

washingtonpost.com

For Cloaked Saudi Women, Color Is the New Black

By Faiza Saleh Ambah
Washington Post Foreign Service
Monday, May 28, 2007; A01

JIDDAH, [Saudi Arabia](#) -- Manal Fageeh never liked the abaya, the long black cloak she was forced to begin wearing at 13. She resented the fact that it was obligatory for women in [Saudi Arabia](#), and the black absorbed heat in the often-scorching climate.

When Fageeh, a health industry executive, appeared at a recent business conference in a floor-length white abaya made of light cotton and monogrammed with an M, some of the attendees were shocked, she said. But others were inspired.

"When I saw her, I said to myself, 'Yes! This is right,' " said Manal al-Sharif, an editor at al-Madina, a Jiddah-based newspaper. "Nothing in Islam imposes black on us. And I decided to make a brown abaya for myself."

Saudi women have long been known in the West for their all-enveloping black attire, widely considered a mark of their oppression. But Sharif and Fageeh are among a growing number of women and girls here who are rethinking and reinventing the abaya to more closely reflect their personalities and religious beliefs.

The change is most striking in Jiddah, the kingdom's most cosmopolitan city, where many young women now wear their head scarves around their shoulders and leave their abayas open to reveal pants and T-shirts. Medical students here often forgo the abaya altogether, frequenting malls and coffee shops in brightly colored head scarves and white knee-length lab coats over jeans.

Abayas with patches of fluorescent color, floral patterns, animal prints, embroidery and even zodiac signs have started to show up in other cities as well, prompting clerics to criticize the trend and reiterate that abayas were meant to deflect attention, not attract it.

The redefinition of the abaya mirrors the greater, though still limited, personal freedoms allowed in the kingdom over the past five years. A major factor in the change was the involvement of young Saudis in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Many people began to question the official Wahhabi ideology that was believed to have partly inspired the hijackers and that had long dictated the country's ultraconservative lifestyle.

Saudi women bear the brunt of that puritanical ideology. They are not allowed guardianship over themselves and need male permission to marry or travel. They cannot drive or work alongside men and are forced to cover up with the abaya in public.

Since shortly after the first girls schools opened here in 1955, the abaya has been mandatory beginning in middle school. Until several years ago, members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, the enforcement arm of the Wahhabi establishment, patrolled streets and malls with sticks, making sure that women were properly veiled, that men and women who were not related did not mingle and that stores closed during prayer times. But the committee's influence has waned since the Sept. 11 attacks, and its bearded members are rarely seen in Jiddah these days.

"You cannot separate what is happening with the abaya from other issues related to women, including women's appearance in the workforce and having more say in their affairs," said Saad al-Sowayan, a professor of folklore and anthropology at King Saud University in [Riyadh](#), the capital.

Until recently, the abaya was a plain black robe that women kept by the door and wore like a coat over their clothes when they left the house.

Today, abayas are often stylish, personalized wraps that women enjoy being seen in, said Thana Addas, an abaya designer. Addas's creations, many made with material from international fashion houses such as [Roberto Cavalli](#), [Burberry](#) and Fendi and decorated with [Swarovski crystals](#), can sell for more than \$1,000.

Many conservatives see the new abaya as sinful, and orthodox clerics have issued fatwas, or edicts, decreeing that the robes must be dark, loose and shapeless.

The varied views here on women's dress stem from different interpretations of Koranic verses and hadith, anecdotes about Islam's prophet Muhammad and his followers that are considered an important source of religious practice and law. Though there is no consensus among Muslims regarding what constitutes proper dress, most believe that God ordered women to wear loose clothing that covers their contours.

The first verse in the Koran that deals with the Islamic dress code for women says: "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful."

Advertisement



The day that verse came to Muhammad from Allah, according to hadith, women walked to dawn prayers "looking like crows." Ahmad al-Mussaed, a geography professor and the author of several books on traditional clothing, said Muslim women should therefore dress in black abayas to follow the example of women during the time of the prophet.

But some Muslims, including Sharif, the newspaper editor, say the women were said to resemble crows not because they were wearing black but because they were walking in the dark.

Sharif, 39, said it is possible for a woman to flout God's orders even if she's wearing a black abaya. She said she dresses conservatively in hats, long jackets and scarves even when she travels outside the country. "God ordered women to dress modestly, to be respectable and to avoid provoking lust. Many young women here wear the abaya and yet are all about provocation."

At a mall on fashionable Tahlia Street recently, a line of young men trailed three fully covered young women wearing the niqab, or face veil, with slits that exposed only their eyes. The women, who had stopped to look at cellphone accessories, wore tight black abayas, green and blue contact lenses, heavy mascara and eyeliner, and strong perfume.

The black abaya came to Saudi Arabia from [Iraq](#) or [Syria](#) more than 75 years ago, as did most textiles and goods at the time, said Leila al-Bassam, a professor of traditional clothing and textiles at Riyadh University. The robes caught on in the kingdom after King Abdul-Aziz, who conquered the country's disparate regions and formed a state in 1932, distributed them as presents to various tribal leaders, said Mussaed, the geography professor.

Before that, women wore modest but often colorful regional costumes, and in the more conservative areas did not leave the house until they were married, Bassam said.

As the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice started enforcing the dress code across the country, the abaya slowly supplanted the traditional regional costumes and became the national dress.

On weekends, 20-year-old business student Laila Yamani replaces the abaya she wears in town with capri jeans and T-shirts at the beach resorts where young men and women wear Western clothes and mingle freely, far from official eyes.

Yamani said she was excited when she went shopping with her mother for her first abaya when she was 13. "It was like I was grown up," she said.

Now, like many Saudi women, Yamani unwraps her head scarf and removes her abaya as soon as she boards a plane leaving the country.

Sharif, the editor, called such behavior an instance of Saudi Arabia's split personality. "We act one way in Saudi Arabia and differently when we travel," she said. "As if God is to be observed only here."

Post a Comment

AD Join the discussion. Sponsored by Cisco.  welcome to the human network. **CISCO**

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Your washingtonpost.com User ID, sangkancel, will be displayed with your comment.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Log in](#) | [Register](#)

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

Ads by Google

[Islamic Clothing Abaya](#)

Searching for Islamic clothing? Visit our Islamic clothing guide.
[IslamicClothing.info](#)

[50% off Hair Coverings](#)

Lots of Styles For Less Pre Tied Headbands, Bandanas & More
[www.CoverYourHair.Com](#)

[Al-Nabeela MegaStore](#)

Islamic Clothing, beautiful Jilbabs Abayas, Kaftans, Hijabs and more!
[www.alnabeela.com](#)