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

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I began this thesis with a reflection on my location as an ethnographer in a challenging, sensitive field, where I also had to confront my own prejudices. Focusing on the hotly debated “headscarf issue” would have been a relatively easy solution to this ethnographic dilemma, as most of my interlocutors immediately assumed that this was the focus of my research. For quite a long time, the “headscarf issue” has been considered the most important question for research on Muslim women’s clothing practices to address and answer. Studies in this vein privileged the “modern Islamic headscarf” and the women who wear this style. Other items of dress and the dilemmas of everyday clothing, as well as other coexisting styles, remained in the margins of the literature. Above all, the approach of the literature on the “modern Islamic headscarf” is based on problematic dichotomies between veiling and non-veiling, and “consciously Islamic” and “habitual” headscarves; therefore, this literature has failed to describe what it means to be a visibly Muslim woman today.

Rather than firm categories of “old” and “new” headscarf practice, my research has emphasized the shifting, ambiguous character of Muslim dress among Turkish-Dutch women. In doing so, it has entailed a revision of the two major assumptions of the thesis of “wardrobe modernization,” which have also shaped scholarly analysis: the anticipated disappearance of the religious clothing in secular, modern public spaces and the incongruity between fashion and religious clothing. By tracing the genealogies of garments and collecting ethnographic accounts of everyday clothing, I was able to illustrate that transformations of sartorial practices and discourses about Muslim dress are far more complex than the narrative of the “modern Islamic headscarf” (the “conscious headscarf”) has suggested. Studying Muslim appearances in a context of migration, where Muslims are a sartorial minority, pushed me to grapple with the multiple meanings and interpretations of what looking Muslim means at different historical moments and locations. My ethnography demonstrates that the increasing mobility of Turkish-Dutch women and items of clothing has not only enabled a mix of styles and trends; it has also facilitated recognition of different aesthetics and understandings of tesettür clothing. In this transnational field, the sartorial biographies of women and the collections in their wardrobes offer critical readings of the narrative of “wardrobe
modernization,” in which recognizably Muslim appearance has generally constituted the sartorial Other.

1. Continuities and Ambiguities

The denial of continuities and historical links between certain items and styles in Muslim sartorial practice and the endeavor to explain the novelty of the “modern Islamic headscarf” are partly products of the narrative of wardrobe modernization. This narrative presupposes a sharp rupture with the past, and treats current sartorial practices as if they are essentially different from the past. Fabian’s argument that anthropology historically constructed “relations with its other by means of temporal devices (that) implied affirmation of difference as distance (1983: 16)” has strong echoes in the narratives of the modern headscarf and wardrobe modernization in Turkey. Wearing a headscarf was often associated with a peasant background and poverty, which the project of secular-modern nationalism desired to leave behind. The prediction was that the headscarf, as a marker of the rural, religious, and ethnic identities of the past, could never find a proper place within the project of wardrobe modernization. However, the enduring presence of visibly Muslim women in the secularizing world, and women’s endeavors to combine headscarves with creative, fashionable clothing, both challenged the presupposition of this rigid difference and a break with the past.

Together, a critical analysis of “wardrobe modernization” and attention to various genealogies of different garments reveal associations and continuities, as well as differences, between the former and current sartorial practices of Muslim women. The modernization project employed the ideological notion of “the new” to designate the modern, and the two notions were often used interchangeably. The desire of modernizers to distance themselves (and their appearance) from what was seen as “archaic” produced a temporal gap and affirmed the precedence of one hegemonic understanding of modernity over alternative ways of becoming modern. As Walter Benjamin famously suggested in his critique of modernity, the search for the new is a particular sensation characteristic of the modern age. Benjamin describes “the new” of the modern epoch as “a quality independent of the use value of the commodities (1999: 22).” He critically approaches the notions of newness, repetitiousness and ephemerality as motivating characteristics of modern, everyday experience. Although Benjamin regards everyday experience as alienating because of these characteristics, his
approach gives great value to the different ways in which individuals try to overcome the
effects of such experience. By turning my attention away from the “new veiling” to everyday
clothing, wardrobes, and genealogies of garments, I was able to gather narratives that were
critical of both the “modern” appearance of Muslim women in the Netherlands and the project
of “wardrobe modernization” in Turkey.

In fact, narratives of the modern headscarf fit seamlessly into the discourse of
wardrobe modernization. As with other garments, the headscarf has rapidly adjusted to new
sartorial practices. The discourse of “new veiling” linked the modern headscarf to the
emergence of new Islamic movements in the 1980s and 1990s, and women’s active
participation in these religious-political movements. In the second phase of “new veiling”
covering was interpreted as an instance of the articulation of faith with consumer culture; in
this light, Muslim women were reborn as consumers. Both of these discourses began with the
aim to explore the turn from formerly non- or less-agentive subjects to highly agentive
subjects in a secular world, with the modern headscarf as a significant marker of this
transformation and agency. This mode of discourse privileged women who presented
themselves as “conscious” or “fashionable” Muslims while excluding other women. It
privileged the pious actors of Islamic movements and the consumers of “Islamic fashion,”
who shared an activist profile or similar sartorial tastes. While this approach highlighted
wearing a headscarf as a new and distinct phenomenon, it also hindered discussions of
tesettür clothing as an embodied practice and a matter of everyday life.

In this respect, Saba Mahmood’s work is helpful because she emphasizes the
transformative capacity of veiling in the cultivation of pious selves. Mahmood’s approach is
able to recognize historical continuities and ambiguities while also highlighting the
performative and transformative aspects of wearing religiously inspired dress. With her
argument in mind, we can clearly see that the “conscious” headscarf, as a significant marker
of the “new veiling,” shares the same ideological grammar as the thesis of “wardrobe
modernization”; furthermore, “conscious” headscarf practices forecast and imply a closure
that results in the successful attainment of proper practice. The women’s accounts that I have
presented in this thesis consistently criticize the discourse of the “consciously Islamic
headscarf”, which implies that the subject already possesses adequate knowledge and
responsibility for her acts. As their narratives illustrate, modest, pious clothing is part of a
continual process of self-disciplining. The notion that this process would ever come to an
“end” is contrary to the very understanding of the modest self that these women cultivate.
In addition to the transformative capacity of pious clothing, this thesis aimed to understand how the effects of particular outfits and combinations—including headscarves—depend on the ways and contexts in which they are worn. Bringing Muslim sartorial practices back into the dilemma of everyday clothing and emphasizing that women make choices informed by a wide range of factors, including piety, generation, fashion, gender, economic status, location, ethnicity and social context, unsettles hegemonic representations of the modern headscarf. By going beyond the division between veiling and non-veiling and the exclusive categories of “habitual” and “conscious” headscarf practice, I was able to achieve a better understanding of the complexity of what it means to be visibly Muslim today. As the stories that I present in my research show, producing a recognizably Muslim appearance is as complex as the production of any individual appearance (Tarlo 2010).

Collecting genealogies of garments and women’s sartorial biographies helped me to recognize similarities and differences in dress over a longer period of time than the literature typically focuses on. This literature breaks with the past of Muslim dress, and has a tendency to emphasize recently introduced items and trends in Muslim women’s sartorial practices, as if they are entirely new. By contrast, my research indicates that Muslim clothing became fashionable long before the literature on “Islamic fashion” assumes. Both the “new veiling” and, later, “Islamic fashion” assert a problematic temporal difference between religiously inspired clothing and secular dress. Furthermore, both arguments have constructed troubling hierarchies among different styles of Muslim dress. On the basis of a closer examination, it turns out that the relationship between fashion and religiously inspired clothing extends much further back in time. The assumption of an incongruity between fashion and religious clothing has oriented the literature on Muslim dress and its definitive questions since at least the 1990s. Because of this, the literature’s main concern has been to describe the shift from “Islamist women,” who were represented as “radical” political actors dressed in an austere, uniform manner, to the consumers of fashionable Muslim clothing today.

Fashionable, covered Muslim clothing has co-existed with modest, religious clothing for a much longer period than the narrative of the modern headscarf suggests. The example of the çarşaf, which I discuss in detail in the second chapter, provides a rich account of the ambiguities and contingencies that define wearing a particular type of covering garment entails historically. The çarşaf first appeared in 19th Century Ottoman public space; it became popular and fashionable because it could hide both western fashions (for the rich) and ethnically marked clothing (for the poor). With its increasing popularity, the çarşaf replaced the imperial ferace as a “national fashion.” As a new, urban, outdoor garment, the çarşaf was
incorporated into skirt-jacket combinations, which included fashionable head coverings. This occurred even before its name changed.

During the early years of Republic, sartorial transformations continued as modern overcoats began to replace çarşaf in secular public space; ironically, this substitution was again considered to be a break from the past, this time from imperial fashions. Three-quarter, slim-fitting overcoats were the first modern garments for most migrant women who came to the Netherlands in the 1960s. In studying sartorial genealogies, I faced a variety of difficulties inherent in the privileging of certain ideas of modernization. Akin to the representations of the modern headscarf, these historical narratives provide us with accounts and observations of a particular style of çarşaf and the women who wore this style; therefore, we still do not know much about less fashionable, more covering forms of çarşaf and the women who wore them during earlier periods. In the contemporary tesettür scene, the çarşaf has become a specific marker of the İsmailağa Community and a sign of a woman’s commitment to disciplining the self. Nevertheless, in the last few years, çarşafs have again become popular as outdoor attire. These new çarşafs are well decorated, with laser-cut designs and pattern; they are also produced in multiple colors. To interpret the çarşaf as nothing more than a strong marker of religiosity would be an oversimplification; as the genealogy of the çarşaf and the narratives of everyday clothing in this research reveal, wearing a certain style of çarşaf has been always a more complex matter.

In summary, narratives of the “modern headscarf,” which focus first on “conscious” headscarf practice and later on “fashion,” deny a whole range of continuities and similarities that I have endeavored to take seriously in my research. Above all, this broader perspective, which avoids the ideological battles over “consciousness” and “fashion,” strives to recognize and account for the different impulses, aspirations, expectations, modalities of femininity, and notions of piety that form women’s multiple belongings and longings.

2. Looking into Wardrobes: Multiple Longings and Belongings

In my research, I focused specifically on wardrobes in order to develop a new methodological and conceptual framework to study Muslim dress. The items of clothing and collections of artifacts that constitute wardrobes vividly reveal the diverse, multiple belongings and subjectivities of Muslim women; they enable an understanding of the ambiguities, commonalities, and dilemmas of everyday Muslim sartorial practices. Without a doubt, my
research did not include all items of clothing and accessories that contribute to everyday 
tesettür; I have necessarily been selective in my choices of inclusion and exclusion, based 
primarily on the emphases that my interlocutors put on certain garments in their sartorial 
biographies. Although I tried as much as possible to include women with different styles and 
backgrounds in my research, many of my interlocutors are connected to the same Turkish 
religious communities and networks in the Netherlands.

To study wardrobes, one must necessarily go beyond the dilemma of veiling and non-
veiling, and expand one’s analysis beyond fashion’s communicative capacities. Highly 
fashionable and absolutely unfashionable garments hang next to one another in women’s 
wardrobes. Wardrobes incorporate artifacts and items from different places and time periods, 
as well as gifts from close friends and relatives. They are the building blocks for ordinary 
clothing practices, moments of exception, and complex sartorial performances on special 
occasions such as festive events, religious gatherings and business meetings.

In this thesis, I have insisted on the links between sartorial practices and particular 
social contexts. The great diversity of garments that I found in wardrobes encouraged me to 
explore and convey how the idea of modesty and the practice of tesettür work differently at 
different moments and locations. By examining wardrobe collections, I discovered that there 
are moments of exception in the sartorial biographies of women. Certain garments represent 
an individual’s understanding of modesty and aesthetics in the most flexible and ambiguous 
contexts. These items of clothing are never worn as everyday attire because they are often 
flamboyant, tight, and attractive; hence, they risk transgressing norms and challenging ideas 
of modesty in tesettür clothing. By exploring festive garments, my thesis argues that festive 
events are moments of exception that produce different understandings of religious modesty. 
At weddings, this is especially the case for the bride and others who are at the center of the 
celebratory setting; for them, the context itself naturalizes and purifies female attractiveness 
from its negative connotations. The festive atmosphere functions as an abstract tesettür. I 
explored in detail how uncovering (or covering less) does not mean the same thing in these 
contexts as it does in everyday life: uncovering is more acceptable in festive settings and does 
less to violate the meaning of tesettür in the way that it would on any other day.

Similarly, the meanings of makeup and its absence differ depending on social context. 
Women employ different styles and amounts of makeup to complete their tesettür 
appearances. Wearing the same amount of makeup may produce opposite effects in different 
contexts, as understandings of tesettür and the expectations of others vary according to the 
occation. Women wear “invisible makeup” to produce a natural, healthy look as the marker of
a well-cared-for self. Focusing on different amounts of makeup added another dimension to our understanding of how women accommodate and contest particular understandings of femininity and ideas of beauty in different contexts. For instance, women’s preferences in makeup may change totally during the month of Ramadan, when they are at work, or when they attend a wedding party. Women’s adjustment of makeup according to different requirements in these different contexts explains how contemporary interpretations of modesty in tesettür clothing have evolved towards the “management of beauty” rather than its concealment.

My analysis of skirts and trousers underscored the relationship between femininity and piety. Skirts and trousers highlight a set of gendered sartorial practices in fashioning tesettür to an extent that other garments do not reveal. More gender-neutral garments such as şalvar and entari were replaced by modern clothing such as trousers and skirts. Trousers and skirts were not only modern, secular garments; they were also constructed as modern items central to “conscious” Muslim dress. Women choose between skirts and trousers according to occasion. By putting on long outdoor garments, they may hide or reveal their preferences in order to manage the effects of wearing skirts or trousers. For some women, a particular style of skirt can simultaneously be a strong marker of piety, femininity and “Turkishness.” By drawing on Islamic texts and arguments, other women contend that wearing trousers is a gender-neutral practice. They often choose to wear trousers rather than skirts for practical reasons, or to manage their appearances in different contexts.

In fact, in the case of each particular garment, similar long-term changes have had comparable effects. In other words, the project of wardrobe modernization succeeded in transforming different garments in similar ways. As their sartorial biographies reveal, Turkish-Dutch women not only want to wear their headscarves in different ways than their mothers did, they also want to wear modern attire such as kumaş skirts, trousers and overcoats. The headscarf was not alone in gradually becoming “modern” and “Islamic.” Nearly all of the items of clothing in women’s wardrobes were affected by the discourse of “conscious, urban” Muslim dress. While these changes produced certain general characteristics of tesettür practice, an increasing diversity of interpretations and modes of recognizably Muslim dress are now visible on the streets of the Netherlands.

Although the modern headscarf seems to have adjusted to “wardrobe modernization,” recognizably Muslim dress is still often considered to be monotonous and oppressive, as well as insufficiently modern and fashionable. Representations of the modern headscarf in the
literature show that the aspiration and motivation to wear recognizably Muslim dress tends to be thought of as “new” and “different.” In other words, these sartorial practices were not predicted by the thesis of “wardrobe modernization,” which assumed that religiously inspired dress would fade away in modern public space. This observation points to another important question that demands further exploration: why is this wide range of fashionable Muslim clothing still often perceived by outsiders as uniform, dull, and submissive, and still seen as destined to disappear?

3. Transnational & Cosmopolitan Aesthetics in the Turkish-Dutch Tesettür Scene

The increasing mobility of people and garments (via online stores, social sharing sites, etc.) has played a crucial role in mixing styles and shifting trends in tesettür clothing. The findings of my research illustrate that such mixing is not only a matter of geography or ethnicity, but also a temporal, historical process; the fashions of the past return as “retro” styles. The rapid pace of blending styles and spreading fashions, as well as an increasing interest in exploring the genealogies of garments beyond the narrative of “wardrobe modernization,” deny a single, stark formulation of Muslim women’s dress. Individual innovation and personal styling have gained greater importance in bringing a different set of aesthetics and notions of beauty and religious modesty together harmoniously. Women make different combinations and choose particular styles for different occasions; the diversity of combinations expresses and relates to women’s multiple belongings and positions.

Retro trends are becoming a key part of cosmopolitan styles of Muslim dress. These trends push us to think about associations and similarities between tastes and preferences that belong to different epochs and localities; to some extent, they merge the aesthetics and norms of the past and the present. Continuities in both the forms and names of garments challenge the assumptions of “wardrobe modernization.” One striking retro trend is the increasing presence of the “ferace” in women’s wardrobes, an aspect of sartorial neo-Ottomanism. Although contemporary feraces are not very similar to the Ottoman feraces in terms of color or fabric, they are similar in form. In the Netherlands, these garments are called ferace in Turkish stores and “jilbab” in Morrocan-Dutch stores. Feraces are not the only garment to reemerge through retro trends; the fashionable, three-quarter-length, close-fitting overcoats of
the 1970s, worn with small headscarves, have also returned to the contemporary Turkish-Dutch tesettür scene.

Many transnational actors and objects have become part of and participated in my research: not only post-migrants and their wardrobes, but also the producers and sellers who have become part of the global tesettür market. Social events (festivals, concerts, conferences, trips to Turkey, etc.) organized by religious communities functions as nodal points in the circulation of actors, styles and fashions between Turkey and the Netherlands. Young tesettürlü women are costumers of global fashion stores such as Zara, Mango and H&M; tesettür producers in Turkey follow mainstream trends, diligently incorporating the fashions of the day, such as leopard prints, polka-dot patterns, and furs. In the Netherlands, clothing stores such as Manzaram not only consider tesettürlü women as their customers, but target Dutch costumers as well. In their catalogues, Turkish tesettür producers use covered and uncovered fashion models together in the same photo shoots. The increasing mobility of people and the global circulation of garments encourage and result in a mix of styles and tastes, which together produce novel Muslim appearances.

Wardrobes also bring together transnational elements, divergent aesthetic judgments, and a wide variety of garments in unexpected, sometimes contrasting ways. Again, I want to emphasize that the assumption of a strong contrast between sober, pious clothing, on one hand, and mainstream fashion, on the other, fails to comprehend what it means to look Muslim today. Such an assumption ignores how the construction of any individual wardrobe is necessarily informed by a wide variety of factors. These factors relate both to the present moment and the multiple modes of belonging that women experience, as well as to their memories and past relationships.

An investigation of the material aspects and the aesthetics of Muslim dress broadens the field of possible interpretations of what looking “Muslim” means. We can see this vividly in my analysis of the fabrics and shapes of headscarves preferred by women over time. Fashions in headscarves exhibit extraordinary chronological variation, from loosely-covering, white cotton scarves to smaller Atatürk scarves, from colorful satin scarves to more sophisticated silk scarves, and, finally, from çarşafs to cosmopolitan, rectangular shawls made of different fabrics in plain colors. In the Dutch setting, these shawls are ambiguous—they communicate easier with a wider audience. On the other hand, the Turkish headscarf still tends to be perceived as ethnically marked, and, consequently, remains a sign of the wearer’s unwillingness to mix with other Muslims migrant communities and integrate into Dutch society at large. However, wearing the same style of rectangular shawl in Turkey and in the
Netherlands may produce very different effects. While such a shawl is considered more cosmopolitan in the Dutch setting, in the Turkish tesettür scene this same shawl is perceived as an aesthetically unsophisticated garment with rural and elderly connotations.

Selecting a matching headscarf with a proper style of tying that fits with the rest of one’s outfit is a key aspect of managing one’s appearance and the impression that it makes. Furthermore, matching is also evidence of the successful merger of piety and fashion. As the narratives of young women illustrate, it is essential to know when, where, and in the presence of whom to wear a particular headscarf. But headscarves are also valued for reasons other than their aesthetic appeal. As small but mobile commodities, they are easily acquired, but they can be difficult to discard, especially when they were received as gifts or bought as souvenirs. Headscarves become collector’s items; as such they materialize the relations between the wearer and those who have contributed to the collection.

For many women, a headscarf collection is much more than a fashion statement or a marker of piety. Moreover, women not only see wearing a headscarf as a pious act; they also manage their entire tesettür appearance in accordance with certain understandings of modesty. They may take up multiple subject positions or selves; they selectively hide and reveal different forms of belonging related to categories of gender, generation, status, ethnicity, community, and professional attainment. With the proliferation and mixing of styles and fashions, it has become much more difficult to know what to wear in different contexts. In order to do so, innovation and common sense must work together.

This thesis is an account of a moment of transformation, which seems to be moving into two different directions in the Netherlands and Turkey. In the Netherlands, public debates and shifting policies related to Islam and immigrants have transformed the effects of looking visibly Muslim remarkably over the last decade. First, the migrant headscarf turned into an “ethnic” headscarf, before gradually becoming the “Islamic headscarf” in public discourse. In Turkey, on the other hand, the “rural headscarf” first turned into the “Islamic headscarf,” but in recent years being recognizably Muslim has begun to achieve legitimacy through a secular discourse based on the notion of tolerance towards different “lifestyles.” In Turkey, the headscarf is now considered less of a “threat” to the secular state, even if the consequences of the former headscarf ban in universities and the current employment inequalities experienced by tesettürlü women have yet to be fully addressed and reconciled. In the Netherlands, the headscarf has become a symbol of danger and threat in an atmosphere that is increasingly antagonistic toward Muslims. This moment of transformation is not characterized by the problematic divisions between “modern” and “traditional” or “rural” and “urban.” Rather,
Dutch politics itself has turned toward a more rigid construction of secularism that increasingly defines integration as assimilation. However, the stories of Turkish-Dutch women who are witnessing this transformation vividly illustrate an ongoing movement and shift in sartorial practices, which enables actors to articulate different tastes, notions of piety and modesty, and modalities of femininity. Personal innovations and the management of impressions and appearances now play a greater role in the construction of proper combinations of tastes, aesthetics and religious modesty in relation to different temporal and spatial contexts.