

WESTERNIZED 'EASTHETICS': UNDERSTANDING SURFACE, DEPTH AND
INDIVIDUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY MODEST WEAR

AN ETHNOGRAPHY ON HIJAB WEARERS AND DESIGNERS IN BRITAIN

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by

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Abstract

Building on original ethnographic work carried out in a cosmopolitan, multicultural British context, as well as on dialogical engagements with textile experts, artists and designers, this study prioritizes — in an attempt to fill a void in the existing literature — the analysis of *privately*-informed, emotional, spiritual, artistic, idiographic (versus public, political/ideological, or class-related) aspects of modest gear appropriation.

Drawing on a wide range of scholarship, from anthropology, history and fashion studies to psychology and design theory, the project looks into the creative individuations and taste (in)formation mechanisms of contemporary modest wear, with a particular stress on the Islamic headscarf. In concrete terms, the focus falls on agency-driven, (micro)cultural and psycho-sartorial dynamics of *hijab* observance, and the ways these are enmeshed, in real life cases, within a socio-biographical tableau of a far more complex nature than has been generally acknowledged.

I will evidence throughout how, alongside publicly-evident aspects, there can, indeed, exist an incredibly rich depth ‘inside’ a textile’s surface. Above all, the nexus of relationships between (material) dress, as it is worn and/or created by a subject at a given point in time, and its (immaterial) projections into the person’s imagination, memory, and value system — in other words, the idiographic, often self-enhancing experience resulting from its wearing or making — will be brought to the fore.

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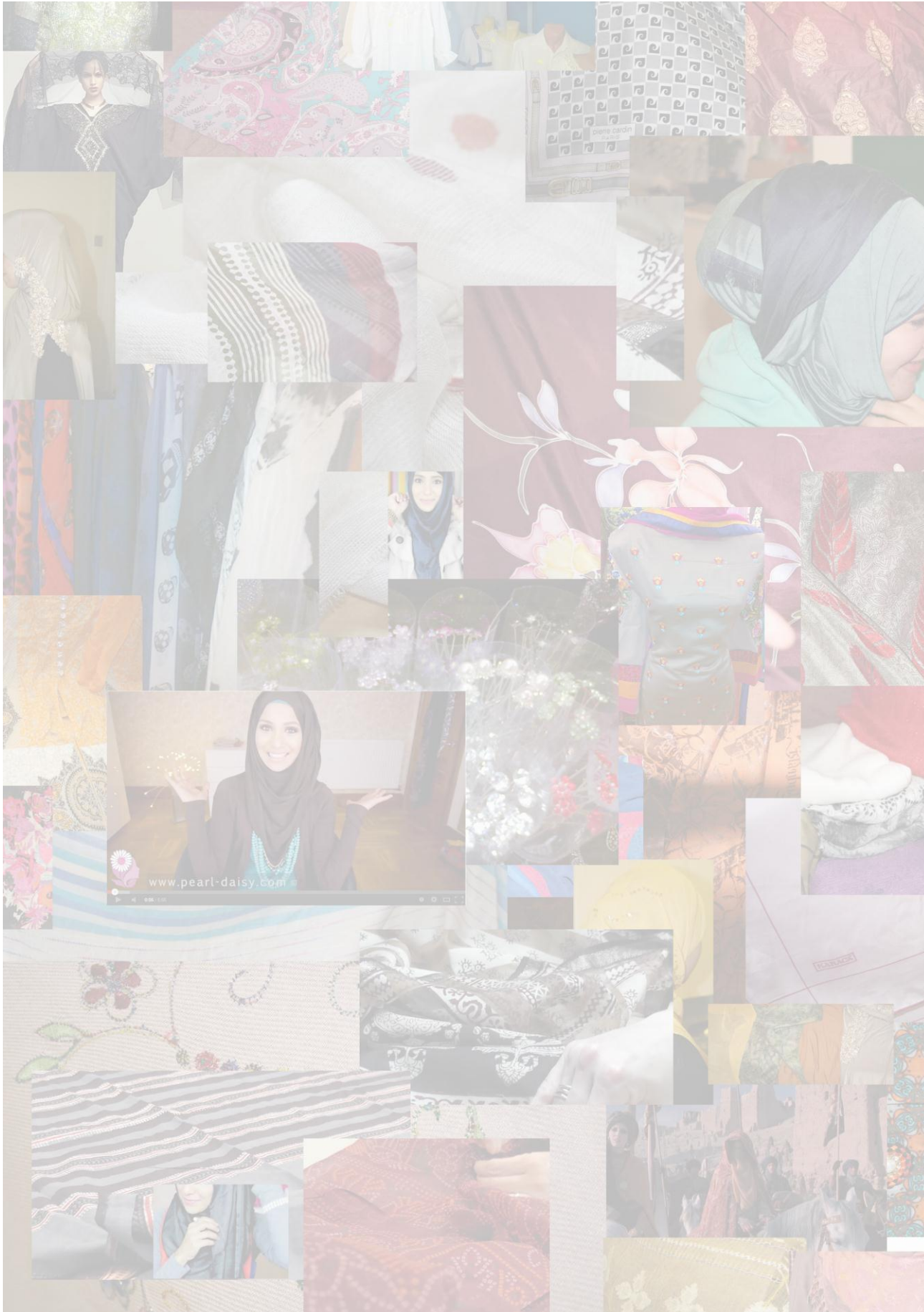
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Foreword

Beyond the veil, underneath a cloak, beneath a scarf or behind a ‘dark’ shield — there have been many attempts, by scholars and non-scholars alike, to demarcate between the impact of a modest cover and its meaning. Politicians, journalists, anthropologists, cultural analysts, but most of all, mere citizens walking the streets of a Western city are often unable — in present times when the notion of *multiculturalism* takes on increasingly ambiguous connotations, fraught with ideological, class and ethnic tensions — to grasp the scope of ‘veiling’ as an individually-driven (s)election, submitted as it is to multifarious analyses, criticisms, and interpretations.

Admittedly, before setting forth to probe into this topic, I had my own, rather naïve preconception of the (aesthetic) formats, (religious/axiological) rationales and (psycho-emotional) meanings entailed by this dress ‘typology’. For instance, I expected to find some contradictions between outward display and inner ‘essence’, between fashion and piety, between dogma and choice. I could not fully grasp the reason why a Muslim woman would wear a tight, purportedly uncomfortable headdress teamed with close-fitting jeans, sequins and eye-catching make-up; or, in effect, how something overtly fashionable and appealing could actually deter the ‘male gaze’ and signal a depth of creed, or a profound belief in piety.

In other words, I suffered from what Daniel Miller (2012) qualified as a “depth ontology”¹ (p. 16). Although referring to a different context (that of Trinidadians’ approach to life and the self, which, Miller argues, is based on the freedom to keep and display ‘truth’ on the visible surfaces of quotidian life and/or the body, rather than in some profound recesses of personality), I found — or, rather, learnt, by observing and interacting with my informants

¹ Miller seems to distance himself here from the ‘universalist’ tradition of Cartesian ontology, and, building on authors such as Goffman, argues that humans can only exist in constant and dynamic interaction with *others* (society/societies). He uses Trinidad as a case in point to illustrate the difference between how we (e.g., academics, ‘Westerners’) perceive the notions of depth/surface via a moral/value judgement antagonism, in comparison with Trinidadians, for whom surface *is* depth: e.g., tattoos, T-shirts, DIY textiles. Particularly in relationship to lived experience, detail and self-cultivation (p. 21), all of these become in the case of Trinidadians profound expressions of their owners’ ‘essence’, worn nevertheless on the *surface* of their life/skin.

— that, in order to understand many important nuances (to which I will later metaphorically refer to as *pixels*, as they relate to both abstract and material dimensions, from status roles and the framing of memories to the texture, colour, and even sound of the fabric), we need to acknowledge, and thereby attempt to transcend, a rather academically institutionalized ‘depth’ bias. That is to say:

“[t]he assumption ... that *being* — what we truly are — is located deep inside ourselves and is in direct opposition to the surface. A clothes shopper [a veiled woman] is shallow [‘opaque’] because a philosopher or a saint is deep. The true core to the self is relatively constant and unchanging and also unresponsive to mere circumstance. We have to look deep inside ourselves to find ourselves. But these are all metaphors. Deep inside ourselves is blood and bile, not philosophical certainty. We won’t find a soul by cutting deep into someone, though I suppose we might accidentally release it.”

(Miller, 2012, p. 16, original emphasis).

As I will argue and attempt to showcase in this dissertation, there can, indeed, exist an incredibly rich *depth* ‘inside’ the surface of a material. This *depth of surface* — a metaphor itself, yet what better tool can we deploy if we are to advance alternatives to its counterpart? — manifesting itself both through and beyond hijabs’ sensorial characteristics, has hereafter grown into a concept that my study is substantially informed by.

Introduction

Hijab can, indeed, connote a myriad of things, including one or several (or a nexus, or a reflection, or a melting pot) of the following, in no particular order: ritual, morality, character, prestige, purity, modesty, inhibition, wealth, friendship, feeling, individuality, ‘magic’, insight, gift, ‘soul’, sacrifice, trauma, frustration, ambivalence, beauty, adornment, charm, love, art, time(lessness), space(lessness), form, content, etiquette, function, power, confidence, diffidence, affirmation, negation, sharing, giving, wisdom, consumption, passion, energy. These are all personal meanings, material and immaterial, given to the surface of a cloth. Each of these connotations is intimately connected, one way or another, with one or more garments appropriated (either worn or created) by one or more respondents in this study. And each of these connotations will be analyzed throughout this study’s pages.

In my stretch beyond the afore-nominated ‘depth ontology’ (a term that, I need to again underline, I have adopted for my own purposes from Miller’s anthropological research (2011a, 2012)), I must also admit to being partially guided here by my own knowledge bordering the subject, i.e. views rooted in, and influenced by, my Eastern European (Romanian) background, where women also ‘veil’ — although more seldom today — for social, modesty-related purposes, and often in an explicitly religious context (e.g., church attendance).

Also worth mentioning at this point is that my research status in this quest — namely, that of neither fully ‘Western’ (as I myself come from a developing, migrating social context), nor fully ‘Eastern’ observer (and by ‘East’ I designate developing geographies such as African or Asian) — proved key not only in facilitating access to ethnographic resources, but also in the empathetic reception of its findings (see **Chapters 3-6**).

For, here we have the ‘veil’ (in its Islamic manifestation, the *hijab*): a complex, nuanced ancient symbol; a symbol that, we shall see, once reflected social status, then religion, and now escapes beyond the span of the two, bridging together — or pulling apart — perceptions, disciplines, cultural understandings.

Researchers have, competently and repeatedly, engaged in discussions revolving around political (Bowen, 2007; McGoldrick, 2006; Laborde, 2008; Wallach Scott, 2010), ideological, ethical, theological (Hoodfar, 1991; Arthur, 1999; Thomas, 2006), as well as historical (Ahmed, 1992; Hoodfar, 1993; El Guindi, 1999a; Bullock, 2003) and gender-related (Ahmed, 1982b; Shirazi, 2001; Lewis, 2013a,b) considerations on veiling. While these are all important perspectives here (which I will review shortly), it is equally salient to note that less has been said, or empirically documented, about its individually-contingent (psycho-emotional, aesthetic, narrative/biographical) dynamics. How do the latter come together in one individual, what happens as the individual comes into contact with other individuals, communities and cultures, and how does the nature of all these (ranging from global to intimately personal) interactions shed new light onto hijabs, onto their wearers, designers, and, why not, onto the analysts themselves?

To these ends, I have set off to explore ‘hijab’, ‘piety’ and headscarves in particular in terms of their psychological and ethnographic ‘depth’, rather than well-trodden macro-level debates hinging on (gender) ideology, economics, politics and the public sphere (see above). This was a conscious and consistent choice followed throughout the text, based on my review of the literature, as well as on my intent to foreground individuals, or rather individual morphologies, still left largely opaque or underexplored. Along these lines, the pioneering work of Emma Tarlo (2010), focused on individual case studies of ‘atypical’ hijabis such as the comedian Shazia Mirza or the textile artist Rezia Wahid — the latter’s more recent transformations, both on a professional and personal level, originally documented in this study — has proven pivotal to my own quest. In fact, it can be said that Tarlo’s competent eye for (emotional/biographical) detail, combined with Miller’s above-cited approach to clothing and material culture more broadly, are two important landmarks that helped shape my own navigation course through these topics (more on this later).

However, this account distances itself from Tarlo’s (and certainly from Lewis’ more politically-angled) seminal work on hijab in Great Britain, centered predominantly on ideology, macro-dynamics, which is to say *public* circulation and performative functions of modest apparel, inclusive or not of relevant biographical undertones. First, it does so by tackling less charted (privacy-, individuality- and ‘authenticity’-related) *intra*-personal dynamics of hijab appropriation/design. Overall, while Tarlo’s scope falls more on what happens *outside* the individual and is set almost exclusively in public dialogue with an

audience or community (i.e. public appearance, politics, performance, design output and online activity), this study converges toward the psycho-emotional minutiae and philosophical nuances of personality that underlie the production of meaning and taste, however brought forth at a much more *private* level, i.e. in constant dialogue with intimate notions of the self. Secondly, such taste (in)formation mechanisms are linked to an identified ‘depth’ of surface encoded within textiles themselves, and are discussed in correspondence to one’s (broader, or arguably deeper — aesthetic, semantic, philosophical) *Weltanschauung*. Furthermore, this is often (introspectively) framed as a personal self-improvement project inclusive of, yet not restricted to, appearance, conduct and cultural or ethnic background.

On this score, one of the original contexts that helped shape my observations on the subject relates to the *Markfield Institute of Higher Education* in Leicestershire, where I have conducted part of my fieldwork and where important cosmopolitan, transcultural, and even trans-faith mechanics of modest aesthetics have emerged. More specifically, a relevant share of this project’s informants were ‘cultural passengers’ (i.e. transient residents) in Britain, where the impermanence of their Western/British experience, alongside their on-campus interactions as students of Islam, often produced particularly rich and eclectic ethnographic input (follow relevant sections in **Chapter 5**).

Chapter Overview

Structure-wise, my dissertation follows an ascending mode, delineating a journey from the general to the specific, and from the collective toward the individual. The first chapter will outline a historical framework for *hijab* — bridging together theoretical and practice-descriptive angles, while shedding light onto how modest garb has become as connotationally ‘layered’ as it is today. To this end, I will map out its trajectories from antiquity through to the birth of Islam and up to the present day, with relevant turns and interpretational ‘twists’ charted in various geographical and ideological contexts.

Successively, in **Chapter 2** I will zoom in on several cultural locales of contemporary modest gear, underlining a series of more or less subtle contradictions and inherent symbolic deflections, while reflecting on its position in current global markets. Added to

this is an exploration of how processes of standardization, mass production and aesthetic uniformization affect the practice of covering worldwide.

The points established in the first two chapters will thenceforth serve as an essential basis for a discussion of primary findings throughout **Chapters 4-6**. Although at times the reviewed literature may appear dense or somewhat dispersed, it should be noted that virtually all topics that I establish here will, in one way or another, be later reflected on and empirically contextualized. In this sense, after introducing my methodological design in **Chapter 3**, I will devote my attention to more nuanced psycho-cultural analyses of hijab appropriation, and therefore to subtler portrayals of modest fashion. In **Chapter 4** I will have already begun to analyze several cases in point derived from the ethnographic work carried on between 2011-2013, highlighting the qualitative and relatively idiosyncratic human input — in terms of ‘sensitivity’, ‘spirituality’ and ‘insight’ — that comes into play in the creation, adjustment, but also in the individual wearing of modest apparel.

In dialogue with fashion trends reviewed in **Chapter 2**, **Chapter 5** will continue to contextualize this quest for expression, individuality, and extrication of psycho-aesthetic contingencies, which is to say for *personal* representation and subjective acculturation, in relation to both local (most often referring to national) and global (international) contexts and vogues (thus, again, justifying my eclectic sample of participants, spanning across three continents and over ten countries; more on this will, of course, follow in the methodology section). Throughout the process, I will also answer questions related to the creative, artistic or inspirational nature of (some) modest clothing, with key topics emphasizing hijab’s creative ‘narrativity’, synaesthetic nature, ‘charm’, or even ‘truth’. (One on my participants, as we shall see, refers to her garments as “true” dresses.)

Finally, **Chapter 6** will further the scope of this qualitative exploration on to an examination of textile designers’ perspectives on modest dress they produce. I will show here, drawing on the input of professional designers and artists, that alongside visual, tactile, olfactory and acoustic associative attributes, synaesthetic encounters between hijab ‘affectivity’, ‘immateriality’, as well as a vaguer, metaphysical dimension (relating to ideas of mystery, ambiguity, ecumenic spirituality) can be psychologically understood and culturally contextualized.

Overall, it is safe to affirm that the overarching focus of this dissertation falls on the nexus of relationships between (material) dress, as it is worn or created by a subject at a given

point in time, and its (immaterial) projections into the person's imagination, biography, memory — in other words, the idiographic experience resulting from its wearing/making. To be noted here is that, alongside Tarlo's and Miller's academic models, this combinatorial and interdisciplinary approach is also informed by the research of fashion and cultural theorists such as Barnard (2008: particularly his emphasis on fashion as personal expression, creative engagement and sartorial bricolage) and Tseëlon (2001b,c: particularly her Goffman-informed stance on a pluralistically 'authentic', rather than false or hypocritical, nature of human 'covers', masks, and adjacent psycho-social roles).

While locating the scope of my exploration scope on and around women², with the occasional incorporation of male observations and specialized input (e.g., imams, retail representatives), I aim to provide a qualitative cross-section into the following issues, as they relate to hijab in a British context:

1. The way(s) individual modest wearers permanently or transiently located in Great Britain adjust existing sets of dress codes, aesthetic beliefs and articles of clothing (prominently, headscarves) to (g)local societal norms or expectations. In this sense, my work places itself in — and develops — the cultural studies tradition of authors such as Tarlo (2010, 2013) and Lewis (2013a,b).
2. The way(s) subjective codes and experiences of dress appropriation translate hijabs as one's 'own' personal and private garments, i.e. complying with the wearer's fashion tastes, character, personality and myriad biographical nuances, but also with religious scriptures and/or spiritual principles. In this sense, I draw on Miller's anthropological work, both in a Western (Miller, 2011a) and in a global (Miller, 2012) context.

² Although I will occasionally adhere to a 'pro-women' tone in the following chapters (most notably, when addressing Amena's designs in **Chapter 6**), this study is not descriptively built on, or informed by, feminist discourse. My reasons for avoiding this are mostly linked to the following issues: on the one hand, the fact that my respondents have not once referred to their own cultural/sartorial choices as in any way 'feminist' — rather, the terminology they deployed came as far as 'pro-women'. Secondly, keeping aware of popular denunciations of Islamic lifestyle and gender relationships as 'patriarchal', I deemed it best to situate my arguments on a purely empirical and reflexive level, all the while contextualizing hijab as an individual practice hinging on community, familial and cultural influences rather than on specifically gendered rapports. In this sense, my respondents proved on more than one occasion that they have transcended the need for 'liberation' and gone to the next level, where modest gear is not viewed as emancipatory from male 'hegemony', but, as I will show in **Chapters 4-6**, more as a lever for self-improvement and self-assertion, stretching beyond oversimplified feminist/patriarchal dichotomies.

3. The way(s) materiality and immateriality blend in the above-delineated processes, hinting at purposes and roles of hijab as they become apparent — and even pivotal — not just in theory, but also in a Muslim woman’s everyday life and interactions. In this holistic sense, the current literature is still underdeveloped, mainly due to a disciplinary reticence on the part of fashion analysts to simultaneously engage with anthropological (Tarlo, 2010; Miller, 2011), psychological (Tseëlon, 2001b, 2012), art and design critique (Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000; Chapman, 2005).

Finally, building on interplays between tradition, innovation, and the sartorial performativities thereof, this study will:

- Review both historical and contemporary hijab practices, i.e. modest varieties originating from various geographic regions (with a focus on their convergence in the West), while charting issues such as (self-)Orientalism, commercialization and hybridization of (global) style (**Chapters 1 and 2**).
- Advance empirical case studies reflective of the distinctive elements an Islamic garment can subsume (i.e. spiritual rationales; cultural/traditional associations; the ways it is actively worn and pre-empted by the wearer; sensorial characteristics such as colour, size, fabric and texture; aesthetic considerations; personal and emotional significance, including the garment’s perceived ‘authenticity’ or ‘lyricism’) (**Chapters 4, 5, 6**).
- As a result of these engagements, understand how modest gear *wearers* and *designers* respond to the headscarves they wear or produce, i.e. what meanings come thereby invested, and how these are classified in terms of personal and communal — moral, aesthetic, psychological, philosophical, commercial — functions/benefits.

Notes on Terminology

To avoid potential ‘epistemological’ confusions, it is perhaps useful to briefly clarify below that — unless otherwise specified — I will deploy throughout the text a series of terms based on their etymology, and (vernacular) appropriation in the English language:

- *aesthetics*³ — from the Greek ‘aisthetikos’ (‘sensitive’, ‘perceptive’; by extension from ‘aisthanesthai’: the act of perception, or perceiving, with the senses or with the mind; to *feel*). Wherever I will deploy the term, the focus will fall mainly on the experience of perceiving reality, in all its forms, nuances, harmonies and disharmonies, and less on a relativized notion of ‘beauty’. When ‘beauty’ will be invoked, it will be either related to, or directly extrapolated from, the empirical data gathered, which is to say from my participants’ views, principles and actions on the subject;
- *authentic/authenticity* — from the Greek ‘authentikos’ (‘original’, ‘principal’, ‘genuine’); from ‘authentēs’, ‘acting on one’s own authority, via autos ‘self’ + hentes ‘doer, being’; to accomplish, to achieve. When used, my focus will fall on agential, individual(ized) dimensions invested, for example, by wearers in clothes (**Chapters 4-5**);
- *axiology/axiological* — from the Greek ‘axios’ (‘worth’); + -logi/-logos (‘word’, ‘speech’); referring to the study of values. Here the focus will fall on personally- and interpersonally-informed, cultural and psychological resources endowed by my respondents with subjective value.

³ The term ‘Easthetics’, used in the title, combines the concept of ‘aesthetics’ with the Eastern origin of ‘hijab’ and adjacent Islamic covering practices (see subchapter **1.1**. for more on the etymology of ‘hijab’).

Chapter 1

Modest Wear and Veiling: History, Symbolism, Relevant Concepts

The following chapter marks an introduction to the subject of veiling, as reviewed within relevant historical and cultural contexts from its early beginnings up to the present day.

Firstly, I will map out the linguistic, alongside the (past and contemporary) cultural significance of the term *hijab* — of foremost importance in this project — at three different levels: conceptual, behavioural and appearance-related (sartorial).

Secondly, I will clarify the relevance of each of these levels by providing a synthesis of some of the most relevant facts and events which contributed to the development of *hijab* as a concept and as a practice over time.

Thirdly, by referring to a series of pre-Islamic and Islamic examples of head covering, I will analyze key socio-aesthetic mechanisms which have significantly influenced the use and perception of modest garments to the present day. This will serve as a basis for better understanding the shifts in meaning between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Muslim attire, i.e. between historical periods probed below and contemporary Islamic covers (put forth by secondary sources reviewed in **Chapter 2**, and primary sources examined in **Chapters 4-6**).

1.1. The Meaning of the Term *Hijab*

Sometime during the third year of my research, one of my participants, Sabiya, sent me the following text message:

A Prophetic quote: I went to the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) and he asked me, ‘Have you come to inquire about piety?’ I replied in the affirmative. Then he said, ‘Ask your heart regarding it. Piety is that which contents the soul and comforts the heart, and sin is that which causes doubts and perturbs the heart, even if people pronounce it lawful and give you verdicts on such matters again and again.’ [Ahmad and Ad-Darmi]

(Original source: al-Nawawi, 1984, p. 380).

Piety — a central, if not *the* central principle which motivates the wearing and making of hijabs everywhere in the world, sometimes appears to be the only ‘given’ premise underlying this behavioural and sartorial course of action. Beyond it, much geographic and stylistic diversity spans border to border, preference to preference, culture to culture and aesthetic to aesthetic. In fact, all the other (social, psychological, political) dimensions related to hijab, be they placed within a specific geographical perimeter, within a certain interpretation of the concept, or within an individual choice, more often than not translate as *difference*. By this I am referring to the fact that different ‘layers’ coupled together in the mental understanding, the tangible materiality or the functional dynamics of hijabs can also be regarded as (cultural) factors of differentiation: e.g., the visual motifs featured by a traditional Omani scarf, the length or width of an Indian garment compared to an Arab homologue, the colours or styles preferred in a particular area, contrasted to the apparent plainness of others. And, while, for instance, appearance and style can be decisive personal arguments in countries such as Turkey or India, they can conversely be completely muted in more conservative areas such as Iran or Saudi Arabia.

Piety, therefore translated as personally-, nationally-, or culturally-specific garments reflective of different prints, cuts, lengths, widths etc., marks the starting point of this chapter, and entails a variegated semantic sub-territory of neighbouring human *values*: modesty, dignity, discretion, kindness, generosity, selflessness — in other words, common denominators of morality and virtue. I am referring here to those covers (designated by terms such as *hijab*, *khimar*, *burka*, *jilbab*, *abaya* etc.) worn primarily as expressions of faith, with a topical stress on Islamic apparel. Apparent contradictions between the overarching idea of modesty and *revealing* elements such as insufficient coverage, body-shaping or eye-catching materials, will be brought to light in subsequent chapters.

Viewed in an interactive and in an interpersonal communication framework, I learnt both from primary and secondary sources that the term ‘piety’ is, in fact, synonymous with the idea of giving, *sharing* one’s moral attributes — such as wisdom or probity — with others (a topic to be more clearly illustrated by cases in point in **Chapters 4, 5 and 6**). For the time being, it suffices to stress the intimate connection between modest apparel and piety as an existential value, as personal ambition and as a complex, multi-scope behavioural prescription (Daly Metcalf, 1992; Mernissi, 1995, Chapter 5; El Guindi, 1999a, Chapter 9).

As a matter of fact, the source and homologue of ‘piety’ in Arabic would be the very term *hijab*, endowed with similarly complex and multi-layered denotational and connotational spheres. In this sense, I subscribe to Barnard’s (2008) definition of denotation as “the literal meaning of a word or image, what Fiske suggests is the ‘common sense, obvious meaning’ [of a term]” (Barnard, 2008, p. 84). On the other hand, *connotation*, “sometimes called a second order of signification or meaning”, can be explained as “the things that the word or the image makes a person think or feel, or as the associations that a word or an image has for someone” (*ibidem*, pp. 84-5). In other words, we speak of a concrete, visual and more directly accessible sphere of meaning in the case of denotative significance, and of a more abstract, ‘implicit’ or symbolic meaning in that of the connotative. With hijabs, the denotative level would thus include generic parameters directly associated with any kind of scarf (i.e. the fact that it is a piece of fabric worn on the head primarily for religious motives), while any subjective associations, from sensorial to psychological and affective, would fall under the connotative.

Having established that, our navigation through the wide-scope discussions about Islamic veiling (past and contemporary) nonetheless calls for a thorough understanding of *hijab* as detached from the (even broader) notion of *veiling*. Opening up a theologically elaborate and culturally complex circle (see the next subchapters for specific exemplifications of veiling), *hijab* can be understood at three different levels:

- as a mental construction, or **conceptual** dimension (coming forth most evidently from philosophical, gender, cultural and anthropological perspectives: e.g., Ahmed, 1992; Shirazi, 2001; Bullock, 2003),
- as an adopted practice or **behaviour** (recurring in religiously- and politically-angled accounts: El Guindi, 1999a; Castelli, 2001; Bowen, 2007; McGoldrick, 2006; Laborde, 2008; Wallach Scott, 2010),
- and, finally, as **physical appearance** (which constitutes the focus of visual culture and fashion studies: Bălăşescu, 2003, 2007; Osella & Osella, 2007; Sandikci & Ger, 2007, 2010; Moors & Ünal, 2012).

Ultimately, the manner in which these intersect in real life and experience (Tarlo, 2007, 2010; Tarlo & Moors, 2013), following dynamic processes of (self-) questioning, adjustment and negotiation, arguably (in)forms the most interesting and valuable way of

understanding hijabs as (inter)cultural and symbolic exchange currencies (see Jones & Leshkowich, 2003, for an excellent contextualization of these processes through performance and practice theory, partly informed by Bourdieu and his conception of habitus, 1977[1972], 1984, ultimately showing how “abstract social and cultural categories become expressed and reproduced through individual actions”, pp. 23-24).⁴

Beyond the scope of geographic or socio-semiotic contexts, therefore, the present study aims at reuniting the three dimensions nominated above, with a stress on **behavioural (2)** and **aesthetic (3)** aspects, in a *subjectivity*-centered portrayal that prioritizes individual perspectives. In order to reach that analytic point, however, one needs to transcend the largely contentious theoretical hijab ‘arenas’ reviewed below, which are dependent on history, geography, politics and dogma, admittedly often to the detriment of ‘hands-on’, real life examples (which, again, this dissertation will prioritize, both empirically and discursively).

Theoretical Level

To better understand matters at a theoretical level, I propose we begin with an etymological note. Linguistically, *hijab* denotes a sacred division — whether in concept, attitude or comportment — between two contrasting worlds assumed to exist: the earthly (mortal, sinful, decayed) on the one hand, and the divine (immortal, chaste, transcendental) on the other. In practical terms, this entails a twofold demarcation: firstly, between what are deemed to be ‘superior’ human values accompanied by contiguous behaviours (obedience, decency, moderation etc.) and worldly compromises (sins); and secondly, between the perceived sanctity of the private and the exposed nature of the public (Mernissi, 1995, pp. 85-101; El Guindi, 1999a, pp. 148, 156-57).

In fact, up until the ninth century A.D., the Arabic term *hijab* not only did not equate with ‘veil’ or ‘veiling’ as popularly understood today, but encompassed several semantic planes, functioning both interactively and separately. Originally, the word *hijab* was derived from the root *h-j-b* and the verbal form *hajaba* — translating as to ‘veil’, ‘seclude’, ‘screen’,

⁴ Jones & Leshkowich (2003) stress the usefulness of combining this approach with an equally essential consideration of performance-related attributes of fashion, in such a way that individual agency, idiosyncrasy and “role play” counteract the (Bourdiesian) risk of “reducing people to the sum total of their socially and culturally defined roles” (p. 24).

‘conceal’, ‘separate’ or ‘mask’ the wearer from the rest⁵. The substantival form, which came to form part of the habitual Arabic lexicon in early Islam through the expression *darb al-Hijab* (English translation: ‘to adopt the hijab’), therefore designates a ‘cover’, ‘wrap’, ‘curtain’, ‘veil’, ‘screen’ or ‘partition’, terms initially used to differentiate the prophet and his wives’ private domain from the outside world (El Guindi, 1999a, pp. 148, 157; Bullock, 2003, pp. xl-xli). Also of relevance here is the secondary meaning of the Arabic *hagab*, i.e. the notion of “amulet” which “shielded or hid the wearer from malevolent forces. Amulets protected against evil, while talismans, from the Arabic word *talasm* for charm, were thought to bring good fortune magically. Amulets repelled, while talismans attracted, and both reflected the world-views of their makers. Although they were worn on the body, amulets and talismans differed from purely decorative jewelry” (Rivers, 1999, p. 58, original emphasis). Rather surprisingly, I was able to trace this separate, metaphysical protective function in contemporary practices of wearing and producing modest dress, evident in the case of some my respondents (see **Chapters 5 and 6**).

Where the religious appropriation of the term *hijab* is concerned, there is no explicit reference to it (or, in fact, to any other form of veiling) as a specific dress requirement in either the Qur’an or the hadith — the two most important texts still regulating Islamic standards of comportment today — although both do prescribe certain codes of conduct, dress included, generally subsumed to a generic attitudinal/behavioural sphere of self-restraint, moderation, seclusion and *piety*. It is important to note here that the term closest to ‘dress’ or ‘material cover to be worn on the head’ employed in the Qur’an is not *hijab*, but *khimar*⁶ (Qur’an, 24:31), directly equated with ‘headveil’ in a narrower and less ambiguous sense. In today’s circulation, *khimar* and *hijab* are intimately related and function as reported synonyms, together with a series of other Arabic locutions among which *litham*, *burqu’*, *ghita’*, *tarhah* (for a more elaborate review of the religious terminology allocated to the semantic field of sanctity/privacy/propriety, inclusive but not restricted to modest apparel, see El Guindi, 1999a, Chapter 5).

Keeping to the sacred texts’ rendition of this aspect, the exact meaning of *khimar* deployed in these varies greatly from translation to translation and from interpretation to

⁵ Bearing a similar function to that of fashion itself, which Entwistle (2000, Chapter 3) suggests can be regarded as a protective armour, or shield against the modern world.

⁶ Similar to, but not inclusive of the same polysemanticism as the word *hijab*; *khimar* is the original Arabic term used in the Qur’an to refer to covering.

interpretation. For instance, in following the literal translation of original Arabic, some Qur'an translators convey the meaning of *khimar* in arguably lenient/permissive terms:

“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] over their bosoms* and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their womenfolk, or those whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! Turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss.”

(Qur'an, 24:31, Wordsworth Collection, emphasis added),

while others less equivocally emphasize the imperious necessity for faithful women to subscribe to rigorous body and head cover observance:

“And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts, etc.) and not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent (like *palms of hands or one eye or both eyes for necessity* to see the way, or outer dress like *veil, gloves, head-cover, apron*, etc.), and to draw their veils [khimar] *all over Juyubihinna* (i.e. their *bodies, faces, necks and bosoms*, etc.) and not to reveal their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands fathers, their sons, their husbands sons, their brothers or their brothers sons, or their sisters sons, or their (Muslim) women (i.e. their sisters in Islam), or the (female) slaves whom their right hands possess, or old male servants who lack vigour, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And all of you beg Allah to forgive you all, O believers, that you may be successful.”

(Khan, 1977, quoted in Abbas & Atwell, n.d., para. 1, emphasis added).

Regardless of the exact sartorial prescription these verses enjoin to (aside from ‘veil’, cited above in Sura *al-Noor*, other English variations include: ‘headscarf’, ‘headcover’, ‘partition’, ‘curtain’ or simply ‘khimar’ preserved as such — assuming that a native English-speaking Muslim would master the accurate translation of this term as covering cloth), the general idea transpiring from here holds to the same principle of *separation* inherent to original readings of hijab (Ahmed, 1992; Hoodfar, 1993; El Guindi, 1999a), despite many interpreters' use of dress-convergent, univocal terminology.

Admittedly, the Qur'anic Sura (33:53) where the word *hijab* itself appears is Sura *al-Ahzab*:

“O you who believe, do not enter the prophet's homes unless you are given permission to eat, nor shall you force such an invitation in any manner. If you are invited, you may enter. When you finish eating, you shall leave; do not engage him in lengthy conversations. This used to hurt the prophet, and he was too shy to tell you. But GOD does not shy away from the truth. If you have to ask his wives for something, *ask them from behind a barrier* [hijab]. This is purer for your hearts and their hearts.”

(Rashad, 2001, quoted in Abbas & Atwell, n.d., para. 4, emphasis added),

although here the meaning prompted is evidently that of ‘screen’, ‘curtain’ or ‘barrier’—not necessarily one made of cloth, and not necessarily one to be worn on the head.

Henceforth central to the present study remains the theme of *privacy* and separation between what is considered sacred, pious, personal (and thus ‘protectable’), and what is not, which is to say open to public scrutiny — an issue further explored and exemplified through my fieldwork (see **Chapters 4** and **6** in particular). The relevance of the meanings indicated above, as well as that of different definitions circumventing the principle of covering in Islam, will gradually appear clearer and more informative with the introduction of various *hijab* practices below as well as in **Chapter 2**.

Behavioural Level

In terms of practical conduct and application of covering principles, a broader, more encompassing sphere for hijab representation — and also comprehension — takes shape, based on very different, even polar regional approaches to covering. But before setting off to exemplify some of these along with the rationales behind, a few explanatory notes are in order. Numerous historical events have influenced and nuanced the heterogeneous hijab practices enconced today in Muslim majority (also in Muslim minority) countries. Even before Islam was established as a religion, veiling and head covering, either customary or occasional, were already present in societies such as the Persian, Mesopotamian, Hellenic and Byzantine, documented by various scholars particularly throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Marsot, 1978; Ahmed, 1982b; Nashat & Tucker, 1999; Hoodfar, 1993; El Guindi, 1999a). Before Islam, however, veiling was significantly less frequent than it is today, and

the practice itself was ascribed to a broader spectrum of wearers, consisting of both women *and* men.

The first textual reference to veiling is ascribed to an Assyrian legal text (namely, the 40th Assyrian law) dating from the thirteenth century B.C., that stipulated which women were required to, and which were prohibited to veil in public (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 11-30; Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000, pp. 8-9). According to this law, ‘ladies-by-birth’ (which is to say noble) or married women were to be veiled outside their homes, while ‘concubines and servants’ were explicitly forbidden to, thereby confining the custom to the respectable elites⁷. Only when accompanying a noblewoman were servants or ‘non-nobles’ allowed to cover themselves; alternatively, they were granted access to veiling solely after matrimony (Keddie & Baron, 1991, p. 3; Driver & Miles, 1935, quoted in El Guindi, 1999a, p. 15; Shirazi, 2001, pp. 3-4).

Simultaneously, in various ancient civilizations (e.g., the Greco-Roman, Persian or Byzantine), the idea of seclusion was present and widely adhered to. In the Iranian context, for instance, in addition to the simplicity and respectability conferred by sartorial covering, *pardah* (meaning seclusion) came to compliment the status of the privileged, protecting women from unrelated men, minimizing their contact with the disreputable and consigning them to the domestic sphere (Hoodfar, 1993, pp. 6-7)⁸. More so when reinforced by familial seclusion, the veil epitomized status, dignity, superiority, separating the emblematic upper classes from the subservient social strata. Later on, after the use and meaning of the veil have been progressively appropriated and proliferated by Islam, in the nineteenth century a notable revival of this symbol took place in the Eastern world and, to an extent, in the Western world by contagion (El Guindi, 1999a, Part 2; Roberts, 2007, Chapter 5). It was at this point that Muslims began to justify veiling (and the hijab implicitly) as a religious cachet of Islam, alongside extant socio-economic vectors. The most drastic differentiation between male and female attire thereafter occurred in elite Arab urban environments as a riposte to imperialist Westernizing (i.e. colonizing)

⁷ This fact was also traceable in Western (e.g., British) head covering practices, regarded as a respectable, albeit not elite, custom associated with a glamorous, sometimes Oriental-inspiration ‘edge’ and practised by both men and women up to the 1960s (Gerval, 2009, Chapter 2).

⁸ In most cases of pre-Islamic veiling in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies, seclusion correlated with the diffusion of endogamous marriages, and came as a convenient tool to monitor and control the youth, most prominently women. This stemmed from the need to safeguard these women from unsought male company (especially unrelated men) and minimize their exposure in public, which involved a relative confinement to the perimeter of the home; spatial seclusion could, however, in such cases be or be not reinforced by the physical act of veiling (Ahmed, 1982b, pp. 154, 160-67; Hoodfar, 1993, p. 6).

manoeuvres which targeted the Middle East, Islamic Africa and Asia (Hoodfar, 1993; El Guindi, 1999a; Bullock, 2003).

Progressively, what is known today as the most common form of ‘veiling’ — consisting of a long, loose overdress in any colour variety (contrary to popular stereotyping, not just blatant black) and a headscarf tied in one of many fashions over the hair, ears and neck — ensued. Among oft-cited reasons to cover beyond a primary religious scope, particular relevance was allotted to (the wearers’) social and economic status, age and gender, geographical/traditional background, profession, political protest, comfort and availability procured by the fabric, occasion and ceremony (Ahmed, 1982b; MacLeod, 1991; Arthur, 1999; Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000; Shirazi, 2001; Bullock, 2003). Further to the above, more ‘worldly’ considerations have been reviewed by different authors, such as:

- the intent of *beautifying* the wearer (Wikan, 1982; Hoodfar, 1993);
- *conformity* to society’s regulations and ideas of position or respectability thereby derived (Hoodfar, 1991, 1993; Bullock, 2003);
- *fashion consciousness* and the need to ‘camouflage’ or dissimulate one’s personal features (Fernea, 1965)⁹.

From a different angle, all motives enumerated above can be subsumed into four interrelated dimensions serving four main functions, or quarters of quotidian life:

- in the first instance, the religious premise whereby hijab is understood as a behavioural step toward moral improvement, transcendence of trivial distractions and carnal desires;
- an ‘action-barrier’ that physically divides between the commonly inhabited environment and individual privacy;
- the communicational role ascribed to clothing, and implicitly to the people behind, in concealing, which is to say anonymizing or protecting personal identity (Roberts, 2007, pp. 96, 106; Barnard, 2008, pp. 51-9);

⁹ The issues of anonymity, identity dissimulation and protection from external influence (frequently perceived as a threat by Islamic dress observers) will be more closely perused in **Chapter 4**.

- a material and instrumental function performed by dress in covering the body on the one hand, and adapting one's chosen style to local fashion/conduct on the other. Relevant to retain here is the attention given to physical features, and the adorning role that clothing plays and has played over time (El Guindi, 1999a, pp. 6-7) — for a more detailed discussion of primitive social divisions and their use of the 'decorative impulse', see Jayakar, 1989; Young, 1994, 1996; Rivers, 1999;

to which, as we will see in this study's final chapters, an immaterial, meta-religious, affective-cognitive 'stratum' can be added (i.e. a certain 'mystique' ingrained by wearers and designers alike in the practice of hijab, circumscribing aesthetic, as well as conceptual and behavioural aspects).

Another important factor in the understanding of hijab is the revolutionary, *resistant* character historically linked with it throughout the social and political evolution of different geographical areas. In terms of women's apparel, the early twentieth century brought about major shifts and re-interpretations of the veil plus related behaviours in countries such as Egypt, Turkey and Iran.

A first reforming change was brought about by the feminist emancipatory movement of the 1920s, a movement which commenced in Egypt and, again, was part of a wider reactivist response to foreign colonizers' attempts to unveil and purportedly 'democratize' the East. To this end, cultivated upper class Egyptian women whose interest was sustained by a prolonged contact with Islamic lore began to militate for rights to vote, egalitarianism, reforms in women's education etc. (Ahmed, 1982b, 1992; Hoodfar, 1993; El Guindi, 1999a)¹⁰. A documented case of inspiration was that of Huda Sha'rawi, Egyptian politician, nationalist and feminist, who in 1922 established the *Egyptian Feminist Union* and through it became a prominent public personality and a convincing model for other women to follow¹¹.

As for the remainder of the population, the first third of the twentieth century saw an almost complete abolition of the veil among urban educated Egyptians (Ahmed, 1992; El Guindi, 1999a), rendering Egypt the first Muslim country to unveil without any formal

¹⁰ According to Hoodfar (1993), as early as 1914, 14 magazines written by women and centered on issues such as rights to vote, special education and specific reforms, were available in Arabic (p. 9).

¹¹ Her renouncement of the veil remains to this day a strong and eloquent statement: "she cast off her veil (there are a number of versions of this event: that she took it off on her way to Rome and never wore it again, that she cast it into the sea as she stepped ashore in Alexandria on her return from Rome, etc.) and thus inspired Egyptian women (middle and upper class women) to also cast off theirs" (Ahmed, 1982b, p. 160).

support from the state. Conversely, in Iran and Turkey around the same time, it was the state that decreed mass unveiling — in theory, for very similar reasons (i.e. liberation, women’s progress and modernization)¹², although quite different in practical terms: here, the movement served the goal of nation-wide secularization rather than women’s interests *per se*¹³. While Atatürk’s reforms in Turkey extended well beyond prohibiting the veil and targeted the entire spectrum of traditional dress, fez included, in the case of Iran, the change was of a milder nature, mainly due to organizational deficiencies on the Iranian feminists’ part (compared with their Egyptian or Turkish counterparts, at least). Here, the traditional Iranian cover, called *chador*, was viewed as an impediment to progressive plans to have women educated — as any other form of head cover, save for Western hats and ornamentally-purposed wraps. On these grounds, in 1936 its use in public was prohibited by law, as part of a more elaborate endeavour to restructure and modernize the whole of Iran, and ‘elevate’ it to the tastes of urban elites. In fact, the police were specifically instructed to do away with *any* form of head cover manifest in public areas — even if that meant tearing the cloth off the wearers — irrespective of age, class or social status. Only in rural areas, where traditional costume was markedly more widespread and adhered to, did the reforms have a lesser impact, compared to most major urban centers (Hoodfar, 1993, pp. 9-10).¹⁴

Aesthetic (Physical Appearance) Level: The Cultural Diversity of Veiling

Alongside established creeds and considerations underlying the observance of hijabs in Islam-majority regions, an important rationale is the (in)visibility conferred upon wearers, as ambassadors of faith both in their native countries and when going abroad. However, in different cultures and societies, modesty, piety, respectability — translating as visual indicators of a given religious affinity, Islamic or other — can take on many forms and integrative sartorial habits.

¹² The potential liberating/emancipatory character of unveiling also has a contentious flipside, as incrementally more covered Muslims today argue that the act of veiling in turn can generate similar, or even more powerful liberating/emancipatory effects (Ghazal Read & Bartkowski, 2000, pp. 404-5; Bullock, 2003, pp. 41-84, 183; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2006, pp. 78-80; Lewis, 2007, p. 431; see also **Chapters 4-6** for on-topic responses from this study’s interviewees).

¹³ For a broader discussion on the political context of early twentieth-century dress developments in Iran and Turkey, see Baker, 1997, and Norton, 1997.

¹⁴ Conversely, in certain geographical areas today (e.g., Iran), the police are instructed to admonish *non*-veiled women, at times in a violent manner (Shahin, 2014).

In Haredi Jewish communities, for instance, women's hair and head grooming rituals follow very strict regulations and signal distinction in terms of social identity and ranking, as well as loyalty to given groups (Schiller, 1995; Arthur, 1999, Chapters 1 & 11). Similarly, as Goldman Carrel (2013) suggests, in Hasidic communities today there is a high level of commitment to a particular modest aesthetic and related notions of respectability. More specifically, in the case of New York Hasidic groups, this aesthetic relies mostly on dark colours, simple cuts, moderate lengths and high quality materials, nevertheless with an evident focus on distinctive pricing (often related to designer brands), exclusivity, and finesse (pp. 101-12). Furthermore, drawing on nostalgic, idealized views of (more conservative) femininity linked to a pre-war European, 'old world' idea of elegance, New Yorker Hasidic women aspire to a highly selective, class emblematic, 'regal' portrayal of faith via clothes, which often involves the retailoring and remodelling of ready-made clothing to better fit their modesty requirements.

Conversely, for Christian Orthodox believers, piety draws on 'lighter' and more permissive sartorial prescriptions. In this case, covering the head with a traditional *batic* or shawl of any textile composition loosely tied over the hair on entering the church is a customary practice — and, in this sense, my own experience attending church in Christian Orthodox majority Romania has been edifying. The century-long custom, similar to Muslim covering in both motive and aspect, has nonetheless gradually waned in recent decades; little of the traditional dress habitually worn in the past by women to signal social standing, respectability and submissiveness to God, still surfaces in everyday practice. From the hand-woven, natural fabrics typically donned by married women (as in the case of Hasidic Jewish communities) and associated with psychological maturity, marital unavailability and the same behavioural standards of moderation, simplicity, prudence, the garments have been largely replaced by simply 'decent' outfits accompanied by *any* scarf or shawl worn on the hair and shoulders.

In this sense, co-opting a senior (86-year-old) Romanian woman well familiarized with traditional Oltenian attire (in her own words, the *most* traditional of Romanian covering garbs) to assist my navigation through ethnic costume varieties, has proved enlightening. As Ena recounts (drawing on personal experience as much as on her mother's and grandmother's), toward the end of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth, scarves have been added to specific Romanian outfits to complete distinctive looks for distinctive age groups. As such, younger women would often be seen wearing a

basma or a *batic* — the former habitually clad on an everyday basis, while the latter observed on more festive occasions — featuring ‘young’ floral motifs. Conversely, married women would generally favour *năframă* or *maramă*, popular especially in the countryside — as portrayed in **Images 1** and **2** by Romanian painter Nicolae Grigorescu.



Image 1

Nicolae Grigorescu: *Țărancă cu maramă* (Engl. *Countrywoman in Maramă*), private collection, second half of the nineteenth century.

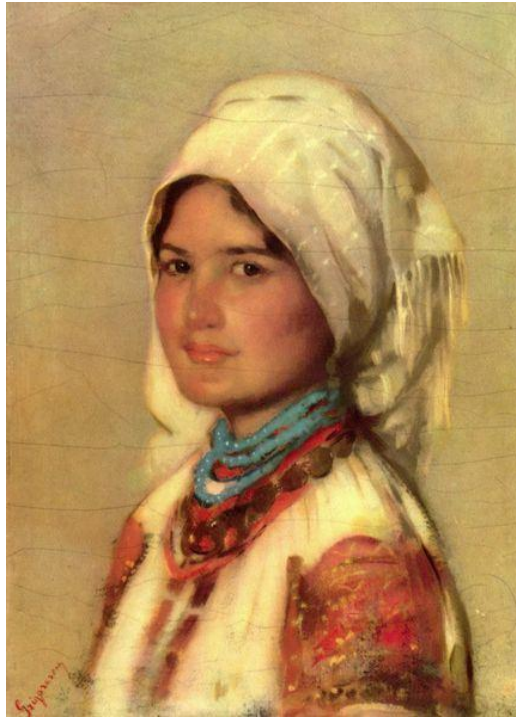


Image 2

Nicolae Grigorescu: *Țăranca din Muscel* (Engl. *Countrywoman from Muscel*), private collection, second half of the nineteenth century.

Used interchangeably, *maramă* and *năframă* stand for sheer, soft, woven natural fabrics generally produced within the wearers' home and embellished with discreet embroidery or crochet work. Unlike *batics* and *basmă* (see **Images 3-5** on how a *basma* is typically tied), square-shaped and still broadly available on Eastern European markets today, *maramas* were habitually cut in long, narrow strips and invested with much more decorative value. As can be observed in the images above, *maramas* were generally worn in light, natural colours preserving the original characteristics of the material, and often featured added embroidery in the traditional cross-stitch technique (usually coloured in contrasting red, green, brown or navy blue).



Image 3

Nicolae Grigorescu: *Fetiță cu basma roșie* (*Little Girl in Red Basma*), private collection, second half of the nineteenth century.

Other two examples of *basma* come from the personal collection of Ena — **Images 4** and **5**, the former taken in her distant childhood, when ethnic apparel was still customary especially among the (more educated) rural population¹⁵, and the latter from her current collection, avowedly much closer to her present taste.

¹⁵ Ena's parents were both "educated and knowledgeable" rural land owners, her father being the village's school teacher. She later moved to a larger city and married into an old gentry family that had been recently dispossessed by the newly installed Communist regime.



Image 4

Basma tied behind the head and donned to complete a traditional look. Photo dated 1930, courtesy of Ena B.



Image 5

Ena showcasing the two conventional modes of tying a *basma*. Photo by researcher¹⁶.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise specified, the remaining photographic material included in this study has been personally produced by the author.

Ena attests that throughout her life course, she has gathered “quite a few scarves, both Romanian and foreign”, for the purpose of “conforming to the fashion norms of the time” — thus mixing the extant significance of modest attire with aesthetic and social interpretations: “everybody wore them, and especially so during communism; if you were lucky enough to go on a trip to the diaspora and that diaspora happened to be Italy or a similarly fashionable destination, you would certainly look for a stylish batic or scarf to show off upon return!” (author’s translation). In her view, the main difference between a batic and a basma consists of the fabric they are made of, i.e. basmas being ordinarily made of cotton, while batics “are slightly fancier, either natural or vegetable silk¹⁷”. Two examples of batics purchased during Ena’s trips to Italy are showcased in **Image 6**.



Image 6

Batics purchased in Italy, c. 1970-1980. Properties of Ena.

Despite her admitted desire to keep with foreign fashions and generally maintain her appearance as modern and attractive as one could in such a hostile period — bear in mind that I am pointing to some extremely difficult decades Romanians have faced during the communist regime — she attests to having always “bewailed the scarcity of those old-style, fine, genuine, well-made maramas” she recalls from her youth. Today, when

¹⁷ During my conversations with her, Ena explained that *natural* silk was neither inaccessible nor exceptional in the first half of the twentieth century, as many household owners domestically grew silk worms and produced their own silk at home. ‘Vegetable silk’ does not stand for synthetic silk in this case, but was procured from vegetable sources instead.

“there is little to do with one of those, other than take pretty photos or commission them to a museum”, Ena has only a few remaining samples, and all in less than optimal condition. However, upon politely insisting to view the pieces, I have taken some snapshots for the purpose of illustration (**Images 7-9** below).



Casual style,
typically worn
indoors or for less
ceremonial
occasions.

Image 7

Cotton *năframă* with crocheted section and stitch-technique floral embroidery (handwork). Property of Ena.



Image 8

Detail: hand-made *maramă* in natural chiffon, with added embroidery pattern. Property of Ena.



Image 9

Oltenian *maramă* made of soft, gossamer-like silk (Rom. *borangic*), featuring delicate hand embroidery.

Property of Ena¹⁸.



Worn over the head and shoulders, in the traditional fashion.

This tradition has lost most of its currency today, and such garments are now considered artisanal work, priced accordingly and encountered only in marginal communities, specialized shops or rural museums (as Ena herself noted during one of our interviews), much in line with other religious or ethnic traditional garbs in more or less peripheral societies. Indeed, in many other parts of the globe, these have been equated in recent years with the elderly, the countryside, or the obsolete (for a more focused discussion on the decline and marginalization of traditional veilcloths in India, see Tarlo, 1996, and Edwards, 2009, 2011; for a tackling of recent shifts in Vietnamese and Indonesian traditional dress, see Leshkovich & Jones, 2003, and Niessen, 2009; for a similar approach

¹⁸ Some of these scarves have been preserved from Ena's youth (hand produced at the time within her family's household), while others were received as ceremonial gifts (e.g., at weddings, childbirth etc.) from close friends or relatives.

to Muslim attire and perceived dilution of authenticity thereof, see Osella & Osella, 2007; Moors, 2007; and Schulz, 2007)¹⁹.

Instead, a more convenient and commonplace alternative today is the re-making of traditional textiles into ‘modernized’, more appealing counterparts targeting mainstream, albeit less *connaissant*, consumers and taste. While in Vietnam and Indonesia, these can take the form of a self-Orientalizing ‘ethnic chic’ fashion whereby traditional aesthetics are readjusted and arguably diluted to accommodate foreign (e.g., American), often touristic or diasporic, representations of local costume (Leshkovich, 2003; Leshkovich & Jones, 2003), the Romanian counterpart translates into a similar phenomenon: an exponential diffusion of *simplified* ethnic aesthetics, marked by straighter cuts, less elaborate designs, and less added adornment (see **Images 10-12** below). In this sense, the *Craft and Artisanry Fair*, a national initiative started in 2013 and periodically hosted by Romania’s major cities, circulates a considerable variety of neo-ethnic modest clothing. Predictably, nevertheless, the handwork invested in this is becoming scarcer and poorer in quality, as Julia, one of the vendor-exhibitors at the 2014 edition of the Fair, remarks:

“We don’t do much handwork these days. I do add bits of embroidery, especially to the *ies* [traditional Romanian blouses, usually loose, long- or three quarter-sleeved, and light-coloured], but I buy these separately from specialized stores, and then I sew them on using a sewing machine. The garments are simpler to make and easier to sell as such!”

(author’s translation).

¹⁹ I will return to intersections of old and new dress elements, or recuperations of ‘old’ styles into contemporary designs, in **Chapters 4 and 6**.



Image 10

ie samples on display at the 2014 edition of the Romanian *Craft and Artisanship Fair*.

The result consists of a visibly more uniformized aesthetic (note in **Image 10** the identical cuts and motifs available in two colour varieties²⁰), and the sheer absence of traditional head covers — either *maramas*, *năframias* or *basmas*.



Image 11

Julia showcasing some of her ‘modern tradition’ *ie* designs.

²⁰ The white is obtained via the chemical treatment of the fabric with chlorine, while cream (off-white) is the natural colour of cotton preserved as such.

To address a broader taste and affordance spectrum, this present day ‘universalizing’ fashion places the emphasis, as Julia points out, on “wearability, function and a more commonsense idea of *beauty*”, the latter to be found in “the very qualities of the fabric, which is natural [cotton, usually], light, soft and easy to match”, as well as in its “internationally-friendly” character.



Image sequence 12

Other garments produced by Julia.

As I will further illuminate in this study's second chapter, and as Julia herself remarks, this has to do with today's "capitalization of the world", where "it is no longer lucrative for us [designers/vendors] to produce the elaborate handwork a maramă would traditionally require. We no longer possess the knowledge, the technique, or the motivation to do it. Younger people wear modern [Western] clothing, while the elderly just can't afford to pay for artisanship anymore. There's nothing we can do about it." However, as I will come to demonstrate in **Chapters 4, 5 and 6** of this dissertation, despite a global decline in 'old' traditional artisanship, new interpretations of ethnic/modest dress and related design practices continue to surface at a speedy pace in both Eastern and Western contexts.

1.2. Modesty versus Opulence: Reflections on Womanhood and Femininity

Most times that it is referred to, sartorial modesty is still inextricably linked to one religious creed or another (other examples of Christian and Jewish modest fashion are reviewed in a recent volume edited by Reina Lewis, 2013b; for a brief comparative perspective on Christian and Muslim head covers, see also Lindholm, 2012). Rarely does it stem from 'cleanly' secular or purely stylistic considerations, as in the case of yearly or seasonal Western vogues. To close the parenthesis on visual configurations of modesty outside Islamic borders and return to the Muslim dress topos, in the current study the visual impact of 'adapted' Islamic clothing occupies a prominent place, precisely due to the immense range of extant stylistic variations, from plain-looking to highly elaborate, that Islam has diffused among its followers. The main pillar that these variations lean against is their common theological grounding, although, as it will gradually become clear over the course of the present text, these too are invested with multifarious personal connotations.

In Daly Metcalf's (1992) translation of the *Bahishti Zewar*²¹, a collection of Islamic principles initially written in Urdu by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi in the early 1900s, a comprehensive range of behavioural recommendations for respectable²² Muslim women is provided. A prime focus falls here on virtue, truth and knowledge as indispensable tools in

²¹ Translated into English as 'Heavenly Ornaments', although the title referred to here has adapted the volume as *Perfecting Women*.

²² In this text, values such as decency, piety, candour and self-restraint occupy salient positions, enjoining women and men to carry out similar roles outside and inside their households. For a specific tackling of *respectability* as a reason to observe the veil, see Bullock, 2003, Chapter 3.

overcoming everyday struggles and complying with the *correct* recipes for moral conduct, which in turn closely underlie physical appearance.

Accommodating a generic atmosphere of social change, dissatisfaction with foreign influences and unease, which manifested in many Middle Eastern and African countries at the time, the late nineteenth century brought about an important reform movement in Northern India, by which local authorities condemned the decaying morals and threatened integrity of Indian society, and planned to restore it through educational, religious and political make-dos. Part of a wider manoeuvre to prevent further decadence and what was perceived as an imminent decline in the population's conduct and ideals, the *Bahishti Zewar* was principally aimed at women's development (although men were equally targeted in the attempt to set a code for optimal upbringing) in their quality of household pillars and fosterers of integrity. Keeping to Qur'anic guidelines, of the ten books of the original Urdu text, Book 7 addresses character and behaviour formation, stressing the importance of simplicity, decency and cleanliness of appearance. In continuation, Book 8 exemplifies ideal behaviours through biographical stories of women fit to serve as models from before, during and after the life of the prophet (Daly Metcalf, 1992, Books 7-8).

Even before the *Bahishti Zewar*, in much of the Islamic world, 'templates' of virtue and character existed and circulated to ensure the improvement and 'controllability' of the masses; and from the oldest of times, particular importance was given to women, proper womanhood and ideal femininity. Also relevant here is the fact that women and the feminine (addressed both in terms of character formation and physical aspect) have been ascribed numinous — idealized, eroticized, sanctified — valences not only in ancient European rituals of adoration²³):

“All across Europe small figurines of female deities have been unearthed by archaeologists ... suggesting an early association with fertility rites. Mother worship appears to have been nearly universal. It formed an important component of the religions of pre-Christian Europe. Goddess cults thrived in ancient Greece and Rome. They also flourished in Ireland, Germanic Europe and among the ancient Hebrews. ... People usually turn to female deities to be healed, to assure abundant harvests, or for relief from many kinds of physical and spiritual suffering. All these qualities are also found in the various manifestations of the Indian mother goddess.”

(Preston, 1985, pp. 9-10),

²³ According to Preston (1985), evidence of worship rituals for goddesses in the European space go back approximately 30,000 years, to the Neolithic period.

but also in other geographical perimeters and their respective religions. As protectress from evil, emblem of chastity (in its embodiment as virgin) or carrier of knowledge or good fortune, the domestic female figure was first documented in South Asian prehistory (approximately around 3,000 B.C.) and has continued to play a central role in Hindu rituals of worship thereafter, especially as motherly figure²⁴, most prominently since the seventh century A.D. (Chattopadhyaya, 1970, quoted in Preston, 1985, p. 10).

Many legends and myths foreground the (earth) mother goddess motif and lend it universal value, versatile immortality, and timeless significance. In Eliade's (1958) philosophical view, "woman comes to symbolize the irreducibility of the sacred and the divine, the inapprehensible essence of the ultimate reality. Woman incarnates both the mystery of creation and the mystery of Being, of everything that *is*, that incomprehensibly becomes and dies and is reborn." (p. 203). In this capacity, she is endowed with a dichotomous sphere of meaning, both material and spiritual, both individual and universal, sometimes both mother and virgin — a semantic fluidity and multiplicity much less visible in Christian chronology (for a more lengthy analysis of myths, legends and iconography associated with mystical femininity and deified female/mother, see Fuller, 1992, Chapters 2 & 8, and Jayakar, 1989, Sections 1-5, 7-13, 15; the latter also includes interesting accounts of interbred Hindu and Muslim cultural influences during Muslim invasions in Chapter 2, as well as a unique description of symbolic and procedural cloth making based on ancient myths and visual renderings in Chapter 12). Where my own analysis is concerned, the South Asian (Indian most notably) symbolic legacy is a chiefly relevant theme whose influence on contemporary Muslim dress will be scrutinized in **Chapter 6**, via the works of three South Asian-inspired designers.

Returning to the fostering of socially desirable femininity in Islamic times, and especially from the seventeenth century onwards, an important hiatus between the (Christian) European and Islamic worlds was marked by recurring European efforts to make sense of, and intervene in, the progress of the Eastern world (Said, 1978; Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000; Bullock, 2003). This also becomes apparent from sources that tackle the historical evolution and transformation (or, in some cases, lack thereof) of Islamic dress in recent centuries. In contrast to European (court) fashion, which, starting with the fourteenth century, has seen many turns, shifts, additions and abolitions, the Islamic costume has

²⁴ Most often symbolizing fertility and inception.

preserved its — more atemporal — generic characteristics, marked by concealing robes, generous lengths and widths, and various head covers for both men and women, with a particular focus on fabric and texture rather than visual impact *per se*. In Islamic areas, decorative pieces of clothing²⁵ were often invested with luxury value, functioning as tokens of appreciation and primacy in high societies, or as symbols of honour/dignity in military contexts (Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000, pp. 8-10) — a link to social status and prestige that I have begun to contextualize in the sections above and will continue to forge throughout subsequent chapters.

During the Ottoman period, stylistic models and pressures from the West have reached unprecedentedly high quotes, translating as an infusion of luxury fabrics, designs and patterns imported mostly from Italy since the fifteenth century (*ibidem*, p. 10), which culminated with the late twentieth century consumption peak and related aesthetic Westernization/cross-fertilization phenomena (Bălăşescu, 2003, 2007; Moors, 2007; Osella & Osella, 2007). Even before, in the Mughal epoch, India saw a clear demarcation between demure apparel (mostly marked by its length and simplicity) adopted by the common population, and heavily adorned dress (among which many Kashmir shawls) peculiarly favoured at the rise of the seventeenth century, for instance, by extravagant, fashion-inclined Emperor Akbar and his entourage (Wright, 2008, pp. 179-184).

On a related score, the colour white associated with clerics and religion was commonplace at this point, as were mantles and various forms of head covers — from turbans to *dupattas*²⁶, *pashminas* and *jamias* encountered not only in India, but also in Turkey and Iran. It is interesting to note how different colours have acquired different connotations in this timeframe, from purely aesthetic to profoundly spiritual — for example, green's association with the *Hajj*, or the recognized 'humbleness' of patchwork throughout Asia and parts of the Middle East²⁷ (Kennedy, 1983, quoted in Wright, 2008, p. 187). The decorative function performed by *patkas* (waist sashes), turbans and other pieces of clothing, sometimes displaying European-style floral motifs of remarkable detail and craft (Skelton, 1972), becomes quite ironic considering the dominant aesthetic that pervaded not

²⁵ I will return to expand the visual scope of various covering garments (colour, fabric, form, size and other sensorial specifics), based on both primary and secondary data, starting with **Chapter 4**.

²⁶ Shoulder scarves.

²⁷ Despite the established significance of patched fabrics as noted above, the author recognizes some exceptions, for example Shah Dawlat's atypical appropriation of this style. For a more elaborate description, see Wright, 2008, section 'Textiles, Dress and Attire as Depicted in the Albums' by Steven Cohen.

only Mughal India, but also most of the Muslim world since the rise of Islam: long, modest robes, sometimes supplemented by head covers.

In light of this, it is pertinent to also peruse the mechanisms through which many of the perceptions formed on the European continent about the Eastern/Islamic ways have been, and on occasion still are, abruptly misshaped and garbled by knowledge gaps or downright ethnocentric ignorance (Said, 1978; Ahmed, 1982a; El Guindi, 1999a, Chapter 3; Sharma & Sharma, 2003).

1.3. Orientalist Perceptions versus Oriental Realities

1.3.1. Orientalist Perceptions

The reverse of modesty in terms of feminine attire lies at the sexually-appealing, ‘gaze-attracting’ pole (Bullock, 2003, *passim*) and has, surprisingly enough, been recurrently associated if not with Islam directly, then certainly with the ‘East’, despite the former’s explicit predications *against* forms of ostentatious public display.

Between the seventeenth and the twentieth century, some regions of the globe previously unexplored or unremarked by the European (artistically-inclined) audience have been heavily assimilated through a spectrum of attributes that had, in fact, little to nothing to do with factual reality. In this timespan, an influx of Orient-inspired art and Occidental perceptions of the East permeated Europe (which is to say France and Great Britain most prominently), indulging a century-long voyeuristic eye for the morals, lifestyle, but mostly for the poignant aesthetics of geographical ‘otherness’ (Said, 1978; Alloula, 1986; Roberts, 2007; Tromans, 2008).

Turkey and Egypt are two of the most widely documented cases. Beginning with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s Oriental experience conveyed in her early eighteenth-century *Turkish Embassy Letters* (Wortley Montagu, 1965), reflections of exoticized, and sexually idyllicized adventures — such as the highly distorted rendering of Ingres’ *Turkish Bath* painting (**Image 13**) — intensified by a morbid attraction to spatially remote, unusual

domestic habits²⁸, materialized in a flood of literary and graphic accounts of Orientalist expression²⁹. Promoted in the European landscape as an amassed ‘travel experience’ mosaic, narrative diaries (initiated by Wortley Montagu and carried on by Sophia Poole, Emilia Hornby, Mary Herbert, Annie Harvey etc.), epistles, photographs, postcards, but most notably paintings such as David Roberts’, Frederick Goodall’s or John Frederick Lewis’, all provide insightful glimpses into the “immaterial dreamscapes”³⁰ and hypnotic geographies of the Middle East — largely concentrated in cultural capitals Istanbul and Cairo — too often elevated to Dionysian proportions³¹ (Said, 1978; Ahmed, 1982a; Bullock, 2003; Roberts, 2007; Tromans, 2008).

On the borderline between artistic revelation and concocted myth sits a parallel borderline between space and art, fed by the (Eurocentric) hunger to discover new loci for sensation. Places of intra- and intercultural encounter — which in the latter case turned into synonyms for either voyeurism or narcissism (Bullock, 2003; Tromans, 2008) — were eroticized and reinvented in hyperbolic captures such as Ingres’ *The Turkish Bath*, or many of John Frederick Lewis’ renditions of the harem (illustrated next).

²⁸ Such as the practice of polygyny, or the possession of a harem.

²⁹ This is not to say that Mary Wortley Montagu has instigated the immense flux of speculations herself; on the contrary, Wortley Montagu’s writings have been repeatedly classified as a negative contribution to the proliferation of false, sexually-charged fabrications about the Turkish society, countering overly ‘florid’ accounts about wanton behaviour or unrestrained nudity, and advancing efforts to maintain factual objectivity in her recounts (Ahmed, 1982a; Lock, 2011).

³⁰ As quoted by Geczy, 2013, p. 7.

³¹ E.g., polygamy, the unconditional submission and/or unbridled sensuality of harem women, speculated exhibitionism and immorality of elite Ottoman women in the perimeter of their homes etc.



Image 13

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres: *Le bain turc* (*The Turkish Bath*), Louvre, 1862.



Image 14

William Holman Hunt: *A Street Scene in Cairo, The Lantern-Maker's Courtship*, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 1854/1861.



Image 15

John Frederick Lewis: *The Seraff — A Doubtful Coin*, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, 1869.



Image 16

John Frederick Lewis: *The Siesta*, Tate, 1876.

Note the refinement of the clothing displayed (where there is any): the vivid colours, the lush textures, the finesse of the costumes sometimes inclusive of a face veil (as in *A Street Scene in Cairo*, or in *The Seraff — A Doubtful Coin*) which, Orientalist imagery aside, were part of the fashion customarily associated with the upper classes. At the same time, the visual richness portrayed here and attributed to the local aristocracy was a first culprit in the classification of such paintings as valid ‘proof’ of an excessive, degraded, morally corroded system, rather than as mere (and quite isolated) elite whimsicality³².

Some of the written and visual instantiations of *this* East have generated an extensive, minutely detailed body of women’s dress descriptions, of which an important harem marker was the veil (Alloula, 1986; Bullock, 2003). One example of the European fascination with this particular garment, alongside the actual appropriation of some veiling forms for entertainment or for specifically deceptive purposes on the European continent³³, is that of Theresa Grey and Princess Alexandra of Wales “dressed in the veil in the harem of the Viceroy of Egypt” (Roberts, 2007, pp. 66-67). In a more generous approach to the subject, some of Annie Harvey’s written passages recount how the veil (*yashmak*) looked, felt and was to be worn like through the prism of a profuse, sensuous, synaesthetic personal experience:

“Upon our expressing a wish to know how the ‘yashmak’, or veil, was arranged, Nadeje immediately had one put on, to show how it ought to be folded and pinned; and as by this time we had become great friends, it was good-naturedly proposed that we should try the effects of yashmak and ‘feredje’, and the most beautiful dresses were brought, in which we were to be arrayed.

Further acquaintance with the yashmak increases our admiration for it. The film delicacy of the muslin makes it like a vapour, and the exquisite softness of its texture causes it to fall into the most graceful folds.”

(Harvey, 1871, quoted in Roberts, 2007, p. 73).

A certainty remains the fact that, no matter the colour it was illustrated in, its thickness or translucence, ‘the veil’ was a consistent emblem of femininity and beauty — hiding it,

³² Family portraits, and especially those having women as protagonists, were a common practice in noble families especially in Istanbul, continuing a long Ottoman court portraiture tradition. Sometimes, foreign artists (including British) were preferred for their talent and prestige to effect the paintings, a way for the local upper class to transcend geography and emulate the European fashions, albeit occasionally resulting in a melange of Eastern and Western (sartorial and/or architectural) aesthetics (Roberts, 2007, pp. 110-18).

³³ Such as in plays, public festivities and masquerade balls (Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000, p. 17; Roberts, 2007, p. 93; Tromans, 2008, pp. 52-4).

heightening it (in the case of semi-transparent or extra luxurious fabrics), inviting the viewer to further discovery.



Image 17

Frederic Leighton: *The Light of the Harem*, private collection, c. 1880.

In Leighton's painting (above) titled *The Light of the Harem*, the accent on sartorial extravagance is set against an equally opulent and glorious architectural background, a cadre wherein an apparently noble woman heedfully ties an elaborate headscarf around her head, aided by a young girl who upholds a mirror. The silky cream dress with the wide sash, the golden thread robe on top, the width of the sleeves and added embroidery, the burgundy piece nonchalantly lying on the floor at her feet, all point to a general atmosphere of glamour, elegance and striking luxury, with the headwrap (key in this image) holding a significant part — the painting allows, in other words, the public eye into the privacy of the harem, revealing that which is hidden, secret, mysterious or taboo, and creating an almost 'pornographic' thrill that was crucial to this type of Orientalist

psycho-aesthetic. From a sartorial perspective, however, and as has elsewhere been argued, most of the visual extravagance and ‘Eastern’ enticement of such pictorial representations is justified by the apposition of simple, elementary geometrical shapes and highly decorative, innovative fabrics. It is this stress on colour, feel, quality and detail that can construe the West’s vivid fascination with a vibrant, multi-coloured East, as well as the Western appropriation of Oriental dress vogues at a speedy pace, especially from the nineteenth century onwards.

The stricter, more ‘stifled’ or ‘prudish’ European societies were (e.g., the mass use of corsetry, the social mannerisms and ‘unmentionable’ topics, the formal censorship existing in full hypocritical parallel with pornography and prostitution), the greater their enthrallment with the ‘prohibited’, voluptuous fashions of the ‘others’ (Ahmed, 1982a, pp. 524-25; Foucault, 1984, pp. 11-12; Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000, pp. 16-7). An important demarcation needs to be made here, however, between *Eastern* and *Islamic* dress. While most of the works of art from Orientalism-pervaded centuries highlight the beauties of the harem, personified either as noblewomen³⁴ or odalisques, and further aestheticized through the addition of resplendent fabrics, settings and architectures (Tromans, 2008), the religious costume (simple, lengthy and virtually untouched by fashion vacillations³⁵) worn by common people — which is to say the majority of the population — does not justly transpire. The critical focus indefinitely remained, though, on the softness, colourfulness and perceived *sensuality* of Eastern feminine attire, albeit of vague shape or oversized proportions (intended to camouflage the contours of the body). Again, this was most likely connected with a generalized discontent (the extent to which this was genuine or not, across society, is another topic) with the excessiveness of European lifestyle itself (Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000, p. 18; Bullock, 2003, Chapter 1). As can be read into the critiques shipped back and forth between the continents, one salient outrage targeted, for instance, the disputable social stereotypes, familial dysfunctions and outstanding sanctimony of the Victorian societal apparatus, amassed in a tableau of generalized impotence, addiction and

³⁴ It has been argued that, in reality, the entire vanity framework comprising of the visual languor, the sexual incitement and overall availability of nineteenth-century Orientalist pictorials was fictional, while the harem protagonists were either paid beggars, prostitutes, slaves or impoverished European travellers (Tromans, 2008, pp. 43-4).

³⁵ The immutability of Islamic dress and the class homogeneity conferred by it particularly appealed to Western ‘moralists’, “who were always quick to stigmatise the mindless pursuit of change in personal appearance”. The length, width, simplicity, functionality and overall ‘wearability’ of Muslim apparel, mostly made of natural fabrics, has, from as early as the sixteenth century, raised the interest of European designers and costumers (Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000, p. 18).

(female) submission to just another version of patriarchy. For, indeed, corseting aside, some factual elements, such as the alarming number of mistresses and illegitimate offsprings resulting from matrimony, or the extent of informal prostitution, had long pervaded the full range of social classes and Occidental Christian hierarchies, in a more or less obvious fashion (Hoodfar, 1993, pp. 8-9).

Therefore, seeking refuge in dreams and tales from the East was an understandable, if not necessarily justifiable escapist lever³⁶, especially when paired with Western societies' overt intention to forward their (re-)educating efforts to allegedly underdeveloped patches on the globe (Said, 1978; Ahmed, 1992; Bullock, 2003). In this sense, Geczy (2013) persuasively describes Orientalism's exuberant aesthetics' penetration into, and imbrication with, Western fashions (both at a conscious and an unconscious level³⁷) at length. Referring to the end of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century, he reviews a rich palette of 'Eastern' influences on the establishment and growth of the Western fashion industry as we know it. African, Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Turkish loci of inspiration have essentially effected a metaphenomenon of 'foreignness' impacting on early twentieth-century Western fashion and (developing) consumptionscapes. More specifically, exotic elements such as Japanese silks and kimonos, 'jupe-culottes' and harem trousers — identifiable, for instance, in the eccentric designs of Paul Poiret — aimed to 'emancipate' women's bodies from corsets and bustles to simpler lines and more fluid curves, scarves included. This was soon picked up on by other prominent fashion brands established at the time (Chanel, Patou, Fortuny), leading to a spread of Oriental aesthetics from the previously (relatively) contained repertoire of masquerade costume, private dressing gowns and accessory headgear such as fezzes, shawls or turbans, to a world-wide industrial span (Geczy, 2013, Introduction, Chapter 4). A general 'cosmeticization' and mystification of dress ensued, where 'flowy' garments and embellishment techniques (such as beading) previously quoted as typically Indian or South Asian, recurred in

³⁶ In sartorial terms, this translated as a penchant for exotic 'philiias' (or, arguably, pathologies) where the emulation of the foreign and an adjacent thirst for adventure gave birth to aesthetic phenomena such as Bohemianism (with the 'romantic bohemian' figure of the Bloomsbury group and the addition of "a sumptuous and bohemian flavour to the image of the British literati in the 1920s and 1930s" (Tarlo, 2013, p. 77), and various entwinements between existent Western aesthetics, acculturated Chinoiserie/Japonisme/Turquerie waves and newly-produced visuals of enchantment, altogether converging toward an ever more eye-catching 'Easternly Western' hybrid mystique (Steele & Major, 1999; Geczy, 2013, Chapter 3; Martin & Koda, 2013).

³⁷ An example lies in the absorption of floral motifs, as in chintz and wallpaper themes. This often applied to the aesthetic of scarves also, e.g., the floral vogue with English scarves particularly noticeable in the second half of the twentieth century. Paisley motifs, Kashmir shawls and established Liberty prints similarly hark back to Eastern origins (Geczy, 2013, Chapter 3).

twentieth-century Western fashion vogues (this will bear further relevance when viewed in light of primary findings advanced in **Chapters 5 & 6**)³⁸.

In this same vein, a poignant use of colour (vibrant, flaring, contrasting) was linked to a lush enjoyment of fashion on both the European and the American continents, the latter drawing much of its visual flamboyance from novelty produced onto the former (*ibidem*, Chapter 4) — this is still visible in the post-war aesthetic aftermath and the countercultures of the 1960s and 70s, which retain Orientalist elements reflected particularly as ‘relaxed’ lengths/widths, perennial floral motifs and spirited chromatics.

1.3.2. Oriental Realities

Unsurprisingly, as a form of protest against domineering Western attempts to ‘amend’ the Eastern lifestyle and steer it in the ‘right’ direction, the Islamic movement of the 1970s had a well justified reactive engine at core. Started in Egypt and later dispersed throughout Islamic Asia, Africa and the Middle East, this second emancipatory movement of the twentieth century brought about, alongside a number of socio-political reforms, a new, *voluntary* — and, this time, more enduring — modest dress code for Muslim youth. The initiative was a grass-root, community-spurred, youth-generated and youth-sustained effort whose leaders were educated, urban college women; part of the enterprise was a strategic plan to introduce a new Islamic dress arrangement, the Arab name of which was ‘al-ziyy al-Islami’ (Engl. ‘The Islamic Dress’) (El Guindi, 1999a, pp. 68-69, 1999b, pp. 55-59; see also Bullock, 2003, Introduction & Chapter 3). The sartorial agenda in this case was plain and clear: women would re-veil, part of which meant adopting the hijab — a term specifically employed to underscore the idea of *conversion* and detachment from secular dress to a reassessed and reasserted sense of individualhood, as well as collective identity (Brenner, 1996, pp. 691-92).

Supplanting (partly ‘Europeanized’) secular outfits with newly-available Islamic counterparts (e.g., *kufiyyas* as head covers) both in the case of women and of men, these garments have rapidly turned into routine practice, making systematic use of body-adumbrating overcoats and headscarves accompanied in more conservative spheres

³⁸ In popular culture too — music, film, television and erotica — Oriental elements and the veil in particular have continued to function as powerful and alluring sexual signifiers (occasionally with a comedic scope) throughout the twentieth century (Shirazi, 2001, Chapters 1-3; Geczy, 2013, Chapter 5).

by dark gloves and stockings. An interesting fact to remark here is that, the better schooled and more knowledgeable of Islamic ideology the proponents of the veil were, *the more covered* they became, hypostatizing demure opponents of Western tenets and flaws (consumerism, materialism etc.), as well as revivers of the original Islamic principles (El Guindi, 1999a, pp. 143-145).

Hereafter, a so-called Islamic resurgence took place to a pan-Islamic extent, propagating most speedily throughout the 1980s and 1990s across the Arab-speaking world, Islamic Africa and Asia, and portending a new (contemporary) phase in veiling. This turn was further corroborated by mass work force migration — male force chiefly — toward the Gulf states and especially toward Saudi Arabia, thereby establishing new markets for hijab *consumption* and *commodification* (Abaza, 2007; Akou, 2007; Moors, 2007). However, as we will shortly see in the following chapter, both in Eastern and in Western environments this has been, and still is, permeated by enduring Orientalist (or, better yet, transorientalist³⁹) ‘ripples’ connecting together Eastern and Western geographic traditions, histories, economies and elements of style. In following this thread and in joining the two separate planes previously surveyed (Eastern and Western respectively), I will progress to exploring several consumptionscapes and respective hijab practices, first in Eastern (Asian, Middle Eastern and African) regions, then gradually steering toward what is happening now in the West. This will, of course, directly anticipate and later inform my own empirical findings plus analyses thereof.

³⁹ I refer to this term as coined and employed by Geczy, 2013 (see Introduction, Chapter 5 and Conclusion as particularly relevant).

Chapter 2

Geographies of Place and Meaning in Acculturated Islamic Attire

This chapter moves forward to signpost some of the main hijab fashion hubs, along with respective transformations and East-West pollinations of Muslim apparel over the last three decades. Gradually shaping up as a new, partly globalized, partly neo-(or trans-)Orientalized (Geczy, 2013) ‘attractively modest’ aesthetic, the Islamic fashion today and related supplier-set trends put forth a backdrop of salient importance in the understanding of individually-appropriated and (micro-)culturally readapted formats, as those explored in the succeeding chapters (see primary findings introduced in **Chapters 4 to 6**). Based on the existent scholarship on the subject, the sections below will follow a gradual progression from the developing to the developed world, highlighting relevant points of intersection between geographically-specific codes of meaning and revitalizations/rebrandings of the traditional into the postmodern.

2.1. Boundaries, Place and Meaning

Space and aesthetics often spark controversy, paradoxes and equivoque, especially when coupled together in an ultimately mobile, widely cosmopolitan garment such as a *hijab*, a *jilbab* (Islamic outer robe) or an *abaya* (Arabic outer gown). Despite the international diffusion and world-around prevalence of Muslim wear, however, regional markers of distinction still percolate the discrete denotations and also discrete connotations these articles of clothing bear. Consumption rationales considered, the choice of wearing modest clothing becomes increasingly more complex in a time — and culture — which actively encourages and rewards physical attractiveness, sartorial innovation and overall aesthetic exuberance (Etcoff, 2000; Duke, 2002; Jones, 2008)⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ I am referring here to developed societies, most prominently Western.

Having contextualized the principle of modesty/piety from a theoretical, behavioural and aspectual point of view, then situated it in a historical, transcultural socio-sartorial framework in the previous chapter, these sections are concerned with a more in-depth exploration of the dynamics between looking *modest* and/or looking *emancipated*⁴¹ in Eastern and Western environments, with a particular focus on physical (visual) detail.⁴² The latter is hereby understood as the ways in which women from different geographical areas pre-empt and invest the act of covering with personal and cultural significance, starting with religious and cultural meanings, and ending with stylistic and material(istic) attributes such as colour, fabric, format, size, design/décor and cost.

On this route, a significant part of the present chapter will be devoted to a *spatial* tackling of hijab in terms of its physical configuration *in* and *as* personal space on the one hand (i.e. individuals' relationship with the garment, understood as the sum of its sensorial and extra-sensorial features), and in terms of geographical traditions impacting upon it, on the other. To illustrate both instances, a number of topographically dispersed case studies drawn from different cultural perimeters will be perused, in order to shed light onto the characteristics that render hijabs either commodities, personal identity markers, or something beyond (or all of these at once) — all aspects with practical applications in **Chapters 4-6**.

In the case of all the above-cited sartorial indicators of Islam (*hijabs*, *jilbabs*, *abayas*, *niqabs*), the perceived distinctiveness is partly lent by their *in situ* context and their contiguous cultural cosmos. At the present time, boundaries (physical, political or conceptual) no longer contain or account for these — permeable and at the same time pervasive — outfits' semantic sphere, nor for keeping their meaning clear-cut. A perfectly white, plain headscarf worn for the *Hajj* in Mecca may just as well be a trademark of high-end stylistic exuberance in Kensington, or in a mindfully concocted *Hermès* ad⁴³.

Significance is thus intimately intertwined with geography and (g)local tradition, while spaces across the globe are linked in *nexuses* of meaning that lend novel, fluid, at times

⁴¹ I use and/or in this formulation to refer to either one of two possibilities: first, opting for visual modesty without conscious adherence to fashion vogues, and second, seeking a modest appearance while at the same time concerning oneself with the actuality and attractiveness a specific style conveys to the viewer (i.e. fashion considerations).

⁴² This theme has become the focus of numerous debates and continues to generate increasing scrutiny in recent scholarship (Jones, 2003, 2010a; Tarlo, 2010; Lewis, 2013a).

⁴³ Examples of recent instantiations of 'modern' covers produced and promoted by *Hermès* ensue in section **2.3.4**.

contentious substance to garments we previously knew very little, or, indeed, nothing about. As Geczy (2013) notes, the final twentieth century decades have seen a notable revival of Eastern-Western collaborations and cross-fertilization mechanisms, where ‘authentic’ or aboriginal dress was often enriched with global elements (and vice versa) in order to appeal to a wider audience. For example, Indian designs (particularly apposite here due to their prominence in this study — **Chapter 6**) have been subject to unprecedented quotes of exchange since the 1970s, featuring both dress elements, as well as ““spiritual and folksy jewellery [such as]: wooden bangles, massive earrings and beads in drunken profusion” (p. 185). In the following sections, cases in point that concretely illustrate the use and different levels of identification with hijabs will be mapped out and set onto specific backdrops — spatial, representational — to better clarify the formation, information, and also deformation of mindsets on Islamic veiling.

Geo-political affairs and governmental regulations aside — of which some vehemently articulated against the use of head covers in public set-ups (e.g., the 2004 French law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols (Thomas, 2006; Bowen, 2007); the Turkish legislation vacillations occurred over the last three decades (Albayrak, 2011; Lindholm, 2012; Özdalga, 2013, section ‘Legal Aspects of Veiling’); along with other isolated cases of head cover prohibition / school expulsion on account of wearing a headscarf in a non-Muslim country⁴⁴) — this emblem of Islam still poses a semiotic problem in academic literature, colligating a vast array of complex, at times combative scholarly perspectives. The Muslim headscarf (hijab) alone is continuously regarded as a symbol of women’s repression (and corresponding disproportionate male hegemony), religious anachronism and/or political backwardness (Ahmed, 1992, Part 3; Todd, 1998; Arthur, 1999, Chapters 9 & 10; Shirazi, 2001, pp. 35-67, 146; Bullock, 2003, Chapters 1 & 2).

On the other hand, and as will also become apparent from this study’s contribution to the literature (which still tends to be somewhat repetitive, often neglecting the biographical and philosophical valences surrounding this subject), the same garment is invested with emancipatory connotations, being often declared to *empower* the wearer and grant her the advantage of exerting her liberty of choice, personal autonomy, outspoken beliefs and fashionable progressiveness (Ghazal Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Bailey & Tawadros, 2003; Tarlo, 2010, Chapters 4, 5 & 8; Moors & Ünal, 2012; Tarlo & Moors, 2013, Sections

⁴⁴ See Todd, 1998; also, BBC News, 2004, Johnson, 2006, and The Guardian, 2006, on the broadly popularized development of Shabina Begum’s case in Britain.

III-IV). As I will outline throughout the following chapters, this is related to the idea of agency and women's choices in particular (social, biographical) contexts, all of which reflectively impacts on their wider conceptions of life.

Addressing both the perspectives above while referring to individual autonomy and identity politics in the context of women's mosque movement in contemporary Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2001, 2003, 2005) provides a twofold view on personal agency with regard to piety and adjacent sartorial choices. While acknowledging feminist or 'resistant' behaviours as active agential tools used to empower the individual, advocate her autonomy and subversion to male-dominated relations, Mahmood also adds a passive agential complement to this, subsumed into a larger pious attitude which interiorizes (rather than actively prevents or tackles) difficulty, rejection or even forms of oppression without apparent efforts to countervail them. In other words, in the latter case agency transpires through more complex life decisions and behaviours than commonly presumed, including some that may appear self-oppressive or subordinate at a first glance (Mahmood, 2001, pp. 205-212; see also Abu-Lughod, 2013, on a similar train of thought).

To further these points, Mahmood cites examples of Egyptian women who regard veiling as "a bodily practice that is part of the larger project of becoming a pious Muslim the *entirety* of one's life", as opposed to "a practice that is Islamic in form and style but does not necessarily serve as a means to the training and realization of this pious self" (2003, p. 842, emphasis added). Otherwise couched, by cultivating the use of the veil, women in fact cultivate and perfect "virtues, habits, and desires that serve to ground Islamic principles within the practices of everyday living", and shape the foundation of the pious individual — a self-reflective process involving the *whole* of somebody's conduct, personality, existence, not just a dress- or even faith-related expression (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 45-55). As we will see in the second part of this study, Western veilers too (women like Atarra, Alena or Amena) manifest and exercise different forms of agency in response to different contexts they traverse — 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 (I will come back to reinforce these claims in **Chapters 4-6**).

2.2. Consumptionscapes and Globalization Matters

Demographically, Muslims in the United Kingdom form the largest religious populace following the Christian majority. According to the National Census for England and Wales via the Gatestone Institute, the number of Muslim people currently living in the United Kingdom is estimated at beyond 2.6 million, the group comprising over 4.5 per cent of the country's inhabitants and over half of its non-Christian religious population (Murray, 2012). And the numbers are increasing — all the more so, with a reported collapse in birth rates in recent decades, which results in a subsequent endorsement of mass immigration (Wenham, 2006). To quote directly from the Gatestone Institute official declaration in December 2012:

“Over the course of a decade up to four million more people have entered the country to live. In the capital, London, people identifying themselves as ‘white British’ have for the first time become a minority. Perhaps most strikingly, the national Muslim population has doubled.

This last fact is perhaps one of the least considered of the census so far. Doubled? Surely not. This has to be the claim of Mark Steyn or some other demographics-obsessed nut. Well no, it isn't, and it is now official: between 2001 and 2011 the Muslim population of the UK rose from 1.5 million to 2.7 million. Otherwise put, that is an increase from 3 percent to 4.8 percent of the overall population.”

(Murray, 2012, p. 1).

Needless to reinforce the obvious fact that Muslim habits, lifestyles and convictions have broadly ramified and occasionally converted their hosts' mindsets to Islamic habits, from purely religious (e.g., the case of European converts to Islamic faith) to social, architectural, touristic, culinary and, indeed, sartorial (Zebiri, 2007; Varul, 2008; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010; Moors, 2012). At times, the opposite also stands true, with the arrival of Muslim migrants polarizing the ‘natives’ against what are sometimes trenchantly perceived as conspicuous, disturbing exceptions from local cultural patterns — unjustly rooted, somewhat endangering to Western beliefs, mentalities and lifestyle (for more on this topic, see Todd, 1998; Bailey & Tawadros, 2003; Sharma & Sharma, 2003; Lewis, 2007; Zebiri, 2007).

2.3. Aesthetics on the Edge: Trendy Modesty around the Globe

2.3.1. Indifferent to, or Different through Fashion?

Due to shifts in geographies, but also in the mindsets of British Muslim headscarf wearers, the traditional scarf typologies are currently undergoing several processes of cultural enrichment, connotational deflection and, in accordance with many women observing it, stylistic emancipation in Western European countries (prominently, but not restricted to Great Britain). The latter category represents a constantly increasing segment of the U.K. population, consisting of young, modern, stylish *hijabis* exposed to manifold choices, new fashions, and embellishment options put forth by headscarf designers today (Shirazi, 2001; Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Bailey & Tawadros, 2003; Tarlo, 2010; Tarlo & Moors, 2013).

Fuelling this propensity toward ‘showy’ pieces of dress which render the wearer more noticeable, fashionable, and by that, more contemporary, the growth of conspicuous consumerism and the influence of retailers’ reflections on ‘ideal womanhood’ have an immense say. In this sphere, however, we are focusing on a set of ideals and grasps of femininity far detached from primaeval visions of beauty, ‘earthly’ seductiveness and the profound ancient relationship between humanity and nature, or spiritual life (approached in the previous chapter). Instead, the aesthetic in point effectively adapts to fast, post-industrial living (s)paces where symbolic and spiritual values are often mistaken for material goods, and (Western) physical attractiveness is sold as a first and foremost ingredient of social interaction (Etcoff, 2000; Bullock, 2003; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006; Gundle, 2008, Chapters 8 & 11; Jones, 2008; Wilson, 2009).⁴⁵

What has been recently labelled as a ‘globalization of nothing’ (i.e. empty form) or a platform for ‘turbo-consumption’⁴⁶ (Honore, 2004; Ritzer, 2007; Lawson, 2009) becomes a well-fitted descriptor for the enormous increase in sheer volume of material goods deployed and employed world-wide. In fact, there are few — if any — reasonable

⁴⁵ Further reviews of popular culture’s (i.e. film, television, fashion media, advertising) influence on consumer self-image and self-identity formation can be found in Shirazi, 2001, Chapters 1 & 2 (directly concerned with veiling imagery); Duke, 2002 (on African American teenagers’ aspiration to Euro-centric magazine-framed ideals of slim bodies, European-American facial features, and make-up aesthetic enhancement); Moeran, 2010 (reflecting on the unrealistic constructions and ‘enchantment’ techniques devised by the media to lure and motivate female consumers into self-beautification).

⁴⁶ For a more compact critique of turbo consumption’s effects in contemporary ‘work and spend’ societies (primarily the North American and European), see Schor, 2008.

arguments to contradict the environmentalist claim that “on a planetary scale, consumption as such is currently going on at a rate which literally cannot be sustained, in so far as it itself threatens the very biological survival of humans and related species” (Gilbert, 2008, p. 553; see also the Worldwatch Institute Report, 2004).

This turn toward objectification of spiritual beliefs and their reassessment as mass consumption thermometers has also been specifically linked with religion(s): “Religion is one of the places that is being rapidly colonized by consumerism. You see it in evangelical movements that have combined religiosity with a kind of very ‘boosterist’ love of the market and consumer culture” (Schor, 2008, p. 589). From Chapman’s (2005) standpoint, the same phenomenon is described as a twentieth-century

“steady societal migration away from deep communal values toward a fast-food culture of nomadic individualism and excessive materialism. During recent years, there has been a move away from interpersonal relationships toward a newer and faster mode of relations; a significant shift occurred from inter-human relationships toward a contemporary mode of individuality fragmented over countless relationships with designed experiences.”

(Chapman, 2005, p. 18).

Conversely, looking at things through a more optimistic prism, this would entail a hark-back to

“objects with potent sensory and emotional resonance [i.e. designed affective *experiences*]. We are already beginning to see early signs of a rising consumer desire for products embodying traits of consciousness, eccentricity and an increased responsiveness to emotional input.”

(*ibidem*, p. 19).

However, with the rapid spread of global consumption and the multinational brand web (with world-wide aggregates such as *Inditex*⁴⁷, *H&M*, *Gap* or *New Look* being just a few examples) encroaching upon every mall of every important city in the Euro-American world (see also Soper, 2008; Tungate, 2012), the challenge of keeping up with the present and maintaining a pleasant physical appearance that ‘fits in’ (Khalil, 2010) often appears insurmountable. In this sense, many scholars point a — sometimes critical — finger at the majority of Islamic women who allocate a significant part of their time and effort to looking ‘appropriate’, feminine, as well as attractive (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2007, 2010; Moors,

⁴⁷ A multi-brand conglomerate comprising world-scale popular brands such as *Zara*, *Oysho*, *Massimo Dutti*, *Bershka* and *Stradivarius*, highly resonant to lower- and upper-middle class Western consumers.

2010; Tarlo, 2010; Moors & Ünal, 2012). For the most part, this aspiration is not only reasonable, but also in (arguable) tandem with the foundation prescriptions of the Qur'an and hadith, which stress the importance of displaying a clean, neat, well-presented persona in public interactions (Meyer, 2009; Moll, 2010; Moors & Ünal, 2012)⁴⁸.

To this end, incrementally more innovative, cosmeticized⁴⁹ prints and fashions (Lewis, 2007; Noor, 2009; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2007, 2010; Tarlo, 2010; Lewis, 2013b, Part 1) are available in large supplies every year — not only in high street stores, but also in a multitude of online vending hubs (e.g., <http://www.hijabstoreonline.com/>, <http://www.hijabfashionshop.com/>, <http://www.hijabgirl.com/>, or <http://www.hijabnow.co.uk/>, just to highlight a few of the most popular)⁵⁰. Occasionally, such widely available, trend-led garments are criticized for crossing the border between enclosing and disclosing, covering and revealing, while reaching a point of loudness and, according to some authors, sexually charged 'decadence' (Winter, 2009) in conflict with the original, Qur'anic prescriptions.

This is also in line with a reported eroticization, fetishization or carnivalization of sacred symbols and among these, of religion-associated dress (Keenan, 1999) coinciding with, yet apparently dissociated from, the loosening of a haughtily critical position adopted by more conservative Muslims toward globalization/consumerism in precedent decades (Moors, 2012, p. 275). Many other dress items originally produced with the intent of covering, or even disguising⁵¹, rather than displaying, have been turned over time, either via embellishment or alteration, into tantalizing, enchanting or carnivalesque sites (glamour alone having been expressly linked to this outcome) (Laver, 1969, pp. 84-95; Barnard, 2008, pp. 53-9, 166-68; Gundle, 2008, Chapter 4).

The mask serves as an apposite case in point, similar in its concealing (or, more pertinently, in its *representing*) function to hijabs, yet often fraught with an erotic mystique (Laver, 1969; Tseëlon, 2001a; Heath, 2008b). Another example is that of contemporary

⁴⁸ See also Jones, 2003, 2010b, on ideas of national- and self-advancement as reflected in neat, fashion-sensitive, pious *and* commercial urban dress in the particular context of Indonesia, where neither beauty, nor sartorial chicness/flamboyance are regarded as inconsistent with religious piety.

⁴⁹ By this term I am pointing to garments invested with aesthetic (i.e. cosmetic) attributes such as particularly selected colour, fabric or print, as well as articles in relative contrast with the plain sight of an 'orthodox' hijab.

⁵⁰ A similar internationally-popular hijab fashion outlet, www.pearl-daisy.com, is discussed in **Chapter 6** of the present study.

⁵¹ Such as in theatrical or cinematic costume (Laver, 1969, Chapters 7 & 8).

saris (embellished or not), arguably laden with sensuous and sensual allure (Kamayani Gupta, 2008; Miller, 2012, Chapter 1) — this is especially relevant in the context of modernized/readapted Indian designs (see **Chapter 6** for empirical reflections in my own study). Conventional hijabs can undergo similar transformations, especially when teamed with ‘glamorous’, ‘glitzy’ or blatantly innovative dress-accessory ensembles. In this sense, the sections below will offer purposive insights into conspicuously fashionable contemporary modest styles around the world, with regional appropriations of issues such as tradition, innovation, glamour, ‘chicness’, coverage, display and frictions thereof.

2.3.2. Hijabs and Contemporary Glamour in the Case of Iran: “No designs, no standard patterns, no tracing paper involved”⁵²

A first example in this series is situated in the contemporary — somewhat paradoxical — aesthetic context of Iran. A cultural climate still amply pervaded by a latent sense of vexation and stifled reactions to sartorial impositions enforced after the Islamic revolution (i.e. dark colours and rigid cuts), Iran is yielding increasingly more terrain to a number of Western-inspired substitutes for traditional *chadors*⁵³. Most prominently, new forms of *mantoha*⁵⁴ and *russari*⁵⁵ put forth reinterpretations of accepted modest dress, mixing modernity with tradition and fuelling a quest for new, progressive, more global apparel. In introducing the works of two Iranian haute couture designers, Bălăşescu (2007) discusses the miscellaneous sources of inspiration, stylistic lines, motifs and ornaments featured by such novel ‘demure’ styles.

Parissa and Mahla Zamani, two of the very few⁵⁶ designers existing and functioning in Tehran, cater to high-class clientele from within and outside the country’s borders⁵⁷. Referring to the *modernity* and *mobility* of dress in this set-up, with Iran still being one of the strictest countries where the enforcement of plain, dark, fully enclosing hijabs is

⁵² Quoted from Bălăşescu, 2007, p. 314, who refers to the fashion produced by Iranian haute couture designer Parissa.

⁵³ The full, ankle-long and usually dark-coloured overcoats traditionally worn by Muslim women in Iran.

⁵⁴ The name is derived from the French *manteau* (corresponding to ‘mantle, cloak’), itself a Western word further widening the gap between the black, all-enveloping, classic Iranian *chador* and foreign alternatives in lighter, more colourful visual palettes.

⁵⁵ I.e. headscarf.

⁵⁶ The author ascertains the existence of around 10 to 12 local designers in Tehran at the time his study was conducted.

⁵⁷ E.g., Southern Californian re-rooted Iranian communities.

regarded (Ghazal Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Shirazi, 2001), Bălăşescu (2003, 2007) identifies the above-nominated fashion creators as exotic exceptions from orthodox, formally-sanctioned norms of modesty. As it becomes evident from both designers' descriptions, as well as from the author's observations, the encounter between local tradition and cosmopolitan modernity in this case results in a rural-edge aesthetic which joins together different historical epochs⁵⁸ with sundry geographical influences⁵⁹ (Bălăşescu, 2007, pp. 310-315); the outcome appears to be an experimental, rather nostalgic recipe for *ethnic smart* which doesn't risk ever growing out of fashion, as it simply transcends time and space (and sometimes, affordable prices too).

The same author reports a spatial (urban) dichotomy in terms of Tehran's population's formation and propagation of taste. Dividing between Northern and Southern Tehran, an imaginary borderline 'tells' affluent hijab wearers apart from the female inhabitants of poorer, Southern parts of the city, who more conservatively cover themselves in plain, orthodox *chadors*. Where the influential, socially and economically powerful (i.e. middle- and upper-class) women are concerned, a significant part prefers

“to wear as *hijab* headscarves displaying [Western] designer signatures: Paloma Picasso, Dolce & Gabanna [sic], and Yves Saint Laurent are among the most popular. The most fortunate of these women buy their headscarves during their trips to Paris, London, or Southern California — places with a significant Iranian Diaspora population. Others receive them [as gifts] from friends and/or relatives, or have to be satisfied with the available counterfeits.”

(Bălăşescu, 2003, p. 43, original emphasis).

Returning to the two designers whose work Bălăşescu examines more closely, in the first instance, Parissa's — a catchy, French-resonating name which also designates her brand, since she benefits from considerable popularity in Tehran and doesn't need another signature to qualify her work — exotic aesthetic, enhanced by an interesting apposition of rustic dress elements (the latter otherwise linked with Iranian village life, poverty and the lower classes) and charted onto the urban consumption map, lends her a privileged position as novelty and 'freshness' provider for the powerful and glamour-seeking:

⁵⁸ As Bălăşescu explains, Parissa's style closely follows the shapes and lines of the nineteenth-century Qajar era, rendered more functional by adapting lengths and widths to better suit the body's need for mobility today.

⁵⁹ Such as the bringing together of traditional Iranian garments, European fabrics, and laces and borders she cuts off from saris purchased from India or Pakistan, resulting in unusual shapes and colour combinations.

“In this process of creation, there are no designs, no standard patterns, no tracing paper involved. The combination of Indian borders, European or Asian fabrics, and innovative cuts and color mixing, gives birth to the Iranian style clothing for which Parissa is so well known among fashion consumers and for which she is recognized in Tehran and in the diaspora.”

(Bălăşescu, 2007, p. 314).

Similarly, in Mahla Zamani’s “adaptations of regional or historical dresses”⁶⁰ (*ibidem*, p. 308), the visual bricolage / reinvented tradition component and the continuous to-and-fro between past and modernity, culture and fashion, time and place⁶¹, are taken one step farther, on a yet thinner borderline between the religious and the hedonic, somewhere along the way diluting at least *some* of the reasons why Islamic countries have so assiduously resisted Western models in the first place. Like Parissa, Mahla also resides in and caters to Northern Tehran (elites). Additionally, despite the enduring censorship and official authorities’ close surveillance of the local fashionscape’s development, Mahla organizes her own fashion shows, and since 2003 has edited a fashion magazine called *Lotous*, which is “the first Persian fashion quarterly journal” that points back to pre-Islamic times (more specifically, to Zoroastrianism) and brings national identity closer to a sense of fluid historicity, rather than to Islam today (*ibidem*, pp. 307-310).

⁶⁰ As in Parissa’s case, Mahla draws much of the inspiration deployed in designing her embroidered tunics and overcoats from the Turkman style and the Qajar period.

⁶¹ Bălăşescu himself draws attention to the way “Mahla calls her eveningwear ‘modern dress’ or ‘Western dress’ interchangeably, thus using the generally accepted symbolic geography that equates the West with modernity” (p. 310).



Image 18

Mahla Zamani designs (via www.faramodel.ir; www.skyscrapercity.com).

This entire chart of modernized chicness coincides, it has been argued, with a slow but steady transition from *traditional* to *modern* states of consumption⁶² aligned with ‘high capitalism’, moral relativism, an exponential ‘materialization’ of society, and a systematic impingement of Western values and contingent styles (Godazgar, 2007, pp. 390-94). Raising the issue of Islam’s compatibility with such high (or post-) consumption modes, the move toward ‘liberated’ aesthetic expression via fashion falls under a hedonic⁶³ sign and seems to starkly clash with primal, or more transcendental life views.

Indeed, the fact that such trends seem to stand in apparent antithesis to the original Qur’anic enjoinders that women avoid unnecessary attention and assert their individuality through (probity and) *lack of* adornment appears to flash at this point, as such conspicuous progressive forms can be easily assimilated into a ‘show yourselves’ and

⁶² Characterized as fulfilling superfluous desires and being “a source of ‘the worst’ of human motives: envy, avarice, pride and extreme materialism [...]. In contrast, ‘traditional consumerism’ is characterized by ‘fixed needs’ rather than endless wants, consumption of ‘the same products repeatedly as and when these needs arise’ and, more importantly, these ‘needs’ are ‘dictated by traditional ways of life’” (Campbell, 1994, quoted in Godazgar, 2007, p. 394).

⁶³ Godazgar argues that “[t]he spirit of consumerism, with its hedonistic ends, is also associated with an ‘imaginary’, ‘daydreaming’, ‘fantasy’ and ‘illusionary’ world, in which ‘individuals turn away from what they perceive as a non-stimulating real world in order to dwell on the greater pleasures imaginative scenarios can offer’ ... Daydreaming causes repeating cycles of permanent dispositions and dissatisfactions with real life — the realization of ‘illusion’ depends on purchasing new products, which naturally lead to disillusionment quite quickly” (Godazgar, 2007, p. 396).

‘look confidently forward’ attitude, instead and despite of the ‘cover yourselves’ / ‘lower your gaze’ Qur’anic philosophy.

Perhaps of further relevance here is the extent to which the “Iranian obsession with physical beauty”, plastic surgery and other means of attaining “doll faces” is spreading among the population, not least among the youth, drawing on “Hollywood films and satellite television programs from the west” (The Guardian, 2013, p. 1). Currently the country with the highest nose surgery rates around the world (rising to an estimated 60-70,000 rhinoplasties per year), Iran is home to a phenomenon reported as a counter-effect to compulsory hijab⁶⁴, with the face acting as an alternative beauty display ‘outlet’ compensating for the impossibility of wearing one’s “beautiful figure, hair, skin” out in the open (*idem*; see also Oskouei, 2006). In other words, such practices are nuanced by the fact that hijab is a legal requirement in Iran, thus determining women to seek to express their individuality through alternative claims to their bodies (which, in effect, is different from the diasporic context where hijab is a choice).

However, in light of the insights derived from primary-sourced modest wear designers (follow the descriptions of Ayra’s and Amena’s fashion experiences in **Chapter 6**), I would argue against such manicheistic divides, turning instead to more nuanced, subjectively-sifted understandings of pious behaviour, as well as of cultural heritage and aesthetic preferences, overarched by constructs of inner-outward coherence and authenticity⁶⁵.

To return to the two Iranian dress makers discussed above, it is not only that designers today are striving to maintain their creations afloat in the stream of mass production more than elsewhere, but the very *surface* beauty auctioned by these is exponentially more often regarded as a desirable, religiously ‘harmless’ artifice; thus culturally defensible. Sometimes, this is due to different Muslim women reading different interpretations into prophetic adages such as “Allah is beautiful and He *loves beauty*” (al-Oadah, n.d., emphasis added). Other times, this is associated with women taking matters into their own hands and deciding they *can* decide for themselves what modesty or beauty mean, and how to make sartorial amendments accordingly. To quote an example, “[t]here was a certain

⁶⁴ In the broader context marked by excessively coercive local normative strictures — exaggerated by poverty- and surveillance-related discontents — and post-war disillusionment with Iranian politics. In this sense, the graphic novel-based cinematic production *Persepolis* (Paronnaud & Satrapi, 2007) provides useful insights into the general social atmosphere of late twentieth-century Iran.

⁶⁵ I will return to develop these semantic topoi starting with **Chapter 4**.

idea I had in my head about how a Muslim woman should look which is the black Abaya (baggy dress and scarf), but [then] I realised that this is not true and that I could *experiment* with my looks, while being modest.” (Hana Tajima Simpson, fashion designer quoted in Khalil, 2010, p. 3, emphasis added).

Admittedly, “Islam doesn't prescribe rigid rules of colour or style[,] it just says these are the areas you need to cover, the rest is really up to you” (Jana Kossiabati, fashion blog editor quoted in Khalil, 2010, p. 4). The reported lack of explicit textual interdictions apparently legitimates some wearers/designers’ enthusiasm: “[w]e wanted to go out there and say: Islam is beautiful and dressing modestly is cool” (www.artizara.com, quoted in Akou, 2007, p. 404) — which, in fact, does seem to corroborate the content of a plethora of Muslim fashion magazines and newly-arisen websites on the subject⁶⁶. And yet other times, this is plainly because “we do not like to wear the veils. We have to do it, but I try to make it beautiful” (unnamed informant, quoted in Bălăşescu, 2003, p. 49).

Regardless of the exact reason for choosing to look more, rather than less attractive (either to oneself or to anyone else), this constitutes an expanding socio-aesthetic territory both in the East (illustrations of which is to be extended shortly) and in the West (see also Akou, 2007, and Lewis, 2013b, Parts 1 & 3, for reviews of Internet-surveyed webshops and modest styles addressed to Western consumers). Also, my primary fieldwork observations will reinforce this argument in **Chapters 4 to 6**, on occasion operating around the same belief that “Allah loves beauty”.

2.3.3. Couture and Eastern-Western ‘Modest Chic’: Converging through Divergence

To further emphasize the development and diffusion of hybrid, national/internationalized, stylistically ‘enhanced’ modest apparel (i.e. Eastern with Western influences and vice versa, in a permanently expanding circuit of acculturation and cross-pollination), and simultaneously continue to unfold the previously-initiated thread on modest dress’ *prettification*, what happens now in more, if not most, Islamic environments has been essentially described as a switch to “a modern consumer who actively seeks a fashionable and chic look” (Sandıkçı & Ger, 2007, p. 190). I have thus chosen five additional examples supportive of this paradigm’s entrenchment upon different Islamic arenas, as follows.

⁶⁶ I will return to approach both these media typologies and related hijab imagery formation more minutely.

Western/Islamic Chic in Egypt

The same aspiration to novel, interactive fashions, alongside an added appeal to multicultural over local (traditional) aesthetic is even more pronounced in Asian vogues that hybridize ethnic dress through the insertion of Western elements — most notably since the 1990s onwards. For instance, in Nepal, Vietnam and Indonesia, this is reported to take the course of a neo-, self-Orientalizing incorporation of foreign (Orientalist) perceptions into local dress and identity production, the resulting ‘Asian Chic’⁶⁷ being described as more commercially profitable and appealing both on the internal and on the international market (for more detailed illustrations of this phenomenon, see Hepburn, 2000; Leshkovich & Jones, 2003; Niessen, Leshkovich & Jones, 2003).⁶⁸

In Egypt, this is one in three main trends of fashion production and marketing today: namely, the ‘ethnic look’ — supported by a tradition up until recently downplayed and marginalized by society on ‘peasantry’ grounds — which consists of reawaken *galabeyyas* (mantle-like garments worn on top of regular clothing), with a more modern look and geared to wealthy, upper-class consumers (Abaza, 2007, pp. 285-294). Other two representative styles qualifying as contemporary Egyptian aesthetic are the typically Western (appealing to the majority of the populace and featuring well-familiar jeans, T-shirts, skirts etc.), and the ‘Islamic chic’ respectively, which is to say “Islamic attire with Western names” (this is a particularly useful interpretative lens for Western hijab styles in turn, provided that many first- and second-generation West-established hijabis report travels to Egypt and related fashion observations⁶⁹):

⁶⁷ Phrasing deployed by Leshkovich & Jones, 2003, *passim*.

⁶⁸ In Indonesia particularly, the country with the largest concentration of Muslims on the globe (comprising almost 90% of its total of approximately 220 million people), the post-Soeharto period has concurrently seen a massive, somewhat paradoxical growth in hijab observance, from a symbolic, rather scattered practice during the 1970s, to a diverse array of trendy ‘new veil’ styles today, marked by ambiguity and eclecticism (Smith-Hefner, 2007). In this sense, Smith-Hefner offers a complementary view to that of Jones on ‘new’ Indonesian middle class modest apparel, noting that, despite an inclination toward less rigid, more permissive fashions in recent years — also portrayed in the author’s textual and imagistic juxtapositions of headscarves with ‘funky’ Western elements such as jeans, make-up and tight clothing — Islamic covering remains an act of great rational and moral weight, “a serious personal and religious commitment” that takes up much time and thought to adopt (2007, p. 400). Consequently, veiling in Indonesia is regarded as having little to do with global fashion, innovation and consumption, and more to do with authentic/essentialized Islamic tradition — in this sense, coming nearer to a conservative translation of modesty as simple, body-obscuring and attention-detering garments.

⁶⁹ A feature also reported by several of this study’s hijabi respondents.

“If the fashion industry is now blossoming in Egypt, it is doing so both in the domain of Islamic dress and locally produced modern Western clothes. *The Ultimate Guide to Shopping* 2004 (issue 2) advertises *circa* 133 fashion shops, some of which are franchised brands. The Ma’adi Grand Mall has plenty of fancy shops specializing in Islamic attire with Western names like Suzanna and Pour Elle. ... To make it appealing to younger women, Islamic attire is advertised with terms such as *al-‘abaya al-shababiyya* (the youthful ‘abaya), ‘abaya-jeans, and the hippy veil. The attractive colors of the long dresses and trousers are well matched with headscarves, which can be bright red, blue or purple. Advertised as ‘écharpe,’ wearing covered dress (*hegab*) seems more fashionable. ... In Summer, the malls of Cairo are filled with visitors from the Gulf who are the main clientele for expensive ‘chic’ *abayas* and *galabeyyas*, which can cost up to 1,500 to 2,000 Egyptian pounds.”

(Abaza, 2007, pp. 288-98, original emphasis).

Although certain consumer segments *do* still adopt the demure dress identity a conservative hijab (especially when combined with loose-fitting clothes) accords, most of the time these examples are assigned to traditionalist minorities and/or Islamist parties such as the Egyptian *Muslim Sisterhood*⁷⁰ (Khalaf, 2012). In this regard, it would be interesting to track how such instances of ‘old-fashioned’ piety — to this day, still overshadowed by a mass vote in favour of eclectic modern styles — find expression in the Arab Spring and in the aftermath of the Egyptian 2011 revolution, as soon as relevant research arises.

Mobility, Glamour and ‘Bling’ around the Gulf

To continue the foray into expanding consumerist landscapes that feature modernized hijabs, it is significant to note the contribution of the Gulf states and related ‘Saudified’ or ‘petro-Islamized’ vogues (Abaza, 2007, p. 288) to the world-wide Muslim fashion alternative gamut. Alongside a series of web-based Arab brands which I will discuss in section 2.3.4. below, the capital these Arab countries circulate around the wearing of specific garments is substantial to state the least. Many designers — and, as I will stress in subsequent chapters, wearers too — attest to the influence and affluence of wealthy residents from the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman (including royal families), who spend enormous sums on an edgy Islamic outfit (e.g., by designer Shahira

⁷⁰ Comprised of women counterparts to the well-established *Muslim Brotherhood* Islamic organization, formed in Egypt in 1928.

Mehrez⁷¹, quoted in Abaza, 2007, pp. 291-94). Local clientele and designer brands on a par invest their attention and “petrodollars” (Akou, 2007, p. 404) into covering styles ever enriched and embellished with beads, sequins, embroidery or crystals (Kelly, 2010, p. 218)⁷².



Image 19

Egyptian costume défilé by Shahira Mehrez (via Abdel-Malek, 2007), screenshot.

No different in this respect from other countries’ residents who travel abroad — European capitals London and Paris ranking among the top preferred locations — to find the latest stocks of designer scarves (Bălăşescu, 2003), elite Kuwaiti coverers are welcoming a transformation of the locally-classical *daraa* (a “high-necked, long dress that in times past was worn *under* the abaya”) into upgraded homologues inclusive of “a multitude of colors and fabrics”, “and decorated in a great variety of ways” (Kelly, 2010, p. 219). ‘Change’ and ‘variation’ are key operational factors in the temporal and spatial stride from regionally-contained to Western fashion, both for national and for transnational (which is to say transitional) use. Already unsurprisingly and more than just on occasion, Islamic covering — especially when observed by Kuwaiti university students — is adjoined by

⁷¹ According to UNESCO (2006), designer and researcher Shahira Mehrez has been collecting and promoting Egypt’s regional costumes and jewelry for over 40 years, and has had up to now exhibitions in Egypt, Kuwait, Italy, Spain and the United States.

⁷² See **Chapter 6** for an illustration of this via British-produced modest apparel.

popular Western markers such as jeans, “lots of make-up, and plenty of ‘bling’”. For special celebrations, this fashion ‘rush’ is amplified by the investment of expensive luxury fabrics and extra elaborate ornament into a necessarily *new* gown, preferably as revealing as can be, and finished with “one’s most stunning jewelry” after long hours into the hands of face and hair care professionals (*ibidem*, p. 221).

Albeit only tangential to the Gulf’s economies and fashions, Yemen’s innovative, colourful, ‘chic-ified’ hijabs and outer wear are not as aesthetically subdued as one would expect, especially when compared with the cases introduced above. Turning against a traditional rigidity similar to the oppressive socio-political climate descriptive of Iran (in the sense of the norm, not the exceptions illustrated above), the Yemeni capital, up until recently located at the outskirts of, if not completely outside, the global fashion landscape (Moors, 2007), is in turn commencing to rejuvenate itself. While at a first glance, “most San’ani women appear in public completely covered in black, often including a face-veil” (*ibidem*, p. 319), new varieties of classic *sharshafs* (overcoats) and *khimars* (headscarves) are developing, linked with youth and informal use, and chiefly with well-educated, high status wearers. Among socially privileged classes, newly-arisen items such the *balto*⁷³ and the Arabic *abaya* rank highly, due to their more tightly-fitting shapes, glamorous connotations and fashionable look (Moors, 2007, pp. 326-28):

“A dangerous phenomenon is spreading amongst Muslim women and that is that some women wear the `abaya on the shoulders and cover their heads with a headcloth that in itself is an embellishment. Such an `abaya follows the body and shows the chest and the shape of the body. This dress is worn as fashion.”

(Ahl al-Shaykh, 2000, quoted in Moors, 2007, p. 327, original emphasis).

Whereas covering in itself is generally understood as a *conformist* act whereby the wearer abides by existing norms and accords with societal expectations, opting *not* to veil has been described as an act of individuation and empowerment in Yemen, which enables the wearer to relinquish her anonymity (as conferred by covering) in favour of an assertive, fashionably *visible* persona (Moors, 2007, pp. 332-333). Perhaps more interesting to note in this particular context is the use of black, purposed neither to achieve anonymity/uniformity, nor (solely) to reflect a conservative adherence to linearly preserved

⁷³ Described as “one-piece, loose-falling, full-length overcoat” (Moors, 2007, p. 322).

tradition, but rather as a tool to attain more *modern* and *mobile* personal status (*ibidem*, pp. 323-324, 326, 330).

The influence of luxury- and glamour-suffused societies upon their ever more *form*-driven constituents is not confined to Kuwait or any other rich Arab state whose female population is granted little say beyond domestic and aesthetic spheres. The African continent, with its long history of colonial interference and much scarcer financial resources than the Gulf, brings some surprisingly similar elements to the fore: chromatic ebullience, heavy ornamentation, stylistic eclecticism and past-present imbrications are just four. Both in terms of local fashion production and in terms of foreign manufacture of African style, haute couture designers blend the ‘ethnographic present’ (or, more pertinently, past: denoting traditional dress) with a ‘perpetual future’, again hypostatized by Western fashion and its “continual rush to the next season” (Rovine, 2009, p. 134). Liquefied temporality and spatiality thus coalesce into visual form(at)s appealing to both African — earnest to bring their national/continental identity up to date and resign a postcolonial hypostasis of stagnancy and shadowed marginality — and Western consumers. Although this advancement route is often read as consciously trampling on regional heritage, crafts and sense of identity, the infiltration of Western dress into twenty-first century Africa “often constitutes a creative adaptation [i.e. recuperation] rather than a capitulation”, offering “insights into both ancient cultures and the latest global fashion trends” (*ibidem*, pp. 135-36). Concurrently, well-resonant Western designer names such as Galliano or Gaultier fall back on this topical reservoir of ancestral depth and ‘authentic’ symbolism to draw new ideas, refresh their creativity and attain the ‘je-ne-sais-quoi’ so ardently sought after in the cut-throat competitive business today. The phenomenon is far from innovative or unusual — in fact, having started well before the age of imperialism and exponentially grown to encompass a perennial fascination with Africa’s imagistic and artefactual rarity, or even luxury (i.e. objects and materials) (Loughran, 2009, pp. 244-250), it is hardly a modern device. Rather, the magnitude and diffusion of this exotic force driving a wave of goods to and forth in the global tide of novelty remains somewhat bewildering; from this vantage point, it appears that the underexplored ‘other’ has, indeed, never lost its Oriental nimbus, continuing to captivate us (Western ‘voyeurs’) and hierarchize our tastes — for an insightful exploration of neo-Oriental routes of fashion, the viewer understood both as Westerner *and* as Easterner by contagion, see Jones & Leshkovich, 2003, and Leshkovich & Jones, 2003; also, for a review of Oriental(ist)

elements subsisting in Western fashion throughout the past three centuries and well into the past three decades, see Geczy, 2013.

Mali: Localizing the Global

Further emphasizing the same proclivity for outward display is Mali, an African scenery with a vast majority of Muslim inhabitants, itself contemporarily struggling with “great diversity of female attire, with respect to the fabric, *ornamentation*, and tailoring of dress items” marked by young women’s “appreciation of tightly fitting clothes, often inspired by the Western liking for *displaying female curves*” (Schulz, 2007, p. 254, emphasis added). Here, the phenomenon is incongruously attributed to recent efforts of reinstalling moral uprightness (both at a personal and at a collective level) on the part of elite Malian women, who decry and denounce their compatriots’ *exceedingly Muslim* apparel as encumbering modernization and de-emphasizing the African in favour of an Islamic national identity (*ibidem*, pp. 255-256).

An unexpected, paradoxical factor rising among priorities of identity-conscious (read: fashionable) female advocates of ‘authentically African’ is nowadays a ticket into community acceptance, inclusion and appreciation, informing of the wearer’s economic power and social fulfilment: *cost* emulation. “Blouses, for instance, offer women ample opportunity to show that they are up-to-date about the most recent fashions of décolleté embroidery, trends that are usually set by the female starlets of Malian popular music who night after night parade in elaborate clothes on national television” (Schulz 2001b, 2002, quoted in Schulz, 2007, p. 258); furthermore, “opting for a particular degree of ‘*sophistication*’ in *ornamentation* and tailoring thus operates as an important, non-verbal code through which women assert social standing and economic power, a code that simultaneously fuels discursive modes of assertion and contestation” (Schulz, 2007, p. 259, emphasis added).

Also interesting to note is that the currency of this capitalist runway, the most sought-after fabrics (e.g., the ‘*bazin riche*’), are *not* locally produced, but imported from foreign countries such as Germany, which lends them supplementary prestige and desirability (creating, or at least encouraging, a global over a local identity):

“Loose robes constitute the prevailing type of ‘decent’ dress among women from the urban middle and lower-middle classes. They are also preferred by many upper-class women who, although displaying a closer affinity to Western-style clothing, share with other female consumers a predilection for fashion influences from Senegal and the Ivory Coast. Both of these countries are deemed more ‘cosmopolitan’ because of their closer connections to the European fashion market. To many female consumers, an important rationale for the acquisition of ‘sophisticated’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ designs is to display the costs of fabrication these dresses necessitate. For this, most of the women are ready to spend enormous sums of money that most often largely exceed their monthly income.”

(*ibidem*, p. 260).

Revealing Glamour in India

Price and (non-)affordability are also central rationales in Indian customers’ preference for expensive, sophisticated garments placed well above the simple, locally-produced, traditional *pardahs* (i.e. overcoats). In South Indian Kerala, for instance, “while many working-class and lower-middle-class women buy black or dark cloth (most commonly green, blue, brown, maroon) and stitch their own *pardah*”, a “recent take-up of the Arabic *abaya* as a more glamorous and costly form of *pardah*” is foregrounded (Osella & Osella, 2007, p. 242). Especially as regards young, slim, financially secure women, the preference for glamour over simplicity and for revealing shapes rather than camouflaging is juxtaposed to an explosion of “flared sleeves, embroidery, silver thread-work or stone-work” (*ibidem*, p. 243)⁷⁴, culminating in highly fashionable, attention-drawing, not-so-modest sartorial effects. Not restricted to Muslim veils and head covers, though, this tendency overarches other religious garments arguably losing their former spiritual significance to recent, mass-manufactured Western vogues and catchy looks. In the Gujarat region of Western India — one of the few conservative oases still fostering traditional craft and hand-made fabrics — Rabari dress, of stark inherent purity in the past, is itself becoming an ‘unprofitable’ business and a superfluous reminder of less progressive times (Edwards, 2010). Formerly woollen veilcloths are hence replaced (from the second half of the twentieth century) by capital-generating, *viable* polyester or polycotton substitutes easier to wear, visually more attractive and, of course, much cheaper to purchase (*ibidem*, pp. 22-4, 31).

⁷⁴ Elements echoed in Ayra’s and Amena’s British-produced designs, discussed in **Chapter 6**.

Due to a number of motives (among which the Bollywood phenomenon and India's close ties to the West) and despite the challenges to its developing economy, India was among the first religiously-conscious countries whose Muslim population became characterized by an ostensive preoccupation for external appearance, glamour and, yet again, quality *imitation*:

“Most Muslim women prefer to shop at the new shopping malls (open-air multi-story concrete structures) in the bazaar, where shopkeepers understand local tastes. Shopkeepers claim that Muslim women are unwilling to spend highly on the *quality* of the fabric, preferring to place emphasis on *display* and *spectacle*. Upmarket shopkeepers lamented women's *lack of knowledge* about quality and their unwillingness to spend on it.”

(Osella & Osella, 2007, p. 245, emphasis added).

Instead, what they are willing to pay for appears to be ‘glitz’. With Western brands and vogues abounding in Indian television shows, printed materials and high-street stores (Nagrath, 2003), finely discriminating eyes and fingers no longer set apart high-quality items from gaudy, synthetic *forms* of material(ist) culture cosmeticized to the core.

“Various grades of synthetics are glamorized with names like *summer cool* or *art silk*, but shopkeepers confirmed that customers rarely discussed the fabric as such. Rather they discussed the color, design, and *work*. In Kozhikode, Muslims are distinguishable from Hindus and Christians by their commitment to cutting-edge fashion, their disdain for ‘classic’ and *simple* cotton floral prints and their increased fondness for strongly colored synthetics and *glitzy work*.⁷⁵”

(Osella & Osella, 2007, p. 245, original emphasis).

An Intimate Interlude: ‘Sexy’ Syrian Apparel

One possible concern transpiring from here is that little meaning beyond the glazing of (branded) ‘catchiness’ resides in these garments after they have been consciously adapted to emulate a purely visual craze, rather than something deeper — for instance, a glimpse of the wearer's *felt* identity. To more eloquently explicate the hiatus between traditional costumes' relegation to the margin of local consumption and their substitution for globally-aspiring forms of *pastiche* based on exhibiting — and, to a certain extent, on

⁷⁵ I will shed further light onto, and argue that such descriptors of contemporary Indian fashion are an oversimplification of the aesthetic and cultural (individually-assimilated) heritage invested into present-day sartorial adornment — see **Chapter 6**.

randomizing — physical appeal, two authors’ survey of Syrian lingerie becomes pertinent. “Syrian design is schizophrenic. Ages and influences compete with each other. According to Syrian political commentator and novelist Ammar Abdulhamid (interviewed for this book), the country is ancient and postmodern at the same time.” Referring to lingerie in particular, Halasa & Salam (2008) resume:

“Lingerie is no different. Styles zigzag from prim virginal floral arrangements crowning a thong like a wedding corsage to nippleless leotards reminiscent of Frederick’s of Hollywood. There are colourful plastic butterflies and flowers sewn onto underwire bras and zippered breasts and crotches verging on a crudely innocent version of S&M. Some of the bra-and-panty sets sing and light up. Others can be eaten.”

(p. 7).

Although the scenic attraction of Syrian women to racy, see-through, latex underclothes, grab-holed and tasselled and feathered and edible (or even music-generating) does not really shed light onto their outer garment preferences, the authors describe some picturesque appositions of veiled buyers and the above-cited class of underwear in the souk (city market). For a conservative, Muslim-majority, highly religious and largely sexually-muted state characterized by rigid censorship and minimal exposure to international erotica or pornography, such findings prove quite revelatory. They do, however, appear less perplexing in light of the described market square attractions, inclusive of great numbers of (often clandestine) European photographs and catalogues in turn focused on lingerie for the greater part, informing Syrian women of the latest intimate wear trends and tips. This sits in line with a world-wide effusion of cheap, tawdry textiles and products imported mostly from India and China (*ibidem*, p. 8), which, in addition to their accessibility, delineate a sharp contrast between (sartorial) sobriety impositions and the laxity promised by such goods in private, especially when supported by the social ‘duty’ of being sexy derived from a culture of *pleasing* others: God, husbands, authorities in general (see primary research reports by Halasa & Salam at pp. 35-54).

To follow the ‘red thread’ started at the beginning of this chapter, in the cases previously described beauty is regarded as a central feminine attribute, one that is *actively* sought, tinkered with, and — privately or outwardly — displayed. Indeed, the post-Orientalist discourse remains just as valid (if not more) for this Syrian survey: the belly-dancing recounted to occur in private (we learn from here that all Syrian woman have at least one belly-dancing costume when they marry! — p. 48), the centrality and privileged status of

men as voyeurs / sexual beneficiaries, the visual pomp of the garments intended to entice (be these as self-degrading or even physically-vexing as may be), the “fight for husbands they don’t even love” (p. 53). All point to the self-sacrificing, yet simultaneously self-manicured, female persona devoted to domestic life, and by this, keen to maximize her femininity and attractiveness.

New-Generation Turkish *Tesettür*⁷⁶

In the case of Turkey, a country marked by sustained efforts to express and uphold its proximity to Western values, politics and fashions, today’s fashion landscape continues to be greatly influenced by an open-gate philosophy toward the secular and the aesthetically modern (O’Neil, 2010). To quote from Sandıkcı & Ger’s (2006, 2007, 2010) collection of ethnographic data garnered over several years in the regions of Ankara and Istanbul, “the 1980s and 1990s ... witnessed the emergence of an Islamic consumptionscape in Turkey”, supported by “the proliferation of foreign brand-name products, the emergence of new spaces for shopping and entertainment, the growth of the advertising industry, and the development of a consumption-oriented urban middle class” (2007, p. 192). Furthermore, according to the same researchers, the ‘affliction’ does not stop at bourgeois, cityscape secular consumers, but is extended to include faithful elites on a par: “... just as the secular upper classes developed a taste for bourgeois consumption, *so did the religious upper classes*” (*idem*, emphasis added). Despite a spiralling demand for headscarves, overcoats, and Islamic dress in general on contemporary *tesettürlü* women’s part, the ubiquity of ‘heterogeneous styles’ and the “rising fashion consciousness especially among the middle-/upper-class, urban, well-educated, younger religious women” zealously opting for “smaller headscarves and tighter and shorter coats, skirts, pants, and jackets in brighter and trendy colours”, is contrasted by a relegation of “the large [traditional] headscarf and the long, loose overcoat ... *to the squatter areas*, their symbolism limited to the urban poor” (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2007, p. 195, emphasis added).

Consequently, a substantial amount of criticism was aimed at notorious fashion shows bearing significant influence on the broad public’s taste and aspirations, and threatening to take this new veiling phase in Turkey to unprecedented, almost profane proportions. As an

⁷⁶ *Tesettür* refers to fashionable Islamic dress for women.

example, the controversial *Tekbir Giyim* show in 1992 was critically assailed from numerous angles for its deployment of “pretentious and distasteful clothes” worn by women “fully made-up and as attractive as ever *but* with heads covered”, as well as for “exploiting religion for commercial purposes” and engaging with “top models who are not normally covered and who had quite promiscuous lifestyles” (*ibidem*, pp. 195-196). We will shortly see how these influences reflect onto Western-transported hijab fashions in the ensuing section.

2.3.4. East into West and Beyond

While keeping these capitalist instantiations, paradoxes and semiotic relativities on our focal radar, this is not to dispute that *not all* novel, pricey or ‘showy’ Muslim outfits promoted on either the Western or Eastern commercial platforms are strident, meaning-deprived and adamantly ‘false-need’ (Tomlinson, 1990, p. 6). Toward the opposite end of sheer consumerism, there are still brands that manage to transcend this and produce more pointed intersections between religious wear, couture design and aesthetic sophistication — in toned-down chromatical spectra and relatively simple lines.

We have seen before how countries such as Iran or Egypt cater to hijabi diasporas on Western (European and American) continents, where garments’ styles and even names themselves echo the producing country’s Muslim consumers’ clothing preferences (Bălăşescu, 2003; Akou, 2007). In a similar rubric, closely following the expanding numbers of American-based Islamic outlets online⁷⁷, Middle Eastern hijab websites cater “authentic Islamic clothing” (Akou, 2007, p. 413) to modest customers around the globe. One such example I came across in my own exploration is *Rouge Couture*, a high-end brand founded in the United Arab Emirates by two successful women entrepreneurs united by a close friendship, Sara Al Madani from the U.A.E. and Apple Wang from China. The fashion house relies on high-quality fabrics in producing “A Fusion of Traditional and Modern design, which brings a unique trend and style tailored with Class and Elegance. ... Sara combined her knowledge and experience bringing you a line of Luxurious, Unique and Stylish Abaya's. Sara built a bridge between Tradition and fashion that resulted in a

⁷⁷ In the case of more affordable (i.e. mainstream) Islamic attire too, a plethora of internationally accessible hijab websites and online stores, many of which based on the American continent, “display Islamic fashions, ... offer[ing] Muslims living in areas where they are not in a majority the chance to have the same kinds of clothing and dress practices as those who live in the Dar al-Islam (the Islamic world)” (Akou, 2007, p. 405).

unique line, designed and engineered to bring out the woman in you.” — reads part of the ‘About Us’ section on the Rouge website (2010).

The muted tones — mostly situated around blacks, with scarce white/cream, beige or red details — counterbalanced by extravagant cuts and creative stylistic combinations attest to the ‘unique’ label attached to each of the Rouge creations (and advertised as such); although occasionally an alien element does come to sight, such as a curious suite of pistols and machine guns included in Rouge’s 2010 Dubai Fashion Week collection, when models paraded on the catwalk with one or two pistols/machineguns in their hands on the “Mission: Impossible” (De Palma, Geller & Koepp, 1996) musical theme⁷⁸, ‘aggressively’ pointing these either at the public, or at each other. A more radical *shot* at their ‘tradition with an *edge*’ slogan, perhaps.



Image sequence 20

Still shots from the Rouge Couture runway show during the 2010 Dubai Fashion Week⁷⁹.

Another peculiar element in recent Rouge collections is the omission, or barely evidenced inclusion of head covers in their latest shows. While some forms of headdress do appear in their 2010-2011 collections, these consist either of (60s like) loosely-tied, hood-ish

⁷⁸ A 1996 remix by Larry Mullen Junior and Adam Clayton (U2) of the original *Theme from Mission: Impossible* song (1967) by Argentine composer Lalo Schifrin.

⁷⁹ The photographic quality is due to the singular video source available to document this show, i.e. a poor-quality YouTube upload by user rillobug.

extensions of the abaya pulled over the wearer's head while leaving most of the hair visible, or of carnivalesque face masks (**Image suite 21**).

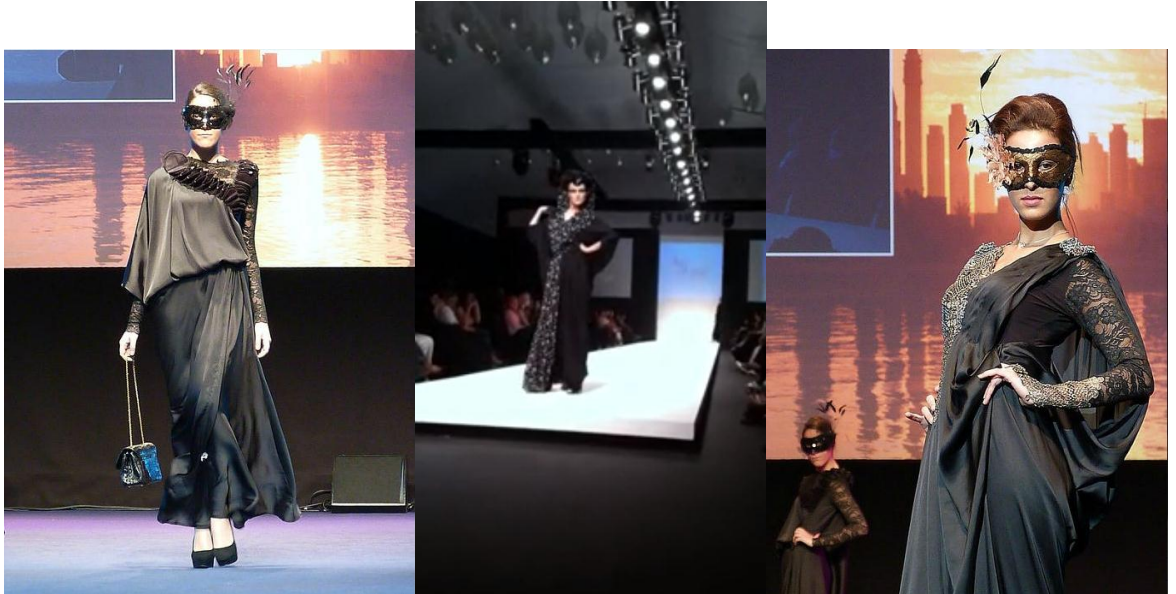


Image sequence 21

Stills from Rouge Couture collections (center image: October 2010, Dubai Fashion Week 2010; left and right: Salon International Du Monde fashion show, Paris, Muslim Edition, November 2011).

Another Gulf-based fashion house, *Hanayen Group*, created by Nader Nouraei in 1990, designs exclusive, hand-made abayas and sheilas (the latter meaning headscarves) aimed at *confident* women and available for purchase in boutiques from Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Oman. The keys this company resonates with strike “sheer opulence”, “exquisite designs”, “majesty and grace” — in a nutshell, “true elegance of femininity” (Hanayen Group, section ‘About/Overview’, 2010). In more narrative terms, the company’s self-description reads “exquisite designs, superior quality and customer satisfaction is the buzzword at Hanayen. The company is concentrated on the quality and these products are made from the finest materials which are imported from France, Japan, Austria & Italy” (*idem*).

Again, a focal quality that stands out is the brand’s multicultural, cosmopolitan intertwinement of high-quality silks, cottons and chiffons with posh modern accessories

(such as fashionable sun glasses, sophisticated hair styles, jewellery, make-up and high heels), in an international language of East-West cross-fertilization and hybridity. While the obvious stress on relaxed and graceful smartness transpires from the textual descriptions above, a reasonable question comes to mind on ‘impact’ with first-page projected large, colourful, provocative photographs of semi-transparent and animal print hijabs: how are animal patterns — qualified by print design analysts (e.g., Pious & Neptune, 1997; Jhally, 1999) as symbolic of the wearer’s physical availability, sexual assertiveness and ‘predatory’ taste for adventure — to be reconciled with “say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty ...” (Qur’an, 24:31, Wordsworth Collection)? (This issue will be reiterated when referring to primary-source analysis of scarves belonging to U.K.-based hijabis in **Chapter 4**).

On the borderline between West and East, Paris and the Gulf, fashion and art (as the name itself suggests), Parisian haute couture *Arabesque* promotes its lines as creative, artistic, custom-designed and, of course, cosmopolitan *par excellence*. Mostly black, the clothing Judith Duriez produces is directed at an admittedly fashion-savvy clientele. Aside from trying to impute the “exceptional richness of the Middle Eastern heritage” to her company’s designs and dissuade women from being content with anything less than ‘impeccable finish’, no explicit references to Islam or religion, save from the items’ names themselves (‘abayas’), are to be found on the website. Instead, visible make-up, nail polish and long legs are juxtaposed to hand embroidery, flowing translucent robes and sassy poses — “an intricate combination of the Eastern and Western inspirations”, indeed (Arabesque Haute Couture, 2010, ‘Brand’ section).⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Note the self-Orientalizing name of the brand itself.



Image 22

Arabesque Spring/Summer 2013 collection (screenshots).



Image 23

Arabesque Fall/Winter 2013-14 collection (screenshots).



Image 24

Arabesque 2011-12 lace collection (screenshots).

Furthermore, on conducting a quick survey of hijab styles over the Internet and in high-end stores, it becomes apparent that not only Eastern fashion houses, but also many Western resonant brands are beginning to include Islamic consumers in their marketing targets: that is, wealthy, educated, sophisticated Muslim (read: Arab in the vast majority) women in search of new sartorial identities. Western names such as *Givenchy*, *Louis Vuitton*, *Chanel* and *Calvin Klein* implicitly or explicitly direct their creations at Islamic clientele, some collections advancing meticulous interplays with long, unfettered cloaks and head covers. To give an example, *Hermès*' — very Western-, and at the same time very Eastern-looking — Fall 2011 prêt-à-porter collection convincingly speaks for itself. Designer Christophe Lemaire's resourceful tinkering with (abaya-like) “sweeping caftans” and “elongated kurtas” (Blanks, 2011) was edged with hybrid-style leather and textile head covers of a synthesized aesthetic effect — i.e. resembling something between sportive caps, turbans, scarves, sometimes with an additional hood pulled on top.





Image sequence 25

Hermès hood-cap ‘bricolage’ head covers (Fall 2011 collection).

Such daring approaches to hijab articulated through East-West imbrications of fashion, novelty and style largely portray Western adaptations/appropriations of modest dress in a diverse, eclectic, cosmopolitan and multicultural vein. On its steady course to global assimilation and the development of a global, pan-Islamic Muslim identity, however, fashionably cosmopolitan Islamic dress is on a continuous ascending scale, imported from Islam-majority countries, locally-manufactured or procured via the Internet (Tarlo, 2013, Chapter 3).

This entails a growing tendency to adapt, restyle and even silence overtly conservative religious costumes while assimilating local alternatives to better fit into secular environments — e.g., Finland (Koskennurmi-Sivonen, Koivula & Majjala, 2004), France (Österlind, 2013), Poland (Górak-Sosnowska & Lyszczarz, 2013), as well as the American continent (Ruby, 2006; Lewis, 2013a). Even though in such cultures, sometimes headdress observance can become stricter and more ‘enthusiastic’ (which is to say orthodox) than in original environments, with “people becom[ing] more loyal to their traditions and customs

if their identities are threatened⁸¹ by the larger society” — for instance, through negative media stereotyping of the veil as oppressive, subjugating, radical etc. (Ruby, 2006, p. 61) — there is still a reported heterogeneity of Muslim clothing, inclusive of ‘unorthodox’ Western elements such as jeans, short sleeves or sunglasses (own findings), which signal consistent efforts to adapt to local practices and fashions — I will return to reinforce these observations in **Chapter 5**.

While the vogues sanctioned in recent years by Islam-majority countries undoubtedly remain the prime sources of inspiration for hijabis worldwide (with Turkey, India, the Gulf states and Egypt at the top) predominantly through the influence of online fashion outlets (Akou, 2007; Moors & Ünal, 2012; Tarlo, 2013), the European and Northern American continents on a par produce — or in effect, reproduce — Islamically-appealing trends⁸², sometimes with a significant international diffusion (Lewis, 2013b, Part 3). An example is put forth by Moors & Ünal (2012), who cogently locate the Turkish *tesettür* aesthetic in the Netherlands. The fabrics (prominently silks), shapes (squares⁸³ in particular), style diversity and even beauty of hijab are all transported or recreated onto the Western continent as similarly cosmopolitanizing devices as elsewhere, with notable reception especially among second-generation Dutch-Turkish migrants. The circulation of scarves in this transnational context, facilitated by mobile media such as Muslim lifestyle magazines with international currency, is paralleled by a matching mobility of accessories available in high-street and online stores alike, as well as by physical grooming practices, with a relevant share of Western(ized) hijabis continuing to place great importance on fashion, glamour and status/luxury display (*ibidem*, pp. 316-325).

On a neighbouring route, Tarlo (2013) documents the ample South-Asian infusion of Muslim aesthetics onto British territory, and London in principal (see also Lewis, 2013a, pp. 315-16, who corroborates the afflux of Asian fashion trends in Britain and globally after 1990, i.e. ‘Asian Cool’ and respective revivalist-Islamic appropriations). However, in her observations, the brightly coloured, highly ornamented, patterned or embroidered

⁸¹ Ruby (2006) cites post 9/11 examples of discrimination (i.e. racism) against hijabi students in the Canadian regions of Quebec and Saskatoon, which sometimes discourage hijab observers from this practice (pp. 62-64).

⁸² Such as “Islamist cool” or mainstreamed ethnic dress, quoted in Lewis, 2007, p. 436, although these are also to a large extent subject to the influence of diasporic traditions.

⁸³ The authors also report a high incidence of *rectangular* head covers, i.e. shawls, as effected by Moroccan-Dutch wearers and disseminated on among Dutch converts as well, who deem the style “less ethnically marked” (p. 324).

Indian-inspired ‘cultural’ designs⁸⁴ that have long permeated the British history and consumptionscape have yielded terrain to a new aesthetic phenomenon in the last few decades: namely, a downplaying of conspicuous South Asian ‘visuals’ via Western clothing hybridization or ‘mitigation’, caused by an ambivalence of second- and third-generation Indian-origin British Muslims to less hospitable local reactions (such as “ridicule, racism and suspicion”: Tarlo, 2013, p. 77). Such specifically muted dress identities notwithstanding, Tarlo (2013) underlines the “growing numbers of people whose affiliation to Islamic values, identity and faith are marked out through everyday dress practices and who have become a visible presence in the sartorial landscape of cosmopolitan cities in Britain, Europe and elsewhere” (p. 78). Interestingly, increasingly more Muslims of non-Indian descent (e.g., Egyptian, Afro-Caribbean and also white British) integrate South Asian ‘cosmopolitan’ elements — both dress and adornment — into their fashions (*ibidem*, pp. 79-80). (This, we shall see, justifies some of the reasons why Indian-style designers such as Amena, discussed here in **Chapter 6**, attain such high popularity and cultural ‘currency’ among Muslim consumers worldwide.)

The phenomenon is in line with a growing development of English-language Muslim lifestyle publications such as British *emel*, Northern American *Muslim Girl* or, indeed, Kuwaiti *Alef* (discontinued in 2008), which inform the global Islamic (bourgeois) readership of the actualities of “what Muslim looks like, or what looks Muslim” and related interpretations of feminine modesty (Lewis, 2010, p. 59).⁸⁵ Zooming in on the actual circulation of diverse fashions (both high- and low-end) among the British Muslim populace, including revivalist and convert sectors, Lewis also discusses new lifestyle media such as e-retailers who address styles different from, and sometimes conspicuously polarized against, preceding-generation British Muslims, where “the previously secular role of style intermediary is filled by Muslim style-setters representing new trends in modest dressing and veiling within the individuating discourse of modern lifestyle consumer culture” (Kılıçbay & Binark, 2002, quoted in Lewis, 2013a, p. 69). As Lewis resolves,

⁸⁴ Such as saris and the *shalwar kameez*, qualifying more as culturally- rather than Islamically-sensitive dress, and sometimes considered insufficiently modest (i.e. chromatically ‘flashy’, excessively embellished or simply too revealing) to be worn as faithful apparel (Tarlo, 2013, p. 80).

⁸⁵ *Alef* magazine was an exception from the bourgeois-oriented rest by targeting “an affluent and educated” Emirati audience “with the presumption of internationalism common to the global luxury consumer” (Lewis, 2010, p. 64).

“these phenomena are resolutely international. While the production and distribution of Islamic fashion items, like the rest of the fashion industry, becomes increasingly globalized, the practice and dissemination of new Islamic style cultures [among which an ethical consumption niche] are characterized by connections to international Islamic fashion trends that transcend national or linguistic limitations.”

(*ibidem*, pp. 69-70).

2.4. Further Considerations

In sum, from a review of the existing literature, it is apparent that cosmeticized modest garments today arguably allow their wearers to maintain certain affiliations with their native culture, while at the same time ‘stretch’ their femininity and experiment with visually attractive fabrics, prints and fashions, Western *par excellence* (Moors, 2007; Khalil, 2010). And, in the case of migrants having left native countries behind to re-settle in the West (as will also become apparent from my primary research, **Chapters 4-6**), women continue to combine in their outfits nuances of Eastern *ethnic chic* (Tarlo, 1996; Abaza, 2007; Loughran, 2009) with more universal Western aesthetics, resulting in fascinating forms of socio-sartorial bricolage⁸⁶.

Conversely, from a more critically reflective stance, the (locally-contained or global) tendency toward *exterior* beautification can also be convincingly linked with a “subtler process of redefining femininity and eroticism” both in the Oriental and in the Occidental arenas, since “through its consumerist culture, modern capitalism has advocated the *manufacture, extension and detail of desires, rather than their suppression*” (Turner, 1984, p. 25, emphasis added). To take this point a critical step further, one could arguably consider such macro-moves and related stylistic fusions to be reflections of, and responses to, ‘false needs’ created for the sole purpose of maintaining capitalism’s profit levels (Tomlinson, 1990). Not unlike traditionalist Islamic critics of Western fashion, unyielding upholders of this viewpoint might also consider embellished hijab alternatives to come dangerously close to “a set of apparent choices based upon personal taste”, amounting up

⁸⁶ As I will evidence through my primary findings, the veiler-as-bricoleur (see also Barnard, 2008, Chapter 7, for a broader understanding of bricolage in fashion) not only integrates aspects from different spatial and aesthetic contexts, but actively filters and reintegrates these in individual appropriations of meaning, social interaction (i.e. sharing and giving), surface-depth harmony and inward-outward ‘flow’.

to “the triumph of the fragmented self, a constant lust for the new and the aesthetic among a population of consumer clones” (Tomlinson, 1990, p. 6; see also Schiermer, 2010, on the caveats of falling into a “fashion victim”, object- and excess-governed consumer typology).

However, as will become apparent below, despite the pertinence that Marxist critiques of capitalism undoubtedly hold, I believe that such a particular reading would in this case disregard many fashion-related psychological, spiritual, aesthetic, fundamentally *individual* variables. Simultaneously, it is also true that a “socio-cultural production and reproduction of the body contributes to a highly politicized⁸⁷ series of definitions through which our individual and collective identities are mapped and ascribed meanings” (Goodrum, 2001, p. 87). In this sense, with the clothed body perceived as a “cultural product central not only to a sense of self, but also crucial in the creation of conformity, a feeling of shared belonging” (*ibidem*) and a means of interrelating within a macroculture with the acceptance of another macroculture⁸⁸ (Akou, 2007, pp. 408-09), one may indeed wonder where and in what fashion these re-styled headscarves occupy an inevitable position on the wider socio-dialectical continuum between national/collective identity and individual psycho-aesthetic preference. In this sense, I support Akou’s (2007) view on sartorial identity as developing in either of the following three social loci:

1. group or small-scale individual associations (microcultures) that have a stamp on everyday practices and can alter a person’s perception for a limited period of time;
2. specific national/ethnic contexts corresponding to a well-delimited ‘culture’; or
3. a broader, transnational “system that transcends a single culture; an abstract, high-level of identity [i.e. macroculture] connected to the global circulation of people, ideas, images and material objects (ex. — Islamic, African, Socialist)” (p. 409).

⁸⁷ Provided that the politics of veiling have been a widely mined terrain in the past three decades, both within and outside British borders (through studies endorsed by authors such as El Guindi, 1999a, Castelli & Rodman, 2001; Shirazi, 2001; Bullock, 2003; McGoldrick, 2006; Bowen, 2007; Laborde, 2008; Wallach Scott, 2010; Tarlo, 2010, Lewis, 2013a to nominate just a few), I will subsequently follow an anthropological, individually-centered, less travelled route in the exploration of meanings and ‘bricolage’ processes associated with modest gear.

⁸⁸ For example, Akou (2007) refers to Islam and the West as two macrocultures interacting.

I will consequently progress to instantiating, via worn and designed pieces of modest wear⁸⁹, all these operational frameworks, highlighting overlaps, as well as imbrications between them (**Chapters 4 to 6**). It remains evident that, in the dynamics of producing, selecting and/or wearing a specific dress item, the three levels interact. Interestingly enough, nevertheless, it appears that only the second and the third (namely, the cultural and macrocultural) have acquired sufficient ‘gravity’ and evidence to keep regional modest styles in motion: it is the mixed influence of national heritage and cosmopolitan (most frequently, Western) influence that defines Islamic garb today, and predicts its tomorrow. This in particular has motivated my focused exploration of (generally underresearched) *micro-cultural*, *micro-aesthetic* ‘authenticities’⁹⁰ located not only within an individually-aculturated preference/style, but in the subjectively holistic — emotional, psychological, reflexively introspective — experience of covering.

⁸⁹ Put forth by wearers and designer-wearers respectively.

⁹⁰ A terminological collocation derived from Adam Geczy’s approach to the idea of *cultural authenticity* (2013, Chapter 5), as well as from Efrat Tseëlon’s (2012) grasp of authenticity in fashion and in art — further unpacked here in **Chapter 4**.

Chapter 3

On Methodology

3.1. Methodological Design

3.1.1. Introduction

The empirical stage of this project was conceived with the general aim of facilitating access into the shifting (mental) geographies, meanings, cultural and micro-cultural aspects relevant to hijabs today. These meanings were analyzed *in situ* in the case of Muslim headscarf wearers (permanently or, as I will show on a case-to-case basis, transiently⁹¹ located in Great Britain), hijab creators and ‘analysts’ respectively.

In line with other authors’ investigations of hijab fashions and adjacent connotations in Asian / Middle Eastern (Akou, 2007; Bălăşescu, 2007; Moors, 2007; Sandikci & Ger, 2010) or Western environments (Tarlo, 2007, 2010; Lewis, 2010; Moors & Ünal, 2012), the situation with Muslim fashion in Great Britain continues to be arguably among the most conspicuous, and therefore ethnographically ‘rich’ from all Western regions, the United States included, due to the enormous density of Muslims living in Britain (Wenham, 2006; Murray, 2012), but also due to the local ‘permissiveness’ and inclination to cultural bricolage evidenced here. Therefore, this study proposes to examine issues such as the following.

How and *why* have the garments we find around us in style-conscious communities taken on the shapes, colours, sequins, embroideries, daring prints or ethereal ‘flowiness’ that they have? When and why are we to label such garments *hijab* — as distinguished from alternative, secular vogues that simply involve the wearing of scarves? How are we to understand what makes one scarf more special or valuable — or, to quote my participants, more ‘harmonious’, ‘elegant’, or ‘beautiful’ — than another? What are the subjective

⁹¹ The question of ‘how transiently’ someone is situated in Britain significantly impacts on their meaning of dress — for instance, follow the changes undergone by Mea’s, Alena’s or Eshel’s styles in **Chapter 5**.

codes and experiences that render a hijab one's *own* personal and private garment, i.e. in full accordance with the wearer's fashion tastes, but also with various religious scriptures (e.g., the idea of piety addressed in **Chapter 1**)? By what means and after how much effort do such clothes come to be appreciated and gauged as a nexus of personal *meaningfulness*, in fact as a "second skin" (to use an expression proposed by Geczy, 2013, p. 12, when discussing reverberating aspects of Oriental influences in contemporary fashion)? And, ultimately, how can we chart what this personal semantic, or 'nexus' of materiality and immateriality, invokes (what its purpose is, and how it becomes pivotal not just in theory, but also in a Muslim woman's everyday life and interactions)?

While this is not to contend that many of the problematic phenomena previously highlighted in **Chapters 1 and 2** — such as the enduring stereotypy, Orientalist depictions of the 'East' and sexism deployed in the Western media — have neither found solutions nor been dealt away with in contemporary Oriental *or* Occidental environments, the aesthetic practices and social contexts introduced in this study, some inclusive of such problematic angles while others underlain by exceptional circumstances (i.e. privileged social positions, financial well-being and unusual geographical mobility), mean to broaden the scope on eclectic forms of covering in particular Western set-ups. In more concise terms, the main investigation path followed here reflects the ways both 'ordinary', but especially 'extraordinary' types of scarves affect their wearers and the people with whom these interact, as well as the means they perform physically as clothing.

3.1.2. A Review of Aims

With the above questions in mind, I have structured my inquiry according to three principal directions:

- Conducting a review of how contemporary hijab practices (**Chapters 1, 2**) interact with, or are reflected by, visual descriptors and personal styles as manifested in several British cities⁹² (the prime empirical focus falling on fashions and niches accessible in the areas of Leicester, Nottingham, Birmingham, Bradford and, in part,

⁹² Exceptions from this were my interviews with Ena, located in Romania, Faria, located in the United States of America, and Umarya, located in Saudi Arabia at the time our conversations took place (in the latter two cases, via interactive software).

London), and relating these, both at an individual and general level, to my eclectic group of respondents (described below).

- Complementing the above-cited efforts with examinations of rather neglected ‘values’ and particulars an Islamic headscarf can be invested with — from spiritual/ecumenical to traditional and cultural aspects, including: the ways it is actively worn and appropriated by the wearer; sensorial characteristics such as colour, size, fabric and texture; aesthetic-affective rationales involved in choosing a specific garment; personal and emotional significance; the clothes’ perceived ‘authenticity’ or even ‘poetics’. (Examining all of these dimensions allowed me to produce a particularly rich, ‘life’-based analysis, one that arguably includes as many nuances and personal/cultural contingencies as possible.)
- Unravelling how selected modest gear *wearers* (represented by England-located Muslim hijabis, with the mentioned exceptions) and *designers* currently view, classify and respond to the articles they wear or produce⁹³, and exploring how the latter are continuously (re)shaped by an active process of interaction on three planes:
 - a. within and among Muslim communities;
 - b. in Muslim—non-Muslim rapports;
 - c. in connection with Western environments, marked by contexts involving commercial consumption / globalization.

All ethical aspects of the research have, of course, been given heedful consideration, and University ethical guidelines have been respected in full. (All respondents have given their informed consent to be interviewed; pseudonyms were used to replace participants’ names and protect their anonymity, with the exceptions of Rezia and Amena (public figures); all participants were assured of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time with or without providing a justification.)

⁹³ Or, alternatively, what they would like these to be(come) — as will become evident below, my initial course of action proposed an evaluation of the level of satisfaction manifested by wearers vis-à-vis ranges of scarves available on the market, as well as a potential ‘liberation’ exercise, which would have materialized as an assisted effort to produce an ‘ideal scarf’. As my fieldwork has proven, however, such an act turned out to be unnecessary, being undesired by my respondents.

3.1.3. Methodological Tools

In technical-methodological terms, I have made synergic use of the following analytic tools:

A. During the first stages of research, my main focus fell on conceptualizing the subject matter by reviewing a wide range of interdisciplinary material (cultural, historical, anthropological, socio-political, theological, fashion studies) verging on Islamic headscarves (see **Chapters 1 & 2**). Simultaneously, relevant methodological guides, University staff members and a number of monographs (i.e. Crang & Cook, 2006; Blaikie, 2010; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) were consulted on the use and empirical deployment of qualitative interviewing and focus group set-ups.

B. As far as the actual processing (commentary, interpretation, contextualization) of the interview / focus group material is concerned, aside from using interpretative abilities acquired over my formation as a psychologist⁹⁴, I have also approached the discursive material in question as an open-ended, psycho-culturally permeable text. I have therefore intentionally circumvented quantitative tools in textual analysis (word frequency and other statistical quantifiers), and relied on more interpretative/constructionist skills instead (as also recommended by Gill, 1996; Potter, 1996; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Along these lines, I have made use of insights derived from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (I.P.A.), which is a qualitative methodological framework developed at length by Smith (1996), and which provides an alternative to more positivist nomothetic approaches (the latter more concerned with establishing universal laws and causes). It does so by placing the analytic focus on participants' *subjective accounts* of their own *personal experience*, as well as encourages an *idiographic sensibility* centered on particular experiences of particular individuals (as also recommended by Finlay, 2011; see Sadkowska, Wilde & Fisher, 2014 for a similar application of I.P.A. in fashion studies). Despite the poststructuralist critiques articulated against phenomenology in the second half of the twentieth century (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977[1972], 1990) for its subjectivism, anchored in individual consciousness and the idea of lived experience which imputes the individual with unmediated intentionality and somewhat detaches human interaction from wider social, cultural and economic structures (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 81-82, 168-84), the method allows us to better probe the 'depth' of a phenomenon (in our case, the complex individual

⁹⁴ B.Sc. in Psychology and Educational Sciences.

dynamics of wearing or creating modest dress), highlighting not only convergences and divergences within the participant sample, but also tentative extrapolations on the margin of the phenomenon's particularities (Sadkowska, Wilde & Fisher, 2014, p. 9).⁹⁵

C. Additionally, I have made use of a selection of informative databases, media productions (advertisements, documentaries, press releases, visual archives, film productions, video clips etc.) and online Islamic (commercial) hubs. Original photographic material, captured by me with the consent of my participants, has also been employed throughout the study. The material is mainly composed of digital photographs of hijabs, which will be introduced when discussing certain sartorial aspects such as colour, texture, style, pattern etc. When approaching the emotional and personally symbolic connotations of the garments in question, the images will serve as efficient complements both to my participants' verbal input, as well as to my actual interpretative amendments, as described above.

D. For an optimal processing and understanding of the sources described above, I have also conducted two video 'deconstructions' of modest gear assisted by University textile/design specialists, as well as elicited information via interviews with high-end sales managers and assistants (from *Harrods*, *Selfridges*, *Harvey Nichols*, *Liberty*, in the cities of London and Birmingham), and high-street retailers / shop owners in the Leicester area⁹⁶.

Overall, by selecting methods from across the liberal arts, humanities and psycho-social sciences, my approach can be described as dealing with "methodologies rather than a single methodology", making the methods serve "the aims of the research and not the research serve the aims of the method" (McGuigan 1997, p. 2).

3.1.4. Participants: Locations and Demographics

⁹⁵ This is not to exclude or minimize relevant political, ideological, or economic dimensions which will transpire more than on occasion from some informants' recounts — e.g., Faaiza (**Chapter 4**), who reports observing not only the headscarf, but also a face veil for socio-political reasons; Amena (**Chapter 6**), who attests to feeling 'empowered' by the very fashion she produces; or Eshel and Alena (**Chapter 5**), whose extensive travels through various socio-political contexts result in particular learning and adjustive behaviours. Rather, it is to inform that the stride from the general toward the specific and idiographic aspects of hijab captured throughout the final chapters is, in fact, intended to enrich and integrate these in a wider, both individual- and context-focused agentic framework.

⁹⁶ This location was selected due to the high incidence of respondents permanently or temporarily based here, i.e. at the *Markfield Institute of Higher Education*, Leicestershire.

For the most part, due to the high incidence of Muslim migrants in these areas (Reid & Miller, 2010/11) and also to the researcher's strategic location in the East Midlands, the fieldwork has taken place in the cities of Nottingham, Bradford, London and at the *Markfield Institute of Higher Education (M.I.H.E.)*, Leicestershire. A total number of **42** participants, consisting of veil wearers aged between 19 and 48⁹⁷ (the vast majority ranging between 25 and 35 years of age — see **Appendix A**), as well as designers, retail representatives and analysts⁹⁸, have offered their views on the uses, semiotics, aesthetics and 'ideals' of veiling. It is also worthwhile to add that many of these participants have a high level of education⁹⁹, all being schooled in Islamic thought and therefore familiar with the complexities of Muslim culture, but also with many local and global hijab 'sensitivities' and 'biases' (e.g., sectarian violence, human rights issues, regional laws, recent socio-historical debates on veiling etc.). While this may somewhat detract from my study's generalizability (as is also the case with the work of Tarlo, 2010, or Miller, 2011a), it adds to its psycho-ethnographic quality by incorporating a wide range of informed opinions, as well as an eclectic and diverse biographical 'pool'. In this sense, also worth underlining is the immense ethnographical value provided by these women's very different ethnic backgrounds, ranging from Saudi Arabian to Afghan-American, Indian, Bengali, Pakistani, Indonesian, Malaysian, Iraqi, Somali, Turkish, Czech, German and British — hence an ample assortment of life experiences, views and mentalities, which I will elaborate on at relevant points in the following chapters.

Alongside 'classical', real life interactions, I have also utilized, on a number of occasions and due to geographical and/or temporal restrictions, *online interviewing*, both synchronous and non-synchronous, via interactive platforms such as e-mail and instant communication programs (Skype). This proved to be an efficient tool not only in gathering information from people with whom I was unable to meet (two cases), but also in providing a 'safer' space wherein sensitive issues could be discussed (e.g., unveiling) in a thoroughly non-threatening manner characterized by low cost, convenience and the relative readiness of participants to 'open up' (Barak, 2008; James & Busher, 2009). Generally, however, my interactions were based on real-life dynamics, albeit by using a less typical mechanism of dialogue construction which consisted of highly judicious,

⁹⁷ With the exception of Ena, aged 86 at the time of our interviews, whose input drew on an older regional tradition of head covering largely obsolete today.

⁹⁸ By this I designate individuals who do not actively wear or design scarves, but have an informed opinion on their use and semantics; i.e. textile and design specialists, religious figures.

⁹⁹ University level or higher.

discourse-eliciting and psychologically-enabling formulations (a technique I will describe shortly).

Occasionally, I have also chosen to conduct *paired interviews* in order to capture the dynamics between certain participants — for instance, the case of two Saudi Arabian hijabis currently studying in Nottingham (interviewed simultaneously due to their common geographical background and close friendship), and two additional women sharing the same dormitory at the *M.I.H.E.*, whose availability and participative interest were enhanced by their proximity and familiarity with one another.

In this sense, one of the central figures in this research's logistics was Sarvat. At the time of our interactions, she filled the position of Postgraduate Administrator at the *M.I.H.E.*, and is currently a doctoral candidate in the field of Islamic Education. After having 'accessed' her at the recommendation of Dr. Eiluned Edwards, senior lecturer in Design and Visual Culture at Nottingham Trent University, Sarvat was very prompt in understanding my difficulties retrieving and recruiting participants, and came forth with resourceful ways to facilitate my liaising with several of these, thus jumpstarting what later became a rather classical 'snowball' sampling method. Her key role and great contribution to the research will be further unwrapped later.

Finally, a total of 42 participants have been interviewed in the course of three academic years, starting in June 2011 and concluding in December 2013. Relevant to specify here is that, due to spatial limitations, I was unable to include all 42 participants' input equally and exhaustively throughout the thesis. Nonetheless, efforts have been made to include as many points of view as possible, using demarcation criteria such as richness of material and eclecticism of opinion, while prioritizing biographical and cultural diversity.

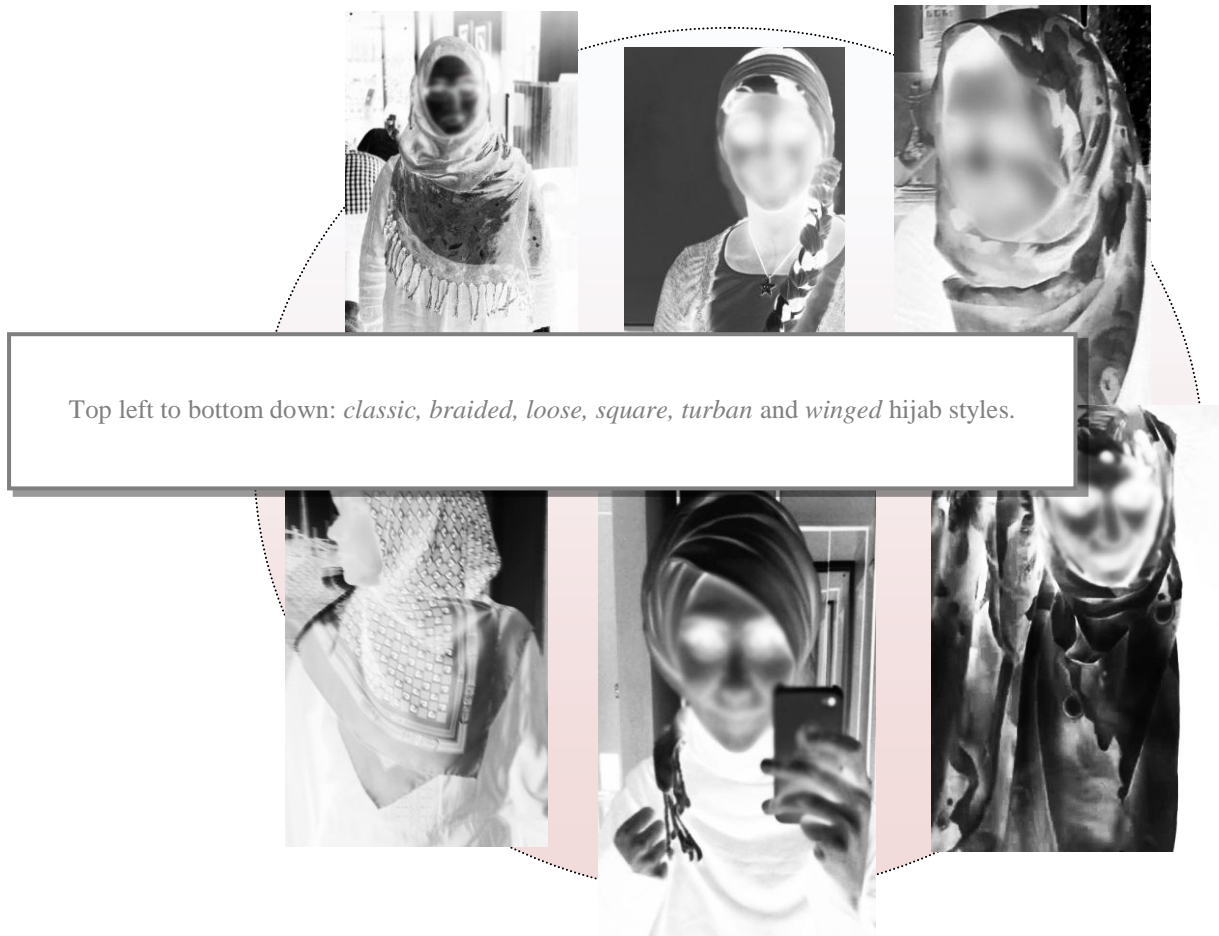


Image 26

Scarf shapes juxtaposed.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ More closely examined in **Chapters 4-6.**

3.2. A Qualitative Inventory of Analytic Tools: Focus Groups, Interviews, ‘Participative’¹⁰¹ Shopping’ Sessions and Participant Observation

As explained in the **Introduction**, the ‘sensitive’ and individually-focused nature of both my research and the topic at hand called for a judicious and versatile *in situ* methodological strategy. This included an awareness of mutating variables encountered in the field, which is to say a proneness to, and readiness for, well-managed ‘improvisation’ throughout the entire course of action. Indeed, after a preliminary piloting stage (which consisted of a ‘trial’ interviewing period intended to better familiarize me with the researcher-respondent, Muslim—non-Muslim, and in some cases Western—non-Western interactive context, plus potential difficulties arising from here¹⁰²), I eventually became convinced that, in the absence of this psycho-affective versatility, little, if any, of the valuable information garnered would have been made available to me.

More specifically, with the purpose of learning as much as possible about the particularities — especially in terms of visual presentation — complexities and subjectivities involved in the personal appropriation/adaptation of modest garments, I needed to continually adapt, readapt and complement my inquisitive utensils. For instance, as I began to navigate through the gathered data, it became apparent that hijab is something much too private, complex and omnipresent in a hijabi’s life to be taxonomically separated into domains, or labelled indicative of solely religious, social, economic, political or aesthetic significance. Rather, it presents itself as a cross-point that one becomes truly familiar with only after many years of knowledge and first-hand contact, while its instantiations in domestic spheres, around the household, as well as in various public settings, can only acquire meaning through first-hand experience: seeing, hearing, touching, feeling — in a word, interiorizing what hijab *does* (beyond words, and beyond conventional, popular connotations); what it *can* do; and also, what it *cannot* allow its wearer to do.

Method-wise, therefore, my practical efforts were carefully channelized in an attempt to capture as full a spectrum of understanding as possible. Admittedly, my research plan was

¹⁰¹ I.e. accompanied by the researcher and informative of the styles and parameters (prints, patterns, shapes, sizes, colours) the respondents took interest in.

¹⁰² Such as digressions from on-topic themes and the withdrawal of two respondents from the interviewing process (occurred later on).

initially placed into a slightly different, more ‘experimental’ structure, which has suffered significant modifications, as described below. This was caused by a disjunction in observed planes of participatory input, when, during some early discussions with my informants, I realized that my initial plan to create, with the help of a designer, a *new* hijab (invested with all the ‘individual’ meanings and desires expressed by my subjects) was somewhat redundant. In other words, I realized that the *existing* hijabs¹⁰³, both on the market and in my participants’ possession, were sufficiently complex and ambiguous to warrant a full investigation without the need to employ the experimental ‘liberational’/‘empowering’ design (see McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Noor, 2009; Costello, 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) — which, in my initial perception, would have enabled hijabis to feed their own impressions, desires and aspirations into the creation of a customized, one-of-a-kind garment. To be noted here is that the idea in itself, developed at the early stages of my research, and thus well before I became fully acquainted with my respondents and the empirical (most *relevant*) aspects of hijab observance, could have arguably betrayed my own, perhaps subliminal biases as a Western analyst attempting to understand and ‘liberate’ the ‘veiled otherness’ of hijab wearers (see also Roberts, 2007; Tromans, 2008; Geczy, 2013).

Nevertheless, early during the individual and group discussions, it quickly became apparent that the ‘empowering’ aspect of this creative exercise needed practical re-adjusting. In other words, most of my participants did not express explicit critiques of the headscarves in their possession, nor any desire to be sartorially ‘liberated’¹⁰⁴. However, the idea of having a garment tailored exclusively around their life-views, sense of style and identity was quite well received, albeit at a purely ‘fashion’ level, arguably demonstrating that the hijabis in question were already ‘empowered’ enough to relate to this from a ‘Western’ consumption/aesthetic perspective. All in all, these aspects rendered the task of creating a sartorially ‘liberating’ garment superfluous and therefore problematic.

Rather, what my participants showed an express interest in was the very *process* of interaction: the discussions sparked, the (indeed, liberal) exchange of opinions, life experiences and viewpoints accumulated, and multifarious hijab preferences — all articulated with remarkable assertiveness and self-reliance. Additionally, a wish that

¹⁰³ Pertinent examples in this sense are offered by wearer-designers Ayra and Amena (**Chapter 6**).

¹⁰⁴ On the contrary, they showed manifest appreciations of these and even recommended further routes of exploration for me to follow, such as various Islamic (e-)retail hubs, newly-arisen styles or ‘tinkering’ possibilities with shapes/formats of their own scarves.

surfaced several times during my group interviews was that of wearing garments similar to those donned by various fictional characters, such as film protagonists: e.g., a vintage-type head cover¹⁰⁵ worn by the supernal ‘elf’ Arwen (portrayed by Liv Tyler) in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Jackson, Tolkien & Walsh, 2001-2003).

The ambiguous connotations and intricate cultural valences imputed by the conceptual conjoining of an Islamic hijab with the mystical imagery of an other-worldly ‘elf’, superimposed on the Western commercial aesthetic imbued in this character’s velvet cloak¹⁰⁶, therefore determined me to adjust the experimental stage of my project — i.e. transform it into a hermeneutic, *process*-focused effort aiming to provide a context for, and examine the dynamics of, a mediated interaction (via the research itself) between the production (fashion designer), and reception (headscarf wearers) sites of hijab.

Also relevant to note here is that, alongside individual and group sessions designed to elicit style-, product-related and personal insights from hijab *wearers*, four separate discussions elicited four designers’¹⁰⁷ input on the production and visual milieu of Muslim garb on the one hand [production end — see **Chapter 6**], and specialized interpretations of primary data (i.e. scarf samples) by three University lecturers, on the other [interpretative/deconstruction end]. The latter were:

- Maria, senior lecturer and specialist in fashion design at Nottingham Trent University;
- Philippa, employability coordinator, lecturer and specialist in print and textile design at Nottingham Trent University; and
- Stella, senior lecturer in fashion knitwear design and knitted textiles, and former senior knitwear designer and knitted product technologist at *Monsoon/Accessorize*.

Included here were two ‘deconstructive’ meetings (conducted with the former two experts), which interpreted a sample of Muslim veils from a fashion and design perspective (video-recorded sessions); the latter specialist offered valuable input on the design and

¹⁰⁵ In graphical terms, this points to a fantasy, ‘Medieval’ style, pearl-silver hooded cloak.

¹⁰⁶ This somewhat atypical sartorial model, which some participants appeared to draw on to validate their veiling practices, can be read here as both a desire for assimilation, as well as a ‘safe’ method for asserting difference — for example, differentiating themselves from a more sexualized/explicit mainstream aesthetic (see **Chapter 5** for more on this topic).

¹⁰⁷ Namely, Ayra, Rezia, Amena and D., two of whom have been directly recommended (i.e. ‘snowballed’) by participating wearers.

branding processes relating to former Monsoon/Accessorize collections of Oriental-inspiration dress.



Image 27

Deconstruction sessions video stills.

Alongside these, relevant insights into contemporary modest vogues (both high-end and high-street) available on the British market were derived via individual interviews with retail outlet representatives (shop owners, department store supervisors, marketing and sales associates) from:

- *Harrods, Liberty, Harvey Nichols* and *Selfridges* in the cities of London and Birmingham, and

- over 15 (traditionally-focused¹⁰⁸) modest wear shops in and around central Leicester — on occasion, guided by a study participant.

This information was further complemented by a survey of popular Western high-street womenswear (scarves included) stores such as *Monsoon*, *Accessorize*, *H&M*, *John Lewis*, *Debenhams*, accompanied by hijab wearers and their expressed preferences and observations (‘participative shopping’ sessions). Finally, two Muslim imams were co-opted for a supplementary charting of hijab’s religious significance.

Therefore, my study also proposes a detailed analysis of the naturally-ensuing feedback loop exemplified below (**Figure 1**), marking an effort to further illuminate the psycho-socio-cultural aspects of hijab wearing, alongside their entanglement with commercial, fashion and design-related descriptors (see **Chapters 4-6**).

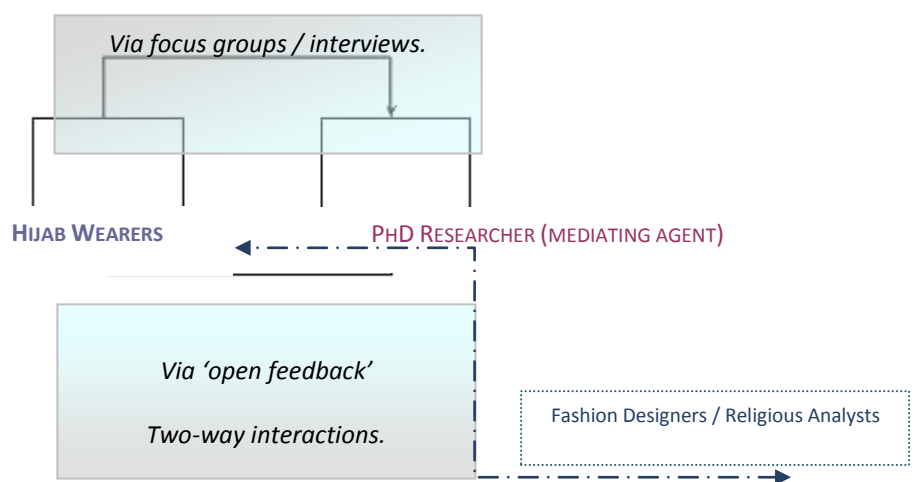


Figure 1
The processuality of my research.

¹⁰⁸ I am referring mostly to fashion traditions imported from South Asia and the U.A.E., chiefly India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Dubai.

3.2.1. Interviews: Modes, Particularities and Locations

The interviews I conducted were semi-structured, non-directive and consisted of 15-30 questions per interaction, all contextually adapted to fit the character and individuality of each participant. That is to say that not only the range, but also the content of my questions (see **Appendix B** for a full sample) has been subjected to a fluid *process of adjustment* — even throughout the actual interviewing sessions — depending on the answers received and non-verbal signals that were fed back to me. It is well known in clinical psychology that this type of “semi-structured interviewing, perhaps more than other types of interviewing, depends on the *rapport* established between interviewer and interviewee ...”, requiring a “sensitive and ethical negotiation” between the two (Willig, 2008, p. 25).

In general, therefore, the questions have been conceived as open, permissive, leaning toward the unstructured end of the narrative spectrum (see also sections **3.3** and **3.4.** below), in the form of ‘*why*’, ‘*how*’, ‘*by what means*’ or ‘*in what sense*’. Needless to say, all interactions were preceded by a written, as well as an oral introduction detailing my academic credentials, institutional affiliation and research purposes.

3.2.2. Focus Groups

Focus groups were my second investigative tool, and were generally very closely related to the interviewing process, meaning that many of the subjects I interviewed individually also took part in one or more group discussions, either before or after the one-to-one sessions (depending on each individual’s characteristics, engagement with my study and circumstantial need for further clarification). All of the group sessions of this sort have taken place at the *Markfield Institute of Higher Education*, facilitated by the benevolence of the librarian on site, Jasmine, followed by the courtesy of some residents. Where the focus group questions are concerned, they were very similar in form and content to my interview guide, with particular importance allocated to exchanges *between* respondents and any ‘open ends’ arisen on this course. Albeit that, for reasons related to economy of space (as mentioned above), I could not nominally and exhaustively include in this dissertation all the individuals with whom I came into empirical contact, it should be noted that their input and particular interpersonal *rapports* have helped, without exception, inform the case studies explored at length throughout the following three chapters.

As a more general observation, it is also important to note that efforts have been made to distance my project's 'logistics' from any autocratic or interventionist patterns of communication, focusing instead on in-depth, yet purposefully *colloquial* conversations between researcher and hijab wearers; this created a free, non-'ideological', open and natural context wherein the research topic could be qualitatively explored. As a matter of fact, the main purpose of group encounters was to create a 'dynamization' of data by reuniting various women (whose number varied from two¹⁰⁹ to eight) who were, via a semi-structured focus group guide (see **Appendix B**), encouraged by me to spontaneously voice opinions, anecdotes, habits, agreements, disagreements, and other feeling hijab-related. In fact, this topic — extremely familiar to the participants but because of that often taken for granted in their day-to-day life — proved to be a splendid discursive catalyst, for it is known that "focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives — but don't" (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004, p. 65).

Normally, once a question was asked, participants would sequentially provide their answers. However, no fixed rhetorical rules prevailed, which often resulted in responses that generated new questions, and eventually redirected the conversation in unpredictable, animated directions and exciting 'fringe' topics. One interesting example:

[Focus group sequence 1, November 2012]:

Hyacine: Have you seen *P.S: I Love You*? [girls squeak and exclaim and cheer, taking much pleasure in discussing actors, films and fictitious roles/figures — other examples include Orlando Bloom: see **Chapter 5**, section 5.3.]

Eshel: I love it! I LOVE IT! I LOOOVE IT! Eshel [resuming]: Did you see [*The Bounty Hunter*?

Voice: *I did!*

[Researcher says no.]

Eshel: Ah, it's nice too. But he[Scottish actor Gerard Butler]'s like a jerk there! [laughter] [this moral evaluation doesn't appear to bother either of the girls much, as what they are primarily discussing here is the actor's looks.]

¹⁰⁹ The principal difference between an interview with two participants and a focus group with the same number was the form of my invitation, plus the orientation of conversation: whereas in a coupled interview, the stress would fall mainly on the information I received from each of my respondents, in a focus group where only two participants were available to meet the stress fell particularly on the *interaction* between these.

Voice: Which is cool...

Hyacine: Have you seen *The Ugly Truth*? [also featuring actor Gerard Butler — some of the girls prove to know more about this actor than the researcher knew at the time; manifest captivation for films of this genre.]

Eshel: Ooooh, yea, I love it, *love* it...!

[while other girls talk indecipherably about similar films/actors.]

Hyacine: You know, in my town there's this guy who comes into town 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 I was like... [fades] [in this interim, the researcher was filling out some of the respondents' names on a sheet of paper and was partly distracted from the ongoing conversation; in this sense, the exchange surprised me in the posture of a spectator, rather than a participant.]. Hyacine: [resumes, quoting herself] 'Do you know who you look like?' And I was like 'Gerard Butler!', and he goes like... 'Reeally?', and I go like 'Yeeeee! Take it as a compliment!' [laughs; other girls laugh too.].

Often, the expressed satisfaction of taking part in such groups (which, I noted, increased particularly in the course of focus groups involving more than four participants) unwittingly led to exceeding durations of scheduled encounters. I believe this was also partly due to the democratic manner I had 'reassigned' social roles to fit my research purpose, aims and objectives. Namely, from a researcher-guided rhetorical position *actively* attributing equal roles to respondents (where this would have automatically implied their vulnerability toward myself in my capacity of 'expert'), I have intentionally cast aside this 'shadow of power', opting instead for an interactive framework wherein all parties involved in communication — researcher included — had an equal say, an equal merit and an equally significant perspective. For instance:

[Focus group excerpt 2, November 2012]

Hyacine: This is gonna sound really ... [indcipherable], but have you ever watched *Harry Potter*?

Researcher: Yes, of course. I liked it.

Hyacine: Do you know Hermione?

Researcher: Yes, I 'know' her very well [laughs].

Hyacine: You look like her!

Eshel (and girls): Yeeees, she doooooees! [laughter]

Hyacine: You look like Emma Watson! Yea, you look like her! This was the first thing I noticed, I was like ‘...Should I tell her?!’

Eshel: I also felt like she’s reminding me of someone, but [wasn’t sure of whom].

Maryam [resuming preceding subject]: You know, on our weddings, we don’t wear scarves, we go with outfits, just like that...

Daniella: Like Pakistani... [enumerates]

Voice [noise]: Culture.

[Researcher is shown pictures.]

Researcher [jokingly; trying to steer the discussion back to the topic of interest]: Oh, any images from *Harry Potter* that come to mind, relating to hijab? [Girls laugh.]

These modes of ‘rhetorical’ interaction can be illustrated in the following manner:

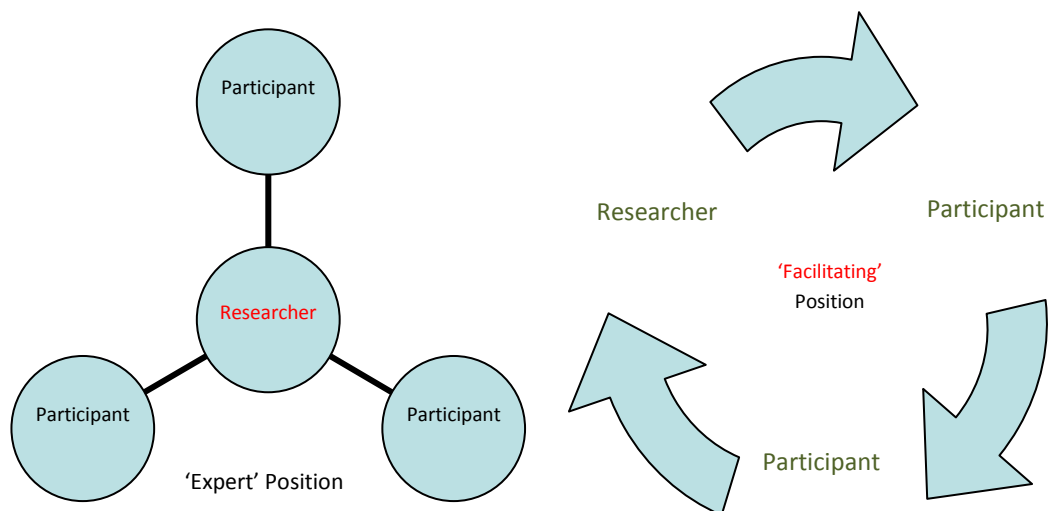


Figure 2

Visual representation of researcher-participants interaction.

3.2.3. 'Participative' Shopping

Complementing the preceding two methods of inquiry and offering an alternative to the classical way of collecting information, this technique (mostly used for conducting 'shadow' research on measuring and improving customers' feed-back vis-à-vis marketed products and company services — e.g., Pike & Gordon, 1997, quoted in Desai, 2002, p. 31) has been adapted by me in the case of my own research, proving a helpful and dynamic mode of producing qualitative data *while* activities were being carried out.

More specifically, I used the procedure to address one of this study's purposes, namely that of exploring hijab wearer attitudes, reactions to merchandise and subjective preferences for styles/products; in this sense, the focus was shifted from the market goods themselves onto the (potential) customer. In practical terms, I accompanied three of the interviewees I was better acquainted with on shopping excursions in shopping venues, and recorded their behaviours in such commercial and informal social environments. To provide an example, on the first trip, my company consisted of Faaiza and Sabiya, both study residents and roommates at the *M.I.H.E.* The two thus became my guides toward a more accurate familiarization with their commercial and aesthetic preferences, 'on site'. Our destination was the *Highcross* Shopping Center in downtown Leicester, where we took approximately two hours strolling from one store to another while evaluating various stocks of scarves, jewellery (pins, broaches, bangles, earrings) and hand bags. The locations that mostly appealed to them were the *John Lewis*, *Monsoon/Accessorize*, *H&M* and *Miss Selfridge* stores.

Alongside the advantages put forth by a casual¹¹⁰, appealing research set-up (which, indeed, has shed considerable light on my participants' fashion/consumer tastes), the main limits of this tool, and also the factors that determined me to confine the number of such meetings to three, were:

1. The physical distance to shopping malls, in fact to any commercial areas, from the *M.I.H.E.*, provided that the latter is located about 25 minutes away (by car) from downtown Leicester and not very well serviced by public transportation. Additionally, inviting *M.I.H.E.* residents to join me on this journey involved a

¹¹⁰ Sabiya (25 years of age, a graduate student at *M.I.H.E.*), for instance, appeared significantly more at ease and out of her 'shell' on this occasion, which is to say showed more responsiveness and enthusiasm to the pleasant switch from our previous indoor meetings.

responsibility on my behalf and a significant amount of ‘trust’ on theirs, both delicate issues that I did not want to abuse in any way.

2. The difficulty in effectively keeping track of factual and dialogical *in situ* data, especially since a voice recorder turned out to be virtually impossible to use in such loud, crowded, physically dynamic circumstances. This meant that most of my recordings on the days were performed in writing, and this element in itself contributed to a reduction in the quality of documentation, having the side effects of raising my participants’ wariness and ‘muting’ their input to a certain extent, by constantly foregrounding my role of ‘expert observant’. An exception from this was Atarra, who showed an impressive amount of mobility (despite having her baby daughter travel with us at all times), tenacity and willingness to contribute to this study to her best ability.

3. The strict timetable which *M.I.H.E.* residents observed (including courses, prayer breaks etc.), which resulted in some of the girls proving challenging to get a hold of, even though they lived on the Institute’s premises. Moreover, others commuted from different cities, thus further reducing their availability to take part in the exercise.

3.2.4. Participant Observation

Alongside written notes recording details left unmapped in our conversations (e.g., written descriptions of scarves/outfits/accessories worn by respondents), I have also kept a relatively strict *post-factum* fieldwork diary, comprising visual and behavioural descriptions of participants, as well as interesting topics that we had discussed and possible directions for future study. The diary proved a very useful recording tool especially following situations where I had been unable to use an audio recorder, but also in ‘rounding up’ holistic interpretations of meta-discursive/non-verbal factors which can greatly influence the accuracy of subsequent data processing (Becker & Geer, 1960; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

3.3. Applying the Methods: A Subject-Centered Approach

A first and noteworthy particularity of this project's methodology lies in its intent to approach the principle of *hijab* — both at an abstract/conceptual and at a practical, functional level — as an exploration of individual meanings, styles and sartorial realities, and also in view of its symbolic acculturation in a Western context. The fashion-sensitive Islamic women of different ages, geographies, upbringings, personal tastes and aesthetic preferences whom I interviewed provided an ideal 'knowledge pool' for my research to probe. For, despite their heterogeneous demographic characteristics, they were all united in spending significant amounts of time in the West (Europe and North America, and particularly Britain); the importance of this transient cultural landscape will be further evidenced at relevant points in following chapters.

That is why the present project has taken the course of a wide, open-ended, yet in-depth analytic incursion into the life experiences, related understandings and stylistic configurations of individual hijabis, most of them brought together in Leicestershire by one factor alone: their desire to learn more about their faith (and, implicitly, about themselves) in a spiritually-oriented Institute of Higher Education (the *M.I.H.E.*). Even if the 'student of Islam' descriptor does not literally apply to the full gamut of interviewees (for instance, it does not characterize participants interviewed in the city of London, Bradford and Nottingham), at the time our conversations took place, they all confirmed their personal commitment and continuous 'studentship' to Islamic thought and teachings, attributes positively reinforced among Muslim communities worldwide.

Also related to my commitment to the projects' focus on diversity, inclusion and idiographic engagement was the decision to conduct the fieldwork — in groups, pairs or individually — as psychologically comfortable as possible. Therefore, adopting a position of 'silenced' authority as an interviewer, while nonetheless retaining a professional fieldwork attitude (e.g., recurrently attempting to divert attention from my own input to that of the participants, always being warm, accommodating and non-intrusive throughout the dialogues) has generated more prolific results than initially expected, confirming that a harmonious, relaxed set-up plays a significant role in eliciting more reliable, sensible and generous answers (see also Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, Chapters 3-4; Hollway & Jefferson, 2007; Woodside, Megehee & Ogle, 2009). This was, of course, a gradual

process of learning and discovery, aided by a genuine interest in the vastly complex topic of veiling (particularly when the stress falls on individually-sifted, emotional aspects thereof), both on my behalf and on my respondents', who gradually enriched and nuanced their insights as well as their attitudes — initially sceptical on occasion — toward myself as a virtual stranger. As a result, oftentimes our discussions felt truly natural, unstrained and completely 'untainted' by the formality of an 'academic interviewing' routine.

Drawing from Hollway & Jefferson's (2007) experience with narrative forms of interviewing and free association techniques — which they have skilfully included in the active process of interviewing as aids in situations where the subjects appear vulnerable, defensive or reluctant to share information — I myself have deduced that such psycho-rhetorical enhancements can indeed prove helpful, particularly so in collective discussions. Combining these insights with an implicitly respectful, discreet and warm attitude proved highly beneficial in a scenario where the non-Muslim, non-hijab-wearing 'outsider' (myself), incidentally the investigator of a publicly sensitive issue (Islamic dress), was initially concerned that she would be perceived as an unfamiliar, potentially untrustworthy stranger. This might have well been the case before my discovery of the group of informants from the *M.I.H.E.*, during a fairly lengthy timespan when I failed to gain access to other Muslim quarters (for instance, through Nottingham Trent Students' Union, or by 'prospecting' various local communities).

Nonetheless, I was fortuitously served by a particular advantage in the *M.I.H.E.* case. As mentioned earlier, I was fortunate to have been introduced by a 'Muslim sister'¹¹¹, Sarvat, to my future interviewees. This immediately created a 'head start' investing me with credentials, reliability and a crucial sense of *belonging*. More so, I was introduced to my participants *as* a 'sister' ('Meet sister Ruxandra!') — another 'white flag' that later proved of salient importance, when building up the number of participants via snowballing. It was only through the kindness, tact and reliability of Sarvat (and other hijabis consequently acting in a similar manner) that the gates to my ethnographic work were opened. Further enhancing this advantage was the fact that I too was a student, in a discipline where my subjects had arguably more authority than myself: the lore and everyday experience of hijab — which triggered a great willingness on many of my informants' behalves to host

¹¹¹ Rather than invoking feminist language through my use of this term, I am quoting and acknowledging the terminology deployed among Muslim women when referring to a 'sister in faith', and simultaneously my own adjustment to this atmosphere of 'sisterhood'.

and guide my navigation through the subject, thus positively contributing to my contextualization among respondents.

In other words, I would argue that this has developed as a reciprocal learning process: one through which I was being exposed to demonstrations of, and incursions into, the material and immaterial aspects of hijab, into hijabis' covering perceptions, peculiarities and modulations; and another one, by which *I* as a researcher was exposing *my informants* to the ways in which a non-Muslim viewer, or 'outsider', might respond to this symbol and its complexities, what the world outside knows, thinks or is curious to find out, and how these two planes (namely, the hijab and its audience) interact in turn.

Thirdly, knowing that I too was rather young and eager to learn as much as I could as an individual (something that inevitably transpired throughout many of our lighter-hearted discussions), *empathy* and *reciprocal trust* (Neuman, 2003; Hollway & Jefferson, 2007) became two pivotal ingredients. Understanding the contexts the interviewees spoke of, the origin of their thoughts, the cultural settings where they had developed their tastes and life views, and the intrinsic dynamics involved in making not one, but often several difficult choices in a world of constant tension and prejudice, did not come particularly easily unless met half-way.

That is chiefly the reason why the point where I began to actually probe into first-hand, real-life data did not come from the very start; quite the contrary — some scepticism and caution prevailed throughout the first (tens of) minutes of almost every discussion, as I was introducing myself and my research field. In a broader sense, I was, in fact, confronted with a series of 'false starts'. For example, some potential participants lacked a real interest in my research from the very beginning, manifested either during the pilot-interviews or beyond (i.e. did not respond upon receiving my written invitation to partake in the study, which included a brief description thereof). Others (two, to be exact) decided to step back later along the way, invoking lack of time, or with no reported reason respectively. However, having anticipated this possibility in the preliminary stages of my interviewing scheme, I was able to shift, if not substitute, the input lost through the absence of these individuals, to 'newly-found' voices with equally significant insights (individuals who joined my study in the second or third year).

Also, I was careful about clearly and consistently reminding my participants of their freedom to continue or cease the interviewing process at any point, as well as about any

privacy, anonymity, or other delicate issues encountered along the way. Furthermore, one of the pivotal aspects that I noticed mitigated concerns and ensured the creation of a mutual trust atmosphere was the similarity between myself and many of my informants in terms of age, cultural ‘distance’ (or at least some contrast) to the United Kingdom, as well as the status of ‘student’ in a discipline that they valued. Therefore, I was able to observe how this usually triggered a warm, accommodating attitude on their part, which translated in their acting as guides welcoming me into Islamic knowledge and culture.

In this manner, I was pleased to note that much of the dynamic I imagine otherwise would have been inhibited by various (unavoidable) cultural differences and/or strain has been emotionally facilitated, producing a win-win situation for both researcher, who benefitted from more detailed and in-depth personal views, and participants — who felt more at ease discussing a variety of topics, some more enjoyable, and some more sensitive than others (Hollway & Jefferson, 2007; Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). Once placed in the same room as me, and after heedfully observing, then gradually becoming to trust the authenticity of my scope and good intentions, most respondents followed suit with deeper, more thorough and fruitful modes of interaction. To illustrate the transition from the more *formal* toward the more *informative* end of my investigation, the fragment below originates from a conversation between myself and two Saudi-Arabian students currently residing in Nottingham (Mea and Madeeha):

[Paired interview excerpt 1, November 2011]:

Researcher [finishing to navigate through some demographic and introductory questions]: Can you please tell me your age?

Mea: 28.

R.: ...And could I ask now, when did you first start to wear the hijab?

Mea: I started wearing hijab since 2007 [note here the scarcity of detail at this point in our conversation].

...

R.: Were you born in the U.K.?

Mea: No, I was born in Saudi Arabia, then we moved on to the U.K. in 2009. I was first in Canada, and from Canada I moved to the U.K.

R.: Cosmopolitanism, right? [laughs, trying to defuse and lighten up the atmosphere.]

Mea: Yea [laughs — but doesn't go beyond that].

...

[R. asks Madeeha to write her name down, so as to remember it better and also to take a short break from an apparently rigid point in conversation.]

Madeeha: Actually, in my culture, we start wearing hijab after you reach the adolescence age, so at 13 or 14 I must wear the hijab [already]. So I started wearing it in my country, of course...

R.: So, around this age, 13, 14?

Madeeha: Yes.

R.: Which country are you referring to?

Madeeha: Saudi Arabia.

...

[gradually progressing toward more insightful responses:]

R. [having just asked Mea to show how she ties the two-layered scarf she was wearing at the time]: I see how you tie it... Do you do it like that yourself [Mea has two scarves on, one on top of the other, covering her hair, but not her neck], or do you buy it [readily shaped so]?

Mea: No, no, I tie it, it's two scarves and I put it together.

R. [surprised]: Ah, ok, ok... [encouraging Mea to explain a little more about the process.]

Mea: Yea, sometimes I make something fashion[able] like this, and sometimes I use the traditional way. So, it's different. And then, after I gave birth to my son in 2007, he was sick [thus hijab as a helping aid through a traumatic experience¹¹²]; so he stayed in ICU... maybe for about three months. And then I'm just trying to... rethink about anything [sic], because as a Muslim, you know, we believe in God, so I'm just trying to find my way back to my God. So I felt maybe... I do most of the good things, so why not wearing hijab? So I started to wear hijab and I like[d] it. [note here an already more generous answer, compared to that provided above in response to the same question.]

Performed in a 'democratic', minimally-invasive key, which is to say by entirely respecting not only their rights, but also their personalities, concerns and attitudes, this

¹¹² See the 'significant life event' thematic course developed in **Chapters 4, 5 and 6**.

discussion mode proved even more fruitful in other interactions, with groups or individuals, which I will return to in more detail.

3.3.1. In-Depth Engagement

Another element accounting for this study's distinctiveness, not only in approach, but also in quality of ethnographic data, relates to my participants' personal autonomy, determination and, in some cases, sharp ability to pierce through the substance of things (which is to say, their analytic intelligence) — exemplified at more length below. Salient here are, of course, the diverse cultural backgrounds that informants brought to the 'table', and, implicitly, the interesting ways in which these integrated, or 'fused' together, throughout our encounters.

Also to be specified here is that apparently singular discussion topics could 'grow' many more 'fringes' and distinct fields of inquiry, as correspondences between separate life quarters emerged. Nevertheless, this did not compromise the consistent cohesive atmosphere and 'feel' of our interactions, or the fitting of everything together, from thought to behavioural pattern and from clothing preferences to ideas about piety, tradition, purity, love etc. — something based on a certain (moral and emotional) *quality* of life, and maturity of affect:

[Focus Group Excerpt 4, November 2011]:

Vanda: When I came to Islam — I was like 18, 19 — I was aware that hijab is part of Islam, but it was not the part that was appealing to me, that made me become a Muslim. So I thought that I would wear it someday, maybe when I'm like in my 50s, or 40, 30. ... I knew it was a part mentioned in the Qur'an, ... but still, I was not [ready], I was working on other things that I saw more important. Like I started to pray and worked on my *character* and all those *principles* that you should have [when following Islam]. I thought you should not wear hijab when you're talking bad about other people, like all those moral things that you are asked to do, I thought it's better to work on them first; obviously, they're harder than just putting a scarf on your head.

[resumes] I thought you need to be *good*, like you need to produce a good picture of Islam, so work on yourself first and then put the hijab on. ... It was similar, when I started, my aunt was really ill [again, significant life events as a recurring theme enforcing the decision to adopt the scarf], and she died of cancer during a year, so like all the plans that you think 'oh, I'll do this

someday, like I'll wear hijab someday', you question yourself: 'Well, when is a good thing to do, why not do it today?'. And then I thought 'well, the character thing, I will not be done anyway, ever'. Yes, so this was like the idea of 'first, let me become a perfect person and then put on the hijab' — this is not the way, it's impossible.

...

[a bit later on, asked about their personally-ascribed hijab meanings:]

Sarah: Obviously, first of all it's part of the religion. It's not optional. And number two, like we were discussing earlier, yes, it gives you *that confidence* where there's *male* and *female* and you're like an *equal* [sic]... There's even been times when I have tried to wear very nice scarves, you know, like being more trendy. And it just changes the way that men treat you even by that. You know, I've changed it a little bit and then I've got *the* [unwanted] *attention*. And it was like what, by just changing my scarf, it became from nobody saying anything to me, being as though I haven't got one on, you know? What's that all about?! Just by changing the colour and the style... So there, that affirmed, I think, even more to me how important it is. That said to me in a nutshell how more important it is. ... So yes, for me even to just change the colour and the style made the men react in a completely different way. It's also that if I want to be treated as an equal, to be relaxed, comfortable, study, work — it's part of that as well.

...

Maryam: Even in terms of the boundaries of hijab, I don't let society dictate how I'm gonna wear it, whether it's men liking it or disliking it — it's about what boundaries God Himself set. Like, am I allowed to wear it coloured? Yes, ok, then I'm not going to feel guilty if someone likes the colour of my hijab. I know that God has approved of it and I'm doing it for Him. Same thing style-wise, but without going against the actual conditions, 'cause some styles are actually breaking the rules, but I stick to God's rules and I'm doing it in that sense [note the interesting play between theological and psycho-sartorial deliberations]. The other thing that I thought was nice was when you [Alena] said that about being seen as a sister in society. I think not that this is like a reason for wearing it, but I find that in interactions — 'cause I've been born and raised in the West [the United States of America, more specifically] — sometimes women are perceived in the West as being sort of threatening to men, and so I noticed that my presence around co-workers and in the university... People felt... [having a difficult time explaining] — like men, male colleagues, they felt much more relaxed around me, in the sense of... just talking to me normally about something. I worked in a corporation, I won't say the name, and I noticed that it was all women in this flat, and there were some men in the legal department, and they would always work with their door closed. And women would come in, and they were wearing like horrible stuff [intertext: with a sexual appeal] at work, but then they would always try to talk to these men [in a sexually-charged manner], their male co-workers, and I noticed that co-workers, they had families, pictures of their kids all around them, and

they just didn't want to interact with them. But if it was *me coming in*, I would ask about 'oh, that's your son, he is very cute', or whatever, and then he would tell me the whole story about his son or... He felt comfortable just being a human being, and knowing I don't want anything from him, like I'm not trying to get his attention or anything like that; I'm just a friend and a co-worker. So I feel like [more humanized this way]. And the people have told me, like guys of my classes have told me, 'I just want to *thank you for being you!*' [laughs].

Relevant to highlight here is that, although my interviewees almost unanimously declared that they have *actively* chosen to don the headscarf (along with every religious, political and philosophical sub-layer it entails) following a long process of deliberation and self-reflection, this proof of intellectual activism, resolute character and decisiveness never materialized in any form of 'radical' behaviour; quite the opposite: I was repeatedly stricken, in my capacity of moderator, by the self-restraint, candour and wisdom they consistently showed, even in the most spontaneous stances.

3.3.2. Storytelling, and the Pleasure of Sharing¹¹³

From an inter-personal perspective, also worth noting is the fact that my status had barely reached that of a relative acquaintance, when I was thrust in the midst of a fascinating set of dynamics: one between myself and the participants present, and another one between the interviewees themselves, particularly in the case of paired or group dialogue sessions. Despite the obvious differences in most personal variables (biographical background, social or economic status, personality, keenness to discuss matters, attitude, and even language use), the pleasure of story-telling by being together and 'catching one's breath', of intimate all-girls interaction and even some innocent gossip about fabrics, styles, make-up, accessories, magazines, designers and what not (indeed, films and Hollywood stars included), often seemed to render me completely redundant — a mere observer indulging in the richly ethnographic value of their enthused talks. Although I will later refer to, and explore, some of the material below in more detail, it may prove useful to include here a larger 'chunk' of dialogue reinforcing the point above:

[Focus Group Excerpt 2, November 2011]

Alena: But when you are older ... you don't want to be attractive to *every man*, you want to be attractive to *your man*. You know? And that is [the] making [of] hijab, hijab is making you

¹¹³ This is an important thematic thread followed up in **Chapters 4, 5 and 6.**

super attractive to your man, to your own man, to your own husband. ... You take it off at home, you're the princess, you know? They didn't see other girls taking off their [hijab]. ... Because, I mean, of course, we all want to be attractive, and I *love* it when we get compliments.

Runa: I love make-up, I wanna [wear] make-up the whole day, but I wouldn't wear it in public; but that's me. [self-correcting] Sometimes I do, I'm not gonna say I don't — it's like, if I'm going out with my husband, he likes me to put it on.

Sarah [42 years old at the time of this conversation, thus older and arguably more age-conscious than Runa, aged 31]: [allow me] To disagree. No, I'm just saying, because I feel as you get older, you *do* still want [to be attractive]. Not that I want to be that for every Tom, Dick and Harry, but it's natural, you know, that as you get older, your kids are growing up, and you still [want to look good]. Because that is *the feminine*, that is part of you as a woman, if that is taken out of you, then what are you? You know, I don't mean that in a funny way, you know, you're just like... what are you, then? That's part of you being a woman. And then, once your children are growing up, once your husband is getting older, you still want that [feminine] side to be there, you know? Whilst you want it to be there when you're young...

Alena [slightly recalibrating the topic]: *Inside* you — like outside you don't want to be flirtatious...

...

Maryam: This lady loves leopard print, let me tell you [indicating Sarah; laughter, brief comment exchanges].

R. [to Sarah]: Do you like it [leopard print] in general, or is it... [interrupted]

Sarah: Yes, I like it in general. I wouldn't mind a rug in it [laughter], cushions in it — I just like it in general, yea.

...

Aasia: My husband sometimes makes decisions on that. Like he doesn't like [the print] to be bright, and to be like... examples of animals, or you know [animal prints].

[collective laughter.]

Alena: In my case, I personally like plain colours and simple colours. I LOVE brown and cream and cappuccino colours. Oh, yes, I like silk, material case [sic], I like silk, and not shiny silk. It has to be matte silk. I don't like polyester in case of the quality, it's really bad, like some polyesters are really bad materials, not even healthy, but [the advantage is] you don't need to iron it all the time. In that case, practical case, it's preferable.

Sarah: But do you like print, like say... [gesticulates].

Alena: When it comes to print, I hate prints, but when I'm with my parents, I can't go around if I wear simple colours. I do not fit [in], cause everyone is like in the super-super printed colours, so the Turkish hijab is, you know, the strand of full prints, beautiful prints, you know, those Pierre Cardin hijabs, they're all... Versace hijabs, they're all very printed. And if I would wear this [points to the hijab she's wearing, which is a dark purple-toned silk hijab worn inside out], that is worn at home — this print, it's worn at home, when you have male guests and you want to wear something comfortable. But when you're going out, it has to be *really* nicely printed, you know? And it has to fit with everything, like my mom bought me a scarf for this outfit here, it has this print [same as her outfit's], brighter. She said it has to be brighter in order to match it, so it doesn't soak it, but it does stick out. *I* can't wear it, it's too shiny. This one here is shiny normally [refers to the one she's wearing], my mom bought it shiny, in plain colour — thank Allah, she learned my taste [laughs] — but I turn it to the *matte side* [thus adapting it], I don't like it shiny. Yeah, when it comes to shawls, I love them, but I feel as if my face looks too fat [referring to the scarf's impact on her personal perception of attractiveness], therefore I don't like to wear that. I look like a different person in it, I think.

Alena [resumes]: I know some people who do not recognize me when I change my style [i.e. mostly shape].

Vanda: They all think I'm Turkish immediately, if I wear it like that!

...

Alena: But it is [also] a kind of respect if you adjust to your environment. If I'm in California and I go around in a black hijab, it doesn't match — everyone is *bright* over there [environment-sensitive adjustment]. If you're in Germany [Alena has resided in Germany throughout her childhood and adolescence] and you wear white, people are generally in grey and black, so... It depends on where you are, but I prefer not to go in... I mean, not to change too much from my own taste.

Maryam: Recently, I just discovered that if you wear hijab in a way, as long as you're fulfilling all the conditions of the hijab, you can wear it in *different* forms. It's always actually existed in different forms. And you could be more rewarded for actually *adjusting your hijab* to the culture of the land, because then that land will... You're making a contribution to that society that's within its own cultural framework. For example, when Islam came to Malaysia, it didn't impose jilbabs [outer robes] on everyone; but *the Malaysians adjusted their clothing* to the Islamic guidelines, and they had their own beautiful [note the recurrent stress on aspect] Islamic dress. Same thing in other, all the different Muslim countries — Pakistan, India... Not everyone's wearing a jilbab, but that's still... That's a cultural expression of Islam. So what I'm trying to do now, although if I wanted to follow what my heart says, my heart wants to wear like big, fat, fluffy jilbabs, that's what I want to do. But the concept of, like, I want to also

make a contribution, make it so that Americans, regular Americans would not feel like this is something foreign. It can be an American thing, hijab can be American. And there can be an American hijab that fits their cultural tastes and that's not really so far from where they are right now.

3.4. Notes on Ethnographic Value and Innovation

Other valuable aspects and contributions that this ethnography puts forth are the following:

1. My external role, as neither-Muslim, nor fully 'Western' investigator (given my Eastern European origin and upbringing) and how it has enabled me to act as an important facilitator and natural catalyst for my participants' desire to bring forth significant dimensions of modesty, inclusive, for example, of 'emancipatory' and 'escapist' variables (further unwrapped in **Chapter 6**).

2. The great benefit of *focus groups* in exploring and explicating *dynamic* hijab contexts, in terms of taste-formation, reinforcement, distillation and distortion of meaning; for instance, whereas other authors such as Bălăşescu (2007), Sandıkcı & Ger (2010) or Tarlo (2010) rely on ethnographic input derived from singular interviewing, I believe that a vital amount of hijab preferences, behaviours and aspirations (all the more so in Western environments) can be, and is, derived from inter-personal, inter-cultural planes of negotiation and social 'comparison'. This justifies the priority placed in my methodological design on focus group 'debates', which have indeed sparked a free, unencumbered transfer of information of salient significance for hijab-related meanings. Another interesting peculiarity lies in the apparent contrast between targeting *individual* sartorial preferences, aesthetics and underlying rationales, which are nevertheless brought forward in a *collective* context, within a communal and interactive socio-verbal environment (i.e. the focus group).

3. The inter-cultural aggregation of geographies, ethnic (and ethical) backgrounds and traditions conjoined on British territory, under the auspices of an Islamic Institute for Higher Education. This foregrounds another difference from more 'orthodox' focuses placed by other authors on a particular ethnic environment's relation with dress (e.g., the case of Egypt (Abaza, 2007), Yemen (Moors, 2007) or

India (Osella & Osella, 2007), just to name a few); and/or on transcultural fashion-style phenomena (Schulz, 2007; Halasa & Salam, 2008). The demographically eclectic nature of my fieldwork added significant value to the capturing of hijab as a fluid/global nexus of intra- and inter-cultural connotations (or micro- and macro-cultural respectively).

Thematically, these efforts converged toward a theoretic contextualization and in-depth examination of current covering practices surveyed around the following, all underresearched, landmarks:

1. The oscillations — in veiling, de-veiling, persisting in veiling (despite reported impediments / hostile factors) and ‘little things’ (of a micro-cultural nature) that contribute to the metaphorical ‘thickness’ of a garment, and its depth in the wearer’s biography. By this I am referring to key, often subtle, factors that ‘tip the scales’ in a wearer’s life in favour of, or against, adopting, maintaining, or even renouncing the hijab, enhancing its secondary valences (e.g., fashion-related).
2. The self-‘liberating’ and improving function of hijab, as a trope for (imaginary/affective) escape or cathexis. As for the object of escaping, I am referring to either scrutinizing ‘gazes’ of a judgemental community (e.g., the case of Atarra, perused in **Chapter 4**), the avoidance of quotidian prosaicness and a related quest for something ‘greater’ (Amena, Rezia), or, other times, to the transcendence of one’s own painful, traumatizing, self-questioning past experiences (again, the case of Amena, as well as that of Atarra, Mea, Alena or Vanda). This existential escapism occurs primarily in the mind, through the use of metaphor and reconsiderations of values and principles, yet is also reflected at the surface of the textile, thus investing it with the *depth* defended by me in the **Introduction**.
3. A more holistic, synergistic, synaesthetic dimension to modest attire, circumscribing the cultural/aesthetic, sensuous/sensorial, as well as meta-levels of individual pre-emption, ranging from the sartorial to the oneiric, and from the spiritual to the philosophical, or even ‘mystical’ meanings ascribed (as similarly documented by Miller in the case of material objects more broadly — 2011a, 2012, Chapter 1). As afore mentioned, this explicitly detaches my study from the widely and rather repeatedly debated political, historical and socio-religious aspects of veiling, which abound in the literature (Mernissi, 1995; El Guindi, 1999a; Castelli

& Rodman, 2001; Shirazi, 2001; Bullock, 2003; Bowen, 2007; McGoldrick, 2006; Laborde, 2008; Wallach Scott, 2010).

4. A series of previously uncharted hijab styles: e.g., the innovative aesthetic of the *hoojab* (or ‘winged hijab’), invented and patented by Internet entrepreneur Amena (**Chapter 6**).

In the following chapters, therefore, I will begin to address all of these subjects — plus relevant examples, interpretations and extrapolations — in close detail.

Chapter 4

Aesthetics of Experience: On *Individuals* in Hijab

This chapter marks the beginning of my primary data examination and charts a first descriptive perimeter around the concept of covering, understood as agency-driven individual aesthetics and foregrounded against the collective framework wherein the influence of communities — both hijabi and non-hijabi — is interiorized and deployed in different ways, for different purposes.

Zooming in on key (Western) societal elements that ‘weigh’ on how hijab is worn and adapted in the British context, along with adjacent rationales relevant in the decision-making process (e.g., ‘foreign’, non-Western traditions and their influence; the desire to appeal to the opposite sex etc.), I will refer to examples of how modest garments impact on individuals and ‘individuality’, and their facilitating role in attaining self-development, self-confidence, social empowerment, acceptance, respectability, as well as more or less subtle forms of (cultural) resistance. In introducing hijab-related *experiences*, certain paradoxes, such as conceiving the cover as a symbol of moral integrity while simultaneously eschewing (wearing) it in situations where it becomes an obstacle in the way of social integration, will be outlined.

4.1. Preliminary Notes: On Meaning and Individuality

As a preliminary observation that will later allow me to engage with and extrapolate this theme into the broader context of my study, it should be noted that material objects can function as ‘talismans’, or recipients of ritual and belief, imbued with meaning much beyond their physical borders. Referring to “the force of things” and using the example of objects exchanged during ceremonies in traditional civilizations, Mauss (2009) distinguishes between material items commonly used as part of everyday consumption and ‘sharing’ practices, and “the precious things which belong to the family, the various

talismans, emblazoned copper objects, blankets made of skins, or cloth bedecked with emblems” — a category defined as “*sacra* that a family divests itself of only with great reluctance, and sometimes never” (p. 55, original emphasis). In other words, such things are animated by spiritual value, possessing “individuality”, “qualities” and “power” — summed up as “fairylike qualities” — and thus can be treated as living beings, which are “mixed up with spirits, their originators” and take part in the mechanics of possessing, displaying and sharing (Mauss, 2009, pp. 56-57).

Assimilating hijabs into a semantic or experiential sphere related, for example, to the concept of ‘light’ (see also **Chapter 6** here, particularly the descriptions of Rezia’s textiles), ‘harmony’, or ‘love’ (follow Alena’s and Amena’s sartorial expressions in **Chapters 5** and **6**) often implies transformations far beyond the confines of fashion, and even beyond those of faith (understood in the broadest sense possible). The hijab may well become, or is confounded with, the wearer herself — her sentiments, her nuances, the minutiae that make up her image, person(ality), life story. In such cases, wearing an apparently simple (or at least plain-looking) scarf can nonetheless refract into a *detailed* picture of oneself, comprised of myriad nuances, or, again, to use a more technical term that seems particularly suited to metaphoric use, *pixels*¹¹⁴.

While attempting to encapsulate some of these pixels into text, I will subsequently circumscribe the idea of *individuality* in the closely-related notions of authenticity and personal experience. While the former is not without its contentions and ambiguities (to be shortly explored), the latter is used in reference to a cumulative sphere of human action and interaction, and I will generally subscribe to an integrative approach to its sense, as it is conventionally expressed below (‘experience’, Merriam-Webster dictionary):

Experience:

- “1 a: direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge

 b: the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation

- 2 a: practical knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or in a particular activity

¹¹⁴ I am borrowing this term from computer science and photography, as a metaphor for the manifold small-scale details involved in producing and/or wearing a scarf (also the micro-cultural elements surrounding it), whether pointing at the process of creation, individual appropriation or existent aesthetics of the cloth itself.

...

3 a: the conscious events that make up an individual life

...

4: something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through

5: the act or process of directly perceiving events or reality”

(Merriam-Webster, 2014).

As far as the idea of ‘authenticity’ is concerned¹¹⁵, in the Western context this seems to have emerged

“between the ages of Shakespeare and Rousseau, when men and women began to think about an authentic self as an *honest* or a *true* character, in contrast to personal duplicity, on the one hand, and to society’s false morality, on the other hand. As a social theorist, Rousseau [in close connection with earlier notions of ‘creative individualism’ and ‘creative genius’, as punctuated by Tseëlon, 2012, p. 114] developed a structural grounding for the authenticity of individual *character*. Men and women are authentic if they are closer to *nature* — or to the way intellectuals imagine a state of nature to be — than to the institutional disciplines of power.”

(Zukin, 2008, p. 728, emphasis added).

Although referring to a spatial rather than an individual ‘geography’ of authenticity in that particular context, the author integrates, for instance, alternative consumption practices in this sphere, as forms of ‘freedom’¹¹⁶, and at the same time as agential attempts a(gains)t popular cultures and commercial mainstreams, constructing auras of authenticity onto so-called *discourses of distinctiveness* (*ibidem*, pp. 734-35). (Indeed, if we are to look at current representations of feminine beauty in Western fashion magazines, we will soon find that *distinctiveness* is not only something desired, but also something actively prescribed to anyone aspiring at being in any way creative, or ‘individual’.)

Linked to the idea of truthful/genuine character and stretching it to (post)modern times is also about “the re-creation or revival of objects and motifs from the past [i.e. retro trends]. Indeed, Mark Jones has argued that the concern for authenticity has grown with the passion for revivalism ... This phenomenon is especially noticeable in the desire for authenticity in

¹¹⁵ At a cultural level, at least — see Miller, 2012, pp. 44-8, for an alternative exploration of a similar theme in the context of ancient India.

¹¹⁶ For example, the “[f]reedom to be gay instead of hetero, or just to buy raclette instead of American cheese, is ‘emplaced,’ then, in these spaces” (p. 745).

fashion” (Jenß, 2004, p. 387), where a “real thing” (authentic item) appears as something endowed with feeling, value, and, again, *rarity/uniqueness*, derived from either customization, adaptation or innovation taken in its “micro-management” sense — i.e. as a project, or process, serving to mirror the self through the object (pp. 388-91). Reverting to (youth culture) retro styles and particularly objects whose perceived authenticity has been elevated with time, Jenß reinforces that the “aura” or “charm” of historical artefacts resides in their originality/uniqueness which “merges with the subject”, investing him/her with authenticity in turn. In contemporary practice, however, the idea of a ‘true’ self no longer bears the same weight, having lent the stage to a more fluid, inconstant, malleable, innovative and progressive sense of selfhood which can also be constructed and enriched by either style, artifice or performance (*ibidem*, p. 395-96); or by a sum of these, as subsumed, for example, into clothes. Tellingly, in the particular case of dress, O’Neil (2010)¹¹⁷ remarks that

“[c]lothing can be used to protest, assimilate, and/or pass in an attempt to negotiate various situations. Dress can also serve as a ‘means of authenticating social categories [read: identities], legitimating and contesting authority, and as [a] means of producing and reproducing values”.

(O’Neil, 2010, p. 66).

Along similar lines, reflecting on the use of masks as performative and symbolic tools (for instance, in carnivals), Tseëlon (2001b) refers to their ability “to address ambiguities and to articulate the paradoxes of appearance”, as well as to deconstruct categories of identity; she builds on the conventional understanding of masking “as concealing in the sense of ‘protecting, hiding from view””, while underlining how ‘disguise’ is pictured as a case of “concealing in the sense of ‘misrepresenting’ (employing false elements)” (p. 2). If we are to insert the example of hijab in this set-up, just like the mask, it would serve as a transformative ‘cover-up’ for the wearer, symbolic yet retaining of a certain individual ‘authenticity’ (whereas a disguise would entail the ‘fuller covering’ of masquerade and, implicitly, of deceit — “deliberate covering”) (*idem*). In fact, Tseëlon goes on to develop the philosophical backdrop behind the mask in two directions: one that relies on the singular existence of an exclusively “authentic self”, in which case the mask becomes *pretense*, an instrument of deceit (*hiding* the individual); and the other — which she, as well as I, have subscribed to — regarding all human actions, or ‘selves’, as equally

¹¹⁷ This article refers to the particular case of twentieth-century dress reforms in Turkey.

authentic, allowing for plural, transformative identities that through the use of ‘masks’ simply ‘liberate’ the self, often in actions that include equally ‘authentic’ performative elements (i.e. ‘liberating’ the real self — as I will later show can be the case with hijabs) (Tseëlon, 2001b, p. 4; see also Tseëlon, 2001c, 2012; Miller, 2012, Prologue and Chapter 1; these ideas can also be found, in one form or another, in the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers, as well as in Erving Goffman’s sociology of the self).¹¹⁸

Interesting to collocate here is Eliade’s (1990) approach to masks as

“a means of dealing with *otherness*. Indeed, they represent not simply the quintessential Other but also its inversion and the possibility of transcending it. The mask shares some basic troubling features with the stranger in modernity: both defy order, introduce ambiguity and suggest lack of commitment and the questionability of belonging and not belonging.”

(quoted in Tseëlon, 2001b, p. 6).

Nevertheless, as Jenß (2004) resumes, “[i]nstead of finding an authentic self [within ourselves], we [can] work on producing it. At a time of individualization and an idealization of singularity ... [and] where the individual is forced to localize itself, the world of commodities provides key tools for identity construction, social communication and navigating the self within groups and communities” (p. 399). Important to retain from here is a response to ‘otherness’ (of the surrounding world as well as of one’s own, if we consider the extent to which ‘Easterners’ living in the West have been exposed to, and consequently absorbed, labels of ‘otherness’) on the one hand, and product consumption/enactment with a self-authentication purpose on the other: both territories to be found in modest dress creation and pre-emption. Furthermore, we can view the latter (namely, object consumption) in a ‘semiotically democratic’ sense (Fiske, 1987), as a self-mediated mode of selecting and incorporating relevant meanings of products in line with one’s individuality.

Keeping the idea of something foreign, or exotic, in an open drawer, clothing in general, and modest clothing in particular, can also signal *distinction* through (feminine) allure, charm, piety, and other features coming from ‘within’. Alongside political, class- and ideology-related factors, Hawkins (2008) notes that much of the polysemous nature — and,

¹¹⁸ In the more specific context of veil observance, this bears similarities to Mahmood’s (2003, 2005) observations on piety and women’s agency (discussed in section 2.1. in this text): much like the ‘liberating’ effects of the mask, veils also have the ability to channelize and transform the (inner) life of wearers through alterations on the outside. In other words, by altering expressions (clothing or behaviour) of the individual, structural modifications occur on the *inside*, character- and personality-wise.

implicitly, much of the (meta)spiritual ‘feel’ — of hijab gravitates around the ‘genuineness’ of the wearer: ideas related to purity, sincerity and charm thus become transferred onto the cloth itself, especially when accompanied by a sense of warmth and positive emotion (*feeling*) — which, for example, Hawkins argues contributes significantly to how attractive Tunisian hijabis are perceived by the opposite sex.¹¹⁹

This delineates a two-way mode of understanding the relationship between modest apparel and its wearers and/or makers: on the one hand, there is the genuineness and ‘meaning’ of the wearer/maker transferred onto the thing; concurrently, the thing possessed is equally, if not *more*, reflective of its owner’s character(istics). If we take Miller’s (2012) standpoint at heart, that “we too are stuff, and our use and identification with material culture provides a capacity for enhancing, just as much as for submerging, our humanity” (p. 6), then we can subscribe to his recipe for transcendence of object-subject dichotomies, and even probe the possibility that “stuff actually creates us in the first place” (*ibidem*, p. 10), or at least that it is as much made by us (living individuals) as we are ‘made’ by it, in a reciprocal equation of symbolic investment (see Miller, 2012, Chapter 1; a continuation of this train of thought will ensue here in **Chapter 6**).

To summarize, we have established the projections of the self onto personal connections to what we perceive as true, pure, or authentic (I will subsequently refer to these at both individual and objectual levels, although, as suggested above, the boundaries between the two are often porous). As opposed to mimicry, deceit or followed norm, other elements come into play, attributes such as rarity, originality, distinction, innovation and/or *uniqueness*. Just as everyday-worn items like denim¹²⁰ can be perceived as highly ‘authentic’ due to their intimate contact with the wearer as well as to their ‘unique’ combinations with other items (Woodward, 2007; Miller & Woodward, 2011b), I will

¹¹⁹ The author points out that *charm* of the covered female originates not in the interaction with males *per se*, but in the *way* she interacts with these, i.e. the emotion and singularity invested in the rapport. In this sense, being covered while preserving a genuine, reticent/bashful attitude (“hisham” is the term deployed by the author to refer to being shy, blushing, looking away, preserving one’s ingenuity in interactions) is preferred over the woman’s manifest availability, imparted, for instance, via open display of skin. Hawkins further explains the difference between these poles in terms of differences between pornography and emotional attraction (or being in love): “[b]oth include erotic desire, but while the latter is intimate and personal, pornography is addressed to no specific person but to the anonymous public ... This distinction appears between the men’s flirtation with hisham women, which is *specific* and *individual* [thus authentic], and their reaction to the display of women’s flesh, which is assumed to be displayed for the public [thus anonymizing and ‘corrupted’/superficial].” (p. 10, emphasis added).

¹²⁰ This work posits that, albeit a global item, denim is also an intimate, particularized expression of individuality (arguably the *most* global, and arguably the most intimate), more so via the process of ‘distressing’.

show that head covers can be, and are, subject to similar connections and individuation processes. In fact, the emotional dimension is paramount here, the object becoming a channel for particular expressions of warmth, care, charm, sincerity, or virtue — in short, verging on *genuine feeling* (as was the case above, with the ‘timidly’ authentic hijabis described by Hawkins, 2008).

As a final point here, it is important to establish that all the above expressions of individuality/authenticity can only acquire empirical sense when instantiated by a sum of *connections* — present and former, with individuals and with objects — which is to say, in relation to the larger semiotic and socio-dynamic architecture of the ‘outside world’¹²¹ (Miller, 2011a, Epilogue; Miller & Woodward, 2011b). For, indeed, such experiences “flow in and out of materiality, such as the relationship between listening to music and appreciating the CD cover, between the memory of a woman and her photograph” (Miller, 2011a, p. 280), and, why not, between her personality/character and (the design, sound, smell, texture, *story* of) her head cover. Or, as Chapman (2005) frames a similar idea, “[n]othing stands outside the system of differences, and we must be co-dependent with the other in order to experience the self. There can, therefore, be no such reality as an individual as separate from society, just as there cannot be a societal mass without the presence of individuals” (p. 12).

For this reason, I have chosen to introduce my case studies in a gradation starting from more clear-cut collective influences (on the use of head covering), and ending with individuals’ (headdress’) impact on society in turn. As we shall see below, context and collectivity, conformity and empowerment, expression and impression can all function at different and dynamic levels, to be henceforth explored. In this sense, in the interest of coherence, the subsequent sections will follow a total of 11 case studies (plus supplementary contributions derived from adjacent ethnographic episodes), with conclusive considerations following each chapter.

The examples below aim to underline relevant hijab-invested values and ‘aesthetics of experience’, viewed through a phenomenological lens that focuses on idiographic data, as earlier explained in subchapter **3.1.3.**; women who at a first glance show little in common

¹²¹ By this I am expressing allegiance to the viewpoint that people express themselves (also) through their possessions (Miller, 2011a, p. 1) on the one hand, as well as anticipate the role of relationships with both people and objects in fuelling subjectively-appropriated ideas of life order (balance), fulfilment, comfort and purpose on behalf of my respondents, which corroborates some of Miller’s (2011, Epilogue) observations on the broader territory of ‘things’.

aside from covering and studying or working at the *Markfield Institute of Higher Education* will come together in the ensuing discussion through their experiences and particular appropriations of headgear.

4.2. Aesthetics of Discretion and Convenience: Atarra's Individual's Passport to Community

I met Atarra at the beginning of my research, when my professional liaisons on this subject were still incipient and my 'hands-on' knowledge still developing. I was from the very start stricken by her kindness, willingness to contribute and general tendency to be helpful and cooperative. Being involved in academia herself (a doctoral candidate at the time), she easily understood my difficulties co-opting participants, and warmly offered to assist. The first time we met was in Leicester during the summer of 2011; she was wearing a brown-coloured outfit (*jilbab*) matched with a beige headscarf, and I immediately noticed the mindful use of colour and subtle elements of style underlying her look.

The second time, then, when she invited me for a follow-up visit, she was wearing a vibrant coral-coloured shawl-like scarf over her head, neck and shoulders, attesting to the fashionable, elegant style that I later learnt perfectly characterized her aesthetic. Nothing about Atarra revealed any reticence toward me or my status as 'outsider'. Indeed, Atarra is a mature, confident woman in her early 40s, whose look initially imparted nothing but overall composure, finished by moderately (which is to say discreetly) fashionable modest dress. Behind appearances, nonetheless, there is a lifetime of diverse experiences, changes, and, as she eloquently points out, *self*-transformations. She testifies to having been exposed to many people and geographical variety especially throughout her 30s, when she worked as a stewardess; Atarra was a flight attendant for Saudi Arabian Airlines, and — to use her own words — “a party animal” for the most part of the 15 years she spent in Saudi Arabia, the last seven of which were with her head covered. During the first seven or eight years, however, she recalls how

My life was very different, I was a party animal, and wearing a headscarf would just not go with my lifestyle, yea? My social life, as I said, was different. Not that I was a 'bad girl' as such, but it was just part of my lifestyle to go for a party literally every day. So that included

dressing up, you know, straightening out your hair, stylish dressing and make-up and everything ... and the hijab wouldn't go with it. But somehow, [even then] something was pulling me towards the hijab.

Originally from India, thus accustomed to the aesthetic (and broadly speaking, the cultural) flamboyance characteristic to that part of Asia¹²², Atarra's palette of choices was somewhat larger than, perhaps, an Iranian native's would be, or a Saudi Arabian's. She was exposed to colour, style, fashion and experimentation — in an uncensored public space — from a very early age. This was partly due to her *not* following strict (Islamic) rules as a young girl; for instance, she went to a regular school instead of the traditional Islamic *madrassa* (despite having been born and raised Muslim), and later on attended “one of the top colleges in Mumbai where daughters of top business people, film stars and ministers were studying”. Throughout her adulthood too, Atarra continued to follow a nonconformist path — e.g., by working as a stewardess, leading a ‘party life’ and then becoming a divorcée (neither among the orthodox prescriptions put forward by Islam).

For Atarra, hijab was (and still is) an integral part of personal development, having contributed to her discovery/appreciation of ‘domesticity’ in at least one sense; that of family life. First, it is relevant to emphasize how she has been exposed to a world of creativity and autonomy of thought from her early childhood, which arguably accounts for her present freedom of action, but, more importantly, for her detachment from the community she is *bound* to (I will justify my choice of terms below):

Let me explain this. I do not relate nor fit into the Gujrati community that is currently in Leicester and about whom you may read in academic literature in the U.K. I was educated and brought up in Bombay (now Mumbai) due to my father's decision to send me there to have good education. ... I do not get my tastes (fashion) from the Gujrati background but from *my friends in college*. However I am absolutely crazy about ethnic Indian embroidery work. I developed the love for it in my college going days. I was exposed to it by a Hindu Gujrati friend who took me to a shop where this artistic work was available.

¹²² To place this in the appropriate aesthetic context, it suffices to look at some fashion studies conducted in the region to familiarize oneself with the flamboyance and considerable eclecticism of styles there: for instance, the strong influence of jeans and, paradoxically, of luxury Western brands (Nagrath, 2003; Boroian & de Poix, 2010) on the one hand; the continuous emulation of Western glamour, ‘whiteness’ and high fashion (Nagrath, 2003; Osuri, 2008; Cowaloosur, 2011) on the other; the heavy Bollywood influence, consisting of ‘catchy’ imagery, beautification of (human) appearances, and sexualization of — both veiled and unveiled — women (Shirazi, 2001, Chapter 3; Geoffroy-Schneiter, 2004; Rajpal, 2013); but above all, the striking colourfulness and stridence of *glitzy* fashion (Osella & Osella, 2007).

The term ‘experimentation’ comes into the argument above. The main factor that I had in mind with this was Atarra’s (albeit brief) enterprise designing for herself, which she took up around the same time, while living in Mumbai. As she explains,

I developed this interest due to my upbringing, where attention to detail was taught in dressing and any tasks we did. Now, since I was always particular about my dressing (I used to sew my own clothes), one of my friend[s] suggested why we don’t have a partnership where I will design the clothes and she would worry about merchandise. We got together, invested money (a small amount on fabrics), then got accessories on consignment basis (my friend’s contact), shared the art gallery with another designer and exhibited our clothes and jewellery to go with — also matching sandals were displayed. We did well, considering it was our first attempt. We made only one piece in one design, so it was exclusive and made [things in] different sizes. ... We did this for about a year. We made very little profit, but it was an experience. ... My experience was one of learning the real world. I learnt about business strategies. How to conduct when you are selling something. It was good to have these experiences at a young age. I was hardly 18 years old at that time.

There is a very interesting back-and-forth motion, both in her attitude to people and in her most significant life choices, that I noticed in Atarra’s case from the start. She divides with clarity and insight between influences, decisions, places and ‘blocks’ of individuals. But, interestingly enough, this vacillation between right and wrong, here and there, never appears to have persisted in terms of feelings of uncertainty or weakness. On the contrary, Atarra’s ‘imbalance’ only serves her — higher sense of — *balance* insofar as, once the moment of transition has passed (such as when she formally took up the hijab in 2002-3), she fully embraces her decision and doesn’t look back with regret. This way, she can live *relaxed*.

One timely example lies in her very choice to adopt the hijab — namely, where, when and especially *how* it happened:

So I had friends who were encouraging me to do hijab, I wasn’t sure that I wanted to do it. It was a trip to South Africa and to England, amazingly, in 2000 ... around 2002, 2003, that I made. I made these two quick trips, one to South Africa and one to England. Where *I saw a lot of people were doing hijab* [note here the first stage in her decision-making: contemplating existing societal behaviours *abroad*, giving ‘it a try’, contrasting two different behavioural planes] and I said... It kind of gave me a push, if they can do it, why can’t *I* do it? So I took a trial, first, in Bombay. It was very hot and I went out for the whole day wearing this hijab I [had] pinned myself somehow, because I wasn’t used to it. ... And then I went out, it was a very hot day, I was literally in tears, I said ‘oh, God, I can’t do this. This is too hard’. But

gradually I developed the feeling, and I read a very nice book, it was *Love for Allah* ... so that was a very big motivating factor. When I started reading the book on the flight from South Africa — it was a direct flight from Johannesburg to Bombay, seven-hours flight — I did not remove my headscarf. That's it. That was it. That was the moment I started wearing it.

Revisiting what she had stated, Atarra felt the need to once again punctuate the significant elements:

One important thing to note here was that *my trip to England and South Africa motivated me*, rather than me being in India, because people in India were not doing it as much as they were doing it in [the] U.K. at that time ... In London. And I used to see people in hijab, and I was like 'wow, if they can do it, I can do it!' ... This is the important point I'm trying to make, that it was *coming to the West* that encouraged me and gave me confidence that I can, as a Muslim, carry on doing what I want to do!

Henceforth came every other 'steady' landmark in her life as it is shaped today: from leading a careless, somewhat hectic existence, to wearing the hijab, and by that to having a more settled, mature lifestyle — the second husband, the fixed academic position and the secure familial set-up; overall, her commitment to a more (topographically and psychologically) focused sense of being. The hijab, in a way, signposts her more settled composure, along with an agile awareness of the (societal, cultural) surrounding environment — all key facilitators for Atarra's social situation today. At this point, having completely relocated in the United Kingdom and decided to raise her daughter (born in 2012) here, this self-cultivated peace of mind and sense of transcendence over everyday trifles are elements securing her 'oneness', her selfhood. As for cultural heritage, from Atarra's narrations, India now seems something of a pictorial remoteness, clipped off from a vividly-coloured children's book; a book she has grown too old or too jaded to browse through, placing herself in a present negotiated between doing the 'right thing' (or what is socially deemed right) and just 'living away'.

What she intends now is for "everything to be *close to perfection*, so that people see in me a good example of somebody who's a Muslim"; this is the first reason she lists in her threefold explanation as to why she chose to keep her hijab on. The second and third are closely connected, albeit somewhat more self-driven: "It [wearing the hijab] helps me. The work I am doing, because I teach Islam, it [hijab] just goes with it. I cannot [searches for words]... No parent or no institution will accept me, if I want to teach Islam and I don't have a headscarf". And, "thirdly, I think due to my research, my studies, I'm convinced

that I'm *supposed* to wear this. However, very recently, I've started questioning that — will God really punish me if I don't wear it?"

Looking at all these factors together brought my attention to one unitary dimension that appears central to Atarra's life, and that she has consistently followed since her 'switch' from a looser understanding of Islam to her mature, *connective* stance reconciling personal identity with *ideal* 'personhood': *self-improvement* within, yet also outside society's regulations (a thematic thread further addressed in **Chapters 5 & 6**). Before, she found herself "not living up to Islam. And I wanted to do more for Islam, or towards Islam... So my situation at that time, or my social life at that time, was... one side was pulling me towards being more of a social, party animal, living a free life, and [the] other side, with my reading, was pulling me more towards the spiritual side, which would require me to cover and have *a norm of a life*, or a standard of life [based on existent, socially-observed models]".

It was this clash between society and the self, therefore, or rather between surroundings and her own consciousness, that motivated her decision to cover and eventually brought her to *peace*.

I have been there, I have seen that that life is not stable, that life is not rewarding. I'm not talking about the *profession*, I'm talking about the *life* I was leading by being an air hostess. Not the air hostess job itself, I'm not saying *all* air hostesses go to a club every day, I'm not saying all air hostesses wear a certain type of clothing. But I have been into that profession — it's fantastic, it's a rewarding profession to serve people, but it's the *after* effects of being there, you know, that I found that life was not stable, that it was not rewarding, spiritually it was taking me away, I was not happy, I was not at peace. And so, I turned to religion. Which gave me more peace, more spirituality.

Nevertheless, although she is able to recount with detachment and ease of her former vacillations, she often reverts to the (negative) weight the local environment has placed on her shoulders. While living in Leicester, she struggled with reconciling her job and her faith; she then struggled with the status of divorcée, hard to carry even in laic circles, let alone in a foreign country where the coagulated cosmopolitan Muslim community is, in Atarra's own description, much more rigid and judgemental; she still struggles with ideological pressure, stigma and taboo (confirming the influence of culture on stigmatization/destigmatization, taboos and related coping strategies in shifting social contexts — Hofstede & Arrindell, 1998; Argo & Main, 2008; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010;

Furtado, Marcén & Sevilla-Sanz, 2013), as put forth by the Muslim communities in and around the Leicester area:

It's a *struggle* for me to prove myself, to convince people [of who I am]. So for me to wear a headscarf and not talk about my being an air hostess, half the battle is won. You see? ... I mean, I became more religious *because* I was in that job, you know? Even though people think otherwise, I became more close [sic] to my religion *because* I was an air hostess, *because* I was exposed to those books in Saudi Arabia. Had I not taken up that job and not gone to Saudi Arabia and visited Mecca so many times, I would not have turned to religion. And in Bombay, it [being a stewardess] wasn't that big a problem. It was accepted, it was normal [again, a view to social sanctions]. It is *in England*, in *Leicester*, that people have this issue — the *Islamic environment* has this issue, that I was an air hostess before. Yea. Bombay is very forward. Bombay is modern, people are very forward thinking in Bombay. It is *here* [that] people are like that, narrow-minded. Unfortunately. ... People are more conservative in the U.K. than the Muslims in India. The Muslims in Pakistan are more forward thinking than the Pakistani Muslims in U.K. It is written, it's documented, it's researched. There's a reason for it, because when they migrate and they come out, they cling on to the old ways of thinking. ... They're scared of changes. So they cling on to where they came from, whereas the people out there have moved on. It's a very normal phenomenon, it happens to the Hindu community, it happens to the Christian community, it happens to *any* community, including the Muslims. When they migrate to a new country, they tend to cling on to the old style and old habits and old thinking. That's *because they lack confidence*.

Consequently, she stays as far away from the Islamic community in Leicester and the adjoining 'insecurities' she is involuntarily part of, preferring to take refuge in domestic life. "Because I just feel that somehow, they tend to be very judgemental about things. So I'm very private that way, you know? I like to do my own thing, ... I prefer staying away from the main hub. Like, if you go into Leicester, into Green Lane or Highfields, that's the concentration of Muslim families there, yea? Muslim community. Well, save me from that area, I don't ever want to go and stay! ... I would run far away from that kind of cluster of Muslims. That's why I prefer staying in a very different area altogether" (namely, a residential area at the outskirts of Leicester).

Having transcended (or, if not transcended, at least relegated to an opaque corner) the times of restlessness and susceptibility, Atarra is significantly more relaxed now vis-à-vis her life as well as hijab. Asked how the meaning of hijab has changed for her over time, she replied:

[In the past] I was very serious about it, you know, ‘oh, my God, my hair shouldn’t be seen and I should wear it in a particular way and no part of my hair should be seen, I should *always* make sure I’m covered’... Now I’m *much* more relaxed. Because I don’t really associate... I *know* that God will not punish me if my hair is showing or I don’t have the scarf on, I understand that now. So I’m much more relaxed. ...

I am who I am, whether I wear the scarf or not wear the scarf. It has *not* given me more confidence in terms of what I can do or who I am. As I said, it only helps me... I have to answer less. Or I have to prove myself less if I’m wearing a scarf. ... Automatically, people accept [me]. [But] it does not change my behaviour or my attitude, *nothing*. I’m very confident both ways, with or without it.

In fact, she sometimes takes it off — in airplanes or while driving — without concerns as to who might be looking and ‘what ifs’¹²³. Unlike many other women I have had the privilege to interview, confidence is not among the prime factors reinforcing Atarra’s wearing of the scarf; nor is individuality, in effect — which renders her an individual by default, albeit an exception from other cases portrayed in this study, in that she does not need a scarf (even though she *would* appreciate a custom-made, one-of-a-kind hijab, given the choice) to prove her sense of selfhood. She ‘uses’ people as well as former experiences to that end. Stylistically, she *does* co-ordinate scarves with her outfit. She still likes to match colours, dress up and feel fashionable. She *does* prefer quality — or bespoke, ideally — garments over mainstream. But there is also a different kind of quality and practicality to be considered here: a metaphoric practicality referring to her existential configuration, rather than an aesthetic to be worn on the head.

She wears the scarf as an escape¹²⁴ from the past and as a passport to ‘oneness’, necessary during (and after) a convoluted, long-lived passage through redundant rules and judging eyes.¹²⁵ The hijab provides her with a second, social skin to be presented in, and acts as a token of acceptance, of *reliability*; one that says ‘Muslim’ and little beyond (as I myself initially remarked), allowing other qualities to come through to the fore. It is a skin that

¹²³ To provide an exact quotation in this sense: “[Sometimes] I know that people are not really watching me. Because I’m in the car, so I’m driving, I know people are not literally looking out for me because I’m not wearing a scarf. On the plane, the other day, I was totally hassled, it was a long flight, and I didn’t have it [on]. I fell asleep without it, no big deal. I didn’t consider that ‘oh, my God, I don’t have the scarf and I must put it on’. So I’m quite relaxed that way”.

¹²⁴ This was the first case reflective of the meaning of hijab as an escape from past (painful, self-questioning, traumatizing) life experiences. For a reinforcement of this theme, see **Chapters 5** and **6**, particularly the sections on Mea, Alena and Amena.

¹²⁵ Indeed, this ‘oneness’ seems as deeply personal as much as socially-oriented. Her discussion of it seems to suggest that it helped her make an identity-related transition, but, as she becomes more secure in it for herself, she has less practical need of hijab.

doesn't really prevent Atarra from being the same strong-willed and independent individual she always was, but *within* a collectivity that she needs to validate her worth; a skin designed to preserve her strength and ease, while keeping her priorities (interiorized as personal achievements) in check: family —> profession —> followed by community life and the rest.



Image 28

Atarra's modest 'passport', captured during one of our interviews.

4.3. Sabiya and Hyacine: Aesthetics of Hope and Negation

I met Sabiya by chance, on an early spring day when I visited Markfield to do a follow-up interview with Alena (whom I will be discussing in **Chapter 5**). As it frequently happened in my fieldwork, initial one-hour individual meetings would easily turn into several-hour group discussions with familiar *and* new participants. By the time I had made myself comfortable, one of the girls particularly involved in the conversation would often jump out to ask another friend to join in (as the lounge we habitually met in to discuss hijab matters was located in the immediate vicinity of the girls' dorm — an area transited by

many female students). That is how I was introduced to Sabiya (later to become one of the most dedicated members of the group), of whom a first impression was that she appeared ‘talkative and friendly, although a bit shy; wearing a long, blue-black dress, plus a grey, dark blue/greenish-black head cover loosely sprayed along her dark hair’¹²⁶ (fieldwork diary entry).

This is an important visual element to retain from Sabiya’s style, with whom I have kept in close contact until the end of my research and thereafter: shape-wise, her scarves are not what she would call “old school”, but tend to rather *float* over her hair, leaving the bangs, ears and sometimes the neck uncovered. She picks up elements from different cultures here — her grandparents were Afghan, her parents born in Pakistan, while she, along with her seven sisters, was born in England, and has travelled extensively (still does) to countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or Tunisia. Her covering style, however, continues to principally derive from the Afghan traditional *nikaab* practice, which Sabiya defines as “a gigantic scarf we use to cover our body and face — although this is rarely visible here, in England, on an ordinary day” (note: not to be mistaken with *niqab*, a term I have employed throughout the text to refer to the face veil alone). By preserving this style, Sabiya also preserves something that is “authentic” and “true” to her original culture, arguably “in opposition to the cultural colonization of imperialism [i.e. Western fashions]” (Wilson, 2013, p. 14). For the purpose of comparison, I am juxtaposing an image of Arissa, also Pakistani-origin hijabi, wearing a very similar Punjab (Pakistani) hijab style she dubs *Dupatta*¹²⁷, which she has brought along with her in Britain (I have referred to this style as characteristic of the Indian head covering tradition, also disseminated to countries such as Turkey and Iran, in **Chapter 1**):

¹²⁶ In this sense, Sabiya’s covering style shares some similarities with Western scarves “worn by Western women such as Katherine [sic] Hepburn, Jackie Onassis, Brigitte Bardot, Sophia Loren and Grace Kelly in the 1960s”, by relying “more on stylization than on hiding” (Botz-Bornstein, 2013, pp. 7-8; see also Albrechtsen & Solanke, 2011, on a variety of twentieth-century Western styles from and around the same period), although, as we will see below, this is *not* the reason for her wearing it as such.

¹²⁷ As Arissa herself clarified, the *Dupatta* is alternatively called *Chaddar*, *Chunri*, *Rida*, *Bochan*, or *Ajrak* in different (Eastern) regions, and “[i]ts history is pre Islam. So most of the women in Pakistan have it as tradition, not for religious purpose. In some regions like deserts women cover their faces with Dupatta in order to avoid direct sun and heat. In some [other] areas it represents prestige.”



Image 29

Arissa's 'Punjab hijab' (i.e. Pakistani-style *Dupatta*).

Sabiya has warm, pleasant (facial) features, something that is noticeable about her with or without a head cover on (being of the same sex, I have seen her in both hypostases, something that frequently happens in the girls' communal areas, and is not deemed problematic in gender-segregated spaces). Notwithstanding a general preference for dark-coloured, usually black outer gowns (which she wore on each of the occasions we met) determined by her self-conscious, albeit utterly implausible, impression that she is "obese"¹²⁸, Sabiya makes use of embellishing elements such as embroidery, shiny (golden or silver) threads, sequins, as well as bangles (which often captured her attention during our 'participative' shopping excursion in downtown Leicester) — see **Image 30**.

¹²⁸ Despite having a slim figure, a very harmonious physiognomy and long, wavy, beautiful dark hair, Sabiya thinks she looks *terrible*; and *fat* (her own phrasing, recurrent); and is admittedly aware of her own insecurities. As a researcher, being familiar with the fact most women have at least one significant discontent with their bodies (BBC News, 2002; Grogan, 2007; Grabe, Hyde & Ward, 2008), I haven't taken this aspect very seriously, but rather ascribed it to a pre-marriage phase Islamic girls sometimes traverse: a phase of introspection, self-contemplation, and self-evaluation, further explored later on as part of a more systematic course to self-achievement (see also Chittick, 1991; Daly Metcalf, 1992; Bullock, 2003, Chapters 3 & 5).



Image 30

One of Sabiya's scarves (worn with *abaya*) / Sabiya trying on bangles during our shopping trip.

In her head covering, however, she deploys a more 'romantic', volatile aesthetic, in tune with the equally romantic emotional traits that define her as an individual, and which best surface when she is among other girls (e.g., in my focus groups). Without a direct intent in this sense, Sabiya explained why her idea of romantic beauty, and of appearance more broadly, is a prominent theme in her life: mostly due to the Afghan community in Pakistan¹²⁹ which she was, and still is, partly involved with, and whose aesthetic heritage she preserves. Interestingly, however, she refers to this Afghan set-up as a Pakistan enclave, where most of the original (Afghan) traditions have nonetheless been maintained and are proliferated as such: "They [Pakistan-established Afghans] perceive image is a big thing. To be a good Islamic person means to be good inwardly and outwardly. There is a famous Islamic tradition, 'Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty.'¹³⁰ And another one; 'Cleanliness is half of faith.' So not only should we focus in a spiritual way but be perceived by the world as people of modesty and class. (Even though I'm not even close to that yet [laughs])".

¹²⁹ Sabiya's parents and Sabiya by extension retain cultural ties with a small Pakistani village located near the Afghan border.

¹³⁰ I will readdress this topos in **Chapters 5 and 6**.



Image 31

Sabiya in the *M.I.H.E.* lounge.

In part, Sabiya's 'loose', relaxed stance on matters of image and the aesthetics of covering can also be assigned to her being still in her mid-twenties, thus not completely 'crystallized' in one culture or another, psychologically as well as stylistically (at the time of our conversations, she was a Master's student at the *M.I.H.E.*). When I say 'relaxed', I am pointing to an unusual 'compromise' that Sabiya makes reconciling a markedly self-conscious image of herself, wherein she considers herself a 'wallflower' (this also became apparent from the contemplative stance she adopted during our first phases of interaction, as well as from some of her more explicit assertions, such as the fact she habitually tries to *fit in*, or *hide away* from the rest due to her insecurity), with an escapist predilection for elegance and chicness: she likes ornament; she likes colour; she likes the glitter of diamonds:

I'd like diamonds [in my wedding dress]! [in a whispering, fascinated voice] And pearls! I don't know, *anything*! I like that *fresh* look. I like that nude... there's a nude dress that I have at home, I like that, and it's got... I'd like a really fresh, clean look with the mascara and the

light blusher and maybe... [interrupts herself]. Just everything is gonna be nude, like colour, and then *red* lipstick! I think it looks *really nice*.

Asked to elaborate on the reasons why she envisaged the-above cited chromatic/ambient scenery in particular, Sabiya reinforced this by an ingenuous invocation of a similarly romanticized, rather mystical visual setting, where ebullient hopefulness, colour, sparkle, overall ‘prettiness’ and a general sense of fulfilment come together in a coherent whole:

Just generally. I don’t know why diamonds and pearls, why would I... I *love* diamonds, I love them! And I love that cream look and then that red lipstick! It’s so *pretty*, that look [in a passionate tone]! Just that, there’s a certain red lipstick that you’re gonna find in Debenhams, maybe. And that’s gorgeous, I love that look. If I had any colour on, I’d never wear a bright lipstick [emphasizing her sense of ‘classy’ proportion]. I always wear this lipstick [shows me a nude-shaded lipstick, branded Yves Saint Laurent], if I ever dress up. And when I do go to [sic] anywhere, this is my favourite... I *love* this!

Much like Sabiya (and much *unlike* Faaiza — described immediately below — whose age is approximately the same), Hyacine¹³¹ is another scarf wearer whose aesthetic and *Weltanschauung* more broadly are situated onto a ‘young’, romantic¹³², similarly escapist terrain. At this point (just 20 years of age at the time of our conversations, in 2012), she is only beginning to explore the multiple ways of observing hijab, not yet fully convinced she even *wants* to wear it on a permanent basis; she is, in fact, drawn to a simpler, cruder sense of life, which better suits her age and range of interests. Moreover, she is interested in flirting — in expressing herself unrestrainedly, in socializing with *men*:

You know, in my town there’s this guy who comes into town and plays the guitar. He looks exactly like Gerard Butler¹³³ [admiringly — note the repeated invocation of this actor in the girls’ narratives: Eshel and Hyacine in particular] and he’s SO [attractive]! I would smile at him and he would smile at me and I was like [fades]: ‘Do you know who you look like?’ And I was like: ‘Gerard Butler!’, and he goes like: ‘Really?’ And I go like ‘Yeeaaa! Take it as a compliment!’ [collective laughter].

In this phase of her life, the social apparatus Hyacine recognizes and wants to be(come) part of is largely comprised of opposite sex interactions, flirtations and games of attraction, attributed to a sentimentalist proclivity that she herself acknowledges (and that recurred not only in my talks with her, but also in those with other respondents).

¹³¹ A graduate student I first met at the *M.I.H.E.* in November 2012.

¹³² See **Chapter 5**, subchapters **5.3.-5.4.**, for further insights into this thematic sphere.

¹³³ The excerpt comes as a continuation to some discursive digression sequences (on potential male partners, as well as on Western films and actors) revealed in **Chapter 3**.

Hyacine: Basically, we are a bunch of romantics. We are a *bunch of romantics*¹³⁴! ... I don't know, we're all *so* romantic, downright soppy! In every sense, so emotional, you see someone cute and AA-AAAH, he's *sooooo* cuuuuuute [in a squeaky voice]!

Eshel: Bunch of drama queens! [collective laughter] ... Maybe because we don't have these options of boyfriends and express this kind of things [sic] [collective approval]. So this emotion is kept until marriage, then BGGUUH!! Everything is out! [vigorous laughter followed by jokes related to the wedding night, in 'suspense' tones of voice.]

R.: Do you miss that part, do you miss being able to experiment with boys?

Hyacine: Yes! Yes! Yes!! [other voices iterate a firm and convincing 'yes'.]

Eshel: [laughing] In nowadays [sic], yes!! Especially in Markfield! [laughs; girls sigh]

R.: Is there any form of compensation — I don't know, how do you cope with that?

Hyacine: Dreams!! [girls laugh loudly; collective enforcement]

Eshel: Day-dreaming! [more laughter]

Hyacine: As a woman, I can tell you, because I'm obviously not really experienced yet, but my friends — they all, like, have boyfriends and stuff, they always ask *me* for advice! And I can give it [in a proud voice]!

In Sabiya's case too, much of the sensuous abundance and oneiricism included in her narrative relates to ...well, *relating*, and draws on fantasies of idealized male companionship. This often pivots around similarly-idealized wedding day scenarios (elements invested with utmost hope and imagination by most unmarried Muslim women interviewed for this study, articulated at different times yet in similar tones). However, unlike Hyacine's, Sabiya's projected ideals are somewhat muter, framed in softer, lighter, timid tones. The psycho-emotional imagery she colligates is best placed in line with the physical and visual harmony surrounding Sabiya's life more generally. Because these are all important nuances, essential in understanding how hijabs are dynamically involved in the ways people perceive and express themselves, I will continue my commentary on them below. An example in this sense came when I entered Sabiya's pastel-coloured, diaphanous, light-cream and baby-blue parlour in Bradford (decorated with a

¹³⁴ Note that the kind of romanticism she is referring to is a modern, in fact a postmodern construction manifest through a particular affinity to mass-delivered products and popular productions; for instance, the attraction that several of my Muslim subjects expressed for Western fashions and media productions, i.e. idyllic film set-ups and romanticized story lines / feminine garb as visible in *Braveheart* (Gibson & Wallace, 1995) or *Kingdom of Heaven* (Scott & Monahan, 2005). This is a topic I will further unwrap in subchapters 5.3. and 5.4.

carefully-assembled assortment of cushions, candles, mirrors, matching curtains, an overall Zen-like atmosphere — illustrated in **Image 32** below). I could then grasp the extent of (aesthetic, sensorial, affective) oneiricism/escapism she engages with on a daily basis — again, in part lent by her Afghan-Pakistani ‘roots’ and the related aesthetic transported along with her in Europe: customs, music (I was exposed to several highly melodious Afghan songs while travelling in Sabiya’s car), apparel. And yet, perhaps the most relevant aspect here is underscored by Sabiya herself, via the life that she projects in detail, and the progress she gradually makes toward achieving this respective imagery (associated with a perfect day, a perfect set-up, a perfect scarf, a perfect — moral *and* physical — self):

Eehh... I’d do, definitely do that [i.e. put some elaborate make-up on] for when I’m on my day, when I’m getting married, the engagement — when the guy is putting a ring on [my finger], I’d like that. Because he’s not married to me [yet], so he can’t see my hair. So I could do that. But then, after he marries me, Islamically, I’d just leave my hair open.

R.: Are you planning to do [all of] this, actually?

Sabiya: Definitely.



Image 32

Sabiya’s lounge in Bradford, and one of our meeting venues.

Conversely, Hyacine’s (somewhat more realistic) ‘social aesthetic’ and related ideation are based almost exclusively on Western influence. Unlike the rest of this study’s informants (save for Vanda, who is a German citizen, born and raised in Germany with no reported

‘Eastern’ background), Hyacine was born in Manchester, England, and attests to having no identifiable ties with any culture other than the British. Hence her expressed allegiance to social interaction, her noticeable proneness to Western aesthetics¹³⁵, and open eye for potential (Western) male partners (all the more so, as she has only very recently adopted the headscarf):

Hyacine: You know, because my family — they’re not like the very traditional type, so we’re very Westernized [girls joke and equate ‘Westernized’ with ‘British’] ... *Nobody* does scarves in my family. We were all born here in the U.K., but none of my family did the Islamic dressing code. So, yea, and because of that, even though I went to an Islamic boarding school, and obviously they teach us there, you know, how to dress Islamically and the scarf and...

R.: You were born Muslim, right?

Hyacine: Yea, yea, but because — I think it was more because of my family, I didn’t wear it [hijab]. And because of the fact, I don’t know, I just felt — I know this is going to sound a bit bad [laughs, embarrassed] — but I just felt better *without it*. And I think it’s because I didn’t understand the definition of hijab, and then up until when I *did* and when I *wanted* to wear it, that’s when I started wearing it.

R.: How old were you then?

Hyacine [laughs]: That was quite recently. Yea, quite recently.

R.: So, 20 something.

Hyacine: Yea, 20, I could say. And even then, there’s some occasions, like when I’m with family and stuff, and I, like, eat for example, like, I’m not wearing [it] when I eat and I’ll do my hair and you know [referring to when she prefers adopting a fashionable, groomed appearance] [laughs]...

R.: You said you haven’t worn it continuously, right? So there were times when you [interrupted wearing it]...

Hyacine: No, it was more like [laughs, hesitating] — like when I was in school, you know, my boarding school, that’s when I’d wear it. And then I’d come out — then I’d take it off [laughs].

R.: ... Why [was that]?

Hyacine: I don’t know, I just didn’t feel *connected* to the Islamic dress code. I just didn’t want to do it. I felt more comfortable in my jeans, my top, with my hair up and my heels.

¹³⁵ Visible in the colourful way she dresses, generous use of make-up, hair style and overall Western fashion co-ordinated appearance — see the description in the next paragraphs.

...

[as the dialogue advances and she opens up more, later on she resumes, reinforcing her previous remarks:]

Hyacine: For me, I don't know, I know this is gonna sound really-really bad to you guys [referring to the other Muslim participants present], but for me, I just feel better *without* it! [other girls laugh]

Eshel: She sounds like my sister!

Hyacine: Yes, I feel like, I don't know, I've always felt like this, though. I don't know, I feel more comfortable, more confident *without* my scarf than I do with my scarf.

R.: Is this because of the people around you...?

Hyacine: Yes. 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 scarf on] ... I feel like my character shines out more when I *haven't got my scarf on*.

As a compromise, she wears the scarf intermittently. For instance, when I first met her, her hair was uncovered, styled, groomed and worn loosely over her back. She admits to accessorizing consistently. She prefers fashionable, colourful¹³⁶, playful outfits, and would *love* to wear a scarf that is “glitzy, glammy, sequins, flashy, catches the light!” — interestingly, a visual combination suited to describe contemporary Bollywood ‘excess’ attire (Sharma & Sharma, 2003; Geoffroy-Schneiter, 2004; Mishra, 2012; Wilkinson-Weber, 2014; see also Barnard, 2008, Chapter 7, and Gundle, 2008, Chapter 10, for style-, pastiche-, extravagance- and excess-related considerations in twentieth-century Western visual culture) and, more generally, the Indian hijab aesthetic described in **Chapter 2**. She wore distinct make-up (her eyes lined in an Egyptian, ‘cat eye’ fashion¹³⁷ with black ‘wings’ prolonged well beyond the extremities of the eye), tight jeans, and a T-shirt reading “FEEL THE FEVER / DISCO DIVA” on our first encounter, all the while surrounded by girls mostly dressed in slack Islamic gowns (jilbabs) and loose-fitting jackets. She spoke cheerfully and exuberantly, and joked and laughed in a full voice. She asked many questions and was often the first to answer mine. But despite her visibly

¹³⁶ When asked what she means by “glammy” more specifically, Hyacine’s first answer was: “Reeed!”, which she later visually assigned to “an English dress”.

¹³⁷ Reminiscent of Elizabeth Taylor’s eye make-up in the epic drama *Cleopatra* (Mankiewicz, Mamoulian & MacDougall, 1963).

Western dress, attitude and conduct, she is well aware of Islamically-prescribed moral and behavioural codes. And while it remains true that clothes do not make a person, certain visual cues Hyacine puts forth nonetheless produce more impact than others — such as indicators of her social, and arguably sexual, availability (for instance, tight, flashy, multi-coloured, skin-imitating or lace outfits teamed with conspicuous make-up and/or disclosure of personal information are regarded as body-sexualizing signs¹³⁸): “the sexual obviousness of [Western] dominant styles” (Wilson, 2013, p. 10). An interesting interstice in Hyacine’s negotiation of an ‘appropriate’ hijab-related attitude is the jilbab itself, which appears to add an extra restrictive dimension to the already-confining role the scarf plays in her physical and ethical social functioning.

Hyacine: Actually, do you know when you’re dressed a certain way and then you have like two different personalities — no, not personalities, but just the way you *are*, it *changes*; which is really weird. Because I remember when I did, you know, the jilbab, and I wore, like, the whole thing — just the way I was, I *completely* changed! Outside, I’m usually that really loud, popular [girl], and then I just became really quiet and just more — [searches for the right words] I just became more...

Daniella: Calm?

Hyacine: Just like, you know, ‘I need to behave!’ [hence a self-‘censorship’ element]. Yes, and it’s just like you have two separate [selves], yea, 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...’.

Integrating a ‘fragmentary’, which is to say “exaggerated yet fragile sense of self”, within society’s “connective tissue” via fashion thus facilitates the expression of the individual and brings out the “the semblance of a unified identity” (*ibidem*, pp. 11-12). Hyacine’s retreat in day-dreaming, as well as in fashion, is arguably an attempt at that. Although her style is markedly different from that of Sabiya (and so are her social interaction ‘tools’), some of their main preoccupations converge in the romanticization of love, partnership, and the future. Through fantasies of romance and adjacent idealized settings (some ‘clipped off’ from hear-say or films, others more realistic — themes further unwrapped in the following chapters), they are both able to transcend the fixity and materiality of

¹³⁸ See, for instance, Halasa & Salam, 2008, on the paradoxes delineated between extant Islamic dress norms and some Muslim women’s penchant for sexy lingerie and market-available, provocative or ‘glitzy’ garments in contemporary Syria. Also, see Gundle, 2008, Chapter 3, on the connection between (Western) concerns with ‘glossed’ appearances, ‘surface’ display (resulting in ‘public visibility’), and perceived sexual availability.

everyday reality, and lend it a ‘je-ne-sais-quoi’ (Barthes, 2006; Black, 2009). In Sabiya’s case, this search for beauty and feeling in proximal reality is formulated more fluidly, where hijab is but a utensil, an adjuvant, an ancillary detail, comparable to the aura of a happy day, or to a beautiful image of herself. This is projected onto a future promise of more e(so)theric living: a charming, worry-free *potentiality* of being, which in its emotional escapism transcends religion and cultural (e.g., ethnic) differences.

Moreover, unlike Atarra, Sabiya feels *freed* by wearing the hijab (see also Bullock, 2003, Chapter 5). This also reflects in the manner she wears her scarves, which is loose and somewhat nonchalant — a style unlikely to make anyone feel entrapped or restricted, physically or psychologically:

I feel more *liberated* [by wearing hijab], and I feel as though, when I see these [Western, sexualized] movies and this... the whole industry, it makes it... I just walk more *proudly* [in a hijab]. Thinking I’m the more *respected* one. I feel more liberated. I feel as though *they’re* [Western women] oppressed ... as though they’re slaves to men, sexually. They’re sexual objects. And they are displaying their bodies for that reason. And because that’s their... why they are there, I don’t know.

Not only does Sabiya’s above remarks empirically corroborate similar arguments made by cultural analysts (e.g., El Guindi (1999a, Chapters 5-6); Ghazal Read & Bartkowski (2000); Bullock (2003, Chapters 2 & 5); Lewis (2007, 2013a)), but her views on hijab’s potential liberating/empowering effects are used to implicitly defend a system based on alternative (sartorial) values, defined by modesty and a ‘trueness’ of self:

... And then there’s the contrast, the way we dress ... A man will not accept us for our body, or any sexual feelings he has. He will not, he’s not going to look at that. Especially with the people who have a veil on. He’s genuinely gonna just restrict it to values, what he’s heard [about the woman], what he’s spoken to them about, and just base it upon that.

Conversely, for Hyacine, an exponent of Western society, hijab arguably stands in the way of social achievement. Woodward (2006, 2007) refers to (Western) women’s anxiety when confronted with dress selection choices, especially when the decision involves a measurement of the self against perceived social expectations and aesthetic canons¹³⁹. Failure in self-representation is singled out as the ‘culprit’ leading to subjective feelings of discomfort and anxiety, where women — constantly subjected to societal scrutiny, and,

¹³⁹ Where ‘getting it right’ and picking an outfit that ‘goes’ with both wearer and occasion are fundamental in the arithmetic of feeling in place and being oneself in the selected costume.

indeed, the male gaze not least — aspire to social acceptance and admiration (see Woodward, 2007, Chapters 4 & 5, for a more detailed tackling of these arguments). As the twentieth century spurred the development of mass production of cosmetics and various beautification rituals, ‘looking good’ and ‘feeling right’ have become as much achievable as problematic, if we are to look at the multitude of sources debating or downright proclaiming what looking ‘beautiful’ means. And, while it has been often argued that Western feminine ideals and stereotypes of unrealistic beauty disseminated through the media have a disastrous impact on the average woman’s self-esteem¹⁴⁰ (Duke, 2002; Gamman & Makinen, 2007; Grabe et al., 2008; Damhorst et al., 2008, Chapters 2-3; Moeran, 2010) — apparently also the case with Sabiya’s bizarre impression that she is ‘obese’) — it is also true that the ‘veil’ itself is similarly fetishized by Western channels of communication, sometimes transformed into a ‘1001 nights’ erotic device aiding in the proliferation of (neo)Orientalist stereotypes (see Shirazi, 2001, Chapters 1-3, on veiling as a sexual motif in advertising, erotic magazines and the film industry).

In Hyacine’s case, if we subscribe to the idea that the West’s historical use of female dress is (at least in part) sexually charged as it is “necessary for the maintenance of sexual interest”, therefore a step closer to romantic love¹⁴¹ (Rouse, 2007, pp. 124-25), this might account for some of the aspects we have explored above as a Western-angled attempt at a similarly-framed goal; in other words, one could appositely argue that hijab colours the romantic vision, by focusing it on marriage, yet without necessarily eliminating (the more physical aspects of) romance. Evidently, Hyacine has a difficult time trying to understate the physical side of her femininity, and by that, her perceived beauty ‘arsenal’. Following her own explanation above, the ‘plural’ self she refers to suggests an ongoing ‘sorting’ through a multitude of — sometimes conflicting — influences and related self-images. When wearing hijab, she feels inevitably ‘purified’, thus (partly) de-sexualized¹⁴².

¹⁴⁰ With consequences ranging from low self-esteem to defective social integration and eating disorders (anorexia or bulimia).

¹⁴¹ Based on Laver’s (1969) views, Rouse acknowledges that “[m]any women possess some garments which are intended to attract attention to or show off the body. This is the case because it is the custom in our society at present for people to select their partners on the grounds of finding them sexually attractive. Along with face, figure and personality, clothing can play a part in such an assessment. The dominance of the idea of romantic love in our society as a basis for marriage has led to the notion that sexual attractiveness is an essential ingredient for a successful match. In particular, it has been seen as a woman’s duty to be sexually attractive and this has had implications for the clothes women wear.” (2007, p. 125).

¹⁴² Being able to consider oneself good enough, *pure* enough, in Islam, and implicitly worthy of hijab, is not easy to achieve, but rather something constantly aspired to: ““You must be a good person and always be honest””, with hijab functioning as a mark for ““having a good character and being honest”” (respondent quoted in Ghazal Read & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 407).

Admittedly, as Ghazal Read & Bartkowski (2000) point out, there are also discontents where the wearing of hijab in the West is concerned, and the authors express this best through the voice of one of their respondents:

“Najette, the same respondent who argued that veiling makes her feel ‘special,’ was quick to recognize that this esteem is purchased at the price of being considered ‘weird’ by some Americans who do not understand her motivations for veiling. For women like her, engaging in a dissident cultural practice underscores Najette’s cultural distinctiveness in a way that some people find refreshing and others find threatening.”

(p. 406).

Hyacine is thus divided between wearing the scarf (and along with it, many changes still difficult to interiorize at this point in her life), thereby risking to become out of place with her current entourage, and maintaining her flirtatious social identity. That explains why even in wearing the headscarf she strives to incorporate novelty, boldness and spark: note the raw colours and ‘predatory’ animal prints¹⁴³ featured by some of her favourites scarves in **Image 33**. The reason she cited for these bold choices is similarly understated: It just “looks nicer to me!”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Especially in advertisements, animal symbolism is generally associated with sexually aggressive behaviour, erotic availability, whimsicality and ‘sexiness’ (Worell, 2002, p. 705; Gardner, 2011, p. 70).

¹⁴⁴ Hyacine is not the only one who directly expressed an interest in animal-printed scarves; other wearers, among whom Sarah, a more mature respondent in her early 40s, seek the same in such prints: attractiveness, ‘likeability’, and youth. An interesting cultural intersection between the two women consists of their common geographic heritage: they were both born and brought up in Great Britain, both live in big cities (Manchester and Birmingham respectively), and both manifested an interest in looking attractive *for men*.



Image 33

Three of Hyacine's printed scarves.

4.4. Faaiza: Aesthetics of Confidence and Promise

As I was constantly reminded of throughout this study, it is generally encouraged in Islam (as in other religions) to cultivate one's sense of knowledge and self-growth as profoundly and extensively as possible: interiorizing personal life events, sharing experiences with others, learning, developing and disseminating culture. Indeed, I learnt this not only from writings touching on Islamic faith and its core values (the idea of perfecting oneself through life progress, including personal appearance, dress and style, is a relevant theme in the Qur'an and hadith, as well as in more recent writings by Ahmed, 1992; Bullock, 2003; Jones, 2003, 2010b; Moll, 2010; see also **Chapter 5** here (Alena) on this subject), but also directly from my respondents, wearers, designers or imams who referred to their own — learning, practising and teaching — experience.

Faaiza, a *M.I.H.E.* student of Bengali descent (like Hyacine, only 20 years old when we were first introduced in 2011), is well aware of this. Not only is she aware, but she systematically *acts* in this direction: she actively incorporates a sense of individual agency — merely a constituent cell in the system of collective, cultural (Islamic) identity — into

actions that form part of her Islamic ‘recipe’ for spiritual and professional *evolution*: discreet behaviour, a pragmatic sense of efficiency, self-reliance. When she talks, albeit in brief sentences and usually in a timid voice, her views come across as well-informed, pertinent and socially adept. For instance, when I asked how she feels her clothing (generally consisting of a dark-coloured, loose overdress, a head cover *and* a face veil) impacts on the society she lives in, whether it marks a particular contribution or sends a specific message, she replied:

I am ... sending a message to a certain part of society telling it that I *choose* to reject the definition or image they have created and imposed on women. Society tells us one season our hair should be curly, the next season it has to be straight. Then they tell us pink is in fashion, then the next [day] you have to wear red. I’m not saying I’m not fashion-conscious, because I am. I am up to date with what colour, style, is in fashion, but I do not let it dictate everything in my life and I certainly am no longer a prisoner to it [see below for an unfolding of “no longer”]. Muslim women still are women and we still want to look beautiful, that’s natural, but we understand that this is not our sole purpose in life. Women are being used across the world as sex objects everywhere you look. I think true liberation is when you have full control over your body, who sees what and when. *We hold that power.*

This Western objectification/commodification/fetishization of the female body, which Faaiza so openly rejects, has also — quite predictably — been deconstructed by academics, in contexts ranging from contemporary advertising, fashion images, to television and film (Laver, 1969, Chapter 9; Duke, 2002; Bullock, 2003, Chapter 5; Ward & Friedman, 2006, Gamman & Makinen, 2007; Lewis, 2007; Steele, 2007). As Atarra and Sabiya before, Faaiza too uses the hijab to usurp these problematic dynamics, providing an(other) alternative to surmount transient attributes such as corporeality/sexuality, with their manifold discontents (as does Atarra, who reportedly does not attach much significance to the physical modulations of wearing a hijab), consolidating Sabiya’s equally legitimate discourse of empowerment, freedom and *strength*. Faaiza is, in fact, more politically up-to-date, more culturally aware, and more in touch with the latest global developments, therefore more opinionated (compared to other women I have interviewed). All of these things, indeed, *empower* her to assume more autonomy and a stronger, more determined voice¹⁴⁵. For a Muslim young woman ‘performing’ hijab in the midst of a Christian-majority populace, but also for a 20-year-old just beginning to learn the world

¹⁴⁵ See also Williams & Vashi (2007) on the impact of veiling on the autonomous self in American Muslim women.

and understand its mechanisms, hijab appears as a key, a *promise* for a brighter future and a more understanding society, which is a highly relevant factor for those who suffer(ed) from its labels, misconceptions, or offences (Ahmed, 1992, Chapters 8-11; Bullock, 2003, Chapters 2, 3 & 5; Sandıkçı & Ger, 2010; Tarlo, 2013). This coheres with the predominantly *functional* quality Faaiza ascribes to her scarves, in that she prefers to wear black, and although it can hardly be said that it matches her personality¹⁴⁶, this is something she opts for with consistency, both in her head- and face-covers¹⁴⁷.

For instance, her favourite scarf consists of a plain, black item, “because everything goes with black! It’s a long rectangle shape made of a soft material (I have no idea what it is [fabric-wise]), ... flowy and elegant”, yet without any particular emotional investment: “I don’t have any particular memory of it and I don’t have any emotional attachment to it. I just love it because I can wear it at any occasion and it still looks good. It’s also comfortable and not high maintenance (doesn’t need constant ironing etc.)”.

For Faaiza, therefore, veiling is closer to *function* than it is to aesthetics. Her scarves, her outfits in general, are practical — they serve a purpose: on the one hand, that of neutralizing her attractiveness and physical presence (masked in black) on the social stage, and on the other, that of foregrounding her moral and intellectual qualities, allowing her to exert her abilities with more *confidence*. Admittedly, while referring to the sartorial means deployed in assembling her public appearance, she explains the use of niqab (facial veil):

For me, right now in my life, I think the niqab is [most important]. Because of how I was before: *I was obsessed with make-up*, and I’d be in front of the mirror for hours. And, you know, *I was buried in that kind of trendy wear*. But now, for example, going in front of people, doing a presentation, I just whip [put] my niqab on and I’m still confident to give a presentation in front of 15, whatever, however many people might be. For me, right now it [niqab] is very dear to me. Even when I was wearing hijab and just jilbab, I still used to get comments and whatever it was, and I didn’t feel comfortable, even then. So right now, I can go in front of [a crowd], even if it was full of men, and I know that they’re *not judging me for what I look like*, but [for] what is coming out of my mouth, what I’m saying to them. For me, right now, that is what’s very important. So I feel more like I can go out and not be restricted to my house, that, you know, I can’t be in front of men. Because I’m doing whatever I can to protect myself. That’s why I feel so I can do things and be active in a meeting.

¹⁴⁶ Beyond a crude, ‘girly’ timidity, Faaiza presents herself as quite lively and, as I have highlighted above, strong-willed.

¹⁴⁷ Aside from observing the hijab, Faaiza is also a consistent niqab wearer.

In some regards, Faaiza's remarks contradict, or at least complement, one of my observations whereby many of the tastes and hijab 'positions' adopted by women I met in Markfield were greatly influenced by their social environment, both theoretically and practically. While the rest of this study's informants have almost unanimously shown an evident inclination to *embellished* hijabs (be the effect achieved through colour, pattern, perceived 'flowiness', 'catchiness' or ornamentation, which Faaiza nowadays only exceptionally engages with), Faaiza's style intentionally eschews 'risqué' scarves, save for rare, occasional 'indulgences'; one example of a print-embellished article she possesses can be viewed in **Image 34**. This choice is not, however, the result of a random fashion drive, but rather the consequence of a long and mindful process of (self-)deliberation begun in Faaiza's early adolescence, which, as pointed out above, has brought her to some interesting conclusions before her 20s even started.

From the age of 12, when she (in her own description) "properly" started to don the headscarf, experimenting with aesthetic identities and vogues, fashionable styles, make-up and accessories (such as shoes, hand bags and jewelry) has been a significant part of her cultural voyage. Gradually, nevertheless, she "cut down" on make-up (mostly because she started covering her face, and "obviously, it wouldn't make sense for me to do full make-up going to class when I'm covering anyway"), colours, and any other ostentatious elements in favour of a more demure, visually-neutral *protective* shell. She does admit to still taking colours into consideration, as well as to being conscious of existing fashion vogues, "but not as a big issue ... it wouldn't be the main thing"; and certainly not for *others* to see. If ever adorned (through the use of make-up or elegant clothing), she would opt for this style for her benefit alone (thus not for public display), and camouflage it underneath her cloak or underneath her niqab: "you know, sometimes when I'm just very bored, I'll put it [make-up] on at home. Dress up ... put on concealer and stuff, *just for myself*, really".

The idea above is particularly relevant. On the rare occasions that she does bother with 'beautification', Faaiza does it for *herself* — engaging in a sort of aesthetics of pride, agency, choice and pleasure, yet not directed outwardly, but *inwardly*; thus compatible with the (spiritually self-enhancing) ideology of hijab itself. The reasons are to do with biography and a particularly reflexive connection with (unpleasant) past experiences.



Image 34

Faaiza's printed scarf.

From the more fashionable phases in her past, for example, she only retains being a “bagoholic” up to the point where she “wouldn’t leave the house if my bag isn’t matching”, plus a sheer aversion to being fetishized, regarded as a form of enticement or a sexual icon (LeMoncheck, 1997; Goldenberg & Roberts, 2004; Kearl, 2010; Rajpal, 2013); she recounts a particularly poignant experience in this sense:

I think one of the reasons I did choose to wear, you know, hijab and [niqab]... Once ... I was wearing jeans and tops and I was sitting on the bus quite at the back. And I was watching, and there was this other girl, and she was in a similar outfit to mine, she was wearing, you know, jeans that were really tight and a top. And this *naaaasty* [in an amused voice] man, you know, this old perverted man, he was like next to me on the opposite side of the bus, and he was just staring at her soooo... [laughs and mimics]. He had this *biiiiig* [sexual] *smile* on his face and... After I saw that, I was just, I felt sick, you know? I was like ‘that could have been me, and that probably *is* me and I don’t know it!’. And after that, I started looking into it more, ‘cause I used to wear hijab, but I thought that hijab is just a covering of the hair, then I realized it can’t be [just that].

Moreover, observing a full cover, including the niqab and everything that comes along with it, makes her a — highly appraised — role model for other girls in her entourage. For instance, she is openly ‘recommended’ by Alena (also a transient resident at the *M.I.H.E.*, described in **Chapter 5**) in our open sessions as self-confident, especially *brave* and assertive, on account of wearing the niqab (see also Tarlo, 2010, Chapter 6, for more extensive reflections on the use and related effects, in terms of benefits or concerns, of wearing the niqab in public set-ups). Indeed, an element that easily transpires from all the

talks I have had with Faaiza, spoken and written, resides in her well-aggregated, sharp decisiveness and social (inter)acting, which would make any individual (let alone a young Muslim) her age appear savvy and mature. Being well-familiarized with social clichés and gendered stereotypes (perhaps a facilitating factor in her case was having lived in the United Kingdom since she was five years old, unlike other women I have interviewed, who were transient residents here), she seems to contribute a sense of moral agency to the group, underlining the importance of making and believing in one's choices (a theme further explored in the next chapter). A final exemplification of her complex understanding of life follows:

R.: What would account for those [sexualized views of women on the part of Western 'gazers' (see also **Chapter 1**, section **1.3.**, for a tackling of this argument)] — what would trigger this from people?

Faaiza: This fascination?

R.: Yes. Why does it [still] happen?

Faaiza: I don't know, I think it *is* a lot to do with that Edward Said's Orientalism thing, you know, the *unknown*. I think, like you [meaning Sabiya] said, the media *is* the only thing they have that's educating nowadays — of most [sic] the people here.

By carefully gauging the meaning of facts unfolding around her, Faaiza is advancing a form of *resistance* to everything she believes 'strays' from a sound, healthy, objective base for judgement (see also El Guindi, 1999a,b, on qualifying the veil as a form of resistance, and Barnard, 2008, Chapter 6, on fashion/clothing as resistance tools more broadly). Despite the discrete social pressures, mainstream fashion voices and viewpoints on what 'normal' preoccupations for someone her age should typically pivot around (in the sphere of enjoying life with its full array of distractions — as prioritized by Hyacine) continuously exercised upon her, Faaiza has stood by her coagulated choices and standards. Interestingly, she has even managed to resist the influence of her own mother, who repeatedly attempted to convince Faaiza to 'lighten up' and wear *more colour* in her outfits¹⁴⁸. This form of resistance can be explained by Faaiza's determination to eschew a

¹⁴⁸ As Faaiza relates: "I think traditionally, my mom wasn't happy with me, first with the niqab, but with wearing dark colours, she has told me: 'you're still young, *why* are you doing this to yourself?!' You know, in Bengali culture, you are meant to wear — the younger ones *do* wear colour, you know, yellow [vivid colours in general]... She was very, very upset with that, and she still is, she still tries to buy me little things on the side to encourage me to wear more colour, ... she'd be like 'no, wear red, wear yellow, wear this!'. That's her, her being the traditional."

conspicuous Bengali aesthetic reflective of a traditionalist, less forward, even marginal social position (see Tarlo, 2013, for a related discussion of South-Asian British youth fashions), to the benefit of the wiser, more emancipated self she is actively fostering instead (see also Amena's 'flip-side' approach to the emancipatory role of modest dress in **Chapter 6**).

As relevant to the theme of *personal betterment* as Atarra and Sabiya have proven above, Faaiza's precocious insightfulness, confidence and immutability to unsought social influence is a testimony to the same course of evolution toward a true, 'authentic' person(ality), a strong individual and an advocate of a 'greater good' — one able to overcome tradition, and even aesthetics, framing a personal sense of individuality *through*, yet *beyond* hijab's material presence. There is reason behind her choices; there is confidence behind her sobriety; and there is depth behind her meaning(s).

4.5. Further Considerations

I have met, through and throughout my research, women whose notion of hijab did not reach much beyond a sketchy, at times disyllabic indication of Islam(ic 'identity'). Some of them were unsure as to *why* they wore it in the first place; others were completely unable to nominate any *individual* reason, or preference for wearing a particular scarf (this 'superficiality', or perhaps assumed 'normalness', although not at all exceptional throughout society, is seldom quoted in the hijab-focused literature); yet others confessed to questioning its overall necessity. Hijab, therefore, is as complex as the person wearing it — this is a simple point, yet one that needs reinforcement. In some ways, Atarra is an example of a strong, assertive individual wavering in her decision to keep the scarf on, simply because she is efficiently in charge of her own individuality even in the absence thereof; her faith and personality do not really necessitate an 'extension' into the material world, an explicit flag to vocalize her identity or spiritual belonging. For Atarra, hijab is a tool employed to generate security, to fit in and be part of a social apparatus, to receive acceptance (see Skeggs, 1997, and Ghazal Read & Bartkowski, 2000, on the benefits of social *respectability*, *connectedness* and *fitting in*, which sometimes rank higher in individual hierarchies than perceived social autonomy/independence). Similarly, it can be

argued that both Sabiya and Faaiza make a similarly instrumental use of their scarves, serving the individual's social 'insertion' and affirmation — and by this I am recalling the generally 'muted' chromatics, i.e. black or 'non-catchy', deployed either consciously or subconsciously to this aim by all three respondents: Atarra, Sabiya, Faaiza. (Although for Sabiya, this clearly also bears the mark of her weight-related self-consciousness.) Simultaneously, for Sabiya, hijab also means charm. And chance. And *form* (i.e. added adornment, albeit moderate), which (in)forms a distinct part of her young, hopeful, optimistic view to the future. Her self-proclaimed "untidy" scarf fashion — a label based on her not wearing hijab the conventional way, allowing the fabric to be lighter and looser, showing more hair and skin than normally sanctioned — only attests to her ambivalent aspiration to (visual, romantic) aesthetics on the one hand, and (moral, social) empowerment on the other.

Interestingly, in Hyacine's case, the situation is reversed, the scarf being considered detrimental to her social (and aesthetic) assertion, and problematizing her 'fitting in'; unlike Faaiza and Sabiya, she feels more confident *without* her hijab (Atarra's scarf is more 'neutral' in this sphere). Additionally, unlike Faaiza, of approximately the same age, Hyacine situates herself much closer to childhood in some regards: while Faaiza brings into hijab years of experience, political engagement, personal research and experimentation with both Islamic dress and Western fashion, Hyacine is only beginning to explore the multiple ways of appropriating the garment, which at this time doesn't 'go' with her social environment. Thus, while resisting her family's non-covering 'tradition' by trying to adopt the hijab in full, she also adheres to the wider (Western) ideology, the benefits of social interaction in particular, by pondering — and 'adjusting' — this choice. To an extent, in both Sabiya's and Hyacine's cases, their self-perceptions and their perceptions of the outer world revolve around a potential *male presence* (as different from the 'male gaze' — see Woodward, 2007, Chapter 5, for a related line of thought), integrated into an idealized, escapist-romantic ideation, a *mélange* of selected cultural elements and related aesthetics.

Nevertheless, Hyacine's — only partly interiorized — stance vis-à-vis hijab observance should not come as surprising (or even immature), particularly not to us ('Christians', 'Westerners') who are so often seen wearing denim (Miller & Woodward, 2011a), mass-produced (globalized, thus similarly anonymizing) *New Look* or *Marks & Spencer* jumpers, or the same old, generic black coat, which say little, if anything, of our individuality at a first glance. In (some of) our cases, not being able to voice a handful of

reasons as to *why* that particular pair of jeans, *why* that particular combination, or *why* that particular day, would be far from a bewildering exception. It is not so much about the *whats* — what a scarf looks like, what it is made of, or the exact style it is worn in (as we have, in part, seen in **Chapter 2**, and as I will further reinforce in the next two chapters, there are several ways of fitting a hijab: starting with Sabiya’s ‘flowy’ style and ending with very tight-fitting, multi-layered, ‘winged’ or ‘turbanesque’ scarf arrangements); it is more about *why* and *how* it is worn, individualized and displayed.

Unless prepared to engage in a *dialogic* experience with the scarf owners and the very garments on display (what the cloth looks like, feels like, what it ‘communicates’), one can never aspire to fully grasp the personal significance an(y) article of clothing bears, its connotative symbolism within and outside of its spiritual and aesthetic scope. The wearer and, by extension, the ‘living’ item alone are ‘knowledgeable’ of that; be it a headscarf, a shawl (Rivers, 1999; Geczy, 2013, Chapter 3), a sari (Banerjee & Miller, 2003; Kamayani Gupta, 2008; Miller, 2012, Chapter 1), a quilt (Moorhouse, Otto & Anderson, 1995; Kuchler, 2006a), a pair of jeans or an old sweater kept in the wardrobe for over 30 years (Woodward, 2007; Miller & Woodward, 2011a; Miller, 2012)¹⁴⁹. Such dialogues reflect, of course, on issues such as the (affective) *character*/‘soul’/‘charm’, escapist symbolism, and *individuality* of cloth, which I propose, in light of our earlier discussion on experience, substance and authenticity, to further probe in **Chapters 5 and 6**.

¹⁴⁹ For an incursion into personal belongings’ socio-emotional valences and related considerations, see Woodward, 2007; Miller & Woodward, 2011a; Miller, 2011a, 2012.

Chapter 5

On Hijabs *Individualized*: Style, Creativity, Improvisation

“From here I flip it, so it shows that I have two colours. ...

If you ask me to do it again, I can't do it; it just happened!”

(Eshel)

5.1. Individuality, Agency, Inspiration: On Norm, Creativity and Hijab

As a socially-enacted practice teamed with a public behaviour intended to anonymize and ‘purify’ social interactions of distinctive personal markers (especially of a physical or sensual nature), the act of covering in Islam involves or requires, in principle, agency and choice, whereby individuals select the exact tools to ‘adapt’ to their environment (sometimes, a *new* environment — if we consider the transient cultural landscape the *M.I.H.E.* puts forth, where many different Muslim backgrounds intersect). This process is realized through decision-making, which refers not only to *how much* is on display, but also to *how* it is displayed. Regarding things as both denotative and connotative to (collective or individualized) significance automatically calls in the question of ‘agency’ in a sphere that goes beyond semiotics and extends into a more dynamic system of complex, polysemous “narratives of meaning”, highly contingent on social context and interaction (Boradkar, 2010, p. 248). In this sense, Boradkar identified ‘meaning’ as part of a network of structures in motion, endowed with ‘living’ properties which generate and account for the *attachment* formed between people and their possessions, as well as for the resulting identity-forming mechanisms (see also Baudrillard, 1981, Chapter 3; Chapman, 2005, Chapters 3 & 4; Woodward, 2007; Mauss, 2009; Miller, 2011a, 2012, on attachment between individuals and material items beyond their functional value).

Relationships of subjectification and personalization of objects, along with their power to influence or change people in the dynamic of “possessing” and being “possessed” (i.e.

controlled or ‘shaped’) by things, are in this sense ineluctable. The latter can be regarded as extensions of the self, expressions of their owner, invested with knowledge, creativity and power, as suggested in the previous chapter (Boradkar, 2010, pp. 250-52; see also Dilnot, 1993, and Mauss, 2009, for similar principles applying to objects as gifts). But this is most of all valid when speaking of personal(ized) items rather than of ‘impersonal’ ones, which is to say that gifts or objects treasured for spiritual and affective properties have a ‘monetary’ value that is either irrelevant or below the sentimental one.

Since the vast majority of this study’s respondents were (and are) quite young — mostly in their mid and late twenties, or early thirties — at the time our interviews took place, similar issues related to personalized taste/meaning and an implicit discussion of agency constituted the subject of a continuous process of deliberation and mediation¹⁵⁰, with hijab functioning as both object, subject and catalyst in the decision making / preference negotiation dynamic (as will become evident below). And, as any relationship between possessor and item(s) possessed would entail, this dynamic rarely restricted itself to a threefold (actor — context — object) form of interaction, but instead extended to encompass a wider ambit of variables, starting with simple social indicators such as age, social status or ethnicity, and ending with the subtlest subjective considerations. As significant parts of the literature (e.g., Haddad, 2007; Williams & Vashi, 2007; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2007; Moors & Ünal, 2012; Tarlo & Moors, 2013) deal with the former, it is upon the latter that I wish to dwell throughout this chapter, steering our course to three qualitative exemplifications of creative, ‘playfully’ adapted hijab styles. The first example is instantiated by a respondent I will refer to as Mea.

Before starting my fieldwork, I approached hijab with slight confusion and uncertainty, open-minded yet unsure of its ‘true’ connotations (see also **Foreword**). Although fascinated by its conceptual morphology, its social scopes and ethics, the ways it seemed to transform people, relationships and behaviours, I couldn’t quite grasp its ‘depth’ — not so much within a collective set-up, but rather in individual cases, forms and nuances (‘pixels’). And it was precisely these idiographic pixels that I gradually came to unravel, assembling them bit by bit into clearer images of people as time and interviews progressed,

¹⁵⁰ Described between the wearer and the world outside on the one hand (represented by other hijab wearers, designers, friends, husbands or myself as a researcher in their midst), and *within* the wearer on the other.

where memories, feelings and facts began to coalesce into a cinematic story-of-stories. It can even be said that I have *grown* into this understanding, I have ‘seen’ feelings transported into images, was made aware of the personal impressions impressed onto the material, and have, in more ways than one, ‘heard’ the voice of hijabs speaking (in the form of wearers’, designers’ or imams’ input). In any case, it was Hyacine who, toward the end of my fieldwork, made me realize just how important each sense — sight, sound, touch and motion — is in the synaesthetic aggregation of fibres (this very notion of affective synaesthesia is largely neglected by the existing literature, and even Tarlo, who intersects with it (2010, pp. 19-27, 40-2), dedicates relatively little space to this issue; I tried to correct this slightly myopic approach below). Furthermore, ideas related to ‘otherness’, innovation and difference were equally underlined.¹⁵¹ In fact, the ‘passage’ of knowledge — the transfer of my participants’ reality into my own, and from my own into academia — is similar to an introduction to a new sport, or yet an unexplored culinary art: one learns that differences are *not* that different, that what might seem unusual is not that strange, and seemingly absurd behaviours end up making reasonable sense.

The first step on this route toward relative understanding, if not complete ‘knowledge’, of hijab (in many ways, I was left to believe that a ‘true’ knowledge thereof — implicit, personal, spiritual — would presuppose wearing it as a Muslim, after having embraced and ‘lived’ within it: see also Woodward, 2006, 2007, 2011; Miller, 2011a, 2012, Chapter 1, on the ‘inside’ connections and intimacy between subject/wearer and object possessed / clothing), in its multiple shapes and connotations, can be situated at a collective level, zooming in on how individuals inscribe themselves in social circles, communities and shared ideologies, arguably building their way up to the personalization/individuation of the object (as underlined in **Chapter 4**). In this chapter, therefore, a closer focus on individuals and idiosyncratic ‘experiential’ maps thereof ensues, following creative processes by which hijab, viewed through subjective lenses, becomes relevant as a personal vignette and/or identity catalyst.

¹⁵¹ See Sandıkcı & Ger, 2001, on the ‘pluralism’ and ‘difference’ of Islamic fashions in contemporary Turkey; Williams & Vashi, 2007, on the quality of hijab as a vignette of difference in American Muslims; Tarlo, 2013, on markers of cultural/ethnic and aesthetic difference in British Muslims of South Asian origin; also, Black, 2009, on ‘details’ of difference and ‘je ne sais quoi’ elements, based on Barthes’ approach to *The Fashion System*, and Miller, 2012, Chapter 1, on the importance of detail, feeling and [the] senses in dress’ “minutiae of the intimate” (p. 41).

5.2. Mea's Braided Hijab Style: A Fashionable Retreat

Just like Hyacine, Mea, a Saudi doctoral student temporarily in Nottingham finishing her studies, is drawn to the visual aesthetics of hijab. Although brought up in a completely different culture¹⁵², Mea is a very fashionable young woman embodying a(nother) relevant facet of modern, multicultural, innovative hijab. And, while we have seen that Hyacine does little to improvise with the fabric as such and covers up mostly in readily-purchased garments, Mea *plays* with her scarves in a creative, personalized way.

From our earliest stages of dialogue, I noticed a certain reticence in Mea's conduct, as if I might have been interested in something *beyond* the fashion of her outerwear, potentially intruding on whether or not the aesthetic she embraced was the 'proper' one. For, in fact, while I was not one to dare assess its propriety, I could easily note it was not a stylistically 'orthodox' fashion. And in this observation I was aided by her close friend Madeeha's covering style, which sits at the opposite (fashion) pole and consists of plain, monochrome outfits and headscarves teamed with no make-up and very few, if any, Western accessories — see below for a more descriptive illustration of Madeeha's appearance.

With Mea (28 years old at the time), however, the impact was markedly different. She has worn hijab for only four years, but is highly drawn to its fashion, and to the fashion world generally. In the past two years, she has had a chance to 'dip' her scarves into several cultural 'pools' — first, the Saudi Arabian; second, the Canadian; and third, the British. Like Hyacine, she habitually matches and accessorizes (with ear rings, "watch, bag, everything. As much as I see it suits my look, I do."). The visual nonconformity of Mea's style (portrayed in **Image 35** — note how the neck and ears are partly left uncovered by her headwrap; admittedly, Mea 'complained' that she sometimes leaves some of her neck, ears and/or hair in sight) is in part a reflection of her family's less strict adherence to Islamic (dress) norms, in the Saudi society which Mea characterized by a predominance of veiled women, including of the young generation, over the unveiled, whereas up until recently "just the old women were wearing hijab".

¹⁵² The Saudi Arabian socio-sartorial climate is rather different in many respects from the British — it takes less than a *connaisseur's* eye to establish that (Davies, 2012; FT Reporters, 2012). However, having met three women of Saudi Arabian descent over the last four years of research, I realized how significant differences between representatives of the same country can prove. Two of these, Mea and Madeeha, are close friends, and I have consequently chosen to interview them both at the same time, which, interestingly, brought to the surface more contrasts than I had anticipated.

Although she nominates her family as the first factor having driven her to veiling in the first place, she *likes* hijab more nowadays, as it “becomes fashion”. On meeting with me, Mea had not one, but two scarves on her head, one on top of the other, creating a layered look that she literally and figuratively wove to enhance the beauty, impact and ‘contemporaneity’ of her headgear.



Image 35

Mea wearing a two-layered headdress, consisting of a top-layer, light-cotton, monochrome baby pink ‘bandana’ braided with a printed white/graphite-gray/fuchsia cotton scarf underneath.

Yet beyond familial influence and Mea’s penchant for stylistic actuality / fashion improvisation, there is another, more profound reason lying at the core of her covering. As other women I have interviewed (Atarra, to recall an example), Mea embraced the hijab to take refuge from past vicissitudes and trauma, regarding it as a reservoir of spiritual strength and solace:

Sometimes I make something fashion[able] like this, and sometimes I use the traditional way. So, it’s different. And then, after I gave birth to my son in 2007, he was sick, he stayed in ICU, maybe for about three months. And then I’m just trying to rethink about anything [sic], because as a Muslim, you know, we believe in God, so I’m just trying to find back [sic] to my God, to

Mecca. So I felt maybe I do most of the good things, why not wearing hijab? So I started to wear hijab and I liked it.

Before reaching this point, her views on head covering had been largely informed by the dress regulations enforced in Saudi Arabia, where you simply “have to [veil]. It’s not an option. It’s the rule in our country, you have to wear the abaya and scarf”. Nowadays, she is able to blend confidence and style with her covering, all the more so as she regards it as a vehicle conveying bits of her person(ality) to the outside world — where aesthetic creativity, femininity, and physical attractiveness¹⁵³ appear to carry particular relevance.

The issue of self-esteem, of confidence, oft-cited when referring to hijab in academic texts (Bullock, 2003, Chapters 2-3; Damhorst et al., 2008, section 79; Bailey & Tawadros, 2003; Tarlo, 2010; Moors & Ünal, 2012; Tarlo & Moors, 2013), appears here as a twofold construction whose ‘folds’ sometimes find themselves in direct opposition. For the purpose of contrast, I am juxtaposing Madeeha’s perspective on this. On the one hand, there is Mea, who attests to being “proud to be one of the Muslim ladies wearing hijab”; she *enjoys* it all the more as she adds an experimental dimension to the meaning of hijab, derived from colour, artifice and shape innovation — as we will see — all clearly informed by Western practices. On the other hand, Madeeha too sees a confidence ‘booster’ in hijab, only she feels more confident *hiding* underneath it, her beauty muted by the use of monotone colours and hardly visible elements of style: “Yea, it makes me secure sometimes, by wearing it. So I feel secure when I cover, I’m *hiding*.”

¹⁵³ Although difficult to discern here due to Mea’s request to keep her facial features unidentifiable, she has her eyes, eyebrows and lips distinctly enhanced by make-up.



Image 36

One of Madeeha’s less ‘muted’ scarves (worn at my request to don one of her favourite garments for our interview).

“I like any *nice* and *new* style of hijab. I always look for the new in hijab”, Mea resumes, while openly demarcating between her own habitual preferences and those of Madeeha, who wears her headscarf without any make-up or ‘experimental’ effects, strictly as a ‘distractor’ from her beauty. As Mea too observed, Madeeha uses hijab “as a *tool*, not as a fashion”. Conversely, Mea is drawn to make-up and accessories to highlight not so much the beauty of her hijab, but, admittedly, herself:

Mea: Ok, for me — I know Madeeha is different [laughs]. For me, I feel — I like make-up. ... I believe that hijab mean[s] not to show your beauty, but I like make-up and I like to look nice, so I got make-up [laughs].

R.: Do you feel that it renders your hijab more visible, or yourself, or something else?

Mea: Myself. Honestly [resumes laughing].

The stylistic schism between the two is matched by a similar attitudinal difference over what wearing hijab inside and outside their home country feels like. While one of them acquiescently follows tradition:

Madeeha: It [covering] wasn't a decision, it's just, you know, a progress of our [society]. ... We don't protest, we know that at some point we will wear it. ... You become an adult, so we know that it will come, this day will come anyway.

the other prefers to follow *fashion*, inasmuch as her host geographic setting allows it:

Mea: You know, for me, I don't care about tradition. And the only point that I have to just accept of the tradition is wearing the abaya and scarf. ... But I don't go with tradition, I just think about my belief, so I don't care about tradition.

Location is a relevant variable here. In Saudi Arabia, Madeeha's home town is the holy Mecca, transited by a plethora of pilgrims every year and overcharged not only with religiosity, but also with social scrutiny — which, in Madeeha's case, adds the observance of the niqab alongside the traditional form of dress locally approved of.

Madeeha: You know, it's different from [one] city to another. In her [Mea's] city, people are more free to wear colours and stones in the abaya. But in my city, when I walk with this type of abaya, I would be just — I would look different.

Mea: Because she lives in Makkah; as you know, Makkah is where is the holy mosque...

Madeeha: And in my city, people wear the veil, the niqab. So I wear niqab inside Arabia, just as a tradition [read: social conformity], because I don't believe that I should cover my face. But I still can't feel ok if I take the niqab off. So I wear it just for traditional reasons. But the hijab, I still wear it [wittingly].

In a similar (somewhat conformist) vein, yet still differently oriented, Mea finds it paramount to match hijab chromatically and stylistically to the rest of her garb, being consistently up-to-date with the most recent Islamic dress vogues. Alongside the carefully-selected fashions and colours of her scarves (for example, she points to her favourite one, the top scarf in the two-layer ensemble she wears in **Image 35**, suggesting that she was very particular in choosing this combination and its “amazing” colours), she also admits to enjoying “the colour and the look of a *fashion abaya*”. To point out exactly what she means by “fashion”, she showed me some images of very recent abaya styles on her iPhone, some embellished “with stones”, others semi-transparent and/or embroidered, which I found quite similar to the aesthetic promoted by cross-cultural¹⁵⁴ Islamic fashion

¹⁵⁴ By cross-cultural I mean enriched with Western elements such as open necks, stretch- or oversized sleeves, asymmetrical hem lines, ‘posh’ hand bags in contrasting colours, smart hair updos and/or a diverse jewelry range.

companies such *Rouge Couture* or *Arabesque* (discussed in **Chapter 2**); she even showed me glamorous poses of herself in a green, shiny, strapless outfit.

A circumstantial advantage for Mea, whose look puts forth a much more ‘Western-friendly’ image in the British milieu (compared with Madeeha, whose abayas are usually black and notably more conservative, to avoid drawing unwanted attention), is managing to steer clear of potential feelings of ‘misfitting’ and exposure as a cultural ‘alien’. In this sense, both Mea and Madeeha have recounted occurrences of feeling physically and psychologically threatened, exposed or rejected in the West: “Because some people don’t like to make friendship[s], for example. Because I’m not going with them in bars, I’m not going with them in night clubs, so — what kind of friend are you?!”. But, as we have seen above, safety is a relative assumption, and the girls seek it in different modes; on the one hand, Mea experiments with Western colours, prints and sartorial artifice, keeping with the latest fashion trends, while Madeeha feels more protected in what she considers to be the most *neutral* sartorial guise, avoiding strong colours like “red or fuchsia¹⁵⁵”, and favouring black in abayas and pastels in headscarves, with no make-up and no jewelry added¹⁵⁶.

At one level, we have witnessed a similar instantiation of this with Faaiza and the way she ‘targets’ the West as a scenery, or receptacle for an alternative system of values — one less infatuated with external appearance and more focused on *intrinsic* human property. At another level, we have noted Atarra’s mode of coping with the practice of covering in response to having been rejected, or vexed by her host-society, which conduced to her seeking acceptance by using hijab as a *shell*. This is not, however, to say that either mode of covering, serving to underline or ‘undermine’ physical features, is risk-free. As Madeeha relates, even (or perhaps particularly) the most austere, plain-looking covers can trigger antipathy and, more generically, Islamophobia (see Bullock, 2003, Chapters 2-3; Sharma & Sharma, 2003; Tarlo, 2005; Haddad, 2007, on Islamophobia and/or hijab as the “standard of the enemy”¹⁵⁷, a token of backwardness, and a perceived affront to Western culture/normativity especially after 9/11):

¹⁵⁵ Interestingly enough, fuchsia is one of the colours appearing on Mea’s ‘scarfdo’ on this occasion.

¹⁵⁶ This is in line with some of veiling’s positive symbolism (as perceived by wearers), signalling “the devout Muslim woman’s disdain for the profane, immodest, and consumerist cultural customs of the West” (Ghazal Read & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 399).

¹⁵⁷ Direct quote from Haddad, 2007, p. 263.

Madeeha: My friend, she was wearing this black abaya with the niqab [in Great Britain], and she looked different. And one little girl, she was crying and saying ‘this is Batman!’ So the lady, the little girl’s mother, told my friend ‘you have to take off your niqab to show her you are a normal person, because my girl will have nightmares [otherwise].’

R.: And did she?

Madeeha: Yes, she did [smiles]. She gave the little girl some sweets, and said that it was ok. But you know, in my country, on the other hand, if [there is] a lady without the hijab, she will look *different the same*, and she will have some judgements — so it’s just about culture, it’s just that you are more obvious [when covered] here.

5.3. Eshel’s Ludic Approach to Hijab and Proportion: A Creative Encounter

“I just play with the hijab. Something will come up and that’s it!”

Although it is perhaps not immediately apparent, creativity neighbours the idea of *difference*, both form a theoretical point of view, as well as in practical, object- and dress-related ‘experiments’. At a basic/vernacular level of understanding, creative acts translate as novel behaviours impelled by the capacity to combine ideas and generate new abstractions, understood either as cognitive or pragmatic endeavours. In modern times, talent and creativity assume quotidian roles in most human (inter)actions and are often expressed through theoretical and/or artistic constructs, humour, as well via scientific achievement. In literature, music and the arts, creativity is often paragoned with the ambiguous notion of *insight* that Sir Francis Galton (1869/1978) defined as a creative ability of an exceptionally high order, translating into enduring, unaccidental, tangible accomplishment. The same idea transpires from Simonton’s (2004), Sternberg’s (1999) or Kaufman and Sternberg’s (2006) approaches to the subject, with a stress on *breaking the routine* and reshaping of meanings in a given field, which results in the creation of unprecedented or unexpected value(s). The creative accomplishment as such can be described as producing “something that is both novel and interesting and valuable” (Simon, 2001, quoted in Smith, 2005, p. 293), where creativity acts as

“a dispositional trait or ability which enables one person to put forward ideas, or execute and produce works of imagination, having an appearance of novelty, which are immediately or in due course accepted by experts and peers as genuine contributions having social value.”

(Eysenck, 1995, p. 82).

However, the extent to which a creative act acquires ‘value’ is almost invariably regulated by subjective criteria and interpretation (see Tseëlon, 2012, for a discussion on the relativity of different socio-economic criteria engaged in the determination of an art work’s ‘value’¹⁵⁸). Leaving the sciences and the arts aside, we will continue our journey through novel and surprising elements of individuated style, using the hijab as a case in point — which, even if not artistic or revelatory at all times, often takes on the hallmark of novelty/improvisation derived from interesting (inter)cultural combinations and space-time jigsaws. Therefore I will not dwell on theoretical definitions of creativity any further — especially since, given the wide array of styles introduced in these chapters, it is unlikely that one single paradigm will be able to explicate all. Rather, I propose to continue our exploration of narrative and visual illustrations of headscarves, zooming in on creative elements of intent, fashion and style.

With Faaiza and Sabiya, we have seen elements of difference and personal taste deployed in how head covers are worn (tightly secured or loose, on the head alone or extending to the face, neck and shoulders etc.), how colour and print matter in the interpretation of meanings displayed. With Hyacine, we have partaken in the question whether hijab is to be worn at all, and if so, what is gained or lost. With Mea’s trendy ‘hijabdo’ we have identified an active involvement in, and extension of, the Western fashionscape (all the more so, considering the body-shaping tops and generally Western dress she dons juxtaposed to modest headwear, as portrayed before), and a related adaptation of Muslim headgear in this context. Eshel will serve as the next ‘link’ reinforcing hijab’s acculturation into global/glocal fashion. Not only the shape, but also the volume of the scarf will play a key part in the discussion below.

¹⁵⁸ Discussing the impact of an art object between “a premium” placed “on the creative *activity* [i.e. experience] or the creative *product*”, the author distinguishes between criteria built around “*intrinsic features* [of the object]”, where “formal criteria and uniqueness matter most”; “*individual expression*”, where “authorship and authentic expression are most important”; “*market judgment*”, where “authorship and uniqueness are [again] key factors”; and “*audience effect*”, i.e. “the ability to give authentic expression to a genuine feeling or to produce aesthetically pleasing images”. By placing the stress on the “experience of creating” itself, I mostly adhere here to the second criterion, that is the “individual expression” of both process and outcome, where authorship and creative effect (e.g., bricolage) are equally relevant (Tseëlon, 2012, p. 113, original emphasis).

There are six years of difference between Hyacine and Eshel (Eshel being 26 at the time of our conversations), and, as we shall see in the subsequent paragraphs, much ethnic and cultural diversity. Also a passionate shopper, keen on matching and accessorizing her headdress (on every occasion we met, her clothing, Western¹⁵⁹ or Islamic¹⁶⁰, matched her hijabs), Eshel too engages in stylistic ‘experimentation’ frequently. Indeed, Eshel is familiarized with fashion trends worldwide, from Syria to Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and most of the Gulf countries; coming from an economically-privileged family, she has travelled extensively and been exposed to considerable topographic and cultural diversity, her tastes imbued with an equally diverse range of covering alternatives.



Image 37

Eshel wearing Western clothing alongside a matching, bichromatic ‘volume hijabdo’.

In terms of sartorial creativity, while Hyacine is arguably still beginning to build up her dress identity, Eshel can be said to follow a ‘zigzag’ movement around and between increasingly creative styles. It is relevant to note that Eshel was born and raised in Iraq,

¹⁵⁹ A (partly) Western outfit, consisting of a turquoise sweatshirt, navy jeans and a chromatically matched hijab, can be viewed in **Image 37**.

¹⁶⁰ Abayas or jilbabs.

whence she retains some cultural influence, but has lived in Dubai for the past 12 years of her life — a location she gradually came to describe as home. Not unlike other girls I have met in Markfield, Eshel came to Great Britain from Dubai in 2012, to complete her studies (and is currently enrolled in an Islamic Banking Master’s programme). Her knowledge and use of hijab consequently reflect more than a singular aesthetic influence, which is to say her styles differ and mutate not only in line with her age and growth, but also with her geographic mobility. Asked how she perceives the differences between the U.K. and Dubai hijab-wise, she answered:

To be honest, I love wearing hijab here in U.K. more than in U.A.E. I don’t know, I feel like here it *represents* me. It’s not representing me there [in Dubai] — I wear it more for the culture [there]. Because I’m *supposed* to, and everybody does, and you don’t have the freedom to wear like [what you choose], to do styles and everything [note the similarity with Mea’s reflections]; people will laugh, people will judge, they will say things.

This is to say she has to wear more conventional forms of hijab in Dubai. Referring to one of the more daring styles she sometimes dons, called the ‘turban style’ (see below for a more specific description and imagistic illustration), Eshel resumes:

People will look at you with a different look if you experiment there, [as in] ‘what are you doing?!’; so judgemental. I went with my sister to Dubai, we live like 40 minutes far from Dubai. So we went to Dubai; since it’s my city, I don’t wear the turban [style] there. ‘Cause, like, people know me, [they] will start laughing, I will not wear it. They know me in [a] *traditional* way.

Despite Eshel’s not qualifying this as a significant impediment in her embracing complete stylistic liberty elsewhere, she is visibly vexed by societal influence not only in Dubai, but also in her home country (Iraq), where people are even more judgemental, and where she is often confronted with “laughing” and “silly comments” both from strangers and people she knows. Above all, the higher authority she has to abide by is her father, a respectable professor in Iraq, who regulates “like ‘this is short’, or ‘this is tight’”, although she admits to sometimes ‘stretching’ things in her favour, in order to voice her own will and style. When she was younger, she recalls her father’s comments would often make her angry and frustrated, and sometimes still do — for example, one of the few things her father objected to in Dubai was Eshel’s recently adopted turban-style, which in the U.K. “is ok, but wearing it in U.A.E. is a different thing” as “he [her father] is well-known there!”.

Instead she opts for regularly-shaped ‘hijabdos’ in Dubai. Eshel explains that on the Internet, as well as in fashion magazines and even in academic articles, one can read about the liberal fashion and multitude of styles commercially available in Dubai (some of which were presented here in **Chapter 2**), an aesthetic that rapidly spread to British retailers too — a sample of the latest scarf fashions imported from Dubai is exemplified in **Image 38**.



Image 38

Two snapshots of ‘Dubai style’ varieties available in downtown Leicester.

Note similarities between British retail samples and Eshel’s scarves, illustrated next.



Image 39

Eshel's hijab hanger (scarves transported along with her in Europe).

Admittedly, in Eshel's experience, the inhabitants of Dubai (generally clothed in black) are more often exposed to daring, innovative veilcloths in tourists and foreigners than in local residents. "Even with the turban, like with a cell phone and everything, everybody was thinking I'm Kuwaiti [Kuwaitis being reportedly perceived as more fashion-sensitive]. They start talking to me, they feel like I'm a Kuwaiti, because of the turban." In this sense, she remarks that most foreigners established in Dubai, herself included (and here she cites other examples of Iraqi, Syrian, or Lebanese people residing in the U.A.E.), "they mostly use colourful hijab, and just wrap it the same way". One can tell a visitor from the native population by the colourfulness of the scarf, which acts as an element of distinction and creative input brought into the U.A.E. almost exclusively by *outsiders*; rarely does one spot a local wearing light-coloured scarves, despite the heat and the sun which can easily turn any dark-coloured garment into a nuisance. The rest of the costume comes easier for Eshel; "because I'm Iraqi, I don't *have* to wear abaya! So [I] like wearing jeans, wearing casual things, with hijab and everything. ... [whereas] they *have* to wear the abaya".

On the last two occasions when I visited her in the *M.I.H.E.* girls' dormitory, Eshel wore two very different and intriguing hijab 'updos'. The first, illustrated in **Image 40**, is a self-fashioned "confection" resulted from the wrapping of a scarf on top of a fake clip-bun (which looks like a sizable sponge and has the role of giving the scarf proportion and better stability). In the U.A.E., "we call it *shabasa*", while Botz-Bornstein (2013) calls the device a "hijab bo tafkha", or a "puffy hijab", attesting to its potency to restructure the traditional 'architecture' of the head and the predictable effect a normal veil produces. The second is the turban-style she referred to above, which will be described in the following pages.



Image 40

Eshel's two-layer, volume-enhanced 'hijabdo'.

Following this (illustrated) fashion, Eshel's liberal, yet thoroughly modest (i.e. not revealing any of the hair or neck) 'scarfdo' takes on the aspect of an oversized headdress. A second trick she makes intentional use of is displaying both sides of the fabric when tying the scarf, where each surface has a different colour, one lighter than the other; hence the false impression that there are two items creating the arrangement.

When improvising with various modes of tying, layering and fixing her headdress¹⁶¹, she flips, turns, twists, enhances and lifts various elements to construct the desired look, most of which is decided spontaneously: “I flip it so it shows that I have two colours ... I have another hijab like this, it has two colours. From here I flip it, so it shows that I have two colours. ... If you ask me to do it again, I can’t do it; it just happened!”. Indeed, the impermanence and the whimsicality of this act should not be understated, especially since such ‘immaterial’ performative elements are rarely associated with hijab throughout the literature.

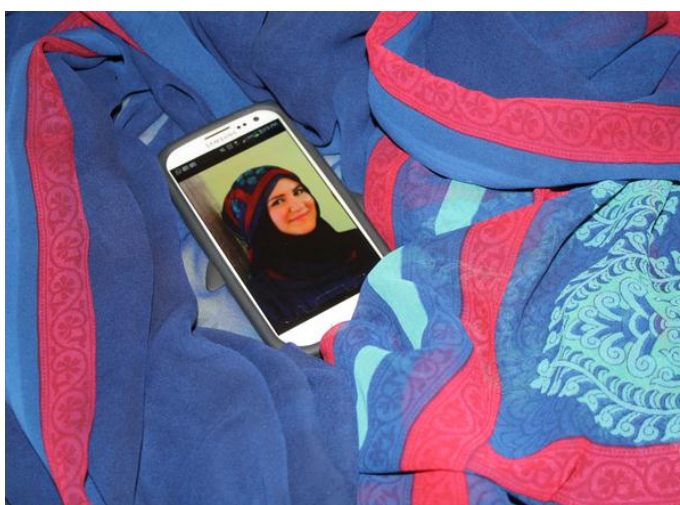


Image 41

Another of Eshel’s ‘proportion’ hijabs.

It should also be noted here that for Eshel, the composition of the scarf is not as relevant as *the look*. She spends many hours on the Internet, on fashion websites, Facebook and Instagram, talking to friends and posting “aaaaaa looooooooot of pictures”, constantly updating and ‘tweaking’ her stylistic preferences. Again, Eshel and Hyacine are much alike in this regard: they are both highly sociable, prone to interaction, and both seek the

¹⁶¹ Other noteworthy creative artifices Eshel has engaged with to create specific effects include collections of *buttons* she has in the past sewn in various “messy” configurations onto her outfits to render these more attractive (see related thematic threads on embellishing modes and materials by *designers* of modest wear in **Chapter 6**). She views these in a potentially confidence bolstering way, especially when recounting about the years she spent in Dubai, restricted by the local scarcity of colour and adornment, a context wherein she regarded these as an impetus to positive attitude and thought — i.e. the more innovative her attire, the more nonconformist her attitude, the more they enhanced her self-esteem.

company of men¹⁶². Even in the enclosed Muslim circles they frequent (e.g., within the *M.I.H.E.*), Eshel is accustomed to being surrounded by men, being the only female in an “all-guys” study group; she even relates about the boys who habitually play under her window, and who on this particular occasion were treated with a (literally) cold shower as a result of Eshel’s and Sabiya’s playfulness¹⁶³.

In addition to this, both Hyacine and Eshel feel that hijab sometimes obscures their femininity, hindering their ability to socialize or flirt freely. In one of the focus groups I conducted, the two engaged in a spot-on conversation on the issue of veiling and unveiling, sharing doubts about moments when hijab might become “too much to handle” and impulses to rid themselves of its ‘weight’ in casual interactions. On this matter, Eshel’s life views are, indeed, markedly more Occidental than most of my other respondents’: she considers many Islamic practices “old school”, which is to say “strict and old-fashioned”, such as the discouragement of male suitors from a hijabi’s life before marriage (a practice, for instance, ongoing in countries like Saudi Arabia and largely in conservative Muslim communities worldwide), which translates as not being able to date and become properly familiarized with a partner before marriage. However, she explains that nowadays, especially in more developed societies like Bahrain, the U.A.E., or Kuwait, people meet each other in college or at work and start dating without the family’s permission, which she deems preferable to any form of pre-arranged partnership. And, despite local traditions (including her own) generally preventing Muslim youth from having lax (Western) dating relationships before marriage, Eshel proudly attests to having bent this rule to her advantage: “We are not allowed, but we still do it [laughs] — actually, because it’s not allowed it gets *extra spicy!* I love breaking the rules!” Somewhat expectedly, her liberal views may, at times, clash with the customary use and grasp of the idea of hijab in its holistic sense:

Yea, I have [interrupted wearing the scarf on occasion]. You have like days which [sic] you are down and off, down and off, so yea, there was some period of my life [when] I tried to take it off and I *took* it off. For some time.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² In Eshel’s case, actors and male celebrities occupy much of her spare time. Of the numerous photos of actors she collects on her iPhone, some feature physically attractive actors (from Dubai, Turkey etc.) and other male figures who substitute for a reported lack of “male sight” at Markfield.

¹⁶³ The girls emptied a water recipient over the boys, seated outside for a friendly chat underneath their window.

¹⁶⁴ The uncovering of the head after having it covered is strongly discouraged in Islam. Of the two imams I have consulted on this theme, one avoided a direct condemnation of uncovered Muslim women (along the

R.: Can I ask, was there any reason in particular that made you think about this?

Eshel [wavering a bit, as the subject of unveiling appears to be quite a delicate topic to engage with¹⁶⁵]: I was young, I wanted to try something new and this kind of stuff. And usually, actually, I took it off in Syria and Lebanon when I went to my holiday. So I told them, like ‘I want to go on holiday like even from hijab!’. Like, I want to go off. Like this. Yea, that’s it. Yea, I tried it. So, it [was] just like for holidays, like two months.

R.: Did you feel unusual?

Eshel: In the beginning, yes. Ahm — as if you are naked. Yea? [laughs] But then you get used to it.

A rather evident factor to emphasize here is that Eshel’s stylistic flexibility hijab-wise has been, and is still greatly influenced by her economic well-being, cultural mobility and freedom to update or adjust her look to particular environments, travel experiences and aesthetic vogues. Interestingly, it was coming to the United Kingdom in particular that brought Eshel to the challenge and decision to keep her hijab on; distance from home gave her the opportunity to analyze things thoroughly and *miss* being covered:

Actually, when I came to [the] U.K., I found like I’m *attached to it*. Yea. In the beginning, when I got my acceptance from *M.I.H.E.* and everything, my dad did tell me, like ‘if you find even one per cent that they treat you differently because you are wearing hijab’ — because I don’t [sic] know about U.K., like people and everything — so, he told me like ‘even one per cent you find like they treat you differently or look at you like in small size, take it off. Don’t push yourself!’ But when I came here, I found myself — this is me, this is my identity, like I’m telling people like ‘I’m a Muslim’. Yea, so I get [sic] attached to it.

Similar ideas are reflected in the literature; in Williams’ and Vashi’s (2007) observations, “[s]everal women mentioned the benefit of gaining more respect from men after starting to cover. One meaning of respect in this case may be discouraging unwelcome flirting or sexual attention” (p. 282). However, both in Eshel’s and in Hyacine’s case, the purpose of diverting the gaze from the woman in hijab appears to be reversed, or presents itself at least as an opportunity to advertise the individual’s sense of style and sartorial chicness. With Eshel, this goes even farther, to an intentional challenging of authority, which

following lines: “in my knowledge, there is no punishment for deciding not to wear it after adopting it initially. A human being always has the supreme choice. There is no compulsion in Islam according to my knowledge and understanding”), while the other more trenchantly testified to the necessity of hijab in a Muslim woman’s life, understood as “loose clothing and the covering of the head”; “there’s no difference of opinion, there’s not really room for interpretation in this thing!”, he concluded.

¹⁶⁵ An observation reinforced by another of my interviewees, who has relinquished the scarf altogether after a significant timespan wearing it.

includes both tradition and her father's authority, the latter disallowing her to wear some of the more daring hijab styles in Iraq or Dubai (however, he cannot prevent her doing so in Great Britain). In fact, it is not uncommon for young hijabis to wear head covers as "a way to escape parental authority and supervision, at least temporarily" (Williams & Vashi, 2007, p. 282). Coming to the *M.I.H.E.*, the chance to explore new social spheres, new educational horizons and new stylistic trends surfaced with a self-discovery process wherein Eshel was able to affirm her hijabi identity through novel, interesting, 'edgy' expressions.

Of the many modish shapes Eshel adopts in her 'plays' with hijab, arguably the most innovative variety consists of her turban-style arrangements (briefly referred to above), reportedly one of the newest headdress vogues emerged in the Western fashionscape (see also Tarlo, 2010, pp. 33, 38-40, on an example of African-inspired turban-style). As an apposite intermezzo here, this reminded me of an interesting focus group digression on the topic of turban-shaped hijab, developed during one of my earlier group sessions (not involving Eshel at the time) and referring to headgear inspired from Western media productions; for illustration purposes, I have chosen to include a rather sizeable excerpt here:

Runa: You know *Kingdom of Heaven* [motion picture, Scott & Monahan, 2005]? I know she's a bad [noise], she kills her son. You know that Christian lady there? [side voices: 'I didn't see that part' / 'Whom are you talking about?'] Runa [resuming]: *Kingdom of Heaven*, man! [more questions: 'Who kills her son?!' 'She didn't have a son!'] The Christian woman, you know, the king's wife...! [some clarifications on the margin; adjacent recollections.]

Voice: The baby...!

Runa: Yea, yea. She does [have a son], and she poisons him. She pours poison in his ear. ...

Maryam [explaining]: You know the girl that Orlando Bloom likes, and he gets with in the end... Are you talking about her hijab?

Runa [confirming]: Anyway, she's a Jewish lady in it. She's not Christian, sorry. She's a Jewish woman, and she has this beautiful, curly hair... And she has this hijab thing happening with the clothes, and... It looks *really* nice. It's like a *regal* look. She's got like a lock [?] there...

Alena: Or [in] *Braveheart*, yeeaa [motion picture, Gibson & Wallace, 1995]! The *Braveheart*, the French woman [referring to Sophie Marceau in her role as Princess Isabelle — see **Image sequence 49**] as well!

Sarah: Even Orlando Bloom with the Arab look! Isn't it? It [he] looked *good*. I mean, I know he's not an Arab [laughs]...

Runa: And then, *Kingdom of Heaven*, the movie... [asked to describe the look she had just been referring to] Basically, she's got this hijab on [i.e. a turban-shaped 'scarfdo', though never explicitly nominated as hijab], it's like layers on...

Maryam: Ah, it's *that* lady, I know which one you're talking about. It's like, she's wearing like a *turban type* of thing with hijab. Like, it's not a turban, but it's like a massive headdress!

Runa: Yea! It looks really nice, though.

[Maryam agrees] [Sarah asks if this is the woman who comes in on a horse in the first part of the film.]

Maryam: Yea, the one that comes on a horse.

Sarah: No, she hasn't got a son!

Maryam: Exactly, that's what I'm saying!

Alena: Girls, let's make it movie night and confirm!

[noise]

Runa: She *has* got a son! Anyway [confirms that she was referring to the woman on the horse] Yea... Now I'm confused, but there's a woman in it [the movie], she's pretty, all that, and her whole outfit thing is... The whole gown thing...

Sarah: Does she have like a turban thing? No?

Runa [confused]: Well... I don't know.

Maryam: It is, it *is*, there's a turban.

Sarah: Yea, there's a turban. [voices overlap]

R.: Would you also accessorize somehow [the style they all suggested — at that particular time, I hadn't yet seen the film myself], or match it to anything?

Runa: It's *quite* accessorized, I think [laughs]!

[more noise and voices overlapping; the participants are all familiar with the character, and they complement each other's recollections of the film.]

[Indeed, as I was soon to discover, the pose(s) that my respondents were reacting to featured Eva Green as princess (later queen) Sibylla, displaying a heavily-accessorized, multi-layered headdress shaped as a turban and covered with an embroidered hood; the effect is visibly

enhanced by multiple strings of (faux) pearls and sequins, metallic chains (over the forehead as well as downwards, tracing the contours of the face), multiple rings, tassels, a highly ornamented V-neck line and a translucent 'niqab' veil she removes from her face upon meeting the male protagonist (namely, Balian de Ibelin, played by Orlando Bloom).]





Image sequence 42

Still captures featuring *Kingdom of Heaven* style headgear.

...

Alena: She looks like a *queen*.

Sarah: You know, when she comes in the beginning, on the horse — have you seen that? And she's got that turban style, and where it's coming down like this [shows], and then she's got all the jewels there, coming down. Very *empiry*, like a *queen look*, and yet covered up. Yea. And lots of... [detail?]

Sarah [to Runa]: Imagine walking in with *that* [laughs, amused; all girls laugh]. That was *nice!*

...

Alena [resuming previous train of thought]: Did you watch *Braveheart*, ever? Do you know that French [female character — referring to Princess Isabelle, played by Sophie Marceau]...? [I would like a scarf] just like that style, I was *in love* with that, it was like Middle... Middle Ages.

Runa: I think in my dream, I would be like six-foot tall as well. I would be six-foot tall, and reeaally thiiin, and obviously anything would look beautiful on me, 'cause... Because I think, you know, the whole thing, like, [on] tall people, things look nicer.

Alena: That's not always true. Cause they say tall is like, for women they say it's giant. For men, they say it's looking good. For short women, they say it's petite and cute in women... And for guys, they say it's a dwarf [laughter].

Runa: You know that look, it makes you look tall... It makes you look *tall*, that look.

Remarkable here is how these (self-)Orientalist themes light-heartedly blend with humour and irony, becoming, as the discussion continues, also entwined with a sense of (escapist) agency and (idealized) aesthetic scope. Equally interesting on this score is Sarah's rhetorical defence of a related film imagery (*One Night with the King* — Sajbel et al., 2006), and her efforts to center her (equally agential/emulative) interest on sartorial detail:

Sarah: Yea, whenever I watch my period dramas, or one of those old films, I really like the way they wear it [headdress]. And I was thinking of copying some of the[ir] dresses [laughs]. For weddings and stuff, like there's a Jewish film called — the title sounds bad, but it's not bad — it's called *One Night with the King* [the others burst into laughter], have you seen it? Where she tells him stories, 'cause he has to — I know it sounds bad, you can google it, yea? — where he chooses a bride, and she's got a famous name, basically she's in the Jewish book, and basically she dresses up *so elegant*[ly]. So basically, she wears, you know, like the medieval kind of dresses, where they're flowy, light colours, like beiges and you know... She wore this on her wedding, she wore like off-white [other girls enjoy the story and sustain the atmosphere with enthusiastic background interjections]. And it had dull red trimming on it, yea? Yea. And

where it came down, you know, like where it comes like a medieval belt, it comes down [gesticulates]... It was like that, with a bit of a trail. And then she had the white scarf on top, and her crown was on top. But it was just... And her necklaces was coming on top! And she just looked *sooo puuure, and nice*, and... So feminine! So elegant! ‘Cause her sleeves were actually coming down like that [shows], they were like chiffon, and it was just like... Woooow, like that beats *any* mini dress, any day [laughs]! It was just *SO* elegant, you know? [Follow relevant descriptions of Ayra’s and Amena’s embellished and accessorized designs in **Chapter 6.**]

To return to Eshel’s turban hijab (evidently sanctioned fashion-wise by many of her Markfield colleagues), an arguably (self-)Orientalist style potentially linked with other, similar adaptations of Eastern feminine aesthetics *by* Western media, I learnt that she discovered and assimilated this *while* in England, and was aided in doing so by her regular contact with Instagram, YouTube tutorials and other modest wear ateliers of style¹⁶⁶. “They call it *turbanasia* or *turbanista*”, she informs me, and ascribes its emergence to a Malaysian practice later propagated throughout the Gulf countries, the U.K. and Europe. Nowadays it is worn *especially* in Europe by Muslims who recently migrated from the East and mean to retain a chic Eastern dimension in their updated/revitalized mien: it is “more free, more into sight when you wear this, like you feel like you are not something old”. Moreover, she appreciates the turban for its versatility, which is to say adaptability to many visual permutations (where the wearer can have it “up, down, small, with a knot, with a braid”)¹⁶⁷, which differentiates it from the actual Turkish turban worn usually by men. As Eshel continues, neither do Turkish women really “do” the “regular” hijab fashion, but have their own (*tesettür*) style, inclusive of a “triangle here” and a loose hijab — a style we are to become acquainted with in the following subchapter, based on Alena’s input.

¹⁶⁶ One such atelier of style is *Pearl Daisy*, along with its Facebook and YouTube ‘extensions’, whence Eshel retrieved yet another original style called *hoojab* (designating a head cover hybrid between a hijab and a hood). I will elaborate on this at length in the following chapter.

¹⁶⁷ This bears some resemblance with Mea’s (braided) scarfdo, both varieties considered unorthodox by the “strict people, who are saying ‘this is not hijab’, because you are showing your neck and you are showing your ears”, while others, “they don’t classify the turban as hijab” at all. Despite these opinions, neither of the girls seems to mind the consequences of their nonconformity.



Image 43

One of Eshel's turban hijabs.

At my request, Eshel demonstrated how her two-sided turban hijabdo is to be tied and secured onto the head, by taking it off and then putting it on again, so I could minutely observe the procedure. The fabric (i.e. textural characteristics of the cloth) was less relevant in this case than any other detail, and although unsure what the material exactly consisted of, Eshel did specify that it had been given to her as a *gift*. Indeed, many of this study's informants agreed that a garment's emotional value is enhanced if it is received as a gift (supporting Dilnot's, 1993, and Mauss', 2009, above observations on objects-as-gifts on tangential analytic trajectories), as it becomes symbolic either of the giver, or of the moment of giving: "You keep holding [on] to it, even though you're not using it [anymore]! You keep *holding* [on] to it! ... I feel like, if I let it go, I will let go of these memories. And sometimes it's good memories".

5.4. The High End of Religious Cosmopolitanism: Alena's Modesty

“Paradise is *promised* for her [Mary]. So being like her is the biggest thing in the heart.”

Alena's scarves were among the first examples of “elegant”, high-end¹⁶⁸ headdress I came across in my research. Stylish and graphic in a Western vein¹⁶⁹, these were, in fact, nothing short of ‘proper’ hijabs in terms of stricture of covering the hair, neck, ears and shoulders. Although she presents herself as a highly devoted Muslim, for Alena the look of a scarf does not necessarily state simplicity/piety, but rather conveys her piety through practical and stylistic thoroughness, underlain by a complex, long-lived set of moral and theoretical tenets. Her scarves are elegant, fashionable and visually appealing, attributes ranking among the top qualities Alena takes into account whenever she picks out an outfit. To understand her preference for such garments, it is relevant to dwell on some of her personal(ity) features first.

Throughout our many discussions, Alena recurrently manifested an inclination to escape the literal (i.e. physical) and the mundane through aesthetics deployed in her outerwear. Having been brought up in a prominent upper-middle class family of Turkish intellectuals, where her mother was close friends with the first lady of Turkey, Alena was habituated from an early age to high-end, high-quality fashionable garments often worn in conjunction with well-assorted accessories (such as broaches and pearls) and subtle, similarly-coordinated make-up. Consequently, many of the scarves she possesses today are endorsed by designer names such as Yves Saint Laurent or Pierre Cardin (an example is illustrated in **Images 44** and **52**). Even her haircut, revealed to me on some of the occasions we spoke on, is styled in a modern, glamorous bob fashion. And, while few would argue that she is *unfashionable*, the aesthetic characterizing Alena's style hinges on a plurality of influences, best described through her eclectic, cosmopolitan life experience.

¹⁶⁸ By high-end I am pointing mostly to (Western) designer scarves made from luxury fabrics such as silk or chiffon, and viewed by Muslim wearers as high-quality, “elegant” dress.

¹⁶⁹ My use of the term Western is due to these articles' resemblance to ‘glamour’ scarves worn in the 1950s-70s by celebrity figures such as Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe etc., generally characterized by their square shapes, ‘vibrant’ chromatics, ‘novel’ prints and ‘graphic’ patterns (Albrechtsen & Solanke, 2011; Gardner, 2011; Botz-Bornstein, 2013).

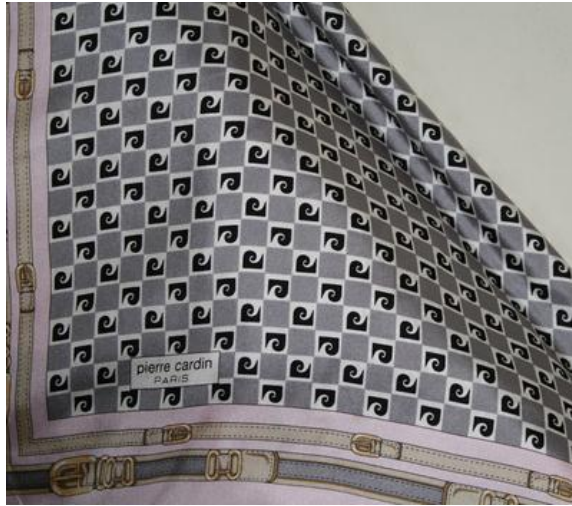


Image 44

One example of Alena's (silk) "branded" hijabs, by Pierre Cardin.

Kurdish in origin, Alena was born in East Turkey from two educated parents (both of them religious teachers), and left Turkey for Germany at the age of three, where she spent most of her childhood and young adulthood — 22 years in total. Further on, she studied in France for two years, in the United States of America for an additional four, spent another two years in England (at the *M.I.H.E.*) and then shifted back to America, where she recently graduated from a Master's programme and an intensive Arabic summer course (on a full scholarship) at Berkeley University (the latter graduated as the year's "honor student"). She also speaks six languages: Turkish and Kurdish (native tongues), German and English fluently, French and Arabic. In short, even more so than Eshel, Alena boasts an impressively diverse, culturally- and economically-privileged life experience and was fortuitously willing to share some of her influences on and beyond covering with me.

Referring to the incipient stages of her hijab observance and related dilemmas frequently faced by women who begin to cover their heads (as previously underscored by other respondents like Atarra, Mea or Hyacine), Alena recounts how much she wanted to wear hijab since she was a little girl, exposed to other girls' headscarves as she was growing up (her sisters most prominently — she has four), and thus wanting to emulate the practice. Most of all, she recalls being drawn to *silk* hijabs¹⁷⁰ from a very early age, whence she

¹⁷⁰ As Moors & Ünal (2012) note, it is not uncommon for silk hijabs to constitute a requisite in fashionable

retains a genuine appreciation of natural, soft, high-quality materials. At around age 14, Alena began to don the scarf on a permanent basis, albeit not before a long and elaborate self-deliberation process, where key factors were her Islamic upbringing on the one hand, and her German (secular) adoptive environment on the other. Most prominently, she points to the powerful role played by Western media and school influence in consolidating her perceptions on social roles and gender, wherein boys had a significant part:

The biggest influence is outside the house, once you are at school. You are spending a few hours at home, but other than that you are in school, different classes, different courses where you're going, and different friends. ... You're busy with school, you're busy with the environment, the boys are coming in and then you are trying to be — you want to look *good* for them. And the only thing that you know is from the media, the relationship cases that you see in the media, what boys like, and then you're trying to be like that — what boys like — so you would not wear the cultural way of dressing [hijab], because you never saw a scarf-wearing girl in a movie who had the boy who had a crush on her; you never saw it. So, automatically, the picture comes in your mind: Uh-ho, I don't want to wear that! So I grew [up] with that, I did not wear it.

After this stage, however, she was confronted with an important philosophical quandary concerning the choice between embracing hijab with all the (aesthetic, expressive, practical) changes it entailed, and pursuing her long-lived passion for sports — which, at the time, meant preparing to run for the German youth Olympics, hence having to train long hours with a male instructor alone while wearing a “super tiny”, bikini-like outfit; she decided despite her parents' adverse advice to renounce sports in favour of hijab, and therefrom put all her time into morally re(de)fining herself:

All of a sudden it shook me ... the entire philosophy came in, of why am I living, why do I do that, what is the purpose of life, why do I need to follow a religion; I had a whole philosophy. ... In teenage time, that's the time when I started writing diaries after diaries, just to ask myself what do I want in my life. And that distanced me from different cultures in my environment, it made me confident more. I had my own opinion all of a sudden. Once you research and you find something which you like and want to do it and have your background for that, you are standing *straight*. And all of a sudden, from one year to the other — it took me like two, three years, in that time — I was not anymore a normal student in the school; I was the school speaker, I was the class speaker; I was the *runner* in every case. When we moved to another place and my dad was imam, so he was building different communities, we stayed like around five years, so when we were moving, all of a sudden I was the one who was collecting friends,

Turkish women's wardrobes in and outside Turkey. The haptic sense in particular is regarded as crucial in the process of choosing a headscarf, rendering it “a highly seductive and addictive commodity” (p. 320).

and not waiting that people accept me as friends [as before]. Cause you are *self-confident* already. So it was a win for me, God thanks; when I look back, it did influence [me] a lot in [gaining] self-confidence.

Though she ascribes high self-worth and -esteem to well educated, accomplished individuals who worked hard — cognitively and spiritually — to achieve their current selves and virtues, she finds *beauty* in being independent, individualistic, in building a unitary sense of self on long moments of introspection and soul-searching (see Amena’s similarly-framed insights on this topic in **Chapter 6**). Concurrently, she reflexively revisits the ‘unicornic’, Barbie doll image of young, blonde German girls she had been previously drawn to in her childhood, realizing how she then appeared to lack an in-depth understanding of (moral) beauty and had not yet developed a sturdy axiological hierarchy. And at this point, she begins to underline her own struggles trying to find, understand and appropriate *beauty*, by navigating through many moments of anguish and trauma (which relate to a great extent to the vicissitudes evoked by Atarra in **Chapter 4**, or by Amena in **Chapter 6**). While in the past she would have taken off her scarf to better fit her age and gain social acceptance¹⁷¹, now she speaks of the key ideas that helped her transcend appearances and see *inside* of people — people who “think individually, who think independently”. Researching into the scarf meant researching into humanity, going “deeper into a person”, and by that, the beauty retrieved did not need to dispense with aesthetic considerations altogether, but rather refine and reinterpret them. As such, her idea of *true beauty* involves conscious choices, self-determination, as well as a strong sense of *style*, *grace*, ‘*class*’ and *glamour* — in a word, fashion.

A foremost role model she follows on this course has been, and continues to be, her mother, “who is *very* stylish”. Many of the designer scarves Alena possesses are thus aimed to emulate her mother’s elegance and sense of refinement, which reflects in a meticulous selection of outfits, head covers and paraphernalia belonging to Alena. (Even the width and length of her clothes are sometimes carefully orchestrated via a laborious suite of measurements and adjustments, whereby Alena distances her aesthetic from that of

¹⁷¹ In this sense, she refers to having to prioritize between “worldly morals”, i.e. “the worldly desires of having a lot of friends, boyfriends especially, girls going out together, going to the beach” etc. (something she qualifies as “attractive for everyone nowadays”), and “God-given morals”. The entire process of deliberation translated into approximately one year of thorough consideration before fully embracing Islam and its dress code.

her mother's — reportedly more Western/global, more innovative, and fashionably bolder.¹⁷²)

A second standard that Alena adheres to in choosing her public attire is *cultural* adjustment. On more than one occasion when I interviewed her, she stressed her adaptive flexibility and sensitivity to locally-specific fashion vogues. Even though she does not habitually don Western clothing outside domestic premises, she consistently alters her dress (by adding culturally-sensitive elements to her wardrobe), in order to gracefully 'fit in'. When in France, she will therefore wear Morocco-style scarves, in keeping with the local fashion; at Pakistani weddings (which she attends quite often, due to her husband's Pakistani lineage), she wears traditional Pakistani *shalwar kameez*; in the presence of her Kurdish family members, she respects her own heritage to meet relatives' expectations; in Saudi Arabia (which she visited more than ten times), she will wear monochromatic, black or white, dress ensembles and even put on a *niqab* to avoid harassment or malevolent comments; in California, she opts for more Western, brightly-coloured clothing to eschew post-9/11 stereotypes; finally, in Britain, she uses less colour and thicker materials, adapting to the weather and local sartorial customs. It can be argued here that it is Alena's cosmopolitanism and phenomenal cultural capital which allow her to successfully navigate all these channels of (geographical/psychological) difference or 'otherness', to which end she employs a wide array of sartorial variations, subtly, empathetically and efficiently.

Withal, she is admittedly conscious of the quality and materials involved in each of her outfits. In this sense, silks, cottons and 'chiffons' are her top favourites, depending on the occasion they are to be worn for — for example, she preserves thicker shawls for boating and sailing: "I like [rectangular-shape] shawls as well, when it comes to sailing ... When I'm on the ship — I'm in California, you know? — it stays straight ... Because of the wind ... It doesn't fly away, it does stay there the entire time, nicely". But above all, her individual style best comes forth from her selection of accessories, most prominently pearls and broaches, which she likes to *collect* and wear as hijab pins (three of her favourite websites nominated in this sense are *Dramafree Hijabs*¹⁷³, *Inayah Collection*¹⁷⁴,

¹⁷² Alena admits that she generally prefers to wear looser and longer garments to those donned by most Muslim women in her entourage (her mother included), to ensure she abides by the strictest Islamic dress regulations.

¹⁷³ A brand relying on "traditionally styled and beautifully crafted accessories" aspiring to "illustrate individuality thus source exciting designs including handmade pieces" (Dramafree Hijabs, 2014, section 'About Us').

¹⁷⁴ As the London-based brand(qualified by Alena as "sooo my style!")'s description advertises, the site

and *Pearl Daisy*¹⁷⁵ — see following illustrations). Guiding Alena’s selections are also Muslim lifestyle publications such as the British *Sisters* magazine, or the American *Azizah* (see Lewis, 2010, on a more in-depth exploration of these).

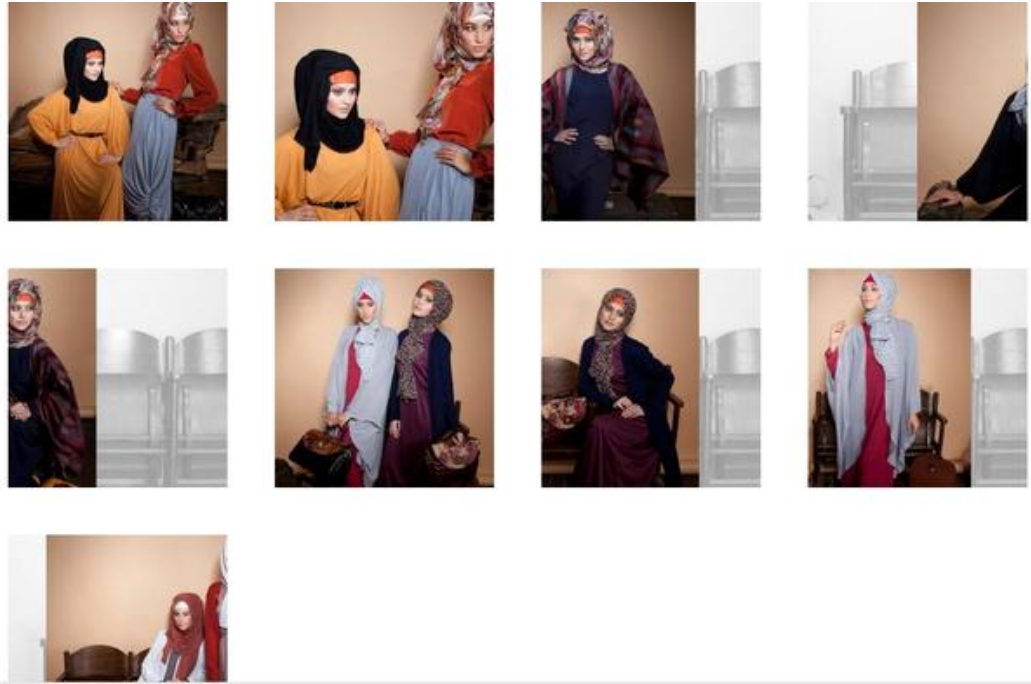


Image 45

Inayah Collection modest ensembles (screenshot), referred to by Alena.

provides “Islamic clothing & fashion, abayas, jilbabs, hijabs, jalabiyas & hijab pins” characterized by “three elements; Vintage, Ethnic and Contemporary ... [for] unique, modern, sophisticated and elegant modest wear. Our designs reflect distinct fusion of different periods in history, cultural art and high fashion, as well as current trends to offer you the ultimate modest fashion experience.” (Inayah, n.d., section ‘About Us — The Brand’).

¹⁷⁵ This brand, as well as the designer behind it, will be discussed at length in **Chapter 6**.



Image 46

Inayah Collection modest outfits (screenshots, Inayah Modest Fashion Boutique, 2014a,b).



Image 47

'Brooch Pins' by *Dramafree Hijabs*, 2014 (screenshot).



Image 48

‘Everyday Hijab Pins’, by *Dramafree Hijabs*, 2014 (screenshot).

Beyond these more or less material aspects, it should be noted nonetheless that the above-described aesthetic is, indeed, modulated around an ‘inner’ imagery associated with modesty, purity and discretion, reflected outwardly though use of light and “sinless” colours (that most appeal to Alena), especially since she associates these with the sacred Christian symbol of the ‘Virgin Mary’. Simplicity and serenity are key here:

It’s just so pure, so clean; I don’t like dark in general. ... You see the cleanness, you see the care in it. You never picture Mary in any [other] way — you won’t see in any pictures that the scarf she’s wearing is actually wrinkled, you don’t see that. It’s pure, iron[ed], clean, nice and in bright colours. This is *so clean* [a highly feminine imagery also transpiring from Rezia’s textile art, subsequently explored in **Chapter 6**]. ... I tried to imitate her [Mary] for a long time, just because of her outer appearance. I have, just from the Christian pictures [laughs]!

This ethereal, ideal-serving image of Mary and her iconic light-coloured headdress recurred through more than one group session, as a (modest) symbol of beauty, sensitivity, and *love*. Keeping with a generic, cross-faith symbolism of the deified mother figure, integrated within a universalistic cult of the Mother Goddess / Mother of Creation —

whose symbolism has trans-historically pivoted around notions of femininity, fertility, “protection, nurturance, earthiness, and surrender” — this also seems to have retained, for my participants, “an element of mystery that people can relate to with ease” (Preston, 1985, p. 98). Such imagery purportedly hinges on (escapist) identifications with the supernatural, assimilated here as the ultimate representation of femininity and motherhood, and enmeshed with the promise of *good*. Furthermore, in Islam, Mary, mother of Jesus, is considered the foremost of five leading role models¹⁷⁶ for women. Indeed, as one of the imams consulted for this study informed me, “the highest [female figure], definitely, is Mary”, standing for two of the most treasured feminine qualities in Islam (as nominated by the same source): loyalty and motherhood respectively. However, Islam being an iconoclastic religion, Mary is absent from any specific graphic representations addressed to Muslim believers.

Alena, therefore, borrows the greater part of her imagistic aspirations from Christian renditions of the Virgin and ecumenic figural elements which combine the idea of purity with that of (visual) cleanliness, grace and light. This aesthetic also feeds on current media channels, both Muslim and Western (Christian). “While Islam, like Judaism, is an iconoclastic religion, this does not mean that it is a visually impoverished one. On the contrary, a consideration of contemporary media practices in Islam invites us to expand our definition of what the visual might be and what acts of seeing might entail” (Moll, 2010, p. 21).

Many of today’s media can, in fact, ascribe audience figures to an idealizing, day-dreaming consumership able to ‘lift’ its own substance from the powerlessness and prosaicness of reality — e.g., the recurring misrepresentations of Islam in the Western world, its negative stereotyping, malignance and ‘other’-ification (Tarlo, 2005; Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Moll, 2010). Conversely, as another author posits, contemporary media constitute a locus for consuming visual and aesthetic fantasies also described as *alternative hedonism* — with fashion and self-styling serving as cases in point — i.e. modes of escaping or circumventing feelings of fixity, malaise and “existential loss, whether of meaning, security, or identity” (Soper, 2008, p. 570).

¹⁷⁶ The remaining four are Asiya, wife of the Pharaoh; Khadija, the first wife of the prophet; Fatima, the prophet’s daughter; and Ayesha, Mother of the Believers and another of Muḥammad’s wives (fieldwork citations derived from two Muslim imams interviewed for this study).

Arguably an adaptive mechanism devised to transcend everyday reality toward a ‘greater’ good and a related ‘better’ image of oneself, the aesthetic that Alena adopts, based on transpositions of the celestial/supernatural into sartorial practice, is, nonetheless, of an eclectic sort. Alongside specific faith-derived constructions of piety, loyalty, beauty, femininity, ideal motherhood and so on, there is also a descriptively Western, mainstream commercial aesthetic involved, ‘borrowed’ from Western filmography. Two examples have already been cited, one in **Chapter 3** and the other in section **5.3.** above, where several focus group participants expressed their preference for Western film-inspired (‘medieval’ fashion) head covers and where the article in discussion was 1. visually conspicuous in the set-up, 2. highly adorned/accessorized, and 3. of a hybrid composition (i.e. reflective of both Eastern and Western — more or less Orientalizing — aesthetic elements, as well as of different geo-historical planes). Passing from an expressed allegiance to the (pictorial) framing of the Madonna that Alena draws on:

She [Mary] had the under-hijab — for example, the double thing, and then the long thing [cloak-like garment] over, on top. And then *I* wore that for a long time, that way. And then the dress, that style, and then another one on top, I just loved it! She was like a pure person, she was [a] very pious, peaceful person ... And paradise is *promised* for her. So being like her is the biggest thing in the heart. So I try to [be like her]. There is a beautiful movie, by the way, about her life. *Beautiful* movie ... Afterwards you just wanna walk like her, act like her...!

to more commercial renditions of the same ideas of purity and (physically, spiritually) ennobled femininity superimposed onto a *light* aesthetic backdrop, a third example in this series comes from the historical drama *Braveheart* (Gibson & Wallace, 1995). Here too, the similarly-romanticized aesthetic is situated beyond a clear-cut religious perspective or belief system, somewhere between the Middle Ages, (post)modern multiculturalism, elements of fiction, nobility and status, bravery, adventure and *love*. For instance, what Alena recalls as most memorable from *Braveheart* is the “French woman”’s (i.e. Princess Isabelle’s, interpreted by Sophie Marceau) headdress, made up of a white, translucent, pearl-sprinkled veil wrapped around the hair and face and topped with a golden crown: “I was *in love* with that, it was like Middle... Middle Ages!”





Image sequence 49

Screenshots from *Braveheart*: Sophie Marceau's head covers.

In this same rubric, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Jackson, Tolkien & Walsh, 2001-2003) sparked a related fascination for “nostalgic, you know, fairy tale figure[s]” similarly clad in medieval-fashion, “other-worldly” covers such as the silver hooded cloak endorsed by the supernatural heroine Arwen (portrayed by Liv Tyler), as well as an overall sense of

timeless mysticism / surreal beauty the world of elves is enwreathed by. Indeed, all of these eclectic, oneirically-informed collages of beauty, style, ‘pastness’, far from being reflections of historiography or religion, are arguably grounded in a rather escapist/romanticized narrative, vicariously reflecting (through their very presence in the West) what Svetlana Boym identified as a contemporary

“mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing ... *The nostalgic is looking for a spiritual addressee. Encountering silence, [s]he looks for memorable signs, desperately misreading them* [with the comment that, through their embrace of hijab and Islam, my participants do not lack a spiritual addressee, and therefore their ‘reading’ of these signs is self-affirming, rather than existentially dilemmatic, as Boym appears to suggest].”

(Boym, 2001, p. 8, emphasis added).

Resulting from this is a rather idiosyncratic combination of, or tendency toward, (outer, sartorial) elegance, grace, intrinsic purity/piety, and an escapist assimilation of ‘freedom’ and individuality as means to attain a psycho-aesthetic state neighbouring the sublime. The natural is thus glorified in the *supernatural*, and integrated within an alternative hedonist (consumption) mode which materializes and idealizes its object at the same time, gratifying the subject through “fantasy, fashion and self-styling” (Soper, 2008, p. 567).

Tellingly, in an article focused on beauty tackled by international magazines such as *Vogue*, *Elle* and *Marie Claire*, Moeran (2010) speaks of “technologies of enchantment”¹⁷⁷ aimed at maximizing women’s self-esteem via various techniques of self-beautification/-improvement, with beauty regarded as “inextricably linked to fashion” (p. 492-93), centered on the latest fashion vogues and most coveted *looks* in terms of apparel, hair, and make-up. However, despite the evident centrality of outer appearance in this scheme, Moeran argues that

“[t]here are certain contradictions in the way fashion magazines talk about beauty. Even though many of us may have been taught to think that ‘beauty is only skin deep’ and that we should ‘never be deceived by appearances,’ both text and advertisements in the magazines assert that beauty is something that starts inside ourselves: ‘Natural beauty comes from deep within yourself. It’s about being comfortable with who you are and taking care of yourself’; ‘True

¹⁷⁷ Described by Moeran (2010) as “probably *the* most sophisticated psychological weapon we use to exert control over the thoughts and actions of other human beings, because it ‘exploits innate or derived psychological biases so as to enchant the other person and cause him / her to perceive social reality in a way favourable to the social interests of the enchanter’ ... Among its manipulations are those of desire, fantasy, and vanity.” (pp. 498-99, original emphasis).

radiance starts from within'; 'If true beauty lies within, then it is surely reflected in a smile — your greatest beauty asset and the secret to *feeling great* about yourself.'"

(*ibidem*, p. 493, original emphasis).

In their engagement with such themes, my informants too seem to acknowledge that attaining beauty is something that encompasses both the outside and the inside of the individual, which is to say both physical appearance and character — a philosophy generally accepted by Islam and a rationale repeatedly nominated by my respondents. Eshel, Alena, Sabiya, Ayra and Amena are just five of the names addressed here supporting this view. And, if make-up, jewelry and accessories remain some of the more debated elements when it comes to the sanctioned ways of pre-empting modest gear, *grooming* practices are taken as integral, and even indispensable to maintaining personal 'cleanliness' in Islam¹⁷⁸:

"Grooming practices play an important and essential part in the concept of dress, which is itself a broad term that includes 'visual as well as other sensory modifications (taste, smell, sound, and feel) and supplements (garments, jewelry, and accessories) to the body'", involving "highly conscious, social aspects of physical appearance, which is manipulated in various ways to make a desired impression upon others. Such manipulations include bathing, cleansing, anointing, moistening, and coloring the skin; ... both deodorizing and scenting the body; coloring or marking the lips, eyes, cheeks, face, nails, or other exposed regions; cleansing, coloring, straightening, and filing the teeth; molding, emphasizing, training, restraining, and/or concealing various parts of the body; and so on."

(Moeran, 2010, pp. 495-96).

Incorporating all of this in the construction of a pure, clean, authentic self-aesthetic supported by one's sartorial identity enables us to view Alena's choice as a conscious alternative consumption mode, based on an idealization of the self and a similarly idealized re(in)statement of human nature. Her 'technology of enchantment' (amounting to a form of pious consumerism — as described by Jones, 2010b, pp. 624-32) thus draws on a selection of supernatural elements, such as the utterly beautified imagery of Mary cast in an idyllic setting, and enriched with concrete fashion details clipped off from motion pictures and Western/Christian iconography more broadly. Like Sabiya, Alena uses this rationalization

¹⁷⁸ An idea present both in the Qur'an and the hadith as part of the overarching notion of *da'wah*, which prescribes the proselytization of Islam in non-Muslim spheres — see also Sandıkcı & Ger, 2006, on the importance of preserving an overall appealing, trimmed physical appearance (beautifying 'devices' included) in the case of Turkish women.

process to take (both moral and aesthetic) refuge in an invoked sartorial idyllicism; a spiritualized, metaphoric and meta-temporal milieu permeated by chromatic and pictorial ‘lightness’, cleanliness, and an overarching sense of inner-outer harmony (see **Chapter 6** for a continuation on this terrain). (Her romantic visions sometimes go as far as to plan a “white party” with wedding dresses worn by her (married) female friends — “we all have bridal dresses and no one wears them again...”.)

Indeed, when asked what the notion of beauty means to her, Alena replied that:

Beauty is everything in itself, that God created, in general; [if] it’s *individual*, it’s beautiful. You have to look, look into it a little more in detail. Even if someone is handicapped, [or] somebody doesn’t have one eye — look into it in more detail, that person has another beautiful part.

She therefore speaks proudly of her favourite scarves, some of which custom-made — for example, a garment “sky blue, silk, with a golden signature of the sister from Istanbul who painted it”, made especially for her. Other scarves that she “loooove[s] and keep[s] for special occasions” are her “really good quality branded hijab, which my mother mainly bought for me. They have designs which could get framed!” (for a more focused discussion on hijabs as gifts and souvenirs in a Dutch-Turkish context, see Moors & Ünal, 2012, pp. 313-18). And others yet, she simply holds on to for their visual appeal and/or textural quality.

As for the effect such items produce on viewers, Alena proudly recalls a fundraising event in California where she

wore a sky blue jilbab with white buttons, white shoes, white bag, my bright blue-white-lime mixed silk hijab and a white poncho on top. When I entered the hall, I had the uncomfortable but somehow comforting feeling people turned to look at me, and then I got lots of ladies coming and introducing themselves. To the fault of my husband (because he asked me to go in already, while he was chatting with some old friends outside), I got two marriage proposals! My wedding ring must definitely not have been big enough!

Her (acknowledged) visual appeal, nevertheless, is solely directed at her husband, whose compliments are enough to justify and enhance her sense of worth, reflected both intrinsically and extrinsically:

When you are older ... you don't want to be attractive to *every man*, you want to be attractive to *your man*, you know? And that is making hijab, hijab is making you super attractive to your man, to your own man, to your own husband. ... You take it off at home, you're the princess, you know? They [husbands] didn't see other girls taking off their [hijab]. ... Because, I mean, of course, we all want to be attractive, and I *love it* when we get compliments.



Image 50

Another of Alena's silk scarves.



Image 51

Cotton-silk mix scarf in Alena's possession, featuring an 'Istanbul' motif.

This reflects in Alena's public attire as well, in that she heedfully considers all elements coming into play in each of the ensembles she puts together for special occasions. Sense-wise, she stresses that "all senses are important! Visually it [scarf] has to appear [sic] to me", auditively it is best left silent¹⁷⁹, "smell is important too, I don't like the smell of the ironed silk hijab and when rain comes on ... so I started to put scented ironing water", and touch — "oooooh yes, softness and smoothness!". In this architectural fusion of synaesthetic (fashion) sense, hijab becomes the key ingredient adding coherence to the whole, as "Muslim women don't have just two pieces to match, they have three. It's fun, though. I love it. We have — I mean, from the fashion perspective, we have one more thing to adjust". Tellingly, as Moors & Ünal (2012) note when referring to fashionable Turkish women re-established in the West, "[i]n order to put together a pleasant and up-to-date look, it is crucially important to the women concerned to select the right kind of headscarf in terms of color, patterns, fiber, texture, and so on. An outfit that in all other aspects is a perfect fit may be ruined if it is worn with a headscarf that does not match." (p. 314).

Mood, energy, season, occasion, all play salient roles in the way Alena chooses and adjusts her look, where everything is matched and blended in the entirety of *hijab* (taking us back to the broader sense of the term, i.e. the holistic aesthetic, attitudinal and behavioural aspects associated by Muslims with covering¹⁸⁰). Little is left to chance, from the length of her jilbabs to the nuance of her shoes, hand bag, and jewelry. The standards this aesthetic whole is measured against, as Alena herself acknowledges, have — again — to do with her upbringing, i.e. the Kurdish and Turkish scarf-wearing traditions. In this sense, the Turkish *tesettür* (previously introduced in **Chapter 2**) remains her most prominent influence, with visual markers such as size, shape and brand of scarf playing prominent roles in the process of personalization and display. Admittedly, distinctiveness¹⁸¹ — a prime marker of

¹⁷⁹ In this regard, Alena provided an amusing anecdote, a situation where she had to improvise a headscarf out of a table cover close at hand — "a square thick satin cloth" — the result consisting in that "the sound of the material made me like deaf".

¹⁸⁰ Note in Alena's case also a tendency to associate hijabs with *status*. This comes forth from both film protagonists she admires and refers to (i.e. the *princess* Isabelle, and Arwen, princess of elves, later to become *queen* of two kingdoms in *The Lord of the Rings*), and reverts to the original, pre-Islamic meaning of veiling addressed in **Chapter 1**.

¹⁸¹ An example lies in visual heterogeneity, which has been consistently *en vogue* among urban, well educated, middle- and upper-class hijab consumers in Turkey since the 1990s. Designs, prints and patterns — although changing rapidly from year to year — ranging from floral to geometrical rank highly in fashion shows, catalogues and design competitions in Turkey, compared to pre-1990 times when scarves were produced in small workshops and at a much slower pace (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2006, pp. 66-7; see also Moors & Ünal, 2012, pp. 320-323, on the dissemination of scarves via "imaginaries of modernity and luxury" (p.

tesettür fashionability in Turkey and beyond — is not something that Alena lacks, or fails to incorporate in her styles. Interestingly, though, the more I looked into Alena’s fashion, the more similarities I found with the recent Turkish aesthetic: from the mindful matching of colours, materials and accessories Turkish women customarily observe, to a conscious employment of *tesettür*-characteristic visuals such as shape, tying mode and pattern (note the checkered pattern in Alena’s Pierre Cardin scarf, displayed in **Image 44** at the top of this section and below, in **Image 52**), and on to the preference for broaches to finish a look (also surveyed by Sandıkçı & Ger, 2006, pp. 69-74). Of course, with the rapid commercialization of ‘ethnic’ fashions on the global market, these trends can be viewed and bought in many parts of the Western world too (Moors & Ünal, 2012; Lewis, 2013b; Tarlo, 2013).



Image 52

Alena’s attire selected for one of our interviews — consisting of a square-shaped, silk Pierre Cardin scarf tied in the typical Turkish way, with a conservative coverage of the chest and part of the back area.

Furthermore, a final distinctive preference manifest in Alena’s covering (as well as in recent *tesettür* trends: Sandıkçı & Ger, 2006; Moors & Ünal, 2012) is the *layering* of

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upper- and under-scarves for everyday use, as well as for more glamorous occasions — to the effect embodied by Sophie Marceau in **Image 49** above, or by Arwen’s medieval ‘hooded’ aesthetic in *The Lord of the Rings*. Notably, this was the ‘edge’ that first drew Alena, alongside Eshel, to Amena’s *hoojab* collection (see section 6.4.), and is also one of the reasons why I have chosen to situate Mea’s, Eshel’s and Alena’s aesthetics in this chapter as such. The layering of two or more hijab strata in a ‘scarfdo’ not only reconfigures the girls’ self-images (in terms of self-confidence and perceived inward/outward beauty), but actually alters the geometry of the face, which becomes yet another versatile element to be ‘tinkered’ with: “[I] loooove the fact that with every hijab I can change my face appearance, I can make it look thinner, smaller, round or tall [laughs]...”.¹⁸²

5.5. Further Considerations

Based on the cases examined above, it can be argued that these women’s ‘self-enhanced’, which is to say freely and consciously elaborated, psycho-sartorial facets of identity (if we subscribe to the view that there *is* a personal essence within us, in which case head covers, like masks, can be said to either hide or liberate the ‘true’ self: Tseëlon, 2001b) do not inevitably imply a formal, *objective*, almost mechanical ‘liberation’ process. From Mea’s braided ‘scarfdo’ to Eshel’s Westernized and modern hijab plays, and on to Alena’s more conservative, yet highly elegant, idyllicized aesthetic, each of the styles reviewed in this chapter showcased one or another facet of *expressive* freedom, fuelled by either individual creativity or by external fashion reference points. In the latter sense, selecting from a wide range of (often contradictory) influences available on the global market can become a cumbersome process. We have seen how, in some cases, one’s taste and stylistic potential can only be activated within a foreign climate (as Mea’s fashionable ‘bloom’ in the United Kingdom, where she effectively ‘freed’ herself from any cultural restrictions). In other cases, the creative input is nuanced and adapted based on specific, social and physical, parameters — such as in both Eshel’s and Alena’s culturally-sensitive selections of colour,

¹⁸² Which corroborates Sandıkcı & Ger’s (2006) observation that “the square scarf makes the face look rounder and chubbier and is preferred by women who have elongated and small faces, while the rectangular foulard makes the face look longer, thinner and smaller and is preferred by women who have bigger and rounder faces” (p. 69).

fabric, volume, style, which can either ‘fit’ or not within a given geographical perimeter (in both cases, admittedly facilitated and enhanced by their economic and spatial mobility). By this, we have participated in the negotiation and ‘acclimatization’ of hijab to standards of attractiveness ascribed to both Eastern and Western contexts. On the one hand, the influence of the West, governed by its more ‘liberal’ aesthetic norms and expectations, transpires from elements such as blue jeans, hoodies, tight tops and modish accessories, as well as from the ‘other-worldly’ dimensions retrieved from fictitious (Western film) plots. On the other hand, preserved ties with the home culture — the geographical ‘other’ in the Western spatial arithmetic, applying to one extent or another to all cases discussed above — in turn inform the experience of dress either through contrast (as in Eshel’s experiments with fashionable headgear and proportions in Great Britain), or through consistency and coherence (as in Alena’s extension of the Turkish *tesettür*, teamed with context-specific stylistic adaptations).

And here, the *hows* and *whys* of doing hijab ‘right’ differ significantly. While some respondents choose to engage in stylistic innovation as part of a transient experiment performed in a transient cultural set-up (as Mea did while in Great Britain, keeping aware that upon return to Saudi Arabia, her dressing habits would go back to previous routines), others are morphologically and psychologically altered by these (Eshel). To go back to the first paragraphs of this chapter, the idea that objects possessed are personalized and subjectified by their owners has an equally valid reverse (Miller, 2012, Prologue & Chapter 1): subjects can, in turn, be ‘possessed’ by materials, which is to say transformed, reoriented or redefined by these (in our case, hijab and its vagaries). Playing with how hijab looks, what it denotes and what it ‘does’ to the viewer is therefore paralleled by a minute process of observation whereby its objective existence is entwined with the moral philosophy of the wearer, the look marking the blurry edge between the two.¹⁸³

Perhaps most interesting on this score is how hijab can actively contribute to a *metaphysical* elevation (in a moral purification and cultivation sense) of the wearer, where signs of outer beauty are fused with metaphors of inner substance, coming together in a holistic tableau of individuality, distinctiveness, and ambition, as in Alena’s case.

¹⁸³ This corroborates and nuances Mahmood’s (2003, 2005) observations on piety and related decisions, reviewed before in **Chapter 2**, section **2.1.**, as bridges between the inside and the outside of an individual, often beginning at the surface — i.e. through changes occurred in dress — and growing to transform the wearer’s inner core (principles, values, character).

While both Mea and Madeeha articulate important hijab social aspects, it is Eshel and Alena that actually nuance, ‘debate’ and personalize these. Still in the process of self-discovery (in fact, each of the informants described above was under the age of 30 at the time of our interactions, and also indicated a shifting life dynamic, either on an educational, geographical plane, or both), Eshel and Alena alike search for a deeper substance in hijab: an authenticity of meaning (‘depth’) and simultaneously one of beauty (‘surface’), true to both inner self, outer aesthetic and ethnic/cultural belonging. And, while Eshel’s aesthetic views still vacillate between personal taste and social must-do(n’t)s, between “following your society and doing your thing at the same time”, her plays with scarves are admittedly not an “Islamic thing”, but an individually-informed (micro)cultural device distorted and retorted, stretched and contracted from one place to another, and from one experience to the next. She brings cultural capital and audacity onto her charts of shapes and styles, accommodated by the liberal British socio-aesthetic environment; for “here [in the U.K.], you’ve got no limits”.

Similarly, Alena’s experience of covering translates into a quest for a deeper, perhaps more insightful definition of modesty, governed by, and anchored in, both aesthetic and spiritual individuality (for, most of all, each of the girls discussed above wants to feel special, unique and ‘authentic’), simultaneously sustained by her ingenuous enchantment with the idealized/idealistic¹⁸⁴, the transcendental, the fantastic. In the following chapter, I therefore propose to probe the ways such metaphysical constructions are met — anticipated, shared — or, in effect, invested in the cloth through the experience of modest wear creation.

¹⁸⁴ Hence my subsequent use of the term ‘idealism’ referring to personal ideals rather than political ideology or philosophy.

Chapter 6

Depth of Surface in Western ‘Easthetics’ — Moved and Touched by the Fabric

Three Cases of Modest Dress Design

“Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty.”
(Sahīh Muslim, 911, quoted in al-Oadah, n.d.)

6.1. (Dis)Covering: Hijab and the Senses

Although this has been our focus up to the present moment, it should be noted that producing or consuming ‘individuality’ is not something restricted to an agential dimension created and sustained exclusively by wearers. A process of ‘(proto)authentication’, in which potential codes of value, the connotational charges, become anchored in the article, can also be found in its first stage of existence, namely that of production (see Boradkar, 2010, pp. 245-248 on the genesis of objects’ meaning categorized into three stages — production, distribution and consumption respectively).

This can begin as an image in the mind of *any* individual exposed to the practice or culture of hijab, either a wearer, a designer, or both. In this chapter, I will introduce three cases of hijab designer-wearers whose individual input starts in the mind (or, reportedly, heart), continues in their hands, and finishes up adorning their heads, or those of their respective customers. Along this path, exemplifications of productive creativity and elements of inspiration or insight, as well as feelings of strong attachment to the cloth, will be perused and described as complementing, informing and guiding the use of hijab (as previously outlined in individuations of Islamic scarves by selected wearers). In this process, I will attempt to demonstrate how at the surface of (certain) hijabs there can exist a considerable depth of meaning — or, otherwise phrased, a *depth of surface*¹⁸⁵.

¹⁸⁵ This is a method of argumentation extrapolated by myself based on Daniel Miller’s notes on materiality and objects/clothing, from *The Comfort of Things* (2011) and *Stuff* (2012: Prologue, Chapters 1 & 2).

In this context, modesty itself remains an idiographic matter. Although the Muslim headdress generally calls for scarcer embellishment options (due precisely to *modesty*-related Qur’anic prescriptions) compared to other, Eastern or Western, dress articles (e.g., ‘glamour’ hats or evening gowns), it is perceived, defined, *refined* and adapted by wearers in a myriad ways, often involving complex levels of ‘beauty’ and ‘charm’¹⁸⁶. At times, even seemingly paradoxical notions of ‘glamour’ or personal *display* occur. This is, however, despite the popular “underrat[ings] [of] the value of beauty ... [arguably reflective of] an Islamic value. Allah intended for His Creation to contain beauty. ... Our faith in Allah’s beauty should [therefore] also encourage us to concern ourselves with our appearance, dress, and decorum, as well as with the beauty of our words and deeds. This is something that Allah wants from us.” (al-Oadah, n.d., p. 1). This chapter will therefore chart such — generally less explored — emotional-aesthetic (and, on occasion, ‘mystical’) dimensions of modest gear inclusive of, but not restricted to, headscarves.

For the sake of clarity, let us assume that we speak of one single scarf — a plain, neutral, achromatic, ‘asemantic’ scarf with no particular texture, shape, or message to convey. What it *becomes*, nevertheless — the ideas or even personas it grows to reflect, sustain, represent, the forms and formats it slides into — remains to be demonstrated as it shifts (much like identity itself) between states and perceptions, intents and attitudes, fragments of life, lived or imagined. We have seen how different wearers interiorize and adjust the notion of hijab in accordance with their lifestyles, tastes, and surrounding environments. The interpersonal differences evidenced were not few, and in almost every case explored, the issues of beauty and visibility played a capital role, being carefully considered by the subject. Perhaps the clearest exemplification of this was Alena’s choice of scarves (and arguably Sabiya’s contextual ‘romanticization’ of the fabric, as part of a broader view to the future, self-fulfilment and married life). Yet to give life to the ‘neutral’, hypothetical scarf we imagined above and imbue it with narrative text(ure), one needs to first align it with the particulars of both creator and wearer, the ‘pixels’ (a term we should have grown used to by now) of (t)he(i)r personality. Hence, I propose to take one step back from

¹⁸⁶ I use this term (consistent with its previous deployment in **Chapters 1** and **4**) in full awareness of its usage in certain Qur’an translations, pointing to feminine beauty and physical attractiveness: “Women, in advanced years, who do not hope for marriage, incur no sin if they discard their garments, provided that they do not aim at a showy display of their *charm*. But, it is better for them to abstain from this. God is All-hearing, All-knowing.” (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2006, p. 63, emphasis added). Other terms, such as ‘beauty’, ‘ornaments’ or ‘adornment’, are deployed in other translations as substitutes for ‘charm’.

picking and wearing a scarf, to picking and *making* a scarf, along with the rich connotative (conceptual/axiological, aesthetic, emotional) underlying substance, and zoom in on its actual creation; attempting, as it were, to understand it from ‘within’.

6.1.1. Connecting Origin, Character and Originality: On ‘Beauty’, Scope and Intent of Covering

“Everything is *connected*. The wing of the corn beetle affects the direction of the wind, the way the sand drifts, the way the light reflects into the eye of man beholding his reality. All is part of totality, and in this totality man finds his hozro¹⁸⁷, his way of walking in harmony, with beauty all around him.”

(Hillerman, 1984, p. 264, emphasis added).

In July 2013 I noticed in a call for papers titled *Decadence and the Senses* (Goldsmiths, April 2014) the idea of deliquescence¹⁸⁸, and realized how vividly the concept comes to evoke and circumscribe, by extrapolation, notions of personal aesthetic, (multi)sensorial experience and individualized ‘value’ (as opposed to more impersonal, socially accredited grasps of ‘value’¹⁸⁹) into a sphere of meaning potentially connoted by hijabs. I have thereby chosen to adopt this concept as a *unity* of material dimensions ‘melting’ into perception, abstraction and individuation — thus immateriality — i.e. into sensorial, psychological, attitudinal and axiological channels of (design) interpretation.

While in **Chapter 5**, the idea of beauty linked with selected hijab styles hinged on the *wearers’* understanding of, and appropriation of, head cloths, here I will feed back to the birth of such cloths (both high-end or unique: the case of Rezia, and more affordable and widely distributed: the case of Amena), the process of their making and their makers’ role in relating intent to input.

¹⁸⁷ Hozro (also Hozhó or Hózhó), Engl. “the beauty way”, is a Navajo word denoting an ideal state of inner peace, well-being and harmony with all experiences and circumstances, conducive to ultimate beauty and truth (Pratt, 2007, pp. 141, 221).

¹⁸⁸ Deliquesce/deliquescence, from the Latin ‘deliquescere’ (‘to melt away’). When employed in this chapter, the term will take on metaphorical connotations and is aimed at capturing what I identified in my participants’ relationship to modest gear as an evasive, ‘immaterial’ quality of material objects, which becomes ‘knowable’, so to say, through fluidly intertwined senses, both physical and abstract.

¹⁸⁹ As Bell & Werner explain in the Introduction to their *Values and Valuables: From the Sacred to the Symbolic* (2004), certain objects — such as gifts, ritual- or faith-related goods — have the ‘ability’ to extend their value beyond material/monetary scopes, based on their imaginary or symbolic reception as ‘sacred’, and are thus invested with the power to “represent the non-representable” (p. xii).

Foraying into the modes in which hijab nuances a person's life and is at the same time nuanced by it — the baggage of past, present and potential experiences — I found that much of this 'baggage' is assigned *before* and *during* its actual crafting, through the designer's creative endeavour, which corresponds to the design stage of production or "pre-configuration" (Boradkar, 2010, pp. 245-46). By analyzing the interviews I have myself conducted with hijab designers, I noted that not only physical parameters such as colour, shape, print or adornment are assigned to the textile, but in some cases, also the 'feel' and 'identity' are constructed in this process, lending the object a textual semiotic beyond the textural¹⁹⁰. Again, the idea of narrative, personal narrative in particular, is important in this dynamic, as it helps elucidate the 'story' (i.e. micro-symbolism) assembled through sensory and meta-sensory cues from maker to buyer/wearer, which renders a piece of textile singular and distinct from any other. And, while this connotational category is key in the understanding of a holistic, in-depth hijab meaning, it can also function as a valid vignette of the designer's persona(lity) — as we shall see below.

This entire connotative construction falls in a rather elusive category, following a subjective course from intent to creative vision and on to creative act/artefact. To begin to understand the aesthetic investment accrued as such, I have supported my findings (in part also by following the advice of some of the designers interviewed here) on a quasi-philosophical approach to Islamic aesthetics (Kukkonen, 2011), as well as on a review of Islamic-inspired poetry and Sufi writing. The first account tackles Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī's conception of beauty (alongside that of 'goodness' and 'truth') as an interpretative negotiation between the inward (perception, subjectivity, 'insight') and the outward (matter, form, *object*), where the physical properties of the world depend on their similarity with the perceiver's cognitive and sensorial qualities (al-Daylami, 2005, quoted in Kukkonen, 2011, p. 101). In other words, a subject is prone to respond to forms of beauty / aesthetic experience by attuning to his/her own sensorial apparatus and/or aesthetic background. Moreover, when a moral judgement echoes the aesthetic/sensorial experience, it develops similarly from an inward, subjective perspective on 'beauty', based on both sensory and abstract capacities. The inward thus facilitates the subject's access to a

¹⁹⁰ 'Textual' refers to both autobiographical and external semantic dimensions here, i.e. connections with the outer world of an inter-personal and cultural facture — see Holliday, 2007, on the experience, 'narrativization' and 'comfort' of identity expressed through body and clothing, negotiated between outward (familial, social) and inward variables.

more holistic and in-depth insight into the object's *character*, beyond its concrete (physical) attributes. Despite these rather abstract formulations, I found that such processes can, indeed, be reflective of hijab creation, and implicitly of the designer's 'attitude' toward clothing/fashion (again, an idea underexplored throughout the literature). Or, in al-Ghazālī words:

“[a] perfect and proportionate inward form which combines all its perfections in an appropriate manner, as is required and in accordance with what is required, is beautiful in relation to the inward insight that perceives it. Its suitability to this insight is of such a nature that in beholding it the perceiver will experience far greater rapture, delight and emotion (*ladhdha, bahja, ihtizāz*) than the one who apprehends (*nāzir*) the beautiful form with outward sight.”

(al-Ghazālī, 1982, quoted in Kukkonen, 2011, pp. 101-2, original emphasis).

Further along, based on explorations of al-Ghazālī's *Book of Love and Longing (Revivification of the Religious Sciences)*, Kukkonen argues that the ultimate goal in 'experiencing' beauty is emotion (translating as pleasure, or delight), whereby certain objects are appreciated as ends in themselves (which is to say they serve psycho-aesthetic purposes only), without any need for external gratification, and conduce to feelings of inward joy / unity with the outward — a topic I will come back to develop with Amena's designs, in section 6.4. Although, as we shall see, 'worldly' properties and proportions do play important roles in this scheme, the greater scope pivots around the overall *character* (or beauty) of the object, which spans beyond its joint sensory features and comprises an "organic unity" "whose parts are subservient to the whole" (p. 105). In this sense, al-Ghazālī stresses the *intent* of the 'creator' (in our case, designer) in the realization of her/his creation (which in the end can only be meaningfully assessed in connection with the maker's vision), where (individual) character, (emotional) investment and (personal) scope are echoed in the item created. Indeed, we will soon observe how this effect of mirroring the 'creator' into 'creation' serves us in the practical understanding of the process of hijab making, where 'like' is transposed into 'likeness'¹⁹¹, and material 'objectuality' reflects auctorial subjectivity.

With hijab production, this *likeness* comes to shape through the investment of a variegated suite of sensitive details (which I have previously referred to as 'pixels', and which form

¹⁹¹ Al-Ghazālī regards objects created as glimpses, or windows into the creator's character (of either human or divine nature), reflecting its "inner teleology" through similarity; on this score, he gives the very example of "God is beautiful and He loves beauty" to construe the phenomenon of like reflecting likeness (Kukkonen, 2011, pp. 107).

the individual ‘micro-culture’ I have described in **Chapters 2 and 3**), feminine *par excellence* (as hijab is a mostly feminine practice throughout Islam), each in itself an independent and a co-dependent meaning entity. Independent, as each signifies something in itself, and co-dependent, for helping coalesce together the integral fabric of the individual’s personality, sartorial/aesthetic facets, as well as affective and even philosophical considerations (i.e. the ‘character’ of the designer). In the latter regard, I found that — subjectively perceived — notions of ‘beauty’, ‘charm’, ‘harmony’ and ‘unity’ are premier to this point. Therefore, although atypical, an inquiry into the ‘mystical’ side to Islamic lore, e.g., Rumi’s poetry and al-Ghazālī’s philosophical contributions, proved particularly useful and pertinent, arguably allowing for a deeper, more enlightening evaluation of lyrically feminine and exuberantly sentimental conceptions of Islamic aesthetics, and hijab fashion respectively (e.g., Rezia and Amena, both discussed below). I will henceforth invoke the idea of ‘deliquescence’ throughout the remaining sections of this chapter — referring to a fluid milieu of creative scope and individual substance, or yet individual ‘character’ — superimposed on that of subjectivity, deliberated between (emotional) sensitivity and (intellectual) insight, and applied to three particular cases of textile design.

6.1.2. Within and Beyond the Fabric: An Immaterial Materiality

To arrive at the idea of something meta- or immaterial (of a spiritual or symbolic nature), we have yet to depart from the notion of materiality itself. Alongside authors such as Graves-Brown (2000), Mauss (2009), Dant (2005), or Dudley, 2010, Daniel Miller locates this at the intersection between more technically-oriented domains (e.g., textile, design, museographic studies) and cultural, sociologic and anthropological fields, with strong semiological and philosophical influences (Miller, 2006, pp. 1-5). Either in the notion of accumulation, in that of reified humanity, and otherwise in that of praxis (from the Greek denoting ‘action’) or production, the point that materiality departs from *artefacts* retains its validity both in the presence and absence of cultural or philosophical frameworks (Miller, 2005, pp. 1-6).

However, Miller also warns us against the caveats of trying to ‘squeeze’ this vast and hazy territory (of materiality, things or ‘stuff’, denotations and connotations notwithstanding) inside a fixed set of borders, without acknowledging the convoluted network of relational

intertwinements between the objective, subjective, extant and ephemeral, individual and collective, each inflected by the vagaries of agency. Indeed, the latter is largely responsible for blurring “our common-sense opposition between the person and the thing, the animate and inanimate, the subject and the object” (Miller, 2012, p. 5). And, although it does show evident utility to formally demarcate between the two — as has often been the case throughout the present narrative — I will adhere to Miller’s vote for ‘fluidizing’ or merging the two by renouncing any ‘alien’ separative bifurcations between created objects and creative subjects. As Miller has argued elsewhere, “[a]pppearance *can* be substance”, where “[t]he sensual and aesthetic [dimension] — what cloth feels and looks like — is the source of its capacity to objectify myth, cosmology and also morality, power and values” (Miller, 2006, pp. 1-4, emphasis added). Hence, arguably, the ‘deliquescence’ of entities (commercial, artisanal, sentimental) into personal meaning, affect, and pre-empted substance:

“Even within the most secular and self consciously modern systems of belief the issue of materiality remains foundational to most people’s stance to the world. ... Humanity is viewed as the product of its capacity to transform the material world in production, in the mirror of which we create ourselves. Capitalism is condemned above all for interrupting this virtuous cycle by which *we create the objects that in turn create our understanding of who we can be*”.

(Miller, 2005, p. 2, emphasis added).

With objects commodified or not (and, as we have seen, hijabs can subscribe to both categories), intrinsic to human nature is the desire to change and forge personal possessions in such a way that permits the imprint of the ‘self’, of one’s personal character(istics), onto the object possessed. As Dant (2005) points out,

“[t]he human capacity to engage with the world in ways that shape the material environment must have its foundation in the embodied characteristics of the species; the particular arrangement and orientation of senses, especially *sight* and *touch* [which I will linger upon in the following sections], the motor capacity of fingers, hands and limbs, and, perhaps most importantly, the capacity of mind that *imagines, anticipates and communicates*.”

(p. 137, emphasis added).

What is *communicated*, therefore, depends on much more than the simple presence — or format — of the object. The stride from palpable materiality to the comprehension of codes inherent to the artefact requires the cognitive-affective operations of sensing and perceiving, and, at a finer level, a creative capacity to ‘abstractify’. It is through this latter

medium that the connection between reality and meta-(or micro-)reality is drawn, arguably allowing for the imagined alongside the concrete and for the individual alongside the collective to be asserted. For materiality bears little meaning outside the reach of abstract notions such as virtue, value, sacredness, transcendence, or cosmology, as different authors emphasized (Werner & Bell, 2004; Boradkar, 2010, Chapter 2; Miller, 2012). We are dealing here with potentials and transformations, as much as we are dealing with cotton, silk, colour, stitch or cut. And it is here, at the junction between an object's corporeality and its (individual or collective, conscious or subconscious) subjective apprehension, that it acquires fluidity, 'deliquescence', which is to say dynamic scope and meaning.

For Godelier, the imaginary is the one governing over the symbolism of the object, thus determining which object is perceived as precious (or sacred) and which is not: "[f]or sacred objects and valuables are first and foremost objects of belief; their nature is imaginary before it is symbolic because these beliefs concern the nature and the sources of power and wealth, whose content has always been in part imaginary" (quoted in Willmott, 2008, p. 41). In this sense, he supports the existence of an *infra* life underlying the living, partly on Mauss' assignment of "souls" to objects, which enable them to exist "as a person with the power to act on other persons" (Mauss, 1990, quoted in Werner & Bell, 2004, p. 10). However, Miller (2012) goes one step farther questioning the very capacity of objects to represent their owners or creators; tellingly, he presents a case study of Trinidadians who make particular use of their clothes to celebrate transient moments in life, investing impressive amounts of time and effort in the creation of individual styles and peculiar dress-up costumes for rather brief display situations. In Miller's view, such seemingly 'superficial' body shells are informative of an individual's identity to a surprising extent — perhaps more so than any genetic background, personal achievement or social marker — by presenting the self as a versatile entity characterized by the *changes*, and not by the fixities of its existence. On this route, Miller underscores the importance of *holistic* experiences of being (with clothing as a case in point), with their changes and inconsistencies, which he regards as more suggestive of the individual (see Miller, 1994 & 2012, Chapter 1, for further insights on this subject).

With scarves, due to their malleable and versatile substantiality, the expressive potential enabled through 'life' woven around and *inside* of materiality, in the form of sentiments, memories, or even life philosophies and ideals, becomes even richer. Head covers serve

both purposes of (theological) abstraction and (visual) representation¹⁹²; but beyond the religious and eth(n)ically symbolic messages conveyed, hijabs are also arguably percolated by a diverse and dynamic repertoire of individuated meaning (as I have already noted, on multiple occasions, throughout the previous chapters), centered on the (multi)sensorial, the aesthetic, as well as on the psycho-emotional and autobiographical ‘weight’ of their creators.

Take, for instance, the comparative example of the quilt, used in the motion picture *How to Make an American Quilt* (Moorhouse, Otto & Anderson, 1995), where the emblematic value and uniqueness of a hand-crafted everyday cloth corresponds to the ‘layers’ of feeling, personal narrative and pastness invested by its makers.¹⁹³ Here, the potency of the textile (in this case, a quilt specifically linked to *love*) to connect stories, times (past, present, also future — as the cloth is crafted for a bride-to-be), and most of all, *people*, is central to the plot. While seven female characters sit down together to produce a wedding quilt dubbed *Where Love Resides* for 26-year-old Finn (played by Winona Ryder), the integral *significance* (i.e. character) of the outcome is built upon emotional bits that each of the sewers brings to its making. Personal memories, both painful and fulfilling, relating to heartache, infidelity or lost youth, but most of all, a shared recuperation of love, find their way along the stitches and into the textile. What results is a melting pot of interlaced experiences, a forged sisterhood resilient enough to overcome bitterness, betrayal and old age, eventually finding the way (back) to the idea of love (which we will keep in mind especially when perusing the designs of Amena, in subchapter 6.4.). The film is laden with inklings to, and formulas of, holding on to precious things: for example, Gladys’s room hosts myriads of objects from her past, literally walled into the architecture of her room, reminding her of past emotions. Notes and photographs are recalled from the past and recast into the present; old-fashioned gowns, habits and dated quilts are resuscitated and welcome into here and now (see also Ayra’s similar use of old dresses as prime material in the creation of new ones, to be addressed shortly). As the film progresses, the narratives, the mood, the light itself infuse the setting with warmth, familiarity, and a sense of overall attachment, intended not only to substantiate each character in part, but also to give ‘life’ to the textile created: the *love* quilt.

¹⁹² Largely insusceptible to religious iconography and graphic representations, Islam does, however, owe some of its foremost contemporary visual expressions to the headscarf (Silverstein, 2010, Preface; Moll, 2010; Lewis, 2007, 2010, 2013b; Tarlo, 2007, 2010).

¹⁹³ See also Küchler, 2006, on the investment of hand-crafted quilts as sacred cloth (imbued with ‘feeling’ and intimacy) in Polynesia.

At one point, this becomes explicitly expressed through one of Marianna's remarks: "Sometimes you have to break the rules to *keep the work alive*". But most of all, it is the idea of plural symbolism, the autobiographical and emotional density achieved with the apposition of each detail (e.g., an image of a crow revived from one character's youth and sewn into the quilt to commemorate her finding of true love) as living part of the artefact, that accounts for the quilt's value as an emblem of love: "Young lovers seek perfection. Old lovers learn the art of *sewing shreds together*, and of seeing beauty in a *multiplicity of patches*" (text on Marianna's note).

In the three cases of modest wear design detailed below, the idea of emotional attachment, along with its past-presence correspondences, is essential. Attachment to people, to spaces, to memories, but most of all, attachment to one's feelings is arguably the prime element breathing *life* and *character* into the nitty-gritty (bits, or patches, or yet 'pixels') of cloth-making. To better explain this locus of personal appropriation where something made becomes something *felt*¹⁹⁴ (or vice versa), I will narrow down my emphasis to three overlapping planes of interest:

- a 'technical' side, consisting of the totality of *physical* cues, i.e. the sensorial characteristics of the item (shape, colour, material composition, design pattern etc.);
- a cultural and traditional aspect, referring to (inter-)cultural context(s) — such as the cloth's origin, age, socio-cultural appropriation and significance; and
- a micro-cultural, 'subterranean' matrix of personal experience which spans beyond the manifest use of the object, and is subject to a continuous flux of deliberation between individually perceived value(s), virtue(s), beauty, 'energy', affect and philosophical/aspirational relations infused by the creator in the cloth.

Keeping these divisions in mind, I will progress to identifying the elements described above in concrete modest cloth samples and related creative endeavours corresponding to three Islamic garb *designers*: Ayra, Rezia, and Amena respectively.

¹⁹⁴ While it bears both truth and relevance that objects, sacred or laic, have meaning mostly or (arguably) exclusively within a social structure (Godelier, 1986, quoted in Werner & Bell, 2004, Introduction; see also Boradkar, 2010, Chapter 8, for a full discussion on the dynamic meanings of things in social contexts, and Miller, 2011a, Epilogue, on a similar integration of the meaning of 'material systems' into relational dynamics), it is also pertinent to add that "[f]rom the perspective of the individual, objects are incorporated into the life of a person and extend his or her being in the world, both the material world and the social world." (Dant, 2005, p. 60).

6.2. Ayra's Aesthetic of Vision: Connecting through Buttons, Ribbons, Colours and Imagination

Colour-wise, I have examined hundreds of scarves belonging to very different people — different cultures, different personalities, different 'subjectivities'. Some were monochromatic, supporting a demure simplicity the wearer desired to express (for instance, Madeeha's scarf displayed in **Image 36, Chapter 5**, expressing her non-fashionable preference to as plain a style as possible, and the avoidance to display a beauty she believes belongs *on the inside* of the individual). Others revealed prints in conspicuously lively colours (e.g., Hyacine's, Mea's, Eshel's, or Runa's scarf, portrayed below), of which most featured popular contemporary floral, geometric or animal motifs (as illustrated in relevant sections of **Chapters 4 and 5**). Others, as we shall see, put forth more abstract/oneiric representations, such as Rezia's *The Gift* or *Sun Set in Snow*, captured in **Images 64 and 67**, subchapter **6.3**). Yet the first time I came to realize just how much symbolic power one singular cloth can garner was when I met Sabiya's sister, Ayra.



Image 53

Runa's scarf, donned for one of our focus group encounters.

At 42 years of age, Ayra has an extensive experience sewing and designing. Currently established with her family in Bradford, West Yorkshire, she recounts how she practically

started ‘designing’ when she was “9 or 10”¹⁹⁵, and continued to do so for members of her family (Sabiya included, along with their six other sisters, all of whom are “very fashionable”) and a handful of close friends. Once a customer seeks out her services and explains what the outfit or scarf (she tailors both) should look like, she forms a ‘vision’ in her mind and endeavours to bring it to ‘life’.

I was particularly interested in the range of colours she receives most demand for. Keeping some of the connotational intricacies hijab chromatics involve — among which the purity of whites¹⁹⁶ and the frequent denunciation of bright and flashy colours as insufficiently modest, thus “Islamically inauthentic” (Tarlo, 2013, p. 80) — in mind, I found an impressive array of strong, flamboyant colours, highly ornamented skirts, dresses and wrap-arounds in Ayra’s workshop, all reminiscent of a contemporary Indian aesthetic / ‘Indophilia’, or of an arguably neo-Orientalist one (Sharma & Sharma, 2003; Geczy, 2013, Chapter 3; also revisit **Chapter 2** here on the topic of conspicuous, ‘glitzy’ Indian fashion). This became more evident, as I was already familiar with the idiosyncratic cultural heritage Ayra and Sabiya share (the mix of Afghan and Pakistani cultures, to which the British influence was added), which, in Sabiya’s case, translated into dark-coloured outer robes and a moderate use of colour in headwear.

¹⁹⁵ She attests to the hobby of designing dolls’ dresses from her early childhood. Since then, she has also worked for acclaimed high street retailers such as Next, which added to her professional skills and experience.

¹⁹⁶ Preferred in certain parts of the world by young, unmarried women, or donned for special occasions such as weddings or the Hajj (Arthur, 1999, Chapter 9; Altinay, 2013; see also the ‘pure’ symbolism of white gear evoked by Alena in **Chapter 5**).



Image 54

Designs by Ayra.

Throughout history, the involvement of Muslim women in domestic sewing and embellishing (including the creation of highly decorative, if not ‘opulent’ pieces) was not uncommon, especially when the items created qualified as gifts. In this regard, Ayra can be said to follow, in a way, this tradition (Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000). However, in her case, being self-schooled in designing fashionable outfits from her early childhood, the interest was mostly guided by an inner sense of aesthetic ‘propriety’. She is particularly skilled at “putting pieces together” — pieces consisting of borders, edges, buttons (some purely ornamental, while others functional as well — “some will open, some will not”), embroidered patches, frills, pleats, or patterned ‘motifs’, even when the recipients aren’t quite sure what would best suit them. Tellingly, most of her customers today simply trust Ayra’s taste and intuition, leaving the responsibility of choosing what would “look best” in her hands.

As such, her ‘insights’ are sparked whenever she comes into contact with a new material, assesses its colour, ‘gauges’ its potential and aims to embody it. Our neutral scarf would, in this case, flow into final shape following a meandering path, from 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, through the addition of ‘motifs’, embroidery, buttons, beads etc. Her work in progress is therefore similar in potentiality to gouaches on a painter’s palette,

promising, open-ended, awaiting to *become*: a playful, bright red, feather-print children's dress on the side of the sofa; a festive, burgundy velvet kaftan with golden margins and a bead 'tie' by its side (Image 55); an autumn-inspired, kaleidoscope-print camisole with buttons that look like sunflowers (Image 57).



Image sequence 55

Examples of dress hand-made by Ayra.

Something to remark here is that Ayra never designs for herself. Her clients are invariably her sisters, her daughter and her friends, whom she devotes her entire creative energy to. “I don’t do anything for myself. You’ll see me in rags ... I never have anything for myself; *never*. Friends and family, that’s all!”

As can be inferred from the images above, in Ayra’s view, elegance is a combinatory force which brings together patches, playing contrasts and eclectic details into judiciously-assembled, collage-like festive gowns. As borders meet laces, globular buttons meet glossy ribbons, splits, beads, sequins and even golden threads, I learn that “anything” can come from her moments of inspiration. Yet, despite the immense variety her ‘visions’ yield, one can actually identify an (often literally) red thread of (unconscious or unacknowledged) Afghan aesthetic in the majority of her creations — e.g., the cream-and-silver etched dress illustrated in **Image 56** (left). In this particular case, she patiently takes me through the entire process of stitching, matching and *enriching*, as I see items shuffled back and forth throughout her workshop/kitchen floor and sofas (both turned into a moving showroom at this point) and closely follow every bit of narrative she offers. “I do *so* much for a dress”, she playfully complains, “and then I don’t take a picture at the end ... And then that dress is gone!”



Image 56

Afghan-style midi dresses designed by Ayra.

Ayra's creative experiences confirm and complement Roach & Bubolz Eicher's (2007) claim that aesthetic expressions translate well into colour, texture, shape or ornamental effect (as put forth by the cloth), having the power to communicate — i.e. emphasize or disguise — feelings to the onlooker, and resulting in *moods* integral to the textile, then passed on to the wearer.¹⁹⁷ In this sense, brighter colours and contrasting lines are more likely to suggest feelings of exuberance, while perceived novelty and creative effects are likely to generate a sense of uniqueness and/or self-confidence on the part of the wearer (*ibidem*, p. 110). In a similar vein, Chapman (2005) links the use of certain colours involved in design with specific emotional responses, such as “hot pinks being described in terms ranging from sullen and melancholy to joyous and even lustful, while deep purples are often perceived as decadent and bourgeois” (p. 97).

With Ayra's textiles, this transfer of emotion from creator to cloth and from cloth on to wearer seems to take place implicitly, especially since she tailors each outfit without ever drawing a sketch first. “This was just a plain material”, she points to a specific garment, taking me through another step-by-step re-enactment of its vertical and horizontal (trans)formation (the cuts, the combinations, the differences, the intent behind all): another garment she'll never take a picture of, but whose *mood* she recalls very clearly. “It's *sooooo* nice when you have something in your head and then you have that actual [thing]!”, she remarks, with the proud satisfaction of an artisan whose work is a live testimony of year-accrued dedication, skill, and passion. Then she asks me: “can you *imagine* it?”

Sometimes, Ayra turns scarves into dresses (for instance, a Pakistani-Afghan-Western¹⁹⁸ hybrid style, sufficiently long and wide to be worn as an ‘edgy’ wrap-around); other times, friends come to her house (which, as I learnt from Sabiya beforehand, is full all the time) and ask her to design “really nice”, Western fashion dresses they have seen on the street, in films or in retail stores (e.g., the British Home Stores). She would perform this exercise regularly for her sisters when they were younger, especially after having just relocated to

¹⁹⁷ See also Barnard, 2008, Chapter 3, on individualistic expression and ‘mood’ associated with clothing and fashion.

¹⁹⁸ The interaction and mutual influence of Islamic and Western dress has been manifest long before modern times, yet most prominently from the sixteenth century onwards (Orsi Landini & Probst, 2000, pp. 18-22); revisit **Chapter 1** here, section **1.3.**, and **Chapter 2**, for more focused examples of this historical phenomenon.

Great Britain. For instance, one particularly memorable pair of outfits was tailored for Sabiya: “One [dress] was *red* [pauses] — you know, I forget things but [not this kind of thing] — one was red, one was navy blue. The red one had [matching] black trousers; the navy blue had fuchsia pink trousers. You know, like when you say they’re *memorable dresses...*”

Admittedly, in a Western space governed by ‘shared’ aesthetics reined by mass production and globalized fashion, it is fascinating to observe how these are then reworked and arguably used to produce “individualistic expressions” of rarity or uniqueness, either through novel permutations of colour or texture (Roach & Bubolz Eicher, 2007, pp. 110-112), or simply through the labour of intuition and love described in Ayra’s dressmaking. While this does not dissolve the undisputable fact there *is* a commercial component, also a commercial influence to her work (albeit less so than in the case of designers making a full living tailoring and designing clothing), Ayra’s activity can be hardly subsumed into a mass production, typically capitalistic framework. Furthermore, her innovative take on the process extends past fashion and creative combinations of colour, texture, shape; amendments of lines, lengths, and the general geometry of the garment are all hand-customized (sometimes to a striking effect) and enriched through the addition of various elements used for embellishment/artistic purposes (beads, buttons, pom-pom ties, pieces of lace or embroidery) — which, in fact, constitutes her favourite part of the process, and also her signature mark. She makes the process sound so easy — as if it simply flows, or happens: “You can design it yourself! Get some ribbons, add some buttons... That’s not hard! You know, like imagining the material, I’ll do it like this, I like this [demonstrates]...”

This corroborates Chapman’s (2005) claim that personal engagement with objects interiorized up to the point of *immersion*¹⁹⁹ constitutes a superior form of attachment, which also creates a locus for uniqueness, whereby the inanimate thing is endowed with a *soul*-like essence. While Geczy (2013) links the use of foreign fabrics — e.g., Kashmir shawls — imported from Asia in nineteenth-century Britain with mystical and talismanic properties alongside “aesthetic allure” (i.e. exotic beauty; pp. 100-105), embellishment

¹⁹⁹ By using this term here I am adhering to Microsoft Corporation’s definition (1999) of immersive experience, according to which “in an experiential context, to be immersed is ‘to become completely occupied with something, giving all your time, energy or concentration to it’” (quoted in Chapman, 2005, p. 102), which can also translate as investing oneself in the object created (and, adjacently, in the creative process) until experiencing oneness, or sameness with it (*ibidem*, pp. 102-103).

means can serve a similar function. Pointing to older societies' animistic approaches to the physical world, Chapman (2005) acknowledges that the sacred and mystical value allotted in older societies to elements such as feathers or pebbles can also be found in "our existential and frequently animistic utilization of material objects [which] remains unchanged [to this day]" (p. 59). The role is similar to that played by glass, metal or various glittering surfaces when added to designed objects and fabrics in particular, which Rivers (1999) documented at length. Her research looks into the significance of shiny objects, such as pieces of mirror, precious or glittering metals (particularly gold, silver and iron), natural threads, feathers and plant motifs, as associated with traditional forms of dress. Of these, I have noted a recurrent presence of floral, pearl, glass and metal elements (or imitations thereof) in Ayra's designs, as well as a long-lived preference for lustrous fibres and finishes. Either as symbols of 'protectorship' by celestial luminaries (the sun, moon, stars)²⁰⁰, reminiscent of watery surfaces (e.g., fragments of mirror, shiny buttons), or mimicking the iridescence of feathers or pearls, each of these elements can be traced back to older traditional associations with supernatural forces. In this case, while Ayra mixes these ancient 'intuitions' in her personal creations, she also implicitly circumvents the neo-liberal channels of mass production and consumption that dress normally uses to circulate on Western markets; furthermore, this happens despite the fact, or even particularly because, she 'hijacks' or emulates commercial elements, as in the case of her 'copying' or enriching high-street dress models (above).

Indeed, her almost totemic insistence on personalization and individuation is striking. From the flower-shaped buttons²⁰¹ related in Afghan tradition to the protective nature and vital force of the sun (note the similarity between the decorative *phul* elements illustrated by Rivers and Ayra's sunflower-mimicking buttons in **Image 57**; also, note the solar, floral and leaf themes evident in **Images 54, 55, 56** (right) and **59**), to the multi-coloured beads, sequins, feather motifs and pom-pom finished margins, all these embellishing forms manifest in Ayra's fashion have been fraught with wealth and status, hope, vitality, virtue

²⁰⁰ For example, golden objects associated with the luminescence of the sun in ancient Sumerian, Egyptian or Andean societies were conferred with "the sweat or seed of the sun", and thus widely thought to be "the most perfect form of matter", invested with healing properties, purity, and indestructibility (Rivers, 1999, p. 50). In India too (more relevant an influence in Ayra's case), gold and golden dress has a vast history, connoting wealth, the strength of fire as well as that of life through its "purifying and life-giving powers" (*ibidem*, p. 53). Concurrently, the belief that metals (such as silver or iron) had *souls* was widespread in this sphere, hence their consequent use as amulets symbolizing fertility and withholding magical powers (pp. 56-58).

²⁰¹ According to Rivers (1999, p. 119), these are characteristic for the Pushtun people from the region of Afghanistan, who viewed the sun as the strongest source of life and endeavoured to mimic its vibrancy through the addition of *phul* (meaning flower) details to clothing, buttons in particular.

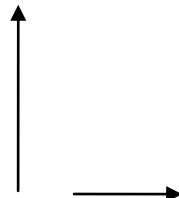
and ‘charm’ symbolism throughout history. In this connotative sphere, beyond more obvious references to rarity and preciousness, wealth and well-being, and, certainly, to visual allure, such elements arguably carry talismanic values, i.e. the power to deflect negative forces (also through the kinetic effects and tinkling sounds exercised by their friction), linked with beliefs that they can provide access to ‘magical’ capacities and/or the spirit world. Moreover, embroidery itself, frequently deployed by Ayra on its own or sprayed with reflective surfaces, recalls old Afghan, Pakistani and widely Indian recognitions of its protective valences and adjacent “magical, restorative, and evil-banishing functions” (*ibidem*, p. 8).



Image 57

Left: *Phul* elements illustrated by Rivers (1999, p. 119) and ascribed to the Pushtun people, Afghanistan.

Right: ‘Afghan’ style dress created by Arya.



Serving here a comparative function, for a better contextualization of the feather leitmotif manifest in Arya’s practice (Images 54, 55, 59).



Image 58

Details of Indian dress (from the regions of Kutch and Rajasthan respectively) featuring a leaf motif, portrayed by Rivers, 1999, pp. 39, 77



Image 59

Leaf-motif on organza and cotton respectively, as employed by Ayra.

As Ayra goes on, explaining how she added squares onto a recently-crafted gown that soon turned into triangles (“pinched down the corners, drew them together and they were triangles! And then, in between, I put beads! Lovely, I’m going to find it...”), I begin to *see* the evoked outfits made from nothing but disparate bits, using no supportive model other than her imagination. “I’m *into* it”, she reinforces with the decisiveness of someone who has long known her own creative potential, hinging this natural visual flow on subliminal cultural ancestry references (as nowhere along our dialogue has there been an explicit reference to ancient Afghan or Pakistani heritage, beyond a natural, implicit sensorial *enjoyment* of this particular aesthetic). It also seems to escape Ayra that, with all the labour, love, attention to detail and ancient motifs / spiritual traditions embedded in her work, she 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 is not the aim of this dissertation to explore such derivative directions (but rather to highlight the *individual* contexts and *psycho-emotional* contingencies allowing them to surface in the first place), the (post)Marxist implications of this dynamic, in terms of advancing possible forms of (unintended, in this case) cultural resistance and consumption alternatives, are well worth analyzing in the future.

From all the outfits I examined and all the photographs I took, the overall sensation that Ayra’s designs have left me with is almost kinetic: the colour plays, the tendril-like figurations and prints, the dynamic ornamentation, the intricacy of detail and the overall atmosphere she stitches together formulate a depth of worlds-within-worlds, each with a story of its own, whether explicitly imagined by Ayra or not.



Image 60

A ‘youthful’ look by Ayra.

It is this fluency of vision, drawn from within and channelized via the Asian (visual) culture, that Ayra perhaps unconsciously recreates, and that permeates and defines her aesthetic — a mechanism she classifies as an escape from the quotidian, or one that I myself would classify as *passion*. She speaks of the softness and elegance of designing, of its richness and delicacy; of femininity-enhancing lines; of subtly eluding anything “too bright” or just “too much” in favour of “*true dresses*”. In today’s cultural atmosphere, characterized more and more by “nomadic individualism and excessive materialism”, where “empathy and meaning are sought from toasters, mobile phones and other fabricated

experiences” and “consumed not so much from each other, but through fleeting embraces with [readily] designed objects” (Chapman, 2005, p. 18), designers like Ayra have the ability to bring the permanency of ‘each-otherness’ into the design process, recalibrating and substantiating objects’ meta-sensorial, spiritual and emotional depth. From when “there is nothing there”, her textile compositions are visually and symbolically enriched by “adding the past” (albeit at a subconscious level) to contemporary styles, as “the past comes back in the future”. Materials are thus re(a)dressed into the present, partly through the natural tide of fashion and partly through her active recuperation of successful past experiments into new formats — a recycling process that melts differences and times into a sense of fashionable continuity (similar in effect to Mahla Zamani’s ‘atemporal spacelessness’, discussed in **Chapter 2**).

As for ‘beauty’, she finds it “when[ever] the person is mostly covered... In modesty. You know, the fully covered, that looks more nice [sic], I find beauty in that”. Long outfits, ample widths, complete Islamic coverage — this is what she most enjoys producing, and this is when she feels she duly captures the spiritual depth within. Colour, detail, ornament, all have their scope and their charm, as long as they form part of *the cover*. Indeed, perhaps the biggest paradox to underline here is the ‘catchiness’ of her textiles. Despite Ayra’s sustained attempts to elude excessive ‘flashiness’ in her work, that is precisely what I noticed when first exposed to her designs: the colours (vivid, saturated), the extent of adornment, and the strong, at times clashing combinations spun between these. Having already surveyed several Hindu and Muslim dress stores in Leicester before visiting Ayra’s workshop, I was acquainted with this penchant for diversity and contrast in modern, fashionable modest dress varieties — which serves well to confirm Tarlo’s (2010, 2013) research on the subject of cosmopolitan diversity in British Muslim fashion vogues.

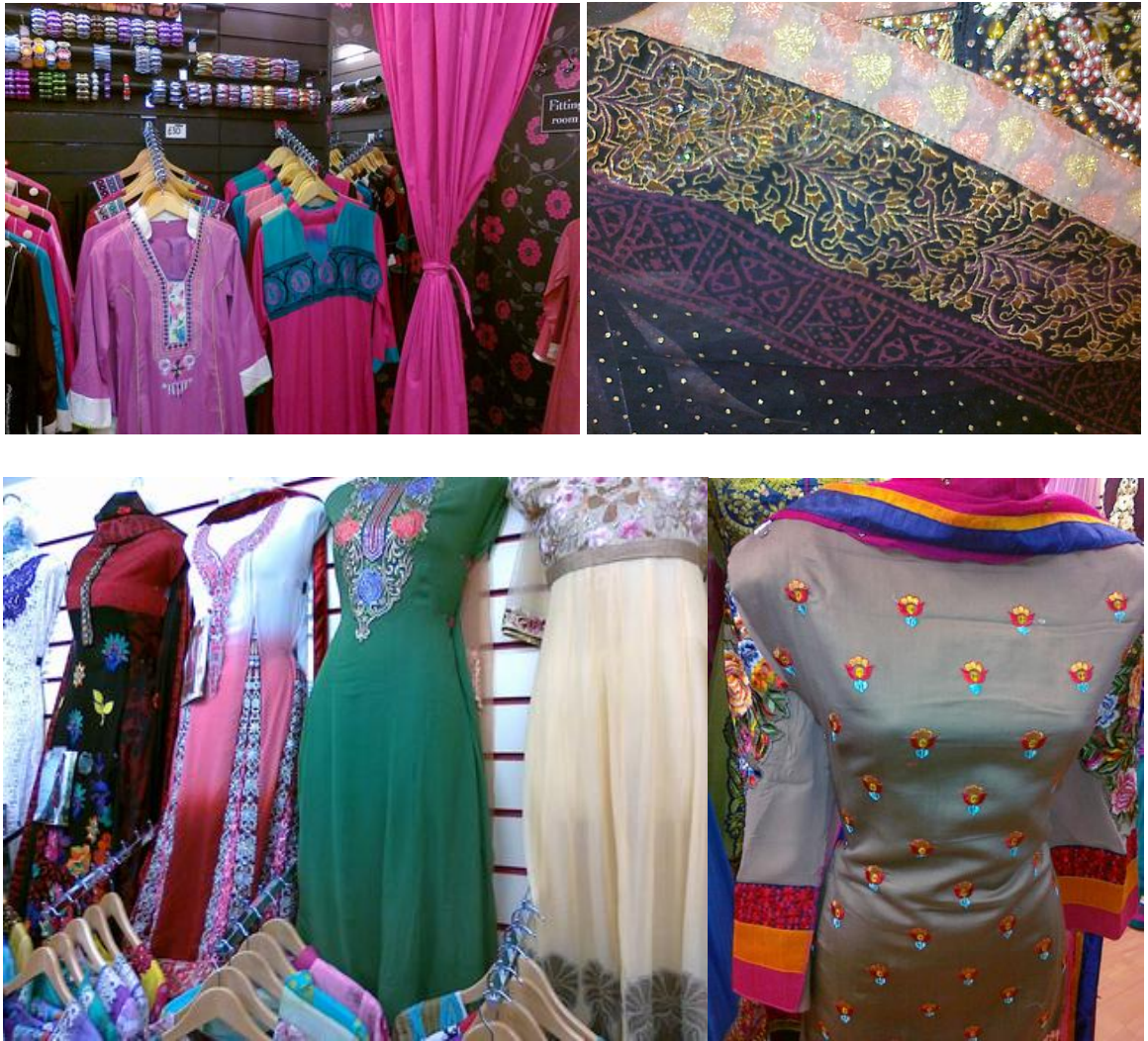


Image sequence 61

A sample of modest apparel retrieved in specialized dress shops in Leicester.

The fact that Ayra appeared virtually unaware of this idiosyncrasy has led me to ascribe it to an — again, arguably subconscious — attachment to her Afghan-Pakistani hybrid cultural roots, whence she retains an individual perspective on clothing and embellishment. The social character of her work notwithstanding (if not otherwise emphasized, then certainly evident in her close ties with each of her customers and her relentless efforts to gratify all their requests), it can be argued that Ayra finds both ‘likeness’ and depth within her own persona, through a seamless deliberation between memory and actuality, between (latent) tradition and (expressed) innovation, between connecting and essentializing the whole of a textile, between its earthly beauty and symbolic “truth” — all conducive to, in her own words, “true dresses”.

6.3. Layers of Vision, Movement and Sound: Rezia's Synaesthesia

Perhaps even higher on the abstract 'scale' of giving and of understanding, of seeing and of feeling, Rezia is the second designer I have interviewed who makes poignant use of her memories, imagination and Asian heritage in textile design. I incidentally found her work upon consulting Emma Tarlo's research on Islamic dress, conducted in the past decade (2007, 2010), and then decided to try and meet the artist in person. Indeed, after talking for many hours with Rezia in her workshop, I concluded that there is more to be understood and learnt from her 'post Tarlo' period, a period of transition and transformation into a mature human being, which, as we are about to see, greatly impacted on her practice and hence merits further consideration. Moreover, beyond her recently acquired public acclaim²⁰², Rezia's idiosyncratic textile art will serve well in this chapter to draw pertinent connections to the aesthetic aspirations (e.g., light-coloured, 'ethereal', 'other-worldly' hijab fashions) previously expressed by wearers such as Alena or Sabiya.

Prior to meeting her in person, I could already envisage the young and whimsical Rezia Wahid, her inspirational weavings reflective of the past (childhood memories), present (her current life as a British-established artist), and future (visions of an ideal world). Even from the black-and-white photographs rendered in Tarlo's (2010) account, one could easily tell Rezia's textiles²⁰³ are nothing like the headwear commonly seen in high-street, or even high-end stores, and retailed as *fashion hijabs*; or, in fact, anything like the varieties introduced by my participants before (see **Chapters 4** and **5**). Nor have I noted in this sense any solid resemblance with the sample of veilcloths — both traditional and modern — examined by myself, together with co-opted textile experts, in the deconstructive sessions conducted at Nottingham Trent over the spring and summer of 2012.

²⁰² Rezia was officially distinguished with the Order of the British Empire in 2005 for her London contribution to arts, and her work has since gained international recognition through numerous displays and exhibitions within and outside the United Kingdom.

²⁰³ Few of the panels Rezia designs can actually be called hijabs — e.g., her *Ikat scarf*. Rather, she generally confects multi-purpose, curtain-like veils or 'hangings' which can serve either decorative or functional purposes, and can also be worn as modest clothing.

Image 62

Sample of popular scarves on display at
Harvey Nichols (2013 collection).



Image sequence 63

Video stills from textile deconstruction meetings.



Heading toward Rezia's newly-established studio in London in July 2012, I expected to meet the exclusivist "woven air" artisan I had pictured while browsing through Tarlo's pages — a meeting I admit to having anticipated not without some self-conscious trepidation. To my honour and surprise, I was, instead, invited into a much more down-to-earth domestic set-up, where Rezia opened the door holding a baby son in her arms. Shortly after this, her three-year old daughter Noorie was asking me to fix her pen, while I was just being introduced to her father. Soon, I was putting on a pair of Rezia's shoes and sliding off — with Noor hanging on to my index finger — to the other end of their back yard, into Rezia's (not yet officially 'inaugurated') wood-panel studio. We sat and talked for over three hours in a row, during which time Rezia remained the same person who had first opened the door: warm, delicate, open; without a trace of pomp or reserve. Beyond the young, passionate, professional Rezia described by Tarlo, I was hereby discovering Rezia the wife and the mother of two, a self-admittedly wiser, more mature individual. In fact, all these dimensions — motherhood in particular — surfaced as key themes throughout our discussion of her latest work. Closer to the world, sharing more of herself, she has in the interim transcended the status of "[mainly] a weaver", and begun to define herself more in connection with society, the art world, and her own professional growth. This also impacts, we shall see, on how she relates to hijab:

It [life] has changed in a lot of ways, it's changed since I met [Emma Tarlo]. When Emma met me, I was a weaver ... Now I'm a mother, a wife, a home owner. ... I've been doing so much of other things since the interview, which is workshops, I've done fashion shows, I've also directed a piece of dance — with my woven pieces. So it's just... It just feels it's kind of reachable. Yea, it[referring to her weaving]'s becoming reachable ... The world can reach me and my work much more than before. ... But, mm, let me answer this properly [takes some time to consider]. You know, the difference between me [today] and the Rezia as a weaver before is: before, when I wove, it didn't matter to me whether they [hangings] sort of become part of something. A show, you know. Now, it seems like they *have to*, I guess I want to make it more, make it more *purposeful*, if I'm weaving something. ... [Also,] I think now I want to do collaborative work, you know, I'm ready to do collaborative work. I'm ready to sort of take on more risk. Whereas before I was very much 'I'm weaving this'; more self-contained.

In all the topics we engaged with, ranging from her earliest memories to her most recent causes of frustration, and from the density of things happening in her life on to the value of the 'truth', this evolution from a "weaver" (descriptive of her Tarlo interviews period) to

“a mother, a wife, a home owner” delineated a transformation into a more diverse and complex human being, prompting my curiosity over how this has reflected in her work.

On the one hand, integrating an older, more ‘abstract’ side of youthful oneiricism into her current family life has brought her closer to a *purposeful* self that for us, readers, analysts or simple viewers, translates as a more *interactive* and multifaceted Rezia. Whereas “before” she would be a perfectionist (while showing me photographs of her older, Egyptian cotton woven textiles, back when she was a “perfect weaver”, she points out that she made “no mistakes”), now she allows herself more space, more freedom, more room to explore the diagonals of her art, rather than flawlessly straight lines: “I’ve become different; for me, mistakes now are just meant to be. If something breaks, it’s just meant to be. And I’m not weaving with different materials, it’s just that I’m allowing myself a little bit more freedom”. This freedom aims to transcend theoretical fixities along the borders of Islamic lore, toward a sense of universal unity and panoramic spirituality that she refuses to place “in a box”: “I feel very close to Christianity, as well as Judaism, but then my [Indian] culture brings me very close to Hinduism [too]. And Buddhism. So spirituality [is a language we] can all speak. ... I don’t like to be [put] in a box.”

Like Amena (introduced below, in section 6.4.), Rezia has always been drawn to the ‘mystical’ side of spirituality, often blended with a sense of beauty, elegance, and a discreet, almost abstract sensuality in her outside-the-box grasp of the world (beyond the scope of dress, and even that of aesthetics). This complexity is echoed in her delicate, airy, ambiguously ‘ethereal’ weaving (see **Images 64-67**) — in which sense, her tendency to connect more in recent years is in accordance with an acquired sense of open ‘humanness’. I could identify this in the way she spoke, in the poignancy of her designs, and we can also trace it in the way she interlaces sensorial features in weaving. In effect, when she talks about the senses involved in her work, she talks mostly of *feeling*, which she regards as a meta-, touch-plus-sight, or *touching sight*, plane — one that stretches well beyond the realm of the senses, and is potentiated by inner warmth, tranquillity and serenity. As the description on her British Muslim Art gallery artists’ profile reads,

“Rezia’s work is a celebration of life, beauty, peace, tranquility, air, and light, and seeks to build bridges with the simplicity of fibres, colours, techniques and feelings which are felt within her when she is amongst the natural beauty of this earth — which can also be a form of escaping the harsh and troubled issues of the world around us. Her ultimate aim is for people to

escape into a beautiful dream, connect with natural light and the feeling of peace.”

(British Muslim Art, 2008, p. 3).



Image 64

Woven ‘panel’ by Rezia, titled *The Gift*.

The viewer is thus challenged to overstep the cloth’s materiality onto a meta-sartorial level (immateriality) where spirituality blends with aesthetics in pastel colours and waves of sheer ‘feeling’, conceived as aestheticized life narratives. The resulting sensations of pleasure and freedom/escape lent on to the viewer are therefore forged by means of three sensorial (and arguably sensual) channels:

- a *visual* dimension (consisting of colour, shape, transparency/translucence);
- textural and spatial *kinetics* — i.e. the haptic ‘lightness’ and movement of the fabric;
- *acoustic* codes enabled via, and laden with, psycho-emotional signals (i.e. the cloth’s ‘narrativity’) and autobiographical references.

Finally, the fusion of these factors conduces to a unitary, synaesthetic sense of harmony (‘character’) consistent with Rezia’s intent. But, in order to understand the totality of this ‘character’, we first need to take a closer look at its constituent parts.

6.3.1. Colour, Softness, Movement

While Tarlo's description of Rezia's style pivots around mainly chromatic and textural attributes condensed into the 'feeling' of the textile (Wahid quoted in Tarlo, 2007, p. 151; 2010, p. 22), the artistic depth of Rezia's 'storified' panels²⁰⁴ goes even farther, beyond impressions of airiness and softness/lightness, stretching into a continuous present, a temporally-frozen sense of soft motion, a dream-like animation of the cloth, a dance between reality and fantasy. To better grasp the multi-sensuous framework I attempt to describe here (based on Rezia's own recounts), I have aligned the first two topical planes above (referring to chromatic and kinetic features) together, as visuo-kinetic *narratives*.

Comprised chiefly of whites, sheer creams and subtle pastels, Rezia's chromatic palette is noticeably lighter compared to twenty-first century popular hijabs sold in the high street, and even to sophisticated, high-end international vogues — two examples came with the aesthetic promoted by the Arab fashion brands *Arabesque* and *Rouge Couture* (discussed in **Chapter 2**), which combine traditional Islamic coverage with claims to glamour, elegance and exclusiveness, in turn edged with a Western finish.

"I produce delicate stuff", Rezia casually explains, a delicacy I ascribe to a large extent to the way she combines colour (or lack thereof) with motion, to achieve translucency, ethereality, 'flow'. These details (difficult to accommodate into photographs) are best perceived when the fabric is touched, felt, worn, *experienced* both mentally and emotionally. The thickness and consistency of her hangings, for instance, are both sheer and soft, giving the impression of cloud-like, iridescent sections through which light and wind are free to play and fuse.

²⁰⁴ I am including in this choice of terms acoustic and narrative elements detailed below.



Image 65

Woven sample by Rezia.

It should not surprise us, hence, that on a personal level, Rezia describes herself as a dreamer, and talks about those moments when she is “feeling light and airy”, her loom facing the East, attuned to her *inner* compass — suggesting an existential sense of space orientation which relies on both the material and immaterial world, people, values, and senses. Moreover (as we will see with Amena too in the following subchapter), nature is a prominent presence reflecting in Rezia’s aesthetic aspirations, whereby the wind, the sun, “the sea, the river”, night or day are superseded by the softness of the cloth, its feel onto the hair and skin mimicking the sensation of freedom.

In addition, the fabrics that Rezia weaves are fully natural — she uses chiefly silks and cottons, either separately or in combination, to further add to the perceived ethereality of the cloth and potentiate the impression of translucence. Indeed, there are few alternative places where one could retrieve similar fashions, and among these, an example was advanced by Ena’s hand-crafted Eastern European *maramas* in **Chapter 1**. In Rezia’s explanation, the translucent effect is achieved in relation to the way colour is *structured* within the light, where white²⁰⁵, reflecting the entire chromatic spectrum, supports and orchestrates the structural effect. Other than white, very little colour is deployed, the absence thereof marking one of the distinctive traits that render Rezia’s aesthetic so eloquent and original.

²⁰⁵ For Rezia, white “goes back a long way” and is reminiscent, for instance, of her favourite childhood dresses received as gifts from her uncle and hypostatizing one of her dearest childhood memories.

Oh, yes. It's because light travels through white and reflects other colours. So I'm getting all the colours. ... Transparency and translucency, I just love [them]. You can see my studio windows: I wanted more of those translucent windows here and there [shows]. But I couldn't afford more than that. So yes, translucency — with colour, you [would] lose a sense of that transparency.

This 'haziness' is in tone with an abstractization of materials, which sends (once more) to immateriality — imagination, memory, reverie (all historically romantic tropes filtered through Rezia's heritage and personality) — through which the viewer is conducted to an ambiguous, poetic experience of softness and warmth in/of motion.



Image 66

Rezia's Sand and Mist.

Its enactment as such is intentional, yet at the same time instinctive for Rezia, who relies on unconscious forces to 'dictate' the effective shape of her vision, and somewhere along this path, aims to encapsulate its *soul* (the subtle connection with hijab's spirituality is again visible): "Elegance, I think I'd define elegance as [long pause to ponder]... I think for me, unconscious elegance is more beautiful than consciously trying to be elegant. Instinctive, just natural elegance — that's something I'm more attracted to". This way, she

can naturally ‘confound’ a sunset with snow and render the outcome wearable, or at least preservable²⁰⁶ in the form of a cloth.



Image 67

Sun Set in Snow: spun silk, silk organzine and merino wool (hand dyed).

Physical and psychological limitations are thus successfully set aside when invoking inward resources to attain aesthetic ‘flow’. On this score, movement is indispensable in the process of actuating intent into tangible outcome: the way the fabric moves, the way light moves through it, the way the wind catches its ‘soul’ and makes everything move together; movement is change, and change is growth for Rezia, whose identity as an individual is inseparable from that as an artist:

I just feel everything is moving. You know, I wake up in the morning, I put the washing out, and then all of a sudden the sun goes and the wind starts, and then there could be rain... And without complaining, I just sort of take the clothes inside, and I just think it’s part of nature. Movement is *so important*. ... It’s constantly there, the natural movement of the environment, it’s just in front of me. So yes, the way they [things] move, the way they change, grow — it’s just amazingly inspirational.

²⁰⁶ This relates to another of Rezia’s best memories, i.e. a most beautiful image of a sunset reflection on snow that she endeavoured to immortalize in one of her weavings (**Image 67**).

Another interesting connection to be drawn here is the relationship between this ‘motion of heavens’ (clouds, rain, sun etc.) and the hijab itself (concept and cloth), especially since the garment is not very often portrayed as particularly dynamic, synaesthetic or intricately layered in the literature. Indeed, so much about Rezia is, or comes from, motion: the natural ‘fluidity’ she seeks in (social) interactions, the flexibility of character (tolerance, empathy), her embracing and b(l)ending with and through change (as weaver, artist, mother), all bridged by and *within* the fabric of her panels. The echo of this movement, the message it ignites into a viewer’s — or yet a listener’s — perception will be examined in the next subsection.

6.3.2. Echoes of (Im)Materiality

Interestingly, Rezia seemed to first become aware of her textiles’ acoustic potential when I inquired about the synaesthetic nature of her work. That was when she appeared to have a small revelation relating to the multi-sensorial character of her work — to be explored immediately, after a brief yet relevant biographical exposé.

Rezia was born in Bangladesh, and is now 37 years old. She moved to the United Kingdom at the age of 5, where she continued to ‘feed’ on her first cradle of inspiration — her Asian home. As Tarlo (2010) pertinently suggests,

“Rezia’s textiles and personal aesthetic are perhaps best seen in terms of a creative re-engagement with Bangladesh, with memories of her grandfather and with Islam. But this re-engagement was not direct. In fact Rezia and her sisters were deliberately kept away from Bangladesh throughout their childhood for fear that they would have to be promised in marriage to friends and relatives if they returned. As a result, Rezia’s Bangladesh existed in the form of remembered images, sensations and projections, as did the image of her grandfather as a holy man, reminiscent of a ‘Persian mystic’, whom she remembers seated peacefully on the ground, draped in shawls and reciting prayers.”

(Tarlo, 2010, pp. 21-22).

Also relevant to emphasize here is that the aesthetic presented in Tarlo’s (2010) account is most prominently framed in terms of *visual*, public impact (as specified in the title of the book itself), with a noticeable focus on the ‘look’ of Rezia’s handwork, whence an emotional underlayer is unravelled (i.e. the textiles’ ‘feeling’: see Chapter 2, pp. 21-23, on this subject). Little attention is devoted, however, to the discreet acoustics and the musical

‘lyricism’ connoted by Rezia’s aesthetic, to which I attribute a complex *narrative* function. Complementing and, from a certain vantage point, activating the powerful imagery celebrated in Rezia’s work, the auditive stands here perhaps as an even more powerful marker of depth: there is sound, like an intimate rhythm, a whispering tone in the narrative mode, which accompanies each of her pieces.

On the one hand, we have the story lines recalled from Rezia’s distant past and suffused onto contemporary weavings, lending them meaning and purpose; sometimes, such story lines also transpire from the stylized names she assigns, and the poetic gravitas thereof: *Woven Air, Feather, Sun Set in Snow* (multiple versions), *Topkapı Palace, 8 Petals, The Hearts, The Gift, Sand and Mist* are just a few examples. The soft, yet powerful voice of her childhood years, of the child she still allows herself to be, adds to the poignancy of this semantic subterrain which, without the right ‘ears’ overhearing, might just as well seem fully silent. Otherwise phrased, her auctorial presence within the textile is merely inked by these subtle, elliptic narrative threads: Rezia in the midst of snow, of sand, of rain or wind, at given points in time.

Secondly, there is a distinct, natural acoustic that she wittingly imbues in her textiles. One can almost hear the blood-coloured drops of sunset falling with contrast on pure, white snow; as one can almost hear the wind, its movement and its hiss, therewith her hangings’ flutter. Perhaps it is precisely the immense difficulty of transposing sound into imagery that challenged Rezia to want to weave rain drops, sea storms, or tranquil waters — an almost impossible attempt at liquefying acoustics into something in(de)finitely subtle, of high emotional resonance.

And, thirdly, there is a contextual acoustic ‘narrativity’ in each of the cultural set-ups her work moves in and out of, which functions as an operational anchor into contemporaneity, as well as a catalyst for both movement and sight: the pacific floating of curtains presented in a fashion show; a fan effecting their movement; surrounding music, and the ballet dancing.

I mean, when I had a commission to do a fashion show, the thought of models walking with my fabrics, standing, you know, walking, stand[ing] still just as models, was just killing me; I had to come up with an idea and I said ‘Dance!’ My fabrics had to dance... So yes, dance, sing, in air, that sort of [thing].

Her fabrics *sing* and *dance*, frontier-free, in flowing synaesthesia. At the opening of the *Art of Integration* event held in London in June 2007 (as well as at the British Museum’s ‘Arabia Late’ event held five years later, in March 2012 — alluded to in the quotation above), Rezia was commissioned to direct a stage performance where her woven cloths would be worn and displayed by models through dancing. For this purpose, she envisioned stories happening in motion, in music and in dancing, which galvanized more (real-time) stories, and in the process, enabled her own artistic voice — that of the dreamer, mother, wife and child: the *whole* of Rezia. Present and past interconnected, fluid and fluent, combined imagery, sound, and movement — this performative repertoire epitomizes Rezia’s idiographic teleology, substantiates its meaning and turns its scope into a spoken art. For, as she herself has remarked, “a lot of imagination needs to be given and spoken”: the memories of Bangladesh, the sea, the sun, the snow, a farm, a river; “the way we move, change, grow...”; and the unbound, intense emotional experience thereof. The purpose, in the end, is to dissolve (both physical and psychological) restrictions. “[Because] I like non-boundaries, [and] things that have no boundaries.”

6.4. Empowering Beauty and an Online Journey to ‘Deeper Purpose’: Amena and Pearl Daisy

Many participants in this study have recounted the benefits of their personal travels, integrating these into their views and use of hijab. Alongside wearers like Atarra, Alena, Sabiya, Faaiza or Eshel, designers such as Rezia and Amena connect their personal growth to the life experience and insights derived from past journeys, both geographical and metaphorical. Between these, hijab, we have seen, acts as a vessel. Indeed, its design and appropriation become intertwined with the experience of ‘life’ in its full (emotional, aesthetic, biographical, synaesthetic) idiosyncrasy.

In point of fact, Amena recalls how her business — now developed into a small online empire — has grown “like a baby”, after many years of looking for the “right” hijab in high street stores, both within and outside the United Kingdom, and simply not finding it. *Pearl Daisy*²⁰⁷, the brand she established in Leicester at only 26 years of age as a family

²⁰⁷ Although toward the conclusion of my doctoral project (started in 2010) I came across a passing note on

business²⁰⁸, epitomizes her transformation, both in terms of personal growth and artistic diversification. In addition, Amena's (material and symbolic) voyages (she characterizes herself as a "soul searcher") have continuously refined her ability to blend sartorial expression with personal impressions, feelings and ideals. She places great emphasis on broadening her life view, as well as on immersing herself into the "cultures of the world", to attain personal development as a woman, wife, hijab wearer and even as a global hijab 'defender'.

In the latter respect, her life in the past years has, indeed, grown consistently from a science background and an envisaged corporate career to a deeply humanist, creative profession; and on this path, from a former "rock chick" with blue/purple hair to a committed hijab wearer and designer. Amena's YouTube channel, with 135,315 subscribers and 28,483,872 views in January 2014²⁰⁹, is an extremely popular online hijabi destination. Additionally, at the end of January 2014, *Pearl Daisy* had 13,164 followers on Twitter, 92,223 followers on Instagram, 177,012 likes and 21,008 individuals "talking about this" on Facebook, in short a very robust online presence that reflects her popularity not only within British borders, but also internationally.

As a modest fashion designer, Amena fits into an aesthetic framework culturally and stylistically different from any other creative paradigms explored before (and, indeed, one left largely unexplored in academia to this day). Judging from her public acclaim, as well as from the fact her work is significantly more politically- and consumer-oriented than that of Ayra or Rezia, one can — and should — read more public engagement, and even 'activism' on her part (see below). However, Amena implicitly and explicitly rejects the disenchantments of mass production (Giddens, 1990) and the "schizophrenic" (Jameson, 1991) neo-liberal tensions between merchandise producers and consumers; tellingly, the rapid success the company has seen since its launch in 2009 up to the present day, when it puts forth a global fashion outlet with "a massive customer base worldwide", is largely attributed to her interactive abilities to empathetically relate to her customers, listen to their

this brand's presence in the online (British) fashionscape (Moors, 2013, p. 22), my study had begun the exploration of *Pearl Daisy* already in 2012. Furthermore, Amena's input or website have not, to my knowledge, been critically discussed in any academic study.

²⁰⁸ *Pearl Daisy* has a physical (studio-shop) headquarters in Leicester and a strong online representation on interactive platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Keek, Vine, as well as through the company's official website, www.pearl-daisy.com.

²⁰⁹ To gauge the social impact this entails, consider the mere 858 YouTube subscribers and 332,530 total views of Nottingham Trent University, or the University of Oxford's 21,134 YouTube subscribers and 2,006,321 total views, recorded on the same date.

feed-back, then personally incorporate their preferences and quality requirements into her new collections:

I am always my target customer, so I always try it [any product] on myself first, to see how I feel. ... Every product is a product that I would wear personally, that is something that I want to be able to say. Every product is a product that I've tried and tested and that I love.

Moreover, as she explicitly reinforced on more than one occasion, the popular/commercial side to her work has “never been the driving factor, and I hope and I pray that it never will be, because otherwise it [*Pearl Daisy*] would lose the *heart*. And without a heart — anything without a heart is dead. And pointless. And meaningless. It's got to have *meaning*.”



Image 68

Two of Amena's festive ('Eastern style') looks. Courtesy of Amenakin, via Pearl Daisy Ltd. Facebook.



Image 69

Amena in Western dress teamed with her signature hoojab and Western accessories. Courtesy of Amenakin, via Pearl Daisy Ltd. Facebook.



Image 70

Amena in Western-style dress (left: with her husband) plus hoojab. Courtesy of Amenakin, via Facebook.



Notice 'Free Syria' activist/humanitarian inscription on her T-shirt in this stance.

Quite remarkably, Amena is also a style pioneer: she has invented and patented the *hoojab* style (which also constitutes the reason for my meeting her, following ‘snowball’ recommendations by Alena and Eshel, both customers and great admirers of the hoojab). Notwithstanding the great variety and, indeed, the versatile aesthetic of Amena’s ‘emancipatory’ designs²¹⁰ (a connotation I will shortly return to explain in more detail), her most frequently endorsed, ‘signature’ style remains the *wing hijab* (or *hoojab*)²¹¹. In practical terms, this consists of a hood-shaped central piece and two loose ‘winged’ extremities left to drape loosely around the head, providing volume and a ‘layered’ aspect (as can be observed in all the illustrations above and below). Usually secured over a tight-fitting underscarf and on occasion incorporating an Oriental, Arab(esque) mystique (e.g., the *turbanesque* hoojab exhibited in **Image 71**, similar in shape to Eshel’s turban-wraparound, yet different in its asymmetrical fitting and the added ‘wings’ cascading downwards on each side of the head), the hoojab meets some of the ‘romantically’-coded imagery referred to by Alena in **Chapter 5**, as well as Eshel’s and Sabiya’s affinities for generous volume and ‘flow’. Furthermore, Amena’s hoojab varieties also respond to a recent call for layered headwear in contemporary modest dress, as a more ‘elegant’, feminine and ‘proactive’ alternative to older/classic styles (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2006, pp. 68-69).

²¹⁰ Alongside hoojabs, pearl-daisy.com offers a total of 14 categories of scarves that Amena currently produces and commercializes, based on fabric type, drape, texture, finish and embellishment.

²¹¹ As far as the appellation is concerned, Amena explains it is not “meant to mock the term hijab”, which she extends to a wider behavioural sphere, “your character, other external things like clothing and many other things that relate to our inward, and not just the outward” (as referenced and discussed in **Chapter 1**); but rather “a variation of the term hijab when we are referring to the hijab being a scarf. So what distinguishes a hoojab from a hijab is the fact that on one end of the hoojab there is a hood which you put on your head [demonstrates], and the whole point of the hood is to make the scarf wearing a lot easier, because the scarf sits on your head as a hood would, and therefore it won’t move about” (Pearl Daisy, n.d., section ‘About Us’).



Image 71

Amena demonstrating how to tie a turban-inspired (*turbanesque*) hoojab. YouTube screenshot (Amenakin, 2013b, October).

However, as Amena explains, the shapes and general aesthetic of her designs are derived from her Western upbringing. “Most of it, Ruxandra, is, you’ll see, more Western-inspired; the lace, the bright colours, the contrasting colours certainly, the different materials, and the hoojab itself — it was inspired by the snud initially, which is a Western article of clothing”. Having “that [Western] take on things”, she qualifies one of her main priorities as an effort to permanently adapt her designs to Western wardrobes, where concerns with adornment, wearability (i.e. pleasant materials/textures, easy-to-style varieties) and accessorization rank highly. To satisfy the demand for the latter, along with her latest clothing line she introduced “something that’s new and it’s *massive* and I hope, insha’Allah, that it does well, [because] it’s a very, very big step for me — along with the clothing, I’m releasing another full range of jewelry as well, hand chains and head chains!”.

Nevertheless, despite her expressed allegiance to Western aesthetics and a general avoidance of Asian ‘entertainment fashion’ (e.g., Bollywood style), the more I browsed through her latest creations, the more striking I found the resemblance between “the lace, the bright colours, the contrasting colours certainly” (enhanced by accessories such as

beads, head and hand chains, and even false lashes) and some contemporary South Asian hijab vogues. In fact, one of Amena’s earlier (2013) videos illustrates an “Indian edition” hijab style which renders the association discernible (see **Image 72** below), and only serves to prove the fluid circulation of global hijab trends.



Image 72

Screenshot from Amena’s video titled *Simple Bride Makeup & Hijab Style! Indian Edition* (Amenakin, 2013, February).

6.4.1. Amena’s Creed: On ‘Feminine Beauty’, Individuality and Balance

At only 29 years old, both as hijab wearer and maker, Amena seems to have made it her goal to reach a perfect balance between covering and keeping ‘feminine’ or beautiful, as well as between her professional and personal life. Indeed, in both these sectors, as we have already begun to see, she is a ‘tinkerer’, working with objects (and resulted perceptions), modifying them, adapting them, while nonetheless looking for — or exposing — their hidden meaning, deeper purpose, and open *potential*. Indeed, balance is a key concept to retain herewith, all the more so as Amena is well versed in academic discourse (keeping informed on the latest debates on Islamic fashion, politics etc.), and has developed a highly reflective attitude toward herself, her work, and also her clientele. She is thus hard, if not impossible to ‘pigeon-hole’, with comments such as the next

underlining her considerable value as a primary ‘source’ informing both this and potential future research:

I think what it [hijab] honestly does — and whilst it might seem a paradox, because we are offering something that obviously, visually seems fashionable and something visual that seems quite pretty — might give off the misconception that it is a vanity issue, which I absolutely believe that it isn’t; certainly not for me. And I could say that for a lot of women that I meet as well. It might seem that it is something so on the outward, but I think that when you start to wear it, you *do* focus more on the *inward*. You become — I think, intrinsically, you have to become quite an inward person, because you really search for *why* you’re wearing it. ... You then have to almost rebuild your identity.

In this sense, she underscores the ways she has been struggling (as Alena or Atarra) for a long time contemplating and consolidating her cultural identity, negotiating it between her being a Muslim, her Indian descent and her Western (British) upbringing. This ultimately reinforced her idea of a *universal* spirituality binding together several systems of belief (similar to the syncretic creed that Rezia, also of South Asian lineage, adheres to):

You’ll find the discussion about that a lot in Hinduism, because obviously there are more Muslims in India than there are in Pakistan, actually. But because there are so many Muslims in India, the Hindus are a lot influenced by that as well. And you’ll find that in India there are a lot of Saints, and they have these, you know, shrines that people go to visit. I’ve been there myself, actually, and it’s very interesting how the religion was spread through spirituality — these are spiritual [people], I mean they’re all ascetics. ... And you’ll hear similar things in Hinduism as well, and obviously there’s a cultural thing as well. I think the cultural part of our identity is also very important, because I struggled with it for very many years. And a part of that was something that led to my being unhappy as well, because it was sort of like ‘who am I, am I Indian or not, or British, or...?’ You know, uncertainty. ... For example, I’m British. I’m very much influenced by having been born and brought up here, in the West. And my clothing — I wear mostly Muslim [modest] clothes. But I’m also Indian. You know, my parents are from India, I was exposed to the Indian culture, still am, and I love it. And that’s something that I also hold very dear.

This experiential, and not entirely non-dilemmatic, cultural potpourri is sustained by her afore-expressed affinity for travelling, which constitutes a broader backdrop to ‘pin’ personal development onto (as also reported by other, previously introduced, respondents). Among the many advantages brought about by journeying around the world, the idea of change, growth, and multi-axial ‘betterment’ (frequently sanctioned in Islam, as well as in

Christianity and other religions) is particularly prominent in Amena's perception of life, and, consequently, her hijab creation.

Like Rezia — with whom she shares a focus on emotion, feeling, individuality, and essentially all the (post)romantic undertones developed in the West over the past 200 years — she feels inspired by topographic diversity and by nature above all, which she consistently pours in her design activity as an essential part, and which she blends with an emotional-aesthetic animism related to her Indian heritage: “Nature, I’ve always been touched by nature, and therefore I think it’s inevitable that I be inspired by it. But I’m mostly just inspired by the world, the *beauty* in it, and the *love* in it as well.”

Admittedly, shuffling back and forth through hours of recorded conversation, the main two principles supporting Amena's aspiration to personal betterment and a balanced existence are — and she managed to engage with both without once sounding saccharine, stereotypical or redundant — ‘beauty’ and ‘love’. She describes *Pearl Daisy* itself as “a labour of love”, a passionate activity derived from intrinsic verve, as opposed to a race for financial revenue (see also above), and explains that, despite having not received a single paycheck for over a year after jumpstarting her business, this factor never curbed her dedication or belief.

As far as more ‘prosaic’ sides to beauty are concerned, she informs me right from the start — almost in an effort to clear the air of any ‘academic’ duplicity or reticence on my part (the researcher interested in the practice of covering) — that she enjoys feeling pretty and likes “pretty things”, which she believes add beauty and feeling to her work. This even fuels her ‘activist’ endeavours to “enhance confidence in women”, as “I think beauty *does* mean something to women, and I think that it doesn’t necessarily have to be a shallow, negative, or vain quality. I think women can appreciate beauty, be inspired by it, and also be motivated by it”. Furthermore, she considers there is “nothing wrong” with wearing an attractive hijab style as long as it “suits” the wearer, and “as long as it’s in balance”, which is to say in accordance with the rest of her persona. She speaks of a proactive, *empowering* attractiveness her dress seeks to instantiate, both in terms of outward (physical) appearance and in terms of inward (psychological/emotional) strength, commencing with an efficient management of the ego:

You know what, with hijab it is a case of controlling your ego. For me it is easier, I know *I am more attractive without hijab*, no matter what anybody says. Yes, ok, there will be people who

will find it more attractive, what have you, whatever you want to say. But as women, that we have been created beautiful, and to cover that beauty means you are by default becoming less attractive. You might find — I still think that a lot of hijabis are still attractive, but not in the same way, you see.

Relevant to remark here is that Amena — almost nonchalantly — draws certain bridges between the ego and the world, between physical attractiveness and headdress, and between her own views/choices and those of the ‘rest’ (“no matter what anybody says”). On this thought line, on the one hand she highlights having established and disseminated a strong ‘sisterhood’ ideology between her customers (who share the same preference in scarves and often the same values) and herself, while on the other, the fact that she continuously strives to act on an individual-to-individual plane, for, in her view, her clientele represents more than a mere source of profit, and certainly more than a suite of sexualized bodies (to the larger society). To this end, she has developed a pro-women (though not descriptively ‘feminist’), individually-centered theoretic and pragmatic approach in her female-to-female(s) virtual interactions:

I’m somebody who likes to base a lot of what I think on scholarly thought, specific scholars, but then again I have to take into account that it’s absolutely a patriarchal field right now. So there is that male imprint, and because I am more pro-women, I see it in a very different way, and I think, you know, ‘make life easier for women’.

Again, we should spot the tension between her wish to adopt a well-informed, scholarly tone, and her realization that ‘authentically’ feminine voices — and defensible interests thereof — are largely lacking in this “patriarchal field”. She navigates such tensions, for example, by diverting the (visual) focus from women’s sexualized bodies through dress, which she admits should be used to effectively cover the most attractive parts, yet leave enough room for fashion innovation and appeal. Responding to requests from wearers around the globe for incrementally more modern and visually ‘friendly’ modest dress ranges, Amena is determined to offer her clientele a generous supply of such appealing garments which simultaneously elude any objectifying/sexualizing effects²¹² and elevate women’s sense of self-worth / *holistic* beauty. Aside from echoing most of my other participants’ wish to preserve a pleasant appearance while conforming to Islamic ethical and behavioural guidelines, this also enriches findings advanced by authors such as Bălăşescu, 2003, 2007; Jones, 2003, 2010b; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2006, 2010; Moors & Ünal,

²¹² E.g., focal areas of the body left uncovered or clad in tight-fitting garments.

2012; Tarlo & Moors, 2013. An extraordinary thing about Amena is that she engages with these emancipatory aspects with a clarity and conviction that, added up, further enhance her popularity (the points that she herewith expresses are complemented by many hours of YouTube video material):

Obviously, [as] for men, they're not gonna see me as a sexual object. So I will say 'yes, I'm empowered, because I'm not a sexual object for a man who is not my husband'. I'm *not* an object and it *is* incredibly empowering and I *do* want for women to *not* be objectified, particularly through the media. And all of this means — definitely, it does mean something to me, it does mean a lot to me, ... I want to maintain that I'm not going to be a sexualized, objectified woman. And that is more my pro-women kind of side that I've always sort of had in me.

I will extend the exploration of these, and other related themes, below.

6.4.2. *We Are More Than We Wear: On Hijab Choice, Intention and Aesthetic 'Empowerment'*

In an interview with German television presenter and journalist Kristiane Backer (dated 19 July 2013 and titled “*Be: Empowered*”) under the rubric *Life in Islam: A Revert's Perspective*, the two women discuss empowering effects of modest clothing on shifting the social focus from physical qualities to moral behaviour, principles and overall attitude. For instance, following her conversion to Islam and related switch from Western dress to a Muslim-sensitive wardrobe, Backer engages with the concept of ‘dignity’ — as a modest attire qualifier — and its key role in being recognized “as a person, and not just as an object [of attraction]”, which is to say “valued for my personality, for my character, and treated with dignity” (Amenakin, 2013, July).



Image 73

YouTube Still of Amena from the “*Be: Empowered*” video.

In another video posted in August 2013 on Amena’s YouTube Channel and titled *We Are More Than We Wear*, Amena talks about the importance of hijab as an aesthetic ‘prop’ upholding an individual’s character. Although the look she adopts here is modern, even ‘glamorous’, and arguably self-exoticized to some extent (note the two stone chains in **Image 74**, one sliding down her mid-forehead and another attached to her wrist, complementing the embellished sleeves and upper front), she highlights the importance of putting “your soul inside your body” and the related need to transcend the social “trendometer” for appearance and style, as “what comes across above all of the exterior is *you as a person*”.



Image 74

Still from Amena's *We Are More Than What We Wear* YouTube exhortation.

Indeed, this validates Chapman's (2005) observations referring to human aspirations to *have* and to *be(come)* via objects (more widely), that "the consumption of material artefacts is largely motivated by the need to designate one's own particular being — [which is to say that] matter serves to illustrate our values, beliefs and choices as an individual within an unstable and ever evolving societal mass" (p. 41).

The same (or perhaps more, given that the process of production requires superior effort and levels of engagement on the part of the maker) can be said of *producing* the artefact, at which level an 'animistic' appreciation of the object is enabled, the object being assigned a 'soul' of its own (*ibidem*, p. 57) — therefore blurring the subject-object boundaries. Amena stresses this point of superior identification between the (soul of the) wearer and (that of) the cloth in a passionate vein, advocating against the general wearing of head covers out of obligation, perceived peer pressure or the desire to "fit in". Her *We Are More Than What We Wear* video alone registered 71,570 hits just six months after it was posted on YouTube on August 21st, 2013, and a number of 3,378 'thumbs up', suggesting that a significant share of her YouTube followers find her words heartening and adhere to this 'philosophy'.

Sustaining Amena's rhetorical impact on her followers are compelling first-person hijab experiences involving topics ranging from difficult moments traversed in the past (for example, when deciding to wear, and then keep wearing her head cover), to problematic family- and motherhood-related situations. One such experience refers to her independent choice (that is, regardless of her husband's, her own family's, or her husband's family's exerted influence) to start covering her head approximately one year after being married, which involved going "with my gut feeling" and later resulted in a boost of self-confidence and empowerment²¹³. Along the same lines, she openly expresses her indignation vis-à-vis contexts and social media that "shame" women into covering, pointing, for example, to a highly popularized poster displaying two lollipops, one covered by a wrapper and one not, the latter attracting *flies* around it. Following this, Amena voiced her solidarity and empathy "for the women that it insults, because we are all one, one and the same", covered and uncovered, protected and exposed respectively, and eloquently criticized the demeaning analogy women-lollipops, as well as the equation of males with flies. "Shaming women into doing things *never* works, ever; in fact, shaming anybody, or threatening them, or using emotional blackmail, or abusing and harassing them. Never, *ever* works. Ever.", she concluded.

Another interesting argument against the same objectification of women — *by Muslims*, this time — was anchored in the observation that exaggerating the importance of clothing in Islam leads to the neglect of one's character, kindness, generosity, sense of loyalty and altogether human quality. While attesting to the fact that "our outer experience is definitely a reflection of our inner hearts, because everything we see on the external *is* a reflection, is an echo of the state of our hearts", she is nevertheless advising her followers to rise above the surface (or even depth) of clothing by "let[ting] your soul shine through more than your hijab style; or your hijab colour; or how trendy or fashionable you are".

²¹³ Interesting to add here is a more recent 'activist' project undergone by Amena in the city of London on February 1st, 2014, and uploaded in video format on her YouTube channel (Amenakin, 2014, February). Given the significance of this day (namely, the World Hijab Day), Amena presented a range of her scarves to both covered and uncovered/non-Muslim women walking the streets of London, assisted them in trying on the garments and then elicited their feelings as to "what they think about the hijab". The project proved highly successful in informing non-covered women of practical hijab-wearing aspects, and generated a range of more cognisant (and empathetic) views vis-à-vis head covering along with subjective impressions such as "Oh, I like it; I thought that it would feel weird, but it doesn't.", or "I feel comfortable, warm, and nice. Pretty.". There exists, of course, much potential for future investigation here — note the 'performative', 'empowering', quasi-political, multicultural dynamics that inform her project, as well as the personal, 'fun'-related, empathy-based drive behind it — all of which define Amena.

Concurrently, supporting the idea that empowerment *per se* cannot be bought, nor yielded by “materialistic things”, Amena ascribes its source to “the people around you, the earth, the environment, animals”, as well as (abstract) moral levers such as education, love, and compassion — “the things that really, ultimately matter when everything else fades away”. Again departing from her own example, she openly denounces judgements of character based on people’s wearing or not the hijab (or particular styles), and pedagogically exhorts against being “led by other people’s expectations”, as “hijab is beautiful however you wear it”. (At the core of this argument lies the same self-improvement objective that wearers such as Atarra, Alena, Maryam, Faaiza etc. have previously voiced, situating hijab and clothing on a moral self-development scale²¹⁴.) Underlying this train of thought is Amena’s belief that God “doesn’t want us to burden ourselves”, or “live in a Wizard of Oz, black and white land”; instead, “He has created beauty and colour”, for “He loves beauty” — hence her ongoing quest for ‘ensouled’ forms of beauty in all things natural, as authenticated loci for aesthetic experience.

It is interesting to note how she infuses her textiles with a natural symbolism derived from movement (drape) as well as from floral themes, colours and moods of the night (“[when] you can have the longest, most profound moments”), “water²¹⁵, and rivers, and waterfalls — that beautiful harmony of the way that the water falls” — thereby connecting the surface of the cloth with an invested depth of feeling, which culminates in subjective sensations of “flow” (harmony) and “femininity” (not unlike in Rezia’s case, explored earlier):

I always talk about this. Before it began a fad — because all the companies now say it, but we were the first to say it — the drape was very important for me. Like I said, it’s all about the flow, you know, like the waterfalls... Fluidity. ... Flow and femininity. There’s a feminine — why, this is why they call it Mother Nature, right? — there’s a feminine quality in nature, and I get inspired by that as well, when I create hijab styles. You know, the flow of it.

²¹⁴ Amena provides another example with her consistent efforts to determine her viewers to retrieve the essence of being human in treating others with understanding, compassion, and generally doing as much good as they can. Yet another example is put forth by her charity work and related use of her popularity on YouTube or Facebook, to raise funds for orphan children (e.g., for Syrian orphans in the summer of 2013 — see the captions in **Image 73** reading “save an orphan” and “Buy your FREE SYRIA t-shirt now”).

²¹⁵ According to Eliade (1961), water symbolizes “the entire universe of the virtual ... the *fons et origo*, the reservoir of all the potentialities of existence”, preceding all form and sustaining all creation (p. 151, original emphasis).

6.4.3. Beauty Beyond Aesthetics: Amena’s ‘Dialogues’ With the Cloth

“*Pearl Daisy* has always been something beyond hijabs. ... It’s about *me* connecting with sisters, it’s about *my* personal connection[s].”

Despite her achieved popularity, Amena continues to eloquently refer to hijab as an *art*, inclusive of harmony, balance, and artistic vision. Art, as well as a sense of ‘communion’ with the cloth, play major roles in defining her sartorial aesthetic. To synthesize, first comes “fluidity”, the *continuity* of the textile — how it drapes, the feeling of connection it forges between the wearer and the outside world. In this sense, she prefers fabrics such as viscose, jersey, cotton mixes and laces, which are able to create, through their light weight, the desired flow/drape effect. Secondly, not unlike literary endeavours (which she greatly admires and occasionally engages with)²¹⁶, her designs retain the “ability to paint different pictures in your mind and different emotions”, which is “what art is. ... Because I think there’s hidden meaning, you see, I think everything carries a very deep meaning and purpose.” This renders the entirety of her work — in her own couching — an artistic experiment, “a form of expression”, as much as a feminine experience, despite “covering up the most feminine parts of you”.



Image 75

YouTube still of Amena presenting a wedding hoojab ensemble (Amenakin, 2012, October).

²¹⁶ An interesting reference to literature is inkled by the very name of the brand, *Pearl Daisy*, in part chosen as a reminder of one of her favourite books (*The Great Gatsby* — again relating to a Western cultural perimeter), where the female protagonist’s name is Daisy (see below for more on the significance of the *Pearl Daisy* brand name).

The more one learns about Amena’s professional activity, the more one is able to grasp the roles that art and spirituality, intertwined with her personal beliefs, play in the actual development and proliferation of hijabs/hoojabs. On the one hand, she attributes a *protective* value to the scarf as material cover, all the while noting how the act of covering *per se* honours women, emphasizing their inner ‘value’, yet keeping their ‘charm’ private in a public context: “Firstly I feel like sacred things [i.e. faithful women] have always been covered. And protected. There is that sense of... Even when you go to the Vatican, you can’t go in showing your shoulders, you have to cover your shoulders, so there’s that sense of respect. And reverence.” Reinforcing this is a talismanic, quasi-mystical appropriation of headscarves and their ability to safeguard wearers from negative “energies”, which is to say abstract perils beyond the religious²¹⁷: “keeping bad energies away, warding off. ... Whilst I realize it might sound a little bit superstitious in that sense ... I won’t deny the fact that wearing hijab means [also] that.” This can also delineate a figurative, metaphysical protectorate safeguarding the ‘substance’, or ‘soul’, of the hijab-clad individual (which is in line with the secondary semantic sphere of the term *hijab* referred to in **Chapter 1**, section **1.1**. — namely, the notion of ‘amulet’ that shields and protects the wearer against evil/harm).

It should therefore not surprise us that in this metaphysical framework, Amena ecumenically characterizes herself as a “soul searcher”. This way, she is able to empathize with the ‘essence’ of *every* religion — and, indeed, with almost any human action — as long as they have “a heart”. It is relevant to take into account how this simple metaphor — the *heart* (with all its intuitive connotations pointing to life, core, emotion, dynamic flow and circulation of ‘energies’, literal or metaphoric) — is repeatedly used by Amena to mark her unambiguous disregard of, and visceral antipathy to, the disenchantments of neo-liberal consumerist societies, where mass-production and corporate agendas have been shown to threaten (if not completely undermine) human ‘essence’ and related notions of individuality, value, worth, originality (Tomlinson, 1990; Ritzer, 2007, 2013):

Obviously it[*Pearl Daisy*]’s a business, we earn our living with it, but it has to have *heart* to it.
If it didn’t have heart to it, I would be in the corporate world that I was in, that I felt was really well paid but that was *killing my soul*.

²¹⁷ The spiral-like shape of the hoojab itself can be taken as an allusion to infinity — present in both European and Asian traditions from the Neolithic period onwards — through associations with natural phenomena (such as water flow, lightning, or birth) and the symbolism of the Great (Snake) Goddess (suggesting fertility, natural regeneration and eternal life) (Eliade, 1961, pp. 143-44; Haarmann, 1996, pp. 60-61).

Withal, in visiting Amena's workshop in Leicester in July 2013, I found her in a 'hectic', yet spirited and accommodating state of being, preparing for an important upcoming event: the launch of her new hijab and accessory collection. And, seeing her juggle with so many chores at once (allowing me to interview her, presenting her designs, while tending to her children and tackling — or worrying about — various preparations around the launch of her new line), I couldn't help wondering how being such a dynamic, self-confident, assertive individual reconciles with her more 'poetic', emotional side, as well as with the whimsical and ethereal brand name (*Pearl Daisy*).



Image sequence 76

Video stills from Amena's *Tour of the Pearl Daisy Boutique* virtual presentation (Amenakin, 2012, August).

Referring to the significance of the two terms juxtaposed in her brand name, ‘pearl’ and ‘daisy’, Amena explained the combination of these as a tribute to an understated frailty and subtlety inherent to femininity:

I’ve always preferred daisies over things like roses. I think roses are such an extravagant gesture”, whereas “if you’ve got daisies, if somebody comes and gives you [daisies], it’s that child-like quality, it’s what children give to each other, that means you’ve gone and you’ve picked it yourself. ... They’re smaller, they’re not as loud, and you have to look for the meaning. And that’s something that I had to do, I had to *look* for the meaning of hijab.

As far as her use of the word ‘pearl’ is concerned, researchers (e.g., Eliade, 1961) have long emphasized its talismanic valences, as well as drawn an interesting parallel with the figure of Christ, or the divine nature of the human soul, whereby the pearl was regarded as a link to “the very sources of the universal energy, fecundity and fertility” (Eliade, 1961, pp. 144-49).²¹⁸ This energy- and purity-related dimension is then reinforced, as noted above, through the addition of the daisy, a natural element equally symbolic of both the earthly and the ethereal, as well as of innocence, youth, and undistilled emotion (in fact, a popular symbol of love).

Equally interesting in this framework is Amena’s exploration of Sufi writing and its mystical grasp of the self’s journey through life, and, inevitably, through various spiritual meanders. As in Rezia’s case, this ecumenic *Weltanschauung* (marked by Hinduism and Islam most prominently, yet occasionally pierced by Western/Christian elements) also feeds on mystical nuances, for instance when relating to more abstract, impalpable ‘energies’ as quoted above. In fact, Amena admits that “the spiritual dimension” of Islam, and mysticism in particular, was “one of the things that really triggered my search that culminated in my wearing hijab”. Related to this is her belief that “ultimately we are souls — see, it’s the *experience of the soul* that you begin to then hone in on, as opposed to the experience of the physical”.

As a note to guide further explorations at the crossroad between fashion theory, theology and literary studies, it is pertinent to add that these themes are derived to a large extent from Amena’s readings of Rumi’s poetry and Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī’s philosophy (see reflections on the latter at the beginning of this chapter). For

²¹⁸ On a related thought, pearls are among the earthly elements that Rivers (1999) qualifies as spiritually and psychologically comforting, delighting through their tactility, protective through their mystical associations with the moon, instrumental in their potency to visually transform light and colour, and regenerating through their alleged capacity to restore youth (pp. 69-72).

instance, much of her unwavering belief in ‘good’, ‘beauty’, harmony, and interpenetrations thereof is linked to poetry — Rumi’s poetry in particular — which she ‘inweaves’ in the artistic process of hijab creation:

I’ve always said that — again, it might be a little bit controversial, but there is an art form in hijab styling. Whilst obviously there is a deeper meaning to it and often I don’t get to explain that, I also do see it as a form of art, just like everything else, just like *poetry*. I’ve always been very, incredibly moved by poetry²¹⁹. And it can all be, you know... It doesn’t have to be so different. Everything *can* come together. That’s generally what our philosophy is.

Having always been an idealist, as well as “a very avid, vivid dreamer”²²⁰, she seems to relate to her design practice in terms of syncretic materializations of creative ‘energies’, which implicitly helps her interiorize ideas of ‘beauty’. This transpires — to the informed viewer, at least — from some of the videos posted on her YouTube channel. For example, in one particular clip called *Dream Encounters*, she comments on some of her viewers’ dreams, wherewith she adds autobiographical references and art-related stories under the rubric “Adventures with DreAmena”²²¹. Notice how the video cadre below — as goes for prior instances as well — is in tandem with her visual presentation, aesthetically adapted to accommodate the ‘day-dreaming’ atmosphere.

²¹⁹ Looking to define her own identity within the real world has in the past led her to seek refuge in writing fantasy prose, as well as poetry: “I used to do a lot of writing, poetry and prose. But it was often when I was very unhappy — and it’s very interesting, it’s not necessarily Gothic or unhappy stuff, but I used to write when I was unhappy. And ... I stopped. I stopped. I made an intention when I began to look into spirituality, I made an intention that I will only write when it’s for God, and not when it’s out of my own... when it’s not [selfless]. ‘Cause it can be a very self-indulgent thing.”

²²⁰ Reportedly, reverie enables her to escape hardship, life crises, and even depression: “See, I’m somebody who’s come from a background where I spent a lot of my life quite depressed, really very unhappy, but struggling with that, still *living in the dream world, being an escapist*”.

²²¹ Citing, for instance, some of the poetry she wrote and published during her University years, which she has since given up in order to avoid “selling” herself for recognition, and by that lose the intimate “passion” for writing (Amenakin, 2013a, October).

Perhaps also noteworthy below is the similarity between Amena's look in the video and the oneiric 'Virgin Mary' imagery put forth by Alena in **Chapter 5**.



Image 77

Screenshot of Amena in the *Dream Encounters* video.

Even Amena's introductory YouTube video, consisting of a condensed description of her life and running along the lines of: "She'll make art from head coverings / Ramble on her own musings / So come take a twirl / With an intergalactic girl / Take a look through her eyes / And see the Beauty in the world / Come and see more / There's even an online store!", ends in a philosophical vein, citing two verses by Rumi:

"When you do things from your soul / you feel a river moving in you, a joy."

(Rumi, n.d., quoted in Amenakin, 2012, December).

6.5. Further Considerations

At a first glance, the three designers introduced above are very different — both as individuals and as creative output (referring both to the aesthetics, as well as to the practicality of their creations) — which is, in part, the rationale behind my choice to illustrate their work in this study. What brings them together, however, the common ground they all share — their “aesthetics of caring”, to use an idiomatic extrapolation from one of Miller’s observations (2011, p. 29) — lies in their constant aspirational strive toward ideas of unity, beauty, ‘charm’, sharing and giving, connecting with others. In this process, they all appear to — wittingly or unwittingly — project themselves, their individuality, in the fabric created. Through these sometimes evasive dynamics, all the garments presented above arguably become individuated forms of meaning, be they aimed to empower, to nostalgically evoke (past experiences), to commemorate or defend (values, ideas), or to resist what is perceived as ‘inauthentic’, soul-wrenching, or excessively commercial. Albeit that, as noted above, Ayra does not appear to explicitly acknowledge her ‘resistance’ to the consumerist paradigm that her grass-root approach to fashion implies, we have seen how in Amena’s case, the designer’s rhetoric and self-aware (even academically-informed) grasp of the industry and society allows her to more trenchantly and directly express critiques, and also to advance her own creations as micro-cultural alternatives to the ‘inauthentic’ *Corporate Other*.

I referred above to how lived experience, positive or negative, influences or enhances a person’s ability to create. In Amena’s case, as can be said of Rezia and Ayra too, much of this experience is poured into the object created — the textile — to a synaesthetic, meta-sensorial effect: “It’s not even about believing, it’s about *seeing*; and *feeling*” (Amena). This underlines the — indeed — fluid coalescence between the inward and the outward, utterly blurring the subject-object boundaries (Miller, 2005, 2012). In this sense, I believe we can safely refer to that *depth of surface* inkled by me in the **Introduction**, a depth that connects the dots between the deeper levels of spirituality, Islam, and the practice of covering, while seamlessly reconciling two apparently clashing (individual) spheres: the aesthetic/sartorial, contingent on material surface and driven, for instance, by an ingenuous attraction to “pretty things”, and the (profoundly) spiritual, hinging on modesty, individual merit, and a “true” sense of self. Along these lines, I found an image

posted by Amena on her Instagram and Facebook pages on January 25th, 2014 particularly relevant, despite its perhaps banal aphoristic glazing: “Detachment is not that you should own nothing. But that nothing should own you.”, read the caption (Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib²²², quoted in Pearl Daisy Ltd. | Facebook, 2010).

Furthermore, the notion of ‘unity’, if not that of ‘detachment’ (taken here as ‘resistance’ to conspicuous materialism/consumerism), recurs in both Rezia’s and Amena’s discourses, somehow overarching the transposition of object into ‘beauty’, of act into ‘heart’/‘soul’, of matter into belief and of style or appearance into interiorized experience — a point that complements well the handful of studies that have broached this topic from similar angles (Woodward, 2007; Tarlo, 2010; Miller & Woodward, 2011b; Miller, 2005, 2011a, 2012; Tseëlon, 2012). After having spent many hours in the company of my informants and many months reviewing the ensuing data, I would go as far as to suggest that these designers apparently endeavour to access the same state of ‘supreme harmony’ and ‘cosmologic connectedness’ (*hozro*) that artists, mystics and clerics alike have reached toward from the beginning of time, and which penetrates, in Amena’s own words, “beyond religion, beyond the headscarf, beyond all of the labels that we put on each other. That there is one source and so everything must be unified ... and harmonious”.

Through this prism, the process of design appears, indeed, to be an act of *love* (almost in the Christian, theological sense, but also arching toward other religions, or even to the ‘new age’ spiritualities associated, for instance, with the hippie counterculture), both selfless and self-giving (like in the case of the quilt, discussed at the beginning of this chapter). Some of the garments resulted from these — admittedly complex, and highly individualized — deliberations are one-of-a-kind, while some aren’t; some are plain and demure, and some less so. Yet what is thereby *given* and *connected* does not restrict itself to the look or even the feel of the fabric, but hinges on abstract, artistic, philosophical, interpersonal dimensions that evade the tangible, and yet find reflections in it.

In Amena’s case, this allows for no compromises and requires an ‘all or nothing’ thinking mode, where “it’s gotta be one hundred per cent or nothing” (a principle she generally observes in her life); “I will give that love, everything that I do [is] out of love, and that will come back to me as positive energy”. For Rezia, this is subsumed by her idea of

²²² Cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad, Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib is a prominent figure in Islamic history and also in mystical traditions such as Sufism.

harmony, assembled from (syn)aesthetic — visual, haptic, kinetic, acoustic — appropriations of the past and a continuity of the self — more reachable, more worldly in recent years, in order to attain that sense of ‘connectedness’). For Ayra, this is all about sartorial puzzles, glimpses, ‘vision’, which she simply and naturally melds together — in the form of ‘bits’, beads, edges, shapes, buttons, pom-poms — in “true”, “memorable” dresses, for the sheer pleasure of doing (it for), and sharing (it) with, close ones.

In all these cases, it can be argued that the *individual* stands behind cloth, either as character, intent or extrapolated ‘feeling’. Indeed, if we should retain one thing from all the above, we can concede that there is belief (both in themselves and their connections — with religion/spirituality, with other people, with their creative practices); there is remembrance; there is imagination, reverie; and there is a sense of *transcendence* in all these designers’ artistic enterprises. Whether of an escapist, idealistic or merely ‘connectivist’ (i.e. interrelational) facture, what seems to matter most for each of them is *if* and *how* they meet their (deeper) purpose. Do they evoke (a friend, a memory, a mood)? Do they touch, move (beyond the literal)? Do they inspire empathy? Do they impart self-confidence? Do they ‘empower’ or resist? Judging from customers’ response at least, and also from Amena’s and Rezia’s noteworthy (globally acknowledged), albeit differently enacted, contributions to contemporary design practice, one would have good reason to argue that they do. And, if at least one of these aspects has been brought to light through either of this final chapter’s three portrayals, then I would argue that they served their purpose too.

Conclusions

Summary

The previous chapters all attest to the immense diversity and connotational potential a fabric can impart — both to the wearer, and, through the wearer's ideations, also to the world outside. Created in this process, thus, is a (textile) surface invested with emotional, agential, individual depth. I have anticipated this phenomenon in the **Introduction**, related it to the existing literature throughout the first two chapters, and further investigated it in the empirically-informed chapters above.

Coming into intimate contact with all of these meanings, nuances, stories and individuals over the past three years of fieldwork has made me conscious of the reductive nature of many of the existing discourses on the subject. In essence, the situation is as follows:

1. The religious/political/ideological approaches to hijab — articulated either in a progressive (positive) or a conservative (critical) vein — remain overemphasised throughout the literature and continue to need further consideration from fashion-, psycho-anthropological, artistic and design-related perspectives.
2. In this sense, I have showed that psycho-sartorial, spiritual and affective aspects of hijab observance are enmeshed, in real life cases, within a socio-biographical tableau of a far more personal facture, involving elements of self-expression (but also doubt), artistic insight (but also conformity to extant norms), 'cosmopolitanism', style, spirituality, local affordance, commerce. In practical terms, this happens to a much larger extent than most academics and journalists have, in general, thus far suggested.

In other words, a person's awareness of hijab as a vehicle for self-expression is often equally important as the wearer's sense of personal identity, culture and/or ethnicity. Such findings come to complement the research of Tarlo (2007, 2010) and Lewis (2013a,b) in the British perimeter, as well as that of Woodward (2007) and Miller (2011a,b, 2012), the latter referring to clothing or material culture more broadly.

On this route, prioritizing the private and ‘abstract’ aspects of modest gear appropriation, and foregrounding issues such as dress-related authenticity or emotion, allowed me to distance this study from more politically- or economically-angled recent scholarship such as Lewis (2007, 2013a). Concurrently, although Tarlo (2010) does step closer, from an anthropological perspective, into the interior ethos of (mostly London-based) hijab observance, she does not quite touch on certain relevant aspects, such as intra-familial and close friendship dynamics that impact on hijab creation/creativity (i.e. the production of emotionally-endowed garments for close friends and family members only: the case of Ayra); the multi-sensuous (including acoustic and kinetic elements alongside visual and tactile) attributes of the cloth; micro-cultural tensions and connections located within the individual or within/around an enclosed domestic sphere; in other words, the way hijab constructs and construes *private* identities.

Where the specific cases of hijab observance and design are concerned, I therefore continue to feel it is imperative to point out, as a researcher as well as a ‘foreigner’ to the practice of covering, that such experiences can and should be understood from the ‘inside out’. In fact, my thesis attempts to achieve precisely this, both in a cultural, as well as in a psycho-anthropological vein, using empathy and reflection to analyze the practices and meanings of hijab, sensorially, as well as metaphorically.

Limits

To list some of the limitations that the study faces, it can be argued that the main one lies in its foremost advantage: namely, its idiographic focus. However, it has not been one of the aims of this dissertation to make (quantitative) generalizations, but rather to ‘zoom’ in on, and learn from, the very particulars of hijab observance/creation. On this score, as mentioned in the methodological chapter, an additional set-back consisted of the impossibility to address all 42 participants’ input equally and exhaustively — which leaves sufficient room for future study. Nevertheless, I have devoted consistent attention to as wide a variety of (individual) angles as possible, prioritizing diversity of opinion and richness of experience.

Another possible limitation is related to this very richness of individual biographies, as well as to the variety of (emotional/psychological, philosophical, experiential) codes used

to describe or analyze an extensive range of *subjectivities* (amplified by respondents' different levels of familiarization with notions such as fashion, innovation, empowerment etc. — take, for instance, the difference between Ayra and Amena; or the different degrees of adherence to global/Western fashion in Mea and Madeeha): e.g., the ambiguous, individually-contingent meaning of words such as 'beautiful', 'chic', 'flashy', 'true', 'character', 'love' and so on. With garments as intimately fraught as hijabs, one can never reach a 'safe' level of certainty vis-à-vis its connotational milieu; hence my consistent attempts to refer to my interviewees' self-expressed standpoints and sensitivities, even if that sometimes called for lengthy, if not occasionally dense, fieldwork excerpts. To this end, I have also generally tried to avoid direct (qualitative) comparisons between wearers and/or designers, steering the focus toward observed contingencies or *complementarities* instead.

Finally, this study's findings are, therefore, neither quantitative, nor statistically 'generalizable'. I do not deem the selected lot representative of all Muslims, all British Muslims, all 'cosmopolitan' Muslims, or even all modest observants in the vicinity of the areas I have conducted my fieldwork in. I do believe, however, that many aspects underlined here are reflected, in one way or another (and with respective individual variations), throughout the general population. Overall, the data corroborates information advanced by recent scholarship on modest garb on the one hand, tackling issues such as resistance, empowerment, or self-confidence, as well as probes less charted, or virtually uncharted, topical territories such as the emotional, metaphysical and (multi)sensorial sides to hijab, on the other.

More specifically, in terms of **theoretical** and **empirical contribution**:

- a. My work demonstrated that modest dress wearers transiently or permanently located in Britain often appear far more similar to non-religious women, in manifesting interests in fashion (or 'beauty', or 'love', or 'romance' in general) not so much influenced by theological or dogmatic moral concerns, but rather by a deep(er) sense of personal identity and self-realization, with various modes of covering giving women access to various expressive outlets (thus, one might argue, rendering the dichotomy between religious and non-religious women meaningless, or at least reductive). Nevertheless, to be noted here is that the religious principles or

moral premises (essentially Qur'anic) underlying hijab have, in all examined cases, preserved a palpable influence. For instance, they have contributed to my participants' defensive mechanisms against perceived 'decadent' aspects of Western society (e.g., women's sexualisation/fetishization by the media, sexually-fraught public behaviour etc.). In these cases, it was interesting to observe how certain film productions and (admittedly, commercial) 'moods' pivoting on fantasy, style, emotion and 'reflective' nostalgia (as defined by Boym, 2001, pp. xviii, 8, 50), such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, or *Braveheart*, were referred to by hijabis in their attempts to locate a certain aesthetic of spirituality, even as this becomes, voluntarily and light-heartedly, enmeshed with self-Orientalizing elements (see subchapter 5.3.). What renders this aspect even more interesting is that this self-Orientalizing process is being enacted — at times by hijabis well up-to-date with postcolonial theory and Orientalism's persistent impact on fashion — *in the West*, as opposed to the internal/self-Orientalizing phenomena spanning across the Asian world since the 1990s (Jones & Leshkovich, 2003; Leshkovich & Jones, 2003; Leshkovich, 2003).

b. Another conclusion the study puts forth, practically based on all the examples perused, is the — evident by now — fact that piety and fashion, 'beauty', 'authenticity' and 'glamour' are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and not just at a surface level (as also suggested, in an Indonesian context, by Jones, 2007, 2010b). Women like Alena, Amena and Rezia most prominently integrate these dimensions in a reciprocal flow between the inward and the outward, fully engaging in a quest for moral and sartorial unification, with the often self-declared purpose of achieving subjective equilibrium and peace of mind. In other words, such hijab practices delineate full and active processes of negotiation (cultural, sensorial, psychological, philosophical), converging toward a complex psycho-sartorial bricolage scheme that relies on appropriations of Eastern and Western elements alike. We are not dealing with an ambivalence here; but, rather, with a form of *ambiguity* arising from a reinstatement of cultural roots, colligated memories and life goals, into an equally individuated 'adoptive' perimeter. More so in the case of 'visiting' Muslims, i.e. women whose contact with British culture(s) and fashion(s) is only temporary (as in the case of many of my *M.I.H.E.* informants), this process is still ongoing and therefore merits continuous investigation, as cross-fashion creative elements (such as

various ‘beehive’ hijab styles, or sporty items like the ‘Capster’ invented in the Netherlands by Cindy van den Bremen: Boubekeur, 2005; Tarlo, 2010, Chapter 7) surface every day. In this sense, this study does highlight some of the most recent, previously unexplored or underexplored, hijab fashion vogues, among which innovative varieties of ‘turban hijab’, the ‘braided hijab’ and the ‘winged hijab’ or ‘hoojab’. Although, to use Tarlo’s (2010) words, they are all “visibly Muslim”, these styles are remarkably eclectic and, in some cases, can only be ‘safely’ worn *in the West* (as we have seen with Mea and Eshel).

c. Another noteworthy point to underline here refers to the idea of modest gear practices acting (e.g., in the case of Ayra or Amena) as design and consumption alternatives to what may be perceived as excessively consumerist or sexualized/fetishistic Western trends. Even though it has not been a direct aim of this project, the study does provide some tentative qualitative insights into the dynamics of how such a process might work (see subchapters **6.2.** & **6.4.**).

d. As I have argued throughout the final three chapters, part of the experience of hijab wearing and/or sharing resides not in a notion of ‘isolation’ or defensive separation (i.e. between the wearer and the outside world), but can actually facilitate a *closeness* to the perceiver, whereby the woman in case is able to wear, create, and reinvent the purpose of a scarf all at once, sharing its ‘substance’ (spirituality, sense of depth, selfhood) with those who seek to understand it. The sentimental value imbued in a scarf received, for instance, as a gift from a close figure (Alena’s or Eshel’s ‘souvenir’ hijabs), further enhances the garment’s socio-affective scope, conferring it a ‘warm’ quality whereby feelings, perceptions or even memories can flow into the present. Not only is this an interesting dimension worth further scrutiny, but it also allows for connections to be drawn between hijabs and the ‘mystique’ of masks: covering, though not fully concealing; communicating, yet not revealing; mysterious, yet not ‘inauthentic’. In fact, much like masks, hijabs can function as tools for metamorphosis or hierophany, delineating associations with the supernatural or the “spiritual unknown”: on one side, this is accomplished through the modification of physical proportions and psychological perception, and on the other, through their function of (partial) concealment, protection, (self)mystification and (self)celebration (Heath, 2008b, p. 102; see also Tseëlon, 2001b,c) — with

Amena being an excellent case in point. However, an important distinction needs to be made here, for what the mask puts forth (as goes for other partially concealing devices, such as carnival guises or sunglasses) is a somewhat *cold* and distant imagery (the embodiment of ‘cool’), deflective of the outside ‘gaze’, *detaching* the wearer from the viewer, and, to some extent, de-humanizing them by effacing part of the physique and supplanting it with an attitude of aloofness or indifference (Botz-Bornstein, 2013). Instead, with hijabs and modest dress more broadly, the opposite seems to be true: hijab can be subsumed — not into a counterpolar idea of ‘hotness’, with its discordant sexual implications, but — into an intermediate sphere of *warmth*, connecting the wearer to viewers through spiritual and affective, rather than physical or public cues. Amena, Alena, Mea, Eshel, Atarra, Rezia, and even Hyacine, all seek to (be)come *closer*, to effect an *attachment* to the onlooker (Muslim or not), to share something with him/her, to gain and forge connections. As such, I would argue that hijabs accommodate a ‘warming’ function counterpoised to the ‘cool’²²³, in which sense, my study also complements, if not necessarily critiques, the associations previously drawn between the concept of ‘cool’ and certain types of fashionable Islamic veils/streetwear, as well as sunglasses (Boubekeur, 2005; Botz-Bornstein, 2013).

e. To sum up, I have evinced that hijab can, indeed, be an extremely versatile, protean, individually ‘rich’ garment, reflective of the choices, experiences, tastes and interpretations of one particular wearer or designer. While one’s religious, cultural and ethnic allegiances are publicly evident, I have also shown how individuals’ *private* identities become entangled with their covers. Indeed, many of my respondents referred to their modest dress as highly reflective of their ‘authentic’ selves; and, as in the case of saris (Banerjee & Miller, 2003; Kamayani Gupta, 2008; Miller, 2012, Chapter 1), shawls (Rivers, 1999; Geczy, 2013, Chapter 3), or quilts (Moorhouse, Otto & Anderson, 1995; Küchler, 2006), as a *heart cloth*; or yet, to quote Adam Geczy once more, a “second skin” (2013, p. 12). In this sense, hijab can be visually attractive, enhancing the facial/physical features of the wearer, or not. It can enable the wearer to be more assertive, more ‘empowered’, more resistant, more ‘individual’ (e.g., Faaiza, Eshel, Amena). It can also be whimsical, ‘ethereal’,

²²³ Part of a “cool Islam”, defined by Boubekeur (2005) as “a new western Islamic culture represent[ing] a form of secularization”, and indicating a “revalorization of the personal pleasure of consumption, success, and competitiveness.” (p. 12).

idealistic, romantic, and it can serve as a means to escape quotidian (di)stress (Sabiya, Alena, Ayra, Rezia, Amena). It can fluently blend with both the public *and* the private, while simultaneously navigating Eastern and Western geographies and cultures, aesthetic and spiritual aspirations. It is both the outside and the inside of a person, both visible and *invisible*, functioning, to an extent, as a ‘glamour’ cover (Mea, Eshel), and at the same time as an in-depth articulation of one’s multifaceted personality (Alena). Admittedly, it can also act as a shield, separating the wearer from undesired social focus, judgement and/or stereotypy (Atarra); or, as we have seen in Hyacine’s case, it can *inhibit* the wearer from exerting her personality at ease in particular set-ups. Modest garb can, therefore, both enable and restrict the scope of interaction (as has been argued in the case of Indian saris too: Miller, 2012, pp. 23-31), while allowing for self-expression to be negotiated and refined in deeply individuated terms, toward a projected *personal improvement* outcome.

In terms of **methodological value** and **innovation**, worth recapitulating are the following contributions:

a. My external role as neither Muslim, nor fully ‘Western’ investigator, as well as my ‘privileged’ status of student-among-students at the *M.I.H.E.*, have allowed me to act as catalyst/facilitator to my respondents’ input, ‘equalizing’ the rapports and adding to the value of interaction. Moreover, the particular set-ups chosen for this investigation, such as the girls’ dormitory, where most focused discussions took place, as well as the informal shopping excursions, have all enabled my informants to bring forth topical aspects not yet fully or properly documented: ranging from emancipatory and escapist dimensions to profoundly lyrical, spiritual, ecumenical and metaphysical issues.

b. On this path, I have demonstrated that focus groups can be highly effective eliciting the *dynamic* context(s) of hijab observance and design, shedding light onto the formation, reinforcement and distillation of taste, as well as on many (trans)biographical and (inter)personal nuances that would have otherwise remained obscure (e.g., in the case of single interviews).

c. Equally important was my successful coagulation of a highly eclectic sample of respondents, proving that this multicultural aggregation of geographies, ethnic (and ethical) backgrounds and traditions, conjoined on British territory under the auspices of an Islamic Institute for Higher Education, can add considerable value to the capturing of hijab as a fluid/global nexus of intra- and inter-cultural (or micro- and macro-cultural respectively) connotations.

Along these lines, my study also opens up **routes for further investigation**, among which:

- possible parallels with faith-related male covering practices (e.g., South Asian *Pagri* headwear varieties, masculine Muslim turbans worn in different regions of the globe), as potential loci for similar symbolic variables, both aesthetic and socio-affective;
- ways in which the issue of unveiling can be understood and related to this complex psycho-emotional dynamic, and whether it withholds a comparable milieu of meaning/purpose;
- further examinations of ‘fully Western’ converts who observe modest gear (either born of Western Muslim parents or self-converted): for instance, how and why do the reasons and rhetoric of veiling differ (if at all) from the case of acculturated Muslims?
- Sufism-related, and other abstract and mystical elements associated with modest dress, and headdress in particular: how, when, why do these surface, and to what extent are they triggered by cultural/geographical variables? For example, the designers examined in this study who most engaged with such themes were of South-Asian (Indian and Bangladeshi) descent.

Afterword

I do not know how I came to learn so much about hijabs from my informants. It might be that I asked the ‘right’ questions. It might be that my respondents had asked themselves the ‘right’ questions long before I ever met them (more likely). Otherwise, it might have been something as simple as circumstance, or good fortune — a ‘right time’ and ‘right context’ chain of situations. In any case, “difference is beautiful”, said one of my interviewees at a certain point during our dialogue. “Feel the power of cloth on your body”, said another. “You can either live in the world or be *lost* in it”, remarked yet another. I am still not sure whether any of the women interviewed here has chosen to live in this world or be “lost” in it (we could say that they all do a little bit of both), but if either to live or be lost in the world means to believe in something, in oneself, one’s actions, whether this advances a lifestyle or merely a style, then the least we can do — as academics, if not as simple individuals, is *listen*. For, only after we have listened long and hard to what these individuals have to say, only after having kept our minds and eyes open to what they do, think, feel, can we begin to put together bits of theory in an attempt to contextualize their practices and make sense of the wider world we all share.

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Appendix A
List of Participants

| No. | Name/ Pseudonym | Modest Dress: | Activity (Location) | Ethnicity/ Background | Age |
|------------|----------------------------|----------------------|---|----------------------------------|------------|
| 1. | Aasia | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | Chinese/Indonesian | N/A* |
| 2. | Alena | Wearer | M.I.H.E. visitor | Turkish, Kurdish, German | 29 |
| 3. | Amena | Wearer, designer | Entrepreneur (Leicester) | British/Indian | 29 |
| 4. | Arisa | Wearer | Student (Nottingham) | Pakistani | N/A |
| 5. | Atarra | Wearer | Professional, PG** researcher (Leicester) | British/Indian | 40+ |
| 6. | Ayra | Wearer, designer | Professional (Bradford) | Pakistani-Afghan | 42 |
| 7. | Balqees | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | N/A | 27 |
| 8. | Beverley | — | Sales assistant Harvey Nichols (Birmingham) | British | N/A |
| 9. | Celia | Shop vendor | Leicester | N/A | 26 |
| 10 | D. | Wearer, designer | Student (Nottingham) | Czech | 29 |
| 11 | Daniella | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | Indonesian | 31 |
| 12 | Dariya | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | Somali | 25 |
| 13 | Ena | Wearer | Retired professional | Romanian | 86 |

| | | | | | |
|----|-----------------|-----------------------|--|--------------------|-----|
| | | <i>(maramă/basma)</i> | (Romania) | | |
| 14 | Eshel | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | Iraqi | 26 |
| 15 | Faheem | Religious expertise | Imam | British/Indian | 42 |
| 16 | Faria | Wearer (unveiled) | PG student (U.S.A.) | Bangladeshi | N/A |
| 17 | Faaiza | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | British/Bengali | 20 |
| 18 | Hyacine | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | British | 21 |
| 19 | Inayat | Shop vendor | Leicester | N/A | 25 |
| 20 | Julia | Designer | Vendor/exhibitor (Romanian Craft and Artisan Fair) | Hungarian | 40+ |
| 21 | Linda | — | Sales associate Harrods (London) | N/A | 23 |
| 22 | Madeeha | Wearer | PG student (Nottingham) | Saudi Arabian | 29 |
| 23 | Maria | Academic expertise | Fashion design specialist, lecturer (Nottingham) | British | N/A |
| 24 | Maryam | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | American/Afghan | N/A |
| 25 | Mea | Wearer | PG student (Nottingham) | Saudi Arabian | 28 |
| 26 | Muheet | Religious expertise | Imam | American/Pakistani | 30 |
| 27 | Nancy | — | Sales associate (Scarves) Liberty (London) | British | 23 |
| 28 | Nara | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student (PG) | Malaysian | 40 |
| 29 | Philippa | Academic expertise | Print & textile design specialist, lecturer | British | N/A |

| | | | | | |
|-----------|----------------|--------------------|--|---------------------|-----|
| | | | (Nottingham) | | |
| 30 | Rafeeda | Shop owner, vendor | Leicester | N/A | N/A |
| 31 | Ramaya | — | Sales assistant Selfridges (Birmingham) | N/A | 22 |
| 32 | Rezia | Wearer, designer | Professional (London) | British/Bangladeshi | 37 |
| 33 | Runa | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | British/Bengali | 31 |
| 34 | Sabiya | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | Pakistani-Afghan | 25 |
| 35 | Samira | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | Somali | 19 |
| 36 | Sarah | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | Pakistani | 40 |
| 37 | Selina | Wearer | PG student (Nottingham) | N/A | 32 |
| 38 | Shirley | — | Department supervisor (Scarves) Harrods (London) | N/A | 33 |
| 39 | Stella | Academic expertise | Fashion & knitwear lecturer (Nottingham) | British | N/A |
| 40 | Summer | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | British | 19 |
| 41 | Umarya | Wearer | N/A | Saudi Arabian | 48 |
| 42 | Vanda | Wearer | M.I.H.E. student | German | 29 |

* Information not disclosed by participant.

** Postgraduate level.

Appendix B

Interview / Focus Group Guide



Research into Modest Dress (Headscarves): Cultural Symbolism and Fashion

Introduction

Hello, my name is Ruxandra Todosi and my study explores the influences, uses, and fashions of contemporary modest dress, with a particular focus on headscarves. I am very much interested in understanding your personal choices and related feelings invested in modest garments today, from a spiritual, from a cultural and from a fashion perspective.

This study is funded and supervised by Nottingham Trent University's School of Art and Design, where I am a full-time postgraduate researcher. I am keen to bring your voice, opinion and experience into the academic discussions on modest dress, and *hijab* in particular. To enable me to do this, I would like you to answer a few questions and provide your own thoughts and experiences relating to your use of modest garments.

The interview will consist of a focused discussion eliciting some of your own views on practices and fashions of hijab, and will take approximately one hour, one hour and a half. With your permission, our talk will be recorded and transcribed, and if you want a copy of the transcript, then please ask and I will arrange for one to be sent to you. The information you give will be used in confidence, to inform my academic study. In addition, the data may be used in subsequent publications, such as research papers, articles, monographs and/or books.

Please know that your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from this research at any given time without prejudice. Also, should you wish to use a pseudonym rather than your first name during the discussion and throughout my research, please let me know, so I can proceed accordingly.

If you have any questions after this session is over (about my research, the interview or anything related you are interested to know), please contact me and I will gladly address each question in part.

First, a series of demographic and introductory questions referring to how you view headscarves, and how you began to wear them:

Were you born in the U.K., or in another country? / What is your country of origin / ethnic background? / When (at what age) did you first move to the U.K.?

When (at what age) did you start wearing the hijab?

Could you tell me what the main reason for your wearing it was?

(If it's not too private for you to tell me,) what other reasons did you have at the time?

Have you worn it continuously since then (on a daily basis, without interruptions)?

Now, I will progress to what the hijab means to you, and to how you personally view it:

What does hijab mean to you personally?

What kind of styles and visual models do you prefer in a hijab (any particular patterns or prints)?

What is your favourite colour and fabric in a scarf? E.g., light/dark (why) / Softer/thicker (why?). In general, and for special occasions — plain colours, light or dark shades, looser or heavier fabrics?

Does your preference have anything to do with your cultural background / upbringing, or any regional customs (e.g., Indian, Afghan, Somali etc.)?

Also in terms of fabric, colour and style — do you generally match your headscarf to your outfit (e.g., what you would wear for a specific occasion)? Could you please describe this process of adjustment in your own words?

Do you keep certain scarves in your wardrobe as formal garments, casual garments, elegant garments etc.?

Do you also adapt your outfits according to geographical locations, such as a Western or a Middle Eastern / Asian country you find yourself in? Could you please describe this process of adjustment?

Do you match other accessories to your hijabs, such as jewelry, pins, shoes, hand bags?

Could you tell me who the most important people that influenced your decision to wear the hijab were? How did they influence you (for instance, relatives or friends, men or women)?

Now, a set of questions addressing your personal feelings as linked to the use of hijab in private and social contexts:

Do you also wear the scarf in private, or just in public settings?

If you could you distinguish between the most important factors determining your choice to wear the hijab, do you feel that it is more reflective of your:

social/economic status,
age,
cultural background,
personal taste
social factors, or
fashion influences?

How do you feel your garments relate to your sense of personal identity? (E.g., do they help develop it, channelize it, restrict it at times?)

How about your sense of belonging? Do they make you feel more Turkish/Afghan/Pakistani etc., more European, more embedded in, or detached from, one place or another?

Generally speaking, how does the practice of hijab currently affect your life — in terms of positive and negative effects, if you could name a few (maybe relate a positive and/or a negative experience reflecting on that)?

How do you think hijabs are currently viewed by others in the country you live in (U.K.)?

How does covering yourself make you feel in terms of protection or exposure? Do you feel more protected or rather more exposed (or threatened) by wearing modest dress in public?

Do you include in the hijab an overcoat (i.e., jilbab or abaya), a face veil or any other modest garment, or do you prefer wearing the headscarf only? Do you adapt this preference depending on specific circumstances or locations (such as)?

Of all the clothing garments you normally wear (abaya, hijab, maybe the niqab etc.), which would you say comes closest to your heart, which do you hold most dear (and why)?

Do you feel that your make-up enhances the aspect or effect of your hijab, or is it the other way around (overshadows, hinders it)?

(If it's not too intrusive) What emotions do you experience when you put on the hijab? How about when you take it off?

Has the meaning of hijab changed for you in time? How?

What is the main reason why you wear the hijab *today*?

What other reasons contributing to this decision would you nominate?

Have you lived anywhere else aside from the place you consider home? How did that experience differ (hijab-wise) from that of living in the U.K.?

(If so) What made you hold on to the hijab when you first moved countries, i.e. came here?

Do you feel that your dress style has an impact on society, that it makes a particular contribution or sends a certain message across?

Regarding your more affective experiences, memories and recollections of hijab:

What does your favourite headscarf look like? (If you could describe it in a few words...) -> referring to colour, fabric or any other aspect you consider relevant.

Does it come with a story, or a particular memory? What does it signify to you? (Do you remember where and when you bought it/received it? What makes it dear to you?)

Do you relate this garment to any kind of art, such as music (songs), poetry (a poem?), a piece of visual art?

What would the ideal head cover look like in your opinion? What colour and model/style would it be?

How would you wear and accessorize it? Casual/elegant?

Could you please close your eyes and imagine yourself wearing the perfect headscarf in the perfect, ideal setting — now, could you name the first words that come to mind to best describe the feeling and the setting?

*Could you find this perfect scarf in a retail store?
(If not, how does it differ from the styles available in high street stores?)*

Since we're about to conclude soon, I'll return to a few more general questions:

Could you approximate how many head covers you have in your wardrobe right now?

Do you generally look for conveniently priced items, or is price less relevant when it comes to making a hijab choice? (What is most relevant to you, when purchasing a scarf?)

Would you prefer wearing a one-of-a-kind, custom-made hijab rather than one available in stores, which can be purchased by anyone?

What hijab brands do you prefer (local/foreign?)

Do you ever order hijabs online? (How does the Internet influence your hijab-related choices?)

In conclusion:

Would you agree to take part in a second, follow-up discussion on the same topic in the near future? (Just in case I have some questions left, or would like to learn a bit more about a specific issue.)

If there is any other thoughts that you would like to add or share with me on this topic, they are most welcome...

I think our discussion went very well, thank you so much for your participation and, again, if you would like to see the transcript of this conversation or you have any kind of questions, please contact me at... or just drop me a line at...