

The Silence of the Lambs: Kristof and Buruma Put Women in Their Place

by Lorna Salzman (February 2015)

For writers like Nicholas Kristof and Ian Buruma, it would seem that it is perfectly all right to tolerate “overheated” language in talking of social injustice, provided the speaker is an African-American, because we all deplore the slavery and discrimination which this group has suffered, to the point of assuming the guilt of early American settlers long dead. (The descendants of the Arabs who sent black Africans into slavery do not seem to be burdened with such guilt).

I have not actually heard either of these social critics express an opinion on whether African-Americans are entitled to complain about slavery or present-day discrimination. But I daresay they would be extremely cautious. Were they to do so, I doubt they would call these complaints “strident,” “exaggerated,” “overheated and overstated.” I doubt they would tell blacks fighting discrimination to plead their case politely and modestly so as not to get anyone angry...“don’t be an uppity ni-er.”**

But in their rarified privileged world, a woman of color, namely Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who has personally suffered even more than American slaves did, who narrates her history of genital mutilation, forced marriage, repeated death threats (including from the man who brutally murdered her film collaborator Theo van Gogh), and narrow escape from Islamists in Somalia and the Netherlands, is not allowed to utilize equally strong language to describe her own suffering because, they claim, her use of strong language is an incitement to bigotry.

Writer Ian Buruma, in his book “Murder in Amsterdam,” proclaims that “her strident tone puts people off,” and “there are hints of jealousy, echoes perhaps of her earlier enthusiasm for the Muslim Brotherhood, before she was converted to the ideals of the European Enlightenment.” Even worse, Buruma, by way of quoting other women, manages to insult Ali, regarding an Amsterdam screening of the film *Submission* (the one she worked on with van Gogh); four veiled Muslim women claimed the film insulted Islam, denied that women’s oppression had anything to do with Islam and told her to stop. Buruma spends a lot of time in his book discrediting Ali and quoting her critics, but nowhere does he express respect or undiluted praise for her

courage, conviction and principles.

Then there is Kristof, reviewing Ali's new book *Nomad*, in the *NY Times Book Review*. Kristof and his wife authored *Half the Sky*, about the oppression of women in the undeveloped world. In this review he acknowledges the problems with Islam: repression of women, persecution complexes, lack of democracy, volatility, anti-Semitism (he doesn't mention the stoning or genital mutilation of women in African Muslim countries), and then blithely goes on to rant about Ali's exaggeration, overstatement, "ferocity" that he finds "strident" ("potentially feeding religious bigotry," though he says nothing about Muslim bigotry against non-Muslims). He excoriates HER for excoriating Islam, even though he has just listed some of the quite sound reasons for doing so, especially if you have experienced Islamic repression personally. But that counts for nothing in his book, apparently.

Let us pause for a moment and ponder this. Kristof and Buruma, rather than empathizing with Ayaan Hirsi Ali's harrowing personal experiences, and those of many dissident, apostate and ex-Muslims who still live anonymously with bodyguards, choose to deplore the "zeal" of these victims rather than the zealous fanaticism and bigotry of their oppressors. Apparently one must bear one's fate stoically, without emotion, without anger, or else risk feeding "religious bigotry."

Just what have Kristof and Buruma undergone that would entitle them to speak with moral authority? Nothing whatsoever. Neither of them have suffered under Islam. Neither of them live under death threats. Neither of them have been mutilated. Neither of them have had to submit to arbitrary parental discipline regarding marriage. They are two privileged western males preaching from high and casting judgment on someone who has in fact undergone the most severe tests imaginable in her life and in her beliefs.

This sounds familiar, to those of us who recall the dismal and unprincipled response of most of the western world to the publication of the Danish cartoons about Mohammed. Newspaper, magazine and book publishers declared they did not want to "offend" the sensibilities of Muslims, who were busy rioting across the world over the supposed defamation of Mohammed...and in between were themselves issuing vile declamations and vows of revenge against Jews and infidels, all of which today continue to be broadcast daily on Arab TV networks, in madrassas, and from mosques in the Muslim world.

It would be easy to assume that these attitudes stem from sexism or even professional jealousy. But it has been suggested that there is a insidious form of proprietorship at work. Here we have progressive journalists concerned with social justice and oppression, with strong

personal opinions about how such problems should be dealt with.

These opinions are delivered at a distance from such problems, however. True, Kristof and his wife have travelled the world and interviewed poor, uneducated and sick women in many cultures. His *NY Times* columns on the plight of women in most of the world are compassionate and moving as is the book they wrote together, *Half the Sky*. Yet for some strange reason, Hirsi Ali – who was once one of these same women and experienced their dire condition firsthand – is not worthy of this same compassion, nor even entitled to speak with ferocity.

Why, you ask? Because Kristof, like many other sequestered social critics, has arrived at his own analysis of how one should deal with oppressed people. Above all, he admonishes, one must NOT make your oppressors angry! One must not be antagonistic to those who mutilate, repress, beat, enslave or murder, because antagonism will be interpreted by the oppressors as “bigotry.” So what is Kristof’s solution? Education. It is, he says, “the best way to open minds, promote economic development and suppress violence.” Let me suggest that education resonates with much the same timbre as appeasement.

Whose education is he referring to? The women who recoiled from the film *Submission* and denied that Islam was responsible? The men who beat their wives or behead their daughters for some imaginary transgression against the family honor? The imams, mullahs and clerics who spew hatred against Jews and preach jihad against infidels?

Or, is he suggesting that it is the outspoken women, the oppressed women themselves, the “strident” ones, who need to be taught their place and need to be educated to be polite, well mannered, and...well, submissive? People like Hirsi Ali, for example? People like the African slaves brought to these shores? How about the African-Americans today who can’t find jobs or get promotions? And by whom will they be educated? By the likes of patronizing western liberals?

Usually it is religious leaders who are reluctant to take moral positions. Despite the prevalence of concepts like evil and sin, liberal religious leaders are remarkably non-judgmental when it comes to actually fingering sinners and villains. So it is with people like Kristof and Buruma, who have apparently managed to deplore injustice by not only withholding moral judgments from criminals but by finding fault with their victims.

Such is the extent of their ego and pride that they strive to deprive victims of violence and injustice of their right to point out what they have suffered and who is responsible. Truly, we live in a topsy-turvy world, where accusations against tyrants and tyranny are themselves considered to be transgressions.

**I have taken pains not to use the N-word, even though it is in quotes and intended to be a sarcastic commentary.

Lorna Salzman's career as an environmental activist and writer began when the late David Brower hired her to be the regional representative of Friends of the Earth in NYC. Later she worked as an editor on *National Audubon's American Birds* magazine and as director of Food & Water, an early opponent of food irradiation, and then spent three years as a natural resource specialist in the NYC Dept. of Environmental Protection. She co-founded the New York Green Party in 1984 and in 2004 she sought the U.S. Green Party's presidential nomination. She is the author of "