

Title—Do Muslim Women Need Saving?

Author—Lila Abu-Lughod

Year—2013

Categories: Islam, Gender, Anthropology/Ethnography, Middle East

Place: Middle East (Mostly Egypt)

Time: 1980-2010

Argument Synopsis:

Abu-Lughod's book is concerned with the dominant Western discourse surrounding the oppression of Muslim women and how this discourse squares with her ethnographic experience with Muslim women. She is an anthropologist and has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the Middle East on and off since the 1980s. The majority of her fieldwork has been conducted in the rural communities of Egypt. She reveals that for many women across the Arab world, their identity as Muslims is deeply meaningful and integral to their sense of self and community. Abu-Lughod discusses how the idea that Islam was the reason for their suffering strikes the Muslim women she knows as absurd. This book attempts to make sense of this disjuncture between lived experience and Western public attitudes. Especially in the post-9/11 period, Western representations of Muslim women became connected to the mission to rescue them from their cultures. These views thus rationalize American and European international adventures across the Middle East and South Asia. Abu-Lughod utilizes various case studies of individual women she has known from her research in order to combat this Western narrative that identifies Islam as the cause of all of their suffering. She acknowledges that the majority of the case studies come from the Middle East, and more specifically the region of Egypt where she has spent the most time; different lessons can be learned from different contexts.

In general, Abu-Lughod notes how Muslim women's issues regularly stir up international debate in ways that concerns about women elsewhere in the world do not. She argues that everyday forms of suffering that women endure are not always gendered or specific to particular cultures or religious communities. In other words, the existence of Muslim women's suffering does not prove that Islam is oppressive to women. Her book demonstrates how varied and complicated the source of any one woman's suffering might be, through the use of granular case studies of specific Muslim women. According to Abu-Lughod, the Muslim women she has spent time with would find it bizarre that people would believe they were oppressed by their religion, even though they have not had easy lives and some of what they suffer is gendered. Her book considers the ways that representations of Muslim women's suffering and arguments about their lack of rights have been working politically and practically. She is critical of the Western tendency not to look for similarities in the difficulties faced by Muslim women as it disavows our common humanity. An honest self-reflection about how the privileges of elites might be connected to the persistence of inequalities is essential to any ethical stance towards women's human rights.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Like other women, the kinds of suffering that Muslim women undergo are of many sorts and have various causes, only some of which might be traced to religious traditions or cultural formations
- Western common sense about the plight of Muslim women does not match to the reality of the lived experience of Muslim women
- Convictions about Muslim women's relative lack of choice ignores the extent to which all choice is conditioned by, as well as imbricated, with power