Lawrence University
Lux

Lawrence University Honors Projects

5-31-2012

# The Abaya: Fashion, Religion, and Identity in a Globalized World

Elizabeth D. Shimek
*Lawrence University*, housecat16@live.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://lux.lawrence.edu/luhp

Part of the Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons, Other International and Area Studies Commons, Religion Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Recommended Citation

Shimek, Elizabeth D., "The Abaya: Fashion, Religion, and Identity in a Globalized World" (2012). *Lawrence University Honors Projects*. 12.
https://lux.lawrence.edu/luhp/12

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by Lux. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lawrence University Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of Lux. For more information, please contact colette.brautigam@lawrence.edu.

# The Abaya: Fashion, Religion, and Identity in a Globalized World

Elizabeth Shimek

Thesis Submitted for Honors Consideration

Thesis Advisor: Professor Martyn Smith

Submitted May 9, 2012

In the climax of “Sex and the City 2” (2010), four middle-aged fashionistas are chased down the streets of an Abu Dhabi market by a mob of angry, conservative Arab men. It seems they are about to be caught, but suddenly, a woman in the niqab (a full face veil) tugs them into an open doorway and hides them deep within the harem, saving them from the mob. The beleaguered protagonists are at a loss at how to communicate with women who live such different lives from themselves. To the protagonists' shock and awe, their saviors tug off their veils and long, black robes to reveal “the latest collections from Paris!” The Emirati women read Carrie's (the main character's) books and are great admirers of Western fashion. The Abu Dhabi adventure ends on this lovely note: Underneath all of those oppressive, conservative garments, Arab women are “just like us,” passionate about fashion, gossip, and shopping (King).

“Sex and the City 2” is a deeply flawed and offensive movie for many reasons, but it does touch upon one aspect of globalization: the high demand for Western couture and high fashion for women in the Arab Gulf states. However, in its attempt to demonstrate that women everywhere are alike, despite religious and cultural differences, the movie neglects the influence of globalization on the robe Gulf women wear over their Western clothes, known as the abaya[*], unwittingly ignoring the of the abaya's recent rise as an object of high fashion itself in the Arab Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). The voluminous abaya covers and conceals the physical form of the women who wear it; in the movie (and in the eyes of many in the West), this concealment is a suppression of the wearer's personal interests and individuality by forcing her to conform to a uniform look (al-Jadda). The abaya may once have been a plain, drab garment meant only to conceal; however, today, the abaya has become a “stylish, personalized coat” that many women enjoy wearing, an expression of individuality within the template of a physically modest robe (al-Mukhtar 37). Gone are the days of the plain, voluminous, uniform black robe – today, the new abaya, dubbed the “abaya-as-fashion,” is available in a dizzying array of cuts, colors, and fabrics embellished with a myriad of decorations. Many designers draw inspiration from the self-same Western fashions many Gulf women wear underneath their abayas to display these tastes to the greater world, while others pull from styles and cultures around the world. The abaya is not simply a religious or cultural expression, but an expression of individuality for women in the Gulf, heavily influenced by and influencing Western fashion through globalization.

---

[*] A note on transliteration: For the sake of simplicity, this study will utilize the most common transliterations of Arabic words. “Abaya,” pronounced “ah-BYE-ah,” will be the primary transliteration used. Other variations may appear in proper names or quotations, including *'abaya, 3abaya,* and *abayah.*

The traditional abaya serves as an important symbol of Islamic and nationalistic identity for people in the Arab Gulf states, but with the emergence of the new, fashionable abaya, conflict has emerged between neofundamentalist cleric supporters of the traditional, conservative abaya and the Islamic fashionista proponents of the new abaya-as-fashion. Expounding upon Noor al-Qasimi's 2008 study, “Immodest Modesty: Accommodating Dissent and the 'Abaya-as-Fashion in the Arab Gulf States,” this study will attempt to highlight the effects of globalization upon the abaya-as-fashion trend and upon the symbolic identities of the women who wear the abaya around the world. It will follow the abaya from its initial rise to present-day styles, attitudes, and sales techniques to its gradual outward spread from the Arab Gulf states to the world at large in order to understand the forces behind the abaya's changing meanings. The study will be comprised of four sections. The first will be a short exposition of the abaya's history in the Arab Gulf states, particularly focusing on its rise in Saudi Arabia, which serves as a religious leader in the region. The second section will examine the conflicts in identity produced by the emergence of the popular abaya-as-fashion trend through the work of previous authors. The third section will explore the influence of globalization upon the abaya-as-fashion trend through media sources and personal experiences. Fourth and finally, we will look at the spread of the abaya beyond the traditionally Muslim Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to Muslim and non-Muslim populations around the world.

Personal observations and conversations drawn from my travels in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, the United States, and the United Kingdom will be included in this study as qualitative evidence toward the influence of globalization on the abaya and Islamic fashion around the world. During the fall 2011 semester, I attended the American University in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates in order to attain my certificate in Middle Eastern Studies. During this time, I was able to speak with and observe many women from around the Middle East who attend AUD and wear the abaya about their experiences and preferences. I was also able to visit many stores and special events to see how the abaya is made and marketed in the Gulf region. During the same semester, I was able to visit the city of Doha in Qatar, one of the UAE's near neighbors to attend the HYA Abaya Exhibition, which gathered small abaya producers and buyers from around the Persian Gulf to sell their wares. I also made visits to mosques and Muslim neighborhoods in London, UK, and Dearborn, Michigan, which are centers for Muslim populations in their regions. Anecdotes included in this study are drawn from these experiences.

## I. The Abaya in the Arab Gulf States

The abaya is a long, voluminous robe worn over other clothing by many Muslim women, particularly in the Arab Gulf states. It covers from the neck to the feet, covering even the wearer's shoes from view, with sleeves extending to the wrists. The abaya is traditionally black in color, and is usually worn with a light, matching veil called a shayla. According to Al-Qasimi, “the 'abaya is the predominant form of female dress throughout the Arab Gulf states,” and “donning the 'abaya constitutes a veiling practice and is an institutionalized form of dress that is socio-legally implemented by the state” (46). Saudi Arabia has the strictest policy toward veiling, in keeping with its Wahhabi religious police, effectively requiring women in most regions of the country to wear an abaya in public spaces (Ambah). Other countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, do not require women to wear the abaya, although it is the official national dress and women are encouraged to dress conservatively (Sharp).

Conflicting accounts of the abaya's origins exist in current writing. Many authors claim the abaya is a centuries- or millennia-old Saudi Arabian tradition (al-Qasimi 46; Kaur-Jones). However, other experts offer a different story, describing the abaya's ascendance in Saudi culture as a relatively new trend, emerging only in the twentieth century. Leila al-Bassam, a professor of traditional clothing and textiles at Riyadh University, explains that the black abaya “came to Saudi Arabia from Iraq or Syria more than 75 years ago, as did most textiles and goods at the time” (qtd. in Ambah). Abayas became popular when King Abdul-Aziz al-Saud distributed them as gifts to tribal leaders around the kingdom in the early 1930's, when the country was first united under the al-Saud monarchy. Gradually, the abaya supplanted regional costumes as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Vice began to enforce a strict interpretation of the Islamic dress code across Saudi Arabia (Ambah).

Al-Bassam is not the only woman to describe these events; her account of the abaya's rise is echoed in interviews with elderly Saudi women in Rima Al-Mukhtar's *Sayidaty* article, “Saudi

Women are Expressing it Through an Abaya Evolution." The black abayas "came from Turkey, Iraq, or Syria 80 years ago," the article explains (36). Seventy-eight year-old Nazeera Sadek relates that women never wore the abaya when she was a child, but they also rarely left home (qtd. in al-Mukhtar 37). When they did, "they used to wear a special cloth designed especially for men which we call *meshlah*" (37). Another woman, Fatima, 82, of Mecca, said that "women used to wear conservative colored local costumes and covered their hair with a veil" (37). When Fatima's mother would visit friends or the mosque, she would go "in a normal robe, only adding a scarf on her hair," but as Fatima grew older, "we started wearing a semi-*abaya* which was like a big scarf that we wrapped around our bodies when we left the house" (37). The abaya became officially required for girls in Saudi middle schools in 1955, when educational opportunities for girls became more widely available in the kingdom (Ambah). These accounts bring together a different origin story for the abaya, framing it as a relatively recent fashion trend which took on monolithic proportions as a more conservative interpretation of Islamic law took hold across Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States, rather than a constant and ancient expression of faith in the Gulf. Regardless of the origins, it is useful to understand how the abaya is understood by many of the women who wear it in the Arab Gulf states: For them, the abaya is a timeless piece of history and culture, passed through the ages.

Injunctions for female veiling in Islamic law are derived from two main sources, the Qur'an (the Islamic holy book) and the hadith, anecdotes of how Islam's prophet Muhammad. According to Islamic belief, the Qur'an was given to Muhammad by God through the angel Gabriel over a 20-year period. After receiving each revelation, the prophet shared each sura, or chapter, with his people. Commands within the suras serve as the basis for most Islamic law. The hadith are used to extrapolate upon the suras by revealing how Muhammad himself followed God's commands. Hadith were originally related orally, and were later collected by different scholars into books, some of which are considered more reliable than others. Together, the Qur'an and the hadith are interpreted to make legal rulings. Different interpretations of these sources result in different legal injunctions.

There are two suras in the Qur'an that refer to female veiling. Verse 53 of Sura 33, "The Joint Forces," reads, "When you ask [the Prophet's] wives for something, do so from behind a screen: this is purer for your hearts and for theirs." Later in the same sura, it says "Prophet, tell your wives, our daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them so as to be recognized and not insulted" (33:73). 33:53 is ambiguous in its applicability to veiling; the word translated as "screen" from the original Arabic is "hijab," which is interpreted historically as a literal screen or curtain between different parts of a house. This screen was present to give the Prophet's wives privacy from the many believers who came to Muhammad's house for prayers five times each day. However, many jurists do interpret it as a literal veil, as the word is colloquially used today. 33:73 is more useful when it comes to creating veiling requirements: women are asked to "make their outer garments hang low over them," which is often interpreted as a requirement for baggy clothes or cloaks like the Gulf abaya or the Afghani burqa. Some historians do interpret the verse as less a call for modesty, though, and more of a way to mark Muslim women as separate and special compared to the Jewish, Christian, and pagan women in the community and surrounding areas. Sura 24:31 ("Light") reads, "And tell believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their headscarves fall to cover their necklines and not revel their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons... or children who are not yet aware of women's nakedness.” This verse provides the greatest justification for veiling in Islam; it describes proper modest behavior and mentions the wearing of headscarves. It is ambiguous about how women should dress otherwise, leaving the verse open to either liberal or conservative interpretations, based on what jurists feel is “acceptable to reveal.” Combining 33:73 and 24:31, jurists in the Arab Gulf states (and around the world) feel that loose, cloaking robes and headscarves are required for Muslim women, although other interpretations are popular even in the Gulf region.

Many Muslims agree that these verses exhort women to wear loose clothing that covers much of their bodies. However, Islamic veiling takes many forms, and there is no absolute set of rules for how women should dress, nor is there a single garment that is objectively “better” or “more Islamic” than all others. The abaya is one particular expression of Islamic veiling among many, and it is particularly functional as a veiling practice when following the more conservative interpretations of Islamic law prevalent within the Arab Gulf states. As a result, it has become the predominant form of female clothing for Arab Gulf state nationals. Hadith are used to reinforce this popularity, purportedly tracing abaya-like veils back to the prophet Muhammad's time. According to one hadith, related in Book 32 of Abu Da'ud's collection, after the above verses were revealed, “women walked to dawn prayers looking like crows,” which some scholars cite as the reason women should wear black abayas, as opposed to other colors (Ambah). Others argue for another explanation, suggesting that they looked like crows because it was still dark when the women left for prayers, rather than because their clothes themselves were dark (Ambah). The usage of hadith can be more or less reliable, depending on the source a hadith is drawn from, because they were handed down orally and only recorded generations after Muhammad's death. Because of this, listeners must be cautious as to the origins and motivations of the person who relates the hadith to them; it may be a later addition used to support a political or religious agenda. Despite the ambiguity of a hadith's origin, this hadith, in combination with the Qur'anic verses above, have encouraged the abaya within the Arab Gulf states, and these states advocate or enforce its use to varying extents.

The abaya is popularly considered a piece of cultural and religious heritage in the Arab Gulf states, and has become the national dress for their citizens. According to Noor al-Qasimi, “the fact that the 'abaya is worn by women across the Arab Gulf states arguably presents a solidarity that transcends national boundaries” (49). Al-Qasimi argues that the prescription of national dress for citizens regardless of gender is part of the power dynamic between citizens and state and serves to preserve “the self identity of national culture” in opposition to the “rapid pursuit of modernization in the Arab gulf and the increasingly disproportionate ratio between national and expatriate communities” (49). Rapid modernization, the influx of expatriate workers, and the exponential growth in cross-border industries in the Gulf region are all symptoms of globalization. Although Al-Qasimi does not directly mention globalization by name in her study, but the above passage demonstrates both a personal and regional awareness of its effects in the Arab Gulf states, even if not by name. These changes have gone a long way in encouraging the nationalization of citizens' dress in the Arab Gulf states, and particularly in women's dress.

The Arab Gulf states have reacted quickly to maintain aspects of the traditional customs and values of their culture in the face of globalization. The most visible of these customs is the implementation of national dress, including the abaya. The abaya serves a religious purpose, following the prescripts of popular Shariah interpretations, while simultaneously producing a national identity based on a particular brand of Islamic nationalism developed in the Arab Gulf (50). Wearing the abaya defines women in the region as the region as a symbol of religious integrity and national identity, and yet women in this incredibly wealthy, rapidly changing region cannot themselves avoid the influence of globalization. The abaya owes its rise as the female dress of choice in part as a defense against the effects of globalization, but it too is changing in response to global trends in fashion.

## II. Beyond Preservation: The Abaya-as-Fashion and Conflicts of Identity

The abaya serves as a key symbol of both religious and national identity in the Arab Gulf states. However, in the last twenty years, a new trend has emerged: the abaya-as-fashion, an adaptation of the traditional, plain black abaya into fashionable, individualized garments tailored to suit the tastes of the wearer (Kaur-Jones). This new trend has challenged the traditional abaya in popularity, subtly undermining the traditional social order and the religious and national identities symbolized by the abaya's traditional form. The abaya-as-fashion's individualized, sometimes flamboyant form retains the physical requirements for modesty, i.e. covering all skin but the hands and feet, but flaunts religious prescriptions against drawing attention to oneself with adornments (al-Qasimi 56). Wearing the abaya gives women in the Arab Gulf states a particular status and attributes a particular identity to them, but the abaya-as-fashion is able to adapt that status, giving women more personal freedom while appearing to maintain the status quo.

In order to understand the tensions that grew out of the abaya-as-fashion's emergence, it is essential to understand the differences between the “judicial” abaya, or the abaya as considered appropriate by typical Islamic jurists in the Gulf, and the “abaya-as-fashion” (al-Qasimi 56) (*See Figures 1 and 2*). Noor al-Qasimi's 2008 study is a foundational work for the study of the abaya-as-fashion, as it establishes standards to distinguish between the traditional, “judicial” abaya and the new abaya-as-fashion trend, as well as examining the social implications in the shift from the traditional, plain black abaya, which she calls the “judicial abaya,” to the new “'abaya-as-fashion.” The judicial abaya, whose definition has actually been revised by clerics as an effect of the abaya-as-fashion, should fit six specifications:

1. It should be thick and non-clinging.
2. It should be 'all-covering,' that is, of the entire body and loose such that it does not describe the contours of the body.
3. It should be open only in front, while the sleeve opening should be small.
4. It should not contain adornment, which may attract the eyes, and therefore should be free from drawings, decorations, writings, and symbols.
5. It should not be similar to the clothing of infidel women or men.
6. It should be placed on the top of the head (56).

The judicial abaya stands in direct opposition to the new abaya-as-fashion. The abaya-as-fashion with its multitude of cuts, colors, and adornments, does not fit much of this definition by design. However, the many proponents of the abaya-as-fashion feel that, since the garment is generally “all covering” just like the judicial abaya, there is no harm in embellishing the garment itself

(Ambah; al-Mukhtar 36). These women emphasize modesty in attitude and action over physical modesty, although physical modesty is still an important part of their faith. Manal al-Sharif, an editor at al-Medina, a newspaper in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, points out that girls wearing the judicial abaya and the niqab, a face veil that leaves only the eyes showing, can be just as seductive and distracting (or more) than women who wear a fashionable abaya and behave modestly. Some girls who dress conservatively wear heavy eye make-up, strong perfume, and flirt outrageously, acting immodestly despite their strict Islamic dress, according to al-Sharif (Ambah). For proponents of the abaya-as-fashion, modesty is in action, not in how much skin is covered in black fabric.

The abaya, even the abaya-as-fashion, is commonly understood as a great equalizer among the women who wear it, eliminating class distinctions and reducing conflict by creating a level playing field for all women. In al-Qasimi's words, “The 'abaya may appear to preclude the prospect of hierarchy, since... uniformity is heightened among the wearers” (al-Qasimi 51). The abaya-as-fashion, however, is a paradox within this paradigm: even within the uniformity of the black abaya, people find ways to compete based on how each individual manages to distinguish herself within the boundaries of her culture's veiling requirements (51). Thus, the black abaya serves as a template on which to elaborate, a blank canvas for designers to paint upon, with endless possible variations. According to al-Qasimi, the abaya-as-fashion “privileges the concept of fashion over piety” and disrupts the function of the veil, since the appearance of the abaya-as-fashion trend suggests that the new abayas are “not necessarily worn to “veil” but to display” (63). This subversion of neofundamentalist Islamic modesty ideals, which emphasize uniformity and anonymity for women, undermines clerical control of female behavior and gives women an independent voice in their own lives, leading to the creation of the above standards for the judicial abaya in an attempt to reinforce “standard” modesty ideals.

The conflict between the abaya-as-fashion and the neofundamentalist Islamic establishment is explained by the theory of “accommodating protest,” developed by Arlene MacLeod with her 1986 study, “Hegemonic Relations and Gender Resistance: The New Veiling as Accommodating Protest in Cairo.” MacLeod examined a new clothing trend among Cairo’s lower- and middle-class women, as they began to reject popular Western-style clothing in favor of more traditional, Shariah-compliant dress. MacLeod, who lived in Cairo at the time, felt there was more to the trend than women simply being “forced” to don the veil; the theory of “accommodating protest” emerged from conversations she had with women in her neighborhood in recent years.

Accommodation of protest centers around the female response to both societal pressures and conflicts in personal identity. Women who “protest” adopt or preserve certain essential parts of tradition, and break with other parts, mitigating a conflict between personal identities. For women of MacLeod's Cairo, this involved donning the hijab, or the veil, as well as more conservative or traditional clothing, as a means of negotiating the pressures of a new globalized lifestyle ( characterized by pervasive Western “modern” culture experienced through the mass media), working outside the home, and traditional gender expectations (547). By adopting the more conservative traditional dress, women in the study were able to cope with the conflict in identity created from the above factors. Many women were able to enjoy new freedoms by working outside the home, yet traditional gender expectations dictated they remain homemakers and mothers first, creating conflict over time management, traditional gender roles, and personal identity. The veil serves as a "symbolic mediator" for the women, "expressing and ameliorating women's concerns arising at the intersection of work and family" while maintaining new freedoms (550). By adopting the new conservative dress, the women in MacLeod's study took on the identity of the mohajjaba*,* the veiled woman, and with it the respect due to devout, traditional women in their communities, relieving some of the pressure exerted by traditional gender norms and their own guilt at violating the traditional taboo of women working outside the home (543; 551). By taking the veil, the women were automatically identified as good Muslims, good wives, and good mothers, because their adherence to traditional gender roles was assumed. For these women, practicing one highly valued tradition (veiling) helped to rectify their breaking with another (working outside the home), both internally and within their communities.

The use of the abaya itself, including its newest iteration, the abaya-as-fashion, constitutes a form of accommodation of protest, mitigating conflicts between traditional identity and modern roles for women in the Gulf and the men who implement the abaya as a national and religious symbol. Al-Qasimi expands on MacLeod's research, applying MacLeod's theories to interactions between men and women in the Arab Gulf states through an examination of the female-driven abaya revolution. "The implementation of the 'abaya is born out of discourses concerned with the articulation of authenticity and the preservation of tradition," she says, and it "contributes to a contentious form of female emancipation by displacing the boundaries of the home and serving as a literal marker of socially approved female conduct" (Al-Qasimi 50). Women are allowed to enter the public realm cloaked in the abaya because the garment embodies traditional religious and cultural values. By wearing the abaya, women align themselves with these values, like the women new veiling movement in MacLeod's study. The abaya helps women in the Arab Gulf states negotiate between the boundaries of traditional gender expectations and a woman's new freedom to operate outside the home (50). However, since the abaya continues to acquiesce to the ideals of the hegemony, that is, it maintains an aspect of the restriction of female rights and roles within society, al-Qasimi supports the view that it “engender[s] a new, and yet entirely legitimate subordination” (Chatterjee qtd. in al-Qasimi 50). The many fashionable iterations of the abaya “invariably preserve the essential qualities of the 'abaya – the 'patriarchal bargain' in this context insists that deviation from the 'abaya is not possible within this system” (Al-Qasimi 64). Although the women who create and wear the abaya-as-fashion are engaging in a form of passive protest against the judicial abaya in favor of personal style and expression, they still express their personal style within the confines of the patriarchy's dictates for modesty by maintaining the basic form of the abaya. This follows with MacLeod's study, in which MacLeod notes that despite the veiling movement's origin as a movement of individual women veiling for personal reasons, the movement was hijacked by the male hegemony. By the end of the study, there was growing pressure for all women to commit to the new veiling practice from religious leadership and the men in their lives, co-opting the liberation inherent in the new veiling movement for hegemonic purposes and maintaining the social status quo behind the veil (556-557). Veiling, and the abaya in particular within the Arab Gulf states, allows women to take on a privileged identity associated with religious and cultural virtues, particularly feminine modesty, which helps to mitigate their actions which break with traditional values.

Despite the inherent conformity of the abaya-as-fashion to patriarchal edicts for modesty, many clerics and conservative Muslims continue to voice their disapproval over the “immodest” trend, attempting to reassert hegemonic control over the appearance as well as the form of the abaya. Conservatives “see the new abaya as sinful, and orthodox clerics have issued fatwas, or edicts, decreeing that the robes must be dark, loose and shapeless,” conforming to the new standards set for the judicial abaya (Ambah). One Saudi student whom I spoke to about the abaya-as-fashion trend during my research in Dubai was vehement about the line between appropriate and inappropriate abayas. “The abaya should not be like a dress,” she told me, indicating styles which have belts or nip in at the waist, “it should be loose and cover the body.” She did not have an objection to the trend as a whole: her own abayas had simple black-on-black panels of embroidery on the sleeves and bustline. A girl whom I competed with on the college's debate team also voiced disapproval at many girls who wear the abaya-as-fashion, stating “These girls only want to bring attention to themselves. They wear heavy make-up and use the robes to flaunt themselves. This is not modesty.” She did not wear the veil or the abaya, but instead emphasized internal, behavioral modesty as essential, as opposed to girls who dress modestly but act otherwise.

The abaya-as-fashion has become “an element integral to contemporary social practices in the region,” in spite of its perceived conflict with popular religious ideals for modesty (64). Designer Halima al-Shamry says, “the 'abaya should be distinctive because special attention is paid to it. It is not worn solely out of an obligation to Shariah, that is, for veiling, but also for reasons such as customs and tradition, and it is also considered as 'fashion'” (qtd. in al-Qasimi 64-65). The abaya-as-fashion is “consumerism that transforms the politics of identity into a politics of symbols,” with the judicial abaya as a signifier of belief pitted against the abaya-as-fashion, which “deprives the patriarchy of its claims to the political regulation and determination of gender ideology – most significantly its control and censure of female display" (66, 69). Although the abaya retains essential aspects of the patriarchal control structure, it does challenge those structures, and al-Qasimi believes that "ultimately, the transformation of the 'abaya represents a move away from the vertical form of subordination toward one that advances progress" despite its participation in the logic structures of the patriarchy (69). In spite of patriarchal attempts to reassert control over the abaya's appearance, the abaya-as-fashion and its proponents have effectively engineered an "abaya evolution," in the words of  reporter Rima al-Mukhtar, giving women new freedom to express themselves regardless of what religious leaders say (34).

Not only does the abaya-as-fashion challenge patriarchal control of female behavior, but it challenges the religious and cultural identity of the communities where it is worn. If the abaya-as-fashion is indeed "consumerism that transforms the politics of identity into a politics of symbols," the politics of symbols is a part of a new identity. The abaya is symbolic of national and religious identity for the Arab Gulf states, but the abaya-as-fashion moves beyond "Arab," "Gulf," and "Islamic" identity paradigms to identify with a larger, transnational global culture. It participates in global fashion trends, drawing inspiration from other cultures, creating a new cosmopolitan identity coveted by the wealthy citizens of the Arab Gulf states. The abaya-as-fashion not only changes the relationship women and conservative religious clerics in the Arab Gulf states, but also the relationship between women and their own national cultures though the influence of globalization.

## III. The Abaya and Globalization

The forces of globalization have played a key role in the abaya's evolution, influencing everything from its designation as national dress in the Arab Gulf states to the look, production, and sale of the abaya itself. Globalization's influence is multifaceted: On the surface, the popularity of Western fashion is undeniably integral to the emergence of today's myriad of colors, cuts, and design elements. The language utilized by designers and media reporters in reference to the trend demonstrates the new, “global” nature of the abaya as a product both of Gulf culture and religious sensibilities and of the more subtle stylistic and cultural influences from around the world. Many preeminent designers have Western design degrees or worked with top European design houses. Even the way abayas are sold owes some influence to models developed outside of the Arab Gulf states. This section, “The Abaya and Globalization” will explore the many connections described above.

The popularity of Western fashion in the Arab Gulf states is uncontested, and trends in high fashion have an undeniable influence on the design of many abayas. In media articles on the abaya-as-fashion and interviews with designers, this influence is a given, mentioned in passing but never explained. A 2007 Bloomberg article, “Harrods Sees Profit From Islamic Fashion as Qatar Takes Control” interviews designer Hind Beljafla of DAS Collection, a prominent abaya design house she runs with her sister Reem. Customers come to Beljafla for unique, bespoke abayas made to match “the color of their designer bags and high heels by brands such as Christian Dior, Hermes, Chanel, and Gucci” (Meyer and Couch). Beljafla's buyers cannot display their Western-style clothes in public, but the ubiquitous abaya serves as an admirable replacement. Thana Addas, another abaya designer, actually incorporates material from international fashion houses into her creations, including pieces from Roberto Cavalli, Burberry, and Fendi (Ambah). Other designers incorporate materials and symbols that derive from more general Western fashion trends, such as lace, leather, floral patterns, animal prints, and zodiac signs (Hancock; Ambah). The material influences of Western couture fashion are undeniable in the abaya-as-fashion movement, fueled by globalization's international markets.

Globalization shows a more subtle face in some designers' works, as they shy away from the direct influence of Western high fashion in their abayas, but draw inspiration from vintage fashions and traditional garments around the world. Effa, one of Dubai's most prestigious designers, themed her Autumn/Winter 2011/2012 collection “[19]40's Glamour,” evoking the feel of vintage fashion in the United States circa 1945 in her abayas' cuts, silhouettes, and embellishments. Her Spring/Summer 2012 collection evokes a 1980's feel, with exaggerated and embellished shoulder pads, while other earlier pieces are reminiscent of Japanese kimonos (Fig. 3) (“Effa Collections”). Inayah Collection's Spring 2012 collection of abayas, hijabs, and other accessories follows an “English Vintage” theme, while the Sweety design house's latest collection utilizes toga-like draping (Fig. 5) (“English Vintage;” “SweetyAbayas.com”). These designers look beyond Western fashion labels for inspiration, developing their own signature styles based on global fashion heritage.

Globalization has changed not only the face of the abaya, but also the way it is bought and sold, in person or over the Internet. Originally, abayas were made-to-order from local seamstresses or bought in souks and malls. Women in larger cities had a wider selection of sources, while others had to travel greater distances for different names and brands. However, thanks to new technologies, women in the Arab Gulf states can procure their abayas from anywhere in the region, or even around the world. Many abaya designers today look to the Internet to spread their designs and access a global clientele. Top designers, such as Effa, Sweety, and DAS have carefully cultivated websites where potential buyers can see pre-made designs and request bespoke pieces. Designer Badr al-Budoor of Abaya Couture in the United Arab Emirates has found that “interest in her unusual designs is so high that she is [took] her business online to target an international audience” (Hancock). Some of the most elite designers in the business, such as the aforementioned Effa and Sweety, contract with 3Abaya.com. 3Abaya is the go-to website for women around the world to buy top-of-the-line abayas, evening gowns, and other clothing from Gulf designers (“3abaya.com”). The site brings together wares from top designers around the Gulf and ships worldwide, allowing the designers it serves to sell their goods to a wider audience, and buyers to procure clothes from multiple designers in one easy source. Rabia Z, another Emirati designer, “already has plans to tap Asian markets like China and Korea, as well as countries closer to home like Iran and Afghanistan,” because “the potential for further growth is massive... It's still untapped, it's a niche market and the potential is enormous” (Hancock). Women around the world no longer need to travel to Dubai or Jeddah to buy the best abayas; the Internet has come to the rescue, allowing global access for customers and higher profits for designers. Websites have opened a new frontier for these entrepreneurs and a new buying experience for their customers, but the changes in abaya sales do not end with the Internet.

Other designers utilize new technologies, but integrate unique live experiences beyond physical storefronts. Like top fashion houses in Europe and America, many Gulf designers display their wares in the twice-yearly Dubai Fashion Week, held in the Spring and in the Fall.

Abaya designers send their pieces down the catwalk in front of packed crowds side-by-side with evening gowns, dresses, and pantsuits, highlighted by fantastical make-up and props (Figures 6 and 7) (“Dubai Fashion Week”). Dubai Fashion Week consciously models on pre-established Western paradigms for fashion sales. Other groups integrate some Western business practices into their events and abaya sales while maintaining elements of traditional trade. The Qatar Tourism Authority sponsors the biannual HYA[*] Abaya Exhibition, which brings lesser known designers from throughout the Gulf to the capital city of Doha for a long weekend in summer and fall to sell their wares to wealthy buyers assembled from throughout the Arab Gulf States (Fig. 8). Attending the Fall 2011 exhibition, I met designers from Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and beyond, all drawn to Doha for the weekend in the hopes of contacting the new clientele necessary for small-time designers to succeed.

The exhibition was particularly interesting as an example of a globalization, because like the abaya, it was a mix of both global and traditional culture. The event showed the influence of globalization in its language, international nature, and use of new communication technologies, but the exhibition itself felt much like a traditional souk or bazaar. Each designer had his or her own particular booth, covered with racks and racks of unique creations ready for customers to try on, buy, or alter. Moving from booth to booth, designers and their assistants hurried to assist customers, pointing out special features or bargaining prices. Most salespeople hurried to encourage interested-looking parties to try on the wares and gossiped about the prices and quality of their own goods and those in other booths. “Don't buy from a Bahraini,” one Qatari saleswoman said, “Theirs are overpriced!” In one booth, a Kuwaiti producer had set up a small table with homemade cake and Arabic coffee to negotiate prices and close deals. Sitting down with her, we talked about her life in Kuwait, my time in Dubai and the United States, and her work creating the abayas. Upon leaving, she encouraged me to return and talk again or text her, and gave me a card with her e-mail, phone number, and her BBM number. Designers throughout the exhibition were the same: They had business cards stamped with websites, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and Blackberry Messenger numbers. The use of new technologies to spur business across national borders is a hallmark of globalization. This, combined with the conscious movement to draw dispersed designers together from all over the region, using language originating in Western business practices (an “exhibition”), makes the HYA Exhibition a particularly interesting example of an adaptation of traditional practices fused with globalized trends, much like the abaya itself.

---

[*] “She” in Arabic

Many designers describe themselves, their designs, and their customers in global terms. Effa, who runs an eponymous fashion line, is one of the Gulf's most famous designers. She was born in Saudi Arabia, raised in Sussex, England, and runs her fashion house in Dubai. She studied fashion in college and worked as a buyer and brand manager in Dubai for some of the top names in the business – Christian Lacroix, Valentino, John Galliano, and more. Building on this experience with top fashion houses and her own cultural heritage, Effa struck out on her own and started her business, Effa Abaya Couture. In an interview with Arabian Woman magazine, Effa describes her mentality in starting Effa Abaya Couture: “Our customer wants to dress fashionably but in a way that suits her lifestyle – it needed to be international, trendy, and stylish... I knew EFFA would be the perfect platform to get it right” (“Arabian Woman” 79). It should come as no surprise that Effa's designs exhibit the effects of globalization, then: She, herself, has led a cosmopolitan lifestyle, and she herself describes the designs as “international”

(79). Effa's designs have become so popular that they have become known colloquially as the "Little Black Dress of the Middle East," drawing a striking comparison between the once-plain abaya and a symbol of female beauty and sexuality in the West (78).

Effa isn't the only designer who shows the personal influence of globalization; Badr al-Budoor, of Abaya Couture, describes her customers and her creations in cosmopolitan terms. According to the Abaya Couture website, al-Budoor "spent years living in the UK, Italy and Spain broadening her skills in all genres of art dear to her," bringing that influence back to the Emirates and her customers in her "minimalist, eccentric, and elegant" designs ("Sayidaty" 70). Al-Budoor "conjures up magic, combining the soulful beauty of the Arab theme with the sophisticated boldness of the Western world" (70). In a personal interview for Sayidaty Magazine, al-Budoor says, "Abaya Couture carries stories and symbolizes the beauty of multiple cultures, never compromising the integrity, instead showcasing it in a bolder and brighter way" (71). Like Effa, al-Budoor takes Western experiences and integrates them into her Gulf style, merging cultures to create some of the most popular abaya designs in the world.

The influence of global fashion and consumer culture on designers and consumers is evident even in the names attached to specific abaya designs in a collection. The Sweety brand is an excellent example of this technique: more expensive, intricate abayas are given names such as "Rolex" or "Rolls Royce," appealing to the reputation for excellence and extravagance that these brands enjoy around the world (Fig. 4). Abayas with more conservative cuts, including wide sleeves and bodices and high necklines, are identified with European icons from bygone eras, such as the "Queen Anne" or the "Shakespeare" (SweetyAbayas.com). These design monikers associate the abaya primarily with a lavish lifestyle and a cosmopolitan culture, rather than the religious or national identities emphasized by clerics and governments in the Arab Gulf region.

Changes in the abaya are part of a larger, global shift in the way Islam is practiced. Olivier Roy's book Globalized Islam examines the changes Islam has undergone in the last fifty years, as Muslim populations have spread worldwide, mixing as minorities in Western countries and reacting to the effects of modernization and capitalism. Neofundamentalist interpretations and practices of the Salafi and Wahhabi sects have grown in influence around the world as young Muslims in Western countries break with their parents' traditional practices in favor of a universal, egalitarian, “pure” Islam, as opposed to their parents' regional folk practices (165). These neofundamentalist sects, such as Salafism or Wahhabism, preach a single, universal Islam that must be purified of “innovation,” or practices developed after the time of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs (243-244). The sects' emphasis on community and universality and their clear-cut, yes-and-no style of Islamic law, in combination with the egalitarian style of leadership and a focus on social activism, is incredibly attractive to disaffected youth around the world, particularly in Western countries and poor areas (156; 167-168). The worldwide popularity of this new form of Islam, from its origins in Saudi Arabia and Egypt to the Americas, Europe, and Asia, has inspired Roy's idea of “globalized” Islam.

Factors contributing to the rise of neofundamentalist Islam globally are relevant to the development and spread of the abaya-as-fashion as well. After exposure to Western culture and fashion, young women throughout the Arab Gulf region have chosen to break with traditional practices in their areas in favor of a new practice. Designers come, not from traditional sources of leadership in the community, but often develop a viral following as other women saw or heard about their designs (al-Mukhtar 35; “Arabian Woman” 78).The women espouse traditional values in a new way, and they are changing the culture of their region in the process.

## IV. Beyond the Gulf

With the advent of “globalized Islam,” the abaya, in both its judicial and fashionable forms, has spread outward from the Arab Gulf region. The abaya has grown popular with Muslim women in Europe and the Americas as a way to conform to neofundamentalist modesty recommendations while maintaining an elegant look (al-Khalifa 17). The abaya is worn by women from all backgrounds – It is not limited to women from a Gulf background. Many women buy their abayas from locally run, Islamic import stores, rather than shops devoted to clothing alone. During my research, I visited many of these stores, particularly in Dearborn, Michigan, which has one of the highest concentrations of Arab Muslims in the United States, and the Green Street neighborhood in East London, UK. These stores are often packed with Islam-related goods, including books, CDs, DVDs, and religious instruction materials, as well as imported clothing from the Middle East. Abayas from these stores often have a more conservative cut. They are generally decorated with small rhinestones or embroideries along the sleeves and collar, and usually are quite expensive despite their relatively poor quality. At one store on Green Street, Zamzam International, the average abaya was priced at £60, or about $96, with prices on special occasion or “wedding” abayas (which generally have more complex decorations, such as concentric rings of large rhinestones along the collar) rising exponentially. These abayas serve the Islamic prescripts for modesty for young girls and older women in these communities, but many young women have chosen to reject less flattering abayas in favor of a new trend.

Many young women in Europe and the Americas have become “hijabistas,” evoking both their passion for the latest fashions and their Islamic faith in a portmanteau of “hijab” (the Islamic head veil) and “fashionista” (Khalil). Hijabistas move beyond neighborhood Islamic stores for their clothing, demanding both fashion and modesty like their Gulf counterparts (Khalil). The Internet has become a leading source of abayas for such women, who buy not only from designer websites such as 3abaya.com but also from emerging abaya designers in their own countries, such as the aforementioned INAYAH design house, based in Great Britain, or small producers selling in online markets like eBay (“Shopping Links”). Other online stores, such as the UK-based aab, provide everything from abayas and hijabs to full-length cardigans and maxi skirts to suit the tastes of their hijabista buyers, who often are comfortable in a wide range of modest clothing (“aab”).The abaya is not a necessity for many hijabistas, but it can be a convenient and effective part of a larger fashion ensemble.

Like women in the Arab Gulf states, Western hijabistas are prepared to take the abaya to the next level of fashion, adapting it to their lifestyles and tastes while maintaining its modest intent. This has given rise to a new kind of fashion blogger, centered around the hijabistas' fashion cravings. One of the most prominent hijabista bloggers is Jana Kossaibati, a medical student in Britain, who writes the wildly popular Hijab Style blog. Jana's blog provides style tips and finds for Muslim women around the world, covering everything from new designers to clothing sales online and in the real world to outfit suggestions. She built a following by writing about where young British Muslims could find inexpensive and modest clothing, and expanded to feature everything and anything related to hijabista fashion (“It's a wrap!”; “Hijab Style”). The hijabistas have created their own trend in the abaya: rather than focusing solely on the abaya as the source of outer style, hijabistas mix their abayas with traditionally Western-style clothes such as blazers or denim jackets to create a cosmopolitan look that reflects their own mixed cultural heritage (Fig. 9) (Hijab Style). Bloggers like Jana often create sample outfits from images online, mixing and matching fashions to create chic, comfortable outfit ideas and providing inspiration to fellow hijabistas. In the hands of the hijabistas and their Arab Gulf sisters, the abaya is infinitely adaptable, changing to fit the needs of the wearer without losing its modest roots.

The relationship between the abaya and Western couture fashion is often circular, as demonstrated in the 2010 Bloomberg article, “Harrods Sees Profit From Islamic Fashion as Qatar Takes Control.” Gulf designers may draw inspiration from their works from Western couture fashion, but Western designers are taking note, as big money continues to roll in from the oil-rich Gulf States. The Middle East Quarterly's Summer 2010 issue concurs, describing how “top European fashion labels” such as John Galliano and Blumarine have begun to compete for a piece of the couture abaya market in Saudi Arabia as well (“The Abaya Gets...”). As top names in the West get involved in the abaya market, non-Muslim women have begun to take notice: A press release from Harrods Ltd. suggests that non-Muslim women are beginning to take on the trend, wearing the abaya as “a chic dress or coat,” cementing the garment's position as an object of high fashion (Harrods Ltd.). The abaya has become truly global, influenced first by Western fashion, then influencing Western fashion itself.

## Conclusion

The abaya rose to prominence in the 20th century as a marker of religious and national identity, conforming to Shariah modesty injunctions while placing itself as a visual and ideological opposition to the influx of foreign nationals, products, and ideas that flooded into the Arab Gulf region with the discovery of oil. The implementation of national dress standards in the Arab Gulf states was meant to preserve traditional culture against the onslaught of globalization in each country, yet the demand for Western high fashion and a cosmopolitan lifestyle created a new trend in the abaya – the abaya-as-fashion, a decorated, individualistic garment that flew in the face of conservative expectations for modesty in the Gulf. The abaya-as-fashion drew inspiration first from European high fashion, and later from fashions from around the world, reflecting the globalized mindset of both designer and consumer. It changed the power dynamic between men and women, undermining religious officials' ability to control the way women present themselves. Finally, it has moved beyond the Arab Gulf states, emerging into the world at large and adapting yet again to meet the needs and tastes of Western Muslim women within the new, more conservative version of Islam they practice. The abaya-as-fashion has gone even further, moving into the world of Western high fashion and worn by non-Muslim women. Through globalization, the abaya rose, became the symbol of a people and a faith, and transcended such symbolism to become a truly global garment.

# Works Cited

"The Abaya Gets an Extreme Makeover." *Middle East Quarterly*. 17.3 (2010): 12. Print.

"About aab." *aab*. aab, n.d. Web. 24 April 2012. <https://www.aabuk.com/aboutaabflash.php?outside=291>.

"About Us." *3abaya.com*. 3Abaya.com, 2011. Web. 24 April 2012. <http://3abaya.com/about-us.html>.

"About Us." *Dubai Fashion Week*. Dubai Fashion Week, n.d. Web. 26 April 2012. <http://www.dfw.ae/about.php>.

Ambah, Faiza Saleh. "For Cloaked Saudi Women, Color is the New Black." *Washington Post* [Washington, DC] 28 May 2007, n. pag. Web. 9 May. 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/27/AR2007052701180.html>.

Effa. *AB11-142*. 2011. Photograph. Effa.aeWeb. 5 May 2012. <http://effa.ae/images/AbayaAutWin2012/AB11-142colored.jpg>.

Effa."Effa Collections." *Effa.ae*. 2010. Web. 25 March 2012. <http://effa.ae/index.html>.

Effa. *Spring 2012 Collection*. 2012. Photograph. 3abaya.com. Web. 9 May 2012. <http://www.3abaya.com/blog/>.

"Effa's Little Black Arab Dress." *Arabian Woman*. Issue 139. 2011. 78-79. Print.

"English Vintage." *Inayah Collection*. Inayah Collection, n.d. Web. 21 Apr 2012. <http://inaya.we-convey.com/index.php?main_page=lookbook&id=6>.

Hancock, Stephanie. "Jazzing up the abaya." *BBC News*. BBC News, 24 Jun 2009. Web. 7 March 2012. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/8117185.stm>.

Harrods Ltd., . "Abayas successfully cross fashion lines at Harrods." *Middle East*. 418 (2011): 10. Web.

al-Jadda, Souheila. "A veil doesn't mean 'oppressed'." *USA Today* 21 06 2006, n. pag. Web. 9 May. 2012. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2006-06-21-muslim-women-edit_x.htm>.

Kaur-Jones, Priya. "Reinventing the Saudi abaya." *BBC News*. The British Broadcasting Corporation, 12 May 2011. Web. 7 March 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13372186?print=true>.

al-Khalifa, Raya. "The New Black." *New Statesman*. 23 Oct 2006: 17. Print.

Khalil, Shaimaa. "Muslim designers mix the hijab with latest fashions." *BBC News*. The British Broadcasting Corporation, 14 May 2010. Web. 7 March 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10105062?print=true>.

King, Michael Patrick, dir. *Sex and the City 2*. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, and Cynthia Nixon. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2010. Film.

Kossaibati, Jana. "Hijab Style." *Hijab Style*. Blogspot.com, 09 May 2012. Web. 9 May 2012. <http://www.hijabstyle.co.uk/>.

Kossaibati, Jana. "It's a wrap!." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 30 Mar 2009. Web. 24 April 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/mar/30/fashion-hijab-muslim-women>.

Kossaibati, Jana. "Shopping Links." *Hijab Style*. Blogspot.com, n.d. Web. 24 April 2012. <http://www.hijabstyle.co.uk/p/shopping-links.html>.

MacLeod, Arlene Elowe. "Hegemonic Relations and Gender Resistance: The New Veiling as

Accommodating Protest in Cairo." *Signs*. 17.3 (1992): 533-557. Web. 9 May. 2012.

Meyer, Henry, and Heidi Couch. "Harrods Sees Profit From Islamic Fashion as Qatar Takes Control." *Bloomberg*. Bloomberg, 12 Jul 2010. Web. 7 March 2012. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-07-12/harrods-sees-profits-in-islamic-fashion-as-qatari-owners-showcase-abayas.html>.

al-Mukhtar, Rima. "Saudi Women are Expressing It Through an Abaya Evolution." *Sayidaty*. Aug 2011: 34-37. Print.

Official Dubai Fashion Week. *Amira Abaya Model*. 2011. Photograph. Facebook.com. Web. 5 May 2012. <https://fbcdn-sphotos-a.akamaihd.net/hphotos-ak-ash4/250864_10150204039624253_160046524252_6909961_1566559_n.jpg>.

Official Dubai Fashion Week. *Models Behind the Scenes*. 2011. Photograph. Facebook.com. Web. 5 May 2012. <https://fbcdn-sphotos-a.akamaihd.net/hphotos-ak-ash4/316540_10150368105399253_160046524252_8063113_1567841947_n.jpg>.

*Plain Abaya Black*. N.d. Photograph. Polyvore.comWeb. 5 May 2012. <http://www.polyvore.com/plain_abaya_black/thing?id=33697582>.

al-Qasimi, Noor. "Immodest Modesty: Accommodating Dissent and the 'Abaya-as-Fashion in the Arab Gulf States." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. 6.1 (2010): 46-74. Web. 9 May. 2012.

*The Qur'an*. Trans. M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.

"Ramadan Glamour: Abaya's Enveloping Couture Fashion." *Sayidaty*. Aug 2011: 70-71. Print.

Roy, Olivier. *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. England: Columbia University Press, 2004. Print.

"Sweety Designer Abayas & Sheilas." *SweetyAbayas.com*. Sweety Designer Abayas, 2011. Web. 24 April 2012. <sweetyabaya.com/image-gallery/gallery.asp?action=browse&categoryid=44&whichpage=1>.

Sweety Designer Abayas. *Rolex*. N.d. Photograph. 3abaya.com. Web. 5 May 2012. <http://3abaya.com/view/55/rolex.html>.

*VLB-1.jpg*. N.d. Photograph. Inayah CollectionWeb. 5 May 2012. <http://inaya.we-convey.com/image_gallery/VLB-1.jpg>.

All interviews within this document are used with the express permission of the interviewees.

- Elizabeth Shimek