

SUNDAY'S ZAMAN

Designer Yalçın: 'Don't expect an Islamic fashion show from me'

Celebrated fashion designer Rabia Yalçın had everyone's attention when she displayed her décolleté clothing designs in New York. Yalçın said she has also designed conservative clothes but will not exhibit them because fashion is not a valid concept for concealing clothing. She explains, "The mere fashion in Islamic clothing was preset -- covering."

The fashion shows she arranged in New York aroused great interest, whereas the clothes she exhibited in an art gallery in Chicago attracted the American press. News and interviews with her have appeared in several mainstream publications such as Time and the Chicago Tribune, as well as TV stations including CNN and CNBC-e. What makes Yalçın and her success different is the fact that she makes beautiful pieces in a conservative style. We interview Yalçın, who has just returned from the US, on fashion, neighborhood pressure and her designs.



RABİA YALÇIN

How did you get to New York?

I have an expressive identity and character due to my artistic spirit. I wanted the entire world to see what I have produced. I set the US as a target because it is a cosmopolitan country where people of from all ethnic origins coexist. I thought the US would accelerate the process required to reach the world. I knocked on the door, it opened wide.

Is the reason you became a designer -- everybody admired the clothes you had made and asked where you had bought them?

I started my professional career because of the increasing demand for my clothing. I used to sew clothes for myself and my friends. I opened my initial workshop in the Fatih district of Istanbul, where my home was located; I had to be close to my children. Then we moved to Nişantaşı as a family but not because the stylists were there -- I did not have any customers in Fatih.

Do you always sew clothes for special occasions?

I am a designer concentrating on casual wear, but this is not understood at first glance because I am always perceived as the "woman in a hijab designing décolleté." This is not what I mean to do. It is open to debate whether I am doing right or not; nevertheless, I am reluctant to display a fashion show on conservative, veiled designs since covering (conservatism) is a religious concept for me. I do not want to mix religion and trade. Thus, always visible are the high décolleté clothes I design; I avoid displaying others.

Why?

I do not want to be someone using conservative women as items to be rated. The reason is I am a conservative woman myself and have experienced similar difficulties. I usually end up viewed by others as a woman who is conservative but also an advocate to get others to open up; a conservative person producing nothing for anyone in the conservative cross-section other than herself. I am aware of this; however, I don't know how to cope with it. You should either show off, making use of the

conservative sector, or behave the way I do.

Is the rising interest of the media in you a result of your success or the fact that a woman in hijab has put on a fashion show in New York?

Of course, it is the hijab. People believe that religious people retire from the world, and so it is interesting for them to see someone engaged in the design business, since they would never believe that such a person could have success in this field. That is to say, they believe we cannot look at a concept irrelevant to us with an objective perspective. Fashion is about aesthetics; however, a tendency not to combine aesthetics with religion does exist. It has a background, though; I do not know who did it or why, but somebody separated religion from aesthetics, coming up with the idea that a religious woman means an un-aesthetic woman; even the house of the religious is not aesthetically designed. Nowadays a woman exclaims, "No. Religion is equivalent to aesthetics!" then explodes the bomb. I find religion aesthetic. It is enough to have a look at what God created to see religion is so gentle and fragile. Remember, the Islamic arts are the most aesthetic ones in the world.

What you wear and what you design are far different. Doesn't this present a dilemma?

We are devout and modest people constantly avoiding ourselves and our inner worlds. What I do is just to talk about our inner lives. They keep asking me, "Would you wear the clothes you design?" I have never produced something I would not wear. What I emphasize is that devout people like me have a double wardrobe. One part opens out whilst the other opens in. Now, I have revealed what is in the inner wing. Nonetheless, questions may occur in people's minds as I only show the items without exclaiming about them.

Is it moral to show them?

I don't abstain from doing so.

Do you face problems entering in your headscarf?

I do not face any problems in the places I enter wearing my headscarf because I avoid settings where the headscarf would be a handicap. That is, I do not attend areas I am reluctant to, thus I do not have any problems. I can sacrifice a great deal of things for my headscarf. It is my identity. It is quite funny -- a woman will not show her breasts, they are private; I do not want to show my hair, it is private, too. People keep speculating on such a simple issue. I am 40 and it has been questioned for 35 years; I guess they will continue speculating until someone tells them the truth.

The favorite issue of debate has recently been "neighborhood pressure." Does it really exist?

Do you know why this is always on the agenda? They gaze at a mirror and think everybody will do what they do. I believe in another concept. We make them open their minds with pressure. They may ask us to cover our heads using pressure when they rule us. They may be scared of this concept.

Can the headscarf be modernized? Should it be?

To me, the headscarf cannot and should not be modernized. The headscarf is not a personal accessory; it has a role defined by religion. You cannot leave that definition, so what will you change or modernize? You cannot make something trendy without changing it: fashion cannot be applied to conservative clothing. Fashion is changeable; skirts may be lengthier one year and may shorten the next. You have to "change" it since it is a commercial concept. Occasionally you should change it to such an extent that what one bought six months ago becomes old fashioned. How can you make conservative dress into a trade concept? What you can do mainly to update conservative dress is to modify the fabrics, patterns or colors. I cannot say this is the trend of the year in conservative clothing. The unchanging trend of conservatism is covering your body.

There has been a thunderstorm of debate going on about the style of First Lady Hayrnnisa Gl. What do you think about her clothing style?

Perhaps Hayrnnisa Gl is having fun when she reads what has been penned and spoken about her. I think she dresses up in a good way, fitting to her position. The stitches may be a bit more exclusive.

You claim that you have never changed the style in which you wear your headscarf. Why?

Conservative fashion has been on the agenda for a while, and I am tracked as a stylist. I do not modify my style because it may be perceived as a trend when I personally change it. I avoid showing off in distinctive styles in the media.

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