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TOPIC

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AN INTELLECTUAL REVIEW OF MARYAM JAMILA'S VIEWS IN ISLAM AND MODERNISM

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Abstract

Modernism emerged in the West after the Renaissance and Enlightenment, promoting reason, science, and material progress while distancing society from religion. Over time, this ideology influenced Muslim societies, leading some thinkers to reinterpret Islam according to Western standards.

Against this trend stood Maryam Jamila, a powerful and independent Muslim voice. Born Margaret Marcus into a Jewish family in New York, she later embraced Islam and migrated to Pakistan to defend her adopted faith. This article presents a critical study of her influential book *Islam and Modernism*. It explores her intellectual journey and examines her strong critique of Western materialism and Muslim modernist reformers whom she believed were weakening the foundations of Islam.

The study highlights her central argument that Islam and modernism represent two opposing worldviews and cannot be reconciled. Her work remains highly relevant today, as Muslims continue to face challenges related to identity, faith, and cultural influence in the modern world.

Keywords: Maryam Jamila, Islam, Modernism, Western Philosophy, Muslim Reformers.

This article is divided into two main parts.

The first part focuses on the life of Maryam Jamila, including her background, early life, conversion to Islam, personal hardships, migration to Pakistan, and her career as a writer. It explains how her personal experiences shaped her strong views against Western modernism. The second part of the article analyzes her famous book *Islam and Modernism*. It discusses her critique of Western philosophy, her response to Muslim modernist thinkers, and her belief that Islam and modernism cannot be reconciled. This part highlights the major themes and arguments presented in the book.

Part 1: From New York to Lahore – The Making of Maryam Jamila

To understand *Islam and Modernism*, it is essential to first understand the woman behind the book. Maryam Jamila was not born into Islam; she chose it after a long and painful journey through Western secular society.

A Jewish Girl Who Looked East

Maryam Jamila was born as Margaret Marcus on May 23, 1934, in New Rochelle, New York, during the time of the Great Depression. She was raised in a secular

Jewish family where religion was treated more as a cultural tradition than a spiritual commitment. Religious holidays were celebrated casually, and her Sunday school experience left her dissatisfied due to the lack of seriousness and spiritual depth.¹

From childhood, Margaret was an intellectually curious and serious student. She loved reading and spent most of her time in libraries and bookstores. Her interests included religion, philosophy, history, sociology, and biology. Unlike other children, she disliked meaningless entertainment and became increasingly disturbed by the materialism and moral emptiness of Western society. Her journey toward Islam began unexpectedly through her own Jewish textbooks. She learned that Arabs and Jews were both descendants of Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him). She also discovered that during the Middle Ages, when Christians persecuted Jews, Muslims had offered them protection. These facts deeply impressed her and sparked a lifelong interest in Islam. As she grew older, she rejected Zionism, which she came to see as a source of hatred and injustice. She also found that atheism and secular humanism failed to answer her deeper questions about life, purpose, and morality.²

The Turning Point

The final turning point came during her university years. She attended a course titled “Judaism in Islam” taught by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Katsh. The professor aimed to prove that Islam was merely a copy of Judaism. However, his lectures had the opposite effect. When he spoke about Prophet Moses (peace be upon him), divine commandments, and belief in the Hereafter, Margaret began comparing the Bible and Talmud with the Qur’an and Hadith. At that moment, she realized that Islam offered the pure monotheism she had been searching for. This realization deeply moved her and strengthened her desire to embrace Islam. After years of illness, personal struggle, and correspondence with Muslim scholars around the world, she finally accepted Islam in 1961 and changed her name to Maryam Jamila.³

Migration and Hardship

Maryam Jamila did not only change her religion; she changed her entire life. She began exchanging letters with Maulana Syed Abul A’la Maududi, a leading Islamic scholar in Pakistan. Their correspondence was serious and intellectual. Maududi became her mentor and guide, even advising her on personal matters according to Islamic principles.⁴ In 1962, she migrated to Pakistan with the hope

of living in a truly Islamic environment. However, life there was far from easy. She faced extreme heat, language barriers, cultural differences, health problems, and deep loneliness as a foreigner. She also entered a polygamous marriage arranged by Maududi, which brought emotional and social challenges.⁵ Despite these hardships, Maryam Jamila remained firm in her faith. She made a strong decision to dedicate her life to writing in defense of Islam and opposing the Western modernism she had once lived in.⁶

Maryam Jamila as a Writer

Maryam Jamila became one of the most powerful Muslim voices against Western modernism in the twentieth century. She wrote more than thirty books and numerous articles in English. Her writings focused on:

- Criticism of Western secularism
- Defense of Islamic civilization
- Rejection of blind cultural imitation
- Protection of Muslim women's dignity⁷

Her famous works include:

- Islam and Modernism
- Islam Versus the West
- Western Civilization Condemned by Itself
- Westernization Versus Muslims
- Islam and the Muslim Women Today
- Islam and Orientalism

Her writing style was clear, emotional, and intellectually strong. She did not write only as a scholar but as someone who had personally experienced Western culture and consciously rejected it for Islam.⁸

Part 2: Philosophical Foundations of Western Modernism

In *Islam and Modernism*, Maryam Jamila explains that modernism is not just about technology or scientific development. Rather, it is a complete worldview that removes God from the center of life and replaces Him with human reason and desires. According to her, this shift is the root cause of moral and spiritual decline in modern society.⁹

Source of Western Materialism

Maryam Jamila argues that Western philosophy gradually moved away from

belief in God. Revelation was replaced by human reason, and faith was replaced by science. As a result, people began to measure success only through wealth, power, and material progress. She explains that when divine guidance is ignored, society becomes materialistic. Spiritual values lose importance, and worldly achievements become the main purpose of life.

The Trinity of Materialism and Modern Thinkers

Maryam Jamila traces the roots of modernism to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, but she identifies three major Western thinkers who shaped the modern mindset. She calls them the “Trinity of Materialism.”¹⁰

Charles Darwin

Darwin presented humans as products of evolution rather than a special creation of God. Jamila argues that this theory reduced human dignity and weakened belief in divine creation.

Karl Marx

Marx reduced human problems to economic conditions. He believed that changing the economic system would fix society, while completely ignoring spirituality and moral values.

Sigmund Freud

Freud explained human behavior mainly through sexual desires. He also described religion as an illusion. Jamila criticizes this view and says it promoted moral corruption.

According to Maryam Jamila, these thinkers created a world where there is no absolute truth, only relativity. In this system, material progress and physical pleasure become the only goals of life.¹¹

Consequences of Modern Philosophy

According to Jamila, modern philosophy has produced many harmful effects, including:

- Moral decline
- Spiritual emptiness
- Depression and suicide
- Breakdown of social values

She strongly believes that progress without morality leads to destruction. When societies focus only on material development and ignore ethical values, they lose peace and stability.¹²

Destruction of the Family System

Maryam Jamila strongly criticizes how modernism attacks the traditional family structure. She argues that so-called “women’s liberation” is actually a trap. By devaluing the role of mothers and housewives and pushing women to compete with men in the workforce, modernism weakened the family system.

She also criticizes:

- Free mixing of genders
- Sexual freedom
- Decline of modesty

According to her, these trends caused:

- Broken marriages
- Illegitimate children
- Loss of respect for elders
- Moral chaos in society

Jamila believes that Islam protects the dignity of women and strengthens families, while modernism destroys social harmony.¹³

Can Islam Be Reconciled with Modernism?

Maryam Jamila clearly rejects the idea that Islam and modernism can be combined. She explains that both are completely opposite worldviews.

- Islam is based on divine revelation (Qur’an and Sunnah).
- Modernism is based on human intellect and personal desires.

Since their foundations are different, she concludes that reconciliation between Islam and modernism is impossible.¹⁴

Rise of Modern Heresies

Jamila warns against new interpretations of Islam that ignore the Qur’an and Sunnah. She calls these changes Bid‘ah (religious innovations).

According to her, such practices mislead Muslims and slowly weaken their faith. Islam, she argues, must be followed in its original form, not reshaped to fit modern trends.

Part 3: The Internal Threat – Muslim Modernists

The core of Maryam Jamila’s work is a strong critique of Muslim leaders and thinkers who attempted to blend Islam with Western modernism. She calls this approach “apologetics,” meaning Muslims who feel ashamed of their religious tradition and try to rewrite Islam in order to please the West. According to Jamila, such efforts weaken Islamic faith instead of strengthening it.

Critique of Muslim Modernist Thinkers

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

Maryam Jamila considers Sir Syed Ahmad Khan the pioneer of Islamic modernism in South Asia. Although she acknowledges his efforts to promote education among Muslims, she strongly criticizes his religious ideas. Sir Syed tried to interpret the Qur’an according to modern science. He denied miracles and even questioned the existence of angels. Jamila argues that this approach damages the very foundations of faith. For her, Islam is based on divine revelation, not scientific theories that change with time. She believes that trying to make Islam appear “rational” in the eyes of the British was a sign of inferiority.¹⁵

Syed Ameer Ali

Syed Ameer Ali wrote the famous book *The Spirit of Islam*, which gained popularity in the West. Jamila criticizes him for judging Islam by Western standards. She argues that Ameer Ali tried to prove Islam was “progressive” by claiming that practices such as polygamy and jihad were temporary and should be abandoned. According to Jamila, this is Islam. Islam does not need validation from Western values. She believes Ameer Ali focused too much on worldly progress and ignored spiritual depth.¹⁶

Egypt: Muhammad Abdu and Taha Hussein

Sheikh Muhammad Abdu

Abdu is often praised as a reformer, but Jamila sees him as a dangerous influence. Although he wanted to modernize education, she argues that he opened the door to religious distortion. He tried to explain miracles scientifically, for example, suggesting that jinn were actually microbes. He also made interest (riba) seem permissible. Jamila believes this set a harmful precedent where religion is twisted to fit modern science.¹⁷

Dr. Taha Hussain

Taha Hussain, a famous Egyptian intellectual, openly declared that Egypt belonged to Europe rather than the East. He questioned the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry and even raised doubts about the Qur'an. Jamila views him as someone suffering from a deep inferiority complex toward Western civilization. She criticizes him for rejecting his Islamic heritage in order to gain Western approval.¹⁸

Turkey: Ziya Gökalp and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Ziya Gökalp

Gökalp was the philosopher behind Turkish secularism. He argued that Turkey should abandon Islamic civilization and fully adopt Western culture. He promoted the idea of a "Turkish Islam," where even the call to prayer (Adhan) should be in Turkish instead of Arabic. Jamila strongly opposed this, saying it cut Muslims off from their religious roots.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Atatürk put these ideas into action. Jamila describes him as a dictator who hated Islamic history. He abolished the Caliphate, banned Islamic dress, forced men to wear Western hats, and changed the Turkish alphabet from Arabic to Latin. According to Jamila, this cut future generations off from the Qur'an. She considers Atatürk the ultimate failure: a leader who tried to save his nation by destroying its spiritual soul.¹⁹

Khalid Muhammad Khalid

Khalid Muhammad Khalid wrote from *Here We Start*, in which he supported a secular Islamic state. He argued that poverty, not lack of religion, is the root of evil. Jamila strongly rejects this view. She argues that a full stomach does not guarantee a pure heart. According to her, moral corruption cannot be cured by economic comfort alone.²⁰

Islam vs Nationalism

Maryam Jamila strongly criticizes nationalism in all its forms:

- Arab nationalism
- Turkish nationalism
- Even "Islamic nationalism"

She argues that nationalism divides the Muslim Ummah. She points out that Arab nationalists sided with British colonial powers against Ottoman Muslims during World War I. For her, nationalism is a tool of colonialism.

Islam, she explains, unites people of all races and nations under one faith. It is not a political slogan but complete submission to God.²¹

The Myth of Progress

Jamila rejects the Western belief that history always moves forward. She argues that new does not always mean better. Just because a society has advanced technology does not mean it is morally superior. True progress, according to her, is spiritual and ethical, not material. She warns Muslims against “change for the sake of change.” If the Qur’an declares something right or wrong, it remains so forever, regardless of modern trends.

The Futility of Apologetics

Jamila criticizes Muslims who try to defend Islam using Western approval. She asks: Why do Muslims need Western philosophers to prove their religion is true? She also criticizes glorifying the “Golden Age” of Islam only to show Muslims were “civilized” like Europeans. She argues that true Islamic greatness lies in the character of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his companions, not in palaces, philosophy, or scientific achievements influenced by Greek thought.

Conclusion: The Unapologetic Path Forward

This study concludes that Maryam Jamila’s message is clear, firm, and uncompromising. She strongly argues that Islam and modernism are incompatible. One places God at the center of life, while the other places human desire and reason above divine guidance. According to Jamila, it is impossible to follow both at the same time. For her, the solution is not to “reform” or “update” Islam. Instead, she calls Muslims to stop feeling inferior to Western civilization. She urges them to reject the false idea of progress and return to the pure and unchanged teachings of the Qur’an and Sunnah.

Her Legacy

Maryam Jamila was a unique figure. Raised in the heart of Western civilization, she consciously rejected it after deep reflection. Her writings act as a mirror for Muslims. She forces them to ask an important question: Are we following Islam because it is the truth, or are we changing it to make it acceptable to the modern

world? Her life itself was proof of her beliefs. She did not only write about the clash between Islam and the West—she lived it through her personal journey from Western despair to Islamic peace.

Methodology and Writing Style

Maryam Jamila's work is based on a strong academic method. Her approach includes:

- Deep reliance on the Qur'an and Sunnah
- Historical analysis
- Comparative study of civilizations
- Critical evaluation of thinkers
- Simple and clear language
- Use of practical examples

She also quotes Western thinkers who admitted the moral failure of their own civilization. This strengthens her arguments and shows that her criticism is not emotional but intellectual. Relevance in the Contemporary World Today, Muslims face many challenges such as:

- Identity crisis
- Growing secular influence
- Moral confusion

Maryam Jamila's message reminds Muslims to:

- Protect their faith
- Reject blind imitation of the West
- Return to Islamic values

Her writings are more relevant than ever in a world where Islamic identity is under constant pressure.²²

Final Words

This article presented a critical study of Maryam Jamila's Islam and Modernism. Her life, conversion, intellectual struggle, and major ideas were discussed in detail.

According to Jamila:

- Modernism is a serious ideological threat
- Islam and modernism cannot coexist
- Muslims must reject Western models

Her work is not mere criticism. It is a sincere intellectual effort shaped by deep faith and personal experience. Her journey from Western confusion to Islamic clarity gives her message powerful credibility. Maryam Jamila's writings continue to guide students and researchers in understanding modern challenges and preserving Islamic identity in the contemporary world.

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