

ROBERT F. HARNEY PROGRAM IN ETHNIC, IMMIGRATION AND PLURALISM STUDIES  
MUNK SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS  
2015 - 2016 HARNEY LECTURE SERIES IN ETHNICITY

# Ayesha Chaudhry

## (Im)Moral Scholarship: The Politics of Responsible Scholarship



**Friday January 29, 2016 2-4 p.m.**

1st floor Boardroom Munk School of Global Affairs Observatory Site  
315 Bloor Street West, University of Toronto

**Abstract:** In this talk, we will discuss the impossible space occupied by "Muslim feminists", who simultaneously engage in an internal critique of patriarchal interpretations of their own religious tradition, while also critiquing neo-imperialist and neo-colonialist agendas imposed upon them. In their work, Muslim feminists often come under vehement critique from various parties. The very phrase "Muslim feminist" is seen by some as a contradiction in terms, such that one cannot possibly be both Muslim and feminist at the same time. Muslim feminists are accused by "patriarchal co-religionists" who promote patriarchal versions of the religion, "cultural relativist liberals" who suspend all moral judgement when approaching a culture they do not consider their own, and "supercessionist feminists" who see religion as irredeemably patriarchal, for being "inauthentic", and "compromising" fundamental values of religion and/or feminism. In this lecture, I will discuss the ways in which Muslim feminists navigate this difficult terrain, thinking about the unique challenges they face.

**Ayesha Chaudhry** is the Rita E. Hauser fellow at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. She is Associate Professor of Islamic studies and gender studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC). She is the author of *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition: Ethics, Law, and the Muslim Discourse on Gender* (Oxford University Press, 2014). She has consulted on high-level national and international cases concerning human rights and religious pluralism and freedom, as well as on divorce cases involving Muslim-majority countries.

At Radcliffe, Chaudhry is working on a project that constructs a feminist Shari'a by re-imagining the narrative of 'Ā'isha, Muḥammad's youngest wife. Constructions of 'Ā'isha are central to justifying and supporting patriarchal Islamic laws, especially those regarding women's political and religious leadership, women's testimony, polygamy, child marriage and virginity testing, slander and corporal punishment for illicit sex, and domestic violence. Therefore, creating a feminist narrative of 'Ā'isha is necessary for Islamic legal reform. Chaudhry is examining premodern, patriarchal constructions of 'Ā'isha, investigating modern Muslim debates around these laws, and proposing strategies for reimagining 'Ā'isha to frame a narrative for a gender-equal Islamic law. Looking at major Muslim debates about gender through the lens of 'Ā'isha will provide a counter-narrative to conceptions of a patriarchal Islam.

This event is open to the public and also serves as the keynote lecture for the  
9<sup>th</sup> Annual Ethnic and Pluralism Studies Graduate Research Conference  
Registration: <http://munkschool.utoronto.ca/ethnicstudies/harney-lectures/>

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