

## **ISOBEL RYAN**

### **Fashion As Text: An Analysis of Modern Islamic Fashion in Egypt**

In feminist discussions there is perhaps a tendency to depict women as the passive bearers of ethnic, religious and national symbols.<sup>1</sup> Muslim women in particular may be perceived as evidence of women's subordinate role within ethnicity, religion and nationalism. However, my research in Egypt suggests a much more complex relationship between women, their clothes and their place in Islamic society. There is something very interesting happening in Egypt amongst young veiled women. A new fashion is developing which is being worn by both middle class and upper working class women. I will be looking at this fashion in this paper and I will refer to it as modern Islamic fashion.<sup>2</sup>

Choosing to be veiled, and for most middle class women at least it is a choice, does not necessarily mean that women forsake fashion and stop taking pride in their appearance. Some Egyptian women choose to dress in Western fashion, but a large majority choose to wear modern Islamic fashion. The choice in Egypt is very often between what is perceived as Western and what is perceived as Eastern.

“Westernised” Egyptians usually speak fluent English having gone to British or American schools in Egypt and universities such as the American University in Cairo

(AUC). They are usually middle or upper class with a high disposable income. Those wearing Islamic fashions have often come through Egyptian schools and go on to Egyptian state universities. What is ironic, however, is that although Westernised Egyptians are often assumed to have much more freedom than those Egyptians who are not Westernised, and who may speak little or no English, I hope to show in this paper that this is not strictly speaking the case, at least when it comes to fashion. Fashions do not just affect the surface of the body, however. I argue that the choice of fashions can lead to sometimes quite drastic measures being taken to alter the body itself and thereby adhere to Western concepts of beauty and attractiveness.

A young veiled Muslim woman can wear almost anything, no matter how exotic, colourful or “bazaar” as long as the requirements of modesty attendant on being veiled are met.<sup>3</sup> She can wear Eastern or Western clothes or any combination of the two. She can wear potentially suggestive or revealing clothes as long as there is a garment showing underneath. Since El Guindi wrote her article “Veiling Infitah” changes have taken place amongst young Egyptian women wearing Islamic dress. El Guindi isolated three main stages in the veiling process: the wearing of the *bonnet*, the more substantial veil called *al khimar* and the accompanying loose gown *al-gilbab*, and finally the additional face cover or *al niqab*. Huge developments have taken place in the *al khimar* category however, with a whole Islamic fashion emerging.

A trip to places such as Attaba<sup>4</sup> that cater exclusively for the tastes of more traditional, and usually veiled, young Egyptian women will show just how extraordinary the Egyptian fashion designs are. When the aim of clothing is to conceal, the designer has a lot more fabric in hand: layers and layers of lace and panelling, light weight chiffon or nylon waist-coats, scarves and wraps of all kinds,

give the designer's virtuosity free reign. A detailed description of some of these designs will be given later. These are the styles that I term modern Islamic fashion.

On the other hand, a young middle-class woman following Western fashion exclusively will find herself almost always wearing the same styles, in the same colours.<sup>5</sup> The risk of appearing gaudy is too great for her to take chances with creativity. These women whilst they can wear tight-fitting clothes, and occasionally low-cut tops, will almost always wear black. So the idea of a *baladi*<sup>6</sup> woman feeling that black is a suitable colour for her to wear in public seems to have found its way into the middle classes also. Paradoxically, in their bid to be Western and free, many young people in Egypt are restricting themselves at every level of fashion. It is also clear that modern Islamic fashion transcends class. If a woman is veiled she will tend to follow modern Islamic fashion no matter what social class she comes from. The quality of the materials used in her clothes will of course be higher than those worn by working-class or lower middle-class women. Westernised clothes will generally not be worn by working-class or lower middle-class women, but men from these classes will often wear jeans and a T-shirt. Even very poor men will often be quite Westernised in their dress, but their wives will wear either traditional clothes (the *gallabaya*, for example) or follow modern Islamic fashion.

What is the significance of these choices regarding dress on the part of the young Egyptian women? What statement is being made when a woman chooses to be either veiled or unveiled, Western or Eastern, or both or neither? What statement is being made when a woman chooses to dress in the full *hijab*<sup>7</sup> and thereby refuses to reveal anything at all about her identity or what she may be wearing underneath the exterior coverings?

In this article, I will look at the possibility of seeing the choice and combination of clothes as a form of expression on the part of the wearer comparable to self-expression in a written text. The wearer expresses a message about herself, who she is and how she wants others to see her, based on her clothes. In Western society, we often reject the idea that clothes are important in judging someone's social status or position. We may even consciously work against this idea and strive to escape categorisation on the basis of clothing or accessories. Think of the college professor who insists on wearing jeans, the cool young medical doctor who will not wear a suit. We seem to make a point whenever we can get away with it of not being judged from the outside or purposely confusing the onlooker in our bid to be accepted on our own terms. This is not the case in Egypt. Here there is no attempt to deny that people are judged, firstly, and secondly that they are judged primarily on appearances. In Egyptian society, people do not hesitate to rank others as belonging to a high standard or a low standard. There is no apology given for blatant class distinction. Very often, in the case of unknown people in any situation, the basis for the distinction will be the way the person is dressed: the choice between Western or Eastern clothes is crucial.<sup>8</sup> Depending on the quality of the clothes and the overall impression made by the individual, which of course also includes behaviour and speech generally, the person will be quickly categorised and, depending on which socio-economic class s/he fits into in the eyes of the interlocutor, will be treated as befits his/her rank.

Whilst general behaviour and speech are, of course, very important factors in assigning social rank in Egypt, I am predominantly interested in clothing and fashion and will not concentrate on those two factors here.

So what is this modern Islamic dress that I have been referring to and how does it differ from what has rapidly become an almost universally uniform code of dress among young people all over the world? Based on the imperative of modesty, modern Islamic fashion is characterised by two main features: colour and movement. Bright, rich colours are given free reign—yellows, oranges, reds and virtually every available colour along with white, gold and, of course, black—but black used in a much more sensual manner than is customary among young women wearing Western styles. Movement, because of the many layers, and the loose fit of most of these clothes, is built into the designs. A woman wearing modern Islamic fashions is often a figure floating in colour, and while no rules of modesty are being broken, it is easy to understand her appeal to would-be admirers who will turn and watch her pass.

Most often we find young veiled women wearing long skirts, either loose-fitting or slim fitting with a loose blouse worn over the skirt. The blouse moves in response to any draught or movement on the part of the wearer and floats about. Arlene MacLeod in *Accommodating Protest* categorises skirts and blouses as Western dress.<sup>9</sup> I would rather see the Egyptian use of skirts and blouses as a distinct development in fashion, however, as the blouse is usually worn outside the skirt and the overall effect is markedly different from Western styles. When “dressing up” a particular favourite seems to be the pinafore, in any fabric—cotton, nylon, denim—worn with a long sleeved T-shirt underneath. This combination in particular is usually tight-fitting on top and loose-fitting from the hips down. During the winter, tight-fitting leggings (or stretch pants) are often worn underneath a long flowing shirt or blouse. How tightly clothes fit does not seem to be a major concern as long as arms and legs are covered. Toes and feet showing through sandals are also not a problem and a veiled woman can wear nail varnish on her toenails without censure. The veil

also has been modified to suit any combination of colours. Non-representational patterns can add considerably to the general effect of the outfit. Far from being restricted by constraints of religion and/or custom, many young Egyptians have used these features to their own advantage. There is certainly no austerity or oppression evident in the appearance of the majority of young Muslim women in Egypt. The most remarkable compromise regarding the veil I have observed in Cairo was the appearance of one young girl in the public park in Tahrir Square who was wearing a baseball hat on top of the veil. Such a combination of Eastern and Western styles is unusual. The veil is most often seen as a rejection of Western values.<sup>10</sup> Wearing something over the veil is not that uncommon, though. At graduation ceremonies, veiled women also wear the mortar-board on top of the veil.

Fashion can be seen as a statement of liberation: the miniskirt, the high heels, the tight leggings: that is, if we interpret liberation to mean the freedom to expose the body. In Egypt the desire to expose is often seen in young women belonging to the middle and upper classes. These women are not necessarily “liberated” in a Western sense. They live at home with their parents, they are economically dependent and often have a fiancé chosen for them. Exposure for them is more a statement of being Westernised, the implication being that they are thus modern and educated. Morality, however, must always appear to be traditional. Exposure is not a statement of sexual liberation. For these young women, then, the relation with clothes is very complex, for it depends on the ability of the onlooker, the people in the street, to correctly interpret what is behind this dress code. Social class indicators such as the mobile phone, expensive accessories and well applied make-up are vital. When morally unsure, money will determine in the final analysis.

True social freedom, in the sense of being able to walk anywhere at any time, is really only achieved, however, if the woman is veiled. A veiled woman is easily interpreted by the onlooker. And even if there is no moral purity under the veil, at least the woman is prepared to pay lip service to the tradition—which will in most cases satisfy the onlooker. The purposeful walk, the conservative dress and the veil, will enable this woman to walk where her Westernised counterpart would not dare to be seen. Far from indicating oppression, conservative clothes and the veil in particular liberate a woman more than low-cut, tight-fitting Western-style clothes. In Egypt then, women who choose Western-style clothing and opt for tight-fitting, revealing clothes do risk harassment on the street. They are in a similar position to Naomi Wolf's American woman standing in front of her wardrobe, unsure of what to wear: afraid of either appearing unattractive, or too feminine and thus a target for harassment.<sup>11</sup> The compromise made by these Egyptian women, however, seems to be not a decision not to wear revealing clothes, but rather a decision not to go to places where they would be highly censured, and to avoid walking in the street as much as possible, either by driving or having a driver.

Both veiled and unveiled Egyptian women love make-up and for the most part make-up is not associated with sexual looseness as long as it is not too gaudy. Even when it is very gaudy, a veil will counteract its potentially unsettling effect.

The veiled woman, therefore, wearing modern Islamic fashions seems to have a decided advantage over Western women and Egyptian women wearing Western clothes. Protected by the Islamic rules of modesty, the veiled woman is under no pressure to reveal her body in order to be seen as feminine. Egyptian fashion designers having catered for her requirements, she has a huge range of fashions to choose from that will not evoke harassment in the street.

There are many reasons, according to Arlene MacLeod, why women choose to be veiled. It has strong religious overtones, but it has also become a fashion like any other. It is a way of combating unwanted attention from men in the street, but it is also for some “an expression of hard times.”<sup>12</sup> It has become increasingly necessary for women to work particularly after marriage, when a husband’s income will no longer cover all the household expenses. For women to work at all is considered *haram* (taboo in a religious sense), but after marriage if a woman works, it is considered even more wrong. Being veiled can help to offset this wrong whilst simultaneously confirming the woman’s sense of her traditional position in society even if she is pressed financially to leave her home, and possibly children, to go out to work.<sup>13</sup> The *hijab* gives women the means to send a strong message to their husbands and men in general:

The *higab* voices the protest that many women dare not voice directly to their husbands, and perhaps that many cannot articulate completely even to themselves. The veil, above all, demands respect for the wearer. “When I put on the *higab*, men must respect me. It says that I am a good woman, and if they are a good man, they will see that it is right that they treat me with dignity.”<sup>14</sup>

In a class of several hundred university students, those young women wearing full *hijab* are now in a decided minority in cities like Mansoura. The great majority of female students are wearing modern Islamic fashions. One of the characteristics of the full cover is to blur class distinctions and of course almost all physical difference between one woman and another, thus creating a sisterhood amongst female Muslims. Most young Egyptian women are not opting for this mode of dressing, however. Perhaps it is an element of modernisation itself in Egypt that young women want to be somewhat different from other young women while still concerned with the rules of modesty. Modern Islamic fashion can be seen as a means of personalising Islamic clothing, thereby making it individualistic. In Egypt, conformity is necessary while

sustaining individuality. Elizabeth Wilson, in *Adorned in Dreams*, sees clothes as a possible link between the modern individual and the mass group:

Modern individualism is an exaggerated yet fragile sense of self—a raw, painful condition.

Our modern sense of our individuality as a kind of wound is also, paradoxically, what makes us all so fearful of not sustaining the autonomy of the self; this fear transforms the idea of “mass man” into a threat of self-annihilation. The way in which we dress may assuage that fear by stabilizing our individual identity. It may bridge the loneliness of “mass man” by connecting us with our social group.<sup>15</sup>

In Egypt, the wearer of modern Islamic fashion belongs to the community but is also an individual.

Thinking about fashion and clothes leads us inevitably to consider the place of the body itself in Egyptian society. The pressure on women to have beautiful bodies is as strong in Egypt as anywhere else. Having given my university students writing assignments on various aspects of Egyptian society and culture, it emerged that there was a general consensus on what could be called beautiful. The eyes more than any other feature of the face are important in determining whether a woman is considered beautiful or not. Green eyes are very well liked. Mansoura women are considered the most beautiful of Egyptian women for this reason as well as their lightness of complexion. However, black irises are considered the most stunning in the brown and dark eyes categories. A straight nose, and full mouth are admired. (One informant told me that red cheeks are a sign of nobility and are highly coveted.) The hair of course is a major concern. It should be shiny and thick but most importantly fine in appearance and straight. The word *leece*, meaning straight and fine, is most often used in Egyptian Arabic with regard to beautiful hair, and judging from the sales pitch used by shampoo marketers is one of the most important goals for any would-be beauty.

The full figure is no longer in fashion. As in the West, the young Egyptian woman wants to be slim all over, but a big bust is a must in Egypt. Women are very

conscious of the size of their chest measurements. It seems as if the Barbie ideal has taken firm hold here.

Being beautiful, for a woman, is extremely important in the quest for a good husband in Egypt, and the importance of getting a husband in Egypt cannot be overstated. (Many of my students were at the engagement stage of the marriage process.) From the age of about seventeen, marriage becomes the chief concern of most young Egyptian middle-class girls. Middle-class boys, too, are very concerned with getting married, but while many of them are also focusing on their physical appearance (body-building, using cosmetics and hair products) the marriage drive seems to affect them more on a career level. The pressure on boys is to graduate from university, get a job, start a business, “build himself” (Arabic), so that he will be able to put himself forward as a prospective husband. Middle class girls, on the other hand, want to graduate from university, and then get married and, hopefully, work. They know there is a chance that they will not work because the social pressure on newly-weds tends to result in a baby within the first year of marriage, meaning the young woman is expected to stay at home and take care of the baby while the young man goes out to work. The initial importance of being beautiful, then, is to attract the best young man available within the appropriate social class and income-bracket. After marriage it becomes a question of keeping down encroaching weight, keeping the husband interested, and generally protecting what has been achieved. This is even harder than getting the man in the first place. The man is “out there” meeting new people, moving ahead, seeing other young women who are still looking for a husband. The young woman at home with a baby is in a difficult situation. After a few years she will begin to blame any problems in the marriage on her “waning” looks. (This may or may not be true. Diverging life experiences, lack of common subjects of

conversation, and of course exhaustion as the man often works very long hours in more than one job, may be more significant factors in the decline of the marriage relationship.) At this point cosmetics are not seen as enough anymore. Plastic surgery may now be considered.

When taking on the Western-style dress does a woman also take on the “beauty obligation”? It seems to be acceptable for a veiled middle-aged woman to grow old gracefully, but it is less easy for a forty-something year-old woman to let this happen if she wears Western clothes. There seems to be a certain pressure. If you’re going to be Westernised, you’ve got to go all the way and do it well. An older woman who is not veiled and does not keep up with the beauty standards is not given the same respect on the street as her veiled counterpart. For she is not seen as a *haga*<sup>16</sup> but some indefinable person who is breaking the rules without the necessary attractiveness to get away with it.

In Egypt, women’s self-image is very closely connected to appearance. Girls begin interfering with their physical appearance quite young. It is not simply their teeth that become a target for improvement but their noses, skin colour and of course hair colour and texture. *Fair and Lovely*, a skin bleach, is advertised on TV. If not actively engaged in acquiring a tan, girls are often engaged in becoming “fairer.” Brides-to-be in particular are under pressure to be as white as possible.

Young women in Egypt first work on the “illusion” that they have the “ideal” shape. Before becoming engaged this is the first step. Attracting a potential husband is extremely important. The problem is what will happen after marriage when he discovers that the impression he had of her physique was not accurate. So after creating an illusion, by wearing very tight, usually black, clothes or even a corset, the young woman must make the illusion a reality. This could take the form of rigorous

dieting, exercise or, in more extreme cases, surgery. This sequence of events seems to be found primarily amongst upper middle-class women who can afford recourse to a plastic surgeon. Here also the fashion difference between those who wear Western fashions and those who wear modern Islamic fashions becomes very evident. Modern Islamic fashions tend to obscure the shape of the body. Layers of flowing garments and an extensive veil leave almost everything to the imagination of the on-looking male. If he is deluded into expecting more, or less, than is really the case, it is his own fault and he cannot blame the woman for misleading him. This places the woman under far less pressure to interfere with her body to please her husband/fiancé. The more “revealing” Western clothes demarcate the body, possibly as it is or in many cases as the woman would like it to be. Without the support of lycra clothing however, the body takes on a far floppier shape. *Wonder Bras* are only effective if their presence is not suspected. When they come off, a very different shape is revealed. The irony of Western clothing is that it makes the actual body in all its reality very much a runner-up in the beauty stakes when compared with the clothed body. Not only can the body then be interpreted in much the same way as a written text, like a text it can also be manipulated, altered and even rubbed out.

Having spent three months working by night in a beauty centre in Cairo, I can conclude that plastic surgery is the more radical method of making the illusion a reality, and it is a thriving business in Cairo. Men resort to surgery for lipo-suction and hair transplants, women for anything from wrinkle reduction, to tummy tucks, to breast “improvement,” to nose jobs.

Corporeality (the experienced reality of the human being of his/her body) is far more crucial to women’s self esteem than to men’s. Generally, men in Egypt seem

to be much more concerned with their clothes and perfumes than with the actual state of their bodies. Men are not judged on the basis of their weight and shape.

Women, on the other hand, are judged on their physical appearance. Many middle class young women are willing to undergo any amount of surgery, any amount of pain, to look the way they want to look. These young women (in their late teens and early twenties) will try to squeeze into any kind of clothing that comes into fashion. The body must be made to fit the prevailing consensus of the right kind of trousers, skirts or footwear. The concept of the mirroring self<sup>17</sup> is much more applicable to women than to men in Egypt. I use the term mirroring here to refer to the action of creating not the clothes to fit the body (as in the old days of tailoring) but of recreating the body to fit the clothes. Mass production all over the world has put huge pressure on individuals to discipline their bodies either by dieting or more radical measures in order to be able to wear “normal” clothes. A trip through any shopping mall or downtown street anywhere in the world will remind one very quickly of what one must look like at this particular time. A quick look through the clothing rails of a department store or boutique makes very clear the size ranges that “normal” women fit into. “Out-sizes” may be found in a separate section or even in a separate shop altogether. If your foot happens to be larger than a size 7 or 8 (41/42) in Europe, you are in danger of going barefoot. In Egypt the sizes tend to be even smaller.

It is not surprising, then, that women are so concerned with weight loss and dieting. Many of the women I have met in Egypt seem to spend their entire adult life on some kind of diet. It is easy to be harsh on women who spend a lot of time and money on their appearance. Feminism tends to berate them as self-oppressed, slaves to fashion oriented to the male gaze. Is paying attention to the body (either by

spending on cosmetics or undergoing plastic surgery) a form of self-love? Is it a form of pampering, reassurance? Maybe it is a form of consolation, a substitute for the total body care and attention received in childhood from the mother and never replicated since. Or is it rather a form of self-hate, a dissatisfaction with self, a desire to alter, improve, escape? Is playing around with the body an attempt to change things that are actually a lot deeper in the person's character/past?

To what extent can corporeality be reduced to exclusive experience of our bodies as physical realities? When, for example, we look in the mirror, how can we ever appraise the image we see in purely physical terms? The face will not be separated from the character we know underneath it. Our internal feelings frame the reception of the self looking back at us in the glass. Not only this but other people's treatment of/response to our bodies influences how we esteem them ourselves. We learn to see as beautiful what we have been told is beautiful. We are encouraged to judge certain things as pleasurable by our immediate society, and that unfortunately tends to militate against those who do not fit into those mass-produced products. The standardised sizes have even more drastic consequences. Clinics and even beauty centres (not to mention aeroplane seats) are designed with a maximum size in mind which is quite small: consider the width of examination beds and the kind of chairs found in clinics and beauty centres. If the clinics and beauty centres themselves exclude the larger client then the message seems to be that there are some citizens for whom there is no hope at all of conformity with the ideal, and they are thus excluded from possible treatments. One would imagine that obese people need assistance more than anyone with health care. This does not seem to be the popular belief, however, in Egypt.

The body may not always have been as easily changed as it is now, but the importance of clothes, and particularly of the veil, are certainly not new in Egypt. If we look back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries we find that the clothes women chose to wear, or felt they had to wear, demarcated them as either upholders of the status quo and thus respectable, or challengers of the status quo and therefore subversive. The two women who perhaps illustrate this dilemma best are: Huda Sharaawi and Doria Shafik. Whilst the former has been heralded as the leader of the Egyptian Feminist movement, the latter has been virtually forgotten. Sharaawi has been credited with bringing upper-class Egyptian women out of the *harems*<sup>18</sup> and setting women on the road to achievement. Shafik<sup>19</sup> was the younger of the two and was perhaps one of Sharaawi's greatest disciples, going further along the road to self-fulfilment than had probably ever been dreamed of by the early founders of the movement in Egypt.

Given the restrictions placed on women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is not surprising that Sharaawi's preoccupation with doing the right thing and never endangering her reputation kept her firmly within the realms of respectable Cairene women. What was acceptable in Paris was not acceptable at home.<sup>20</sup>

Sharaawi led the way in removing the veil from the face amongst upper-class Egyptian women. This veil was different to that worn nowadays by Egyptian women:

The black face and body veil that Shaarawi removed did symbolise seclusion which, in fact, only the wealthy classes could afford to practise. The Islamic headdress, on the other hand, is used by students at university... and by women who are out at work. It serves, in this sense, as a useful off-limits sign: it tells the public, particularly the male public, that although a woman has left the house to study and work, she is respectable and does not expect to be harassed. It is a useful mechanism for societies in transition, where such off-limits signs have not yet had time to take root internally.<sup>21</sup>

But the rest of Sharaawi's appearance stayed very much within the parameters of what would be expected of a woman of her class and rank. How different from this

paragon of contained social activism must have seemed the young woman appearing in Paris fashions in Cairo who seemed to be making so few concessions to the expectations of Cairene society; she who after all was not a Cairene but a provincial (having grown up in Mansoura and Tanta), with no claim at all to either wealth or family name.

Doria Shafik must indeed have seemed a very liberated woman on her return to Egypt from her doctoral studies in Paris. Her very appearance in terms of clothes and style, not to mention her use of make-up and accessories must have made her stand out as a very different kind of Egyptian woman. So different was she, in fact, that she suffered from the ongoing accusation of no longer being Egyptian but of having become French. It was clear even then that Egyptian feminists or indeed Egyptian women wishing to be taken seriously in any field would have to tread a very careful path between modernisation and Westernisation. There is no advantage to being too individualistic or out of step with your peers in Egypt.

Even though upper class women may have led the way in the early decades of the twentieth century, casting off the face veil, and making their way in the public domain, the later years of the twentieth century have seen a re-establishment of some of the symbols if not the reality of seclusion. Not least of these is the current popularity of the veil amongst the middle classes. It is also possible to find women completely veiled from head to toe walking around Cairo, but the important point is that these women are indeed walking around the city, going about their business, driving cars or taking public transport. Seclusion is now a personal matter, whereby women seclude themselves from the public gaze by means of their clothing rather than by living behind the screened windows of their husband's house. Helen Watson sees this return to the *hijab* as a form of feminism:

...the apparent paradox of a return to the *hijab* among women in the public worlds of employment and education is not 'anti-feminist', but is a kind of 'feminism in reverse' with a moral connotation as well as a political one. The interweaving of secular and sacred concerns represented by the adoption of the veil also can be seen as a reaction against the secular feminism of the West, and as part of the search for an indigenous Islamic form of protest against male power and dominance in public society.<sup>22</sup>

For Arlene MacLeod, the veil symbolises an accommodating form of protest. Women choose to protest by means of their clothing because it is the easiest thing for them to alter. She does not see it as a very effective form of feminism, however:

[t]he accommodating aspect of veiling as a symbol of women's struggle derives from the fact that women see no possibility of men altering, and therefore, they feel that they must adapt and accommodate. The symbolic area of dress is perhaps the least costly realm in which to acquiesce, given the constraints of their current situation; women can then retain their mobility in the city and the right to leave the home and go to work, if they offer this compensation. So women alter their looks to conform to the prevailing norms and expectations, leaving themselves covered, literally, and not vulnerable. Unfortunately, they also leave the prevailing discourse of gender inequality intact.<sup>23</sup>

There are subtle ways in which a veiled woman can make herself seem aloof in the street. For example, many young women, veiled or unveiled, wear sunglasses. The wearing of sunglasses is quite common also during the winter, as it is only marginally related to the brightness of the sun. Sunglasses give women an anonymity and also a distance which is difficult to bridge for young men who may intend speaking to them in a public place. The veil worn with sunglasses makes the woman virtually unapproachable.

The increasing availability of cars in Cairo and other large cities in Egypt has greatly facilitated women in their wish to travel around unharassed by the general public, and more particularly by members of the opposite sex. However, as only those women who are quite well off financially can afford to ride around in cars, either by themselves or with a driver, we once again see that physical seclusion is an upper-class affair. Peasants and working-class women never could live a life of seclusion.

They always have engaged in farm work and trade and have worked side by side with their husbands and family members. Veiled or not, their lives were always integrated in the hurly-burly of every-day social life. Far from seeing seclusion then as an oppressive force in Egyptian society, it is more accurate to see it as a luxury few can really afford.

In conclusion, whilst some Egyptian women are dressing in Western fashions and adhering strictly to Western beauty standards, the majority of Egyptian women are following a very different fashion. Modern Islamic fashion as we have seen could be perceived as oppressive—after all, it includes the veil which triggers alarm bells in the minds of many Western onlookers—but it is, I have argued, a far more liberating type of fashion in many ways than Western fashion. The shape of the body can easily be obscured in Islamic fashion; there is no pressure to reign the body in as there is in Western styles. Whether Western eyes appreciate modern Islamic fashion or not is a matter of taste in the final analysis, but I, for one, think it deserves some attention as it has a lot to offer.

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<sup>1</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, “Women, Ethnicity, and Nationalism” in Hutchinson and Smith, eds., *Ethnicity* (1996, London: Oxford University Press), 312.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on my research in Egypt during the four years I spent living and teaching in two Egyptian cities, Cairo and Mansoura.

<sup>3</sup> The Islamic dress code is known as *al-ziyy al-Islami*. (Fadwa El Guindi, “Veiling Infitah with Muslim Ethic: Egypt’s Contemporary Islamic Movement,” *Social Problems* 28.4, April 1981, 465).

<sup>4</sup> Attaba is one of Cairo’s poorer districts and well off the tourist beat.

<sup>5</sup> Black is the most popular colour amongst middle-class young women. It is called the king of colours. Black clothing is perceived to be more expensive-looking and, of course, slimming.

<sup>6</sup> The term *baladi* here is transliterated from Egyptian Arabic and means traditional.

<sup>7</sup> “full hijab” here refers to the full Islamic covering of the whole body, including the face (maybe the eyes also), which is usually but not exclusively black. *Hijab* itself refers to religious modesty (Akbar

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Ahmed and Hastings Donnan, eds., *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, London: Routledge, 1994, 141.)

<sup>8</sup> By “Eastern” clothes here I am referring to both modern Islamic fashions and of course the traditional *gallabaya* (long shirt-like cotton garment in the case of men; long loose nylon/cotton dress in the case of women) which is the usual clothing of peasants or “lower class” people in public as well as private, but that is often worn at home by middle-class people when relaxing.

<sup>9</sup> Arlene MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>10</sup> “Akbar Ahmed (1992) has observed that a critical element in the late twentieth-century resurgence of Islam has been the emphasis on traditional female dress. Male attire has undergone a similar ‘dewesternisation’ with the tie being shunned as a symbol of western dress. In this respect, the adoption of an identifiable Islamic form of dress can be regarded as ‘a sign of the times’ which entails the assertion of independence, separate identity and a rejection of Western cultural imperialism” (Ahmed and Donnan, 151).

<sup>11</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Vintage, 1991), 38-39.

<sup>12</sup> MacLeod, 112-114.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* (London: Virago, 1988), 12.

<sup>16</sup> A woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>17</sup> Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner, eds., *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage Publications, [1991] 1996), 61.

<sup>18</sup> In nineteenth-century Egypt, seclusion of women was part of the élite custom. The harem was a family organisation which ensured both the security and reputation and therefore the social rank of women in the higher class. Seclusion nowadays is less common and less practicable given economic pressures, the perceived importance of education for all, and the emergence of a feeling of national responsibility which encourages everyone to work and make a useful contribution to society. Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot gives an account of how upper-class women contributed to public life in her article: “The Revolutionary Gentlewomen in Egypt” published in Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, eds., *Women in the Muslim World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). Also cf. Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987), introduction by Margot Badran, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Doria Shafik was a poet, publisher, political activist, editor in chief and owner of *La Femme Nouvelle*, and founder of two Arabic magazines: *Bint Al Nil* and *Katkut*. *Bint Al Nil* was also the name of a feminist union and political party set up by Shafik (Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron, eds., *Women in Middle Eastern History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, 312). See also Cythia Nelson, *Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist: A Woman Apart* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press), 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Sharaawi was quite prepared to dress in Western fashions, including dispensing with the veil covering her hair when outside Egypt: cf. photograph in her memoirs of her wearing a hat in Paris.

<sup>21</sup> Nadia Hijab, *Womanpower: The Arab debate on women at work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 52.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmed and Donnan, 152.

<sup>23</sup> MacLeod, 151.