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Unveiling rights

Disvelando i diritti

Abstract

Since 2015 the term Modest fashion has been used to define a women fashion trend. For some Muslim women Modest Dressing means empowerment. Well-known fashion brands produce collections, a business worth 250 billion dollars a year. However, Modest fashion is an ambiguous, “cynical” concept. Rights and equal opportunities are at a serious risk. It is dangerous to let trendy brands codify what modest or immodest dressing is, how much of less skin-revealing clothes is a safe pass to public life. The time has come for an open-minded debate: it is time to change course.

Key words: Modest fashion/Hijab Pride/East-West/Freedom

Abstract

Dal 2015 Modest fashion indica un modo di vestire femminile e le musulmane osservanti ritengono che sia esempio di empowerment. Marchi famosi producono collezioni in forma islamicamente corretta e il settore fattura 250 milioni annui. Il termine è però ambiguo, sottende un “concetto cinico” che mette a rischio diritti, pari opportunità. Codificare cosa sia adatto o non per l’abbigliamento femminile, quantificare la superficie di pelle esposta come passaporto per affrontare lo spazio pubblico, è una tendenza preoccupante. Occorre una discussione senza pregiudizi: è ora d’invertire la rotta.

Parole chiave: Modest fashion/ Orgoglio islamico/Est-Ovest/Libertà

Since 2015 the terms Modest fashion and Modest dressing have been used to define a women fashion trend. The term Modest Dressing was first used at an international symposium on the Islamic fashion industry, held in Turin on July 28th, where the

guidelines of this fashion trend were drafted: wearing less skin-revealing clothes, opting for loose and comfortable outfits covering the body. This trend is popular not only among orthodox Muslims but also among Jewish, Christian, Hindu and other faith groups that have dress requirements. Modest fashion is being promoted as a way to allow women to wear modestly without any limitations in style. Over the past two decades a very diverse market for Modest fashion has rapidly developed.

From the point of view of Arabic-Islamic studies, Modest fashion is an interesting field of research for several reasons: it is a huge world market and a profitable economic business; it is a full-fledged fashion that is influencing trends; and last but not least, there is an ongoing debate on whether Modest fashion is a real factor of empowerment or a skillfully disguised hidden obstacle to women's freedom and rights, especially in Middle Eastern countries where most of the Modest fashionistas live, and buy.

The numbers of Muslim women wanting to dress modestly and in style is on the rise, especially among young girls. All over the world, from the U.K., the U.S. and Canada to the Gulf's Emirates, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, girls are combining Modest Dressing with mainstream fashion styles and shapes. In the early 2000, the so-called Islamic moms started designing modest clothes for their pre-teen and teenage daughters; after those pioneering attempts, now it is possible to talk about «a second wave of young Muslim modest fashioners and/or influencers». Special Capsule Collections are being offered to Muslim Millennials. A few Muslim designers started leading the way in Great Britain. In Italy Asmaa Mt Paciotti was the first Modest fashion manufacturer to open an Italian Islamic Boutique - Fatima Shop - some years ago; nowadays all top Italian fashion-brands are in this international business.

Many brands have entered the Modest fashion segment making clothes that cover most parts of the body in tune with the latest trends. DKNY was the very first brand to create a *Ramadan*¹ Collection, conceived to respect all the Islamic rules and the dress code of the Holy Month. The *Maison* hired two Arab fashion stars such as the Kuwaiti editor Yalda Golsharifi and the well-known designer Tamara al-Gabbani from Dubai. DKNY

¹ *Ramadan* is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, in Arabic *sawm*, prayer, reflection and community. A commemoration of *Muhammad's* first revelation, the annual observance of *Ramadan* is regarded as one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Fasting from dawn to sunset is obligatory for all adult Muslims who are not acutely or chronically ill, travelling, elderly, breastfeeding. At the end of the month one of the most beloved Islamic Holiday is celebrated '*Aid al-fitr*' or '*Aid as-saghir*'. During *Ramadan* it is recommended that both men and women dress conservatively. Not doing so may offend those who are fasting. Individuals must refrain from wearing revealing and/or tight clothing and at the very least ensure shoulders and knees are well covered during the Holy Month.

Ramadan Collection was the first collection aimed at Arab markets, and now all top fashion signatures like Tommy Hilfiger, Oscar De La Renta, Valentino, Prada, Victoria Beckham, Yohji Yamamoto and pop brands like Zara, H&M are also in the game. The model Mariah Ibrissi was the first to wear a *hijab* in H&M Close the Loop Campaign, then Primark and Mango launched similar campaigns; the Japanese brand Uniqlo hired a Muslim fashion designer, Hana Tajima, for their Modest Wear Collection. In the 2020/21 Global Islamic Economy Report, sales of modest clothing represent one of the fastest-growing segments of the global fashion industry and total an estimated 283 billion dollars. The Muslim population is the new frontier for Western fashion brands. The *Abaya* Collection by Dolce&Gabbana presents 14 outfits featuring *hijab* and *abayas*², without forgetting all accessories, from glasses to shoes. The whole Modest fashion movement is expected to reach a global market value of 400 billion dollars by 2024. Sport brands have not missed this opportunity of making profits: Nike was the first to enter the market of sport apparel. Turkish sociologist and author Neslihan Çevik highlighted that the most popular Modest fashion products are those that solve practical problems (Çevik, 2015), such as *burkini* - a swimsuit covering the whole body except face, hands and feet, and is light enough for swimming - and sporty *hijabs*.

E-commerce has contributed to the expansion of this niche market as it reduces overheads for producers. Internet marketing makes the promotion of creativity and invention easier and offers new routes to consumers interested in non-standard items. The producers are also publishing contents about modesty and faith with educational, spiritual and political purposes, inducing consumers to identify their brands with the practice of modesty. The result is the rise of the Modest blogosphere: young Key Bloggers stream their contents online. They started as independent, today they have their sponsors.

Most young Muslim women say that Modest fashion is a factor of empowerment and celebrate the World *Hijab* Day to promote respect and acceptance, especially in areas where Muslim minorities live. In the European context the Modest Dressing movement involves Muslim women who are committed to modest self-representation but do not

²*Hijab* is the most common term used for Islamic veil, and can refer to any hair, head, face, or body covering worn by Muslim women that conforms to Islamic standards of modesty. The *abaya* is a simple, loose over-garment, a robe-like dress, worn by some women in parts of the Muslim world including North Africa and Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula. Traditional *abayat* (pl.) are black and may be either a large square of fabric draped from the shoulders or head or a long *kaftan*. The *abaya* covers the whole body except the head, feet, and hands. It can be worn with the *niqāb*, a face veil covering all but the eyes. Some women also wear long black gloves, so their hands are covered as well. It is common that the *abaya* is worn on special occasions, such as Mosque visits and Islamic Holiday celebrations for ‘*Aid al-Fitr*’ and ‘*Aid al-Adha*’.

necessarily wear a headscarf or a face veil as a symbol of pride and belonging to a community.

Modest Dressing is not solely the preserve of the religious; we discover a vocal cohort of modest dressers who define themselves as non-religious or secular, as well as religious women who do not identify faith as a key motivator for their modest self-representation. For some women modest is a useful term whilst other women might simply say that they dress in a way that is ‘appropriate’ to their age, occupation or location. (Lewis & Tarlo 2011, p.13).

However Modest fashion is an ambiguous, “cynical” concept. From the so-called Arab Spring revolutions till today, women’s rights have been under attack internationally; thousands of Muslim women and girls are punished for violating the Islamic veil “dress code” in Middle Eastern countries. Nowadays emancipation rights, equal opportunities and equality are at a serious risk in the region from Turkey to Iran, to the Gulf area, as well as in Europe and in the “Americas”, in areas where large Muslim communities live. The problem is not only a Muslim women and girls’ concern. Once again, the very presence of women’s bodies into the public space is under attack. It is dangerous to let trendy brands codify what modest or immodest dressing is, and decide that wearing less skin-revealing clothes is a safe pass to public life. An international dangerous framework is emerging against women’s freedoms and rights to put their bodies in the public sphere; a new globalized gender-based violence built on fashion and style. Modest fashion trends are dangerous for women’s bodies and their activism in the public sphere.

It is a cynical concept indeed, as wearing clothes accepted by the traditional and established *Ummah* community (Bausani 1978, p.753) turns into - as Inge Bell stated - «a slap in the face of girls and women worldwide who do not want to wear headscarves or want to take them off», or of the thousands women who are punished for violating dress codes or for wanting to enjoy their basic civil rights in some Islamic countries. In Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan, women are not allowed to go out, drive their cars and go to work without the consent of their male “guardian”. The time has come for an open-minded debate. It is necessary to respect every choice provided it is made freely.

The Internet and e-commerce help develop the Modest wear business, but also help legitimize modest practices even where they are provided for by the law, e.g., in Europe.

On the other hand, the Internet gives Muslim women living in Islamic countries the opportunity to express their opinions and religious interpretations, which would be impossible in the often male-dominated formal structure of established religious organizations.

At the same time, some ambiguities stem from wearing fashionable *hijabs* or headscarves. Watching “Muslim Girl Collective’s 100 Years of Hijab Fashion in 1 minute” and “100 years of Arab beauty” by Nora’s Balcony, it is clear how the women’s struggle against imposed veils and Islamic dress code is still the core question from Afghanistan to Syria or Iran. Ironically the videos tell the story of the steps back made by Muslim women during these years, in terms of clothing and veiling. Huda-ash-Sharawi (1879-1947), the first Egyptian feminist and nationalist, considered to be the founder of the women’s movement in Egypt, unveiled in 1921; her Egyptian countrywomen have re-veiled again in the last decades. The Islamic Revolution in Iran or Islamic fundamentalisms raised during the XX and XXI centuries led to situations where women have less rights than they used to. The expansion of Modest fashion has a dark side that is paving the way to strict interpretations of the Islamic Law in terms of individual and collective behaviors of restrictions and illiberal policies in the Middle East.

A dangerous trap might be a popular website as “hautehijab.com”. Melanie Eltutk, founder of the site, sells hijabs and offers popular Instagram and YouTube tutorials dedicated to the *hijabistas* (from hijab and fashionistas). She presents the veil as a shield, a powerful weapon in girls’ hands; women can control their own private sexuality managing modest clothes and veils by themselves, they decide who can see them or not. Could they act and feel empowered without observing a Modest dress code in the public sphere? Unfortunately, in the case of Modest fashion neither social nor cultural attitudes have been modified. It is time to change direction.

Professor Ida Zilio-Grandi, Italian Culture’s Institute Director at Abu Dhabi, wrote an essay entitled *Modesty, decency and reticence: the Islamic virtue known as ḥayā*. *Hayā*’ is an Arabic word that means “natural or inherent shyness and a sense of modesty”. In Islamic terminology, it is mainly used in the context of modesty. The Qur’an refers to *ḥayā*’ as «decency and reticence, self-respect and a careful behavior not only in one’s appearance and in the gaze» (Zilio-Grandi 2017, p.169-171):

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. 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 *khumur* (veils) over their bosoms and not display their beauty (Qur'an, Surat an-Nur XXIV, 30-31).

It is important to underline that *khimār* (pl. *khumur*) is the term used in the Qur'an to refer to a piece of cloth worn in public that usually covers the head and the upper part of the body, a kind of shawl; the word *hijāb* is commonly used with this meaning, but the word is never mentioned in the Qur'an!

In its original meaning *ḥayā* is avoiding anything considered to be distasteful or abominable; in this sense modesty is a religious duty of the true believers, both male and female; but modest clothing is interpreted as a special requirement for women. In her essay - in Italian - Zilio-Grandi underlines «Dall'altro lato *ḥayā* è pudore nella parola: significa tacere per non urtare la sensibilità degli altri dicendo loro quel che li ferisce, e anche tacere per riserbo, per proteggere» (Zilio-Grandi 2017, p.169).

Zilio-Grandi explains that the Arabic word *ḥayā*

usually translated as “modesty” emerges as an essential element in the life of every believer, not confined to the world of women, not to external appearance. It is rather a question of wide-ranging decency, rooted principally in abstention from looking, as much as from displaying, and equally in verbal reticence, and goes hand-in-hand with respect for oneself and for others (Zilio-Grandi 2017, p.171)

This statement can be controversial in places where free speech and free thinking are harshly repressed.

Most well-known scholars studying Modest fashion do not promote or oppose it in any of its forms, and they do not set out to provide statistics or commercial market research. They provide only a snapshot of how Modest fashion is going on. On the contrary, the scholars who study the new generation of Muslim women who fight for their rights should analyze the consequences of the expansion of Modest fashion trends in the public sphere. Muslim communities account for a valuable market, there is curiosity in the press about

women wearing *hijab*, and companies and producers are interested in making profits, but what is happening in Muslim immigrant communities in the West and in Muslim countries shows that the spreading of a “modest” style can have an impact on women’s rights, as it legitimates a self-imposed code, a limitation to the female presence in the public space. The Modest Dressing market supports a self-imposed acceptance of an undervalued role of women in society. It starts as self-limiting in clothing, then it turns in self-limiting in acting and speaking and expressing freely in the public arena.

Finally, it is necessary to be honest and watch reality for what it is: Modest fashion may be a free choice in Western countries, but it is not the same in countries like Saudi Arabia or Oman where women can wear trendy clothes only in restricted places, only among women, as they must wear dark veils when going out!

In conclusion we report Reina Lewis’ most recent observations about Modest fashion:

We can also consider how discrimination and exclusion because of body size and race is endemic in the globalized fashion industry and media, even if consumer activism on both fronts has led to some progress in market offer, industry practice, and regimes of representation. Both body size and race inequities are present in the Muslim modest fashion industry and media, which is not surprising; the cross-faith niche Modest fashion industry will inevitably reproduce some components of wider societal divisions and tensions. Distinctive is how these often-intersecting forms of discrimination are experienced and judged in a fashion industry and media focused on serving—and creating—a multi-ethnic and supra-national consumer demographic defined by Muslim religious identity and cultures. The challenges of fostering size and racial inclusivity demonstrate the extent to which normative modesty ideals are predicated on bodies that are “non-fat” and often “non-black” (Lewis, 2019).

The ways in which large and/or racialized bodies are judged to have failed in achieving the preferred versions of modest embodiment reveal wider fault-lines in the affective affiliation to the *Ummah*, the imagined global community of Muslim belief, and that the way to reach equal rights and opportunities is not exactly around the corner.

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