Book Reviews


Despite the elevated position enjoyed by women in the early days of Islam, women in the Muslim societies have generally been subjected to male domination and oppression. The legal structures, social institutions and personal behaviours are highly discriminatory towards women in many ways. There are extremes of control, exclusion, injustice and, indeed, brutality being meted out to the women in the name of Islam. This is one of the themes discussed by Leila Ahmed in her work under review. The book deals with women and gender in Islam as a lived and contested reality. It explores the historical roots of the contemporary debate about women and Islam by tracing the developments in discourses on women and gender from ancient world to the present.

The author of the book, Leila Ahmed, is first professor of Women’s studies in religion and was appointed to the Victor S. Thomas Chair in 2003 at the Harvard Divinity School. Prior to her appointment at Harvard Divinity School, she was Professor of Women’s Studies and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she was director of Women’s Studies Program. Besides the introduction, the book is divided into three parts: part I deals with the Pre-Islamic Middle East; part II focuses on issues pertaining to women during the medieval era, covering a period from the rise of Islam to its ensuing centuries; while part III discusses the issues related to gender and women in the modern era, especially in the wake of colonial domination of the Middle East in the thirteenth/nineteenth century. This is followed by a conclusion and notes. An index of names, places and important terms and concepts at the end of the book adds to its usefulness. The overall scheme of her book is chronological, but each chapter explores a specific theme.
The chronological focus of the study stretches from the ancient to the modern period, whereas in spatial terms, the work primarily focuses on the Middle East including Egypt, Arabia, Mesopotamia and Iran, etc., but it also refers to developments in other regions and areas such as Turkey, South Asia and Greece, though in brief, for comparative purposes. As for the reasons for selecting the locale for her research, the author informs that there exists preliminary scholarship on these areas, which provides very useful information, and hence, the basis for her study.

Reviewing the existing literature, Leila Ahmed points out that there is a dearth of literature and contemporary scholarship on Islam and gender. The only available general account of women in Arab history are such works as Wiebke Walther’s *Woman in Islam* (1981), which is more anecdotal than analytical in nature, and does not employ the feminist perspective. Similarly, Ira Lapidus’s seminal work *A History of Muslim Societies* (1988) makes no mention of women or the construction of gender prior to the thirteenth/nineteenth century. Keeping in view this historiographical silence regarding the issues of women and gender in the contemporary scholarship on Islam, Ahmed submits that the findings in her study are essentially “provisional and preliminary” (p. 4), since in many ways her work is the first of its kind.

Regarding her sources, the author informs that for studying Muslim societies and the Arab culture, she has utilized primary sources including the Qur’ân, *Aḥādīth* collections, and other classical texts of the early Islamic era. Nonetheless, for studying non-Muslim and non-Arab cultures, she has relied entirely on secondary sources. As for the citation method, the work follows the Chicago Manual/Kate L. Turabian’s Manual in her end-notes.

Part I of the book deals with ancient pre-Islamic Middle East. Leila Ahmed informs that archaeological evidence suggests that women in ancient Middle East enjoyed an elevated and possibly even a privileged position prior to the rise of urban societies. Relying on Gerda Lerner’s argument, the author maintains that urbanization with increasing population and need for labour force contributed to women’s subordination in general. For instance, in the Sassanian society in Persia, where Zoroastrianism was the state religion, patriarchal family structures were instituted which demanded total obedience of women to men. On the contrary, the upper-class women in the region enjoyed high status and legal rights and privileges, and also played an important role in economic and religious spheres. Nonetheless, veil (face covering) and seclusion of women were also prevalent among the upper-class women. In fact, veil was used to distinguish respectable women from those who were publicly available or were a fair game (see, pp. 14–15).
In the ensuing centuries, the advent of Christianity effected some changes in the Middle East. Challenging the prevalent notions in the Zoroastrian socio-religious order, Christianity recognized female spirituality, and the equal spiritual worth of men and women. However, these notions were contradicted by the perceptions of the early Church fathers who regarded women as the “cause of sexual temptation, corruption and evil”, and branded women as the “Devil’s gateway” (p. 36). In the Byzantine society, seclusion of women was prevalent and female infanticide was also practiced. Mindful of the exceptions, the author avoids making generalizations, and mentions that women’s position in Hellenistic society improved outside Athens. For instance, in Egypt, which was then a province of the Hellenistic Empire, women were not secluded and played an important role in the public arena (see, pp. 29–30).

Part II of the work covers the entire medieval era till the beginning of the thirteenth/nineteenth century. Leila Ahmed maintains that in the ancient world prior to the rise of Islam, there existed three major religious traditions in the Middle East, viz. Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism which prevailed in the Byzantine and the Sassanian Empires. When Islam appeared in Arabia and in the ensuing decades its neighbouring regions came under the political sway of the Muslim rule, a large number of people entered the fold of Islam. These converts brought their own traditions of thought and customs with them, which led to the assimilation of the scriptural and social traditions of the Jewish and Christian populations into the corpus of Islamic life and thought. Muslim women, for instance, adopted the veil, which was apparently in use in Sassanian society in Persia, as well as seclusion of women, which was prevalent in the Christian Middle East and Mediterranean regions like Syria and Palestine (see, pp. 14, 18, 26, 55).

Leila Ahmed reveals that according to the Qur’an, only the wives of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) were required to veil, since a high standard of piety was expected from them. Later, after the expansion of the Muslim Empire in the adjoining regions including Persia, where the upper-class women veiled, veiling became a common practice among the upper-class Muslim women (see, pp. 55–56). Therefore, the author argues that the contributions of the conquered societies to the formation of Muslim institutions and mores concerning women need to be taken into account (p. 4).

The author highlights the contribution of Islam to women’s rights, e.g. Islam banned female infanticide, and divorce and remarriage were permitted. Regarding marriage and the relationship of husbands and wives, she reminds the Qur’anic assertion that both husbands and wives have corresponding rights over each other in equitable reciprocity (Qur’an 2: 229) (p. 63). She adds that Islam has also recognized women’s right to inherit property as well as to
control income and property without reference to male guardians (see, pp. 110–112).

The author cites precedents from the early Islamic era indicating the elevated position of women in those days. She mentions that the first convert to Islam was a woman, i.e. the wife of the Prophet (peace be on him) named Khadijah (d. 3 B.H./620), who was economically independent and was involved in trading (p. 42). Women were also important transmitters of the early verbal texts of Islam, i.e. the Hadith literature. ‘A’ishah (d. 57/677), the Prophet’s wife, had, for instance, narrated more than two thousand Ahadith, which were incorporated into the Hadith compilations. It clearly shows that the Muslims of the early Islamic era had no difficulty in accepting women as authorities (p. 47). Moreover, women in the early Islamic era freely participated in warfare. After the demise of the Prophet (peace be on him), his wife ‘A’ishah used to give legal verdicts and decisions, and many people used to consult her. She also delivered a famous public address in Makkah, and also assumed political leadership for a brief period after the assassination of the third Rightly Guided Caliph ‘Uthmān (d. 35/656) (see, pp. 61, 73–75).

Challenging the contemporary Islamist argument that the establishment of Islam improved the condition of women, Leila Ahmed argues that this is not supported by empirical evidence. Problematizing the issue of gender in Islam, she contends that despite the fact that women in the early Islamic era enjoyed a better position, historically speaking women in Muslim societies have been oppressed by the patriarchal structures (passim). The central argument of her study is as follows: there are two distinct voices within Islam representing two competing understandings of gender. One is expressed in the pragmatic regulations for society instituted in the early centuries of Islam, while the other one is expressed in the articulation of an ethical vision of Islam, which is “stubbornly egalitarian” with respect to sexes. Nonetheless, this egalitarian vision is in tension with the hierarchical structures instituted in the early centuries of Islam (see, pp. 63, 65–66).

The author argues that the sacred and the authoritative text of Islam — the Qurʾān — presents a different message from that of the makers and enforcers of orthodox Islam. In fact, the Islamic law or sharīʿah was codified some centuries after the demise of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) during the Abbasid era. The political, religious and legal authorities in the Abbasid era presented a rigid and dogmatic interpretation of Islam which served the interests of the ruling classes. However, taking a sympathetic view of these early law-makers, Ahmed contends that they strove to the best of their abilities to render Islamic precepts into law that expressed justice
according to the available measures of their times. It is unfortunate that their descendants are reinstituting the same old laws when it comes to women.

The author further argues that the practices instituted in the early Islamic era were relevant only to that particular society at that historical moment. These practices were never intended to be normative or permanently binding on the Muslim community (p. 66). Like many modernist scholars of Islam, Ahmed stresses the need to reinterpret many Qur’anic verses such as those dealing with polygamy. According to the Qur’an, if men are polygamous, they are required to treat their wives equally, and the Qur’an goes on to declare that husbands would not be able to do so. The Arabic phrase connotes permanent impossibility, and may suggest that men should not be polygamous (p. 63).

Leila Ahmed also discusses the resistance from the Muslim society to the legal structures instituted for the benefit of the ruling classes. Sectarian groups such as Kharijis and Qarâmatians banned child marriage, while the latter group also banned polygamy as well as veil. In addition to these groups, the Sufis also implicitly challenged the way the Islamic establishment had conceptualized gender (See, pp. 66, 71, 99).

Part III of the book deals with the modern era. In the wake of colonial domination of the Middle East, the issues of women’s position in Muslim societies were used as the spearhead of the colonial attack on these societies. There were, however, contradictions in this colonial discourse. For instance, Lord Cromer, the British consul general in Egypt, was famous in England for his opposition to feminism, but in Egypt he championed the cause of women’s emancipation, especially unveiling (p. 153). Not only the role of Muslim intellectuals such as Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afgânî (d. 1314/1897), Rîfâ’ah al-Tahtâwî (d. 1290/1873), Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1323/1905) and Qâsim Amin (d. 1326/1908) in women’s liberation has been examined, the contribution of women feminists and activists such as Malak Hefni Nassef, Huda Sha’rawi (d. 1366/1947), Mai Ziyada (d. 1360/1941), Doria Shafik (d. 1396/1976) and Zeinab al-Ghazalî (d. 1426/2005), and feminist writers like Alifa Rifaat (d. 1417/1996) and Nawal El-Saadawi (1350- /1931- ) has also been critically assessed and their approaches compared (See chapters 9–10, pp. 169–207).

The author believes that the question of veil has assumed a central position in the contemporary discourse on gender and Islam. With reference to the reassertion of Islam in recent times, she analyzes the recent trend among Muslim women to appear once again in veil and other traditional clothing. She interprets it in two ways: it symbolizes resistance to the hegemony of the West and Western modernity; while some argue that in some cases, it may be seen as an attempt to return to a ‘pure’ Islam — the pristine and original
version of Islam, a restoration of its indigenous traditions in contrast to the Western modernity (see, pp. 220–225, 235–236). Nonetheless, she reminds that there cannot be a return to a past of “unadulterated cultural purity” (p. 236), because the so-called “revitalized and reimagined Islam” (p. 236) has been informed by the Western discourses, such as on women’s rights and human rights, in many ways.

The book under review is highly original and well-researched as well as thought-provoking. It has added a new perspective to the debate on gender in Islam in early 1990s when it was published. Unlike many Muslim scholars of Islam, the author’s approach is neither apologetic nor defensive regarding various injunctions of Islam. In her own way, she has tried to remove some of the misconceptions regarding women and Islam such as injunctions regarding polygamy. Her own interpretation of some of the verses of the Qur’an is very radical (for instance see page 63). As for the theoretical framework, the work employs a blend of feminist and Islamist perspectives. Empirically, the work is quite rich in terms of data and cross-cultural comparisons and references. The author is not only well-conversant with the contributions of the orientalists to the study of Islam, but also frequently cites from the works of feminist scholars such as Judith Butler (1956– ), Nabia Abbott (1897–1981), Gerda Lerner (1920– ) and Nancy Cott, etc., and critics of feminism such as Elizabeth-Fox Genovese.

Nevertheless, some critical comments and observations on the book would not be out of place. The author has frequently used the semantic constructs such as Islamic societies, Islamic culture and Islamic women. The term ‘Islamic’ refers somewhat to the ideal type, i.e. how these societies, culture and women should have been, whereas the term ‘Muslim’ refers to the actual and the existing. So for the purpose of clarity, phrases like Muslim societies, Muslim culture and Muslim women would perhaps been more appropriate. Similarly, the semantic construct of ‘Medieval Islam’ (chapter 6) seems to be loaded and politically charged, as the chronological phrase ‘medieval’ connotes conservatism and backwardness.

Moreover, in the work under review, certain ‘facts’ have been uncritically accepted, such as ‘A’ishah’s age at the time of her marriage with Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him), and the age difference between the Holy Prophet (peace be on him) and his first wife Khadijah. Scholars of Islam have written on these controversial issues, but the author does not seem to be acquainted with such works. In addition, the usage of the term ‘early Islamic society’ is quite confusing in her work, as she has used it at least in two meanings: first, to refer to the times of the Holy Prophet (peace be on him) and the ensuing three decades of the Caliphate of the four ‘Rightly Guided
Caliphs,’ and secondly, to refer to the early six centuries of Islam covering the era of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates.

In addition, at certain points the demarcation between the Islamic traditions and the pre-Islamic indigenous traditions of the Muslim societies seems to be blurred. The author seems to have overlooked the distinction between the traditions instituted by Islam and the existing pre-Islamic social, religious and ideological heritage of the present day Muslim societies, which considerably influenced the practices of the Muslims living in these societies and still continues to inform them in many ways.

Last, but not the least, there are quite a few statements and assertions in the work that raise eyebrows: the author seems to be implicitly endorsing that there are contradictory statements in the Qurʾān since the two distinct voices within Islam representing two competing understandings of gender have been derived from the Qurʾān itself. Such contentions have made the work quite controversial.

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What was once unthinkable, has happened. Up to the 1970s, to experts and laymen across the board, Islamic resurgence was the least likely thing to ever take place in Bangladesh. While Islamic resurgence at every level of the polity had become a fait accompli by the early 1990s, since the turn of the century there is nothing unusual about Islamic militancy, terror and even suicide bombing anywhere in the country. The erstwhile “secular and socialist” Bangladesh has turned into “Islamic.” Having Islam as its “state religion” and Islam-oriented parties and groups as important power brokers since the overthrow of the Sheikh Mujib-led one-party rule in 1975, Bangladesh has had a complete volte-face.

What had begun with the official renunciation of the symbolic “secularism” and “socialism” by General Ziaur Rahman (1975–1981) got further momentum during General Ershad’s “benign” military autocracy (1982–1990). Islam-oriented political parties have not only emerged as