

A woman with dark hair and light skin is lying down, wearing a black strapless gown. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. A sheer black veil with a small star pattern is draped over her head and shoulders. She is wearing a gold chain bracelet on her right wrist. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

A Rose Uprooted
By the *Arab*
Spring

*Hanaa Ben Abdesslem the face
that started a revolution*

EXCLUSIVE



Hailing from Tunisia, a nation currently making headlines due to political upheaval as a component of the Arab Spring, Hanaa Ben Abdesslem is causing a revolution of her own as one of the first Arab models to walk international runways and as the current face of ROSERAIE DES DELICE, the Spring/Summer 2012 cosmetic campaign from Lancôme. By Hafsa Lodi

One look at 22-year-old Hanaa Ben Abdesslem and you would assume she has been a model for as long as she's known how to walk. With spunky short hair, high cheekbones and a distinct air of elegance, she could pass as the Middle Eastern reincarnation of Audrey Hepburn. Raised in Nahbeul, Tunisia, Hanaa always thought that being a model was a dream way out of her reach, and instead prepared to become an engineer. But today, she is privileged enough to travel the world and do catwalk shows around the globe as one of fashion's rapidly rising faces. With shows for Ricardo Tisci, Vivienne Westwood, Givenchy, Ralph Lauren and Oscar de la Renta, she is already gilding her supermodel-in-the-making portfolio.

Hanaa recalls the first time she ever wore makeup. She was getting ready for a cousin's wedding, and though she was only a little girl then, she still remembers how special those few moments felt. As lipstick was applied to her lips, blush was brushed onto her cheeks and her eyes were lined with dark kohl, Hanaa felt like a princess. Little did she know that hair and makeup sessions would one day become part of her daily job.

Like many other young girls, Hanaa would often flip through fashion magazines and admire the glamorous clothes draped on models. She yearned to be one of them, especially to be an Arab woman among them. But the career dream seemed impossible, so she enrolled in an engineering program.

"People would often say that with my face, I should have gone into an artistic career rather than getting my hands dirty in cement and concrete," she says. In a twist of fate, Hanaa attended a party held at Tunisia's French embassy, where she was met a modelling agent who introduced her to IMG, the top world's top international modelling agency. From there, her career skyrocketed; her lean, regal physique and striking Middle Eastern features quickly made her one of the most sought-after models in Europe and beyond.

"Fashion allows me to explore every facet of femininity. One day you're a princess, the next a femme fatale, a glamour icon, androgynous, etc. But in my personal life, I go for a more minimalist approach," says Hanaa. And

EXCLUSIVE

“Today, we all share the sense that walls have been broken down. Things that seemed impossible yesterday now seem achievable tomorrow.”



Hanaa gets ready for her close up behind-the-scenes of the Lancôme *Roseraie des Delices* shoot

“This whole year has been full of unexpected and sudden changes – for both myself and my country. We’ve both created our own revolutions.”

although fitted T-shirts, jeans and LBD’s may clutter Hanaa’s closet, her taste for traditional Arab attire has stayed with her throughout her climb to success in the West. “My dream would be for a designer to transform and modernise kaftans and traditional Tunisian clothes—while respecting them, of course,” she says.

Like most conventional Arab girls, Hanaa once had long, dark and thick hair, before cutting it into a pixie style—a drastic move for a woman in the Middle East. “It was part of a big turn-around in my life,” she says. “This transformation I’ve gone through has also been a kind of rebirth.” Her iPod hosts a hash of contemporary Arab singers who mix traditional music with modern rhythms—a soundtrack suited for the aim Hanaa has to merge Western and traditional Arab cultures. Modelling may be a taboo career choice in Islamic societies, and she may not represent the mainstream Muslim woman, yet Hanaa has been deemed one of “The New Faces of Islam” by Newsweek Magazine, and has become the poster girl for international diplomacy—the United Nations Development Programme recently invited her to support

Tunisia’s democratic transition. “A degree of fame goes hand in hand with the work I do, and you have to learn how to use it for good, both in the professional sphere and beyond,” she says.

Between shows and shoots, the model found time to join forces with the Franco-Algerian actress and former model Farida Khelfa to produce a documentary about youth in Tunisia. Hanaa is also a spokesperson for Esmaani, an association that offers aid to children and refugees, particularly Libyan, who’ve had to flee their war-torn home countries. Esmaani means “Listen to Me” in Tunisian, and the initiative offers psychological support to the children and refugees, in addition to providing for their basic needs.

An advocate for reform, Hanaa hopes to make modelling more socially acceptable in the Middle East. “I’d like to represent and encourage other girls from the southern Mediterranean to enter this world too,” she says. Hanaa, who doesn’t smoke or drink, advises other aspiring models to stay true to themselves, while being open to other

people. Her future plans put her back where she started, in her home nation of Tunisia, perhaps ten years from now, as the head of a new fashion magazine or modelling agency. “I want to share this experience with as many people as possible, and to help Arab girls understand that doors are open to them,” she says. She explains that before she entered the field, the profession of modelling simply hadn’t existed in Tunisia. “They’ve had to create a new tick box just for me,” she says. “This whole year has been full of unexpected and sudden changes – for both myself and my country. We’ve both created our own revolutions,” she says. “Today, we all share the sense that walls have been broken down. Things that seemed impossible yesterday now seem achievable tomorrow.”

As the world waits for the political situations in the Middle East to settle down, one thing is for sure—a new generation of Arab women has risen from the ashes of revolution, and they’re ready to “refashion” what the regime deems appropriate.