

Me and My Abaya

“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze. And guard their modesty; that they must draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty....” Muhammad

My abaya is black. In Saudi Arabia, if you're Saudi or a visiting American dignitary (like me) and not an African street seller, your abaya is going to be black. Even so, and even though closer acquaintance might eventually convince me otherwise, I'll go out on a limb here and say that no two abayas are exactly alike. You work with what you've got, ladies, and when a floor-length black robe with wide sleeves and a matching headscarf is *the* thing to wear, you find your own way to make a fashion statement.



First, you decide on the fit. If you've been eating too many Lebanese pastries, or if modesty (that being the point) means “total coverage” to you, then you might wear an abaya as shapeless as a graduation gown. A woman out walking for exercise along the Corniche in Jeddah will also wear a loose-fitting abaya that reveals only a glimpse of her Nikes and jeans. For work and evening, however, most Saudi women, even those who hoist the veil over nose and mouth if a man enters the room, even these women wear a streamlined abaya, not exactly form fitting but hardly a bag. Graceful, in fact. In Jeddah, you can tell a stylish woman even in her abaya, even if all you see is her eyes.

Then there's the fabric. If you're a Saudi woman, public fashion is all about the fabric. The abaya—that is, the gown itself, as compared to the scarf, or hijab—is usually crepe, often polyester crepe, always, always black, but personalized even so. The whole costume together, gown and scarf, is called hijabi, which means “cover.”

Hana's “everyday” abaya has the rich understatement of the aristocrat she is, with a full six inches of bronze braiding at the cuffs, and an inch of the same gorgeous trim along the scarf hem. She tells me she changes her abaya the way she changes her handbag or shoes, depending on her mood or the occasion. The effect is invariably elegant.

The night of the big Microsoft awards ceremony, when university deans and technology experts from all around Saudi Arabia gathered in the Hilton ballroom to see which teams would win this year's crystal plaques for their software ideas, Hana was dressed in the finest of black crepes, with a black embroidered bib, cuffs and tiny covered buttons—no colored trim, no edging of tiny pearls, no gold sequins or fancy cuffs, nothing that exactly stood out, yet the whole effect looked like Armani, and it might well have been. He and Versace, Hermes, Yves Saint-Laurent, Jean-Paul Gaultier and even Burberry are all doing

abayas now. Mostly, though, Hana says she and her friends “have our abayas made to order” and then add “our own touches.”

That night at the Hilton, I saw 200 or more women, all professionals: professors, administrators, computer technologists, most with PhD.s, every one dressed head to toe in black. I shook hands with one woman in long black evening gloves. She wore a diaphanous black shawl over her entire head, and, aside from the fact that she was taller and wider than me, I have no idea what she looks like. Even though the foyer to the auditorium was filled entirely with women, this one woman never took off her veil. Yet everyone knew her. Woman after woman approached, took her two outstretched, gloved hands in theirs, murmured warm words of recognition, and kissed her three or four times, twice or three times on one cheek, once on the other.

This kind of bobbing hello goes on whenever Saudi women meet. That night, all around the room, old friends and colleagues from universities throughout the Kingdom said hello in this way. They accepted tiny cups of strong (and I mean strong) sweet tea from Burmese or Indonesian waitresses in stewardess-like uniforms, and gradually drifted into the theater the way audiences everywhere do.

The auditorium had a slanted floor like a movie theater, a wide stage with its velvet curtain closed, immense crystal chandeliers, deep blue and gold carpeting, tiers of tables with white linen cloths and sumptuous swivel chairs for everyone. Down the middle of the room, running from the back doors to within 20 feet of the stage, was a polished, semi-opaque black screen about 10 feet tall. Through the screen I could see the shadows of the men milling about and taking their seats. I have it on good authority that they could not see through their side to ours.

As the crowd settled in, a man in a long *white* robe (like every other man in the room except my husband in his Brooks Brothers suit) went to the podium at the far corner of the stage on the men’s side, where all the action took place. We women were separate, but, sort of, equal.

The speaker rattled on in Arabic, drawing polite applause. From time to time he turned over the mike to someone from one of the competing teams. The room would darken and we would all watch slides illustrating that team’s entry in the competition. Then the lights would come up, the speaker would announce the winning team’s name, everyone would clap and the team leader would go to the stage, receive a plaque from the male dignitaries and smile for the official photographer.

Even in English this would be dull stuff. In Arabic, I was lost. I perked up at intermission, however, when the lights came up and the women mingled in the aisles and at their seats. As they gossiped and laughed like girls in one giant pajama party, I studied their abayas. Black, yes—but this was evening wear at its most subtle and sophisticated. One woman’s antique paisley cuffs made me—California me—green with envy.

I had been in the Kingdom two weeks, and by now had seen maybe a hundred abayas at close range. From a distance, the day wear and night wear may look identical, but up close you can see the fine distinctions. These evening “gowns” were downright gorgeous.

Not that the everyday abayas are anything to sneeze at. They are as much an expression of individuality as one American’s preppy khakis vs, another’s gold lame pedal pushers. At a restaurant, I saw a teen-age girl with sequined butterflies all the way down the back of her abaya. Suzan, who teaches Emily Dickinson, wears an abaya covered all over with swatches of antique black velvet and lace. Nada, who teaches French, wears one edged in the style of an Aubusson tapestry. Hala and her friend Rowyda both have abayas with colorful red, yellow and orange checker-boarding at the cuff—similar colors, different fabric, so the two abayas look nothing alike, yet the overall effect makes you see why these two women are friends; they giggle like pixies as they walk arm in arm through the mall. Ajif, our young techie, wears an abaya trimmed with shiny silver grommets; this is definitely *not* her grandmother’s hijabi. Afnan wears white plastic sunglasses on her forehead, and her auburn hair just won’t stay hidden under the scarf. Sara, by contrast, wears a black under-scarf tight around her face, and a flowing black scarf that drapes wide over her shoulders, giving her, with her round face, pale skin and freckles, the impression of an Irish nun. Yet she too seems just right for who she is—and her patent leather shoes with the delicate heels and fashionably pointed toes are a dead give-away that there is more to Sara than you might think.



Saudi women who are healthcare professionals wear white. Nadia, who teaches dentistry and goes to the clinic most afternoons, came to our class every morning in an ankle-length white lab coat with pockets. Her white lace scarf is held close to her smiling face with small pink hat pins. Under that scarf is a wide band of pale yellow cotton elastic that comes halfway down her forehead. I have never seen a hair on her head. The whole rig stays firmly in place all day long and she never fusses with it.

Not that every Saudi woman has flair and personality. If you have no sense of style, then your abaya is probably what Hana calls “plain and sad.” In some parts of the Kingdom, I suspect there’s more to be sad about, but Jeddah is the Los Angeles of the Kingdom, lively and modern and cosmopolitan (within the bounds of modesty, of course) and I saw few abayas that didn’t make me almost wish I had one like it.

The operative word being “almost.” When you’re in a public restroom trying to accomplish things best done without loose threads, and if you’re new to all this, like me, I don’t care how ancient or revered the custom, you’re going to want to tear the thing to bits and flush it away. Still, I did adjust. I did figure it all out. With help from Afnan and Nadia and Hala and Rowyda and Suzan and Nada and Omima, I did learn how to arrange my hijab so it stays in place. Sort of.

In the high-rise Westin Jeddah, where we stayed, I sometimes saw women covered entirely in thin black chiffon, without even eye slits. I assume they could see, because they glided through the lobby as if on wheels. One such woman stood like a statue near the elevator. Another perched, bird like, on one of the lobby sofas. Both women looked like sculptures in a manor house closed for the season, carefully draped to keep off the dust.

So. My own abaya is made of good quality polyester crepe, lightweight, with small snaps down the front almost all the way to the hem. The neckline is collarless, with a v-shape at the front that would allow you to see my collarbone if I ever took off the matching black scarf, which I never did, not from the time I left the hotel room in the morning to the time I returned eight hours later. And, I put the whole get-up back on twice a day to go up to the 12th floor for breakfast and dinner. Each sleeve, which covered my wrist bone, is about six inches wide at the cuff, requiring extra vigilance at the buffet table. More than once I brushed the humus bowl on my way to the tomato salad.

At each cuff, my Abaya is decorated with a delicate six-inch circle of crocheted threads and jewels that sets it apart from all other Abayas (or at least I'd like to think so). At the center of the circle is a tiny faceted ruby jewel surrounded by a dime-size circle of bronze sequins surrounded by eight diamond-shaped crystal petals within a web of tiny green crocheted chains orbited by 18 tiny mother-of pearl disks grouped in threes and trimmed with gold thread. Around this is a scalloped circle of bronze sequins outlined with one single crocheted chain of maroon silk and another of hair-thin spun gold. Piercing the whole business are six crocheted teardrops in pale green silk trimmed with more gold crochet. Crocheted gold branches with leaves and petals—of gold, copper, green and maroon—curl out from the center, and the entire decoration is capped at the edge by another diamond-shaped gold crystal and marked at each forearm by a fleur-de-lys of sequins. A narrow version of the same pattern runs along both edges of the scarf.



As you can see, I got to know my Abaya quite well. I have to admit, it's nice. I've had compliments. Not that I can take credit. Hana had it tailor made for me in advance of our trip and it was brought to the hotel room our first night by our terminally embarrassed driver, Assad. But that's another story.

From what I'm told by the women who befriended me (and they are the kindest and dearest of women), it's not the men who dictate this costume, but the women themselves, and the *young* women are especially determined to remain covered as a statement of their faith.

"It's our choice," says Hala, and she means it.

I too had a choice. Sure, I could have exposed my female sponsor to criticism in high places for allowing an American woman to stand in front of a "mixed" class of Saudis,

and saunter around town, uncovered. But that would have been cruel and ungracious in the most gracious of cities. Instead, I did my bit for international relations. As best as a blue-eyed English-Irish American woman could, I blended in. For the length of my stay in Arabia, I made this small concession, ate sparingly (with great care), and followed my wise American friend Carol's advice to keep my sleeves out of the elevator doors.

To learn more about abayas:

- <http://www.arabview.com/articles.asp?article=736>
- http://www.chowk.com/show_article.cgi?aid=00004902&channel=chaathouse