

# HI

## POWER DRESSING

MEET SAUDI ARABIAN DESIGNER **HONAYDA SERAFI**—A FAVORITE OF BOLLYWOOD STARLET PRIYANKA CHOPRA—WHO IS REWRITING THE RULES OF FASHION IN THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH DESIGNS THAT FOCUS ON EMPOWERING WOMEN. NOW SHE IS LOOKING TO CEMENT HER SUCCESS WITH A FLAGSHIP STORE.

BY MARY SOPHIA

PHOTOGRAPHY FROM **HONAYDA SERAFI**



**A** slight blush spreads over Honayda Serafi's face at the mention of Bollywood celebrity Priyanka Chopra Jonas. The Saudi Arabian designer is overcome with happiness, breaking out in a huge smile as she reminisces about the moment the Quantico-actress treated fans to pictures of herself in not one, but two Honayda creations during Sophie Turner-Joe Jonas' chateau wedding in June this year.

But this was not the first time that a celebrity had spotted Honayda. In March, Black Panther star Lupita Nyong'o stepped out at the premiere of her latest film "Us" in a white pantsuit from Honayda's spring/summer collection. Before that, rapper Eve and Olympic skater Lindsey Vonn both wore Honayda outfits, propelling the designer into the limelight.

It is not a small achievement for a brand that only set up shop in 2017. But it has managed to catch the fancy of Gulf consumers, who are big spenders on luxury. Research by Panworld Education puts the average spend among affluent GCC nationals on beauty, fashion and gifts at \$2,400 per month. Capitalizing on such demand, Honayda has since grown from its home base of Saudi Arabia, and is now present in boutiques across Kuwait, Bahrain, Lebanon, Egypt, France and Panama. Sales in its second year grew to reach \$799,725 (SAR 3,000,000).

Despite its small beginnings, the brand has managed to garner increased interest from stylists who have taken note of Honayda. Building on that, this year the mother of seven is planning to open her brand's first flagship store in the Kingdom as she builds on her creations' success. While such celebrity endorsement of her label has definitely helped the brand grow, the designer believes it is the message behind her creations that has caught their eye.

"The brand is about women empowerment and my designs are inspired by women," says Serafi, who admits to having consciously imparted messages of female power through her creations. So much so that she decided to immortalize the moment that Saudi Arabia took the step to lift a historic ban on women driving last year. The Jeddah-based designer launched a "driving force" capsule collection to celebrate the move to allow women behind the wheel.

Empowerment messages are peppered through her collections, with her next big one shining a light on the role that Saudi women play. Titled "Evolution," the collection aims to showcase how local women have evolved from their traditional Bedouin roles, where they even took up hard labor alongside their husbands, to today emerge successful in modern professions. At other times, Serafi has also been inspired by women in her life. Her very first collection, titled "The Secret Garden" drew inspiration from her mother. "I took my mother's image and actually

played a little bit with it and put it in my prints," says Serafi. "I called it The Secret Garden because usually a girl gets her strength from her mother."

Serafi's efforts to subliminally empower women are partially drawn from her own experiences. As a businesswoman, success did not come easily to the Makkah native. When she initially started her own label, Serafi was met with skepticism from her close associates and sometimes from society.

"When I started my own business, I was rejected many times by many saying things like you don't know [how to do business], you don't need to [have a business], why do you have to start a business even," recalls Serafi.

Remaining true to her name (Honayda roughly translates to a sheath of a sword in Arabic), she says such experiences only served to make her tough. "Stronger the challenge, the more determined I was to move forward," she explains. It also helped Honayda that Saudi Arabia was steadily changing under its new Vision 2030—an economic plan that envisaged a kingdom not reliant on petrodollars but instead focused on empowering a robust private sector that would drive growth.

**S**erafi's residential city of Jeddah itself was a hive of activity in July as summer kicked in. Concerts by pop stars and public cinemas—which would have been previously unthinkable in the country—have been underway. Fashion too has not been left behind. Keen to tap into a \$55 billion fashion industry in the MENA region, Saudi Arabia conducted its first fashion week last year, providing a platform to emerging designers in the Kingdom who have mushroomed thanks to the country's love for haute couture and its deep pockets.

"Saudi's disposable income for HNWI has always been the allure for international brands," says Marriam Mossalli, founder of luxury fashion consultancy Niche Arabia. "There has always been interest and the super brands have always been present. Jean Paul Gaultier, Reem Acra and John Galliano when he was at Dior, were the go-to names for Saudi brides. Valentino and Karl Lagerfeld visited Saudi often for couture clients."

While Middle Eastern designers such as Elie Saab and Zuhair Murad are red carpet favorites, many emerging designers from the Arab world are now elbowing into the limelight. Egyptian celeb stylist Yasmine Eissa, who has dressed figures such as Tunisian actress Dorra Zarrouk to Salma Abu Deif, says it is because the region is brimming with talent. "Every stylist is looking for a variety of options and the Arab market is rich in talent," Eissa reveals.

Saudi Arabia's dabble with fashion, in fact, has brought some local designers to the fore, who have surprised the

wider community with their talent and expertise. But they are not upstarts. Like Serafi, many have tapped into the Kingdom's eye for style by starting boutiques that catered to local consumers. Today, Mossalli says they have evolved, establishing full-fledged brick and mortar retailers.

Serafi herself had somewhat of a late start. The youngest of four siblings, she was always keen to accompany her father when he went to the office, while also inheriting a flair for design from her mother, who too used to fashion her own clothes. Taking a cue, Serafi showed a talent for design early on. The designer created her first outfit—a skirt and a top—when she was just 13. "It was white and yellow with red flowers. I still remember the fabric," she says.

She later pursued her studies at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, followed by a degree in Paris' prestigious Parsons School of Design, but initially worked with her family business, Al Salehat Holding, to place luxury brands within the group's retail units.

On the side though, Serafi kept her passion alive for nearly a decade by designing kaftans and dresses for relatives and other family members while attending to her domestic duties. Eventually she decided to take a bold step to strike out on her own. Her resolve became even stronger when patrons would compliment her sense of style and recommend that she start a brand of her own.

"This has been my passion," remembers Serafi. "I had a vision that I wanted to start a brand since I was a little girl; it is not anything new. Hearing it from other people made it more valid. I wanted it to happen and I made it happen."

Armed with just \$30,000 that she retrieved from her savings—Serafi fended off offers of monetary assistance from her husband and wider family—she started the label with just two employees. Over the next two years, Serafi continued to pump her savings and returns into the business while cutting down her personal expenses.

Her marketing too was a lot more direct. When she was about to launch a collection, Serafi would host trunk shows for a handful of VIP guests in an art gallery or at her house.



It is a practice that she continues today. "I believe having direct contact with your clients is the best marketing tool." She started selling her outfits through her website last year during the launch of her collection hoopoe bird during Fashion Week.

Meanwhile to catch the celeb's eyes, Serafi employs an active PR strategy to regularly touch base with stylists while maintaining a strong social media presence. Stylist Eissa agrees as she explains: "Instagram has made it much easier for their (designers') work to be seen, it is a platform to see everything easily and to contact them. Before you couldn't do that."

Serafi's gamble paid off. Local women came out in support of her collection upon its launch, with many

identifying with her style. Mossalli, who has attended some of Serafi's private shows, agrees. "I think Honayda has captured us," she says. "I couldn't think of a better representation of Saudi fashion and talent."

Such endorsement from her compatriots in the Kingdom does not surprise Serafi, but she is grateful. "You cannot be successful if people from your country does not support," she allows.

"Women in Saudi are quite intellectual and they would like to stand out in anything they would like to choose."

It has definitely helped the brand of Honayda grow from just two employees to 20 currently. Production, meanwhile, has increased from 100 pieces to 500 pieces per season and a third collection has been added annually. The brand also has two offices in Jeddah and Beirut while Serafi shuttles between Jeddah, Riyadh, Lebanon, Cairo, Paris and New York, dividing her work week accordingly. So far, Serafi has been careful with her funds, but even so operational costs have been significant due to the nature of the business. That is not stopping Serafi, who is now looking to increase the number of stores that exhibit her label and expand into accessories and lifestyle.

"I am concentrating in (increasing) the department stores or boutiques. Nine is a big number for an upcoming brand from Saudi. This was a challenge. Now we need to be in more stores." She is also hoping to expand her trunk shows beyond Saudi Arabia and the GCC. All these, she predicts, could help ramp up brand sales to \$2.6 million (SAR 10,000,000) by early 2020.

Now considered a celeb favorite thanks to the likes of Chopra and Nyong'o choosing the label, Serafi is hoping that more starlets pick her brand. Ask her who she wants to dress and her list is long. Royalty like Jordan's Queen Rania and the Duchess of Cambridge top her wish list, but like those who have worn her brand before, Serafi is particular that the women who wear the label embody a deeper message—that of empowering and uplifting fellow women. Honayda is definitely paving the way. **F**

Log on to [www.forbesmiddleeast.com](http://www.forbesmiddleeast.com) to watch the full video interview with Honayda Serafi.



Priyanka Chopra

## STARSTRUCK

While it was Priyanka Chopra Jonas and Lupita Nyong'o that catapulted the Honayda brand into fashion, they are not the only stars to flaunt their Honayda outfits. The brand has been chosen by athletes, pop artists and actors. Here are a few who have worn the Saudi Arabian designer's creations.



Eve

### Lindsey Vonn

Former American World Cup alpine ski racer

### Briana Mcneal

American track and field athlete

### Eve

Hip-hop artist and actress

### Ashanti

Singer-songwriter

### Angham

Egyptian artist

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