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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.[1] 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.[2]

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

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.[5] 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*[6] 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

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.[8] Depending on the quality of the clothes and the overall impression made by the individual, which of course also includes behaviour and

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

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.[11] 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.

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.
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> 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.[15]

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

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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

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 lypo-suction and hair transplants, women for anything from wrinkle reduction, to tummy tucks, to

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[17] 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 15.g7ao t([char)-9ao t(in5(una)4mentb imme)4s0.7(a)4.5(n(the

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

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

[8] 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.

[9] Arlene MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 4.

[10] "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).

[11] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Vintage, 1991), 38-39.

[12] MacLeod, 112-114.

[13] Ibid., 123.

[14] Ibid., 133.

[15] Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* (London: Virago, 1988), 12.

[16] A woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

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

[18] 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.

[19] 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.

[20] 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.

[21] Nadia Hijab, *Womanpower: The Arab debate on women at work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 52.

[22] Ahmed and Donnan, 152.

[23] MacLeod, 151.