

Skill, style and reticence

Ayesha Hashwani

*has packed
a lot of
living into
her young
life, and
she has
greater designs
on the future,
says*

Shobha Ispahani



Ayesha Hashwani is a couturier who has recently appeared on the Pakistani design scene. Her label has thus far been exclusive and low key. Lately, she has made a decision to up the ante and has started marketing her product seriously. She also exhibited her debut collection at a fashion show recently in Karachi and this collection got favorable press, which said that she showed great promise. Her design sensibility is to create the stunning but wearable garment. She claims that if she cannot wear a garment, then she will not design it. She leaves the Va-Va Vroom factor for another kind of designer.

In my interactions with Ayesha, she comes across as reserved and reticent. She is not given to talking about herself. This distinguishes her from the new breed that is supremely confident and full of themselves. Which makes her all the more interesting to interview. We met up at her studio. This place is tucked away, far from the madding crowds. I walk up the stairs and there it is, Ayesha's work place with soft hues shading the walls, and comfortable furniture dominates the room. For colour, she has beautiful delft blue vases brimming with fragrant white lilies, placed at vantage points. This singular note is powerful, as it adds decorative value, but does not detract from the main purpose of the studio, and that is clothes. The well-arranged racks carry her innumerable designs from which a client can select and place orders. A mannequin is draped in her piece de resistance. There is a sense of calm and quiet about this place, until a door opens and you see and hear the buzz; it is the upper level of the factory.

We sit down to talk, after she has shown me around, enjoying the beautiful display of garments. Ayesha tells me that she was born in Karachi, and is one of two sisters with herself being the older by eighteen months. The family moved to Dubai and then Abu Dhabi when her banker father was posted abroad. She acquired her primary education in the

Emirates. The institute was called the English speaking school in Dubai and she attended an affiliate of the same school in Abu Dhabi. Once her father was posted back to Karachi, she started her education at St. Joseph's, and it was there that she sat her A' levels. Once she had finished her schooling she was interested in traveling to the West for further education but her parents did not want the nuclear family of four to diminish, thus she completed her college education at St Joseph's,



graduating with a degree in Literature and Psychology

As a school child, Ayesha most enjoyed sports. She loved swimming, cycling and other team activities. Ayesha tells me that whilst she was a good student, she was not a terribly serious one, and she paid equal attention to social activities, which included being dressed

to perfection. Unexpectedly, for one of artistic temperament, she was also keen on the sciences, enjoying subjects such as chemistry, physics and maths. And then she loved literature. She also did a course in teaching dyslexic children. Naturally, the last thing her peers expected of her was to choose fashion design as a career. But fate intervened and she went into an arranged marriage with Reza Mirza in 1994. Sadly, the marriage did not work and they parted ways amicably. But

before they went their separate ways, Reza was posted to Singapore where they went with their three-year-old daughter, Mahnoor. As an efficient homemaker, she had time aplenty and took up a correspondence course from the Hornsby Centre in London, learning to teach dyslexic children. She tells me her years of studying psychology stood her in good stead with this program. Once she had completed her teacher training program, she started to teach in Singapore, but returned to Karachi when her marriage hit a rocky patch. Once back, Ayesha started working at R.E.A.D, a remedial center for children with learning disabilities. Ayesha worked there for three years.

The time she spent at this institute was memorable, she says. It was now 2001 and her marriage had ended in divorce. Being a single parent, however well supported, began to weigh her down. The number of hours that needed to go into preparation and planning for schoolwork, along with the hours spent at the school, began to take its toll, so she quit her job. Cooped up at home, Ayesha began to indulge her penchant for

design. She began creating clothes for herself and was inevitably complimented on her sartorial sense. And fate had another pleasant surprise in store for her. She began a relationship with an old family friend and colleague, Hussein Hashwani; the two married in 2003.

Soon afterwards, it became obvious to Hussein that Ayesha was a talented



designer and he encouraged her to follow her dream. As a businessman, he also advised her to start small. Thus, her first team consisted of a single hand embroiderer, a machine embroiderer, a tailor and herself. Her initial dream was to concentrate on embellished western clothing, and so she made embroidered T-shirts. This trial run, though successful, gave her an insight into Pakistani market requirements. Ayesha realized, early in the day, that only an East-West line would work in Pakistan.

The strategy deployed to market her garments was to do capsule exhibitions in locations where she had a following. Her twenty piece exhibitions in Karachi, Lahore and Dubai, soon increased in volume. With steadily healthy responses, she was able to increase the number of workers and the net production from the factory. This inevitably led to the need for a formal workplace. Only a couple of years into the business, Ayesha moved out of her home base to a commercial location. Once there, she realized she would need greater interaction with clients, and being of a shy disposition, she asked a friend Naazish Faisal, to help her at the shop. This arrangement, which she says worked out perfectly, gives Ayesha the time to do what she loves most, and this is designing clothes. So, Naazish handles finance and some client meetings.

Charting her meteoric growth in five years, I ask her about the pitfalls she has encountered. Ayesha tells me, that she, like many others in the industry, is as much a casualty at the hands of skilled labour as any other. Yet she prides herself on managing the team with empathy and incentives. Being a hands-on designer, she spends a lot of time in the factory. This in itself is a bonding exercise with her workers. This also helps her keep the checks and balances and ensures quality control. Her success has given Ayesha the confidence to plan ahead. She is charting out an expansion program. In the short term, she would like to have a showroom on the lower floor of the commercial building she is located in currently where she will add her RTW (ready to wear) and specialty lines. For the moment she has no desire to venture into haute couture or wedding garments. The upper floor will be her factory and workplace.

For guidance on investment, branding and advertising, Ayesha turns to key advisors, amongst whom are her husband and



his close friends. She considers herself lucky to have such steady support from her husband, who has come to realize that his wife absolutely loves her work, and is therefore committed to help her achieve her goals. Professionally, she wants to grow steadily with a plan. In the long term, she wants to have her own building, stocking various lines on different levels. She would also like to add branded shops

in Lahore, Islamabad and Dubai, and stockists in Hong Kong and Singapore, where she knows she has a following. Drawing out her business plan, Ayesha, the shy and reticent one, is clearly one level headed and smart woman, who knows what she wants from life. She will surely realize her dreams. **E**

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