Wardrobes of Turkish-Dutch women: The multiple meanings and aesthetics of Muslim dress

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ABSTRACT

Wardrobes of Turkish-Dutch Women:
The Multiple Meanings and Aesthetics of Muslim Dress

This thesis addresses the diverse and changing sartorial practices of Turkish-Dutch Muslim women by exploring the effects that particular garments and combinations have depending on the ways and contexts in which they are worn. Going beyond the divisions of veiling and non-veiling and the exclusive categories of “habitual” and “conscious” headscarf practice, this research enables a better understanding of the complexity of what it means to be a visible Muslim woman in the Netherlands today. It rearticulates Muslim sartorial practices as inherently related to the dilemmas of everyday clothing, and emphasizes that women make choices informed by a wide range of factors, including piety, generation, aesthetics, gender, economic status and social context. Finally, it argues that women’s sartorial practices have transformative effects on both themselves and on their relations with others.

In general, this thesis goes against the grain of arguments that deny the continuities and historical associations between certain items and styles in Muslim sartorial practices and endeavor to explain the novelty of the “modern Islamic headscarf” as a product of wardrobe modernization. Such an approach presupposes a sharp rupture with the past, and analyzes current sartorial practices as if they are essentially different from those of the past. Rather than relying on firm categories of “old” and “new” headscarf practices, this thesis emphasizes the shifting and ambiguous character of Muslim dress. This emphasis entails a revision of some of the main assumptions of the discourse of “wardrobe modernization,” which has also shaped scholarly attention: the anticipated disappearance of religious clothing in modern, secular public spaces and the incongruity between fashion and religious clothing, or, alternatively, the newness of combining fashionable styles and religious dress.

This dissertation is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out primarily in the Netherlands between 2007 and 2011 among women of the Turkish immigrant community, along with brief periods of research in Turkey. It draws on a combination of in-depth
interviews, participant observation and wardrobe research; the compilation of a large number of topical life stories (focusing on dress); and a visual archive of garments from wardrobes and street scenes. I also analyze media sources, including news stories and advertisements, social networking websites and online stores from both Turkey and the Netherlands. Moreover, I make use of secondary literature on related subjects, letters of travelers from Ottoman era, literary fiction, historical photographs, and dictionaries to trace the genealogies of the garments mentioned in the interviews.

Each chapter analyzes a different item of clothing in order to explore changing sartorial preferences and what these preferences mean for different categories of women at different historical moments and locations. Even if the headscarf is a central item in pious women’s clothing, all of the other items in their wardrobes are equally important to how women produce different modalities of femininity and modesty. Above all, each chapter emphasizes that the motivations and inspirations that shape sartorial choices in tesettür clothing can never be reduced to a particular interpretation of religious clothing, contrary to the claims of the so-called “new veiling.” Among the specific garments and sartorial practices that the chapters discuss are the çarşaf (a long, loose, two-pieced outdoor garment), the pardösü (overcoat), combinations with trousers and skirts, festive outfits, styles of makeup, and the headscarf.

A critical analysis of “wardrobe modernization” and changing sartorial practices highlights the associations and continuities, as well as differences, between the former and current sartorial practices of Muslim women. By focusing on specific wardrobes and topical life stories centering on changing sartorial practices, the thesis also provides a wider, alternative approach to studying the controversial practice of wearing the headscarf. By tracing genealogies of garments and collecting ethnographic accounts of everyday clothing, I illustrate that transformations of sartorial practices and discourses about Muslim dress are far more complex than the narrative of the “modern Islamic headscarf” has suggested. Contemporary Muslim dress is not simply a matter of decline or a sharp break with the past, as the thesis of “wardrobe modernization” predicts. Rather, the sartorial practices of Turkish-Dutch women unite and express multiple histories, geographies, and modes of belonging.

Studying Muslim appearances in a context of immigration, where Muslims are considered sartorial minority, demands comprehending the multiple meanings and interpretations of Muslim dress at different historical moments and locations. The research that constitutes this thesis takes up this challenge. It shows that the increasing mobility of both
Turkish-Dutch women and the items of clothing in their wardrobes not only results in a mix of styles and trends, it also facilitates the recognition of different aesthetics and understandings of tesettür clothing. Emergent discourses about the ethics and aesthetics of tesettür span the transnational space between Turkey and the Netherlands, as both women and garment circulate between these two national spaces. In this transnational field, sartorial biographies of women and their wardrobes offer a critical perspective on the narrative of “wardrobe modernization”, in which recognizably Muslim appearance has constituted the sartorial Other. In contrast to this narrative, this thesis shows that producing a recognizably Muslim appearance is as complex and multi-faceted as the production of any individual appearance.