

A MODEST OUTLOOK



She takes what many people believe to be a limitation as a challenge. In fact, it's a challenge she has set for herself, and excelled at. A young and dynamic designer, Rabia Z is not out to challenge convention. She, in fact, is almost stubbornly sticking to it, and that's the secret behind her success. She tells **Arabian Woman** why she thinks she is a niche designer, and why she likes it that way.

Arabian Woman (AW): Tell us about yourself. Where did you grow up, what did your parents do, how many siblings did you have, etc?

Rabia Z (RZ): Born in the UAE, I grew up between Dubai and the US but spent most of my life with my mom's side of the family in the US. I have two sisters and three brothers. My father was the Chief of Immigration at the Dubai Airport for over 30 years and my mom is a part-time businesswoman cum fulltime mom. She's also one of my business partners.

AW: What did you want to be when you were growing up?

RZ: Growing up, I've always had a flair and interest in fashion but thought of it as more of a hobby rather than career. I wanted to be a doctor but then changed my mind in college and studied business instead with a minor in fashion. All my life I was told I should be a fashion designer and it looks like it was my fate.

AW: Did you ever imagine yourself in the position you are in today?

RZ: I always knew that if I kept to my vision, persisted and worked hard, I would make a name for myself but never imagined that it would be in this field of inclusive fashion. I am very grateful to Allah SWT for being where I am and

coming this far with something that seemed so impossible, especially in mainstream fashion.

AW: Who were some of the early inspirations in your life? What, or who, inspired you to get into fashion?

RZ: My mother, my manager Giorgio when I worked at Valentino in NY, a majority of the ladies that I designed for as a freelance designer in my teens, as well as the direction that life took me towards. Wearing the hijab in the US at a time where there were no long tops, long sleeves or loose modest but stylish clothing, inspired me to create fashionable clothing that were modest and stylish. But the biggest push came during the challenges we all faced with the hijab in a post-9/11 America. Only then did I realise my calling. And only then did I stop looking at my fashion career as a hobby and became much more serious about it. The thousands of emails from Muslim women from all around the world over the last 10 years is what truly inspired me to create Rabia Z. with its vision and ethos.



AW: Share with us some of the early challenges you faced.

RZ: Numerous challenges! Simply creating a brand philosophy that doesn't exist in mainstream fashion, nor existed as 'Islamic fashion' was difficult. Personally, I don't call my work Islamic Fashion because the term itself is an oxymoron but all the major Western media started calling it that. It wasn't easy to create such a concept while keeping it modern and universal in a way that appeals to different cultures, not to mention putting the hijab into mainstream fashion and international catwalks!

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We have lots of non-Muslim and non-hijabi customers too who still prefer to dress modestly but with style. That wasn't easy to do from the get-go. Most modest clothing are very ethnic or traditional, or simply just way over the top, so modernising it whilst still keeping it within moderate boundaries, wasn't common. I've been told by very talented and experienced designers that they couldn't do what I do because it is too hard to always keep the designs covered and yet make the woman beautiful and stylish.

There are many limitations in design and technique. It has taken 10 years of research, rediscovery and reinvention to come up with designs that speak to women worldwide; especially modestly dressed women. Other challenges include short-run production, funding, fabric sourcing, retail space in local malls and expertise in the industry, or rather the lack of expertise in this industry. And now that the concept is well accepted and common, others who are just starting



out on this concept don't face the same challenges. At least I am happy to be able to open that door for others interested in modest fashion.

AW: With all the many fashion brands in the market, local and international, how do you create a niche for yourself?

RZ: My focus, as well as my market, is unique in itself, thus creating that niche. It is something we have pioneered. When I started my concept of 'modest and modern', no one was doing that locally or internationally. But we did. I am a living example of my concept and have never been afraid to show the modern and moderate side of Muslim women today; ones who enjoy style but without compromise to faith. I have been told many times not to limit my market and that I should design for everyone but I don't think there's a great need for designers doing the same thing all around the world. However, there is a need for designers who design with women like me in mind and an even greater need for such specialised clothing in shared spaces like the West.



AW: Most women in this part of the world say that strong women are generally envied and pulled down by other women. Comment.

RZ: Envy to me equates to ingratitude. If anyone is pulling another down, she is only dragging herself down to loss. And I know that what goes around comes around; so anyone wanting to push others down, do expect the same in return from somewhere you least expect. I believe there is plenty of room for all of us to work together. In fact, we can do much better if we support one another, if with nothing else then at least with well wishes. It will only come back to you. How hard or bad is that?

AW: How do you balance between being a wife, mother, and businesswoman? And do you ever find time for Rabia the woman?

RZ: It's certainly one of the most difficult things to do but I manage alhamdulillah! I do my best not to bring work home so when I shut down my laptop and doors to my design studio, I leave everything that is work-related behind, though I do peek at my Blackberry once my son is asleep. My husband can't stand Blackberries, especially mine! But he's extremely supportive of me and my work. He's the reason why it's possible for me to travel to events and shows outside of the UAE, with a peace of mind, knowing he's there for our son.

I do work with a schedule that includes a date night with my husband, planned weekends as a family and time for my immediate family and close friends. As for Rabia the woman, I honestly don't find enough time. However, spending time with my loved ones automatically adds to me-time because doing that makes me and my loved ones happy, and that is what is important at the end of the day.

The little things in life, which includes not doing anything at all and simply chillaxing with loved ones is important to me. I used to be much more active in sports and I do miss having the time to do that; as well as time for spiritual retreats. I would like to find more time to do that for myself.

AW: How do you compare the fashion scene in Dubai to the rest of the world?

RZ: Dubai is no doubt a significant fashion hub and it has certainly been up and coming for a while but I feel it still has a long way to go. There are one

too many missing links, for example, not having an actual fashion industry or non-profit fashion council that can nurture designers. The Art scene is much more active and supported but unfortunately it's not the same for local fashion designers. Event companies are the only ones mainly benefiting from the upcoming fashion scene here.

AW: What does the future hold for you?

RZ: The future is limitless. InshaAllah. I believe I am where I am first and

foremost by the Grace of the Almighty Allah. He's already brought me this far starting from nothing, so I am sure He knows best where to take me. As for plans, we have lots of exciting plans that are already in the works for the growth and expansion of Rabia Z., from online to flagship stores in key cities across the world, God Willing. I am grateful for all I have and with that I will continue to strive and persist to fulfil my vision, goals, and duty to my Muslim sisters around the world.

RABIA Z.

A Business Graduate from University of Phoenix & Nassau Community College NYC, Rabia studied fashion at F.I.T New York and Esmod. After the 9/11 events, Rabia realised the challenges faced by moderate Muslimas trying to dress conservatively. This hands-on experience stirred deep insights, leading to a unique design ideology. Her experience as a store manager for Valentino and as an assistant stylist for Christine in NYC gave her the skill set she needed to develop her ideas into a brand. Rabia Z. was born-a brand that deemed 'modesty is always in style'.



Designed to create solutions for women who want to be moderate yet modern, Rabia benchmarked the concept of 'conservative chic', becoming the first brand to produce prêt-a-couture ranges catering to niche needs of the ever evolving USD96 billion Islamic wear market. She won 'The Emerging Designer Award' for her debut collection in October 2007 at Dubai Fashion Week and then went on to win the British Council's 'International Young Fashion Entrepreneur of the Year 2008' Award. Soon Rabia's vision was incorporated in every signature ensemble she created, inviting in women from across the world, introducing to modest dressing that were extremely modern and in keeping with trends.

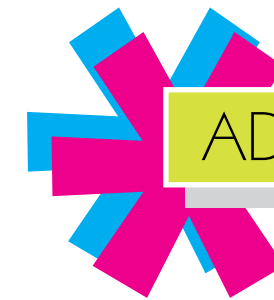
Rabia's Masterclasses with Sir Paul Smith and retail management training at TOPSHOP & SELFRIDGES gave her the wherewithal to evolve as one of the first professional brands that introduced covered silhouettes onto

international catwalks- outfits that were fashionable yet functional. Infusing color into normally dark Islamic wear, Rabia took on the challenge of developing veiled solutions that wouldn't divide easterners or westerners in shared spaces. For her, it was all about empowering women who were facing problems whilst 'covering up' internationally; she focused her brand to challenge these stereotypes whilst introducing solutions to bridge the divide.

2011 Rabia addresses issues of emerging cultural identities for modern Muslimas. Creating economical sustainability, she networked with prominent Gulf and Scandinavia businesswomen at WSG; she seeks to contribute by sharing her learning of globo-local solutions. She is currently co-writing a book with Zayed University Press detailing her work and design concept, she hopes this is an inspiration for young Muslimas as she continues her trajectory to empower young Muslimas globally through her balance between trends and traditions.

Achievements

- 'Emerging Designer Award' October 2007 Dubai Fashion Week
- British Council's 'International Young Fashion Entrepreneur of the Year 2008'.
- Abu Dhabi Fashion Week 2008 'Black Collection- Tribute to dynamic women of the Gulf'
- Dubai Fashion Week, 2008.
- Creations Fashion Week 2009
- Dubai Fashion Fiesta, 2009- Group Showing of 3 'Rising Arab Designers'
- Fashion Expo Arabia, Abu Dhabi, 2010- 'In the spirit of Arabia'
- Arabian Fashion World, London, 2009.
- Miami Fashion Week 2010 'The Veiled Issue'
- Fashion Pakistan Week, 2010 'Moderate, Modest but Modern'
- African American Muslim women, at Muhammad Ali Center and Muslim Journal Gala Event, Louisville, 2010. 'Inter-faith Celebration'
- Capsule collection for Mercedes Benz SLS-AMG, 2010
- Special Capsule Collection RUBY by Rabia Z. for SPLASH, 2009.
- ASPIRE Woman 4 Sports Conference Qatar, 2010, high-performance sportswear collection & exclusive fashion show RUBY4Aspire- exclusively on display at ASPIRE, Doha
- Athena Leadership Seminarian 2010
- Seminarian 5th World Islamic Economic Forum's Young Leaders Forum on 'Creating Innovative Market', 2009.
- Seminarian Women for Sustainable Growth Summit (Scandinavia & UAE), on Female Leadership "Against All Odds" 2011.
- 85Broads Global Networking Forum, NY/Dubai Chapter, speaker at their "Visionary" panel, 2011.
- Featured in international books: Islam and Muslims- a Tapestry of Faith (Canada); UAE Encyclopedia; Power Dressing (USA), Islamic Fashion (EU).
- Lead protagonist in two Award winning documentaries: 'DoBuy- The Fabric of Faith' (2010) & 'The Veiled Threat' (2011-12). Also featured in BrownBook Magazine's Short on Abayas
- Dubai Fashion Week 2011- Fall / Winter
- Private Fashion Showing South Africa 2011
- Guest speaker at London College of Fashion courses, Dubai, 2011.
- Ambassador to Charity Organization: Save An Orphan, UK. 2011.
- Kansas City- exclusive fashion show- Out of The Box Foundation Tour- a Youth Empowerment Tour. 2011.
- Seated Presentation, Spring/ Summer 2012 Collection in New York City for the mainstream fashion industry- Nov, 2011.
- Invited to open UAE's Nation Day celebrations, with an exclusive fashion show in Karachi, by the United Arab Emirates Consulate.
- TED speaker at Tedx Youth, Jan 2012.



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