

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants - A Feminist Reflection on Leila Ahmed's Women and Gender in Islam

Saturday 24 September 2022, by [JUSOH Ruby](#) (Date first published: 19 September 2022).

Almost ten years ago, I asked a senior activist, “what is it like, fighting for women’s rights in Malaysia?” She sighed, “it is a marathon, Ruby. A long marathon and you just have to keep running even when you know not the destination.”

Reading a book such as *Women and Gender in Islam* by Leila Ahmed reminded me of her words. To seek justice for women has always been a muddy road that sees no end to difficulties. I went through the pages of the book with friends in the Islam and Feminism Reading Circle, organised bi-monthly by Sisters in Islam (SIS). Even in Malaysia, struggles were (and are) aplenty. Unequal laws that forbid Malaysian mothers from passing citizenship to their overseas-born children and attempt to ban SIS, a feminist organisation championing human rights, are among the issues that could have shattered one’s faith as a Muslim feminist in the country.

However, there is hope. Leila Ahmed’s book tells the tale of Muslim women who fought for their selfhood in history. Their shares of ups and downs are inspiring and heart-breaking, the figures serving as both role models and warning signs to generations of women after them. Yet fighters never quit and those who sought the truth would eventually prevail, some posthumously, despite the condemnation of society.

The book’s strength lies in tracing women who dared to stand up for themselves in history. The process was never sudden – we had marvellous examples in the Prophet’s wives, Khadijah RA and Aisya RA whose lives represented two different sides of the same coin. Khadijah RA was a business-minded widow who proposed marriage to the Prophet and remained his sole wife until her death. Aisya RA, as outspoken as she was, lived her years observing the veil and seclusion prescribed to the Prophet’s other wives as well. Beyond the romanticisation of the Mothers of Believers as the ideal women, therein lies the stark reality of their existence. They were venerated yet cloistered, their own person yet expected to serve as paragons of virtue for fellow Muslims. Their images present them as the epitome of female perfection and humanity.

That was the mere beginning of what it means to be a woman in Islam.

For centuries, women have always pushed back against forces that wish to control them. Polygamous marriages remained contentious as women faced economic, social and emotional insecurities. Leila briefly narrated stories of those after Aisya RA’s generation namely Aisha bint Talha and Sukaina bint al-Husain who stipulated and asserted their rights in marriage contracts, underscoring the most threatening risk of being born female – if we do not articulate the need for freedom, others will take it away from us. Even worse, they would sweep it under the rug, pretending it had never existed.

Muslim women's progress continued to be transformed by a variety of factors such as culture, law and class. Only the very few could go against the grain. Outside the purview of marriage, the figure of Rabia al-Adawiyya looms large in Muslim narratives as one who renounced marital relationships and devoted her entire being to the pursuit of spirituality. In a way, her elevated spiritual reputation freed her from societal expectations. Unfortunately, this also signals that the prerequisite of female freedom is to be extraordinary, something not all of us can afford to be.

Two chapters titled *The First Feminists and Divergent Voices* focusing on early feminists during the colonial and postcolonial period in Egypt highlighted the diverse ways in which women have fought for their rights against the intersectional oppression of patriarchy and colonialism. They paid a heavy price for being who they were. Energised by the rise of education for girls, the Islamic movement and nationalism, societies began to learn that the polarisation of ideas was inevitable and there was no one dogmatic way of being a Muslim feminist.

Two renowned Egyptian women, Huda Sha'rawi and Doria Shafik epitomise the receivers of colonial education who utilised their background to shape the foundation of women's rights based on the western discourse, choosing to unveil as a step towards liberation. They were radical and subversive for their times, refusing to bow down to men from both the colonial and Islamic systems. Solidarity was the answer to their activism with Huda founding the Egyptian Feminist Union and the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women in the early 20th century. Doria Shafik followed suit decades later by establishing Bint Al Nil Union to pursue full political participation for women in Egypt, storming the Parliament for the right to vote.

On the other hand, some feminists found their voices in their identity as Muslims such as Malak Hifni Nassef and Zeinab al-Ghazali. Nassef, an eloquent author whose writings invoked deep anticolonial sentiments, brought about a brand of feminism that is not grounded on westernisation. She was a forceful intellectual whose death was grieved by many. At home with her native culture, her activism contested the dominance of the western-based discourse. Al-Ghazali, another famed figure, was trained to be a leader of the female Islamic movement by her father. Both women found themselves empowered by their upbringing, believing that Islam provides women with the right to self-actualisation through learning and public participation.

The two strands of feminism in Egypt represented the tense relationship between the predominantly westernised privileged class and ones that wished to express their female subjectivity grounded on native Islamic discourse. Language also became a point of contestation – westernised feminists had a comparatively weaker command of the Arabic language than their more Islamic peers. Speaking a language that is not native to their land made them exiles in a society that already diminished their feminist identity. Nonetheless, women from both sides were envisioning the same goal – for Egyptian women's dignity as human beings to be upheld and their choice to be active participants in society guaranteed.

Women need giants before them, giants who have painstakingly carved the path towards liberation. Their lives were not easy, and their motives were often misunderstood. Tragedies were rife from child marriages to a life of seclusion and loneliness, having broken boundaries of feminine propriety. Nonetheless, these feminist giants could not turn their backs on the cause. The two chapters, among many more in the book, taught me how to appreciate the complexities of the feminist experience. Growing up, my mind was set to associate progress with everything modern and regression with everything traditional. How wrong I was! The reality proves to be jarring. Women have been striving for justice and equality no matter where they came from. More often than not, the feminist giants had to manoeuvre the interplay between politics and patriarchy to the detriment of their personal lives.

The female destiny is such that she faces the risk of her freedom being violated in the name of others. The same can be said for Malaysia. Misogyny is ever-present on a daily basis, affecting women legally, socially and personally. Therefore, reaching a goal in the feminist movement is a sort of work that takes decades to materialise. The stories of the past, as elucidated so clearly by Leila Ahmed in the book, prepare us for the future that is uncharted, gruelling yet necessary. The journey is far and like those before us, we in the present must move forward and expand the path for those that come after us.

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P.S.

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