

# We, Myself and I

By RUTH LA FERLA  
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FOR Aysha Hussain, getting dressed each day is a fraught negotiation. Ms. Hussain, a 24-year-old magazine writer in New York, is devoted to her pipe-stem Levi's and determined to incorporate their brash modernity into her wardrobe while adhering to the tenets of her Muslim faith. "It's still a struggle," Ms. Hussain, a Pakistani-American, confided. "But I don't think it's impossible."

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Stephanie Keith for The New York Times

**CULTURAL CROSSROAD** Aysha Hussain, left, who tries to maintain a modern flavor in her daily attire, goes shopping for clothing in Astoria, Queens.

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William Mebane for The New York Times

**STYLE GUIDES** Fatima Fazal, left, and Tam Naveed offer different takes on layering.

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Courtesy Muslim Girl magazine

A magazine layout offers ways to style the hijab.

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Ms. Hussain has worked out an artful compromise, concealing her curves under a mustard-tone cropped jacket and a tank top that is long enough to cover her hips.

Some of her Muslim sisters follow a more conservative path. Leena al-Arian, a graduate student at the [University of Chicago](#), joined a women's worship group last Saturday night. Her companions, who sat cross-legged on prayer mats in a cramped apartment in the Hyde Park neighborhood, were variously garbed in beaded tunics, harem-style trousers, gauzy veils and colorful pashminas. Ms. Arian herself wore a loose-fitting turquoise tunic over fluid jeans. She covered her hair, neck and shoulders with a brightly patterned hijab, the head scarf that is emblematic of the Islamic call to modesty.

Like many of her contemporaries who come from diverse social and cultural backgrounds and nations, Ms. Arian has devised a strategy to reconcile her faith with the dictates of fashion — a challenge by turns stimulating and frustrating and, for some of her peers, a constant point of tension.

Injecting fashion into a traditional Muslim wardrobe is "walking a fine line," said Dilshad D. Ali, the Islam editor of [Beliefnet.com](#), a Web site for spiritual seekers. A flash point for controversy is the hijab, which is viewed by some as a politically charged symbol of radical Islam and of female subjugation that invites reactions from curiosity to outright hostility.

In purely aesthetic terms, the devout must work to evolve a style that is attractive but not provocative, demure but not dour — friendly to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

"Some young women follow the letter of the rule," Ms. Ali observed. Others are more flexible. "Maybe their shirts are tight. Maybe the scarf is not really covering their chest, and older Muslim women's tongues will wag."

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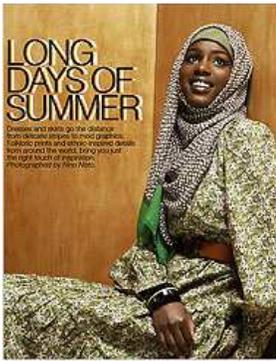
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Laura Pedrick for The New York Times  
Brooke Samad, a designer who focuses on clothes for Muslim women, shows off a pink chiffon hip-tie skirt.

The search for balance makes getting dressed “a really intentional, mindful event in our lives every day,” said Asra Nomani, the outspoken author of “Standing Alone in Mecca: An American Woman’s Struggle for the Soul of Islam” (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005). Clothing is all the more significant, Ms. Nomani said, because what a Muslim woman chooses to wear “is a critical part of her identity.”

Many younger women seek proactively to shape that identity, adopting the hijab without pressure from family or friends, or from the Koran, which does not mandate covering the head.

“Family pressure is the exception, not the rule,” said Ausma Khan, the editor of Muslim Girl, a new magazine aimed at young women who, when it come to dress, “make their own personal choice.”

The decision can be difficult. Today few retailers cater to a growing American Muslim population that is variously estimated to be in the range of three to seven million. “Looking for clothes that are covering can be a real challenge when you go to a typical store,” Ms. Khan said.

Only a couple of years ago, Nordstrom conducted a fashion seminar at the Tysons Corner Center mall in McLean, Va., a magnet for affluent Muslim women in suburban Washington. The store sought to entice them with a profusion of head scarves, patterned blouses and subdued tailored pieces, but for the most part missed the nuances,

said shoppers who attended the event. They were shown calf-length skirts and short-sleeve jackets of a type prohibited for the orthodox, who cover their legs and arms entirely.

“For me the biggest struggle is to find clothes in the department stores,” said Ms. Arian, who has worn the hijab since she was 13. She scours the Web and stores like Bebe, Zara, Express and H & M for skirts long enough to meet her standards. The majority, gathered through the hips, are “not very flattering on women with curves,” she said, chuckling ruefully, “and a lot of Middle Eastern women have curves.”

Maryah Qureshi, a graduate student in Chicago, has a similarly tricky time navigating conventional stores. “When we do find a sister-friendly item,” she said, “we tend to buy it in every color.”

Tam Naveed, a young freelance writer in New York, has devised an urbane uniform, tweed pants, a long-sleeve shirt and a snugly fastened scarf that dramatically sets off her features.

Ms. Nomani, the author, improvises her own head covering by wearing a hoodie or a baseball cap to mosque. “I call it ghetto hijab,” she said tartly. For everyday, she buys shirtdresses at the Gap. “They cover your backside, but they’re still the Gap. That kind of gives you a visa between the two worlds.”

In its fashion pages, Muslim Girl addresses concerns about fashion by encouraging young readers to mix and match current designs from a variety of sources, and reinforces the message that religion and fashion need not be mutually exclusive.

“We are trying to keep our finger on the pulse of what women want,” Ms. Khan said. Fashion pages, shown alongside columns offering romantic advice and articles on saving the environment, are among the more popular for the magazine’s teenage readers, she said, adding that the magazine’s circulation of 50,000 is expected to double next year.

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Aspiring style-setters also find inspiration on retail Web sites like [Artizara.com](http://Artizara.com), which offers a high-neck white lace shirtdress and a sleeveless wrap jumper; and [thehijabshop.com](http://thehijabshop.com), with its elasticized hijabs, which can be slipped over the head.

Some women seek out fashions from a handful of designers who cater to them. "I think people like me are starting to see that Muslim women make up a significant market and are expressing their entrepreneurial spirit," said Brooke Samad, a 28-year-old Muslim woman who designs kimono-sleeve wrap coats and floor-length interpretations of the pencil skirt out of a guest room in her home in Highland Hills, N.J.

"We follow trends, but we do keep to our guidelines," said Ms. Samad, whose label is called Marabo. "And we're careful with the fabrics to make sure they aren't too clingy."

Today fashion itself is more in tune with the values of Islam, revealing styles having given way to a relatively modest layered look. Elena Kovyryzina, the creative director of Muslim Girl, pointed to of-the-moment runway designs, any one of which might be appropriate for the magazine's fashion pages: a voluminous Ungaro blouse with a high neck and full, flowing sleeves; a billowing Marni coat discreetly belted at the waist; and a Prada satin turban. Among the more free-spirited looks Ms. Kovyryzina singled out was a DKNY long-sleeve shirt and man-tailored trousers, topped with a hair-concealing baseball cap.

There are Muslim women who choose to cover as part of a journey of self-discovery. In "Infidel" (Free Press, 2007), her memoir of rebellion, Ayaan Hirsi Ali recalls as a girl wearing a concealing long black robe. "It had a thrill to it," Ms. Hirsi Ali writes, "a sensuous feeling. It made me feel powerful: underneath this screen lay a previously unsuspected but potentially lethal femininity. I was unique."

But adopting the hijab also invites adversity. A survey by the Council on American-Islamic Relations last year found that nearly half of Americans believe that Islam encourages the oppression of women. Referring to that survey, Ms. Hussain, the New York journalist, observed, "Many of these people think, 'Oh, if a woman is covered, she must be oppressed.'"

Still, after 9/11, Ms. Hussain made a point of wearing the hijab. "Politically," she said, "it lets people know you're not trying to hide from them."

Among the young, Ms. Nomani said, "there is a pressure to show your colors."

"Young people aren't empowered enough to change foreign policy," she said, so they adopt a hybrid of modern and Muslim garb, which is "their way to say, 'I'm Muslim and I'm proud.'"

Such bravado has its perils. Jenan Mohajir, a member of the prayer group near the University of Chicago, spoke with some bitterness about being waylaid as she traveled. Ms. Mohajir, who works with the Interfaith Youth Core, which promotes cooperation among religions, recalled an official at airport security telling her: "You might as well step aside. You have too many clothes on."

What was she wearing? "Jeans, a tunic, sandals and a scarf."

Ms. Hussain no longer covers her head but has adopted a look meant to play down misconceptions without compromising her piety. "Living in New York," she said, "has made me want to experiment more with colors and in general to be more bold. I don't want to scare people. I want them to say, 'Wow!'"

She has noticed a like-minded tendency among her peers. "In the way that we present ourselves to the rest of the world, we are definitely lightening up."

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