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Meet the woman behind the niqab: Fathima Farook

An entrepreneur, teacher, mom and volunteer, Fathima Farook has had to put up with shameful taunts for nothing more than her choice of garb.

By: **Catherine Porter** Columnist, Published on Tue Feb 05 2013

Fathima Farook has a pleasant round face and warm dark eyes.

If you buy her pakoora or aloo masala at the Evergreen Brick Works Farmers Market, though, you'll see her eyes but not her face.

Farook wears a niqab — a black cloth with slits for her eyes to peek through.

She was worried about that when she opened her little stall here two months ago.

She had reason to worry. She's experienced this city's dark side of multiculturalism.

"Sometimes people say bad things. They try to humiliate me," she says, dropping a freshly made vegetarian samosa into the deep fryer beside her stall. "They ask me if I'm a terrorist."

Farook is from Columbo, Sri Lanka. She immigrated to Canada with her family three years ago, just as her country's brutal civil war was ending. Their life there was good. Her husband owned a printing business. She taught kindergarten at a Montessori school.

But the country was unstable. They wanted security and a good future for their six children.

Like most newcomers, their life here has been difficult. They haven't found stable work. They've had to reinvent themselves. And they've faced some grotesque racism, much inspired by Farook's niqab.

"People literally roll down their car windows and yell 'terrorist,'" says her 16-year-old daughter Maryam, who, together with her younger sister Safiyya, helps run Farook's stall every Saturday.

Then there was the man who stopped her on her walk to school one morning with her youngest daughter. "He yelled all bad words. 'You should go back to your country,'" Farook says. "From that time, I am very, very scared when I go on that street."

Stories like this make me burn with shame. No woman should be yelled at by strangers for what — or what not — they're wearing. That Farook arrived at school that day and stayed for an extra 1.5 hours to volunteer with the snack program, which she does every day of the week, adds more fuel to my fury.

"Sometimes I think: It's okay. They don't know. They are not used to (the niqab) yet," Farook says. "Sometimes I feel hurt. I'm a human."

But Farook's story offers reason to exult in our city, too.

While her family lives near Moss Park now, they spent their first year in a cramped one-bedroom apartment in Thorncliffe Park. There, one Friday night, Farook discovered the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee's [weekly summer bazaar](#). She sized up the vendors, who are mostly immigrant women like her, selling salwar kameez, henna tattoos and prepared food. She decided to apply for a spot. And, after teaching herself how to cook by watching YouTube videos, she passed her food-handling course and was given a stall.

Farook, it turns out, makes a mean curry.

"I didn't cook much before. I had a lot of help back home," she says. "I learned I love cooking. I love when people say, 'Your food is good.' I like to make people happy."

The same wondrous [Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee](#) helped Farook expand her business out of the neighbourhood into the toney Brick Works market on the edge of Rosedale.

She is the first of their vendors to jump into the mainstream. They hope she becomes a model.

Farook's first two months have provided lots of lessons.

Samosas sell, and watalapam — steamed pudding — doesn't, for one. And some people will pay \$20 for a Mennonite-raised chicken. But mostly, the racism she's experienced in our city is the exception, not the rule.

"People are very friendly here," she says. "I haven't had a single person yell at me. There was a nice old lady. She asked me why I'm wearing this. I told her, 'This is my religion. I feel safe with this on and I like it.'"

That's the great thing about farmers' markets in general. People come here for the conversation as much as the fare. They are designed to inspire new friendships.

So, if you go to the [Evergreen Brick Works' market](#), try Farook's channa puri and tofu masala. Talk to her about her restaurant dreams. And, if you are curious, ask about her niqab.

She'll tell you she decided to start wearing it 18 years ago after learning more about Islam, and that she'd have no problem taking it off for a police officer or dentist, or even lifting it to take a sip of water, which she needs when working the deep fryer at the market.

That last question made her laugh.

"People need to learn more about it," she says.

Catherine Porter usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Email: cporter@thestar.ca