

# Approaching Distance: Veiling by British Muslims, from Separation to Connectedness

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## Modesty between Choice and Effect

The choice between a veil and secular dress, piety and glamour, conformity and resistance, is folded and embedded in numerous social debates, politics, geographies and dynamics, as much inter-personal as inherently intra-personal. More often than not, the idea of modesty and its visual instantiation (veiling) is negatively framed as something 'foreign', 'backward', 'sexist' or simply inappropriate in Western settings where secular dress constitutes the norm.<sup>29</sup> However, as any other article of clothing, modest wear goes well beyond the scope of culture or religion, into subjective motives, worldviews and perceptions.

In most of today's Western socio-geographic contexts, distance is one of the prominent markers associated with various forms of covering: by separating the wearer from the outside world, 'masking' her appearance in line with Qur'anic principles (which prescribe pious attitudes and related behaviours; separation between the public sphere and the private; restraint in physical appearance accompanied by conscious efforts to deter the male 'gaze')<sup>30</sup>, the veil distances and estranges the subject not only from the viewers, but from the culture itself. The phenomenon has been critically addressed and reiterated by numerous scholars, as well as served to fuel recent debates often resulting in bans on the headscarf (e.g., the case of France or Turkey), social unease, stigma or negative propaganda.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Linda Arthur, *Religion, Dress and the Body* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), Chapters 9 & 10. Faegheh Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled: the Hijab in Modern Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 35-67, 146. Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical & Modern Stereotypes* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003), Chapters 1 & 2.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, Sura *al-Noor* highlights: "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils [khimar] ... and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, ... and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments." *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2001), 24:31.

<sup>31</sup> Elaine Thomas, 'Keeping Identity at a Distance: Explaining France's New Legal Restrictions on the Islamic Headscarf', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29:2 (August 2006): 237-259. John Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). Elisabeth Özdalga, *The Veiling Issue: Official Secularism and Popular Islam in Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 2013).

To zoom in on the case of Great Britain, host to over 2.6 million Muslims today<sup>32</sup>, an increasing variety of modest covers, more often than not fashionable, is displayed and worn as “visibly Muslim”<sup>33</sup>, which is to say in contrast, yet not necessarily direct opposition to fashion-informed high-street secular dress. The apparent paradox is most blatant in clothing where pious intent teams up with purely decorative form, effecting a ‘catchy’, even ‘glamorous’ appearance.<sup>34</sup> As Tarlo<sup>35</sup> and Lewis<sup>36</sup> emphasized at length, this can be inspired from either real life (i.e. networks of friends, family, acquaintances), or with the help of virtual media such as fashion and lifestyle magazines, online fora, hubs and discussion boards, alongside hijab webstores. In other words, the phenomenon becomes more complicated when we have distance on the one hand, and fashion — or beauty, ornament, design technique and visually-enhancing artifice — on the other.

First in a series of three aims followed here, the article proposes to answer the question whether contemporary fashionable veiling can be understood as a form of submission or resistance (to fashion, norms or Islam itself). Secondly, the paper tackles this ‘form’ (appearance) versus ‘substance’ (depth) polarity in relation to issues such as personal appeal, femininity and selfhood, superimposed on dress practices which admittedly occupy ambiguous positions on a materiality-spirituality continuum. Thirdly, along the same lines I propose to shed more light onto the part played by agency in such conceptual configurations, by highlighting ways in which it is practically enacted by pious women in secular societies wherein religious covers continue to read as otherness, backwardness or distance (see Johnson, 2006, and The Guardian, 2006, on the broadly popularized development of Shabina Begum’s case in Britain<sup>37</sup>).<sup>38</sup>

First, to probe the conformity-resistance dichotomy and navigate some blurry aspects arising at this level, I draw on Saba Mahmood’s scholarship on women’s agency

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<sup>32</sup> Douglas Murray, ‘It’s Official: Muslim Population of Britain Doubles’, revised December 2012 [Accessed: <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3511/britain-muslim-population-doubles>, 23 January 2013].

<sup>33</sup> Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), *passim*. Emma Tarlo, ‘Landscapes of Attraction and Rejection: South Asian Aesthetics in Islamic Fashion in London, in *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, eds. Emma Tarlo & Annelies Moors (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 73-92.

<sup>34</sup> Ruxandra Todosi, ‘Westernized ‘Easthetics’: Understanding Surface, Depth and Individuality in Contemporary Modest Wear’ (Doctoral dissertation, Nottingham Trent University, 2015), Chapters 2, 5 & 6.

<sup>35</sup> Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim*. Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> Reina Lewis, ‘Marketing Muslim Lifestyle: A New Media Genre’, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 6:3 (Fall 2010), 58-90. Reina Lewis, *Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> Boris Johnson, ‘The Shabina Begum Case Never Had Anything to Do with Modesty’, revised 23 March 2006 [Accessed: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3623879/The-Shabina-Begum-case-never-had-anything-to-do-with-modesty.html>. 5 April 2011]. The Guardian, ‘Law Lords Back School over Islamic Dress’, revised 22 March 2006 [Accessed: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2006/mar/22/schools.uk>. 27 November 2012].

<sup>38</sup> Tabassum Ruby, ‘Listening to the Voices of Hijab’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 29:1 (2006), 54–66. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Harvard University Press, 2013), electronic edition.

in contemporary Egypt.<sup>39</sup> More specifically, looking at individual autonomy and identity politics in the context of Egyptian women's mosque movement, Mahmood provides a twofold view on personal agency with regard to piety and adjacent sartorial choices. On the one hand, she acknowledges feminist or 'resistant' behaviours as *active* agential tools used to empower individuals, advocate their autonomy and subversion to male-dominated relations, while on the other, she adds a *passive* agential complement to it, subsumed into a larger pious attitude which works to interiorize (rather than actively prevent or tackle) difficulty, rejection or even forms of oppression without apparent efforts to countervail them. Otherwise couched, in the latter case agency transpires from more complex life decisions and behaviours than commonly presumed, including some that may appear self-oppressive or subordinate at first glance.<sup>40</sup>

The question of submission *or* resistance is therefore not only wrongly asked in dichotomic terms, but also reductionist in that it claims clear demarcations between connotative domains not necessarily opposed, not even necessarily distinct. As I will shortly evidence, submission *and* resistance, much like other related polarities (e.g., the individual and the communal, the public and the private, or surface and depth), can coherently coexist in the invested meaning of a textile.

As Mahmood emphasizes, we are, indeed, approaching one of the practices that function toward the creation and realization of a pious self, which is to say undergirding the entire foundation of the pious individual by channelizing "virtues, habits, and desires that serve to ground Islamic principles within the practices of everyday living".<sup>41</sup> To support this claim and steer our focus to the case of British Muslims, I will discuss two instances of headscarf observance (and related mindset) drawn from my own doctoral fieldwork conducted in the cities of Leicester and Bradford between 2011-2014. As we will shortly see, Western veilers too manifest and exercise different forms of agency in response to different contexts they take part in — sometimes of an active nature, self-empowering or resistant, while other times of a more passive resolution, compliant in appearance but no less virtuous in effect.

## Aesthetics of Deliberation

The first example resumes the ambiguity described above in the case of a recently veiled British hijabi who struggles to locate her 'self' between fashion and faith. Born and raised in Manchester, England, Hyacine draws on both poles to reflect both elements of conformity and resistance. Unlike other participants I interviewed, who simply reported covering for the purpose of fitting in and finding their place within a given society without having to cope with judgement, bias or rejection, Hyacine (20 years old at the time of our

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<sup>39</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival*, *Cultural Anthropology* 6:2 (May 2001), 205-212. Saba Mahmood, 'Ethical Formation and Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt', *Social Research* 70:3 (Fall 2003), 1501-1530. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), electronic edition.

<sup>40</sup> See also Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*.

<sup>41</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 45-55.

conversations) frames her personal struggle as an oscillation between a moral (ideal) self and her everyday (worldly) persona as engaged in the apparatus of social interaction:

You know, [after adopting the hijab, I thought] 'I need to behave!'. Yes, and it's just like you have two separate [selves] ... it's like you change when you have a scarf on, and everything about you changes, 'cause you know, you think that 'well, I have to adhere to wearing the scarf and then to all the principles that come with it'.

While the moral element is often included in a wider self-betterment project many Islam observers assume<sup>42</sup>, Hyacine's argument showcases how this becomes unavoidably enmeshed with social and with gendered elements: at this stage of her life, she expresses an interest to remain attractive to the opposite sex and be able to freely interact, play social roles and 'flirt' the Western way.

You know, in my town there's this guy who comes ... and plays the guitar. He looks exactly like Gerard Butler [admiringly] and he's SO [attractive]! I would smile at him and he would smile at me and [at one point] I was like: 'Do you know who you look like?' ... 'Gerard Butler!', and he goes like: 'Really?' And I go like 'Yeeaaa! Take it as a compliment!'.

A relevant aspect to note here is that she recently adopted Islam — i.e. around the age of 20 — despite her secular, 'typical' British upbringing, which henceforth created difficulty reconciling two sides of the same character: the pious and the feminine, the (spiritually) faithful and the (mundanely) playful. This is also apparent in the aesthetic she observes: for instance, upon meeting with her, her hair was uncovered, styled, groomed and worn loosely over her back; she wore distinct make-up (her eyes lined in an Egyptian, 'cat eye' fashion with black 'wings' prolonged beyond the extremities of the eye), tight jeans, and a T-shirt that read "FEEL THE FEVER / DISCO DIVA" on our first encounter, all the while surrounded by girls mostly clad in subdued, ankle-length overgowns (jilbabs) and/or loose-fitting jackets.

In short, her intent in displaying this semblance evokes a common Western mindset vis-à-vis looking and feeling desirable. Hyacine is well up to date with Islamically prescribed moral and behavioural codes. And while it remains true that clothes do not make a person, this particular selection of visual cues nonetheless produces more impact than others — as indicators of her social, and arguably sexual, availability (for instance, tight, flashy, multicoloured, skin-imitating outfits teamed with conspicuous makeup and/or disclosure of personal information are regarded as body-sexualizing signs<sup>43</sup>): "the sexual obviousness of [Western] dominant styles".<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Todosi, 'Westernized 'Easthetics'', Chapters 4-6.

<sup>43</sup> See Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Chapter 3, on the connection between (Western) concerns with 'glossed' appearances, 'surface' display (resulting in 'public visibility'), and perceived sexual availability.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 10.

For Hyacine, however, this image hinges on a *Weltanschauung* that transcends Western notions of physical attraction and aspires to attain emotion, or, in her terms, romanticism:

Basically, we are a bunch of romantics. ... I don't know, we're all [respondents involved in a focus group discussion] so romantic, downright soppy! In every sense, so emotional, you see someone cute and AA-AAAH!

In line with which, she often opts for the omission of the scarf when going out:

I feel like — 'cause you know, when I'm out and about, I like talking to people and interacting and socializing, but then when I have my scarf on, I feel like that affects it. And that I'm not as confident in my talking and interacting with people than [sic] when I have it off. I don't know, I feel too different [with the head cover on].

As a compromise, she wears the scarf intermittently. Although her style is markedly different compared to other, perhaps more demure, approaches to contemporary veiling, her choices and perceptions intersect in a romanticization of love, partnership, and social relations. This allows her to overcome the fixity of everyday reality, conforming to some existing stereotypes (such as Western fashion vogues and femininity ideals), while at the same time countervailing others: the expectations of her British entourage, or the virtual consequences of not rising up to Islamic standards. Following her own explanation above, the 'plural' self she refers to suggests an ongoing process of sorting through a multitude of — sometimes conflicting — influences and related self-images.

To better understand this overlap and nuanced coexistence of the spiritual and the material, the individual and the communal, aesthetic and axiological constructions of identity materialized via clothing at and beyond the surface, I propose to start by replacing the idea of distance with that of connectedness, or *closeness*. The boundary between appearance (surface) and substance (depth) thus becomes blurred, as does the demarcation public-private. In this sense, a second micro-context of veil appropriation becomes apposite.

### **Aesthetics of Connection**

Ayra is a 42-year-old 'private' designer, which is to say catering solely to members of her family and a handful of friends. She has designed outfits and Muslim wear as a hobby since she was "9 or 10", and although she never incurred significant financial gains from it, she sees it as a vocation: she hears the wishes of her customers, envisages the garments and tries to sew bridges between the two, which in her words means bringing them to "life". To meet this goal, she uses fashion as a combinatory force and as a reservoir for pleasurable creativity. Importantly, beside moulding together pieces, contrasts and eclectic detail into judiciously assembled, collage-like festive gowns (featuring borders, laces, globular buttons, glossy ribbons, splits, sequins, beads, embroidered patches etc.), her work is nonetheless framed as an emotional liaison, a tie between herself and loved

ones, laden with memories, as well as with a sense of continuity between the present and the past.

Unlike Hyacine, whose quest for right proportions and ideas of selfhood are only taking shape, Ayra has reached a point of stasis in her life; she draws on both culture and intuition, and fluidly merges the two in wearing and designing modest fashion. Although currently established together with her family in Bradford, West Yorkshire, she retains cultural ties to a small Pakistani village located near the Afghan border, where her parents lived most of their lives. This influence still occupies a prominent position not only in Ayra's memory, but also in her work: notice the colours and motifs, the decorative and the traditional in **Figure 1** below.

Interestingly, the outfits she creates also exude a profoundly interactive feature: she does not simply help other women cover; she helps them *discover* themselves, their personality and aesthetic identity. With every new gown she designs, some of which are recycled from older wraparounds or scarves, she relates (with) people, times, and cultures: a piece of fabric bought in a high street store, an image of a doll's dress from Ayra's childhood, a style viewed in a recent magazine, an Afghan-Pakistani print with sentimental value.



**Figure 1: Examples of dress hand-made by Ayra. Photographs by author.**

Tellingly, this invests tangible outcomes with an “emotionally durable” quality that Chapman<sup>45</sup> describes as attachment, which creates a locus for uniqueness and ‘animates’ the object, as well as the relationship between object and maker. Indeed, in Western societies governed by ‘shared’ aesthetics reined by mass production and globalized fashion, it is relevant to note how these can be reworked and arguably used to produce expressions of individuality either through novel permutations of visual

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<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Chapman, *Emotionally Durable Design: Objects, Experiences and Empathy* (London: Earthscan, 2005).

attributes, or simply through the labour of intuition and devotion involved in Ayra's dressmaking. Furthermore, her innovative take on the process extends past fashion and creative combinations of colour, texture and geometry, all of which are hand-customized (sometimes to a striking effect) and adapted. What she seeks to produce are "memorable dresses", the "life" of which extends beyond materiality, into social and (auto)biographical detail that helps instill emotion into textile — which is to say depth into surface.

This draws as much on active agency (choosing what to create and how) as it does on a passive opposition to Western norms, by implicitly circumventing the neo-liberal channels of mass production and consumption that dress normally uses to circulate on Western markets. Furthermore, in Ayra's case this happens despite the fact, or even particularly because, she 'hijacks' or emulates commercial elements, as with her 'copying' or enriching of high-street styles.

In this regard, Ayra locates herself and her customers implicitly at what is practically an opposite end to mass-produced clothing in the production-consumption spectrum, Islamic or otherwise. Although it has not been the aim of this article to explore such divergent directions (but rather to highlight the individual contexts and psycho-social contingencies allowing them to surface in the first place), the (post)Marxist implications of this dynamic, in terms of advancing possible forms of (either active or passive) cultural resistance and consumption alternatives, are relevant not least.

### **From Separation to Connectedness**

The common thread between Hyacine's intermittent scarf observance and Ayra's — perhaps more fluent, and surely lengthier — experience with modest dress lies in their shared desire not (only) to fit in, but to relate, find affect, common ground and *closeness*. With Hyacine, maintaining her natural inclination to a specific fashion/femininity while cultivating her moral integrity is a trial to locate the self — and on this path, she reaches out rather than impose distance. She is only beginning to explore the multiple ways of appropriating modest gear, which at this time doesn't 'go' with her social environment. Thus, while resisting her family's non-covering 'tradition' and working to adopt the hijab in full, she also adheres to the wider Western ideology, patterns of interaction included, by pondering — and adjusting — this choice. Importantly, in doing so she is conceiving ways to suppress and/or eschew the signals typically linked to conservative veilcloths today (black, cold, deterring), to indicate her presence and seek connectedness. With Ayra, this becomes even clearer: there is no harshness or hostility involved in her aesthetic: she looks to please and to appease, and chooses fashion to do so. While Hyacine adapts the practice of hijab to fit her scope of interaction (social acceptance, likeability), Ayra in turn promotes relationships via clothing — she mixes Asian heritage with Western vogues, which functions as a means to share and to connect. They both come nearer to the viewer through adjusted aesthetics and adjacent uses of agency, their 'warmth' derived as much from visual device as from personal background and interpersonal dynamics. Neither fully complies, nor fully resists: it is the game of nuances, surfaces, depths, material and spiritual variables that informs and determines the meaning of a cloth — worn, made or both.

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