

**STUDENT BOOK REVIEW:
DO MUSLIM WOMEN NEED SAVING?**

Lila Abu-Lughod

By Courtney Danae Paterson, Harvard Law School, J.D. 2016

In the era of post-9/11 politics, the weighty questions of identity, religion, and human rights center increasingly on the topics of the contested universal human rights framework, cultural relativism, and the role of Islam. Lila Abu-Lughod's timely work, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*,¹ addresses this critical dialogue and cuts across many of the contemporary discussions in the media, in Washington, and in Geneva. The book's message rests on the contention that Western actors must rethink commonly held, normative assumptions about the role Islam may or may not play in the repression of women in predominantly Muslim communities and nation-states. Instead, Abu-Lughod argues, factors such as government structure, politics, and economics are more closely linked to the subjugation of women.

The book is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, Abu-Lughod characterizes the Western framing of women's rights in Muslim populations as highly contextual. She focuses on popularized figures, such as Bibi Aysha, an Afghan woman whose Taliban husband and in-laws punished her by cutting off her nose, and whose picture was portrayed on the August 2010 cover of *Time* magazine.² By presenting this figure, Abu-Lughod considers the co-optation and manipulation of women's rights in the politics and justification of the War on Terror. Famously, Laura Bush's radio address in November of 2001 constituted a cry to action for the sake of Afghan women, a galvanizing of anti-terror forces in order to "save" the female population of Afghanistan. According to Abu-Lughod, this mobilization of support for the War on Terror through the framing of the conflict in terms of top-layer feminism is a classic example of Western co-optation of women's rights as a means of bolstering support for the war.³ Chapter 2 criticizes a phenomenon that Abu-Lughod describes as a "new common sense;" the typified language developed to reference women's rights, particularly in the global South.⁴ Abu-Lughod's criticisms rest heavily on this

¹ See LILA ABU-LUGHOD, *DO MUSLIM WOMEN NEED SAVING?* (2013).

² See *id.* at 27.

³ See *id.* at 29.

⁴ *Id.* at 55.

discourse's essential lack of Western introspection and open self-assessment. In particular, Western-issued reports focusing on global gender discrimination consistently ignore the rampant rape culture, unpunished domestic violence, and workplace gender discrimination that regularly takes place in Western countries such as the U.S.⁵

In Chapter 3, Abu-Lughod explores how the global women's rights movement has developed into what she terms a "moral crusade," pitting the West against the Islamic other.⁶ She criticizes popular written narratives by survivors, and is skeptical of the imagery offered in relation to topics such as modern slavery. In Chapter 4, Abu-Lughod portrays the concept of honor crimes as an overdramatized, over-fetishized practice that presents a skewed representation of normal and acceptable behavior in Islam.⁷ In Chapter 5, Abu-Lughod analyzes the "social life" of women's rights: how rights are specifically framed in relation to Muslim women, and how they are morphed and adapted in widely differing social contexts.⁸

In the course of this analysis, Abu-Lughod conducts two small case studies that examine a variety of women's rights actors (including local NGOs) operating in Egypt and Palestine.⁹ In Egypt, the complex relationship between women's rights, local and international organizations, and Islamic institutions have ultimately culminated in both the governmentalization and commercialization of women's rights (with "Honour" tote bags available for a donation, for example).¹⁰ In Palestine, meanwhile, Abu-Lughod briefly touches on the relationship between women's rights work and national politics, considering the impact of siege and occupation on the advancement of women's rights.¹¹ Finally, Chapter 6 provides a careful reflection of the role of anthropology – Abu-Lughod's primary field of expertise – in assessing human rights.¹² Through an anthropological lens, Abu-Lughod concludes that Islamic feminism – and efforts to improve women's rights through reform of Islamic law – fails to address issues of class privilege, education, and global governance. She further asserts that the vast disparity

⁵ *See id* at 63.

⁶ *Id* at 81.

⁷ *See id* at 113.

⁸ *Id* at 143.

⁹ *See id* at 148–62.

¹⁰ *See id* at 151, 155.

¹¹ *See id* at 157–62.

¹² *See id* at 173.

between the reality of women's daily lives and the "social imagination of rights" is a barrier to the success of Islamic feminism.¹³

Throughout her work, Abu-Lughod proffers a range of perspectives on the normative "othering" and co-optation of Islam-centric arguments, crafting a persuasive and critical perspective for contemporary practitioners, as well as those passionate about the global "war on women." Ultimately, the work points to the importance of raising attention to Muslim women's rights in the contemporary context of international interventions and shifting geopolitics that place a heavy critical lens on Muslim populations.¹⁴ Abu-Lughod argues that in this weighted geopolitical context, the increasingly popular Western focus on what she frames as saving Muslim women from their own culture is a deeply problematic reflection not of those cultures, but rather of these hegemonic geopolitics.¹⁵ This is the foundation of Abu-Lughod's underlying message: that Western thinkers and practitioners must reconsider their assumptions about the role of Islam in women's rights, and approach this topic with a more nuanced lens.

In her consideration of such weighty topics as the politics of the veil and honor killings,¹⁶ Abu-Lughod emphasizes the necessity of recognizing and consciously accepting the broad cultural differences between Western and non-Western conceptions of autonomy, as well as respecting social standards that reflect non-Western values. She underscores the importance of acknowledging Muslim women's agency, rather than reducing them to symbolic entities rendered helplessly invisible (and thereby impotent) by their *hijabs*, *niqabs*, or *burqas*. This view contrasts strongly with many contemporary attitudes regarding the state of women in Muslim communities, and in this sense represents a refreshing counter-culture perspective.

However, the book suffers from a number of key weaknesses. Most notably, Abu-Lughod suggests broad alternative causal factors (such as global and national politics, militarization, and economics), but does not delve deep enough into these

¹³ *Id* at 176.

¹⁴ For example, as discussed above, a strong focus on cultural and religious explanations for the treatment of women in Afghanistan (as opposed to history and the U.S.'s role in geopolitics) has been used extensively in justifying the War on Terror. *See id* at 31–32.

¹⁵ *See id* at 47.

¹⁶ *See id* at 35, 113–15.

complex issues.¹⁷ Nor does she make a substantially persuasive argument supporting their viability as causal factors that hold more dispositive weight than Islam in relation to the repression of women's rights. While these factors are periodically addressed, the reader is left with a sense of skimmed superficiality, and craving a deeper comparative consideration of the relevant factors she introduces. This significantly weakens her overall argument.

Abu-Lughod also makes interesting, if brief, use of the work of preeminent scholar Deniz Kandiyoti, but ultimately seems to employ only a limited version of Kandiyoti's perspective on the relationship between Islam and gender. Abu-Lughod cites Kandiyoti to emphasize a focus on predominantly economic explanatory factors as an *alternative* to Islam.¹⁸ While economic factors are certainly essential, Abu-Lughod does not discuss Kandiyoti's deeper analysis on the direct role of Islam in women's rights. In particular, Kandiyoti focuses on the quintessentially instrumental use (and abuse) of gendered symbols and traditions in substantiating national authenticity through Islamic practices, grounded in the context of complex geopolitics and economic pressure.¹⁹

Twentieth century Iran provides a poignant example where strong political reactions against Western imperialism triggered the embrace of visibly conservative Islamic tenets. For example, many of the tenets that were emphasized had a direct impact on female dress and access to education, work, and the public sphere generally. Kandiyoti observes that the use of Islam as a reaction to Western imperialism has shaped political frameworks, which in turn has impacted the development (or lack thereof) of women's rights.²⁰ Many Islamic feminists, including Riffat Hassan, view this manipulation of religion within politics as a questionable and patriarchal interpretation of Islam, but nonetheless undeniably a use of Islam in the political sphere.²¹ This tight-knit connection between politics and Islam points to a general gap in Abu-Lughod's analysis: the relationship *between* Islam, politics, and economics. She treats these subjects as discrete, but many theorists – including Kandiyoti – have produced

¹⁷ See, e.g., *id* at 53.

¹⁸ See *id* at 52.

¹⁹ See DENIZ KANDIYOTI, *WOMEN, ISLAM AND THE STATE* (1991).

²⁰ See *id* at 8.

²¹ See Riffat Hassan, *Feminist Theology: The Challenges for Muslim Women*, in *WOMEN AND ISLAM: CRITICAL CONCEPTS IN SOCIOLOGY* 53–65 (Moghissi, Haideh ed., 2004).

convincing arguments that these areas are in fact fundamentally linked in many nation-states, and have a profound impact on the advancement (or lack thereof) of women's rights.²²

Acknowledging this relationship would not weaken Abu-Lughod's general argument that Islam is often inappropriately labeled as the sole cause of women's repression. Kandiyoti's argument rests on instrumentalist politics and the misappropriation of Islam through political agendas, a notion that connects strongly with Abu-Lughod's posited causal factors of international and national politics and economics. In particular, Kandiyoti views Islam as a vessel *through which* politics shape women's rights, which indicates that it is politics, not the inherent quality of Islam in and of itself, that rests among the base causes of rights repression. The geopolitical context, domestic politics, and economic factors that trigger the use of gendered Islamic norms for political ends (as according to Kandiyoti) are in fact among the factors that Abu-Lughod herself cites as key causes. As such, Abu-Lughod's argument is ultimately compatible with Kandiyoti's, and would have been strengthened significantly by further consideration of the complex but highly relevant relationship between Islam and her posited alternative causal factors.

Additionally, as she openly acknowledges in her introduction, throughout the work Abu-Lughod herself often draws general conclusions about "Muslim women" as a largely homogenous group. On the whole, she addresses class and other socioeconomic differences only in her dismissal of locally driven Muslim feminist movements and female-friendly interpretations of Islam.²³ Her work would be further strengthened by a more nuanced discussion of the critically different experiences of Muslim women across states and regions.

Ultimately, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* is a prescient and timely call for a more sharply conscious and thoughtful consideration of women's rights in Muslim populations, but would be significantly strengthened in two ways: by engaging in a more thorough consideration of the relationship between Islam and the broader political and economic factors that Abu-Lughod cites, as well as exploring the priorities and perspectives of differing Muslim communities.

²² See KANDIYOTI, *supra* note 19, at 2.

²³ See ABU-LUGHOD, *supra* note 1, at 17, 183–87.