

Muslim Representation in Western Fashion

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July 10, 2015, Italy. On the rocky outcroppings of Portofino, small boats full of extravagantly dressed women floated in from the Mediterranean to walk through a garden decorated with twisting garlands of fruit and twinkling lights. Ribbed bodices pinched into delicate waists, sweetheart necklines revealed sloping shoulders and collarbones, accentuated by chokers adorned with depictions of silhouetted women. Full skirts erupted from underneath corsets, trailing vibrant colors and delicate florals along the grass. Head pieces towering with gilding, floral arrangements, and birds balanced on top of tightly pinned hair. That night, in the gardens of Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, Roman, Renaissance, and Baroque Italy were lavishly revived in what Vogue magazine called “an Italianate *Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” aka Dolce & Gabbana’s Alta Moda Fall 2015 collection (Mower). In that sea of extravagance, there was only one thing missing – representation.

Many of the biggest producers in the Western luxury goods market are heavily invested in their European roots. The draw of “old world” luxury is the basis for fashion houses like Dolce & Gabbana, Dior, Valentino, or Yves Saint Laurent, which rely on the established elite position of Europe to reinforce the idealized version of life designers sell. The idealization of “young, skinny... white bodies” as the ultimate, unattainable aesthetic adds to what Reina Lewis, a professor at London College of Fashion, calls the “principle of exclusivity” and is a large contributor to the racial homogeneity of the fashion industry (qtd. in Pike). However, this “principle of exclusivity” is being challenged in favor of inclusivity as global markets grow and interact. European goods are no longer being consumed solely by Europeans, nor are Europeans the only producers. Model lineups, as well as the clothes themselves, have been diversifying over the past decade, making questions of diversity and representation more prevalent than ever in industry conversation. More specifically, international tensions and extremist groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram have brought Islamophobia and Muslim representation in media into a prominent position within said conversation. Within the past ten years, the increased racial diversity in the Western fashion

industry has been fueled in part by economic gain; however, on a much larger scale, the push for wider inclusion has been strengthened by growing social pressure and increased globalization between consumers.

In the transition of 2015 into 2016, Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) surprised the world by releasing a line that came from a very different place than the *Alta Moda*. The collection, "*The Abaya Collection: The Allure of the Middle East*," released via *Style.com/Arabia* in a lookbook of nineteen photos, features hijabs and abayas in neutral tones, accented with lace and the daisy motif found throughout the line's Spring 2016 collection. Other high fashion brands have also recently focused on the Muslim market; H&M's Fall 2015 ad campaign featured Mariah Idrissi, a hijabi model of Pakistani and Moroccan heritage. Tommy Hilfiger and DKNY, in 2015 and 2014 respectively, released summer "Ramadan Collections," made available exclusively in the Middle East. However, these releases may not carry the same impact as D&G's line, as neither Hilfiger nor DKNY feature head coverings or actual abayas, their lines consisting instead of long skirts and conservative blouses. In recent years, Dolce & Gabbana has immersed itself in Italian culture and aesthetic (in fact, their Summer 2016 collections are titled, "Sizzling Carretto Siciliano" and "Sicilian Western"). For a design house whose slogan was previously "Italia is Love" to release a collection which celebrates the "grace and beauty of the marvelous women of Arabia" is indeed significant (Minthe). On a larger scale, diversity in high fashion runway shows has been steadily increasing. According to data collected by *Jezebel*, an online lifestyle magazine, the number of non-white models walking in New York Fashion Week has increased by eight percent since 2008, signaling a growing awareness of representation among high fashion brands (Sauers).

To understand the full impact of such releases, they must be contextualized within the current cultural climate; specifically, they must be considered against the background of western Islamophobia. In a post 9/11 world, according to Mirza Mesic, Professor of Islamic History at the Zagreb Madrasah, "the terms 'Muslim' and 'Terrorist' are synonymous in many Western countries." Indeed, news sources are focusing increasingly on acts of terror from Islamic extremist groups and Western anti-terror campaigns, connecting the image of Islam with that of fear and violence. Mesic calls the War on Terror a "war of images," referring to the media's capability to create a "personality" for a group of people and project it onto the public consciousness; more often than not, the created image for Muslims is that of the

“other,” an alien outside of Western cultural norms (Mesic). However, those images can be countered in the tradition of fighting fire with fire – this is where fashion and Islamophobia intersect. Fashion has become “a way in which people [practice] religion in their daily lives,” which has both positive and negative consequences. The “unwelcome spotlight” the media put on Muslims after 9/11 made religious expression for Muslims more conspicuous to a sensitive public, reinforcing the ostracized “other” image (Wang). But by flooding popular media with images that integrate Islamic expression, fashion brands are creating a normalized image vastly different from that depicted on the news.

This push for representation comes in the wake of worldwide expansion in the fashion industry. Global expenditures on footwear and clothing have increased since 2012 and that trend is projected to continue well into 2025; in the United States, spending is predicted to increase per capita from \$686 in 2012 to \$781 in 2025 (Global per Capita). Within the global market, the Middle East is the fastest growing consumer market for luxury goods, with spending expected to rise from \$266 billion per year to \$488 billion in 2019, making it no surprise that a brand like Dolce & Gabbana would cater specifically to the Middle East (Alleyne). Similar to D&G’s new release, other designers also successfully “revamped their... [marketing] strategies to appeal to the shopping habits” of East Asian markets after “similar booms” (Yotka). And their strategies are working. In the past decade, Asian-Pacific consumers’ share in global luxury goods has increased by ten percent (Pike). With that in mind, widening their target audience will likely “prove good news for D&G’s 2016 revenue as well” as their image (Yotka).

However, it would be unfair to claim economics as the singular or dominant source for the recent push towards diversification. To begin with, the markets that designers like D&G are targeting aren’t newly created, only newly expanding. Western luxury goods were being consumed by foreign markets when they were still considered exclusively to be outside of niche clientele. The brand’s decision to focus its marketing on the outside client comes after the outside client’s decision to consume the brand. A 2013 study by Fajer Suleh Al-Mutawa of the Gulf University for Science and Technology explores the impact of “consumer-generated representations” (brand representations created by consumers rather than purposeful advertising) by focusing on a group of Kuwaiti women and their consumption of Western luxury goods. The study found that when the base values of a

brand's advertising are seemingly incompatible with the values of a foreign market (i.e., Western sexuality and Islamic modesty,) the product's image is simply adapted by consumers to fit the foreign market. Essentially, when there is no marketing directed at them, foreign markets create their own representation *through* their consumption. In Kuwait specifically, a "Modestly Sexy" aesthetic is achieved by integrating western goods (often accessories) with more localized fashion (Al-Mutawa). This demonstrates that while direct marketing on the part of the brand helps grow and solidify its relationship with the consumer, it does not establish a *new* relationship, thereby limiting the amount of economic gain to be achieved by diversifying the brand.

Additionally, increased globalization has created pressure on design houses to respond to expanding markets with expanding representation. A 2007 press conference with former model Bethann Hardison, along with prominent designers, agents, and well known industry faces, including Naomi Campbell and Iman, publicized and helped end the practice of modeling agencies including phrases like "no blacks, no ethnics" in their casting calls (Pike). Frédéric Godart, an assistant professor at INSEAD, an international graduate university, says of the fashion houses, "[they] do listen...if their customers want something, they will oblige." That becomes increasingly true as social media brings designer and consumer closer than ever. The comments on an Instagram post from Stefano Gabbana give immediate responses about Dolce & Gabbana's "*Abaya Collection*" from the new target audience. Positive feedback ("thanks for thinking about Muslim women") illustrates the line's success, but is mixed with criticism that responds to the social significance of the line. About the nature of the hijab, one commenter asserts, "[it] is not a fashion statement." The market's desire for diversity is seen in comments like, "Not saying it's not a great step, just a perfect opportunity to challenge beauty standards missed," which refers to the lookbook's use of a white model and which implies that the design house did not go far enough to include "the marvelous women of Arabia" (Minthe).

While progress has been made in recent years against the roots of racism in the fashion industry, some wonder whether these strides are only temporary. Minh-ha Pham, a professor at Cornell University, asks, "it's okay when Asia is becoming this new and important market, but what happens when the economy begins to slow down?" Pham speculates that the recent strides will be erased when the tide of the economy changes and

consumers like Muslims and East Asians lose their salient position in the global market. However, others argue that the “changing ways people consume fashion,” aka social media, are “harbingers for diversity in the industry” (Pike). Because access to high fashion media is no longer restricted to the high-rolling elite, brands have no choice but to acknowledge and answer to the markets with which they are in direct contact. Reina Lewis, introducing a panel she moderated in May of 2015 on Muslim women and style, comments: “If we had been planning [a panel] on Muslim America fifteen years ago, it’s highly likely that fashion would not have been one of their themes. Not only with Muslims, but in general, the idea of putting faith and fashion together would have seemed antithetical to many” (Wang).

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