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Cultural relativism- a phrase that elicits the questionable dichotomy presented to western feminists when confronting misogyny abroad- was never far from my thoughts when considering the case built by Bennoune, Kassamali, and Terman in this week’s readings.

Previous to these readings, female genital cutting (FGC) and honor killings were exactly the point at which my ability to be accepting of different cultural values failed; where anger consumed me, where I agreed with controversial activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s statements in *From Islam to America -*

Here is something I have learned the hard way, but which a lot of people in the West have a hard time accepting: All human beings are equal, but all cultures and religions are not. A culture that considers women to be the masters of their own lives is better than a culture that mutilates girls’ genitals and confines them behind walls and veils or stones them for falling in love. - Ali 2013

Here Ali compares the imaginary culture of the western enlightenment with the imaginary culture of Islam using her lived experience as a circumcised Somali immigrant to Holland. The binary oppositions exhibited in this quote- west, east, feminism, misogyny – imply a hierarchical ordering for states, and can be used to justify war against those at the bottom. Weak cultural relativist arguments provide the response to this type of thinking- the west cannot fathom the east, any intervention is colonialist, and attacking problems in non-western societies is itself an act of imperialism.

The scholars here avoid falling into either of these camps by sharpening the intellectual rigor of the argument and looking closer—fine grain focus being here necessary for subverting longstanding, unhelpful abstractions. Terman lays out a framework for characterizing the apparent tension between anti-imperialism and feminism. Kassamali illustrates how this tension does not, in fact, exist in the on-the- ground experiences of women’s health educators and activists combatting the worst effects of FGC in several countries in East Africa. Lastly, Bennoune shows that, the perceived incompatibility between women’s rights and cultural respect actually inhibits strategic and successful third-world feminist activists.

Rochelle Terman exposes the false equivalence between feminism and imperialism that is purported in, particularly post 9-11, scholarship. She begins with a historically justified fear: “When the US invokes the oppression of Muslim women to justify war, how do we practice feminist solidarity without strengthening orientalism and imperialism?” [2] An anecdotal argument between Palestinian activist hip-hop group DAM and Lila Abu-Lughod and Maya Mikdashi over DAM’s music video criticizing honor killings is illustrative of one response to this question, which “presents women’s rights activism not just as complicit in imperialism and Islamophobia but as foundationally or inescapably imperialist and Islamophobic.”[2] Abu-Lughod’s “Seductions of the ‘Honor Crime’” provides a good illustration of the development of this position. Abu-Lughod presents the ‘Honor Crime’ as a construction of the west in recent years to further its colonial agenda. In this view anyone who tries to fight real violence against women is at best westernized and at worst complicit in imperialism. That violence against women, embedded in the social order, does exist never surfaces in this discourse. Engaging with the history of the real, physical crimes reveals that these crimes do indeed exist, and have their basis in the forced adoption of British legal codes regarding ‘Crimes of passion.’ This whole exchange exhibits what Spivak calls “The cliche of anti-imperialism: the privileging of a critique of western imperialism above all else and at all costs.” [Spivak, 2013]. The dark side of this discourse is how activists on the ground, in communities affected by honor crimes, are delegitimized and lose critical support. << insert here understanding of mahmood, who I don’t understand>>

Against this scholarly backdrop, Noor Kassamali’s

This scholarship begins the exploration of how to maintain a radically peaceful quest for human dignity whilst deeply respecting cultural difference. Here by respect I am referring to an active quest for understanding as opposed to a passive acceptance.

1. Ali, Ayaan Hirsi. *Nomad: From Islam to America: A personal journey through the clash of civilizations*. Simon and Schuster, 2011.
2. Terman, Rochelle. "Islamophobia, Feminism and the Politics of Critique."*Theory, Culture & Society* (2015): 0263276415590236.