



The Abaya as Traditional Muslim Attire: An Analysis of Silhouettes in the Indian Context

Ms. Nazia Begum,

Research Scholar, Fashion Design Department,
Banasthali Vidyapith, Tonk, Rajasthan

Abstract

The Abaya has traditionally served as an important form of modest attire among Muslim women's, reflecting religious values, cultural identity, and evolving fashion preferences. While the garment originated in the Arabian Peninsula, it has been adopted and adapted in many countries, especially the Gulf Countries but in India, the regional textile traditions, craftsmanship, and contemporary fashion have influenced its design. This research examines the various silhouettes of the Abaya in the Indian context, focusing on their evolution, design characteristics, cultural significance, and consumer preferences. Using a mixed-methods approach, data are collected through surveys, interviews, market observations, and visual analysis of abaya designs in India. The study identifies the most preferred silhouettes, fabrics, colors, embellishment techniques, and functional features among Indian Muslim women. The findings demonstrate that although traditional loose-fitting silhouettes remain widely accepted because of their association with modesty and comfort, contemporary variations incorporating modern cuts and fashion elements have gained popularity, particularly among younger women. The study contributes to the modest fashion lover and documents the changing nature of abaya silhouettes in India while highlighting the balance between tradition and innovation.

Key Words Abaya, Silhouettes, Fashion, Muslims, Tradition

Introduction

Clothing plays an important role in expressing cultural identity, religious values and social practices. Among Muslim women, the abaya is recognized as one of the most prominent garments representing modest dressing. Although its origins are linked to the Middle East, the Abaya has become increasingly popular in India due to globalization, Islamic fashion trends, and the growth of the modest fashion industry.

Fashion sector is one of the top ranked industries all over the world (Nazia Begum, 2023). Where abaya is one of the most preferred clothing among the young Muslim women's.



Abaya as a Muslim women clothing, it follows the principle of modesty, this abaya styles are in demand all over the world (**Nazia Begum, 2026**). The Abaya, which is made loosely and covers a large portion of the body, is a significant modest garment worn by Muslim women. Despite being historically connected to Arab and Middle Eastern cultures, the abaya has become popular in a number of nations, including India, where it has been modified in accordance with regional customs, climate, textiles, and current fashion trends (**Stillman, 2000**).

The silhouette of the traditional Abaya is often straightforward, flowing, and loose. The shape, sleeves, panels, pleats, gathers, layering, and ornamentation of modern abaya styles vary significantly, too. These modifications show that the Abaya is a changing modest fashion style rather than a static traditional garment. Research on Muslim attire has also demonstrated that shifting ideas of modesty, identity, and modernity are linked to shifts in attire (Osella & Osella, 2007; Lewis, 2015).

Objectives

- To identify different silhouettes of Abaya worn in India
- To analyze silhouette characteristics
- To study consumer preferences

Need for the Study

There is Limited research on Indian abaya silhouettes available as the modest fashion market is growing day by day so there is need to document of Indian abaya styles. The market of Gulf Countries is full of modest wear specially the abaya as the Muslim population is growing in India and the world and Muslims have good financial status and they can spend on the Abaya which looks unique.

Research Gap

Previous studies focus mainly on religion or modest fashion but there was lack of silhouette-based analysis in context of India. Along with this there is limited academic literature available on structural variations of Indian abayas.

Review of Literature

In Arab and Islamic societies, the abaya has long been used as a loose outer garment. Most of the Muslim women in India is wearing abaya with the hijab and having variety of surface ornamentation along with the various types of silhouette. The review observed that many researches has been done on the religious aspects of abaya but no research has been done on the silhouette of the abaya. Indian abaya differ from their Middle Eastern counterparts by incorporating local textiles, embroidery traditions, decorative techniques, and regional fashion influences. Contemporary designers have introduced diverse silhouettes that meet the changing needs of consumers while maintaining the essential principles of modest dressing. Historical Development of the Abaya

According to Algar (1982), the 'abaya as a loose, cloak-like garment that differed depending on the locale in terms of construction, fabric, and appearance. According to these investigations, the abaya has never been a fully fixed silhouette. Stillman (2000) says that Islamic attire developed through different cultural, social and historical influences and those clothes differed greatly across geographical locations. Muslim Dress and Modesty Islamic dress codes are varied and impacted by personal tastes, societal circumstances, local traditions, and religious interpretation. According to Lewis (2015), modesty, identity, and fashion consumption are all negotiated in modern Muslim fashion. Therefore, modest attire can serve as a vehicle for both esthetic and personal expression as well as religious expression.

Abaya in the Indian Context The evolution of Muslim women's clothing in India shows how local cultural customs and Islamic traditions interact. In their research of Muslim women in South India, Osella and Osella (2007) noted shifts in fashion habits, such as the growing use of the Arabic-style abaya. According to their research, shifts in Muslim attire are linked to more general changes in social life, modesty, and religious identity. Nazia Begum (2024), discussed about the various types and styles



of Abaya, adopted in India in the past and the present. Further she discussed the role of fabric for creating the styles of the silhouettes. She said there are various contemporary Abaya having variety of the silhouettes like batwing abaya, maxi abaya, batwing abaya etc.

Source of Image: Self

Contemporary Abaya and Silhouette The silhouettes of modern abaya designs vary greatly; they might be straight, A-line, flared, pleated,

gathered, or layered. In order to produce stylish silhouettes while adhering to the modest coverage guideline, contemporary designers employ variations in garment volume, sleeves, panels, and surface decoration.



Source of Image: Self
Abaya design Silhouette from Dubai



Source of Image: Self
Abaya design Silhouette from India

The Abaya's place in trans-regional Muslim fashion networks is highlighted by **Thimm (2021)**, who shows how the garment has transcended its initial geographic setting and become a part of modern modest fashion. **Nazia Begum (2026)**, in her research discussed that Abaya is now available in variety of the colors and various types of the silhouettes, in which consumer choices are being fashionable along with the modesty. So various design features and silhouettes of abaya are created according to the young generation. She created designs of Abayas in different silhouettes using the Corel-draw software.

Research Methodology

The study “**The Abaya as Traditional Muslim Attire: An Analysis of Silhouettes in the Indian Context**” adopted a descriptive and exploratory research design. The study was conducted in the Indian context, with particular focus on Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, to examine the use and variation of abaya silhouettes among Muslim women. The current study intends to investigate the main silhouettes of abayas and comprehend how traditional forms have been transformed thru contemporary design influences. The study focuses specifically on the overall silhouette, garment volume, sleeve construction, panels, pleats, gathers, and layering. In the Indian context, the abaya represents an interaction between Islamic dress traditions and Indian fashion esthetics. The data was collected from the 100 Muslim women’s who are abaya wearer of Aligarh. For the sample students and faculty were considered for research. The age group of Muslim females was 18 to 45 years as abaya is usually.



There was use of both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected using questionnaire, interview, market survey, Observation and photographic documentation of particular abaya designs worn by Muslim women were used to gather primary data. A structured observation schedule was used to capture information about the general shape, length, sleeve style, fullness, panels, pleats, gathers, layering, and surface embellishment of the garment. Respondents were also asked about their favorite abaya styles and whether or not they were appropriate for various circumstances. Secondary data about Islamic dress, Muslim fashion, abaya history, and clothing design were gathered from books, research articles, journals, and other academic sources.

The dominant silhouettes of the chosen abayas—straight, A-line, flared, pleated, gathered, paneled, layered, and cape-style forms—were categorized. Frequency, percentage, and descriptive analysis were used to analyze the data, and photographic and visual analysis was employed to compare traditional and modern silhouettes.

Results & Discussion

The analysis of the selected abaya designs revealed that, despite significant diversity in modern silhouettes, the traditional idea of a loose, full-length, and modest garment is still upheld. Straight, A-line, flared, pleated, gathered, paneled, and layered/cape-style shapes were among the recognized forms.

The A-line and flared silhouettes showed more variation in garment volume, especially toward the hem, and reflected the influence of modern fashion design, while the straight silhouette represented the most basic form and closely reflected the traditional structure of the abaya. Its loose construction and minimal shaping offered comfort and freedom of movement. Paneled and layered/cape-style abayas showed greater structural complexity and offered opportunities for combining different fabrics, textures, and decorative elements, pleated and gathered silhouettes introduced controlled fullness and added visual interest without compromising modest coverage. These developments show that fullness, which was previously associated with functional coverage, has increasingly become an esthetic feature in contemporary abaya design.

Table 1

Major Silhouette Characteristics of the Abaya		
Silhouette	Major characteristics	Design significance
Straight	Uniform width, loose fall	Traditional and functional
A-line	Gradual widening towards hem	Simple contemporary adaptation
Flared	Increased lower volume	Movement and fashion appeal
Pleated	Structured fullness	Texture and controlled volume
Gathered	Soft fullness	Fluid and feminine appearance
Paneled	Multiple joined sections	Structural and visual variation
Layered/Cape	Additional overlay	Contemporary and dramatic effect

This table shows the types of abaya silhouettes, characteristics & Significance

The findings suggest that contemporary abaya design represents continuity between tradition and modernity. According to Osella and Osella (2007), who documented shifting Muslim women's dress practices in South India, including the adoption of the abaya within evolving expressions of modesty and identity, the results indicate that modern abaya design represents continuity between tradition and modernity. While the basic principle of modest coverage has not changed, designers have introduced new silhouettes and construction techniques to meet changing esthetic and functional requirements. The diversity of silhouettes also shows how modern Muslim design is becoming more and more influential.



Students displaying types of Abaya at Abaya show organized by the researcher Nazia Begum at Aligarh Muslim University, Fashion Design Department

According to Lewis (2015), current Muslim dress entails balancing identity, modesty, and fashion consumption. In a similar vein, the evolution of various abaya styles shows that modest apparel may support individual expression and innovation.

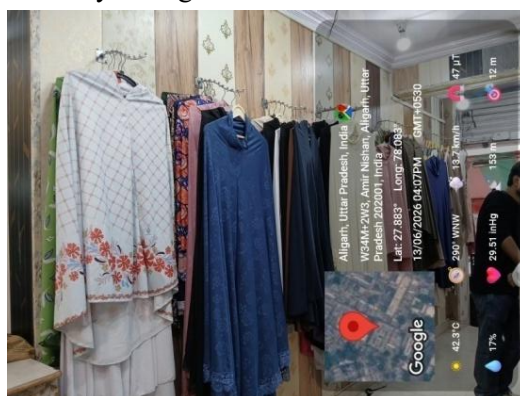
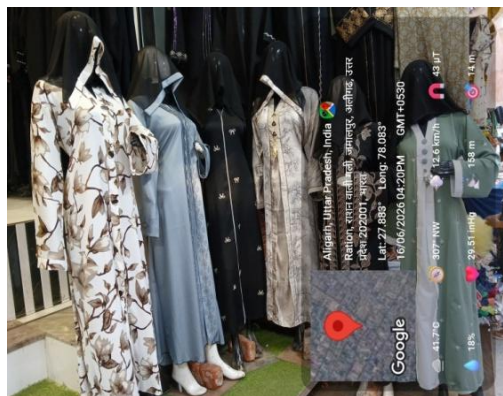
Thus, the evolution of the abaya in the Indian context might be interpreted as a process of cultural adaptation. The evolution of many abaya forms has been influenced by Indian textile traditions, decorative techniques, modern fashion trends, and practical needs. The garment adapts to modern lifestyles while maintaining its cultural affinity with modest Muslim dress. Overall, the findings show that the abaya has developed into a multipurpose modest-fashion item from a primarily basic outer garment. The observed alterations in silhouette show that innovation and tradition may coexist, enabling the abaya to preserve its cultural character while adapting to modern fashion and practical needs. Regional textile traditions and local craftsmanship contribute to the unique identity of Indian abayas; younger consumers frequently seek fashionable cuts and lighter fabrics, while older consumers tend to prefer classic silhouettes and darker colors. The discussion compares findings with previous studies, which may indicate that Indian consumers are increasingly choosing modern silhouettes while maintaining modesty.

Conclusion

The current study, "The Abaya as Traditional Muslim Attire: An Analysis of Silhouettes in the Indian Context," looked at the abaya as a significant type of Muslim modest clothing and investigated how its silhouettes changed within the Indian cultural and fashion context. The study shows that the abaya is not a static or unchanging traditional garment, but rather a dynamic form of dress that has continuously adapted to changing social conditions, lifestyles, esthetic preferences, textile developments, and modern fashion trends.



A-line, flared, pleated, gathered, paneled, layered, cape-style, and semi-fitted silhouettes have been introduced, and variations in sleeve shapes, front construction, garment length, layering, and surface ornamentation have further expanded the design possibilities of the abaya. The analysis of abaya silhouettes revealed that traditional features such as loose construction, full-length coverage, generous garment volume, and modest appearance continue to form the foundation of contemporary abaya design.



All things considered, the development of abaya silhouettes shows how traditional Muslim clothing may continue to be relevant in modern culture. Design innovation has allowed the abaya to adapt to contemporary lives while preserving its fundamental relationship with modesty and Muslim identity, rather than lessening its cultural value. According to the study's findings, the Indian abaya is a dynamic example of how tradition and modernity co-exist, preserving inherited cultural values thru ongoing design modification.

The study also shows how crucial silhouette is to comprehending how tradition, modesty, identity, and fashion are related. Different shapes give different levels of visual appeal, comfort, movement and adaptability for educational, professional, social and formal occasions. The contemporary abaya consequently serves various purposes: it works as modest apparel, communicates cultural and religious identity, provides practical coverage, and offers opportunity for individual fashion expression.



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