

Contesting Religious Identities

Transformations, Disseminations and Mediations

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Fulla, the Cover-up Girl. Identity Politics via a Doll?

Martha Frederiks

Introduction

In 2003 the Syrian company NewBoy presented a new product: Fulla, an 'Islamic' Barbie-type doll. Since the launch of the doll, Fulla has been a resounding success, businesswise as well as toy-wise. Over 2 million dolls have been sold, making Fulla a top commodity in the Middle Eastern toy market.¹ In 2009 the doll was also introduced in Western Europe, with the Dutch company Little Muslims serving as distributor for the European market.²

Central to the Fulla success is the attempt of manufacturer NewBoy to promote, via the doll, a model identity for young Muslim girls. This is done through a widespread advertisement campaign, featuring Fulla billboards, Fulla clips and narratives on the internet and Fulla-advertisements during prime-time television for children. In 2008 NewBoy had spent an estimated 100 million dollar on the advertisement campaign.³

The appearance of the doll on the shelves of toy-stores has met with much resistance. Many consider the doll to be a "symbol of Islamic revivalism".⁴ The

1 'What's up with the Fulla Phenomenon' (December 27, 2009), at: www.fullashop.eu (March 22, 2010). Note: All narratives of the Fulla campaign referred to in this contribution were accessed via the European Fulla site www.fullashop.eu (March 22, 2010). The dates in brackets indicate the publication date of the narrative on the site.

Though Fulla is a top-selling toy, the sales are modest compared to Mattel's Barbie. According to M.J. Lord's *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll* (New York: Avon Books 1995), p. 7; Patrick Lettelier, 'Barbie And The Daughter of Lesbians', in: *Lesbian News*, November 2003, p. 32.

2 Fulla was obtainable in Europe through the web-shop of Little Muslims, www.fullashop.eu. This website no longer exists.

3 Reporter, 'Fighting Fulla: A New Toy Story', in: *Dubai Business*, February 4 2008 (accessed October 8, 2010); Larry Portis, 'Une Femme de Damas', *Cinémas Méditerranéens* 13 (January 29, 2009), www.divergences.be (accessed, March 27, 2011).

4 Renée Terrebonne, 'Fulla, the Veiled Barbie: An Analysis of Cultural Imperialism and Agency', in: *MAI Review* 2 (2008), p. 1.

Syrian women's activist Maan Abdul Saan has called the doll "emblematic of a trend towards Islamic conservatism sweeping the Middle East".⁵ French sociologist Catherine Costa-Lascaut, quoted by *The Sunday Times*, even deems the doll to be "an Islamist strategy".⁶ Apprehensive of these alleged revivalist connections, Tunisian security forces in September 2006 raided toy-shops and confiscated Fulla products.⁷

This chapter explores these alleged connections between Fulla and Islamic revivalist movements.⁸ More precisely, it investigates whether and if so, in what ways, the English-language Fulla advertisement campaign can be understood as an attempt to inscribe on the Fulla doll Arab Islamic revivalist ideals about female identity and behavior and whether or not the campaign is an expression of Islamic revivalist identity politics regarding gender.⁹ This chapter starts with a brief description of the doll's history. It then proceeds with a discussion of the advertisement campaign, first focusing on Fulla's often-mentioned and much-scorned counter-image Barbie, followed by an analysis of the positive role-model that Fulla is said to embody. The chapter then turns to Islamic revivalist identity politics and links the campaign with revivalist discourses on gender, exploring whether and if so how the Fulla campaign tallies with the revivalist project to promote a normative female 'Islamic' identity.

5 Quote from the Syrian women's rights activist Maan Abdul Saan, cited in Craig Nelson, 'Modest Fulla Doll Displaces Barbie in Mideast Toy Stores', *Sign on San Diego*, November 25, 2005, www.signonsandiego.com (accessed October 8, 2010). The newspaper changed its name and is now called: *Union Tribune San Diego*. The article is still accessible but under a difference weblink: www.legacy.sandiegouniontribune.com. (accessed November 10, 2016).

6 Matthew Campbell, 'Barbie Hasn't a Prayer Against Devout Islam Doll', in: *The Sunday Times*, January 22, 2006.

7 Mohammad Al-Hamroni, 'Hijab-Clad Fulla "Wanted" in Tunisia', in: *IslamOnline.net*, September 22, 2006, www.turntoislam.com (accessed March 24, 2010).

8 Following scholars like Gilles Kepel and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, I prefer the term revivalism over the much contested (and often misunderstood) term 'fundamentalism'. Cf. Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1994); Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996).

9 In 2008, the Syrian producer Diana El Jeiroudi produced the documentary *Dolls: A Woman from Damascus* in which she critiques the ideals of womanhood promoted by the Fulla campaign. For an interview with El Jeiroudi, cf. Larry Portis, 'Une Femme de Damas', *Cinémas Méditerranéens*, January 29, 2009, www.divergences.be (accessed March 27, 2011).

Fulla. The Story

In 2003 the Syrian company NewBoy launched a new product: Fulla, a Barbie-type doll designed for the Middle Eastern market. Fulla is available in two different outdoor outfits: a black *abaya* and headscarf for the more conservative market (a *niqab* or face-veil was deemed a bit too drastic for the kiddy market) and a pastel-colored long rain-coat and white scarf for the more liberal markets. Thus, according to the manufacturer, the product Fulla endeavors to meet both cultural and religious sensibilities regarding appropriate female dress codes in the Middle East.¹⁰

Underneath her *hijab*, Fulla wears fashionable indoor-wear. The indoor outfits vary from fairly conservative¹¹ suits that cover most of the limbs, intended for consumers from the Gulf, to trendy clothes such as short skirts, t-shirts and jeans aimed at a more liberal market. Accessories include a pink prayer mat, a miniature Quran and—to show that Fulla is a modern girl—a Mac computer. The only thing conspicuously missing from Fulla's extensive wardrobe is a swimsuit; this, according to the advertisement campaign, is not considered appropriate, not even for an 'Islamic' doll.¹² Alongside the doll there is a whole range of Fulla promotion products, ranging from Fulla backpacks and girl-size Fulla prayer mats to Fulla breakfast cereals and Fulla bicycles, all—naturally—in bright pink.¹³

But there is more to Fulla than meets the eye; Fulla is by no means just a 'veiled' or 'Burqa-ed' Barbie. Attempts to launch Islamic Barbie-type dolls are not new. Earlier products included Razanne, a doll designed by a Palestinian-led US company for the Muslim market of North America and Europe,¹⁴ Dara and Sara, twin dolls made in Iran and the Jamila doll, produced by Simba Toys from the Middle East. All these Barbie-type dolls were devised as 'Islamic',

10 'Fulla Wardrobe: Conservative yet Chic', (September 9, 2009); 'Fulla: Conservatively Stylish', (November 11, 2009).

11 American journalist Susan Taylor Martin preferred the word "dowdy" for these dresses. Susan Taylor Martin, 'Doll That Has It All (Almost)', in: *St Petersburg Times*, May 18, 2005, www.sptimes.com (accessed March 24, 2010).

12 'Fulla Wardrobe: Conservative, yet Chic', (September 9, 2009).

13 Cf. the interview with Fulla designer Manar Tarabichi on www.dailymotion.com/video/x14avl_fulla-est-a-la-fete_news (accessed October 15, 2010). Press Release, 'Damas Launches Fulla Jewelry Line for Kids', November 24 2004, www.ameinfo.com (accessed October 8, 2011). Cf. also: 'Fulla: Back to School', (October 8, 2009) or 'Fulla and her Popularity', (November 1, 2009).

14 For a discussion of Razanne, cf. Amina Yaqin, "'Islamic' Barbie: The Politics of Gender and Performativity", in: *Fashion Theory* 11/2,3 (2007), pp. 173–188.

feature- and clothes-wise and preceded Fulla in the market; none of them however has met with the same success.¹⁵

Key to Fulla's popularity seems not so much the doll's outward appearance (which is after all only skin-deep) but the personality created for the doll. Like her counterpart/rival Barbie, Fulla has become more than just a one-dimensional toy. NewBoy, in its advertisement campaign on internet and television, has managed to create a narrative around Fulla, which stresses her Arab as well as her 'Islamic' identity.¹⁶ To quote words of the Fulla brand manager Fawaz Abidin: "You have to create a character that parents and children will want to relate to. Our advertisement campaign is full of positive messages around Fulla's character. She's honest, loving and caring and she respects her father and mother."¹⁷ An advertisement-narrative states: "She encompasses all the traits that parents want their daughters to emulate and develop".¹⁸ The manager of a leading toy-store in Damascus summarizes the success of the doll with the words: "Fulla is one of us but Barbie is still a stranger (...) Fulla is my sister, my wife, my mother. She comes from the same culture."¹⁹ Pious,

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- 15 Mattel's attempts at 'Islamic' dolls provide juicy food for Orientalistic analyses. For a critique on orientalist depictions of Muslim women, cf. Edward W. Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', in: *Cultural Critique* 1 (Fall 1985), pp. 103 [89–107]. In the ethnic representation series Mattel designed two dolls that fit the description 'Islamic': a Moroccan Barbie, a glamorous princess straight from the tales of Scheherazade and Leyla, described as a slave-girl (sic!) at the Ottoman court. In 2009 a number of burka-ed Barbies created a major row. At the occasion of Barbie's 50th anniversary, Mattel organized an exhibition of 500 collectors' item Barbies. Among the exhibits were the so-called Burka-Barbies, designed in cooperation with the Italian designer Eliana Lorena. The Burka-Barbies were donned in full *hijab*, wearing burka-type garments including face-veil in the colors lime-green, red and black. After the exhibition, the Burka-Barbies were chosen to be auctioned off at Sotheby's and the proceeds of the auction were donated to the foundation Save the Children. The Burka-Barbies met with a storm of protest. Cf. Vince Soodin, 'Here's Barbie in a Burka', *The Sun*, November 20, 2009; Daily Mail Reporter, 'It's Barbie In a Burka: World-Famous Doll Gets a Makeover to Go under the Hammer for 50th Anniversary', in: *Mail Online*, November 21, 2009; Barbara Kay, 'Burka Barbie', in: *National Post*, December 2, 2009; Mona Eltahawy, 'What's under your Burka, Barbie', in: *The Huffington Post*, December 21, 2009; www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1229760 (accessed March 19, 2011).
- 16 Cf. Youtube clip 'Fulla. Interview with manager of NewBoy', Official Fulla Youtube Page <http://www.youtube.com/user/FullaPage?blend=23&ob=5> (accessed September 7, 2010).
- 17 Katherine Zoepf, 'Bestseller in the Mideast: Barbie with a Prayer Mat', in: *New York Times*, September 22, 2005.
- 18 'Fulla, The Ultimate IT Girl!', (September 8, 2009).
- 19 From our correspondent, 'Barbie who? Fulla, her Islamic Counterpart takes her on', in: *Liberty Post*, December 24, 2006, www.libertypost.org (accessed February 23, 2011).

intelligent, out-going and modestly yet fashionably dressed, Fulla has become more than a doll. She is promoted to embody Arab ideals of Islamic womanhood in the 21st century.

Fulla's success cannot solely be credited to a clever and successful marketing campaign; a number of external factors has also contributed to Fulla's popularity. Anthropologist Renée Terrebonne has pointed out that in many ways the market was 'ready' for the product. Already in 1996, the Iranian state-owned Children Cultural Promotion Centre had expressed its disapproval of the skimpily-clad Barbie and pointed to the damaging influence Barbie was believed to have on young minds. The centre designed two dolls that were deemed more in line with Iranian culture and Islamic values.²⁰ In 2002 the twin dolls Dara and Sara were presented to the public.²¹ The fact that brother and sister were clothed in folklore-type outfits including turbans and veils, rather than in the glamorous dresses that make Barbie so fascinating to little girls, might explain the limited success of the dolls.

Early in 2003, Barbie also became a contested item in Saudi Arabia when the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice pronounced a ban on Barbie, considering her "a threat to morality, complaining that the revealing clothes of the 'Jewish' toy . . . are offensive to Islam".²²

The denouncement of Barbie can be read as an expression of a much more widely carried anti-Western sentiment, following the invasion of Afghanistan and, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the American proclaimed 'war on terror'; the antagonistic attitude towards the West was, amongst other things, expressed by a call to boycott of Western products, in which Barbie fulfills an iconic role, embodying Western decadence and immorality. Only a few months after the Saudi condemnation of Barbie, Fulla was launched, offering an alternative to this conspicuously American product. Terrebonne has also pointed out that the doll was launched in a time of steadily increasing Muslim

20 John Walsh, 'Here is Islamic Barbie, Complete with Chadour and Devout Expression', in: *The Independent*, October 24, 1996; cf. also: Scott Peterson, 'Barbie Struts into Islamic Stronghold', in: *Christian Science Monitor* 91/56 (February 17, 1997). Peterson writes rather cynically: 'to many hard-line clerics in Iran, the most insidious cultural threat to the values of the Islamic revolution comes in a hot pink box and sits on toyshop shelves.'

21 www.daraandsara.com (accessed March 24, 2011).

22 Terrebonne, 'Fulla, the Veiled Barbie', p. 2. Note: Ruth Handler, Barbie's creator, was Jewish and therefore, by association, Barbie was conceived to be Jewish as well. Earlier on, in March 2001, the committee had also censured Pokémon dolls. Sheikh Abul Aziz, 'Saudi Arabia bans Pokemon', March 26, 2001, www.news.bbc.co.uk (accessed March 27, 2010).

revivalism in Syria and that the presentation coincided with a time of economic booming.²³ All in all: the world was ready for Fulla.

Say Goodbye to Busty Barbie²⁴

The Fulla campaign to promote a role-model for Muslim girls hinges on two strategies. One strategy consists of critiquing Fulla's rival Barbie, who is considered the embodiment of licentious Western womanhood and empty consumerism. The other strategy is to construe a positive counter image embodied in Fulla that can serve as a model to emulate. This paragraph discusses the negative projections around Barbie whilst the next paragraph will focus the positive image projected on Fulla.

There are few toys that have generated more emotions than Barbie. Since her birth in 1959, Barbie has been under siege and scorned as a licentious and top-heavy blonde bimbo. This 'dumb blonde' image seems to originate from the fact that in the first decades Barbie dolls were mainly sold in the basic outfit of neon-pink swimsuits. Though no doubt intended to stimulate the purchase of outfits for the skimpily-clad doll, it suggested long days of leisure on sunny California beaches. This image seems to have persisted, despite the fact that Mattel designed Barbies in nearly every conceivable job in the book, including that of female astronaut, long before NASA even considered the possibility.

Barbie's figure, shaped after a German sex-doll named Lillie by Mattel employee Ruth Handler, has always been a topic of intense contestation.²⁵ Unlikely alliances of radical feminists and concerned moms have been formed to blame Barbie and her makers for corrupting the minds of girls—and men—by propagating an impossible ideal of the female body. Barbie's big-busted, long-legged figure adorned with luscious blond hair, Caucasian traits and an impossible tiny waist has caused frustration, not to mention low self-esteem and anorexia, in generations of girls and women worldwide. Many authors have been quick to point out that any real woman of Barbie-proportions would immediately topple over, thus underscoring the unrealistic dimensions

23 Terrebbonne, 'Fulla, the Veiled Barbie', p. 2.

24 Quote from a heading on the website of www.fullashop.nl, dated December 23, 2009 (accessed October 12, 2010).

25 Ann Ducile, 'Dyes and Dolls: Multicultural Barbies and the Merchandising of Difference', in: *Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6 (1994), p. 47; Link Byfield, 'I don't Think Rubens would have Painted a Woman Built like Barbie', in: *Alberta Report Newsmagazine* 23/34, (May 8 1996), p. 2.

of Barbie's physical shape.²⁶ However, as Ann Ducille has pointedly observed, though Barbie might suggest sensual womanhood, she has plain plastic "down below" instead of genitals and therefore Barbie seems "locked into a never-never land in which she must always be sexual without the possibility of sex".²⁷

Barbie's shape and its scanty coverage has been one of the key targets of the Fulla campaign. Repeatedly the campaign stresses that Barbie's mini skirts, tube tops and revealing bathing suits show too much skin for propriety.²⁸ Short narratives with titles like *How Fulla saves girls from Barbie* and *What's wrong with the Barbie* elaborate on Barbie's "shameful postures", her "very revealing clothes and outfits", her "sensuality" and her general "offensiveness".²⁹ Linking up with critiques of Barbie in the Western world, Barbie's figure is said to have a detrimental effect on young girls' perceptions of their own bodies and to affect their self-esteem negatively. The tantalizing shape of the doll is considered a danger to morality.³⁰

Fulla, on the other hand is presented as modesty personified: her skirts are always below the knees and she wears tops that cover the shoulders (and elbows).³¹ She is "unlike the many dolls who are so concerned about their image and sexuality"³² [read: Barbie] and wears a *hijab* when outdoors. In short, Fulla is a girl who dresses and behaves in accordance with cultural and religious sensitivities, embodying "the image of a true Arab woman".³³

Another bone of contestation in the campaign is Barbie's "liberated" lifestyle.³⁴ The critique culminates around Barbie's multiple relationships with men, more in particular her 40 year affaire with boyfriend Ken and, since they broke up in 2004, her flirtation with Blaine, an Australian surfer. The campaign states emphatically that Fulla, unlike Barbie, "is never allowed to engage

26 Cf. e.g. Mary F. Rogers, *Barbie Culture* (London: Sage Publications 1999), pp. 22–24. In 1997 Barbie was re-designed, adjusting the buste-waist dimensions to resemble more 'natural' proportions. Cf. e.g. 'Barbie Undergoes Plastic Surgery', in: *BBC Business News*, November 18, 1970, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business.32312.stm>. (accessed March 18, 2011).

27 Ducille, 'Dyes and Dolls', p. 62.

28 Cf. e.g. 'Barbie's Muslim Match: Fulla', (November 17, 2009); 'Fulla: Saving Muslim Girls from Barbie', (September 26, 2009); 'Fulla: The Hijab Donning Doll', (September 28, 2009).

29 'Fulla: An Islamic icon for little girls', (September 24, 2009); 'Fulla: Saving Muslim Girls from Barbie', (September 26, 2009).

30 'Fulla: Saving Muslim Girls from Barbie', (September 26, 2009).

31 'Fulla Fashion Choices', (September 13, 2009).

32 'Fulla: The hijab Donning Doll', (September 28, 2009).

33 'Fulla and her Popularity', (November 1, 2009).

34 'Fulla Doll: What's Wrong with the Barbie', (November 15, 2009).

in any relationship with a man prior to marriage". This is underscored by the statement that Fulla respects herself and her parents too much to hang around with men and will stay single until marriage, a stance aptly summarized in the capture 'No guy for Fulla'.³⁵

Remarkably enough however, though the manufacturers of Fulla explicitly contest the sensual image of Barbie as an appropriate role-model for Muslim girls and have created a doll with more modest physical proportions and with less exposing dresses, they seem to sexualize the doll even more than Mattel has done. For one: Fulla has underwear and more precisely: irremovable underwear. Anyone who has fathered or mothered daughters who like Barbies, has had ample opportunity to observe that Barbie has none. Rather, one of Barbie's favorite hobbies seems to be supporting the nudist case, lying around the house naked. Yet only prudes seem to take offense at Barbie's nipple-less torso or asexual abdomen. But precisely by etching irremovable underwear on the doll, the manufacturers seem to suggest that there *is* something to hide, thus sexualizing what Mattel has designed as a-sexual plastic.

A similar ambivalent message can be seen with regard to Fulla's *abaya*, which the manufacturers propagate as the required Islamic dress-code.³⁶ The *abaya* is a garment designed to hide adornment and to facilitate what Erving Goffman has called "civil inattention".³⁷ Remarkably enough however, in a substantial number of cases (e.g. in the video clips) Fulla's *abayas* are embroidered, a feature which Anne Meneley has called "sexualizing the chador", as garments designed to hide adornment have become now adorned themselves and thus become a means of distinction and therefore sexual attraction in the public sphere.³⁸ Even more curious and ambivalent is the sale of "lace underwear" for the doll,³⁹ which gives the remark that "most little girls love playing dress-up in

35 'Fulla: A Lifestyle away from Barbie', (October 4, 2009); 'No Guy for Fulla like Ken for Barbie', (October 16, 2009). This has led to the joke that though Fulla, unlike Barbie, has no male friends, 'she might have angry brothers'. 'Barbie Who? Fulla, her Islamic Counterpart takes her on', in: *Liberty Post*, December 24, 2006, www.libertypost.org (Accessed February 23, 2010).

36 'Fulla: Conservatively Stylish', (November 11, 2009).

37 Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on Social Organisation of Gatherings* (New York: The Free Press 1963), p. 87.

38 Anne Meneley, 'Fashions and Fundamentalisms in Fin-de-Siècle Yemen: Chador Barbie and Islamic socks', in: *Cultural Anthropology* 22/2 (2007), p. 236.

39 Cf. 'Fulla: The Cover-up Girl', (October 20 2009): "Fulla is a fashion fanatic. It is Fulla's love of fashion and numerous accessories that debatably make her so well like. (...) This sense of belonging is further improved by Fulla's indoor costumes, which are just as revealing

their mommy's clothing"⁴⁰ an unexpected dimension. Lace underwear, a timeless and interculturally-carried symbol for the invitation of sexual attention, seems a rather remarkably accessory for a doll aimed at girls between the ages of 3 to 13 and intended to promote a virtuous role-model. Therefore, though the Fulla campaign contests the suitability of Barbie's sex-permeated image as a role-model for young girls, the campaign communicates messages about Fulla's sexuality which are ambivalent to say the least.

Fulla. An Islamic Icon for Little Girls⁴¹

The advertisement campaign does not just consist of critiquing the Western Barbie, but also endeavors to promote an alternative in Fulla. Fulla is described as an "Islamic icon", a "role model for Muslim children"⁴² and portrayed as the embodiment of Arab Muslim ideals of women: she is demure, pious, obedient to her parents and above all, she is veiled. The campaign calls Fulla a "traditional and modest mini of what an ideal Muslim woman ought to be."⁴³ Playing with a veiled doll like Fulla, according to the campaign, facilitates a smooth transition from childhood to puberty and provides young girls with a sense of 'Islamic' decorum: "Most people surmise that the little girls playing with and dressing Fulla are more likely to handle the transition from bare-headedness and wearing practically anything they want to the relative conservativeness of the Islamic adult female dress code".⁴⁴

Thus, the manufacturers consider Fulla to be much more than just a toy; she is an instrument to promote "Islamic' values; a device to influence girls' behavior. In order to be an effective instrument as well as a desirable commodity, Fulla has been designed to appeal to girls in the Middle East. With an olive-colored skin, brown eyes and black auburn-streaked long hair and—in comparison to Barbie—modest physical proportions (though still with impossible long legs and a tiny waist), Fulla offers an alternative to Barbie's

as Barbie's. Fashionable skirts, bathing costumes, even lace underwear—the choices are irresistible".

40 Fulla: The Ultimate IT-Girl', (September 8, 2009).

41 'Fulla: An Islamic Icon for Little Girls', (September 24, 2009).

42 'Fulla: A Barbie-like Doll with a Veil', (September 14, 2009).

43 'Glam it up with Fulla Accessories', (December 17, 2009).

44 'Fulla Wardrobe', (September 9, 2009).

much scorned Caucasian-based beauty ideal.⁴⁵ Dress-wise Fulla's outfits are fashionable but respectable.⁴⁶ Fulla shows impeccable taste in 'Islamic' fashion, distinguishes between indoor- and outdoor wear and varies for the occasion from hip to discreet.

More important than Fulla's clothes however, according to the manufacturer, is Fulla's character, though the constant stress on modest dressing seems to imply the opposite. Rather than a mere 'Barbie in *hijab*', the campaign promotes Fulla's outward appearance to be the logical consequence of her character and life-style.⁴⁷ She is portrayed as the ideal daughter, who is prayerful, modest, loving and generous.⁴⁸ Fulla prays the *salat* regularly, reads in her pink Qur'an, bakes cakes for friends, takes care of her siblings and is deferential to her parents; she is intelligent, sociable and—depending on the type of Fulla—studies or works hard. Thus she appeals to parents who try to install Islamic values into their daughters via a doll⁴⁹ and functions as a role-model for little girls.⁵⁰

Fulla's character is frequently mirrored with Barbie's in order to highlight Fulla's superiority: Fulla "is baking cakes and praying before going to bed" whilst Barbie is "a liberated young girl who takes on her life with her own desires"⁵¹ and "is only concerned with her fashion bags".⁵² For those who by now feel that though the Fulla role-model might reflect the ideals of parents and certain religious groups in the Middle East, she cannot be a very exciting toy to play with, the campaign stresses that Fulla is *not* boring; rather, Fulla is sociable, fun loving and above all she *loves* fashionable clothes.⁵³ The latter is underscored by Fulla's immense wardrobe which might lead the more critical

45 'Fashionable Fulla: An Icon for Kids,' (September 13, 2009). As early as 1968 Mattel has attempted to diversify Barbie's Caucasian traits. Mattel's efforts to produce black Barbies met with much critique as the initial black Barbie was simply a white Caucasian Barbie dyed black, lacking distinctive feature and hair differences. Later attempts to multiculturalize Barbie (Chinese, Mexican, Jamaican etc.) have been only slightly more successful, as the main difference between the dolls is not their features but their costumes. Ducille, 'Dyes and Dolls,' pp. 51–52.

46 'Fulla Wardrobe: Conservative yet Chic,' (September 9, 2009).

47 'Bye-bye Busty Barbie: Fulla is Here,' (September 12, 2009).

48 'Fulla, Noor and Bader: Let's meet the Family,' (September 10, 2009).

49 'Fulla Wardrobe: Conservative yet Chic,' (September 9, 2009).

50 'Fulla as Inspiration,' (September 9, 2009).

51 'Conforming to Mideast Culture,' (September 20, 2009).

52 'Fulla and Barbie,' (September 12, 2009).

53 'Meet the cover-up girl,' (December 21, 2009).

observer to suspect that Fulla herself, like Barbie, has succumbed to the snares of consumerism.

Some narratives also present Fulla as a career woman. However, in this area the campaign is remarkably ambivalent. A few stories explicitly state that Fulla as dentist/doctor/teacher is meant to motivate girls to pursue higher education and a career.⁵⁴ A narrative reads: “in the world of Fulla young Muslim girls are stimulated to study and to develop themselves as strong highly educated women, who can contribute significantly to society and exercise influence in the world”.⁵⁵ In these narratives, Fulla is promoted as a commodity that merges the assets of Western emancipation with traditional Islamic gender values, advocating a female identity which is Islamic as well as emancipated and modern. Other narratives however convey a rather different message: Fulla’s career as doctor is deemed acceptable because “Fulla as a doctor looks after her parents by making sure that the right things are done at the right time to cure illness or prevent further complications” while teacher Fulla “shares her wisdom and knowledge to little children”, teaching them “values” and “the right principles of life”.⁵⁶ This interpretation of career-Fulla stresses the traditional role of women as care-takers and transmitters of tradition and construes Fulla’s profession to be an extension of her traditional role (i.e. taking care of children and the extended family), rather than that the doll actively promotes a career in the public domain.

Fulla, an Islamic Revivalist Identity Project?

The phenomenon Fulla has not only met with approbation, the doll has also been the object of much critique. As mentioned earlier, many consider the doll an expression of Islamic revivalism. In this paragraph we explore Fulla’s alleged connections to Islamic revivalist identity politics.

In the 20th century, Islamic revivalist movements have gradually extended their influence in the Middle East. Acquiring visibility in the public sphere from the late 1970s onwards⁵⁷ the movements received new impulses with occurrences such as the Western invasion of Afghanistan, the declared ‘war on terror’ and the cartoon affair. Revivalists frame these developments as a

54 Text on home page, <http://www.fullashop.nl/> (accessed October 11, 2010).

55 ‘Fulla: An Islamic Icon for Little Girls’, (September 24, 2009).

56 ‘Fulla: A Doll Fulla Fun’, (December 3, 2009).

57 Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, p. 14. Kepel considers the development of Islamic revivalism to be a part of a larger trend towards revivalism in a variety of religions.

continuation of Western imperialism, a process that started with colonialism and aims at “attacking and corrupting Islamic ethos”.⁵⁸ Denunciation of the West therefore is a central feature of the Islamic revivalist project; part of this denunciation is a recurrent call to boycott Western products. More constructively revivalist movements construe and propagate an ‘Islamic’ identity over and against the West; they consider ‘Islam’ to be the solution to all societal and political problems.⁵⁹

In revivalist identity politics, gender plays a critical role. Amina Yaqin explains this focus on gender (and in particular on women’s behavior) by stating that in “Islamist movements (...) women become the carriers of tradition and an ‘authentic’ Islamic identity. They represent the structures of the family, the home, and the religious ideals.”⁶⁰ Shahin Gerami adds that because women “cannot be trusted to do this on their own wits and wills, mechanisms are in place to safeguard their morality and consequently the faith.”⁶¹ Underlying the revivalist discourses on gender is a derogatory perception of women. Women are considered morally weak, emotionally unstable, sexually powerful and increasingly selfish; thus women form a threat, morally as well as sexually, to the social order.⁶² Hence comes the conviction that the preservation of morality hinges on a strict observance of mechanisms controlling women. Veiling, distinct sex roles and spatial segregation that restrict women’s economic and societal participation have traditionally been some of these control mechanisms.⁶³

Revivalist groups are convinced that Western cultural imperialism, with its secular ideology and its call for women’s emancipation, for the uninhibited mingling of the sexes and with its condemnation of the veil, specifically targets the mechanisms that safeguard the traditional role of women. In the revivalist analyses fashion, media, and transnational companies are all tools employed by this Western imperialistic project to erode Islamic values, thus undermining the faith itself.⁶⁴ Hence the call to boycott Western products. Entrepreneurs have cleverly responded to this development by ‘commodifying Islam’; they

58 Shahin Gerami, *Women and Fundamentalism: Islam and Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 1996), p. 37.

59 Yaqin, ‘Islamic Barbie’, p. 174.

60 Yaqin, ‘Islamic Barbie’, p. 184.

61 Gerami, *Women and Fundamentalism*, p. 31.

62 Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, (Routledge: Abingdon 2005), pp. 290–292.

63 Gerami, *Women and Fundamentalism*, pp. 8, 14–17.

64 Gerami, *Women and Fundamentalism*, p. 39.

have started to manufacture commodities which are branded 'Islamic', resulting in products as diverse as 'Islamic' socks and 'Islamic' dolls.⁶⁵ Yaqin has observed that the supply of these commodities seems to meet a demand in the market as more and more people purchase Muslim-branded products as a way of asserting an 'Islamic' identity.⁶⁶

Though there is no evidence for straightforward links between NewBoy and revivalist groups, the Fulla campaign in a number of instances quite clearly reiterates key issues of the revivalist identity politics on gender. Very evident is the antagonism towards the West. Sentences such as "the moral values have come to decay because of so many outside negative influences" and "the wearing down of Islamic principles by modes of interaction imported from the West" abound in the narratives.⁶⁷ These seem to pertain mainly to the changing role and behavior of women. Therefore, the campaign states, there is amongst Muslims a "recent outcry to revisit the core values of their cultural tradition" and "[m]ore emphasis is being given to becoming the ideal Muslim, especially for women."⁶⁸

The link to revivalist identity politics is most evident in the depiction of Barbie who is considered the embodiment (rather: 'endollment') of the menace that threatens the world of Islam. The doll is branded as "generally offensive" and the campaign hints at Barbie's exhibitionism ("shameful postures" and "very revealing clothes") her egotism ("takes on her own life with her own desires"), her consumerism ("only concerned with her fashion bags") and her immorality ("liberated life-style"). Women and girls emulating Barbie and her liberal life-style herald the moral decay of society. Fulla however is considered "a safeguard against what many see as the wearing down of Islamic principles by modes of interaction imported from the West";⁶⁹ imitating her role-model aids in the preservation of 'traditional values' and thus of Islam.

The campaign also reflects other characteristics of revivalist identity politics. It emphasizes traditional female virtues such as modesty, deference to elders, piety ("Fulla prays and reads in her Quran before going to bed") and care for others ("Fulla takes care of siblings", "Fulla bakes cakes for her friends"). In

65 Meneley, 'Fashions and Fundamentalisms in Fin-de-Siècle Yemen', pp. 214–220.

66 Yaqin, 'Islamic Barbie', p. 174.

67 'Conforming to Mideast Culture', (September 20, 2009); 'The Importance of the Fulla to Muslim Girls', (December 25, 2009); 'The Fulla Doll: Fulla's Lifestyle', (September 16, 2009).

68 'Fulla: The Ultimate It Girl', (September 8, 2009). Note that the campaign synchronizes Arab culture and Islam.

69 'The Importance of the Fulla to Muslim Girls', (December 25, 2009).

addition, the campaign propagates the spatial segregation of the sexes, firmly positioning the realms of the home and the family as the woman's domain: "A traditional Muslim woman lives a life where it would mostly revolve around home and family only."⁷⁰ The campaign wants to make customers believe that purchasing Fulla aids in installing these values into young girls: playing with Fulla "is a prime opportunity to begin honing their maternal instinct and parenting skills."⁷¹ Girls can "start to 'practice' their future duties and occupations as dutiful wives (. . .) during their playtime with the Fulla doll."⁷² And as a bonus for purchasing the toy "your daughters will surely not only enjoy playing with it but will also be encouraged to live and preserve the Muslim culture."⁷³

Adhering to 'Islamic' dress-codes is another major issue in the campaign. Women should dress modestly and when venturing outside the prescribed realm, they should be appropriately covered e.g. veiled and modestly dressed.⁷⁴ Fulla, we saw earlier, helps girls "to handle the transition from bare-headedness and wearing practically anything they want to the relative conservatism of the Islamic adult female dress code" and teaches girls that "the required dress code for Muslim women need not be stifling but can be functional and fun while being conservative as well."⁷⁵

The relationship between the Fulla campaign and revivalist identity politics is, however, less straightforward than the above might seem to suggest. There is a number of issues that does not match the mold, so to say. One such issue is the fact that Barbie-type dolls like Fulla seem unlikely devices to further the revivalist project. Though it has often been observed that revivalist movements do not en-block reject modernity but rather selectively make use of modernity to further their cause, the chance that revivalists would deliberately choose a doll as means of communication seems rather unlikely.⁷⁶ Playing with dolls as such is not forbidden in Islam. According to a *hadith* from the Buhari collection, Aisha, one of the wives of Muhammad, played with dolls in the house of the prophet. However, as Faegheh Shirazi has pointed out, a number of *muftis* consider playing with dolls that display "attractive parts of a woman's body" (read: breasts) *haram* and have pronounced a *fatwa* to

70 'Fulla: A Doll Fulla Fun', (December 3, 2009).

71 'The Three Musketeers', (September 10, 2009).

72 'Fulla and Fashion', (September 8, 2009).

73 'Fulla and Barbie', (September 14, 2009).

74 Gerami, *Women and Fundamentalism*, pp. 31–32.

75 'Fulla: Conservatively Stylish', (November 11, 2009).

76 Gerami, *Women and Fundamentalism*, p. 27.

that extent.⁷⁷ Fulla, though veiled and with more moderate proportions than Barbie, has an unmistakably mature female body. This means that some of the more conservative revivalist groups will consider the doll *haram*, which makes it both an inappropriate and unlikely tool for revivalist campaigning.

Another problematic issue pertains to the fact that NewBoy has modeled Fulla after the highly contested icon Barbie. Feature-wise Fulla is instantly recognizable as a Barbie-clone; yet NewBoy uses Fulla to promote a un-Barbie-like lifestyle. It is possible, as Terrebonne has proposed, to interpret Fulla as a “postcolonial mimicry” of Barbie. Terrebonne writes: “By donning the veil and becoming a modest version of Barbie, Fulla is mocking the West for its overevaluation of objectifying female sexuality”.⁷⁸ But construing Fulla solely as a ‘postcolonial mimicry’ seems to underrate Fulla’s commercial dimensions. There is much is at stake in the Fulla campaign, morally as well as commercially, considering the 100 million dollar investment in advertisement campaigns. The question remains however, whether the campaign succeeds in moving beyond the image of Fulla as ‘Barbie playing dress-up’ and is successful in creating an alternative role-model in Fulla. It would be worth researching whether Muslim girls own Fulla dolls instead of Barbie or rather in addition to Barbie. The latter would render the success of identity project questionable.

The picture becomes even more complex when one realizes that the very notion NewBoy says to reject in Mattel’s Barbie, is reproduced in Fulla: also the Newboy campaign hinges on the commodification and commercialization of the female body. Worse still, the manufacturer exploits revivalist discourses on gender as commercial slogans to promote the sales of dolls as well as promotion items like Fulla cheese and Fulla jewelry. Thus, NewBoy perverts the rhetoric of revivalist identity politics into a marketing strategy.

The subordination of religious discourses to commercial goals emerges most clearly in the Fulla clips. Where most of the clips show the ideal-daughter Fulla, praying or playing with her friends, one clip presents a rather independent Fulla on horseback, exploring sites in the Middle East such as the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, the city of Petra in Jordan and the Ka’ba in Mecca. Albeit Fulla is decently robed in *abaya* even when riding astride on a horse, a companion-chaperone for the adventurous Fulla is conspicuously missing,⁷⁹ something which is generally conceived at least as problematic for the

77 Faegheh Shirazi, ‘Islam and Barbie: The Commodification of Hijabi Dolls’, in: *Islamic Perspective* 3 (2010), p. 23.

78 Terrebonne, ‘Fulla, the Veiled Barbie’, p. 4.

79 Apart from a baby-brother, NewBoy has not produced male dolls around Fulla that could have functioned as chaperone.

reputation of a Muslim girl and her family as modest dressing. Here, Islamic propriety seems to have lost out to the manufacturer's ardor to promote Fulla as a toy with a transnational appeal, presenting Fulla as a 'Middle Eastern' rather than just a 'Syrian' doll.

A problematic issue of a slightly different nature—one, which both the Fulla campaign and revivalist identity politics conveniently ignore—is that the choice of the veil as key identity marker of Muslim women is highly problematic. The veil as characteristic of Muslim women reiterates Western discourses on Islam rather than reflects past and present Middle Eastern realities, where the veil is a complex and multi-layered symbol.

Scholars such as Leila Ahmad, Fadwa el-Guindi and Carl Ernst have pointed out that the classification of the veil as the exclusive identity marker of Muslim women was a part of the colonial narrative. Muslim veiling according to the narrative symbolized Islam's inferiority and its oppression of women and therefore legitimized colonial occupation, which aimed at the 'liberation' (read: unveiling) of Muslim women. The fact that also Jewish and Christian women in the Middle East veiled themselves and that veiling was a cultural rather than religious custom, was conveniently ignored in the colonial narrative.⁸⁰ In post-colonial times Muslim women in countries like Egypt and Algeria celebrated independence and promoted feminism by donning the veil, making the veil a symbol of subversion and colonial resistance.⁸¹

With its emphasis on the veil as prime identity marker of Muslim women, Islamic revivalism seems to have internalized the colonial narrative as well as actively seems to protract it by promoting the singular religious significance of the veil; the Fulla campaign seems to follow this choice. Though NewBoy, by manufacturing Fulla in different types of outdoor clothing (*abaya* and raincoat versions) problematizes the simplistic conceptualization of all veiled women as one homogeneous category, the campaign does not contest the idea that a true Muslim woman is a veiled woman. Thus, the Fulla campaign contributes to what Amina Yaqin has called "self-representation as self-stereotyping".⁸²

According to Yaqin the propagation of *hijabi* dolls as normative representations of female Muslim identity, are attempts to stabilize the fluid category

80 Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1992), pp. 163–164; Fadwa El-Guindi, 'Veiling Resistance', in: Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (eds), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Routledge 2003), p. 595; Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad. Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005), p. 148.

81 El-Guindi, 'Veiling Resistance', p. 591.

82 Yaqin, 'Islamic Barbie', p. 177.

of “Muslim women”.⁸³ However, revivalist efforts to stabilize the meaning of ‘Muslim women’ seem far from successful. Diana El Jeiroudi has shown in her documentary *Dolls, a woman from Damascus* that in Fulla’s homeland Syria, the veil is first of all a cultural fashion accessory. According to the documentary Syrian women (Muslim and non-Muslim), wearing anything from *abayas* to mini-skirts or tight slacks to the veil without co-opting the ‘religious package’; rather they employ the veil to highlight their individual tastes in fashion. Veils can be stylish, hip, tempting or trendy, covering or exposing, depending on the woman’s choice. Yet again it seems, women have shown their agency, this time by inverting what was propagated as an exclusive identity marker of conservative Islam into a highly individual, imaginative and at times sensual symbol of fashion. Thus, despite efforts of revivalist identity politics and the Fulla campaign, the connotations of the veil are still fluid: from a characteristic of ‘Islamic propriety’ and a facilitator of ‘civil inattention’ the veil seems to have turned into the opposite: a symbol of ‘civil enticement’.

Conclusion

NewBoy’s doll Fulla was marketed in 2003 as an Arab alternative to the conspicuously Western and much-scorned Barbie. NewBoy designed a doll that was more modest in proportions and dressing and created narratives around Fulla that promoted her as the embodiment of Arab ideals of Islamic womanhood in the 21st century, both feature- and value-wise. In some aspects the campaign reflects Islamic revivalist identity politics on gender: the doll promotes veiling, separate roles for men and women and segregation of the sexes. However, solely understanding the doll as revivalist identity project is to underestimate the commercial dimensions of the doll. The commodity Fulla seems to be the result of a complex intertwinement of the growing influence of revivalist movements and the subsequent demand for ‘Islamic’ commodities, clever business enterprise and the desire of people to respond to global developments. It is the package deal of an attractive and sophisticated toy, an extensive advertisement campaign combined with the promotion of a so-called ‘Islamic’ role-model for young girls that make the doll a commercial success and make it succeed where other ‘Islamic’ dolls have failed. Or to quote the campaign one more time: “Fulla, a cut above the rest”.⁸⁴

83 Yaqin, ‘Islamic Barbie’, p. 184.

84 ‘Fulla: A Cut above the Rest’, (September 30, 2009).

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