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Book Review
**A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the
Middle East to America.**

By
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Yale University Press

Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian American scholar at the Harvard Divinity School is one of the leading academics who have long been addressing the complexities intertwined in the Muslim societies regarding conditions and lives of women particularly in the Arab world. Her previous seminal work on *Women and Gender in Islam* (1993) explores the historical roots and traces the developments in Islamic discourses on women and gender issues spanning from pre-Islamic Middle East to contemporary Arab world. Her latest work *A Quiet Revolution* (2011) provides a grand narrative of the veiling and unveiling in Egypt and the resurgence of veiling in the US particularly after the 9/11. She combines her personal experiences with the expedition in the Egyptian history to offer a meticulous analysis of social and cultural construction of the meaning, and significance of veiling with the changes in the socio-political context of Egypt. She also depicts a parallel resurgence of the veil in the US with the beginning of this century which resulted due to the spread of Islamism, network of immigrants Muslims like Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).

The book is divided into two parts. The first part of the book consists of eight chapters discussing the issue of veiling and unveiling in conjunction with Islamism particularly from the early modern period to late modern period in Egypt. Here, she explains the objectives, motivation and strategies of the Islamist; Islamist notion about women and their proper roles; the importance of women to the Islamist movement; and the role of women in activism.

Chapter one mainly focuses on the origin and genesis of unveiling in Egypt in the 1950s 'when being unveiled and bareheaded had become the norm in the cities of Egypt and other Muslim-majority societies' (p.10) which Ahmed ties with the influence of British imperialism, European modernity and its influence in the Egyptian society. Reviewing some of the previous works, e.g. the writings of Albert Hourani, Qasim Amin, and Lord Cromer she points out that being unveiled in this era was not a sign of secularism or rejection of Islam, but was 'simply the "modern" and "advanced" way of being Muslim' (p.43).

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Chapter two covers the period from 1920s to the end of 1960s that has seen many critical incidences and event such as founding of Muslim Brotherhoods, rise and fall of Nasser regime, a fierce rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Egypt to call it 'Arab cold war' and the victory of Israel over Egypt. These altogether, ultimately set the stage for the resurgence of the Islamist in 1970s. Chapter three focuses on the turmoil of Egyptian society, a shift of power from Nasser to Sadat who brings back Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt while Brotherhood's nonviolence shift gives other to rise with violence. Therefore, Ahmed considers the 70s as the turning point in veil's movement when the 'seeds of the resurgence' was sown (p.68). Over the chapters four, five and six she traces the process, means and methods used by the Resurgence and with it the veil, spread in the 70s and ensuing decades of 80s and 90s. Ahmed draws up on the contemporary accounts of the women and reconstructs the re-emergence of veiling in these decades that explains why by the end of 1990s the overwhelming majority of women adopted veil which marks 'the apparent willingness and even active desire of an ever-growing number of women to wear it' (p.116).

Last two chapters of the first section go beyond Egypt and Arab world to narrate the story of the migration and expansion of Islamism and the veil to America and the rise and increased prominence of the Muslim American organization such as ISNA. The growth of the Muslim population in America as Ahmed describes, is mainly due to two processes. The first process marks with the change in the immigration laws in 1965 that allows the non-European immigrants to reach America; second is the rising rate of conversion of African-American into Islam who now constitutes the 40 percent of the American Muslim. She also tells the story of development of Islamist organization and the eruption of violence (e.g. 1993 bombing of the World Trade Centre) in a changing climate in America in the 1990s.

Second part of the book consists of three chapters that deal with the issue of Islamism, Islam and women in America in the post-9/11, which sparked new levels of fear and suspicion of Muslims in the West leading to the eruption of violence against Muslim and attacks against women in *hijab*. Altogether, these shape the environment in which Islamism has been evolving in this decade. With this background, Ahmed describes the impact and effects of 9/11 on the social, political and cultural environment in American society as regards Islam, Islam and women in chapter nine. Ahmed also discusses the dominant themes and elements in the public conversation on women in Islam and reflects on the way public conservation, American views and foreign policy on the plight of Muslim women plays out, intertwines and interacts with actual lives of Muslim women whether they live in the States or abroad. On chapter 10 Ahmed discusses the impact of 9/11 on Muslim American organizations, particularly ISNA and its women member based on her observation and participation in the annual conventions through

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the ensuing years. She also discusses women's role and activism at ISNA and with sketches of some of the most prominent women in ISNA. The concluding chapter offers an overview of the main trends of American Muslim women's activism through the first decade of this century which as Ahmed considers, is 'the product of the convergence of key elements in the teachings of Islamism with the ideals and understanding of justice in America in these very specific decades' (p. 294).

Rise of Islamism is the main theme of Ahmed's analysis which within the space of four or five decades turns from a 'marginal' into 'the dominant' form of Islam within the West as elsewhere (p.300). This transformation, as she describes, influence on the widespread of the Islamist style of veiling that started off as a marginal Egyptian 'campus phenomenon' (p. 83) and turns into a 'quiet revolution' (p. 116) in the Muslim societies as well as in North America through 'immigration of Islamism' (p.157) and subsequent women activism in relation to gender and women's rights. Therefore, she comes to the conclusion that 'it is after all Islamists and the children of Islamists—the very people whose presence in this country had initially alarmed me—who were now in the vanguard of those who were most fully and rapidly assimilating into the distinctively American tradition of activism in pursuit of justice...and women's rights in Islam' (p.303).

Ahmed brilliantly unveils the complexities intertwined in the reemergence of veil to a lucid and uncomplicated style that makes this scholarly book an easy reading. Islamism as a dominant theme of the book requires a sharper definition and a detail on the typology of it. Yet, Ahmed's book is very distinctive as it takes the readers to travel through the history and the debates over the veil in a globalized world. *A Quiet Revolution* would inspire questions for further research on peripheral Muslim majority states (e.g. Bangladesh that is more modern on the one hand and more religious on the other) to explore women's activism as well subordination to patriarchy and Islam.

Mohammad Salehin holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Sydney (Australia), an MPhil in Peace and Conflict Transformation from University of Tromsø (Norway) and a Master of Social Sciences from Dhaka University (Bangladesh). He has taught Sociology at the University of Sydney and Bangladesh Agricultural University. He has published widely on Islam, gender, (faith-based) development, democracy and NGOs. His most recent article on Islam and democracy has appeared in *Sociology of Islam*. His main research interest includes gender, development, Islam and politics in South Asia. He is currently working on a book on Islamic NGOs and neoliberal development in Bangladesh.