." She cautions that these sorts of generalizations make "us forget the violence and oppression in our own midst" and conveniently allow us to elide our own responsibility for creating "the (sometimes harsh) conditions in which distant others live" (26). By imbuing her subjects with individuality and engaging with the "messiness of the facts" (14), the work shows that although crimes against women must be acknowledged, whether they are the effect of an Islamic code must be more thoroughly investigated.

Under these directives, it is possible to see beyond what Abu-Lughod denigrates as "simplistic ideas about freedom" (19) to actual choices Muslim women are making on behalf of themselves and their families. However, rather than a narrative of rights, Abu-Lughod would rather engage with a narrative of constraints and
the ways in which each of us attempts to live the best possible life. This effectively deconstructs the false binary of Muslim and non-Muslim exemplifying that "our everyday understandings of the individual are culturally and historically specific" (217). Although Abu-Lughod cites Wendy Brown's idea that "choice itself is an impoverished account of freedom" (19), it emerges rather unequivocally that what actively oppresses Muslim women is not in fact their religious affiliations, but rather the complex entanglements among patriarchal systems and poverty, family traditions, and foreign military interventions and occupations. Ultimately, Islam constructed as a central commonality becomes fairly meaningless, as the practice of Islam differs by region, and one might as well assign the consumption of wheat as a commonality that produces oppression.

Outside of Abu-Lughod's "IslamLand," the literary trafficking in "pulp nonfiction" is another way in which Muslim women are constructed in the Western imaginary. Over-generalized stereotypes—almost tropes—of the beleaguered Muslim woman are regularly commissioned by publishers and evince a preoccupation (Abu-Lughod is prone to use the more clinical term "obsession") with subjects such as the veil, forced marriage, honor crimes, or violent (frequently sexualized) abuse. These repetitive, Islamophobic constructions of Islam as the commonality among these very different crimes in varying geographical and geopolitical schemas are problematic, and Abu-Lughod uses these as starting points for critiques of international capital, military-industrial complexes, and Western saviorism.

These Western attitudes and positions that Abu-Lughod describes have sometimes been termed "gendered Orientalism" by postcolonial scholars. Dohra Ahmad and Meyda Yegenoglu, for instance, have pointed out that forms of gendered orientalism have provided a ready-made narrative for the failings of native societies since colonial times (Yegenoglu 1998; Ahmad 2009). Applied to Muslim societies, this shorthand of stereotyping is rife with stigmatizing assumptions, dog whistles, and euphemisms. In Abu-Lughod's work, these are referenced as the fetishisms of a gendered and voyeuristic orientalism, as her use of terms such as "seduction" and "fantasies of intimacy" to describe global responses to what are considered specifically Muslim problems shows (49). As anti-colonial and postcolonial feminists have pointed out, non-Western women's bodies are the site of the struggle between colonial imperialists and nationalists. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formulation, the theme of white men saving brown women from brown men drives colonialism. In a twenty-first-century context, as we are aware and Abu-Lughod stresses, calls to rally around the "saving" of Muslim women are frequently accompanied by real or threatened military operations or occupations. Abu-Lughod's montage of references from First Lady Laura Bush's address to the nation on the plight of Afghani women prior to the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, to the bombed cities and fields where Afghani women live, is an acerbic commentary in itself.

Divided into six chapters with a separate introduction and conclusion, Abu-Lughod provides ample expository material. In the introduction, "Rights and Lives," Abu-Lughod begins to sketch out several of the motifs that she unpacks throughout the rest of the book. The core of the argument is against the over-generalization ("that mythical place where Muslim women undifferentiated by nation, locality, or personal circumstance") and othering ("lives that are totally separate and different from our own") of Muslim women (26). In chapter 1, "Do Muslim Women (Still) Need Saving?" Abu Lughod evaluates the remarks she made in the wake of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 by revisiting Afghanistan in 2010 via the case history of Bibi Aysha. She connects the history of humanitarian "saviorship" with the nineteenth-century missionary rhetorics of salvation. Chapter 2, "The New Common Sense," addresses how philosophically different approaches such as that of Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali converge on Islamophobic positions, and unpacks the use of the abolitionist movement in constructing the truism of Muslim women's oppression vis-à-vis Islam. In chapter 3, "Authorizing Moral Crusades," Abu-Lughod's attention shifts to the application of human rights to women's rights by invoking thinkers as various as Catherine MacKinnon,
Charlotte Bunch, and Martha Nussbaum. The second half of the chapter addresses the "(porno)graphic" (98) accounts of abduction, (sexual) slavery, and lack of consent and choice that are popular and trafficked. Chapter 4, "Seductions of the 'Honor Crime'" concentrates on the "honor crime" or "honor killing" that mobilizes Western media in Islamophobic directions, although the practice has been delegitimized through reform in several Muslim states. The account of the 2005 "honor killing" of a young woman with a Turkish background in Berlin is investigated to expose the media frenzy as a fear of Islamism, and more precisely, as a demonization of immigrants rather than concern for Muslim women. In chapter 5, "The Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights," Abu-Lughod explains several of the civil rights and laws that cover Muslim women as a reminder that "Muslim women's rights are pursued in particular places through a variety of institutions and instruments" (145). Chapter 6, "An Anthropologist in the Territory of Rights," revisits the human rights framework to ask if "humanitarianism is the new face of colonialism" (175), and to chronicle the rise of faith-based feminist initiatives in "Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, Indonesia, Lebanon, and Egypt" (177). There is an espousal of "selective intervention" and the need "to be more realistic about the limits and locations of the vocabularies and imagination of rights" (199-200). The conclusion, "Registers of Humanity," notes the changes due to modernization and Islamic revivalism and concludes with the reminder that the "suffering Muslim women undergo are of many sorts and have various causes" and the reminder that the "failure to look for similarities" (222) cross-culturally erases our common humanity, although it may be "a humanity subjected to different forces and expressed in different registers" (227).

The provocative titular question, clearly, exists less as a geopolitical/cultural interrogation of realities and more as a predetermined rhetorical flourish, and readers may therefore be frustrated as it becomes obvious that Abu-Lughod does not really mean to entertain a debate on the subject. And although each individual chapter is convincing, there is apt to be some dissatisfaction with what may seem like repetitive conscience-clearing and refutation vis-à-vis Islam's involvement in gender imbalances. Especially since, although Abu-Lughod's clarifying analysis identifies several culprits from neoliberalism to military-industrial nexuses, none of these replace (the popular and false) adoption of Islamic commonality. It might have been useful, however, to consider the question of commonalities. Although we can see the way Islam is constructed in the Western public imaginary via governmental and media activity as an excuse for xenophobia, immigrant othering, and military interventions, it might be useful to similarly counter ways in which Islam is constructed in communities as varied as Saudi Arabia to Indonesia as a form of control over female aspirations and bodies. Both Deniz Kandiyoti (who asks, why are national iterations of Islam frequently antagonistic to gender equality? [Kandiyoti 1994/2016]) and Martha Nussbaum (who asks, do social/nation statist repressions impinge on the capabilities of individual human beings? [Nussbaum 1995]) the work of both of whom Abu-Lughod cites briefly in chapters 1 and 3, provide alternative and important ways of thinking through this problem. As it stands, the appeal that "we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or even choose, different futures from ones we envision" (43) remains a problematic one.

There are other small dissatisfactions. Abu-Lughod acknowledges that "so many of my examples have come" from one "village in Upper Egypt" (211); these humanistic, exceptional stories, although they effectively counter the sensationalistic, exceptional stories that are circulated in the Western public sphere, still leave open the question: what do women in other villages and countries think and experience? Or although the idea that a burqa affords "portable seclusion" and allows women to leave their homes to enter public spaces is a persuasive argument for the limited freedom that women have constructed for themselves, readers may ask more radical questions: why should their freedom be limited at all? What is the source of such stringent gendered segregation? Abu-Lughod is inclined to counter such questions with the observation that all human beings function within their constraints. But, this, unfortunately, seems a deflective misinterpretation of real and
metaphorical dangers. After all, the consequences of hijab noncompliance in Saudi Arabia are not the same as being subject to the "tyranny of fashion" in the West (37). Finally, although Abu-Lughod repeatedly cautions us not to think of Muslim woman (or in Miriam Cooke's sardonic formulation, "The Muslimwoman" [Cooke 2008]) as a monolith, she is herself prone to devolve self-referentially into urging us to think about "Muslim women" collectively, demonstrating how difficult it is to think outside categories of constructed phenomenology.

Several versions of Do Muslim Women Need Saving? have appeared in venues as various as Time, The Daily Beast, The New York Times, and so on; hence, the main argument disassociating Islam from specific gender harm can come off as somewhat repetitive, reactionary, or diversionary. In this monograph, however, the profoundly sympathetic ethnographic descriptions further the argument in ways that are responsive and rewarding. Additionally, the network of academic coalition that Abu-Lughod develops provides an accessible and trenchant way of thinking through the reflexive othering applied to other categories of non-Western women (Hispanic/Third World/Asian) and may impel mobilizations of our rich intersectionalities.

References


Prathim-Maya Dora-Laskey teaches and researches global/postcolonial/anglophone literatures, women's and gender studies, and cultural studies at Alma College, Alma, Michigan. She is a poetry editor at Jaggery: A DesiLit Arts and Literature Journal, and a moderator at SAWNET (sawnet.org). She has previously published work in Contemporary South Asia, Interventions: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies, and South Asian Review.
"By turns charming and cautionary, Abu-Lughod interrogates the homogenized interpretations of 'Muslim' in the West with humor, sympathy, and logic. She structures individual autonomy and universal human rights as constructions installed by prevailing geopolitical contexts and linguistic formulations rather than innate universalism."

Hypatia Reviews Online
editor@hypatiareviews.org

Website supported by Michael Digital

Source URL: https://www.hypatiareviews.org/reviews/content/317