

Research Article



Draped in Meaning: The Evolving Symbolism of the Black Abaya in Saudi Arabia

الدلالات المعاصرة عن تطور رمزية العباءة السوداء في المملكة العربية السعودية

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Abstract

This study explores the symbolism of the Black Abaya within contemporary Saudi society. This loose-fitting, full-length garment, prevalent as an item of women's clothing in the Arabian Peninsula, has a long history as the standard modest dress for day-to-day wear among Muslim women. In recent years, academic and media attention toward the attire in the West has seen it come to serve as a symbol for Muslim womanhood sometimes associated with religious extremism, oppression, and personal agency. This interpretation has underscored the need for greater understanding and appreciation of the diverse cultural practices and traditions associated with the Abaya within Arab and Muslim societies. This study investigates how contemporary Saudi women interact with and explore the garment, especially their relationship with the traditional Black Abaya. This is pursued through undertaking ethnographic research consisting of interviews, observations, autoethnographic methods, and documentary analysis. The study notes the ambiguous and diverse interpretations of the Abaya as well as a trend toward embellishing the traditional Black Abaya form to better suit the needs of modern Saudi women for self-expression.

المخلص

تتحدث هذه الدراسة عن الرمزية المرتبطة بالعباءة السوداء داخل المجتمع السعودي المعاصر. تعد هذه العباءة الفضفاضة والطويلة، المنتشرة كأحد ألبسة النساء في شبه الجزيرة العربية، جزءاً من تاريخ طويل باعتبارها اللباس المعتاد الذي يعكس الحشمة في الحياة اليومية للمرأة المسلمة. في السنوات الأخيرة، جذبت العباءة السوداء اهتماماً أكاديمياً وإعلامياً في الغرب، حيث أصبحت رمزاً للمرأة المسلمة ومثالاً للجدل بين ارتباطها بالتطرف الديني أو القمع أو حرية الإرادة الشخصية. هذه التفسيرات سلطت الضوء على الحاجة لفهم أعمق وتقدير أكبر للممارسات الثقافية والتقاليد المتنوعة المرتبطة بالعباءة في المجتمعات العربية والإسلامية. تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تعامل النساء السعوديات المعاصرات مع العباءة واستكشاف علاقتهن بالعباءة السوداء التقليدية. وقد تم ذلك من خلال إجراء بحوث أنثوجرافية تضمنت مقابلات، وملاحظات، وأساليب ذاتية أنثوجرافية، وتحليل وثائق. وتشير الدراسة إلى تعدد التفسيرات المختلفة للعباءة، بالإضافة إلى ظهور اتجاه نحو تزيين وتطوير العباءة السوداء التقليدية لتلبية احتياجات المرأة السعودية العصرية في التعبير عن الذات.

Keywords: Arab cultural identity, Black Abaya, Muslim women, Modesty, Saudi Arabian womanhood

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية الثقافية العربية، العباءة السوداء، المرأة المسلمة، الحشمة، الأنوثة السعودية

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1. Introduction

The Black Abaya has a long history as a garment in Saudi society and has acquired symbolic significance over the generations within the context of the localized culture. A long and loose-fitting veiled cloth, the Abaya has traditionally been worn by Saudi women in public spaces, meeting the demands for a modest dress that has endured the gradual modernization of Saudi society (Yarwood, 1978, p. 9). As a society that has undergone significant changes in social practices as a consequence of the discovery and extraction of oil replacing traditional socioeconomic practices and lifestyles in much of the country (Rossanigo, 2024), the endurance of the Abaya renders it a symbol of traditional Arab social and religious conventions. In particular, the prevalence of the Black Abaya – popular not only for the ease of accessing black dyes but also for the inherent conservatism of the color – has seen this iteration of the dress become the dominant form of the raiment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA; Long, 2005). The Black Abaya has become celebrated in some quarters not only as a practical form of daily wear but as a “national dress”¹ for Saudi women (DeCoursey, 2017).

However, as the literature review below observes, the Black Abaya has historically also been largely excluded as a topic of study with regards to Middle Eastern culture, especially across research carried out in Western academic frameworks. Western commenters have long represented the Black Abaya as a symbol of Middle Eastern exoticism, illustrating the divergence of Saudi society from Western norms (Marsden, 2023). Such interpretations, which tend to mischaracterize the Black Abaya as a symbol of gendered oppression (Lootens, 2024), demonstrate the continued need for scholarship that challenges current perspectives and adopts an emic rather than etic perspective on the garment itself and the connotations that are associated with it. As such, this article contends that garments such as the Black Abaya can be helpful to researchers and analysts studying cultural, social, and political dynamics within societies (Kaiser, 2012).

Generating data and findings relevant to this objective necessitates formulating multiple research questions concerning the cultural importance of the Black Abaya:

1. What does the Black Abaya symbolize to women in Saudi Arabia today?
2. How do women view the Black Abaya as relevant to their identities?

These broad, explorative questions regarding women’s perceptions of the Black Abaya necessitate qualitative research methods to thoroughly investigate the perspectives of contemporary Saudi women regarding the garment.

Adopting an autoethnographic and ethnographic methodology, this paper employs a range of ethnographic, historical, visual, textual, and linguistic modes of analysis to examine and contextualize the historical context, societal norms, and personal attachments that revolve around the Black Abaya. The paper adopts a methodology centered around ethnography and participant observation. Furthermore, as

a Saudi Muslim woman who wears the Black Abaya, this researcher utilizes her own positionality relative to the phenomenon in question to investigate how wearing and not wearing the Black Abaya impacts personal identities and social relations (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). In addition to this, the paper makes use of historical and primary source documents related to the Abaya's traditional interpretations. By utilizing primary texts directly, this article provides direct insight into how such interpretations and representations concerning the Black Abaya have evolved from the aforementioned origins (El Guindi, 1999).

Based on the findings of these investigations, the study contests that Saudi women view the Black Abaya as not merely a symbol of religious piety, traditional lifestyles, or Saudi identity, but as a symbolically versatile garment. The analysis and discussion below suggest that Saudi women view the Black Abaya as allowing them to negotiate their own identities in the context of a rapidly changing Saudi landscape. Exploiting the garment's symbolic connotations to structure their social relations, Saudi women can confront both tradition and modernity in a manner of their own choosing, as well as affirming and asserting their personhood through the medium of fashion.

2. Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the literature on the topic of the Black Abaya. It first considers the theoretical basis for the research undertaken here, exploring the use of fashion as a form of expressing culture, identity, and personhood. The chapter then explores some of these dimensions, examining the Black Abaya's social connotations within Saudi society. Finally, a brief review of the academic literature published on the Black Abaya highlights a gap within the literature that this study seeks to close.

2.1. Theoretical framework

Prior to relaying and discussing ongoing debates on the role of the Black Abaya in Saudi society, it is worth elucidating some key concepts raised and discussed within this study. The significance of the Abaya to Saudi "culture" is a topic of discussion, referring here to culture as a shared set of beliefs, values, behaviors, practices, symbols, and objects that characterize a social group. From a social constructivist perspective, these components of culture interrelate with each other to develop the social norms that govern standards for behavior within a society (Jung, 2019). Individuals both contribute to social norms through their behavior and also internalize social norms themselves by making meaning out of their interactions with society (Witkin, 2012). According to this interpretation, Saudi women are not simply influenced by society, but they influence society and its culture.

"Identity" within this context refers to the individual's sense of self, shaped by their cognitive processing of these interactions and constituting a collection of beliefs, values, and affiliations. The social element to the development of identity also highlights the potential for "social identities" to be developed, referring

both to the individual's affiliations with social groups (e.g., being Saudi, as a woman, as a Muslim) and also the connotations and meanings they attach to these groups. When these associations become shared across a group or set of groups, it also becomes practical to talk of social identities at a group level. According to the theoretical interpretation of group identities favored, these identities may be formed from sociohistorical phenomena (e.g., shared histories, collective memory), as a consequence of social psychology (e.g., in-groups versus out-groups), or constructed through the relationships of groups to other groups (e.g., between Eastern and Western cultures) or to social forces (e.g., "Westernization", "modernity"; McLeod, 2019).

From a social constructivist perspective, these social forces can play a significant role in identity formation (Wendt, 1999). The concept of "modernity" refers to the transformation of societies through social, economic, and technological changes that align with specific values, conditions, and practices prevalent among dominant Western cultures since the Enlightenment. In the context of KSA, the transformation of socioeconomic practices via industrialization, the establishment of secularism, and the implementation of legal rights grounded in humanistic values, alongside the integration of economies and societies into a globalized framework, are significant factors that may undermine traditional norms and values through the process of "modernization" (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2022). The implicit progress linked to the term "modernization" and its relationship with "Westernization," considering the origins of modernity and its ongoing innovations, has elicited criticism from numerous non-Western commentators regarding the effects of modernity on society (Borck, 2023). The rejection of modernity in favor of nativism faces criticism for its atavistic rationale, particularly from critics of Islamic law who argue it imposes disparate rights for men and women (Cioffoletti, 2019). The concepts examined through a social constructivist lens remain relevant in subsequent discussions.

2.2. Historical and social contexts of the Black Abaya

After Saudi Arabia became a predominant supplier of global oil reserves in the 1970s, the rapid economic development associated with oil revenues created substantial tensions among different segments of Saudi society, with Islamic purists ultimately laying siege to the Grand Holy Mosque in Makkah in 1979. As a result, Saudi Arabia developed a conservative social and political framework (also known as the Sahwa Movement *الصحوّة*), particularly where conventions regarding the participation and presentation of women in public spaces were concerned (Anishchenkova, 2020). During the 1980s, women wore a more conservative style of dress, characterized by the enforced adoption of Black Abayas (Doumato, 2009).

Despite the government's conservative stance, in the mid-2000s, Saudi authorities launched a "national dialogue" concerning the societal position of women that led to expanded public areas designated exclusively for women (van Geel, 2016). As women's societal roles continue to broaden, the phenomenon of women-only spaces has experienced a corresponding increase in size and intricacy (van Geel, 2016). The long-standing regulations mandating women to wear Abayas in public were lifted in 2018 (Reuters,

2018). Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman affirmed his conviction that women should have the autonomy to make their own clothing decisions, provided that their choices suit and respect prevailing social norms (Reuters, 2018). This declaration allowed women to freely express their personal preferences while adhering to standards of decency and respectability. Although precise definitions of decency and respectability were not provided, they were derived from well-established Islamic principles and cultural customs.

Historically speaking, donning the Black Abaya² has been considered a statement of religious piety and in the case of Saudi Arabia, national identity (Alajaji, 2018). However, as oil revenues rose in the latter half of the twentieth century, the social meaning of the Black Abaya began to shift, with a new generation of Saudi youth using the garment to assert consumerist values, personal identity, and personal aspirations (DeCoursey, 2017). The enforcement of national dress standards throughout the Arab world occurred within a social context shaped by state power, highlighting individuals' perceived lack of choice in transgressing the self-regulations of national and cultural systems (Al-Qasimi, 2010).

For instance, DeCoursey (2017) points out that Saudi youths in the twenty-first century commonly adorn their Black Abayas with appliques, logos, calligraphy, lace materials, and embroidery, and they can be worn in various silhouettes, colors and shapes. These innovations in the styling and design of the Black Abaya seem to transgress the fundamental understanding of what the garment is and what it signifies, thus demonstrating a shifting cultural landscape regarding women's fashion in Saudi Arabia and the wider Arab world, leading to the garment's ambivalent impression. Augmentation of the Black Abaya is thus framed as a manifestation of these shifting norms that attest to the fluidity of cultural and national identity in line with Roland Barthes' theorization of the "preservation/innovation" dichotomy determines how fashion evolves within cultural contexts from one generation to the next (Al-Qasimi, 2010; Barthes et al., 1990).

2.3. Research literature on the Abaya

This section examines the research literature on the Black Abaya to date, exploring what has been established, what debates remain ongoing, and where the gaps in the literature lie.

Investigating the social and cultural implications of the Black Abaya requires an understanding of the context of Islamic veiling practices. Similar to the Black Abaya, the veil has a symbolic value of otherness (Bouvier, 2017; Zaatari et al., 2023, p. 610). El Guindi (1999, p. xi) contends that, for Muslims, the veil and, in this case, the Black Abaya perpetuate deeply rooted elements of religious piety and cultural modesty. These garments are imbued with ambiguous meanings that reflect the complex interplay of social, religious, and political milieu that shape the lived experiences of the women who wear them. As such, there remains an active debate about how to frame the Black Abaya within Islamic and Arab cultural milieus (Wagner, 2008). In particular, this debate involves deciding whether the Black Abaya is considered a national, religious, or cultural form of dress.

For instance, according to Al-Qasimi (2010, p. 10), “the Abaya garment may seemingly limit the possibility of establishing a hierarchical order, given that it promotes a greater sense of uniformity among those who don it.” In this ethnographic study, women used fashion to balance their national, religious, and cultural identities. Many did not aspire to adopt Western norms and values, even if they did not wear the Black Abaya regularly (Al Saud, 2023). However, rather than mindlessly following tradition, these women exercised personal agency and autonomy in determining the specific terms and conditions under which they chose to adhere to such traditional practices (Al Saud, 2023). Thus, the modern Black Abaya has evolved beyond its original purpose of conveying modesty. As a canvas for personal self-expression, the Black Abaya rests at the intersection of individuality and fashion (Lindholm, 2010, p. 2).

The literature indicates a trend of interpreting the Black Abaya as a symbolically conservative garment compared to alternative forms or colors. Tahani Nasser Alajaji (2018), for instance, contrasts “traditional” Black Abayas with “modern” Abayas that incorporate color and ornamentation. Lindholm (2010) likewise associates the embellishment of Abayas as representing a decision not to be rendered “invisible” by the dress, referring to the implication that its simple form and decoration suppress the expression of individual personality. This is also true of the work of Noor Al-Qasimi (2010), who explores how the Abaya, when worn or treated as fashion – that is, when *not* black and long – disrupts the hegemonic order of Islamic patriarchy whilst staying technically within its confines. This is the view of Jasmine Phillips (2014), who focuses on the Abaya when worn over Western dress as a balancing act of fashion and modesty in the region.

What is less considered within the existing literature is how the decision to wear a Black Abaya might be related to the expression of identity. Muddassir Quamar (2016) observes that many Saudi women have discarded the *Niqab* (face veil) but continue to wear the Black Abaya regardless, noting that the Abaya is thus considered by some women who wish to be more “seen” in public to be compatible with this aim. This perhaps indicates a shift within Saudi society. Previous interviews, such as one carried out by Rabolt and Forney in 1989, found that women who sought greater autonomy and to have a public role in life (such as through working) tended to eschew the Black Abaya. As Gwen Bouvier (2017) has noted, what the Abaya represents within society and what it communicates through its wearing is far from monolithic and subject to change. However, there is not a significant body of contemporary literature on the connotations of the Black Abaya for Saudi women.

One relevant study by DeCoursey (2017) explores how Saudi women perceive the Abaya. Women interviewed by DeCoursey (2017, p. 21) perceive the Black Abaya as a form of national rather than religious attire, contending that its color is not conservative, as it is viewed as “elegant” and can create a slimming effect on the figure. Others argue that color is determined by context, arguing that in formal settings such as education, a Black Abaya is preferable but that wearing a Black Abaya to an evening party or wedding would be inappropriate (p. 22). What was emphasized across these responses was the reinterpretation of the Abaya as a versatile fashion item. However, DeCoursey’s work did not explore the symbolic qualities

of the garment, inviting further research into these dimensions. This study is designed to build upon these findings and improve understanding of the symbolic significance of the Black Abaya for women within today's cultural landscape.

3. Methodology

This section presents the methodology used in the present research, justifying its methodological decisions and describing the specific research methods used to attain its results.

3.1. Research methods

This study draws from ethnographic data collected through interviews and observation of cultural practices and participants' behaviors. By engaging in ethnographic data collection, this research has been shaped by the researcher's positionality within the Saudi social system and their cultural knowledge of the practices and traditions that comprise that system (Fetterman, 2009). This method has been selected due to its allowance of research to incorporate variations of Western anthropology and adapt them to a non-Western setting. Previous studies have tended to view Arab and Muslim women as "invisible" (Lindholm, 2010), and since it is essential to gain access to the private and inner workings of Saudi women's cultural and social practices, utilizing an ethnographic methodology has enabled the researcher to draw from personal experience and extant knowledge to provide a more nuanced and culturally salient analysis of the data gathered.

This approach aids the current study in addressing the anthropological call for research conducted "from within" the cultures being examined, challenging longstanding methodological hegemonies that positioned valid research as the domain of external, objective observers studying "other" cultures (Halilovich, 2016, p. 88). An emic perspective on the practice of wearing the Black Abaya is particularly relevant considering the longstanding mischaracterizations and misunderstanding of what the practice signifies for those who are not a part of Saudi or even Islamic cultural systems.

3.2. Data collection

Data for this study was collected through travels in Saudi Arabia over six months. Locations of particular importance include the Holy Mosque in Makkah and Serafi Mall in Jeddah. Data were also gathered in women-only spaces like hair salons, Abaya stores, and changing rooms that the researcher frequented. Collecting data in these locations reflects the importance of emic research in anthropology, particularly when investigating cultural and religious habits that require the preservation of modesty and the sense of belonging associated with the Abaya in these communities.

With respect to the interviews carried out for this study, around 20 women were interviewed. This has been identified as an ideal number for a small-scale study, given the level of detail contained within one-to-one interviews (Rapley, 2014). Interviews lasted a minimum of 1 hour each with some lasting days, were carried out separately or within groups, and employed a semi-structured approach to elicit detailed responses (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). The structure of these discussions was less rigid than conventional interview methods; the aim was to foster an organic environment that encouraged participants to express themselves freely and informally. Participants were familiar with the researcher's role and, consequently, perceived my research as nonintrusive. This experience corresponded to Altorki's (2015, p. 55) concept of the "observant participant," where the researcher actively participates in the study. Nevertheless, the risk for factors such as social desirability bias to play a role as a consequence of this familiarity was noted. For this reason, participants were informed that their data would be anonymized and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time (Saunders et al., 2015).

Additional data were gathered through secondary sources, such as novels and popular films, which provide insight into how the Black Abaya is framed both within Saudi society and the broader global cultural framework. For example, Rajaa Alsanae's (2012) novel *Girls of Riyadh* provides essential contextual information about individuals navigating the Black Abaya's social and cultural significance. On the other hand, popular international films like Greta Gerwig's (2023) *Barbie*, which became a remarkable cultural success globally and within Saudi Arabia, provide insight into how the culture of the Abaya has been enmeshed with broader cultural moments that have their origin outside of Saudi Arabian traditionalism or culture. By gathering data about such cultural phenomena, this study provides greater contextualization of the role that the Black Abaya plays in Saudi society and how Saudi women work within the bounds of their cultures to assert agency in their means of presentation to the outside world.

3.3. Data analysis

Upon gathering data through interviews and personal observation, data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, itemizing specific data points and grouping them to identify which themes are the most prevalent in the social discourse surrounding the Black Abaya. This analytical approach has roots in psychological research and is one of the most common methods of analyzing interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is also common in ethnographic studies due to its capacity to naturalistically interpret qualitative and subjective topics (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). The analytical process was iterative, involving the researcher actively engaging with acquired data and refining approaches to interviews and observations as fieldwork was conducted, thus enabling new understandings of the phenomenon in question to emerge as the research was conducted (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019).

The theoretical precepts of social constructivism and post-structuralism guided the data analysis process used in this study. This approach follows the same strain of theorizing that Al-Qasimi (2010) first used when she argued that

Barthes' (Barthes et al., 1990) "fashion system" served as a venue in which the Abaya can be understood paradoxically as a product of a pre-existing cultural landscape and as a means by which individual subjects could refute or affirm the parameters of that landscape from within its boundaries. As the themes identified during the data analysis process will indicate, this framework provides critical insight into how individual subjects negotiate the longstanding social, cultural, and religious meanings of the Black Abaya within contemporary Saudi society.

4. Results

4.1. Cultural framing of the Black Abaya: Girls of Riyadh and Barbie

AlSanea's (2012) ground-breaking epistolary novel, *Girls of Riyadh*, explores the tensions inherent within Saudi society through the lives of four best friends' discussions on love, desire, and social expectations. At one point, a young woman, Sadeem, travels to and from the Kingdom:

Before her flight begins its descent into Heathrow Airport, Sadeem headed for the airplane bathroom. She took off her Abaya and head covering to reveal a well-proportioned body encased in tight jeans and a T-shirt and a smooth face adorned with light pink blush, a little mascara and a swipe of lip gloss. (AlSanea 2012, p. 61)

And in the reverse direction,

After the seatbelt light went out, Sadeem headed [...] to the WC to put on her Abaya. She could not bear putting this task off until just before the plane landed in the Kingdom, when the women were all lined up [...], waiting to get into the toilets to put on their official garb. (AlSanea 2012, p. 115)

Sadeem's Abaya dilemma is mirrored by the experiences of many travelling Saudi women, this researcher included.

For instance, when packing to leave London to embark on fieldwork, maternal family figures reminded me to pack a travel Abaya, as they always had throughout my upbringing. The travel Abaya is usually light (does not take space), modest (to conceal what I am wearing underneath), and loose (to not get stuck) to wear when entering the Kingdom. However, when the situation is reversed, Abayas are taken off as soon as the seatbelt sign is turned off.

Although most study participants did not wear their Abayas when travelling in the West, one fashion critic, Hadeel, states that by wearing the Abaya in foreign countries, one becomes an automatic target instead of blending in. The Black Abaya can convey the wearer's modesty even though she stands out among other women. While the Abaya could connote an adherence to traditional values and customs,

the immediate removal of Abayas in Western spaces could indicate that such adherence has limits and, carried to an extreme, could even be seen as superficial, confined to blending into their surroundings wherever they are located.

The choices made by Sadeem's character when crafting her appearances create a bridge between her social interactions and personal experiences. Through careful curation of their Abayas, women navigate the complex world of fashion, culture, and balancing societal expectations and conventions with their individuality and subjective experiences. According to Entwistle (2000), the process of constructing the dressed body is influenced by routine and mundane practices of everyday life. When getting dressed, individuals align themselves with the situation and conform to established norms by functioning in specific routes (Entwistle, 2000, p. 45). Individuals often feel compelled to conform to their environment, irrespective of their cultural background (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013, p. 285).

In AISanea's novel, Sadeem notices similar phenomena based on an analysis of her aunt Um Nuwayyir's teachings:

Fashion victim: This woman changes her behaviour according to the current fashion. If the trend during a certain time is to act all spiritual, attend religious gatherings and wear the Hijab outside the Kingdom, she will do it and 'go with the flow.' But if the trend is to dump your Hijab once you get outside the country, and when you are inside to spend a lot of time in the malls wearing a tight-fitted Abaya that shows off the features of a woman's body, then she will go with that flow, too. (AISanea, 2012, p. 72)

While Sadeem's experience is fiction, in contemporary societal landscapes, people may hide behind self-fashioned facades. The Black Abaya as a "shield" was in fact one of the most prevalent themes derived from the interview analysis (see below). However, some note that clothing as a "disguise" can inhibit self-expression insofar as it makes it hard to differentiate the authentic from the make-believe (Tseëlon, 2012, p. 7).

In the wedding described in Chapter 1, the young women changed into their Abayas without spoken agreement. Together, they changed outfits to maintain group cohesion; had one decided to keep her Abaya off, she might have stood out and disrupted the group identity. The convergence of adaptive dressing practices with the concepts of Sharaf (شرف) and 'Aieb (عيب) was evident, reflecting the dichotomy of honor and dishonor as applied to modest and immodest dress. Sharaf carries a multifaceted meaning that blends honor, dignity, and moral integrity not only on an individual level but also as a face for familial and communal reputations. On the other hand, 'Aieb revolves around the idea of shame and impropriety, viewed as a guiding principle that influences behavior, often rooted in the desire to uphold community values. Exploring this convergence enables a better understanding of the intricate relationship between cultural norms, individual autonomy, agency, and the evolving nature of fashion choices. In Saudi, women's expression of individualistic identities through dress is formed by the setting in which the dress is worn

and the audience for whom the presentation is made (Al-Munajjed, 1997). For many women, the result is a balancing act between their personal identities and traditional demands (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013).

Comparing the depiction of the Black Abaya in *Girls of Riyadh* to the way the concept of the Abaya was used as a show of support toward director Greta Gerwig's feminist narrative in the 2023 film, *Barbie*, shows that the garment can certainly have a fluid meaning and social value when used in real-world sociocultural contexts. The film, based on toy manufacturer Mattel's decades-old American doll for girls, was a smash hit with Saudi audiences. My personal TikTok feed showcased Saudi and Khaleeji women getting ready to watch the highly anticipated Barbie, all adorned in matching pink Abayas. Generally, these videos portray a group of friends embarking on a collective outing to the cinema, each adorned in distinctive Abayas that bore a captivating shade of pink (See Figures 1–3). These women have adapted Barbie's iconic aesthetic to conform to the cultural norms and values of Saudi Arabia as a form of "Saudized Barbie attire" (AlSaud, 2023). Through these posts, the women and Abaya retail businesses encourage their fellow Barbies (women) to participate in the trend. The hashtag #BarbieAbaya (عباية باربي) has, to date, boasted hundreds of views and millions of interactions on TikTok (AlSaud, 2023). However, this trend is in itself significant.

Figure 1

Sales Promotion by Abaya brand Hullahsa on TikTok (Screenshot from @hullahsa (2023) on TikTok).



Figure 2

Post by @lovinsaudi via TikTok (screenshot from @lovinsaudi (2023) on TikTok).

**Figure 3**

Saudi Barbie Mania (screenshot from @sahib.line.sa (2023) on TikTok).



Within the context of Western culture, pink in dress or design is associated overwhelmingly with women and indeed with femininity (Elsesser, 2023). The association of Barbie with the color pink has itself received study (Gills & Pellegrini, 2024), as has the tendency of women to express their femininity through adoring the color (Atkinson et al., 2024). Within the context of the *Barbie* movie, the significance of the color pink and the trend of women attending the film's showing wearing pink has been discussed (Lang, 2023). Some view it as a means to assert the reclamation of traditional femininity on behalf of feminism, with Barbie coming to represent the navigation of the desire to both be a feminist and to be traditionally feminine (Gills & Pellegrini, 2024).

The Barbification of the Black Abaya—or, conversely, the “Saudization” of Barbie—demonstrates the fluid nature of culture clashes and globalization. It may be that in the local context, Saudi women view the phenomenon as containing similar symbolic importance. However, what may be inferred is at least that Saudi women are engaging with forms of Western symbolic expressions of womanhood that include both Western conceptualizations of femininity and interpretations. How the Abaya mediates this requires some analysis. On one hand, it may be that the pinking of the Abaya “disrupts” its traditional connotations, as Al-Qasimi claims. On the other hand, it may be that the decision to wear the pink Abaya rather than a pink dress reflects a decision to redefine what is meant by femininity through a specifically Arab, Saudi, or Muslim lens. In either case, it is notable that the Abaya's blackness is renounced by these women, and, by proxy, its association with conservative values or social spaces being dispensed with.

4.2. The Abaya and personal expression

Throughout this ethnographic study, many women confirmed that the Black Abaya was a means to express solidarity and a symbol of their bond. One consultant from Riyadh, Aljohara, detailed her first Abaya. At age nine, Aljohara was a massive fan of the late musician Michael Jackson and was taken aback by an unexpected gesture from her mother. Her mother presented Aljohara with an Abaya; however, unlike the traditional Black Abaya as we know it, this one featured a picture of Michael Jackson from his iconic “Thriller” era on the back. Although the Michael Jackson Abaya did not adhere to the conventional style of a plain Black Abaya, it served as an introduction to Abaya wearing practices.

For Aljohara, this unique variation of the Abaya departed from the customary aesthetic of Abaya wear, it served to familiarize her with the cultural and sartorial significance of the traditional attire. By donning her first Abaya, Aljohara gained exposure to the diverse range of Abaya designs and styles, thereby equipping her with a foundational understanding of the garment's historical and contemporary contexts and other Abaya-wearing women. Aljohara vividly recollected experiencing overwhelming exhilaration and joy upon

acquiring her novel Abaya. When inquired about the current possession of this “cool” acquisition, Aljohara stated that her first Abaya continued to reside on a hanger within the confines of her childhood bedroom.

For many Saudi women, including Aljohara, the Abaya is a fundamental component of their cultural identity and personal experience. The Michael Jackson Abaya held significant personal meaning for Aljohara, as it demonstrated her mother’s love and understanding of her daughter’s passion for Western music. This support was reflected in the incorporation of Jackson’s iconography into elements of her daughter’s future cultural identity. Aljohara’s mother fostered a deeper emotional connection with her daughter by engaging in her musical interests, which served as a symbol of love and support, thereby reinforcing their familial bond. Consequently, Aljohara’s mother solidified her relationship with her daughter as Aljohara matured and began to make independent choices.

Thus, this traditional garment can be deeply ingrained in their lives from a young age, symbolizing modesty and adherence to societal norms while also serving as a vehicle for love, support, and acceptance of children’s agency to express their identities from their formative years. The assumption in some of the literature discussed earlier that there is a dichotomy between the traditional long Black Abaya and expressions of identity may appear to be upheld by this story. However, a social constructivist understanding of meaning-making tells us this is not necessarily the case. The Michael Jackson Abaya could, in another context, be a Black Abaya sewn by her mother or bought on a memorable trip to the market together. The symbolic meaning is not necessarily tied to the aesthetic uniqueness of an object, nor does it require overtly semiotic content such as an image or words. The garment’s significance extends beyond mere clothing, encompassing a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and social dimensions that shape these women’s lives.

Although Aljohara’s mother selected a Michael Jackson Abaya for her daughter, women actively exercise personal agency and autonomy to make such decisions (AlSaud, 2023). This conscious approach allows them to navigate the complexities and nuances of tradition and modernity while asserting their values and beliefs. In contemporary Saudi Arabia, the Black Abaya has evolved as a medium for personal style, self-expression, and the preservation of cultural identity. The increasing globalization and interconnectedness of cultures have allowed these women to explore and embrace diverse fashion influences while still honoring their heritage. However, the tensions between respecting tradition and globalized modernity are consistent and contribute to concepts of choosing to wear—or not—Abayas with Sharaf or ‘Aieb.

4.3. The Abaya between commodification and tradition

As Aljohara's experience with the Abaya demonstrates, this garment can provide Saudi women and girls with the opportunity to maintain a unique identity while also merging said identity with traditional roles established by the culture they are a part of. In her story, the importance of the adornments on her first Abaya showcases that the rules and roles associated with the Abaya are not preestablished but instead can be augmented to fit the desires and needs of the individual wearer. Thus, by donning the Abaya, some women find the means to navigate the various notions of their cultural heritage and the tension that such heritage generates when combined with the drive for individuality of expression in the fashion world. Al-Qasimi (2010) highlights the tensions between men and women in the Arab Gulf by specifically mentioning the transformative phenomenon of the female-led Abaya revolution. By exploring this sociocultural movement, Al-Qasimi (2010) argues, "The implementation of the Abaya is born out of discourses concerned with the articulation of authenticity and the preservation of tradition," which can lead to a "female emancipation by displacing the boundaries of the home and serving as a literal marker of socially approved female conduct" (p. 50). These women purposefully enter the public realm cloaked in the Abaya because the garment embodies traditional and cultural values.

Another respondent shares a narrative demonstrating how adherence to donning the Black Abaya is more complex. Mashael, for instance, elucidated some of the external pressures that drove her and others alike to wear the Abaya. When poised with the question of wearing or not wearing the garment, she had apprehension regarding the potential consequences of being discovered by her community for not adhering to the traditional practice of veiling or observing the Abaya due to the prevalence of localized gossiping practices. Caught for failing to veil appropriately, Mashael explained that her reputation might be tarnished if family, friends, or acquaintances see her in this state.

Her example reflected a generational fear in which noncompliance may negatively reflect her family's honor and reputation; the concepts of 'Aieb and Sharaf play out in real-time, influencing her private identity and choice of dress (Goffman, 1956). In Mashael's case, she expressed concern about the presentations of how her public self could bring dishonor due to her "disregard for norms of cultural propriety." The presence of a localized gossiping culture within these women's lives fosters heightened anxiety that permeates daily decision-making processes (Anishchenkova, 2020; Le Renard, 2014). Consequently, a significant proportion of these women opt for the path of least resistance, succumbing to societal pressures and conforming to prevailing norms and expectations.

Poised at a cultural crossroads, Mashael struggled with her private self's standards of modesty. She spoke of navigating this thin line between constructing a fashionable identity and one that pushed the boundaries too far past the cultural norms of modesty (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013, p. 283). Mashael

does not wear the Abaya while travelling. Her existential distress is manifested in her striving to maintain equilibrium between multiple intersecting identities while simultaneously harboring an aversion toward being perceived as engaging in actions that are deemed socially unacceptable or morally reprehensible. Feelings of guilt, fear, and anxiousness lead to these actualized notions of conflicting identities, as Mashael's distinct expression paradoxically contradicts personal agency and her traditional family demands.

5. Discussion

Based on the secured data, the Abaya and the culture that surrounds it are positioned at a juncture that intersects Saudi traditional practices, societal expectations, and Islamic culture. These traditions annex the morality associated with adherence to Islam as well as the concept of self-expression through the commodification of fashion. While Mashael struggled over the thought of wearing the Abaya, many other women contend with the choice of which Abaya to purchase and adorn. The Abaya, when examined from the perspective of fashionable clothing, not only serves as a means to challenge the societal pressures imposed upon female behavior, but also complicates the religious and cultural identities of the communities as a fashion statement. As a manifestation of consumerism, the Black Abaya effectively converts identity politics into a realm governed by symbols that impact the purchaser's identity (Shimek, 2012, p. 18).

The tension between the commodification of the Abaya and its role in traditional forms of self- and cultural expression, as defined earlier, conveys the semiotic nature of various forms of culturally laden clothing. From a structuralist perspective, all humans inherently seem to make sense of the world they live in by attaching meaning to the symbols that exist around them. A garment like the Abaya, with a long cultural, political, and religious history, should theoretically be a symbol that is set in place through its prolonged and relatively unchanging usage. However, the experiences of wearing the Abaya that were hypothesized about throughout this research study instead reflect the key theoretical concession that post-structuralists ask of their audiences: the symbols and indexes that individuals attach meaning to might mean different things to different observers, and one's interpretation of a symbol might be subjective and idiosyncratic, interpreted differently by a different subject (Layton, 2006).

This insight can extensively explain why cultural critics have thoroughly misunderstood the garment and why it has been seen as a site of major political reform and social entrenchment. Whether discussing Aljohara's sense of self-expression through wearing her Michael Jackson Abaya or Mashael's guilt at *not* wearing an Abaya, one is confronted with different dimensions of a culture represented through the Abaya but not perfectly captured.

As DeCoursey (2017) encountered, women in Saudi Arabia, particularly, have complicated understandings of the Abaya, what it signifies, and how it either expands or curtails the ability to self-express. In her study, for instance, participants not only expressed overwhelming support for the Abaya – at the time, a politically and religiously mandated garment aimed at ensuring the modesty of women – but also made qualitative statements about how wearing an Abaya can cause women to be perceived as more elegant, thinner, or more fashionable. Negative comments about the Black Abaya similarly focused on how it can make one's skin look paler and less prepossessing (DeCoursey, 2017). These idiosyncrasies help to elucidate some of the contradictions found in my own research, such as the ability of the Black Abaya to stand as both a symbol of one's cultural and religious identity and as a consumer product that comes with a variety of colors, cuts, fabrics, and accessories that all serve at once to establish individualism through consumption while undermining the social solidarity aspects of the Abaya that are long-standing norms associated with the garment (Shimek, 2012).

When Al-Qasimi (2010) states that the inculcation of fashion and style into the design and wearing of the Abaya results in a social struggle over the meaning of the symbol itself, she notes that “the Abaya is only disrupted, never displaced” (p. 69). The findings from this study and its themes regarding the commodification of the Abaya as a form of self-expression on the one hand and its significance in tradition and modest attire on the other reaffirm this observation.

Taking the stories of both Aljohara and Mashael as symbolism of two distinct reactions and interactions with the Abaya as the emblem of the social system, one can argue that either feelings of guilt or shame over not wearing the garment or of choosing to alter and wear personalized version can clarify how the Abaya itself has become a social field. Actors within the community interact with the social structure of the Abaya in different forms and, in turn, make different contributions to the changing nature of the garment within the contexts of modern Saudi society. Through personal interactions with the Abaya as a social structure or institution, the nature of this said institution has been rendered malleable.

Recent innovations in the Abaya fashion industry, therefore, attest to both the centrality of Saudi culture for women as well as their ability to exercise agency in self-expression within the confines of a cultural tradition that Western observers have typically linked with the oppression of women and the uneven gender roles of a patriarchal society within the Kingdom. Therefore, this study helps understand the nature of the Abaya conveyed as it is in popular media and as a part of the lived experiences of Saudi women, reflecting the nature of social systems and their construction through symbolic meaning. More profound than a study about a particular social phenomenon within Saudi culture, this analysis shows the malleable nature of symbols and the ability of human interactions with such symbols to shift the meaning associated with them.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the symbolic connotations of the Black Abaya within contemporary Saudi society. Through interviews and observations with women, as well as autoethnographic analysis, perspectives and experiences related to the Abaya have been observed, analyzed, and discussed. Within the discussion above, several trends have come to the fore that can illuminate the status of the Black Abaya.

Whilst some women see the Abaya as a symbol of modesty or as a religious or national symbol, others view it as a means for the self-assertion of individuality. The Black Abaya, according to this research, does not necessarily contain only connotations of religious or social conservatism, but in practice, it seems as though moments or events of self-expression tend to involve the embellishment of the Abaya or the adornment of color. There is a tendency to utilize established and new symbols for identity, such as color, imagery, design, and language, to add expressiveness to Abayas. The women interviewed shared stories of their experiences in this regard, whilst observations saw women opting for expressive options when selecting an Abaya.

This self-expression predominantly employed the semiotics of Western culture. Saudi women utilize Western symbolic and semiotic imagery, such as sporting pink at *Barbie* movie screenings or purchasing Abayas featuring American pop stars, to convey their individuality. These expressions explicitly reference Western popular culture rather than elements of native Saudi culture. This raises enquiries regarding the extent to which modifications of the Abaya reflect personal identity and the degree to which they indicate alignment with Western group identities. While these instances are infrequent and do not reflect the majority of Abaya-wearing women in Saudi Arabia, this contrast presents a compelling argument regarding the symbolism of such attire and what it means in the contemporary social landscape.

The analyses indicate that the Abaya has become a versatile and expressive garment with ambivalent characteristics. However, this may be less applicable to the traditional plain Black Abaya, which is perceived as too formally rigid to allow for nuanced expressions of identity beyond its existing social connotations. The Black Abaya serves as a symbol of social belonging or group identity; however, it is less conducive to modifications that reflect individual identity. As Saudi society evolves toward individualism, the Black Abaya may no longer adequately fulfil the diverse self-expressive needs of Saudi women.

These reflections add much to the current debates on the significance of the Black Abaya within contemporary Saudi society, expanding on previous research and adding new perspectives on the symbolism of clothing within Middle Eastern cultures. However, the study is limited by its omission of quantitative analysis, which might establish some of these trends as statistically significant. Further research utilizing a larger cohort and undertaking a more formal analysis could better explain how

representative these themes are across Saudi women and distinguish between trends in dress across social groups.

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None.

Author Biography

Latifa S. Al Saud is a researcher with a BA in Fashion Communications from the Conde Nast College in London and an MA in Material and Visual Culture from UCL's School of Anthropology. Her academic interests lie at the intersection of culture, fashion, society, and identity politics, focusing on the GCC and Saudi Arabia.

Latifa's current research explores the symbolic and cultural significance of the Black Abaya in contemporary Saudi society. Her work investigates the diverse and often ambiguous interpretations

of the Abaya, examining how it has evolved to meet the needs of modern Saudi women as a tool for self-expression and identity negotiation. By highlighting the shifting meanings of this iconic garment, she contributes to broader conversations about tradition, modernity, and agency within the context of Saudi womanhood.

In addition to her academic pursuits, Latifa is deeply committed to advancing the study of fashion and identity in the Middle East from an emic perspective. Her work emphasizes the importance of understanding cultural practices through local frameworks, providing nuanced insights into the dynamic relationship between clothing, society, and individual agency.

Endnotes

1. The classification of the Black Abaya as a form of national dress is a subject of significant debate, with many arguing that such a designation undermines the rich history of local traditional crafts and tribal attire that may be more deserving of this recognition (Al Saud, 2023).
2. The "Black Abaya" mentioned throughout this paper refers to the garment as a symbol.

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