

The Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights

ANTHROPOLOGIST LILA ABU-LUGHOD DELIVERS THE *JMEWS* DISTINGUISHED LECTURE AT UC SANTA BARBARA

by Diane James

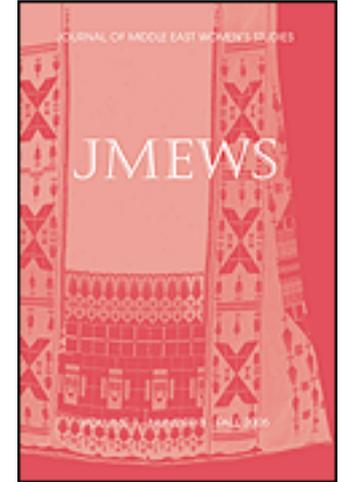
Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod delivers the *JMEWS* Distinguished Lecture at UC Santa Barbara on Wednesday, February 11, 2009, at 4:00 pm. Abu-Lughod is Joseph L. Buitendyk Professor of Social Science at Columbia University, where she teaches in the Anthropology Department and at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. The theme she has chosen for her remarks is “The Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights.”

The event, which is open to the public, is sponsored by the *Journal of Middle East Women's*

Studies and cosponsored by the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, Center for Near Eastern Studies, and Women's Studies Department, and the UC Santa Barbara Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, and Feminist Studies Department. Hosted by *JMEWS* co-editor Nancy Gallagher of UCSB, the event takes place in UCSB's McCune Conference Room, Humanities and Social Sciences Building (near parking lots 22 and 27; see <http://www.aw.id.ucsb.edu/maps/>).

It has been almost a quarter of a century since Abu-Lughod published *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (1986), an ethnography of the Awlad `Ali Bedouin in Egypt's Western Desert—pastoralists in transition to villagers—a work in which she unpacked the women's poetry which served them as a counterpoint to “ordinary” language, a way of expressing without owning socially impermissible feelings.

In 1990 Abu-Lughod co-edited (with Catherine Lutz) *Language and the Politics of*



Emotion, an anthropological study of emotion and discourse that sought to “pry emotion loose from psychobiology” and consider emotions as “cultural products,” learned habits shaped by social interaction. Contributors to the collection showed that apparently singular emotions may have



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different meanings and status in the hierarchies of admirable, acceptable, and anti-social emotions in different cultures.

Abu-Lughod returned to the subject of the Awlad 'Ali in *Writing Women's Worlds* (1993) to examine the subtle transformation of values among these erstwhile nomads who traced their origins to Libya and were now integrating into the Egyptian nation.

Her groundbreaking edited volume, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (1998) brought together leading scholars in the field who questioned the dichotomy of tradition and modernity and the equation of modernity with progress, emancipation, and the empowerment of women.

Throughout the 1990s, Abu-Lughod expanded her research to the media, particularly television, a medium in which emotion, language, gesture, and politics are fused to more or

less (im)perceptible degrees. In *Dramas of Nationhood* (2005), she explored national television and developmentalism in Egypt through field work among the producers, distributors, and consumers of special dramatic series made for TV viewing during Ramadan.

One of Abu-Lughod's abiding concerns has been the politics of ethnographic representation and sociological description, problems of feminist aspiration and method, and assumptions about the Muslim Middle East. When she began working on women in the Arab world, she says, she "could never have imagined how charged the trope of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' would become in public discourse." (Recall how the trope was used to justify the invasion of Afghanistan.) Her ethnographies "challenge standard anthropological views of the patterns of Arab social life that are thought

to constrain and construct women's experiences, the same constructions that now organize human development reports and even human rights documents."

Over the past decade, Abu-Lughod's interests have shifted toward a more explicit consideration of international feminist politics, and the award of a Carnegie Scholarship in 2007 allowed her to concentrate on the ethics and politics of Muslim women's rights in the international arena. Her project aims to analyze the way that arguments couched in the language of women's rights tend to become compromised in the global political and cultural fields in which they are discussed. Thus we anticipate an original analysis and forward-looking discussion of rights, women's rights, and Muslim women's rights on February 11.

Abu-Lughod's lecture is the second presented by *JMEWS* and collaborating UC research units. The journal launched its

four-year residence at UCLA in 2006 with a conference on “Gender and the Transnational Middle East.” Professor Susan Slyomovics delivered the first *JMEWS* Distinguished Lecture in 2007. And in 2008, *JMEWS* sponsored a roundtable and reception of Southern California scholars who discussed their current research on “Gender in Muslim Societies.”

On April 9 to 10, 2009, *JMEWS* cosponsors a two-day research workshop on “Women in Conflict Zones,” funded by the UCLA Burkle Center for International Relations. Participants will consider the nature and rationales for violence, militarization and masculinity, the politics of memory and the politics of naming, trauma and healing, and forms of “truth and reconciliation.” The colloquium begins on Thursday evening, April 9, with a reception and premiere of the documentary film, *Dancing for Change:*

Kurdish Women in Iran, based on Shahrzad Mojab’s decades of research and work with Kurdish women. Workshop participants include conference organizer (and *JMEWS* co-editor) Sondra Hale of UCLA, Caren Kaplan of UC Davis, Jennifer Terry of UC Irvine, Elisabeth Jean Wood of Yale University, Lara Deeb of Scripps College, and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Visiting Professor in the UCLA School of Law and Women’s Studies. Dr. Mojab will present the keynote lecture on “Re-centering Imperialism in Feminist Theorization of War, Reconstruction, and Women’s NGOs.”

The Winter 2009 issue of *JMEWS*, now in press, includes articles on “The Burqa in *Vogue*” by Ellen McLarney, “House of Obedience” (a legal concept used in Gaza courts of law), by Nahda Shehada, “Religious Change among Yemeni Women” by Sophia Pandya, and a field

study of “Violence against Women in Qatari Society” by Kaltham Ali Al-Ghanim. The Spring issue features articles on the sexual revolution in Iran and a comparison of Palestinian male infertility and assisted reproductive technology services in Israel and Lebanon. The Fall issue will highlight research by the Arab Family Working Group.

JMEWS is available by membership subscription from the Association for Middle East Women’s Studies (<http://www.amews.org>) and Indiana University Press (<http://inscribe.iupress.org/loi/mew>). The journal is also accessible online through the UCLA Library via GenderWatch and Project Muse. Check it out.

Diane James is the Managing Editor of the Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies.

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