The Scented Winds of Change: Conflicting Notions of Modesty and Vanity Among Young Qatari and Emirati Women

Rana Sobh, Qatar University, Qatar
Russell Belk, York University, Canada
Justin Gressel, American University of Sharjah, UAE

Wearing modest Muslim dress in public is intended to conceal women’s sexuality and promote a virtuous public domain. Nevertheless, emerging bodily adornment practices in some Gulf region countries serve the contradictory purposes of revealing female wearers and celebrating fashion. We explore the conflicting notions of modesty and vanity embodied in Qatari and Emirati clothing and cosmetic choices in the public sphere. Using insights from in-depth interviews with twenty-four Emirati and Qatari female students we explore the dynamics underlying these conflicting imperatives of virtue and beauty and capture some of the ambivalence inherent in these performative constructions of female identity and conceptions of the self.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Individual clothing choices reflect a person’s conception of social, gender, and religious identities and are means by which wearers situate themselves socially vis-a-vis established codes of behavior (Gibson 2000; LeBlanc, 2007). Muslim women’s clothing is a visible form of public consumption, and has been the subject of much debate within social science literatures (for example, Abu-Odeh, 1994; El-Guindi, 1999a, 1999b; Tarlo, 2005; Ruby, 2006, Gole, 1996, 2002). Modesty in clothing for both men and women is central to Islam. Based on Islamic teachings a woman for instance should be covered in a way that does not reveal her sexuality in public. She should wear clothes that cover the body (except face and hands) and which are loose and opaque, neither revealing what is underneath nor delineating sexually attractive parts of the body (al-Qaradawi 1995:79-87). Other public consumption proscriptions include: perfume, explicit make-up, tattoos, plastic surgery, and wigs or hairpieces (Al-Albani 1994).

The requirement for modesty in women’s clothing has been translated into different forms and styles of body and hair coverings in different countries and also varies from person to person. A large body of work has looked at the diverse meanings and connotations of the Muslim veil and the practice of hijab in Muslim countries where women decide whether to observe modest dress, including Egypt (e.g., El-Guindi, 1999a, 1999b), Turkey (Sandikci and Ger, 2001, 2005, 2007; Secor, 2002; Gole, 2002), Mali (Shultz, 2007), Cote D’Ivoire (leBlanc, 2000), Indonesia (Jones 2003), South India (Oseal and Osealla, 2007), and London (Tarlo, 2007a, 2007b). Other work has looked at women’s dress in Muslim countries where women are expected to conform to a black loose outer gown like the abaya or similar garments worn in Gulf countries, Iran (Balasescu, 2003, 2007), and Yemen (Moors, 2007). However, the black abaya within oil-rich Gulf countries is embedded in a different contemporary local context and is increasingly associated with status and wealth (Abaza, 2007). As a result, it has different meanings and connotations from wearing the chador in Iran, the abaya in Yemen, and purdah in South India. In some Gulf countries like Qatar and Emirates, wearing the black abaya and shayla and in some cases the burqa or face cover is not necessarily religiously motivated. It is in some cases a social requirement that women are expected to conform to in order to remain loyal to local customs and traditional culture; it is not a legal requirement like it is in Saudi Arabia. Such loyalty is equated with national pride and dignity. Men also are required to conform to a uniform traditional white dress, the thoub, and head covering, the ghatra, in public.

Studying women clothing practices in Qatar and Emirates (UAE) is particularly interesting because of the social and economic upheaval that these countries have been undergoing and the concomitant shifts in discourses of beauty, religion and modernity in the media, advertising and other forms of local commercial imagery. The gulf region has been known to be the global economy have increasingly attracted foreign investment and Westerners to the region, leading to major social changes. In many of the GCC countries, like Qatar and Emirates, the leaderships’ desires for modernity and openness to the West has resulted in embracing more western values. This has caused some tensions and concerns that local values and national identities will be diluted and has lead to hot debates between those advocating modernity and those emphasizing the importance of preserving local culture. New clothing styles and adornment practices are increasingly adopted by young women in the region and reflect the conflicting forces of Western values that emphasize display of women’s beauty and sexuality in the public sphere and traditional values requiring modesty and promoting a virtuous public domain. This contrast is strikingly evident in shopping malls that house both abaya shops and Western style multinational clothing stores with gigantic posters of provocatively dressed Western women. The abaya itself has been gradually reinvented and has evolved from being a concealing garment that hides women’s sexuality and beauty in public to an embellished fashionable, trendy haute couture garment that enhances beauty and reveals sexuality. This has created a thriving abaya fashion industry featuring local and European designers attempting to reinvent the traditional plain costume into a sophisticated and fashionable garment that denotes status and prestige and makes statements about women’s affinity for fashion and modernity, all supposedly without undermining the local look.

We seek to explore how women negotiate the conflicting tensions between their desire for fashion, elegance, display of beauty, and expression of individuality in the public sphere on one hand, and their desire to be loyal to local culture and observe proper Muslim dress on the other hand. We look at dress not only as clothing but as including all bodily adornment and beauty enhancement practices (e.g., shoes, purses, watches, jewelry, sunglasses, perfumes, make-up, henna, and cosmetic surgery) that form women’s looks in the public sphere. We use insights from in-depth interviews with twenty four Emirati and Qatari female students to ascertain the dynamics underlying these conflicting imperatives of modesty and vanity and to capture some of the ambivalence inherent in these performative constructions of female identity and conceptions of the self.

Preliminary findings reveal that young women resolve conflicting tensions between vanity and modesty on one hand and traditional and modern on the other, through syncreticism rather than forced choice. Thus, many choose a traditional black abaya covered with expensive Swarovski jewels. The abaya that many young women choose is also more colorful, form-revealing and gives more hints of the outfits they wear beneath. The shayla is also worn sophisticatedly high and exposes some of the hair. The traditional garment is increasingly assuming a modern fashionable appearance accessorized with jewelry, designer handbags and high heel shoes, huge and catchy sunglasses. The look is complemented with flawless make up, nails and shaggy perfumes. The abaya that used to be a unifying garment that expresses women collective religious and cultural identity has evolved into a singularly self-identifying look that is expressive.
of status, distinctiveness and personal identities. It is used by girls to make statements about their personal tastes and affinities to fashion. Findings also reveal that girls choose different garments, scents, and makeup in different settings. And they find ways to rationalize their own appearance choices while distinguishing it from other practices that they condemn (Bier, 1986; Greenwalt, 1986; Scott and Lyman; 1986). Rather than the dichotomous choices posed by Western authors (Lexus vs. Olive Tree; McWorld vs. Jihad), they have chosen to combine both.

REFERENCES


The black abaya is a long black loose outer garment worn by women in most gulf countries. It is intended to hide the curves of their bodies, while the shayla is a black head cloth used to cover their hair. The abaya is made of two layers of thin material to make sure it is not transparent. Some women also cover their faces with a black veil – niqab- although there is wide agreement amongst Muslim scholars that this is not a religious requirement for physical modesty in Islam but more of a norm for women in some social circles.