



Leila Ahmed

Biography

Born in 1940, Leila Ahmed began her childhood in a modest villa with an expansive garden at the outskirts of Cairo. As a young child, her mother and grandmother provided her with her first tastes of Islam, a religion that would play a vital role in her later career. It was here that she learned the unique relationship women had with Islam. As she describes it, “For women, being in tune and aware of the wonder of life was part of what Islam was. It was not the ritualistic things one reads about, or the official Islam. It was about what sense you make of your life and how aware you were of other people and the stars and the rhythms of existence” (Lieblich). She learned that this “lived” Islam was just as important and profound as an official Islam.

In 1952, a revolution brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power in Egypt, ushering in an era of Arab nationalism. For Ahmed, this meant upheaval in her family life. Her father lost his job because of his opposition to Nasser’s Aswan High Dam project. A learned civil engineer, Ahmed’s father saw this project as politically motivated and shortsighted. However, with the prevalence of fierce nationalism, his opposition was looked upon as a form of treason. As a result, government harassment of the family ensued, almost costing Ahmed her opportunity to achieve her dream of attending college abroad. The revolution also compelled her to reevaluate her own identity. She wondered about her Jewish and Christian friends who were now part of the “other” in this emerging Arab nationalism. The Ahmeds were now being looked at as the “other” with their interest in Western ideas about culture and education. A harsh example of this was an experience Leila had in school when a Palestinian teacher slapped her for identifying herself as Egyptian rather than Arab.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1940 in Cairo, Egypt
- * Scholar of Near Eastern Studies and Women’s Studies

This page was researched and submitted by Christopher Kim Thomas and Elizabeth Hook on 5/23/01.



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During the 1960s, Ahmed attended Cambridge University. While still in Cairo, she had attended English-speaking Western schools and experienced a stark contradiction of emotions. She cherished her European education, but she encountered racism and stereotyping from her British instructors. This contrast continued in her years at Cambridge where she was always conscious of her “otherness.” She became frustrated with the simplistic views of Arab culture displayed by her peers. But she was equally suspicious of ideas of socialism and nationalism, embraced by some of her American and European classmates, having experienced their constrictive effects in Egypt. It was in England that she honed her balanced views, not giving way to extremism and over simplification. She received her Ph.D. at Cambridge and in 1981, she became professor of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. In 1999, she became the first professor of Women’s Studies in Religion at Harvard Divinity School where she currently teaches.

Ahmed’s experience constructing an identity while crossing social and cultural boundaries has had a strong influence on her work. She has experienced both Arab and Western culture. She has experienced the personal, “lived” Islam taught by her mother, as well as the ritualistic and sometimes oppressive Islam enforced by the state. She has experienced the educational opportunities afforded her by Western influences in Egypt, but suffered the racism and stereotyping of her British teachers and peers. These varied experiences have fed her work and compelled her to provide balanced, sensitive analyses in her texts. In her texts, Ahmed doesn’t highlight what is “right” or “wrong.” Instead, she describes complex situations in various ways and shows that multiple answers are possible to every question.

After publishing an early book in 1978 on Edward Lane, a nineteenth century Orientalist whose views are condemned by many Arab nationalists, Ahmed has focused her work primarily on gender and Islam. Specifically, she has examined women’s roles in the Muslim world and fought stereotypes about them, both within Islam and in the non-Islamic world. Her early articles show her effort to define an Arab feminist sensibility. In a 1984 article titled “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem,” she expresses her frustration with Western feminists’ assumptions about the Arab world. “Thus American women ‘know’ that Muslim women are overwhelmingly oppressed without being able to define the specific content of that oppression, in the same way that they ‘know’ that Muslim -



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Arabs, Iranians, or whatever - are ignorant, backward, irrational, and uncivilized. These ‘facts’ manufactured in Western culture, by the same men who have also littered the culture with ‘facts’ about Western women and how inferior and irrational they are” (523). It is impossible, in Ahmed’s view, to fight one stereotype (i.e. women as inferior) while employing another (i.e. Muslim as primitive).

In 1992, Ahmed’s personal and academic experiences culminated in the publication of *Women and Gender in Islam*, an exhaustively researched groundbreaking work on the history of gender in the Arab world and its implications for modern Arab feminists. She combines a thorough examination of Muslim history with an enlightened understanding of modern day issues of post-colonialism and Arab nationalism to present a balanced discussion of the role of gender in Islam. She traces the treatment of women in the Arab region from the beginnings of Islam in the seventh century AD through the modern Middle East. She also continues to fight against misogynist views in organized Islam and Western stereotypes about the primitiveness of Muslim culture. She criticizes the over simplistic views of the West, arguing that, “The peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women had always formed part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam” (149). She is equally suspicious of “official” Islam, acknowledging the historical justification for practices such as polygamy, but at the same time criticizing the practices as detrimental to a woman’s self worth. She includes an extensive discussion of the veil as a symbol with a complex history that has come to represent the current gender debate. The text is by her own admission incomplete. These issues are far from resolved and historical resources for this subject are often sparse. However, it is the most comprehensive work on gender and Islam, and, as reviewer Barbara Metcalf discusses, it is “a significant contribution - its ambitious scope, its lucidity and its committed vision all make it a work that will be stimulating and informative for specialists, students and general readers alike” (199).

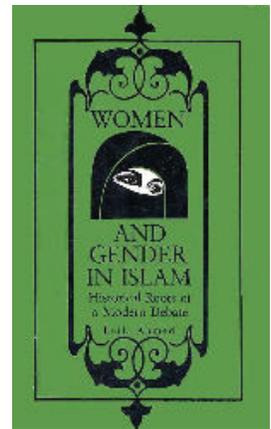
Ahmed’s most recent book, *A Border Passage*, continues this investigation of women, Islam, and the West, but its style sharply contrasts with her earlier works. The book is a personal narrative examining her life and the issues of identity she encountered as she moved between cultures. Using an enchanting, lyrical style, she seamlessly weaves her personal story with the political and social realities of the time. She is working with the same issues of sex, culture, and religion evident in her early works.



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“There are two different notions of Arab that I am trapped in - both false. Both imputing to me feelings and beliefs that aren’t mine. It was only when my discordant memories failed to make sense that I was compelled to look more carefully into the history of our Arab identity. Eventually I began to see the constructed nature of our Arab identity as it was formed and reformed to serve the political interests of the day.” In the end, she comes to the same conclusion that she always has. Women’s understanding of and role in Islam transcends the artificial boundaries placed on it by notions of Western feminism and Arab nationalism. As she states, “Generations of astute, thoughtful women, listening to the Koran understood perfectly well its essential themes and its faith. And looking around them, they understood perfectly well, too, what a travesty men had made of it.”



Ahmed’s work has been of immense importance to the study of Islamic views toward women. Ahmed was stunned when she came to the United States to find that so many well-read feminists had little clue about the lives of Muslim women. Professing an accurate perception of the religion and its relation to women became especially important to Ahmed as she challenged the ignorance about Islam in the Western world. Ahmed saw that non-Islamic people in the West, particularly in the United States, placed such a huge emphasis on polygamy, the veil, and female circumcision that, outside of these issues, they had little understanding of Islam. This problematic view of Islam is what Ahmed has set out to change.



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