

Leila Ahmed's Women and Gender in Islam

Leila Ahmed's book *Women and Gender in Islam* is not another description of the conditions of women in Islam. While researching for her book, the author soon realized she would have to concentrate on historical and contemporary Islamic discourses. She examines "constructs, institutions and modes of thoughts" central in the definition of women's place in Muslim societies.

The debates going on in the contemporary Arab world between Islamists and secularists -- between advocates of veiling and its opponents -- and the ways in which the issues of the veil and women as they figured in these debates were apparently encoded with political meanings that on the face seemed to have little to do with women, again brought the issue of discourse to the fore. Similarly, the way Arab women are discussed in the West, whether in the popular media or the academy, and the sense that such discussions often seem to be centrally even if implicitly engaging other matters through the discussion on women also highlighted the importance of taking the discourses themselves as the central focus of investigation (pg. 2).

Hence, Ahmed analyses the various contentions that religious and secular, East and Western debates assign to women in Islam, as well as their political interpretations. The historical framework of the book begins with pre-Islamic discourses and works its way to the present reemergence of the veil in Eastern Arab societies. It includes discourses during the rise of

Islam, colonialism and the turmoil that followed and persist, new discourses in the twentieth century, and the evolution of feminist thought.

Ahmed's analysis of discourses is quite enlightening and places relevant debates in their political, economic and socio-economic contexts. Hence, since definitions of women's roles reflect a continuity of Islamic civilizations with previous civilizations in the region, relevant mores and traditions entered into play with the rise of Islam. Eventually, colonialism and contemporary politics induced interregional and international discourses and debates over women's status in Islam.

Ahmed states that *the place of women in Islamic societies is essentially related, in a reactive manner, to the struggle over culture (pg. 237)* which sprung with colonial patriarchy at first and Western interpretations of women in Middle Eastern Arab societies at present.

Still part of the reactive nature of politics in the Arab world, women, among other tools, are used for political pressures and leverages by various political movements in the region.

Areas surveyed in the book, therefore, include regions that played basic and leading roles in the development of women and gender constructs during the respective periods of history. Thus, Arabia and Iraq were crucial during the rise of Islam. Egypt played a leading role


during colonialism in the nineteenth century and the feminist discourses which followed. *The first region in the Arab world to experiment with social change for women, Egypt played and continues to play a central role in developing the key Arab discourses on women, while developments in Egypt continue to parallel, reflect and sometimes anticipate developments in other Arab countries (pg. 6).* Mesopotamia, Greece and Iran were equally important for their importance or influence in the region and their relevance to the Islamic system.

Women and Gender in Islam presents an in-depth examination of discourses about women's place in Eastern Arab societies. The historical review spells out the history of women in Islam, and the historical analysis elucidates the development of women's status and its impact on Western-Arab cultural and political influences. Ahmed's analysis of Islam and women is absolutely enlightening for she cuts across all established ambiguities and misconceptions surrounding the issues in Western literature as well as the Middle East itself. Ahmed's skillfully makes the necessary distinctions between religion and politics exposing where, why and how overlaps occur, and how women are brought into the formula. *Women and Gender in Islam* is an profound interpretation of history for a better understanding of the present.

Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. ISBN 0-300-04942-0

R.A.H

W O M E N
and
G E N D E R
in
I S L A M



LEILA AHMED