

Title—Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate

Author—Leila Ahmed

Year—1992

Categories: Gender, Islam, Colonialism, Religion

Place: Arab Muslim Middle East

Time: 500-2000

Argument Synopsis:

Ahmed crafts an expansive work focused on how women and gender have evolved alongside Islam from the origins of the religion through the present. She is more focused on the discourses of women and gender, as opposed to the material conditions of women in Middle Eastern Arab history. For the purposes of her study, she remains geographically confined within the Arab Muslim Middle East. The book represents a first attempt at providing a perspective on the discourses of women and gender at crucial, defining moments in Middle Eastern Muslim history. The book is divided into three parts. Part one outlines the practices and concepts relating to gender in some societies of the region prior to the rise of Islam. Ahmed claims that Islam brought the Arabian organization of women in line with the rest of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean regions. She notes the importance of relating Islamic practices to the patterns of practices across these early Middle Eastern societies.

The second part of the book is focused on Arabia at the time of the rise of Islam. Ahmed strives to trace the changes that occurred when Islam was instituted and changed that accompanied its spread across the wider Middle East. The book's third part looks at the turn of the nineteenth century and outlines the socioeconomic, political, and cultural changes that came along with European encroachment on the Middle East. This section begins with a focused discussion of the Egyptian experience, as they were the first Middle Eastern Arab country to experience the consequences of European commercial expansion and also the first region to experiment with social change for women. Ahmed posits that Egypt in the present day continues to play a central role in the development of Arab discourses on women. The remaining chapters of the third section trace the impact on women of the socioeconomic changes that occurred over the course of the twentieth century, as well as tracing the appearance and evolution of feminist discourses.

Ahmed identifies two influential readings of Islamic scripture, that continue to inform that way gender and Islam interact. Namely, she reveals an 'ethical' Islam, which calls for the moral and spiritual equality of all humans, and a establishment, legalistic Islam, which is the most powerful interpretation of the texts. Ahmed argues that Muslim women often interpret the Islamic texts using the ethical lens, leading them to declare Islam as nonsexist. This establishment Islam is flawed in that it assumes the meaning of gender which informed the first Islamic society is reducible to a single, unconflicted meaning. Ahmed argues that European encroachment brought about the beginning of the unraveling of the dominance of this establishment Islam. She reveals the influence of the European experience in the Middle East, noting that colonial discourse determined many of the meanings of Islamic symbols, notable the veil. She criticizes the modern notion of returning to an 'original' Islam as itself a response to colonialism and colonial attempts to undermine Islam and Arab culture and replace them with Western practices and beliefs. Ahmed concludes by arguing that both Islamic and Western culture and open to reinterpretation and change.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Islamist position towards women traps women in the struggle over culture, in the same way that the colonial discourse did
- Notion of returning/holding on to an 'original' Islam is itself a response to colonialism's attempts to undermine Islam and Arab cultures and replace them with Western practices and beliefs
- Other ethnic & religious groups played as central a role in shaping Middle Eastern culture as Arab Muslims