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Do Muslim Women Need Saving?

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Review

Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*
Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

From a rigorous and large ethnographic research during more than twenty years in Arabic countries, as Egypt and Palestine, the anthropologist Abu-Lughod criticizes the Muslim societies and culture's image that Occident depicts through a certain popular and academic literature, and through some feminist, human rights and cooperation NGO's discourse, that unfairly blames the whole Muslim culture for the violence against Muslim women. The author explains how Muslim societies' beliefs and values are against gender violence, and how are not societies but certain individuals who commit atrocities, contravening the ruling values system. So, a negative image is specially drawn by the so called "pulp non-fiction" literature, exposing kidnappings, forced weddings, harassments, sexual trafficking and exploitation, that is presumably accepted and covered in Arab societies. Abu-Lughod maintains that this constitutes a new gender orientalisation, which follows similar goals and patterns as those denounced by Edward Said (2002). She unambiguously declares herself both against gender violence and against this new imperialism that simplifies and discredits Muslim values systems to justify a military and diplomatic democratizing intervention in Arabic countries.

She has chosen a truly sensitive matter as stoning, ablation, honor crimes or forced veil, but likewise she has scientifically and courageously criticized what she considers a campaign against the Muslim World that takes these ignominies as a pretext. She denounces that following this campaign

distracts from paying attention on Muslim women important facets as consent, freedom of choice, which can lead to more profound and durable social transformations. This campaign projects an image of Muslim women without agency, caged, without freedom or choices. Their narratives are decontextualized and forget to say that the aforementioned atrocities are widely rejected by Arab societies and Islam, and not only by West countries and Christianity. This Manichaeism avoids realizing about the Arab civil society internal movements, about how young people interpret their religiosity and how they take their sexual-affective decisions. It avoids realizing how Islamic religious leaders raise fatwa condemning honor crimes, and distracts the attention on stances and manipulations maintained by populist, conservative and fundamentalist Islamic organizations against these fatwa. Meanwhile it does not show the existence of Muslim men supporting women's freedom and struggling for both women's rights and equality among men and women (Abu-Lughod, 2012: 139-140, 145).

Abu-Lughod considers that interpreting the complex moral values system as a patriarchal oppression that leads towards gender violence is an unfortunate and an inoperative simplification. From a deep analysis, she maintains that this system regulates important issues like offspring, inheritance, economy and political and social relations. She points out that its interpretation is reflected in songs and poems, and that people daily discuss when it is properly enforced or not. The author maintains that violence against Muslim women comes from the economic and political structures, instead of coming from culture and religion. She denounces that ethnocentric stances avoid taking into account how Muslim women see and think themselves, and how they live and describe their own reality. At least two things to take into account to any analysis are that they have agency, and that the Muslim community is heterogeneous. Thus, the author criticizes an ethnocentric and classist feminism, while aligns herself with Third World feminisms, Afro-American feminism or Islamic feminism. So, she conceives that the overcoming of Muslim Women oppression must come from their own agency and from the Muslim civil society, articulating it by means of their own reflexive, critic and creative capacities. The most effective and correct proposals are coming from Muslim societies, a non-patriarchal Quran interpretation or women's kin and friendship's networks. As an example she

highlights some Islamic feminist movements as Musawah or Sisters of Islam, which are plural and dialogic (Abu-Lighod, 2013: 177-187).

The contribution of Abu-Lughod has important implications to correctly and effectively end with discrimination and inequalities suffered by Muslim women. As for example, realizing that projects and policies designed by international institutions and NGO (she cites UNESCO or International Amnesty) that counts of big amounts of money, do not get to eradicate violence against Muslim women. Or when the current debate on the burka banning in Western countries is tackled, frequently undertaken with ignorance and superficiality. So this book deserves a careful reading and a subsequent debate.

References

Said, E. (2002). *Orientalismo*. Madrid: Debate.

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