# Contesting Visibilities: Sartorial Strategies Among Muslim Women in Danish Media

Connie Carøe Christiansen
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# Contesting Visibilities: Sartorial Strategies Among Muslim Women in Danish Media

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*New media technologies and migration networks create a new situation for the Muslim population in Europe. During the past decade Muslims, usually descendants of migrants, have increasingly taken part in media debates in Danish national and interactive media. They blog on the Internet, write in newspapers and partake in televised panel debates. A significant share of these media activists are women and their reflections on clothing and appearance constitute the major part of my argument in this paper. I discuss the clothing style of eight women who identify as Muslim and who have attracted attention in different forms of media; written and visual mass media or individualised interactive media. Beginning with the concept of sartorial strategies, I argue that by entering the Danish media these women challenge what it means to be equal and available for social contact in a Danish public realm. Some do so by considering how to avoid being ascribed negative stereotypes in everyday interaction and by media audiences, and others by choosing a distinct Islamic style of clothing, consequently their visibility as Muslim women is contested. In other words for some, subtle ways of communicating the new presence of active Muslim women in the media is the response, whereas others communicate this presence more distinctly. These strategies constitute a form of conscious impression management, revealing that Muslim women enter the Danish media with caution. Thus, wearing Islamic fashion is a form of micro-politics, a level of politics usually ignored in discussions of Islam in Europe.*

*Keywords: Denmark; Fashion; Imagined Sameness; Impression Management; Islam in Europe; Media; Micro-politics; Muslim Women; Sartorial*

Currently, on the streets of many European cities, in national and international media and on fashion catwalks, an increasing diversity in the style of clothing, which appeals to fashion-conscious and practising Muslim women, can be observed. This style can loosely be termed Islamic fashion, denoting a style of clothing that seeks to appear attractive and at the same time match an Islamic moral code or aesthetics (Koskennurmi-Sivonen *et al.* 2004, Akou 2007, Moors and Tarlo 2007, Moors 2009).

In Europe, Africa and the Middle East there are strong disagreements among Muslims about what is appropriate as a Muslim woman's clothing. These disagreements concern, for example, the extent to which it covers body parts, the extent to which it reveals the shape of the body and the extent to which it attracts attention, and lead to fashion styles that in various degrees involve or combine covering body skin and hair, loose fit or dim colours. In combination these observations raise the issue of what is communicated in a fashionable Islamic clothing style; does Islamic fashion make a difference for the Muslims in a European context? And if so, what kind of difference?

By asking these questions I want to investigate how Islamic fashion forms part of Muslim women's active participation in Danish public life. Do the ways Muslim women manage their appearance in the Danish media make a difference for their social interactions in daily life? Islamic fashion as a commercial style with global outreach draws on fashion items from different fashion systems, anti-fashion included (Tarlo 2010), and partly for this reason it provokes and furthers the disagreements about Muslim women's dress. The building of an Islamic subjectivity is an important aspect of these clothing styles (Göle 2002, Christiansen 2003, Mahmood 2005, Jouili 2009), and looking at the communicative aspects of clothing, as perceived by the women, can further our understanding of how Islamic female subjects challenge European publics. Moreover, in the context of Danish media, I argue that the disagreements over, or diversity of, Muslim women's clothing have a bearing on strategies of Muslim women in terms of relations vis-à-vis the non-Muslim majority population.

The European mediascape is increasingly characterised by an active Muslim audience (Cherribi 2001, Allievi and Nielsen 2002, Eickelman and Anderson 2003), reflecting migration from Muslim majority countries to Europe combined with the transnational character of media audiences as a consequence of new media technologies. Although the terrorist tangent of contemporary Islamism claims the larger share of attention, another tangent characterised by a cultural orientation interacts with a secular public in order to find a space for Islam in public including the fields of the market and consumerism (Göle 2002, Göle and Ammann 2006). Contemporary Islamism in Muslim majority societies but also in Europe,

> . . . seeks to make religious difference visible in public through micro-practices such as veiling in schools, the construction of mosques in Europe, gender segregation in public transport, food 'taboos' etc. (Göle and Ammann 2006: 3)

Islamic fashion should be placed in line with these micro-practices which unwittingly reveal that Muslim women are contesting visibility in the public sphere. Wearing Islamic fashion constitutes in this perspective a form of micro-politics, a level of politics which is usually ignored in discussions of Islam in Europe (Nökel 2006). The media, especially new interactive media, offer an arena for the display of such politics.

Like elsewhere in Europe, the debate among Muslims in the Danish context is seconded by a media debate on Islam and again like elsewhere (Gullestad 2002b: 45) it is highly politicised (Hussain 2000, Andreassen 2007). The identification of Muslim perpetrators behind the attack on the twin towers in New York in 2001 and on the London Underground in 2005 has increased the pressure on the Muslim population in Europe. Can wearing Islamic fashion in the media combine with asserting oneself as a Muslim in a Europe attentive to such threats? In 2006, the cartoon crisis which originated with a number of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed published in Danish daily, *Morgenavisen Jyllands Posten*, brought Muslims to the fore of media debates in Denmark as well as in international media.

## Muslim Women in the Danish Media

Even though there have been no terrorist attacks within Danish territory, nor Muslim perpetrators, in the twenty-first-century Danish media context Muslims are often perceived as a threat. From a Danish perspective, the most remarkable facet of the cartoons incident was that it gained reactions from Muslims globally, some of them violent and directed at Danish representations in the Middle East as well as in Asia. Muslims in Denmark were divided on the issue, but a number of Imams in Denmark were dubbed as traitors, and signalled out as having created the furore by drawing the attention of the Muslims of the world to the cartoons.[1]

For the past decade Muslim women's headscarf (or *hijab*) has been a recurring news topic in Denmark, borrowing arguments about neutrality from the French debate, and about Muslim women's oppression from feminist scholarship, but mirroring primarily the Dutch debate in its focus on labour market functions (Cherribi 2001: 196–197). Instead of paying attention to the properties of the *hijab* as a consumer item on a par with other clothing items, various commentators in the Danish news media have asked if a woman can wear a *hijab* in a number of professions, spanning from a supermarket cashier, a day-care worker, a member of the Danish parliament and most recently a judge. The most vociferous debaters have either been of feminist or right-wing viewpoints – or combinations of these. In the spring of 2008 this debate gained new vigour, and this time public figures from the whole political spectrum agreed that the *hijab* is not only the sign of a Muslim woman, but also of an oppressed woman, a statement which none of them found any need to qualify.[2] In May a headscarf contest to elect the most beautifully styled headscarf was launched by an online community from the national and public service television station, Danmarks Radio, and shortly after the first juridical initiative addressing Muslim women's headscarf in Denmark was issued; a controversial law

proposal from the government and its supporting party, Danish People's Party as well as the Social democrats, stipulating that judges cannot wear religious symbols.[3] This proposal came into law in the summer of 2009. That very summer, the coalition government party, the Conservatives, proposed yet another law to forbid the wearing of '*burka*' or *niqab* in public – a proposal that the party had to withdraw since it proved to be against the Danish constitution.

During the past decade self-identified Muslims, not easily placed in any ethnic category by media consumers, have taken part in debates in the Danish national and interactive media. They blog on the Internet, write in newspapers and participate in televised panel debates. A considerable share of these media activists are women and their reflections on clothing and appearance constitute the major part of the material underlying my argument in this paper. I discuss the clothing style or sartorial practices (Moors and Tarlo 2007: 134) of eight women aged 17–36 who all view themselves as Muslims, and who have attracted attention in different forms of media – written or visual mass media or individualised interactive media.[4] They have not been chosen as a sample, rather, they simply constitute the women who live in Denmark and have repeatedly appeared in the media as visibly Muslim (Tarlo 2010). The women all take part in some kind of activism connected to their Muslim identity, and some of them actively took part in the controversies of the cartoon crisis but in different functions.[5] Since the activists often belong to the same organisations and circles, some of the women I interviewed know each other and in my conversations with them, they refer to each other. Among them are writers, a singer, a lawyer, an actress and, with the exception of the singer (Jasmin), they have all figured in the media as public debaters. They are not equally known among Danish media audiences, but for all of them their clothing practices form part of their media strategies, which does not necessarily mean that they wear a *hijab*. Here I focus on Helen (a blogger), Safira (a blogger and political activist) and Sherin (a public debater and writer). In my interviews I encouraged the women to reflect upon their own sartorial practices. In this approach I have been inspired by the methodology of Tarlo (2007: 143) who refers to "sartorial biographies" as a way of "tracing the processes, experiences, and reasoning behind their clothing choices". The interviews were conducted in private homes, in cafés, at university and so on, and I recorded each of them for later transcription.

Nonetheless, the usually smiling face of the left-wing politician Asmaa Abdol-Hamid has appeared so often in the media that she is undoubtedly the Muslim woman most present in the Danish media in history, especially when she ran for the national parliament in 2007. She did not succeed in the elections, but became the substitute for the leader of the Unity List in parliament. Generally, she is represented as controversial, occasionally ridiculed, for example, as 'the talking headscarf'. In 2006, 23 years old, she made herself well known among media consumers in Denmark as a television host on a national channel. The clothing style of Abdol-Hamid is in line with many other young *hijabis*.[6] She is careful about the way she dresses, how the colours match, and pays attention to little details that are currently

in fashion among these women (such as wearing a thin crochet scarf on top of an inner scarf made of very light but non-transparent fabric). Often she wears a blazer and an ankle-long skirt, alternately a *jilbab* (a long and loose dress on top of trousers) occasionally styled as a Moroccan *jelleba* (with embroideries and a hat hanging from the back of her neck). She never wears jeans or trousers alone or anything shorter. Her *hijab* is large, covering neck and breast and often in bright colours. Photographs of Asmaa in a deep red coloured *hijab* has often accompanied articles about her (revealing not only that she is a Muslim but also a socialist?). In other words, she is visible as a Muslim, a media figure, and the fact that she is Muslim is something which her political opponents and occasionally fellow party members note in writing and speech. The newspaper, *Information*, published a piece in which Asmaa explained her view on Danish morality and liberal attitudes, and a reader commented:

> As far as I am concerned, Asmaa A-H can dress as she likes – shake hands/avoid shaking hands, whenever she wants to. The only thing is that it has nothing to do with socialism and with what the Unity List represents (*Information* [Online] 2009, *author's translation*)

Asmaa Abdol-Hamid is distinct in her clothing style and this style is sometimes regarded as provocative and exposes her to critique. I argue that the extreme media scrutiny of Asmaa is not only due to her viewpoints, regarded as controversial in the news media – for example, she considers Danish soldiers in Iraq as occupants, rather than, as the official argument goes, part of an aid effort – but also her clothing style, most notably her *hijab*, and mode of interaction more generally which is informed by her faith. One of the topics debated has been the fact that Asmaa does not shake hands with men. As a politician Asmaa Abdol-Hamid has tried – with little success – to steer the media focus away from her Muslim style and comportment and towards her political viewpoints. It is for this reason, I believe, that Asmaa was not interested in actively taking part in this study which centres on a subject that she already finds too personal and harmful for her political career.

According to the interviews conducted, the women select their style of clothing in dialogue with the requirements of clothing that they find in their religion, with fashion trends and with their own taste and likings. In these considerations they correspond with other Muslim women (Moors and Tarlo 2007), but some try to make sure that their clothing does not intimidate or seem appalling to others by appearing 'too Muslim', specifically in the eyes of non-Muslims. This is a point on which these women are to be distinguished from Islamic activists who generally do not express a willingness to change their behaviour or dress in order to oblige people in their surroundings. Another point is that among Islamic activists, or Islamists, a change of clothing is accompanied by a change of conduct (Christiansen 1999, 2003). Accordingly, some of the women interviewed, Sherin, Helen and Shabana, all see themselves as improved versions of their former selves. I argue that this sensitivity towards ones surroundings constitutes one of the core issues for understanding the differences in style among Islamic fashion consumers in Denmark. As a result, the

emphasis here is not only on the reasoning behind clothing choices but also on how style of social interaction intersects with these choices; and for this reason I refer to 'sartorial strategies'. With this concept in mind, I seek to combine an investigation of how the micro-politics of active Muslims are changing a modern European public (Göle 2000, 2002, Göle and Ammann 2006) with insights gained from Islamic fashion studies, which examines the extent to which Islamic fashion constitutes an alternative fashion system that builds on an Islamic ethics (Akou 2007, Moors and Tarlo 2007, Moors 2009, Tarlo 2010), but less preoccupied with fashion as an inherent part of micro-politics that are enabling and at least potentially more profoundly changing the conditions of being Muslim in European societies.

## Sartorial Strategies

For analytical purposes it is useful to contrast a clothing style that openly integrates features from the Western fashion system and is intended to usurp the ambiguity of clothing signals with a style that tends towards long skirts, large *hijabs* and a full covering of arms and legs and is therefore intended, unequivocally, to signal a distinct Muslim identity. In the ambiguous type of style,[7] the emphasis is on being fashionable, whereas the distinct alternative, mentioned above, tends towards anti-fashion. Nevertheless, both types of style depend on the Western fashion system. In European contexts, garments like *abaya* (long dress) and *niqab* (face-veil), for women, can signal a political agenda or the opinion that one's Muslim identity must be mirrored in daily and mundane practices, for men a trimmed beard, the *keffiyeh* (the scarf which became the Palestinian national symbol) or *kufi* (cap) may signal the same.[8] Anyhow, the specific political agenda of the wearer is, needless to say, not clear from these clothing items and some women may switch from one to the other strategy – or move from a phase in which the distinct Muslim style is emphasised to another in which an ambiguous one is presented. I do not wish to imply, however, that an ambiguous Muslim style is somehow a better choice than a distinct style of Muslim dress.[9] Still, distinctions are made on the basis of style and these differences have a bearing on inter-Muslim relations.

Clothes constitute goods for consumption and goods communicate information about the consumers (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). But other consumers may understand that communication in unintended ways – or phrased differently, goods do not usually communicate in an unambiguous way. Since consumption is practised it involves *style*, meaning, a specific way to consume (Christiansen forthcoming) – crudely put, the style of your consumption is a source of information about the kind of person you are. According to Douglas and Isherwood (1979), this is the way that goods facilitate a cognitive classification according to which co-consumers place the individual consumer in social and cultural categories.

Nonetheless, some individuals hope to send a clear message about their conviction as a Muslim woman, and for these women the problem becomes how to convey this message clearly. 'Impression management', Goffman's now classical term (1959) for

the way that social actors take reactions to their own actions into consideration, seems relevant for this discussion and therefore supplements the approach of consumption as a communicative practice. To frame and explain sartorial practices among the Muslim women approached in this study, the consumption of Islamic styled clothing is viewed as a communicating practice. Style of clothing and the staging of self are intimately interwoven (Moors 2006), and the Muslim women interviewed in this study are aware of this communicative capacity.

Just like Goffman, Gullestad (1992), especially, is preoccupied with the interplay between individual personality, micro-practices and society, but more particularly with the way that 'others' are constructed. In a number of studies Gullestad develops the idea of 'imagined sameness'; based on a Scandinavian version of egalitarianism (1984, 1992, 2002a). She argues that although this cultural scheme can be found in all of Europe, the idea that people need to be the *same* in order to be *equal* is particularly strong in Scandinavian countries. And for people to interact and establish a closer kind of relationship, they need to be able to regard each other as equal. For this reason people develop an expanded idea about same kind, and the relevant others who are able to support and confirm identities as the same are those who can be put on this formula of 'imagined sameness'. The result, she maintains, is a style of interaction that focuses on sameness (Gullestad 2002b: 47). Consequently, the ones who are regarded as 'the same' are those that one is able to have friendship relations with, whereas the ones who are regarded as too different ('*for forskjellige*' is the Norwegian term) are those to be avoided. The latter are thus excluded as persons one is able to maintain close relations with, and in interaction with them, one needs to develop strategies of avoidance.

Thus, Gullestad (1992: 193) proposes "symbolic fences" as shorthand for this style of interaction or strategy. Particular competencies and sensibilities to one's surroundings are needed to signal the kind of ambiguity that allows limited contact with others *and* marks a particular identity; setting up subtle social boundaries. While a number of differences mark the field of Islamic fashion compared to the neighbourhood studies conducted by Gullestad, I argue that transferring these insights to the micro-practices among Muslim women in Danish society, brings forth an analytical distinction between an ambiguous dress and a fashion style that marks clear social boundaries (symbolic fences) between 'Muslim' and non-Muslim. Both clothing styles mark symbolic fences in everyday interaction, but the distinct Muslim (easily recognisable as 'Muslim') is intended to be 'anti-fashion' or bold about the inherent Otherness of a Muslim in Danish society. Not all women are easily placed as either distinct or ambiguous in their style of clothing. For Jasmin, for instance, who is an 18-year-old R & B/rap/pop singer, her only consideration when deciding what to wear is that she find the clothes beautiful or appealing to herself (interview, May 2008). She featured in a Saturday night entertainment programme on national TV. The show was a choir contest and Jasmin was one of the lead singers, in a distinct light blue glitter *hijab* that matched her outfit. A woman performing in *hijab* on Danish Saturday night entertainment is certainly a novelty, but it did not provoke any

discussion from the usual commentators. In contrast, I suggest that Asmaa Abdol-Hamid appears as 'too different' to be contained in the 'imagined same' in the view of many media consumers. According to Gullestad, Asmaa makes herself inaccessible to these media consumers.

## Style and Social Interaction

Even though some of the women interviewed are reluctant to call their style of clothing 'fashion', for the majority, no matter how strong they are in their faith, the style they have chosen is based on aesthetic reflection; they wear the clothes they wear because they like them. Some prefer clothes that are simple or not decorated too much while others want glimmer with bright colours and transparent, light fabrics. Along with the aesthetic choice, two other forms of reflection follow: is the clothing in accordance with this person's perception of covering and the principle of not attracting attention? And is the clothing in certain contexts repelling or provoking? To some, the last consideration takes centre stage, and I argue that the result is a style that emphasises ambiguity rather than a distinct Muslim style.

### Sensitive and Accessible

The ambiguous style attracts women who want to play with their Muslim identity – like one respondent, Helen, a blogger, Muslim activist and student of medicine, who claimed that she is satisfied when patients ask her if her headscarf is Muslim or just fashion. I will examine Helen's style further below, but first I would like to discuss a few other examples of women who entered the Danish media displaying this type of style. These women either directly declare that they do not like distinct Muslim clothes, or they simply point out that they prefer to combine *hijab* with mainstream fashion, or that they have created their own particular style, from shopping abroad or by buying second-hand clothes. First, 25-year-old Shabana, who published a book on the dialogues that she had had with her journalist neighbour (Bom and Motlani 2006), told me that she pities the children of Pakistani parents that she sometimes sees around Copenhagen; she thinks that the parents ought not to let them wear such traditional clothing [shalwar khamiz] in their everyday lives in Denmark. With an equal regard for the way that style of clothing is apprehended by her surroundings, she makes sure not to wear black; Shabana is convinced that this colour engenders images of Islamic extremism with the people she encounters. Consequently, she prefers pastel colours:

> In fact nothing is wrong with black, but I avoid wearing black, because I think that too much in the negative is related to black, especially among Danes. I prefer that they are open to meet me, instead of thinking, oh, she is a typical Islamist. (Interview, June 2007)

Shabana is keenly aware of the way that dress and appearance may create invisible fences between people. This is in fact what she in her sartorial practices is trying to avoid without compromising what she believes is required by her faith.

Much in the same manner, Suher manages her clothing and attempts to mitigate the way that it signals 'Muslim woman'. Suher has repeatedly appeared in television documentaries and news reports about 'Muslim girls who wear the headscarf'. Studying medicine, 29-year-old Suher points out, gives you a specific ability to focus on the patient, rather than on yourself: Suher uses this technique whenever a patient pays attention to her headscarf. To complement the technique, or it could be said, conscious impression management, Suher always wears a white-coloured *hijab* so that it matches the white coat. Moreover, Suher is annoyed that it is not in fashion to wear long skirts, since she is tired of always wearing jeans and a tunic: "I try to follow fashion trends", she states.

A final example is Khadije who is 20 years old and already an experienced actor having appeared in movies and television films usually playing 'the girl with the headscarf'. She too prefers to follow fashion trends, such as tunic and jeans, and is trying to avoid tight clothes that would reveal her body shape. Khadije says: "I just love black but it is associated with an oppressed Muslim woman."

Helen, 25 years old, is a central figure in bringing a discussion of Islamic fashion to Denmark. On her blog she regularly shows Islamic fashion, for example, by featuring and commenting on catwalk pictures from Arabic and European centres of fashion. For Helen, her style is a deliberate choice:

> That long dress, I just think that it means more distance when you show that you belong to a particular culture. You associate Arabic culture and then you think of other things, also attached to Arabic culture, the suppression of women, for instance. (Interview, November 2007)

Thus on her blog she has one post on the *burkini* (Islamic swimwear), another showing how the latest collection of Dolce & Gabbana includes models who wear a headscarf in retro-style, and further a report from an event – a gay party arranged by an ethnic association – for which the dress code was *burka*. She describes her own style as deliberately playful and colourful:

> I take a little from here and there, different fashion stores. Sometimes I wear a considerable variety of colors, just to show that Islam is not such a dead-religion as is made of it – why doesn't everybody wear white, why isn't it white, why must everything be black? – I wear what I am, classic and sporty. I like to see how it moves; I keep an eye on design ... I like the Latino-look, long dresses, long at the back and short in the front – long and flowing, sort of gypsy style, long earrings. (Interview, November 2007)

Helen was only three when she came to Denmark with her family as refugees from Iran. A few years ago she had an experience that convinced her that she needed to pay more attention to Islam – not the *Shia* version found in the homeland of her parents,

but the *Sunni* version dominant among Muslim student activists in Denmark. Helen argues that the idea of a Muslim woman's clothing is not to cover one's femininity, and she uses a broad notion of veiling:

> With veiling I mean headscarf and the covering. If one really would cover one's femininity, I suppose one would have to cover one's face as well, but He doesn't say so.

For Helen this argument makes it clear that Muslim faith and femininity in clothing style can be combined. Moreover, she is clear that she is, on the one hand, a modern woman and on the other a Muslim:

> I like to demonstrate modernity, the fact that my religion is very dynamic compared to how it is represented by the media and others. That is why I have adopted it [the headscarf], I am myself a dynamic person, it has to fit with the person I am.

Helen agrees that many Muslim women probably are affected by what sometimes feels like harassment against them (interview in the youth/fashion magazine, *Sirene* 2008). For Helen this means that she needs to manage how she is perceived:

> I feel that I am always in focus and need to keep smiling to appear extra obliging to prove that I am not the way people think. It is sometimes strenuous, especially if one is having a hard day. (*Sirene* 2008)

Helen seems to apply impression management as a conscious strategy to make her available for contact – in one word accessible (Gullestad 1992: 193). She is clearly concerned with her appearance, and in her everyday encounters with non-Muslims she seeks to create bridges – or contact. Helen's approach to Islamic fashion can be readily explained as an ambiguous Islamic style, seeking to establish subtle borders or symbolic fences between Muslims and non-Muslims. In fact, Helen's explicit objective is to be accepted as Danish:

> They often think that I am against Danish culture when I veil. My life has been very Danish. I am conscious about Danish culture. (Interview, November 2007)

As a media figure she is the epitome of a sartorial strategy that appropriates ambiguity to become accessible.

### Sensitive and Marking Social Boundaries

Safia, aged 36, is a woman with contradictory or at least unusual combinations of activities. Safia's father was born in Libya. Her mother is German, and Safia was born in Germany. She came to Denmark when she was eight years old because her mother married a Danish man. After primary school she went to Libya and had one year of military training because she wanted to become a pilot. She returned to Denmark

and later became the first Muslim in Denmark to obtain a full education as a lawyer. This education she has used more in her activism than in her profession. She assisted in the defence of those accused of the Lockerbie airplane crash, and recently she responded to the proposed law banning judges from wearing religious symbols.

> I did this for The Common Muslim Council [a Danish Muslim umbrella organisation], and what I did was to point out that the hijab is not a religious sign, there is no half moon or anything attached to it, so it is but a piece of clothing. Therefore, banning it is an attack on women's modesty, and that is what I told the parliamentary delegation. (Interview, February 2009)

She works for many causes, for example, Danish-Muslim Aid. Safia has many talents but writing is something she has always done. As a divorced mother of two children, she earns an income as a freelance writer, but more so as a school teacher and from the estate property that she owns. She has published books, for example, a cook book and a book about a Danish explorer who travelled to Libya.

Recently Safia has kept a low profile. A few years ago she joined the Conservative party and quickly became a member of its Copenhagen board. On her blog Safia manipulated a picture of some of her opponents in the literary world – so-called Islam-critics. They appeared wearing Nazi symbols with Ayaan Hirsi between them and a picture of Goebbels on the wall. This, along with accusations that she sympathises with historical revisionists (rejecting the Holocaust) incited so much protest in the news media that she had to leave the party. At the time of this incident she did not wear a *hijab*, and in the photograph that was circulated in the media during this period, Safia's long and voluminous hair hangs loosely around her head. When she finally decided to wear the *hijab*, only one and a half years ago, she found it much easier than expected. The hostile reactions that she anticipated never actually occurred, even when she looked very firmly into the eyes of people she was passing in the street; people just continued, taking no notice of her *hijab*. Safia reflects, "If I had known that wearing the hijab would be that easy, I would probably have started long ago."

Safia is not much interested in clothing; she does not like spending on her clothing so she buys it in second-hand shops or abroad. Thus, she bought 30 scarves the last time she went to Egypt; they are much too costly in Denmark, she finds. Mostly she wears trousers and a tunic but on Fridays she puts on an *abaya* because she likes to mark Friday as a special day of the week.

In contrast to Safia, Sherin considers her clothing carefully, and like Jasmin the singer, clothes represent a kind of passion for her. Her father is from Syria and her mother from Finland, but she grew up in a Copenhagen suburb with both her parents (interview, December 2007). A few years ago she established the association called 'Critical Muslims' together with a scholar studying Sufism. This was the point at which she, for the first time, attracted attention in the media. Sherin has a university degree in the history of religion, and follows what she terms a *Sufi* path. She represents a Muslim voice, more often in the intellectual media, than in the most

popular parts of the press, but she has often played a direct role in public disagreements, for instance, about Islam and terrorism or about the possibilities of a combination of Islamic faith and democratic rule. Sherin is also a writer, and in 2006 she published a book called *Islam and Reconciliation* (published in Danish, Khankan 2006), which was, in part a personal narrative, in part a discussion of a European Sufi way of life. The book forwards an argument for placing Islam in the European public sphere (inspired by Tariq Ramadan) along with a personal account of her own involvement with Sufi versions of Islam:

> I like the word journey; it is probably a kind of Sufi term that I have adopted. I consider my life a journey, and I like the word 'journey', because it implies that there is no final goal and the fact that one has not reached one's final goal, that one is on-going. I do not feel that I have reached a definite destination – I am at home, I feel at home here where I am in Denmark, but also in Syria and in Finland. That thing, journey, indicates that I am in the midst of something, also when it comes to Islam, the journey that I started when I began to actively relate to Islam. (Interview, December 2007)

She combines this Sufi orientation with efforts to make Muslim women more visible in public life, in terms of participating in public debates (with frequent appearances in televised debates, though most often on the national channel, which addresses the well educated) but also in terms of clothing, an issue on which she has a very deliberate stance. Willingly she talks about her fascination:

> But my clothes have never been static; I like to mix genres too. Even before I married a man with Pakistani roots, I wore Pakistani clothing, so it is not something that comes from him, I have always liked this layer-upon-layer, that is very beautiful, I think [–] that you wear trousers and then something which is long on top of the trousers and a scarf which is sort of hanging. I like that style, it always attracted me, I always found it very graceful.

Sherin is not convinced that a Muslim woman is obliged to wear a *hijab*, and when she enters a shop (usually in Syria) to buy a *galabiya*, she tells the shop assistant that she would like one in a size 14, meaning that she prefers it tight rather than loose.

> But I feel that my boundaries of modesty have been moved. Now, rather, it has become a question about God watching me all the time, meaning that it is not for others, but rather connected to my relationship with God.

During her studies she conducted fieldwork in a Sufi environment in Syria and it was during this time that she seriously considered adopting the *hijab*. Today she recognises that a Muslim woman should be modest, resulting in a more flexible and context-based approach to wearing the *hijab*:

> For instance when I am out giving talks I am always completely covered, but I do not wear a headscarf. Today I only wear a headscarf when I perform the prayer or if

I am in the mosque. Sometimes, when I give a talk I may put on the headscarf, depending on context, but I am not convinced that covering one's hair is an obligation for me as a Muslim woman. I think it is an obligation for me to be modest, to be decent and demonstrate modesty.

The result is that Sherin is highly reflexive about her clothing and tries to manage the impressions they receive. This flexibility she ascribes to her *Sufi* inspiration. It does not however, necessarily mean that she attempts to approach a non-Muslim audience; on some occasions it is her intention to shock and shake prejudices about Muslim women's clothing:

Now, I told you that I am very conscious about adapting, when I know that I am going to a Muslim gathering. But I also like to break conventions, I also like the other way around. If for example I have been invited to join a specific occasion – such as in Deadline (a news program) to which I have been invited many times – and then wear a galabiya – taking a little step to the side and demonstrate that you can be a modern Muslim woman and wear a galabiya – breaking people's imaginations and opening people's eyes ...

Sensitivity towards the reactions of people in one's audience as a consumer of Islamic fashion does not necessarily motivate someone to become more accessible: not even if, like in this case, Sherin apprehends that some may feel offended by a distinct Muslim outfit. Safia and Sherin hardly see their own clothing style as 'Islamic fashion'. Both expect that their appearances evoke reactions, but this does not always mean that they seek to blur the image of a Muslim woman.

## Islamic Fashion as a Tool for Impression Management

Accepting Goffman's dramaturgical approach to social life, impression management is not exclusive to women wearing Islamic styled clothing, but rather a task that we must all perform in order to optimise our social interactions. Impressions are not always controlled by the social actor. In Goffman's terms, "an event" which is "... expressively incompatible with this fostered impression" may occur and "the situation may cease to be defined, previous positions may become no longer tenable and participants may find themselves without a charted course of action" (Goffman 1959: 235). Similarly, for those wearing Islamic fashion, there is a limit on impression management; one cannot necessarily fully control the way that the style of one's clothing is read and understood by other social actors, let alone media consumers. In contrast to Goffman, Gullestad elaborates the techniques that social actors must apply in order to administer and control the impressions they have of others, or at least attempt to control them. Thus women wearing Islamic fashion elaborate more or less subtle sartorial strategies that are intended to regulate impressions and social interaction. The interviewed women, however, not only attempt to regulate impressions, these attempts also form part of their self-representations. Thus,

impression management emerges in the interviews; in the women's representations of themselves, whether they style their clothing as distinctly or as ambiguously Islamic.

For some women, it is more important to preserve ambiguity in their style of dress rather than invoke a clear image of being a Muslim woman. As with other kinds of goods, goods that are styled as Islamic invite play; the young women who style their clothes as Islamic play with signals and create subtleties. Thus *Sherin* consciously tries to shake prejudices whereas *Jasmin* purely speaks about what she likes, she presents an aesthetic evaluation as the basis of her clothing choices. Even though certain styles such as 'Arabic' or 'Turkish' form part of Muslim women's sartorial practices, a Muslim woman's belongings cannot be determined simply from a reading of her clothing. Play with ethnic, religious and national belonging in clothing is instead to be expected, as with Sherin who is fascinated with 'the Pakistani look'. This sort of play is part of ambiguous as well as distinct Muslim sartorial strategies among Muslim women on the Copenhagen scene. As such it does not represent a distinction between 'cosmopolitans' (following Western fashion trends) and parochial (or 'ethnic') versions of Muslim clothing; as observed by Akou, "originally items of ethnic dress that were associated with a particular country or group of people – have now spread throughout the Islamic world" (2007: 405) – and beyond, I would like to add. Nonetheless, different sartorial strategies for entering the Danish public can still be identified. When women like Helen, Khadije and Shabana are attracted by ambiguous sartorial strategies and employ symbolic fences when they appear in the media, they reveal that they find it important to make themselves socially accessible to people otherwise they might keep their distance. In contrast, other women like Asmaa Abdol-Hamid seek to transmit a clear image of themselves as Muslim women. Even if the women are sensitive to the effect that this style has on their surroundings – as with Sherin or Safia – unambiguous signals that denote a Muslim woman are still maintained: in terms of a conscious anti-fashion style, with an emphasis on a dress code informed by their religion.

The way they combine control of impressions with their personal reflections, reveals, on the one hand, their attempt to be pious Muslims and, on the other, their contribution to the ongoing debate about what characterises 'real' or 'correct' clothing for a Muslim woman (Moors and Tarlo 2007: 134; see also Christiansen 2003, Mahmood 2005). Yet according to the women interviewed, who are visibly Muslim and active in the Danish media, breaking the conventional, often prejudiced image of what it means to be a Muslim woman is also an objective. This is the aspect of Islamic fashion that the concept of sartorial strategies puts to the fore. It is not particular to those wearing Islamic fashion in Denmark; thus the celebrated American Afghani designer of Islamic fashion, Rabiz Z. stated:

> I want to make modesty look beautiful and also show a more beautiful side of Islam in media . . . I want my designs to be a bridge between practicing Muslims and non-practicing. (in Haagerup 2008)

How does Islamic fashion then make a difference for Muslim women when they manage their public appearance in Denmark? It seems that the lesson learned from the case of Asmaa Abdol-Hamid is that marking distinct boundaries of belonging between Muslim and non-Muslims is controversial for a Danish media audience, whereas marking such boundaries in subtle ways may facilitate not only contact and interaction, but also inclusion in the 'imagined same'. This would be the ultimate goal of the ambiguous style of Islamic fashion. Notwithstanding 9/11 and the attacks in Madrid and London one should, just like Talal Asad, not be surprised that misrepresentation occurs, also in the Danish media sphere:

> I take it for granted that in Europe today Muslims are often misrepresented in the media and discriminated against by non-Muslims. (Asad 2002: 209)

Among the background of historical narratives, emphasising Christian and post-Christian identities, Europe has defined itself as a civilisation in opposition to an Islamic civilisation, seen to be essentially antagonistic to Christians. Is 'Muslim' consequently always external to Europe? The modern space of a Europe which is anxious about Muslims within and outside of its borders is a space of "abundant consumer choice and optional life-styles" (Asad 2002: 227). This observation is relevant for a discussion of Islamic fashion and its significance.

Both the ambiguous type of style building bridges to non-Muslims and the distinct style (advertently or inadvertently) setting up more manifest symbolic fences, constitute sartorial strategies that create an aesthetics: a taste for clothes based on an Islamic moral code and thereby the media public is challenged as a secular sphere (Göle 2000: 115). Although the women attracted to each type of style do not interpret the Islamic moral code in the same way, the differing sartorial strategies are perhaps most telling of the kind of public that these women are entering.

## Contesting the visibility of Muslim Women in the European Public

In many ways, the *umma* is much more visible in Europe than in the countries of origin (Allievi 2002: 22). So is their internal differentiation. New media technologies and easier access to other means of communication have significantly changed the minority situation for Muslims in Europe in terms of networks and in terms of emerging passive, but also active media audiences (Allievi 2002: 12). Muslim women are a recent phenomenon in the Danish public, but even more so are Muslim women who are not just represented as objects but actively influencing the way that Muslim women are represented in the Danish media. Moreover, new and interactive media, such as the Internet, challenges any clear distinction between private and public spheres (Anderson 2003), and Islamic fashion thrives on the erasure of these spaces. Islamic fashion is based on the assumption that women belong in the public sphere,

thus opening for investigation the question of what constitutes a professional, middle-class life for a Muslim woman (Anderson 2003: 889).

The impression management emerging in both types of sartorial strategies discussed, reveals that Muslim women in the public realm of Danish media are under pressure; and only cautiously and consciously take steps to enter this and other public domains at the same time testing their visibility as Muslim. The women who wear Islamic fashion develop different strategies in their style to demonstrate what a Muslim woman may also be: some emphasise that their choice of style is based on current mainstream fashion while others combine their personal assertive-ness with a distinct Islamic clothing style, risking ridicule.

The current phase of Islamism may be oriented towards weaving Islam into the cultural and social fabric rather than towards ideology and radical politics; this does not, however, mean that it is not political (Göle and Ammann 2006: 5). The staging of self and the clothing style which sustains this process is a highly political issue, since it involves managing relations between Muslim immigrants and their receiving society. In discourses Muslim women have been placed centre stage for managing this relation (Gullestad 2002a: 32). Taken from Muslim majority contexts, Moors suggests a 'politics of presence', as a notion of engagement in the public sphere, signifying that who count as agents in this sphere is always a contested issue (Moors 2006: 121), whereas Bayat suggests 'the power of presence' as indicative for non-movement, everyday activism. Bayat defines this power as:

> . . . the assertion of collective will in spite of all odds, by refusing to exit, circumventing the constraints, and discovering new spaces of freedom to make oneself heard, seen and felt. (2007: 161)

The emergence of Islamic fashion indicates that Muslim women have to be contended with in public: however not, in order to formulate a common Muslim women's agenda, but on the contrary, by employing multiple strategies and activism, to be heard, seen and felt. This in spite of the fact that visibility as a Muslim woman is not always welcomed by these publics. The sartorial strategies discussed here cannot provide a full picture of why subtle ways of communicating this presence is for some the response, whereas for others it is to maintain distinct boundaries. They should be discussed in conjunction with other spheres of activities, such as the political activism, education and profession of the women.

However, along with those Muslim women who in their clothing style prefer to mitigate the signals denoting Islam, it may be correct to assume that a distinct Islamic style creates distance and separation, rather than mediating between Muslims and non-Muslims. If in Europe, as Asad has it, each group has constituted itself as a group through its own narratives, such narratives should be just one narrative among the many that together form a European identity, rather than representing a religious minority (Asad 2002: 223). If this vision of mulitiplicity is maintained and European

publics open up their margins, it seems at least just as likely that a style of distinct Islamic clothing – compared with a fashion style that consciously mediates – can sustain such a development.

## Notes

[1]  See the article in *Middle East Quarterly* (Ammitzböll and Vidino 2007) by a *Jyllands Posten* journalist, taking sides with the paper's claim that the Imams are to blame for creating the furore.

[2]  See the blog by Karen M. Larsen, a teacher of religion and former novice in a convent: "The Fuss about Asmaa Abdol-Hamid". http://www.teologinet.dk/blog/index.php/karen/2007/04/25/baladen_om_asmaa_abdol_hamid. The president of Women for Freedom gave similar statements to the Danish national newspaper, *Politiken*, on 3 July 2008 (www.politiken.dk), and finally Lone Nørgaard, also a Danish feminist, in May 2007 wrote a feature article in *Kristeligt Dagblad*, another daily newspaper, containing the same unsubstantiated viewpoint that Muslim women's headscarf is a sign of suppression. All three women, however, continuously participate in debates about Muslim women and their headscarves, and never about Muslim women's clothing more generally.

[3]  The law reads: "A judge cannot in court meetings appear in a way which is suitable to be perceived as an assertion of the religious or political belongings of the concerned or other attitudes to religious or political issues of the concerned." http://folketsting.dk/love/retsplejeloven-aendring-af/1047/lovtekst/vedtaget (translated by the author). See Tarlo 2010 (pp. 104–110) for a British media-covered case about a schoolgirl who wanted to wear *jilbab* instead of school uniform. Although the British case is less restrictive, especially compared to the French, which in 2004 outlawed the headscarf in schools – the House of Lords finally ruled out the *jilbab*. The headscarf is allowed.

[4]  The material on which I base my analysis takes different forms. Alongside the interviews I conducted with the seven women, I have material of different sorts that I also draw on: in two cases a book, a documentary, a blog on the Internet, and features on Myspace and Facebook. In order to characterise Asmaa as an important figure in the media I draw on the analysis of Andreassen (2007).

[5]  Exemplified by Asmaa being the spokesperson of the 11 organisations that reported the cartoons to the Danish police, Helen who wrote a piece for a newspaper, "Boycot the Boycott" which was reprinted in a Sudanese paper, and Sherin who was invited to a large convent in Uganda for African Muslims to talk about Muslim reactions to the cartoons.

[6]  This term is widely used among English-speaking Muslims, but I have only come across it in the Danish language media in Gülay Kocbay's blog, http://gulaykocbay07.wordpress.com/

[7]  All clothing styles may be ambiguous; the point for the wearer of the ambiguous type of style is that the ambiguity is intended.

[8]  Whereas in Europe these garments tend to take on a political meaning, this is not necessarily so in a Middle Eastern or North African context.

[9]  Muslim women's dress has proved to be highly normative, involving the idea that separate cultures can be placed in a hierarchy, created on the basis of the status that is allotted to women in each cultural setting. This is not unlike the place occupied by Muslim women in the discourses of colonising powers in their attempts to legitimise the colonisation of Middle Eastern countries, as Leila Ahmed has demonstrated so powerfully in her historical inquiry of how the gender–Islam nexus has been constructed and re-constructed during the centuries (Ahmed 1992; see also Yegenoglu 1998, Ossman 2002, Balasescu 2007).

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