



ASRA NOMANI'S 'STANDING ALONE IN MECCA': A STUDY IN IDENTITY & SUBJECTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Though the terms 'subjectivity' and 'identity' are often used interchangeably, there is a slight difference in their meanings. Donald Hall¹ defines identity as 'that particular set of traits, beliefs and allegiances that in short or long-term ways, gives one a consistent personality and a mode of social well being', while 'subjectivity', according to Hall, 'implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity.' Elaborating on this distinction further, Hall states that 'subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent is it understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control.' Hall is right in pointing out that after the politicisation of identity in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the process of reading, studying and critically engaging with a wide variety of cultural texts is part of our continuing struggle to understand the different ways in which identities are socially valued, interrogated, and replicated.

INTRODUCTION

On similar lines, I intend to focus on the subjectivity and identity of Asra Nomani as depicted in her autobiography, '*Standing Alone in Mecca: A Pilgrimage into the Heart of Islam.*' Though mine is essentially a literary endeavour to analyse the identity of Asra Nomani, it adopts an interdisciplinary approach and as such, it would be worthwhile to take a look at some key questions related to identity-formation asked by key thinkers from the disciplines

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of sociology, politics, psychology, economics and social policy. Some important questions that I intend to raise are as follows:

How are identities formed and what are its features/characteristics?

To what extent can a person shape his/ her own identity? How far do others influence this process?

How far do factors like gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion constrain people and shape their identities?

What kinds of tensions are created between social structures and agency?

How can people influence social structures and use them to recreate collective identities?

It should be very obvious that in attempting to find an answer to these questions, I will be looking at Asra's life in all its dimensions, at her childhood, her adulthood, her experiences as a single unwed mother, her brave but often futile attempts to reclaim the right to pray in mosques alongside men. However my focus will always primarily be on her subjectivity, and her identity-formation.

How are identities formed and what are are its features and characteristics?

Identities are formed through interaction between people. When people take up different identities there are different *processes* taking place as people position themselves, and are positioned, in the social world. These processes, social scientists argue, include a focus on the *personal* dimensions of the identity equation as well as an interrogation of how these connect to the *society* in which we live. Analysing the social aspects of identity leads us to explore the structures like gender, nationality, and religion, through which our lives are organized.

Our identities are not something that we are completely free to choose and use exactly as we want: they are shaped by society, the culture we live in, and our experience and understandings. Besides other factors like gender, religion, nationality, occupation, etc also contribute to the sorts of identities we hold. Our identities are shaped by these factors, but we no doubt participate in forming our own identities.

As mentioned earlier, Identity provides a link between individuals and the world in which they live. Hence it follows from this that identity combines *how a person sees herself* and *how the world sees that person*. Identity involves the internal and the subjective, and the external. It is a socially recognized position, recognized by others, not just by the person whose identity is being discussed.



However how a person sees herself and how others see that person do not always fit. e.g. When Asra went to the Morgantown mosque to pray in the main hall aside of men, many men out there see her as one who causes mischief or *fitna*. Some call her as an idiot, some blame her father for what they call ‘wrong upbringing.’ Some accuse her of having a hidden agenda. Some accuse her of being a publicity seeker in the line of Tasleema Nasreen and Salman Rushdie. Some even give her death threats. Thus what Asra views as a legitimate attempt on her part to reclaim women’s rights sanctioned in Qur’an and also by Mohammad.

Another feature of identity is that it is built through identifying *similarities* and *differences* with other people. For e.g. though Asra respects her Burqa wearing aunties, she can never imagine herself as wearing one, and she feels that she is different from them. Her identity as a modern Muslim woman is also marked with similarity with the likes of Princess Zahra and others.

Another defining feature of identity is that no person has just one single identity. Every person has many simultaneously overlapping identities. For example, Asra has multiple identities of being a proud American, a single mother, a loving daughter, a successful journalist, an author, a crusader for Muslim women’s rights, a friend for Marianne Pearl, a loving and caring aunt for Safiyyah.

Role of the Choices she made in Asra’s Identity-formation

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
two roads diverged in a wood, and I --
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

What better than the concluding lines from Robert Frost’s memorable poem ‘the Road Not Taken’ to express the role of choice in the identity formation of a person? As these lines make it clear, the **choices** one makes (or does not, at times!) go a long way in shaping our identity and making us what we eventually become. While analysing Asra’s identity we realize that her identity is formed by the choices that she makes. Two of the decisions that Asra took were extremely crucial in her identity formation: first was the decision to give birth to Shibli, and the second was the decision of going to Hajj. Both these decisions had profound implications. Giving birth to Shibli meant that Asra would be bringing Shibli up all by herself. Shibli’s conception hadn’t followed the script that she had planned for her self, but she accepted the responsibilities that came from her life choices. She embraced her son and dedicated her self to raising him with virtue, respect and honour.



Going to the hajj was potentially very dangerous, as she was carrying her son, who would be proof of the fact that she had committed *zina* or the sin of having sex outside of marriage, a crime punishable by death by stoning in Wahhabi Saudi Arabia. Asra was at odds with religion, but instead of turning away from religion, she decided to find out more about her faith. However the decision of going for the Hajj changed Asra's life irrevocably: she found her lost voice. The hajj became a catalyst to her empowerment as a woman in Islam. The hajj allowed her to 'walk a living history, that pulses with meaning to Muslims.' The hajj gave her the conviction that women can be fully engaged members of the Muslim community.

Role played by Asra's faith in her identity Formation

For millions of believers of different faiths across the world, their faith, and their religion form an integral part of their identity. Hence we need to analyse the role played by Asra's faith in her identity formation. Though Asra was slightly ambivalent about her faith yet faith formed an integral part of her identity. This ambivalence sprung from Asra's rebellious nature and refusal to accept things blindly. She was 'a post- modern woman in a religious culture with many pre-modern dispositions'. Could she find a place for herself within her religion? Her parents had strong faith that she could.

She found her greatest faith in nature. When she saw Shibli for the first time, she believed in god. When she saw a bird soar through the sky, she believed in God. When she saw the moon, she believed in God. It was the rest of the time when she doubted the existence of God.

Since going for the Hajj, transformed her and her life once and for all, it is worthwhile to look at Asra's faith and her complex relationship with her religion in three phases:

- a) Pre-Hajj
- b) During-Hajj
- c) Post- Hajj

a) Pre- Hajj:-Asra never pretended to be a model Muslim according to Islamic standards for rituals and external appearances she didn't pray the requisite five times a day. She didn't cover her hair. And her baby was evidence that she had had sex outside of marriage. Although she had a firm faith in a divine force, she didn't invoke the name of a God who judges, punishes and rewards. She 'tried simply to live as a good Muslim with humanitarian values, in the same spirit as a good Christian, Jew, Hindu or a Buddhist.' She didn't lie. She didn't cheat. She 'tried not to hurt others.' She 'tried to live sincerely.'



As a reporter for the Wall Street Journal Asra once went to Allahbad to interview the Dalai Lama, who had come for a holy pilgrimage for the Maha Kumbh Mela. The Dalai Lama did light candles in a Hindu ritual. However when asked if he would join the pilgrims bathing in the icy water of Ganges river, the Dalai Lama replied, 'I don't think so. It's too cold.' Later at the press conference he said, 'I always believe its safer and better and reasonable to keep one's own tradition or belief.' At that moment Asra understood what the Dalai Lama's words meant to her. She had done the Buddhist pilgrimage she was doing the Hindu pilgrimage but she had never done her own pilgrimage – the pilgrimage to Mecca called the Hajj. At that moment, she formed an intention, to do her pilgrimage. The Qur'an says that it is the duty of all able bodies Muslims to do the pilgrimage to Mecca, but Asra had never even thought about going. The Hajj is meant to be a time to absorb the central messages of Islam: that Islam means having a special relationship with God based on surrendering to divine will and praying to ad revering God; that there is a kinship among people that expresses itself through sacrifice for the benefit of others; that life is about struggle – a battle to secure a livelihood and ensure that good triumphs over evil.ⁱⁱ From this point onwards Asra makes efforts to go for the Hajj. The first time she was about to go for the Hajj was when her close friend Daniel Pearl was kidnapped, and subsequently beheaded. At this time Asra was in no mood to do the Hajj. To her shock, Daniel's murderers slandered the name of Islam by killing in its name. Asra wondered whether this was the right time for her to do her pilgrimage. Would here ever be a time? Asra wondered. Michael Wolfe the author and producer had a philosophy that answered her question: 'Hajj is in the heart. You don't go until you're supposed to go.'

In her heart Asra felt fear and loathing for her religion:

*Could I remain in a religion from which so many people sprang spewing hate?
Could I find space in my religion for my kind of woman? Could I remain a
Muslim?*

*I didn't know the answers, and I wondered if it would ever be time for me to
venture into the heart of Islam.ⁱⁱⁱ*

After Shibli's birth Asra was drawn again to do the Hajj. She felt that she had made many mistakes that she could not reverse even if she wanted to, because they had all led her to the creation of her son and they were necessary for her to understand what she truly believed. With her sin she needed a new beginning. She decided that at that time the logistics of doing the Hajj were possible and she would do it.

She decided to go for Hajj even though some of her friends warned her that Shibli was too young to travel, and that his immunities were still developing. However Asra wanted Shibli with her because she felt that he was the result of the best in her. He lived because she 'had



chosen life over fear.’ He smiled because she ‘had chosen happiness over shame.’ He grew because she believed that ‘the present and the future define us, not the past.’ He was the result of her ‘efforts to be a better person, to flow toward the divine.’

One of the main purposes of Hajj is to submit completely to God. The pilgrimage symbolises a transformation. Yet Asra was a bit sceptic that she would be so deeply touched by this religious exercise that she would emerge transformed. This pilgrimage made Asra wonder about her faith. Throughout her girlhood she had believed ‘unequivocally in the concept of God.’ Until high school she firmly believed in a God.

In the way He is described with human attributes. But when she battled shattered expectations in love she wondered ‘how there could be a god who would so disregard a daughter’s prayers for happiness.’ This apprehension continued for some time even after she landed in Jeddah. She was not sure whether she could find a sense of community in her Muslim Ummah.

Asra never pretended to be a model Muslim according to Islamic standards for rituals and external appearances she didn’t pray the requisite five times a day. She didn’t cover her hair. And her baby was evidence that she had had sex outside of marriage. Although she had a firm faith in a divine force, she didn’t invoke the name of a God who judges, punishes and rewards. She ‘tried simply to live as a good Muslim with humanitarian values, in the same spirit as a good Christian, Jew, Hindu or a Buddhist.’ She didn’t lie. She didn’t cheat. She ‘tried not to hurt others.’ She ‘tried to live sincerely.’

b) During- Hajj :- At the terminal 4 at the Jeddah airport it was prayer time that was when Asra’s doubts reappeared – why did she have to pray *behind* the men and why her father *had* to be with her before she entered this sacred space. Asra just hadn’t fully surrendered to the faith. Yet she completed her prayers. On the Hajj, she stood in Bin Laden’s lands of Islam. Asra felt that Osama -Bin- Laden and the events of 9/11 had made her religion ‘a lightning rod.’ Asra stood in Saudi Arabia, that her religion was ‘being misrepresented by Osama-Bin-Laden and his brand of puritanical Islam.’ She lamented the fact that ‘no longer perceived in all their complexity and humanity, Muslims had become a monolithic enemy.’ What troubled her even more that the broader Muslim community was being taken over by right wing Muslims. She felt conflicted as she went deeper into the land of Saud. She faced a contradiction. Very often when people are faced with contradictions, they don’t resolve them. Here was Asra trying to resolve her own contradictions, and even though this journey was risky she knew that it was the right thing for her to be doing. She was also afraid because ‘Soudi Arabia is so notoriously repressive.’ Despite the risk Asra was happy to be there. she



felt that one way to resolve contradictions is to create a delicate balance between safety and risk taking.’

When they reached the Ka’bah, she was surprised at the freedom their, she felt that she ‘could have been approaching the steps of the New York public library,’ and ‘felt no inhibitions or restrictions as a woman approaching this daunting creation.’ On seeing the Ka’bah Asra experienced mixed feelings. She was nervous, scared, excited and also cynical – all at the same time. ‘The Ka’bah,’ she whispered to Shibli. Having safely brought her son there she ‘felt triumphant.’ She was also impressed by the sheer diversity of the people from all over the world that she saw. Even as she saw the stone that the prophet had reportedly kissed during his last Hajj she couldn’t express any affection towards that stone, unlike the other pilgrims who were trying to get to the stone. Asra, never a believer in blind faith, felt that ‘our world and our religions would be better served by conscious mindful faith.’ To her the stone merely ‘represented mythology used to secure our physical connection to the divine.’ Asra simply couldn’t feel the surrender to her faith that she was told she ‘should feel at a moment like that.’ She some how wished that she could be like them, and also realised that she wasn’t. Seeing the mad frenzy of the pilgrims throwing themselves against the Ka’bah’s walls trying to kiss the stone, the journalist in Asra whispered to herself ‘crazy.’

This devotion to the physical structure of the Ka’bah struck Asra as ‘contradictory to Islam’s teachings prohibition idolatry.’

Religion is supposed to inspire the best in ourselves. This was why despite being abandoned by Shibli’s father and despite the judgement of others, Asra felt that she could be in Mecca and stand with a child before God. She had drawn on the best in herself to try to save her friend Daniel. She drew on the best in herself to bring her son into the world. She felt that it was because she went through so much that she could hold her child ‘without shame.’ Asra felt that what it means to be a good Muslim is defined by ‘the core universal values of what it means to be a good person.’ Asra had gone through that struggle and that is how she felt she ‘became legitimate,’ just as ‘the sincerity of Hajar’s heart allowed her to find her Zamzam.’

Seeing Shibli many women continually kissed him on his forehead ‘little hajji!’ the women exclaimed. Asra’s heart ‘smiled with each expression on love for Shibli.’ These women didn’t know that Asra had no wedding ring. Asra felt that ‘a spiritual umbilical cord connects all women through the timeless universality of motherhood,’ and that she ‘was one of those women. When the crowds were swelling, one of the tour guide Alshareef’s friend lifted Shibli and kept him safe. Such and many other small acts of kindness moved Asra and reaffirmed her faith in humanity.



While at the Ka'bah Shibli was hungry and started to stir restlessly, and started crying Asra looked around her realised that it had got very crowded. She simply didn't know how she could feed her hungry son in that crowd. She was a mother desperate to feed her son. She dropped to the floor, and took her father's scissors to cut the top of her chemise and ripped it open with her bare hands, and she drew Shibli to her. Having successfully nursed Shibli, Asra felt as if she was connected to him with the eternal bond that linked Hajar to Ishmael. That moment meant so much to her. She was in Mecca, 'a criminal' in that land for 'having given birth without a wedding ring' on her finger and she was nursing her son at the holy mosque of Mecca, overlooking the sacred Ka'bah this Asra felt, 'was nature's law expressing itself, more powerfully than man's law.' Thus the hajj marks a tranformatory phase in Asra's life.

C) Post Hajj:- After coming back from the Hajj, Asra crisscrossed

USA on her book tour. As with the Hajj, Asra felt it right to take Shibli with her, because he had helped propel Asra into a new identity. She was a Muslim woman who had searched for her voice. When she went for the Annual Convention of the Islamic Society of North America, she took a seat in the second row. Where it dawned on her that she 'wanted a seat at the table in the Muslim world.' She 'didn't want to remain in the shadows,' as she had done not only in the Muslim world but even in her life as a journalist for the Wall Street Journal. She then did something awesome: she stood up and moved to a seat in the front row, and asked a question to Dr. Ingrid Mattson about the legitimacy of a woman in Nigeria being stoned to death for having a child out of wedlock. Dr. Mattson rejected the verdict of stoning and argued that Islam's teachings on compassion and tolerance overrode any perceive sexual crime. It was then that Asra felt very much affirmed that her religion didn't condemn a women like her, and that in America she had the intellectual freedom to find that out. More then in any Muslim country, America was where Asra could be 'a fully realised Muslim women and mother.' Asra felt 'so very buoyant about being a Muslim women in America.' This was where Asra 'could live with her head held up high,' As her religion told her that she deserved to do.

What baffled Asra is that if men and women could pray together in the Sacred Mosque of Meccah, why couldn't they do so elsewhere? She then took up the task of reclaiming women's rights to pray alongside men in the main prayer hall. She began this campaign at her home town mosque of Morgantown. Predictably enough, she encounters a stiff resistance from the male members, who want her to go the women's section at the back, which is dingy, stuffy and ill-light. She drafted a manifesto for Muslim women's rights in the mosque and had it sent to the Board members. They didn't act on it. Her father was her lone supporter in this battle. The male members try all tricks in the bag: they intimidate her, use religious edicts to stop her, call her acts as 'fitna', and at times also use force to evict her. Asra's brave stand



and her attempt to assert her rights are testimony to her conviction in these matters, and go to show how they form an integral part of her identity. She realised that the fight for women's rights in Islam just as in any other religion and society isn't a gender battle of men versus women. It was much more complicated: it was a battle between those seeking equity and those preserving the status quo.

Role of gender and sexuality in Asra's identity formation

Both gender and sexuality are important to our understanding of identity. Our sense of who we are is most significantly linked to our identities as women or as men. Gender is a very important part of the organization of a society, and not just a part of each individual's experience. It is part of the culture of a society. Assumptions about what is appropriate for men and women can influence our identities and the scope which we have for deciding both '*who we are*' and '*who we want to be*.'

Gender identities are shaped by many different factors. Social scientists point out that *biological factors* (such as the forms of our bodies, or the genetic material) and *social factors* (such as the experiences we have inside and outside schools and colleges) are not independent. Gender identity is a complex interweaving of a variety of different influences—biological and social.

The way we construct our identities is strongly influenced by feminine and masculine characteristics associated with the gender categories, men and women. As individuals we choose which aspects of gender identity to take up, but our choices are constrained by a variety of factors, including cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

In order to explore the flexibility of gender categories and the diversity of gender identities, we need to look at development from childhood to adulthood, and see how developing an understanding of gender involves a search for certainty. In early childhood, gender categories are used in a fixed, often stereotypical, essentialist way, but gradually, as children learn more about their social world, gender categories become more sophisticated and flexible. This increasing flexibility accommodates a diversity of masculinities and femininities.

As discussed earlier, Asra grew up as a traditional Muslim girl, and even at that age she could figure out that women were restrained just because of the gender they were born in. Further, as pointed out earlier, for eight years, she lived by the rules of *hudud*, or the boundaries of her Muslim culture. However this could not continue for long. As Asra rightly points out, 'restrictions and repression breed not always compliance but rather conflict and dissonance.'



As a result, Asra, from her late teens to her twenties, i.e. almost a decade, lived a double life satisfying her curiosities about men, while lying to her parents because she knew that she was crossing boundaries that ‘weren’t supposed to be crossed.’ Asra continued with this life of ‘lies, deceit and hypocrisy’ till her marriage fell apart, and this was when she realized that humans ‘weren’t meant to suffer so deeply’ just to deny their ‘true selves and realize societal, parental, and parental expectations’ for them. She then decided that she ‘wasn’t going to live with contradictions’ in her own life. Thus we see Asra’s identity evolve from a conformist child to a rebellious adult. In this connection Asra states that ‘in any society governed by oppression and rules that don’t make sense, there will be rebellion, even if it’s expressed privately.’ To express such rebellion publicly, Asra believes ‘is the sign of a mature individual and a mature society.’

Apart from gender, *sexuality* is another very important axis which plays a very important role in a person’s identity formation. Asra had, right from her childhood, confronted the repression of sexuality. She had from an early age learned ‘to not talk’ about this part of herself ‘because it was so taboo.’ The same attitude towards sex and sexuality continued, when in her fifth grade when her mother didn’t want to sign the permission slip for the school’s sex education class. Eventually she relented when Asra persisted and predictably enough, Asra didn’t learn anything that she thought ‘was sacrilegious.’ Throughout her teenage years, Asra never had a conversation with her parents- or with anyone for that matter –about sex! When Asra was twenty years old and confessed to her mother that she had had sex, she was asked to stop the conversation. A renewed effort by Asra to raise the topic at the kitchen table once again, led to her mother sobbing uncontrollably, giving Asra the impression that she was ‘doing something terribly wrong.’ Thus she had no choice but to stay secretive about her activities and as a result, she didn’t have a community to help her ‘make wise decisions’ about her relationships. When Asra became sexually active, she began ‘to understand the power of sex,’ but could never understand why people often ‘attach a stigma to adults having sexual relations.’ Asra was always taught to believe that sex was ‘wrong, dirty and sinful outside of marriage,’ but Asra disagreed with this outlook and believed that there must surely be a better way of looking at things. This led to reflections about her own sexuality, which had been germinating since her earliest days.

This is how she describes her dilemma :

Everyone has a choice: either we figure out on our own what we believe about sex or we accept a religious authority’s edicts about sex^{iv}.

It was at that time that she got an assignment to report on the business of tantric sex, and it also helped her to look at sexuality ‘outside the prism of religion.’ This is what she found out :



I learned a fundamental concept during this assignment: sexuality is a vital part of our being, and we are best served if we deal with it as a healthy part of society, not something to repress, sanction or adjudicate on^v.

She also discovered that Islam has a very rich tradition of sacred sexuality, and that prophet Mohammad talked about the ‘sweetness of intercourse,’ and that he dealt realistically with issues of pleasure, desire and frustration. Further, she came to know that ‘the Qur’an speaks eloquently about the concept of sacred sexuality between husband and wife.’

Finally a stage came when Asra found it difficult to live with this deceit, more so on the trip to Hajj with the Quranic injunction ‘Exhort one another to the Truth’ (103:3) bearing heavily on her mind leading to a conflict between her varying emotions. Finally, when a woman pilgrim asked her about Shibli’s father, Asra revealed the truth that she was not married and was raising the child with her family’s support. This revelation came as a big relief to Asra, and she felt ‘as if she had pulled the noose off from around her neck.’

Asra was drawn into exploring sexuality and gender relations because ‘she saw the profound effect of those issues on our lives, from power, position and social acceptance to love, marriage and intimacy.’ She felt that she had a commitment to speak about issues of sexuality’ because her own experiences told her that ‘this subject needs to be discussed among all religions.’

More importantly, Asra, now the mother of a child, would have to think about what to teach Shibli. She wanted to raise him in an environment in which he could discuss sex openly, and honestly with her, where both acknowledged the possibility that ‘he might have sex before he was married.’ Asra wanted to ‘present sex to Shibli as an act of love between two human beings carried out with respect, honesty and responsibility.’

Gender identities are not fixed; they change across time and between cultures.

Thus we see that Asra’s identity evolves from being a conformist in childhood, to an independent woman, who developed a nuanced understanding of sexuality, and accepts the consequence of her pregnancy outside of marriage. She decides to bring up her child on her own, and is helped to do so by her family’s support. Asra was a sinner by religious standards, but as such she was not ‘ashamed of her errant ways.’ She believed that what she had done was a part of life, and she wasn’t going to punish herself for it. She also believed that we all have a dark side and if we accepted it instead of despising it, we would be more positively transformed.



Asra's identity as a mother

After the birth of her son Shibli, another dimension gets added to Asra's identity as a woman: that of a mother, and a single mother at that. While leaving Mecca, Asra has a conversation with an Egyptian-born pilgrim, who tells her that the name Shibli means 'my lion cub' and not just 'lion cub' as she had previously thought. This seemingly insignificant revelation was very important for Asra because of the symbolism of the name. Asra had chosen Shibli's name partly because she felt that it captured a spirit of courage. With Shibli in her arm, Asra realised that indeed her son was not separate from her, and was an extension of her. He was the physical manifestation of her courage- that courage which had brought her to the Hajj. Asra had come to the hajj thinking of herself as a criminal who needed to avoid detection and in the midst of a deep spiritual conflict over her son's conception. After she nurses her son on the sacred ground of the Ka'bah, she feels liberated, and she leaves Mecca with a feeling of completeness.

Shibli's birth had awakened in her a new mindfulness and clarity that she had never had before about her purpose in life. For most of her adult life, she was a woman trying to reconcile the dissonance between her birth, religion, and ancestry and her western upbringing. She had wandered around the world for two and a half years, 'from meditation caves off the coast of Thailand to grass hearts on the banks of the Indus River.' She had returned to Morgantown, 'betrayed, disillusioned and yet somehow still hopeful.' With his birth, Shibli had given her a new life. She had constructed her own identity and her son was a vital part of it.

Asra's stand on women's rights

An important part of Asra's identity was what Turner would call as her self- categorization as a modern Muslim woman, who was aware of her rights and would fight to assert them. She was a woman who tried to live life on her own terms. Though she knew of her parents stand on sexual matters, she experimented for herself. When she was abandoned by the father of her child, she still decided to go ahead with the pregnancy. All this was possible because Asra was a strong woman, who not only knew her own rights, but also felt strongly about the rights of other women. Thus, to understand her identity as a strong-willed modern Muslim woman, it is necessary to look at her stand on issues related to Muslim women's rights. Her stand acquires credibility when we see that when it comes to taking a firm stand on most of these matters, Asra does so.



Pakistan had passed laws based on Hudud, or 'boundaries for moral conduct'. To Asra, these laws symbolized a deeper crisis of self-determination for women in Islam. Women in Islam are so very much defined by Hudud. These Hudud, Asra felt, are used to control everything about women's lives, from their sexuality to where they can pray in mosques. Asra lamented the fact that 'very often religion is used to impose boundaries that ultimately deny women's rights that have now been articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the right to self-determination, the right over our bodies, the right to travel freely.' She points out that these religiously imposed boundaries directly affect a woman's economic life, identity, sexuality, and political power.

But when Asra discovered that she was pregnant she realised that the deepest boundaries have are within themselves; they are often most constrained by the fears that keep them from crossing the boundaries. Asra points out that religious dogma reaches into the most intimate corners of our lives. Most religions have repressive rules about sex except in marriage. She further shows how Muslim leaders translated these attitudes into rules about women's about women's behaviour in public, and now sexuality has become repressed in Muslim societies. This association of sin with sexuality makes women feel a sense of shame about their sexuality. She quotes the renowned 20th century Syrian poet, Nizzar Kabbani, who noted the sexual double standards that emerged with the idea that women must be protected while men are free to wonder. She points out how a strict segregation of men and women leads to a hyper sexuality, and as a result sexual dysfunctions emerge. Asra counters the traditionalists' claim that strict segregation of men and women protects women from 'eve teasing' and other kinds of harassments. She does not consider segregation to be an effective response to the challenge of creating societies with health gender dynamics.

When at the Ka'bah, Asra and her mother were doing some stretching exercises, which her mother found inappropriate to do, specially in a country 'that so controlled women's movement.' Asra felt that in societies like Saudi Arabia the Puritanical Muslim culture was 'that men had more control over women's bodies than the women themselves did. Men set rules and laws that defined women's reproductive rights, women's sexual rights and women's rights to free movement.' To Asra 'these restrictions not only defied internationally accepted standards for simple human rights and decency but also violated important tenets and traditions established at the time of the prophet Mohammad she also resented the fact that so many rules are imposed upon women in puritanical societies as absolute laws of God. When they are simply controlled instituted by men. It had longed seemed to her that women like men, should be able to live with rights to self-determination over their own bodies.

Asra's Identity as a Journalist



Asra worked for twelve years as a journalist for the Wall Street Journal, flying into new cities, diving into rental cars and navigating her way to interview CEOs and senators.

She knew the power of unfettered mobility, and her driver's licence was a powerful symbol of that mobility which empowered her as a professional journalist and as a woman. She recollected how when a United Airlines flight crashed outside Iowa killing 112 people, her editor at the *Wall Street Journal* had dispatched her to report from the scene which was her first reporting assignment in the field. She flew to Omaha, Nebraska, rented a car and drove interstate 29 North to Sioux City. This was when her driver's licence came in very handy.

When she travelled to India she embodied the values of self-determination that she had learned in America. Hero Honda Splendor, a 100 cc bike was her vehicle of empowerment. She rode that bike into the Himalayas, having cut her long hair and wearing pants and jackets to resemble a man.

Influences in Asra's Life

Who we are is not given in advance, we are not born with an identity, but it emerges through a series of **identifications** which combine and emerge in an infinite number of forms so that there is never one fixed coherent identity but several in play.

Identification is the psychological process of association between oneself and something else (originally someone else). Identification does not just involve copying; it involves taking that identity *into* yourself. The figures that a person identifies with play a major role in shaping the identity of that person.

Asra, being a single unwed mother looks for inspiration in the history of Islam, for finding women who might have faced a similar predicament. When Asra looks at 'the forgotten history of Islam' she saw the legacy of women who had to stand very much alone in the world, starting with the mother of the Prophet of Islam. Asra points out that although the history books don't cast her that way, his mother Amina entered motherhood as a single mother, given the fact that Mohammad's father had died before he was born. She describes the reason why she identifies with Amina as follows:

I had heard this story before, but it took on special meaning for me after I took my own son through the city of the Prophet's birth. I knew well the fears and dashed hopes of a mother bringing a child into this world alone, no matter what the circumstances. At a time when I was looking for strength from



women in my religion, I found a strong woman right at the birth of Islamic history, namely Mohammad's mother^{vi}.

Having seen with her own eyes, the influence of a mother on the child in its early years, Asra presumes that Amina must have had a profound influence on the man He grew up to be.

Asra also identifies herself with **Khadijah**, the first wife of Mohammad. Asra points out that though Khadijah was a forty year old widow, and Mohammad was twenty-five and single, she had no fear about making the first move. Islamic historians point out that Khadijah respected the virtue of her employee and proposed marriage to Mohammad. What Asra finds remarkable is the fact that Khadijah chose her own husband, proving that 'she was a woman who had ownership over her heart and body.' That ancient proposal, Asra claims, was the first example in the Muslim world of the right of women to self-determination in matters of love and marriage. With the acceptance of the proposal, Asra implies, 'Mohammad blessed the notion.' This however, is not the sole reason why Asra reveres Khadijah. Asra points out that Mohammad had a reflective personality, and Khadijah gave him the space to express it. With her wealth, Khadijah 'provided Mohammad with the material comfort that allowed him to focus on his spiritual practice, meditation and preaching.' More importantly, Asra claims that 'it took a woman- Khadijah to act decisively, bravely and wisely enough to encourage Mohammad to venture onto the world stage as a prophet.' Thus Khadijah is a pivotal figure in Islam's long list of working women, who inspire Asra and many other working women.

Asra sees Medina (during Mohammad's time) as 'the model for the kind of community the Prophet envisioned, including women's participation and leadership in everything from the big issues of the day to the seemingly mundane.' More importantly, Asra points out that 'the Prophet created a community that was built on feminist ideals.' **Prophet Mohammad** was a profound influence on Asra's life because 'he was a social reformer who believed in justice equity and tolerance.'. Besides Asra strongly believes that 'women's rights are equal to men's rights as defined in Islam and the life of the Prophet Mohammad.' Asra endorses the stand of Asma Gull Hassan, a young American Muslim lawyer, who wrote in her book *American Muslims* that the prophet was Islam's first feminist. 'After all', Asra points out, 'he accepted as his first love and his first wife a woman who was savvier, wealthier, and more successful in the world than he was.' Asra argues that 'few men, Muslim or not, would accept that kind of strength and worldliness in a wife.' What truly touched Asra were the accounts of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina. 'During the Prophet's time and for some years thereafter', Asra claims, 'women prayed in the Prophet's mosque with no partition between them and the men.' She further claims that 'historians record women's presence in the mosque and participation in education, and in political and literary debates, as well as in asking questions of the Prophet after his sermons, transmitting religious knowledge and



providing social services.’ In support of the claim that Mohammad was Islam’s feminist, Asra points out that Mohammad himself prayed with women, and cites the example of Umm Hisham (Mother of Hisham), who memorized the Quranic chapter ‘Al-Kahf’ from the Prophet himself. At another time, Asra claims that the Prophet consulted a woman named Umm Salama during the Treaty of Hdaybiyya, and heeded her advice. All these examples convinced Asra about the claim that Mohammad was Islam’s feminist, and thus affects her identity as a modern Muslim woman profoundly. As a result Asra states that when she thought about her identity as a Muslim woman, she thought of Mohammad. Asra felt that Mohammad treated women as they should be treated and honoured them. Asra also cites Ali Shariati and Karen Armstrong’s views that the Prophet treated women in a humane manner. This strong identification with the feminist ideals of the Prophet goes a long way in her future struggle across USA to reclaim the rights of Muslim women to access mosques.

Another ‘strong woman in the Prophet’s life’ with whom Asra identifies is his wife **Aisha**. Though she seems a bit ambivalent about Aisha’s child marriage, Asra points out that ‘she spent her girlhood devoted to her theological mission,’ and also that she ‘secured her place in history as Mohammad’s favourite wife when he died with his head on her lap.’ Asra goes on to describe Aisha as ‘Islam’s first journalist,’ and the reason for this being that ‘today nearly half of the Islamic jurisprudence of the Hanafi school of thought, which followed by 70 percent of Muslims, is based on the theology and jurisprudence communicated by Aisha to her students.’ Asra claims that Aisha ‘became the transmitter of the fourth largest number of hadith, or sayings of the Prophet.’ This is how Asra describes Aisha’s place in Islamic history:

She (Aisha) also earned respect as a profound critical thinker and great expert in law, history, medicine, mathematics and astronomy. She corrected many hadith, and her corrections became the subject of an eight century book on jurisprudence that is considered mandatory reading for any student of jurisprudence^{vii}.

One of the most important figures from the Muslim world that Asra identifies is that of **Hajar**, the second wife of Abraham. Hajar is one of the forgotten heroines of Islam. According to Islamic history, she was a slave woman from Egypt, and Abraham’s second wife and a co-wife. She bore him a son called Ishmael. Legend has it that Abraham’s first wife Sarah was tormented by Hajar’s fertility, and she ordered Abraham to banish her to the desert. Abraham complied. According to the Qur’an, Allah ordered Abraham, in a test of faith, to take Hajar and Ishmael to the parched desert in the valley of Mecca. After the water that Abraham had left for Hajar and her child ended, Ishmael was desperate for water. Hajar, the helpless mother ran seven times from Safa to a nearby hill called Marwah, searching for



water. Just when she was about to start her eighth trip, she collapsed next to Ishmael. It is said that Jabril or Angel Gabriel caused water to spring from the place where Ishmael was kicking the ground, desperate for water. Through her strength of character, Hajar became mother to a new civilization, and she showed exemplary courage in bringing up Ishmael all alone. However, Hajar is not even mentioned by name in the Qur'an. The history books have always identified her by her son's name. Asra believes that Muslims are the symbolic sons and daughters of Hajar. What Asra found so important about her story was 'that this woman didn't crumble when the father of her baby took her to the desert to leave her alone with her son'. She 'had the courage to decide to raise her son by herself and to experience the wonderful love between a mother and a child.' Hajar's life story had a special meaning for Asra, who was abandoned by the father of her baby. She gave Asra courage to raise her son alone, and hence she identifies strongly with Hajar. Millennia separated Hajar and her, yet Asra felt that so much connected them together.

Closer home, a very strong influence on Asra's identity was that of her mother, **Sajida Nomani**. Asra respects her mother for her metamorphosis from a life in a traditional Muslim family where 'women didn't work for others' to an independent woman entrepreneur in USA. All throughout her teens, Asra points out that her mother 'inherited a deep sense of hudud,' and accordingly covered herself with a traditional burqa. However, Asra points out that she was 'always a rebel,' and had a strong will. Sajida Nomani went to USA to join her husband, while she left her children with her in-laws in India. To raise money to get her children to USA, Asra's mother even did some babysitting. Asra claims that 'business was in her blood,' and so she set up a business selling shirts exported to USA by one of her elder brothers. Though she came from a family where 'few women had ever worked outside the home,' Sajida unfettered in America sold these shirts at a nearby flea market. It is to her credit that she worked as a lab assistant in West Virginia University, and always guided Asra in her academic and religious life, even as she completed her BS degree. She then went on to set up a boutique for selling the clothes sourced from India. In this endeavour Asra's father supported her actively. That Asra identified strongly with her mother is clear when she says that she 'felt proud' of her mother 'as she asserted herself as an independent businesswoman.' Her mother was a role model for young Asra:

Watching her realize her dream in the public world encouraged me to strive to fulfil my own dreams^{viii}.

Later she was also Asra's guide on her Hajj trip:

On the Hajj I came to realise that my mother is a wise and courageous woman in many ways..... I realized, however that we can learn from the people who



show courage without demanding perfection from them. We often need a guide when we embark on a journey and she was mine. We need to seek out courageous people to be our guides, and we need to be courageous ourselves to fully learn from them. For me my mother was a simple but brave guide....^{ix}

While in Mecca, Sajida risked possible arrest for going out to a KFC outlet without a male chaperone, rather than let her grandson Samir go hungry!

Asra's father, **Zafar Nomani** was another strong influence in shaping Asra's identity.

Since his mother was the leader of his family, Zafar Nomani, 'learned from an early age to always respect women, their voice and their authority.' As he grew up, Asra's father would be shocked at the double standards of highly educated men who would preach ethics in the public sphere, and yet would verbally and physically abuse their wives at home. Zafar Nomani saw the Prophet as a pioneer 1400 years ago in encouraging and supporting women's rights, freedom and social status. She describes her father as 'her fiercest defender' for having accepted her responsibilities as a single mother, while her son's father walked away. When she comes back to USA after her breakup with the father of her child, Asra is shattered and helpless. It was at that time that her parents (who had added one more room to their house to welcome Asra back), accept her unconditionally, and nurture her back to health, so that she can deliver her baby safely. Her father stands solidly behind her in her struggle to reclaim women's rights in their hometown mosque of Morgantown, and later across USA. In this process he is often abused as an 'idiot' for having brought up his daughter in a 'wrong' way, intimidated, and even threatened with death. However his support for Asra is unflinching and unwavering. It wouldn't be out of place to claim that Asra would not have been able to achieve all that she did her in her struggle to reclaim women's rights in American mosques, had her father not stood behind her with such determination.

A contemporary figure that Asra respects and identifies with, is that of **Princess Zahra**, the daughter of the Agha Khan, whom she saw at the Ismaili Health Professionals' Conference at Atlanta. She was a Harvard graduate, and was working for the Agha Khan Development Network, a group of institutions dedicated to improving living conditions and opportunities in the developing world. When Princess Zahra walks towards the podium, Asra is impressed with her athlete like gait, her regal air, and a kind of confident energy that she exuded that Asra wished she 'could express' in her 'Muslim community or even see in another Muslim woman'.

Right from her early childhood, Asra 'found strength in the stories of women who challenged tradition,' and talked of Louisa May Scott's *Little Women*, a tale of strong women as her 'most favourite book.' As she grows up and encounters difficult moments in her life, she seeks



and finds inspiration in the legacy of strong women in Islamic history, right from Hajar to Amina, Khadijah, Ayesha, and to Princess Zahara in recent times. And of course the impact of her parents on her identity-formation is undeniable. All these women inspire Asra, and give her some sort of psychological legitimacy in her own eyes. She sees her reflection in the different roles that these women play: a working woman, a single mother, a modern Muslim woman who is both a professional as well as a confident mother. These women that Asra identifies with also inspire her and keep her going in her difficult moments. They also affect her thoughts and feelings on a subconscious level.

How can people influence social structures and use them to recreate collective identities?

It is not only through individual engagement that people seek to exercise agency and to forge new identities. From the 60s many social movements in the West have shown collective endeavours to shape and give voice to new identities. So when Asra finds the going tough to reclaim women's rights in the mosque, she uses her collective identity as a modern Muslim woman, and appeals to like-minded people like Dr. Alan Godlas, Amina Wadud and others to achieve what she could not have achieved as an individual. Asra harnesses the power of the internet and gets in touch with like-minded progressive liberals, who she feels will surely help her. People who offered Asra support included Asma Afsaruddin, a professor of Islamic studies at Notre Dame University, Dr. Ingrid Mattson, the Vice President of the Islamic Society of North America., Amina Wadud, a scholar from Richmond, Virginia., Mohja Kahf, a poet, Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl a professor from UCLA, Sarah Eltanwi an activist from New York, Saleema Ali, a novelist living in San Francisco. Asra and her friends came together and created history, when eight women and one man marched to the Morgantown mosque and offered prayers together in the main hall of the mosque alongside of men. Thus Asra achieved with the help of her friends what she found difficult to do all alone. She posted a symbolic message: women had an Islamic right to equity in the Muslim world, and that they would no longer accept the marginalization imposed by cultural traditions!

George Herbert Mead's Theory

The work of George Herbert Mead, published in the 1930s has been extensively used in thinking about identity because he offered useful insights into the link between how we see ourselves and the ability of human beings to imagine how others might see them. Consider a simple example. Imagine that a person has to attend an interview the next day. The person would think about what to wear for the interview and would spend a lot of time in deciding the right kind of attire suitable for the interview. The person would reject some dresses as being too informal/casual or too formal, etc. In order to make the decision about what to



wear, the person has to imagine herself, and has to look at herself from the outside. Mead argued that it is the capacity to imagine how others would see us and our capacity to carry certain images in our heads, which is an important distinguishing feature of human beings. We do this, Mead argued, through **symbolizing**. We symbolize the sort of person we want others to think we are through the clothes we wear and the ways in which we behave. A Symbol is simply something that stands for something else. Symbols and Representations are important in the production of identities and in marking the way in which we share identities with some people and distinguish ourselves as different from others.

In Asra's case we see that there are many symbols which play a very important role in her life. For example, going to the Hajj is symbolic of her efforts to make a new beginning, and to come to terms with her own faith. Her naming of her child as 'Shibli Daneel Nomani' has multiple symbolism. Firstly, it honours the name of Shibli Nomani, Asra's ancestor who was a twentieth century reformer, and firmly establishes Asra's reformist credentials. Secondly it also pays homage to the memory of Asra's close friend Daniel Pearl, who was beheaded by militants. It also refers to the legend of Daniel, in the Bible, who when he refused to do as the king said was sent into a lion pit. Daniel managed to make the lions his friends and was thus saved. This indicates the simple message: God is the only judge.

Erving Hoffman the sociologist focussed on everyday interactions, conversations and encounters. He suggested that how we present ourselves to others was rather like acting out a part in a play where the scripts are already written. His perspective on the self is dramaturgical- that is based on the idea of a performance. What we are is not given (that is- there already), it must be created. We act out in a whole range of different roles which are like parts in a play. Actors in a play cannot act out any part that they like randomly. They have to speak the lines which they have been asked to. Hoffman's approach suggest that there are links between the society in which we live and the limitations offered by the roles or parts that we play in society, because the scripts have, in a sense, already been written. However there is also scope for agency because those who play the parts can improvise and offer their own interpretation. In Asra's case we can argue that being a part of a traditional Muslim family, the clash that emerged between her upbringing and the male dominated society was in a way inevitable. However, the way Asra rebels against this upbringing and tries to live life on her own terms was her own improvisation. Besides the way Asra is transformed after the Hajj and decides to reclaim women's rights across USA's mosques is also her own improvisation.

What kinds of tensions are created between social structures and agency?



The concept of identity encompasses some notion of human agency; an idea that we can have some control in constructing our own identities. There are of course constraints which lie in the external world, where material and social factors may limit the degree of agency which individuals may have. Identity necessarily involves a relationship between the personal and the social, which can also be expressed as a tension between structures i.e. the forces beyond our control which shape our identities, and agency, i.e. the degree of control which we ourselves can exert over who are.

In Asra Nomani's case we see a strong tension between social structures and agency and it is necessary to make sense of the identity of Asra Nomani, in becoming what she became. The first is a clash between the liberal Western society in USA that Asra grew up in, and her upbringing as a traditional Muslim girl, in keeping with the 'traditional Muslim sensibilities' of her parents, her father in particular. A striking example is that at the age of nine, Asra stopped wearing frocks because her father felt that it was not proper to 'keep baring' her legs. At the age of four, Asra moved from India to USA. She first stayed in Piscataway, New Jersey, where she spent her 'girlhood trying to find a place' for herself 'as an immigrant child of America.' Later at the age of ten she moved to Morgantown, West Virginia, where her father was an Assistant Professor of nutrition at the local university, West Virginia University. In her own words, West Virginians have a fierce mountain tradition of independence which she 'seemed to absorb.' For the initial eight years Asra lived by 'hudud' or the boundaries of her Muslim culture. She didn't protest when she had to sit with the men in the kitchen while the men sat on the living room sofas. She would just listen to the political debate that her father and his friends were often engaged in- from the civil war in Lebanon to the Iranian hostage crisis- but felt that she could never enter the men's space and she never did-except to whisper messages from her mother to her father to stop talking so loudly. Even at this age, Asra knew enough to recognize that 'women were restrained just because of the gender' they were born in. However it is noteworthy that her parents did allow her a lot of freedoms like sharing a seat with her male friends, which, by her own admission was symbolic of the freedoms that aren't allowed to girls in 'traditional Muslim cultures around the world.' They also allowed her to earn money on her own, by babysitting neighbourhood children, which earned her \$ 2.50, a small sum, yet remarkable because it set her 'on a path towards economic independence that so many women in more traditional culture' weren't allowed.

At different times in her formative years, Asra had the feeling that her culture was trying to *confine* her and *define* her. From that early age Asra could feel the difference between circumstances that she felt were oppressive and those that weren't. She recollects having enjoyed a gathering celebrating the Hindu holiday of Diwali :



Us girls had relay races in the hall and arm wrestling (I beat them all). It was fun in all.

.... The next night there was an Islamic association party. It stunk! The ladies had to go up to a little efficiency apt (owned by one of the members) because they weren't to sit with men. There were like fifteen people in one dinky room! The men carried the food up and oh! It was as if we were in jail!^x

As she entered adulthood, she began confronting the boundaries in her life, 'accepting them at times and daring to challenge them at other times.' Her father was very clearly a very important influence on her life and her identity formation as well. Asra points out that he had 'his own struggles reconciling his culture with his own beliefs' but 'as a scientist he firmly believed in having an open mind and pursuing intellectual enquiry', and he encouraged her 'to develop these attributes.' He even crossed state borders and drove her to New York City so that she could do a summer internship at Harper's magazine, a step which Asra describes as 'crossing a much more profound kind of line : the cultural tradition that a daughter didn't leave her father's home except to go to her husband's house.'

To respect Muslim cultural traditions her parents told her to apply to only her hometown school of West Virginia University. She complied, but even there she 'continued resisting traditional Muslim boundaries.' At, the age of eighteen, when she kissed a man at the first time, or a year later, when she 'consummated' her 'love,' she wept in confusion over what she calls as the truths of her physical and emotional urgings and the expectations of her religion and tradition. In this process Asra admits that she broke her parents' hearts with her 'social trespasses' and tried to lead a double life, but her parents 'knew enough to be disappointed.' Yet her parents allowed her to go to American University, Washington DC for her graduation, and this helped her to 'find economic opportunity and professional status.' (The role of her profession as journalist and the consequential economic independence and freedom and mobility that it brought, in Asra's identity formation is something that I will discuss shortly). Her economic freedom and world wide travels notwithstanding, 'the voices of traditional values echoed' within her; so much so that these traditional values play a very important role in her personal life as well. At the age of twenty seven, when she met a Pakistani guy, who she felt was the right person for her; she projected onto him, what she calls as her deep desire to reconcile the dissonance in her life between East and West. Though at that point of time, she had an American Lutheran boyfriend, who Asra admits 'loved her fully' and 'was ready to convert to Islam' and 'was ready to learn Urdu,' Asra's mother's repeated warnings that if she married an American, her father would have a heart attack, affected her profoundly, and 'Muslim guilt set in.' Asra describes her confusion at that time as:



The deeper voices of her religion were speaking to me: the ban on Muslim women marrying non- Muslim men, the disapproval towards sex before marriage. I was looking for a reunion between my two selves^{xi}.

She rejected her American lover and married the Pakistani guy. However within weeks of the marriage, Asra realised that she had not made a suitable match for her. She fell into depression, and her husband walked out of the marriage, withdrawing from their joint bank account the proceeds from the sale of Asra's condominium that she had sold off just before her marriage. This experience was thoroughly disillusioning for Asra and her 'pendulum swung to the West.'

Asra tried to keep herself engaged with her work. She then went to Pakistan to cover the story of the family of a suicide victim. In the midst of this reporting Asra fell in love with a young Pakistani guy, who she believed loved her, and was going to marry her (as he proclaimed to one of his friends). Even in love, Asra was 'looking for truth and wisdom.' They entered into an intimate relationship, and soon she was pregnant. Though Asra had got pregnant outside of wedlock, she didn't feel as if she had done something wrong, because she had loved him deeply and had surrendered herself to him. She points out that even though her assumptions about him might have been wrong, she *did* love him when she made that baby. This was precisely the time that Daniel Pearl, a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, who was based in Karachi, and a close friend of Asra, was kidnapped by Islamic militants (and subsequently beheaded). Investigating authorities visited Asra's boyfriend to question him about what he knew about Daniel and Asra. This clearly scared Asra's boyfriend, and when confronted with the news of Asra's pregnancy, he simply chickened out and wanted to abandon her.

Asra felt that her relationship with the father of her baby was based on a false premise: she felt incomplete and wanted him to complete her; she felt illegitimate without her husband and wanted him to make her legitimate. Realizing that she had loved that man for 'the wrong reasons' and that their relationship would be 'unfulfilling and tumultuous,' she decides to leave him.

She describes dilemma at that moment as follows:

Throughout my life I had felt so much pressure from my culture and religion to get married that I often stayed in dead-end or unhealthy relationships longer than I should have. Breaking free of unhappy relationships was symbolic of my wider effort to question the rigid acceptance of rules set forth by others, be they religious, government, or community leaders, or family members^{xii}.



At this point we once again view the *tension* between two aspects that play a very important role in a person's identity formation, namely her religion and her nationality, and the qualities that she inherits from being an American. Asra becomes the site of two competing forces. On the one hand was the American woman within her who believed in free will and who therefore felt that she had the right to keep the baby and raise him with her head held high. On the other hand however, were the voices of her religion's traditions' which 'also spoke strongly' inside her. She was consumed 'by the shame of ignoring the rules of sharia, the 'divine Islamic law.' She also knew Pakistan had passed laws based on *Hudud* or 'boundaries for moral conduct,' and that violating them could have serious consequences for her, including landing her in prison.

Another of the tensions between social structure and individual agency, that moulds Asra's identity is due to the clash between Asra's relatively liberal upbringing in USA and the constraints imposed on her by the male dominated Muslim society of USA of which even her father is a part. A whole new world opens up for Asra when she goes to Atlanta to attend the Ismaili Health Professionals' Conference. This visit was for Asra her 'education in the freedoms possible for Muslim women in modern-day Muslim society.' The women out there belied the traditional stereotype of Muslim women. She found them to be assertive and poised, with their hair open. Some of them wore a sleeveless pant-suit without any sense of shame. Asra realised that this community of Muslims, unlike her local Muslim community in Morgantown, 'valued women as vibrant and equal participants.' This marked contrast makes her yell at her father:

*It's just ridiculous the way you treat women. We don't even get to speak....
We have to sit like we are deaf, dumb, and blind^{xiii}.*

Asra felt a great deal of anger towards the leaders of her Muslim community in Morgantown, including her father. She lamented the fact that 'since the arrival of Arab immigrants with their strict cultural sense of segregation,' they' hadn't even been able to enjoy Muslim holidays and social gatherings as a family. Her anger was also largely because these very constraints had gone a long way in stifling her identity and sense of self-worth as a Muslim woman.

This tension comes to the fore in a somewhat nasty manner during a book reading of her newly released book at a Barnes and Noble bookstore in Lower Manhattan, when a young Muslim man stood up and politely yet directly admonished Asra for being a criminal in the eyes of Islamic law. He wanted to hear from Asra's father. Asra argued that her position was legitimate even in the eyes of Islamic law; all the same bowing to this idea of her father as the patriarchal spokesman of her life, she handed over the podium to him. Her father gives a



comprehensive rebuttal to this charge against his daughter, leading to a thunderous applause. However Asra is torn between gratitude for her father and a resentment that she could not fully understand at that point of time. Sometime later Asra simply explodes and screams at her father. She admits that her anger was clearly disproportionate to the situation, but she was so consumed by it that she couldn't clearly see what she was really angry about. This tension between her and her father keeps escalating for a long time till it peaks with a showdown with her father. Asra was supposed to go to Washington and Lee University to deliver a lecture about women in the Middle East. When her mother insisted that her father drive, since Asra hadn't slept the previous night, Asra becomes melodramatic and refused to go with her father. While driving, she realized the real significance of what she had done. She was a woman driving alone to give voice to her thought. She realises that in her fatigue, her deep rooted resentment at the patriarchal forces in her culture had expressed itself in anger. She also realised that though she hated her family, it was more figurative than literal, and that this was for 'all that entire she had inherited from them- the silence, passivity, and subordination, and compromise expected of Muslim women.' She also realises that she ended up with so much self-loathing because she couldn't 'find a mature way to free' herself 'from the programming' she 'wanted to escape.' Unable to find a sympathetic ear in her family and unable to express herself fully Asra turns to writing.

Conclusion

When Asra started writing this book, her goal was to describe her experience doing the Hajj. But along the way she found her voice, and the book helped her to clarify her identity as a Muslim women. What she ended up with was a book in which she believes that she has expressed herself in the strongest voice she could muster.

Asra believes that society is better served by redefining its boundaries in the spirit of compassion, forgiveness, tolerance and love that all religions teach. Having redefined these boundaries, she feels that she has become a better person.

In this paper, I have tried to present Asra's identity and its evolution over a period of time. I have tried to potray the multi-dimensional personality of Asra, with a lot of positive qualities as well as a few limitations, in as best a manner as was possible.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen in his book 'Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny' deplores the "little boxes" that divide us. Sen observes that ideologies of hate typically slot people into communities based on a single dimension that trumps the multifaceted affinities of class, sex, politics and personal interest that make up individual identities. Following Sen, it would be futile to just classify Asra into any one identity.



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iii	(Nomani) 43
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v	(Nomani) 169
vi	(Nomani) 117
vii	(Nomani) 140
viii	(Nomani) 127
ix	(Nomani) 128
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