**West and non-West Dynamics: Critical Reading of ‘Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society’**

**Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society**

The book Veiled Sentiments is the first book of the well-known anthropologists Lila Abu-Lughod. The book was published in 1986 and became one of the classic ethnographies in anthropology studies, and it is being taught in introductory and advanced courses in anthropology around the world. The book describes an ethnographic journey that lasted two and a half years in the late 1970s and early 1980s among a Bedouin community “Awlad Ali”, in the Western Desert in Egypt. Abu-Lughod describes the purpose of her initial research as follows: “I had come to study the patterning and meaning of interpersonal relations, in particular, between men and women, so I merely jotted in my field notes that people seemed to love reciting some sad-sounding short poems” (P.25). The subject of the research is understood in the context of the seventies when gender studies were at the center and very dominant (this is a very western subject, as I explain later). After entering the field, Abu-Lughod noticed the role of poetry within the Bedouin society and focused on it.

In her book, Abu-Lughod refers to the ethnographic writing that preceded her writing. For example, she refers to Meeker, Caton and other American and British anthropologist and the way they studied poetry in the Bedouin society. According to Abu-Lughod, while they studied poetry as an intellectual means to deal with political aspects, she seeks to bring in a more general question, one that deals with the relationship between men and politics (P.29). Her means, according to her, is the access to the private sphere she has, which the researcher she refers to could not reach due to their gender. Having a female point of view, Abu-Lughod was able to point out that the binary separation between the private and the public spheres is a limited readings of the Bedouin society. Instead, she suggests that it is actually two spheres that are bound to each other in complex social relationships that touch all aspects of life (P.30).

Methodologically, Abu-Lughod claims that an open form of research is required, one that does not come to the field with ready-made questionnaires and does not have pre-structured in-depth interviews. Although she is aware that it is important to collect information systematically, the disadvantage outweighs the advantage, because only through the open form of research, she was able to become familiar with poetry, its central role in the lives of Bedouin. This way, she argues, poetry became the object of her research. Through this process her research question arose: “How is the fact that individuals express such utterly different sentiments in poetic and in non-poetic discourse to be understood? Is one discourse a more authentic expression of personal experience than the other” (P.32). The way Abu-Lughod put it, one can conclude that her research approach is based on the ethnographic work of Robert Levine who studies the Self. Through it, she claims that poetry should be studied through research on the inner discourse of the person who performs the song, then we will understand the psychological context of the person, in combination with his social context – and then we will also be able to understand why in one song the person will express one sentiment, and in another song – a different sentiment, or two different people will sing the same song, but their performance will express different sentiments. Using her words, the topic of her search then is:

The relationship between Awlad Ali sentiments and experiences and the two contradictory discourses that express and inform them: a genre of oral lyric poetry of love and vulnerability on the one hand, and the ideology of honor in ordinary conversation and everyday behavior on the other. (P. 10).

In the eyes of Abu-Lughod, sentiment is beyond emotion, and therefore she calls her work “Veiled Sentiments” – there is a scarf, a mantle, a connecting thread, and a veil here – which are also charged with emotions and are also the ones that transmit the emotion from person to person within the Bedouin society.

**The Political and Geopolitical Context**

Abu-Lughod extends the introduction with background descriptions of the society she is looking at. She also clearly points out the process by which she organizes her research method – according to the cultural aspects of the field. Abu-Lughod, who is now a professor at Columbia University in New York City, was mainly troubled by her gender and her mixed ancestry – an American of a Palestinian descent. This combination is problematic because the Bedouins are known for their hostility towards Western people (P. 13), and for this purpose she uses her father’s presence to help her enter the field (P. 11).

Abu-Lughod’s father, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, was born in 1929 in Palestine in the city of Jaffa, and in 1948, after completing high school, he left with his family to the United States, and received American citizenship. Before his death, he was considered one of the leading Palestinian academics and intellectuals in the world. Thanks for her father’s presence, Abu-Lughod was able to be accepted into the tribe, and entered the family as a member of the household (P. 12). Yes, even after she passed the “first entrance exam”, they still knew she was Western and she was required to continue to prove herself to them. That is why she chooses to reach the field when her research method is “open”. A central part of her method is “to know her social place” and thus to increase her interlocutors’ trust in her. That way, she contends, she was able to approach the informants and create an intimacy that will encourage them to be exposed to her in an honest way. Therefore, she does not ask them questions as if she were interviewing them, and also tried not to be seen writing. At some point, they share with her their past experiences with other ethnographers. She writes:

I appreciated their perception of me as different from those researchers they had previously encountered. I heard stories of the "exams" these researchers had given them (questionnaires) and the hilariously wild tales the Bedouins had fed them. (P. 24).

This sharing confirms to her that she is no longer a “normal” Western researcher, and that she had managed to differentiate herself from the Western identity and that her research method works. From this it appears that Abu-Lughod does indeed describe the political and geopolitical context of her research field, through her personal story that appears at the beginning, and the methodological choices that led her and her research, both in choosing the research topic and in its continuation.

Alongside this, we must also notice how it is precisely her being Western that organizes the text. Does Abu-Lughod aware of her different identities? On the one hand, it can be argued that she is aware. On the other hand, it can be shown that this is not the case. This means that Abu-Lughod is emotionally involved in the poetic style of her research, to the point where she is so fascinated by the object of her research, as is she was…an Orientalist. “The orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.” (Said, 1995, P. 11). Contrary to the Zeitgeist of writing her ethnographic book, it is Abu-Lughod’s act of writing, the sentimental one that expresses the lack of being a Western who denies her Western-ness. Abu-Lughod supposedly chooses, consciously, a writing style that is directly influenced by the object of her research – Bedouin poetry whose dialogic style is meant to express emotions. That is why she reproduces it into the act of ethnographic writing and thus assumes that she departs from the Western style, and produces the Eastern style, through the style of writing that she adopts. But in terms of the content of things, her position is still a Western –binary one in which she only changes sides, and at the center of Said’s argument is that opposition to the Western binary that organizes the power relations according to what is right and what is not. And thus she becomes, contrary to her clear intention, an Orientalist.

If we take as an example the organizing time of the research, we can also find there the cultural boundaries that are drawn, especially when entering into the “other” time (allochronism) that is given a positive and proper status in the eyes of the researcher. Allochranism refers to the fact that the other’s time is negative, and because she sees Bedouin time as positive, the other time here is the Western (Fabian, 1983). The descriptions of the time when she enters the field, are as it were, an innocent visual record, but they emphasize the transition from the busy volume to the spaces and silence of nature (this is how each description of her returning to the field begins), the relief that will come to her when the landscape opens up and the silence that accompanies it, will mark the crisis of representation that can be marked in Abu-Lughod’s work. The description of the sentiment towards nature is the signifier of the changes timeline – where one enters another space, another world. This temproalization is the ideological move that establishes the object of research within Abu-Lughod’s interpretive context.

Another example can be seen in the epilogue, which she writes thirty years after the publication of her research, following one of the times she returned to the field. A researcher’s return to the field is an exciting event in itself. Therefore, we expect a poetic writing style, which expresses excitement and closeness to the research objects. We also expected such a style in light of the tragic news about the deteriorating health of the Haj. Abu-Lughod introduces us to a sensitive description of her return visit – different from the other visits, and therefore she writes about it and her research in retrospect. And here is the difference, in her retrospective she reveals how she perceives the objects of her research. This is how she describes them compared to her:

Faith in God and a sense of belonging to a moral community of Muslims were taken for granted by the Haj and the whole community— men, women, and children—in every aspect of their lives. (P. 264)

This is a statement of her position on what “ideal” is and especially how not ideal it is, that she was only exposed to the Qura’n for the first time at the age of eight, and that the copy from which she first learned is with her wherever she lives. Although she continues to indicate that she respects religion, even if she did not understand the practical, everyday aspect of its existence. Meaning, she does not define herself as a religious person, and in this case, it can be cautiously said that she sickens religion, thus echoing the orientalist (secular Western) aspect in her writing.

Moreover, at the end of this paragraph, she reveals her own blind spot: “I found the perfect discipline for someone in my existential state: it commands respect and encourages understanding, but does not demand full participation” (P. 265). Abu-Lughod prides herself on being a sensitive researcher, who uses the mixed identity for understanding research, but without being an active participant. However, it seems that she is an active participant, as she herself testifies, as she writes following the quote above. In addition, Abu-Lughod noted that in the first months of her arrival in the field, she made sure that her relationships with most people were asymmetrical. Although she wanted them to tell about themselves and answer her questions honestly, she did not agree to reveal much about herself (P. 18). The question arises here – how ethical is it not to share her Western background and to pretend that she shares the same values with them, and even lives like them.

Another example of this we can see even earlier in the way she writes about her research object in the prologue. “There is no loneliness, always someone to sit with. I feel so much part of something here. I don’t remember ever feeling that before” (P.XIII). They play a crucial role in balancing her personal identity. They give her a cultural connection that was missing as long as her life was conducted only in the United States. For her, her father’s culture was on the verge of disappearing. And being so, he becomes revered, wonderful, and unique.

The anthropological discipline dealt (and still deals) a lot with the concept of ethnocentrism versus the concept of cultural relativism. These are one of the questions that preoccupied anthropologists. Many times ethnocentrism occurs from a place of lack of awareness. Because it is very difficult to detach ourselves from the cultural concepts we grew up with. Therefore, as part of the dismantling of the cultural self-evident, anthropologists are constantly required to resort to a reflective process so that they will later succeed in disconnecting their cognitive and mental categories and thus they will only be able to understand the cognitive categories of the field they are researching (Dandes, 1998; Weingrod, 2004). And in the context of Abu-Lughod, she is indeed of Palestinian origin and the daughter of a refugee. But nevertheless, she was born and lived in America all her life. And here the question arises: What defines culture? Is this history? Is this where the person was born or raised?

**The individual Relationship between anthropologists and Interlocutors**

During the reading of the book, one can get a clear impression that Abu-Lughod is very present in her writing. This is reflected in the way she relates to her relationships with the researched and the ways in which these relationships were shaped throughout her stay in the field. For example, she describes a situation in which she became human and thus also social for many of them (P. 21). At first, they were afraid she didn’t care about them and that she would forget them. But later this changed, when she comforted Haj’s mother when her brother died and began to cry herself (P.21). The haj’s mother was very excited and at this stage treated her differently. This moment was a defining turning point in Abu-Lughod’s relationship with Awlad Ali.

Her identity as an “Arab” was important for the informants in the field to accept her. In addition, the fact that she was a woman limited her conversations with men, but also opened the door for her to get to know the women’s world in depth (P. 16). At the beginning of the book, Abu-Lughod shares with the reader that her father accompanied her at the entrance to the field. Her father is an Arab from a Palestinian origin, so he knew Arab culture and society well enough to know that an unmarried your woman traveling alone is an anomaly who will be perceived as suspicious, and she will have a hard time convincing people that she is a respectable woman, even though she is leaving her family for the sake of research and traveling alone. By having her father accompany her, these concerns were eliminated and she was assigned the role of an adopted daughter (P.12).

Abu-Lughod contributed a lot to the household, even more than she wanted and even had her own chores (P. 15). The members of the community did not let her do her fieldwork only, but there were also demands from her. It should be noted that the position was not forced on her, but that she cooperated voluntarily. Because she realized that in a society where relationships between women define most relationships, it was necessary for her to have the role of a fictitious family member so that she could participate and be part (P. 15). She was grateful that they let her into their lives and considered her part of the family. In addition to being part of the household, Abu-Lughod had to adapt herself, in some behavioral norms, to Arab girls. Her freedom was limited by subtle hints. For example, Abu-Lughod could not go outside the tribe’s boundaries because they were concerned about her safety and also feared that she would embarrass them or interfere with their social obligations towards other communities (P. 14-15).\

The process of her acceptance into the tribe occurred, as she describes on pages 19-20, when there was a festive event she knew her place, which was the women’s tent, and there they shared gossip with her. The feeling of “us versus them”, that is, the “women” versus the “men” in the tribe, which was central to the accepted social interactions in the tribe, became central to her as well. She was no longer an honored guest to be pampered. The sense of inauthenticity diminished as she participated more and more in the community. Thus she became the person who lived with them. In this way, life in the tribe felt natural to her. This feeling came after 15 months into the fieldwork (P. 19).

However, her social status (which is a derivative of her female sexual and gender identity) led to the fact that she was also limited in the topics of her discourse with men, and was mainly exposed to female poetry and from their point of view, and her topics of discourse were also limited with the women – because she was single they could not talk about sexuality freely (P. 17).

Still, Abu-Lughod certainly makes good use of her cultural background, and is proud that the Bedouin identify her as a Bedouin, thereby confirming to herself that she is alert to various aspects of their culture. Her fieldwork was also influenced by her form of research, which was indirect – she listened to people’s conversations, did not prepare questionnaires in advance or initiate conversations. Precisely through such an open approach, she discovered the importance of poetry, which she might not have noticed if she had come with assumptions and previous research directions to the fieldwork.

Because of this, there are moments when she forgets that she is American, and this is one of the weak points in her research. It is very important that she remembers that part of her perspective, whether she likes it or not, is primarily Western, not Arab. The product of such forgetfulness is the following:

Alternatively, some poems may call up specific situations in which they were last heard or in which they properly belong, as, for example, love stories. By drawing images and experiences from the shared world of a small, culturally homogeneous community, poems gain meaning (P. 176).

Poetry analysis is always within some context, certainly in a society where the oral tradition is still part of the cultural set-up. Put differently, one should ask: Where is the methodological innovation from an anthropological point of view? This example comes to emphasize that her fascination with the Bedouins, and the forgetting of her Western origins sometimes leads her to a writing that misses her unique identity.

**Reflexivity, and the Self**

Abu-Lughod devotes entire sections of her book to describing the research process from the outside, and she makes great efforts to be reflexive in her writing. For example, entire sections at the beginning of the book were dedicated to describing her entry into the field, and the self-occupation occupies a central place in her research. But here, I argue, that it seems that since Abu-Lughod was very reflexive, she thereby lost the ability to see herself (Ruby, 1982).

From my analysis of the Abu-Lughod research findings, I see that power relations are about the politicization of sexuality. The set of power relations stems from the assumption that the blood ties to the father are the central component in the accumulation of political power in society. And the responsibility for maintaining the purity of the blood relations falls mainly on the woman – through a clear demand for sexual purity. We see how the culture rationalized this, gives meaning and rewards every woman with a high social status, if she has maintained sexual purity. But when Abu-Lughod describes the things, she writes as follow:

Women's closer "natural" association with sexuality saddles them with a greater need to distance themselves from it in order to gain respectability, but men, too, must deny their sexual interests if they are to assert their autonomy (P. 208).

In this formulation, she shows us that she accepts the premise of the society she is investigating. Without asking or reflecting on it, she assumes, like them, that the woman is closer to sexuality, in a “natural” way, and therefore she has the social responsibility to distance herself. She goes on and tries to create gender symmetry, but this is especially lacking, because the man here does not have a “natural attraction” to overcome, but “another matter” that they have to deal with. It is true that a man who maintains sexual purity also has cultural privileges, but a harsher disciplinary mechanism is applied to the woman.

This analysis of things becomes even more acute when Abu-Lughod comes to a conclusion about the status of cultural ideology:

This is the great strength of the ideology of honor and modesty as a means for perpetuating a system of power relations: by framing ideals as values, in moral terms, it guarantees that individuals will desire to do what perpetuates the system, thus obviating the need for overt violence or force. (P. 238).

Abu-Lughod claims that poetry allows the members of the tribe to express their self, without losing their honor and social status and this is the focus of her research interest. But she does not make a gender separation here, and such one is absolutely required, and she doesn’t emphasize how much the poetry itself is part of the same mechanism that allows the ideology to continue to exist. This blindness largely stems from the way she is fascinated by the society she is investigating.

In my opinion, the following quote can be read in two ways, one time Abu-Lughod is analyzing the objects of her research, and the second time, Abu-Lughod is writing herself:

Two features characterize the ghinnawas sung or recited in these informal contexts. People tend to sing about themselves and their situations in life, and, in the context of conversations, the poems they recite are usually either comments on the situation being discussed or concise, and often poignant, expressions of their sentiments about the situation. Also, as I noted above in the case of 'Aziza, men and women most often recite poetry about their relationships to loved ones. In short, the ghinndwa is the poetry of personal life, the poetry of intimacy. As we shall see, this discourse on sentiment is also a discourse of defiance. (P. 185)

In this definition, we understand that there is a means of expressing feelings, and alongside it a means of resistance. Through the analysis of female poetry, she develops a style of analysis that allows both male and female Bedouin poetry to be deciphered, and she claims that:

Poetry as a discourse of defiance of the system symbolizes freedom—the ultimate value of the system and the essential entailment of the honor code. (P. 252).

That is, the poetry contains the Bedouin essence in its entirety – both as a system of resistance and creating spaces of freedom, and maintaining the social system and the moral code. But she also notices the element of preserving power in such a practice:

As a declaration of autonomy, of freedom from domination by the system, poetry is cherished, even though it carries subversive messages and is associated with those denied autonomy in Awlad 'Ali society. (P. 252).

However, her continued discussion completely misses the opportunity to express a clear gendered conclusion (P. 255-252). It is true that Abu-Lughod uses the examples of women, and she is good at discussing Bedouin poetry in a different way than the ways other scholars did before, so she can say that poetry is a tool for liberation, coping, discourse, and control. However, she looks at the tribe as one piece, and does not point to the gender aspect in an overt way. Abu-Lughod claims that poetry is a means of resistance. Yet, she examines the objects of her research out of fascination, and not out of a reflexivity that negates her various identities. Then, she could point to the power relations of the race through gender decimation, which are reproduced through poetry – more than expressing any objection.