



COLOR ME BEAUTIFUL: HALIMA ADEN ISN'T

ESSENCE

CHANGING FOR ANYONE

By Jeannine Amber · ESSENCE · January 6, 2020

MODEL HALIMA ADEN BEGAN LIFE IN A REFUGEE CAMP IN KENYA. NOW SHE'S POISED TO TAKE ON THE WORLD.

The Somali-American beauty shares with the industry's biggest stars—think Naomi, Tyra, Iman—an uncanny ability to gaze into a camera and conjure a mood with a glance. There she is, smiling for a close-up, giving us girlish dimples and playful innocence. Then, a moment later, she tilts her face downward, squints her eyes and parts her lips, in an instant serving up 100 percent grown-woman fire.

In 2017, both Vogue and Cosmopolitan anointed Aden a breakout star. That same year Rihanna tapped her to appear in Fenty Beauty's debut video. But it's more than Aden's on-camera presence that has won her a legion of fans. At 22, the stunner is helping to disrupt conventional beauty standards as one of the first hijab-wearing models to rise to international fame. And she's using her platform to change the world.

Aden, who was born in a Kenyan refugee camp, relocated to the United States when she was 7; her family eventually settled in St. Cloud, Minnesota. She likes to say that her life is filled with "firsts"—the first Muslim homecoming queen at her high school; the first Somali student senator at her

college; and the first hijab-wearing woman to be the face of numerous fashion magazine covers, including Allure and British Vogue. "It's important for me to be visible and to do whatever I can to let girls know that they don't have to change who they are," she says. "I want them to know the world will meet them exactly where they stand."



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WEARING: PRAJJÉ OSCAR GOWN, A FANM DJANM HEAD WRAP AND ARIANA BOUSSARD-REIFEL, L'ENCHANTEUR AND BEN-AMUN BY ISAAC MANEVITZ EARRINGS. BODYSUIT, STYLIST'S OWN.

Last year Aden broke another barrier—and the Internet—when she appeared in Sports Illustrated’s annual swimsuit issue luxuriating on Kenya’s Watamu Beach. But instead of a revealing swimsuit, Aden modeled brightly colored hijabs and modest burkinis, her body covered from head to toe. The response was like “an avalanche,” says swimsuit editor MJ Day. “There was a lot of, ‘Thank you for doing this.’ And then, of course, you have people who are a little slow to adapt to progress and change, and their first reaction is always like, ‘Oh, my god, what have you done!?’ But Halima is so loving and warm, to me she was the perfect person to help us move the conversation forward. Plus, I mean, oh, my God, Halima’s looks are major.”



WEARING: HAUTE HIJAB HIJAB, A SALLY LAPOINTE LEATHER BLOUSE, AN ESENSHEL FOR SALLY LAPOINTE HAT, MOUNSER EARRINGS AND A JOHNNY NELSON RING. BODYSUIT, STYLIST'S OWN.



WEARING: HAUTE HIJAB HIJAB, A CONG TRI GOWN, ARIANA BOUSSARD-REIFEL EARRINGS AND AZIZA HANDCRAFTED RINGS. BODYSUIT, STYLIST'S OWN.

Aden lights up when asked about appearing in the issue, which boasts a readership in the tens of millions and is widely regarded as a golden ticket to modeling fame. “It felt like life was coming full circle,” she says over lunch at a New York City Mexican restaurant not far from the United Nations headquarters, where she’d just attended an event commemorating World Children’s Day. In 2016, Aden wore a navy burkini and gold hijab when she competed in the Minnesota Miss USA competition. While she didn’t win the crown, she did garner national attention and a modeling contract with IMG, home to top models like Jourdan Dunn, Joan Smalls and Precious Lee.

Introducing the burkini to middle America “is how I launched my career,” says Aden, who had never participated in a beauty pageant before. She was inspired to compete in part to counter the narrative in multiple resort towns in France that had enacted “burkini bans,” claiming the modest swim apparel was religious garb and an affront to the country’s secular rule. “Burkinis were not allowed on public beaches,” Aden explains. “That is something that affects a lot of » women. I wanted to tell girls in my community, ‘If I can wear a burkini onstage alongside women who are walking in bikinis, there is no reason you should opt out of swimming.’ A burkini is just another form of swimsuit. I can dress modestly and still feel cool, modern and absolutely beautiful.”

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Muslim activist and author Blair Imani hails Aden as a game changer. “She’s an absolute powerhouse,” she says. “She’s constantly giving back and lifting others up. It would be very easy to stick a model who doesn’t usually wear hijab in a scarf for a shoot or a runway show, but Halima’s presence shows me and many others that we matter, and our looks and styles are more than a trend.”

But, Aden notes, there is one person who doesn’t fully share the enthusiasm: “My mother doesn’t understand why representation is so important to me,” she says. “Of course, she wants the same things for me that all parents want for their children—that I be of service, be a good person, lead an honest life, work hard and get an education. But, at the same time, she doesn’t know the struggle I faced growing up in America and being in spaces where I was the only hijab-wearing girl or the only girl who looked like me.”



WEARING: HAUTE HIJAB HIJAB, AN IMANE AYISSI TOP AND PANTS AND L'ENCHANTEUR RINGS. BODYSUIT, STYLIST'S OWN.

Still, Aden says, “I respect my mom; she is the epitome of a strong, resilient woman.” Indeed, Aden’s mother faced unimaginable hardships of her own. Her home was bombed during the Somali civil war, and she trekked for 12 days to the Kakuma refugee camp in northwestern Kenya. Aden and her younger brother were born and spent their early childhoods in the settlement. “Our home was made of mud, plastic, paper, plastic bags, sticks, whatever my mom could find to make a little hut,” Aden recalls. “That’s where we laid our heads, and when it rained, it would all disappear. My mom was like, ‘Okay, let me get the neighbors and we’ll build another house.’ That was my childhood.” And yet, Aden remembers feeling happy in the camp. “There was a sense of community,” she says.



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After years of enduring a rigorous vetting process, Aden, her mother and her brother were granted entry into the United States in 2004. They settled first in St. Louis, Missouri; the transition was not an easy one. “In Kenya I spoke Somali and Swahili; I was so talkative,” Aden says. “But my school in St. Louis didn’t have an English as a second language program, so I spent most of my early months in America not talking at all.” She was so lonely, she used to wish for rain, thinking that their tiny apartment would wash away, and she’d finally get to meet the neighbors she imagined would come to help her family rebuild.

Later that year Aden’s mother learned that Minnesota was home to the largest Somali population in the U.S., and she moved her children 600 miles to St. Cloud. There Aden began to thrive, doing well in elementary and middle school and becoming one of the most popular girls at Apollo High School. She was a hard worker too: She held down a job from 3 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. every day at a local hospital, making beds and cleaning toilets. Aden kept that

housekeeping job for seven months after she got her modeling contract, taking time off to walk the runway in New York City and Milan Fashion Weeks and shoot the covers of *Vogue Arabia* and *CR Fashion Book*. “I appreciate what I have now,” she reflects, “because I know what it is to do backbreaking work.”

With only three years in the industry, Aden is already branching out, extending her influence beyond the confines of fashion. She’s executive-producing *I Am You*, an independent film about a young refugee. And she’s one of UNICEF’s most ardent ambassadors, speaking out on behalf of displaced children around the world. “When I was a refugee in Kakuma, UNICEF field workers gave me a sense of stability and hope that we were going to be okay,” she says. “Now I’m able to give back. I think if you receive a blessing, you shouldn’t think of it as yours to keep. It’s more like a loan. Like, I got my wish. Now I have to pay it forward. If we all paid it forward, the world would be a much better place.” She pauses and smiles: “I think this is the reason I am here.”

*Jeannine Amber (@jamberstar) is an award-winning journalist and author. She recently collaborated with attorney Carrie Goldberg on the book **Nobody’s Victim: Fighting Psychos, Stalkers, Pervs, and Trolls.***