

SCENE & HEARD

Whose mosque

Inter-faith relationships can only prosper once we break out of the mould and re-arrange our own deck of cards

face value? Are hearts homogeneous? You may well ask. And you could be right, but pure submission to Allah is in ample evidence here, because neither biting cold with snow falling on their heads nor lashing rain storms; thunder and mist or blazing heat and scorching sun ever comes in their way of worship.

The working class Pakistanis living in America don't show up in the mosque every Friday because they have a need to be seen, impress, or gain favour from a bigwig (as is often the case back home). Their compact is with Allah and there's no middleman to get through.

So, why have I opted out of such sublime spirituality of bowing my head alongside my 'sisters' in the house of God? Why have I become an outsider, sitting on the street sidelines (literally) during *juma* prayers, lost in spatial musings?

In the beginning, after 9/11, the organizers at Boonton Islamic Centre made a hoopla about inter-faith meetings, cordially inviting Jews and Christians to understand Islam. More than men, I saw American women interested in Islam, as they interacted, head covered, body clad, with the Muslims at the mosque. Fascinating questions crackled, sparking a soldering of religious bonds among the three *Ahle-Kitab*, (People of the Book) to whom have descended the heavenly



TOO DOCILE A DIRECTOR? Mrs AmanaT (front row) hosting an interfaith moot at Boonton Islamic Centre. — Photo AN

Torah, Bible and the Quran. At the call of *Azan*, men moved to the side and prayed in rows while women kept sitting on chairs and watched them go down in *sajda*. No man dare tell women to get lost. We were equals that night.

That sadly was a show put up for the outsiders.

While the Director, Mrs Amanat — yes, the centre is run by a woman! — a Pakistani-American is devoted to helping the community with distinction, even performing funeral services according to Islamic rites, there is a bunch of *semi-parda nasheen* sisters of piety, who congregate in the upstairs section, reserved for

women worshippers and discuss doctrines unreal from life of today.

"Women who wear makeup will go to hell, because their sole motive is to attract men", says sister-in-chief, on sins of applying "lipstick" and "foundation" solely to "seduce the opposite sex"! Everybody present agrees heartily. Clean bowled, I turn my face the other way, embarrassed to my toes (covered in shiny paint as are my lips!) desperately searching for an escape hatch.

Sitting dumb-founded, stung by the sanctimonious chatter, I swear this is the first and the last time I will put myself through such hate-filled rhetoric.



WOMEN IN THE MOSQUE? NEVER MIND! Young Christian and Jewish girls sit in the main hall to hear Islam being explained, and watch how men pray. — Photo AN

FREQUENTLY on Fridays, around noon, my pastime is to count the faithful heads stride towards the mosque. I feel no compunction to follow them inside. Detached and depersonalized howsoever this activity is for someone like me — a stationed onlooker in a parked car, while waiting for the males of my family to offer their *juma* prayers, empirically typecasting the throng at the Boonton Islamic Centre, a township of New Jersey, is no rocket science.

They are all men, upwards of twenties. Most happen to be Pakistanis. The women like the blue moon, are rarely seen crossing the male threshold. Located in a residential area, parking along the tree-lined avenues is thus at a premium. The worshippers pull up in their Mercedes, Lexus, Volvos and SUVs (sports utility vehicles) — top of the line gear. No one parks in front of a driveway or on the pavement, as is habit in Pakistan. I notice urgency in their gait, telling me that most of these young men come during their lunch break and really can't afford to be back late. Some sport beards, jeans and leather jackets; others, less casual are in business wear.

Uniformity of expression is what they exhibit — clean-hearted, sincere and good Muslims. A judgment and a

Islam
Dawn
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is it anyway?

ric. Blemished by the dead giveaway: foundation and lipstick, I still can create a scene by telling these chastity sisters where they get off! But I don't. I am outnumbered.

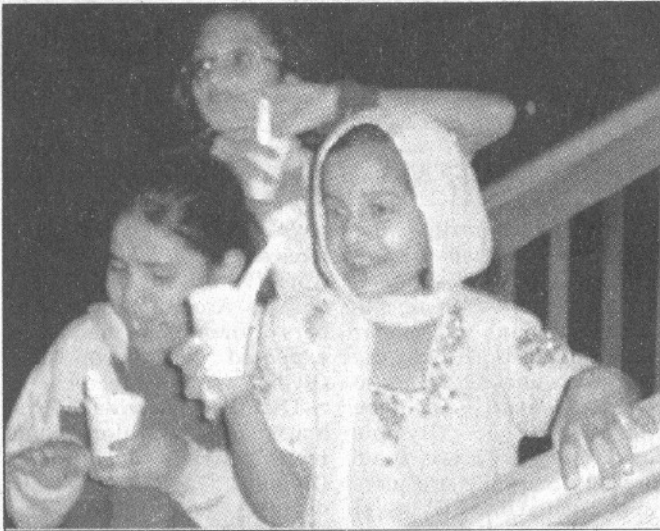
"Women should stay at home and not work because they are looked upon as sex objects by men...besides a woman's place is at home...also women must never wear flesh-hugging outfits that show their curves and never, never wear a swimsuit!" drones on the high priestess. The woman's obsession with sex is unstoppable.

Is this the 21st century America or the backwaters of mediaeval Islam? In today's rat race, to put food on the table, both men and women, irrespective of their faiths, work shoulder to shoulder, sex or no sex!

My protestations to Mrs Amanat draw a blank. She begins to dodge me, taking me for a troublemaker. Considering that the mosque gets us (oops! the males in my family) to cough up donations with no questions asked as to their disbursement, their womenfolk like myself, bereft by our Muslim "brothers" of any independent identity, surely have a voice that deserves to be heard — for heaven's sake!

At the other end of the spectrum is Asra Nomani. Remember her? Scandalizing the local hacks with her unconventionally open living arrangements with Daniel & Marianne Pearl, the feminist journalist-turned-religious rights campaigner has invaded the male preserve at her mosque in West Virginia. She has become a darling of the mainstream media, including *The New York Times* as a model Muslim woman whose "simple act of defiance (praying with men) has sparked what she hopes will be the first step toward ending gender discrimination and reclaiming Muslim women's rights at mosques across the nation (America)".

"Sexuality is often used as an excuse to deny us rights", declares the 38 year-old single mom, who has won western hearts by declaring that her son Shibli, 21 months, is born out of wedlock.



BREAKING DOWN THE WALLS: Will one day these little girls, when they grow up, be allowed to say their prayers in the same hall? — Photo AN

In for the long haul, hunkered down in her trench, dug deep by five others calling themselves 'The Daughters of Hajar: A New Generation of American Muslim Women Speak,' the group is sponsored by the West Virginia University Centre for Women's Studies.

Hajar, known as Hagar in the Bible, is the historical mother of Islam and a symbol of a woman's strength and muscle-woman Asra certainly is enjoying a high noon despite

being inquisitioned by the Morgantown mosque members, a 35 strong. They want her banned from the mosque.

Rallying around her are the younger women in their 20's and 30's, and their male supporters, who identify themselves as "progressive Muslims" — a network of activists and writers linked by books, web sites and listservs in America.

"It is counterproductive to air their divisions and dirty laundry when Islam is under

scrutiny and Muslims' civil liberties are at risk," say Asra's detractors. Many think, she's seeking cheap publicity,



By Anjum Niaz

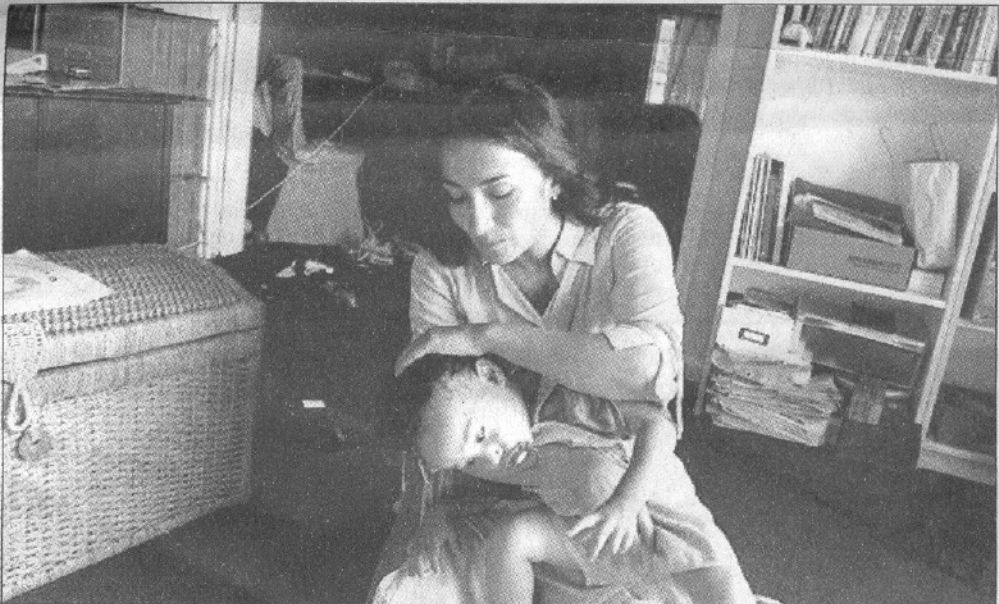
"if her interest in women's rights is genuine, why doesn't she turn her guns on bigger issues like crimes against women in the name of Islam?"

A Columbia graduate and Asra's associate-in-arms, Saleemah prefers to stay focused, "We'll kick a door down at Harvard or Columbia, but kicking a door down at our local mosque, we won't do."

"If women are involved in the mosque, what they're doing is secretarial work, child care, cooking and cleaning."

This indeed is the true picture, one that was kept in the dark until now. Mrs Amanat is a living embodiment of the above stereotype. Shahina Siddiqui's, another woman activist has a different take on the whole issue. She advocates "working quietly for change from within established Muslim organizations", and has already circulated a booklet for mosque leaders on how to make mosques more "sister friendly". Feedback is awaited from our "brethren" — the self-appointed custodians of Islam. Until then, carry on praying in your own allotted chambers.

Whoever repeals the Hudood Ordinance and introduces a death penalty against honour killings is the true trooper of women's rights. I have reported, you decide. ■



A REBEL WITH A CAUSE: Asra Nomani with son Shibli has broken all man-made rules to pray in the main hall with men at her local mosque in Morgantown, West Virginia