

cover story

Somehow, fragments form a whole. A mother describes the first time her grown daughter saw her dressed in a niqab, the face veil some Muslim women wear with the traditional Islamic head scarf, or hijab. Her hidden lips press against the thin material as she speaks of how her daughter pushed her away and fell down, screaming “You are not my mother!”

She cries now and the tears soak into her veil, the damp patches hinting at the shape of her nose. Later she laughs loudly and you get a vague idea of her cheeks – how they’d be pale and soft like her exposed hands. Then you picture the brief exasperation on her face when she realises she didn’t buy straws from the supermarket so she could drink orange juice beneath her veil in the presence of a man.

The women’s faces come together in your mind. An impression forms from the slow, deliberate way one places a glass of water in front of you; from the way another turns her head, momentarily embarrassed by the fact she didn’t know about the September 11 attacks in New York until hours into the day because her family had no television; from the way one says “yuz” the way boxer Jeff Fenech said “Love yuz all”. “Maaate,” she laughs, and you just know that mouth is smiling beneath the niqab (pronounced “ni-kab”).

It’s not always easy being a veiled Muslim in Queensland: the stares, the abuse, the prejudice. But these women have a voice. And there’s something they’d like to say.

Story Trent Dalton Photography David Kelly

Her unveiled daughter smiles sweetly and you see she has her mother’s eyes.

Silence says so much. In spartan brick homes in outer Brisbane, the walls blank but for sacred Islamic texts, it can say that insult looms; that talk of love and sex and Islam is dangerous ground. Silence was these women’s main weapon in January when their mode of dress hit the headlines, the Queensland Retailers Association chief having claimed the veils could harbour criminals and should be banned.

But maybe it’s not reticence that fills the long pauses. Perhaps the women are just thinking, heads down, contemplative. So you stop guessing and focus on the one thing they offer openly and unrepentantly: their words.

Iman Amin, 49, Kuraby (pictured opposite)

I was a sinner. The Koran says no drinking of alcohol. No harming of body. I was addicted to cigarettes. I drank alcohol with my girlfriends. I wanted to stop. I was living in Mackay at the time with my three children. Their names back then were Jamin, Sean and Nicolette. My father came to stay for two weeks and I told him I wanted to learn the Koran. We went to a mosque together for the first time. I said to God, “I want to do what you want me to do. No more smoking. No more alcohol.” And after my first prayer I stopped. It’s been ten years since that prayer and I have never once had a drink or a smoke. I tried patches to quit and everything. Nothing worked except that prayer. I pray five times a day now.

That first year we didn’t go out anywhere. The family got busy in learning Arabic. I made it fun for the kids. I got a basket of chocolates and we’d pass the basket to each other as we’d learn the Koran. Then the kids asked for Arabic names. I asked my father. He said he would pray for it at the 3.30am prayer. He rang me later that morning and said he had a dream. The big one, he said, will be called Jamil. The middle one Jamal and the girl has to be Jamila. I said, “C’mon Dad, Jamil, Jamal, Jamila? These kids have to go to school.” But he said it had to be. Their names mean “beautiful”.

I used to be shy. I used to ask my daughter to hang the washing out because I was too afraid to walk outside. ►



culture

I asked God to help me and I found as soon as I walked outside with hijab on people were nicer to me than before.

The more you read the Koran the more you feel the need to dress this way. The more cover you do for yourself, the more rewards you get. I wear niqab for myself and for God. It doesn't mean you're better, it just means you're devoting more to Islam. It's never forced. It's like how a lady puts her favourite jewellery in a special place. We save the special parts of us for the husband, for the family. It shows respect. But it's not for other people to tell you to take it off or put it on. It should be worn from your own heart.

My husband, Bilal, is full Australian. He's a convert to Islam. He was a Christian. He worked in a restaurant in Melbourne where a Jewish co-worker told him Muslims were bad people. Next minute, a Muslim couple came into the restaurant. Bilal asked them, "What's so wrong with Muslims?" They gave him a book to read. Then he went to the mosque. As soon as he put his head down on the ground he said he felt the truth hit him hard. That was it.

I was born in Egypt. We moved to Australia when I was ten years old. I divorced my first husband when Jamila was three years old. He lives on the Gold Coast. He's not Muslim. He still calls Jamila Nicolette because that's the name he gave her. Jamila has been wearing hijab since she was young. I was worried at first that she did it as a game. But she never took it off. I volunteered to help at the school tuckshop and the ladies in there were saying, "It's so hot, how do you feel about your daughter wearing that hijab?" I said, "Please, if you can get it off her, by all means." We usually take hijab off around the house. Jamila liked it that much that she wore it to bed.

A lot of employers simply don't hire Muslims with hijab. I found a group that calls around and finds workplaces that allow Muslim women. They found me a job in childcare. I was worried what the kids and the parents would think of me. I wrote an introductory letter to the parents: *Hello, my name is Iman Amin ... As you can tell by my photo I am a Muslim and cover my face in the traditional Islamic manner when I'm away from home. I only cover my face in the presence of men ... when children meet me for the first time they may be curious about how I look and I answer their questions about my appearance in a very simple way. In my experience I have found children to be very accepting of me once their curiosity has been satisfied ...*

Now the kids warn me when their fathers are coming. They say, "Quick, quick, Iman, Dad's coming, put your cover on." They are so beautiful, those children. No prejudices, you know.

I still speak to my old girlfriends. Their husbands say I've gone crazy. They call me the flying nun. The ladies are still confused about what made me change. All I say is that it was truth and I'm sorry I can't smoke with you guys any more.

Shaima Khan, 24, Runcorn

My parents are from Pakistan. My sister and I were born in Iraq, my dad taught engineering there. After that we moved to Brunei and when I was ten we moved to Darwin. We've never lived in Pakistan but I've gone there five or six times. It's strange as an Aussie Muslim in Pakistan. You see some guy order his wife to get him a glass of water and you're like, "Hey, you get it yourself".

But that's how it is. You're somehow less of a man if you help your wife in the kitchen. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, helped around the house. He even mended his own clothes. Some of these things we should say, "Hang on, this is culture, what you are doing is against our religion".

I'll give you an example of culture versus religion. My ancestors are from present-day Afghanistan. In those parts of the world, honour killing is still practised in some families.



It's not faith that drives people to extremism. It's a disadvantaged background, a broken family, other serious problems in their lives, anger.

Reversing prejudice ... Shaima Khan wants to devote her life to "bridging the gap of misunderstanding".

People have merged religion and culture and some try to justify that practice in the name of religion. But my religion forbids honour killing. Same with male dominance in Muslim countries. That exists worldwide but Islam says males and females are equal. They are described as the wings of a bird. A bird can't fly with one missing wing.

I was in Year 12 at Darwin when September 11 happened. I was the only person in my school who wore hijab. Boom! The next day, everything changed. Friends who I'd known for years were suddenly giving me weird looks. We suddenly got the anti-terror laws, which are clearly discriminatory to Muslims and violate basic human rights. My parents became very protective. On the first anniversary of September 11, my dad, a person who holds education in the highest regard, told me to skip my night lectures at uni. He was scared of backlashes toward his daughters. ►

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Then my brother starts growing a beard. Before, he was never stopped by the cops. As soon as he grows a beard he gets stopped three times in a row. Pulled over, searched and let go. He just looks more Muslim now. Isn't that funny? It's fear that does that.

So how can I turn this around? I want to devote my life to bridging this gap of misunderstanding. It's not faith that drives people to extremism. It's a disadvantaged background, a broken family, other serious problems in their lives, anger. That's why anger is so dangerous and there's a lot of anger in the Muslim community. Islam has been hijacked. A very small minority of people, who happen to be of Islamic faith, are committing acts condemned by Islam in every shape and form.

My whole life should be dictated not only by the Koran but by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. He was a living role model for the Koran. So the Koran says to pray five times a day, but Muhammad shows exactly how we pray. I try to eat the way Muhammad ate. He was a humble man, tablecloth on the ground, eating with hands. He slept on the ground on a cloth.

I go to the gym, but I don't go to a mixed gym. I must be modest. Even Muslim men have to be modest. They can't show their six-packs or wear short shorts. The knees have to be covered and they have to lower their gaze if there's a woman present. It's a sign of respect. And modesty extends beyond dress to behaviour, speech and thought. I choose to stay away from movies and music. We were allowed to watch cartoons until we were ten years old, then Mum and Dad threw the television out. Elders are supposed to be respected. We started seeing shows that didn't reflect these beliefs. It was hard at first, but as I grew older I could see their wisdom.

In Islam, dating is permissible as long as you marry. But you don't need to hold hands with somebody to find out if they're life-partner material. I have someone in the pipeline,

I felt like when I went outside I would be viewed as a terrorist so I stopped going out unless it was necessary. But hang on, I thought, this is my country.

Facing challenges ... Nada Makhoulouf, who has been wearing niqab since 2001, with her father, Omar.

that's all I can say. It's more of a "let's get down to business" kind of thing. What are your priorities? Let's match them up. If they're not compatible, maybe you'll say, "Sorry, you're a loser". No, I'm kidding. The good thing is that because it's not entirely done between the couple, if you don't like them then you can go back into your house and say, "No, Dad, sorry, that guy's a slacker." Or whatever.

Nada Makhoulouf, 25, Logan Central

It was August 2001 when I decided to wear niqab. Mum made me one to wear. There are so many things you have to challenge within yourself to be brave enough to wear niqab in Australia. I wasn't sure about the pressures I'd face outside. Then, the very next month, September 11 happened. People were crazy at the time. Was the world going to end? I felt like when I went outside I would be viewed as a terrorist so I stopped going out unless absolutely necessary. But hang on, I thought, this is my country. My family is Lebanese but I was born and raised here. I grew up in Carina [in Brisbane's inner south]. My dad was a Melbourne factory worker. I am totally Australian. I am not in support of extremism and neither is Islam. Why should I be scared?

I went out. The worst that ever happened was people yelling things out to me. I decided to see how strong I could be. Unless someone is actually going to hit me in the street, I am not going to take it off. I shouldn't have to change myself for ignorance. I've been wearing niqab for eight years.

It takes less time to put on my niqab than it used to take to do my hair and nails and match my shoes with my outfit and all that. It's a completely different lifestyle. Eating, for example. I tend to get takeaway [instead of dining out]. We had a conference for my work recently and we went to a quiet Japanese restaurant in the city. I asked for a seat in the corner and I just sort of turned my face to somewhere that was more secluded and that's just how I sat and ate.

I'm a naturopath. I'm engaged at the moment. We met through a friend who I recite Koran with. I didn't even know the guy. My friend said, "I know a Muslim brother who is single". I was, like, "Okay, I'll stay composed and I'll pray and I'll see how things unfold". He has a lot of qualities that I want in a spouse. He's finding the same as well. The first time I met him I decided I would meet him without my niqab. Every girl is different on that. I felt he had the right to see what I looked like. It also makes it so much easier to interact. It was a shy moment. He didn't really look at me much at all. I think he glanced at me maybe twice during the whole three-hour visit. We just spoke in the corner and my father and his father went off talking. The women were in a different side of the house socialising. It went well. Next time I see him we will be talking about setting a date.

Islam was ingrained in us in a way, but a lot of things weren't really explained to me. So we wouldn't eat pork or we wouldn't drink alcohol or we'd go to a restaurant and choose halal, or Islamically acceptable meat, but why? Why can't we drink alcohol? Why can't I have a boyfriend? My question wasn't "should we be doing these things", my question was more, "Is Islam the truth?" The primary reason I wanted to know was because I knew I could die at any ▶



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moment. I wanted to know what I was going to face. People invest so much time and money in trying to set up their lives for the future. What about death? Is there something after death or do we just turn into dust?

I feel I can confidently say now I know there is something after death. I do believe there can only be one creator, as Islam suggests. I trust Allah 100 per cent. I have people coming in and out of my life. It's difficult to put 100 per cent trust in anything except for Allah. It's a very trusting relationship. I am relying on Him for everything.

Sharon Hussain, 46, Kingston

A lot of people don't know I'm Australian when they see me in the streets. "Go home!" they scream. I was born in Innisfail. Dad was a farmer. When I was born in 1962, he was cutting cane. He was Christian, my mother was Salvation Army.

I had a man say to me, "Go home. Go home". I turned to him and said, "Sir, I'm Australian". He was so angry.

Gradual process ... Former Christian Sharon Hussain took a number of years to decide to convert to Islam.

Mum's a wonderful Christian. I was the oldest of six. Mum read to us and prayed to us every night. God was great big daddy. We moved to Birkdale, in the Redlands area of Brisbane, when I was ready to go to school. I went to bible college.

When I was first married I had a little girl who was very sick. They thought she had cystic fibrosis but she had very bad asthma. I spent a lot of time at the Mater Hospital. Consequently I headed up the beginnings of the Asthma Foundation group in the Redlands area. My name was Sharon Holmes back then. They were hard years. They told me my daughter would never have children. She's now expecting her fourth.

My first husband wasn't a bad man. He's still alive. He's around somewhere. The kids see him. He was hard-working, but he had issues.

Nothing happens fast. For a person to walk straight from Christianity to Islam, you would say there was something wrong with that person. This was a process over years. I would have discussions with the girls at church, like, how do we know that Muhammad, peace be upon him, is not a valid prophet of God? Why not? Then a colleague wore a hijab to work. I asked her to tell me about Islam. I was never going to convert. I was a confident Christian. I knew it all. I knew I was in the right place. Then I read the Koran and, I tell you, I couldn't take my eyes off it. I read it over and over and over. Then I changed my dress. Then I started covering the head. I decided not to show any of the leg any more. And then I had to change me.

I changed my name to Hussain early in the piece. That was because I married a Muslim man. It's a bit of a complicated issue. I took his name but I was still a Christian at the time, which is not common. That was a few years ago. He questioned me very seriously when I told him I was becoming a Muslim. He asked if I did it for him. It wasn't for him. There's no way I would change my religion for the sake of a man.

I work for an apprenticeship company in Bowen Hills [in Brisbane's inner north]. I wear niqab at work. It was scary at first. There were sniggers. But now everybody accepts me. People on the street are worse. The common things we get are "ninja" or "penguin". Two weeks ago, walking to the train station on Brunswick Street, I had a man say to me, "Go home. Go home". I turned to him and said, "Sir, I'm Australian". He was so livid and angry and he came up to me and, thankfully, a security guard grabbed him. I should have kept walking but I'd just had it. If I wanted to walk around in a bikini, I bet he wouldn't say anything – well, at my age, he probably would. But they're happier for a woman to wear nothing than they are for her to be covered.

None of my children really like it. I've got three daughters and one son. The first time my oldest daughter saw me I'd been wearing niqab for some time and she'd asked me to pick her up from Oxley train station [in Brisbane's south-west]. I forgot to warn her about what I'd look like exactly. She held her hands up and pushed me away from her. She went down on the ground beside the car and started crying and she said, "I don't know you. You're not my mother." That hurt very much because I'd hurt my daughter. But I'm accountable to God, not my children. They have to find their own path.

My dad is old now ... I didn't tell him I'd converted, as such. My mother cried. It would be a painful thing to hear. It would be the same if a Muslim child told her parents she'd converted to Christianity. To say that is to say you're going to hell as far as a parent is concerned.

But we grow. You leave behind some things and you take some things with you. The person we were in the past helps build the person we are today. And you just keep putting one foot in front of the other. ■