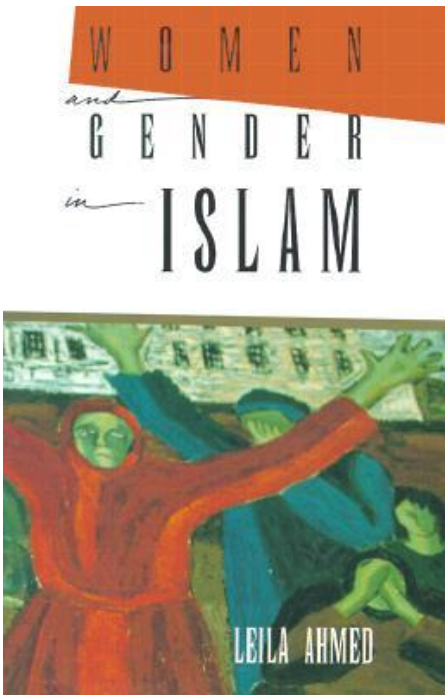

Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate

Leila Ahmed

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Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate Leila Ahmed
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.

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

Date	:	Published July 28th 1993 by Yale University Press (first published 1992)
ISBN	:	9780300055832
Author	:	Leila Ahmed
Format	:	Paperback 296 pages
Genre	:	Feminism, Religion, Islam, Nonfiction, History, Gender, Womens, Academic, Gender Studies, Spirituality

From Reader Review Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate for online ebook

Cara says

Over 20 years old now, this book is still a great introduction to women in Islam. It's detailed and even-handed, suffering only from an over-emphasis on Egypt and a lack of information about the non-Arab Muslim world. Leila Ahmed insists that Egypt is somehow representative of the Arab world as a whole, but it's obvious she's just more familiar with her own country. I don't really blame her for this. I would have also liked to see some comments on the non-Arab world - even though Islam originated in the Arab world, most Muslims are *not* Arab and no book about Muslim women can be considered complete if it focuses only on the Arab world. I don't agree with the author about everything, but though she states her opinions, she is not at all disrespectful of opinions other than her own (for example, on the wearing of Islamic dress). It is nice to read a book on the subject that's not invective and inflammatory, one way or the other.

Amirsaman says

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Sedighe Vazehi says

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Neko Neha (BiblioNyan) says

This book is about the sexism and gender roles in Islam. It begins with the ancient historical context and works its way through the years, focusing on how the evolution of patriarchal societies took shape, and then tapers off with discourse about the differing roles in the modern era. This is the first book that I have read regarding Islam and feminism, and I must say that I found it to be wholly intriguing, and an excellent place to begin your research if you are interested in the same subject matter.

The book offers plenty of insight into the history of Islam and how it was shaped by influences outside of the faith, particularly during the time of its establishment. It was quite fascinating to see (via Ahmed's interpretation) how women were subjugated into these severely dehumanised beings due to men sexualising them constantly. It puts into perspective how many things either haven't changed during this present time, or how much of it has regressed in terms of equality. Ahmed uses an array of sources for her discussion, some of which consist of Hadiths and verses from the Quran, usually highlighting how women are mostly viewed as equals within the core precepts of the faith of Islam.

I believe that Ahmed asks all of the important questions regarding gender roles within the religion, and how much of that is a society's inherent thirst for power and their need to oppress versus what the fundamental beliefs of Islam pertain to. However, with that said, the book is over 20 years old and does show a bit of its age.

The vernacular used is highly academic and severely dry and dense. If you're looking for something that is intelligent but also easy to absorb, you won't find it here. She gets supremely detailed, often time going on long information dumps to provide background or context for one or two arguments that aren't given enough attention to make her point. Another thing to keep in mind is that when she wrote this book, there weren't nearly as many people discussing gender roles and the progression of intersectionality in Islam, so her sources are few and far between, as well as not aptly versed in the subject matter. Lastly, a lot of the words used are also a tad bit outdated given the evolution of language and how many of the words either have different meanings now, or are rarely even used.

Another aspect that can be a bit frustrating is that Ahmed's thoughts are limited to the Middle-East and Egypt. This is most likely due to her being Egyptian and wanting to focus on, not only her own background

and experiences, but also the region where Islam originated so as to stick to the foundations of these societal practises. While **many** Muslima in present times are not of Middle-Eastern or Arabian descent, I felt (personally) on a cultural and religious scale that the information can be applied to those who are interested in or practising Islam just because of how much of the religion's influence stems from these parts of the world.

Regardless of the challenges that came with reading this, mostly in relation to its age if I'm to be honest, I feel that this is **a very vital** piece of reading material for people who would like to learn more about gender roles in Islam, and really any organised faith, and those who'd also like to obtain some basic historical information on the evolution of male-female dominant societies. As I've mentioned before, it's a superb place to start because it lays out the groundwork by asking all of the right questions, particularly for intersectionality in today's climate, and shines a light on the commonly taboo topics that very few people like to discuss when having discourse about equality.

Spencer Riehl says

Fascinating, clear, detailed, and readable.

Things to remember for the future:

1) This book does an amazing job placing the foundation period of Islam within the wider middle eastern and Mediterranean cultures, almost all of whom shared terrible misogyny and repression of women. Except for maybe Egypt at this time. Greeks were no good, Romans no good, Jews no good, and Christians not really any better than the cultures Islam was originally created within and then spread and conquered.

2) What Ahmed terms the “ethical guidance” of The Quran is worth digging into more. Ahmed interestingly points out how much tension there is between the messages of the Quran, the ethical decisions of Mohamed, and the later Islamic legal tradition. Basically, the laws are awful, in contradiction with the ethical standards set by the Quran.

3) The way the West influences the discourses within Islam. Particularly interesting is the way westerners who had no love for feminism back Home chose to champion supposedly feminist causes in the colonies in order to actually reinforce their own hegemony. “It was this discourse of colonial “feminism” that the notion that an intrinsic connection existed between the issues of culture and the status of women, and in particular that progress for women could be achieved only through abandoning the native culture, first made its appearance” I have never thought about the way the encouragement to abandon one’s culture only goes one way, and that’s implications for where we believe the root of sexism or racism lies.

Very good book. Thoroughly enjoyed and feel more well informed today than two weeks ago.

Dylan says

This book was well written and provided the new perspective I was hoping to gain by reading this. I would be interested to read some other books on the topic of Women and Islam to get a more well rounded

perspective because I am sure this book is biased (just like any book of a certain topic). My ultimate takeaway: Religion and culture are two different things.

Sofia says

Leilah Ahmad provides a fascinating, well cited and thought provoking history of women in the Middle East prior to the advent of Islam. She provides a history of how the prevailing attitudes and beliefs regarding women were absorbed into Islamic thought as the empire expanded. Ahmad goes on to discuss the effect of colonialisation of Arab countries and the resistance from the indigenous populations arising in the form of certain dogmatisms. From here on she focuses on the Arab world, and more precisely on Egypt. While thoroughly interesting, it could have been even better had she been able to include the non Arab world and its history too. Nonetheless it is still an excellent book and still so relevant all these years after its first publication.

********Edit********
Read this first in 2014, then again in 2015 for my MA, and then again this year (2018) for a Islam and Feminism Critical Reading Group, and have upped my rating to 5 stars because this is a book that keeps giving each time I read it!

Pelks says

This book was an excellent read and really uncovers a lot of the thorny (and sometimes unexpected) ways that feminist discourse about the Arab or Muslim world has been co-opted by misogynist/colonial powers. It also presents a different and, frankly, refreshing look at the differences between Islam as a power structure and what Ahmed calls "ethical Islam". Despite being about these complex and fraught subjects, the book is a fairly straightforward read which remains mostly free of any difficult academic jargon. Although arguably the book is not perfect, there were stil multiple times while reading that I was genuinely fascinated by the ideas presented, and I felt that I gained a lot of much-needed perspective from reading it.

I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in intersectional feminism, and at the very least the chapter entitled Discourse of the Veil should be read widely.

Carmen says

Ahmed, Leila. Women and Gender in Islam. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.

(forgive me, this is a rough review...)

Leila’s Ahmed’s groundbreaking 1992 work, Women and gender in Islam, is an extremely well-researched and informative introduction to a history of women in Islam, though, as with any such work with broad ambitions, there are shortcomings in terms of coverage. (For a good overview of her argument in the book, read the conclusion)

Ahmad begins her book with a background on women in ancient Mesopotamia as well as in the Christian

pre-Islamic era, pointing out that the veil and other aspects of culture that eventually became associated with Islam were class markers in many pre-Islamic societies. Surprisingly in her chapter on the life of women during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, she argues that Islam created a new patriarchal order which undermined certain forms of freedom women had in pre-Islamic Arabia. In a chapter that outlines the more open and matrilineal marriage customs of Arabia before the coming of Islam, she points out that Muhammad's first wife Khadija's economic independence had more to do with pre-Islamic culture than with Islam itself, and argues that the public participation of women in religion and general life during Muhammad's lifetime was a cultural norm that was undercut by new Islamic practice. "The ground was thus prepared […:] for the passing of a society in which women were active participants in the affairs of their community and for women's place in Arabian society to become circumscribed in the way that it already was for their sisters in the rest of the Mediterranean Middle East" (62). She points out that, while Islam did seem to undermine certain cultural liberties women had in pre-Islamic Arabian society, it did protect them from some of the excesses practiced by neighbors.

Furthermore, Ahmad contrasts what she calls "two distinct voices within Islam, and two competing understandings of gender, one expressed in the pragmatic reg ulations for society […:] the other in the articulation of an ethical vision" (65-66) It is this ethical vision which Ahmad focuses on and which she argues undermines "the hierarchichal structure" between men and women. She claims that it is this ethical vision, rather than to practice, to which laywomen point when they say that in Islam men and women are seen equal. With the spread of Islam into other societies and culture, she claims that these cultures affected interpretations of Islam in which women were required to become much more passive. She also claims that such historically determined power relations impacted the collection of hadith and the version of the Quran that was accepted as the final version, pointing out that alternative viewpoints on the role of women such as those of the Qarmatians or certain Sufis were suppressed.

After chapters about early Islam which are extremely detailed, her chapters on Medieval Islam seem to gloss almost 800 years of practice, and it is at times hard to discern which Islamic society, in which era, she is dealing with. This chapter does, however, serve as a transition between a focus on the early era of Islam in the first half of the book to a detailed focus on 19th and 20th century Egypt in the second half of the book. For the rest of the book she describes how colonialism impacted the history of Egyptian feminism. Because the British cynically co-opted feminist arguments for "women's rights" as justification for continued occupation, this ends up associating emergent women's movements with colonialism and the West. Especially illustrated in the fight over veiling, the veil and women, at large, become territory over which culture wars are fought. As Spivak has also pointed out white men were fighting "brown men" to "protect" "brown women." Ironically, these same men were fighting incipient feminist movements back in Europe. Ahmad also critiques early Egyptian writers who conflated European culture with women's rights—pointing out that it is ludicrous to ask a woman to adopt a completely different culture in a move for equality, especially when European cultures historically had just as problematic treatment of women. She looks at several different feminists from varying backgrounds, including Zeinab al-Ghazali who was affiliated with the reformist Muslim Brethren movement and who believed that Islam provided women with all of the freedom they needed; as well as Doria Shafik whose feminist activism appealed more to Western feminism and who campaigned for women's political rights.

Ahmad continues with the developments of the late twentieth century in which opportunities for women to participate in education grew, as did the return to more conservative dressing affected by political developments in Saudia Arabia, Iran, and elsewhere. Her focus on Egyptian feminism means that she sometimes reviews the thought of non-Muslim Egyptian feminists—such as the Christian Palestinian immigrant Mai Ziyada and other Coptic Christian women.

In conclusion, she critiques the tendency of resistance movements to be trapped in discourses determined by the West. With regard to the role of women, she argues that “The Islamist position regarding women is also problematic in that, essentially reactive in nature, it traps the issue of women with the struggle over culture—just as the initiating colonial discourse had done. Typically, women—and the reaffirmation of indigenous customs relating to women and the restoration of the customs and laws of past Islamic societies with respect to women—are the centerpiece of the agenda of political Islamists […:] in least in part because they were posed as central in the colonial discursive assault on Islam and Arab culture” (236-237). In the end, she says we need to escape this circle in a way that would not be “complicit” in “serving Western interests but that, at the same time, would neither set limits on the freedom to question and explore nor in any way compromise” the ability of women to pursue the right to equal contribution to society.

One theoretical problem I would have liked her to address further is in her differentiation between what she calls the “androcentric” practice in Islam and the ethical message found in the Quran, a message she also recognizes in Christianity and Judaism. Ahmed writes “Arguably therefore, even as it [Islam:] instituted a sexual hierarchy, it laid the ground, in its ethical voice, for the subversion of the hierarchy” (238) My question, (and I acknowledge that, as a non-Muslim, this is one of my major questions as I try to respectfully learn as much as I can about Islam), how does one deal with this seeming conflict between the technical aspects of practice, even within the lifetime of the Prophet, and the ethical voice that appears to "subvert" it. Is the life and are the teachings of the Prophet, which occurred in a specific time and culture, to be emulated or are they to be transcended by way of the ethical vision that was revealed to him?

Murtaza says

There's a curious and persistent disconnect that exists in cross-cultural discussions of the relationship between women and Islam. In the view of most non-Muslims, the religion seems hierarchical and obviously disadvantageous to women. The proof of this given are that its laws seem to seclude women in various ways and push them out of public space. To the chagrin and bewilderment of such interlocutors however, many Muslim women don't seem to agree with this conclusion. Not only do they insist that Islam is not sexist — despite the undeniably sexist practices and laws reigning in much of the Muslim world — but they actually insist that it offers them a potentially superior form of egalitarianism, which they actively demand and would be loathe to part with. How do we reconcile this?

In this excellent book, Leila Ahmed reconstructs something like a Women's History of Islam. The book traces the origins of misogyny in Muslim societies, but also explains what it is in the religion that human beings, women, who just like men naturally seek dignity and equality, find appealing. In doing so the book charts the ways in which the religion has been formulated and interpreted since its earliest days, right up to the modern period.

Ahmed's thesis consists of two main points. First, the misogynistic structures of Islamic law were formulated not during the early period of Islam's creation, the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, many of whom were women and who contributed in various ways to the corpus of Islamic teachings, but during the later Abbasid Empire. As the Arab empire expanded, Islam interacted with and assimilated practices from existing Christian, Jewish and especially Zoroastrian communities in Iran and Iraq. Like most of the rest of the world, the pre-modern Middle East was an intensely misogynistic place. Many practices harmful to women reigned there, especially among the elites, including the maintenance of massive harems and patriarchal marriage structures that empowered men at women's expense.

As Muslims gradually adopted the practices of the older and more sophisticated urban civilizations that they came to rule over, the elan of their earliest days, in which women were at times oppressed but at other times were warriors and compilers of hadith, began to wane. Perhaps most crucially, the spiritual context in which certain practices of the early Muslims took place — including practices of the Prophet himself — was forgotten or suppressed in favor of a dry legalistic interpretations of events. Things that were contingent to premodern Arabia were set in stone, while the spiritual background of the actions of the early Muslims, expressed in the egalitarian nature of the Quranic text, were downplayed or forgotten. The interpretations of Islam that that those in power laid down ended up being almost invariably disadvantageous to women but very convenient for the powerful men of the Abbasid period.

If that were the whole story it would be quite elementary. Few women would stick with a religion that seemed to have been obviously legislated against their interests. But counter to the "establishment" Islam of politically powerful men, there has always been another egalitarian Islam that has appealed to the broad masses of people, including women. In its ethical and moral voice, Islam proclaims the total equality of men and women as living souls, differentiated in value only by their piety. While the applied outward structures of Islamic law have often been disadvantageous or hostile to women (though not as clearly as orientalists claim, nor have their own societies been much better in the full view of history), women have also justly continued to hear an egalitarian moral and spiritual message in their readings of the Quran. As such they have advocated for their rights on an Islamic basis throughout history and continue to do so. Their allegiance is to the popular, "non-technical" Islam, based on spiritual and ethical equality. It also happens to be this Islam that has held the emotional allegiance of the vast majority of Muslims since the inception of the religion.

The first part of the book deals with the formation of Islamic law during the Prophet's time and its transformations under the Abbasids. It then glides very quickly over the Ottoman medieval period before getting into modern Egypt, which appears to be Ahmed's specialty. The richness of the research that she brings to both subjects is impressive. Ahmed mines huge numbers of primary source documents to unearth common attitudes towards women and explain how entirely contingent interpretations of doctrine and history have been reified into law. She doesn't seem to specialize Turkey, Iran or South Asia which necessarily limits the scope of the book but I found that her focus on Egypt constituted an intellectually satisfying case study.

Ahmed's reading of contemporary Islamic movements in Egypt, many of which claim women as adherents, is nuanced and perceptive. She is correct that those who try to implement practices of a distant past that they do not know, which is indeed unknowable, are embarking on a fools errand. But using the example of Egyptian women's movements, Ahmed articulates how complex the modern revival of Muslim practice is. Anyone considering it to be mere reaction is missing the story. The Islamic dress of many working women in Muslim societies is entirely novel, a modern version of clothing with no precedent in the past when few women were educated or lived public lives. Egypt's Muslim women are articulating an alternative modernity in their lives and lifestyles, as they have moved into the professional job market, government and academy in unprecedented numbers over the past century.

There are a number of general takeaways from the book worth reflecting on. Faced with oppression, some women in Muslim societies have attempted a wholesale cultural conversion to the West as their mode of feminist activism. Looked at soberly, this is a strange response and has in fact not been the norm over time. Meanwhile many "male feminists" who have set their eyes on Muslim women have been motivated by less than noble aims. Colonial officials explicitly saw targeting women as a means of destroying Muslim societies from within and leaving them prone for exploitation. Meanwhile, putatively reformist Muslim men like Qassim Amin have been positively hateful towards the women of their societies at times, decreeing their

"emancipation" from the veil (defined by colonialists as the ultimate signifier of culture or lack thereof, a formulation implicitly accepted in turn by reactionaries) as a way of expiating their own embarrassment at being associated with unworthy women who are looked down upon by the West.

Things are clearly not always as they seem and anyone making simplistic pronouncements about women and Islam is probably repeating some very tired and inexcusable old errors. If nothing else, I hope readers of this book will come away from it understanding the absurdity of giving Muslim women the ultimatum that to obtain their rights they must discard their culture and religion wholesale and become Westerners. For those who know or care enough to see it, Islam offers an egalitarian vision based on spiritual, moral and ethical equality among human beings. It is this vision that has kept the devotion of huge numbers of people of both genders, despite the oppression of the powerful.

No culture or society is inherently misogynistic, even those that have annihilated thousands of women in literal "witch hunts" in their past. In the West, women's emancipation was made possible by the expansion of political freedoms to all, which made organizing on behalf of women possible in the first place. We should allow both the political and social space for Muslim women to articulate their own vision of rights and freedoms. This is in fact possible to do in an Islamic context and has been done by many of the brilliant women whose lives are recounted in this book. In creating such a program for women's empowerment, perhaps a more sustainable vision of feminism can take root in the Muslim world than the narrowly upper class and Western-centric version that was imported during colonialism and has been withering away every decade since the colonizers left.

This book is justly considered a classic, both of women's studies and Islamic historical scholarship. It is a powerful rallying cry against misogyny, racism, colonialism, and the many other ugly expressions of power that try and dress themselves up in garments of virtue, whether secular or religious.

Katrina says

If this book was not so academically dry, I would recommend it my friends who have been asking about how Islam and feminism intersect. Ahmed gives a long view of women in Islam from the time of the Prophet Mohamed (peace be upon him) to the late twentieth century, using examples from throughout the Middle East and many from Egypt. At first I thought Ahmed was anti-Islam, since her views of early Islam contradict most of what I've read on the period; she argues that women were actually very ill-treated whereas others argue that early Islam gave women rights that were unusual for the region and time period. However, she goes on to introduce the idea of ethical Islam, the teachings of the Qur'an that men and women are equal, and uses this to show that Orthodox Islam is just one interpretation of Islam -- one which unfortunately has become dominant around the world and under which women have not fared well. I was particularly interested in her chapter on feminism, in which she argues that Western feminism (often misused by colonialist men who were far from feminists back at home) did much to damage the fight for women's rights in the Muslim world, because it advocates a wholesale rejection of Islam as a culture rather than a feminism based in ethical Islam.

N. says

A book you won't regret reading, however it is far from being flawless .

First, I found the title quiet misleading; almost half the book was dedicated to the feminist move in the Arab world and mainly in Egypt. I won't say that this was not informative or interesting , actually it was, but that was not what I was curious about , or the impression given by the book title. Actually I expected more concentration on Islamic doctrine and customs.
Second, the first half of the book had two major flaws in my opinion; lack of evidence or lack of "credible" reference, and some of what I may call "jumping to conclusions". Leila Ahmed, chose to rely on what she called references, though some of which are nothing more than a more or less similar book to hers, i.e. a book which needs a reference itself, and in many times Ahmed depended only on one reference as such to prove her point. In other parts, Ahmed used just one or two pieces of evidence to reach a major and transforming conclusion; like when she used Kadija's financial status and Welfare and another woman (I don't recall her name and to whom I didn't find any reference in other books) to conclude that women of the Arab peninsula enjoyed financial independence and inheritance rights!!
Third, in my opinion, the author's argument was quiet vague or ambiguous in some parts; first she was clear that much of the customs practiced in Muslim countries, some of which are misogynistic are due to indeginous customs of neighbour civilizations rather than Islamic doctrine. Ok I can understand that, but Ahmed didn't refer to some Quranic verses which suggest women subordination or lack of efficiency, (according to some widespread interpretation of those verses). Another point which Ahmed left unexplained, was her referring to that "Islam may have given women some subordination or inequality in practical or legal practices , though Islam sure gave them full spiritual equality". Ahmed blamed Islamic societies for concentrating on the first part while failing to embrace that "spiritual equality". I wished she would have given us at least one or two examples of how that spiritual equality would have been embraced or legalized.
On the whole the book is an interesting informative read.

Edward says

Like Amina Wadud's "Qur'an and Woman," this is another good book to read if you want the perspective of a Muslim woman on issues of gender within Islam. Whereas Wadud's book took a more theological, exegetical approach from the Qur'an, Ahmed examines the issue more from a socio-historical one. She begins with evidence of what life was like for women in Arabian society before Islam (Jahilia), moving into Muhammad's time, to the Golden Age of Islam and beyond.

Also like Wadud, Ahmed does not sugarcoat the often poor record of women's rights in Islamic societies. Her point is to put this record in a fairer context, since much of the discussion about this issue is often done on behalf of women by men, both Muslim and non-Muslim. One of the most contentious battlefields in this area is still going on today: The Discourse on the Veil. Should Muslim women veil? Is it inherently oppressive? These questions are making the rounds in news stories now, but they are old ones. Properly understanding them, and even knowing why they are asked at all requires some historical background.

For this particular matter Ahmed begins with where veiling even came from. Like the "72 virgins" verse, veiling is not mentioned anywhere in the Qur'an. As with the virgins again, the popular notion of what veiling means today came from interpretation and cultural practice over time, long after Muhammad's death. Veiling was actually a holdover from pre-Islamic culture. The Byzantines practiced veiling, and it usually denoted class status. Women from wealthy families wore the veil as a marker of privilege, indicating that they were not like common women who were "exposed" to the public. This practice carried over into Islamic society at first in a very limited way: only Muhammad's wives wore veils. Only later did this become more widespread.

Ahmed argues that this is true of many Islamic practices, and is not unique to Muslim societies. All cultures carry a past that influences it, whether this is acknowledged by its members or not. The transmission of values and norms can never be fully controlled, and no society ever makes a completely clean break with the one that preceded it. Think of the U.S. and British culture. Despite literally waging a war with Britain to break away from it, a huge portion of what we consider the "American" way of life is inherited from them. This includes everything from language, to legal proceedings, to classical ideas about freedom and human rights.

Getting back to Islam and gender, Ahmed states that at its beginnings "Islam selectively sanctioned customs already found among some Arabian tribal societies while prohibiting others. Of central importance to the institution it established were the preeminence given to paternity and the vesting in the male of proprietary rights to female sexuality and its issue." This produced mixed results for women at the time. Some changes were incontestably good--female infanticide was forbidden and curbed under Islamic rule, for instance. But others were definitely not. Among them were laws that put women at a disadvantage in court and legal matters, like divorce and inheritance.

However, this was already a problem before Islam: "But it is also relevant to emphasize that although Islamic laws marked a distinct decline, a Greek, a Roman, and a Christian period had already brought about major losses in women's rights and status. In effect, Islam merely continued a restrictive trend already established by the successive conquerors of Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean. In inheriting the mores that by the time of the Arab conquest had become the mores of the dominant, Christian population, Islam accepted what was deeply consonant with its own patterns of male dominance. Islam, then, did not bring radical change but a continuity and accentuation of the life-styles already in place." Women had been losing ground, so to speak, for centuries prior to Islamic dominance. Muslims did not invent this situation, then or now.

So why do so many women "allow" their "oppression" under Islam, today? Essentially, there are two versions of every religion: one that is bound up in rules and dogmas; the province of the elite, clerical order. The second is the ethical, often mystical vision that touches the layman in a personal way. It is the domain of the heart, the direct communion of one's soul or consciousness with what is considered higher or transcendent:

"The unmistakable presence of an ethical egalitarianism explains why Muslim women frequently insist, often inexplicably to non-Muslims, that Islam is not sexist. They hear and read in its sacred text, justly and legitimately, a different message from that heard by the makers and enforcers of orthodox, androcentric Islam."

This intersects with Wadud's book, which details the textual source of these ethical and egalitarian principles. I have observed this myself over the years, speaking to the religious and participating in religion myself. All spirituality begins and ends personally, regardless of how much stock you put in authority, scriptural or otherwise. It is what resonates with you at an ineffable level that draws you to, and keeps you in a religion, philosophy, way of life, etc. That resonance may or may not align with what is considered strictly orthodox, and yet this is usually not a problem for the "faithful." Ahmed notes that many Muslims, female Muslims included, believe that problems Islam faces today about gender equality will eventually be resolved because Islam is inherently just--it is people and their imperfections that bring the problems about, not the Qur'an, or Allah, etc. The same sentiment is common among Christians, who speak of the "sufficiency" of the Bible, and how whatever problems one might have from it stem from outside the text, not within it.

So how can the Islam of common practice be brought into accordance with what Ahmed calls its "ethical vision?" For feminism specifically, it must start with letting Muslim women find their own voice. For too

long, they have been told what they should or shouldn't do in their quest for greater autonomy. This is part of the Discourse on the Veil, and it is vital to know its history if there is to be any constructive dialogue about it.

Ahmed also emphasizes the role racism and colonialism have played in the matter of Muslim female rights. During the late 19th and early 20th century, many Islamic societies underwent a series of humiliations and defeats at the hands of Western powers, a process that took place around the world for decades. Europeans were blunt about their supposed superiority over these defeated peoples, believing their victories to be proof of said superiority. Military conquest was often followed by cultural conquest--the denigration of native practices and customs in favor of imported Western ones. Ahmed notes that a common target was the Muslim woman:

"Even as the Victorian male establishment devised theories to contest the claims of feminism, and derided and rejected the ideas of feminism and the notions of men's oppressing women with respect to itself, it captured the language of feminism and redirected it, in the service of colonialism, toward Other men and the cultures of Other men. It was here and in the combining of the languages of colonialism and feminism that the fusion between the issues of women and culture was created. More exactly, what was created was the fusion between the issues of women, their oppression, and the cultures of Other men. The idea that Other men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was to be used, in the rhetoric of colonialism, to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples."

Colonialism was not only brutally unethical, it was hypocritical. Western men derided the veil as evidence of "backwardness" in Islamic societies, but took no notice of the inequalities in their own culture. Their concern for women's rights curiously dried up once the matter of changing Islamic societies was past.

This had a huge and lasting impact on Muslim women, Ahmed argues. First, it prompted a lot of internalized shame and racism within Islamic communities. Muslim men in particular saw their culture being trampled left and right on the international stage, and basically bought the imperialist narrative that this was because that culture was inferior. Consequently, they absorbed and regurgitated this narrative, further enabling Western colonization. The most famous example of this was Qasim Amin, an Egyptian author who wrote "The Liberation of Women" in 1899. In it, he called for the unveiling of Egyptian women as part of the modernization process, so that Egypt could be counted among the "civilized nations." It was a landmark work that caused a great stir in the political and literary circles of the day, and Amin is still often referred to as the "first Arab feminist." As with many historical anecdotes though, this is a rather oversimplified and uncritical glossing of the facts. Ahmed delves into the book itself and shows that for a book purporting to "liberate" women, it does little more than shame and blame Egyptian women for all their nation's problems. By wearing the veil (which they often had no choice in doing) women were holding back Egypt. You can see how this put Muslim women between a rock and hard place.

Second, it prompted those who wished to resist Western colonization to associate unveiling, and by extension other issues pertaining to women's rights, with colonization itself: "Further, colonialism's use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and undermine native culture has ever since imparted to feminism in non-Western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests. That taint has undoubtedly hindered the feminist struggle within Muslim societies."

Ironically, by insisting on the superiority of its ways, the Western world has all but assured that some will never accept them, even if positive or needful. We see the fruits of this arrogance every day in headlines

from the Middle East and elsewhere.

Ahmed qualifies her lengthy overview of colonialist influence with the following:

"My argument here is not that Islamic societies did not oppress women. They did and do; that is not in dispute. Rather, I am here pointing to the political uses of the idea that Islam oppressed women and noting that what patriarchal colonialists identified as the sources and main forms of women's oppression in Islamic societies was based on a vague and inaccurate understanding of Muslim societies."

Her point is one that many feminists in more recent years have been trying to make: feminism must be intersectional. It has to account for the many layers that come into play when combating entrenched oppressions, like sexism. Issues of class, racism, and culture, both internal and external, must be incorporated into any attempt toward solutions. Otherwise you end up with white Victorian men and women telling Arabs to just abandon their culture because its worthless. Such "help" is always doomed to fail in the long run for the very simple reason that no one likes to be told that their entire way of life is garbage. If you wouldn't take this well from someone else, don't do it to others. Secondly, it isn't even necessary. Ahmed points out that there is a history of misogyny in Western societies too:

"Nevertheless, Western feminists do not therefore call for the abandonment of the entire Western heritage and the wholesale adoption of some other culture as the only recourse for women; rather, they engage critically and constructively with that heritage in its own terms. Adopting another culture as a general remedy for a heritage of misogyny within a particular culture is not only absurd, it is impossible. The complexity of enculturation and the depth of its encoding in the human psyche are such that even individuals deliberately fleeing to another culture, mentally or physically, carry forward and recreate in their lives a considerable part of their previous enculturation. In any case, how could the substitution of one culture for another be brought about for the peoples of an entire society or several societies?"

Substituting cultures is exactly what many westerners do when they propose "solutions" for female Muslim problems. "Take off your veil" is coded language for "your culture is inferior, and until you surrender it I will never respect you," regardless of intent. Ahmed notes that the reasons for wearing hijab and Islamic clothing is varied and complex. Many women choose to wear it not just for religious reasons, but because it confers very real social and cultural benefit. It creates a sense of belonging and place that is instantly recognizable and in which women can share among themselves. It can also paradoxically free them from the awkwardness and sexually charged nature of interaction between the sexes in Western settings--women who dress this way are automatically treated differently by men, because it is assumed that they are not interested in romantic or sexual dalliance. Consequently, they can be left alone to pursue entrance into professional and academic fields. Its adoption is much more grass-roots than the Arabic feminism of the past, which was usually more top-down. "From this perspective Islamic dress can be seen as the uniform, not of reaction, but of transition; it can be seen, not as a return to traditional dress, but as the adoption of Western dress--with modifications to make it acceptable to the wearer's notions of propriety. Far from indicating that the wearers remain fixed in the world of tradition and the past, then, Islamic dress is the uniform of arrival, signaling entrance into, and determination to move forward in, modernity."

What does this mean in the practical day-to-day life of being a non-Muslim American interacting with Muslim women, who also wants to be just and kind to them? The answer is as simple as it is revolutionary--stop talking down to them. Let them make their own choices about their own lives. Malak Hifni Nasif, a 19th-century Egyptian feminist quoted by Ahmed, was once asked something similar. Her response: "Not dictating to women about whether they should veil but enabling them to obtain an education and allowing them to decide for themselves was the course she commended to men."

Beaman says

Which is worse, having no book on a subject or having a flawed one? This is the dilemma Ahmed's book faces us with. The book suffers from factual errors and methodological shortcomings. Nevertheless, it's the first book to attempt the ambitious task of offering a historical survey of the topic.

To mention but one mistake:

Ahmed asserts that the case of Khadîja (the Prophet's first wife) shows that before Islam women in Mecca inherited property. To back this statement about women in pre-Islamic Mecca inheriting property, she writes, "Other women besides Khadija are mentioned in the texts as trading in their own right, for example, 'Aisha bint Mukharib (Ibn Sa'd, 8:220. 255, no. 26)." The presumption is that inherited money can serve as capital for trade.

Consulting the source she cites, Ibn Sa'd 8:220, one notices a few things. (1) The woman's name was Asmâ, not Â'isha. (2) She was indeed Meccan; however, she is only reported to have engaged in trade in Medina during the reign of 'Umar, i.e. after the death of the Prophet. Clearly, the report has no bearing on the pre-Islamic era (nor on Mecca in that period).
(3) Furthermore, she sold perfume that her son sent her from Yemen. So the report does not bear on the question of inheritance at all. That's three mistakes in one citation.

Saeed Ramazany says

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