

Re-Orienting Fashion: Fashionable Modern Muslim Women beyond Western Modernity

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Abstract : Fashion is considered the main feature of modern and postmodern capitalist and consumerist society. Consumer historians maintain that fashion, namely, a sector of people embracing a prevailing clothing style for a short period, started during the Middle Ages but gained popularity later. It symbolised the transition from a medieval society with its solid fixed religious values into a modern society with its secular consumer dynamic culture. Renaissance society was a modern secular society concerning its preoccupation with daily life and changing circumstances. Yet, the late 18th-century industrial revolution revolutionised thought and ideology in Europe. The Industrial Revolution reinforced the Western belief in rationality and strengthened the position of science. In such a rational Western society, modernity, with its new ideas, came to challenge the whole idea of old fixed norms, reflecting the modern secular, rational culture and renouncing the medieval pious consumer. In modern society, supported by the industrial revolution and mass production, fashion encouraged broader sectors of society to integrate into fashion reserved for the aristocracy and royal courts. Moreover, the fashion project emphasizes the human body and its beauty, contradicting Judeo-Christian culture, which tends to abhor and criticize interest in sensuality and hedonism. In mainstream Western discourse, fashionable dress differentiates between emancipated stylish consumerist secular modern female and the assumed oppressed traditional modest religious female. Opposing this discourse, I look at the controversy over what has been called "Islamic fashion" that started during the 1980s and continued to gain popularity in contemporary Egyptian society. I discuss the challenges of being a fashionable and Muslim practicing female in light of two prominent models for female "Islamic fashion" in postcolonial Egypt; Jasmin Mohshen, the first hijabi model in Egypt and Manal Rostom, the first Muslim woman to represent the Nike campaign in the Middle East. The research employs fashion and postcolonial theories to rethink current Muslim women's position on women's emancipation, Western modernity and practising faith in postcolonial Egypt. The paper argues that Muslim women's current innovative and fashionable dress can work as a counter-discourse to the Orientalist and exclusive representation of non-Western Muslim culture as an inherently inert timeless culture. Furthermore, "Islamic" fashionable dress as an aesthetic medium for expressing ideas and convictions in contemporary Egypt interrogates the claim of universal secular modernity and Western fashion theorists' reluctance to consider Islamic fashion as fashion.

Keywords : fashion, muslim women, modernity, secularism

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