

THE  TIMES

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# MAGAZINE

ARE YOU  
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*Welcome to the new  
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THE  
RISE  
OF THE  
MUSLIM  
MODEL

Stefanie Marsh meets  
Hanaa Ben Abdesslem

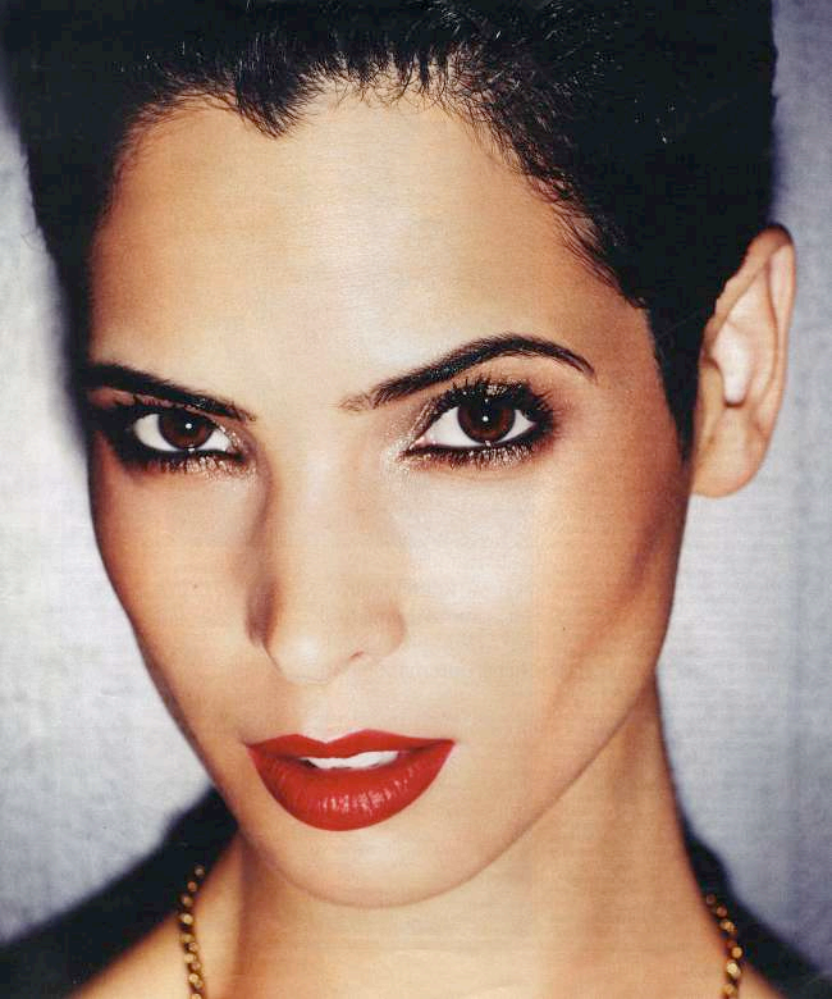
How dyslexia  
changed my life,  
by Philip Schultz

'She's not just  
a model. She  
wants to change  
the mentality  
of her country'

*The latest face of Lancôme is one  
of a new wave of Arab models  
balancing the politics of religion and  
fashion. Stefanie Marsh meets  
Hanaa Ben Abdesslem*

Hanaa Ben Abdesslem  
wearing Lancôme





In 1989, when the politically unimaginable happened and the Iron Curtain fell, a man called Wolfgang Schwarz decided to open a modelling agency. But Schwarz, a former model himself, didn't open his agency in New York or Paris or any of the other obvious fashion hotspots around the world. Instead he opened his agency in Vienna, in his native Austria, a country never particularly known for its sense of world-dominating style, but which counts among its seven direct neighbours the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia and Hungary.

Schwarz had gambled that among the many natural resources that a shrewd entrepreneur might now suddenly be able to exploit in Eastern Europe were many beautiful women eager to take on lucrative modelling contracts in the West. His calculation was rapidly to be proved correct. Soon he was opening satellite offices all over the region – in Warsaw, in Tallinn, in Bucharest – scouting for girls (women are always referred to as “girls” in this business) whom he would first coach in the ways of Western hairstyling, clothing and make-up, then introduce to the big players in the fashion industry abroad.

Schwarz spent his days persuading anxious parents that their 15-year-olds would be well looked after in an industry known for its sharks, then brokering visas for young women who had never left their native Bratislava but, thanks to his networking, were now urgently required on shoots in New York and Milan.

Indeed, it wasn't long before Look Models became the largest model-scouting agency not just in Europe, but the world. If in the Eighties catwalks, magazines and advertising campaigns had been dominated by beaming Americans and ethereal Scandinavians, the Nineties were when the Eastern Europeans arrived – a fact, claims Schwarz, that is largely to his own credit. “I went in there before all the big ones started sending in their scouts.”

Exactly 20 years later, Schwarz was to discover another girl in another country previously more or less out of bounds to the West. Schwarz had recently taken on his employ a young Saudi Arabian scout, though she had grown up abroad. Sophie Galal never forgot her Arab roots and one day suggested to her boss that there was sure to exist in North Africa and the Middle East an ample pool of beautiful women as yet untapped by any agency. “I had seen what Look had done in Eastern Europe in the early Nineties,” says Galal, “and I thought: ‘Why can't we do the same with the Middle East and North Africa?’” And so Galal was duly dispatched on a fact-finding mission.

It was to be a different sort of mission that it might have been in less conservative parts



Hanan Ben Abdesslem became the face of Lancôme last year

## Carine Roitfeld said: “It's time to go and find an Arabic girl and make her an international star”

of the world. Although in countries such as Lebanon modelling is an acknowledged profession, there were areas where Galal had to be discreet. “In a place like Saudi you have to know people: it's all about friends of friends. I tell people I'm looking for a Saudi girl who wants to be a model and the word starts spreading. You start getting messages, ‘I have a daughter,’ and so on. I set up in a house of a friend for casting and told everyone to come without make-up. Getting them to come without make-up is half the struggle.”

It is easy to underestimate just how competitive the search for “new faces” has become in recent years. Outside the Muslim countries there is barely a land that hasn't played host to a modelling competition

backed by one of the high-profile international scouting companies. Their blue-chip clients now set the agenda in fashion: they want more than a pretty face, namely a pretty face that is considered attractive not only in the West but in all their emerging markets, too – China, for instance. Or the Middle East, where Galal is keen to point out, women wear a lot of expensive clothes under their veils. “A lot of people don't know that the biggest market for lingerie is in Saudi Arabia, not France.” To this end, one of the big agencies spent thousands last year trawling Azerbaijan – without success, as it turned out. Ethiopia is next on their list. “When you find the right girl, you get goosebumps,” says Schwarz.

While Galal was busy putting out feelers across the Arab world, a pivotal meeting was taking place in Paris. Two of the most powerful people in fashion – Hervé Bouyon, the president of IMG, the world's biggest model agency, and the magazine editor Carine Roitfeld – were having lunch to discuss how Roitfeld, coming to the end of her long-standing tenure as editor of *Vogue Paris*, intended to fill the final issues. This was April 2010 and Roitfeld had some ideas for her swansong. Bouyon remembers their

conversation well. "Carine said: 'Hervé, I think it's time to go and find an Arabic girl. Find that girl and try to make her an international star within the modelling industry.' The moment I came back to the office, I started setting the wheels in motion. We got in touch with all of our networks, all our divisions internationally to look for the Arabic girl Carine wanted to find."

By July that year there was talk at IMG of a massive scouting operation across North Africa and the Middle East. "And one day, totally out of the blue, I received an e-mail," says Bougon. The e-mail was from Sophie Galal. "She told me she had found an Arab girl and that the girl was in Paris. Could I meet her? And I said: 'Oh, my God, please tell her to come right away.'" Two hours later, Galal was in Bougon's office with the fruit of her travels. The next day Bougon put in a call to *Vogue Paris*. "Carine," he said, "I found who you wanted me to find. Not only that, she has an incredible story."

The girl in question was Hanna Ben Abdesslem. Her name will be unfamiliar to most people, but those who know about such things predict that she will be one of a new band of supermodels who will come to prominence after a decade of celebrities clinking advertising contracts. Ben Abdesslem is Tunisian, but Galal first glimpsed her in Lebanon. "There was this picture of her on the table in a modelling agency I had gone to visit, and I said: 'This girl, who is she? Where is she? I want to meet her.' I remember her hair was in a bob; it was a very simple portrait picture. She was just so different from all the other faces I was seeing."

Ben Abdesslem had taken part in a Lebanese modelling contest in which she'd been a runner-up. Ever since, her photograph had languished in the offices of this agent. "Nobody had her contact number or e-mail address so it took me two months to find her," says Galal. When she did, Ben Abdesslem was in the tourist town of Nabeul in Tunisia, studying engineering (her father runs a construction company) but ten minutes into their first meeting she had confessed to Galal that the only thing she'd ever really wanted to do was be a model. "As a teenager I spent all my money on French fashion magazines, and even when I was younger - 5 or 6 - I would walk round the house on tiptoes, pretending to be a model." Galal asked her about her ambitions. "I want to be in *Vogue*. I want to do Chanel." Ben Abdesslem immediately shot back, "I said, OK, let's go," recalls Galal. Soon after they were in Paris.

When Rottfeld finally clapped eyes on Ben Abdesslem she immediately put her in *Vogue* - twice. Since then, Ben Abdesslem has modelled for Jean Paul Gaultier, Anna Sui and Chanel on the catwalk and posed for



## 'Where I come from, women can do what men do, but modelling is not a recognised profession'

the photographers Mario Testino, Inez van Lamsweerde and Terry Richardson. She is already 22. This is considered ancient in the fashion world (models usually start at about 15) - another measure of Ben Abdesslem's not-to-be-underestimated success.

I met Ben Abdesslem in Paris. Our meeting was arranged by Lancôme because Ben Abdesslem, barely two years into her modelling contract with IMG, has recently won the contract for Lancôme's new skin cream, *Visionnaire*. Ben Abdesslem is, of course, unbelievably tall and thin ("In the Arab world female beauty tends to be round hips, dark big eyes and full lips," explains Galal). Most people, she says, assume she is French or Spanish (few people in New York have heard of Tunisia). She has been compared in looks to a "high-spec Winona Ryder" and to Isabella Rossellini, although her ascent in the world of modelling has been considerably less straightforward than it was for Ingrid Bergman's daughter.

Ben Abdesslem recalls the conversations she had with her family once it became clear that Galal intended to take her on. Her brother, an actor, always supported her decision. Her parents - particularly her mother - were more cautious. "They said, 'Hanaa, do you think you will succeed in a profession where there are millions of models and a lot of competition? Do you think you will be able to make a career out of it?' There are no other examples of Arab women who have succeeded at this job. There aren't really any other Arab women who are models. Where I come from

**Sophie Galal, the Saudi Arabian scout who found Hanna Ben Abdesslem**

women can do what men can do, but modelling is not a recognised profession. But in the end my father said, 'You are free and you can do what you want. But you must always remember that you are Arab and Tunisian and to give a good example to other Arab girls.'

Living up to her parents' expectations while attempting to climb the ladder in a notoriously unstable profession gave her the drive to succeed. "I just had to go forward. You have to be ambitious to succeed. And I am in the process of succeeding. I can't go backwards. I have to keep advancing to prove that I haven't made the wrong decision. It is important that I don't put a foot wrong." In the past she has said: "I learnt a lot during the Lancôme shoots. Everything depends on the expression you convey in a single look, the way you move your face, the way you part your lips..."

The most difficult moment of her career so far was when Schwarz persuaded her to crop her long, frizzy hair (long hair is a mark of beauty in Arab countries). She broke the news to her mother on Skype. "When my mother saw that I had cut my hair, she cried."

Of course, although it is true that Ben Abdesslem is one of the only truly successful Arab models in the world, she isn't the only successful Muslim in the industry. Long before she was born, Iman, a Somali-born Muslim - David Bowie's wife - was discovered by the photographer Peter Beard in Egypt.

There are other names: Yasmeen Ghauri, the Canadian-born Pakistani-German model discovered in McDonald's; Malian model Hawi Diawara; Somali-Norwegian model Rahma M. Wariis Dirie, also an activist and also from Somalia. More recently, Muslim women have conspicuously been winning beauty contests around the world - though there are rumours that Western judges picked, say, Rima Fakih, a Lebanese-born American, to win Miss USA 2010 and Alisar Ailabouani, an Austrian-born Syrian, to win *Germany's Next Top Model* in the same year because of their "novelty value" or "newsworthiness" at a time where Muslim countries have dominated the news agenda.

A handful of these women have subsequently earned the "respect" of Western men's magazines for having had the "courage" to pose nearly naked on their pages. A Turkish-German model, Sali Sahin, was the first Turkish woman to appear in *Playboy*. She did so last year because, she said, "I wanted to be free at last. These photographs are a liberation from the restrictions of my childhood." A few months later, a Pakistani

model, Veena Malik, appeared naked on the cover of Indian *FHM*, but later attended to the magazine for having, she claims, airbrushed away the clothing she had been wearing during the shoot. Responding to death threats that she had subsequently received from conservative Pakistani Muslims, she retorted: "If some mullah on the TV today says, 'Shoot the girl,' they will shoot me. But the guy who removed my clothes using some technology, at least say something against him. This attitude, I'm sorry, is in the society. When they say they have become modern, grown-up, that's wrong. They still live in the Stone Age."

By contrast, the model Kenza Fourati from Tunisia claims that Tunisians had been supportive of her decision to become the first Arab Muslim to pose for *Sports Illustrated* last summer. "I grew up in a Muslim culture, but I can still be a swimsuit model, too," she said. "Why should the two be exclusive?"

Asked whether she ever prayed in a mosque, she said that she didn't. "I don't pray in mosques, it's not a common place for women to go, at least where I come from." Fourati's view is that Western notions about what constitutes either an Arab or a Muslim tend to be irritatingly narrow and outdated.

Even if Ben Abdesslem belongs to a higher order of fashion modelling (she is currently ranked among the top 50 models in the world), her "story," as Bougon puts it, is not entirely unconnected to her success in her chosen career. In the time it took Ben Abdesslem to fly from Tunis to New York for her first Fashion Week last January, the country's President had fled to Saudi Arabia.

The day after she walked the Chanel runway during Paris Fashion Week, Ben Abdesslem flew to the Tunisian/Libyan border to work at the Ras Jdir refugee camp, posting messages about conditions there on her blog. A few days later she posted another message: "I am very proud of my people having the courage to stand up for what they believe."

Together we will bring about change for a better quality of life and freedom of choice. In my own special way, I hope to contribute." Modelling, she believes, "is an expression of freedom. A career choice that goes beyond the barriers of culture and tradition in my country. I hope to lead the way for all young Tunisians who wish to follow in my footsteps."

What was so special about Ben Abdesslem, I ask Bougon. "I saw a girl in front of me who didn't just want to become a model, she wanted really to change the mentality of her country," he says. "There is a lot of competition in modelling, the way the industry has expanded to produce more and more agencies. They've gone to every little village on the planet to find that pearl. It has become a lot more competitive than it was 20 years ago. Scouts are basically covering the whole world now. Last January

in Tunisia there was the Jasmine Revolution, a historical moment. Hanaa was the perfect representation of the educated children of Tunisia, the same children who started that revolution. With what then happened in many other Arab countries – the spread of the Arab Spring – her story became incredible, basically. The revolution in Tunisia was started by Hanaa's brothers and sisters and friends and schoolmates. It is that generation."

Ben Abdesslem has achieved the impossible. But, I ask her, what of her counterparts in other parts of the Arab world? How easy would it be for most young Arab women to pursue their dreams of a career in modelling? Ben Abdesslem replies that any young woman need only "to follow her dreams". But how straightforward would that really be? "Of course, nudity is off limits for an Arab girl," explains Galal. "Even for Hanaa. We are very careful with that. Sometimes the

## Ben Abdesslem walked the Chanel runway; a day later she was working at the Ras Jdir refugee camp

photographers or magazines don't understand that. They say, 'What's the big deal?' I understand that these kinds of pictures will sell. But especially if the girls are young and insecure, their instinct is to comply. I always tell them that if there is anything about a shoot they're uncomfortable with, just say – and if you can't say, I will say it for you."

There are other difficulties. Arab and Western notions of beauty don't always concur. Indeed, when I spoke to Myriam Kaabahe, a contributing editor to *Sayidaty*, one of the Middle East's most popular women's magazines, she told me: "Western designers are often homosexuals, that's why they pick women who are too skinny. They're just jealous." In the pages of *Sayidaty*, bare arms and legs are routinely covered up using Photoshop, she explained.

"In the West, everyone is used to seeing naked women on big posters on the street. Everybody in the Arab world is shocked by that, because a woman is not an object or a product like a car or a necklace. We are always treated like sexual objects by advertising companies and it's not fair. In somewhere like France you will see a girl in a bikini advertising yoghurt – this is not how it is in the Arab world. Beauty is in modesty."

Schwarz thinks it is unlikely that the West will see a sudden influx of Arab models on to the catwalks. "I think the Islamic religion is

definitely a big handicap for the young women wanting to follow a modelling career," he says. "We have had girls whose e-mail and Facebook accounts were hacked by people telling them they were denigrating their faith. We also had a Moroccan girl who wouldn't do swimsuits and lingerie, which is a big problem." Will the Arab Spring produce lots of new faces from the region? "I think it will take a long time. We don't even know if those countries are going to be more or less liberal than they currently are." Schwarz adds that since September 11, visa restrictions on many Arabs wanting to work in the West have been tightened. "I know a girl from Morocco who wanted to be a model, but I couldn't get her a visa. She was exceptionally beautiful and she had a sister in Italy, but since September 11 it is sometimes impossible to get visas."

Nevertheless, the conditions for change are all there, says Alex Aubry, a Bahraini fashion writer who runs the weblog the Polyglot, the declared aim of which is to change perceptions of the Middle East and its diaspora. "The conditions are there for people like Hanaa to emerge – there's a youth bulge, and they're more conscious of fashion, with a burgeoning micro fashion industry."

There's also a fashion publishing industry emerging in the Middle East: there are Condé Nast cafés springing up all over Dubai. The problem is that parents don't want their kids to be get hurt. And the relationship with sexuality is completely different – it's not like Brazil, where people grow up really fast. Personally, I think models should start older anyway. In the Nineties you had models whose careers spanned two decades; now you're considered old in your twenties.

"And we don't have a precedent. If you talk to most Middle Eastern parents, they don't want their daughters to be models. We don't really have examples of successful Middle Eastern, Arab or Muslim models speaking up and being success stories. If you take an example such as Yasmin Warsame [a Somali-Canadian model who has done campaigns for Revlon and Chanel], even she has admitted in the past that she tries to keep her modelling career a secret. So I think that what Hanaa has done is very gutsy. But you are starting to see Middle Eastern fashion designers, which you hadn't before. Being a fashion designer is now the cool thing to do. Modelling may be the next."

This month Ben Abdesslem's face will be all over the Lancôme campaign. It is a beautiful face that fewer and fewer people will mistake for French or Spanish. Whether her ascent will herald a new era of Arab models at a time when catwalks are less diverse than they were 15 years ago perhaps depends on the political direction the Arab states take in these unpredictable and abruptly changing times. ■