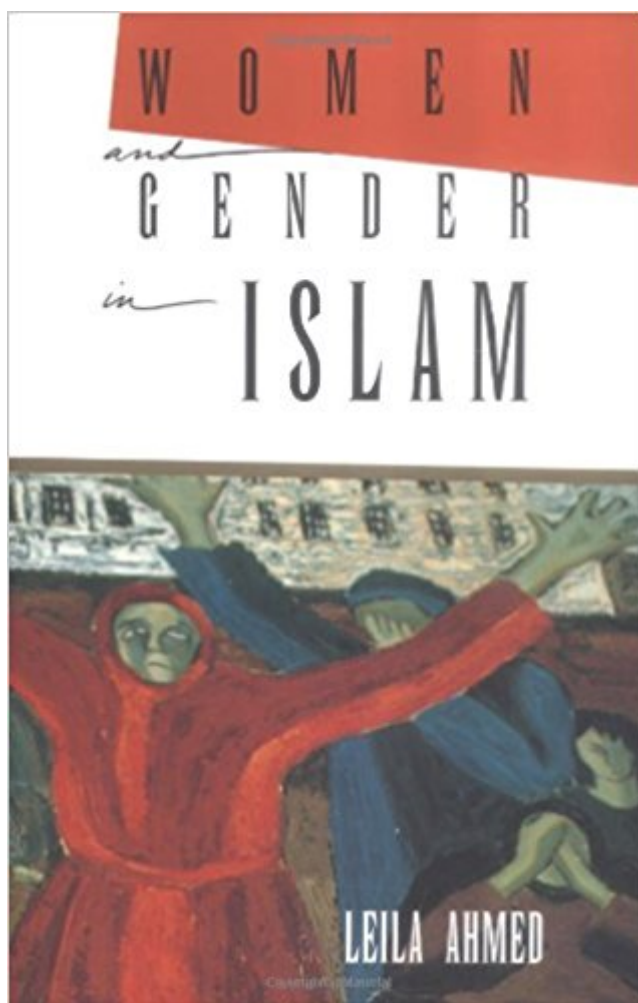


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# Women And Gender In Islam: Historical Roots Of A Modern Debate



## Synopsis

Are Islamic societies inherently oppressive to women? Is the trend among Islamic women to appear once again in veils and other traditional clothing a symbol of regression or an effort to return to a "pure" Islam that was just and fair to both sexes? In this book Leila Ahmed adds a new perspective to the current debate about women and Islam by exploring its historical roots, tracing the developments in Islamic discourses on women and gender from the ancient world to the present. In order to distinguish what was distinctive about the earliest Islamic doctrine on women, Ahmed first describes the gender systems in place in the Middle East before the rise of Islam. She then focuses on those Arab societies that played a key role in elaborating the dominant Islamic discourses about women and gender: Arabia during the period in which Islam was founded; Iraq during the classical age, when the prescriptive core of legal and religious discourse on women was formulated; and Egypt during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when exposure to Western societies led to dramatic social change and to the emergence of new discourses on women. Throughout, Ahmed not only considers the Islamic texts in which central ideologies about women and gender developed or were debated but also places this discourse in its social and historical context. Her book is thus a fascinating survey of Islamic debates and ideologies about women and the historical circumstances of their position in society, the first such discussion using the analytic tools of contemporary gender studies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This survey examines the historical roots and contemporary condition of Islamic discourse on

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"Elegantly argued and intertwining at least three subjects of great contemporary interest – Islam, feminism and postcolonialism – it is certainly both timely and thought provoking." – Cornelia Sorabji, Times Higher Education Supplement "[O]ne of the best studies of Islam's discourse on gender – an aspect of Muslim culture many non-Muslims find particularly difficult to understand." – Hans Kundnani, Wall Street Journal "Ahmed's rousing book is destined to become a classic. . . . It gives [Muslim women] back our rightful place, at the center of our histories." – Rana Kabbani, The Guardian "A pathbreaking survey of Islamic discourse." – Publishers Weekly "I would not hesitate to recommend this book as a good source of information." – Joyce Mokhesi-Parker, Africa World Review "Clearly one of the book's enduring strengths is Leila Ahmed's genuine, as opposed to academic, concern (a distinction often lost on writers of Islam) that Muslim women, for too long the subject of inflated homilies or hollow gender confrontations, strike up their own debate – on grounds designed to suit rather than stifle." – Riffat Yusuf, Africa Events "Leila Ahmed's beautiful style takes us back to antiquity and guides us through the ages; we are made to revisit the past through the eyes of a woman – an unusual and rather refreshing way to enquire into past societies. She possesses the skill and expertise to venture into such an arduous enterprise, her sharp mind allowing her to make perceptive remarks about Muslim men and the use and misuse of religion not just as a tool of social control, but also as a cultural system, as political discourse, a means of resistance at different historical junctures." – Dr. Rashida Hankin, Islamica "[A] very thoughtful and very brave book. . . . Should be required reading not just for Muslim intellectuals and feminists, but also for those non-Muslims, particularly Western feminists and so-called experts, who scornfully dismiss Islam as 'sexist and bigoted.'" – Asian Times "With impressive scholarship, lucid style and a theoretical approach elegantly in command of both feminist and Islamic perspectives, Leila Ahmed . . . helps unravel the mysteries of gender and women in Islam. . . . The passion Ahmed feels for the plight of Middle Eastern women is matched only by her commitment to a style of scholarship that is parsimonious, sober, rigorous and dispassionate. . . . The thematically rich arguments of her book are centered on debunking the Islamic and colonialist myths about Muslim women, as well as correcting what she feels are erroneous assumptions made by some Western feminists." – Abbas Milani, San Francisco Chronicle "While providing a wonderfully comprehensive survey of her subject, [Ahmed] shows how Western chauvinism has harshly – and unfairly – judged women's status in Islamic societies. She

exposes this bias with force and eloquence and, in the process, makes a brilliant case for the liberation of Islamic women on their own terms and in their own time, free from Western constructs or dictates." — Susan E. Davis, *New Directions for Women* "An inspiring tour de force. . . . This courageous and provocative study is a formidable historiographical milestone on whose strengths we must learn to build." — Lidwien Kapteijns, *American Historical Review* "A provocative exploration . . . Leila Ahmed provides a sensitive, phenomenological rethinking of this timely subject. . . . this perceptive book marks a step toward addressing the deficiency . . . of objectively valid studies of Arab women." — Kevin F. Dwyer, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* "[Ahmed] ably portrays the circumstances of women from the medieval period into modern times by synthesizing various materials. The outcome will allow the general reader a far richer notion of women's society as a whole." — Sherifa Zuhur, *Middle East Journal* "A masterful discussion of women's condition in the Muslim Middle East. She highlights the crucial historical arguments over women by skillfully incorporating excellent secondary sources on the early period and provides her own interpretations of certain key primary sources later on. . . . An important contribution." — Sherifa Zuhur, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* "A remarkable tour de force, conceived, presented, analyzed, and articulated with unusual clarity. . . . An impressive social history of mores and attitudes toward women. . . . Because of the book's exceptional breadth and depth of discussion, I enthusiastically endorse Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* as a classroom text, as a reference work, and as an exemplar of what feminist cultural history can be." — Carla Petievich, *Feminist Collections* "This is a book that had to be written. This is a book that must be read. No other general survey of women and gender in Islam exists. I am deeply grateful to Leila Ahmed for giving us this book." — Catharine R. Stimpson "This thoughtful and thought-provoking book should be required reading for anyone who is interested in the complexity of women's experience." — Elizabeth Fox-Genovese "A signal contribution to the question of Islam and gender as well as a solid overview of the history of gender in the region. This is a highly original, well-researched book that explores a topic of great current interest in a responsible and enlightening fashion." — Judith Tucker "Ahmed's book is a serious and independent-minded analysis of its subject, the best-informed, most sympathetic and reliable one that exists today. It is most powerful and compelling in its absence of clichés and hedgings, and more than anyone before her Ahmed discusses women and gender in Islam as a lived and contested reality." — Edward W. Said

Leila Ahmed's study of women in Islam initially impressed me tremendously. The opening chapters discuss women in the Near East prior to Islam, pointing out that many of the institutions that are associated with Islam (the veil, the harem and concubines, for example) pre-date Islam by thousands of years. Similarly, the cultural subordination and objectification of women in the Near East also predates the birth of Islam by hundreds of years. In fact, Ahmed shows, jahaliyya (pre-Islamic) Arabia was remarkably egalitarian in terms of gender roles. Her scholarship in this regard is top-notch, and was a real eye-opener for me. Ahmed goes on to show how, as Islam spread beyond the Arabian peninsula, there was a gradual acculturation that placed women in increasingly subordinate positions - causing conflict within the faith, due to its explicit admonitions that both genders are equal in the eyes of God. How this conflict played out and how the issue was eventually resolved were other strong points in the book. I was therefore disappointed by her close examination in the last chapters of the book of women in Egypt, at the expense of a broader study of women throughout the Islamic world. To be fair, Ahmed explains her decision, holding that Egypt (after the Mongol invasion) was less influenced by the Ottoman Turks, and that it was also among the first Islamic states to come into close economic and social contact with the west. I had rather hoped that she would address the broader issues around gender across Islam, though, given its title. Another disappointment was Ahmed's lengthy discussion of the veiling of women in Islam. While the custom is certainly a symbol to Westerners of gender differences, I had hoped more attention was given other issues - such as equality before the law, differences in custom by region, and economic and educational opportunities for women in the Islamic world, rather than focusing so deeply and narrowly on this one topic. The book is a worthwhile read, particularly for its discussion of the roots of gender identity in the Muslim world. I was also impressed with the way in which Ahmed analyzed data and related it to the conclusions she made. However, I had hoped for a broader discussion of issues across a broader cross-section of the Islamic community.

way too academic and dry

Let me get one thing straight first and foremost: religion can be used for good or bad, yes, but be it Christianity, Islam, or the book of Mormon, it's more often than not a pile of nonsense typically used to subjugate others, and justify backwards views and incorporate them into political bodies in which they do not belong. Leila Ahmed, however, makes a VERY important distinction our western media should take note of. We cannot pretend that Islam fosters sexism more than, say Christianity, and we certainly can't refer to Arab culture as a whole as some thing that is dominated by Islam, as it is

often certain Arab cultural traditions that permeate Islamic jurisprudences and interpretations (fiqh) and thus Sharia law. Tldr religion is garbage imo, but we can't blame religious groups for ALL of the oppression of women in the world, religion feeds culture, but the reverse is also true.

Incredible feat of wrapping 6000 years of history (to Mesopotamia, to Babylon, to Modern Day Turkey and Iran). This one of those books you keep going back to for its incredible collection of facts and history. Ahmed's book goes beyond Islam, and to the evolution of religion parallel to women's studies. A must read.

Very informative but very dull and its just info thrown at you although it goes into detail about the history of women in Islam. Pure info.

I love the content and the look of the book. It is a great class, just not something I would make it my career.

good read about Islam and women and i would recommend it to any one interested in the subject.

An essential reading for any Women's Studies course.

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