

## *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

By Lila Abu-Lughod.  
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Only a few days after finishing *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* by anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, an event took place which aptly demonstrated the importance of this book. The French minister in charge of women's rights, Laurence Rossignol, made a statement condemning international clothing brands such as Marks & Spencer, Dolce & Gabbana and H&M for catering to the needs of Muslim women. These brands, which see a lucrative market in the production of "modest fashion," take part in "the enslavement of women," Rossignol claimed. To make matters worse, she compared women who wear the burqa to "negroes who supported slavery." The minister's words sparked a social media outcry. Muslim women from across the world voiced their frustration at the condescending and patronizing statement from a so called defender of women's rights. Reading about the affair, I imagined Abu-Lughod rolling her eyes in exasperation and bewilderment over yet another Western politician feeling the need to express their misinformed and simplistic opinions about the plight of "the Muslim woman." I imagined Abu-Lughod asking questions to the French minister, and those men and women applauding the minister's courageous stand for putting "freedom" before the financial gain of the capitalist fashion market. What do you really know about the lives of veiled women and their reasons to cover their hair and (sometimes) face, she might ask them. How can you reduce the different ways and reasons for covering that women from various social, economic and cultural backgrounds employ to one simplistic explanation? Is restricting access to modest clothing a step towards living in freedom? How can you reduce the complicated dynamics that produce women's suffering to a piece of cloth they wear on their heads?

*Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* is a book that scrutinizes "the emerging Western common sense about the plight of Muslim women" (8). Since 2001, when women's rights were accepted as a plausible reason to support military intervention in Afghanistan, "the call for women's rights has gone mainstream," Abu-Lughod argues (54). Scrutinizing the "pulp nonfiction" books that narrate the tragic stories of women out there in undefined lands, and the policies of politicians like Rossignol, Abu-Lughod shows how, each in their own way, they contribute to an understanding of "the Muslim woman" as a victim of a patriarchal, oppressive and misogynistic culture: as a being without rights. Building on more than forty years of experience as an anthropologist working with Muslim women in Muslim communities, Abu-Lughod fights this understanding. Through intimate stories of real women in real places, she repeatedly undermines the notion that women's suffering is cultural or religious. She firmly grounds women's suffering in the contemporary world,

a world implicated by global inequality and oppressive military and state regimes. Women's suffering is not the consequence of archaic rooted cultures "somewhere out there." It is the consequence of the very real regimes of power that govern today's world.

Abu-Lughod treads a slippery slope in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* No one can be indifferent to the problems she discusses, such as forced marriages, domestic abuse and sexual violence. It is not surprising then that throughout the book she continuously feels the need to emphasize that she does not condone oppression of, or violence against, women. The book is not a call for cultural relativism or disengagement, nor a criticism of those women working to improve women's lives on the ground (among whom are Islamic feminists held in high esteem by Abu-Lughod). What it is, however, is a biting critique of the tendency of the human rights discourse to "focus the gaze elsewhere": to sensationalize the suffering of people far away and not to be critical of what happens in our own societies or what role we play ourselves in creating suffering elsewhere (221). Abu-Lughod argues that speaking about "rights" obscures how we all, in our shared humanity, are tied in complex ways to the people around us. This means that matters of choice and consent, which are held in such high esteem by the human rights discourse, are never simple or straightforward. It is this that I find the most significant theoretical argument put forward in the book. The obsession of the human rights discourse with choice and consent obscures the ways in which people are implicated in their social environment. Only a human perspective, which would be achieved by looking and listening carefully to each other, can help us to begin to understand "loaded values like choice and freedom and how they actually work in the context of human lives" (224).

*Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* is a complex read in which Abu-Lughod discusses in six chapters a range of very different topics. She moves from speaking of low quality books on the tragic fate of Muslim women, to how the concept of "women's rights" is used in the NGO world in Palestine, to the activities of Islamic feminists in Malaysia and the U.S.A. Yet, she manages to draw the chapters together into with overarching message and statement. The book is also in part a journey through Abu-Lughod's ethnographic career. She draws examples and stories from *Veiled Sentiments* (1986) her first book on the Bedouin of northern Egypt, her extensive work on rural Egypt, and her work in and on Palestine. She also draws from her own life and family history, which also indicates how personal the matter is to her. To conclude, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* is an important book that not only criticizes but also offers alternative perspectives. Instead of calling for moral crusades to "save Muslim women" out of a sense of misguided superiority, Abu-Lughod urges us to carefully analyze, always remain critical of ourselves and to recognize our common humanity.

*By Esther Schoorel*