



ZIADDEH LECTURE 2012



Near Eastern Languages and Civilization

*The Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture  
in Arab and Islamic Studies*

*Authorizing Moral Crusades  
to Save Muslim Women*

*Professor Lila Abu-Lughod*

*Columbia University*

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

It is my distinct privilege to provide you with a copy of the tenth Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture in Arab and Islamic Studies, "*Authorizing Moral Crusades to Save Muslim Women*," delivered by Lila Abu-Lughod on April 30, 2012.

The Ziadeh Fund was formally endowed in 2001. Since that time, with your support, it has allowed us to strengthen our educational reach and showcase the most outstanding scholarship in Arab and Islamic Studies, and to do so always in honor of our dear colleague Farhat Ziadeh, whose contributions to the fields of Islamic law, Arabic language, and Islamic Studies are truly unparalleled.

Farhat J. Ziadeh was born in Ramallah, Palestine, in 1917. He received his B.A. from the American University of Beirut in 1937 and his LL.B. from the University of London in 1940. He then attended Lincoln's Inn, London, where he became a Barrister-at-Law in 1946. In the final years of the British Mandate, he served as a Magistrate for the Government of Palestine before eventually moving with his family to the United States. He was appointed Professor of Arabic and Islamic Law at Princeton University, where he taught until 1966, at which time he moved to the University of Washington.

The annual lectureship in his name is a fitting tribute to his international reputation and his national service to the discipline of Arabic and Islamic Studies. The event and publication would not be possible without the generous support of many contributors including students, colleagues, friends, and above all Farhat and Suad themselves, and their family members. On behalf of our Department, I extend my deepest thanks to them and to all of you who have supported the Ziadeh Fund. You truly have made a difference!

Sincerely yours,



Scott B. Noegel  
Chair, Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilization  
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*The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization  
at the University of Washington*

**The Tenth Farhat J. Ziadeh  
Distinguished Lecture in  
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***Authorizing Moral Crusades  
to Save Muslim Women***

Professor Lila Abu-Lughod

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# *Authorizing Moral Crusades to Save Muslim Women*

LILA ABU-LUGHOD

We seem to be living in remarkable times. A decade after women's rights served as a respectable reason to support military intervention in Afghanistan, not only is the language of human rights on almost every tongue, but the call for global women's rights has gone mainstream. The abuses women suffer are no longer considered private matters or dismissed as insignificant in the international public sphere. Signs of this seismic shift are everywhere, nowhere more apparent than in well-received books by writers in the U.S. who publish for a broad educated public. Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn's *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, for example, is billed as "a call to arms against the most shocking and widespread human-rights violation of our age—gender inequality."<sup>1</sup>

What developments—in global institutions, culture industries, and politics—have enabled the Western public to find so convincing and plausible the sanctimonious championing of distant women by *New York Times* journalists or the fiery denunciations of Islamic patriarchy by the Somali émigré Ayaan Hirsi Ali, or even a liberal Princeton philosopher's call to civilize Pakistani men who are waging a war on women through honor crimes?<sup>2</sup>

These questions could not have been asked if Edward Said had not taught us how. He exposed brilliantly the connections between power and knowledge in *Orientalism* and I want to share with you today some of what his work enables us to see in this new moment of the apparent triumph of global feminism.<sup>3</sup> I want to ask us to consider how the architects of this new common sense about going to war for women gain such authority. And to ask why so many come to agree with their arguments—which manufacture consent for international military and humanitarian engagements across the Muslim world—when there are flaws in their reasoning, silences in their stories, and partiality in their representations of women's problems. I would argue that a myth—of a place called Islamdom inhabited by a creature called the Muslimwoman<sup>4</sup>—lies at the core of this championing of women.



In my book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (which unlike *Half the Sky* will never be made into a TV movie because it flies in the face of this new common sense), I argue that such public intellectuals make their premises unassailable by drawing on a language of human and women's rights that now has tremendous currency.<sup>5</sup> This language insists that people around the world must learn how to be just and to measure up in a universal metric of humanity that is defined, in part, by aspirations for gender equality and women's freedom.<sup>6</sup> But if the authority for this moral crusade to rescue women in other parts of the world depends on associating itself with the lofty language of universal rights that is embedded in a range of international institutions, its emotional persuasiveness derives from the bedrock on which such advocates build: a massively popular genre of writing about the wrongs other women suffer—particularly Muslim women. The genre is graphic, even porno-graphic.

The discourse of international human rights that grounds this “common sense” depends, in other words, on another more sordid discourse. Coming from the world of mass-market commercial publishing, and surely disdained by respectable writers like these, it nevertheless underwrites their crusade. One can identify this genre of books by their covers. We have seen them in airport bookstores. Vron Ware noted in 2004 at Heathrow Airport these books were gathered together in a section on “Eastern Studies.”<sup>7</sup> An image of a veiled woman is paired with titles like: *Sold: One Woman's True Account of Modern Slavery*; *Without Mercy*; *Burned Alive*; *Married by Force*; *Daughters of Shame*; *A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*; and even long ones reminiscent of 19th century melodrama: *Disgraced: Forced to Marry a Stranger*, *Betrayed by My Own Family*, *Sold My Body to Survive*, *This is My Story*. They are personal stories “as told to.”

The two languages, one abstract and disinterested, the other affective, bleed into each other. Key to the vocabularies of both are consent, choice, and freedom. The central drama is constructed as the difference between those who choose and those who do not, between those who are free and those who live in bondage.

Although in my book I consider both of these languages, in this lecture I look only at the second, the genre whose circulation we might think of as a form of literary trafficking. I will analyze the political contexts in which these books are produced and reflect on how they might



be affecting those who consume them. I will also read against the grain of their dark titillations and strange alchemy—in which the exceptional becomes general—to let you glimpse even in such formulaic stories another way of thinking about the victim/heroines who are the objects of such intense concern. In so doing, I offer an alternative image of Muslim women’s lives.

### Feminism and Pulp Nonfiction

We live in an era in which the idea of universal human rights has been broadly accepted. The very success of the institutionalization of the concept in myriad organizations and its virtual monopoly on the high ground of global morality led feminists beginning in the 1980s to try to link the struggle for women’s rights and well-being to human rights.<sup>8</sup> Activists working in the international arena waged a successful campaign to declare women’s rights as human rights. They did so through drafting conventions, installing themselves in vast bureaucratic institutions, and putting in place mechanisms of accountability. If the evils of gender discrimination now seem so obvious and the language of women’s rights has such authority, we have to thank these conventions and campaigns.

But if the new common sense about the urgency of battling for women’s rights gains authority through its association with this international consensus on the utopian high moral ground of “universal” rights with its central value of “choosing freely,” I would argue that it draws surreptitiously on a different discourse for its emotional appeal. A lurid genre of writing on abused women and girls—mostly Muslim—exploded onto the scene in the 1990s and took off after 9/11. These books are read in book clubs, reviewed widely, and sold enthusiastically. The recurrent and defining themes of this genre are force and bondage. At one end are gentle memoirs like Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and polemics like Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *The Caged Virgin* and its sequels. At the other end are books the literary scholar Dohra Ahmad has called “pulp nonfiction.”<sup>9</sup> Here, we are plunged into dystopic worlds of violent abuse, our guides the Muslim girls who have suffered and escaped.

As we all know, there is a long tradition of representing Muslim women in the West. Scholars call it gendered Orientalism, following the lead of Edward Said.<sup>10</sup> Pictorial as well as literary, what is constant is that Muslim women are portrayed as culturally distinct, the mir-



ror opposites of Western women. In the nineteenth century, the depictions took two forms: women of the Orient were either portrayed as downtrodden victims who were imprisoned, secluded, shrouded, and treated as beasts of burden or they appeared in a sensual world of excessive sexuality. Christian missionary women appealed for support by decrying the oppression of their Muslim sisters in the first register. Artists and writers, and even the colonial postcard photographers of the early twentieth century, preferred the sensual and sexual.

The late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century mass-market paperbacks echo these themes but have their own distinct style and character. Their protagonists are, as Dohra Ahmad notes, “plucky individualists” with feminist ideals who do not want to remain trapped in their strange and sordid worlds. They want freedom, like the “native informant” celebrities whose denunciations of Islam as causing the oppression of women have been so warmly welcomed and whose careers have been bolstered by powerful institutions of the Right, celebrities whose personal stories are, as Saba Mahmood has noted, always told in terms of emancipation.<sup>11</sup>

Should we treat these “memoirs” as nonfiction? That is how they are billed. Some are unreliable because they are based on repressed memories. Many of the protagonists are known only by first names. Some books are based on “secret knowledge.” Some, such as Norma Khouri’s *Honor Lost*, have been exposed as hoaxes.<sup>12</sup> Almost all the books are co-written with journalists or professional ghostwriters. They are, therefore, at the least, mediated in complex ways. To the extent that they may reflect real experiences or incidents, they are as disturbing as any incidents of abuse that we read about in our newspapers, legal cases, or psychology case studies of pathological behavior.

But the books work hard not to let us make these comparisons. Although they are told in the first person of individual women, the traumas and abuses they catalog do not present themselves to readers as unique to these individuals. They are always contextualized by culture—the authenticating details of eking out a living on a bare mountaintop in Yemen; the exotic color of Moroccan weddings and exorcisms; the cloistered opulence of Saudi Arabian palaces; the damp cellars of Pakistani immigrant communities in the north of England; the fields of rural Palestine. The placement in these locations marks the abuses as cultural or collective. Without offering a general picture of





the communities in which our heroines live, since these are “just” personal stories, these memoirs cannot give readers any indication that such abuses might be exceptional, or might be considered as horrifying in those communities as they would be in ours. Without this contextual information, we are led to attribute these abuses to the whole culture in the selective process that Leti Volpp, the legal theorist, has called “blaming culture for bad behavior.”<sup>13</sup>

Contrary to the message of uniformity that their copycat covers convey and this cultural framing implies, to someone like me who is familiar with the kinds of communities or the countries in which they are set, the stories seem radically specific. When one reads against the grain, there are even plenty of hints that they are unsettling and exceptional, even if based on truth. Take the trilogy of memoirs beginning with *Sold* that tell the terrible tale of two girls “sold” into marriage in Yemen. These are daughters of a British working-class mother and a violent, gambling Yemeni immigrant father. Although the villain is the heartless Arab man (this was pre-9/11, so Muslims had not yet become the obligatory enemy, and this was the moment of the Gulf War), the memoirs mention that the families who “bought” the underage brides were from a despised group. It is remarked in passing that this is a poor country where three-quarters of the men leave home to look for work. Surely this must produce an unusual situation for women, not to mention the minority of men left behind.

So these stories each use a peculiar situation without marking its radical specificity or lack of representativeness and without giving context. The result is that these best sellers that trade on images of bondage—Zana’s *Sold*; its sequel, *A Promise to Nadia*; and their mother’s *Without Mercy: A Mother’s Struggle against Modern Slavery*—lead readers to surmise that forced marriage is normal in these communities and that women must be rescued from them by outsiders.<sup>14</sup>

The genre is characterized by consistent themes: coercion and lack of consent, absence of choice, and unfreedom. To give the flavor of these works and to suggest how the peculiar play with force may affect readers, I begin with a typical scene. It is from a sequel to *Sold* by Miriam, the mother of the two girls and meant to explain why she had to escape from the brutal Arab Yemeni father of her seven children. She has just chosen to be sterilized. Her husband comes home drunk, and she confronts him again about her two missing daughters. He tells her



to forget them and locks her in the room. Miriam recounts:

He was close now, leaning towards me, his beery breath engulfing me. I sat, terrified, on the sofa. He came closer and held out his hand. I slapped at it furiously, hoping he would go away. Instead he pulled me up, his good thumb and middle finger around my throat. I fought him off, pushing him to the floor. He grabbed at my dressing-gown in a vain effort to save his fall, pulling the material apart, tearing it down its length. . . . “Take your clothes off! All of them!” Muthana growled deeply.

... His eyes travelled over my body, settling on the scar from the operation to sterilize me. He reached out and touched the scarred flesh. ...I went to slap at his hand again when, suddenly, he grabbed my hand by the wrist and pulled me sharply to the floor, rolling me over onto my back and jumping on top of me immediately in a quick movement. I scrunched my eyes shut and clanged my fists at my side. I lay rigid on the floor as he indulged himself, crying out in his pleasure as I cried out in my shame.<sup>15</sup>

Marital rape epitomizes absence of consent, just as does forced marriage, the practice that has captured the imagination and mobilized the efforts of women’s groups and government officials across Europe. One of its fullest treatments in “pulp nonfiction” comes from France.

*Married by Force* by Leila (no last name) is even more graphic in its violence than Miriam’s account. The story of a troubled French girl of Moroccan parentage, the book recounts incidents of violence and terrible cruelty in the family in which Leila grows up. Her father is a disciplinarian; her brothers are abusive. She wants to be like French girls, but they won’t let her. Her parents force her to marry a man from Morocco, a husband she hates. She has a frightening encounter with a sex maniac imam hired to exorcise her because she objects. Like Zana, *Sold’s* heroine, Leila finally escapes her forced marriage and finds freedom. It is then that she tells us her story.

The reader is treated to some horrific scenes between husband and wife along the way. Trying desperately to provoke him to divorce her, Leila goads and insults her husband mercilessly. This leads to a climactic scene: Leila recounts, “One evening, at midnight, I was quietly taking a bath to relax and I’d forgotten to lock the bathroom door. He



began to start a fight, me in the bath, him on the other side of the door, being spiteful.” They exchange insults until she reveals to him a secret about his own mother. He calls Morocco to confirm and then is “furious, his eyes popping out of his head. ‘Bloody bitch, bloody tart, open this door!’”

He charges into the bathroom and shoves her head underwater. She scratches his face. He throws her onto the floor and punches and kicks her, yelling, “Is this what you want? Here, take that and that.” She describes her feelings, lying naked on the floor and being beaten, with a weirdly out-of-place metaphor meant to position this bad marriage squarely in the specific context of Islamic barbarity: “It was the total shame, humiliation and horror of a woman being stoned to death.”<sup>16</sup>

#### A Pornography of Muslim Bondage

In another, more fanciful book, lightened by a likable heroine who has a weakness for whiskey and extravagant shopping at Bergdorf Goodman, the theme of force is also lashed onto Middle Eastern men. *Desert Royal* is the fourth in a series of popular books that are presented as the first person accounts (as told to Jean Sasson) of “Sultana,” a wealthy feminist Saudi Arabian princess who wishes to expose to the world what is really going on in her society. It includes incidents that capture the essential unfreedom of women there. A sexual charge runs through it.

The most sensational scene is a visit Sultana and her two teenage daughters pay to a distant cousin. They have heard rumors that he has built a spectacular palace to replicate Paradise, and they want to see it. Their visit is disastrous. Besides finding thousands of caged birds that one daughter wants to set free and takes away with her (very subtle symbolism), they come across a pavilion that is signposted “Stallions.” Looking for horses, the other daughter discovers a “harem” of sex slaves from Asia. The young women are guarded by an exotic and gnomish Sudanese eunuch. As Sultana explains in her apparently evenhanded condemnation of patriarchy, “I knew that it was not a simple matter to come between men and their sexual desires. It is the natural inclination of many men, and not only in the Middle East, to seek out young girls or young women as sexual conquests.”<sup>17</sup> Yet she surmises that their wealthy owner wants these girls for a special cultural reason. In his eyes, she suggests, “these young women were like the seductive virgins called ‘houris’ that are described in the Koran. I suspected that I



was looking at a stage intended to provide untold delights for Faddel. Yet this must be the scene of unspeakable hell for these women held against their will.”<sup>18</sup>

The public appetite for such depictions of sordid and brutal treatment of women by Muslim or Arab men is disquieting. Unlike the many good ethnographies that describe women’s everyday lives in these countries, these “memoirs” of suffering by oppressed Muslim women enjoy spectacular and enduring popularity, selling millions and going into many editions. More disquieting is the constant reference to sex. The focus on sexual abuse has made some of the memoir writers award-winning activists. The most amazing case is that of Hannah Shah, author of *The Imam’s Daughter*. She went public in 2009 with her gruesome story of sexual abuse by her father, an imam in North England of rural Pakistani origin. She says she speaks to gatherings of 5,000.<sup>19</sup>

What makes these books so appealing and their authors so celebrated when the writing is often appalling and the stories so extreme? To understand this, I think we have to place them in the contexts in which they are being read. These books are caught up in a charged international political field in which Arabs, Muslims, and particular others are seen as dangers to the West. The feminists who write blurbs on the covers of these far-fetched books are often associated with right wing and Zionist groups. The “personal letter” from Sultana that prefaces *Desert Royal* openly engages international politics by framing the book as an invitation to the West: “I hope you are not weary of hearing our tragic tales, for we are gaining small freedoms here and there, and we continue to need your attention and your support...Without media attention and political intervention from other lands, most of our men would be most joyous to return to a time of utter darkness for the females living in Saudi Arabia.”<sup>20</sup>

That books about bad Arabs who force and enslave girls have a special place in the politics of European immigration is revealed by the enthusiastic reception of such books in France. Three of the classics of this genre were first published or publicized there: *Burned Alive*, the memoir by “Souad” and Jacqueline Thibault of a Palestinian honor killing survivor; *Sold*, the book by Zana Muhsen and Andrew Crofts about the girls in Yemen that became a best seller after her appearance on a prime-time French talk show; and *Married by Force*, by “Leila” and



Marie-Thérèse Cuny. French anxieties about North African immigrants are particularly intense, as these Arab Muslims form a postcolonial underclass in the restless suburbs (*banlieues*).<sup>21</sup> In her study of the politics of humanitarianism in France, Miriam Ticktin draws a real-world parallel and says it's not surprising for a country whose then president, Nicolas Sarkozy, had dramatically offered France's protection "to each martyred woman in the world."<sup>22</sup>

In Britain in the past decade—with troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan, eruptions of public hysteria about Shari'a arbitration courts and burqas, fears of homegrown fanaticism instigated by the 7/11 bombings, and feminist agitation leading to national legislation against honor crimes and forced marriage—it is Pakistanis, not Arabs, who have emerged as the new authors of these memoirs. Some of the same ghostwriters who worked with Arabs now work with them.

The pornographic element of these memoirs was surprising to me. The dynamics are clearest in one published in Britain in 2009 that most directly challenges the authority of Islam at a time when the hysteria about family arbitration courts was at its height. The villain is a horrid imam and the heroine his daughter. Typical of its graphic scenes of the rape and abuse of this little girl by her father, an apparent pillar of the Muslim community who locks her in the cellar for his work, is the following: "Dad was like a terrifying predator. I never knew when he would strike. Once I was in the bathroom, when all of a sudden Dad just barged in. He locked the door. . . He took down his shalwar kamiz baggy pants, and plunked himself down on the loo. He forced me to watch as he started touching himself and breathing heavily. I tried to look away, in disgust, but he grabbed me by the hair and forced my face towards him—so close that I could smell that horrible, musty smell that always made me feel so sick. Then he grabbed my hand and forced it around his flesh."<sup>23</sup>

Here we can see most clearly how these memoirs are meant to inspire horror and pity, followed by admiration for the heroine survivors' escapes into freedom. Freedom means escaping not just the Muslim men who torment them but their own communities and cultures. The memoirists confess their rage, self-loathing, and suicide attempts; they often describe themselves as having been rebellious teenagers. This is the feminist difference of the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first, where brown women seem to want to be rescued by their



white sisters and friends, to adapt Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous formulation.<sup>24</sup> If these Muslim girls and women were not portrayed as wanting what we want—love, choice, and sexual freedom—preferring instead to be dutiful daughters living in the bosom of their families, virgins at marriage, devoted wives partnering with their husbands, or pious individuals seeking to live up to the moral ideals of their religion and its laws, it would be hard for Western readers to identify. It would be hard for publishers to find such eager audiences if they offered us women and girls who challenged our assumptions about what they should want and what is good for them. Western women would no longer be the role models, nor would they feel needed. Interestingly, this freedom is not necessarily presented as secular. I found Shah's *The Imam's Daughter* advertised on a website called ChristianBooks where it was described as "a true story of a courageous woman who broke free of cultural oppression and embraced a new life in Christ . . . She married who she wanted. An amazing account of God's saving grace."<sup>25</sup>

The only pious women who appear in this genre of "oppressed Muslim women" stories are the hapless victims, grievously betrayed by their silent God, who appear in the most extreme and controversial examples. The mobilization of the pornography of bondage for anti-immigrant European politics is best seen in a short film that actually breaks with the conventions of faux-cultural and individual specificity of this dystopic genre. The context is the Netherlands in 2004. The writer is Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The work in question is the eleven-minute film called *Submission* that catapulted her to notoriety and resulted in the murder of the film's director, Theo Van Gogh.

Hirsi Ali's signature intellectual style of asserting direct causal connections between decontextualized verses from the Qur'an and abuses of women she has met in shelters and her fantasies shapes the film. There are four characters: a woman repulsed by the husband chosen for her by her family, for whom marital sex feels like rape; a woman who must submit to beatings by a jealous but philandering husband because he supports her financially; a modest veiled woman who is subjected to humiliating incest by an uncle; and a woman who fell in love but was abandoned by her lover and then lashed for fornication.

The film implies that such abuses are sanctioned, if not directly caused, by Islam, ignoring centuries of interpretation—exegetical, judicial, and everyday—of the Qur'anic verses in question, and silent on the



abhorrence of rape or incest in the Islamic legal tradition, not to mention all Muslim societies. And its pornographic visuals Annelies Moors has captured perfectly by calling the film “hard core Orientalism.”<sup>26</sup>

If we want to appreciate the allure of this genre, I think we must confront this pornographic aspect. With Marcus Wood, the scholar who has analyzed what he calls plantation pornography, we might want to ask, what are the effects of a genre of pornography—with its objectification of subjects and its depiction of violence, sexual force, and bondage—when it is tied to a racial politics and a legacy of colonial or racial domination? Wood looks at the role of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British writings and pictures, often placed in the context of abolitionist literature, that depict the abuse of black bodies in the Atlantic slave trade, noting how it overflows into the present as “a huge business” that has infiltrated literature, fine art, popular publishing, film, video, and bondage and discipline, sado-masochism cultures on the web.<sup>27</sup>

Wood shows how central this pornographic genre is to the misrepresentation of slavery. His reading of John Gabriel Stedman’s 1790 classic text *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* reveals a troubling double effect: the way his attitude constantly shifts “between a shrill moral outrage and a series of attempts to emotionally bond with the slave victims by attempting to appropriate their pain in order to demonstrate his own sensitivity.”<sup>28</sup>

We find a similar moral outrage in the pulp nonfiction about the Muslim woman or girl, incited (and, perhaps, excited) by the violations and violence of sex. But given the women authors (all “lapsed” Muslims) and the intended audience (largely female and perhaps mostly non-Muslim), we can see a slightly different dynamic of identification and appropriation of pain put into play.

Western readers find these sensationalist books gripping enough to buy them in the millions and their identification with Muslim women victims may be a feminist one, which gives it a slightly different dynamic than the strangely mediated empathy of the slaver or ex-slaver with the abused slave woman victim that was found in late eighteenth-century works or circulated in the abolition literature. I think we can see that these books produce a horror that underwrites a confident sense of moral distinction and Western feminist virtue. A common enemy—patriarchy—supposedly affirms the sisterhood. But what is shared



is that it is the menacing and irremediably patriarchal Muslim man acting out his cultural script who stands as the clear evil against which such a sisterly community can bond. Such men, we know, are targeted as the enemies of our police forces and our armies. So then we must ask how such identifications erase readers' roles as perpetrators of violence (insofar as they belong to a community involved in violence against Muslims abroad and at home, which these books seem to justify), just as those British men who empathized with slave victims erased their racial and national culpability.

Does the genre help absolve these perpetrators, whose empathetic tears assure them of their morality even as fantasizing about abuse grips them? Does their imaginative suffering over others give them not just some kind of pleasure, but also the reassurance of utter distinction and separation from those who suffer?

### Structuring Desires

Popular literary representations define views and structure feelings about Muslim women and their rights. This new Orientalism is commercial and in our world of mass media, these iconic abused-but-defiant Muslim women are fêted in elite New York circles, featured in glossy magazines, and funded lavishly through personal charity. They warm the hearts of those who promote them, sell their stories, and "steal their pain" for profit and personal comfort.<sup>29</sup> These stories are surely key ingredients in the normalization of political and military hostility toward countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Yemen, and Iraq.

But my analysis of the surprisingly pornographic nature of these memoirs suggests that their most substantial and important effects are the ways they cathect readers, especially Western women, to a fragile emotional truth. Do these readers take comfort in being above such sordid bondage? Blinded to similar stories that occur in our midst, do these books generate fantasies of the possibility of autonomy and freedom from such violence? Voyeurs of cruelty, do women readers feel that they are empathetic and moral subjects simply called to action by their sisterly feeling and their repugnance for those who violate innocent others, some only thirteen years old? Like the sympathy toward those slave women whose lashings and rapes European humanitarians like Stedman deplored in titillating detail, the complex affects the genre inspires create a sense of virtue and lend passion to the mission of saving women globally, even by force.





Critiques of representations always incite questions about how else we might understand the world. It does not matter so much whether these memoirs are truth or fiction; the question for me is how they function in the world into which they are inserted. I do think, though, that it is important to offer alternatives. In my book, I present the lives and personal stories of ordinary women I have known in Egypt to offer some perspective. But one can even look to adjacent genres to get a sense of an alternative truth. It is uncanny, for example, how Ayaan Hirsi Ali's personal story is made to follow the script and feed this passion. The ideal heroine of this genre, she tells us she was beaten, oppressed, and forced into marriage. She then escaped to freedom. Granted asylum in the Netherlands, she discovered secular reason and renounced servitude to Islam. She seems to be the authentic embodiment of that abused victim caught between force and redemption by the West.

Yet I think we can use her autobiography, *Infidel*, to open things up. In it, we discover evidence of how complicated women's lives and social worlds can be. *Infidel* can't be corralled into the story line Hirsi Ali champions in her public lectures and extreme statements. First, we learn that she was never raped or forced into marriage. She actually secretly ran off with a cousin once. Her confrontation with "Islam" was ambivalent. As a young teen, she came under the sway of a fascinating Islamist teacher in her Kenyan school. She voluntarily threw aside her normal clothes to take on a voluminous black cloak and explains that it made her feel powerful. No one forced her to go to religious lectures. In this autobiographical account, she records in marvelous detail both the enormous differences between the Islamic ideals and practices of her Somali family and the Saudis they briefly lived among, and the specific tensions that arose in the 1980s and 1990s between more traditional forms of Islam and the new Salafi movement brought by the Muslim Brotherhood to Kenya, Somalia, and elsewhere.

Even more revealing of an alternative story about how Muslim women are regarded—with respect and acknowledgment of the value of consent—is an incident Hirsi Ali describes in Holland after she was granted asylum (on false grounds, we now know). As soon as her father learned of her whereabouts, the man he had earlier arranged for her to marry in Nairobi flew in from Canada to find out why she had not come to join him. She told him she would not go to Canada with him and be his wife. He returned a few days later, saying he had consulted with her



father and they agreed to set up a formal gathering of the most prominent clan elders living in Europe. The husband arrived the next day with ten dignified men, including the “Crown Prince” of the clan. Each spoke in turn, she reports, about honor, marriage, the civil war, and what values should be upheld. At the end, the prince said, “Now we will pause so you can think about it.” They offered to reconvene the next day to hear her answer, but she was ready to give it. Her refusal was followed by a set of questions about why. Finally, borrowing a key concept from the Qur’an, she said, “It is the will of the soul . . . The soul cannot be coerced.” The prince responded, “I respect this answer. I believe all of us should respect it.” And with that, her husband agreed to a divorce. “All the men stood up then” she reports, “and one after another each man cupped my hands in their two hands, and left. They were full of respect.”<sup>30</sup>

This is a surprising procedure and resolution for a community that Hirsi Ali would have us believe—in works like her film *Submission* and her book *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*—is under the sway of an incorrigible religion that abuses and denigrates women. Two visions are at war in *Infidel*. One is a closely observed and keenly felt rendering of the uncertain and contradictory experiences of a particular girl in a particular Somali family with its unique circumstances, tensions, tragedies, vulnerabilities, and precarious struggles to maintain life and dignity in trying times. The second is a compulsive repetition of a formula that overlays these poignant struggles. The formula generalizes about what Islam means and does to people. The formula pits the enlightened and free West against backward and enslaved Muslim societies. That story turns on simple oppositions between choice and bondage, force and consent.

### The Bonds of Love

It is important not to be seduced by the darkly appealing fictions of pulp nonfiction that underwrite the common sense that links itself publically to the language of human rights. The story of the younger sister, Nadia, who refused her mother’s attempts to spring her from her “enslavement” in Yemen in the trilogy that begins with *Sold*, for example, gives us some clues about an alternative way to think about the key values of choice and consent.

I want to introduce here one important observation: life is complicated for all of us. It is never easy to cleanly distinguish freedom and



duty, consent and bondage, choice and compulsion. The girls' mother, Miriam, cannot see that her daughter Nadia is deeply torn. She has five young children whom she would have to leave behind, the legitimate children of a Yemeni father. In what ways had this life on a barren mountaintop become Nadia's real life anyway? She was only thirteen when she left Birmingham and an unhappy childhood. She lives in poverty in Yemen, it is true. But one has to consider the possibility that the reason she keeps resisting her mother's entreaties is that she would rather raise her children and be a married woman and part of her husband's community than move to the "freedom" of an unknown life in England, haunted forever by the loss of her children. How many women choose to stay in bad marriages for their children because they love them? What does freedom or choice mean under such conditions? What about those of us at the other end of the life cycle who are caring for elderly parents? Are we free? Is this a choice?

The fiction that any of us can "choose freely" is maintained by conjuring up those in distant lands who live in bondage with no rights, agency, or ability to refuse or escape sex or violence. The fact that, in liberal democracies, the most contentious debates are about how choice should be balanced against the public good—in schooling, health care, welfare, or gun control—seems also to get lost in this story line. That is why I think these popular memoirs have such a hold. That is why they seem to have come into our public imagination at the same time the new common sense emerged that we should go to war for Muslim women.

Stories about the complexity of choice and desires for what we may not want would shake our moral certainty about some cherished values of liberalism that have diffused into human rights talk. Along with Talal Asad, I would argue that we should not dismiss these values as instruments of new imperial interventions.<sup>31</sup> We have to take this language of justice seriously. It frames the new common sense about saving Muslim women because it has, as he would put it, produced political subjects around the world who share these values and speak this language. Choice, consent, and freedom are the grammar. What does this grammar allow and disallow?

As an anthropologist whose business it is to understand how individuals are formed within the contours of their cultures and social worlds, I have always been wary of concepts like "choice." The legal



category of “consent” that goes with it poses similar problems for anyone who stops to think about how we go through life. And what intimate relationships mean for us. Liberal dreams like those found in CEDAW’s Article 16 about the equality that women and men should enjoy in marriage and family relations strike me as troubling fictions. A cornerstone of CEDAW is that women should have “[t]he same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent.”<sup>32</sup>

What does it mean to freely choose, or to consent? These are difficult questions for marriage. Across Egypt over the past twenty years girls in different rural communities have been developing knowledge of their rights under Islamic law. They have been using this knowledge to challenge the customary arrangement of marriages by families by pointing to the requirement of consent. Parallel efforts have been underway across the Muslim world by feminist reformers of various sorts, from secular to Islamic, to make choice, consent, and contract the instruments for guaranteeing women’s rights in marriage. In North Africa, for example, feminist reformers developed a model marriage contract that would build in requirements of consent for a husband’s decision to take a second wife. In India and Egypt, there have been campaigns for legal reform of Muslim family law that would establish women’s rights to initiate divorce.

Having the principle of consent in place, though, does not resolve the quandaries young women face as they try to decide who to marry or whether to marry. In the village in Upper Egypt in which I have been working for twenty years, the girl is always consulted when a marriage proposal comes in. But how do these girls form an opinion? Much has to be weighed. Special prayers sometimes help. Marriage is no small matter and it is hard to know what the future holds. For any of us.

The all too human dilemmas faced by characters like Nadia in Yemen and young women in Egyptian villages who miss out on marrying because they weighed family responsibilities too strongly or misjudged situations—women I talk about in my book—open up new ways of thinking about individual choice and rights. In a profound essay on sexual consent in law and psychoanalysis, Judith Butler goes beyond the usual critiques of legal consent to note that consent might be not simply a core liberal value but part of a strong fantasy of autonomy.



Hence our attachment to it. In the final paragraph of this essay, she offers a poignant truth about the limits we all face. The most basic fact of our existence, she reminds us, is that we are born into and depend on families we did not choose. “We are finally creatures of life, including creatures of passion,” she says, “who need what we cannot fully understand or choose, and whose sexual and emotional lives are marked from the start from this being bound up with one another with unknowing and necessity.”<sup>33</sup>

These words give us a different way to begin to think about the divisive grammar that rights talk and pornographic pulp nonfiction enforce. Here are some universals that are not normative and do not pretend to be abstract, hiding carefully their parochialism and politics. I’m interested in these kinds of universals that do not divide us artificially into those who freely choose and those who don’t, those who enjoy freedom and autonomy, and those who don’t. This is common sense, if we stop to think. But this common sense alerts us to the dangerous political role pulp nonfiction plays in our world as it underwrites a passion to go to war for global women’s rights, deploying human rights for authority.

To invoke the universal bonds of love, obligation, family, and uncertainty is to begin from the premise that we all share something as humans. These universals join us together instead of dividing us artificially into cultures in which women freely choose and those in which they don’t, societies that champion rights and those which do not. It is this kind of humanism that so many of us admire Edward Said for: he managed to be both steadfastly critical of the way power and knowledge get entwined and utterly convinced that we had to aspire to something better, a world not divided into West and East. By extension, I’ve been saying, a world divided into places where women are free and other places where they must be freed, even by force. And to ask why we are being asked to go to war for distant women.

**Author’s Note:** This lecture draws from different parts of my book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), which was in press at the time.

1. Nicolas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: How to Change the World* (London: Virago, 2010), back cover.



2. Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).
3. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).
4. miriam cooke, "The Muslimwoman," *Contemporary Islam* 1, no. 2 (2007): 139-154.
5. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
6. For an elaboration of this, see Lila Abu-Lughod, "Against Universals: The Dialectics of (Women's) Human Rights and Human Capabilities." In *Rethinking the Human*, edited by J. Michelle Molina, Donald K. Swearer, and Susan Lloyd McGarry (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University Press, 2010).
7. Vron Ware, "Info-War and the Politics of Feminist Curiosity: Exploring New Frameworks for Feminist Intercultural Studies," *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (November 2006): 526-551.
8. See Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Charlotte Bunch, "Women's Rights as Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1990): 486-498; Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, edited by Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Craven Nussbaum (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
9. Dohra Ahmad, "Not Yet beyond the Veil: Muslim Women in American Popular Literature," *Social Text* 27, no. 99 (2009): 105.
10. Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Annie Van Sommer and Samuel Zwemer, *Our Moslem Sisters: A Cry of Need from Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It* (New York: F. H. Revell, 1907); Linda Nochlin, "The



Imaginary Orient,” *Art in America*, May 1983; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Rana Kabbani, *Europe’s Myths of Orient* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). For an analysis of the more contemporary forms of gendered Orientalism, see Roksana Bahramitash, “The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 221-235.

11. Saba Mahmood, “Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War of Terror.” In *Women’s Studies on the Edge*, edited by Joan Wallach Scott (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

12. Norma Khouri, *Honor Lost: Love and Death in Modern-Day Jordan* (New York: Atria Books, 2003). Anna Broinowski’s 2007 documentary film, *Forbidden Lies*, examines the hoax.

13. Leti Volpp, “Blaming Culture for Bad Behavior,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 12 (2000): 89-116.

14. Vron Ware has written on the books and the incident in great detail. Unfortunately, I had not seen her excellent article until after I had already finished my book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Her analysis of the colonial resonances and civilizational politics involved in the *Observer* journalist’s story about the girls in Yemen is explored in “Moments of Danger: Race, Gender, and Memories of Empire,” *History and Theory* 31, no. 4, Beiheft 31: History and Feminist Theory (December 1992): 116-137.

15. Miriam Ali with Jana Wain, *Without Mercy: A Mother’s Struggle against Modern Slavery* (London: Little, Brown, 1995), 88–89.

16. Leila, with the collaboration of Marie-Thérèse Cuny, *Married by Force*, trans. Sue Rose, 2nd ed. (London: Portrait, 2006), 215-216.

17. Jean Sasson, *Desert Royal* (London: Bantam Books, 2004), 124.

18. *Ibid.*, 130.

19. Hannah Shah, *The Imam’s Daughter* (London: Rider, 2009), 270.



20. Jean P. Sasson, *Desert Royal* (London: Bantam, 1999), 16.
21. See Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, “The Other French Exception: Virtuous Racism and the War of the Sexes in Postcolonial France,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 24, no. 3 (2006): 23–41; Miriam Ticktin, *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Mayanthi Fernando, “Reconfiguring Freedom: Muslim Piety and the Limits of Secular Law and Public Discourse in France,” *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 1 (2010): 19.
22. Miriam Ticktin, “Sexual Violence as the Language of Border Control: Where French Feminist and Anti-immigrant Rhetoric Meet,” *Signs* 33, no. 41 (2008): 863–889. She expands on the case of Zina in Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*. The quote from Sarkozy is on p.128.
23. Hannah Shah, *The Imam’s Daughter* (London: Rider, 2009), 80-81.
24. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
25. <http://www.christianbook.com/the-imams-daughter-hannah-shah/9780310325758/pd/325758?event=1036SPF|527742|1036>.
26. She wrote the script for this film and made it with Theo Van Gogh, a Dutch filmmaker known for his sharp tongue and relish for controversy (including, but not limited to, racist remarks he made about Muslim immigrants). For excellent discussions, see the work by Dutch anthropologists: Annelies Moors, “Submission,” *ISIM Review* 15 (2005); and Marc de Leeuw and Sonja van Wichelen, “Please, Go Wake Up!,” *Feminist Media Studies* 5, no. 3 (2005), 329.
27. Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 87.
28. *Ibid.*, 96.
29. Sherene H. Razack, “Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 29, no. 4 (2007): 375–394.





30. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (New York: Free Press, 2007): 207–209.
31. Talal Asad, “Redeeming the ‘Human’ through Human Rights,” in *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 140.
32. See Abu-Lughod, “Against Universals.” Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, “General Recommendations Made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,” *Division for the Advancement of Women - Department of Economic and Social Affairs*, June 12, 2009, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm>.
33. Judith Butler, “Sexual Consent: Some Thoughts on Psychoanalysis and Law,” *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 21, no. 2 (2011): 405-429.

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