

Inscriptions: Decoding Politics, Gender, and Culture in Epistemologies and Praxis

The irony was not lost that Toronto's Colony Hotel was the site of the AMSS' tribute to the late Edward Said, "Inscriptions: Decoding Politics, Gender and Culture in Epistemologies and Praxis," held on November 27, 2004. The first regional Canadian conference, cosponsored by the AMSS'

Canadian chapter and the University of Toronto's political science department, featured eight sessions. A wide breadth of papers incorporated his intellectual legacy, either directly through his critical frameworks, or indirectly through critiques developed from them. Gender, neo-conservatism, development, legal works of body, and Qur'anic hermeneutics were just some of the issues discussed.

Welcoming and opening remarks were offered by Jasmin Zine and Maliha Chisti, the conference's cochairs; Paul Kingston, of the political science department; and Beverly McCloud in absentia. Participants then split into two groups to attend concurrent sessions. Said's legacy was presented by Nahla Abdo (Carleton University, Canada), who discussed epistemology, diaspora, and identity, and Sedef Arat-Koc (Trent University, Canada), who examined imperial inscriptions, diasporic identifications, and visions for peaceful coexistence. The concurrent session, "Afghan Women, War, and Ideologies of Conflict," featured papers on ground realities in Afghanistan and the neo-conservative agenda that drove American political decisions.

Maliha Chisti (University of Toronto, Canada) and Chesmak Farhoumand-Sims (York University, Canada) examined the trends and impact of the transnational movement and global sisterhood on programming for Afghani women. Relating their experience with capacity-building programs for Afghani women, they conveyed how larger aid agencies used stereotypical epithets that ignored the long legacy of indigenous women's activism and prioritized formally educated, westernized women. Faiza Hirji (Carleton University, Canada) examined the perpetuation of stereotypes of Muslim women in *The New York Times* (US), *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), and *Dawn*, Pakistan's largest English daily. While the two western papers conveyed tropes of veiled Muslim women in need of rescue, *Dawn*, due to its proximity to Afghanistan, flagged that country's sociopolitical and religious complexities by situating women, Islam, and the Northern Alliance. James Esdail (McGill University, Canada) examined the neoconservative movement in American foreign policy and concluded that although no longer overt, imperialism and Orientalist tropes still permeate this movement.

"Gendering Orientalism: Neo-Orientalist Representations, Imperialism, and the War on Terror" was a thought-provoking session. By looking at the feminist majority and the "(en)gendering" of war, Krista Hunt (University of Toronto, Canada) articulated that patriarchal power is being maintained by redirecting feminist attention to the state, and highlighted a

disturbing development of America's war on terror: the undeclared war against women's rights, which further marginalizes Muslim women. Further scrutinizing the feminist movement in the post-9/11 era, Jasmin Zine (University of Toronto, Canada) described the approaches of Muslim women feminists theorizing and praxis to Islamophobia. Citing alternative approaches, Zine discussed the challenges of Muslim feminists situated in secular and faith-based approaches fighting imperialism and racism.

Bilal Hashmi (University of Toronto, Canada) examined the discursive relationship between the torture at Abu Ghayb and the "writership" of text to create a singular Islamic identity to justify colonization, and Md. Mahmudal Hasan's paper provided background information on the representations of Muslim women and Islam in Orientalist literature. The parallel session, "Muslim Women, Identity, and Knowledge Production," offered the work of Alia al-Saji (McGill University, Canada) and Michelle Hartman (McGill University, Canada), who critically examined the representation of women in knowledge production, and Nuzhat Jafri (Canadian Council of Muslim Women), who gave a demographic profile of Muslim women in Canada. Among the many interesting, stereotype-shattering statistics presented was that there are enough post-secondary educated Muslim women in Canada to fill a large university beyond capacity. Tying into the demographics, Tabassum Ruby (York University, Canada) posited questions about Muslim immigrant women and identity.

Adjourning for lunch, served against the backdrop of classical guitar music, participants listened to the keynote speech of Sherene Razack, a race, gender, and law professor from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto, Canada). Her speech, "Law and Muslim Woman's Body Post-9/11," used Norway as a case study to decode how inclusive, multicultural nations can still propagate the "civilizing mission" to rescue Muslim women. She stated that liberal internationalization and a single-minded uni-directional reform, when coupled with Orientalist tropes, is often reproduced in feminist solutions and ultimately fails to address the sources of marginalization.

With full stomachs and much food for thought, participants attended the afternoon sessions. In the session on representation and media, Shahnaz Khan (Wilfred Laurier University, Canada) gave a multimedia presentation on images of South Asian theatre, Lollywood and Bollywood, and the unregulated desire of women, which poses a castration threat to men at a time when hypermasculinity is considered the only means to thwart terrorism. Continuing to look at South Asia, Amina Jamal (Concordia University,

Canada) examined how representations of fundamentalist women have been used in feminist self-construction in Pakistan. The problematics of post-9/11 literature on Iranian women on feminist viewpoints was presented by Roksana Bahramitash (Concordia University, Canada). Anila Zainub, incorporating Said's theoretical framework and Marshall McLuhan's media analysis, looked at the one-dimensional presentation of Muslims on the Internet.

Discourse, hermeneutics, and negotiation were discussed in the parallel session. Ali Hassan Zaidi (York University, Canada) offered an alternative model to the human sciences approach to studying Islam. Arguing that such an approach was far too entrenched in Enlightenment-based assumptions, he proposed a dialogical approach to cross-cultural comparative social theory. Roots for reform in early Islamic law, particularly Hanafi interpretations of textual sources, was offered as a bridge between ethical theorizing and legal theory by Bilal Ibrahim (University of Waterloo, Canada). Aliaa Dakroury (Carleton University, Canada) focused on the hermeneutics of the Qur'an, arguing that translations of the sacred text are problematic unless its underlying spirit is extrapolated. Continuing on this theme, Aisha Geissinger (University of Toronto, Canada) described the genderization of fasting in the Hadith, although the Qur'an nowhere mentions such a gendered practice.

Gendered representations in poetry and historical political aesthetics concluded the conference. Mahdi Tourage (University of Toronto, Canada) looked at gendered and sexed bodies within Rumi's poetry, as well as his unique concept of "true manliness," and Morris Popowich (McGill University, Canada) looked at the development of the "Arab Other" through philological observations based on *jahiliyah* poetry. Atif Khalil (University of Toronto, Canada) examined philosophical and mystical dialogue in Judaism and Islam, and Omar Nasim (University of Toronto, Canada) gave a broad overview of philosophical inscriptions in Islamic history. The session concluded with a discussion on Iran and Marxist elements by Valerie Pocock-Behiery (McGill University, Canada).

The question-and-answer sessions were equally stimulating. Ranging from the failure to incorporate Afghanistan's rich cultural elements into development platforms to the cooptation of marginalized Muslim women's bodies by Muslim women activists, to Zionism and homosexuality, the ensuing discussions reflected the audience's diversity as much as it did that of the speakers. Various crucial topics that the Muslim community, in particular, is often accused of failing to examine objectively found

their way into the conference and, although brief, the responses were varied and insightful. This refreshing mix of academic and activist approaches made Canada's first AMSS conference a truly memorable event.

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