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Standing Alone: An American Woman's Struggle For The Soul Of Islam



Synopsis

As President Bush is preparing to invade Iraq, Wall Street Journal correspondent Asra Nomani embarks on a dangerous journey from Middle America to the Middle East to join more than two million fellow Muslims on the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca required of all Muslims once in their lifetime. Mecca is Islam's most sacred city and strictly off limits to non-Muslims. On a journey perilous enough for any American reporter, Nomani is determined to take along her infant son, Shibli -- living proof that she, an unmarried Muslim woman, is guilty of zina, or "illegal sex." If she is found out, the puritanical Islamic law of the Wahabbis in Saudi Arabia may mete out terrifying punishment. But Nomani discovers she is not alone. She is following in the four-thousand-year-old footsteps of another single mother, Hajar (known in the West as Hagar), the original pilgrim to Mecca and mother of the Islamic nation. Each day of her hajj evokes for Nomani the history of a different Muslim matriarch: Eve, from whom she learns about sin and redemption; Hajar, the single mother abandoned in the desert who teaches her about courage; Khadijah, the first benefactor of Islam and trailblazer for a Muslim woman's right to self-determination; and Aisha, the favorite wife of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam's first female theologian. Inspired by these heroic Muslim women, Nomani returns to America to confront the sexism and intolerance in her local mosque and to fight for the rights of modern Muslim women who are tired of standing alone against the repressive rules and regulations imposed by reactionary fundamentalists. Nomani shows how many of the freedoms enjoyed centuries ago have been erased by the conservative brand of Islam practiced today, giving the West a false image of Muslim women as veiled and isolated from the world. *Standing Alone in Mecca* is a personal narrative, relating the modern-day lives of the author and other Muslim women to the lives of those who came before, bringing the changing face of women in Islam into focus through the unique lens of the hajj. Interweaving reportage, political analysis, cultural history, and spiritual travelogue, this is a modern woman's jihad, offering for Westerners a never-before-seen look inside the heart of Islam and the emerging role of Muslim women.

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Customer Reviews

A former Wall Street Journal reporter, Nomani has invented her own nonfiction genre: gender-sensitive Muslim travel writing. An excellent companion to Nomani's first book, *Tantrika*, this memoir treads similar ground, chronicling her pilgrimage to Mecca, or hajj, in 2003. Throughout the book, Nomani is filled with self-doubt and healthy frustration with her Islamic faith. The portions describing hajj, particularly the other pilgrims' warmth to her infant son, are original and enjoyable. [...] The second half of the book records Nomani's pioneering struggle at her mosque for equal treatment of women. Daring to enter the men's door at the mosque, Nomani is repeatedly ostracized, and her father—a founder of the mosque—vilified by his counterparts. Nomani decries the Wahhabi takeover of American mosques and demands reform—a call that will resonate with the average American Muslim. The stories of her preteen niece and nephew introduce readers to a new generation of Muslims who are American and equality-minded. Through memorable personal narrative, Nomani gently instructs readers about modern Islam and her role as a woman within it. (Jan. 18) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Starred Review Even as she struggled to reconcile her quest for love and equality with her desire to be a good Muslim, Nomani never intended to become an activist dedicated to freeing Islam from the ideologies of misogyny and hate. But she had traveled the world as a Wall Street Journal correspondent, stood by helplessly while her close friend and colleague, Daniel Pearl, was murdered in the name of Allah, and then became a single mother, thus a criminal in the eyes of conservative Muslims. Determined to find the true spirit of Islam, Nomani travels to Mecca on the holiest of pilgrimages, the hajj, a life-changing experience she chronicles with compelling detail, candor, and passion both intellectual and spiritual as she also explicates Islam's intrinsic respect for women as embodied in such figures as Hajar (known as Hagar to Jews and Christians). Inspired by her discoveries, Nomani returns home to Morgantown, West Virginia, and courageously launches a

protest against her mosque's sexist policies, an effort that, thanks to her resounding eloquence and investigative expertise, has had global consequences. Ultimately, Nomani's riveting, cogent, and inspiring account urges the moderate majority in all faiths to rescue their traditions from those who twist religion into a weapon of mass oppression and terror. Donna SeamanCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Standing Alone, by Asra Nomani, is about reforming Islam, and fortunately, despite the title, Ms. Nomani does not stand alone. Many other Muslims stand beside her. And non-Muslims, such as I, who wish to see a reformed (restored) Islam, stand with her also. Why should I care? Because I lived in Saudi Arabia for several years, and wrote a book, Fool's Paradise (travels in Arabia). In that book I note that Islam today has as little to do with its prophet, Mohammed, as Christianity has to do with Jesus. Neither man would recognize the religions which are practiced in their names. And in that book I identify modern Islam's major flaw: its fear of women's sexuality. Why does a Saudi woman, e.g., have to be accompanied by a male relative everywhere she goes? Why is she not allowed to drive a car? It's because she might drive that car to a sexual tryst. Fear of not being able to control women is at the heart of the Islam practiced in Arabia today. Such fear, by the way, does not speak well for the masculinity of the males guarding their females. If a man can't trust his wife as soon as his back is turned, what kind of man is he? This kind of Islam puts a kind of social chastity belt on its women. They are so tabooed and bugabooed that when you visit a man in Saudi Arabia, you will never see the womenfolk in his household. If they do speak, it will be from behind a curtain. There are religious police in the market (souk) to make sure women are veiled, and if too much of her leg is showing, he will swipe it with a black mark. To a Westerner, all this seems like lunacy. So it would have for the first Muslims, also. The reformation of the Islam that has been hijacked by a fearful patriarchy will most likely come from Muslims such as Nomani, raised in liberal, Jeffersonian America. Throughout her book, Nomani stresses that the early Muslims and their Prophet did not treat women as second-class citizens. Women preached in mosques. They were valued, not feared. Ms. Nomani goes to Mecca on the Haj (pilgrimage) where every Muslim should go if financially and physically able. Ironically, in Mecca during the Haj, men and women mixed freely, unsegregated. Elated by this discovery, which hearkened back to original Islam, she hoped to reform the local mosque in West Virginia, where she grew up and still lives. That local mosque had a separate entrance for females, and once inside, the women had to sit in a squalid area behind a screen. Why? Because a Muslim male should not see a female, lest he be distracted and tempted by her.

Asra Nomani is determined to be allowed to go into the mosque through the same door as the men, and determined to pray in the same room as the men, albeit a little behind them in token of modesty. The book is well-written, informative, never boring, and should be read by every American who has been led by enemies of Islam in MSM to fear and distrust it. Islam does need reform (restoration). Asra Nomani shows the way.

This book contains a very complete description of the haji (pilgrimage) plus lots of anecdotal stories of modern day Muslim life in America. The author can be perceived as quite liberal for her faith, but she has a clear way of explaining much of what is hidden of the Muslim faith by the fanatics and the superficial news broadcasts seen in the US. It does seem that she is hung up on the fact that she had her child out of wedlock and how some would want to punish that as a moral sin. Apparently it's quite an emotional issue as it is REPEATEDLY mentioned - a tad overkill for me. But overall it was an excellent book and easy read.

Do not be misled by the title of Standing Alone in Mecca . . . because it speaks not about Islam or even religion but for the eternal human search for liberty, fairness and justice. Her expose of Islam is the expose of abuse that every religion has gone through at the hands of dogmatic zealots. It is the story of human propensity to leverage any and all means of power--religion, politics, money--to control others. The author's journey to Mecca is a fascinating account of the pilgrim that only Muslims are allowed to go to. Other religions have been guilty of this exclusion as well, to be fair. While feeling guilty of bringing a child to the world out of wedlock, Asara ends up in Mecca to seek redemption, and finds a surprise. "After undergoing the most sacred of experiences as a Muslim woman in one of the most repressive regimes in the world, I received a shocking wakeup call when I tried to bring lessons from the pilgrimage home to my own community in America--one of the most democratic societies in the world." She found that "In my mosque, what was alarming was not that this man, living with two Saudi wives in Morgantown, spewed this hate-filled rhetoric just blocks from the campus of West Virginia university, but that none of the 150 WVU doctors, professionals, PhD students, and undergraduate students in the congregation uttered a protest. From the trenches in small-town Americana, I was observing something disturbing. Even at a time when the government of Saudi Arabia was taking a moderate position--at least publicly--tolerant and inclusive Islam was losing in places like Morgantown as zealots filled a vacuum created by an ambivalent moderate majority and a passive, even sympathetic, leadership." Let me repeat for clarity that the men who schemed in the name of religion to ostracize Asra from the mosque that her father had founded are

not the exclusive domain of Islam. Such bigotry runs across all cultures and religions. This book is a bold attack on such behavior and not on a religion. Asra chose to face these and other discriminations as a thinking, courageous speaker of truth, supported by like-minded courageous and thinking Muslim men and women. To me, this was the best part of the book. Moderate, fair-minded people must speak out or lose to the tyrant minority, be it Hitler, Khomeini, Putin, or others like them.

Very nice story, easy to read. Honest testimony about contemporary Islam in Pakistan, USA and Saudi Arabia

Standing alone relates to every and each Muslim woman... Love the book

Asra's story is the story of many of us - finding our place in our religious heritage as women. Sometimes it is easy. Often it is not, especially if we are not welcome to participate fully. Asra is a brave woman who bears a child out of wedlock, traveling on a Haj, facing the people in her mosque. The only complaint I would have is that the book is wordy. It is a very good read.

Excellent read and very well written. It gives a look at how modern Muslim women want to live their lives.

I liked this book. I ordered it after seeing her on Bill Maher's show. She shares her experiences and I learned a lot about her faith. I recommended it to my Methodist Bible Study group because I think we all need to listen to other view points. We need to find our common strengths if we will ever have a peaceful planet.

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