

# Beyond Extremes

*A physician wrestles with faith and feminism in the beguiling, rigid world of the Saudi Kingdom*

BY STEPHANIE HUNT

“**W**hat’s a year?” It was a rhetorical question, no big deal, Qanta Ahmed thought as she signed a one-year contract with the King Fahad National Guard Hospital in Saudi Arabia.

Ahmed, a British citizen of Pakistani heritage, had her visa renewal denied after working for seven years in New York City, where she completed her medical residency and fellowship training, and she needed an overseas stint to tide her over. A lucrative job offer practicing intensive care medicine in a high-tech hospital in Riyadh seemed just the ticket. It was a hasty decision: “I’ve always



**Strong Medicine:** After two years as a female doctor in the gender apartheid of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Dr. Qanta Ahmed is now the associate director of the Sleep Laboratory and an assistant professor of medicine at MUSC.

been a little impetuous,” admits Ahmed, but surely, she assumed, one year in the Islamic Kingdom would be manageable, especially for a full-fledged Muslim, albeit not a particularly observant one. Never mind the contract’s fine print about strict Saudi law; she simply glossed over words like *death penalty* and *decapitation*.

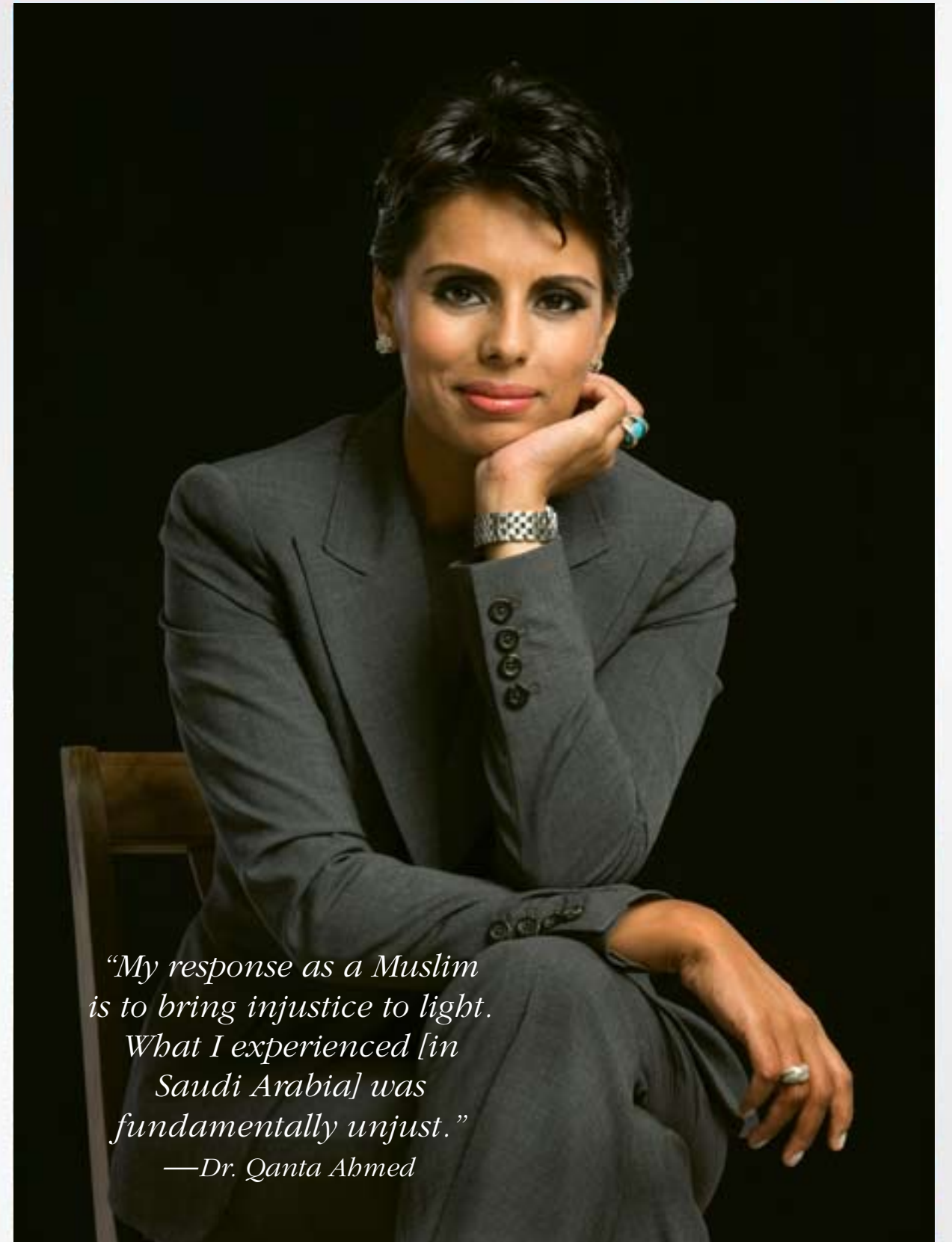
Oh, but what a difference a year can make. It was a year (actually two, after she renewed her contract) of living dangerously, and invis-

ibly, in the veiled world of vehement Wahhabism, where the headstrong Ahmed collided time and again with the gender apartheid of puritanical Islamic extremism, where she, a single woman, could have been arrested, or worse, if found unveiled or in the company of unrelated men in public. Simply dining in a restaurant with male colleagues could result in her being deported or thrown in jail. It was two years of intense personal and professional challenge as this accomplished



**Worlds Away:** During her two years in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Ahmed came face-to-face with a “labyrinth of contradictions.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHER BROWN



*“My response as a Muslim is to bring injustice to light. What I experienced [in Saudi Arabia] was fundamentally unjust.”  
—Dr. Qanta Ahmed*

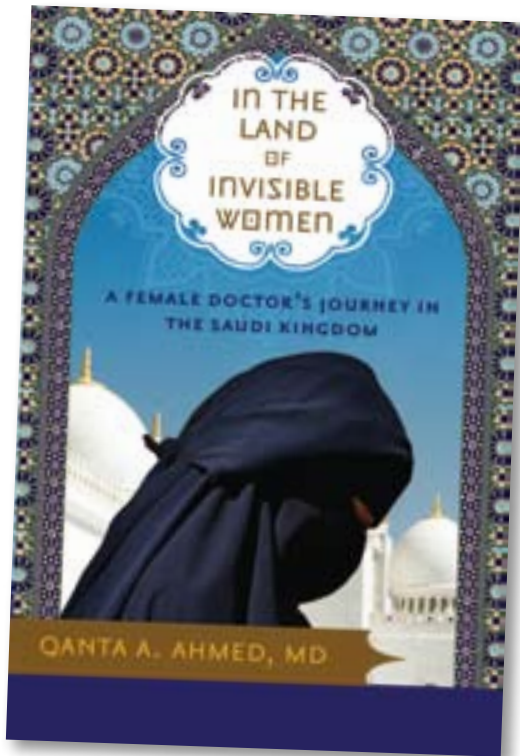
PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK ALTERMAN





**Finding Fellowship:** Ahmed and Professor Didier Pittet of the University of Geneva being greeted by a Saudi host at a palace outside Riyadh. Ahmed's book, *In the Land of Invisible Women*, (below) is a memoir of two years practicing medicine in Riyadh.

*“Dr. Ahmed has a worldliness that is very fresh and appealing.” —Dr. Marc Judson, professor of pulmonary, critical care, and allergy medicine at MUSC*



physician found herself bridled by patriarchal hospital hierarchy: while making rounds, Ahmed was often ignored by or “invisible” to male physicians. And for the stylish and sophisticated Ahmed, it was two years of fashion-suffocation, where she was captive to the “polyester prison” of the decidedly undesigner abayah (an overgarment akin to a burka). But above all, Ahmed's Saudi sojourn became her pilgrimage into the heart of Islam, where a complex and beguiling “labyrinth of contradictions” led her to more fully embrace her faith.

### An Experience Unveiled

In her book, *In the Land of Invisible Women*, released this month by SourceBooks, Ahmed takes readers on her eye- and heart-opening adventure inside the

Islamic curtain. She's a natural storyteller, recounting exotic tales of this land that was “foreign” in so many meanings of the word. Ahmed brings the reader bedside with her as she cares for her first Saudi patient, a Bedouin woman whose face had to remain veiled even as her body was exposed for surgery. We feel the tension and danger that was a constant for Ahmed, who could not venture outside the hospital compound without a male chauffeur. On one shopping trip with a female friend in an out-of-the-way corner of a mall, her friend's head scarf slipped a few inches and the mutaween (the menacing religious police) swooped down and threatened to arrest them. Throughout her account, Ahmed the writer borrows from Ahmed the physician, using her keen powers of observation to diagnose the dichotomies and multilayered ironies she encountered in the Kingdom.

“I cannot express with enough energy how much contempt I have for that backward theocracy,” she says. “I met highly educated female vascular surgeons who could fix an aneurysm but couldn't drive a car.” The visceral anti-Semitism she encountered, even from physicians who were trained in the states by Jewish mentors, was especially disturbing to Ahmed.

She bristles at this poisonous intolerance, because, she asserts, it's antithetical to her faith. “In Islam, it's written clearly that there's room for other religions,” she notes. “Islam is



**Rekindled Faith:** During her time in Riyadh, Ahmed embraced her Muslim upbringing and embarked on her hajj, a ritualistic pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

PHOTOGRAPHS (2) COURTESY OF QANTA AHMED



**Safe & Sound:** Ahmed in front of an aerial view of Riyadh at night. She is not wearing an abayah because the building is owned by Prince al Waleed bin Talal, a man powerful enough in Saudi Arabia that the religious police do not patrol his property.

actually a pro-feminist religion. Justice is at its heart, not discrimination.”

Perhaps the ultimate irony is that it was amidst this arid fundamentalist landscape that Ahmed experienced a profound renewal of her faith. While in the Kingdom, she took the opportunity (in true form, somewhat impulsively) to complete her hajj, the ritualistic pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims are called to do. At Islam's holiest site, amidst a roiling sea of millions of fellow pilgrims from all nationalities and all walks of life, Ahmed experienced “a marvelous sense of equality, rebirth, regeneration, and a sense that we're all connected.” The hajj gave her, she writes, “an intense and purified spirituality, forming concentrated distillations of hope and beginnings.”

### On the Move

Writing a memoir was one such new begin-

ning, and not necessarily an easy one for the busy Ahmed, now the associate director of the Sleep Laboratory and assistant professor of medicine at MUSC. Her resume is plump with clinical research publications, but this book is her first literary foray. “What impresses me is that someone who has trained so intensely in medicine for years and years has the skill to write a book completely outside the clinical realm, and do it so well,” says Ahmed's MUSC colleague Dr. Gerard Silvestri.

The fact that Ahmed should pen a travel memoir, however, is not altogether surprising. “Migration has been a central theme in our family life. It's almost inherent,” she says. When the colonial rule of the British Raj ended and India was divided, Ahmed's father, then seven years old, migrated to Pakistan with his family's money sewn into his jacket. The son of an educator, he excelled in school, became an architect, and moved to London in 1963. Her mother's

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**Family Affair:** Ahmed (at center) with members of her extended family gathered in Karachi for her brother's wedding. Her brother, Sardar Safeer, is to her left, and her father, Sardar-Munir, is wearing a gray Astrakhan hat.

family was airlifted to Karachi after partition (Ahmed's maternal grandfather had been a financial advisor to the final cabinet of Lord Mountbatten in British India). Her mother became a physician and was wed to Ahmed's father in an arranged marriage in 1967.

fluent in Urdu, she once dreamed of being a broadcast journalist for the BBC. (One hopes she'll record *In the Land of Invisible Women* as a book on tape.) "I'd read the Bible lesson during assembly, and when my father picked me up after school, he'd help me learn a verse

*"Islam is actually a pro-feminist religion. Justice is at it's heart, not discrimination."*

—Dr. Qanta Ahmed

Qanta and her two younger brothers were raised north of London, where she went to a private Anglican school. "It was very English—a red brick school where we studied Latin and French and the boys played cricket," says Ahmed in her delightfully proper British accent. Always enamored of languages and

from the Qur'an. But it was not illogical to him that I'd go to a Christian school," she adds. "My parents taught me that in order to be a good Muslim you first had to be a good Christian."

When Ahmed was four, her parents took her to meet her Pakistani family, and three years later they returned to Pakistan via a 19-



**Home Again:** Ahmed at her brother's wedding in Karachi, Pakistan, this past spring, wearing a traditional South Indian sari that she purchased in Delhi the previous winter.

PHOTOGRAPHS (4) COURTESY OF QANTA AHMED



**Breaking Boundaries:** With her parents Sardar-Munir and Zahida Perveen in London in the late 1960s. Ahmed (top) in London at age three, trying to bypass a chain to step on a lawn. "It's a symbol for how I would challenge restrictions for the rest of my life," she says.

day, 7,000-mile road trip through the Khyber Pass, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, entering Pakistan via the Northwest Frontier. "My parents wanted me to know the language and know my family. They were very adventurous; my father would point out architecture along the way. His passion has influenced my love of travel," she says.

At her father's urging, she studied medicine at the University of Nottingham in an accelerated program and graduated at age 21. When the topic of an arranged marriage came up at dinner on her graduation eve, Ahmed balked and made her own arrangements, far away. Ten months later, she landed in New York to begin her medical residency. "I didn't know

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Ahmed at the Lahore Polo Club in Pakistan in 1991 with her uncle and cousins. A plastic surgeon in Canton, Ohio, her uncle was her role model and the reason she went into medicine. Left: In addition to her clinical practice, Ahmed travels frequently to lecture and has returned to Saudi Arabia numerous times.

a single American before I moved to Staten Island," she says.

### Healing Touch

From New York to Riyadh, back to London (for a three-and-a-half-year interlude following her Saudi stay), and now since September 2005 in Charleston, the worldly Ahmed is adept at making her own way and delving into the life and culture of her adopted community. When not working, she enjoys movies at the Terrace Theater, meals with friends at downtown restaurants, and driving her car with the windows open and the music blaring: "Things I remember not being able to do."

With board certification in four medical specialties—critical care medicine, internal medicine, pulmonary medicine, and sleep medicine—it seems there isn't much the multicultural Ahmed isn't able to do. She could take her pick of hospital jobs but is delighted to be working in sleep medicine, especially after the intense, exhausting years of trauma care in Saudi Arabia. "In the ICU, I was only putting people together again. I felt disconnected from patients. Sleep medicine is the opposite of critical care," she says. "I'm solving medical, anatomic, and physiologic issues, and I can help serve the entire family."

"This really is her passion," notes Dr.



**Well-Received:** Qanta and pulmonologist Dr. Steven Sahn at the first party she attended as a member of the MUSC faculty in December 2005.

Marc Judson, professor of pulmonary, critical care, and allergy medicine at MUSC. "[Dr. Ahmed] has a worldliness that is very fresh and appealing. Her scholarly approach has brought sleep medicine into the forefront of our pulmonary group." In addition to her clinical practice, Ahmed travels frequently to lecture and teach in the U.S. and abroad, including numerous return trips to collaborate with former Saudi colleagues. "Medical diplomacy is particularly effective in healing old divisions and decimating preconceptions," says Ahmed. "Physicians are in a unique position to broker peace in small ways that are enormously powerful."

Ahmed takes her role as healer—especially a female Muslim healer—to heart. Her book, she hopes, will shed light on what she believes is a perverted interpretation that distorts the most basic orthodoxy of Islam. "My responsibility as a Muslim is to bring injustice to light. What I experienced there was fundamentally unjust," she says. But her book also introduces us to the "Gloria Steinem of Arabia," a stalwart female Saudi doctor devoting herself to championing child abuse prevention, and to Saudi men who treat Ahmed as a revered colleague.

Ahmed's broader hope is to show Saudi Arabia as heterogeneous and demonstrate that Western misconceptions can be as rigid and unjust as authoritarian extremism. With interviews scheduled with Al Jazeera and



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CNN International, she is braced for backlash and potential isolation from some in the Muslim world, including some of her Saudi friends and colleagues, but, she says, “You have to have the fortitude to self-scrutinize. Let’s hope only good comes of it.”

On the local front, good has already come of Ahmed’s desire to educate others about her faith. She was invited by Rabbi Holz and Shula Holtz to give a series of lectures on Islam at Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim synagogue in Charleston, and Ahmed readily obliged. “The lectures were remarkably well-attended, and Qanta graciously stayed afterward to answer questions

*“Physicians are in a unique position to broker peace in small ways that are enormously powerful.”*

—Dr. Qanta Ahmed

that went on and on,” says Rabbi Aivner Bergman. “But she’s that kind of woman, one of the most inclusive human beings the Almighty ever made. She’s extremely committed to her own faith and that commitment has led her to support others in a greater commitment to their faith, regardless of their tradition,” Bergman adds. “Qanta’s heart is as big as life itself.”

And with that big heart, she has outgrown her loathed abayah. Ahmed won’t be wearing the drab, black, polyester “prison” on the book tour. She intentionally left it in the airplane’s overhead bin after departing the Kingdom.

*Dr. Qanta Ahmed reads from her book In the Land of Invisible Women on Thursday, September 11, 6 p.m. at the Admissions Information Center at 175 Calhoun Street. A signing, discussion, and reception will follow. The event is free and open to the public. For more information, contact Claire Fund at (843) 953-8002.*

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