**American Perceptions of Muslim Women**

The Deep Historical Roots of Contemporary American Perceptions of Muslim Women

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This paper presents one facet of my larger research project examining Muslim women in the cultural imagination of nineteenth-century America, which, as I argue, was a turning point in the development of American perceptions of Islam. Tied to the increasing fortunes of European colonial expansion, these portrayals of Muslim women also fulfilled key domestic needs in negotiating new and unsettling forms of American gender relations.

Several years ago, I was having a discussion with an erudite and highly cultured Azhari scholar about one Western-educated journalist’s negative perceptions about the place of Muslim women, pointedly based on her interpretation of hijab and some segregated seating arrangements in an Azhari forum, and I casually referred to her attitudes as more of the same old tiring discourse on Muslim women. That response elicited a question about what exactly I meant, and so, after finally realizing the need to communicate what many of us Muslim scholars living in Europe and the United States have learned through frequent exposure, I thought it might be helpful, in the spirit of this conference, to share some of my own research on the deep cultural and historical roots of American perceptions and misperceptions of Muslim women. I will focus in particular on the late nineteenth century, which I believe is an important turning point in how Muslim women have been perceived and represented in Europe and the United States. And I will focus on only one slice of my research, specifically American periodical discussions of the veil and women’s seclusion in the harem, which I believe is the most relevant for inspiring contemporary American discussions more generally and that incident in al-Azhar many years ago more particularly.

In this regard, it is very important to note that European and American portrayals of Muslim women are not static and timeless, even if they present themselves as such, but rather that they are tied to particular internal references of European and American culture and history that change over time. Mohja Kahf’s monograph on Western Representations of the Muslim Woman from Temagant to Odalisque (1999) is particularly instructive in this vein, for we learn that in medieval European literature, Muslim women were represented as domineering and threatening noblewomen and giantesses who needed to be subdued by European Christians, which reflected the intimidating power of Muslims in their times. All of this is far cry from the submissive and oppressed shadows of human beings we find Muslim women depicted as today.