



Hana Tajima's elegant and stylish fashions appeal to both her Muslim and non-Muslim international clients.



DESIGNING WOMEN

What happens when fashion, religion and politics collide? TEXT: SUSAN MCCLELLAND



HANA TAJIMA

AGE 23

CAREER Fashion designer

Hana Tajima may be called one of the star British Hijabistas—a handful of trendy but “modest” Muslim designers—but she prefers to be known as a designer who creates beautiful clothes.

“As Muslim women, we spend most of our time being branded as one thing or another, but the fastest way to understand a person is to see her as an individual, not a mass of labels and terms.” The London-based designer converted to Islam in 2005, and her approach to her hijab-friendly fashions is like her approach to Islam itself: a marriage between moderation and a lasting reverence for women. It’s that understanding that informs Hana’s own line of clothing, which she launched in July 2010. The brand caters to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and her designs go beyond the hijab-like hoods and scarves to include elegant dresses, skirts, tops and pants. The look is both beautiful and Islamic, embodying the Arabic name that she chose to describe her work: Maysaa (meaning “to walk with dignity”).

Hana Tajima and Tala Raassi both love fashion. At first glance, they appear to have strikingly different sensibilities—but the two designers say they share a common desire to create clothes that are beautiful, inspiring and, above all, celebrate women’s unique sense of style. It’s never about dictating a look; it’s about having the freedom to choose to dress the way they want. ELLE chatted with both women to find out how their creativity and culture influence their work.

How do your fashions define you? Hana “I am generally a withdrawn person, but I have always spilled my heart out creatively, whether it is painting or writing. For me, fashion is such a subtle creative interaction between your inner self and the outer world.” **Tala** “My own sense of style is very feminine and rock ‘n’ roll, and that is how I design. These two polar opposites are my power, and I create designs that I would wear personally.”

Hana, people say that your work updates traditional Muslim fashions. Is that true? “People want an artist to define their work. I understand why it’s done and the importance of being a role model, but I don’t want to define my work as one thing.”

Tala, have you been criticized for designing swimsuits? “I’ve seen some online blogs in which people write ‘How could you put a woman in a bikini...it’s demeaning!’ I feel that these writers haven’t grasped what I’m doing. I’m not saying that women need to wear bikinis to be empowered. But these bloggers seem to think that this is all I’m about. I’ve turned my personal experience



Freedom of expression means the freedom to wear a bikini, explains swimsuit designer Tala Raassi.



into freedom of expression, and that freedom means being able to wear a bikini!”

How do you feel about European countries that ban, or are in the process of banning, the burka? Hana “It comes down to fear and misunderstanding. From a Western perspective, people think that no one would want to wear the burka, but women do. Many of the women who wear the burka are actually really passionate about wearing it. What the West has done is make the burka a symbol of oppression. We should get rid of that association and understand and listen to the people behind it.” **Tala** “There are a couple of different reasons why they’re banning the burka. They argue, for instance, that it is for security reasons—women have to show their faces in courtrooms, on their drivers’ licences and at airports. But I feel that we can work around this. I think the larger issue is that, in some European countries, policy-makers and feminists think the burka is enforced on women by men, which isn’t the case. Most women who wear the burka *want* to wear it. It is just as wrong for countries like Iran to force women to wear a certain outfit as it is for Western countries to say that women can’t wear something.”

Do you feel that your work is political? Hana “I wouldn’t go so far as to say my work is political as much as it is perceived as socio-political. I do not dress every day with the intention of making a political statement. I don’t create my designs thinking ‘This is political.’ But I think the hijab has become this weird, messy thing that represents something that it actually isn’t.” **Tala** “Women in Iran can’t express their individuality through their style. As a young girl I experienced this firsthand, and it made me who I am today. But I don’t see myself as political. I believe in being free and being yourself.”

How so? Hala “If you look through the pages of *Vogue* or on some of the streets of Western cities, you see women wearing draped fashions similar to how Muslim women would dress. In these contexts, it is acceptable. But if the fashions are obviously Muslim, like the hijab, there is an automatic association in the mind—“Oh, this is a Muslim woman”—and all the negative media comes up. The hijab is just a >

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TALA RAASSI

AGE 27

CAREER Swimsuit designer

Tala Raassi’s date with fashion destiny happened the night she turned 16. She arrived at her friend’s home in Tehran, wearing a head scarf, a black coat and pants. Once she was inside, Tala shed her layers down to a black tee and a miniskirt. Her friends were chatting and listening to music when the morality police burst

through the door. Because it is “indecent” to wear a miniskirt, listen to Western music and be at a party with members of the opposite sex, Tala and her friends were in trouble. They fled, but the police caught them and threw them in jail. Five days later, she was sentenced to 40 lashes. While Tala was receiving her punishment, her family, who

was waiting outside, heard her screams. That horrible chain of events has come to define Tala’s life. After she finished her schooling, she moved to Dubai, but a few months later she left for Washington, D.C. There, she decided to become a designer. “Based on what happened to me on my 16th birthday, fashion became a freedom statement for me,” says Tala. In 2009 she launched her line, Dar Be Dar (darbedar.net), which means “door to door” in Persian. She’s also the official bathing suit designer for the Miss Universe pageant and this summer will launch a Lipstick Revolution T-shirt collection to support women entrepreneurs.

piece of fabric that has come to be a symbol of oppressed women, and turning anything into a symbol can be very dangerous. People can't see beyond the symbol to the person."

Do you try to break down some of those negative associations with your fashions? Hana "I don't want to give energy to anything that is politically divisive. Muslim women say they like my fashions because they give them some diversity in expressing their personalities; non-Muslims say they connect with my styles because they are beautiful."

Hana, you were pleasantly surprised when you began to study Islam and discovered how accepting the faith is of women. Can you share why? "I have never read literature that holds women in such high regard as Islamic literature, like the idea that paradise lies at the feet of your mother. Women's rights, including the right to vote, work and own property, were so far ahead of their time. It was something that really surprised me and left such a strong impression."

Tala, some people might argue that beauty contests are derogatory for women. Hana, some people could argue that modest fashion is also derogatory because it limits individuality. It's rather an ironic twist that you find yourself in similar camps. How do you defend such criticisms? Hana "A woman's beauty is her inner confidence, and you can express that confidence covered head to toe or completely bare." **Tala** "The pageant is about celebrating beauty, not the subjectivity of women. These women come from all different backgrounds: Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Christian. They all have different personalities, political agendas and body types. But they are all there, united and standing tall, unafraid of their bodies and unafraid of being beautiful and confident. For me, Miss Universe is a sign of peace and freedom. In Iran, women aren't allowed to take part in such

competitions. Millions of Iranian girls would trade places with them in an instant. Western women who criticize beauty pageants are entitled to their freedom of expression, but they also need to remember that many women in the world are dying to be able to express themselves through fashion and through their beauty."

How do you feel about British and American fashion? Do you feel that it is accepting of fashions from other cultures? Hana "London is an amazing place to pick up that vibe of people wanting to express themselves through their fashion. Even if their style has nothing to do with the tastes I like, seeing other people feeling really comfortable expressing themselves is such an amazing thing. Another thing about the U.K., compared to other places, is that there isn't that judgment. I feel comfortable wearing the hijab." **Tala** "When I first came to the United States, I was disappointed. I felt that American women didn't take their freedoms seriously: They wore flip-flops and T-shirts. Even in the Middle East, the women may be covered, but underneath they have more sense of style than American women. But this has changed in the past 10 years. Women are trying to be more dressed up."

What do you hope to accomplish with your designs? Hana "It isn't about the clothes that a woman wears but the confidence the clothes give her. With all of my designs, I am looking for that connection, that design that will help a woman walk taller. Like the saying 'The first thing you notice is the man and then the suit.' For me, the clothes embody the woman and make her feel like the clothes are part of her." **Tala** "I want women to feel confident, love themselves and wear what they want and not be judged. I want to empower women and hear their stories. It isn't just about wearing an item but about feeling empowered and confident in following your dreams." □