

Dubai

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Modesty is fashionable. Long black gowns called *abayas* cover many women from head to toe, and the *hijab* or scarf covers the head and is draped over the shoulders. Since it is generally difficult to say whether religion or culture dictates this sartorial choice, it remains a debated issue, both within and outside academia. Contests about the position and place of women are a continuing feature of Muslim (and perhaps all) societies. Critiques about the 'Western style' of modernization have increasingly become centred around the question of women's chastity, modesty and sexuality. As is almost always the case, it is on the figure of the woman that the responsibility of maintaining tradition and upholding family values becomes centred.

#### The Abaya, Gallabya and Hijab

Interestingly, even the stark black *abaya* makes a fashion statement of its own. Some are in lustrous silk, some in more staid fabrics, some have borders embroidered with an exquisite hand, and the garment looks like elegant evening attire, albeit very modest. Under the *abaya*, women wear long gowns or *gallabyas* which is the traditional Arab dress for women in the region. *Gallabyas* are long, wide-flowing dresses with long sleeves, and come in a variety of materials and colours. For normal daily activity, cotton or thin polyester is preferred, while heavy silks and shimmering satin make for evening wear. Designers are now also experimenting with chiffon, georgette, lace and velvet. Often the robes draw on the talents and skills of calligraphers and draughtsmen and use miniature art and embroidery, gold and silver ribbon work, lead crystal, pearls, sequins, beads and semi-precious stones. Most of the decorative embroidery is at the throat, covering the frontal part of the garment, at the base of the sleeve and near the ankles. Decorative work on the body of the garment is less, except of ornate gowns worn during weddings and religious functions. *Gallabyas* come in an explosion of colours, emerald green, purple, fuchsia, brilliant blues, sunflower yellow, and ever dramatic favourites of gold and silver. Moroccan designs and animal motifs are among the favourite decorative patterns. Designers are now experimenting with slightly bold touches like one-shoulder-off gowns with a lace stole showing glimpses of the bare shoulder.

The *hijab* too, does not escape the changing trends in fashion. They are sometimes beaded, fringed, sequined, and ornately decorated.

Weddings give an opportunity for local designers to indulge their most ornate fantasies. The traditional white wedding gown, much like gowns worn at Christian weddings, are normally high-busted, with a narrow waist and flowing lines from the hips. The embroidery and decorative work is splendid, with pearls, sequins, precious stones, lace, ribbons and diamanté – the limits are set only by the designer's imagination.

#### Designer Wear

If women wear the all-covering *abaya* and the *hijab*, and below the *abaya*, mostly their *gallabyas*, then what are some of the biggest names in fashion doing in Dubai, vying for a small market of a few million people? Armani, Givenchy, Gucci, Ralph Lauren, Jean Louis Scherrer – the list is endless. They are all here, along with the ready-to-wear big names like Mex'x, Benetton, Giordano, Laura Ashley, Liz Clairborne, and others. In addition, many Asian designers from India, Pakistan and the Philippines have also set up major retail outlets to cater to increasing local demand. And most of the demand is from the very fashion conscious urban middle class woman, who can afford their prices. She may wear the *abaya* and below it the *gallabya* along with the *hijab*, but she has a keen eye for Western fashions as well. Quite often, under the *abaya*, one can faintly

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make out the trendy cut of a Givenchy creation. Depending on the occasion, women dress to please themselves, be it a Gucci original or a casual T-shirt from Benetton complete with Levi's jeans and Armani belt. Interestingly enough, while the dictates of fashion would have women show off what they are wearing, the *abaya*, quite contrarily, covers the ultimate fashion statement.

#### The Politics of Fashion

The decision to veil or not to veil has attracted wide media attention in recent times. Writing from the viewpoint of someone who lives and works in one of the more 'modern' Gulf cities of Dubai for several years now, one sees that the *abaya* and *hijab* have assumed a central place in issues of ethnicity and identity in what has largely become an expatriate society. This short article is informed from the perspective of what anthropologists would perhaps term ethnography. They are essentially some reflections on discussions which I have had with Muslim women in Dubai who are simultaneously co-workers and friends. Their decision whether or not to wear the *abaya* and the *hijab*, and its signification are seemingly important issues for them.

What comes out repeatedly in these discussions is that if they choose to wear the *abaya* and the *hijab*, they do so more as a symbolic gesture that marks them out as honourable and respectable women who wish to avoid any undue attention. They say, for them, the *hijab* signifies *iffa* (modesty), *tahara* (purity), *taqwa* (righteousness), *haya* (bashfulness) and that it is their *iman* (belief or faith). When asked whether or not it is also an act of obedience, they do agree. But at the same time, they take great pains to make a finer point of distinction: that generally speaking, working class Muslim women find that the *hijab* gives them a sense of worth, both individually and socially; while for urban, middle class women generally, it can be more because of the superintendence of Islamic law and tradition.

Discussions seem to indicate that for the urban, middle class women at least, covering their bodies with the *abaya* and veiling their heads and faces with the *hijab* have taken on

meanings at multiple levels. At one level, it is not merely covering themselves, but more importantly, it is also behaviour, form, manners, etiquette and appearance in public. Thus, in this aspect, dress is merely one facet of a greater totality of being a Muslim woman. This allies closely to issues of morality and purity, in being like Caesar's wife, i.e., above suspicion. In any case, amongst immediate and extended family, she has the freedom to dispense with the *abaya*. Thus, we find a distinction being made between 'private' and 'public' spaces.

At another level, there are fascinating contradictions. For instance, when below the *abaya*, the woman chooses to wear decorated *gallabyas* or trendy Western and Asian designer creations, she is constructing her own, personal 'private' space. Furthermore, as mentioned above, while contradictorily enough, the *abaya* covers the designer fashion statement; at the same time, it also gives the woman more freedom in a way to participate in the 'public' sphere.

It is the dichotomies between the so-called First World and Third World feminisms which are critical in the conceptualization of women and gender to Islam. Is Euro-American theorizing in feminism appropriate in the context of Muslim societies like the Gulf countries? My discussions seem to indicate that women colleagues and friends in Dubai are explicitly or implicitly articulating aspects of such ongoing debates in their talks with me. They are always ready to discuss their decisions of wearing the *abaya* and *hijab* or not, and certainly wish to clarify any misconceptions which I may have about it. Those who do not wear the *abaya* or the *hijab* are generally the ones who are more critical about any so-called 'Islamic atmosphere' at their places of work (should it exist) where they implicitly feel a pressure to conform to 'Islamic' dress codes and behaviour. For others, who do wear the *abaya* and the *hijab*, at one level, it is a personal decision, taken after long consultation with relatives and friends. At another level, it is a highly charged political gesture – a way for them to engage in 'modernity' on their own terms.

In Dubai at least, from where the data for this article are mainly based, the *abaya* and the *hijab* are not as much a domain of political contest as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait for example. That fact in itself is an interesting problem. In one way, it is definitely a form of protest against a perceived sense of a so-called 'Western' modernity: and what better way to explicitly mark difference than the *abaya* and the *hijab*? But is it just this, or can there be other levels of resistance as well? Should this protest not also be looked at within the framework of the globalizing forces of Islam today, and the intricate, multi-layered relationship of such forces to the development of a different 'Middle Eastern modernity'? ◆

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