

# The language of the veil

Egyptian society adopted western styles in the 1920s but has, over time, returned to more traditional dress.

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1923: Stepping down from the train in Cairo Central Station, Hoda Hanim Sha'rawi lifts her hand to the side of her face, undoes a golden clasp, and her fine white crepe-de-chine yashmak flutters to the ground. At that moment, the Turkish-style veil ceased to be de rigueur for Egyptian women of the upper class. Sha'rawi was handsome, wealthy, widowed and securely aristocratic, with powerful political connections through both her father and her husband. She had been in Rome on behalf of the Egyptian Women's Union, a trip that was one more chapter in Egypt's modernisation project. The gesture, at its final moment, resolved a debate that had occupied Egyptian society for almost 30 years.

Or, at least, everyone thought it had. How strange and how telling that now, some 80 years later, here we are talking once more about "the veil". How odd, also, that we don't have one word in Arabic equivalent to "the veil". But perhaps not odd at all, for doesn't English have bowler hats and top hats and trilbys and cloth caps and boaters and stetsons, while Arabic only has qubba'ah, "hat"? And when the west - always so inordinately interested in what Arab (or "eastern") women wear - talks about "the veil", doesn't it mysteriously elide the "seductive" veil as worn by, say, Colette in her Egyptian Tableaux, and the "forbidding" veil as "forced" on to contemporary eastern women? To the west, "the veil", like Islam itself, is both sensual and puritanical, is contradictory, is to be feared. It is also concrete, and is to do with women, and since cultural battles are so often fought through the bodies of women, it is seized upon by politicians, columnists, feminists...

And so it is that, having refused many times to write about "the veil", I am now trying to put together some thoughts about the "dress code" of Arab or Muslim women. But I immediately run into problems. Muslim women are not all Arab. The conditions of Irani women are different from those of the women of Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia and now, famously, Afghanistan.

And they are all different from the Arabs. And not all Arab women are Muslim. Thirty years ago, you could not have told whether an Egyptian woman was Christian or Muslim by her dress. In Palestinian villages, you still can't tell. So whose dress code shall I talk about? Where? The clusters of women you see around the shops in Knightsbridge, tented in black, their faces muzzled with leather-and-brass-beaked masks, are from the Gulf states and would (and do) look equally out of place in the shopping malls of Cairo and Beirut. Similarly, the women with layers of black chiffon over their faces and Jimmy Choo slingbacks tripping out from under their black abayas are Saudi, and their face coverings send out a different signal from those of an Egyptian or an Algerian. So let us say, for the moment, that we're looking at the dress codes of Egyptian women. Let us further say that the women we will look at will be urban.

In every country, social, cultural and political changes manifest themselves in dress. In Europe, we see this in the loose "Empire" cuts favoured by French ladies after the Revolution, or in the flapper styles that swept England after the first world war, or indeed in the mini-skirts that came along in the late 1960s with the sexual revolution and the crystallisation of women's lib. None of this is news. And the principle holds for us in the Arab world as well. Except that, in the Arab world, there has been - since the end of the 19th century - an additional factor: the powerful presence of the west in our lives and its influence on our social, cultural and political changes. It is interesting, for example, that the Bedouin societies of the Arabian peninsula who came into contact with the west only in the past 50 years or so, and whose contact was essentially political and economic, rather than cultural, and who were also in a position of strength due to their oil, have seen no need for the wholesale adoption of western fashion by their men any more than by their women.

That image of Hoda Sha'rawi unveiling in public was present in the schoolbooks of Nasser's Egypt, and to us - the schoolchildren of the time - the contradiction in it was not immediately apparent. Sha'rawi was part of the struggle to break free from the grip of a European power, yet she publicly adopted the "revealed face" code of that same power. My parents' and grandparents' generations were able to live with this contradiction, because they thought (at least, the ones that thought about it did) that politics and culture existed in two separate realms - that even though we needed to shake off the west's political yoke, the western was the more advanced culture and it was, therefore, progressive to adopt it. As overwrought Arabic narrative forms already in decline gave way to the adopted novel, and the folkloric "shadow-play" transmuted into the three-act drama, as Egyptian sculptors started to exhibit their works and musicians to

incorporate waltzes into the traditional Arab quarter tones, so men doffed their jubbahs and qaftans and climbed into suits, and women uncovered their faces and hair and donned tailored skirts and jackets and flowered frocks.

A picture I'm looking at now shows a leading Egyptian journalist interviewing Indira Gandhi in 1955. The journalist, Amina al-Sa'id, is wearing a sleeveless, almost off-the-shoulder flowered dress. No one thought anything of it. Yet I'd lay odds that no Egyptian journalist working today would allow herself to be photographed so uncovered. Why? What happened?

Four Women Of Egypt is a brilliant documentary exploring the lives, arguments and friendship of four very different women. At one point, we see stills from the 1960s and 1970s showing Safinaz Kazem, a well-known writer and columnist, svelte and alluring in an assortment of slinky suits and Audrey Hepburn-type shift dresses. Then Kazem, in 1998, in loose clothing and a scarf covering her hair, says, "For years, we ran around in short skirts and bare arms saying to them, 'Look, see, we're just like you.' Enough. It got us nowhere. We're not like them, and they shouldn't matter. We have to find a way to be ourselves."

It seems it has taken our defeat in the war with Israel in 1967, Nasser's death and Sadat's coming to power in 1970 to bring us back to the position of one of the pioneering feminists, Malak Hifni Nasif, who wrote in 1906 that the veil was, so to speak, a red herring. Her view was that the question of the veil was only central in the debate about women's place in society because the west (personified in Egypt then by Lord Cromer) had made it so. She urged that reformers should concentrate on questions of education, health and economic independence - ie, the opportunity to work outside the home - and let the veil take care of itself. In the Cairo of the time, women covered their hair with a tarha, a thin material in either black or white. For their faces, they had a choice of the white yashmak, which was drawn across the face under the eyes and connoted the aristocracy and their imitators; the bisha, which could be casually thrown over the whole face and was neutral in class terms; and the burqu', a rectangle of the same fabric as fishnet stockings that was hung from under the eyes with a small decorative gold or brass cylinder at its centre over the nose. This last was very much the accessory of the bint al-balad, the "native woman" of the working or lower middle class, who had no desire to imitate the yashmak or bisha-wearing ladies. It is, of course, different from the Afghani "burka", and would not have afforded much of a disguise in the Simpson & Ridley antics.

When I was growing up in the 1960s, the tarha was generally worn by women of the working class and by traditional women over, say, 50 of all classes. The burqu' could still be glimpsed as a piece of exotica in some popular districts of Cairo, but the bisha and the yashmak were to be found only in sepia photographs.

1971: Until the early 1970s, if you sat in the Cafe Riche on Qasr el-Nil street watching the world go by, you could tell fairly accurately what a person was by their clothes. And, generally, the more affluent a person was, the more westernised they looked. That woman there, the slim one in the well-cut suit with the skirt just above the knee, in sunglasses; she might be an engineer/doctor/lawyer/ academic/ranking civil servant, or married to one; or she may own one of the new boutiques that have started appearing as Sadat yanks the reins sharply right towards a capitalist, open-door economy. That child hurrying across the street in slippers and an ill-fitting dress with a white kerchief binding her hair is a servant-girl, sent out to fetch something in a hurry. And here come two women deep in conversation - one has her hair covered in a kind of filigree bonnet, the other wears hers in a bun; they walk slowly in their sensible shoes, and they wear what most Cairene women wear: a straight, dark gabardine skirt ending just below the knee and over it a shirt in a floral or geometric pattern with an open collar and sleeves just above the elbow. They are (or are married to) minor civil servants, schoolteachers or legal workers, but they might also be the wives of men in trade, or workers in the large public sector factories: textiles, pharmaceuticals, food, steel and so on. In other words, they are either the petty bourgeoisie or the upwardly mobile working class. As for that comely, plump woman hurrying along, her long, black overdress similar to that of the peasant woman, her head covered in a loose black transparent tarha over the flowered scarf that binds her hair, she might be married to a butcher's or grocer's assistant, she might work as a cleaner in a school or a hospital or a government office.

Men pass, too, but we ignore them as we watch a bevy of young women saunter by in skirts above the knee and jeans, in tight jumpers and silver bracelets, their hair flowing on their shoulders or cut short comme les garçons . These are students from one of Cairo's various universities, arts academies and colleges.

If we're watching closely, the silver bracelets should tell us something, for since the mid-1960s there has been a revival of interest in traditional culture. Folkloric dance troupes have been formed, the Arabic Music Ensemble plays to packed houses, motifs from Egyptian epics find their

way into the three-act dramas, the comfortably-off are ordering bits of mashrabiyya and appliqué tapestries for their homes (to the relief of the craftsmen, who were dying out fast) and the fashionable silver jewellery blends pharaonic design with inscriptions of classical Arabic poetry. Some women artists, such as the documentary film-maker Atiyyat al-Abnudi, in the absence of a national costume, adopt a modified version of the peasant woman's smocked and colourful galabiyyas, getting them made up in pure cottons or rich velvets.

2001: Thirty years have passed as we take our seats today at the Cafe Riche, which - thank goodness - is still there: Qasr el-Nil Street throngs with three times more people than it did on that October afternoon long ago, and the daughters of those women we watched then are having a harder time getting through the crowds. Most of the women struggling to keep a foothold on the pavement are in a variant of the old uniform: the straight gabardine skirt is now just above the ankles, the patterned shirt is longer, and now has long sleeves. The head is covered with a scarf folded into a large, concealing triangle.

This has become the "default" dress. In the 1970s, the regime of President Anwar Sadat did three things: it switched the Egyptian economy from socialist to capitalist and opened the door to foreign investment, it signed a peace treaty with Israel and, to weaken the opposition critical of both these policies, it nurtured and funded the political Islamist groups. The sky-high inflation resulting from the economic policy and the corruption that came along with it led whoever could to head for the oil-rich Arab states, thus opening the way for their brand of puritanical Islam to enter Egypt. The ones who did not leave - the majority of the population - became increasingly disenfranchised, hard-up and angry; except, that is, for the very, very few who were making money rapidly.

The treaty with Israel, when it was not followed by a just settlement for the Palestinians, and even though it won back the Sinai for Egypt, generated more anger still; except, that is, for the very, very few who developed vested interests with Israel. Both these policies - involving, as they did a turning-away from the Soviet Union - were perceived as western-backed. So people questioned whether following the west was good for Egypt. Perhaps, they thought, we should look back at ourselves, at our own history and traditions, and find the way forward there. Sadat's third policy ensured that the anger and questioning had no outlet, no platform or expression except the Islamist one. Covering her hair then started as a woman's act of political protest and a symbol of a search for an Egyptian, non-westernised identity. In two decades, it became simply what you did -

unless you took a conscious decision not to.

Many young women in the street today are in hijab: a long, loose garment topped with a large plain scarf securely fastened so no hair, ears or neck show through. Some wear it because they believe this is what a good Muslim woman should wear, and, they add, why should men who are not entitled look at my hair or my figure? It neutralises, they say, men's tendency to look at women as sex objects. Some wear it because it deals with the economic problem posed by the need to wear different outfits for different occasions, and makes you a good Muslim into the bargain. Some wear it because their friends are wearing it and they don't want to stand out, and if their friends think it makes you a good Muslim, well, why not?

Today, I see only one woman in the full niqab, a black hijab outfit with a thick, black cloth over the face and a narrow slit to see through. She hurries along, her every movement as deliberate as her garb, which says loud and clear: "I am a political Islamist. I believe our only solution lies in creating an Islamic state. I am in opposition to this government." It takes guts to do this in these days of arbitrary detentions and torture. Guts, or desperation.

Tyres shriek. A woman has started to cross the street and is almost run over by a speeding Cherokee. The driver leans out of the window. Her hair is expensively streaked and her lip-lined mouth screams at the pedestrian: "Open your eyes, you backward one." She wears an imitation tiger-skin top, and if she were to step out of the car we would see that she is in boots and leather trousers. In the back seat, there is a small Filipino nanny, which means that her daughter, in Gap jeans in the passenger seat, probably does not speak Arabic. This is the family of one of the businessmen who have made it big in the new economic climate.

The woman who was almost run over adjusts her headscarf and dusts down her brown, gabardine skirt. She mutters something about "the pashas of these sooty times" and passers-by shake their heads in sympathy. She is a teacher married to an architect. Unable to make ends meet in the inflation ridden 1970s, they had migrated to Kuwait, but were asked to leave after the Gulf war. They lost their savings in the collapse of the big Islamist investment companies, and are now more or less back where they started. There are many, many like her. Where do they go from here?

For at least 4,000 years, Egyptian women have understood the power of the image and have, when they could, manipulated it to their advantage. Nefertiti, reigning with her husband Akhenaten as the first co-monarch, had

herself depicted as the Goddess Isis, a PR coup to be followed by Cleopatra some 14 centuries later when she made her triumphal entry into Rome as Caesar's honoured guest. In more modern times, Shahindah Maqlad, who presented herself as a traditional beauty in her portrait of 1953, transformed herself in 1966 into a modern "woman of the people" as she demanded that the murder of her husband (allegedly) by a feudal family be investigated. And Rawiyah Atiyyah, running for elections after Suez (or, as we know it, the Port-Said war) created an icon by celebrating her victory in battle fatigues.

So what do we do now? The image we need to project should embody our Egyptian notion of ourselves at this moment. It should also appeal to the audience. But we are multiple and varied, and who's sitting in the dress circle? Many think there's no longer any point in playing to the west. And there is no Second Power. And - until the bombing of Afghanistan - political Islam had lost credibility in the Egyptian street. If only we had a national costume, such as a sari or a sirwal qamis, a lot of us would probably be wearing it right now.