From Mini skirts to Veil
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*MUSIC: “Glamorous” cover by Gossip Girl.*

Short skirts, sleeveless tops, high heels, red striking lips stick, no I’m not talking about the fashion week in Paris, neither am I talking about Burberry’s latest collection. I’m talking about Egyptian women in the 1950s and the 1960s.

The British novelist, L.P. Hartley once wrote, “the past is another country, they do things differently there.” With regards to Egyptian women, this couldn’t be truer. Throughout the past 50 years Egyptian women’s appearance witnessed a drastic change from what I just described to majority of women covering their body and faces with the Veil and.

In the next few minutes we’ll dig into history to see what is behind this major transition, but let us first understand how was it like back then.

*NAT SOUND of birds.*

Mrs. Ragaa Mansy, a 69-year-old housewife, describes this period of her life as the era of class and elegance. It was very normal for her and her female friends to go out on a typical Thursday night wearing above the knee sleeveless dresses that exposes her arms and legs.

*Ragaa: “in this period when I was in university the fashion was influenced by the foreign people which lived with us like Italian, Greeks, and Armin; we always dressed like them, shirt without sleeves, and a little bit short the dress and we can go any place with this dressing without the objection of anybody.”*

*MUSIC: “All Out War” by Hans Zimmer.*

Cairo, just like Alexandria, witnessed this drastic transition. It witnessed young ladies walking freely to university or school wearing mini skirts and it also witnessed women walking wearing
the veil or Nekab and being exposed to many forms of verbal or physical sexual harassment everyday.

Dr. Zeinab Shaheen, a Professor at the sociology department at the American university in Cairo, assures that fashion and style of dressing sure reflects changes in society and that is most obvious in women rather than men.

That helps in understating the three main reasons behind this radical transition in Egyptian women’s way of dressing.

The first main reason, or let us just say event, is the 1967 war or the defeat war.

*Shahein: “in the first phase, after 67, there was an understanding and there was an assumption that it was due to October defeat. People felt that they to redress the balance through more adherence to religion and therefore an expression of that, one of the expression of that was the veil.”*

According to Dr. Zeinab Shahein after the 1967 defeat the Egyptian population in general started gathering around religion or Islam as a sort of national strength to help them pass through this period of time; and because women represent a big part of the society they also started to be more religious and reflected that through dressing styles like hijab in nekab.

*MUSIC: “Raks al Nasha’ar Women's Folklorie”*
In the early 1970s Egyptians started migrating to Arab gulf countries searching for job opportunities and by the 1980s they started coming back to Egypt no only with money but with much more.

*Shahein:* “During the 70s and during the 80s, it was Egyptian migrants returning from rich oil gulf states. They brought with them some of the cultural patterns including code of dress, women’s veil.”

Also, according to Dr. Zeinab Shahein when Egyptians were exposed to other culture of the gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Emirates, or Kuwait for a long period they adapted to their culture including the dress code.

According to Egypt state information service Website, in the 1970s the number of women who chose to wear the veil rose from 30% to 65%, not because women suddenly became so religious but because veil was viewed as the news cultural tradition.

The elite too started adapting to the new fashion. Many Egyptian famous singers and actresses, such as Sabreen, started encouraging other women to cover up their hair too.
Last but not least, also in the period of the 1970s and the 1980s a lot of women started joining the Egyptian work force and they took the veil or the nekab as a form of self-protection. Women were more liberal in the sense of going out to work yet still wanted to preserve their traditions by wearing the veil.

*Shahein:* “Women who are fearful of going into the public sphere and therefor it is a conservative move. Don’t you think that I am liberal now, don’t you think I am loose, no I am very still conservative, I am still traditionalist, I didn’t get out of the domestic sphere out of just fun because middle class careen women made more income so they had to step outside and this is why they wore the veil; it reflects a kind of social contra, it reflects a kind of social circumstances.”

There is another reason that is commonly know by many Egyptians as one of the main reasons behind women wearing more conservative cloths and that is sexual harassment.

*SOUND EFFECT: buzzer*

Wrong!

Sexual harassment was never a reason behind the transition in women clothing style.

*Dr. Sherif abd El Azeem:* “I would understand that some women going to some neighborhoods they would choose to cover themselves or wear more unrevealing clothing, in some neighborhoods, but she wouldn’t do this all her life, to sacrifice her way of dress all her life wearing a religious dress in any neighborhood and under any circumstances I would find this rather strange. I wouldn’t except any one to do this.”
Dr. sherif Abd el Azeem, a professor at the Electronics engineering department at the American University in Cairo and also the Founder of Resala charity institution, believes that Sexual harassment has nothing to do with how women dress now or how they used to dress back in the 50s. He simply thinks that sexual harassment problems increased now days because Egyptians are much worse morally than they used to be back then and even if women walked on the streets covered from head to toe they will still be sexually harassed.

Abdel Azeem: “cheating in exams is getting worse, sexual harassment is getting worse, everything is getting worse. Everything was there, but it is increasing, it is increasing that’s all. Morally we are not well educated, we are not well brought up, there is no moral up bringing in this country, we don’t emphasize the moral up bringing and the values; there is something wrong with our values in this country, so it is getting worse yes.”

This clearly falsifies the theory of women wearing more conservative cloths because of sexual harassment problems because simply veiled women still get physically and verbally harassed walking on the Egyptian street.

*MUSIC* “Dream Lover” by Bobby Darin.

There has been an obvious major transition in women’s dress code from the 1950s to what we see nowadays and if that means something it means that clothing reflects the position of women in society and how they are affected by major events happening around them. Through women we can know major problems that has happened in a society at a certain time period, and how women are presented in a certain society tells a lot about it.
I would like to thank Mrs. Ragaa Mansey, Dr. Zeinab Shahein and Dr. Sherif Abd El Azeem for their great contribution and time.

Music by:

“Glamorous” cover by Gossip Girl.

“All Out War” by Hans Zimmer.

“Raks al Nasha'ar Women's Folkloric”

“Dream Lover” by Bobby Darin.