

# Middle Eastern Dolls are Role Models for Arab Girls



**Photo: The American Barbie doll in her underwear stands next to the Arab Fulla doll, wearing a *hijab*.**

Since Fulla's inception in 2003, a fan-based mania for the doll and her accessories has arisen and spread throughout the Middle East. Little Muslim girls can be seen affectionately toting the dolls in public. There is Fulla chewing gum, Fulla breakfast cereal, and Fulla bicycles and school backpacks (among other merchandise).

Middle Eastern fashion dolls have quickly replaced the popular American Barbie doll in the affectionate hearts of Arab girls.

Fulla and Razanne are Muslim dolls that represent Muslim identity and values, and they are approved by Arab parents.

Fulla, the newer of the two dolls, was introduced to the Muslim world in 2003. Fulla is the Muslim equivalent of Barbie. She was created by a Syrian entrepreneur from Damascus and a toy company called NewBoy Toys.

Dark-eyed Fulla comes equipped with a *hijab* (Muslim headscarf), *abaya* (Muslim overgarment), and a pink felt prayer rug. She is not the first doll to come equipped with a hijab (besides Razanne, there were previously Mattel's Moroccan Barbie and Leila the Muslim slave girl), but she is certainly the most popular with Arab girls.

Fulla and Barbie are fashion dolls. Marketed for young girls between three and eleven years of age (although collected by adults as well), such dolls are meant to be dressed and redressed. These dolls and their clothes reflect fashion trends in their respective countries and cultures.



**Photo: cover of the Fulla diary.**

Fulla and Barbie lead contrasting lives. Whereas Barbie visits the beach in a bikini or goes out on the town at night, Fulla prefers to stay home. Like girls around the world, Fulla likes to spend time with her friends, shop, read, cook, play sports, and mentor others. Fulla is honest, loving, devout and dutiful toward her parents. Unlike Barbie who has the Ken doll for a boyfriend, Fulla is single and meant to stay that way. It is for these reasons that Muslim parents approve of Fulla and encourage their daughters to emulate her lifestyle. Barbie with her western values and lifestyles has quickly disappeared off store shelves, replaced by the best seller, Fulla.



**Photo: Fulla (left) is pictured wearing an *abaya*. The original Barbie from 1959 is pictured on the right.**

Typically, when a girl plays with a baby doll, she pretends to be the doll's mother. However, when a girl plays with fashion dolls such as Barbie or Fulla, she usually "becomes" the doll. The girl manipulates the doll in a miniaturized environment and thereby she engages in role-playing activity. In this respect, fashion dolls are a role model of socialization for girls. Through such dolls, girls learn how to interact with their world, and what is expected of them.

Fulla and Barbie represent the values of femininity and beauty for their respective parts of the world. In the west, a woman's beauty is public. Women are encouraged to make themselves look attractive and to wear clothes that meet public approval. Barbie teaches young girls to conform to these western values. Barbie not only strives to look pretty by dressing in various fashions, she is also a consummate consumer: buying the latest fashionable clothes and objects. Barbie challenges Arab values, whereas Fulla embodies them.



In the Middle East, a woman's appearance is private. She controls her appearance by wearing an *abaya* and *hijab*. She is not susceptible to commercial advertising campaigns that promote cultural stereotypes of beauty antithetical to the Middle East.

Fulla lives a contemporary Muslim lifestyle. She is not restricted, however, to wearing solely the *abaya* and *hijab*. Fulla likes to wear Barbie's clothes and her manufacturer has created a line of clothes and accessories she can choose from, including dresses, skirts, T-shirts, and jewelry. There is even a Walking Fulla doll that pushes a luggage cart with suitcases of clothes, so she can change wardrobes at her convenience. Despite the latest fashions and accoutrements, Fulla still maintains her Arabic cultural values. She wears the *abaya* and *hijab* when she goes to work or visits public spaces where modest dress is necessary.



**Photo: Fulla is pictured with three different outfits: indoor clothes (left), party clothes (center), and outdoor clothes (right).**

**Photo (right): An advertisement shows Fulla in her indoor clothes with two of her friends, Yasmeen and Nada.**





Razanne, an Arab doll, is a precursor to Fulla. Designed by Ammar Saadeh, a Palestinian expatriate living in Michigan, Razanne appeared in the Middle East marketplace in 1996.

Razanne (like Fulla) embodies Muslim values and she is a role model for Arab girls who collect and play with her. Razanne comes equipped with a *hijab*, but she also has a variety of fashionable clothes and contemporary accessories to choose from. There are three different Razannes to collect: African, South Asian and Caucasian.

**Photo: Meet the three Razanne dolls: South Asian (left), Caucasian (center), and African (right).**

## Additional Resources

Motz, Marilyn Ferris. ““Seen Through Rose-Tinted Glasses”: The Barbie Doll in American Society.” *Common Culture: Reading and Writing About American Popular Culture*. Ed. Michael Petracca and Madeleine Sorapure. Upper River Valley, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.,1998. 15-20.