

Muslim Fashions – Fashionable Muslims

“We can dress as well as you do,” was an argument Ozlem Sandikci often encountered in discussions between Islamist women with Turkish secularists. Whereas Islam and fashion tend to be seen as standing in a relation of tension with each other, the papers presented at the workshop proved the opposite.

Avoiding the conventional framings of “headscarf debates,” textual approaches, and easy dichotomies of “fashion in the North versus dress in the South,” they showed how under conditions of globalization fashion is everywhere; even the anti-fashion stance of conservative Islamists represents a reaction to fashion. Young Muslim women wearing Islamic dress in Europe as well as in Muslim majority countries are not simply conforming to notions of Islamic propriety, but are also involved in developing new styles of Islamic fashion or hybrid forms of fashion that include Islamic elements. At the same time, fashion in Muslim societies is not restricted to styles of dress that are linked to or inspired by Islamic dressing codes. Other forms of fashionable dress are prominently present as well, whether imported from abroad or developed by up and coming local fashion designers. Everywhere youth are involved in developing their own styles of dress through a creative fusion of multiple sources of inspiration.

In the first session on “Commodification, citizen-subjects and their aesthetics,” Banu Gökariskel addressed the development of an Islamic fashion industry and the commodification of Islamic dress in Turkey in the 1990s where she investigated the implications of the new veiling fashions for the construction of subject-citizens in Istanbul. Özlem Sandikci and Güliz Ger zoned in on one particular item of dress, the headscarf. Rather than dealing with its symbolic meanings, they focused on the aesthetic practices involved, drawing attention to women’s struggles with ethics, politics, and aesthetics in selecting headscarves and in choices regarding how to knot, pin, and wear them.

The next session on “Commodification: religious consumerism or critique?” included work on Egypt and Indonesia. Maha Abdelrahman located the development of Islamic fashion in Egypt within the broader context of the rapidly rising popularity of Islamic goods and services. In her view, the transformation of the Islamic project from a collective, political organized movement to one of fragmented individuality steeped in material fulfilment, fits well with the increasing integration of Egyptian society into a global market economy. Carla Jones, focusing on middle class urban Java, pointed to the shift from Islamic dress as a youth critique of a corrupt older order in the early 1990s to a now highly visible and fashionable presence in women’s magazines, television shows, and on the streets. She argued that in this setting, dress styles have become a form of debate and counter-debate about femininity, piety, and propriety.

“Authenticity: constructions of the ethnic and the religious” was the theme of the third session. Mona Abaza firmly located Islamic fashion within the broader field of lifestyles in Egypt. Starting with the comment that the Egyptian middle class does not have a “national dress,” she discussed a variety of new fashion projects that link ethnic or religious “chic” with claims to authenticity. Dorothea Schulz addressed the controversies in Mali about “fashionable and modern” versus “decent” Islamic dress. She explored how Malian women interrogate and redefine conventional understandings of femininity and proper Muslim observance, and of an enlightened-yet-authentically “African” identity. Annelies Moors addressed the tensions between the anti-fashion stance of the authors of conservative Salafi booklets sold in Yemen, and the ways in which San’ani women themselves link their sartorial practices to Islamic and San’ani authenticity.

The fourth session, “Performing gender and modernity,” brought us to Euro-American settings, where Muslims find themselves in the position of a minority. Emma Tarlo investigated the sartorial biographies of three

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Muslim women in the contemporary British cultural scene. Each had forged distinctive appearances that take distance from the ethnically inspired dress of their parents whilst at the same time incorporating and interrogating stylistic elements they consider to be both fashionable and Islamic. Kimberly Huis-

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man dealt with the meanings of dress and modernity for Bosnian Muslim refugees in Vermont, underlining how these women through their fashionable dressing styles simultaneously keep their distance from “old-fashioned” ways of dressing in Bosnia and from the informal and relaxed styles of dress in Vermont. Focussing on “Islamic Barbie” Amina Yaqin employed the notion of gender performativity to point out how this project engages with different levels of stereotypes. While some stereotypes about the female body are subverted, other notions of gender and sexuality are normalized.

The last session dealt with fashion shows and their publics. Here Alexandre Balasescu showed how notions of gender segregation structure the ways fashion shows work in Tehran and Paris. While in Tehran locally organized fashion showrooms both enforce and transgress requirements of gender segregation, in Paris fashion houses with a Middle Eastern clientele create a gender-segregated space in order to accommodate the sensibilities of their customers. Caroline Osella’s overview of the fashion scene of Calicut in Kerala, brought us back again to a discussion about “Muslim aesthetics.” Linking fashion to gender segregation and women’s life cycle, she also showed how young girls may function publicly as would-be fashion show models, a practice their mothers could not engage in.

Models display dresses designed by Gilang Kenchalis, Kuala Lumpur, 2004.

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PAPERS PRESENTED

- **Banu Gökariskel** (University of North Carolina, USA)
“Islams, Neoliberalism and Transnationalism: The Making of Subject-Citizens and Tesettür Fashions in Istanbul”
- **Özlem Sandikci and Güliz Ger** (Bilkent University, Ankara)
“Aesthetics, Ethics and the Politics of the Turkish Headscarf”
- **Maha Abdelrahman** (American University in Cairo, Cairo)
“Consumerism, Islam and Fashion in Egypt Today”
- **Carla Jones** (University of Colorado, USA)
“More Than Fabric: Debates on Baju Muslim in Contemporary Urban Java”
- **Mona Abaza** (American University in Cairo, Cairo)
“Fashion, Consumer Culture and Life Styles in Egypt”
- **Dorothea Schulz** (ISIM/ Free University Berlin)
“The “virtuous” and the “authentic” women: Competing constructions of femininity through dress practices in Mali”
- **Annelies Moors** (University of Amsterdam/ISIM/ASSR)
“Islam and Fashion on the Streets of San’a, Yemen”
- **Emma Tarlo** (Open University, London)
“The Fashioning of New Muslim Identities in Britain”
- **Kimberly Huisman** (University of Maine, USA)
“Dress, Islam and Modernity: A Case Study of Bosnian Muslim Refugees in Vermont”
- **Amina Yaqin** (School of Oriental and African Studies, London)
“Islamic Barbie: The Politics of Gender and Performativity”
- **Alexandru Balasescu** (Royal University for Women, Bahrain)
“Gendered Space and Fashion Catwalks: Paris and Tehran”
- **Caroline Osella** (School of Oriental and African Studies, London)
“The Fashion Scene of Calicut, Kerala: Aesthetics and Objectification”