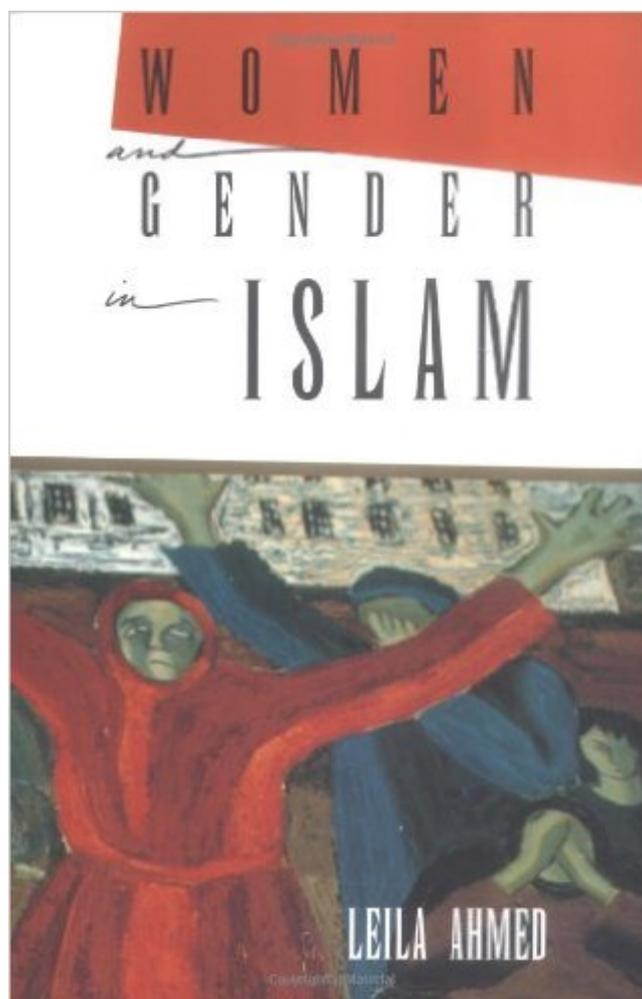


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Women And Gender In Islam: Historical Roots Of A Modern Debate



Synopsis

This book offers a history of the Islamic discourse on women and gender, locating the current debate within its historical framework. It is comprehensive, ranging from the ancient world to the present day, and considering the relationship of Middle Eastern women to education, culture, imperialism, social change, modernization, and feminism. Addressing central questions including the veiling of women, Leila Ahmed explores the various premises of Islamicist positions on women, including how the core Islamic heritage formulated issues of gender, how it altered in terms of the concepts and societies that Islam captured, and how Islamic discourse was affected by exposure to Western societies.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

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