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Rethinking Muslim Women's Agency in Orientalist, Nationalist and Identity Discourses Beyond Abu-Lughod

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Abstract

This article engages with Lila Abu-Lughod's fundamental 2002 review '*Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others',* which criticises Western narratives of Muslim women's passivity and victimhood. Orientalist and post-structuralist gender theories are brought together in a discussion of the complexity of Muslim women's position in global and national politics and the intricate role of rituals in identity and agency. This article aims to critically assess Abu-Lughod's work in the context of the Middle East, asking key questions: (1) To what extent is the identity of Muslim women created by Orientalist narratives? (2) How do religious rituals interact with notions of gender and agency? While supporting Abu-Lughod's criticisms of Orientalist tropes, this article also argues that her analysis is insufficient in addressing the role of Middle Eastern nationalist discourses in shaping gendered identities. This article further critiques Abu-Lughod's limitations in viewing veiling as a matter of choice *or* oppression, instead theorising agency as relational and performative, embedded within power structures and identity formation. The article ultimately calls for a more nuanced understanding of Muslim women's agency beyond binary framings.

Keywords: Orientalism, Islamic veiling, Middle Eastern gender and power, construction of nationalism, production of identity

Introduction

The United States' intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 focused largely on the figure of the Muslim woman to justify intervention in the region, presenting her as the pinnacle of patriarchal oppression (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Connah, 2020). This archetype of Muslim women is fixated on the practice of **veiling**, especially the burqa, coming to represent the ultimate oppression suffered. Lila Abu-Lughod's 2002 article *'Do Muslim Women Need Saving?',* published in the aftermath of September 11 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, critiques the salvation narratives perpetrated by the West, which position Muslim women as passive victims in need of rescue. Through her article, she aims to call out Western **Orient**alist narratives and redefine the politics of the veil to go beyond 'the rhetoric of salvation' (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 788).

While Abu-Lughod's critique is essential in exploring how Orientalist narratives reinforce global hierarchies and produce Western identities, this article argues that her analysis also overlooks the role of Middle Eastern (ME) states in employing the image of Muslim women for nationalist projects and the complex relationship between agency, identity and power in the practice of veiling. Working from a **post-structuralist framework**, this paper combines Said's theory of Orientalism with theories of gender and identity formation, aiming to contribute a more layered account of gender and cultural identities in global dynamics. To do so, this article explores how Muslim women's identities are constructed at the intersection of global power structures, national building projects and performative social norms.

Two key questions frame this paper: 1) To what extent is the identity of Muslim women created by Western Orientalist narratives? (2) How do religious rituals interact with notions of gender and agency? The critique will first briefly outline the theoretical framework relevant to the subsequent analysis. Next it will examine Abu-Lughod's exploration of the saviour complex of the West, furthering the discussion through an analysis of **Said's Orientalism** and hierarchical binaries. It will then explore the limitations of her article,

discussing how it overlooks the role of nationalist projects and the formations of identity in social norms.

Theoretical framework

Briefly, this article will employ Said's theory of Orientalism, defined as a discourse of knowledge based on an 'ontological and epistemological distinction … between "the Orient" … and "the **Occident**"' (Said, 2014). This production of the 'Orient' has created a contrasting cultural and political 'other' based on the role played by the East in the Western's imaginary and has been used to justify military and political intervention in much of the ME region (Said, 2014). Said's analysis is situated within a broader post-structuralist tradition, which aims to contextualise knowledge within power (Lewis, Descombes and Harari, 1982), particularly his understanding of meaning as being actively produced through 'binary oppositions', where terms gain meaning through processes of differentiation and hierarchisation (Derrida, 1997).

In parallel, Butler (1999) theorised that identity is not a pre-existing authentic notion of being but rather is produced through the performance of rituals and social norms. Through this lens, knowledge is inherently tied to power and, thus, never objective (Foucault, 2019), playing a central role in producing identities through a multiplicity of power relations (Foucault, 1980).

Said and Butler are united in their understanding of identities as social constructions that are discursively produced and inherently tied to power. While Said focuses on broader geopolitical and colonial relations, Butler provides insight on individual subjectivity and gender. Nonetheless, together these authors grant this article an in-depth perspective of how Muslim women's identities are shaped both by macro structures of national discourse and micro-level rituals of gender and cultural production.

Saviour complex, identity and Orientalism

To begin, Abu-Lughod's (2002) key critique of the saviour discourse used by the West about Muslim women is valuable to discuss the way Orientalist discourses serve to produce Western identity in opposition with an 'other'. She discusses how, after September 11, the United States and the broader Western world defined Muslim women as subjected to violence under the patriarchy of Islam, and in need of saving, using this to justify military intervention in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This narrative implies two important processes: the framing of the ME as a place *to be saved from,* and women as the ones that need saving, each reinforcing the gendered and colonial dimensions of Orientalist discourse.

The framing of the ME as a place to be saved *from* is central in Said's (2014) Orientalist discourse, in which the ME comes to be imagined as a layered representation of everything the West is not. Drawing on Derrida's (1997) 'hierarchized opposition', in which the superior term relies on the inferior for its definition, the West discursively produces the ME as its 'backward', 'irrational' and 'barbaric' shadow, contrasted with the 'progress', 'rationality' and 'advancement' of the Western-Aryan world (Said, 2014). This dynamic is captured by Abu-Lughod (2002) when she outlines that the connotations of saving someone imply 'saving her *from* something' and '*to* something' (Abu-Lughod: 788), thus representing the journey *from* the backwardness of the East *to* the progress of the West. By defining the ME as a dangerous place that must be civilised and where people must be saved *from,* the Christian Western world reinforces the superiority of its religion, standards and morals, and thus produces its identity as everything the ME is not.

Additionally, Abu-Lughod discusses the relevance of the discourse of saving, not just Muslim people, but specifically, Muslim *women,* in which 'the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women' (US Government, 2002, cited in Abu-Lughod, 2002). Derrida's ideas on hegemonic binaries serve to highlight the way the victimisation of women inherently produces the masculinity of men. By defining women as subservient to violence and inherent victims of violence, masculinity comes to represent both the perpetrator of violence as well as the protector *from* violence

(Tickner, 2001). In this way the colonial hierarchy is not only racialised but also gendered (Hasan, 2005), dividing the world into clearly legible spheres of violence and peace, evil and goodness, victimisation and strength. Thus, the West creates the ultimate hierarchy, where patriarchy and colonialism intersect to demand 'white men' save 'brown women from brown men' (Spivak, 1994). This dynamic, clearly outlined by Abu-Lughod, calls out the Orientalist discourses employed by the West to produce a sense of self at the top of a global hierarchy, where Muslim women become a target for the white man's burden to act upon (Hasan, 2005; Manchanda, 2020).

However, despite her explicit analysis of the way Orientalist discourses impose Western standards on cultural difference, Abu-Lughod seems to fall prey to universalist claims herself. She discusses the work towards making Afghanistan a place where 'human rights are respected' (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 787) and calls for ongoing efforts to make the world 'a more just place' (Abu-Lughod: 789). Ideals of justice and human rights cannot be understood as global apolitical standards, but rather as notions formed *within* societies, specifically ascribed to Western political theories and Western knowledge (Foucault, 2021). In this way, we see inconsistencies in Abu-Lughod's argument, revealing the difficulty of making a feminist argument without falling into the pitfalls of ethnocentric ideals that may not apply to women everywhere (Hasan, 2005).

Overall, Abu-Lughod accurately describes the way discourses of saving Muslim women represent an Orientalist, racialised and gendered discourse used to shape global power relations. Drawing from Said and Derrida's hierarchical binaries, the figure of the Muslim woman is revealed as central in the West's image of itself, serving to justify intervention under the guise of salvation. Nonetheless, as exemplified through Abu-Lughod's article, there seems to be an intrinsic difficulty in making a feminist critique without appealing to universalist and abstract notions.

Nation-building and the role of culture

While Abu-Lughod's 2002 article offers a vital deconstruction of the saviour narratives used by Western states, she dismisses the interplay between culture and national projects, insufficiently engaging with how ME states themselves instrumentalise women's identity. Abu-Lughod criticises the 'cultural framing' in Western media surrounding September 11, outlining that it 'prevented the serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in this part of the world' (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 784). In doing so, she differentiates between cultural and religious narratives, which are not 'serious' (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 784), and political and historical ones, which are, creating a strict dichotomy that reduces culture to a meaningless background. However, as discussed by Hall, culture represents a key framework of intelligibility, making up 'conceptual maps' of meanings and systems of representation, imbuing knowledge into specific societal systems of classification (Hall, as cited in Patierno, 1997), and thus is inseparable from politics and history. As such, in post-colonial nationalist movements across much of the ME, culture has been central to political understandings of the nation and has been used as a marker of essential difference to keep Western powers excluded from national life (Pratt, 2020). Thus, culture is deeply tied to feelings of national sovereignty, reiterated as a site of autonomy, and thus, the more threatened the Arab world feels, the more it relies on conservative cultural trends to protect its independence (Kandiyoti, 1991). However, by treating cultural narratives as distractions from 'serious' politics, Abu-Lughod overlooks how culture is central in political discourses in the ME, intrinsically tied with politics and notions of national sovereignty (Pratt, 2020).

Abu-Lughod's oversight is notable because ME states have long relied on symbolic representations of women to construct narratives of cultural authenticity and thus, sovereignty (Kandiyoti, 1991). Consequently, the political reality of Muslim women cannot be understood as separate from culture. In her critique, Abu-Lughod condemns Western narratives that tend 'to plaster neat cultural icons like the Muslim woman over messy historical and political dynamics' (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 783). While this critique is highly relevant in Western discourses, her article risks ignoring similar 'cultural

icons' that arise elsewhere, revealing how the definition of Muslim women remains a contested field.

In the case of ME states, women have become bearers of cultural and religious authenticity, with Muslim women serving as a 'communal identity marker' against Westerners (Kandiyoti, 1991: 437), which is well exemplified through the case of Iran. In the 1960s and 1970s, the female body in Iran became crucial in symbolising the nation's modern and Western identity (Rahbari, Longman and Coene, 2019). Women were ordered to appear in public unveiled, with Western styles of dressing, such as miniskirts or jeans, associated with modernity and progress (Rahbari, Longman and Coene, 2019; Khadem Makhsuos Hosseini, 2021). After the Iranian revolution in 1979, which largely antagonised Western intervention, the new Iranian identity became heavily centred on religious authenticity, making Islamic dress code and veiling compulsory and emphasising Iranian women's modesty and piety as a source of national pride (Rahbari, Longman and Coene, 2019). As such, the Iranian state has actively regulated the female body to promote an anti-Western national identity (Rahbari, Longman and Coene, 2019) built on a demonised 'other' represented by the Western woman (Kandiyoti, 1991).

Abu-Lughod acknowledges this disparaging portrayal, outlining that no Muslim woman she knows 'has ever expressed envy of US women' who they see as 'bereft of community, vulnerable to sexual violence' and immoral (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 788). This sentiment is echoed by Mahmood, who describes Muslim women's attitude towards Western influence as a corrupt and 'obscene' force (Mahmood, 2011: 44). This demonstrates the internalisation of the East/West binary within Muslim women themselves, reinforcing how the rejection of Western culture cannot be read as simple autonomous preference, but is itself produced within nationalist and religious discourses.

While Abu-Lughod aims to exemplify Muslim women's rejection of Western standards, this dichotomy reveals how ME states construct national identity by centring women as bearers of cultural authenticity, in opposition to Western women, to serve broader nationalistic projects. As such, ME states

legitimise conservative gender norms as markers of national identity, burdening Muslim women with the identity of the nation (Kandiyoti, 1991) and reinforcing cultural binaries that tie femininity to political sovereignty.

Conclusively, cultural difference as a marker of political sovereignty is contested through the site of the female body (Pratt, 2020), sacrificing Muslim women's position and rights in the nation to national projects (Kandiyoti, 1991). By overlooking the role of ME states in instrumentalising and defining Muslim women, Abu-Lughod fails to acknowledge how Muslim women are subjects of both Western narratives *and* identity narratives by their own states, existing in a double bind that places their identity at the centre of international power structures and 'at the service of apolitical discourse conducted by men and for men' (Schick, cited in Kandiyoti, 1991: 432).

Veiling, agency and performing identity

Additionally, while Abu-Lughod is right in arguing that Muslim women's relationship with veiling practices is more multifaceted than the West claims, she is reductive in her approach, simplifying veiling practices to a matter of choice versus oppression and overlooking deeper power dynamics of identity formation and resistance. While Abu-Lughod aims to redefine the politics of the veil by analysing its several meanings, she fails to account for how practices are deeply embedded in power relations that shape what agency means and are central to performing, and thus producing identity.

In criticising the Western narratives of the veil, Abu-Lughod dismisses this as a powerless social norm, overlooking the way power gets produced and reproduced throughout society. She downplays the importance of the veil, calling for focus 'on some more serious issues' (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 786) and outlines that, often, veiling in public for Muslim women is simply a 'socially shared standard', similar to dressing appropriately at the opera, where it would 'not be appropriate to wear shorts' (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 785). By comparing it to something that appears as trivial as the appropriate attire for the opera, she seems to downplay the political and symbolic power of veiling. However, far

from exemplifying a trivial norm, the comparison with the opera reveals the centrality of power, as classical music and the opera have historically been associated with the high arts, operating as mechanisms for social distinction, and drawing on notions of class elitism and racial exclusion (Daly, 2015). As such, a dress code that renders shorts inappropriate is a process of historical and political power-laden processes that have served to reproduce hierarchies through social norms. Similarly, characterising veiling as a social norm without implicit exclusionary and power-laden practices ignores the relevance of social norms in producing societal hierarchies.

Elsewhere, Abu-Lughod's article can be seen as further dismissing the productive power of social rituals for identity, failing to question *how* social structures affect notions of agency, and instead confining veiling to strict definitions of agency and oppression that do not reflect the complex reality of choice. She states that 'veiling itself must not be … made to stand for lack of agency' discussing how 'pulling the black head cloth over the face in front of older respected men is considered a voluntary act' and how veiling is often freely adopted as a way 'to cultivate virtue' (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 786). However, the ambition of modesty and virtue for Muslim women goes unquestioned, attributed to an authentic realisation of the self. Foucault (1980; 1990) discusses the way individuals are products of power relations and how ethical self-formation is dictated by moral systems attributed to specific agencies and structures. As such, the desire for modesty of Muslim women is shaped by specific operations of power and organised by discursive traditions (Mahmood, 2011). To focus only on the voluntariness of veiling is to miss how deeply norms of morality are internalised, how power shapes desires and, therefore, how the very possibility of choice is conditioned by power (Mahmood, 2011). This is not to argue for a false consciousness of Muslim women, deceived under hegemonic power norms, but rather to note the inescapability of power in all social structures, and thus understand the individual and her actions as produced and intrinsically bound to power (Foucault, 1980).

Following, Butler's theory of the performativity of identity can be used to further explore how downplaying the practice of veiling for Muslim women

dismisses the way identities are produced through the ritualised performance of norms (Butler, 1999). Abu-Lughod dismisses this aspect of veiling when she describes how 'most women gave little thought' to the practice, given that it had become 'conventional' (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 785). However, the ritualised performance of gender cannot be dismissed as unproductive simply because it is carried out unconsciously, since identity is typically constituted through 'mundane' and 'ritualised' acts that reenact socially recognised conventions (Butler, 1999). In this way, the action of veiling does not constitute a meaningless social convention, but rather, is central in the way some Muslim women become legible subjects in their environment. In her study of the mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood (2011) recalls a conversation with a woman who outlined how when she started veiling, she felt 'embarrassed' and 'unattractive' but then in time her 'inside learns to feel shy without the veil, and if [she]… take[s] it off, …[her] entire being feels uncomfortable' (Mahmood, 2011: 157). This perfectly captures the way veiling is central to producing the identity of some Muslim women, where the action produces the bodily form and, in this case, veiling produces a pious and modest Muslim woman through the iteration of wearing the veil (Mahmood, 2011). Thus, veiling does not simply signify or 'symbolise' modest or virtuous identity (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 785), but such identity is acquired and performed through the practice of veiling and thus is inseparable from its rituals (Mahmood, 2011).

Overall, in reducing veiling to a practice of either choice or oppression, Abu-Lughod overlooks how these practices are active processes in the production of identity and are embedded within complex networks of power. While she is right in criticising Western narratives about the veil, a more profound understanding of agency requires a focus on how identities are produced *within* the power of social norms and discourses, and how choices themselves produce the agent who enacts them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Abu-Lughod's 2002 article is part of a broader critique of the way the West defines the ME, and especially its discourses about Muslim women. However, she overlooks the complexity of Muslim women's position in global politics as well as their relationship to veiling and other ritual practices. Abu-Lughod's article highlights the way the stereotype of the Muslim woman has been central to producing Western identity and moral superiority discourses centred on narratives of salvation. Drawing on authors such as Said and Derrida, this article has explored the way the West's Orientalist discourse about Muslim women reproduces a hierarchical binary relationship which places 'brown women' at the mercy of 'white men' (Spivak, 1994). Nonetheless, Abu-Lughod's own framing falls prey to universalist and essentialist language, suggesting a tension in her critique and reflecting the difficulty of engaging in feminist critique without invoking liberal and Western-centric frameworks. Further, Abu-Lughod's dismissal of the political importance of culture limits her engagement with the way ME states use cultural narratives to construct national identity, especially through feminine figures. As outlined in the case of Iran, different models of Muslim womanhood are central to nation-building, yet Abu-Lughod seems to underestimate the extent to which local power structures mobilise these ideals, placing Muslim women as central in both national and global power relations. Finally, her discussion of veiling practices reduces the complexities of agency and overlooks how identity is produced through ritual and seemingly mundane practices, as explored by Butler's work. This has revealed how veiling, and by extension other religious rituals, are not only symbolic but rather performative and active in producing Muslim subjects within traditions.

Overall, while Abu-Lughod's critique is of immense relevance in debates on Muslim women's agency and Western narratives, a more comprehensive analysis reveals a breadth of complex dynamics and agents involved in shaping the realities of Muslim women, further complicating their position in global power structures.

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Glossary of terms

Occident: A term referring to the Western world, broadly understood as Europe and North America. In Said's theory, the Occident discursively produced region that arises in opposition to the Orient, often coming to represent progress, modernity and rational (Said, 2014).

Orient: An imagined geographic area that broadly involves the north of Africa, the Persian Gulf and the west of Asia. In Said's analysis, it is a discursive construction produced by the West to produce a cultural 'other'. Thus, the Orient comes to represent backwardness and irrationality in contrast to the Occident (Said, 2014)

‘Other’: Drawing on poststructuralist theories of meaning construction, notably Derrida’s hierarchical binaries, the ‘other’ refers to the imagined inferior term in a binary pair, against which the dominant term comes to be produced. In this article, Muslim women, and the Middle East more broadly, are constructed as the ‘other’ against which the Western identity is produced (Derrida, 1997; Kandiyoti, 1991).

Post-structuralist framework: A theoretical tradition that critiques fixed meanings and universal truths, instead understanding knowledge as always embedded within relations of power. Its main thinkers are Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze, amongst others (Peoples and Vaughan Williams, 2020)

Said’s Orientalism: Edward Said defines theorised Orientalism as the western discourse of knowledge that distinguishes the ‘orient’ from the ‘occident’, highlighting the power relations involved in the west’s study of the middle east. Said depicts how these specific stereotypes of the middle east, pervasive in western discourses, produce a cultural ‘other’ that legitimises imperial power and constitute de west’s self-perception (Said, 2014).

Veiling: A practice of covering the body or face commonly associated with Islamic dress code for women, although it is a tradition that has existed throughout history and around the world (Amer, 2014).

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