

Special Article:

## MARYAM JAMEELAH: A PIONEER OF MUSLIM RESURGENCE

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**ABSTRACT:**

*Maryam Jameelah [1934-2012], originally Margaret Marcus ['Peggy'], was a Jewish-American woman who converted to Islam and migrated to Pakistan at the invitation of Maulana Maududi [d. 1979].<sup>1</sup> She never left Pakistan after her arrival and integrated uniquely into the life and culture of her adopted country. [Her books generally give her photograph showing her covered in a black veil from head to toe with the face concealed.] Her fifty-year stay in Pakistan was the most productive in terms of her writing and she pursued a vigorous intellectual career pouring out her numerous studies of Islam, her critiques of Western life and thought, her examination of the application of Islam to contemporary life amid the challenges of modernity and materialism. All her books, essays, reviews and other writings had Islam as the subject of inquiry. In this essay, we will examine some of her major works that led her to be included among the 'makers of contemporary Islam.'<sup>2</sup> Her vast output entitles her, by reason of its range, depth and prolixity, to be regarded as an authentic voice of 'conservative Islam.'<sup>3</sup> Over the years, the exponents of Islamic teachings have been males. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have the example of two erudite and enthusiastic females speaking on behalf of pure and original Islam viz. Maryam Jameelah of Pakistan and Ruqaiya Waris Maqsood of the UK [b. 1948; also a convert from Protestant Christianity and author of many books on Islam]. No doubt a comparative study of the writings of these two Muslim ladies will not be devoid of interest.*

Apart from her many scholarly studies of the Western-Eastern [Christian-Muslim] interface, Maryam Jameelah was also the author of a novel titled *Ahmad Khalil: the story of a Palestinian refugee and his family*.<sup>4</sup> This was her earliest composition on Islamic themes, and was written before she had accepted Islam. It shows her great outrage against the injustice done to the Palestinians by the formation of the state of Israel. She already exhibits an easy familiarity with the tenets of Islam and their practice.

Many of her brief booklets have been issued by her separately titled and in combination with others under a common title. Her interest in the resurgence of Islam is shown by her many brief studies of various Muslim personalities who worked, struggled and even went to war against the forces of imperialism and colonialism. Among them and in connection with related issues are the following headings:

- i. *Sayyid Ahmad Shahid*<sup>5</sup>
- ii. *Imam Shamil*<sup>6</sup>
- iii. *Shaikh 'Izz-u-din al-Qassam Shahid: a great Palestinian Mujahid 1882-1935*<sup>7</sup>
- iv. *Shaikh Hassan al-Banna and the Ikhwan al-Muslimun*<sup>8</sup>
- v. *Shehu 'Uthman dan Fodio: a great mujaddid of West Africa*<sup>9</sup>
- vi. *A great Islamic movement in Turkey: Badee-'u-Zaman Sa'id Nursi*<sup>10</sup>

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vii. *The resurgence of Islam from the colonial yoke.*<sup>11</sup>

Her investigation into the socio-political penetration of Muslim societies by the West and the remedy for the inferiority complex resultantly conveyed is treated in a number of studies:

1. ***Westernization and human welfare***<sup>12</sup>

This contains three essays:

- a) *The philosophical sources of Western materialism;*
- b) *Modernization – our panacea?*
- c) *Is Westernization the route to human welfare?*

In these essays, Maryam Jameelah traces out the roots of Western civilization in ancient Greco-Roman [pagan] culture that was grafted upon the spiritual message of Christianity.

2. ***Islam versus the West***<sup>13</sup>

This contains a number of studies refuting the position held by various modernist scholars such as William Cantwell Smith, Ziya Gökalp, Taha Husayn, Khalid Muhammad Khalid and Asaf A.A. Fyzee – all of which are based on a first-hand familiarity with their writings. There is an interesting introduction, 'How I became interested in Islam'. An essay on Allama Iqbal is the best in the book.

3. ***Islam and Western society***<sup>14</sup>

This is a critical assessment of Western trends and attitudes that contain within them the germs of destruction of civilized societies. These trends are seen in: unbridled feminism, breakdown of the family, overuse of technology, uncontrolled competitiveness. A valuable part of the book is an extensive bibliography of the works on the ongoing debate on this issue. The more remarkable books discussed are:

- *Grey Wolf: a life of Kemal Ataturk* by H.C. Armstrong;
- *The autobiography of Malcolm X*
- *1984* by George Orwell
- *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley
- *The Gulag Archipelago* by A. Solzhenitsyn
- *Future Shock* by Alvin Toffler
- *The Road to Mecca* by Muhammad Asad.

The list is valuable for her critical comments on each book.

Her attacks on the fallacious view that Westernization is the acme, indeed the ideal, of human existence are contained in two booklets: *Western imperialism menaces Muslims*<sup>15</sup> and *Westernization versus Muslims*<sup>16</sup>.

These contain her insightful observations on this point of dispute. She rejects Western civilization as being inimical to human progress and sees it as the acme of material, rather than spiritual progress.

In her massive compilation, *Western civilization condemned by itself* [2 vols., 1055 pp]<sup>17</sup>, Maryam Jameelah takes this approach to its logical culmination. She states in her dedication that ‘this anthology is dedicated to those in Muslim lands misled by the delusion that the adoption of Western culture is the only road to progress in human welfare....’ This work can be seen as the magnum opus of her critical approach as it contains a wealth of information brought together in two volumes – one containing references to, and copious extracts from, those Western writers who attempt self-analysis of their way of life and in the second volume dealing with ‘civilization in practice’. The relevance of the masses of evidence cited in support of her position is undeniable. In *Vol. One* [‘theory’], we find the following authors mentioned and cited:

- Plato
- Machiavelli
- Voltaire
- Darwin
- Freud
- Marx and Engels.

In *Vol. Two* [‘practice’], among many modern thinkers, we find J.D. Salinger, Richard Wright and Alberto Moravia.

The volumes conclude with the citation of the experiences of a product of Western civilization who became conscious of its deficiency and entered Islam viz. the famous Hungarian Abdul Karim Germanus. These are contained in his essay, ‘From Western to Islamic civilization’. No doubt the example of Germanus must have inspired, indeed mirrored, her questionings of her own Western way of life which were resolved in a climax of clarity of mind and spirit leading to her self-surrender to the Divine Will which is Islam. The topics covered in the two volumes are indeed encyclopedic – ranging from emotional problems, family disintegration, women’s liberation, modern sexual life of adolescents and adults, drug addiction, life in mental hospitals, old-age homes, prisons and concentration camps to birth control, psychoanalysis, white supremacy, cruelty to Red Indians, Eskimos, Negroes and coloured races in South Africa and many more topics that should engage the attention of both the concerned Muslim and the Westerner. In her dedication [cited above], she also included ‘those in Europe and America aware of the harm inherent in their mode of life yet are unable to diagnose or treat the malady.’ Maryam Jameelah sees the problem and the solution in a universal context when she

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writes: ‘Unprecedented material progress combined with equally unprecedented moral retrogression is the greatest threat to the survival of the human race and all life on earth.’ The way out of this inevitable chaos leading to self-destruction is the acceptance of Islam in toto.

In a useful appendix, Maryam Jameelah gives a list on the Islamic movement under the following headings: Quran, Hadith, biography of the Holy Prophet, jurisprudence, Economics, sex, science, government, warfare, religion, philosophy and Islamic renewal. A few books from the various headings are cited below:

- *Risāla-e-noor* by Badee-u-Zaman Said Nursi
- *Fī zilāl al-Qurān* by Sayyid Qutb
- *Tafhīm al-Qurān* by Syed Abul Ala Maududi
- *Quran* translated by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall
- *Le Prophète de l’Islam* by Muhammad Hamidullah
- *Glory of Iqbal* by Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi.

In the introduction of her valuable book, *Islam and Orientalism*<sup>18</sup>, Maryam Jameelah writes: ‘The purpose of this collection of review essays is to provide the student with a full understanding of the ideological weapons of the Orientalists which are being deliberately used to mislead the Muslim intelligentsia into cynicism, heresy and apostasy’. This she does by successfully exposing all the malicious and overtly ‘scholarly’ efforts that masquerade as learning by showing them in all their true colours. The books that she reviews here are:

- *Islam and the West* by Philip K. Hitti
- *The Call of the Minaret* by Kenneth Cragg
- *Modern trends in Islam* by H.A.R. Gibb
- *Islam and the integration of society* by W.M. Watt
- *Islam and Pakistan* by Freeland Abbott.

These books are representative of various approaches such as Christian, Jewish, sociological, secular, humanist, modernist, and Orientalist – but all seeking in their different ways to undermine Islam. In her epilogue, Maryam Jameelah sums up her reviews thus:

‘The theme of all their writings is that Islam must be abandoned on the premise that anything revealed fourteen centuries ago is necessarily obsolete and irrelevant for the technological civilization of today .... None of these Orientalists ... can convincingly prove why Western civilization is superior to Islamic civilization in explicit terms.’

In short, her objective and critical analysis successfully destroys these frauds and falsehoods of pseudo-scholars who seek to weaken Islam.

In her socio-religious analysis given in her *Islam in theory and practice*<sup>19</sup>, Maryam Jameelah repeats some of her favourite arguments against the detractors of Islam. She sees Islamic society as the acme of human civilization in its socio-cultural mores. In her study, she examines the efforts of all those remarkable Muslim scholars, leaders, poets and politicians who devoted their lives to the service of Islam. Among them, she includes:

- Muhammad bin ‘Abdul Wahab
- Muhammad Ali Sannusi
- Shah WaliAllah
- Syed Ahmad Shaheed
- Said Halim Pasha
- Badi’uzzaman Sa’id Nursi
- Jamaluddin Afghani
- Muhammad Rashid Rida
- Hasan al-Banna
- Muhammad Ali Jauhar
- Allama Iqbal
- Syed Abul A’la Maududi.

The whole is concluded in a substantial bibliography which gives details of books she consulted.

In *Islam and Modernism*<sup>20</sup>, Maryam Jameelah combines some of her separately issued essays. The charm, or magic, of modernism in the eyes of unstable Muslims is the most powerful pressure that the West exerts on them making them regard their own faith and belief as obsolete and invalid. She examines and attacks the pseudo-scholarly discourse of modernists such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Kamal Atatürk, Ziya Gökalp, Dr. Taha Husain, and others. In view of the apparent victory of the West in this area, she makes a sincere soul-searching examen of Islam and proves its validity and relevance in the present ‘modern era’. She argues against an apologetic approach – regarded by her as ‘intellectual defeatism’ and ‘religious scepticism’. She calls for a severance of Muslims from Western ‘civilization’ and its baneful effects and for a renewal of, and pride in their heritage.

The two volumes of Maryam Jameelah’s autobiography make delightful reading. Actually, both are in the form of an extended correspondence initially between the young Peggy and her parents and her elder sister, Betty. The first volume<sup>21</sup> takes the story up to the time of her departure

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from the US for Pakistan after her conversion to Islam to live with the family of Maulana Maududi. The second volume<sup>22</sup> describes her eventful voyage to Pakistan and her arrival and reception. The letters stop in 1964 and the sequel is narrated by her husband, Muhammad Yusuf Khan, carrying the story forward to 1989. The interesting details of her adjustment to a relatively primitive lifestyle, the description of the family life in Maulana Maududi's household, the long hot summers in Lahore and Pattoki --- all make gripping reading. At no stage is there any evidence of feeling a 'culture shock' or a sense of loneliness and alienation. True to her Islamic spirit, she spent the rest of her fifty years in Pakistan never venturing abroad and finally dying and mixing with its dust. In the preface to Vol. II, she calls this 'the most decisive and most important part of my life. During this time ... I matured into full adulthood, grew completely independent of my parents, developed my literary career, married and finally became a mother.' She describes her future husband in one of her letters when there was no sign of a marriage with him. The husband had a wife and four children already. She married and merged into the extended family which included other adults and their families. She does not complain of maltreatment from anyone or about the absence of accustomed comforts. She does not hesitate to mention the ribaldry that preceded the consummation of her marriage. She describes her birth pangs on the birth of her daughter [who died shortly afterwards] at the house of a lady hakim. Her husband she always addressed as 'Khan Sahib' in the manner of the older women of Pakistan who never took their husbands' names. Her later life was one dedicated to bringing up her family and composing her books, essays etc. in a torrent of productivity that continued till her death. She provided a unique example of total absorption in a previously unknown and unfamiliar culture. Her attachment to her adopted country would be greater than that of many native Pakistanis.

Instead of being stifled in an atmosphere that was religious but not intellectual, Maryam Jameelah steadfastly pursued her mission of educating the world to the glories of Islam seeing it as the acme of human approach to the divine while fulfilling all contingencies of mundane life. She countered the violent and vicious propaganda emanating from chiefly Western quarters aimed at depicting Islam as a primitive, unjust and antiquated mode of existence out-of-tone with the demands of modern life. Clearly, Maryam Jameelah deserves full credit for examining and exposing the flood of anti-Islamic polemics directed against Islam. Belonging to the West herself and being familiar with its attitudes and mindset towards other religions, she was in a unique position to dissect and uncover the roots of Western antagonism to Islam. She felt that Islam was a continuous tradition coming across the centuries in an unbroken movement that encompassed all facets of life, all dimensions of the human mind and spirit, all culmination of intellectual effort. She did not admit that anyone had the right to tamper

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with this majestic heritage but only to contribute to the strength of its texture keeping the age-old tradition intact. She thus attacks certain 'progressive/liberal/modernist' persons who seek to harm, damage or misconstrue this monolithic edifice by apologetic/idiosyncratic/heretical interpretation. While she is severe in dealing with Western critics of Islam, she is especially harsh towards 'West-worshipping Muslims' who tempted or misled by the Western onslaught against Islam seek to dilute or remove those aspects of Islam that they feel are obsolete or antiquated. She is thus scornful of those like Kemal Atatürk who sought to change Turkey into an extension of the West. She blames Muhammad Abduh and Syed Ameer Ali --- both of whom advocated a synthesis of Islam and the neo-modern thought of the West. Her criticisms of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Taha Husayn and Zia Gökalp are all based on a deep study of their ideas and writings which depict, in her words, 'an overwhelming sense of inferiority which engulfed the East after its humiliating capitulation under the feet of the imperialist West.' However, there appears an ambiguity in the equating of modernism with Westernism. She does not sufficiently stress the eternal validity of Islam till the end of time and its successful application to new challenges. Islam is as modern as tomorrow. How far she imbibes the teachings of her mentor, Maulana Maududi, or deviates from them does not emerge. Certain questions can be asked in the context of East-West/Muslim-Christian confrontation:

- Why have the Muslims taken so ardently to the poisonous culture served to them by the West?
- Why has the West itself not suffered equally from its own indigenous offerings?
- Should the Muslims blame the West for all their ills or do they share some of the blame?
- If the West 'divided and ruled' the Muslims, what is there to prevent the Muslims to be united and strong in order to defeat Western designs?
- Has not the West learned from Islam the values that have made it powerful?
- Cannot the Muslims regain their lost values and become strong in consequence?

These are some questions that pertain to what has become a life-and-death struggle for Muslims. It is a good thing that her approach is not apologetic – as Muslims have nothing to apologize for. She is overly critical seeing the West as 'the other' in the same manner that the West sees Muslims at present. A less strident approach could have been taken without abandoning her principled position on the tenets of Islam – which are not open to reinterpretation. The aim of Islam is not to annihilate the West but to bring it over to Islam much in the way that Maryam Jameelah has seen, recognized and accepted the truths of Islam. The aggressive attitude of

Samuel P. Huntington in his 'Clash of Civilizations' theory would have been a fruitful subject of debate from the pen of Maryam Jameelah. Would she have seen the clash as inevitable and would it, according to her, have ended the way Huntington predicted? These and other issues of paramount importance must occupy the concerns of the Muslims as they advance into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a world that is extremely hostile and antagonistic. The role of Maryam Jameelah in raising, discussing and debating these issues thereby creating a critical awareness of the dangers that are likely to befall the Ummah is pivotal and calls for the greater dissemination of her writings and opinions.

## REFERENCES

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2. John L. Esposito & John O. Voll, *Makers of contemporary Islam*, Oxford, (2001), pp.54-67
3. See above. This is the title of the chapter dealing with her.
4. Printed, Lahore, (2005). All her books were personally printed by her husband.
5. Lahore, (1990). Sayid Ahmad fought against the Sikhs and their cruelty in the Punjab in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Shamil battled bravely against Russian expansionism in Central Asia. See *The Sabres of Paradise* by Lesley Blanch, London, (1998).
6. Mohammad Yousuf Khan & Sons, Sunnat Nagar, Lahore, 1990
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20. Ibid, Lahore, 1966
21. *Memoirs of childhood and youth in America 1945-1962: the story of one Western convert's quest for truth*, Lahore, 1989
22. *At home in Pakistan 1962-1989: the tale of an American expatriate in her adopted country*, Lahore, 1990. A recent biography of Maryam Jameelah titled *The Convert: a tale of exile and extremism* by Deborah Baker [New York, 2011] based on Maryam Jameelah's archives in the New York Public Library gives a number of supplementary details. However, this book is more biographical than analytical and seeks to sensationalize certain aspects of its subject without justification.