

Silencing Historical Cultural Contexts

Western media narratives conceal the roots of systemic violence against women in the Global South behind images of native culture as barbaric, stagnant, and monstrous. Largely stemming from power dynamics established during colonial eras, socio-culturally acceptable forms of sexual and physical violence mimic patriarchal functions aimed at privileging Western culture as perfectly evolved and oppressing native culture as fundamentally uncivilized. To this point, Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* and Ayesha M. Imam's *Women's Reproductive and Sexual Rights and the Offense of Zina in Muslim Laws in Nigeria* illustrate Western portrayals of violence against women in the Global South as an inherent consequence of barbaric, backwards cultures centered in non-Westernized spaces by silencing the historical context in which such human rights violations arose.

To begin, as shown by Abu-Lughod, Western societal erasure of the colonial origins of Jordanian honor defense laws affecting women permits the characterization of Jordanian culture as uncivilized and violent. Notably, "the laws on which the honor defense relies came into Jordanian law from the Napoleonic Code, Ottoman law, and British common law. . . . Any diagnosis of gender violence that attributes it to culture – backward, traditional, or barbaric – distracts us from these kinds of historical dynamics that are essential to an analysis of violence" and the institutional oppression patterns established by colonial power paradigms (Abu-Lughod 139). Centrally, Western societies uphold human rights violations committed against Jordanian women as symptoms of underlying monstrosity and brutishness pervading cultures of the Global South. That is to say, by re-representing honor defense laws as products of an innately violent

culture that victimizes women, Western illustrations of the Jordanian socio-cultural climate silence the colonial roots of human rights violations targeting native women that extend into modernity from Napoleonic, Ottoman, and British colonial exploits. In other words, the isolation of acts of violence against women from their political and legislative roots in colonial power institutions aimed at maintaining white dominance over native populations allows Western societies to represent native cultures as exhibiting violence due to the barbarousness of their cultures, rather than as a result of forced power dynamics suppressing women's agency in colonized spaces.

Continuing, Imam's piece depicts Western decontextualization of Islamic fundamentalism in Nigeria, which ultimately precipitates illustrations of violent acts against women in Nigerian culture as symptoms of a barbarous and unevolved native culture. To this point, "the international media ... ignore or downplay protests and campaigns in Nigeria and the existence of previous successful appeals in the Sharia system. ... The use of terms like 'inhuman' and 'barbaric' to describe Islamic law" with regard to abolishing zina and other forms of violence against women intrinsically dismisses Islamic cultures as monolithic, regressive, and monstrous (Imam 85). At the crux, Western interpretations of Islam as historically stagnant silence colonial narratives that contextualize and illuminate the power dynamics responsible for enacting legislation condoning violent crimes against women forced on native cultures by Western colonial nations. Moreover, international media outlets purposefully inhibit the agency of non-fundamentalist Islamist movements promoting anti-zina legislation in Nigeria in order to maintain mainstream media characterizations of colonial spaces as hosting inherently monstrous and barbaric cultures. Most importantly, the conscious separation of violent acts committed against women in Nigeria from their roots in colonial power paradigms instituted by Western

colonial powers in global media discourse permits portrayals of cultures of the Global South as backwards, stagnant, and innately violent.

In conclusion, both Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* and Ayesha M. Imam's *Women's Reproductive and Sexual Rights and the Offense of Zina in Muslim Laws in Nigeria* highlight the erasure of the colonial context in which permissible forms of violence against women arose. Delving into representations of both Jordanian and Nigerian cultures in Western society revealed patterns of colonial era-representations employed by Western nations to represent native culture as inherently monstrous, unevolved, and violent. Altogether, the works of Abu-Lughod and Imam capture the Western decontextualization of colonial-era socio-cultural institutions that violate women's human rights to ultimately portray violence against women in the Global South as a symptom of underlying barbarousness and backwardness in the cultures of colonized spaces rather than as a systemic paradigm of patriarchal society.