



'That Muslim woman could be happier than you...'

Once she was a party-loving student; then Na'ima B Robert converted to Islam. But how did she become so convinced of the benefits of wearing Islamic dress that she now covers herself from head to foot and has written a book extolling its virtues? Bryony Gordon meets her.

Na'ima B Robert likes to see her devotion to Islam as similar to eating in a fresh, organic restaurant, while we non-believers make do with the greasy-spoon cafe.

Unfortunately, sometimes they do say more than they intend to. Essentially, the non-believers are being summarized as 'dirty unbelievers', and the Judaism and Christianity are, respectively, dirty, untrue religions. Where did Na'ima get this from if she adheres the faith promoting mutual understanding and cultural dialogue?

It's something I want to share. You are free to eat where you like, but I would like to offer an invitation to the restaurant."

Hmm. Usually people try to induce others to follow their footsteps when their conscience is telling them they're on the wrong track. When someone else does the same, you don't feel as guilty. That's why drinking teens always persuade their sober friends to 'try it out'. Now the question is: why do Jews keep their religion so closed to outsiders and have no record of involvement in religious terrorism? A strange coincidence?

The trouble, though, is that to many people in multi-cultural Britain today, Islam is seen as the greasy-spoon cafe in terms of religious restaurants. To some, it represents suicide bombers and honour killings and the oppression of women.

Of course this is a rude misconception! Or do you really believe the Zionist-controlled AP, AFP and Reuters? Or the Police reports? Keep in mind, the Zionist lobby is everywhere.

How to change this perception of Islam? Na'ima is a pretty good start.

Sure she is. After all, it is in tradition of a devoted Muslim to tell half-truth and avoid bringing up controversial issues.

Until six years ago, the 27-year-old married mother of two ate in greasy-spoon cafes. She was born in England, to non-believing parents, before moving to Zimbabwe with them, where she had a typical adolescence, partying hard, listening to pop music and reading fashion magazines.



When she returned to Britain to study at the University of London, she had hopes of becoming a successful career woman who perhaps married and had children sometime in her thirties. But then she went to Egypt and everything changed.

While she was there, she couldn't stop noticing the women in hijab (headscarves) and she was appalled. She could not understand why they allowed themselves to be so dominated by men; couldn't fathom why they wouldn't want to show themselves off. When she eventually asked a woman in hijab why she wore it, she was told simply: "Because I want to be judged for what I say and what I do, not for what I look like."

Poor Na'ima. If she at least had a bit of critical thinking she would have asked a question of why this woman might say this. Did she say it sincerely? Or did she say it because she is forced to dress like this by her husband, and it is forbidden to discuss the internal family matters with strangers? Also, didn't it occur to you that Egyptian religious authorities excel at brainwashing people? If free thinking puts a person under the risk of being accused of 'blasphemy', what is she going to do?

It struck a chord with Na'ima, and she began reading about Islam. While many of her contemporaries were partying and meeting men, Na'ima made the decision to convert - or rather "revert" as it is known in the religion - to Islam. She has just completed writing *From my Sisters' Lips*, an extremely thought-provoking book about her experience that challenges Western preconceptions of Islamic women.

Her devotion to her religion is such that she wears a full jilbab and a niqab, meaning she is completely covered.

Okay, let's see. Na'ima claims to possess a deep understanding of Islam. Yet, if the God is truly merciful, open-minded and compassionate, is he going to frown at a person who doesn't cover herself tip to toe, but is still a devoted believer?

Mentally, however, she is completely uncovered, bubbly and extremely bright, holding forth articulately on her subject. **"I am not downtrodden or submissive."**

Note this line.

"I'm not a desexualised being. Just because we don't display ourselves outside, people presume we don't do it at all and, in a lot of cases, that couldn't be further from the truth." She lets out a huge, infectious laugh.

The problem is that nobody ever dares to ask her what it is like to be a Muslim woman. "I can't bear political correctness. It's so



insidious, all this 'oh I completely understand, but it's just not for me'. No, you don't understand; you haven't asked me anything about being a Muslim. I prefer people to be up-front and ask me why I'm covering up. But nobody ever does because they think I'll be offended."

A good example of the misconceptions we have about Muslim women is believing that they are all helpless, potential victims of an honour killing. But as Na'ima points out, **"honour killings are a pre-Islamic thing, a cultural thing that is filtered down through the generations. But for those of us who have learnt pure Islam from the Koran and the scholars, it's appalling."**

Oh, yeah? Where, then, do all these people who beat up, kill, torture, run over, stab, shoot their wives for 'adultery' get their ideas?

The crux of From my Sisters' Lips is that, rather than making Na'ima feel oppressed, the Islamic dress makes her feel liberated. Indeed, she wonders if it is we non-Muslims who have the problem. "There is an arrogance in the West, a belief that you're on top of the world and everyone wants to be like you. But how do you know that the Muslim woman walking down the street is not happier than you? We tend to attach our happiness to material things but we're just fooling ourselves.

That's some great logic. So, just because West is richer and more developed than the 57 Islamic dictatorships, it follows that we attach happiness solely to the material well-being? Indeed, intellect always shines through. Apparently, it never occurred to Na'ima that in order to become so rich and developed, the Western countries must have had some social conditions in which innovation could thrive. On top of that, she didn't stop to think that on top of our material assets, we also have our most important asset: freedom. You know, Na'ida, some people do attach happiness to freedom of choice, as opposed to material well-being. If that's all you think one can be proud of, well, too bad for you.

"The other day I saw a billboard showing a woman in a bra, and the ad was selling a mobile phone. The mind boggles. That woman is not being seen as an intellectual or an emotional being, but a sexual object selling a phone. And obviously the girl will say that's my right, and that's fair enough.

"But when I look at men's magazines it's all about sex and women," she pauses to correct herself. "Sorry, girls. Girls, girls, girls. It's just infantile. It breeds irresponsibility.

"I mean, why does someone need to wear a tiny top that barely covers their over-inflated breasts?" she laughs again. "For me, that's a self-esteem issue. Do you need other people to validate you and say 'honey, you look wonderful'?"



No, it just means that she thinks she is beautiful, and has something to show the World. Why should she keep it obscured? Tell me, if you're a chess genius, do you avoid going to competitions, just because that might induce people to 'validate' you? Our 'extremely bright' Na'ima should have thought about this. But what I am hoping for? Islamofascists have never stopped to consider other peoples' motivations, while tirelessly demanding them to do the same

People may see me as being self-righteous and old-fashioned, but I just like to think that my self-esteem comes from somewhere deeper. I want to be valued the same way whether I've got a face full of spots or a completely clear complexion."

I admire Na'ima's reasons for wearing the jilbab, but **I wonder if her faith dresses women in these garments for the same reasons. She says that Islam teaches equality between the sexes - why then do men not have to cover?**

"I think that equality should not be equated with sameness. Islamically we are equal but we are not the same. We have qualities that men don't have and men..." She pauses. **"I'm not going to say this next bit." Why not, if it is what she believes in?**

"Because I don't want the feminists on my back. But basically men have things that women don't. They have physical strength and are the father of the children and these types of things. Men and women have different qualities and Islam recognises that and again everything has its context."

Na'ima concedes that reverting to Islam has not always been easy. She is an educated women from **a liberal background**; when I ask about her views on matters such as abortion and homosexuality she says that "my views on every issue are guided by what Islam says. Some issues are hard, because I wasn't raised that way. Sometimes I see the wisdom, sometimes I don't understand everything to the very core. But I submit to Allah. **If He says that these things are obligatory then I submit to them.**

Didn't someone just say 'I am not downtrodden or submissive'?

There are certain things that maybe you can't see a benefit to, but it doesn't mean that there's no benefit to them. **As Muslims we believe that Allah knows us better than we know ourselves.**

Free choice, anyone?

The way I see it, it's like when you go to the doctor with an ailment and he gives you a foul-tasting medicine. I don't know how



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it will make me better and I'd like to make it taste nicer but that is not my place. The doctor knows why it is like that and I trust in him.

Careful, careful. You're now comparing a mortal doctor to Allah, most gracious and merciful. And that, my dear, is a shirk, a major sin. You should study your faith better before rushing to barricades like this.

"If people have issues with that kind of belief, that really is their problem. I can't get into debates with them about it. It is not my place to do that."

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