



# Islamic Cosmopolitanism: The Sartorial Biographies of Three Muslim Women in London

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## **Abstract**

This article focuses on the dress of three prominent Muslim women who have made a significant mark in British public life: the textile artist Rezia Wahid, the stand-up comedienne Shazia Mirza, and the councilor and advisor on Muslim affairs Humera Khan. It focuses, in particular, on their sartorial biographies, tracing the processes, experiences, and reasoning behind their clothing choices. Whilst the wearing of dress that is visibly identifiable as Islamic is often interpreted as a sign of narrow conservatism or political activism, the biographies of these three women suggest something very different. Their sartorial choices and

stylistic innovations are the creative products of cosmopolitan lifestyles and attitudes in which concerns about fashion, religion, politics, and aesthetics are interwoven in interesting ways. The article suggests that a focus on sartorial biography enables a shift away from a whole series of conventional dichotomies: religious/secular, traditional/modern, Eastern/Western, Islam/West, towards a broader understanding of the wide range of experiences and concerns that inform the clothing choices of contemporary British Muslim women. Finally, it is suggested that the proliferation of religiously oriented fashions amongst Muslims in Western metropolitan cities is not necessarily a sign of narrow conservatism. It may also signal the emergence of new forms of Islamic cosmopolitanism.

**KEYWORDS:** Islam, cosmopolitanism, identity, fashion, biography

Over the past few decades fashion studies have undergone a process of diversification. Whilst conventional studies tended to accord authorial status to fashion designers, tracing their impact in the “fashion industry,” a number of recent studies have pointed to the decentralization of fashion, demonstrating how new aesthetics and styles emerge both through grounded practices and through the multidirectional (if unequal) flow of ideas and commodities across class, ethnic and geographic boundaries (see Craik 1994; Hebdige 1987; McRobbie 1994; Polhemus 1994). Here, creativity is no longer seen as the preserve of individual artist/designers but equally the preserve of ordinary citizens who create new looks and ensembles from the visual and material resources available, thereby participating in the formation of new “subcultural” and “street” styles, which may or may not become mainstream. Whilst the emergence of new ethnically inspired fashions in Western contexts has received critical attention in the literature (Bhachu 2004; Craik 1994; Jones and Leshkovich 2003), the emergence of new religiously inspired fashions has been largely neglected in fashion studies in the West, partly because religion is regarded as a realm “beyond fashion” with the consequence that people who dress in clothes that are religiously conspicuous are considered “old-fashioned” and traditional in their tastes. This assumption is, however, being challenged on a daily basis by the proliferation of religiously oriented fashions in the streets of most major cosmopolitan cities in the West.

This article focuses on the creative fashioning of new “Muslim looks” amongst three successful professional Muslim women in London each of whom has a high public profile. What is interesting about their sartorial inventiveness is that it is born not out an overriding preoccupation with fashion as such, nor out of a desire to promote particular cultural, religious or political views, but rather out of biographical experiences in which religion, politics, fashion, memory, environmental concerns, aesthetic preoccupations, and a sense of global awareness are all

enmeshed. Contrary to what might be assumed, their stylish Muslim appearances are products, not so much of inherited religious or cultural traditions as of the interplay between local circumstances and global forces—an interplay that has contributed towards the emergence of new forms of Islamic cosmopolitanism in which fashion plays an important role.

To speak of Islamic cosmopolitanism is to couple together two things that are often assumed to be contradictory, if not down right antithetical. In the current political climate in the West, Islam is often perceived as an inward-looking, retrograde, didactic, and conservative religion so that visual manifestations of explicit religious identity amongst Muslims tend to be interpreted as products either of cultural conservatism or threatening political activism. Cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, evokes an entirely different set of associations. It is linked to ideas of hybridity, pluralistic dialogue, and openness to the worlds of others. It is associated with progressive thinking and a willingness to cross borders and challenge various forms of petty parochialism.

What is striking about the three women in question is the extent to which they have resisted slotting into preexisting sartorial cultural niches either by forging distinctive new “Muslim looks” or by bringing apparently familiar styles into new public spaces where their meaning is reassessed and renegotiated. Far from demonstrating introverted conservatism, all three lead lives characterized by high levels of trans-cultural interaction, whether through travel and histories of migration or through their participation in the multicultural environment of contemporary London. Their clothing choices are a direct product of their cosmopolitan lifestyles and attitudes. A focus on their sartorial biographies enables a shift away from the stereotypes of conventional oppositions (religion vs. fashion, traditional vs. modern, ethnic vs. Western, Islam vs. West) towards a focus on the complexity and transformative potential of personal experience in the creative and symbiotic relationship between people and their clothes.

I would like to introduce the three women in question through the cultural products with which they deal in their professional lives, namely: textiles, comedy, and opinion. The fact that I first came across these products in the contexts of an exclusive London gallery, a television show, and the House of Lords, respectively, is an indication of the extent to which these women are successful actors in British public life.

My initial encounter with the textile artist Rezia Wahid was through her delicately handwoven textiles that were on display in a Christmas exhibition of designer arts and crafts held in the upmarket OXO Tower in Central London. Rezia’s semi-transparent, ethereal, predominantly white textiles with names like “Istanbul” and “Topkapi Palace” were prominently displayed in the window of the exhibition. From outside, one could look in through this diaphanous cloth (handwoven using hand-spun Egyptian cotton and Japanese silk) to see the rich array of

colored felts, pictures, pottery, and jewelry made by the other artists whose work seemed somehow grossly material by comparison. From inside one could look out through her sheer veil-like textiles to see cold Londoners strolling along the banks of the River Thames. Rezia's cloth, with its pure and almost sacred aura, floated like mist between these scenes, visually modifying both and providing some sort of alternative lens through which to view the approach of Christmas on a cold winter's evening in London.

My first glimpse of Shazia Mirza was through her comedy. I was watching television some time in 2002. I no longer remember the program but what I do remember was the unusual sight of a stand-up comedienne with an explicit Muslim look. Shazia was wearing what had become her comedy uniform—an austere black shirt, loose trousers, and a plain black *hijab*<sup>1</sup> (headscarf) tied to cover the hair but not the neck or ears. She was staring blankly at her audience and reciting in a deadpan voice the audacious joke that had accelerated her rise to fame just three weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 when two plane were flown into the World Trade Center with catastrophic effects:

Hello. My name is Shazia Mirza. At least, that's what it says on my pilot's license!

The third woman of this unlikely trio is Humera Khan—councilor and advisor on Muslim affairs, social activist, and founder of the pioneering Muslim organization, An-Nisa, established to offer advice and support to Muslim migrant women and families. My first vision of her was in the House of Lords at Westminster where I was attending the round table discussion and launch of a newly published book on Muslims in Britain. The discussants around the table were predominantly Muslim men, dressed in dull gray suits and expressing reverent praise and admiration for the book in question. Then, in walked a woman dressed in bold cotton prints with a large and exuberant colorful turban folded and draped to one side. It was Humera Khan. When she opened her mouth to speak, the room went silent. Within seconds, she had transformed the atmosphere from one of genteel diplomacy to one of heated and impassioned debate.

I introduce these women in the public contexts of their work in order to give a sense of the disruptive impact of their visual appearances, the nature of their artistic interventions, and a taste of their individualistic styles. What links them is not what they “wear” or “do” but rather the ways in which they contribute towards the reconfiguration of the largely implicit sartorial maps of London—a city that, in spite of its multicultural pride and ethos, has surprisingly well-maintained ethnic and religious geographies of dress (Tarlo 2007). Humera's bold prints and colorful turban are not what you expect to see in the House of Lords. They command attention. So too does Shazia Mirza's austere

black *hijab* in the context of the comedy club, where its wearing is guaranteed to shock. Rezia's textiles, which exude a pure and sacred aura without necessarily evoking Islam as such, make a more subtle, but no less striking, intervention in the context of the visual landscape of British contemporary designer craft. But it is when Rezia herself enters the exhibition space that one gains a fuller sense of how she stretches and challenges sartorial expectations. Despite her well-chosen and elegant choice of *hijab* cloth, and her trendy tailored coat, she finds herself looked upon by the gallery staff as if she has somehow wandered into the building "by mistake." Rezia's visibly Islamic appearance is unexpected in the notoriously white middle-class environment of British designer craft, even in cosmopolitan London. Rezia is aware that in a way her textiles circulate more easily than she does. But she is also aware that where her textiles go, she goes too, for her textiles are none other than her autobiography in woven form.

The second element that links these three women is the extent to which their clothing practices are informed by a particular set of feelings, preoccupations, and experiences: all have experienced displacement or its aftermath and the feelings of difference it engenders, all are religiously active and politically concerned; all have social lives characterized by a high degree of trans-cultural interaction; all have visual and sensual memories and curiosity that encourage a global outlook and orientation. A biographical focus on their lives gives access to the significance of these factors and enables us to begin to plot the contours of their sartorial inspiration and inventiveness. The two main questions explored in this article are how have these unusual women evolved their distinctive appearances and how, and to what extent, have dress and textiles played an innovative and formative role in shaping their identities? This leads to a wider consideration of the complexity of the interrelationship between people and their clothes.

### **Rezia Wahid: An Autobiography through Cloth<sup>2</sup>**

Rezia Wahid's (Figure 1) biography demonstrates the breadth and combination of ideological, sensual, and visual resources on which she has drawn in the development of her personal aesthetic in dress and textile art. It is an aesthetic born chiefly out of the creative interplay of distant memories of Bangladesh and concrete experiences of Britain and Islam.

Rezia Wahid was born in a village in Bangladesh where she spent her first five years, cared for mainly by her grandparents. Her mother, still in her late teens at the time, was busy giving birth to and caring for Rezia's younger siblings whilst her father, who ran a restaurant business in London, divided his time between the two countries. For Rezia, her parents' decision to move to London when she was five represented

**Figure 1**

Rezia Wahid in her studio,  
South London. Photograph:  
Emma Tarlo.



a sharp and painful rift—away from the Bangladeshi countryside she loved, from the freedom to run about in the wild, and from her grandparents with whom she had spent most of her time. Life in a high-rise apartment off the Edgware Road in Central London was a shock to

her and the trauma of it used to surface regularly at night in the form of a recurrent dream. In this dream, she would be running free in the fields around her natal village with her grandparents watching over her, smiling. Then, all of a sudden, their faces would just melt away and Rezia would wake up in a state of panic, crying.

In the area of London where they bought their apartment, Rezia and her family were very much in a minority, having deliberately chosen to avoid the “Bangladeshi areas” of the city. Her mother, who still today speaks very little English, continued to wear saris, adding a long black outer garment and scarf when out of doors—all of which marked her out as “foreign.” Rezia was never particularly disturbed by this and was herself accustomed to looking different. In Bangladesh she and her younger sister had from the start been marked out as different from other girls by being “dressed as boys.” This was apparently a deliberate strategy introduced by their paternal grandfather who did not want them to be treated “as girls” or limited to the restrictive roles placed on Bangladeshi women. Both Rezia and her sister remember how he was opposed to their dressing up in saris, even for special occasions or for fun. Rezia’s mother went along with this sartorial strategy in Bangladesh, but when they settled in London, she introduced a feminine aesthetic, informed by her own love of colorful and silky fabrics. “She used to love tying our hair up in ribbons and bows and dressing us up. . . She still loves to dress us up even now!” laughs Rezia.

Although there is a photograph in the family album in which Rezia and her sisters wear trousers under their skirts in line with Islamic concerns with modesty (Figure 2), this was not common practice in their upbringing. In fact, once in Britain, Rezia’s childhood was characterized by an emphasis on fitting in with the local environment, whatever that was. The family moved frequently around the country following her father’s business, and the children were often sent to schools where they were the only pupils from Asian or Muslim backgrounds. Rezia continued to be “the only Asian” and “the only Muslim” when she took the unusual step of doing a foundation course at the Chelsea College of Art, followed by a postgraduate course in textiles at Farnham College.

Rezia’s textiles and personal aesthetic are perhaps best seen in terms of a creative reengagement with Bangladesh, with memories of her grandfather, and with Islam. But this reengagement was not direct. In fact, Rezia and her sisters were deliberately kept away from Bangladesh throughout their childhood for fear that they would have to be promised in marriage to friends and relatives if they returned. As a result, Rezia’s Bangladesh existed in the form of remembered images, sensations and projections, as did the image of her grandfather as a holy man, reminiscent of “a Persian mystic,” whom she remembers seated peacefully on the ground, draped in shawls and reciting prayers.

Rezia’s reconnection with this imagined Bangladesh came about, not through travel, but through her experiences in England—in particular

**Figure 2**

Family portrait taken in Bangladesh with Rezia (standing) and her younger sister (seated) dressed as boys. Courtesy of Rezia Wahid and family.



through an art and textiles training that encouraged a high degree of personal self-reflection and through her discovery, love, and appreciation of the English countryside—both of which led her almost inadvertently to look anew at her mother’s saris.

A brief discussion of three of her textiles—“Feather,” “Woven Air,” and “Istanbul”—gives a sense of how these different elements are interwoven in her work. Each textile represents a different stage of her autobiographical development in cloth.

“Feather,” like many of Rezia’s textiles, was inspired by her detailed interest and engagement with nature—something she explored in the Surrey countryside when she was at college. It was here that she began to experiment with the possibilities of translating the feelings of natural elements into woven forms.

When we studied printing at Farnham my printing was always very simple, very abstract. I was more texture-oriented than print. It was always the *feeling* of the fabric that interested me most. Then we started weaving. We had this project where we had to pick something from nature. We had to go into the woods in Surrey and find something that interested us. I found a feather.

Rezia's sketchbooks bear witness to a refined sensitivity to the relationship between colors and textures in nature, as well as a remarkable propensity to translate these into woven form. But it was when she found a feather that Rezia had, in more than one sense, found something she could relate to—a sensual affinity between the feeling of the feather and the feeling of silk. After analyzing the properties of the feather through touch and sketches, she eventually sought to evoke its featheriness in silk cloth, weaving a feather scarf or *hijab* (Figure 3).

The feather textile represented the first in a series of textiles that sought to capture a feeling as much as a look. The more she studied the details of natural forms, the more she found herself relating to existing textile traditions and techniques that were bringing her closer, though she did not realize it at the time, to South Asian textile traditions. Her study of a shell, for example, led her to look more closely at the merging of colors in ikat cloth and to experiment with this technique. But it was when she began to work on the properties of wispy white dandelion flowers that had gone to seed that the connections with Bangladesh and Islam began to emerge more explicitly.

We were supposed to be doing something called the Personal Project. It was different from anything else we had done and was meant to be really personal. I was a bit lost. Then I found myself in this field of dandelions. I knew at once that that was what I



**Figure 3**

A page from Rezia's sketchbook. Photograph: Emma Tarlo.

really wanted to do—to create that light and floaty sensation of those dandelions—the soft and airy feeling of floating. When I told my tutor I wanted to capture this floatiness, she said, “Go and take a look in the resource centre. You might find some saris in there.” I said “*Saris!?*” And then it clicked.”

So it was dandelions in the Surrey countryside that pointed Rezia in the direction of South Asian textiles. She soon found herself leafing through the catalog of an exhibition of Bangladeshi textiles that had been held at the Whitechapel Gallery in East London several years earlier, and was entitled, *Woven Air*. It was precisely this sensation of airiness that she so desperately wanted to reproduce. It was then that she began to look through her mother’s saris with new interest and even set about unpicking the border of one particularly fine jamdani sari with a view to better understanding its composition. And it was through this process that she began to develop her own aesthetic and technique of producing ultra-fine woven textiles with unfinished edges and delicate weft floats based on a reinterpretation of the jamdani tradition. But her attempt to capture the essence of the floatiness of dandelions through a reworking of jamdani techniques was also an attempt to capture a certain feeling of sacredness and holiness that she associated both with her grandfather and with Islam:

I wanted to portray the atmosphere and feeling you get when you enter a mosque, to convey the sense of purity and tranquillity. I want the light to travel without being distracted by the colour.

So it was from the establishment of aesthetic affinities between a dandelion in Surrey, her mother’s sari, and her experiences of mosques that she eventually wove the textile she calls “*Woven Air*.”

Since graduating from college over a decade ago, Rezia has continued to weave her autobiography, rejecting attempts to tailor her skills to the fashion industry and even rejecting the offer of a scholarship to work in Japan on the grounds that she did not wish to be distracted by “another culture” before “discovering her own way.” This has not, however, made her culturally narrow. On the contrary, her visual and religious curiosity have taken her to France, Spain, Turkey, Italy, and Japan where her camera delights in small details of Islamic architecture and natural forms, some of which get transposed into subtle floating weft inserts in her textiles—as with “*Istanbul*” (Figure 4).

When I met her in her studio, Rezia was laying the warp for a textile entitled “*Mosque in Rome*” in preparation for an exhibition of *hijabs* aimed at conveying “how beautiful the *hijab* can be.” Her focus on *hijab* had come about in response to her own positive feelings about wearing the *hijab*—something she has only been doing on a daily basis since October 2001. The date, of course, is not incidental. Although

**Figure 4**

“Istanbul.” Handwoven by Rezia Wahid. Photograph: Elisabeth Scheder-Bieschin.



she feels that her adoption of *hijab* was part of a “natural spiritual progression,” she admits that the timing was provoked by the political situation:

September 11<sup>th</sup> was some kind of trigger. The media was portraying Muslim women as oppressed and making out that Afghan women were desperate to rip off their *burqas*, and that infuriated me.

Rezia’s active engagement with the anti-war movement and with the charity Islamic Relief, far from being contradictory to her aesthetic journey, were very much part of her neo-Gandhian philosophy that links weaving, beauty, and simplicity to notions of peace and meditation. In 2006 she was awarded an OBE for her work.

Now aged thirty, Rezia has developed a clearly defined visual aesthetic not only in her textile art but also in her clothes. This involves a subtle layering of garments—usually what she describes as a gypsy-style skirt worn, for reasons of modesty, with fashionable trousers and with layered but fitted tops. On her head, she wears two scarves, an under one and over one, usually in contrasting colors and made of subtle but interestingly textured and colored fabrics. It is a style that initially provoked comments from some of her non-Muslim friends that she looked “too Islamic,” and from Muslim friends that she looks “too arty” and “bohemian.” Most of her clothes she buys from regular fashion shops in the high street and from market stalls. It is not the particular items of clothing that are unusual, but the particular layered ensembles that she creates with them. It amuses her that the custom of wearing trousers under skirts has become a street fashion as it is something she herself has been doing for many years, motivated by a desire to cover her legs. Fashionable, Islamic, and distinctive are perhaps the best words to describe Rezia’s appearance.

Rezia’s dress and textiles pose many questions: about the relationship between memory and experience, between individual creativity and collective resources, between autobiography and history, between personal journey and cultural heritage, between feeling as touch and feeling as emotion. It has been through the process of unpicking and reordering the different cultural threads of her background that she has been able to create something distinctive and new.

### **Shazia Mirza: The Art of Sartorial Provocation**

The comedienne Shazia Mirza’s (Figure 5) creative play with dress and textiles is radically different from that of Rezia Wahid, though no less autobiographical. Shazia is probably the most high profile of the three women discussed here. She is someone who features regularly in the media, whether television, magazines, radio interviews, and of course live performances for which she has won numerous awards. She has a commercial agent and a packed professional itinerary that takes her on the global comedy circuit in Britain, Europe, and the United States, though her plans to perform in Pakistan were canceled out of fear of the reactions her comedy might provoke.

Unlike Rezia, Shazia maintains a sharp division between her public and private appearance. In everyday life she dresses in Western clothes that do not have any apparent religious significance, favoring smart trousers or jeans with casual mainly long-sleeved shirts and tops. She has a streetwise quality about her and is someone who in everyday life chooses to “blend in” rather than “stand out.” In TV interviews and for special occasions she tends to look sleek and elegant and wears conspicuous amounts of red lipstick. She wears her hair loose around her

**Figure 5**  
Shazia in New York.  
Photograph: Paresh Gandhi.



shoulders and admits to having a secret penchant for eyelash curlers. But the stage image for which Shazia Mirza is best known is very different. Until recently she always performed in austere black clothes and black *hijab*—an obvious visual shorthand for and stereotype of “Muslim” (Figure 6).

A pink fitted T-shirt with Shazia’s *hijab*-framed public image printed on the front is perhaps the most apt medium for capturing what Shazia Mirza is about. The ambiguity is made more apparent by the fact that she herself claims that she will not wear T-shirts in public because she feels “uncomfortable” exposing her arms.

**Figure 6**

Shazia Mirza dressed for performance, 2001. Courtesy of Shazia Mirza.



And that's just habit. It's the way I was brought up. If you were brought up with that for 22 years and then you left home, you wouldn't feel comfortable either... Part of it is that I would probably feel a bit guilty. A feeling that I'm not meant to be doing this. And I'd probably think, Oh God, men are looking at my arms. I mean they probably wouldn't be but that's what I've had instilled into my mind—that men look at every part of you that's on display—they are even looking at your at your hands—they'll be turned on by your hands—so that's what I have in my head.

Born in Birmingham to parents who migrated to England from Pakistan in the 1960s, Shazia's childhood was not an easy one. It was

not that she experienced racism but that she found her parents' strict "Pakistani" attitudes and codes of conduct oppressive and inappropriate to the cultural environment in which she was growing up.

My father was endlessly concerned with what his relatives would think about everything. The Asian community is very racist and judgemental. People accuse whites of being racist and judging us but its nothing compared with how we judge each other and the racism among Asians.

Her father's pre-occupation with honor and appearances, his desire to maintain respectability according to his image of what was acceptable in Pakistan at the time he left, and his fear of the effects of Western culture on his children, particularly his daughters, have all played an important and formative role in Shazia's life, dress, and comedy all of which are, of course, interrelated.

I hated the restrictions as a child. I wanted to be like Madonna. I wanted to be able to wear ankle socks and dress like a white girl. I used to wear long socks with my school uniform and roll them down once I got to school. I wanted to have patent shoes and pleated skirts like my friends, but I was made to wear trousers under my school uniform and wasn't allowed to do things other girls did, like ballet and going to parties.

Throughout her childhood and still now, Shazia's mother wore the Indo-Pakistani *shalwar kamiz* outfit—even when swimming. The *shalwar kamiz* and dupatta combination was what Shazia was expected to wear for festive occasions and weddings, and Shazia recalls having "hated" it. "I thought Asian dress was really backward and boring."

Brought up in this atmosphere that she clearly experienced as culturally conservative and confining, Shazia longed for escape and dreamed of entering the world of theater. But a sense of duty led her to study biochemistry at university and to take up a post as a chemistry teacher in a school in East London. At night, however, she began to make appearances in comedy clubs and pubs where, unbeknown to friends and family, she was performing stand-up comedy and using her background as her main material.

When I was young my father said I had to wear trousers under my skirt because if I didn't, men would all want to sleep with me. I tried that, but it didn't work!

Despite her Madonna fantasies, Shazia chose to dress on stage in conservative black trousers and an enveloping long-sleeved black shirt or tunic because, she says, this made her "a blank canvas."

I want people to listen to what I am saying rather than be distracted by what I look like or by my body.”

But the canvas did not remain blank for long. It was soon to be framed by a black *hijab*, which became her most identifiable feature and which visually announced, if not screamed, “Muslim.”

If Shazia is to be believed (and when interviewing her, one has to bear in mind that embroidering everyday life experience is her passion and profession), her adoption of *hijab* came about in response to audience criticisms and perceptions. When she first stood on stage weaving humor around Asian Muslim experiences in Britain, she found herself accused of being a Hindu making “anti-Muslim” jokes.

My mum keeps a huge list of Muslim men suitable for marriage.  
It includes height, weight and size of beard!

By donning a *hijab*, she was at one level simply claiming the right to speak about Muslims “as a Muslim.” But in doing so, she was of course picking up on one of the most sacred and semiotically saturated contemporary symbols of our times and taking it into the very spaces it was least expected to frequent—the tainted macho beer-swilling world of London’s pubs and clubs from which “good Muslims” were by definition self-excluded. Furthermore, to make life more complicated—because that is how her life is—Shazia was claiming that she herself was a “good Muslim.” Several of her jokes revolved around her complete avoidance of sex, drink, and drugs and the complexity of circulating in environments where they were most obviously apparent.

Basically, I joke about myself and allow people to join in. I give them permission to laugh. There’s lots of blokes out there who’ve never even spoken to a Muslim woman. My humour breaks barriers.

From some time around late 1999 to late 2003 the black *hijab* became an essential element of Shazia’s uniform and there is little doubt that it was also one of the keys to her somewhat meteoric success. It got her noticed both by Muslim and non-Muslim audiences, offending many of the former, surprising many of the latter, and shocking both! But the other catalyst in her career was undoubtedly the terrorist attacks of September 11. Her famous “pilot’s license” joke was one just one element of this; the international media’s hunger for Muslim footage was the other. The image of Shazia in *hijab* became hot property and she had the wit, guts, and ambition to make the most of it. It was, then, through the interplay of *hijab* and September 11 that Shazia was propelled to international fame.

In effect, Shazia used the *hijab* as a powerful means of exposing and reflecting back to her predominantly white male audiences “Western” stereotypes of Muslims at a time of extreme political tension and sensitivity. When she stared dolefully at her audience and said reassuringly, “Don’t worry, I won’t blow you up!”, she was using her *hijab*-clad image to highlight the escalation of suspicion and fear that had become attached to Muslims in the aftermath of September 11. Similarly, asked in a television interview where she thought Saddam Hussein was keeping his weapons of mass destruction, she replied, “Up his wife’s *purdah* because no one’s thought of looking there!” It was a comment, not just on the futility of the whole weapons search but also on the absurdity of how all Muslims were somehow expected to be able to answer such questions.

In effect, the *hijab* was for Shazia an extraordinarily powerful working tool. It was “her material” in every sense of the term. But this tool was by no means passive. What she soon found was that the *hijab* was exercising as much agency over her as she was over it and the relationship was a volatile one (Figure 7).

In the Western media, her *hijab* was good copy. Newspapers and magazines were filled with images of this “brave and devout Muslim woman” but often failed to recognize the irony and nuances of her jokes. The subtlety of her *hijab* style, which, by the standards of many *hijab*-wearing British Muslims, was “revealing” in leaving the neck and ears exposed, was never even noticed. Meanwhile the humorous caricature she painted of her British Asian upbringing tended to be taken at face value. She was framed as the Muslim woman stand-up comedian performing against the odds, and although this was the image she had chosen in donning the *hijab*, she began to feel trapped and restricted by it.

I didn’t want to be THE Muslim female stand-up comedian. I wanted to be Shazia Mirza. But I was trapped in a role. I’d totally lost my identity in all this. . . I felt as if I was in prison. And I don’t know if that’s because people made me feel that way or because I felt that way.

In effect, she began to feel that her *hijab* was hindering rather than enriching her performance.

In a way, people were scared to laugh. I was inaccessible. There was definitely a barrier between me and the audience. You know, white laddy blokes on a Saturday night—they wouldn’t know how to laugh at that. . . And I found that when I wore the headdress none of the white male comedians would talk to me at all. They were all scared of me.

**Figure 7**

Shazia in 2003, experimenting with *hijab* shortly before deciding to reject it. Photograph: Steve Ullathorne.



As far as Muslim audiences were concerned, Shazia's *hijab*, and indeed her comedy, had always been controversial, if not problematic. Although some younger-generation Muslims understood what she was trying to do and found her both funny and inspiring (especially her female fans), there were many who accused her of hypocrisy, saying that if she wanted to wear *hijab*, she should wear it all the time and not just as a "prop" on stage. Others claimed the *hijab* was tainted by the alcohol-sodden environment of the comedy club, and yet others objected to a Muslim woman performing on stage at all. Many were deeply suspicious of her jokes, fearing that they encouraged people to laugh at Muslims. In Brick Lane, she was physically lynched by three young Bangladeshi Muslim boys and had to be rescued from the stage before she had even finished her opening lines. To accusations that her

jokes are anti-Muslim, Shazia makes the complicated claim “I never make jokes about my religion, only about my culture.” She also claims that for her religion is a personal thing in which she believes “100%” but which she does not feel obliged to show. “Its between me and God. I don’t have to prove to people that I’m a good Muslim. I only have to prove that to God.”

In late 2003 Shazia made the decision to stop wearing the *hijab* on stage. She said it felt like “stepping out of a box.” The burden of “representing Muslims,” which the *hijab* embodied, had perhaps been greater than she could have anticipated. At any rate, the weight of the *hijab* on her head had become too heavy for her to support. Whether she can maintain the same level of success on the comedy circuit without it remains to be seen. But if her itinerary is anything to go by, she seems to be managing. She claims to have experienced a huge relief at stepping outside the strictures of the *hijab* and no longer being obliged to perform the role it seemed to dictate. Interestingly her entire style of delivery has changed in the process. She no longer performs in the deadpan voice of her earlier days and has developed a more dynamic and fluid stage presence in line with the feeling of “release” she experienced on removing the *hijab*.

### **Humera Khan: The Social Life of Dress**

Humera Khan, now approaching her mid-forties, is the oldest of the three women introduced here and the only one who is married with children. She has a highly distinctive appearance, the most noticeable element of which is a large and generally brightly colored and patterned *hijab* which she wears bound around her head turban-style and hanging loose over her left shoulder. She confesses to possessing a vast number of “sarongs” and never enters the public space without one tied in this particular manner, though she does introduce further covering when entering a mosque for fear that her dress might cause offense to some people. Humera’s bold *hijabs* (usually selected from what she considers an Islamic color palate, dominated by rich earthy reds or blues, greens, and turquoises) are teamed with long-sleeved loose high-necked shirts or tunics usually made from natural fibers and worn with loose trousers. The colors and cuts of her clothes are selected to suit the occasion with some in subtler tones for formal professional contexts, though she confesses to always wearing something bright and “feeling dead” in dull colors. Like Rezia Wahid, she rarely wears black, not because she does not like black but because it has become associated with a particular type of austere and dreary interpretation of Islam with which she does not identify. On the four occasions I have met her I have been struck by the extent to which her appearance commands attention, not just through the colors, forms, and fabrics she chooses to wear but also through

**Figure 8**

Humera Khan at home.  
Photograph: Emma Tarlo.



their capacity to evoke some sort of generalized aura, which might be termed “foreign” or even “exotic” but which cannot be attributed to any particular cultural source or location (Figure 8).

Humera’s sartorial biography reveals the extent to which her personal aesthetic and distinctive style have emerged through a whole combination of factors that include reaction against the cultural traditions of her parents, a cosmopolitan city childhood in Central London, social and political awareness on issues of gender and identity, interaction with people from other cultural backgrounds in both professional and non-professional contexts, and religious and visual curiosity concerning Islam.

Though born in Pakistan to parents who had migrated there from India at the time of partition (1947), Humera moved to London in the early 1960s at the age of one where she was brought up in an unusual household. The move to London involved a shift in the family’s social status. Her well-educated mother, who had never needed to work in Pakistan, took up the live-in job of housekeeper at the Nigerian Embassy in Belgravia, one of London’s most exclusive and central locations. Humera’s family lived in the basement flat of the embassy residence, which made her experiences of growing up unconventional in many ways. On the one hand, she was privileged in living in an exclusive central locality inaccessible to all but the richest of migrants; on the other hand, she was brought up “below stairs” in a household that was unusually multicultural. Despite status divisions amongst the adults, Humera remembers that the children of the household (consisting of herself, her siblings, the children of the Nigerian ambassador and the

Spanish cook) played together all the time. Humera's early childhood was as a result extremely cosmopolitan. She lived in a multicultural household, attended the local Church of England state school, whilst at the same time receiving what she describes as a "culturally Pakistani" upbringing from her parents.

Where clothes were concerned, Humera's family was not particularly conservative. Her father's sisters had "shed their *burqas*" without any particular fuss when they came to Britain and her mother's family had always been more Westernized and "progressive" in their tastes. In general, Humera feels that clothes in those days were not "the big issue" they have become today. Whilst her mother followed fashions in *shalwar kamizes* and saris, the children were brought up in Western styles for everyday wear. It was only when their bodies developed as teenagers that their father expected Humera and her sister to discard their dresses in favor of the *shalwar kamiz*. Humera was unwilling.

The *shalwar kamiz* for the subcontinental psyche represented religion at one level, culture, respectability and *udab* (etiquette) which was very important both in the Islamic tradition and in the Pakistani tradition as well. I always rebelled against that and thought, I'm not wearing it. Of course I did sometimes wear it for special occasions, but otherwise not. It was an ongoing source of conflict.

It [the *shalwar kamiz*] wasn't relevant to me. Also you have to remember that the *shalwar kamizes* available in the 60's and 70's were horrible. There was that too. I don't think I thought much about it consciously at the time, but if I thought hard about it, I think subliminally I felt that it singled you out. Also, in my mind it represented a type of person who was "traditional" and all that and I didn't see myself like that. I didn't want to be put in that box."

The family's sartorial tensions were made more complex by the fact that Humera's sister, who was three years older, took an altogether alternative route, which was equally distasteful to her parents:

At secondary school my sister got into religion in a big way. It was the early to mid 70's and she started wearing a *hijab*. It was not at all common then. In fact it was very unusual and my family were dead against it. They said, "You're never going to get married dressed like that. You are looking ugly. Do you think you are being clever doing that? etc.

By this time the family had moved out of Belgravia and were living in a more multicultural and less central location in West London. Her

sister challenged the school about the uniform on the grounds that it exposed too much flesh and she got a special concession to wear a longer than usual gray skirt. Both sisters were, in effect, departing from what they saw as the “Pakistani” values and aesthetic sensibilities of their parents. Like Shazia Mirza, Humera is adamant that in Pakistan the *hijab* is still much less common than it is in Britain and that it was never worn by their mothers who simply used their dupattas to cover their heads loosely in modesty-demanding contexts.

Humera’s rebellious streak never lead her into sexually revealing clothes but she was experimental, fashion-conscious, and flamboyant. As a young woman, she and several of her friends had casual jobs in fashion boutiques in Oxford Street and they used to pool together their resources and take it in turns to buy something new. Humera’s school friends, with whom she has remained close to this day, were not on the whole Pakistani, but neither were they white British. They were from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, black, mixed-race, and white. What they shared in common was not the same ethnic or religious heritage but the experience of being the children of first-generation migrants, of dealing with cultural and generational conflict within the family, of knowing first-hand the financial pressures of life in London, and of experimenting with the music and fashions of the 1960s and 1970s. Humera was particularly into soul music in her late teens and early twenties and her tastes in fashion were strongly influenced by the fashion aesthetics linked to this scene (Figure 9).

At university in Portsmouth she had her first somewhat alienating experience of being surrounded by a predominance of white British people with whom she made friends at the time but with whom she later lost touch. She describes this period as the “turbulent years” of her



**Figure 9**

Humera (far left) and friends as teenagers in their “soul” days. Courtesy of Humera Khan.

life when she was unsure of her direction, adding, “from the age of 18 to 25 I was not a Muslim.”

It is difficult to say whether it was Islam that brought Humera to the *hijab* or whether in a funny sort of way, it happened the other way round. In their mid-twenties Humera and her sister began to get involved in community work with Muslim migrant women and children in the multicultural outer-London borough of Brent. By this stage her sister was no longer a *hijab*-wearer, having married and moved to Pakistan for a few years where she had found herself “unable to be the type of conscientious practising Muslim” she had been in Britain. “She went to Pakistan wearing a head scarf and came back without it.” Nonetheless, she remained idealistic and both sisters shared a strong sense of the need to do something to help new Muslim migrants adjust to life in Britain. It was in this context that they began to wear *hijab*—not for reasons of spirituality, modesty or religious obedience, but out of a desire to fit in and be taken seriously by the Muslim families with whom they worked, many of whom were from less-educated and more culturally conservative backgrounds.

I must admit that I started wearing it for quite vested interest really. I was working with the community and I didn't want to create any barriers, and I thought if wearing the *hijab* is going to help, then why not? But in a way I felt a bit bad about it because I was only doing it part time, in the context of my work with people or if I went to a mosque. I never felt very comfortable in it at that time. It was only as I got older that I grew in to it”

So for Humera the *hijab* was initially an enabling device in the context of her interaction with Muslims from a range of different backgrounds in the multicultural borough of Brent. She and her sister used to tie it in various ways, but generally flat on the head as a scarf. It was some years before they became attached to the style that now forms such a distinctive element of their look and this too, was through an interactive engagement with others:

I saw an English Muslim woman [a convert] wearing this style and I really liked it. It was the late 80's and early 90's. Women were looking for ways they could dress Islamically which were also fashionable and which we could control ourselves rather than being controlled by the fashion industry. We used to go off to Tie Rack and look for interesting Islamic looking prints like Paisley patterns or whatever we could find. Nowadays I buy cotton sarongs...I just find it [this style] comfortable. I think its origins are probably more African than anything else. You see, in a shrinking planet you have the opportunity to draw from a lot of different things, and the key to it is to take it back to the root, to the essence of what it means.

Although “what it means” is something very important to Humera now, at the time of her sartorial experiments, it was not. What was more important was the combination of being acceptable to other Muslims with whom she mixed whilst at the same time being fashionable and innovative and exploring the possibilities offered by various different Islamic traditions. It was through organizing a massive celebration of Islamic culture at a major exhibition hall in Brent that Humera became aware of just how diverse and rich these traditions were. The exhibition helped her cultivate what might be termed an Islamically oriented vision and was influential in forging her own clothing choices and aesthetic preferences.

I was the one who went around all over London collecting stuff for the exhibition. We had bought loads of stuff—Turkish pottery, textiles, African stuff, Pakistani stuff, Indian stuff—whatever. And going out searching for all this stuff made me really look around and see things I hadn’t noticed before. I realised what an incredible heritage this was...The event included a couple of lectures, a fashion show, an exhibition and sale for women only.

Humera was part of a newly emerging generation of active young Muslims in London who recognized the need to value the social, political, aesthetic, and religious backgrounds of new Muslim migrants whilst at the same time recognizing the importance of adaptation and transformation. Together with her husband, a political journalist, they set about establishing a magazine called *Muslim wise*, which was the first ever magazine dealing with the concerns of British Muslim youth. The emphasis was not on cultural authenticity or conservatism but on recognizing cultural affinities shared by Muslims from around the globe and forging something new in the British context.

It is perhaps not surprising that this outward-looking global orientation should have taken material form at Humera’s wedding where she chose to dress, not in Pakistani or British attire, but in what she describes as a “Turkish outfit,” whilst her husband, who was born in Mombasa and of Yemeni extraction, wore what she describes as “Arabic Robes” and a “Yemeni turban” (tied “wrongly” because no one could remember how to tie it right!) (Figure 10).

It was part of the forging of new styles of British Muslim marriage and I think quite a few couples were influenced by our event.

Effectively Humera was involved in what is an ongoing process amongst religiously active Muslims in the West of selecting and recoding clothing, textiles, and material culture from around the world, and classifying them as “Islamic.” When I first interviewed her she was wearing a blue and turquoise tie-dyed bandhani turban from India.

**Figure 10**

Humera's wedding. Courtesy of Humera Khan.



When I asked her if she had a particular preference for textiles with an Asian look or origin, she said, “I don’t like the term Asian. I tend to go for more Islamic patterns. These blues are very Islamic. That’s my inspiration and I’m a bit of a purist in that respect.” What was to me an Indian design and textile technique was to her, first and foremost, Islamic and her wardrobe contains many such Islamic garments, some of which have been collected from different Muslim countries she has visited on her travels.

This desire to separate out what she calls “the cultural” from “the religious” is something Humera shares with Rezia and Shazia and with many other women I have interviewed in London. In this context, Bangladeshi and Pakistani traditions are often perceived as distortions

of some purer Islamic tradition to which the new generation look and which they perceive to be more compatible with gender equality.

One thing I really didn't like when I was growing up was the clash of colours that people used to wear in the Pakistani community—you know, that over done brocadey, silky, over the top, doll-like thing. It was too much... And I think it represents putting women in their place. Women, when they are obsessed with their looks, their dress, are not thinking about anything else. It represents something rather sinister from the gender point of view.

Humera also considers that “the Muslim world” is guilty of distorting women's roles by promoting either “the self-sacrificing mother” or “the Barbie doll thing”, both of which she feels miss the essence of Islam's real emphasis, which is on gender balance and complementarity. Her own interpretation of an attractive but Islamically appropriate appearance does not require that the clothes come from Muslim countries but rather that they have what might be called Islamic affinities through their color, pattern, motif or form. Though she does have some imported articles, most of Humera's clothes are in fact purchased from Western fashion boutiques and a large proportion of her *hijabs* are from the chain store Tie Rack, a ubiquitous high-street shop, also found in most British airports.

It is difficult to say whether Humera eventually grew into her *hijab* or if in fact the *hijab* grew onto her. Certainly, what began as an enabling device has become her habitus to the extent that she can no longer imagine herself in public without it.

It's funny. I went away on holiday with a friend of mine who was not a Muslim. This was some years back. And we were out one evening and she said, why you don't take your *hijab* off here. No one will know. So I tried not wearing it for one evening and it just felt weird. I'd got so used to it. And I realised it had become a part of me. So after that I wore it without any problems.

Humera's distinctive *hijab* has not just become an extension of her body, a material component of her public self, but it has also gradually become saturated with spiritual meaning as her religious engagement and conviction has in recent years increased.

I realised over the years, it's not about how you look, but conceptually about your spirituality. The *hijab* is about protecting your spiritual self. It also creates an important divide between the public and private. Sexuality is an incredibly powerful thing. It is sacred. You contain it within a sacred space. At the same time you are protecting your energies and remembering that only God

is above you...That's how I've come to understand it at a deeper level.

Interestingly even Humera's spiritual understanding of the meaning of her dress is informed by her international orientation. One of the religious specialists she most looks up to and with whom she studies every year is a German woman convert and scholar of Islam who has taken her through all the instances of the use of the term "*hijab*" in the Koran with a view to better understanding the concept in context.

### Conclusion

A focus on the sartorial biographies of three exceptional and successful Muslim women shifts the emphasis away from concerns about whether their clothes are Western or Eastern, religious or secular, traditional or modern towards an understanding of the wide range of experiences and concerns that inform the clothing choices of contemporary British Muslim women. Humera, Shazia, and Rezia are not "typical" to the extent that they are highly successful, educated, middle-class professionals, but their biographies give a sense of the wide perimeters within which clothing experimentation is taking place amongst progressive religiously active Muslims living in Britain. In all three cases, far from blindly perpetuating the cultural traditions of their parents, they have sought to distance themselves from what they consider "ethnic" dress in favor of clothes they consider fashionable, modern, and Islamic. Brought up in contexts where saris and *shalwar kamizes* were associated with both foreignness and restrictive roles for women, they have rejected these clothing forms as "too traditional," wearing them only occasionally in festive contexts. Meanwhile, in the case of Humera and Rezia, their religious involvement has led them to cover their heads in ways their mothers never did. Whilst their mothers are bare-headed much of the time, and loosely cover their heads in contexts which require modesty, Humera and Rezia have adopted tighter fixed styles of *hijab* that totally conceal their hair and which they put on in the morning and do not remove until they arrive back home at the end of the day. Their understanding of the degree to which women should cover stems not from their backgrounds, but from their interpretative readings of the Koran, their individual spiritual journeys, their commitment to being identified as Muslim and their conviction of the *hijab's* social and religious benefits.

But if Humera, Shazia, and Rezia have rejected the clothing choices of their mothers in favor of a more religiously oriented dress, this new religious dress is informed both by their experiences in Britain and by their global orientation and cosmopolitan sensibilities. In Rezia's case, memories of Bangladesh, of her grandfather and her mother's saris resonate with feelings evoked by the natural forms she discovered in

the British countryside and by her religious engagement. In her textiles, all these elements are interwoven using cotton that comes from Egypt and silk that comes from Japan. For Humera, it is her cosmopolitan upbringing and work with Muslim migrants from diverse backgrounds that have informed her breadth of vision and which have taken on material form whether in her choice of wedding outfit, her African inspired turban-style *hijab* (copied from a British convert) or the overall ensembles she creates. Their “Muslim looks” are concerned not just with issues of modesty but also with particular aesthetic sensibilities to colors, textures, and patterns, which they consider to have an Islamic resonance. At the same time, their choices are also informed by global political awareness and engagement. Shazia’s *hijab* gained increased potency in the context of September 11 and became a powerful medium of political commentary whilst Rezia’s decision to wear *hijab* was directly triggered by the terrorist attacks and the war in Afghanistan.

Finally, what these sartorial biographies reveal is the assertive power or agency of clothes in people’s lives. This is most clearly demonstrated in the cases of Humera and Shazia. For both, the *hijab* begins as a working tool, a means of communicating and enabling specific forms of interaction in specific spaces. In Shazia’s case, it was a powerful visual medium for exposing and challenging stereotypes about Muslims literally head on; for Humera, a means of easing her relationship with Muslims from more conservative backgrounds. One was challenging the hidden geography of *hijab* by thrusting it into public view in the very spaces it was least expected—pubs, theaters, and nightclubs. The other was subscribing to its geography by adjusting to the values of the Muslim migrant communities concentrated in Brent. But for both women, the *hijab* ended up playing a more powerful role than they had anticipated. In Humera’s case it grew to become a part of her in such a way that she no longer “feels herself” without it. In Shazia’s case, the weight and expectations attached to the *hijab* became unbearable, leading her eventually to remove it. In both cases, the logic of *hijab* seemed to supersede their capacities to control it. Meanwhile for Rezia, who chose to wear the *hijab* for her own religious and political reasons, the problem has been not the *hijab*’s effect on her but its effect on those around her. Her greatest fear was that the art/craft-world would reject her in *hijab* and she has had to deal with silent hostility to her dress from the headmistress of the school where she teaches textiles.

Whilst obsessive preoccupation with the religious and political meanings of Islamic dress have obscured the importance of fashion in the lives of contemporary Muslims around the globe, what this study seems to suggest is that fashion, religion, and politics are all enmeshed in interesting ways and that memory and biographical experience are equally essential to the analysis of a person’s wardrobe. Finally, contrary to what is often assumed, the proliferation of new Islamic fashions in Western metropolitan cities is not necessarily a sign of increased

religious conservatism. It may also signal the emergence of new material expressions of Islamic cosmopolitanism.

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### Notes

1. Following the popular English usage of the term, “*hijab*” is used here to mean Muslim woman’s headscarf. In the Koran the word refers, not to a type of cloth, but to general notions of separation, screening, keeping things apart (El-Guindi 1999). In contemporary the term “wearing *hijab*” refers to covered dress.
2. This section picks up on Tarlo’s earlier analysis of Rezia Wahid’s creative development as a textile artist, see Tarlo (2004).

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