

The Egyptian *Infitah* and the 'New Veiling' movement

Under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the emancipation of women was placed in the government's agenda. Women were granted right to vote and to run for political office. Women's access to university education increased and so it did their participation in the work spheres. Especially since the state assured public jobs for all holders of high school and university diplomas regardless of their gender. Feminist movements during Nasser's era and earlier decades were influenced by Western ideas and rejected religious conservatism.¹ However, from the 1970s onwards, more and more women in Egypt began wearing a new style of veiling and in 2000, more than 80% of women in Cairo were veiled.² The *Hijab* movement became popular especially among the university students induced by Islamic political activism.³ However, later, it spread out to other different sectors in society. For the Orientalist feminist movements in the West, the veil has become the image of the patriarchal oppression of Islam and Muslim societies over Muslim women.⁴ The advance of the veiling has been linked with the rise of Political Islam and piety in the Muslim world.^{5,6} However, this paper will argue that the 'New Veiling' movement, as coined by MacLeod⁷, not only was caused

¹ Mohamed Younis, "Daughters Of The Nile: The evolution Of Feminism In Egypt", *Wash. & Lee J. Civ. Rts. & Soc. Just.* 13, no. 2. (Spring 2007): 463-490.

² Jean-Paul Carvalho, "Veiling", *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 128, no. 1 (February 2013): 337-370.

³ Arlene Elowe Macleod, *Accommodating protest: working women, the new veiling, and change in Cairo*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁴ Myra Macdonald, "Muslim Women and the Veil: Problems of image and voice in media representations", *Feminist Media Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006): 7-23.

⁵ Lisa Taraki, "Islam Is the Solution: Jordanian Islamists and the Dilemma of the 'Modern Woman'", *The British Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 4 (December 1995): 643-661.

⁶ Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁷ Macleod, *Accommodating protest*.

by a rise of religious values in the Egyptian society but also by the economic pressure of the *Infitah* period and the ongoing neoliberal policies taking place to date. For that, this essay will argue that the veil was a tool used by feminist movements to avoid any accusation of Westernization –and therefore Imperialist. Lastly, the veiling is used as a measure by working women to defend themselves from sexual or sexist harassment, from societal blaming for leaving their houses and to reaffirm their identities as Muslims. This distinction is important since it sees the ‘New Veiling’ movement not as a passive appendix of a male-led Islamic revival, but as an active response of the Egyptian women to their economic and social realities.

As mentioned above, the New Veiling movement in Egypt emerged in the crowded campuses of urban cities during the *Infitah* period. Following the defeat on the 1973 October War and the break with the USSR, Sadat’s Egypt embarked on a series of economic reforms. It was the opening of the Egyptian economy to foreign investment in the private sector and other measures to liberalize the economy.⁸ As soon as 1977, the middle and working classes already perceived that these series of reforms were decreasing the public services’ quality and increasing basic needs’ prices. Up to a point where this tension led to the violent protests in January.⁹ At the same time, the economy was in a moment of stagnation, Government spending on Education slowed down but the student population continued growing. As Ahmed points out, “These overcrowded conditions were particularly hard for women”. Especially for those of rural background who were uncomfortable with sharing packed classrooms and public transport with males. Even though Ahmed defends the link between the New Veiling and the rise of religiosity, she also hints towards some more political and economic explanations. First, as she put it, these women were already religious Muslims, however, the overcrowded situations that faced in the urban spaces unsettled them. Secondly, Ahmed describes a wider gap between elite’s and working people’s realities. Young women and men who were struggling due to the harsher economic conditions felt unrepresented by the political elites. As Ahmed explains it, the *Infitah* period

⁸ Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt : Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 64.

⁹ Sabine Frerichs, “Egypt’s Neoliberal Reforms and the Moral Economy of Bread: Sadat, Mubarak, Morsi” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 48, no. 4 (December 2016): 610-632.

flooded the market with Western clothes and fashions “that were beyond the means of most young women”.¹⁰

From the campuses, the new veiling movement spread out to middle-class women. These were mainly state servants and were harshly hit by Sadat’s policies and the following Neoliberal reforms. Their fixed salary meant a decrease in their purchase power when food prices were rising. As well, the retreat of the state in the 1980s changed job opportunities for graduated women. The decreasing public spending meant fewer vacancies in workplaces traditionally accepted as proper for women or that were female-dominated, such as administration, Education or Healthcare.^{11,12} Women were pushed to seek for jobs in a growing informal sector. As the young students, they suddenly saw themselves in male-dominated environments, such as the market, with worse working conditions and feeling more vulnerable.¹³ As many scholars argue, the use of veiling was a pragmatic resort, as we will see after.

There was another feature caused by the Neoliberal reforms that fomented the ‘New Veiling’ movement. The Neoliberal policies carried out by the Egyptian government also forced many Egyptians –mainly men– to migrate. The net migration balance in Egypt in 1962 was of -50,100 –there were 50,100 more emigrants than immigrants. However, in 1977, it reached its historical minimum level with -563,000.¹⁴ This left women to take care of the households. One can assume that remittances would stop them from engaging in wage jobs, however, these inflows of money were not enough to cover all the basic needs of the households. As a recent study shows, about 25% of the migrant workers sent remittances regularly in 2012.¹⁵ That might have been different in the 70s or 80s but it seems fairly rare that the figure would be close to 100% in any scenario. The first wave of migrants from Egypt came mostly from the

¹⁰ Leila Ahmed, *Quiet revolution*, 77

¹¹ Margot Badran, “Women have always worked” in *Feminists, Islam, and nation: gender and the making of modern Egypt*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹² Adam Hanieh, “Mapping the Neoliberal Experience” in *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

¹³ Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, 59

¹⁴ “Net migration”, The World Bank Data, accessed December 26, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.NETM?locations=EG>

¹⁵ Jackline Wahba, “Through the keyhole: international migration in Egypt”, *Economic Research Forum* 830 (May 2014) , accessed December 26, 2018 <https://erf.org.eg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/830.pdf>

urban poor. Therefore, women from a wider socioeconomic background were pushed by economic circumstances to join the workforce.

As their middle-class counterparts, these urban, working-class women also adopted the new veiling. Without any cultural preparation, women from different backgrounds either saw their career expectations change or were forced to leave their traditional roles of wives and daughters to work in public. As McLeod argues, these women were socially blamed for it, but they were forced by the economic circumstances.¹⁶ They sorted to the new veiling as a way of reaffirming their Muslim identity and to stop any social accusation. As El Guindi states: “a woman in public has a choice between being secular, modern, feminine and frustratingly passive (hence very vulnerable), or becoming a *mitdayyinan* [religious], hence formidable, untouchable and silently threatening”.¹⁷ MacLeod, El Guindi or Bauer¹⁸ argue that it was not a matter of religiosity but of pragmatism.

Lastly, this essay argues that the ‘New veiling’ movement is not solely the result of the Islamic revival or Islamic feminism but that follows a trend of adaptability displayed by the different Egyptian feminist movements throughout the twentieth century. As Al-Ali expresses, Women’s movements “fluctuate between adherence and opposition to existing structures”.¹⁹ In the Egyptian case, they had always to adhere to a nationalist, anti-imperialist discourse to avoid accusations of imitating the West. Younis²⁰ distinguishes three stages in the evolution of feminism in Egypt. First, during the colonial era, women adapted discourses of self-determination for all Egyptians to claim for women’s rights in the workplace. After the Free Officers coup, due to the secular characteristics of the Governments reforms and their ties with the Soviet Union, feminists sought a discourse outside the Islamic tradition. Lastly, he describes a third stage founded on the alienation with the West. Even though Egyptian society has been always relatively anti-imperialist, the defeat in the October War, the Peace treaty with

¹⁶ Macleod, *Accommodating protest*

¹⁷ Fadwa El Guindi, “Veiling Infitah with Muslim Ethic: Egypt's Contemporary Islamic Movement”, *Social Problems* 28, no. 4. (April 1981): 481.

¹⁸ Victoria Bernal, “Gender, Culture, and Capitalism: Women and the Remaking of Islamic "Tradition" in a Sudanese Village”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no. 1 (January 1994): 36-67.

¹⁹ Nadje S. Al-Ali, “Women’s Movements in the Middle East: Case Studies of Egypt and Turkey” (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2002): 33.

²⁰ Mohamed Younis, *Daughters Of The Nile*

Israel forced by the US and the capitulation of the Egyptian Economy to Global capitalism, made Egyptians specially hostile to the West and Sadat's government. So, as Younis states, the adaptation of the New veiling is a way of silencing any of these anti-feminist arguments of being 'westernized'²¹ while being at the same time an emancipation tool. This "collapse of the religious and the secular" in feminist discourses is a new step on the evolution of the feminist movements in Egypt.²² At the end of the twentieth century, secular feminism stagnated and was looking for new tools and ideologies. And it found it in Islamic Feminism "and made progressive religious discourse its paramount discourse".²³ The New Veiling was a new tool for Egyptian feminists seeking autonomy and empowerment while still navigating at the fringes of social institutions.

The 'New Veiling' movement can be easily depicted as an offspring of the Islamic revival in Egypt. However, as this essay has argued, that reading neglects agency to the Egyptian women and ignores that the movement was a way to navigate through the changing economic circumstances of the *Infitah*. The 'opening' reforms produced the material conditions that led young students in overcrowded settings. They opted for veiling as a way of keeping their social respect while continuing with their studies or careers. The retreat of the State, the rise of informal jobs and massive outflows of male migrants forced women from wider economic backgrounds to join the workforce. These policies changed the patterns of economic development abruptly and the society was not culturally prepared for it. Egyptian women used the new veiling as a tool to match the social expectations and their economic needs caused by Sadat's opening reforms and the subsequent SAPs. At the same time, describing the 'New Veiling' as a merely religious movement is misleading. The 'New Veiling' can be better understood as a new stage of a longer feminist tradition in Egypt that adopted their discourses and practices to the national context and women's realities.

²¹ Mohamed Younis, *Daughters Of The Nile*, 487

²² Margot Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no.1 (Winter 2005): 6-28.

²³ Badran, "Secular and Islamic Feminism", 13

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