

Writing Women's Worlds
By Lila Abu-Lughod

Book Report by [REDACTED]
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One of the best this
Semester. Excellent
job

(50)

Dr. Hames
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In her ethnography, *Writing Women's Worlds*, the ethnographer, Lila Abu-Lughod, tries to convey to the Western reader the lifestyle of the Bedouin woman. She attempts (and succeeds) to employ a style different from that of most ethnographers: Abu-Lughod's approach is more humanistic. Another goal of the author's is to speak in a woman's voice--she tries to tell the story of the Bedouin woman from a woman's viewpoint, and also stresses throughout the ethnography that she is a woman ethnographer. Abu-Lughod uses these techniques to inform the reader of patrilineality, polygyny, reproduction, patrilineal parallel-cousin marriage, and honor and shame, as well as of the roles these topics play in the lives of Bedouin women.

Shortly before beginning work on *Writing Women's Worlds*, Abu-Lughod attempted to write a first ethnography, also explaining the lives of Bedouin women. She didn't feel her effort told all that she wanted it to tell, and so she returned to Egypt to gather more information and to try again. She stayed with a Bedouin family and relied heavily on her tape recorder as a means of collecting information. Rather than just asking questions and recording the answers, Abu-Lughod recorded the stories that Bedouin women (and men) that she stayed with told, organized them, and let the stories explain the topics she wished to address. Because she relied so much on one family, this ethnography is largely their story too. This family consists of Haj Sagr (often referred to as simply "the Haj" or "Sagr"), his first wife, Gateefa, his second wife, Safiyya, and his third wife, Azza. Other key characters are Haj Sagr's mother, Migdim, as well as his various children, namely

his second daughter, Kamla. As mentioned earlier, each Bedouin story in this book falls under one of five headings. In this paper, I will briefly recount the information the stories describe.

In the first section of the book, the author addresses the topic of patrilineality. The book opens with Abu-Lughod trying to coax Migdim to tell her life story. Migdim refuses at first but eventually tells the author about the three times in her life that she was able to escape arranged marriages. Among the Bedouin, marriages are arranged by the bride's father; the bride herself has very little say in the issue (though some of the more feisty women like Migdim are able to get out of marriages they feel are undesirable). Obviously then, in the case of marriage, the male's opinion is more important than the female's. This trend continues throughout life for Bedouins. As in many cultures, sons are thought to be more valuable than daughters. When Abu-Lughod asks Migdim why this is, she replies, "daughters aren't yours. When they marry, that's it. They stay with their families and that's that. They leave you with nothing. But boys, they stay" (56). This statement by Migdim reflects the fact that boys stay near the home camp when they grow. Girls, on the other hand, move in with their husbands' families (just like Yanomamö and Zapotec women do), which may be far from their childhood homes. Also, since boys tend to stay close, they often have the responsibility of taking care of their elderly mothers after their fathers pass away.

The second section of *Writing Women's Worlds* is devoted to the topic of polygyny. As do the Yanomamö and to a lesser extent, the Netsilik, the Bedouins practice polygyny. This practice is not entirely common; the wealthier a man is, the more likely he is to have more than one wife, and there is some controversy over whether polygyny should be allowed at all. The Muslim religion that the Bedouin practice does allow polygyny, but only if the husband is able to treat all of his wives equally. Kamla, a daughter of Sagr and his first wife, Gateefa, is quick to point out that equality in such a situation is impossible. In addition, many women Abu-Lughod speaks with express that they would rather not marry a man who already has a wife. From the woman's point of view, it is more honorable to be the only wife--or at least the senior wife--than it is to be a co-wife.

When a man does have several wives, it is common for the women to feel envious or resentful toward one another. Despite such problems, a bond does exist among the co-wives. Usually, each wife moves into her husband's house upon marriage. Since the entire family (husband, wives, and children) all share one house, the co-wives experience much interaction. The author describes an instance in which one of Haj Sagr's wives is giving birth while another wife helps her with the delivery, and tries to make her comfortable. Although in the past there had been conflict between the two women, in times of need they become allies.

In the third section of the book, the ethnographer speaks about reproduction. Reproduction is a very important part of Bedouin society; children--especially boys--are a status symbol.

In fact, children (or rather, lack of children) are so important that they can be a cause of polygyny. If a man marries and his wife bears no children, he may marry again, in hopes that his new wife will give him a child. He may also take a second wife if his first wife has children, but daughters instead of sons. If a man chooses not to remarry, or cannot afford to do so, or already has several wives and he still has no children, there are many of other ways to become fertile, according to Bedouin lore. The inability to conceive is generally thought to come from the failing to observe certain taboos. Going to doctors or religious healers, or following customs such as washing with some milk from a woman whose child has just died, or stepping back and forth over the afterbirth of a friend is said to "undo blockage" and allow a woman to get pregnant. These rituals are examples of the practice of contagious magic.

Once a man and a woman are able to conceive, there is the actual birth to worry about. As few Bedouin women go to hospitals to bear their children, difficulties occur fairly often. Abu-Lughod recounts many stories of difficult births told to her by Bedouin women. They tell these stories with much feeling and drama: dropping their voices and then suddenly raising them, and gesturing to emphasize the amount of blood or the intensity of pain. Some women become midwives to assist with difficult births, and they have similar stories to tell. Midwives depend on both medical knowledge and lore to help a mother and child make it through a difficult labor.

Children are regarded by the Bedouins as being either good or bad from the very beginning. It is not the parent, but God himself who determines the disposition of a given child. Gateefa says: "It's from God. God creates some good and some bad," (142). While it is God who determines the actual disposition of a child, humans can have an effect on a baby's physical development. As in Zapotec culture, envy or giving a child "the eye" can harm him--make him weak or sickly. Thus, it is very important to keep children protected from envious "admirers" with devices such as amulets.

The fourth section of *Writing Women's Worlds* addresses patrilateral parallel cousin marriage. Abu-Lughod doesn't define exactly what a patrilateral parallel cousin is, but based on the information we were given in class, I'm guessing that patrilateral parallel cousins are the offspring of two brothers. While in the Bedouin culture it is acceptable to marry a cousin, it is unclear whether this type of marriage is preferable to marriage between two non-cousins, or whether this practice is really encouraged at all. Many women interviewed by Abu-Lughod view marriage to a cousin as less desirable than marriage to a non-relative. When asked why, the women implied that because they had grown up in the same village as their cousins, and had played together as small children, the love they feel toward their cousins is more brotherly than romantic or erotic. This answer is a classic example of the Westermarck effect. Marriage to a patrilateral cross cousin is encouraged when the bride is sickly or the lone

daughter in a family, and her mother wants her to stay within the camp.

The marriage ceremony is a village-wide ordeal among the Bedouin, as well as an event much anticipated, especially by the village girls. Weddings, they claim, are one of the few times they see a change in their usual schedules of household work. Before a wedding, traditional songs are sung celebrating the bride's beauty and fortune. For weddings between cousins, special songs are sung. Sometimes, the women dance traditional dances as well, though the older women interviewed by Abu-Lughod claim that dancing is becoming less socially acceptable for women.

As with the Zapotecs, virginity at marriage is expected. To prove virginity, the bride, groom, and several of the bride's female relatives go into a room. There, the bride is held down by her relatives, while the groom wraps a white cloth around his finger, which he inserts into her vagina. If she is a virgin, the cloth will become bloody. The groom then takes the stained cloth outside to prove his bride's purity to the wedding guests. Songs are sung to celebrate.

The final topic addressed by Abu-Lughod in *Writing Women's Worlds* is honor and shame among Bedouin women. The author employs an interesting method to address this topic. Kamla, the ambitious, willful daughter of Gateefa and Haj SAGR, wrote an essay entitled "The Education of Girls: An Essay on the Young Bedouin Woman of Egypt and the Changes in Her Life over 40 Years." Abu-Lughod uses this essay, along with some commentary added by Kamla and herself, to tell of the expectations and limitations of

a Bedouin woman. The reader finds that while there are more opportunities for a Bedouin woman than existed 40 years ago, women still have very limited opportunities and high expectations are placed on them. For example, 40 years ago, education for Bedouin girls was unthinkable. *When Writing Women's Worlds* was published in 1993, education for women was possible, but still relatively uncommon. While education allows a young Bedouin woman a chance to escape from the housework and child-rearing duties that would otherwise take up her time, a Bedouin girl receiving an education has other problems to contend with. Such a girl is often viewed with suspicion by relatives and other members of the camp to which she belongs. Kamla, for example, was accused by an uncle of walking home with a boy, a situation considered shameful and immodest by the Bedouins. Fortunately, she was able to prove the accusation untrue; to fail to do so would have ended her education.

In her essay, Kamla also speaks of Bedouin women being thought of as valueless. She says that men typically fail to realize that women have feelings, that they value things other than clothes and food. Kamla doesn't think this attitude has changed in the past 40 years--a fact made evident by the practice of arranging marriages without consenting the bride-to-be. Though Kamla escapes a marriage with a cousin arranged for her by her father and marries a man she feels she has more in common with, many Bedouin women continue to marry those chosen for them by their families.

Despite her modern views, Kamla does see the value in the Bedouin culture. As she has been to school in the city, Kamla is familiar with the young Egyptian women and with their beliefs and mode of dress. Even she is appalled by the short skirts worn by the Egyptians, as well as by the practices of having boyfriends and going out to clubs. Being exposed to this behavior heightened Kamla's appreciation of her own culture. Kamla feels that if a young woman does become educated, she must not "forget her origins or her customs and traditions" and must "raise her children as well as the people of the city do" (227).

Writing Women's Worlds is an ethnography written about women by a woman. This fact is very important. It must be noted that only a woman could gather the information and become as closely acquainted with the Bedouin women as Abu-Lughod does. Because of the strong belief by the Bedouin women in modesty, they could never discuss many of the things they tell Abu-Lughod with a man. However, after reading this ethnography, I have come to the conclusion that Abu-Lughod may be a bit of a feminist. When describing conflicts between women and men, or between women and society, Abu-Lughod nearly always sides with the women. She also emphasizes instances in which women are unhappy, such as Gateefa's emotions after a fight with the Haj, but fails to comment on the emotions of the men, at times portraying them as heartless. On page 112, the author expresses the pain she feels when Sagr directs an insulting remark at two of his wives. Had Abu-Lughod kept her own emotions silent, *Writing Woman's Worlds* would depict Bedouin life more fairly.

Abu-Lughod does do a very nice job of addressing important anthropological topics through the stories she is told by the Bedouin women. The stories make for a more reader-friendly ethnography, and make the people she is trying to inform her audience about seem more real. By adding her own commentary between the stories, she is able to generalize her findings, and give the reader a more complete picture of Bedouin life than the stories alone could give. She fails to provide the reader with information regarding trade or warfare--subjects that concern Bedouin men more than Bedouin women--but since the author's goal is not to inform the reader on all aspects of Bedouin life, but rather to paint a portrait of what it means to be a Bedouin woman, these exclusions detract very little from the ethnography. *or, perhaps, not at all*

Reading this ethnography heightened my awareness of how ethnocentric we all really are. The Bedouins know that there are some things about their culture that could be changed to make it better. Kamla's essay reflects this. However, the Bedouins are all fiercely proud of their heritage, their religion, their customs, and their beliefs. They realize that some of their customs (such women wearing very conservative clothing) may be considered out-of-date, but they still feel their ways to be superior to those of their Egyptian neighbors. Several times while reading, I asked myself how Bedouins could possibly believe in some of their customs. The example that immediately comes to mind is the practice of stepping back and forth over the afterbirth of a friend or animal to improve chances of conception. However, when I stop and think about some of the things that I, a

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Roman Catholic, believe, it occurs to me that if I would tell a Bedouin about some of my customs, he or she would be incredulous. Reading this ethnography undermined my assumption that people are adaptable enough to welcome new ideas with ease: people everywhere (people of all ages but especially the old) are too ethnocentric to do so.