



## **Veiling: Tradition, Identity and Fashion**

*Attitudes towards the hijab as a fashion item*

### **Emma Tarlo:**

And then of course now that the fashion possibilities that it offers is also something, you know, that can be very attractive to people. The great thing about a headscarf is that it doesn't fit any particular body. It can be given, it can be shared, it's very cheap to buy. Unlike a lot of other type fashion things.

And you can combine it in all sorts of different ways. You can accessorise it with jewellery. You can layer it and you can make all sorts of ensembles with it. So it can become a very glamorous and kind of appealing kind of item to sort of play with if you like.

And in a sense, I think in my book I refer to it as a sort of form of body art in many ways for some women. Because for a lot of young Muslim women it's the most elaborate and most worked part of their appearance.

And I've interviewed some women who say, well you know when I get up in the morning I begin by thinking what I'm going to wear on my head. And what colour combinations I'm going to do.

And then I work my way downwards.

So this thing which in some ways is about, sort of modesty and the idea that you don't want to be kind of at least sexually attractive and assertive, at the same time is also being used as a kind of key item of adornment by a lot of young women.

And then in contrast you have others. Other Muslims who would have a much more sober interpretation of what the hijab should be. And who feel that all this fashion work and this sort of aestheticisation of hijab goes against the essence of what hijab is meant to be.

So you've got very different attitudes amongst Muslims in Britain and elsewhere in Europe as to what that should be. Those kind of internal debates. And in the world.

And I think those internal debates very often are just not recognised beyond the Muslim community because there's always this tendency to sort of look at this whole thing in relation to Islam versus the West. That kind of absurd kind of dichotomisation through which everything's boiled into. And therefore very often all these kind of nuances of what's going on and the subtleties of debates that are taking place amongst the Muslims gets completely sort effaced within the presentation in the media very often.

### **Stefanie Sinclair:**

Is the association of Muslim women's styles of dress with fashion something entirely new or have Muslim women always thought about dress styles and how it would fit into fashion but possibly in different cultural contexts?

### **Emma Tarlo:**

Yes, I mean, I think there's always been a diversity of cloth and textiles and ways of wearing them. And so in that sense people have always been interested in fashion. But I think what's

happened is a lot of things that were classified as local cultural, regional practices have now become classified as Islamic.

So you can almost think of it in sort of three parts. You've got people wearing local forms of dress, which may have had different fashions in different countries.

Then you've got a kind of a moving away from that that have emerged very often with the migration process and people wanting to assimilate within European contexts.

And then in that context if people started to wear something like hijab or niqab then it was very much associated initially as a religious statement. People perceived it as almost as the opposite of fashion. That you were kind of asserting a kind of pious religious self.

And what has happened more recently is this kind of coming together of this idea of a sort of pious religious self. And a kind of active visible assertion in the public sphere and fashion all coming together.

And they want to be modern. And they want to be able to wear jeans. And they want to be able to follow local fashion. But at the same time they want to be able to assert their Muslimness. And quite often the older generation are very ambivalent about that. And they'll say to their daughters, well do you really have to wear hijab?

That marks you out in a particular way. Why do you have to make such a fuss about it? Can't you just sort of blend in more.

So the sort of classic tension you might get, for example, in say a Bengali family would be the mother looking to the daughter and saying, you're jeans are too tight. And why do you have to wear that hijab, you know. She's kind of objecting to both those things.

So the sort of classic tension you might get, for example, in say a Bengali family would be the mother looking to the daughter and saying, you're jeans are too tight. And why do you have to wear that hijab? She's kind of objecting to both those things.

And the daughter will be looking to the mother and saying, well that sari's cultural dress, its un Islamic. And what I'm doing conforms more to what is appropriate in the Koran.

So you've also got this kind of intergenerational conflict. And for the younger generation it can often be a kind of platform of assertion. I can go out. I can be in the public sphere. I can have a job. I can go to university and I can be covered and Muslim. And all of that's alright.

Whereas you mum, you're stuck at home, doing what dad says. Cooking the chapattis or something like that.

I mean these are these kind of cultural things that are being played out in a sense through dress.

