**Re-Fashioning the Islamic [[1]](#endnote-1) Emma Tarlo**

Is it possible to look both fashionable and Islamic? Ask that question to young British Muslim women today and many would almost certainly answer “yes.” For some “Islamic fashion” means wearing fashionable clothes “Islamically” by which they mean in conformity with covering restrictions based on interpretations of Islamic texts. For others it means selecting from a new range of clothes designed and marketed specifically as “Islamic fashion.” For many, it means a mixture of both. In an American Islamic fashion blog, launched in 2007 and “dedicated to stylish Muslima”, it is defined as follows: “By Islamic fashion I mean clothing designed specifically with Muslim women in mind and other clothing that can be ‘Islamized’.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Such a definition would have been unthinkable just one decade ago when most young Muslims living in Britain and other Muslim minority contexts in the West would have perceived the “fashionable” and the “Islamic” as being in tension, if not downright incompatible. Some British Muslim women did of course experiment with adapting Western fashion garments and wearing them in conjunction with hijab, but they probably would have perceived themselves as fashionable Muslims rather than wearers of something called “Islamic fashion”.[[3]](#endnote-3) If such women wanted to wear explicitly “Islamic” garments then they would have been faced with two options: either purchasing jilbabs and abayas directly from or imported from the Middle East (available in mosque stores and Islamic shops usually run by men and specialised in the sale of religious items) or alternatively, stitching their own outfits. Neither of these options are likely to have been perceived as fashionable. The imported jilbabs looked distinctly foreign. They were usually black, made from thin fabrics ill suited to the British climate and were often poorly stitched and stylistically incompatible with and impervious to the cycles of change intrinsic to the fashion system. The home made option offered more potential for experimentation, but unless the person was particularly talented not only in stitching but also in design and innovation, they would have been unlikely to produce garments that would be perceived as fashionable. Such garments had yet to be imagined in the Western context. Furthermore young Muslims even one decade ago were generally less preoccupied both with the issue of covering and the idea of visual distinctiveness. Those women and girls who did wish to dress modestly and visibly express their identity and faith turned to the headscarf rather than to entire outfits which might be identified as Islamic. [[4]](#endnote-4)

Today, however, a young woman who wishes to dress both fashionably and Islamically is confronted with a huge variety of sartorial possibilities in what might be described as a rapidly expanding Islamic fashion scape. This visual and material landscape is extensive and varied, combining both the local and the transnational in particular ways. It does not exclude the mainstream fashions of the British high street but incorporates and reworks them. Young visibly Muslim girls know where and how to seek out garments which can be made compatible with Islamic constraints. They know which boutiques stock a good range of long sleeved polo neck tops suitable for wearing under sleeveless dresses, which seasonal collections contain clothes good for layering and most in tune with Muslim tastes, which shops offer an interesting range of “hijabable” scarves, headbands and shawls and which ethnic markets offer the latest and best priced range of imported cloth, clothing, jewellery and accessories that might be incorporated into new Islamically aware outfits. Not only do they gain inspiration from what they see worn by other young Muslims in cosmopolitan cities and, in some cases from travels abroad, but they can also glean ideas and advice from the rapidly expanding Muslim media, whether this be British Muslim life style magazines such as Emel (launched in 2003) and Sisters (launched 2007) , Muslim TV channels such as the Islam Channel which covers Muslim news and events in Britain and around the world, hijabi fashion blogs and discussion forums which offer advice on fashion matters and the increasing number of online boutiques displaying and marketing a new range of garments often classified specifically as Islamic fashion wear. They can also attend an increasing range of local Islamic events as well as high profile international events, such as IslamExpo and GPU (Global Peace and Unity), both massive annual fairs held in London which attract thousands of Muslims from all over Britain and around the world to celebrate and trade in all things Islamic.[[5]](#endnote-5) This includes a wide range of consumer goods many of which are newly classified as Islamic, from halal marshmallows to hijab pins, Islamic financial products to children’s stickers, Chocolate Ramadan count-down calendars to talking Muslim dolls, Islamic literature, art and music to Palestinian soap and olive oil. Such events confirm London’s place as an important node in the global distribution of Islamica as goods and ideas pour into the capital from around the world, and are in turn taken up and reworked in other parts of Britain and Europe as well as in Muslim majority countries. Such events are also an ideal place for consumers to scout out the latest Muslim fashion trends and for entrepreneurs, traders and designers to assess the marketplace, make contacts, pick up on new trends, launch new products and think about new ideas.

The emergence of Islamic fashion designers and collections in the West can at one level be understood as part of a wider process whereby Muslim dress practices are undergoing new reconfigurations in a global market. In Muslim majority countries like Egypt and Turkey, the adoption of Islamic dress in the 1970’s and 80’s was at first a response to increased secularization imposed by the state whilst in countries like Indonesia and Mali, it became a means by which more strictly practising Muslims differentiated themselves from others they considered insufficiently Islamic. Whilst the turn to Islamic styles in such cases initially represented a self-conscious rejection and critique of fashion in favour of a purer and simpler understanding of Islamic authenticity, it did not take long before new markets emerged selling more elaborate forms of covered dress which soon became known as “Islamic fashion.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Elsewhere Annelies Moors and I have discussed the complex cris crossing geographies of the global Islamic fashion scene as designers and entrepreneurs seek inspiration and new markets in different regional locations.[[7]](#endnote-7) Hence whilst designers in Mali often turn to francophone Africa, Dakar and Abidjan for inspiration, designers in Egypt may look to India, Lebanon and Morocco as well as London, Paris and Milan. Meanwhile in South India and Yemen, black abayas imported from Saudi Arabia are considered an important component of the fashionable cosmopolitan Muslim wardrobe even if the same garments may represent religious conservatism and restrictions elsewhere. In each case what is apparent is a re-articulation of global and local trends which often involves a strong component of re-invention.

This chapter traces the emergence of Islamic fashion design in Britain, examining the origins and ethos of particular brands and introducing some of the different ways the “Islamic” is visualised and given material form. The chapter also considers the relationship between Islamic and mainstream fashions as well as examining the particularity of Islamic fashion in the global market. It suggests that whilst newly emerging “Islamic fashions” catering to Muslims in the West draw on developments in Islamic fashion elsewhere around the world, they are borne out of a particular set of historical and trans cultural circumstances and concerns which render them distinctive.

**Experiences of Sartorial Alienation**

If there is one factor that the first generation of British Islamic fashion designers share in common it is an understanding of the clothing dilemmas of young Muslims living in the West who wish to dress in ways that are fashionable and modern on the one hand and faithful and modest on the other. It is a dilemma which most designers learned, not so much through savvy market research and economic foresight as from their own highly personal experiences of being unable to find clothes which expressed both their feelings of identity and belonging to British (and Western) culture and their desire to express and uphold Islamic values and beliefs. Many, though by no means all, came from second generation migrant backgrounds. Versed in ideas of individualism and freedom of expression and intimately familiar with British youth culture and fashions, these were individuals who felt uncomfortable at the idea of expressing their faith by plunging into imported Middle Eastern garments recognised as Islamic, either because they themselves could not identify with such clothes or because they found themselves perceived by others as alien and foreign if they wore them. At the same time they were critical of the amounts of bodily exposure and the explicit sexual orientation of many high street fashions which they felt were incompatible with Islamic ideas of modesty and did not adequately cover arms, necks, legs and body shape. In short, they were in search of more modest contemporary forms of covered dress which could combine their sense of individuality and their interest in fashion and style with their Islamic belief and values. Such dress quite simply did not exist.

In the case of some Islamic fashion companies, their birth can quite literally be traced not to awareness of emerging Islamic fashions around the world but to this experience of a lack of anything suitable to wear. The small Nottingham based company, Masoomah, which specialises in tasteful contemporary jilbabs in muted colours and contemporary materials, did for example grow out of its founder, Sadia Nosheen’s frustration at the lack of options available to her when as a law student at Nottingham University she became increasingly oriented towards studying and practising Islam and wanted to try to dress in conformity with her beliefs. The year was 1999:

“I was loving Islam and I wanted to cover. But there wasn’t anything out there except the black Saudi jilbab. I was young and image was a massive issue for me. I wanted to be more Islamic but covering was the biggest put off.”

Similarly Sophia Kara, founder and designer of the more eccentric and experimental Leicester based fashion company, Imaan, recalls having gone through a similar experience in the same year:

“To be honest when I wanted to cover I got the biggest shock of my life. I didn’t know how to do it. I just couldn’t find anything I wanted to wear. There was nothing suitable in the fashion shops but when I went to the local Islamic shop, it just really scared me. The clothes were all black and made from this awful frumpy material. They were imported from Saudi or Dubai or somewhere and were completely unsuited to our climate. I thought, this just isn’t me! This is not my identity. I can’t wear these. I bought one abaya because I really did want to cover. I was employed in jobs and pensions at the job centre but was on maternity leave at that time. I started fretting about the idea of being seen dressed like this, looking like my grandmother when I’d been into jeans and Doc Martins and used to wear pony tails and funky hair does!”

Recognition of the inappropriateness of existing forms of Islamic dress for Muslims living in Western countries was not restricted to women. Anas Sillwood, founder of one of the earliest and most established British and American Islamic fashion companies, which specialises in both men’s and women’s dress, was also stimulated in part by his own experiences of sartorial alienation. Unlike Sadia and Sophia who are from Muslim backgrounds, Anas is of non-Muslim British and Greek Cypriot parentage. Raised in the multicultural neighbourhood of Finsbury Park in North London, he converted to Islam at the age of 21 whilst studying at the London School of Economics. Travelling in the Middle East after his conversion, he was attracted and inspired by the beauty and dignity he saw in various local forms of men’s dress but was aware that these were often poorly made and did not comply with what he saw as Western standards of production and finish. His initial idea was to produce high quality versions of existing men’s garments found in Asia and the Middle East. But he soon became aware of the limitations of merely transplanting such dress to a Western context:

“I was a bit of a fashion victim during my youth, following the latest fads of the youth culture of London where I grew up, a youth culture influenced by the inner city culture of America. In this culture, clothing was partly a means of expressing one’s alternative identity to mainstream society. After becoming Muslim and travelling to the Middle East to learn Arabic and study Islam, I became attracted to the traditional clothing I found Muslims wearing there, and adopted some of it even during my visits back home to England to visit my family. After wearing some of the outrageous clothing of my youth, I was used to receiving public stares, but the looks of shock I received this time round made me reflect about what image of Islam I was portraying to my family, friends and wider society. Many, or most, people in the UK and the West already had very unfavourable impressions about Islam, and it seemed like I was adding to an already generally widespread view, namely that Islam was a foreign religion totally unsuitable to the sentiments of Europeans and Americans. I stopped wearing traditional clothing in subsequent visits, and when SHUKR was launched wore instead some of the more culturally compatible styles we had designed, like the men’s longer shirts and loose pants.”

Anas had not only experienced unprecedented amounts of staring on public transport and in the streets when he wore a galabiyya but he had also found his young nephew asking why he was dressed as a woman and refusing to let him to pick him up from school for fear of how his friends would react. Such experiences made him aware of the need for what he calls “culturally-relevant Islamic clothing” for Muslims living in the West. Through designing a range of loose fitting men’s clothes with a more Western flavour, he became increasingly aware that this was precisely what was “was missing” for Western Muslims. His business began with a catalogue of men’s wear in 2001. Within a year he had launched an online store, later expanding to incorporate women’s wear. His business now employs a workforce of 100 tailors in Damascus with head quarters in Jordon where he employs a team of another 15 workers.

The pre-occupation with appearances and perceptions and concern about issues of integration, modernity and belonging emerged in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s and were part of a wider resurgence of interest in Islam amongst young Muslims both locally and globally. This coincided with and was to some extent nourished by the spread of the internet in the late 1990’s which facilitated trans-national communications to an unprecedented degree, but it was also greatly exacerbated by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 which marked the beginning of a period in which Muslims in the West found themselves under intense public scrutiny in politics and the media. The search for suitable clothing seemed to gain new urgency when it merged with the desire to counter the increasing barrage of negative images of Muslims and Islam. There were several elements to this. On the one hand for many young people 9/11 initiated a period of self discovery in which they sought to educate themselves about Islam and found themselves increasingly attracted to it in the process. On the other hand the intense media scrutiny under which they found themselves increased people’s feelings of self consciousness in relation to their identity and appearances. Whilst many felt an increasing desire and need to identify themselves visibly as Muslim, partly out of solidarity with other Muslims around the world, but also as an expression of modesty, devotion and faith, some simultaneously felt motivated to design clothes which might better represent their interests and present a more positive public image. With their loyalty to Britain and “the West” often called into question in politics and the media, the need for positive visual images and material forms which drew on their mixed heritage, rather than polarising it, seemed ever more pressing. It was important both for their own self-confidence, comfort and sense of self-recognition as well as for conveying a positive public image which was explicitly Islamic without being either threatening, traditional or foreign.

The potential role of clothes in combating negative stereotypes of Muslims was recognised by Anas Sillwood of SHUKR. The clothes he markets are not about setting up a polarity between East and West, Muslim and non-Muslim but about drawing on multiple aesthetic and design resources and inspirations. This involves both adapting old classic garments popular amongst Muslims in North Africa, South Asia and the Middle East and simultaneously taking what Anas and his design team perceive as the best of Western fashion trends as viewed from “an Islamic perspective.” He feels one of Islam’s strengths historically lies in the way it maintained its identity whilst adopting the best of local cultures rather than transplanting them and it is this approach which he feels is in need of revival in dress and other aspects of life. In an interview for the British based Muslim website, Deenport, he argued:

“Unfortunately, it seems that until now Muslims living in the West have not been entirely successful in understanding the local culture, feeling comfortable with it, and weeding out good from bad practices. We often see one of either 2 extremes: the completely West-washed Muslim whose inward and outward behaviour imitates non-Muslims; or the adamant ethnic Muslim who can barely speak English, let alone interact on a sophisticated cultural level with non-Muslim neighbours and acquaintances. Of course, what is needed is the traditional, moderate Islamic balance; maintaining one’s Muslim identity whilst adopting the best practice and culture which the local land has to offer. An application of this traditional balanced approach will see the development of an authentic self-identity and culture, in which there is no tension between being both Muslim and Western.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

This desire to fuse and integrate different traditions rather than separate them out or opt for one or the other is shared by most of the people involved in Islamic fashion design. Sophia Kara of Imaan Collections expressed it as follows:

“Why can’t we take advantage of both cultures, fuse them together, and create something different which is us after all? It’s our identity. It’s who we are and it can appeal to women from all walks of life. Modest dress doesn’t have to be intimidating. Let’s face it, we do judge a book by its cover and I can see why black can be intimidating and off putting. I don’t want to set up barriers; I want to break them down, help women integrate better, look nicer, more appealing and attractive. In Leicester we hold a women’s only fashion show every year and its great because everyone is welcome, whatever their background, and they can all mix in, have a good time and exchange ideas.”

Junayd Miah , one of the key figures behind the development of the British based company Silk Route (designer of trendy urban jilbabs) and the larger conglomerate, Islamic Design House, was also keen to convey that his company was not about weeding out the Western but using his cultural knowledge of Eastern and Western traditions to develop contemporary forms of Islamic dress with potential global appeal:

“There was all this stuff coming in from Dubai, Syria, Asia etc but it was all full of cultural baggage, and we didn’t fit into that at all. We’re British. We have a sense of fashion and style. Its important to us. So we wanted to express that unique identity. And we were well placed for doing it because we were part of it. It was our own search for a means of expression for people like us and our younger sisters and cousins – the new generation who were turning to Islam.

**Representing and** Marketing **the Islamic**

British and American Islamic fashion designers share a number of things in common: the desire to integrate faith with fashion; modernity with modesty; Islamic values with the standards of design and production associated with high quality Western fashion brands. Whilst some, like Arabiannites in East London have their own boutiques, most trade predominantly over the web as well as through participation in fashion shows, exhibitions, trade fairs and Islamic events. The internet gives them potential access to a global public and many have been successful at attracting Muslim customers not only in Britain, Europe, America and Canada but also in Singapore, South Africa and a variety of other Muslim minority and majority countries. The internet is also highly valued by a number of women entrepreneurs for enabling them to work from home, keep flexible hours and combine business with raising children. From the point of view of consumers, shopping online not only provides access to fashions inaccessible nearer to home, but also offers the comfort of being able to buy them without having to make physical contact or risk bodily exposure.[[9]](#endnote-9)

To attract the maximum number of Muslim customers over the web the first Islamic fashion companies tended to frame their products both in terms of their Islamic credentials and in terms of their originality, specificity and particular appeal. One simple means of signalling the Islamic nature and feel of a collection is through the company’s choice of name. Many British companies have opted for Arabic names through which they seek to communicate and convey the Islamic values and ethos of their collections.[[10]](#endnote-10) The SHUKR website, for example, explains, “Shukr is an Arabic word found in the Qur’an which means gratitude or thanks. Allah Most High says in the Quran, “If you give thanks, I shall certainly increase you” (Quran 14:7)....The company SHUKR was named as a means of reminding ourselves and others of this important Quranic word and principle, in the hope that we might aspire to be among those whom Allah has increased because of their thanks and gratitude to Him.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Afaaf, we are told means “purity in morals and modesty”. Similarly “Imaan” is the Arabic word for faithfulness,

The Islamic flavour of collections is also built through the use of Arabic names for particular garments. Words like hijab, jilbab and abaya have become part of a global dictionary of Islamic dress terms, though there is considerable ambiguity in how such terms are used in different.[[12]](#endnote-12) Whilst the preoccupation with modesty and Islam is shared, how much these ideas are emphasised and how they are translated into visual and material form varies considerably from company to company, with some emphasising the Oriental and exotic, some emphasising the Western and professional, others arguing for a distinctive Islamic aesthetic and yet others presenting a playful Islamic take on mainstream fashion trends.

**The Ethics of Aesthetics**

Of all the Islamic fashion companies oriented towards Muslims living in the West, Shukr is the one most concerned with integrating Islamic principles and ethics into its production, design, finance, marketing and representation. At the same time it de-emphasises the foreign, exotic and non-Western associations often attached to the idea of Islamic clothing. As a religiously oriented and religiously motivated British convert to Islam, its founder Anas Sillwood is concerned to convey that an Islamic way of life is suitable (and desirable) not only for people in Muslim majority countries but also for Westerners (whether born Muslim or not), and it is this ethos that informs the aesthetic, tone, organisation and representation of his website and fashions which are targeted specifically towards Western Muslims.

The Shukr website is explicit about how Islamic ethics and aesthetics are integrated into the company and the clothes. The choice of displaying not only female but also male models without heads reflects recognition of the fact that both men and women are enjoined to practice modesty in the Qur’ an.[[13]](#endnote-13) The choice of muted colours, loose cuts, natural fibres and unfussy designs also convey a subtle sense of dignity and modesty. Asked what makes his clothing range Islamic, Anas replied,

“Perhaps we can say that, apart from the basic function of clothing which is to protect humans from the elements, both the Qur'an and the Sunnah identify 2 further purposes: first and foremost to preserve human dignity by enjoining modesty in dress; and secondly to rejoice in the beauty and favour of God by wearing aesthetically pleasing clothing. According to a famous saying of the Prophet Muhammad, "God is beautiful and He loves beauty. So, taking this perspective, what is Islamic about our clothing is a) its modest appearance and b) its beauty.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

The relationship between the two relative concepts of beauty and modesty is however a delicate one and Shukr has to some extent explored its permeable boundaries through trial and error. The company initially began by making very loose clothing but found customers complaining that the garments were too tent like. When they produced more tailored garments, however, they had complaints that they were too tight. They now take a middle-ground position, relying, according to, Anas on a mixture of “feedback from customers, religious scholars, and our own sense of God-consciousness.” The women’s range includes skirts, trousers, dresses, coats and blouses that are Islamic more through the respect they pay to Islamic principles than to what are conventionally recognised as “Islamic styles”, though subtle references to the Islamic are incorporated into garments through design features such as embroidery and stitching. Interestingly the men’s collection contains more garments based on styles popular amongst Muslims in North Africa and the Middle East than the female collection which retains closer affiliations with mainstream fashion.

This idea of “Islamic authenticity” is not just about appearances but also about maintaining ethical consistency. Shukr philosophy is, we are told, founded upon the Islamic concept of *Itqan*, (perfection) which translates into the idea of striving to produce the highest quality as well as maintaining high ethical standards. In a section entitled “Is Shukr expensive?”, we are informed that Shukr is against sweatshop production, paying its workers above average wages and guaranteeing worker rights concerning hours, overtime, sick leave and opportunities to pray at work. All of the full time employees are Muslim. The company also follows Islamic principles on finance by avoiding the interest-based system and financing growth by re-investing profits.

**The Poetics of Spirituality**

A somewhat different way of translating Islamic principles into dress is by reference to the spiritual and ethereal. The Afaaf website, when first consulted in 2007 offered what might be described as a sensory and poetic Islamically inspired experience without making explicit references to Islam as such. Here a filmic sequence draws potential customers into a dreamy world of soft focus images in subtle shades of white and grey to the sound of trickling water and exotic birdsong. Textiles first emerge on the screen in soft focus, their patterns progressively traced by lacy white lines which creep across the screen, highlighting motifs of flowers, birds and concentric circles. Images appear in and out of focus in slow motion, taking on an inspirational quality and evoking sense of beauty, tranquillity, mysticism and peace. The sound of water and the peaceful dream like quality add to the other-worldly atmosphere of the site. Particular garments from the collection appear discretely in soft focus at one side of the screen as if they are just one more part of the creation story. The emphasis is on the beauty and sensuality of texture and sound . Though modelled on people, the bodies of models are almost invisible and their heads obscured. What the onlooker sees of the garments is their texture, detail and flow. With each new image a phrase emerges introducing the collection and conveying the ethos of the products and the company:

 “An expression of inner peace and outward harmony

 A language of refinement, tranquillity, simplicity and style,

Textiles and patterns that are inspired from all around the world. Delicate hand embroidery and refined detail,

A rich fusion of Eastern, Arabic classics and contemporary Western cuts .......Afaaf – pure reflections – an expression of harmony.”

The film which carries on repeating itself until switched off by viewers has the hypnotic quality of walking round a garden of paradise. Once switched off, viewers are invited to explore different sections of the website: the women’s collection, men’s collection, jewellery and artefacts. The website operates as an advertisement rather than an online store. People wishing to make purchases from Afaaf are invited to make an appointment to visit the show room in Battersea in South London.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Under “Inspirations and Reflections”, detail is given of the professional background of Sheba Kichloo, founder of the company. Her professional status is made clear by reference to her years of working for Harrods, her experience of management consultancy, her extensive travel and her involvement in charity work, all of which lend legitimacy to the exclusivity of her collection. This is combined with statements about the ethos of Afaaf as a company designed not only to promote the concept of modesty but to raise awareness of its beauty both ideologically and aesthetically. Frequent references are made to the “deep spirituality” of beautiful things and to people’s search for “deeper meaning in life.” The delicate silks, wispy scarves, floating kurtas, gracious abayas, soft and luxurious Kashmir and Pashmina shawls seem to suggest some sort of timeless aesthetic, independent of more transient and superficial fashion trends. Many of the garments are modifications of popular Western and South Asian styles and feature embroidery and motifs which are recognisable as Kashmiri or Palestinian.

“What is true expression?” asks Sheba, “Is it being trapped in the world of fashion, the exposure of flesh to ..., the race of being in vogue?” or might it instead be about “pure reflections, an expression of inner peace with outward harmony, a language of refinement, tranquillity and style?”

At one level this presentation shares much in common with the marketing techniques of a whole range of companies offering peace, fulfilment and exclusivity to elite international clients whether through yoga, travel or various types of therapy. But the focus on the beauty of modesty is what makes it distinctively Islamic. The website includes a poem, written by Sheba which is about light, purity, peace and the search for answers. It ends with the phrase,

“What is this beauty I ask?

This is the light of simplicity.

This is the beauty of modesty.”

She wrote the poem about modesty at a time when she was listening to a series of lectures about paradise. She was inspired by the descriptions of fountains and rivers of milk and honey, and found herself envisaging a beautiful girl in paradise who was fully covered and was like a column of light. It is this image of modesty illuminated in paradise that she wished to capture in the website.

**The Exoticism of the East**

One theme exploited in a number of fashion websites and collections is the association of the Islamic with the Arab world. The Arabiannites website, for example, evokes ideas of the mystery and exoticism of the East in its heavy use of black, its Arabic-inspired calligraphy and its sketches and images of women peering mysteriously from behind semi opaque hijabs. This mode of representation is a form of self conscious self-Orientalism.[[16]](#endnote-16) Visitors to the website are first presented with a black screen, on which the words Arabiannites emerge out of the darkness in a script which replicates stylistic features of Arabic lettering. A crescent moon appears illuminated above the words, and small stars twinkle in the night sky. The home page of the website contains the headings, “Arabian Beauty” and “Behind the Veil”, both of which might equally be titles of popular Orientalist novels. The clothes , which are classified into casual wear, evening wear, timeless black, loungewear and “your own designs”, are described as “Arabian influenced products” based on “Middle Eastern or Indo-continental traditions.” This Arabian feel is further emphasised by a background of geometric patterns reminiscent of Islamic tiles.

Unlike Shukr and Afaaf which in many ways represent a move away from explicitly Middle Eastern styles associated with Muslims, Arabiannites focuses on full length long sleeved gowns and outer robes such as abayas, jilbabs, kaftans and gelabiyyas which have immediate Islamic resonance and which highlight the foreign, Eastern and exotic connotations. A strong sense of drama is built into both the clothing and the website. Models’ faces are not concealed on the website (though they are on bill boards and posters) but are often partly obscured by cloth, emphasising the sensuous and seductive potential of draped fabric and the allure of what cannot be fully seen. This rendition of modesty with eastern promise is very different from the more purist de-sexualised interpretation of modesty found on the Shukr website, highlighting the fact that Arabiannites , whilst being more eastern oriented is less explicitly religious in its frame and ethos. The glamour of Arabiannites clothes was highly visible in the fashion show at IslamExpo 2008, where shimmering embroidered robes in dramatic colours (reds, peacock blue, purples) were worn with high heeled gold shoes and glittering hijabs, giving the impression that the models could quite literally have stepped out of a rendition of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Similarly the Arabiannites boutique conjures up the image of an exotic treasure trove, with its colourful displays of rich fabrics, embroideries, silk scarves, elaborate necklaces and hijab jewellery as well as the long black robes on display. It represents a reclaiming of the sensual pleasures of the exotic by people who have conventionally been exoticised.[[17]](#endnote-17)

It would be wrong however to assume that Arabiannites garments are simply a replica of what is found in the Middle East. A closer look at the designs reveals an element of eccentricity and play often through small details, such as extravagant sleeves, extended hoods, ruffs and unexpected colours or embroidered features all of which identify the clothes as designer fashion wear. Yasmin, the designer and founder of the company, says she aims to “get the feel of the East” but simultaneously remain “in touch with Western designs.” These are clothes conceptualised in Britain by someone with a professional background in fashion design who also uses her knowledge of Eastern styles and fabrics and her contacts with producers in India and Dubai to create some sort of designer fusion wear. Her experimental impulse is to some extent constrained by the demands of some her more conservative customers in East London who, as we have already seen, often favour a more austere interpretation of Islamic dress and sometimes request simpler styles in black. When customers point to some of the evening wear and worry that the colours are perhaps too bright to be considered modest, Yasmin reminds them that rich red or turquoise gowns can always be teamed up with darker abayas for out door use.

**Urban Street Style**

Moving explicitly away from the association of the Islamic with the exotic are various new forms of Islamic dress classified as urban street wear such as Silk Route’strendy urban jilbabs which are about creating everyday forms of dress that are in tune with British Muslim youth culture. They share with Shukr the desire to create a culturally relevant dress for Western Muslims, but their interpretation of what that dress should be is more urban, edgy and assertive. It is less about translating Islamic philosophical principles into dress than about visibly asserting a confident, viable and trendy sub cultural style for Muslim youth. Though very much rooted in their experience as British Muslim Londoners from South Asian backgrounds, the 5 entrepreneurs behind the company (3 men and 2women) have global ambitions for their products. In 2008 they founded the umbrella company, Islamic Design House, which brings together different individuals and enterprises involved in developing Islamically inspired and oriented forms of visual expression : Silk Route, Visual Dhikr (caligraphic art), Sisters (Islamic life style magazine) and Aerosole Arabic (Islamic graffiti artist).

An alternative interpretation of Muslim youth dress is offered by the company Elenany, launched in 2009 by Sarah Elanany, a young British Muslim woman of Egyptian and Palestinian parentage who was born in the USA but raised in Mitcham near London. The company sells trendy but modest long sleeved cotton tunic dresses, jackets and coats which are not recognisably Islamic in style but which are made from fabrics with graphics intended to capture the spirit of Islam. The graphics in Elanany’s first collection are based on repeated hand motifs which recall gestures of prayer and protest. The graphics are bold and angular reminiscent of the Russian constructivist movement, though Sarah perceives the repetition and angularity as features of Islamic artistic traditions. The design, ‘Testify’ consists of hands with one finger pointing upwards, recalling the Muslim obligation to testify to the oneness of God, but, as she points out on her website, “the fact that it also looks like a number one to everyone else ain’t a bad thing either!”. Another print, ‘Throw yo’ hands’ shows raised fists and fingers. Sarah explained the design as follows:

“As a young Muslim person I go on protest marches and demonstrations quite a lot. The design speaks to the experience of many British Muslims. Demonstrations are the essence of Britishness in a way – that ability to stand up for what you believe in. I wanted to convey that in a bold way. I don’t think we should have to apologise for being who we are, to mumble under our breath. The clothes are a kind of release. They’re saying, its OK, its cool!”

The dua pattern consisting of hands raised in prayer comes printed on different coloured back grounds, one of which is bright red. This Sarah uses as the inside lining for jacket and coats, thereby retaining the more muted modesty-associated colours of black, white and grey for externals. Though oriented specifically to cater to what Sarah considers the “needs” of young British Muslims, she is also keen to attract other customers and for this reason the model on her website does not wear a hijab. The reasoning is that non Muslims would be put off clothes modelled on a hijabi whereas hijab-wearing Muslims are used to non-hijabis modelling most of the clothes they buy. Like the entrepreneurs of Silk Route, Elenany associates Britishness with a certain cool. In response to the suggestion that she should cater to foreign markets , she replied, “I do feel like its a very British brand and I’d like to keep it that way. That’s cool. We can attract foreign buyers by exporting Britishness which is what a lot of people are after anyway.”

Recognition of the potential market for Islamic urban street wear is not restricted only to women’s fashions. In 2006, Faisel, a young Muslim man of Gujarati origin, born and raised in Preston in the North of England launched a range of cutting edge men’s Islamic dress, consisting of long thobes (long sleeved long garments) designed as modern versions of the style of garment worn by the Prophet Mohammed whose example Muslim men are enjoined to follow. Interestingly the company’s name, Lawung, does not have any Arab or Islamic association, but apparently means “old King” in ancient Chinese. At the same time the British credentials of the brand are actively asserted in photographic representations in the catalogue and website where a trendy young man with designer stubble poses in various urban and rural British settings. The word “England” is also inscribed after the brand name in the catalogue, suggesting that what is on offer is a form of British Islamic men’s wear, even if, like many so called Western fashion garments, they are made in China. The garments represent a radical departure from more traditional Middle Eastern styles of thobe available in Britain in their use of contemporary materials and their incorporation of design features such as zips, ribbed collars, hoods, ribbed sleeves and combat style pockets. At the Islam Expo and GPU events in 2008 they were displayed on futuristic mannequins and appeared to be attracting a considerable amount of interest and enthusiasm both from young and not so young men. Names such as “Urban Streetz”, “Urban Navigator”, “Urban Military”, “Urban Executive”, “Urban Warrior” and “Urban Extreme” testify to the assertive modernist intentions behind the clothes.

The young man behind Lawung has picked up on the fact that most young Muslim men in Britain are embarrassed to dress in long tunics or robes in their daily life, partly because they feel such dress is foreign, outdated, and unfashionable and also because they are aware of how it is often perceived as an indicator of religious fanaticism or political extremism. As a result they might wear such dress for attending Friday prayers or possibly also for relaxing at home, but are unlikely to wear it in everyday working contexts. Faisel sees his explicitly trendy thobes as important for encouraging young Muslim men and boys “to dress Islamically”. Taking a literalist interpretation of the Islamic principle that all Muslims should follow the Sunnah (the religious norms built on the example set by the Prophet), he considers the wearing of long robes and the sporting of a beard an Islamic obligation in the same way that many Muslim women perceive the wearing of headscarves obligatory. In this sense his collection is also part of the search for culturally relevant forms of Islamic dress for fashion conscious young Muslims living in the West. At the same time, like a number of other Islamic fashion designers and companies, he also has ambitions to expand into the Middle Eastern market.

**Islamic through Inscription**

At the popular end of the market for contemporary urban Islamic street wear is the designer T shirt with Islam-oriented messages, declarations and slogans which assert their Islamic credentials directly through written messages and inscriptions. At IslamExpo and GPU 2008, large numbers of young volunteers and visitors sported T shirts, some advertising Muslim charities and initiatives with punchy and often humerous religious slogans, others simply asserting religious and political views. These were worn by many in conjunction with the chequered scarf (keffiyah) worn as a scarf, headband or hijab.[[18]](#endnote-18) There were also a number of stalls selling T shirts, hoodies, baby clothes, bibs, arm bands, head bands, baseball caps and other items of clothing and paraphernalia which bore declarations of Muslim identity, politics and belief. These varied from simple messages such as “I love Islam” and “100% Muslim” to more assertive messages of political and religious allegiance, such as “Allegence to the Deen”, “Google Islam = Truth,” “Jihad vs G8 summit” and the Shahada (Muslim declaration of belief) written in Arabic[[19]](#endnote-19) - many of them produced by the aptly named East London-based company, wearaloud.com. [[20]](#endnote-20)

Clearly such events provided a space where young people felt proud to declare, celebrate and assert their Muslim identity in the same way that fans at a football match sport football paraphernalia or activists at a rally wear T shirts in support of a particular cause, whether it be animal rights or organic farming. Though visually asserting Muslim particularity and, in some cases calling for Muslim-based political action, such dress should be seen less as proof of Muslim separatism and difference than as evidence of the ubiquity of the T shirt as an iconic item of a global youth culture in which Muslims participate.

**Islamic and other Fashions**

One striking feature of the Islamic fashions that have emerged in the British context is the extent to which they build both on visual resources and skills from around the world and on the local dress practices and experiences of British Muslims. Many of the promoters of Islamic fashion identify an element of outreach in their work, some claiming that it is a form of *dawah*. By making clothes more appealing, they seek to draw Muslims towards perceiving the benefits of covering whilst at the same time encouraging interest in the faith from non-Muslims. Some referred to their collections as “educational” to the extent that they challenged negative stereotypes of Muslims and demonstrated the potential beauty of covering. Anas Sillwood, for example, stressed that “Muslims can educate people simply by their appearance,” adding that Shukr took that “responsibility” very seriously. This educational imperative does of course combine with commercial interests. In Afaaf advertisements, for example, models are shown without heads. Contrary to what I had originally assumed, this mode of representation was chosen, not in order to comply with restrictions on representations of the body and face favoured in conservative Muslim circles, but in order to avoid discouraging Muslims who do not cover and non-Muslims from taking an interest in the clothes.

This blurring of boundaries between Islamic and other fashions is particularly apparent on the website of the Manchester-based company, LOSVE (founded in 2008). What is distinctive about the web pages of this online store is that there are not any references to religion at all. Instead, the company advertises long sleeved tops, long skirts and scarves in trendy patterns with the slogan, “Long is beautiful.” Even the scarves on this website are displayed around the necks of models rather than being worn as hijabs. Whilst Muslim customers find the site through Muslim networks and hijab blogs where the clothes are recommended, other customers come across them by typing the words, “long skirt” into the search engines of their computers. According to Abdul Hummaidah , manager of the company, 40% of his customers are non Muslim.

In a similar vein Shukr has for some time been contemplating developing a second collection that would be marketed as modest rather than Islamic. The company already has a number of non-Muslim customers, some of them religiously conservative Christians and Jews who share similar concerns with modesty , and others who are simply women who like loose clothes and are attracted to the Shukr aesthetic. The proximity of Islamic fashion to other fashions is further clarified by designers’ responses to questions about the extent to which they followed or were inspired by mainstream fashions. Most responded that they keep abreast with fashion cycles, observing which colours and styles were predicted for upcoming seasons and following developments in fashion through magazines, forecasts, high street observations and blogs.

What all of these examples seem to suggest is a relationship of proximity between newly emerging Islamic fashions and mainstream fashions in the West. And like all close relationships, it is not without certain tensions. In many ways the Islamic fashion industry is predicated on the idea that mainstream fashions are “unIslamic” or at least incompatible with Islamic ideals of modesty, an idea which may sometimes be exaggerated. What Islamic fashion designers and manufacturers seek to offer then is something alternative which resonates with the needs and desires of Muslim women who cover. How to define and interpret modesty remains however a difficult challenge and many of those involved in the industry speak of tensions over this issue. Some, like Shukr, have been confronted by the problem that although customers want to cover for reasons of modesty they are often also attracted to more fitted clothes and sometimes make requests for tighter versions of what is on offer. As a result those who deal with customers face to face often end up having discussions about modesty with their customers. Sadia Nosheen of Massomah, for example, refuses to take in garments in response to customer requests. “I just say, no”, she told me, “then I talk to young girls, and ask them why they want to wear the jilbab, and if they know why they are wearing it, then they need to keep that purpose in mind. Otherwise they can just go to any shop and buy whatever they want.” Similarly Sophia Kara of Imaan, refuses to make her designs more fitted as this is not what her collection is about. At the same time she recounted how she sometimes has to “keep a check” on herself as she too can “get too carried away.”

The issue of modesty is also a cause of considerable tension when it comes to the issue of representation in posters, advertisements, fashion shows and websites. Some choose not to display faces on posters or web pages for a diversity of reasons and in this way they take distance from main stream fashion advertisements, although some mainstream online stores also choose this mode of representation. Finding fashion photographers willing to go along with the headless model concept in photo shoots has also proved difficult for some. All companies face the problem that they want their products to look attractive but want to avoid sexually provocative advertisements. At the same time they recognise that sex sells and that even modest hijabi women may find themselves more attracted to clothes which are modelled seductively. Here too, different companies set different standards regarding what may or may not be considered a provocative or seductive pose.

Participation in Islamic fashion shows is generally less controversial as these tend to be gender segregated events in the British context. But invitations to participate in mixed shows or in shows that are not framed as Islamic are sometimes rejected, particularly if the other clothes being marketed are entirely at odds with the idea and ethos of modesty. On the other hand within the protected space of an all female environment, concerns about the sexualisation of the female body are often considered irrelevant as the alluring postures of models and the ample use of make up and high heels suggest. This conforms to the idea that whilst women are supposed to hide their beauty and sexuality from male strangers, they are encouraged to express it in relation to their husbands. Here again, Shukr is perhaps distinctive in down playing sexuality in the presentation of their clothes even within a female environment.

In Britain, however, austere interpretations of Islamic requirements of modesty are not uncommon leading a number of married women to feel they should be wearing black even if this is not a Qur’anic requirement. Hence, Yasmin of Arabainnites found herself producing more black garments than originally intended in order to k satisfy conservative local tastes. Similarly Sadia Nosheen of Masoomah finds that most of her clients are attracted to muted colours which limits her capacity to experiment. By contrast Sophia Kara of Imaan, irritated at the way some women in Leicester “ruined the look” of colourful evening gowns by wearing black niqabs, decided to offer coloured niqabs to match outfits for those women who wish to cover their faces at public functions. She is keen to bring a sense of fun into Islamic dress and to combat the austerity and negative connotations of head to toe black outfits. Finally, like all segments of the fashion industry, Islamic fashion designers and entrepreneurs have to cope with competition both from mainstream retail outlets and from others involved in the Islamic fashion industry. Whilst the first wave of individuals entering the field were, as we have seen motivated by a mixture of personal, political, ethical, aesthetic and commercial interests, they now face competition from others who recognise the commercial potential of Islamic fashion but who are less concerned with issues of Islamic ethics and values. Shukr for example has found it necessary to place a warning to customers on its website about cheap imitations available on the market and how these represent Muslims doing harm to other Muslims.

A brief look at the emergence of Islamic fashion companies in Britain suggests that far from being independent of mainstream fashion they are very much entangled with it, playing simultaneously on notions of similarity and difference. Most pioneering Islamic fashion designers and entrepreneurs were self confessed lovers of fashion and it was their desire to reconcile their love of fashion with their desire to express their faith that motivated them into the industry. At the same time they draw on transnational Muslim networks and a wide variety of visual, material and ideological resources from around the world in their understanding of what might be considered “Islamic” and fashionable.

1. This chapter is an abbreviated extract from the book, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith* (Berg/Bloomsbury 2010) by Emma Tarlo. We would like to thank Bloomsbury Publishers for giving permission for this to be reproduced. The chapter documents key themes in the emergence of Islamic Fashion in Britain. The footnotes and references have been updated to include references to subsequent publications which take up some of the themes outlined here.

 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Islamic Fashion Blog, http://caribmuslimah.word press.com/about this blog (consulted 10.12.08) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The term “fashionable Muslim” might be applied to anyone from a Muslim background who dresses fashionably, regardless of whether or not their clothes have religious connotations. By contrast to say someone is wearing Islamic fashion suggests that their dress is a fashionable form of dress associated with Islam. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This process is well described by Clare Dwyer who conducted research in 2 schools with significant British Asian Muslim populations in the early to mid 1990’s. She describes how some Muslim pupils were differentiating themselves from others by adopting headscarves on a full or part time basis which they wore with skirts or trousers. This was also a way of avoiding more Asian styles of dress and asserting a certain degree of autonomy in relation to their parents ( Dwyer 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In 2008 I attended IslamExpo which was held in Olympia in Earl’s Court and GPU which was held at the vast ExCel exhibition centre in East London. The latter event claims to attract approximately 60, 000 visitors over 2 days and makes claims for being the largest international event in Europe. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For discussion of the emergence of Islamic fashion in Turkey see Sandikci O. and Ger G. , (2005 and 2007) , in Indonesia, see Jones (2007) and in Egypt see Abaza (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Moors and Tarlo 2007, Tarlo and Moors 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Extract from Anas Sillwood’s responses to an online interview with Omar Tufail and Hisham al-Zoubeir for Deenport, a popular Muslim website based in Britain (access to interview courtesy of Sillwood). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For insights into the marketing and reception of faith-based fashions online, including the role of modest fashion bloggers, see Lewis 2013, especially contributions by Lewis, Moors, Tarlo and Cameron. See also Tarlo and Moors 2013, especially the Introduction by Moors and Tarlo and Tarlo’s interview with the fashion blogger, Zinah Nur Sherif. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For further discussion of website names, see Akou 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. <http://www.shukr.co.uk/Merchant.mvc?Screen=SHUKR> (consulted 05/07/2007) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Moors and Tarlo (2007) for discussion of Islamic fashion in non-European contexts. See Tarlo and Moors (2013) for later discussion of the emergence and development of Islamic fashion in Europe and North America. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. In the Qur’an believing men are enjoined to lower their gaze in presence of women and to keep their awra (those parts of the body that are considered sexually charged) loosely covered. (Qur’an 24, 30). In the Hadith further references are made to the importance of dignity and modesty in men’s dress. Some men consider that in order to follow the example set by the Prophet Mohammed it is advisable to wear long garments. These should not be ostentatious. Men are also prohibited from wearing gold jewellery and silk. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Extract from the author’s online interview with Anas Sillwood , 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. When I interviewed Sheba Kichloo in 2007 she was in the process of moving to Dubai where her husband had been posted and had ambitions to expand her business there. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For a wide ranging discussion of the circulation of Orientalist logics in the fashion industry, including self-Orientalising strategies, see Niessen, Leshkowich and Jones 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. At one level this represents a reversal of the Orientialist order and as such presents a challenge to imperialist discourses and stereotypes. At the same time it reproduces the association of the Asian with the feminine and exotic and to this extent may serve to further re-entrench stereotypes (see Jones and Leshkowich 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. A form of Arab headwear, the keffiyah became a powerful symbol of Palestinain nationalism in the late 1930’s and was adopted in the 1960’s by the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat who wore it for the rest of his life. At the same time it has been taken up in America, Britain and Europe by a variety of left wing activists and sympathisers, whether in the struggle against the Vietnam war in the 1960’s or in sympathy with the Palestinian cause in later years. In recent years it has been worn as a form of face covering by armed Muslim militants seeking to disguise their identity whether in Afghanistan or Iraq. Though originally worn only by men, it has become popular amongst Muslim teenagers of both sexes as a sign of Muslim solidarity over Palestine and of Muslim identity more generally. The keffiyah available today are mostly imported from China and have become incorporated into youth fashions. They come in an increasing variety of colours and patterns and many young people who wear them are largely oblivious of the garment’s history and associations. A short film entitled ‘Keffiyah infiltrates our nation’s youth” provides an amusing skit of American anxieties about the popularity of the Keffiyah. (<http://www.kabobfest.com/search?q=kaffiyah>) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The Shahada written in Arabic script on a black background features on the Hamas flag. Arm bands and headbands bearing this message have been worn by a number of self-declared jihadists, including suicide bombers and are associated with aggressive militaristic assertions of Islam. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. In 2007 the home page of wearalound.com used to show the company’s name sprayed graffiti style onto a wall. It also used to advertise a VIP lounge offering what they called “exclusive and forbidden items” but these were no longer advertised when I last consulted the site (11.12.08). <http://www.wearaloud.com/shop/componenth>

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