



“Caught in the Cross-Publics of the ‘Muslimwoman,’”

A talk with Columbia Professor Lila Abu-Lughod on Tuesday, October 7, 2014

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On October 7<sup>th</sup>, over fifty people joined us for Professor Lila Abu-Lughod’s discussion on the topic of her 2013 book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* In this book, she put forth the question of “What happens when an anthropologist... finds her subjects catapulted to the center of popular media attention?” However, rather than discussing the book itself, Professor Abu-Lughod discussed the responses to it, in order to contextualize the continuing discourses around Islam, feminism, and the women subjects at stake. She categorized responses into three groups: those that praised the book, those that vilified it, and those that ignored it.

*Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* is an intervention into broader public debates regarding the politics of Islam. Abu-Lughod’s anthropological approach was based on what she had learned from years of fieldwork in Egypt about the lives of women, with “an eye to public debate.” In writing about the public views of the “Muslimwoman,” (a term she borrowed from Miriam Cooke,) Abu-Lughod considered whether ethnographic specificity could be used to interrupt or unsettle such hegemonic identity formations. Her ambition in writing the book was to re-direct the discourse surrounding views of Muslim women away from an academic audience. Those of us who have read the book can recognize the straight-forward nature of the writing; the direct approach to key topics discussed such as honor killings, popular fictional and non-fictional representations, and Islamic reform; and, perhaps, most importantly, the use of personal stories of individual women to foreground the book’s questioning of how the West views Muslim women.

The author explained that critical responses have surprised her, partially because of the anthropological approach and partially despite it: “Unlike previous ethnographies written for colleagues and students, this is being received unevenly by diverse publics.” Her target audience was the U.S. liberal mainstream, which has essentially ignored the book. One review in *Publishers Weekly* noted that the book “confronts stereotypes,” while a review posted on the *Not Oprah’s Book Club* website discussed the book in terms of “myths versus realities.” Yet no deeper discussion of the book has been taking place in these arenas. When Graduate Center Professor Rupal Oza asked how the book circulated in the mainstream feminist movement, Abu-Lughod summed up the response with one word: “silence.”

The reception outside of the intended readership, however, has ranged from outrage, to an embracing of the book, which touched her, to ambivalence by Muslim feminist colleagues. The author focused her talk on two counter-publics who reviewed the book in blogs. One was hostile; the other adulatory; and both were emotionally-charged, considering the book in terms of “truth and lies.” Taken together, she explained, “They illuminate the political stakes of my venture.”

The blog from *Muslimah Media Watch* explores “[h]ow *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Saved Me.” The “me” here is a Muslim woman named Shireen, who noted that speaking for herself was a novel concept. She considered reading the book as a “psycho-emotional experience.” She could not stop reading it. In fact, at points, she would have to put the book down “to exhale.” She even recounts how a friend of hers slept with the book on occasion. The book gave these Muslim women hope for new discourses they can partake in.

In contrast, in a post in *Frontpage Magazine online*, American critic Bruce Bawer claimed that he had to keep putting the book down because he felt so angry. Bawer, who also writes for “Islamist Watch” and “The Counter-Jihad Report,” gained a fair amount of notoriety for his anti-Muslim article, “While Europe Slept.” He, himself, felt offended by Abu-Lughod’s book, on behalf of Muslim women. What’s more, in comments posted in regards to Bawer’s blog, Abu-Lughod was accused of actually being a man. In such defamatory posts, her personal research for the book was completely negated, while her education, (measured only in terms of degrees from elite institutions), was called into question.

A third response to the book came from British Professor Tariq Modood in a forum in “Ethnicities.” He criticized the book for not discussing the elite Muslims who want to change their own communities, those he considers as “authentic critical voices.” In this regard, he wondered how much support the book offers for “internal critique.” Abu-Lughod acknowledged this choice in her writing, “As an ethnographer, I can’t help seeing them [elite feminists] but through the eyes of less-educated women.” What’s more, she sees ordinary women countering injustices in the communities where she has done research. Then, we might conclude, part of the point of writing a book of this nature is to demonstrate how these “authentic” women are moving to change their own communities, even if they remain invisible to an international view. Abu-Lughod further pointed out that we should not use these boundaries to delineate groups of women, as it further promotes the class-divisions that exist in western and non-western feminisms.

In her talk, Abu-Lughod used the responses to reflect on the “ethics of ethnography.” She asked her audience, “Can a non-specialist public assimilate this mode of argumentation? Can they hear particulars of what these stories were telling us of the world?” She wondered what had happened to the personal stories she recounted in the book and emphasized the impetus of writing it -- that “ethnography has to disentangle individual women from global and national policies, class politics, and military interventions.”

Professor Abu-Lughod wrapped up the compelling talk by asserting what all of the varied responses confirm: that in considering the “awkward” relationship between feminism and Islam, “a healthy internal debate requires space to flourish.” In the aftermath of *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, her “primary response is to figure out why these spaces are being denied.”

*This event was co-sponsored by the Center for the Study of Women & Society and the Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern American Center.*

For more information, see:

<http://feministing.com/2013/12/04/not-oprahs-book-club-do-muslim-women-need-saving/>;  
<http://www.frontpagemag.com/2014/bruce-bawer/saving-islam-from-its-victims/>;  
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmw/2014/03/how-do-muslim-women-need-saving-saved-me/>;  
<http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-674-72516-4>;  
and “Deploying the Muslimwoman” by Miriam Cooke, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*,  
vol. 24, no. 1, Spring 2008, 91-99. DOI: 10.1353/jfs.0.0004.

A related discourse on Malala Yousafzai’s Nobel Peace Prize has arisen this past week:  
<http://middleeastrevised.com/2014/10/11/why-i-cant-celebrate-malalas-nobel-peace-prize/>;  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/11/malala-nabila-worlds-apart-201311193857549913.html>.