

Islamic fashion, media debates and styles of interaction – sartorial strategies on the Copenhagen scene¹

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Introduction

Currently, in Copenhagen streets as in many other European cities an increasing diversity in the style of clothing which appeals to believing and fashion conscious Muslim women can be observed. These styles I loosely term Islamic fashion, i.e. a style of clothing that seeks to appear attractive and at the same time to match an Islamic moral code or aesthetics. In a Danish context, I argue, these disagreements have a bearing on strategies of Muslim women in terms of relations vis-à-vis the non-Muslim majority population. The debate among Muslims is seconded by a media debate on Islam and again like elsewhere (Gullestad 2002: 45), it is highly politicized (Andreassen 2007, Hussain 2000, Hussain, Yilmaz & O'Connor 1997).

Since the 1990's Muslim women's headscarf – or hijab – has constantly reappeared as an issue of the on-going media debates, but the properties of the *hijab* (headscarf) as a consumer item (Navaro-Yashin 2004, Sandikci & Ger 2007) have escaped these debates. Instead various debaters in several Danish media have asked if a woman can wear a hijab in a number of professions. The most vociferous debaters have either been of feminist or right wing observance – or both. They agree that the hijab is not only a sign of a Muslim woman, but also of an oppressed woman, a statement which they apparently do not find any need to qualify.²

During the past decade debaters of Muslim, and usually non-Danish or not-so-easy-to-define ethnicity are to be found in the media debates – blogging on the Internet, writing columns for newspapers and debating in panels. And a substantial part of them are women.

The situation invites the question, what is communicated through Islamic styled clothing? Does Islamic fashion make a difference for the representation of Muslims in a European context?

Islamic fashion as micro-politics

¹ The project is part of the Noface funded “The re-emergence of Islamic fashion as a social force in Europe”, see http://www.relemerge.org/project_10.

1. See e.g.. http://www.teologinet.dk/blog/index.php/karen/2007/04/25/baladen_om_asmaa_abdol_hamid.

By asking these questions I want to present the background as to why Muslim women in Denmark choose one or the other clothing style by taking outset in the communicative aspects of clothing, as perceived by the women.

Clothes constitute goods for consumption and goods communicate information about the consumers (Douglas & Isherwood 1979). But other consumers may understand that communication in unintended ways and goods that are styled as Islamic invites play; the young women, who style their clothes as Islamic play with signals and create subtleties. The consumers, i.e. those who wear Islamic fashion, are aware of this capacity of dress and style to communicate. For analytical purposes I argue that it is useful to contrast a style usurping the ambiguity of signals propelled by clothing with a style which more unequivocally is intended to signal a Muslim identity.

Muslim women who have appeared in the media

The case of Asmaa Abdol-Hamid, a young left-wing politician who in recent years has been by far the Muslim woman most often exposed in the Danish media (Andreassen 2007) demonstrates that marking distinct boundaries of belonging between Muslim and non-Muslim may be controversial for a Danish media audience. Conversely, I propose, marking such boundaries in subtle ways facilitates inclusion in the 'imagined same' (Gullestad 1992) of Danes. The idea that people need to be the *same* in order to be *equal* is particularly strong in Scandinavian countries. Consequently, the ones who are regarded as too different (*for forskellige*) are the ones that one avoids (ibid.). To discuss this I draw on the reflections of clothing styles by seven other individual women whom I interviewed, all declared Muslims. During the past few years each of them have attracted attention in different forms of Danish mass media, written or visual.³

Asmaa Abdol-Hamid was the first Muslim woman wearing a hijab as employed on a TV-station; the first visibly Muslim woman running for a seat in Parliament. The debate about Asmaa (about the fact that she does not shake hands with men; the fact that she wears a hijab etc.) may in fact have been about how to handle religious diversity in Danish institution and society more broadly. Asmaa's distinct Islamic style of clothing has been absent from the debate in spite of several photographs of Asmaa in different kinds of media, displaying this style. In contrast, her style of greeting has been in focus, and in these terms Asmaa defended it:

I Greenland they rub their noses. In China they bow nicely. In France they kiss each other. It's not that I don't greet, I just do it in a different way (24 Timer, here taken from Asmaa's homepage, www.asmaa.dk).

In Gullestad's terms, she may appear as 'too different' to be included in the imagined same. But according to Helen Latifi, blogger of Iranian descent and student of medicine of 26 years, Asmaa's

³ The material on which I base my analysis takes different forms. Besides the interviews I have conducted with the seven women, I have material of different sorts that I also draw on: in two cases a book, a documentary, a blog on the internet, and features on Myspace and Facebook.

rough treatment by the media is in part self-afflicted. Two sisters of Asmaa have told a newspaper that they, just like Asmaa, do not shake hands with men, hold on to their right to wear a headscarf and to be regarded as free women. In her blog, Helen comments:

I simply cannot gather why we once again have to debate the so-called 'virtuous hand', and why it is so important to stress this point of view. Is it because the more controversial the subject you raise, the more media attention you get? Why, it is well-known that Asmaa was carried forth by her headscarf and the virtuous hand, and it seems that the same thing is happening now. (www.helenlatifi.wordpress.com)

The issue for Helen, who is a central figure for bringing a discussion of Islamic fashion to Denmark, is the way one as a Muslim stages oneself towards non-Muslims. For Helen the style of Asmaa constitutes an occasion to emphasize her own inclination to the community of Danes.

The ambiguous style attracts women who want to play with their Muslim identity – as when Helen says that she feels satisfaction when a patient asks her if her headscarf is Muslim or just fashion. Helen finds that many Muslim women are affected by what sometimes feels like harassment (interview in the youth/fashion magazine, *Sirene*, Sept. 2008). For Helen herself this means that she needs to manage how she is perceived:

I feel that I am always in focus and need to keep smiling to appear extra obliging to prove that I am not the way people think. It is sometimes strenuous, especially if one is having a hard day. (Ibid.)

With an equal regard for the way that style of clothing is apprehended by her surroundings, *Shabana* makes sure not to wear black:

In fact nothing is wrong with black, but I avoid wearing black, because I think that too much in the negative is related to black, especially among Danes. I prefer that they are open to meet me, instead of thinking, oh, she is a typical Islamist.

Shabana is keenly aware about the way that dress and appearance may create invisible fences between people. This is in fact what she in her sartorial practices is trying to avoid without compromising what she finds is required from her by her faith. Consequently, *Shabana* finds it necessary to steer or administer her own style of dress. She has Pakistani parents, and came to Denmark from the US six years ago, became friends with her next-door neighbor – a Danish journalist. Together they wrote and published a book with their dialogues on feminism, religious belief and cultural differences (Bom & Motlani 2006).

Sherin represents a Muslim voice, more often in the intellectual media. She is passionate about clothing and style, and she has struggled with accommodating this passion with her faith. Today

Sherin recognizes that a Muslim woman should be modest, resulting in a more flexible and context-based approach to wearing the hijab. The result is that Sherin is highly reflexive about her clothing:

Now, I told you that I am very conscious about adapting, when I know that I am going to a Muslim gathering. But I also like to break conventions, I also like the other way around. If for example I have been invited to join a specific occasion – such as in Deadline (a news program) to which I have been invited many times – and then wear a galabiya – taking a little step to the side and demonstrate that you can be a modern Muslim woman and wear a galabiya – breaking people’s imaginations and opening people’s eyes...

But not all interviewed women incorporate the way media audiences and people in their surroundings judge them on the basis of their style of clothing, *Jasmin*, a r&b/rap/pop singer, 18 years old, tells me that the only consideration she has when she decides what to wear is whether she herself finds the clothes beautiful or appealing. And *Safia*, aged 36, and the first Muslim to be educated as a lawyer in Denmark, does not recognize the possibility of mitigating this hostility in her style of clothing. When she only 1 ½ years ago finally decided to wear the hijab, she found it much easier than expected. The hostile reactions that she expected from her surroundings never actually occurred. – “If I had known that wearing the hijab would be that easy, I would probably have started long ago”, she says.

Ambiguously Muslim in Europe

The controversial status of some of the women who apply a distinct Islamic sartorial strategy signifies that the space for diversity and ultimately a distinct Muslim identity is – at least in the Danish case - still rather limited. If in Europe, as Asad has it, each group has constituted itself as a group through its own narratives, such narratives rather than representing a religious minority, should become just one narrative among the narratives that in total form a European identity (Asad 2002: 223). A style of distinct Islamic clothing, compared with a fashion accommodating Islam, is just as likely to sustain such a development.

According to my interviews with these women, they select their style of clothing in dialogue with the requirements of clothing that they find in their religion, with fashion currents and with their own taste and likings. Some of them try to make sure that their clothing style does not intimidate or seem appalling by appearing ‘too Muslim’, specifically in the eyes of non-Muslims. I argue that this sensitivity towards ones surroundings results in a consciously ambiguous Muslim clothing style, and it constitutes one of the core issues for understanding the differences in style among Islamic fashion consumers. By making an appearance in the media wearing Islamic fashion or a distinct Muslim style of clothing, these women position Islam and believing Muslims as a legitimate part of social life and public space in Denmark.

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