

## The Veiled Revolution

By Elizabeth W. Fernea

*Since the early twentieth century, patterns of women's work and of dress have moved closer to the Western model. However, as Elizabeth W. Fernea shows, those patterns are beginning to shift again as young, educated women return to conservative "Islamic" dress, not for the reasons their grandmothers veiled, but to define their identity as Muslim women in a changing world.*

(This article was written to complement Fernea's film, *The Veiled Revolution*, part of her film trilogy, *Reformers and Revolutionaries: Middle Eastern Women*.)—Eds.

"The feminine veil has become a symbol: that of the slavery of one portion of humanity," wrote French ethnologist Germain Tillion in 1966. That view of the veil appears again and again in the West, partly, of course, because the veil is indeed a dramatic visual symbol. It attracts us to a face that may not be seen and at the same time signifies a boundary that may not be crossed.

Such a barrier or boundary between men and women exists in some form in all societies. But the veil as a visible barrier calls up in the viewer a complex reaction. We tend to believe that those who look out (through the veil) suffer from the same exclusion as those of us who look at the veil and its hidden contents. However, we have no right to make

such an assumption. Much depends on who makes the decision to veil — whether it is imposed or self-selected.

Until recently, veiling and conservative dress had been declining steadily in all parts of the Islamic world. Walking on the streets of Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, and Egypt, a visitor would find a veiled woman the exception [sic] rather than the rule. Yet veiling has continued to be the rule in Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, and some areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. And now patterns are shifting again.

Western and Middle Eastern rejection of, and outrage against, the veil has been seen as rejection of, and outrage against, the values believed to be associated with the veil. These values include chastity, prescribed role for women in the family, and, above all, unequal access to divorce, inheritance, and child custody. If these problems are reformed, many Middle Eastern women say, the use or non use of the veil will become unimportant.

But as the veil has been used over the centuries for political, religious, and social purposes, it is a symbol within the society itself that can find new uses, "An outward sign of a complex reality." The donning of modest dress or, as some women call it, "Islamic dress" is a personal statement in response to new and changing social conditions in Egypt.


The first thing that must be

stressed, however, is that the contemporary use of conservative dress is a new phenomenon. Women are not "returning to the veil," for the garments they are designing for themselves and wearing on the streets of Cairo are not of the style worn since before the turn of the century—the *milaya*, the head scarf, the long, full black dress. The modest garments of today constitute a new style, developed only in the past ten years. The head scarf, the turban, the fitted long dress or the loose full dress are variations on an old theme—with new expressions and new implications.

The second point is that Islamic dress today is a middle- and upper-middle-class phenomenon, found mostly among educated working women. The majority of those taking up modest dress are young, in their early twenties, and many are in the universities and professional schools throughout Egypt. As a medical student at Tanta put it, "I think of Islamic dress as a kind of uniform. It means I am serious about myself and my religion but also about my studies. I can sit in class with men and there is no question of attraction and so on — we are all involved in the same business of learning, and these garments make that clear."

The young women who are wearing Islamic dress are often the daughters and granddaughters of women who wear Western dress. Some sociologists in Egypt suggest that the adoption of conservative dress is a form of rebellion, a rebuff to a parental generation whose efforts have not, as expected, improved conditions in Egypt. Economic conditions in Egypt are indeed better for a





small percentage of the population, but for at least half of Egypt's people, the bright future promised in the 1950s has not materialized. In this sense, the new garb carries a political message: it is a dramatic, nonviolent protest against the establishment and its policies, as well as against the West.

But political statement, in Islamic countries, cannot be separated from religious statement. Egypt is a society which still considers itself a Muslim state, where religion and politics have never been separated. A small minority of Christians (Copts, Armenians, Nestorians, Eastern Orthodox Catholics, Roman Catholics) live in Egypt, but nearly 90 percent of the population is Muslim. The Qur'an is the basis for family law still, though some modifications have been made in recent years, and the criminal and civil codes are amalgams of European and Qur'anic laws. Thus religion is part of everyday life, and religious affiliation is part of one's social identity, whether or not one is a practicing Muslim or Christian.

Therefore, far from being a simple statement of religious affiliation, the wearing of Islamic dress is related to the very basis of social life in Egypt and in other Muslim countries, where the wearing of Islamic dress has also been observed (Jordan, Lebanon, and Libya are recent examples). The wearing of Islamic dress also relates to the individual's sense of belonging to a group, and to the individual's sense of her own identity. Although some men also wear a form of Islamic dress (a long, loose homespun shirt, a white skullcap, and beard), their numbers are not nearly so high as are found among women. Such apparel may even be politically risky these days because it suggests sympathy with Muslim "extremists," as their critics call them.

A third important point to be made, and one that women stress repeatedly, is that the choice to wear Islamic dress is one they make themselves, and it must come

"from inner religious conviction." Although stories of organized Muslim groups paying women to wear Islamic dress are told by Westerners in Egypt, these seem generally to be unfounded. Women make their own choice, but of course they are influenced by their peers, and the decision is one hotly debated within families and among different groups of friends.

Finally, the wearing of Islamic dress has, in addition to the genuine religious motives avowed by many young women, many practical advantages. As one young woman put it, "My family trusts me implicitly, and now that I wear this dress, they are not worried if I stay out later than usual or mingle with friends they do not always approve of. In this dress, my reputation remains intact, for everyone knows that it is a respectable garment. People thus respect you if you wear it."

In crowded conditions, such as the streets of Cairo and the packed public buses, Islamic dress does offer some protection against importuning and aggressive sexual advances by men. Further, the new phenomenon of women working outside the home places many men and women in new situations – close to each other for long periods of the day – that place a strain on the traditional boundaries between men and women, and may also place strains on the public reputation of the young women. It is true that many of the outward signs of the older Egyptian society – veiling, seclusion of women, segregation of women from public work places, and educational institutions, and so on – have disappeared, but traditional attitudes are slower to change. The wearing of Islamic dress is a practical, simple way of stating publicly, "I am a respectable woman. Leave me alone."

A small number of women cover themselves completely. They take the Qur'anic injunction "and tell the believing women to draw their garments close around them" to its logical extreme and

describe themselves as "devout, devoted to God and unwilling to enter the public workplace." The majority of women wearing Islamic dress do not seem to feel this way, however, but see themselves as making a statement or taking action that strengthens their own position within the society. They continue to attend colleges and universities, work outside the home, and mingle with men in the classroom and the streets. They also attend study groups in mosques and private homes to learn more about their own faith and law. Many have taken the "service" aspects of Islamic teaching seriously, and, under the direction of persons such as Dr. Zahira Abdine, director of the Giza Children's Hospital, do volunteer work among the poor. Two young medical students and one doctor spend one day a week at the Sayyida Zeinab mosque, where they have opened a people's free medical clinic. Others teach and offer services as social workers.

The veil, then, is a complex symbol that can have multiple implications and different impacts. Manipulated in one way, it can become a symbol for conservatism or for reaction against modernization; utilized in another way, it can become a symbol for an Islamic approach to the solutions of both old and new problems. However it is used, it means different things to different people within the society, and it means different things to Westerners than it does to Muslim Middle Easterners.

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