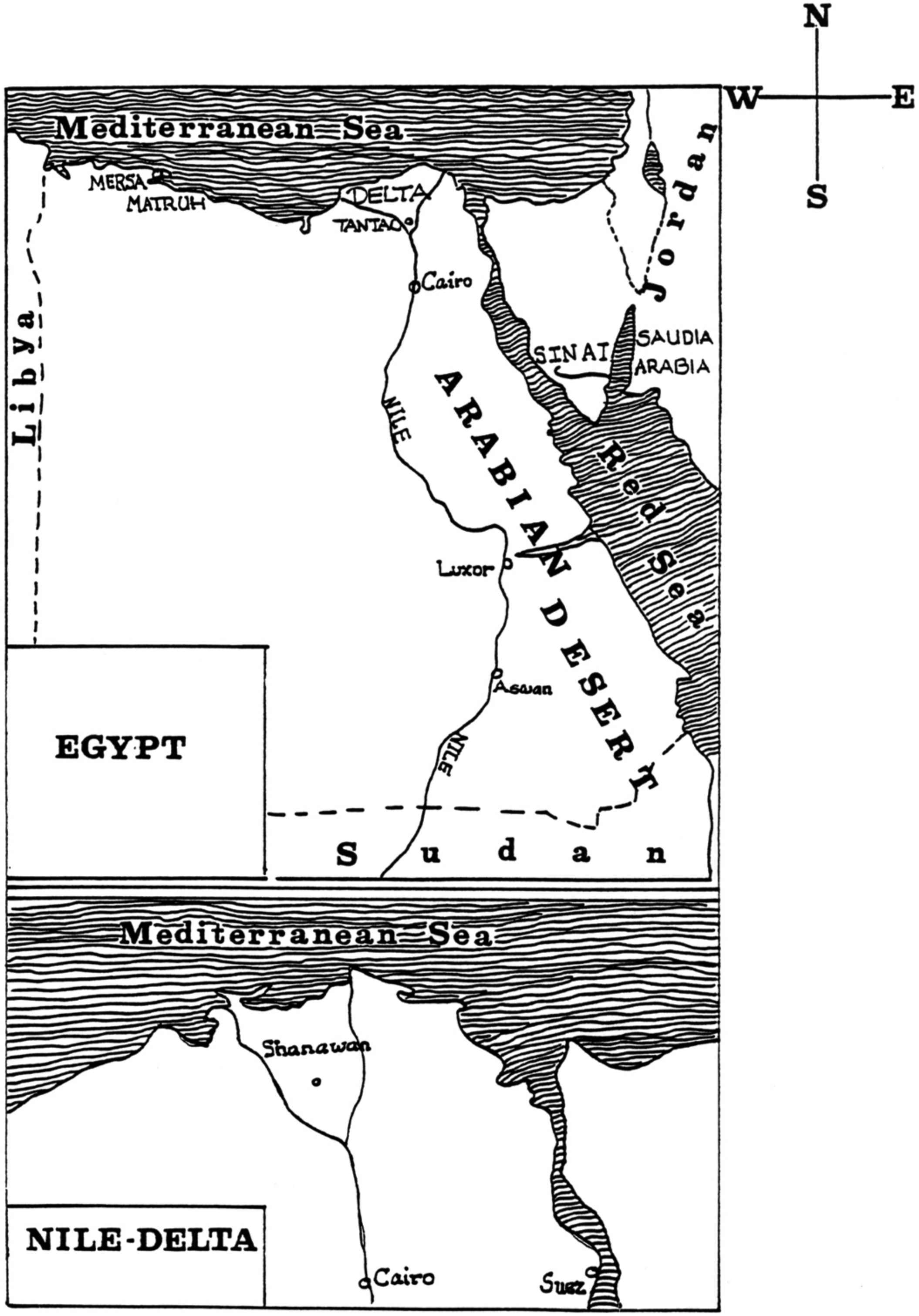
A STUDY GUIDE TO THE FILM

Elizabeth W. Fernea
1982

A VEILED REVOLUTION



Cover Design: Diane Watts

FOREWORD

The study guide that follows is designed to help students and teachers in discussing and understanding the film A Veiled Revolution. An opening synopsis of the film is followed by a general essay on the general topic of women and religious change.

Some biographical information about the people pictured in the film is given, and the voice-over commentary heard on the sound track is then reproduced. A series of suggested questions for class discussion follows, and finally a bibliography for further reading. The maps on the inside of the frong cover give some geographical context to the film.

The film is part of a larger educational project, Reformers and Revolutionaries: Middle Eastern Women, designed to provide information in visual and written form about social change in the Arab world from a woman's point of view. The project, a series of three films, three study guides and a book of readings was made possible in part with the aid of a grant from the education programs section of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Channel 4 Televsion, London, provided additional funding. Many people participated in the production of both films and study guides, in addition to those given specific credit in the film. Salah Dine Hammoud, Nermine Kamel and Abd Bibi worked on the subtitles. Diane Watts and Jenny Morter assisted in the production of the study guides. Dr. Mohammed Ali Jazayery, director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, supported the proposal for the project. Marjorie Payne helped implement the project. Throughout the three years from the project's inception until its conclusion, Robert Fernea provided encouragement and support.

I thank them all.

Elizabeth Fernea
Project Director

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II. A Veiled Revolution (Religious Change)

Egypt was the first Arab country where women marched in political demonstrations (1919): the first Arab country where women took off the veil (1923); the first Arab country to offer free public secular education to women (1924). Today the grand-daughters of those early feminists are putting on a modest garb, sometimes with full face veil and gloves, which they call Islamic dress. What are the reasons for this new movement? Is it an echo of the Iranian revolution? Is it a reflection of Western values? What do women themselves say about it?

The film explores the different facets of the new 'veiling' by interviewing women in many different walks of life: a former delegate to the United Nations; a secretary for an Egyptian insurance company; four university graduates now doing sociological research; a young girl who has decided to withdraw from the world; the head of Egyptian television news; an engineer; a famous pediatrician who is now head of the Islamic Women's Union; a social worker; and Seza Nabarawi, one of the two women who made history in 1923 by dramatically unveiling in public.

"The feminine veil has become a symbol: that of the slavery of one portion of humanity," wrote French ethnologist Germaine Tillion in 1966. This view of the veil is one that appears again and again in the west, partly of course because it is indeed a dramatic visual symbol. The veil 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.

The film offers the viewer a chance to decide how the new patterns of veiling and conservative dress in Egypt are evolving. Are they the result of a woman's own choice or a public imposition on a woman's freedom to choose? The film also suggests some of the social and economic changes in Egypt which have given a new significance to forms of conservative dress.

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 rather than the rule. Yet it has continued to be the rule in Saudi Arabia, North Yemen and some areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. And now patterns are shifting again, as the film shows.

Western and Middle Eastern rejection of, or 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 that of chastity, a 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 purposes, religious purposes, and social purposes, it is a symbol within the society itself that can find new uses, "an outward sign of a complex reality". This is what is suggested by some of the women featured in the film. 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 form shown in the film 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 like the older garments worn before the turn of the century, the milaya, the head scarf, the long full black dress. They 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-class 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 within Egypt suggest that this is evidence of 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 fifties 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, for Egypt is a society which still considers itself a Muslim state and where religion and politics, church and state, 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 Quran 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 Koranic 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 a simple statement of religious affiliatiion, 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, 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 as high as are found among women. Such apparel may even be politically risky these days as it suggests sympathy with Muslim "extremists", as their critics call them.

A third important point to be made, and one that the women in the film stress repeatedly, is that the choice to wear Islamic dress is one that 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 are influenced by their peers, and the decision is one hotly debated within families and with different groups of friends. This is most graphically demonstrated by the scene near the end of the film where four young women, recent graduates of Cairo universities, argue about whether or not to wear Islamic dress, and its advantages and disadvantages.

Finally, in addition to the genuine religious motives avowed by

many young women, the wearing of Islamic dress has 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. This places a strain on the traditional boundaries between men and women, and may also place strains on the public reputation of the young women. For it is true that many of the outward signs of the older Egyptian society--veiling, seclusion of women, segregatinn of women from public work places, educational institutions, etc.---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, like Negla in the film, cover themselves completely. They take the Koranic 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. but see themselves as making a statement, or taking action

that strengthens their own position with the society. They continue to attend colleges and universities, work outside the home, mingle with men in classes and on the streets. They also are attending study groups in mosques and private homes to learn more about their own faith and law; many have taken the "service" aspect of Islamic teaching seriously, and, under the direction of perscns like Dr. Zahira Abdine, do volunteer work among the poor. Two young medical students and one doctor from Nabileh's study group, for example, 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 old problems 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. This is perhaps the strongest message the film conveys.

Cast of Characters In order of Appearance:

Nabileh Attieh — Secretary, insurance company in Cairo. Graduate of secretarial school in the Sayyida Zeinab district, where she lives with parents and an unmarried sister. One of five children, aged twenty-five, unmarried. Rejected three marriage proposals with parental approval. Strong religious convictions. Attends weekly study group at the mosque.

Nawal Sirry — Head of news coverage and transmission, Egyptian Television Corporation, Cairo. Graduate of Cairo University in sociology. Began her media career 20 years ago in journalism, moved into television in it's early years. Married. No children.

Negla — Friend of Nabileh. Graduate of secretarial school in Sayyida Zeinab district, Cairo. Unmarried. Lives at home with parents. Does not work outside the home.

Seza Nabarawi — Pioneer feminist in Egypt. Educated in France. Widowed. One married daughter living in Europe. With Hoda Sharawi, was first woman to remove veil in public in 1923. Politically active throughout the years since that time, for Egyptian nationalist ambitions, and for women's rights. Now 86, lives quietly in Cairo.

Dr. Zahira Abdine — Director, Giza Children's Hospital. Professor of Pediatrics, Cairo University Medical School. Coordinator, Muslim Women's Cooperative Association. Married. Grown Children. Educated in Egypt and for two post graduate years in medical shools in Britain. Honorary degree from British medical school. Leads study group in mosque. Active in medical, religious and social affairs all over Egypt. Lives in Cairo.

Aziza Hussain Former UN Delegate from Egypt.
Served on UN Commission for Women's Rights, as Egyptian delegate. Pioneer in family planning in Egypt. Started Cairo Family Planning Association in the 50's. Married. No children. Presently president, International Planned Parenthood Federation. Lives in Cairo.

Safa, Omaymam Hawaideh and Afaf. Four social researchers for an independent business and marketing corporation in Cairo. Recent graduates of Egyptian universities. (Cairo University, Safa in literature; Afaf in commerce; Hawaideh in Social work; Ein Shams University, Omayma in law.) The four have been working on research project together for one year, surveying attitudes towards women's education in Cairo. All live at home with parents. Safa and Afaf are engaged to be married.

A VEILED REVOLUTION

Commentary

Women in the Mosque!

A revolution in Egypt, where the mosque has long been a bastion of men's power.

Although Muslim women have the same religious duties as men, in the past women were expected to worship and pray at home.

But these women represent a movement that is not only changing the face of the mosque, but the streets of Cairo itself.

Cairo is a sprawling cosmopolitan city of 11 million people.

Although Egypt is a Muslim state,

women on the streets appear little different from women in the West.

For the last 50 years middle class women have worn Western dress, their skirts short, their heads uncovered.

This dress distinguishes them from more traditional women,

who continue to wear what they have always worn - a long full dress and head scarf.

But today middle class women are covering themselves up again.

A new style of conservative dress is appearing on the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities.

It began in the early seventies, when women started to cover their hair with scarves or turbans. Now some have lengthened their skirts, or wear full length fitted dresses. Others have put on loose gowns and more enveloping headdresses.

Nabilah Attieh is 25 years old. She was 19 when she first put on what she calls "Islamic Dress". She says she is obeying the Koran which tells women to dress modestly and cover their heads.

Nabilah is unmarried and lives at home with her parents.

Since most Cairo stores still sell only Western fashions, Nabilah, with the help of her mother, designs and sews her own modest dresses.

Nabilah works in an office like thousands of other young women. This is something new in Egypt. Until recently respectable women did not work outside the home in the company of strange men.

Although the economic situation has changed and women must go out to work, moral attitudes have not changed. Now, more than ever, a woman must be careful of her reputation in public.

In the increasingly crowded streets,

jammed together on the packed trams and buses, women and men are in constant physical contact. Such closeness is thought dangerous in this society, where even casual meetings between men and women are considered to be potentially sexual.

So this new style of dress does provide some kind of protection for women, as it is a clear statement of their respectability.

More and more women are beginning to wear Islamic dress.

Not only secretaries and clerks, but engineers like these women in Cairo's TV studios.

Half the people employed here are women. Of these, 70% are wearing some form of modest dress.

Nawal Sirry is head of all news transmissions in Egypt and has been working in television for twenty years.

One of the first generation of women university graduates to work in TV, she has always worn Western dress.

These days she finds young graduates choosing to wear modest dress.

How does she feel about this transformation?

For a small group of women 'keeping the Faith' means more than simply wearing modest dress.

Like Nabilah's friend Negla, they cover their faces with heavy veils and their hands with gloves.

Veiled women, like Negla, say they wish to emulate the wives of the Prophet Mohammed, who were hidden from public view.

But other women feel that a dress like Nabilah's is modest enough and that veiling the face is more than is necessary.

Does wearing the veil mean a woman must stay at home?

The simple issue of dress, then, is not so simple, for it raises basic questions about the proper role of women in a modern Islamic society.

Negla's brother, a local Imam, believes in a literal interpretation of the Koran.

But Egyptian women, despite tradition and expectation, have <u>not</u> stayed at home.

Even when fully vieled, women took to the streets to demonstrate in the 1919 revolt against British rule.

One of these intrepid and patriotic women was the young Ceza Nabarawi.

Now 86, she and Hoda Sharawi were the founders of Egyptian families.

In 1923 they were the first Egyptian women to dramatically and publically cast off the veil.

After Ceza and Hoda's dramatic gesture in 1923, upper and middle class Egyptian women went on to express their freedom by rejecting the veil and traditional dress, and adopting Western clothes.

They became a strong and dynamic force in Egyptian political life, fighting and winning campaigns for the vote,

equal education and for limiting the age of marriage for girls.

In the fifties they were at the forefront of demonstrations demanding Egyptian independence.

Yet today their granddaughters seem to be retreating behind the veil again.

How do the old fighters for women's rights feel about this?

On the campus of Cairo University, long a centre of dissent and political protest,

the controversy is not yet over.

Here, some of the most fervent supporters of the strictest religious position are to be found.

For many students, confronted daily by the different expressions of the movement, whether or not to wear modest dress has become a difficult personal dilemma.

But dress <u>can</u> be important in a nation's history. It has been used as a symbol in revolutions all over the world -- from Algeria to Iran.

Since the time of the prophet, devout Muslim women, like Nabilah, have fulfilled their duty to pray at home -

far from the centre of religious power, the mosque.

But today, a quiet revolution is under way.

Nabilah's religious conviction is taking her and other educated women out of the home and into the mosque.

For the first time, women's study groups are meeting regularly in mosques all over Cairo.

Politics and religion, church and state, have never been separated in Egypt. And family law is based on the Koran.

It has always been men who have studied and interpreted these Koranic laws that govern women's lives ... marriage, divorce and child custody.

Now women are exploring for themselves the sources of their faith and law.

To understand the law is perhaps the first step towards re-interpreting it.

For the last 60 years Egyptian women have struggled for their rights in the same way as Western women.

Today, many are seeking new paths to freedom ...

within the framework of their own Islamic traditions.

"A Veiled Revolution"

Questions for Class Discussion

1. What do you think are the reasons behind the custom of veiling in many Islamic countries?

2. The Bible says: "Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her head . . . It is the same as if her head were shaven . . . Let her wear a veil." (Corinthians 11:5-7)

   The Koran says: "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands . . ." (Surah XXIV, Verse 31)

   Can you suggest some reasons for Mulsims' continued respect for this Koranic verse: And for Christian disregard for the same statement in the Bible?

3. In the film, what is the significance of the veil for
   a) Nawal Sirry, Cairo television news director
   b) Negla, the young woman who is totally veiled and gloved
   c) Seza Nabarawi, pioneer Egyptian feminist
   d) the four young women graduates of Cairo universities

4. In addition to religious belief, what factors may influence a woman's choice to wear or not to wear modest dress?

5. Compare the new style of women's modest dress in Egypt with a) Amish communities' dress in Pennsylvania; b) hippie fashions of the 60's in America; c) the current fad, in Paris and New York and London, of wearing Texas traditional cowboy garb.

6. In any culture, dress is a statement of membership in a group as well as a personal statement. How does the new style of modest dress in Egypt fit into these categories.

7. In what ways are men involved in a woman's decision to wear modest dress, do you think? Today? In the past? In what ways are other women involved in the decision?

8. The movement toward modest dress in Egypt has been described as a religious revival, a political statement and as a feminist movement. What do you think?

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A Veiled Revolution was filmed in May, 1981, on location in Egypt.

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