

Transnational Feminisms Through Art and Visual Culture

Study Guide: Rhetorics of the Veil

“Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others” by Lila Abu-Lughod

KEYWORDS: Please read the definitions of the following keywords, and explain how they are relevant to the arguments Abu-Lughod makes in her essay.

Ethnocentrism: Ethnocentrism is the practice of positing one culture as the norm or ideal against which all others are judged, and rendered “inadequate.”

Cultural Relativism

Emerging out of a critique of ethnocentrism, cultural relativism regards cultural “difference” as something to be accepted, embraced, and even celebrated. As such, the hierarchies, inequities, and relations of power and domination thought to be endemic to “other” cultures tend to be viewed as beyond criticism, for such expressions of judgment are thought to be consistent with culturally imperialistic practices of ethnocentrism.

Reification

Reification refers to the process by which products of human activity come to be understood as facts of nature. When, for example, we say that “race” is reified, we are referring to the way that the idea of “race” has become so entrenched in popular discourse that its social construction has been rendered totally invisible. Something that is “reified” is seen to exist independently of the social relations that brought it into being in the first place. The act of “reification” presents a concept, object, etc. as “natural,” rather than produced. In doing so, something that is in reality quite dynamic becomes characterized as a fixed and static entity.

According to Abu-Lughod, one of the goals of her essay is to look at the “dangers of reifying culture.” What are some of the ways in which “Muslim culture” has been reified since 9/11? How has this reification been gendered? What have been some of the consequences of this reification?

QUESTIONS:

1. Why is Abu-Lughod wary of discourses which use “culture” as an explanation for global conflicts?
2. How have ethnocentric attitudes towards the veiling of Muslim women been used to justify the American bombing and intervention in Afghanistan, as well as the “War on Terror” more broadly? Why does Abu-Lughod argue that “we need to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women’s unfreedom” (p786)?
3. As explained in the keyword definitions above, cultural relativism has often been seen as an alternative to the pitfalls of ethnocentrism. Yet, Abu-Lughod argues that cultural relativism is an equally problematic lens through which to view cultural difference. Why does she argue this? What other approaches might help feminists (particularly Western feminists) think about cultural difference more productively?

4. Why is Abu-Lughod critical of the “rhetoric of salvation” currently motivating feminist, humanitarian, and military interventions in the Third World? What role did this “rhetoric of salvation” play in histories of colonial and imperialism?

CLOSE READING AND ANALYSIS: Read closely the following passages and reflect on their meaning in the context of the article. Be prepared to discuss and explain the implications of each in your own words.

PAGE 784

“In other words, the question is why knowing about the “culture” of the region, and particularly its religious beliefs and treatments of women, was more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the U.S. role in this history. Such cultural framing, it seemed to me, prevented the serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in this part of the world. Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religio-cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnections, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres – recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas.”

PAGES 787-788

“[W]hen I talk about accepting difference, I am not implying that we should resign ourselves to being cultural relativists who respect whatever goes on elsewhere as “just their culture.” I have already discussed the dangers of “cultural” explanations; “their” cultures are just as much a part of history and an interconnected world as ours are. What I am advocating is the hard work involved in recognizing and respecting difference – precisely as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, and as manifestations of differently structured desires. We may want justice for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or choose different futures from what we envision as best?”

PAGE 789

“The reason respect for difference should not be confused with cultural relativism is that it does not preclude asking how we, living in this privileged and powerful part of the world, might examine our own responsibilities for the situations in which others in distant places have found themselves. We do not stand outside the world, looking out over this sea of poor benighted people, living under the shadow – or veil – of oppressive cultures; we are part of that world.”