

Celebrating our Similarities • Understanding our Differences

# Colors NW

2nd ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

APRIL 2003

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## ART ON A MISSION

*Following in the footsteps of Jacob Lawrence*

MIXED IDENTITY – CHESTERFIELD PHARMACY – A LOOK BACK – KOFFEE KORNER



## Farah Nousheen Filmmaker

*"My purpose wasn't to 'make a film.' I wanted to give voice to Muslim women. I chose film because that medium speaks to me the most."*

– Farah Nousheen

Nousheen describes herself as a post-9/11 activist. After the World Trade Center attacks in 2001, she was concerned by the simplistic stereotypes of Muslim women she saw in the media.

Nousheen decided to organize a film festival and panel in Seattle. As she previewed the movies for the December 2001 event, she discovered that the voices of American Muslim women

were missing.

During the last year she has filled that void by creating a movie of her own, which she called "Nazrah, A Muslim Woman's Perspective." Although she had never before made a movie, she was driven by a mission to present the many voices of Islamic women by exploring diverse experiences and ideas about their lives and their faith.

Much like the voices that emerge from Lawrence's paintings, Nousheen's film is full of stories, told by local Muslim women.

Their stories are also part of historical migrations and spiritual missions and they form a few pieces of the larger stories of

Islamic women worldwide.

"Nazrah" features 12 women, including Nousheen herself, as well as seven local young people. Most of the participants didn't know each other prior to the shooting, but the film depicts their thrilling interaction and response to one another as they debate the questions of their faith and how it works in their lives. The women come from many different countries including Pakistan, India, Iran, Egypt and Canada, as well as the United States.

*"If you are unwilling to undress don't enter into the stream of Truth. Stay where you are, Don't come our way."*

– Rumi

The film opens with this quote from 13th-century Sufi mystic Jelaluddin Rumi. As Nousheen says, "The first poem is especially important because it sets the stage for the film. It is telling the audience to be ready to hear the truth. I am not saying that the film is speaking all of what truth is. It's the truth of the women who are speaking. We are hearing 'their' truths, so if you want to listen, stay. If you don't want to hear their truth, don't come this way. And you will have to be willing to open ('undress')." Each segment of the film is introduced by a Sufi poem or a quote that provides a counterpoint to the women's stories and a meditative perspective.

The film begins on a personal note as Nousheen presents photos of herself at age 4, a time when girls and boys in her Indian Muslim community are asked to recite the first verse of the Holy Koran – Surah Al-Fatiha – the first word of which is "Bismallah" which means "in the name of Allah." The event

is a festive milestone in the spiritual development of some Muslim children.

Following Nousheen's recounting of her early experience, a community activist named Mahnaz explains to her daughter, Atefeh, about the importance for women to go back to the text in order to be educated and know their rights, particularly with regard to shared property. Each of the 12 narrators – law students, journalists, writers, teachers and community activists – explores the meaning of their faith and its practice in daily life. They comment on many aspects of spirituality and life, including travel, raising children, education, relationships, professional careers, teaching and the challenges of spiritual commitment.

"Nazrah" is not an anatomy of the Muslim faith; its purpose is to move beyond simplified essentialist ideas of Islam and to expose the diversity of Islam. Along the way, the film sheds light on terminology that the mainstream press has distorted. Viewers learn, for example, that the concept "jihad" means simply a challenging spiritual journey.

Nousheen describes herself as an "envoy" for these women and felt empowered as she made the film. She was fortunate to have the assistance of Seattle's Malik Isasis, an African-American underground filmmaker who she met as she was conceiving the film. He did most of the filming and provided the facilities for editing. Without his support, she never would have been able to realize her goal, she says. The University of Washington and Arab Film Distribution loaned equipment. She got help from 9-1-1 Media Arts, which provided space for screenings, and from other community groups.

In the film, the women often

speak to each other, rather than to the camera and there is a sense of a bond emerging between them as they revel in the opportunity to share their different points of view.

Nousheen adopted a format that let them speak about what was on their mind. On some occasions she asks a question, as in a discussion of the wearing of the hijab (head covering); in others the women speak directly to the camera or respond to each other. Having the filmmaker as part of the film is an unusual technique. The film's format makes it a personal exploration by all of the women including Nousheen.

Nousheen also has co-founded the grass-roots organization, Tasveer, with filmmaker Rita Meher, who was production manager for "Nazrah." Tasveer screens independent films by and about South Asia, as well of as younger South Asian filmmakers in the United States.

Nousheen hopes to have "Nazrah" included in the curriculum of college/university courses in humanities, the Middle East, gender, South Asian studies, theology, media and communication, and Islam. She is developing a study guide that will help with understanding the subtleties of the film.

Some of her hopes are already being realized. In addition to showings at local colleges, a college in Chicago invited her to present the film as well.

*For more information, visit [www.nazrah.org](http://www.nazrah.org) or [www.tasveer.org](http://www.tasveer.org).*