

Khawab – A Mipsterz Collaboration: The Nexus of Muslim-futurism through Fashion, Art and Technology

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Abstract • *Khawab* is a MIPSTERZ project that centers Muslim women at the forefront of creative identity expression by connecting with participants through their real-life experiences. *Khawab* (kha-wa-b) or “to dream” in Urdu, is a multi-faceted storytelling portrait series from MIPSTERZ (created by Reyhab Patel) that fictionalizes the alter-egos of Muslim women in Toronto. It aims to answer the question of what informs our imagination of a utopia and what it means to have freedom of expression. *Khawab* is informed by the nexus of fashion, art, and culture, and how these aspects allow us to create authentic versions of ourselves in hopes of living free. This project transforms participants’ experiences into fictional alter-egos, presenting Muslim women in a space of creative liberation and inclusivity, breaking free from restrictions, and embracing a space of boundless imagination.

We sought to show how everyday Muslim women in Toronto imagine their alter-egos in fictional realities of their own creation. Their alter-egos described as “alternative identities” were boundless in their existence across various realities. To bring these characters to life, we crafted character biographies and captured their stories through collaborative conversations.

In a two-phase approach, we first photographed Muslim women dressed as their alter-egos. Each portrait was then enhanced using artificial intelligence (DALL·E, from OpenAI) to create a digital world backdrop from key elements and textual descriptions of the alter-ego—including interpretations of cultural identity, occupation, familial ties, as well as responses to Islamophobia, racism, and trauma. At its core, *Khawab* works to heal and reclaim personhood through storytelling.

Reyhab Mohmed Patel is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Carleton University and a creative at MIPSTERZ—a Muslim arts and culture collective.

INTRODUCTION

This project, *Khawab*, is in collaboration with the Mipsterz — an arts collective based in New York City. *Khawab* is a storytelling project that focuses on transforming Muslim women into their fictional alter-egos. The term “khawab” in Urdu means “dream” — which heavily inspired this project as I, myself, am a dreamer. So, in turn, I hoped to assemble a team of dreamers to explore the nexus of fashion, art, and technology. Using the theoretical framework within the emerging field of futurist studies, Muslim-futurism is an emerging social movement that uses art and fashion as modes of identity formation and self-expressions, and as way of resisting rampant Islamophobia.

The purpose of this creative project is to reimagine the inclusion of Muslim women into the realm of fictional storytelling. This project uses intersectionality as a basis to break barriers of technicalities and “what-ifs” that often exclude marginalized Muslim women in these spaces.

My positionality as a visible Muslim woman has impacted how I chose to execute the project *Khawab*. As previously mentioned, “khawab” translates to “dream” — a dream that manifested through feelings of not belonging and familiarity in my hobbies and interests. At its core, *Khawab* works to heal and reclaim personhood through storytelling. *Khawab* opens a gateway in exploring freedom, joy, and happiness that is not within enclosures of oppressive realities that are often informed by our own lived experiences.

MUSLIM-FUTURISM

Muslim-futurism is an analytic concept that signals identities as not static or fixed in past traditions, but as an active and dynamic force of creating Muslim identities beyond the constraints of hegemonic and oppressive realities of settler colonialism, Islamophobia, Orientalism and anti-Black racism.

Thus, Muslim-futurism is a way of imaging a future in which Muslims could embrace multiple identities, and where Muslims in the Diaspora could flourish and lead joyous lives free from Islamophobia and other oppressive forces.

The concept of Muslim-futurism was inspired by similar social movements such as Afro-futurism, which explores the intersections of African diaspora culture with science and technology. Muslim-futurism shares some common themes with Afro-futurism, such as envisioning alternative futures and challenging existing power structures. Both movements explore the intersection of culture, technology, and culture (Yerebakan, 2018; Barylo, 2018; Parikka, 2018). Mark Dery's essay "Black to the Future" (1994) defines Afro-futurism as "speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of the twentieth century techno culture — and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology in terms of prosthetically enhanced future" (1994). In comparison, Muslim-futurism is a relatively new term that is still being developed by scholars in interdisciplinary fields such as Media and Communications, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, and Religious Studies. Although there is little research on the intersection between culture, science, and technology in the Muslim diaspora, many scholars are seeking to explore alternative futures as a way of mobilizing knowledge through art and lived experiences of those in the diaspora (Whitehouse, 2018; Bhatti, 2020; Esfahani, 2022). *Khawab* uses photography and artificial intelligence software to bridge the gap in creating authentic portraits for the alter egos. This is done through the process of transforming each participant through fashionable expression (including the usage of cultural and religious symbols) and refining the images by editing and repositioning these alter-egos in their fictional realities.

TRANSFORMATION

The approach to this project was to gain insight in how everyday Muslim women in Toronto imagine their alter-egos in fictional realities. Their alter-egos, referred to as “alternative identities,” were not restricted by conventional depictions, but instead have boundless potential to exist in various alternative realities. The best course of action was to fictionalize their alter-egos by creating character biographies. They have a story; we just have to capture it.

In collaboration with the participants, we engaged in meaningful conversations about symbolism and self-expression through fashion. In doing so, we were able to highlight key symbols, accessories, and identity markers that translated directly to their fictional alter-egos.



Figure 1 Participant Minhas as her alter-ego “Desi-Elf.”

Participants Aaliya and Minhas connected closely to their cultural identities as South Asian women by incorporating henna and traditional jewelry in the wardrobes of their alter-egos. Minhas soon became a “Desi Elf,” inspired by Tolkien Elves and general Dungeons and Dragons fantasy realms (Figure 1).

In comparison, Aaliya was transformed into Jal Pari (“mermaid” in Urdu). Her persona challenged the western ways of storytelling about sea-life by incorporating South Asian beliefs of nature and aquatic life (Figure 2). Jal Pari exerts the need to connect with nature through a kind-hearted approach that is both warm and mystical, which contradicts common orientalist narratives. Participant Urooj, who is a Toronto-based actress, incorporated her passion for science-fiction and mystery to create Polly — a time travelling detective (Figure 3). Polly’s vibrant nature is easily captured by showcasing a very child-like persona that similarly challenges popular depictions of fictional detectives and time-travellers.



Figure 2 Participant Aaliya as her alter-ego, Jal Pari. She is situated in a fictional kingdom that connects aquatic life to humanity.



Figure 3 Participant Urooj as her alter-ego, Polly, a time-travelling detective.

Finally, participants SuKha and Reyhab's alter-egos focused on reclaiming the often-villainized identities of Muslim women, reproducing them as fierce and fearsome. SuKha channelled her inner underwater ninja-warrior named Cecealia (Figure 4). Cecealia is fierce and loud, exerting dark energy to protect her community from harm.



Figure 4 SuKha as her alter-ego Cecealia, an underwater ninja-octopus.



Figure 5 Reyhab as her alter-ego, anti-hero Sonyc-Rey. Hardened by society's ridicule, she is creating her own space to exist alternatively beyond realism.

In contrast, Reyhab's alter-ego exhibits an anti-hero, Sonyc-Rey, who is hardened by society's constant regulation and ridicule. Sonyc-Rey aims to create her own space which may pose a risk to others (Figure 5). Both SuKha and Reyhab explore scarves in different notions and interpretations. Although SuKha identifies as Muslim, her stylistic choices with the scarves do not constitute as the hijab. SuKha states "I don't like the word hijabi, because I am not a hijabi...I am using them as a stylistic choice that reflects my brown identity" (2022). In comparison, Reyhab emphasizes the use of the veil (more specifically the hijab) in her alter-ego to challenge western political narratives that reduce the hijab as an oppressive tool (Lodi, 2021).

TECHNOLOGY: BIASES IN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The use of technology in this project follows two distinct methods: the photographic lens and the artificial intelligence (AI) production.

The first phase focused primarily on capturing the alter-egos in their raw forms through photography. In addition, using key elements and textual descriptions shared in the AI software, such as Midjourney, produce a unique image. Midjourney is known as “an independent research lab exploring new mediums of thought and expanding the imaginative powers of the human species” (Midjourney, 2022).

However, throughout this process we uncovered AI biases that were unintentionally programmed, including themes of orientalism, colourism, and exclusion of marginalized identities. When the user adds textual descriptions that relate to Muslims and South Asians, the work that is produced often reflects orientalist tropes (for example, the colour scale, mixing of Arab and Asian geographical locations). Recent studies have emphasized how AI software have created new forms of art that is limitless and continuously expanding (Manyika, Silberg and Presten, 2019; Rivai, 2023). However, Choudhary explains software such as Midjourney includes gender and racial biases when using textual descriptions, stating that “the generative engine’s bias is not merely limited to gender but extends to the category of nations as well... the programme displays visibly different colour palettes for India” (2021). Due to these biases, creators are once again faced with challenging common stereotypes that are often present in artistic spaces. The colour palettes that are used to depict countries like India continue to mystify the art production to be relatively the same, through an oriental perspective.

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

Khawab is one of the few artistic projects in Canada that depicts brown Muslim women through the framework of Muslim-futurism. *Khawab* has been showcased at various international conferences and artistic festivals such as the Mosquers Film Festival in Edmonton, Canada.

This project emphasizes its approach in exploring the nexus of fashion, art, and technology, and allowing Muslim women to re-exist in a space that celebrates the construction of their identities that they see fit.

This form of storytelling challenges artistic spaces that become exclusionary due to technicalities of “realism.” Instead, it showcases that storytelling is a powerful tool and can be enhanced by incorporating art and fashion as elements. Overall, this project aims to highlight that the notion that fictional spaces are in fact fictional, hence can be limitless without barriers that usually undermine and exclude brown Muslim women through racist and Islamophobic tropes.

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Credits

Creative Director: Reyhab Mohmed Patel
 Producers: Mipsterz and Reyhab Mohmed Patel
 Photographer: Hamzah Amin
 Makeup Artist: Desiree Grant
 Coordinator Assistant: Urooj Khan
 Participants: Minhas, Aaliya, Urooj Khan, Reyhab Mohmed, SuKha

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Author Bio

Reyhab Mohmed Patel is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Carleton University and a creative at MIPSTERZ—a Muslim arts and culture collective. She holds a Master’s in Fashion from Toronto Metropolitan University. Her research explores the intersection of fashion, identity and culture, and its use in storytelling practices. Her recent work focuses on how Muslim creatives in Canada use artistic practices to overcome Islamophobia. Her interest in Muslim-futurism extends from personal goals of imagining spaces which focus on Muslim joy in the face of Islamophobia and other systemic forms of oppression and discrimination.

Article Citations

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