

World Hijab Day: The Balaclava — A Cultural Tribute or an Insulting Trend?

By: Hedija Spahalic

Head coverings have gone in and out of style for years. This time, it's called a balaclava. But what's the history and wider significance of this latest fashion accessory?



The balaclava is one of many hijab-like fashion pieces that have gone in and out of style. “Babushka scarves,” “hooded headscarves,” and “sculpted headpieces” are some of the many iterations of fashionably appropriated hijab styles.

In a now revised post, Vogue France uploaded a [series of photos](#) on Instagram this week about “Uncut Gems” actress and model, Julia Fox, wearing a headscarf. The backlash was instant and intense. The fashion bible’s original caption stated: “Yes to the headscarf! Swipe left for your recap of Julia Fox and Kanye West style journey at the haute couture shows in Paris this week.”



Julia Fox wearing a headscarf to Paris Fashion Week

The caption was quickly edited after accusations of hypocrisy. France banned full-face coverings like the Niqab in 2010 and recent amendments to a French Senate bill voted to publicly ban hijabs in sports competitions and for those under 18. One commenter wrote, “The double standard of praising her for wearing a headscarf in a country that actively oppresses Muslim women from doing the same is so shameful.”

Beauty influencer and hijabi skin influencer, Hajar, chose to focus her criticism on the French government and its recent attacks on hijab-wearing Muslim women, as well.

“I want every non-Muslim who wore a balaclava to see this,” [she wrote on Twitter](#). “Because while you wear a balaclava freely and are applauded for being ‘fashionable,’ hijabi women are being told the exact OPPOSITE. We cannot practice our faith or do what y’all are doing because we are Muslim.”

When Kim Kardashian wore a full-body black suit to the Met Gala last September, it sparked conversations concerning modesty and other forms of head coverings. Other influencers on [TikTok](#) and [Instagram](#) began donning the fashionable headpiece with prominent designer brands such as Miu Miu, Eckhaus Latta, and Marine Serre releasing their own line of balaclavas to keep up with the trends.



Kim Kardashian wearing a full-body black suit

The Balaclava as an item of utility clothing dates back hundreds of years. During the Crimean War in the mid-19th century, British soldiers wore knitted pull-over head coverings known as Balaclava helmets to keep out the cold. Today, winter sports athletes, race car drivers and even firefighters are all known to use this head

covering.

But increasingly it is being seen as a convenient addition to a wardrobe that already requires a mask by fashion influencers.



Pictured: Fatima Mukhtar

“If you’re using it for function, that’s totally fine,” Fatima Mukhtar, AMT Fashion contributor and writer of lifestyle blog [Modestly Speaking](#), said. “That’s not what people are wearing, though.”

Mukhtar and an army of critics see the use of the balaclava as part of a double standard, with a lack of recognition for the implications caused by such fashion trends. [Several content creators have pointed out](#) that this fad can have varying effects depending on who’s wearing it and the color of their skin. Others have pointed out how balaclavas are socially acceptable but hijabs have been banned in several parts of the world.

“I think it’s ridiculous and bordering on appropriation,” Mukhtar said. “Like, ‘Hey let me take this thing that people wear for religious reasons and let me trim it up and make it look cute.’ I think that that’s kind of offensive.”

Not everyone shares such sentiments, however. Alia Khan, Founder and Chairwoman of the Islamic Fashion Design Council, believes the balaclava is an opportunity to represent a look that is being appreciated and celebrated by mainstream celebrities.



Pictured: Alia Khan



Marine Serre balaclava

“When you see a Vogue cover with a hijabi model on the cover or when you see a hijab collection from a mainstream brand, that’s just perpetuating the oldest narrative in the world,” says Canadian-Pakistani Khan, who sees modest fashion as a “holistic concept.”

The issue has never been with modest fashion. In fact, modest fashion is roughly generating \$270 billion a year and is projected to reach [more than \\$300 billion](#) by 2024. U.S. stores like [Macy’s](#) and [Nordstrom](#) have also adopted modest fashion lines in the past few years.

Even British Vogue made history in 2018 by featuring a hijab-wearing model on its cover for the first time in its 102-year history.



But for many Muslim women, the acceptance is still not there. For them, their choice of head covering is deemed “backward” and “oppressive,” while they see those wearing the balaclava being seen as “fashion-forward” and “trendy.” By choosing to consistently ignore the boundaries that are being imposed on hijabi women around the world, the fashion industry is profiting off their exploitation without permission.

But for women like Alia Khan, hijabs and modest clothing are not at the mercy of the fashion industry. Aside from its deeply personal, religious significance, it should not be regarded as a temporal phenomenon. It’s part of an enduring, long-standing tradition.

“Modest fashion is here to stay because it never went away,” Khan said. “It’s not a trend, it’s a way of life.”