

ACCEPTANCE OF ISLAM BY THE DAUGHTER OF THE WORLD RENOWNED ARTIST OF JAPAN:

“Western women in general are under a great deal of mental pressure; therefore, Muslim women should value the fact that Islam is a blessing unto them.”

Fatima, who is Japan’s new revert to Islam, studied Fine Arts in Japan. She is the daughter of a world renowned Fine Artist of America and Japan, and she is responsible for the female section of the “**Japan Islamic Trust**” which is based in Tokyo.

Malik Ahmad Sarwar interviewed her thoroughly, in order to have background of her acceptance of Islam, and other related matters. The interview is detailed below:

Q. Kindly introduce yourself?

R: I was born in the American state of Kentucky. In fact, my father migrated from Japan to America ten years before my birth. During a year; he spends about half of his time in Japan and the other half in New York. From childhood, my parents named me “*Hanako Iijima*”. Upon completing my basic education at a Girls High School in Tokyo, I was admitted to an Arts College called “*BUNKA GAKUINN*”. After successfully graduating from this college, I spent two years in the faculty of the “*School of Visual Arts*” which is based in New York.

My Father is a renowned personality in the world of Fine Arts, especially in America, Europe and Japan. He has already been awarded the Royal Award by the Emperor of Japan. He has been honored with awards by America, Italy and a number of other countries. I am the only child of my parents and I have no siblings. My mother is a housewife and she assists my father by working as his personal assistant. I was brought up in a mixture of American and Japanese cultures. Artists have their own separate culture which is dissimilar to that of the common society.

Q. What was your previous religion?

R: I had no faith, beliefs nor a religion. Japanese people adopt the Royal Religion: i.e. *Shinto* - at birth and *Buddhism* - at death. (Despite being *Shinto and Buddhist*, Japanese people do marry in Christian churches. Most Japanese people have no firm faith in any religion.)

Q. What weakness did you observe in you ancestral religion?

R: My father did not believe in *Shintoism and Buddhism*, and the surrounding environment was filled with a degree of uncertainty. As a matter of fact: *Shintoism and Buddhism* do not provide any guidance relating to the day to day affairs in life.

Q. What inspired you towards accepting Islam? Which virtues of Islam appealed to you? Did any Muslim preacher/scholar invite you to accept Islam?

R: We were a family of Artists. As I have already mentioned, Artists have their own unique culture. Whether it is a piece of art or religion, an artist is always in the pursuit of betterment. I already believed in the existence of God but I was unaware of the means to establish any relationship with Him. I could not find any religion in Japan which could guide us towards establishing a contact with God. In America I found the first opportunity to observe Muslims and they impressed me. No Muslim neither told me anything about Islam, nor invited me to embrace it. In Japan, the impression about Muslims was already very bad. It was a pleasant experience to see Muslims in America in their typical dress like cap, robe, etc. In Japan the Buddhists are completely cut-off with worldly affairs. They do not go in for any business nor does any other work to acquire the necessities of life. Worshipping in a church is the only thing the Christian priests or nuns do. The other Christian religious scholars also keep themselves away from the affairs of life, but I found that Muslims were quite different. They do business wearing their caps and robes and also worship Allah. I found them to be honorable and respectable. My reverence for them was enhanced. I felt that these people are close to Allah. Muslims belong to different countries, nations and castes, but they all dress similar and look alike.

There is a Senegalese restaurant in New York where I used to go for my daily meals. One day when I was taking a meal, a 50 year old man came in and said "Assalamu Alaikum". He then sought permission from

the owner of the restaurant to use the restaurant toilets. In New York City, nobody is easily permitted to use toilets, but the restaurant owner happily permitted him to use the facility. When the man came out after using the toilet, the owner asked him where he came from. He responded that he was from Egypt. I observed that when a Muslim meets another Muslim, he says "Assalamu Alaikum", which definitely is a common word in the Islamic world. Muslims belong to different countries and speak different languages but they all say "Assalamu Alaikum" to each other. I thought to myself that what a wonderful word it is, which not only removes strangeness between two individuals but also makes them sympathize with and comfort each other. Many incidents of the like kept on coming under my observation thereby resulting in the kind development of progressive positive change in my ideas about Islam.

For as long as I lived in America, I did not know that there are no *Bikshu (Buddhist Priest)* like people in Islam. Even after having a good impression of Islam, it never came to my mind that **Islam was for me and that I would ever accept Islam**. I returned to Japan after having lived in America from 1991 to 1993. Islam spread considerably in Japan during these two years. I became habitual in the aspect of ensuring consumption of Halal food. Through this I had developed an inclination towards Halal food, and I had a desire to consume Halal food even in Japan.

One day whilst in search of Halal food, I arrived at a restaurant and the owner was wearing a cap. I was glad to know that Muslims were there even in Japan.

In Japan, I started to study different religions. I read a book written by a non-Muslim Japanese woman. For the first time I came to know about the doctrines, ideologies, adorations, prayers, rules and regulations of Islam. This in turn resulted in the development of an attraction within me for not just one specific teaching, but Islam in its entirety. After reading the book, I came to know that only "**Allah - the exalted**" is God and truth. I came to understand that one becomes a Muslim by having faith and belief in "**Allah**". At this point I felt that I possessed both these attributes, and I started feeling and considering myself to be a Muslim.

I had a limited study of Islam and my faith was not yet sound. The behavior of Muslims in Japan disappointed me and caused my impression of Islam to become negative - and I distanced myself from Islam. However, whilst watching a TV programme on Islam, a strange sense of happiness overcame me. I felt as if my own brother and sisters are being discussed and the conversation was all about me.

In 1997 I traveled through Indonesia and Thailand, whilst keeping Malaysia as my base camp. It was my first visit to any Muslim country. I observed Muslim women following Islam in their day to day life.

Majority of the women were wearing headscarves - I liked it. In Malaysia, places of worship were being maintained all around. People offer prayers regularly at appropriate times in shopping centers, offices and other places. Muslims, especially young boy and girls, even break journey or stop work to ensure offering prayers. In Islam, it is compulsory for Muslims to offer prayers five times in a day. I witnessed the scenes of this order of Allah being followed there. As in Japan I did not observe Muslims offering prayers. So it gave me the impression that offering prayers was limited to faith and books only and had nothing special to do with daily life. I felt so good when I observed the Muslims of Malaysia offering prayers regularly. I was in search of God but could not find the right way to establish a relationship with Him. I observed Muslims offering prayers five times a day and came to know that they establish a relationship with **'Allah -the most Magnificent'** through this worship.

I liked the method very much, to the extent that these daily observations started influencing me. Since Malaysia is a Muslim country, I had another opportunity to eat Halal food. People of different religions and nations live here. If Malaysians are Muslims then Indians are Hindu and Chinese are Buddhists. I had the opportunity to observe the culture of all these religions. Islamic culture appealed me the most. Once again I developed the feeling of being a Muslim. However, confusion prevailed and I thought to myself that how could I be a Muslim when I do not offer prayers, never do fasting and my dress is without a headscarf. With this state of affairs, I felt abashed and was shocked to say the words 'no religion' to those who wanted to know about my religion.

When I returned to Japan, I was overwhelmed by the feeling that I was spiritually so close to Islam. It was spring when my life was encircled by difficulties. It was dark all around. Dark clouds of disappointment engulfed me. There was no ray of hope from any side. Worries were at the peak. In such worrying and disappointing circumstances, I developed a strong feeling that I should establish a relationship with **'Allah – the Exalted'**. In 1998, I went to a nearby Mosque and recited Kalimah Tayyiba. It was my first step towards accepting and entering Islam. I chose **"Fatimah"** as my new name; because the name of the beloved daughter of Allah's dear Prophet (May peace be upon him) is also **'Fatimah'**.

Before accepting Islam, it was all darkness around me - the situation was complicated, rather labyrinthine, and there was no possible coming out of this mode. After accepting Islam however, I felt enlightened. The darkness vanished and I was out of the maze. I was under great mental pressure. It was gone and I felt so comfortable. I was filled with joy and felt a sense of security. **The state of mind and body after accepting Islam cannot be explained in words even if I want to do so.**

Q. You have said that you had belief in God since your early life. What is the rationale behind this belief?

R: As an artist I used to believe that nothing comes into existence by itself. Then this led me to believe that there must be a creator of the universe who can be called God. Another important reason was the philosophy of 'ZEN' in Buddhism. My father also likes this philosophy. There is a surprising contrast because this philosophy made my father believe that there was **no** God; but conversely it developed in me the faith that God existed. This philosophy made me strongly feel the presence of a big power in the universe. At some point of time 'ZEN' philosophy was very popular in Europe and West.

Q. Have you studied other religions?

R: A brief study of Buddhism and Christianity was conducted.

Q. Some people consider "Hijab or veil" as an obstacle in the way of progress. What do you think about it?

R: That is truly the western thought. In my opinion it is **not** the right way of thinking. I **never** have the feeling that "Hijab or veil" is an obstacle.

Q. How do you find the family system in a Muslim society?

R: In the family system of a Muslim society, there is respect and honor for each other. There is a strong element of care for others. Japanese and western family systems are different to this - whereby in Japanese and western cultures when the second generation takes over, it does not care for the first generation (i.e. parents, grandparents etc.) The most important issue of Japan is the demolition of family system. People feel lonely and upset. Especially the life of old persons is full of tremendous distress. **In a Muslim society old persons are revered and are worthy of respect.**

Q. Have you invited your family and relatives to embrace Islam?

R: I have not directly invited them to do so. My effort has been to remove their misunderstandings and correct their impressions about Islam. I pray for them. In America, I met so many Muslims but no one directly invited me to join Islam. Even then I accepted Islam. I keep on indirectly inviting my friends to Islam. For example I tell them about the changes that took place within me after accepting Islam. I invite Japanese women to the mosque and try to answer them whenever they ask me questions about Islam.

Q. In your opinion which method of preaching Islam is better?

R: **Muslims should improve conduct.** Anyone who observes a practical Muslim develops heartfelt inclination towards his preaching. In order to understand what I mean, my journey to Islam is a very good example. *Meeting good Muslims in America brought me closer and closer to Islam. Observing bad Muslims in Japan drifted me away from Islam.* But Islam attracted me towards itself when I met good and practicing Muslims once again. Every Muslim individually is a preacher and ambassador of Islam. Observing the Muslims brings a person either closer to Islam or takes them further away from it. Western propaganda will have no effect if Muslims are strong and bear good conduct. For example when Japanese have a chance to watch good Muslims, Islam is spreading despite the negative propaganda.

Q. The faith of even ancestral staunch Muslims is shaken after observing the decline of Muslim Society. You are a new revert to Islam. Has it produced any effect on your faith and belief at all?

R: No, nothing of that sort, though there is a strong feeling of sorrow and distress. In my opinion it is a temporary phase. Such incidents may happen during the ups and downs of the lives of nations. Muslims are true and on the right path and I am sure the truth will ultimately prevail. **Decisive defeat is the fate of falsehood. Islam is bound to dominate the world. We should not be disappointed by any temporary defeat or decline.**

Q. How do you find the society in Pakistan?

R: Thanks to **Allah, the most Magnificent**, that I found an educated, religious and good family as my in-laws. The environment is very good. Respect, honor, love and the like are all there. However when I see other families not practicing real Islam and view the markets etc, it is painful.

Q. What problems are being faced by women in Japanese and western societies?

R: Japanese and western women have innumerable problems. Sometimes a woman is treated like a toy. Man treats her the way he wishes. Home and society are being demolished. As a result the tendency of avoiding marriage in women is increasing. The women, who want to marry, face immovable problems due to which the days of suitable marriage are a thing of the past. The extent to which a western woman is victim of mental pressure and worries is unbelievable. Tendency towards adultery is increasing even in married families. Civilized and educated families are becoming victims of this evil. There is a lack of confidence between husbands and wives. That is why the western woman is being deprived of protection and peace of mind. Nobody can predict when her family will break up. As the relations between husband and wife are not correct, wrong methods are adopted in pursuit of tranquility. For example liquor is taken. As the environment is that of drinking, those who do not drink face a lot of difficulties. People look at them with surprise. A female employee who does not drink remains worried because if she does not drink, her Boss will be annoyed and browbeat her. Men and women work together. There is a tremendous mental pressure on women. Dirty and sometimes vulgar jokes are cut with them. I was impressed by Muslims because they are not involved in such things.

Q. What was your background in marrying a Muslim?

R: I started visiting the mosque after accepting Islam. After my engagement in preaching activities, I was responsible for the women's section of the **Japan Islamic Trust**. Our colleagues in **Japan Islamic Trust** started meeting us separately and drawing our attention towards marrying each other. We made decisions based on *Istikharah* (praying to **Allah** for making correct decision), after doing *Isikharah* we decided to marry.

When my father came to know that I had never taken tea or meals in a restaurant together with my husband, my father said: “You do not even know each other, have never been so close?” (He was worried because I was going to get married to an unknown person.) It was very difficult to make him understand all that. He was unhappy with the marriage but did not forbid me. My husband came to meet my father two hours before the marriage. My father said to him, “*I am not opposing this marriage because of your being a Pakistani. My only objection is that you are a Muslim. If you leave Islam, not only my daughter but the entire property is yours.*” Before any reply from my husband, I said to my father: “***It is not merely Haroon that I am marrying – rather it is only due to Haroon being a Muslim that I am marrying him. I will refuse to marry if he leaves Islam.***”

Anyhow, the marriage was solemnized. My husband keeps on visiting my parents. The intensity of hatred has reduced and the relations are improving. My parents are now sufficiently satisfied with this marriage.

Q. Generally there is a change in the behavior of men after marriage. Did your husband's behavior exhibit any changes?

R: I did not know my husband much before marriage. So it is not possible for me to make any comparison. Anyhow, I am completely satisfied with my married life.

Q. If you consider trust, honesty, hard work and adherence to principles as a measuring scale, which do you consider better – the Muslims or Non-Muslims?

R: On the whole, in spite of all the ills and shortcomings, Muslims are better than non Muslims.

IN CONCLUSION:

Q. Do you have any message for Muslim women?

R: I have observed both Muslim and non-Muslim societies. I have studied in Japanese and Western societies. Islam is the only way and religion ensuring human welfare. Women who have observed western society from within can never recommend anyone to experience it.

My message for Muslim women is that they should never think of converting Muslim society to western one. Islam is a blessing. Practice it. In this lies their welfare and salvation. If you observe western society closely you will feel as if everyone is mentally sick. Muslim is seen distinct in this society, a fact that aroused my interest in Islam. Muslim women should improve their society by practicing the Islamic teachings. They should not follow the western culture.