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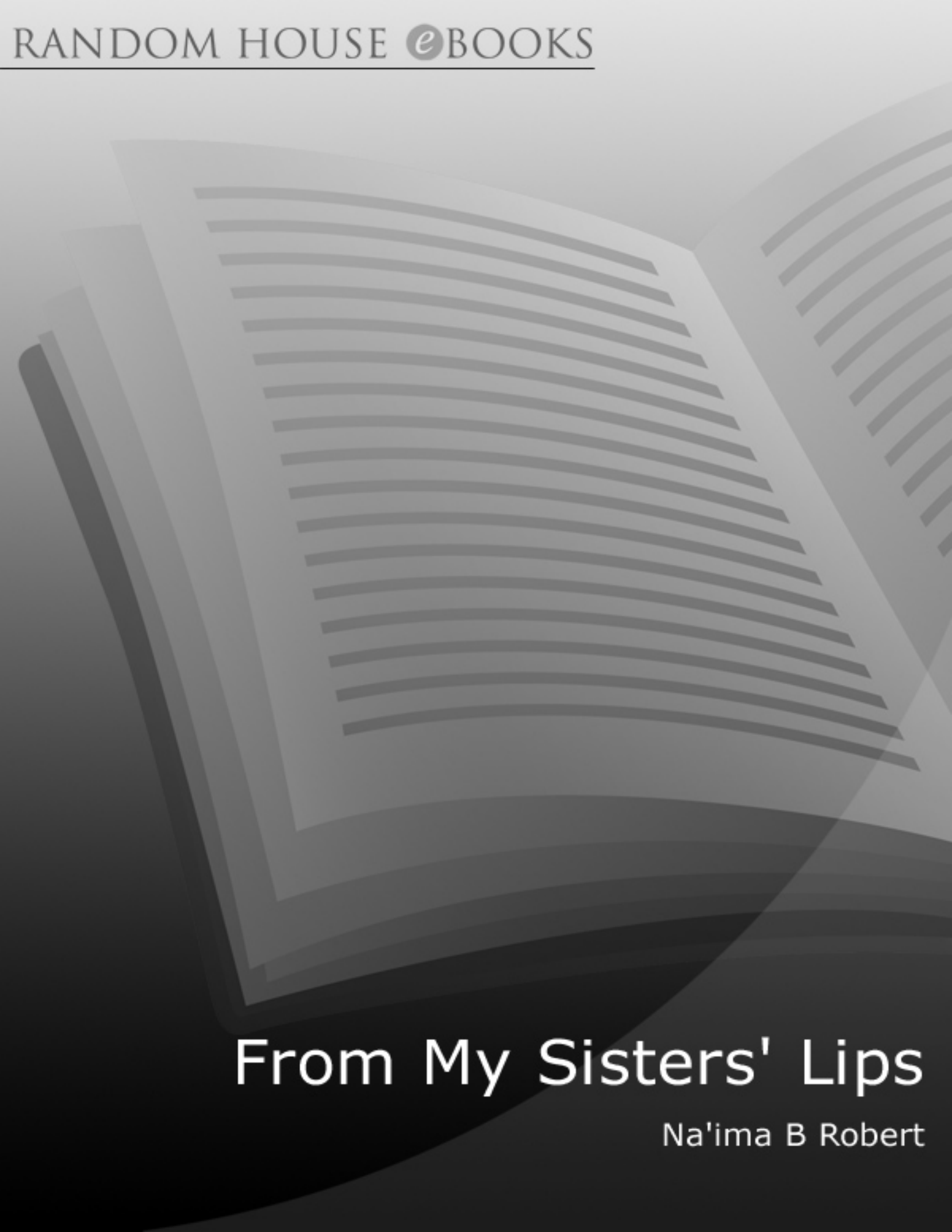

From My Sisters' Lips

Na'ima B Robert

About the Book

Covered from head to toe, with only her eyes visible, the sight of a Muslim woman on a Western city street rarely fails to provoke a strong reaction. Feelings of shock, horror, repulsion, or even fear, are not uncommon. But have you ever wondered who it is behind the veil, what her life is really like and how her hopes and aspirations differ from yours?

In *From My Sisters' Lips*, Na'ima Robert recounts the compelling story of her conversion to Islam and offers first-hand accounts of just some of the extraordinary women she has come to know in recent years – women like herself who have chosen to live as Muslims. What emerges is a vivid and intimate portrait of a sisterhood. As they speak candidly on diverse subjects ranging from marriage to motherhood, stereotypes, submission and self-image, we hear the strong, proud voices of those who are seldom heard.

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FROM MY SISTERS' LIPS

A unique celebration of Muslim womanhood

NA'IMA B. ROBERT

BANTAM BOOKS

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

For my husband, the wind beneath my wings

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FIRSTLY, I THANK Allah, Lord of all the worlds, for making this book possible. I ask that He accepts it as an act of worship from me and places it in the scale of my good deeds. To my sisters: a big '*Jazakunna Allahu khairan*' to all of you who shared your time, your innermost thoughts and feelings with me. In spite of all the children and missing Dictaphones, we did it, *masha Allah*. Take this book: it is yours. To the memory of my mother: dear Mama, you would have loved this book. You live on in all of us. A 'big girl' thank-you to my wonderful Daddy: your hopes were not in vain. I am so glad we were able to share this most 'harrowing' of journeys. Hugs to my brother and sister: thanks for believing in me and being there – with the Hoover and the babysitting! To my loving family, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents: thank you for your support and for loving me and accepting me in spite of the many challenges. A good cup of coffee for Miriam, my sounding board and debate partner – so much of this book is you! A 'shout out' to all my companions on this journey from Africa, Europe and the States: I salute you. *Tatenda*, Sisi Priscilla and Mai Ethel: you deserve medals for your patience! Thank you, Mishti (Chatterji), for taking a chance on an unknown author.

Kisses for Sheri Pie (Sheri Safran), my agent, the woman who made it all happen. Thank you, Brenda (Kimber), my

editor, for letting me flow – and for all those thought-provoking questions!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS IS A personal book and, as such, it focuses on a small slice of the Muslim experience. As Muslim women, we are comfortable sharing our experiences and speaking candidly about our private lives and thoughts because we have a great example in Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad (s), who shared the intimate details of her life with him (s) so that we could learn from her experiences. Perhaps some will learn from ours.

The opinions expressed in this book are the result of personal experiences and understanding and are therefore not representative of every Muslim woman. Nor is our experience as reverts (converts to Islam) a reflection of all Muslim women's experiences. Muslims consider accepting Islam to be merely 'reverting' to the human being's natural disposition of acknowledging and worshipping the One God, thus the use of 'revert' instead of 'convert'.

Also, although I have tried to explain Islamic concepts as clearly as possible, there are some things that will be difficult for non-Muslims to understand. The Muslim accepts these things because of his faith and grounding in Islamic knowledge – the same cannot be expected of those who have not entered the faith.

Muslims are required to send greetings of peace and blessings to the Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu alaihi wasallam*) whenever his name is mentioned. For that reason, there is an (s) after his name, although the greeting

should be said in full. Muslims also express respect for the Companions (r) of the Prophet (s) by saying ‘RadhiAllahu anhu/anha’ (May Allah be pleased with him/her) when mentioning their names.

According to Islamic terminology, the headscarf is called a *khimar* in Arabic. However, as the word *hijab* is more commonly used, the two have been used interchangeably throughout the book.

Although my sisters’ stories are true, all their names have been changed.

INTRODUCTION

CATCHING SIGHT OF a Muslim woman on Western city streets, covered from head to toe, rarely fails to provoke a strong reaction. Feelings of shock, horror, repulsion or pity are not uncommon, especially upon seeing this strangest of sights for the first time. Comments range from the patronizing (‘Poor woman, doesn’t she know she’s in England now, she doesn’t have to dress like that?’) and the insulting (‘It makes me sick to see them dressed like that!’) to the ridiculous (‘I bet she looks like a dog under there!’).

Without doubt, the assumption is that this poor woman was forced by her husband or family to dress as she does, that she is an uneducated immigrant who probably speaks little or no English or that, steeped in ignorance, she has yet to experience the delights of Western freedoms. She is, in essence, desperate to be liberated.

Such is the common perception of this woman, who remains faceless, nameless and voiceless – a non-person.

But what if this woman had a name, what if she had a voice? What if she could tell you about herself, her history, her family, her thoughts and feelings? What if, by sharing herself with you, you grew to see beyond the exterior, beyond the veil, and see for yourself in what ways you are alike and in what ways you are different?

By 1977, my parents had left apartheid South Africa and settled in Leeds, where I was born. We then travelled to Ethiopia and then Zimbabwe, where I spent the next twelve

years, attending primary and high school, living the life of your average middle-class Southern Africa teenager. My peers and I played, partied and preened in accordance with our cultural influences, namely, American music videos and films. At seventeen, I left what I considered the 'small-town mentality' of Harare and came to London to study. While at university, I was exposed to new ways of thinking and living – I became more aware of world issues and, like many Social Sciences students, became more radical and politicized, becoming quite a militant Afrocentric Black Nationalist. However, it was on a trip to Egypt that I first encountered Islam and was struck by the *hijab*, the covering of the Muslim woman. This trip proved to be a turning point in my life, causing me to question my lifestyle, my beliefs and my purpose in life. After much reflection and many air miles, I took my first tentative steps on the path of Islam.

Since accepting Islam, I have been blessed to meet many wonderful women who, like me, converted to Islam: honest women, caring women – strong women. Through our blossoming friendships, I have got to know the many sides of their personalities. They have taught me about faith, about patience, about themselves and about myself. But, for so long, we have been defined by others, in words that are not our own.

For a long time, the idea of writing about my experiences and those of my sisters had appealed to me. I thought that it was important to tell our story, both for those who know us and for those who don't, the strangers who see us and so misunderstand us.

I invite you now to accompany me into my heart and the hearts of my 'sisters in Islam', to find out who we really are – not what the stereotypes say, nor what the media says – what *we* say. We have spoken candidly about many aspects of our lives, trusting that you will listen without prejudice.

I also hope that, while you read, you will address your own ideas and challenge your preconceptions about Islam. By showing the Islamic faith at work in the lives of the women in this book, I hope to show a personal and private side of Islam, one that is only seen by those privileged enough to be admitted to its inner circle.

This book is a celebration. It is a celebration of womanhood. It is a celebration of sisterhood. It is a celebration of courage, warmth and friendship. It is a celebration of laughter, patience and love. It is a celebration of Islam.

Na’ima B. Robert
December 2004

Part One
Finding Islam

This is the story of how we came to accept Islam.
These stories are only slices of personal history.
Part of us wants to keep them that way, to keep them private, to protect them.
But another part of us, the stronger part, wants to share this history with you, to take you on this journey too.
To show that Islam speaks to the hearts of people from a thousand diverse backgrounds, in a thousand different ways.
To show how Islam enriches the lives of millions of people, every day, in every way.
To share the heartache and joy of leaving what you know for what you can only imagine.
To show that we have chosen to be and are proud to be Muslim women.
To show that we are striving to hold on to our Islam with all our strength and that we will hold on, even when it burns like hot coals.
To show that we are of you, that our roots spring from where yours do.
It is only our fruit and flowers that differ, for we are nourished by a different source.

1

MY PATH

I WAS BORN in the north of England, in Leeds, where my mother and father went on to buy a little terrace house, on a narrow road of other terrace houses just like it. Three years later, our family moved to Ethiopia and then to Zimbabwe when I was six. By this time, I had a brother and an extremely chubby baby sister, whom I adored. We lived in a lovely house in one of the 'low-density' suburbs of Harare, with a swimming pool and two acres of flowers, a vegetable garden and banana trees. For the first eighteen years of my life, I lived like every other middle-class Zimbabwean youth that I knew.

I went to a girls' school in Harare, complete with blazers, boaters and Head Girls, as I became in the Sixth Form. My mother and father tried their best to teach us about our Scottish and Zulu roots, our Southern African culture, to appreciate who we were and where we came from. We were never sent to exclusive colonial-style private schools, we learnt traditional Zimbabwean dances and would often sing anti-apartheid songs while we walked to school. Indeed, we were politically aware from a very young age although, as we grew older, the desire to fit in with our peers and emulate what we saw on television often overrode our parents' best intentions!

I enjoyed school a great deal and routinely won academic, art, public speaking and drama prizes at the end of each year. I was an outgoing and confident girl, full of energy and ideas, always on the go, always developing new projects. However, alongside my squeaky-clean school persona, I was also a party girl, as were all my friends. We all lived a double life in a way, many of us excelling at school while remaining a permanent feature of the Harare party scene. Our role models were not classical writers or feminist thinkers, although we did subscribe to the flirty, in-your-face, *Cosmopolitan* magazine brand of feminism! Nor did we model ourselves on the heroines of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, the *Chimurenga*. Our role models were American actresses, singers and entertainers, among them the girl groups TLC and Salt-N-Pepa. Our 'moral guidance' came from R'n'B, ragga music and 'gangsta' rap – not much guidance, as anyone who has ever listened to 2 Live Crew, Snoop Doggy Dogg or Shabba Ranks will tell you! In fact, the sexual mores and social aspirations of the majority of 'cool' Harare youth were wholly imported from Western shores – we were like young people in so many places, carefree and careless. I often shudder to think of how many times we came close to danger because of the way we lived and our lack of caution. Carelessness due to drink, drunk-driving, getting lifts with strangers, being out alone at night with no money, at the mercy of guys as foolish as we were, drugs, STDs, HIV, early pregnancy, abortions, you name it, we came close to it. However, I came out of my teenage years unscathed, with good O and A Levels to boot! Not all my friends were that lucky.

Unlike the majority of Zimbabweans, I was raised in a non-religious household. My mother, a strikingly beautiful Zulu woman, had been born and raised a Christian but lived a glamorous city life in Johannesburg, working as a nurse while winning beauty titles and ballroom dancing championships. Going against tradition (and the apartheid

laws), she fell in love with my father, a White South African. Having been groomed for privilege and supremacy in exclusive White boarding-schools, he had rejected the racist premise of apartheid and embraced the anti-apartheid struggle through grassroots theatre. If ever there was a 'White African', he was one! My father was a committed Marxist and an agnostic at that. So, as children, we were told that the Bible was full of fairy tales, and that was what we believed. However, I sang the hymns and said The Lord's Prayer like all the other children, even though it didn't mean anything to me.

In my final year of high school, I decided to apply for a university place in London. I was determined to get out of Zimbabwe. I didn't want to fall into the trap of thinking that the city life of Harare was all there was and that the Circus nightclub was the most sophisticated place on the planet. So I applied and was accepted at one of the colleges in the University of London. All I had to do was find the money to get me there! After about eight months working in the travel industry and singing in a successful local band, I saved enough money for my ticket and my first few months in London. So I left Harare to study French, Politics and Business Studies in London. It was there that I met my first close-knit group of girlfriends and began to discover the true meaning of friendship between women. We read together, worked together, ate together and partied together. We explored Frantz Fanon, Alice Walker and Descartes. We nodded our heads to Puff Daddy's crew, Maxwell and Erykah Badu. We let our hair 'go natural', no chemicals, twisted it, braided it and wrapped it in Afro print. We talked about Black issues (on which our views were to become increasingly militant), about the state of the world, about our families and our pasts. My social circle was a group of beautiful, confident young Black women, getting an education, having fun – on top of the world, or so I thought!

In the summer of my first year at university, I took a trip that was to change my life for ever. And it all began with an innocent invitation to participate in a music festival in Egypt as a Zimbabwean representative, alongside one of my musician friends who was a professional singer and mbira player (a traditional Zimbabwean instrument). Although I was not a trained musician, I could sing and play the African drum, *ngoma*, as well as perform many traditional Zimbabwean dances.

Egypt was hot and noisy and it bustled in shades of sand and sunlight. Of course, we explored the pyramids, museums and markets as all tourists do. But I also remember being very aware of women in headscarves, in *hijab*, wherever we went and, quite frankly, I was appalled. All my budding feminist instincts raged against the whole idea of a woman covering herself – I thought it a symbol of female oppression, of male dominance. But most of all, I thought it made them look terribly ugly. Usually, when we see things that are foreign to us, we base our opinions on our own experiences and knowledge. It is rare for us actually to step outside our own perceptions and try to understand what we see through the eyes of those living it. For some reason, on that trip, I dared to ask about what seemed so incomprehensible to me.

One evening, we were performing at a concert in a village out of town. After our set, I remember seeing a young woman, the organizer's wife, who was wearing a creamy coloured headscarf – a *hijab*. It framed her face and then fell in folds over her neck and chest. I looked into her face – she was beautiful. It seemed to me that her face was glowing and, somehow, in some way, the *hijab* only accentuated that. I was so taken with that sight that I stopped to speak to her. After exchanging pleasantries, I asked her the question that had been burning in my brain since I had arrived in Cairo: 'Why do you cover yourself?

You are so beautiful.' To this day, her answer hits me with its clarity and simplicity.

'Because,' she said, 'I want to be judged for what I say and what I do, not for what I look like.'

BAM!

Ever since I can remember, I have been aware of my looks – not so much because I am particularly beautiful (although my friends and family would attest to my vanity!), but because of how people reacted to me. Throughout my teenage years, my friends and I were totally comfortable with the notion of using our looks as leverage, of wielding power over men in this way. In that world, every woman knows the drill: when you go for that job interview, you make sure you look your best, and if it's a man you're meeting, perhaps even show a bit of leg, laugh at his jokes, pout a bit to be taken out to lunch – that sort of thing. Most women grow up knowing these tricks and use them both consciously and unconsciously.

So on that night in an Egyptian village, when that lovely woman told me that she was not interested in being judged on her appearance, but on what she said and thought, I had to sit up and take notice! What did she mean? Remove physical looks from the equation? I felt nothing but admiration for this woman. What is it about Islam, I thought, that can make a woman so strong that she no longer strives to be noticed by men, no longer needs the admiring gaze to feel attractive, no longer puts herself on display when the rest of the world is doing just that? These questions affected me deeply. I began to think about my life, about my own self-image and how I wanted to grow and develop. I asked myself whether I had the courage, the confidence, and the self-esteem to get by on my character and intellect alone.

And so it was, on that fateful trip to Egypt in the summer of 1998, that I began to think about Islam and set in motion the wheels of change. It was as if speaking with

that beautiful woman who had so impressed me with her quiet strength of character had opened my eyes. Suddenly, I saw worship all around me – in mosques, on the streets, everywhere. All at once, I became aware of words of devotion, uttered in Arabic – '*bismillah*' – in the name of Allah, '*alhamdulillah*' – all praise is due to Allah, '*insha Allah*' – if Allah wills, '*masha Allah*' – it is as Allah wills. I was both surprised and intrigued, for I suddenly realized that I had a spiritual side that I had never bothered to explore. And it worried me that I knew so little about one of the world's great religions. I had had my fill of Christianity. All those religious education lessons at school had left me cold, the memory of the Bible-bashing, gun-toting colonizers indelibly etched on my brain. It was near impossible for me to divorce the Christian message from all its cultural baggage and from the imperialism that had brought it to Africa. Growing up in Zimbabwe, one of the frontline states bordering apartheid South Africa and conflict-ridden Mozambique, Angola and Namibia, we were very much aware of the way in which Christianity had been used as a smokescreen to cover the wholesale theft of our land. Although this did not (and still does not) deter the majority of Southern Africans from following the faith, it bothered me. This unease was only increased by my involvement with Black and Africanist thought at university – becoming a Christian was akin to selling out. But Islam? Islam was completely new to me then and came with no history as far as I was concerned. I started to ask questions about the faith, what Muslims believed in, what they did, what they didn't do. I resolved to read the Qur'an on my return to London. And the Bible too – I felt I wanted to give Christianity one more shot.

I left Egypt shaken: my encounter with the Islamic faith had affected me to the core. I couldn't put my finger on what had touched me so, but whatever it was had thrown into question all those long-held assumptions and

expectations about my future ambitions. What was my life about? Would I finish university and get a high-powered job, working nine to nine? Would I spend my money on clothes and home furnishings, visiting Zimbabwe every year? Would I eventually return there, get married to a local 'mover and shaker' and live in a leafy suburb with a maid, a cook and a gardener, far away from the common folk, the *povo?* Would I wait until I was thirty and then have children, making sure to send them to the best colonial-style private schools and take them on overseas holidays every year? In essence, would I live the life that I had decided on during my teenage years, the life that all young Zimbabweans in my social group aspired to? Somehow, all that I had seen and heard in Egypt had awakened something in me, a yearning for direction, for depth and substance – a yearning for something more than the vapid existence I had been planning for. For the first time, I began to wonder about the world and my place in it: I began to wonder about the meaning of life.

On my return to London, I was already convinced that I wanted to give 'dressing modestly' a try. So I wrapped my head, much as the singer Erykah Badu was doing that year, and wore loose-fitting clothes – tunic tops and wide pants in muted colours. Alternatively, I would always make sure that I kept my coat on if I had tightish trousers on. My transformation from disco diva to 'African sistah' did not go unnoticed on campus. One of the rumours that reached me was that I had joined a cult and had to wear the headwrap all the time. However, the rumours didn't faze me because my instincts told me that I was doing the right thing, no matter what wild conclusions other people jumped to.

I bought a translation of the Qur'an by Marmaduke Pickthall, the English writer who became a Muslim in the early twentieth century. To my dismay, however, I could not grasp its magnitude. Apart from uninspiring religious education lessons in school, I'd grown up outside the

biblical tradition and could not relate to the stories of the prophets and the peoples of the past. And, as I could not read Arabic at that time, I had to make do with the English version, which, as anyone will tell you, is a poor substitute. No one had ever explained its origins to me – I did not know how it had come to exist in its present form, whether it was the original revelation itself or whether someone, the Prophet Muhammad (s) or his followers, had actually composed it themselves. I thought it very much like the Bible, in that it contained some of the same stories and that it had been written by different men over a number of years. In fact, my initial reaction was quite irreverent and my first copy is full of underlining, question marks and exclamation marks. There were some concepts I just could not grasp at that time and it was only when I learnt more about the Qur'an that I began to understand them.

But there were aspects of Qur'anic law that I readily understood. I could see the beauty and wisdom of establishing the prayer five times a day. It meant that the first action of the day was worship, *Salat al-Fajr*, as was the last, *Salat al-'Isha*. In between those two prayers were the other three, *Salat adh-Dhuhr*, at about lunchtime, *Salat al-'Asr*, mid-afternoon, and *Salat al-Maghrib*, prayed when the setting sun turned the clouds crimson. Those five prayers were a constant reminder of God and a chance to renew one's relationship with Him.

There were other laws that made sense to me as well. Although my friends and I had been known to indulge in a tipple occasionally, I had no problem accepting the prohibition of alcohol and other intoxicants. It is a well-known fact that Zimbabwean men love their beer; throughout my childhood and adolescence, I had seen for myself the drunkenness, the squandering of wages, the violence, the promiscuity and the devastating consequences that accompanied excessive drinking in the African context. But anyone anywhere in the world who has

smelt the reek of stale beer on their breath, felt the throb of a hangover, tasted the sickening slime of drunken vomit, seen the pathetic pain of an alcoholic's need or suffered the consequences of a drunken 'bit of fun' will understand, at least a little, the way in which alcohol can debase the human being. Although these scenarios do not accompany all alcoholic (mis)adventures, the prospect of them was enough to convince me of the wisdom of staying away from it altogether.

However, it took a nasty surprise to stop me eating pork. My flatmate and I had bought some and had put it in the fridge. To our horror, when we took it out to cook the next day, the pale lump of meat was crawling with maggots. That was enough to make me swear off pork for life. To this day, even the sound of the word makes me feel sick.

To me, the injunctions for men and women to be modest and treat each other with respect meant an end to unwanted male attention, to catcalls, to wolf whistles, to innuendo and sexual harassment. It also meant an end to seeking male approval for my looks or clothes. That meant that I changed how I dressed and how I interacted with men, keeping a certain distance between them and me. It was a new way of being, a new way of looking at the world. It meant that I called the shots: I shared as much of myself as I saw fit and no more – no man had any *right* to me. What can I say? It was empowering.

So, slowly but surely, my lifestyle was changing. However, I was not convinced that I needed to actually convert to Islam in order to benefit from the Islamic way of life. I thought that I would merely continue to change a few things here and there while maintaining my own individual lifestyle and goals. I still felt much more loyalty to my Black 'brothas' and 'sistahs' than to the Muslims I had met. Indeed, although I was being drawn towards Islam, Muslims themselves were still a mystery to me. My university was in Mile End, just up the road from

Whitechapel and the now (in)famous Brick Lane, densely populated by Asians, most of them Muslims. They were all around us there – in the estates and terrace houses, chicken-and-chips shops and storefront mosques. I would often see the men, stern-faced, many with grey and white beards, walking purposefully to the little house near campus that served as a mosque – a mosque where, I was later to learn, there was no space for women to pray. Although women have the choice between praying at home or at the mosque, it is a sad feature of some more traditional mosques that they do not allow women to make this choice for themselves. The Muslims there were mainly Bengalis and I would see the women too, their saris peeking out from under their black cloaks, their scarves perched precariously on their heads, their lips and teeth stained deep orange by the betel nut they liked to chew. And then there were the young girls, fresh-faced with neat lace-trimmed scarves and feminine Pakistani trouser suits, *shalwar kameez*, and the young boys, thin and wiry, with gelled hair and the ubiquitous mobile phone. I saw all these people, these Muslims, and I knew that they believed in Allah and that they no doubt read the same Qur'an that I battled with every night. And yet, I felt no kinship with them at all – I did not see myself reflected in their eyes. And so I kept away.

My religious solitude was to end when I saw a girl from university who was in the year above me. Her name was Sandra and I had been trying to get her to come to the African Caribbean Society (ACS) for a long time. However, her best friend, Hanah, was an Arab, a Muslim, with an Egyptian father and Zanzibari mother. I remember she had always been dead against what she saw as the exclusionist and racist premise of the ACS, so I had pretty much given up on the two of them. But, one day, I was walking through the canteen and I caught sight of Sandra, sitting with a group of friends. They all looked the same, except for the

strange look on Sandra's face and the scarf that was tied around her head. It was one of those lace-trimmed *hijabs* favoured by the Bengalis, but she had wrapped it around her head instead of letting it fall over her neck and chest. She looked so different. What has she done? I asked myself. I was so curious that I could not resist going up to her and asking about her new look. That was when she told me that she had taken her *shahadah* that weekend – she had affirmed the Muslim testimony of faith:

'*Ash-hadu an-laa ilaaha illallah wa ash-hadu ana Muhammad ar-rasoolullah*.'

'I bear witness that there is nothing worthy of worship, in truth, except Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.'

She was a Muslim now. I was shocked and envious at the same time – she looked so happy, as though she knew that she had done something important and meaningful, that she had done the right thing. She had taken a brave step, a step I was too frightened to take.

'Well,' I managed to say, 'you were braver than I was.' Then I told her about my tentative steps towards Islam and my reservations. That was when she asked me if I would come to her room in the halls of residence and show her how to tie a headwrap. I was happy to oblige. The very next day, I went over with some material, a beautiful gold and red striped weave from Egypt, a thick black fabric perfect for solid 'wraps' and a length of navy chiffon. And that night, amidst the trying, the tying and several failed attempts, a friendship began to blossom, a friendship that was to change my life for ever.

All of a sudden, I had someone to share my interest in Islam with, to discuss and debate the ins and outs of the faith with and I relished it. And just as my interest in all things Islamic began to grow, so my passion for 'Black issues' began to wane. The more serious issues were hardly ever addressed at the African Caribbean Society meetings

and I was particularly frustrated by the repetitive way in which we discussed the same topics, year in, year out. As the same old debates about African vs. Caribbean identity, the dangers of Black–White relationships, and misogynist and violent song lyrics continued to raise temperatures during our meetings, my heart began to feel strangely restless. It all seemed so shallow, so meaningless – were these really the most important issues facing us as human beings? My growing interest in Islam had exposed me to a radically different world view and a new understanding of the purpose for human existence, and I found it increasingly difficult to ignore all that I now knew. The last straw for me was when the Society organized a viewing of the Jamaican film *Dancehall Queen* as a cultural event. Sitting in the darkened auditorium, with the ragga music blaring, gazing at the writhing bodies on the dance floor, legs splayed, clad in 'batty riders' and thigh-high boots, I felt so distant, so apart. This is not who I am any more, I thought to myself. I no longer belong here.

So I got up; I left and went to the student prayer room on the other side of the campus. I needed to be around other people who were on the same wavelength as me. I needed beneficial company. I needed depth and meaning. I needed *soul food!* And it was then that I realized that I no longer felt completely at home with my old persona and that, little by little, my heart was inclining towards Islam.

But, for all my heart's yearnings, there were practicalities to consider. And ideologies. And politics. How could I, a Black African woman (as I saw myself then, never mind my mixed parentage!) be part of a religion like Islam? As far as I could see, it was a religion for Asians and Arabs! After all, they were the only Muslims I had ever really seen. I failed to picture how I could fit in to that way of life without losing my sense of identity. And to espouse a faith that would risk estranging me from my family, friends and the traditions of my ancestors filled me with apprehension.

My new friend, Sandra, was always very patient with me when I brought up these objections. I think that part of her could see where I was coming from but a larger part of her wondered why I was so hung up on the whole 'African identity' thing. To her it was simple: if Islam is the truth, all these other things are of secondary importance, so why let them get in the way of following what you know to be right?

But I had more questions for her. I remember very clearly crying out one day, 'What if I give my life to Allah and He does something I don't want with it?' After all, I had plans: the fancy job, the money, the big wedding back home, the children in striped blazers and braids – I had it all figured out! But if I accepted Islam, I knew all that had to change. Was I ready to let go of my ambitions and plans for the future? No, I was not ready for that change – not ready to give up a carefully planned future that had been dictated by my past. I was being held back by the fear of the unknown, the fear of uncertainty, the fear of submission.

It was around this time that I started working as a temp for a major shoe company in London. There I met a woman of West Indian descent and, pleased to see another Black face in the office, I became friendly with her. I found her to be very down to earth and welcoming, and I was extremely impressed when she told me that she had taken an 'X' after her name as a substitute for the family name that she would never know. In the West, almost every Black person whose ancestors were slaves has a European surname, the name of their ancestors' owner, the slave master. Their original African names were changed and are now, for the most part, lost for ever. I was soon to discover that the practice of replacing the slave name with an 'X' was what the followers of the so-called Nation of Islam did, just as their charismatic one-time spokesman Malcolm X had done. So when Monica told me that she regularly went to the

Nation of Islam's Temple One in Shepherd's Bush and invited me to go with her, I was eager to go and experience it for myself. Maybe this was where I belonged – in a 'Black version' of Islam? So, on the evening of the next meeting, we went together and I had my first encounter with the controversial Nation of Islam.

We got to the meeting hall. The Nation of Islam bodyguards, tall and broad in their smart suits and neat bow ties were there to greet us. Amid a chorus of '*Asalaamu alaikum*, my Black sisters', '*Asalaamu alaikum*, my Black queens', they directed us to the booth at the top of the stairs where we were to be searched, as was the somewhat paranoid practice at Nation of Islam meetings. The woman in the booth wore what appeared to be a uniform: a navy blue dress and a cape on her head, much like a nun's habit, which covered her hair and lay behind her ears down to her back. We were searched and I remember being impressed by her efficiency and seriousness, something that I had rarely found in the Black organizations I knew. When we entered the meeting room, the women were seated on the rows of chairs closest to the entrance and the men on rows of chairs on the other side of the room. A narrow aisle separated them. Everyone was looking up at the stage, where recruits from the Fruit of Islam, the Nation of Islam cadres, stood with their legs apart, gazing impassively into the middle distance, much as they had in the 1960s, in Elijah Muhammad's day. The other men were all dressed in suits, many with bow ties, and the women wore the same capes as the first woman we had met. The visitors sat in the rows further back, some donning headscarves for the occasion.

The meeting began with the greeting of '*Asalaamu alaikum*' and a reading from the Qur'an, the first verse, Surah al-Fatihah. What followed then was a mixture of evangelist-style preaching (for which the Nation of Islam speakers are well known), personal anecdotes and a

presentation by the children who attended the Nation of Islam school. The meeting and its content evoked powerful emotions in all of us, especially the more ‘Black conscious’ ones in the gathering. I went again, a few weeks later, taking with me my flatmate, Efua, and my colleague, Nichelle. Nichelle was far from impressed with the racist ideas espoused by the speakers but they didn’t put Efua and me off too much. But it was only when I went to a third meeting with a Muslim friend that I began to have doubts as to whether the ‘Nation of Islam’ was the right thing for me. For a start, I was not convinced by their premise that all civilizations in the world had been established by the ‘Asiatic Black man’. I found it ridiculous that a movement that claimed to espouse Black advancement chose to wear suits and natty bow ties as their uniform. Even more incredible was the routine use of the name ‘Muhammad’ – an Arabic name if ever there was one – while still claiming to be neither African nor Caribbean, but ‘Asiatic’ in origin. On the train home, our Muslim friend said, ‘That’s not real Islam, you know.’ And, though I knew very little at that time, I knew that he was right. Compared with the doctrine of the Nation of Islam, ‘real’ Islam seemed measured, balanced, welcoming and open. Instead of concentrating on the relationship between the Black man and the ‘White devils’, Black empowerment and other social problems that Black communities faced, Islam stressed the relationship between all human beings and their Creator – in belief, in manners and in worship. The two ways of life and belief systems seemed miles apart. My search was not yet over.

The sense that I was reaching a turning point in my life just wouldn’t leave me. While on the one hand I sensed that I could not continue picking and choosing the aspects of Islam that fitted in with my world view, on the other, I knew I could not go back to my old lifestyle. The time had come for me to make a decision. Sandra, who had become a good

friend by now, told me that I would have to make a choice or risk dying in disbelief, as a non-Muslim. I was agonized. But the Christmas holidays were around the corner and I had received my pay from the department store where I worked part time. What would I do? Would I go to spend Christmas with my family who were in the States? Or would I go somewhere that would help me understand what I was meant to do with the rest of my life? I chose the latter. I decided to go to Muslim Africa, to Guinea, the land and life so vividly etched in my mind by Camara Laye's book, *L'Enfant Noir*. I also chose Guinea because I knew that it had a largely Muslim population and also because, on my way to Egypt, I had met the director of the Guinean postal service and he and his people had impressed me with their firm faith and strong sense of identity. He was to be my contact as I made preparations for my trip.

All my friends were appalled. To them, the whole idea was crazy: I hardly knew my host, had never visited the country, would be travelling on my own and would have no one to look out for me. So strong were their objections that I almost called the whole thing off, until, by a twist of fate, a few things happened that made me believe that I was destined to make that journey. The first was a chance meeting with a group of Nigerian Muslim women while at work in the department store. I recognized them immediately as Nigerian because they were wearing tie-dyed *boubous*, those voluminous African outfits usually known as kaftans. But on their heads, instead of the common starched headwrap, they wore the same lace-trimmed *hijabs* favoured by the young Asian girls in my area. I was intrigued and, as was my practice in those days, immediately went up to them and said, '*Asalaamu alaikum*' – peace be upon you. They all answered with bright smiles and, '*Wa alaikum salaam'* – upon you be peace. I went on to ask them where they were from and what they were doing. One of them, the one with the brightest smile, told me that