



THE OUTFITS USED IN
THE PHOTO SHOOT
ARE SELECTED FROM
COLLECTIONS FROM
THE RABIA Z BRAND.

the
PIONEER
of
MODEST
FASHION

EMIRATI DESIGNER AND FOUNDER OF MODEST CLOTHING LINE RABIA Z., RABIA ZARGARPUR, IS ONE OF THE PIONEER WOMEN IN MODEST FASHION, AS WELL AS AN INSPIRATION FOR TODAY'S HIJABI DESIGNERS... HER PASSION FOR FASHION AND HER ACHIEVEMENTS AS A HIJABI DESIGNER HAVE EARNED HER RESPECT IN THE MODEST FASHION WORLD, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME PAVING THE WAY FOR YOUNG DESIGNERS OF TODAY.

BY OZGUR GOZLER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY UMIT TAYLAN

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**WE'RE ALMOST
SURE MOST OF
YOU HAVE HEARD
ABOUT RABIA
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Rabia Zargarpur grew up in Dubai and moved to California after graduating 2 years early from high school. She received her degree in business with a minor in fashion in the US. In 2002, she started her own e-commerce store—one of the first e-commerce stores in the world specializing in modern, modest ready-to-wear fashion for women. In 2008, Zargarpur won the British Council's International Young Fashion Entrepreneur of the Year Award for the Mediterranean Region. And the following year, her designs hit the runway of London Fashion Week.

Now she owns a brand which is the only modest fashion brand of its kind, selling to 71 countries online. She is on the way to earning a Ph.D. in Business of Fashion from the London College of Fashion and is in the process of launching the Rabia Z Modest Fashion Academy as well as the online Rabia Z Mentorship Program for young designers and brands in modest fashion. On top of all this, she manages all these responsibilities while raising her kids at home.

We can confidently say her success lies in her passion and in the fact that fashion has always been her true calling... Even when she tried to choose a different career path, everything and everyone around her somehow steered her towards pursuing fashion. Her journey towards pursuing her dreams was not an easy one, but this successful and ambitious woman has overcome many things...

Were you always interested in designing and fashion when you were young?

As a child, I was always creative and loved making fancy gowns for my Barbie dolls, pieces which were glued and stitched together from silk flowers and leftover fabric pieces at home. I also used to style my own outfits early on and would play dress up at my mom's fashion boutique. My mom also took me often to the tailoring shops and encouraged me with the freedom to choose my own fabrics, designs and embroideries for wedding parties and fancy occasions. One such gown in high school landed me the honor of 'Prom Queen'. So yes, I started out as a young 'couture designer'.

Who were your favorite designers?

I used to be obsessed with Christian Lacroix and John Galliano's Dior couture. For ready-to-wear though, my taste was very Japanese, and I loved (and still love) Yoji Yamamoto's work. I also love the work of Haider Ackerman, Alexander Wang, the tailoring of Bouchra Jarrar and the sustainability luxury of Stella McCartney.



Did you always want to be a fashion designer? Did you have the support of your family for your career choice?

In life no matter how many times I chose a career path, the experts in that field (medicine and law) discouraged me somehow and encouraged my creative side instead. When I look back, everything and everyone paved the way for me to pursue fashion, though unknowingly. But it was what was meant to be for me, especially after spending 5 years in New York where I pursued both my fashion and business degree while working in the mainstream fashion industry. My family was always very supportive and encouraging of my career, from my time in mainstream fashion to the time I started the modern modest fashion ready-to-wear industry and movement. I am grateful, especially to my mother and husband, for their limitless support.

What do you, Rabia, like to wear? How do you define your personal style?

I like to wear my own designs for many good reasons. I love the loose and oversize Japanese aesthetic and technical drapery mixed with a high-tailored cut and finish. That is my personal style and my brand's design aesthetic, too. For daily outfits, I have always been a jeans and t-shirt kind of girl. Comfort and quality is key for me. I am not one to strictly follow trends unless it's something that fits into my signature style philosophy of 'effortless-chic', or ones that I feel will have a life beyond the season it's aimed for. As an ethical and sustainable designer, I only like buying pieces that are made of breathable/natural fabrics and styles that have a longer closet life.

What does fashion mean to you?

To me fashion is two things: self-expression and current mood.

What motivated you to start designing modest outfits?

I have been designing womenswear since my early teens and designed bespoke couture gowns for brides when I was in my first year of fashion school in New York City and also working part-time at Valentino. My first experience with fashion was in the mainstream fashion industry. However, it was after I took up wearing the hijab in 2001 (months before the tragic 9/11 events) that I realized there were no modern ready-to-wear labels or brands that catered to the needs of the modest dressing woman. Not a single one! There were options of traditional and culturally modest clothing, including abayas, and mostly custom made to measure. But, it



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wasn't a practical option living in California. I was forced to have things tailor made for me in Dubai again but missed that ready-to-wear comfort and ready-made feel. For a professional fashion designer and fashionista, it was a shock to realize how neglected modern hijabi women were. During these hard times for hijab-wearing women in post-9/11 America along with my own realizations as a neglected fashion-savvy shopper, I started to create my own high-quality ready-to-wear workwear, tunics and hijabs that were beautiful as well as made with breathable fabrics. The fabrics were sourced from the UAE and our garments were made in my mother's tailoring unit. In the end, everything was made in Dubai and designed in the USA.

How did you create the Rabia Z. brand?

The first hijab I designed was ready-made turbans mainly because of the difficulties hijab-wearing women went through when hate crimes were rampant those days. I started by helping myself first and then helping my friends and the local communities who reached out to me for similar reasons. It took me until early 2002 to officially start my own e-commerce store—one of the first e-commerce stores specializing in modern, modest ready to wear fashion for women in the world—made in Dubai: It was totally self-funded, and grew organically from

my grandfather's small garage to later my husband's 25,000 sq.ft warehouse where I had dedicated office space to continue my growing e-commerce business. This was before moving back to Dubai and officially relaunching Rabia Z. as a full-fledged ready-to-wear fashion brand on the international runways.

What were the struggles you had with a modest ready-to-wear brand and as a hijabi designer?

The struggles were many, and quite different than anyone in our industry would have today... But I will name a few key ones for you... For instance, working with factories and pattern makers to invent the 'modest fit' was a real challenge. Please remember this was all before smock dresses and

ARTWORK CREDIT: LEONARDO MONTAÑA, ASEEL ORANGE, 2018 (FROM THE SERIES ASEEL, 2018)



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oversize styles were ever made available to the mass public! Factories didn't get the 'loose' nature of a normal shirt. Even one of the most experienced pattern makers we hired, with 30 years' experience, could not get the modest cut and fit right! That is visible in my first complete runway collections. So, it was a huge challenge to create the right tech pack for factories as a ready-to-wear brand. I ended up setting up our own in-house unit for small runs to get things right before going back to working with big factories.

During that time, another major design and modest style solution, which had never been done before in our industry, was the use of smart draping to create the ideal high-fashion modest fit and look. Over time as we got the technical aspects of creating demi-couture ready-to-wear, innovative cuts and draping became a strong part of our brand DNA. Of course, another big one was coining the term and concept of contemporary 'modest fashion' in the mainstream industry as well as in the regular media, and that includes the Arab media. I will never forget how many times I was challenged and even insulted by people who took offense to the concept, especially since I purposely put full hijab on the mainstream models with no hair showing! I needed to raise awareness about the empowered hijab-wearing Muslim woman and make a serious point which is why I was very much 'in your face' with hijab on the runways. I took so much heat from our own Muslims, who thought hijab on the runway was haram, and at the same time from the mainstream, who weren't convinced that not showing skin was a beautiful thing in fashion, especially on the runways. Remember this was all well before the rise of social media, especially Instagram and hijabi bloggers and influencers! This is one of the few reasons why we don't have a huge Instagram following but are bigger on Google search with regular print media coverage. I worked very hard to raise awareness and dedicated many years of my early runway shows and global speaking engagements to that. So much has changed since those times!



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What is the secret of Rabia Z.'s international success?

Authenticity, design originality, innovation, quality, value for your money, being an ethical brand... Those are just some of the reasons. We offer an affordable, luxury designer product at accessible pricing.

Eco-friendly brands are on the rise and Rabia Z. is also about to launch a new sustainable fashion collection. Why do you place importance on this issue?

We have always been an ethical brand that was and is sustainable, to the best of our ability. It's not easy to be 100% sustainable, as Stella McCartney says. However, since we have always only worked with breathable, pure and natural fabrics and designs

that have a much longer shelf life than seasonal trends, from the beginning of the brand's life (18 years) it was easy for us to move more towards sustainability in the last 5 years, working with sustainable, biodegradable fabrics that don't have a negative impact on the environment nor cause landfill or waste. However, for our latest collaboration collection, Rabia Z x Modanisa, to be able to have sustainable pieces at such affordable fast fashion prices, was something I needed to do to prove to everyone around me that, yes, you can be sustainable and affordable, which many think is not possible or attainable. I can't emphasize enough the importance of sustainability in the future of both fashion and modest fashion. It is the future. And we will continue to pioneer and innovate the way forward, inshallah, because of both social and environmental responsibility. All of us have that responsibility. At Rabia Z. we never produce polyester hijabs, including all those pretty looking chiffon hijabs (unless pure silk) because it's harmful for the scalp and for the environment; it doesn't breathe, nor does it dissolve into the Earth when it's eventually thrown away! It is a responsibility that I take seriously. If I won't wear it knowing it's bad for me, I also can't offer it to our customers. Anyway, I could write a book on these topics, but for now I would like to urge everyone to read about the importance of ethical and sustainable fashion, including sources from an Islamic perspective. We are not perfect, but if we all start slowly from somewhere, collectively that can have a big and positive impact, inshallah.

Soon there will be the official launch of the Rabia Z Modest Fashion Academy as well as the online Rabia Z Mentorship Program. What is the idea behind these programs?

I have been consulting businesses and mentoring fashion labels for many

ARTWORK CREDIT: LARA CAMERON, A MOTHER'S LOVE FOR HER CALF, 2013



years now. That is why I decided to officially design a customized and unique mentorship program most suited for young labels, designers, e-tailers and startup businesses. It is offered to fashion labels that I think have good potential as well as those that need help setting up a stronger foundation and DNA then taking their business to the next level, fast tracking it with our program mentorship and expertise in the industry. I wasn't this lucky in my time to learn from a modest fashion and fashion business expert. I learned everything, painstakingly, with so many trials and errors, and this from some very difficult mentors in my time, not all of whom were good for me. Costing me time and money... I feel most fashion labels need professional help to build a stronger foundation in order to be taken more seriously and create a scalable business.

We still need more professional, global brands. There is a lot of room for growth, where we can compete with the mainstream or at least function as professionally. One of the biggest challenges in our industry (along with many others) is the lack of professional brands with a strong and distinct DNA/style/handwriting. And there's also a lack of professional know-how on range building and editing collections that they display on runways or sell online. On top of that, there are no professionals to critique collections, so in the end there's neither accountability nor the need to improve. In the mainstream, even the biggest names are crushed by journalists and editors' reviews if they show something weak! In our industry, there are no such experts to give constructive criticism. And what we mostly see is mediocre or copy-paste styles! It's hard to sustain such labels in the long run.

Why are you passionate about opening a path for new designers?

It is a passion of mine to grow the next generation of strong modest fashion labels, and that is something I am actively doing through our online Modest Fashion Academy and Mentorship Program. This includes identifying their core DNA and direction, as well as who they really are: a retail brand or a fashion brand, or a fashion designer or a fashion entrepreneur. There is a big difference there that they themselves don't realize, as well as our industry. But through clarity and focus lies power and success. Like I said, I could write a book on many of the topics I have covered briefly in this interview! However, it has truly been such a fulfilling experience to give back and see amazing designers and fashion entrepreneurs come out of our program, Alhamdulillah. It is a very special program in which I openly share years of learning as well as key resources and networks to help their businesses grow. This is also part of

our new business model—'Modest Fashion Eco-System Leadership model'—with the motto of 'We rise by lifting others'. We hope to see amazing, globally appealing, highly professional brands in the modest fashion space and more sustainable brands in the industry, come out of our academy and current program, inshallah. We are organically growing our Modest Fashion Academy with mainstream experts offering customized classes in key areas of fashion business as well. It is all a work in progress.

Looking back on your accomplishments, is there anything you would do differently?

Yes there is a lot I would do differently with what I know today. But in the same breath, how else would I have learned had it not been for my experiences as well as trial and error? The one thing I would have done more was to trust my intuition more over what I was being told or advised by others during my career. Nevertheless, I am still grateful for everything I have learned. So much of it was meant to be the way it was, and Allah SWT is the best of planners.

How do you manage to create a work-life balance, with all these responsibilities on your plate at work, in addition to raising 3 children at home?

It's all about knowing your priorities: time management, having a routine, taking responsibility for your time and actions, and leveraging and sharing responsibilities with those whom you trust. I have been lucky to share some such responsibilities with my husband who provides hands-on help and supports me, Mashallah. Alhamdulillah, we are on the same page in terms of how to raise our children as well as our life goals and ideas of self-development.

What is your idea of true happiness?

Having health and Imaan, healthy God-conscious children, harmony and love at home, a good work-life balance, and a heart that is always content and grateful. That is true happiness to me. Alhamdulillah. ⑩



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