

Fashion, Identity, & The Muslim-American Narrative

Shireen Soliman

Abstract

In this pivotal time, assumptions, boundaries, power structures and relationships within society are being reconsidered and reimagined. My research project, “Fashion, Identity and the Muslim- American Narrative” builds off of well-established prior models and responds to this moment. Through this multidisciplinary, multimedia design workshop series geared towards Muslim American female adolescents, we are able to leverage the powerful intersection of design, technology, community, social media and social justice. In this affirming, enlightening space, we use fashion, dress and personal narrative as the springboard and means of exploring the intrinsic connection between social and emotional issues surrounding identity development, social justice and female empowerment.

Through the lens of fashion (an easily accessible and universal touch point for engagement), students are guided through the process of self and peer reflection, examining how dress directly reflects systems of thought, power and constructed norms. Through a safe, familiar environment consisting of peers and a fellow Muslim woman at the helm (often a first-time experience for many), students develop relationships and feel seen while expressing stories about how we navigate public vs. private spheres (especially relevant in the new virtual frontiers of social media and video conferencing). Participants acquire the relevant vocabulary and make direct connections about how vital their voices are as storytellers.

Through this workshop model, young Muslim women are offered the opportunity to look deeper, to consider the core aspects of their intersectional identities and most critically, how they choose to be in the world while being authentic and true to themselves and their heritage. Through low- stakes experimentation of styling, fashion design explorations and visual curation in a safe environment, students find the inspiration and confidence to be brave in the face of the complex landscape of the post-911, post-Covid, post-BLM future.

Introduction

When the world was plunged into quarantine in the Spring of 2020, the seemingly mundane, daily, universal experience of standing in front of the closet, facing the perennial question: "What to wear?" was forever changed. The task of preparing to face the world had been fundamentally transformed. How we engaged with the world shifted from sharing physical spaces at work, school, and a host of possible events, to deciding how to navigate the virtual world from behind a screen.

New questions arose: To turn on the camera or not? What to wear? Pajamas and leggings or a favorite dress or sweater (from a former life)? What constitutes the redefined public sphere? When home also becomes the workplace, class, and lounge, how do we navigate and create these new boundaries? How do we perceive and present ourselves and our space, both collectively or as an individual? How do we establish the new rules, the new relationship and even the very definition of what fashion means? What does modesty mean? Do we apply different rules for different audiences?

For Muslim American teenage girls, these questions have always existed, and their implications have never been taken for granted. Their dual identities and stages of development are bound up in these concerns. This endeavor is more complex: to curate identity through image and to establish connections between community and culture. At the same time, there is the will and ability to forge a new path forward as storytellers with increased visibility against a landscape of mixed messages and misconceptions. For wearers of hijab in particular, the task of navigating public versus private spaces has meant redefining what "home" represents. The private space has become public. Boundaries are more blurred than ever. For the Hijabi, does turning one's camera off suffice as the new "veil"? Does the Hijabi continue to make choices based on the perception of home as being "private" or don her hijab even in the most intimate setting of her own bedroom, where she has previously been able to remove her "layers" and be free of the public gaze?

Indeed, before Covid (the new "BC"), there had already been the powerful storytelling platform of social media, where Muslim women had, for the past few years, been forging ownership of their narratives. In large part this has meant countering the reductive Mainstream Media narrative, i.e. the oppressed, dangerous, different, inaccessible "other". Muslim women, particularly Hijabis, had leveraged the digital medium so successfully that they had, through their global visibility and the recognition of their buying power, managed to compel the intransigent, often dismissive, complacent fashion industry to carve out space on the global runway for the Modest Fashion movement to take hold.

The work of decolonizing societal norms around dress and women's bodies had already gained momentum. It has evolved through the global discourse around questioning, unpacking and unlearning Eurocentric notions. Among these are the connotations of modesty, power, sexuality, and feminism. In the era of Covid, these navigations and decisions were taking place alongside the broader conversations and urgency of the BLM protests and all interrelated, intersectional social justice movements.

The Covid crisis offered a renewed opportunity to reconsider assumptions and forge a new way of thinking about fashion, identity, narrative through the virtually shared experience of the re-envisioned art and design workshops.

The Pre-Covid backstory: Shireen as Educator, Advocate, Artist and Mother

As a part-time adjunct at two of the most prestigious fashion colleges in America, I had spent many years teaching students from across the world. My coursework centered around the considerations, theories, principles, skills, and knowledge needed to approach the challenge of using visual communication and illustration to express their evolving design language and identity as budding fashion designers. As a fashion consultant and educator, I've employed the analog, digital and time-based modes of expression for storytelling and narrative. The goal is to attach meaning and anchor stories, concepts, and vision to fashion design.

I am the first-generation daughter of immigrants. As a Muslim American woman and mother, I had, for years, understood that the ideas and content I shared with my fashion students in these elite college spaces could be instrumental in empowering and supporting young Muslim women as they grapple with identity construction and formation. Intrinsic to their development are the experiences of parsing and making sense of the multiple, often contrasting messages received from school, community, family, friends, and media.

For me, the mission of bringing these powerful concepts from the halls of higher ed to the prayer halls of mosques, was an act of aligning my worlds to my core purpose as a Muslim American woman and educator: to support equity, access and social justice through democratizing knowledge and learning.

I had already, for many years, come to find myself as a leader and powerful voice in my community as a Muslim American mother and educator. My insights were sought on strategies for various institutions and spaces to create authentic, culturally inclusive and affirming spaces to support Muslim Americans. Specifically, I served on Boards, Parent Teacher Organizations and School Leadership Teams, contributing cultural context and literacy to support multicultural events in schools and encourage family involvement especially in the aftermath of 9/11. I provided input to school districts and organizations on curricula and community offerings and lent my skills to media productions. In the wider world as a fashion professional, artist, and educator, I began exhibiting my illustrations at various shows, both through print and digital platforms in addition to serving on panels and committees. I was invited to be a judge in the first-ever Hijabi Fashion Shows with a global media audience. To this day, I continue to support community-led fashion education initiatives.

The Fashion and Identity Workshop is Born

My aim is to align my experiences and expertise while amplifying voices that for too long have been muted.

On completion of my graduate degree in Educational Leadership, I felt well prepared to create programming that responds to the challenges and potential of this culturally vibrant, politically complex, and technology-rich time. I was ready to embark on applying my knowledge, passion, and message to spaces within my own community—and the focus on adapting the content to middle through high school adolescents at a pivotal stage of identity development. Inspired by a young women's empowerment program through a nonprofit that I chair, I created the workshop model that would serve as the foundation for my future research and work. Through this nonprofit, I witnessed first-hand the powerful dynamic created as a result of young Muslim

women being offered the opportunity to connect and see themselves reflected through other Muslim women.

In these rooms of local nonprofits and neighborhood organizations and classrooms, I developed a workshop model that integrates and contextualizes the connections between fashion, self, identity, and narrative, along with reflective writing and conversation. The elements of image-making, an art-based curriculum and career development are all geared for the Muslim American teen experience. The workshops that I have piloted so far, for Muslim as well as mixed or Non-Muslim audiences, have yielded extraordinary creativity, peer collaboration, and self-reflection.

On a small scale, these workshops were usually described as transformative, affirming, and eye-opening. Many of the Muslim teen girls who I worked with shared that they had never had a Muslim American woman lead an arts-driven learning experience. They were fascinated to learn that beyond the traditional, typical menu of (immigrant) career options offered--lawyer, doctor, engineer, teacher--a career in the arts and design fields could somehow be accessible: "if she could do it, then perhaps I can, too"!

Initial Efforts

My initial workshops followed this arc of engagement:

After welcoming introductions, a lecture, lesson and demonstrations, the young Muslim women are asked to draw a "head-to-toe" fashion look that represents their identity, values, and vision. After only an hour or two, participants plunge into the task with evident enthusiasm. They sketch ideas and choose silhouettes, fabrics and colors that best reflect their identity. Hesitation gives way to curiosity and exploration. Sincere encouragement cheers on musings and risk-taking. The young women claim their ability to actively make connections between aspects of their visual language (color, form, texture, graphics) to their identities. The relief of not having to explain themselves, their experiences, or choices creates a palpable energy of sisterhood, support and power. Trust has been established. It's acceptance: being in a space where one feels understood and seen.

As the students put words to their new discoveries, I became resolved about my own:

- * I knew I wanted to grow my idea.
- * I knew I wanted to offer this uplifting space to more young Muslim women.
- * I knew I wanted to share this curriculum with fellow educators, community leaders and the fashion industry professionals who might not (probably don't) have access to hear directly from Muslim women for whom they were now tasked with designing modest garments and accessories.

I began writing grant proposals about my workshop model and even its potential as a source of vital research and data. In the White, patriarchal, elite, and Eurocentric world of academia, we had already long seen research establishing the critical role of fashion and dress in identity development. However, research or academic inquiry around Muslim women and fashion was virtually non-existent, which should come as no surprise. Even the few contributions that existed in the field were by non-Muslim researchers talking about Muslim women rather than Muslim women talking about ourselves.

I wanted to change that.

Some of my research questions were focused on how these young women navigated the boundaries of culture, religion, and gender roles. What understandings, resources, and dilemmas do they develop to embrace their intersectionality? What do educators and practitioners need to consider in creating learning spaces of equity and cultural literacy? In what ways do visual arts and collaborative learning provide value-forming that “inoculates” young people against demeaning messages?

First grant awarded! It was a new year. 2020. I was ready to facilitate my first grant-funded workshop model with a group of young Muslim women from a local Mosque group.

The Covid Crisis. Life transformed. Finding our way forward.

Fast forward to March 2020.

A Global Pandemic.

Virtually no warning, no way to prepare meaningfully.

That scheduled mosque group meeting was cancelled.

Group gatherings, travel, classes, most work, and life as we knew it, all came to a screeching halt.

We were now all trapped at home.

We were now "sheltering in place".

We were all afraid.

We were all fused to our preferred source of news, watching the unthinkable unfold.

Space and connection as we knew it would be forever changed.

That moment in front of the closet would take on new meaning.

Private became public.

The “in-person” became virtual.

Assumptions and prior ways of being, knowing and engaging...all shed to make way for the "new normal".

It was against this new Covid landscape that I was tasked with re-imaging, reconfiguring, and reshaping how I would deliver this workshop and experience via the virtual platform.

Issues around access immediately came into question.... nothing could be assumed.

Who would have access to a strong enough Wi-Fi connection?

Who would have financial access to colored pencils and paints, to printing and paper?

Who would have access to a supportive, quiet, distraction-free space?

Who would have access to the financial means needed to purchase supplies?

The art supplies, the templates, materials and intimacy of shared physical space were no longer a given.

The Virtual Workshop: Connections, Community, Resilience and Discovery

After the initial few weeks of shock and attempting to manage our collective trauma, it was time to envision a way to recreate the experience of an art-driven design workshop, suitable for students with little to no access or prior design experience but also without art supplies or access to me, to help guide the girls’ hands as they drew their looks. With so much of the overwhelming “new and different” already happening on so many levels, our goals were to create maximum ease of access, familiarity, and confidence.

My mission to democratize education and model equity took on a new sense of urgency.

As I, along with educators around the world, had already been facing the technical and pedagogical challenges of having to suddenly move from the in-person studio to the screens of Zoom, the first “aha moment” came with the realization that there was no way to directly translate the in-person classroom to the online learning experience. The virtual world posed challenges and opportunities and those of us already used to bridging multiple worlds were well suited to be able to adapt and choose how to apply the best of all experiences. We were at a pivotal juncture of moving forward and forging a new way of learning, engaging, and connecting.

I came to see that the move to online learning through the Covid crisis could offer the opportunity to leverage the powerful intersection of technology, community, social media, and social justice to offer new ways of seeing and knowing. By shifting the dynamic of design education to looking outwards for inspiration to affirming oneself as the locus of the design process, students would be able to redefine ideas of self, recognize one's agency through narrative and breed creativity through choice, accessibility, and adaptation.

Out came the virtual whiteboards with little to no learning curve, to support the ease and familiarity of dragging and dropping post-it notes to share ideas and engage in reflection that revealed shared experiences, a safe community space to heal and support, all the more resonant and crucial during those first months of the pandemic.

The major breakthrough for the workshop, though, came from the decision to shift the site of the “canvas” from paper to body, from shifting the practice of making and generating stories from depending on “art supplies” to one's own body becoming the art in question, from the site of “professional” studio space to the intimacy of home.

Shifting the “canvas” from being external or apart from oneself to the idea of one's own body or story being the canvas and site upon which designing is emanating outwards to connect, allows us to align and affirm one's place and point of view in the collective discourse.

Exercises such as photo stories and video essays, requiring only a phone camera offered opportunities for “recognizing” and “reframing” meaning and connection. Our humble image-making and storytelling, in fact, represented a fundamental move away from looking to the traditional canon of art and design as externally dictated from remote, hierarchical Eurocentric elite powers in industry and academia. We find ourselves now looking toward embracing the personal, accessible, decolonized, fluid, experience of art and design as curated from within...through live, real-time, in-person and virtual experiences.

By mindfully attributing meaning to experiences, objects, artifact and images, the Muslim- American girls that had already been comfortably engaging with social media discovered a rich source of narrative-driven storytelling. The previously overlooked artifacts and symbols found not within museums, but in their own homes, were rediscovered. They became appreciated as the valuable holders of stories that had been generations in the making. They came to realize that those Tiktok videos and photoshoots are not just about hemming or showing off a skirt or veil; they're about one's choices on how to present oneself through fashion. They came to shift from a passive consumption of fashion and its “trends” and chosen prophets (ie: the

influencers) to an awareness that they, too, are a vibrant source of fashion and inspiration simply by virtue of who they are!



Image 1: Copyright Shireen Soliman 2020.

Looking forward: Impact, Significance and Vision

I've grown up here in the US and became a mother to two children in the post-9/11 era. I have directly faced many of the same challenges as the Muslim American teen girls that I've worked with. Through the lens of personal experience, of raising my own children and teaching so many others, I have grappled with making sense of, combatting, and countering the problematic, conflicting, and dangerous stereotypes and reductive images and perceptions of Muslim Americans.

It was my own daughter who ultimately came to serve as my muse. She taught me so much as I supported her through the adolescent years, grappling with identity, body image, dress, and cultural/religious identity. The post-9/11 environment amplified for teens the mixed messages of social vs. mainstream media against the backdrop of rising culture of fear, hate and misinformation.

Imagine my pride at seeing my work come full circle, when my daughter, now in college, recently shared that she has just been studying and creating algorithms to track representation in the media.

Imagine my surprise though, when asked during the workshop where they experienced negative representations of Muslim women, a couple of the younger participants responded “nowhere”!

On the 'Tiktok feeds of today's teens, Muslim women are fashionable, funny, approachable and relatable. However, the world beyond 'Tiktok awaits. My daughter, her brother, and their fellow Gen Z Muslim Americans are ready to become leaders and advocates in their own right, actively crafting their own narratives and continuing the legacy of what it is to pay forward, to be of service and share in co-creating new boundaries, norms and shared experiences.

They are ready to mindfully make connections, proudly share their stories and show us the way forward. My workshop is relevant and ready to support them. The story continues...



Image 2: Copyright Shireen Soliman 2020.

Author Biography

Shireen Soliman is an Egyptian-American artist, educator, advocate and mother. Shireen teaches at both Parsons School of Design and Pratt Institute, offering coursework under the umbrella of Design, Communications and Illustration. She is committed to representing and amplifying the voices and experiences of the Muslim-American community. Through the lens of Fashion, Shireen explores topics ranging from Muslim-American Identity, Cultural Diversity and Inclusion, Intersectionality, Representation. "When we raise our collective consciousness around the power of fashion to express Narrative, Heritage and Identity, we can then reclaim and own that power to honor and affirm each of our beautiful and glorious stories."

