

To Veil or Not to Veil

A Review of Revealing Reveiling: Islamist Gender Ideology in Contemporary Egypt

(*Sherifa Zuhur*)

By Nina Costanza

After [the matron of the house] had slipped off my gown and saw my corset stays, she was very struck at the sight of them, and cried out to the other ladies in the bath: "Come hither and see how cruelly the poor English ladies are used by their husbands!" (Mary Wortley Montagu, Shakir, p.4)

Today many Muslim women in Egypt, particularly the younger generation, have chosen to "reveil" which means typically donning the head scarf known as *higab*. Just over a decade ago it was less common to see veiled women on the streets of Cairo, a custom that their forebears struggled to overthrow at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Revealing Reveiling, Sherifa Zuhur terms this renaissance of covering as emblematic of the new or modern Islamic woman, which seems at first a contradiction of terms. Is it truly a modern movement in which women are forging their Islamic identities in a position of feminist strength/choice, or is it a return to past, archetypal images? Is choosing to veil a considered philosophical stance of political, religious, and cultural identification, akin to a new kind of Islamic feminism or revolution, or is it instead a less conscious predisposition and adherence to a new fundamentalist authority and fervor? It is a complicated issue. If it is a defensive reaction to continued Western domination and trivialization of Islamic culture and thus a conformity to Islamic doctrine, could veiling be simultaneously a modern and a reactionary position? And is such a position ultimately liberating or confining? The veil itself is an ambiguous garment. It is a concealing and possibly inhibiting garment, but those who choose to wear the *higab* describe it as liberating and elevating.

