

Modesty as Commodity: Religious Erasure and the Racialized Politics of ‘Inclusive’ Fashion

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Abstract

The fashion industry’s recent turn toward inclusivity has been praised, yet its treatment of religious diversity, especially Muslim modesty, reveals deep contradictions. This paper critiques the limits of that inclusivity through the case of Somali American model Halima Aden. Her 2021 departure from runway modeling, due to pressures to compromise her hijab and religious practices, exposes what the paper terms performative inclusivity, where visibility masks demands for assimilation. Media portrayals vary: Western outlets frame Aden’s exit as a personal decision, while non-Western sources highlight structural exclusion. This contrast reflects how Muslim modesty is both exoticized and marginalized within mainstream fashion. The study uses intersectional discourse analysis of media, corporate rhetoric, and Aden’s statements, framed by critical fashion and postcolonial theory. It contrasts brands that genuinely collaborate with those that force compromise, revealing that Muslim models are welcomed only when their aesthetics align with fleeting trends. Furthermore, fashion often rebrands religious garments as avant-garde when stripped of their Islamic context, reinforcing Orientalist hierarchies. The paper argues for rejecting Western norms as neutral and urges co-design approaches that center marginalized voices, especially Muslim consumers, as a path toward meaningful transformation in representation, production, and aesthetic values within the fashion industry.

Keywords: Modesty; Islam; Decolonizing Aesthetics; Tokenism; Performative Inclusivity.

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Introduction

This article examines fashion's inclusivity gap through the case of hijab-wearing model Halima Aden. It argues that the industry's inclusion of Muslim women commodifies them and demands assimilation. Using a decolonial framework, close reading, and media analysis, it employs Nancy Fraser's concept of misrecognition¹ and Lila Abu-Lughod's critiques of liberal feminism.² This article questions whether the fashion industry's embrace of the hijab is genuinely inclusive, or a Western narrative of cultural superiority, that erases and controls under the guise of diversity.

In 2021, the website Fashion Revolution defined inclusion as:

1. the act of including someone or something as part of a group, list, etc., or a person or thing that is included;
2. the idea that everyone should be able to use the same facilities, take part in the same activities, and enjoy the same experiences, including people who have a disability or other disadvantage.³

Similarly, the website Sustainability Directory defined inclusive fashion as fashion that:

centres on designing, producing, and marketing clothing that is accessible and representative of a wide range of people. This extends beyond traditional narrow beauty standards to encompass individuals of varying body types, sizes, ages, races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and abilities. The movement seeks to challenge the historical exclusion prevalent in the fashion industry and promote a sense of belonging for all consumers.⁴

While both definitions prioritize universal presence and belonging in fashion, their scope of inclusion remains limited.

Marion Iris Young⁵ critiques the dominant "distributive paradigm" of justice for assuming justice is solely about the fair allocation of material goods. She finds this paradigm flawed because it treats justice as a static end-state, ignoring the institutional contexts that produce distributions and misrepresenting non-material goods, like cultural representation, as divisible. For example, critics point to American media stereotypes that depict Black characters as criminals and Arab characters as "sinful terrorists or gaudy princes".

Young further argues that distributive theories, due to their individualistic framework, fail to recognize structural class inequalities. She contends that true equality requires a shift from an assimilationist model to a politics of difference. A genuinely inclusive society must therefore reject simply integrating groups into existing norms. Instead, achieving meaningful inclusion for oppressed groups requires a politics of difference, where equity and group representation are necessary to ensure full participation. Genuine inclusion is thus redefined not as sameness, but as the active accommodation of difference.⁶

Similarly, Nancy Fraser identifies Eurocentrism — establishing norms that privilege whiteness and devalue non-white traits — as a core mechanism of cultural racism. This devaluation causes a spectrum of harms, including media stereotyping, discrimination, and exclusion. Fraser frames these as injustices of recognition, whose remedy requires affirming and according positive value to devalued identities.⁷

1. Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Postsocialist' Age", in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 12–20.

2. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 28–30.

3. Samanta Bullock, "Is Inclusivity Part of the Sustainable Spectrum?" *Fashion Revolution*, accessed July 5, 2025, <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/is-inclusivity-part-of-the-sustainable-spectrum/>.

4. "Inclusive Fashion," Sustainability Directory, accessed July 5, 2025, <https://sustainability-directory.com/term/inclusive-fashion-practices/>.

5. Marion Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 17–18.

6. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 18–26, 158–73.

7. Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Postsocialist' Age," 12–20.

Inclusivity has dominated fashion's discourse since the early 2000s, with brands now actively promoting diversity, equity, and representation. This shift is driven by a new consumer ethos, detailed in McKinsey's The State of Fashion 2019 report. While millennials prioritize environmentalism, 90% of Generation Z demands corporate accountability on social and environmental issues — a change fueled by social justice movements. One-third of global consumers now consistently use their purchasing power for ethical expression.⁸ McKinsey's 2020 report describes mounting pressure from consumers and advocacy groups for greater inclusivity, marking 2020 as a turning point where diversity in race, gender, and sexual orientation became visible at all organizational levels, including leadership.⁹

Yet, U.S. corporations, including those in fashion, often interpret inclusivity in a limited way. As Jennifer Brown's¹⁰ research on workplace diversity confirms, even major proponents like Twitter demonstrate only a partial implementation of inclusion practices. In 2015, Leslie Miley, Twitter's only Black engineering manager, publicly resigned, citing the company's failure to address systemic diversity issues. Despite championing #BlackLivesMatter, Twitter's internal data showed a stark racial gap: while Black and Hispanic users comprised 30% of its audience, they were only 6% of its workforce, with no people of color in engineering or product leadership.

Miley's viral blog post ignited a broader conversation about diversity in Silicon Valley. He challenged the corporate excuse of a "limited pipeline" of diverse talent, arguing that defensive reactions to the term diversity prevent meaningful dialogue and accountability.¹¹

Halima Aden, a Somali-American fashion model born in Kenya in 1997, brought this gap to the forefront. In 2016, she participated in the Miss Minnesota USA pageant, becoming the first contestant in the competition's history to wear a hijab and a burkini instead of a conventional swimsuit. Her participation was revolutionary, not only for the pageant but for the broader cultural conversation around representation in fashion and beauty. In 2017, she signed a contract with IMG Models, a globally renowned agency, and went on to become the first hijab-wearing model to walk in New York Fashion Week and to appear on the covers of Vogue Arabia, British Vogue, and Sports Illustrated.¹²

These milestones are particularly striking when viewed in historical context. British Vogue was founded in 1916,¹³ New York Fashion Week in 1943,¹⁴ the Miss Minnesota USA pageant in 1952,¹⁵ and Sports Illustrated in 1954.¹⁶ Yet, it was not until 2017 that a hijab-wearing model was featured on their covers or within their pages.

Muslim presence in the U.S. predates its founding, dating back over 400 years to enslaved Africans. An estimated 30% of those brought from regions like Gambia and Cameroon were Muslim. While many were forcibly converted to Christianity, some preserved their Islamic identity. Today's U.S. Muslim

8. "The State of Fashion 2019: A year of awakening," McKinsey & Company, accessed September 20, 2025, [https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion-archive#/.](https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion-archive#/)

9. "The State of Fashion 2020: Navigating uncertainty," McKinsey & Company, accessed September 20, 2025, [https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion-archive#/.](https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion-archive#/)

10. Jennifer Brown, *Inclusion: Diversity, The New Workplace & The Will to Change* (Hartford: Purpose Driven Publishing, 2016), 7–9.

11. Brown, 7–9.

12. "Halima Aden," *The Business of Fashion*, accessed September 21, 2025, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/people/halima-aden/>.

13. "British Vogue: The Biography of an Icon," V&A, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/shop/books/fashion-and-textiles/british-vogue-the-biography-of-an-icon-169069.html?srsltid=AfmBOorXntDyoiVxkod7cNaC7VkuPsOmd6NUIJ6RhLpxjw4pKHLqszXF>.

14. "The Complete History of Fashion Week: Origins, Evolution, and Impact," Fashion Week Online, last modified April 1, 2025, <https://fashionweekonline.com/history-of-fashion-week>.

15. "Miss Minnesota Alumnae," *Miss Minnesota*, accessed September 21, 2025, <https://www.missminnesota.org/alumnae.html>.

16. Gill Schor, "Sports Illustrated at 70: Requiem for a 20th Century Icon," *Sports History Weekly*, February 18, 2024, <https://sportshistoryweekly.com/stories/sports-illustrated-cover-swimsuit-magazine-arena-group-authentic-brands,1199>.

population is diverse, including immigrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. African American Muslims — direct descendants of those early enslaved Muslims — represent about 20% of the total, numbering between 600,000 and 850,000.¹⁷

Given this long-standing presence, the persistent performative inclusivity, of (visibly) Muslim women in American fashion highlights a systemic oversight. Halima Aden's achievements represent more than individual success; they challenge and push back against systemic forms of exclusion. In her interview with *The Guardian*, she noted that even within the Muslim community, her choice to enter fashion was questioned, with critics accusing her of compromising modesty.¹⁸

This struggle becomes even clearer when models are recruited. Traditionally, model scouts approached potential models in public places like malls, cafés, or parks.¹⁹ These young people, often in their late teens or early twenties, are selected based on their physical features, what the industry calls "the look." The look generally aligns with Western beauty standards: youthfulness, clear skin, straight white teeth, symmetrical facial features, and slim body types.²⁰ Even in countries where the Caucasian look is not prevalent, it is still largely sought after. Elizabeth Wissinger noticed that Tokyo's modeling agencies enforce a narrow, Caucasian-centric beauty ideal, prioritizing features like white skin, large eyes, and a tall, slender figure. To fulfill this demand, they primarily recruit women from countries with weaker economies in Latin America and Eastern Europe.²¹

Yet a fashion look is more than physical traits; it is a socially constructed system of meanings that places models within hierarchies of desirability and cultural capital. It signifies not just beauty, but a network of industry knowledge and visual codes. Within the creative economy, looks function as symbolic commodities, offering identity and status beyond practical use, with value shaped by consumer desire, not inherent usefulness.²²

Under this system, a hijab-wearing woman is unlikely to be approached by a model scout in the field. Even with the advent of the internet, when aspiring models send their own portfolios directly to scouts or agencies, she may still be overlooked. Her visual difference — as envisioned by average Western norms — especially her religious symbolism, falls outside what scouts are trained to see as commercially desirable. Halima Aden's path into fashion was the result of her own determination to change the image of who gets to be included. Her career challenges the very starting point of fashion's recruitment process, which remains unequally accessible and coded by implicit biases.

Audre Lorde's insight offers a powerful lens for understanding this dynamic. She writes:

Racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia are forms of human blindness stem from the same root — an inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self, when there are shared goals.²³

17. Aliyah Abdo, "The Legal Status of Hijab in the United States: A Look at the Sociopolitical Influences on the Legal Right to Wear the Muslim Headscarf," *UC Law SF Race and Economic Justice Law Journal*, Vol. 5 (Winter 2008): 441–50, https://repository.uclawsf.edu/hastings_race_poverty_law_journal/vol5/iss2/6/.

18. Elle Hunt, "'We All Deserve Representation': Hijab-Wearing Model Halima Aden on the Power of Fashion," *The Guardian*, February 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2020/feb/09/halima-aden-model-activist-hijab-refugee-fashion-we-all-deserve-representation>.

19. Ashley Mears, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1; Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger, "Fashion Modelling: The Industry Perspective," in *Fashioning Models: Image, Text and Industry*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger (London: Berg, 2012), 177.

20. Mears, 4.

21. Elizabeth Wissinger, "Modelling Consumption: Fashion Modelling Work in Contemporary Society," in *Fashioning Models: Image, Text and Industry*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger (London: Berg, 2012), 146.

22. Entwistle and Wissinger, 146.

23. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984), 45.

The fashion industry often publicly celebrates diversity in skin color or size while rejecting ethnic or religious difference, tolerating it only if it doesn't disrupt core norms of beauty and consumption. The hijab, as a visible marker of identity, is thus labeled "political". Marion Iris Young frames this as "cultural imperialism", a form of oppression where a dominant group universalizes its experience as the societal norm. This paradox renders subordinate groups both invisible and stereotyped as deviant Others, creating a double consciousness where they are forced to see themselves through the dominant culture's demeaning lens. The injustice is the silencing of their experiences while the dominant group's interpretation is imposed as reality.²⁴

Thus, the industry's proclaimed inclusivity remains partial. Without equal opportunity at the very moment of recruitment, without recognition of the hijab as a valid and enriching difference rather than a threat, fashion's inclusive turn risks being nothing more than a branding strategy.

Performative Inclusivity: Pressures to Substitute Various Fabrics or Garments for the Hijab

Islam, a major world religion founded in 7th-century Mecca, is founded on "surrender" to the will of Allah, the one God and creator of the universe. Its core teachings are derived from the Qur'an, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and the Hadith, which records his practices. These sources emphasize bodily cleanliness and a dignified appearance. While Islamic scholars disagree on exact dress codes due to varying interpretations of archaic Arabic texts, a majority agree that women are obligated to wear the hijab after puberty. Literally meaning "a cover", the hijab commonly conceals the head, neck, and chest, with its specific style varying by geography and culture.

Halima Aden was steadfast in her aspiration to have herself and other hijab-wearing Americans represented in the American fashion industry, being an inseparable part of the American society.²⁵

Her bold initiative encouraged many hijab-wearing models to follow her lead, and numerous are currently recruited to walk runways and appear on magazine covers or editorials all over the globe. Since then, IMG Models' website added the profile of British hijab-wearing model Ikram Abdi to its list comprising 206 female models.²⁶ Models.com's database comprising thousands of model portfolios features 15 hijab-wearing models.²⁷

Nonetheless, Aden's promising beginning revealed certain hurdles within the fashion industry. Only three years after her entry to the modelling world, she announced quitting the fashion industry through her Instagram Stories,²⁸ referring to the compromises she had to make which contradicted to her religious convictions. Elizabeth A. Wissinger argues that the fashion industry uses subjective aesthetics, like a "color scheme", to justify racial exclusion, thereby enabling the social construction of race. This occurs in two ways: it forces models of color to perform "aesthetic labor" to meet client demands, and it allows gatekeepers to style models to reinforce stereotypical looks. Consequently, under the industry's "corporate gaze", race becomes a performative construct, shaped by client standards rather than a fixed identity.²⁹

24. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 58–60.

25. "Supermodel Halima Aden: 'Why I quit,'" *BBC News*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-55653029>.

26. IMG Models, founded in 1987, is a globally renowned agency specializing in talent discovery and model management. The agency operates from offices in six major fashion capitals: New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, Milan, and Sydney. <https://imgmodels.com/directory/?view=grid&sort=az&gender=woman&territory=new-york&category=4>.

27. Models.com is an online platform and industry database that tracks and ranks fashion models, modelling agencies, photographers, stylists, brands, and other key figures in the fashion world.

28. Manuel Arnaut, "I Thought I Hadn't Done Enough To Showcase The Hijab In A Proper Way': Halima Aden On Her Decision To Quit Modelling, And What's Next," *Vogue*, May 4, 2023, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/halima-aden-interview.%20%20>

29. Elizabeth A. Wissinger, *This Year's Model: Fashion, Media, and the Making of Glamour* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 226.

This performative construct is reflected in the way Halima Aden was treated by certain fashion agents; not only is she Black, but also a visibly modest Muslim. In a BBC interview,³⁰ Halima Aden explained her decision to leave fashion. Her landmark 2017 contract with IMG Models secured her right to never remove her hijab. However, she gradually lost styling control, as creative teams began to style it in ways that revealed her neck and chest or used non-traditional materials like denim, violating her original religious boundaries. Additionally, a separate clause guaranteeing her a private changing space was denied to other hijab-wearing models, who were instructed to change in a bathroom instead. Aden's feelings about her experience in photo shoots were not always positive. Put in her own words: "I had zero excitement because I couldn't see myself".³¹

Naturally, any human being should be allowed to express their identity, including through their clothing. As Audre Lorde writes, "as Black women we have the right and responsibility to define ourselves and to seek our allies in common cause: with Black men against racism, and with each other and white women against sexism".³² This assertion of self-definition transcends race, affirming the right of all women to define their identity, including through (modest) clothing. However, Halima Aden's reality contradicted this principle. She was repeatedly pressured by stylists to wear garments conflicting with her values, an attempt to define her identity on her behalf and appropriate her right to self-expression.

These industry transgressions recall Lila Abu-Lughod's argument about the Western desire to "liberate" women of color from men of color. This obsession with saving Muslim women served as a facade for Western authorities to conceal their colonial ambitions. They propagated the legend that every Muslim woman was forced to wear the hijab by a male relative, framing the West as her liberator.³³ Naively (or not) believing this narrative, many in the West adopted the savior role when it concerns Muslim women, and the fashion industry was no exception. However, fashion industry actors should not dictate what liberation looks like, especially for women whose identities and beliefs do not align with dominant cultural norms.

Fashion Inclusivity Attempts: Between Failure and Success

Audre Lorde warns against the assumption that white women's narratives are the only legitimate "her-stories" to draw upon for power, while the histories of non-white women are either overlooked or treated merely as illustrative of victimhood.³⁴ She emphasizes that this erasure harms women of color and diminishes the voices of white women who neglect to critique their positionality. In fashion, this manifests when the narratives of Black Muslim women like Halima Aden are dismissed or tokenized, undermining the inclusivity the industry professes. Aden's hijab was treated not as a meaningful religious and cultural identity, but as a convenient aesthetic for branding. This indicates that Muslim women are included for visual diversity, not a genuine embrace of their full humanity.

Upon leaving the modelling industry, Aden shared her 2017 American Eagle Outfitters campaign wearing a denim hijab. She formerly justified her participation in the campaign out of a deep desire for representation. In retrospect, she recognised that she had allowed herself to be used, realizing that the fashion brands needed Muslim women for credibility, not the other way around.³⁵

30. Megha Mohan, "Why I Walked Away from a Dream Job in Fashion," *BBC News*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-55653029>.

31. Mohan.

32. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 52.

33. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 783–90.

34. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 69.

35. Zarafshan Shiraz, "Halima Aden Quits Fashion Industry, Rihanna-Bella Hadid-Gigi Hadid Support Hijab-Wearing American Supermodel," *Hindustan Times*, November 27, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/fashion-and-trends/halima-aden-quits-fashion-industry-rihanna-bella-hadid-gigi-hadid-support-hijab-wearing-american-supermodel/story-r3nms1d4z9Wxwqx5GocGhI.html>.

When the campaign launched, Aden had initially expressed pride in participating, believing that the brand was working toward inclusivity and empowering American youth. However, her later reflections suggest that this hope was short-lived. She came to see her inclusion as conditional and superficial, and her image leveraged for market gain rather than respected for its deeper cultural and personal significance.³⁶

This conclusion aligns with American Eagle Outfitters' messaging, which highlighted Aden's background and perseverance, ignoring the product and the religious significance of the hijab.³⁷ Despite broad claims about inclusivity, focusing on her inspirational story over her professional contribution as a modest fashion model indicates her personal brand was capitalized on, not substantively supported. Further evidence support this interpretation. First, the denim hijab sold out within one to two weeks of its release, as reported by multiple sources.³⁸ Yet despite its commercial success, the product was never restocked, nor were any similar items released in the following years. Second, American Eagle's own website, which prominently features the slogan "Inclusive. Authentic. Diverse.",³⁹ does not display any hijab-wearing models.⁴⁰ Its homepage (at the time of writing this paper) features two rotating strips advertising denim clothing, both showcasing exclusively white, thin-bodied models.⁴¹ This choice of imagery directly contradicts the inclusive promise of "jeans for everyone and everybody", effectively narrowing everybody to a white, slender ideal.

Aden described a campaign photo where denim garments replaced her traditional hijab, draping her head and chest. The styling made her feel so uncomfortable and alienated that she cried in her hotel room, vowing never to model without her hijab fully visible. This incident revealed the emotional toll of misrepresentation, demonstrating how a superficially progressive campaign stripped her of agency and commodified her religious identity.⁴² Rather than honouring Aden's unapologetic identity as a devout, modest Muslim woman, the campaign diluted her image to appeal to mainstream aesthetic sensibilities. This paradox in fashion mirrors in broader dynamics within the Western world, where inclusion is often contingent upon conformity. As documented by Annelies Moors,⁴³ between 2006 and 2011, several European employers and schools often penalised women for headscarves covering the neck, shoulders, or chest, urging them to emulate Muslim women with smaller, more "pleasant" scarves. This reveals a troubling standard where expressions of modesty are only accepted if repackaged to fit Westernised aesthetic expectations. True inclusivity remains elusive when appearance is policed in subtle yet impactful ways.

Amid these disappointments, Aden highlighted a positive experience with Fenty Beauty. She recalled that Barbadian artist and brand owner, Rihanna allowed her to wear her own black hijab without interference and later supported her decision to leave the industry by reposting her story.⁴⁴ This moment

36. Amanda Martinez, "Trailblazing Hijabi Model Halima Aden Stars in American Eagle's Latest Campaign," *Mic*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.mic.com/articles/181571/trailblazing-hijabi-model-halima-aden-stars-in-american-eagles-latest-campaign>.

37. "American Eagle Outfitters Sells Out of its Denim Hijab, Made With TENCEL® Fibers," *Carved in Blue*, accessed August 2, 2025, <https://carvedinblue.tencel.com/american-eagle-outfitters-sells-denim-hijab-made-tencel-fibers/>.

38. Nicole Lyn Pesce, "American Eagle Introduces the Denim Hijab," *New York Post*, July 20, 2017, <https://nypost.com/2017/07/20/american-eagle-introduces-the-denim-hijab/>; Kelsey Stiegman, "American Eagle Is Now Selling a Denim Hijab," *Seventeen*, July 17, 2017.

39. AEO Inc., "AEO Inc.," accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.aeo-inc.com/?navdetail=footer:c2:p8>.

40. American Eagle, "Homepage," accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.ae.com/us/en>.

41. "ae.com," AE, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.ae.com/us/en>.

42. Shiraz, "Halima Aden Quits Fashion Industry, Rihanna-Bella Hadid-Gigi Hadid Support Hijab-Wearing American Supermodel."

43. Annelies Moors, "Fashion and Its Discontents: The Aesthetics of Covering in the Netherlands" in *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, eds. Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 241–59.

44. Shiraz, "Halima Aden Quits Fashion Industry, Rihanna-Bella Hadid-Gigi Hadid Support Hijab-Wearing American Supermodel."

stood in contrast to her other experiences, demonstrating that genuine inclusion is possible when brands respect the lived identities of their models, rather than seeking to reshape them.

How Racialized Perceptions of Modesty Hierarchies Privilege Non-Muslim Interpretations: The Turban Case

The Western viewpoint since the Renaissance holds that Europeans are the ones who shape world history. It sees Europe as always moving forward and modernizing, while the rest of the world is stuck in the past or develops slowly.⁴⁵ From that period onward, a major geopolitical shift has been initiated, where the Atlantic rose to become the new center of the capitalist world, the Mediterranean was relegated to the periphery, and a new Eurocentric ideology was built upon the myth of a fundamental European separation from its southern neighbors.⁴⁶ Orientalism created a hierarchical framework that defined the "Oriental" as irrational, childlike, and fundamentally Other in contrast to the rational, mature European. It simultaneously framed the Orient as a coherent but static world, whose foreignness and eccentricity were frozen in time.⁴⁷

These perspectives apply a double standard: a modest outfit on a non-Muslim woman is seen as fashionable, but on a Muslim woman in a hijab, the same look is dismissed, exoticised, or viewed with suspicion. Islamic clothing is rejected not for its aesthetic, but because it represents a religious tradition perceived as "other" and incompatible with secular modernity.⁴⁸ Islamic religious clothing is not inherently at odds with fashion; these garments are worn daily in countless contexts and often possess strong aesthetic coherence. According to Sandıkçı and Ger, fashion becomes a battleground for expressing identity and difference within Islamist communities. While some adopt modern, urban styles to blend in with secular society yet maintain religious sensitivity, others use lavish designer clothing to signal wealth, creating internal divisions over taste, conservatism, and class.⁴⁹

Halima Aden's experience exemplifies this contradiction. She was forced to wear denim as a faux hijab, a visual placeholder that stripped it of religious and cultural meaning, diluting her religious expression. This created a superficial, exoticised version of modesty, palatable because it was divorced from its roots. This portrayal aligns with Laila Haidarali's analysis of the exoticising of Black models, a seemingly complimentary practice that functions as othering, reinforcing racist stereotypes and limiting opportunities.⁵⁰

As Reina Lewis argues, mainstream fashion marginalizes veiled Muslim women by framing their attire as incompatible with modernity, reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes and excluding Islamic dress from high fashion narratives.⁵¹ Modest fashion, though predominantly a youthful phenomenon, is rarely interpreted through the lens of youth culture or self-expression. Instead, modest dressers, especially visibly Muslim women, are often seen as representatives of essentialised, unchanging, collective religious identities. This perception is intensified by the securitising discourses that have dominated since 9/11.⁵²

45. James Morris Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 8.

46. Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism: Modernity, Religion, and Democracy: A Critique of Eurocentrism and Culturalism*, trans. Russell Moore and James Membrez (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 106–8.

47. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 40, 108.

48. Moors, "Fashion and Its Discontents: The Aesthetics of Covering in the Netherlands," 248.

49. Özlem Sandıkçı and Güliz Ger, "Fundamental Fashions: The Cultural Politics of the Turban and the Levi's," *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 28 (2001): 146–51.

50. Laila Haidarali, "'Giving Coloured Sisters a Superficial Equality': Re-Modelling African American Womanhood," in *Fashioning Models: Image, Text and Industry*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger (New York: Berg, 2012), 56–79.

51. Reina Lewis, *Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 1–2.

52. Reina Lewis, *Mediating Modesty: Fashioning Faithful Bodies* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 2–3.

This exclusion is part of broader racialised perceptions of modesty, where garments like African turbans are accepted in fashion only when stripped of their religious or cultural roots. Within this framework, modesty operates in a hierarchy: secular or non-Muslim interpretations of covered dress are celebrated as modern or stylish, while religiously motivated modesty, particularly Islamic, is dismissed as backward or oppressive. For instance, Muslim or newly converted Muslim women in the Netherlands often face discrimination when wearing the hijab but experience less resistance when substituting it with an African-style turban that obscures its religious meaning.⁵³ Likewise, young Dutch Muslim women who wear traditional Turkish overcoats (pardösü) to maintain a connection with their heritage are rarely acknowledged as fashion-conscious, even though these garments have evolved over time in fabric, cut, and color.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, high-end designers frequently appropriate religious garments like the burqa or nun's habit. Stripped of their sacred contexts and reinterpreted for the runway, these silhouettes are celebrated as fashionable and avant-garde. These cases collectively demonstrate how fashion elevates ethnic or religious symbols only when they are stripped of their sacred associations, repackaged, and reinterpreted through the lens of dominant, often white, secular, or non-Muslim tastes. "Increasingly I get a feeling that American standards are sort of an unspoken norm... whether one resists them or adopts them, they are there to be reckoned with".⁵⁵ This observation of Audre Lorde powerfully frames the way Western fashion industry imposes secular norms, like unveiling, as the default. This industry often demands assimilation rather than offering authentic inclusion of Muslim identities. At times, even when fashion attempts to be inclusive, voices disturbed by visible cultural and religious difference mistake such inclusion for hypocrisy or betrayal. Pierre Bergé, co-founder of the acclaimed French fashion house Yves Saint Laurent, spoke out vehemently against Islamic fashion collections. In an interview with *Vogue magazine*, he declared:

I am scandalised. Creators should have nothing to do with Islamic fashion... Designers are there to make women more beautiful, to give them their freedom, not to collaborate with this dictatorship which imposes this abominable thing by which we hide women and make them live a hidden life.

He went on to accuse brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Uniqlo, and Marks & Spencer of producing these collections purely for profit, calling on them to abandon financial motives and instead stand by their principles.⁵⁶

Halima Aden: Intersectionality of Blackness, Religious Belief and Ethnicity

The lack of representation that Aden faced is mainly due to her religious beliefs and sartorial preferences, however this is far from being the only reason. Aden mentioned the difficulty of being "a minority within a minority within a minority. And being a black Muslim, Somali American, former refugee, [she has] so many identities that make up who [she is]".⁵⁷

Her conditioned inclusion in fashion is a reaction to both her Islamic and Black identity, which remain incompletely integrated in American and other white societies. As bell hooks explains, Black women in popular culture often appropriate hypersexualised stereotypes to gain control or benefit. Black female

53. Moors, "Fashion and Its Discontents: The Aesthetics of Covering in the Netherlands," 2–4.

54. Emma Tarlo, "Hijab in London: Metamorphosis, Resonance and Effects," in *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, ed. Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 129.

55. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 21.

56. Scarlett Conlon, "Pierre Bergé Condemns Islamic Fashion," *Vogue UK*, March 31, 2016, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/pierre-berge-comments-designer-religious-collections>.

57. Deena Zar, "After Quitting the Fashion Industry, Supermodel Halima Aden Is Back — This Time, on Her Own Terms," *ABC News*, September 28, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Style/quitting-fashion-industry-supermodel-halima-aden-back-time/story?id=80086345>.

sexuality is frequently depicted as more liberated and deviant; unlike idealized standards of beauty, the Black female body is often noticed only when portrayed as overly available or sexually deviant.⁵⁸

Conclusion: Dismantling Western Norms

Inclusion in fashion is often defined as equal representation for everyone, yet mainstream practices frequently exclude visibly Muslim women. While contemporary fashion discourses champion values of inclusion and belonging, their scope remains critically limited. As the analysis through the lenses of Iris Marion Young⁵⁹ and Nancy Fraser⁶⁰ reveals, a truly just and inclusive industry requires a fundamental shift from a distributive model of justice to one that actively addresses both recognition and representation. Therefore, genuine inclusion is transformative, not additive. It cannot be achieved by simply increasing the number of diverse bodies within an unchanged system. Instead, it demands a “politics of difference”, as Young argues, and an affirmative “politics of recognition”, as Fraser contends. This means actively dismantling Eurocentric norms, valuing distinct cultural identities on their own terms, and restructuring the very foundations of fashion, from design and imagery to business practices, to ensure not just presence, but equitable power and self-representation for all groups. True inclusion is thus redefined not as sameness, but as the active and just accommodation of difference. Halima Aden challenged these narrow norms by insisting on modest representation aligned with her Islamic faith, but ultimately left the industry after being pressured to compromise her values, and, being subjected (consciously or not) to Western attempts of saving her from supposed oppression. Her journey reveals how tokenistic inclusion can mask deeper exclusions, with religious expression often commodified or diluted for mass appeal. Scholars like Ashley Mears⁶¹ explain how fashion markets “the look” as symbolic capital, sidelining those who visibly diverge from dominant ideals. This is evident in campaigns like American Eagle’s, where Aden’s presence was celebrated without supporting her identity substantively. This is contrasted by her positive experience with Fenty Beauty, which offered respectful, identity-affirming inclusion. Western fashion tends to accept modest dress only when detached from religious, especially Islamic significance, embracing turbans or similar styles while stigmatizing hijabs. This reflects Orientalist and racialised biases that shape who is deemed acceptable. Moreover, Aden’s intersectional identity, as a Black, Muslim, Somali-American woman, compounded her marginalization, echoing bell hooks’⁶² critique of how Black women’s bodies are stereotyped in contrast to Eurocentric norms. As Entwistle and Wissinger⁶³ argue, fashion’s creative circuits often reinforce exclusion, validating Aden’s own words: “These spaces were always predominantly white... So you are already at a disadvantage for simply being *you* in a workplace that never considered someone of your background”.⁶⁴ If fashion is truly made for everyone, inclusion must extend beyond the forefront of the runway and the campaign image to the very backbone of the industry. Authentic representation requires diversifying not only the models but all roles in the production process, including stylists, creative directors, photographers, and assistants. Furthermore, the industry must move beyond tokenism, the superficial employment of minority individuals as symbolic specimens, toward a genuine belief in the inclusivity it allegedly champions.

58. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 61–3.

59. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 39–65.

60. Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Postsocialist’ Age,” 68–93.

61. Mears, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*, 4–7.

62. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 61–3.

63. Wissinger, “Modelling Consumption: Fashion Modelling Work in Contemporary Society,” 59.

64. Jessie Yeung, “Model Halima Aden quits runway citing pressure to ‘compromise’ religious beliefs,” *CNN*, November 26, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/halima-aden-hijab-quits-intl-hnk-scli>.

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