

IN THE LAND OF INVISIBLE WOMEN A female doctor's journey in the Saudi Kingdom

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When looking for a book on birds in my favourite bookshop, my eye fell on a different book; on the cover a veiled Arabic lady in front of a background of a white mosque. I read the title: "In the land of invisible women: a female doctor's journey in the Saudi Kingdom". Then turning to the back cover:

The decisions that change your life are often the most impulsive ones.

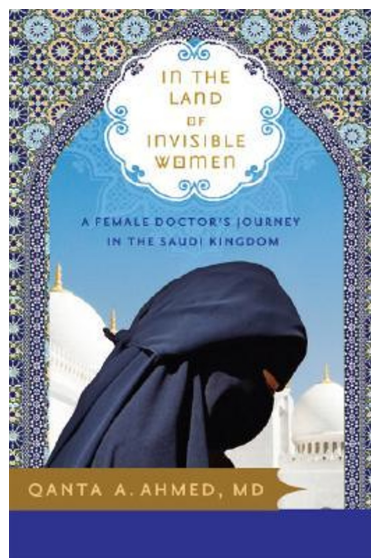
Unexpectedly denied a visa to remain in the United States, Qanta Ahmed, a young British Muslim doctor, becomes an outcast in motion. On a whim, she accepts an exciting position in Saudi Arabia. This is not just a new job; this is a chance at adventure in an exotic land she thinks she understands, a place she hopes she will belong.

What she discovers is vastly different. The Kingdom is a world apart, a land of unparalleled contrast. She finds rejection and scorn in the places she believed would most embrace her, but also humor, honesty, loyalty and love.

And for Qanta, more than anything, it is a land of opportunity. A place where she discovers what it takes for one woman to re-create herself in the land of invisible women.

Upon buying it I read this autobiography in one run. It is highly-structured, easy reading. The initial chapters deal with culture shock. Qanta grew up in a Western culture in the United Kingdom, though because of her Muslim faith and Pakistani background she is totally multicultural. After completing a degree to be a medical doctor she moves to the United States where she further specialised in critical-care, sleep disorders and pulmonary diseases. When she comes to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to work at the King Fahad National Guard Hospital, she expects that she will adjust easily because of her faith and background. This turns out to be a misconception. As she explains, the Muslim way of life in the Saudi Arabian Kingdom is clearly orthodoxy: the right way of believing. Her own way of Muslim belief is, as she calls it, orthopraxy: the right way of living. In Saudi Arabia, women are not supposed to be outside the house alone. Whether for shopping or for travelling, they have to be escorted. Outside the house, women have to wear an all-covering veil, and no hair may be visible. This is for Qanta a very difficult way of life to adjust to. It starts right upon arrival at the airport. Someone will come and take her, because without a sponsor, without husband or father, without brother or son, she would wait as a maid, would wait, *with cargo, like cargo*, until collected. Her first impressions: a land of Cadillacs and camels, a land of Benz's and Bedouins, a land of invisible women.

In the successive chapters she describes and analyses a large number of topics based on the people she encounters and with whom she discusses. Even through the veils and escorts, she comes across women with progressive views, women who want to work. Some of them are women who want to remain single in spite of convention, while other women may be desperate to marry. A special case is about a young woman



who is so dedicated to her job that somehow she is not yet married. But when this young doctor is offered the opportunity to get additional training in Canada, her family is unwilling to let her go as a single woman. So she gets engaged suddenly, desperate to be able to study abroad without dishonouring herself and without dishonouring her family.

On other occasions, Qanta has discussions on faith and Islam, and on interpretations of the

Quran. She also relates her pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in a way which leaves me as a Westerner very impressed. This pilgrimage turns out to be a very spiritual revelation for Qanta. It seems to be a way of reuniting with her faith. It is very interesting reading about how this pilgrimage changes her way of believing.

In other chapters she describes the awkward relations she has with her male colleagues: the medical doctors. In her Western background she is used to being considered as equal in professional discussions. Here, in the Kingdom, this is not as straightforward.

Working at the critical-care, where among others, victims of severe accidents are brought in, allows her to ponder on certain aspects of social life in Saudi Arabia. She specifically mentions how some spoiled sons of rich families harm themselves and others because of excessive speed and risky driving. Other shocking situations are about child molestation. But she also meets with enlightened people like Dr. Maha al Muneef, a female doctor and activist, engaged in seeking better conditions for women and children. There is also the chairman of the department who is open-minded hiring a large number of women among his staff.

Among her acquaintances are people with young children, people who get married, people who get divorced. She describes and discusses on how these various events of life are different in Saudi Arabia compared to her Western background. She meets with people who have spent a few years abroad and how they readjust to life in the Kingdom. She meets with highly qualified doctors who organise international meetings and specific topics of research. And on how it may be difficult or even impossible, for non-Muslims or, in particular, for Jews, to take part in such international scientific events organised in Riyadh.

A very unsettling experience for Qanta is when, on 9/11, the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York, is met in the hospital with cheers and celebration by patients and staff. It takes her a while to get over this shock; the realisation that even if she is a Muslim herself, she does not identify with the Saudi reaction.

This book is very interesting, allowing reflection on religion, social life, different cultures, Western life as opposed to Islam, as well as on the status of women working and remaining independent.