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1

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Lecturing on a World She Cannot Lecture In

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Purchase, N.Y.

IT'S just a cramped, bunkerlike office in a drab low-rise brick building, but Shemeem Burney Abbas has made it feel like home.

Two small fountains on a window ledge recirculate water in a soothing babble of aural feng shui. On one side of the room, Sufi prints, a Guatemalan tapestry and a poster of the Sufi singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan; on the other, an eclectic selection of books: Borges, Rushdie, Munro. In the middle sits a small woman in a black dress with a black shawl ornamented in orange and gold over her right shoulder, speaking in clipped, precise bursts.

It's not surprising that Dr. Abbas has a gift for adapting. She has, after all, gone from being a leading professor in Pakistan, who taught linguistics and devised and put into effect the largest teacher-training program in South Asia, to being a teacher in the United States -- first at the University of Texas, now at Purchase College in Westchester County -- with her long-term teaching prospects uncertain.

Still, as she straddles two worlds that these days seem ever-farther apart, it's not clear what's most striking about her story:

what she felt she had to leave or what she found in its place.

Dr. Abbas's work, with titles like "The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India," doesn't sound all that threatening, but then threats, it seems, can come from all sorts of places these days.

After earning a Ph.D. from the University of Texas in 1992, she returned to Pakistan to teach at the giant Allama Iqbal Open University in Islamabad. But she soon found that being a woman educated at an American university and writing on the populist Sufi traditions of Islamic spirituality was extremely hard in a society increasingly dominated by Islamic orthodoxy. She left in 1999 and returned



Photo: Shemeem Burney Abbas is on the faculty of Purchase College in Westchester County. (Photo by Susan Stava for The New York Times)(pg. B4)

to Texas to write, and then after 9/11 felt she could not continue her work in Islamabad. Through a group called the Scholars at Risk Network, which has found teaching opportunities and housing for more than 150 scholars since its founding in 2000, she was able to teach at Texas. More than 100 universities are members of the organization.

Last year she relocated to Purchase College, where she teaches Islamic law and courses on gender, free speech and literature in the Islamic world. She's giving a public lecture on March 2.

A Pakistani delighted to teach Americans about Islam.

Dr. Abbas said she wanted to maintain her links to Pakistan, but would rather teach here -- she can write what she wants, and she relishes the opportunity to educate Americans, still mostly in the dark about Islam.

Dr. Abbas finds troubling elements in both places. At home, she worries about the doors closing on speech and thought, the struggles of scholars, particularly women, who raise topics that challenge Islamic orthodoxy. Here, she's convinced that American military actions in the Muslim world are only strengthening the Islamists. "They have taken on the role of being the voice of anti-imperialism," she said, "and everyone else has no choice but to let these people represent them."

But in both places she sees more reason for hope than fear.

After all, she writes about ancient traditions of Islamic spirituality and mysticism, about a Sufi song tradition that dates to the 12th century. "These are very rich, very vital traditions," she said. "People have to remember that what we're seeing of Islam at this moment is not the only Islam -- it isn't even Islam. Things go in cycles. The conservative Islam we see today has come and gone over the years, and I'm optimistic that will happen again."

And in the United States what most strikes her is something we take for granted.

If for us universities are often status adornments or battlegrounds over issues like political correctness, she sees them as wonders. To her, they are places of real freedom and interdisciplinary flexibility where a person interested in Islamic religion and Sufi music and linguistics and ethnomusicology can do work that couldn't be done in Pakistan or at universities in Europe, either.

"The attitude in Europe is still very colonial," she said. "It doesn't allow this kind of scholarship to flourish. There's more innovation here, more curiosity, more interest in learning about other cultures."

She is so still as she talks, a motion detector times out and the lights go off. She waves her arms and, like magic, they come back on as the water from the fountains gurgles and coos.