

WOMEN IN THE CHANGING ISLAMIC SYSTEM

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BIMLA PUBLISHING HOUSE

DELHI - 110052

Original Title :

MOSLEM WOMEN ENTER A NEW WORLD

First Published in 1936

Reprinted in 1983

Published by

BIMLA PUBLISHING HOUSE

DELHI-110052 (INDIA)

Distributed by

D. K. PUBLISHERS' DISTRIBUTORS

1, Ansari Road, Darya Ganj,

NEW DELHI - 110002

Phone : 27-8368

Printed at

GOYAL OFFSET PRINTERS

DELHI

**PUBLICATIONS
OF THE
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT**

SOCIAL SCIENCE SERIES

No. 14

TO MY SISTER

WHO FIRST STIMULATED MY INTEREST
IN THE EAST

P R E F A C E

THE American University of Beirut serves as a means for the exchange of ideas between the Orient and the Occident. It is therefore a privilege for the University to include in its series of Social Science publications Miss Woodsmall's volume—*Moslem Women Enter a New World*.

The book tells how the traditional customs of the East are being treated by a post-war generation. A great renaissance is taking place in Asia. As in all periods of transition, there are radicals who go to extremes and others who defend their cherished customs by calling upon moral precept and canon law. It is inevitable that such a comprehensive volume should contain material of a controversial nature, but even those who may disagree with some of the author's interpretations will doubtless appreciate the importance of the material.

The University does not seek through this book to promote some particular point of view. As Miss Woodsmall explains in her Foreword, the book represents her personal observations and she assumes full responsibility for her own remarks and conclusions. She has endeavoured to describe what is taking place in an objective and scientifically minded way.

Since Miss Woodsmall was intimately connected with the growing girls and young women of Istanbul for a long period of years, she gained a clear understanding of the social problems of the Near East. She has also been able to observe the customs of Muhammadan women in a great many countries and in a leisurely way. Her material has been gathered by constant travel, by intimate conversations with all kinds of people, by first-hand observation and by careful reading of recent newspapers and periodicals.

Miss Woodsmall is sympathetic with movements which are enabling Moslem women to enter new spheres of activity. On the other hand, her concluding chapter explains that she is aware of the danger of too rapid change and hopeful that the best qualities of Eastern life may be preserved. She has always been an understanding friend of the East.

Her book shows that her great concern is to see young Moslems adjust themselves to the modern world, without losing touch with spiritual values.

We are living in one of the most important yet baffling eras that the world has ever known. *Moslem Women Enter a New World* gives such valuable first-hand information, that it helps to clarify a fundamental problem of our age,—woman's place in modern life.

BAYARD DODGE

BEIRUT

April 1936

Although the University has its own system of transliteration, the Arabic names in Miss Woodsmall's book have been spelt as they are usually written in popular English books, so as to avoid confusing the reader.

FOREWORD

SOME books are written to fulfil the definite objective of travel or residence abroad; others are the inevitable result of a period of foreign experience. Of this latter type the present effort to portray the changing life of Moslem women is an illustration. Through the post-war years of living and journeying in the East, this subject has been for me an absorbing interest. Like a constant friend, who could not be forgotten after life has moved on to new associations, it has craved expression on the printed page.

During nine years in Y.W.C.A. service in Turkey and Syria, the transformation of the Near East, especially in Turkey, gripped my attention. From the balcony of our residence in Taxim Square, witnessing as from a box seat in a play the main events of the change in Turkey, I realized that I was also witnessing the drama of the changing East. The swift sequence of events in Turkey constantly lured me on to seek to know more of the meaning of change that lay behind its external evidence and especially to lift the veil in order that I might catch some glimpse of what was happening in the life of Moslem women.

Such an opportunity came through a travelling fellowship of the Rockefeller Foundation, which made possible over a year and a half of leisure to journey through the Near East—Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Palestine and Trans-jordan, across the Syrian desert to Mosul and Baghdad and thence over the Iraq border across the high plateaus and mountain passes of Iran, visiting Teheran and Ispahan and less frequented places. Finally this journey of discovery brought me to India with its great Moslem centres like Lucknow and Agra, Delhi and Lahore. To see and try to understand more fully the changing life of Moslem women were the only terms of reference for my study; I was free from any compulsion save that of the inner urge of an absorbing interest.

This book represents then the composite of some years of active service followed by a no less active period of a free-lance pursuit. The quest to understand the changing East

has led me to seek knowledge in many places—in cities, towns and villages, in schools and hospitals, in homes of many types, secluded harems and modern apartments. I have tried to view the East through many eyes—those of foreign observers, diplomats of my own and other countries, officials, missionaries, nationalist leaders in many spheres, conservative sheikhs, defenders of the Faith, and modern youth impelled by other loyalties than religion, Moslems and non-Moslems, peasant women untouched by modern progress, women leaders in civil and national life, and women whose life is bounded by the four walls of the harem.

Even with such a wide and diverse view of the Moslem East, I labour under no illusion of having unveiled the mysteries of the life of Moslem women. No outsider, however sympathetic, can penetrate the inner secrets of another life and culture foreign to his own. Moreover, observation, however unerring it may be, cannot be divorced from the eyes of the observer. My view of the East is inevitably tinged by my own personal background, and hence cannot completely mirror the facts. Therefore this book can only give the observation of one who has seen the East frankly and sympathetically through the eyes of the West. A Moslem woman would write very differently of her changing world.

Undoubtedly, long time residents in the East might give a more intimate portrayal of their special fields of knowledge. Their very familiarity with one single field, however, has necessarily precluded the wider view which this book attempts to give. Its main justification may be, therefore, the fact that it presents the synthesis of change in the East. The same forward movement characterizes the life of the East as a whole, whatever may be the rate of speed in different countries, and the changing life of Moslem women is merely one phase of the whole transformation. This integral connection between the change in the position of Moslem women and the present fundamental change in Islamic life and thought makes a study of Moslem women to-day more than a study in Eastern feminism. Rather may it be interpreted as the index of the change in the whole Islamic social system. Therefore a study of the

position of Moslem women made ten years hence, would, I believe, have less fundamental significance than such a study at the present time.

Although I have centred my attention on the changing status of Moslem women, I am not unmindful of the steady advance during the post-war period in the position of women of other religious communities in the Islamic world, primarily Christians. But in all of the countries except India, included in this study, Moslems constitute a majority, Islam is the dominant religion, and Moslem cultural and social patterns of life prevail. Hence changes affecting Moslem women have primary significance for women of other faiths in this same area. It is true also that the progress among Moslem women has undoubtedly been promoted by the example of the higher status of women of other communities. The interweaving of these reciprocal influences affecting the life of women of different religions, Moslems, Christians and others, is part of the whole subject of the interaction of different religious influences on the total life of the East and offers an interesting and important field for exploration. But such a study is beyond the scope of this book.

It has also not been possible to include all of the countries in the Moslem world in the range of this one study. The almost unchanged Arabia affords a view of early Islam, which would have given the background for present-day change; as would also the comparative lack of change in other parts of Moslem Africa, except Egypt. The Netherlands Indies opens up a field of entirely different Islamic influence, where Moslem women have been singularly free from the veil. The Moslem area of the Soviet Republics presents the unusual laboratory of enforced and successful social revolution. Afghanistan, on the contrary, recalls the fate of a reformer who tried to impose reform on a backward country. A letter of introduction to the ex-King Amanullah and Queen Suriyeh, which I unfortunately had no opportunity to present, is a reminder of the effect of political events on personal plans. These several areas of Islam, which for various reasons, I have been unable to include in this study, would doubtless reveal specific trends of change in the Moslem world. But the countries which it has been possible

to cover, give perhaps a fair cross-section of the changing Islamic scene.

In the attempt to find the meaning behind the fact of change in the Moslem world I have realized that statistics are not of principal value. The East has not as yet registered its life in statistical form. Moreover, statistics to-day are half-truths to-morrow. The subtle nuances of change are of real significance. To see one woman from a high-class family of Mecca to-day unveiled would be a more surprising symptom of change than the thousands now unveiled in Istanbul. I have tried, therefore, primarily to understand trends of Eastern life, the currents already visible on the surface and the undercurrents which determine the main movement, using statistics, where available, only as subsidiary indications of change. It is evident that the very essence of change makes it impossible accurately to portray it, for while you have stopped to record trends of change, life has moved on. To-day a new book each month could scarcely keep up with the changing status of Moslem women; whereas formerly one every century would have given a fair picture, for there was no change.

Into the texture of this book are woven countless conversations indulged in with a sense of leisure that is not yet a luxury in the East. The pages of the book recall to me the spell of the East—the beauty of secluded courtyards and lovely Persian gardens, the peace and repose of mosques, the teeming life of cities, the colourful confusion of bazaars, the charm of Eastern hospitality. Although all this cannot be shared with the reader, perhaps this book may arouse in some a new desire to see and know the life of the East. If so it will not have been written in vain.

To express my gratitude by name to all of those who have had a share in this book would be indeed a difficult task as there are so many, both of the East and of the West, to whom I am indebted. It would be a very real pleasure, however, to mention all of them, as their names recall friendly services of many kinds and gracious hospitality. But perhaps to leave my thanks to individuals unexpressed publicly may be the better part of kindness and also wisdom, since I could not wish these friends, who have so generously

helped me, to bear any criticism from my purely personal observations. I cannot, however, fail to express my appreciation to the American University of Beirut, for the many contacts it has afforded throughout the Arabic world, and also my deep indebtedness to the Rockefeller Foundation for the travelling fellowship without which this panoramic view of the changing life of Moslem women would not have been possible.

RUTH FRANCES WOODSMALL

GENEVA

January 5, 1936

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
<i>Preface by</i> BAYARD DODGE	9
<i>Foreword</i>	11
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	19
<i>Introduction:</i> THE NEW EAST	21

PART ONE

Frontiers of Social Change

I. LIFTING THE VEIL	39
II. IN AND OUT OF PURDAH	59
III. MILESTONES TO PROGRESS	71
IV. A LIMITED SOCIAL LIFE	85
V. THE LATER MARRIAGE AGE	95
VI. FAMILY LIFE, OLD AND NEW	104
VII. TRENDS CONCERNING POLYGAMY AND DIVORCE	115

PART TWO

Education—The Key to Progress

VIII. THE EDUCATIONAL AWAKENING IN IRAQ	133
IX. THE BEGINNING OF GIRLS' EDUCATION IN IRAN	144
X. THE ROAD AHEAD IN GIRLS' EDUCATION IN INDIA	160
XI. NEW EDUCATIONAL IDEALS OF MODERN EGYPT	174
XII. THE NEW ERA OF GIRLS' EDUCATION IN PALESTINE AND TRANS-JORDAN	187
XIII. MANY INFLUENCES PROMOTE GIRLS' EDUCATION IN SYRIA	202
XIV. TURKEY ACHIEVES MODERN EDUCATION FOR GIRLS	217

PART THREE

The New Economic Role of Moslem Women

CHAPTER	PAGE
XV. CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF PROFESSIONAL LIFE	239
XVI. TURKISH WOMEN AND THEIR NEW ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE	253
XVII. MOSLEM WOMEN IN INDUSTRY—HOME AND FACTORY	264

PART FOUR

Health Standards Old and New

XVIII. HAZARDS TO HEALTH	277
XIX. THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL CUSTOMS ON HEALTH	289
XX. INDIA SEEKS BETTER HEALTH STANDARDS	304
XXI. IRAQ AND IRAN BEGIN A PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAMME	312
XXII. A MODERN HEALTH PROGRAMME IN SYRIA, PALESTINE AND TRANS-JORDAN	321
XXIII. A NEW HEALTH FOUNDATION FOR NATIONAL LIFE IN EGYPT AND TURKEY	337

PART FIVE

The Widening Sphere of Moslem Women's Interests

XXIV. THE WIDENING SPHERE OF MOSLEM WOMEN'S INTERESTS	355
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PART SIX

The Pressure of Change on Islam To-day

XXV. THE INTERPRETATION OF ISLAM IN THE ARABIC WORLD	375
XXVI. ISLAM AND CHANGE IN INDIA, IRAN AND TURKEY	389
XXVII. THE VOICE OF WOMEN IN MODERN ISLAM	401
<i>Conclusion:</i> EAST AND WEST	409
<i>Appendix:</i> THE PRINCIPAL KORANIC TEACHINGS ABOUT WOMEN BY A SYRIAN SHEIKH	417
<i>Index</i>	420

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

SOME WOMEN'S COSTUMES OF INDIA

INDOOR AND OUTDOOR COSTUMES OF WOMEN OF IRAN BEFORE THE PRESENT TRANSFORMATION INTO EUROPEAN STYLES

AN INDIAN PURDAH WOMAN OF THE POORER CLASS IN A PALANQUIN
GROUP OF JERUSALEM WOMEN AT THE GATE OF THE RESIDENCY,
OCTOBER 26, 1929, MAKING A PROTEST AGAINST ZIONISM

SPORTS DAY, ON WHICH HUNDREDS OF ISTANBUL SCHOOL GIRLS
DEMONSTRATE THE NEW IDEALS OF PHYSICAL EXERCISE IN MODERN
TURKEY

A MOSLEM GIRL IN DAMASCUS WHO HAS DONNED THE CHARSHAF
AT AN EARLY AGE, BUT HAS NOT YET DROPPED THE VEIL

THE LIFE OF THE WOMAN OF THE DESERT—A BARE LEVEL OF
EXISTENCE

THE FIRST GIRLS' ATHLETIC EXHIBITION IN TABRIZ, JUNE 1935

THE UNEDUCATED MOSLEM WOMAN IN INDIA DEPENDS ON THE PUBLIC
LETTER WRITER—BAZAAR AT RAWALPINDI

THE AWAKENING OF EGYPT

BEGUM SHAREEFAH HAMID ALI, A DISTINGUISHED MOSLEM LEADER
OF THE WOMEN OF INDIA

EGYPTIAN GIRLS ENJOY BASKET-BALL

MOSLEM SCHOOL TEACHERS ON THE PLAYGROUND DURING A RECESS
PERIOD

PIONEERS IN CO-EDUCATION, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

A COOKING CLASS IN THE HOME ARTS SCHOOL AT ISTANBUL

LIFTING OF THE VEIL IN TURKEY HAS MADE MILLINERY CLASSES
POPULAR. CLASS IN A HOME ARTS SCHOOL IN ISTANBUL

THE VILLAGE WOMAN OF ASIA—AN ECONOMIC ASSET

THE TYPICAL VILLAGE MIDWIFE OF PALESTINE

WOMEN OF INDIA

A MOSLEM MOTHER VEILED, WATCHES THE TREATMENT OF HER CHILD
AT THE CLINIC OF THE CHILDREN'S WELFARE SOCIETY IN BAGHDAD
THE NURSES' TRAINING SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF
BEIRUT INCLUDES STUDENTS FROM A WIDE AREA—FROM THE
SUDAN TO IRAN

THE BEDOUIN WOMAN FREE FROM THE RESTRAINTS OF THE VEIL
HEBRON MIDWIVES PROUD OF THEIR NEW EQUIPMENT, THE REWARD
OF A SIX WEEKS' TRAINING COURSE IN JERUSALEM

THE STATUE OF THE TYPICAL TURKISH PEASANT WOMAN, WHO
HELPED TO WIN THE GREEK-TURKISH WAR. PUBLIC SQUARE AT
ANKARA

PROMINENT LEADERS IN THE ALL-ASIAN WOMEN'S CONFERENCE,
JANUARY 1931, LAHORE, INDIA

VEILED WOMEN IN DELHI VIEWING THE PEARL MOSQUE THROUGH
THE ARCHES OF THE HALL OF PRIVATE AUDIENCE

LADY ABDUL QADIR, A MOSLEM LEADER OF LAHORE NOTED FOR HER
DEVOTED SERVICE IN THE ADVANCE OF INDIAN WOMEN

TURKISH COMMITTEE FOR THE INTERNATIONAL SUFFRAGE CONGRESS,
ISTANBUL, APRIL 1935

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