

4 Egypt: And Again the Veil – The Emotional Entanglement of Fashion, Beauty and the Self

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Whenever a strict pattern of purity is imposed on our lives it is either highly uncomfortable or it leads into contradiction if closely followed; and if not observed hypocrisy. That which is negated is not thereby removed. The rest of life, which does not tidily fit the accepted categories, is still there and demands attention.

(Mary Douglas 2003: 202)

Introduction

It was on our way home, having had breakfast in one of Downtown¹ Alexandria's local restaurants, when my friend Neda asked me to join her for a walk through her neighbourhood. Located at "the other side" (al-nāhiya al-tāniya², or the Eastern part) of Alexandria, her neighbourhood was once an upper middle-class quarter with villas and private gardens but had since lost its glory. While the area is still considered to be middle-class (with a shift in demographics to large parts of lower middle class, rather than upper-middle class inhabitants), urban transformation has changed its architecture. Many of the colonial buildings from the periods of French and British

¹ "Downtown" is a geographical location and a social neighbourhood in the heart of Alexandria.

² Note on the transcription of Arabic terms, places and names: The rules of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft have been applied in the transcription of Arabic terms, places and names as well as in the transcription of expressions in Egyptian dialect (as far as possible). In some cases, words or expressions have been abridged according to their pronunciation in Arabic (or in Egyptian dialect). Some terms which are generally used as such in English, have not been transcribed. Quotes from Arabic have been translated into English by the author – unless otherwise indicated. The authors own amendments or omissions are indicated by means of squared brackets.

occupations had fallen into disrepair and decay, and suffering from decades of neglect, became fragile and unsafe. The lack of renovation incentives means it is generally cheaper and more profitable to tear them down and put high-rise apartment buildings on the sites.³ Approaching her neighbourhood, Neda put back on the veil that she had taken off on our way to the restaurant wrapping around her neck and shoulders as a scarf: “the city has eyes everywhere,” she told me (*iskandariyya ‘andāhā ‘aynāhā fi kull makān*). Her voice carried an undertone of amusement and indifference as if she had become reconciled to the fact that she considered herself unable to change the status quo (of the omnipresent social observation in the sense of surveillance and exposure to judgement):

Even if you don’t see them, they see you. Me and you in this Uber for example, we cannot really see who is watching us. But they are watching us. And it is not only them watching us, it is them judging us. Which is not your problem obviously, but it is my problem. In the end, I will be the one who is being confronted. I don’t know, by neighbours, my family, my husband. It does not matter who actually. I just don’t want my children to suffer because I could not control myself. (Neda, 3.4.2017)

She referred here to her unveiling when we were together in the car. Neda described the veil to be an emotion for her, an emotion on various levels. For God (Islam as in religion), for herself (mind and body) and for society. That the veil is tied to emotions or an emotionally charged topic brings together several feelings and positionings that navigate the exterior and the interior: The study of the veil will allow for important insights into the plurality of “inner” and “outer” experiences of women, by making sense of women’s individual trajectories. She continued to talk about how the veil diminished her feeling of beauty, especially as she grew older, and her son and her daughter were in their first year at university and their last year in high school. Her husband was neither very attentive nor appreciative of her:

I feel I am invisible. With the veil outside of my house and without the veil inside my house. It does not make a difference. I am coping. *Al-ḥamdu lillāh* my children are well and healthy. But I am bored. I was very busy with them, but now they don’t need me as much anymore. And my husband, he is a good father, but he is distant, I feel not seen. The veil was hiding my beauty when I was younger, and it slowly took away my beauty. Now I am older, and I am not beautiful anymore. My hair lost all its power. And I still cannot take off the veil. For my husband, my kids and also for my hair. Impossible to show it to anyone. (Neda, 3.4.2017)

³ The change of Alexandria’s landscape in terms of growing density in certain areas of the city has increased the feelings of social control for many of my interlocutors.

The international academic debate about the veil has been intensive in numerous books with a noticeable tendency to subject-fatigue. In the abundance of literature produced the focus often lies on political discursive frames rooted within the tensions and arguments of politicised debates over modernisation versus tradition. Yet, I return to the subject without hesitation, since this is a topic that was brought up in numerous conversations: Sometimes as a side comment mentioning women's appearances or explicit statements in relationship to larger political discussions and emotional expressions over how to wear, if or not to wear the veil. During the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood discussions over women's pious appearances and dresscodes gained urgency and re-entered public debates in numerous ways. I specifically asked what the lived experiences of women are in negotiating their roles and appearances both internally and externally, that seem to be less central to politicised discussions. With regard to the above quote by Neda, the focus of the present contribution is different to those of previous publications, namely it examines the veil as an extended emotion that spans social responsibilities and commitments, as well as its role as a religious emotion. Moreover, the conversations and interviews I conducted were also expressly emotional in both their verbal and their non-verbal expressions. Emotions, fashion, social milieu, religiosities and imagined communities that can arise through women's shared experiences are thus the analytical categories that I refer to when I discuss the notion of beauty in combination with showing or covering one's hair. Both hair and beauty are part of this contribution, since they have been mentioned by most of my interlocutors as co-constitutive in the context of fashion, to which the veil also belongs. Fashion here is not understood as singular phenomenon – rather I analyse the veil as part of fashion, in combination with individuality in everyday life. This includes different fashion styles and aspects of religion and religiosity, morality, social expectations, and pressure. The role of the self must also be highlighted, since every woman had their own opinion in our discussions on the veil, ranging from being shy to being self-confident about their position. I will therefore analyse the veil in the social milieu specific contexts of fashion, beauty, and hair within the realm of the self, and processes of individualisation to contribute to these debates from a different angle. The multilayered analytical categories have been developed to account for the coexistence of different categories that are all entangled in the everyday lives of my interlocutors.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Franke 2020 and 2021), the realm of the family can be indicative of greater conflicts that are fomenting in society. The veil, too, can be a conflictual object and a symbol of power struggles among various family members of the nuclear or extended family, such as between spouses, children and parents, siblings, grandchildren and grandparents, as well as between nieces and nephews with their aunts and uncles. At the same time, the veil can resemble a void, a piece of cloth that should not be discussed – either because it is unaccepted in the family and none of the women wear it (Franke 2020) or because it is out of question to unveil, and close family members declined any discussion about its removal (see examples in this

article).⁴ The veil then is not only a piece of cloth, it is an embodied practice that women perform for numerous reasons, as I will discuss in this article. Among the motives behind the decision to veil or not to veil are religious, social, historical, economic, and political reasons – depending on the respective social contexts and milieus. As embodied practice, the veil is also part of the everyday life of women (and men). For some of the women, it might be a daily commitment and subjugation to God and family, by obeying her husband and being a role model for her children. For others, it can be a daily struggle to put on the veil, knowing it is a religious obligation, yet finding it almost impossible to adhere to these rules. Yet, for others it can be a statement of resistance to keep the veil on or to refuse to put it on at all (despite having been asked to do so by various family members). The aspect of gender must also be accounted for in my discussion of “the veil debate”, since it is an embodied practice that is performed exclusively by women.

As stated by most of my interlocutors, Islamic fashion for both men and women has increased enormously especially since the late 20th century when religious discourses of various types have spread throughout the country encouraging certain styles of fashion that are mostly perceived to be more religious or conservative. Consequently, the *ḥiğāb* is continuously subject to political, social, and religious discourses in contemporary Egypt with the prevailing impression that the wearing of so-called Islamic fashion is taking new formations and manifest in a multitude of styles and varieties. In the present contribution I put a focus on individual experiences of wearing the *ḥiğāb*, with the intention to grasp general shifts and changes in the religious, socio-political meanings of the *ḥiğāb* and how it manifests in women’s lives. As regards my main research question, I am specifically interested in the emotions tied to veiling in terms of the intimate perspectives of wearers and observers who are pro, contra or indifferent towards the veil. This includes a closer look at the entanglement of emotions with veiling (down- and up-veiling), un-veiling and re-veiling, from a gendered perspective.⁵ Moreover, I ask how these perspectives impact the everyday lives of my interlocutors and the constitution of their intimate selves. I consider the nuances and details that my interlocutors depicted during our conversations to be important for my analysis of overall (religious and non-religious) trends in everyday life.

⁴ This void for example can be created by normative expectations to social belonging, milieu, religiosity. In this sense expected social performances are tied to the social milieu identity of the respective family (thus social pressure according to social milieu are decisive here). Many of my interlocutors identified the father as being the one deciding upon the veil in the respective family. However, other male family members, brothers, uncles, cousins were also mentioned. In addition, in many interviews it became clear, that women were the one’s exerting power over other women regarding the veil, either to enforce veiling or to enforce unveiling. These women can belong to the nuclear or extended family, but they can also be potential or future mother-in-laws, colleagues or even neighbours.

⁵ I emphasise this, because I do not want to exclusively focus on the current trend of unveiling in Egypt. My friend Salma encouraged me in our numerous conversations to also portray the situations of veiled women, in her eyes the trend to unveil is not a good one and not representative of the developments in Egypt.

The international academic debate about Islam and its relation to and with fashion has resulted in numerous scholarly works (Ahmed 2011, 1992; Abaza 2007; Abu-Lughod 1986, 1998; Baron 1989; Badran 1995, 2013, 2016; Barakah 2002; El Guindi 1999, 2005; Herrera 2000; Mahmood 2015, 2005; Maṣṣūr 2004; Al-Muṭahharī 1987; Wikan 1991). Most authors deal with the aspect of how gendered fashion is influenced and produced by power relations. The analysis focusses in many cases on the assumption that the acceptance or rejection of Islamic fashion leads either to the weakening of established Islam or to its reinforcement (Al-Šarīf 2015). Thus the meta level of the academic debate on dynamics of Islamic fashion in Egypt deals with down-veiling and up-veiling and corresponding opposed trends, such as un-veiling.⁶ In my contribution to this debate, I will analyse the complexity of numerous fashion varieties that are re-emerging from new forms or even waves of religiosity by referring to the concept of self in the sense of individual (religious as well as non-religious) agency.⁷ My account of the numerous veil(ed) stories portrayed by my interlocutors is indicative of processes of individualisation. Their approval, opposition and indifference towards the veil opened up rather intimate perspectives that ask for individual interpretations and an analysis of individual everyday lifestyles.

The Historical and Socio-political Setting of my Research

Although “the debate about the veil” is not new, the setting for my research and the relevant time frame for my interlocutors is the January 25, 2001 revolution and its aftermath with the social dynamics that have been triggered by the uprising. Debeuf and Abdelmeguid (2015) speak of a “quiet revolution” or “silent revolution” that is ongoing, especially in the virtual space of social media and the internet. They argue that the digitalization of society has enabled and empowered segments of society to continue the struggle for equality, justice, and individualisation beyond the punishing arm of the regime and the disciplining eye of society (Debeuf and Abdelmeguid 2015).

The turmoil of the revolution and its aftermath have been meticulously described and analysed by various scholars such as Abaza (2014),⁸ Fahmy et al. (2019), Saad (2012) and Schielke (2015). Mona Abaza (2020) highlighted how, since the revolution, young individuals searching for identities are torn between agency and passivity. She identifies insecurities, generational differences, and misunderstandings in terms of values and appreciation amid dystopian environments. This article relates to the existing scholarship and deals with searches for identity among young Egyptians but

⁶ For women, the veil is the most discussed and visible marker in the debate, while for men it is usually the beard and religious accessories such as the prayer beads (*masbaḥa*).

⁷ This also includes social agency and how fashion statements can be indicators for processes of individualisation in the sense of how women choose to perform and make the veil a fashion item or not.

⁸ See also Mona Abaza: “The Revolution’s Barometer”, *Jadaliyya*, 12 June 2012 (<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5978/the-revolutions-barometer>).

goes one step further by focusing on the dimension of emotions related to fashion, of individualisation, and (non)religiousities in its analysis.

This struggle for one's (non) religious positioning and identity is consequently also a struggle for individualisation (Fuchs 2015; Fuchs and Rüpke 2015).⁹ The processes of individualisation that are currently happening in Egyptian society are one of the major findings of my field study (Franke 2020, 2021, 2022a). Changing one's appearance can have a transformative effect on one's self (body and mind), and it can also provide a hint to political or religious beliefs (Franke 2021). Women's public appearances can be indicative of ongoing contestation over national, religious and individual identities (Franke 2022a). Most of my interlocutors stressed their "very own" perspective on religion: on how to be religious or *not* to be religious, how to believe or to *not* believe, how to practice or *not* to practice, what to wear or what *not* to wear. They particularly reflect on the crucial question of the "why" – which shall be confined to the intimate space of the self (Foucault 1988). I follow Martin Fuchs in that my "approach [...] implies that one has to be open to the inclusion of additional, partially different experiences and narratives of individualisation [...], it means focusing, above all, on the *experiences*, *doings* and *perspectives* of [individuals]" [...] (Fuchs 2015: 333 [emphases are mine]). According to Fuchs, the lens to research religious developments should be the concept of individualisation, that is, how religion is "lived, articulated and re-instituted [...] [this includes how] actors see themselves and their practices" (Fuchs 2015: 333). In his analysis Fuchs focuses on relationships of the individual with others, which are interactive and constitutive of social imagination. I agree with his observation that notions of the self should be centre stage in analysing processes of individual religiousities (Fuchs 2015). Drawing on fieldwork with both men and women, this article seeks to bring more nuance to the debate that holds unveiling is an act of empowerment, often correlated with an alienation from religion, and veiling resembles an act of increased piousness.¹⁰ I rather want to enrich this debate by the individual narratives of my interlocutors who often do not take decided positions and are meandering between different strategies of being Muslim to *doing* being Muslim and "Muslimness on demand" (similar to the non-conformist perspectives and critical voices which I have analysed elsewhere (Franke 2021)). While the matter of the veil is political, religious and social at its core, women's emotional reactions are crucial to understanding how they make sense of the pressures, expectations and reactions they engage with. My ethnographic analysis of everyday interactions lies at the crossroads of the many gazes (personal, public, familial, international) women are exposed to and judged by. One intention is to rethink the notions of religious embodiment, patriarchy, (gendered) resistance, and empowerment. A second intention then is to ask about the complex meanings of the wearing of the veil and the ambiguities women experience prior, during and after putting on or taking off the veil. I asked my interlocutors for example if they are in favour of the veil or not, and why (or why not), and

⁹ On processes of individualisation and identity formation, see also Alhourani (2018), as well as Hall (1990).

¹⁰ See also Barakah (2002), Kütük-Kuriş (2021), Mahmood (2015) and Manşur (2004).

if the (down-/un-)veiling has to do with politics, society or religion, (or not), or other factors? And most importantly what is the emotional spectrum of my interlocutors' changing intimate engagements with perceived mainstream Islamic ideals? Here, the focus is on notions of beauty and hair, fashion, and emotions as part of the everyday embodied practice of veiling in the realm of religiosities and processes of individualisation.¹¹ This includes the doubts and the ambiguities, the fear, the guilt and the failure that they expressed, but also the hesitancy to make a decision and to negotiate and re-negotiate their positions and social identities towards their selves, towards the veil, towards society, towards politics, and towards Islam. Moreover, the emotional spectrum includes expectations and visions of beauty, of ideal, sometimes even utopian aspirations as much as it includes delusions, frustrations, anger, trauma, and dystopian disenchantment.

Before entering a more detailed analysis of my data, I will describe the political and religious situation in Egypt in the periods when I conducted my fieldwork. In 2011, political and social dynamics erupted that ultimately led to Egypt entering a period of strict military rule that controls and defines all spaces of civil life, including religion (as well as social media). Alexandria formed the centre for my research; having myself grown up in Alexandria, I was reliant upon, and grateful for, my social network there, especially as I took my three small children with me. Alexandria is also an interesting city with diverse and heterogeneous (non-) religious milieus, including Sunni, Coptic, Sufi, and Salafi communities. Being the second largest city in Egypt with approximately 5 million inhabitants, it plays a significant role in the structure by which politics and religion influence the public sphere. The majority of its population is Sunni Muslim, while roughly 10% are Coptic Christians. Among the Muslim population are members and followers of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, many of them have been imprisoned, and those who are still part of the Brotherhood act in secret and have gone underground,¹² while others play a role in the public sphere without being identifiable as members of the Brotherhood. Others do not hide their membership, but still try not to attract attention. The current military regime's strict control of the public sphere, and sometimes even the private sphere via social media,

¹¹ The societal processes that are currently happening in many countries of the MENA region, are situated in individuals "very own" perspectives on issues of their everyday lives: on how to be religious or not to be religious, how to believe or to not believe, how to practice or not to practice, what to wear or what not to wear (Franke 2021; Loimeier 2021; Sieveking 2020). This struggle for one's (non-)religious positioning and identity formation is consequently also a struggle for individualisation (Fuchs/Rüpke 2015: 323–329; Fuchs 2015: 330–343; Alhourani 2008: 185–203; Hall 1990: 222–237). Processes of individualisation and identity making are negotiated within and beyond religious frameworks. I will particularly reflect on these recent processes by tracing the intimate experiences of women with regard to hair and beauty.

¹² I say "still" because the Muslim Brotherhood has been forbidden since the ousting of then-President Mursi during the military coup in 2013 which led to the presidency of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi (in power since 2014, re-elected in 2018). It has also been declared a terrorist organization. See "Egypt's Police Stop Terror in Track, Arrest 6 Muslim Brothers in Alexandria", *Albawaba News*, 16 September 2018 (<https://www.albawaba.com/news/egypts-police-stop-terror-track-arrest-6-muslim-brothers-alexandria-1186676>).

has meant members tend to act in secret and be more careful when wearing or saying things that would make it easy for others to recognise them as part of the Muslim Brotherhood. Other groups include the Salafiyyin, who are also not welcomed by the ruling regime, but are not as strictly prohibited as the Muslim Brotherhood, since they do not participate so actively in politics. By means of oppressive behaviour, the regime tries to control religious developments and dynamics in Egypt. Mosques and other public spaces are meticulously controlled, making it impossible for anything that deviates from the 'mainstream' to be publicly seen or heard. This is intended to stem every possible act of 'otherness'. How are women encountered in and how do women move in the public sphere? How have they been effected by these rapid political and social transformations?

This article is based on numerous informal conversations and interviews (as well as written conversations, participant observation and 'wardrobe research' (Woodward 2007) that I conducted during in 2016–2019 among middle class milieus of Alexandrians who described themselves as being defined by a higher level of education, often leading to well-paid jobs as doctors, engineers, bankers or self-employed entrepreneurs.¹³ The persons I interviewed and had informal conversations with are heterogeneous in terms of age, family status, leisure activities, place of living, religious upbringing and economic/financial backgrounds and ranged in age from young teens to older people in their 70s. I chose interviews as a research method, despite being aware of the limitations and difficulties of interviews and language when researching sensitive subjects, because I was particularly interested in the emic expressions of my interlocutors. My interlocutors who oppose the veil without wearing it (this includes those women who never wore it, as well as those who removed it at some point in their lives) would agree to talk to me regardless of the location for the interview. This was also the case for those who are in favour of the veil. My interlocutors who oppose the veil, but who wear it out of compulsion, were also open to interviews, however these interviews had to take place in specific locations such as my house or cafés with open spaces to avoid proximity to potential bystanders/listeners. It would have been impossible for me to meet them in their private homes and "observe" anything deviant from Islam, since they usually hide their "otherness" (sometimes even non-Muslimness) in front of their families. The language of the interviews was decided upon by my interlocutors and was usually either Arabic or English or a mix of both languages, though in some cases, German was chosen.¹⁴ Informal conversations are those conversations that I did not announce as an interview prior to the meeting. They would happen while we met to "socialize" or if we met by chance: e.g. at the playground with the children, or sharing a car or taxi, in the staircase or elevator of my building, or sit-

¹³ I will deal with the notion of middle-class milieus in the section Middle Classness and Fashion Styles of the present contribution.

¹⁴ All of my interlocutors have been informed and given their consent prior to the interviews about my academic intention, that I will use the interviews as sources for my work. All the names have been anonymised and personal details have been changed.

ting next to each other during meetings in larger groups (such as birthday gatherings, iftār invitations during Ramaḍān, joint restaurant visits, going to the same yoga/dance courses). Sometimes these informal conversations were exclusively between me and the other person, sometimes, especially if we met in a larger group, others would join the conversation. As soon as I noticed that a topic or the way my interlocutors would talk about the topic was relevant for my research, I would ask if I could use the information for my research. Upon consent, I would go on to ask if I could take notes or even record their statements. Since everyone spoke about the veil and it was omnipresent in the socio-scape of Alexandria, I will not present extensive biographic interviews, but various sequences from different interviews and conversations to highlight the variety of perspectives of my encounters. In these conversations, my interlocutors repeatedly referred to and were aware of the historical developments regarding fashion and the veil in Egypt, especially since the 20th century. I will therefore outline the development of the veil debate, since it mirrors the knowledge and is part of the knowledge production of my interlocutors.¹⁵

Throughout this article, I also mention interviews and conversations with “friends”. These friends are either persons I have known since my childhood, in the sense of “old” friends, or they are “new” friends, whom I met in different settings, such as parents of my children’s friends. We would meet regularly in each other’s private homes, initially without any “research intention”, but once we knew each other better, I would also ask them if they would like to share their insights with me and become part of my research.

The Veil in Context: Historical Developments of the Veil Debate in Egypt

In most Muslim majority countries the term of veil is used to describe various forms of coverings of the head (and body) by (an) additional piece(s) of cloth.¹⁶ These can be headscarves or scarves with or without ‘abāya (full body cover, cloak like throw) and are called (with different social milieu related connotations and styles) ḥiğāb,

¹⁵ Looking into intimate experiences of changing appearances, modifying one’s body or transforming one’s style with regards to the veil is particularly relevant in times of societal change. As such, this analysis is central to debates about women’s (fashionable) self-creation, processes of individualisation and (non-) religiosities. Women’s public appearances can be indicative of ongoing contestation over national, religious and individual identities (Franke 2022). The negotiation and re-negotiation of their roles in current social, economic and religious pressures are central to these debates.

¹⁶ The term “veil” is the most common English word for al-ḥiğāb, which not only refers to the female headscarf but also to shielding, close something or someone off, see Wehr (1958: 141–142). Cf. also Chelhod (2012) derived from the verb ḥağaba: to hide from view, conceal (for object or person by sth. put in front to hide it from view or isolate it). References to pre-Islamic veiling traditions of the Sassanids show the historical development of this practice. On Muslim actors, visibilities and public appearances see Göle (2002: 173).

tarḥa, iṣārb/aṣārb, ḥimār and niqāb (face veil) in Arabic (Siddiqui 2006; El Guindi and Zuhur 2009). Style wise, there are many versions and techniques to cover, with much space left to imagination and trial in terms of form, material, pattern and combination. Face and body can be completely or partially covered. These practices of veiling are usually associated by Muslims and non-Muslims with Islamic dress codes worn in public as based on interpretations of the Qurʾān.¹⁷ Thus, talking about “the” veil would be generalizing, unidimensional and not representative of the multifaceted forms and styles of veiling that exist throughout the world. However, for pragmatic reasons, I will apply my interlocutors’ common definition and refer to “the” veil as ḥiḡāb (ḥiḡāb in Egyptian Arabic), which shall describe the so-called headscarf.¹⁸ “The” niqāb will be used to describe the face veil, which is to be understood in combination of wearing “the” ‘abāya. Being aware of the heterogeneous forms of dressing that have changed and are changing according to time and space, I will mention those who veil differently in an explicit manner to point out their otherness from more mainstream practices of veiling.

Much has been written about the historical developments of the veil, especially on the time span since the 19th century (Baron 1989; Ahmed 1992). Colonialism and contestation of “Western” concepts and ideas have been points of focus in scholarly analyses of the veil, women’s position in society and patriarchal perspectives. The historical accounts then tackle the ideas of Islamism and its influence on dress codes and behaviour as well as the concepts and influences of Islamist feminism and Arab feminism (Ahmed 1992; Badran 1995; El Guindi 1983).

Looking at veiling in urban Egypt from a recent historical perspective of the 19th and 20th centuries demonstrates that veiling underlies dynamics that can correlate with other social and political developments (Badran 1995). A prominent example in Egypt’s recent history for taking off the (face) veil and for triggering a debate regarding women’s public appearance, is the 1923 case of Huda Shaarawi (Lanfranchi 2012). Huda Shaarawi and Saiza Nabarawi removed their face veils in the Cairo Railway Station – an act that has received much local and international attention in newspapers and academia and is still referred to as ground-breaking example for the agency of women in Egypt (Badran 1987): “This public gesture accelerated the process of unmasking the face some women had quietly begun earlier, including the feminist educator Nabawiyya Musa” (Badran 2016: 52).¹⁹ This development was continued throughout the following twenty years, and by the early 1940s the act of removing the veil (for both the face, niqāb and the head, ḥiḡāb) became popular among urban middle and upper class milieus in Egypt (Badran 2016).

¹⁷ Other forms of veiling also occur in different socio-geographical areas in Egypt. These are mostly recognisable as non-urban styles. In rural areas along the Nile, as well as in the oasis throughout the desert and the Sinai Peninsula, various forms of veiling can be recognised by means of different styles of covering. Donning the veil is not very popular in rural areas.

¹⁸ See also As-Sayyid (2013).

¹⁹ Cf. for the historical development of the debate Al-Barāzī (2016), ‘Abdel-Wahāb (1995), Maqdisī (2001), Nāṣīf (1998), Sobkī (1986) and Ṣa’rawī (1981).

The trend to unveil was persistent up until the 1970s when the veil again became visible with the influence of the “rising Islamists”, first at university campuses among younger women, as Margot Badran observed (Badran 1995, 2016). According to Badran, “[t]he hijab became a highly visible sign of a ‘return’ to Islam cum ‘flag’ of affiliation with Islamism, and politicised religious forces against the secular state as the enemy. Re-veiling also had a wider, more amorphous cultural dimension through its resurrecting of what was touted as ‘the’ correct practice and aligning culture and the people with political Islam” (Badran 2016: 59–60).²⁰

Leila Ahmed similarly observed that, up to the 1970s in particular, veiling was not very popular among the urban middle-class milieus.²¹ Photographs from this time depict women in the city wearing short dresses and skirts without headscarves. Religious dress codes were not common for women or men (Baron 1989: 380–382). Correlating this with political developments it becomes clear that after the replacement of the king with a president who was in favour of socialist ideologies in line with pan-Arabism, the political focus was not religiosity, while Islamism was still in its early phases. As the idea of pan-Arabism failed and politics needed to talk with the newly publicly visible Islamists who called themselves the Muslim Brotherhood, religion became a subject for debate and consideration in the public-political sphere, which led to a different way of dealing with religion in the private space and triggered diverse discussions resulting in various forms of embodied practices.²² Moreover, labour migration in terms of Egyptian migrant workers played a pivotal role in exporting Islamic ideologies from Saudi Arabia to Egypt, a development that was intensified by Saudi funding of mosques, schools and Islamic charitable organisations (Schulze 1990; Farquhar 2017). The increasingly visible public religious figures provoked emotional disputes regarding issues around Islam, with the wearing of the headscarf being prominent among them (Badran 2016). In reaction, many people, both men and women, public figures and scholars rejected “the veil and the hijab, the Islamic head scarf, viewing them as signs of women’s disempowerment [...] being told what to wear was just another form of tyranny”, as Ahmed analyses for herself and fellow Arab feminists (Ahmed 2011: 41). For them the veil was or still is “a symbol of intolerance” (Ahmed 2011: 41). The turning point for the debate about the veil occurred towards the end

²⁰ From a religious institutional point of view, most interpretations consider the hijab to be a required practice for women. However, different opinions and interpretations exist some of which do not consider the *ḥijāb* to be a religious obligation. Cf. Barakah (2002) and Al-Muṭahharī (1987).

²¹ See Leila Ahmed who refers to Albert Hourani’s article “The vanishing veil: a challenge to the old order” (1955) in which he states that the practice of veiling is declining: “But Hourani’s article has proved spectacularly incorrect. Fifty-six years later, we live in a world where veiling among Muslim women, after steadily gaining ground across the globe in the last two decades, is incontrovertibly ascendant. How did we get it so wrong?” (Leila Ahmed 2011: 40; see also Ahmed and Keating 2011).

²² With al-Azhar being a prominent religious institution that influenced and influences public debates with an attentive audience “[w]hat audiences crave is the confirmation of their faith, rather than new information” (Aishima 2016: 8). On the role of al-Azhar as religious institution, see also Zeghal (2007).

of the twentieth century²³, once scholars, such as Leila Ahmed, depicted the voices of veiled and non-veiled women, acknowledging that while the veil *can* be a means to subjugate and control women, at the same time it can be a marker for individual and pious agency (Ahmed 2011). Although the international academic debate has become more nuanced with acceptance of the *hiğāb* sometimes even being expressed as “a badge of individuality and justice”, the *hiğāb* still arouses various positions and opinions filled with all sorts of emotions both on the side of the observers and those wearing it (Ahmed 2011).²⁴

Moreover, I argue that the veil extends to the realm of the imaginary if it is said to be limiting the male’s gaze and his cravings (Gökarıksel and Secor 2014). Simultaneously, the veil can resemble or mirror a display that can be engraved with various emotions (Yegenoglu 1998: 47). The veil thus is more than simply an object, a piece of cloth; it can be endowed with meaning from inside and outside and thus resemble a symbol and constitute a figurative arena (Kütük-Kuriş 2021). The attributes ascribed to the veil in modern times range from political and revolutionary to religious (Kütük-Kuriş 2021). It can be instrumentalised in the name of Islam for political reasons and demonized or glorified by oppositional powers. Resembling a complex symbol, the veil is being exposed to various configurations. This plurality of implications makes it necessary to re-assess the veil and its symbolic meanings according to varying times, spaces, and cultures. According to Ahmed, in Egypt, as well as the veil constituting a practice of social reproduction, especially in cases where younger family members (daughters, children) take older family members (grandmothers, grandparents) as pious examples to veil (Ahmed 1992: 222), veiling also occurs in opposition to their direct older generation (mothers, parents) who may not be veiled (anymore).²⁵ So veiling does not necessarily occur replicating the behaviour of other (closer) family members or the government (which might also oppose the veil) but can occur in contrast to their opinions – regardless if the wearing of the veil is meant as oppositional behaviour or not. In Egypt, which successfully marginalised left-wing oppositional activities, the 1980s are characterised by a reinvigoration of Islam as a “major oppositional force” (El Guindi 1999: 143).

²³ This correlated with a certain Islamic dress code propagated by the Muslim Brotherhood and its members as well as with Egyptians working in Saudi Arabia and coming back with the idea that Islam should be lived in Egypt like it is being lived in Saudi Arabia (i.e. women generally being fully covered).

²⁴ This literature highlights recent trends that can be observed in many countries of the MENA region: women increasingly take off their veil (van Nieuwkerk 2020, Badran 2016). Their reasons can be complex and might change with seniority, social milieu, marital status and motherhood - political convictions and/or religious beliefs being part of the women’s decision making processes (Franke 2022). Women’s unveiling can also be influenced by patriarchal structures and pressure from both men and women. Yet, most Muslim women remain veiled, get veiled and will get veiled (Jacob Poushter: “How people in Muslim countries prefer women to dress in public”, *pewresearch.org*, 8 January 2014, <http://pewrsr.ch/KEyUvb>).

²⁵ In other words, they wear the veil, because they are replicating the older generation, or in opposition to their family, or the state. Thus, it can be in line with the family or in direct opposition, even if it is not meant to be rebellious.

In the aftermath of the January 25, 2011 revolution this affiliation of culture and people with political Islam again became important with then President Mohammed Morsi who was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Until the revolution, the *ḥiḡāb* was a popular practice and fashion accessory (Abū an-Nūr 2010), “[which] had morphed into colourful, eye-catching headgear, often accompanied by tight jeans, among youth who had adapted it as a cultural expression of their own... [It] has ceased to be a show of affiliation to Islamism or an expression of modesty” (Badran 2016: 60). Under the short-term governance of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islam was propagated as the main source guiding society and politics (Masoud 2014).²⁶ The subsequent change of regime from Morsi to Egypt’s current President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi with his clear stance against the ideology and the members of the Muslim Brotherhood led to various changes among society (Bano and Benadi 2019).²⁷ One major development was that many Egyptians did not want to be associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and public Islam in general with the result that a considerable number of women started to unveil (Badran 2016), in the sense of women’s resistance against political, social and religious norms, as well as in the sense of searching for their intimate selves.²⁸

Political and economic factors²⁹ can be decisive when women consider putting on or taking off the veil, but they cannot be a sufficient explanation. The interconnection of religious and personal experiences in this practice cannot be ignored, and this aspect is closely linked to identity, spirituality, piousness, and modesty in terms of fashion. In return, religion itself can also not be a sufficient marker, since many women do not put on the veil for religious reasons or to demonstrate increasing piety. A multitude of aspects should be taken into consideration when analyzing the veil, in order to acknowledge the heterogeneous complexity of the women wearing it and both men and women seeing and judging it.

²⁶ See also Khaled Fahmy (2013): “How the Muslim Brotherhood Fell from Power”, *khaledfahmy.org*, 17 September 2013 (<https://khaledfahmy.org/en/2013/09/17/how-the-muslim-brotherhood-fell-from-power/>).

²⁷ While the as-Sisi regime limits the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafyyīn and the religious Hizb an-Nur Party support this regime and President Abdel Fatah as-Sisi has not distanced himself from them.

²⁸ “After the 1919 revolution there was a move to unveil (to remove the face cover); now some 4–5 years after the 2011 revolution, there is once again a move, however slow, to unveil (this time to remove the head cover). The first unveiling was accelerated by a consciously feminist impetus. The second unveiling is not emanating from an explicit feminist awareness and activism but rather is appearing at a moment when a spirit of feminism released by revolution is in the air among the young” (Badran 2016: 60). Thus, many of the women I spoke with who unveiled after the revolution were also very critical about ongoing social and political developments and were aware of the so-called culture of protest and questioning of authority that found its way into the collective consciousness (post 2011).

²⁹ In Egypt, disappointment among the population regarding the failure of Nasser’s socialist ideas, Sadat’s politics, the influence of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States in terms of culture, religion and economy as well as the developments of the Iranian Revolution, had a major effect on its population since the 1980s. Cf. Ahmed (1992: 218–219).

Thus, in congruence with Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Ingham, I argue that each woman must be asked for her individual reasons why she does or does not don a headscarf and “must be treated with the utmost respect [by scholars] and as separable from the apparent conformity and communal allegiances such a choice may also convey” (Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham 1997: 18). While ideologies and narratives are being inscribed on the veil, the individual agency of women must be acknowledged and positioned in the respective circumstances of influence and dominance, however within the cultural field and not in comparison to “Western” ideas, ideals, expectations, and judgments. This idea of the politics of representation in the realm of fashion, gender and embodiment stands in close relation to the production of the self, self-representation, and how one wants to be seen by others.

Veiling, Identity Construction and “Imagined Communities”

Saba Mahmood argues in her work on the women’s mosque movement in Cairo (Mahmood 2005), that “Muslim women’s consensual adoption of the veil” (Mahmood 2006: 343) is “a religious obligation” (ibid.: 343, fn.50) and “part of a religious doctrine, a divine edict, or a form of ethical practice and that it therefore has nothing to do with ‘identity’” (ibid.: 343). She thus strips the women of their agency to identity forming and identity-oriented self-determination by focussing on the external framework of the veil to be “religious doctrine”. While I share Mahmood’s view of criticising studies that focus solely on the argument that the veil is a barrier against sexual harassment or a single marker to state Muslim women’s resistance to Western dominance, I disagree with her position that the veil should solely be a religious obligation (Mahmood 2006: 342–344). Rather, I argue, that the veil – or to be more precise the various forms the veil may take – are in many cases loaded with a compilation of meanings, both symbolic and identity marking. I similarly argue that holding the veil to be a marker of religious duty is also a form of (religious) identity. According to my interlocutors, in most cases “the” veil can be attributed with various sense-making elements, that *can* correlate, but do not have to. They can be complementing or contradicting. These elements are sometimes hidden and, even in conversation, silenced and tabooed.³⁰

My point is that “the” veil in itself is indeed a void, regardless of how much religious obligation it is said to entail. It needs an audience and/or a wearer to define or inscribe it with meaning. The embodied practice of performance in the context of veiling is one characterised by processes of identity formation – regardless of the veil being part of one’s identity (even part of one’s body) or not (such as a woman wearing the veil but rejecting it for whatever reasons). If the veil is part of one’s identity, then the religious obligation comes into play with many other aspects (such as protective barrier from the male’s gaze). If the veil is not part of one’s identity, then the woman wearing it can resist the religious obligation by various means of not adhering to the

³⁰ Social milieu and social pressure play an important role here.

other religious obligatory means of dress and behaviour (Amna, 2.2.2017).³¹ However, for the “other”, the audience, it will be difficult to literally see beyond the veil. Most of my interview partners stated that “al-dīn huwa bainī wa bain Allāh” (religion is between me and God), yet this idealised condition for individual religiosity is not as easily lived as is being stated. Many people are exposed to the opinions and behaviour of others (family, friends, neighbours, colleagues). They fear the reactions and rejections of the other so that they are not socially isolated and excluded from being part of a community.

I refer here to the notion of community as in “imagined communities” coined by Benedict Anderson (1991). While Anderson discussed communities in the context of nationalism and politics, I use his idea differently with the connotation of the aspect of the social in the religious, in the sense that many of my veiled interlocutors would feel comfortable around other veiled women and persons who are in favour of the veil. Accordingly, I understand “imagined communities” to be formed of like-minded people, sharing in the present case similar religious perspectives. They do not constitute an established community, but an “imagined” one that is experienced on the emotional dimension as feeling comfortable among like-minded others. In this sense processes of individualisation and religious transformation can also be motivated by mundane and pragmatic reasons, collectively shared experiences or belief systems. A sense of security then comes with being part of the same “group” or community in which women veil in the same or similar manner and can be indicative of social reconfigurations. Discourses, rituals, embodied practices are decisive for such imagined formations, which the term itself signals are in flux and not static. In the context of the veil being a symbol, I want to highlight the importance of style in the religious realm in this sense, namely that embodiment and styles are important for communities that are facing underlying changes: “Style is central to the making of religious and other kinds of communities [...], both by shaping persons and by lending them a shared, recognizable appearance and thus an identity [...]” (Meyer 2009: 10–11).

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that the veil is a versatile practice, which can be worn within as well as beyond religious boundaries and for rather intimate, sometimes even secular, society related, reasons with a multitude of interpretations.³² Sherina, a non-working, 37-year-old married woman with two children a university degree in interior design, for example, expressed this blending of reasons by labelling her intimate self as “being a modest but not a *traditional* ḥigābī” (Sherina, 23.1.2017). She differentiates various meanings that the veil can carry, and although her appearance and style might not necessarily hint at this specific meaning that she has in mind

³¹ Wearing or not wearing the veil in Egypt can be part of one’s formative processes and identity formation since women are often faced with the questions why they wear or why they do not wear the veil at some point in their lives: for both they perceive to be judged by society. They struggle with expectations that are brought towards women: being seductive and desirable, being pious and modest. In this sense the veil can also have erotic connotations, just as much as wearing the veil can be liberating for women to escape the expectations faced by showing and doing their hair.

³² Asad et al. (2009) discuss on a theoretical level the relationship of agency and secularism.

about herself, it is important for her to explicitly mention it. For her, being modest and wearing a ḥiğāb is positive and in line with freedom and religious duty. The label “traditional” meanwhile, comes with a negative tone that is characterised by backwardness, stagnation, closed mindsets, patriarchy, and rural areas (see Aḥmad 2020). This dichotomous depiction is not inclusive and encompassing, but it mirrors a dualism that is dominant in many of the conversations I had. In other conversations my (female) interview partners would not indulge in this positive vs. negative binary and instead highlight the possibilities the veil enables and opens up for them.³³

In this sense it is a statement and a marker of being part of a Muslim community with different meanings and formations. It is an expression of identity as an embodied practice that carries the invisible mindset of faith and belief with it. By wearing the veil, this mindset (as the “conjunction of the material and the immaterial”) can become visible for others and indicative of one’s identity.³⁴

The following example of my friend, Menna, 52, a married mother of four, and a lecturer at the Faculty of Science, demonstrates this situational, identity related aspect. Towards the beginning of summer, Menna and her youngest daughter would ask me and my children to join her on Sundays at one of Alexandria’s beach hotels. In the city, access to the beach is becoming more and more difficult for the larger public, due to state and private construction projects. The seaside is divided into sections that either belong to hotels on the other side from the beach, along the promenade or “cor- niche”, or they are operated directly from the beach. In either case, entrance fees are applicable, and these can be rather expensive, even for middle class families, as Menna explained. Whenever we went, she chose the same beach hotel because it was popular among “traditional and veiled” families. Although she personally did not mind different beach styles for women, she perceived that people with “unveiled lifestyles” feel uncomfortable around her, especially at the beach. Menna was a veiled woman wearing dark coloured ḥiğāb without jewellery or make-up and swam in a burkini. For her, in the case of our beach gatherings (and exclusively only the beach – in all other situations she would not mind unveiled lifestyles), the appearance of the other guests is more important than the content behind their veil stories. In all the other situations in which we met and spent time together, in the nādī (club), in restaurants, in cafés, and concerts, she would not mind the “others”, she would even go with me to restaurants which serve alcohol, “because they have the best coffee in town” (Menna, 4.6.2017).

In Alexandria many styles and reasons behind these styles are present, and since the veil is neither dictated nor prohibited by the state, its citizens have more or less freedom to interpret their respective aesthetic style, and thus belong to a community, or rather be part of (an) imagined community(s). Nonetheless, imagined communities

³³ Such as identity formation, feelings of belonging, intellectual freedom, freedom of movement, freedom of faith and religiosity, gendered freedom, social freedom, freedom of style and fashion.

³⁴ Maffesoli cited in Meyer (2009: 10). The way the veil is worn can be indicative of many other factors, that are telling of other also non-religious social markers. The way a woman chooses to wear the ḥiğāb can be indicative of social class, and also of different forms of religiosity.

can be indicative of collective identities and a benchmark for belonging, whether emotional or physical/actual belonging – in many cases even both. Identity in the context of the veil is of particular importance because the veil can be inclusive or exclusive for women, not only in terms of their peers as in the respective community, but also in terms of other veiled or non-veiled women with all the possible variations and gradations. The way of wrapping the veil then becomes decisive, just as the way of dressing without the veil can determine who is accepted and who is not accepted in the respective community according to one's appearance. Identity again is a crucial element that defines and is defined by others with mutual influence (Hall and Du Gay 1996: 1–17). Many of the women I spoke with expressed the feeling that “their” veil is providing them with an identity that is shared and accepted by other similarly veiled women.³⁵

Emotions as Analytical Category: Time and Identity as Milieu Specific Elements

It was striking that the *ḥiḡāb* was among those contested subjects that came up in almost every conversation I had in Egypt. I rarely had to ask explicitly about it, in most cases it was mentioned by my interlocutors as part of their accounts on being (non-)religious and *doing* being (non-)religious.³⁶ Opinions were expressed in often emotional way along a broad array of positions ranging from being in favour of the headscarf, opposing, or being indifferent to it, and all the colourful facets in between these three extreme positions: tears, laughter, sadness, pride, fear, contempt, shrugs, shaking the head, rolling eyes, despair, failure, resistance, tolerance, rejection, and endurance were all part of the emotional and behavioural expressions I received.³⁷ The fact that the *ḥiḡāb* was and still is such an intense subject, reminds me of the image of a skeleton sitting on a park bench with the headline above it saying “Are we still talking about the veil?”³⁸ illustrating that the debate is old and worn out. Yet the contrary is true in my research; although it is an old debate, at the same time it is a very actual and modern one that becomes more urgent with every new generation and every teenage girl and every personal, political, and social change occurring in their respective countries.³⁹

³⁵ See also Birgit Meyer according to whom, style would be the decisive common denominator in the context of the veil and by being a “forming form” responsible for an aesthetic formation, “both by shaping persons and by lending them a shared, recognizable appearance – and thus an identity” (Meyer 2009: 11).

³⁶ The fact that the veil has been talked about openly with me, has also to do with my role as a researcher. My interlocutors considered talking to me not affecting their social positionality.

³⁷ On the role of the emotional in personal and social life, see Abu-Lughod (1986), Beatty (2005, 2010), Lutz and White (1986), Pappé (2014), Plamper (2015), Rosaldo (1984), Nussbaum (2001) and Wikan (1992).

³⁸ Anonymously photoshopped pictures posted and shared on multiple private accounts on Facebook and Instagram by friends of the author (no permanent links, authorship or source available).

³⁹ International influences such as “the global war on terror”, as well as discourses in the global North regarding the wearing of the veil in public spaces in specific countries (cf. Yamashita (2018) on the debate

These new generations and current events influence and affect the debate about the ḥiğāb in nuanced and important ways. They shed light on the overall social dynamics among the population and can be indicative of certain ways of thinking and positioning towards religion, society, culture, and politics.

From a methodological perspective, I identify emotions as an analytical category in the discursive realm of the self. Thus, my approach is in line with Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod who consider emotions to be entangled with one's everyday life and the politics and struggles of everyday interaction (1990). Lutz and Abu-Lughod locate the study of emotions as discursive practice in the politics of social life rather than in the psychology of the individual. For the case of my own study, I propagate a perspective that encompasses the politics of social life *and* the psychology of the individual, since they are mostly interrelated (Jacobsen 2019). Emotions are consequently a form of expression, a psycho-social language that can be verbalised as well as being physically expressed (Lewis et al. 2010). Emotions are being interpreted by others and need an audience that is able to read the respective emotions without assuming its meaning (this necessarily includes myself, both being a researcher as well as a private individual).⁴⁰

Accordingly, psychological problems resulting from veiling (especially if it did not happen by force but based on free decision making, chasing an illusion of religious freedom and obedience) are not part of public discussions or religious arguments/examination. It is not only an underrepresented subject in academia but also in everyday life, which is not only dismissed, but most often silent and silenced. During my research, I had the chance to speak with many people about this issue because most of the women who consider themselves to be "ḥiğāb-victims" (i.e. having been forced to wear the ḥiğāb usually by family members), opened the subject deliberately and wanted to talk about the negative effects the wearing of the veil had on them. The phenomenon of psychological problems due to illusionary expectations in the realm of religion has also been confirmed and emphasised by a UK-trained psychiatrist in Alexandria, Dr. Shadi, whom I spoke with several times. His clinic is located in a multistorey building near Smoha Club, one of Alexandria's two main sports clubs. He worked with other psychiatrists, whom he trained himself. Apart from this clinic he also ran several rehab clinics specialized in drug addiction.

in Switzerland or France) do not inform my interlocutors position on the veil. These debates are important for example for Egyptians in France and would inform their social network in Egypt. However, none of my interlocutors would mention a context outside of Egypt to be relevant for their positions. An exception in some interviews would be Saudi Arabia as example for the influence of Wahhābī Islam, i.e. strict source-based interpretations of Islam, which were brought to Egypt by returning work migrants.

⁴⁰ Beatty (2005: 17): "For if we cannot reliably recognize emotion away from home – or if we naïvely assume that we know what counts as such – our theoretical generalizations are unfounded and will, in turn, lead us to misconstrue particular cases. For the anthropologist, the problem of what constitutes emotion begins and ends in the field."

The society in Egypt and especially in Alexandria shows many problems; they are from all sorts you can imagine, and they are stratified among all levels and generations. You asked me about religion, but I also want to state drugs, abuse in all possible means, addictions etc. and religion play into all of them. Considering the wearing of the veil, yes it can be a problem. But interestingly not only for the woman wearing the veil, but also and mostly for her husband. Especially if he didn't and doesn't approve of it. He might answer by retreat, physical as well as mental retreat. He might for example not find his wife attractive anymore, he might not want to have sexual relations with her, because he thinks the veil is disgusting (ih al-'araf dā?), he might not want to go out with her, because he feels ashamed of her looks in public and in front of his friends. Moreover, he might not even want to have a conversation with her anymore because he might think that she fell down the Islamist hole and that her opinions are all coloured by religious indoctrination. All of this can happen. It is not the majority, but there is no space to discuss these issues here in Egypt, because the unspoken rule among society and the public is that the veil is something good, something every man and every woman should strive for. (Dr. Shadi, 17.6.2018)⁴¹

With this assessment at the psychological level in mind, I tried to focus explicitly on the unsaid and potentially hidden meaning, asking personal questions in those situations where the interlocutor felt safe. Discussions on the wearing (or discussions about the wearing) of the ḥiğāb and/or the ḥiğāb itself resulted in emotional outbursts of words and tears and were often accompanied by raised or whispered voices.

Thus, I describe the wearing of the veil to be a fluid experience. The interchangeability, varying trends, media, political and global influences and shifts, as well as situational changes according to age, setting, context and occasion, social pressure and identity are factors that make this idea of fluidity important. With the changing polysemic and polyphonic notions of the veil, I aim to move beyond a static picture of the veil and place it in the affective and emotional real-life experience of women in contemporary Alexandria. It is therefore not a streamlined argument but one that takes into consideration the ambiguous emotions and transformations my interlocutors are exposed to and are part of. This dynamic is part of the lives of my interlocutors, of my own life, and thus part of this article. It is about the mutual flexibility of changing concepts and emotions in which the aspect of temporality is utterly important.

Time

The notion of time is an important factor when talking about the ḥiğāb, not only because time in terms of age, according to Qur'an and Ḥadīth, determines when a girl should start wearing the ḥiğāb, but also because there are times and places where one

⁴¹ I will portray Dr. Shadi in more detail elsewhere. His work and his insights into Alexandrian society are noteworthy and need more space to adequately give credit to them, than it is possible in this chapter.

is obliged to wear it, while at other times and places it is possible to remove it. Then again time plays a role in terms of fashion and public-political encouragement or discouragement to wear the *hiğāb*. Moreover, time as an event or incident can be decisive for a (young as well as older) woman to put on or take off the *hiğāb*. Here, notions of (social) status, power and sexuality play a role and can inspire or guide women to put on or remove the veil.

The veil can be analyzed not only from an embodied fashionable perspective, but most importantly from a moral and religious perspective (van Nieuwkerk 2020; Kütük-Kuriş 2021: 33). According to my interlocutors, the moral grounds for women to wear the veil circulate around chastity, honor and shame, gender segregation, protection and modesty. The religious then is focusing on piety, submission to God, afterlife, faith, and ordering daily life. While I sometimes heard both argumentative strands parallel to each other, my findings show that in many cases, religious and moral reasons are combined and expressed as overlying discursive trend (Kütük-Kuriş 2021: 33). Here, at this position when religious and moral reasons overlap, it is more difficult to argue against these reasons and many women are eventually convinced of the need to put on the veil regardless of if they are currently or not (yet) wearing it.

Aspects of culture and tradition are often mingled with the religious and moral in the debate about the veil, which makes it challenging to differentiate and to identify the respective arguments and lines of thought(s). For many women the starting point to wear (and take off) the veil was actually an identity marker in their lives and a life changing experience that is often related to the beginning of puberty (the menarche).

According to my interlocutors, the wearing of the veil can be initiated by various factors such as (dis-)belief (in the wearing of the *hiğāb* and/or in Islam and God per se), children (as in being a role model for them), tradition (in the sense of family tradition), marriage, neighbourhood, relatives, afterlife, work, seniority, personal tragedy, concealment, health issues, personality issues and/or laziness (sometimes even trauma). The *hiğāb* is a highly contested practice and can resemble innumerable meanings or statements (even none), most of which are very individual and intimate. Among these meanings are social statements, signifiers in the sense that women can send deliberate messages with the way in which they wear the veil. In his article on Islamic fashion in Turkey, Pierre Hecker (2018) draws on Dick Hebdige's theory on subversive implications of style. In his analysis Hecker refers to the concept of semiotics in the sense of Roland Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure to highlight the differences between signs and signifiers (Hecker 2018: 9). In the case of the veil, these can be powerful in a modest sense. Yet, contrary to Hecker, I argue that the veil as a powerful symbol can also be playful, even sexual. Just because the veil is often depicted and perceived as a religious symbol does not free it from popular connotations tied to femininity. The veil can be used by the woman to play with notions of sexual intimacy, it can even be seductive (intended or perceived), since it leaves much space for imagination on the side of the audience.⁴² However, the ritualized aspect is visible not only when women

⁴² Seduction is also relevant for other veiling styles, such as the *'abāya* and the *niqāb*.

decide to wear the veil but also in terms of the daily procedures that the veil changes for women and families. My interview partners would mention not only their “wardrobe” changes, but also the fact that they cannot receive male visitors unveiled or leave the house dressed improperly. While most people quickly became used to these practicalities, they are still aware of the differences the veil brings in many aspects of their social and religious life.

The *ḥiğāb* is actually a very visible marker of changes in society, especially in Egypt where the wearing of the *ḥiğāb* takes place in temporal waves with an unveiled majority moving to a majority being veiled and back again, including trends to down-veil and up-veil (Ahmed 2011; Herrera 2000). In Egypt veiling and un-veiling is not obligatory by law nor is it implemented by the state. The onus is upon women and society to cover or uncover. However, the veil can still be politicised and used as a statement pro or against leadership, see for example the times of the Morsi-presidency with an increase in veiling and the subsequent increase in unveiling to demonstrate solidarity with or to be in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood president who encouraged the veiling for women (Badran 2016).

Middle Classness and Fashion Styles

The above-mentioned factors with all the emotional nuances and various meanings they carry with them, can also result in the woman removing the *ḥiğāb*, as the example of my friend Huda illustrates. Huda, a 34-year-old professor at the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Alexandria, was a married mother of two girls. She considered herself belonging to Alexandria’s middle-class milieu. According to Huda, this meant to be “well educated, to have appropriate family structure, to be culturally fine, and to afford a good standard of living”. Having the economic means to a certain level of consumption is indicative of this milieu: they earn enough money to travel abroad, to own (mostly two) private cars, to send their children to private schools and have a membership to one of Alexandria’s sports clubs. Huda’s husband was working in a construction company. They lived in one of Alexandria’s neighbourhoods that is home to people from different middle-class milieus ranging from lower to upper middle class. Located in the heart of the city, some streets in this neighbourhood are inhabited by lower class Alexandrians, others by upper class Alexandrians, but the majority are middle class.

I relate here to Claudia Liebelt (2019a, 2019b, 2019c), who likewise identifies consumer habits as characteristic for certain social classes in her study about secular, middle-aged, middle-class women in Istanbul and their consumption of beauty services. It is this ability to adapt to shifting consumer habits that characterises different segments in the middle class, a social class that is not uniform (in terms of lifestyle nor in terms of values) and that is trying to be better than the perceived “rich people’s immoral extravagances and [the] poor people’s lack of sophistication” (Winegar 2016: 611). This aspiration of being better than the rich and the poor, comes with the am-

bition of also being more beautiful, more religious, more educated,⁴³ and more productive (see my article on Qurʾān courses, Franke 2020): “Becoming [and remaining] middle class in Egypt, then, as in many contexts, is a deeply moral project, one linked to notions of honour and prestige as defined against other social groups” (Winegar 2016: 611). Distinction from other social groups has become difficult for Egypt’s middle-class milieus, especially since the presidency of Mubarak and the aftermath of the revolution – both are said to have fostered the growth of the lower and the upper classes (Amin 2011; Ghanem 2016). The decreasing possibilities and opportunities to distinguish oneself from others can therefore lead to specific fashion styles that are associated with specific milieus. These styles portray claims by means of their symbolic power, such as how modest or religious one is. In combination with their symbolic power the styles need an audience to identify and assess these, as Jessica Winegar highlights for the case of Egypt’s middle class: “[a] key component of being middle class is to be socially recognized as such, since the construction of social class is relational” (Winegar 2016: 612).

Social milieu is important for my analysis, since my findings show that veiling and unveiling manifests different forms of agency according to the respective milieu, age, marital status, and family background (Al-Fār and Ḥaṭābah 2014). Differences are observable between upper-middle class, middle-class and lower-working class women; between women above the age of 50, between married, unmarried, and divorced women, women looking for a husband, women with and without children; between women working in public institutions and those working in the private sector. These women face different social expectations, peer pressures, and expectations regarding their looks and whether or not to wear the veil, depending on their position in life and the social milieus they move in. The expectations that are tied to wearing the veil or to not wearing the veil as well as they are tied to the social milieus also define the question of the self: wearing a veil in an upper middle class milieu or not wearing a veil in a lower middle class milieu is faced with social pressure. Thus, the social milieu also defines individual forms and choices of wearing the veil. According to most of my interlocutors, gossip (if and how they wear the veil or their hair) – as an indicator of how modest, open minded, cool, educated or moral they are perceived to be by others – is a crucial factor for their choices as to “whom” (i.e., which version, identity of their selves) they want to represent in a respective setting, such as in relation to their work environment. They put time and effort into how they appear, what statement they are making with their appearance, and how they perceive themselves as navigating different social settings and workspaces; spaces that are not homogeneous, where they mix with men and people from different social milieus and backgrounds.

⁴³ In most conversations I had in Alexandria, the level of education was decisive for my interlocutors in their self-definition of “middle class”. Due to the ongoing difficult economic situation and the unpromising labour market, it was not easy for many individuals to keep up with the financial standard they have grown up with in their parents’ house, once they started their own life.

The Veil as Fashion

Regarding the aspect of fashion, I want to highlight that the veil can be used as a fashion accessory, as part of a fashion trend that one decides to follow, which includes the entire adjustment of one's wardrobe. The veil is not only a religious symbol, it exceeds religious connotations for most women and functions equally as a fashion item that is tied to more elaborate expressions of one's social identity. In the sense of women's social positioning within a greater fashion landscape that is forming along religious and gendered debates. My friend Amna for example told me about her "ḥiḡāb-story":

I chose to put on the ḥiḡāb after university. I studied engineering and started working in the petro-chemical industry with only men as colleagues and supervisors. For me the ḥiḡāb gave me credibility among this male dominated environment. I didn't want to be judged because I am a woman, and I didn't want to get romantic offers from the men. All I wanted was a good job and to work in peace. So even my husband, he did not see me before marriage without the ḥiḡāb. And his parents, especially his mother was against me because I am veiled. Can you imagine, she asked me if my hair was ugly and if this was the reason I am veiled? This is ridiculous, my hair is beautiful I told her, and it has nothing to do with that. But God wants me to be veiled and my work made it easy to choose the veil. Also, my parents were against the veil, especially my father. But now they are old, and they are ok with it. For my daughters, I will also let them choose. I want them to be really sure. You know the veil is not an easy thing, it will be part of your entire life. You should not take it off again, so it's better to take the time and double think about it before deciding. Plus, the ḥiḡāb is demanding from the perspective of fashion: you can't just combine it with anything. I had to adjust my entire wardrobe. Find materials and patterns that match with the rest, so shoes and bags and jewellery. Buy clothes that are suitable for ḥiḡābī girls. Yes, I can leave the house nicely dressed and not take care of my hair, but I cannot leave the house in clothes that are not matching. People are talking here in Alexandria; you always have to wear nice things in public, have make-up, nice jewellery. It is a tough job to find something to wear every morning and not to repeat the look too often. From my opinion and my experience, in everyday life concerning fashion it is easier not to be veiled. The ḥiḡāb really makes everything complicated. The only thing it makes easier is the relation with men, the relation with God and that you can leave the house without having to consider how your hair looks and Egyptian hair – this is really a story itself [laughs]. (Amna, 2.2.2017)

Among many middle and upper middle class Alexandrians there is also the notion of distinguishing oneself from the urban poor and peasant population and a way of dressing that is usually attributed to lower class milieus. This distinction happens on the basis of "not being Saidi [i.e. from upper Egypt] and culminates in the fact that

many veiled women do not act like veiled women are supposed to act: such as not flirting, not laughing too loud, being modest, and not seeking attention by being attractive”, as my friend Karima put it. Social milieu plays a major role in defining styles of wearing the veil. A whole industry deals with the desires of veiled women to combine piousness with fashionableness. These women want to veil because they believe it is God’s wish, but at the same time they want to remain attractive for themselves, their spouses, and their peers. They do not want to vanish from the public sphere by looking grey, they want to be active members of society with colourful, fashionable headscarves, matching their outfit and jewellery. They want to highlight their femininity while simultaneously obeying God. Mona Abaza has vividly demonstrated how the increased veiling of women in Egypt encouraged a new Islamic fashion industry that proves the transformative power of the veil (Abaza 2007).

In the context of the veil as fashion, it is also necessary to emphasise that we can observe a recent trend in academic research to focus on the current processes and dynamics of unveiling throughout the Middle East (e.g. van Nieuwkerk 2020; Kütük-Kuriş 2021; Badran 2016). The tendency to don the veil was something that I also observed in Alexandria and some of my interlocutors referred to the phenomenon of unveiling in their accounts, especially if they were among those removing the veil. Others would refer to the unveiling as a development of which they do not approve, such as my friend Amna:

If everyone around us is doing everything possible wrong, I at least need to continue doing what is required from us: maṭalan (for example), taking off the veil is very popular in Egypt at the moment. Now, I need to keep up with my faith and trust in God that I am strong enough for all those who behave wrong [...]. In general, ... the philosophy prevailing now in mass media ... national and private TV ... is anti-ḥiğāb. And in full acceptance of “the denial of hijab as a must for proper belief”. The higher- and middle-class levels are now losing more and more ḥiğābies by the day. You have no idea. Everyone wants to show off their beauty and be proud to post it on social media...like others. But the vast majority of poor society is still wearing it. I’m not sure why ... maybe it’s not easy for women there to break taboos... Maybe they’re not suffering peer pressure and social media fever. Well, it’s the easiest way... to just follow media and repeat what the national TV is pressing into the minds...even if the arguments are shallow and mere nonsense. This is what’s happening in politics ...religion ...perspective about “any other”. Honestly...it would have been great for the “pure” raw belief to stay unexploited...but then...this is what is. After all, by the end of days our prophecy. Pbih...has predicted that times will come. When the righteous will be few and sticking to rules will be like holding a fiery stone in hand. Not that we see it with our bare eyes...just on the way. Who knows? I feel it’s like “animal farm” here in our Islamic countries...called middle east. I’m not sad...as long as I stay one of the few. Including my loved ones of course. (Amna, 6.11.2016)

Amna's account is typical of the perspective of those who try to hold on to veiling. It is noteworthy that she considers taking off the veil as taboo and that she thinks it is difficult to keep up with one's faith in times where it is no longer en vogue. She went on to speak about generational differences, and her interpretation of current events, especially of youth breaking out of social norms, is something that I encountered in many of the conversations I had with married women who have children and who depict themselves as having a strong belief in Islam and in God. I differentiate Islam and God here, because sometimes, though rarely, my interview partners would also apply this differentiation. Returning to Amna and her religious conviction, it is also striking that she assesses the "new" or "different", "diverging" behaviour of the youth to be a sign of the end times, that according to Islam's prophecy judgment day is approaching as soon as certain signs occur, such as incorrect religious behaviour by the majority.⁴⁴

These efforts are also extended to thoughts and self-questioning of one's spiritual relationship to God. For example, if a woman chooses to oppose societal codes and expectations regarding the veil, what does this mean for her relationship with God? Does it make her emotionally "closer" to God, because she opposes peer pressure that society imposes on women's bodies and their public representations?⁴⁵ For many of the women I met, these questions were part of their daily routines as the quotes above demonstrate. In everyday life they felt confronted with and exposed to religious practices and their entanglement with social expectations (much more than men), since they have to navigate these issues through their bodies and their representations. Some of these women received strong criticism for wearing the veil in (upper) middle class settings, while others received criticism for donning the veil in similar social settings and had to take strong stances opposing social pressure. What then arises from ambivalent emotions, from meandering between public, private, and intimate situations? How do these women undergo constant processes of reflection, of inner re-constitution? How do they navigate their inner and their outer worlds? And what is the impact of these experiences on their bodies, spiritualities, and agencies?

Examples of several middle class "ḥiḡābī styles" from my field research are women who wear the veil wrapped firmly around their faces and their necks in combination with colourful clothes consisting of a tunic reaching at least mid-thigh, above a long-sleeved high neck shirt, trousers – mostly jeans (medium tight), a belt, jewellery, make-up and nail polish, fancy sunglasses and shoes appropriate to the respective weather conditions (ranging from slippers and pumps, to sneakers or winter boots). Others would wear similar kinds of clothing but wrap the veil in a looser way, either not around the neck ("Spanish style")⁴⁶ and/or leaving a considerable part of their front hair showing. Others would wear large, loose clothing, wide trousers or long

⁴⁴ On a recent debate about the *aṣrāt al-sā'a*, i.e. signs of the endtimes, see Damir-Geilsdorf and Franke (2015). See also the section on young women's perspectives of this article.

⁴⁵ Although this is against religion (*ḡidd al-dīn*, *ḡidd al-Islām*).

⁴⁶ To wear the *ḥiḡāb* in "Spanish style" means to wrap it around the head with a bun-like drape at the back of the head, i.e. not leaving the fabric to cover the neck or the shoulders.

skirts in dark colours with long jackets. Their veil would often be pre-formed, consisting of two pieces: the first being a kind of hair band covering the hairline and the ears, with the second placed on top of this hairband covering the neck, the remaining hair, and parts of the shoulder. Jewellery, except for watches and wedding rings are mostly absent. The same applies to make-up and nail polish. Shoes are often inconspicuous and mostly black. These three versions of style are textbook examples of the variety of styles that exist among Alexandria's middle-class milieu.⁴⁷ While all three women belonged to the same milieu (they lived in the same neighbourhood, their children went to the same school, and their families went to the same sports club and came from similar educational backgrounds with university degrees and professional backgrounds as employees), their style of clothing differed greatly. All three were religious and convinced believers. On the one hand, there was my above-mentioned friend Huda, who was contemplating removing the veil (she wore the veil in "Spanish style") and ultimately decided to take it off. Rana, 44, married with three children and working as engineer in the petro-industry (wearing colourful clothes and the "proper" style of *ḥiğāb*) was convinced that her veil was saving humanity, since around her many women started to unveil. Meanwhile, my above mentioned friend Menna, considered the veil and religion to be absolutely none of anyone else's business. In her view it should only be subject to discussion within the respective family. Both Menna and her husband, a professor at the Faculty of Science, were not very fond of trendy fashion and preferred the "natural and pure style" that does not require accessories or specific colours. They were both very religious, praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, being kind to others, and reading the Qur'an regularly. The veil for Menna was a religious and social obligation, but not one that can be forced upon the woman. Her daughters for example did not wear the veil, although her husband was in favour of them being veiled if it was their wish.

The argument that the veil is important for women in terms of protecting the female body from harassment is demonstrated in comments such as the following from Menna. She, like Amna, is not in favour of the recent unveiling developments around her:

We need the veil, and we want the veil because we are strong and we want to protect ourselves from the men who are still too weak and can't hold themselves when they see unveiled women, they harass them and flirt with them, but we as veiled women, we have a shield around us. I know that women are not responsible for men's desires, but we are the ones who are losing our honour if we get harassed, not the men, so it's better for us to cover, as God advised us." She goes on "those who are unveiling these days, yes some say they do it for political reasons that they don't want to be associated with al-*ihwān*, who were

⁴⁷ This includes questions of how to navigate growing fashion trends that are putting pressures on women in wanting to be modern, sexy, feminine and keeping up with global trends – in managing those expectations with modesty as well as social and religious pressures in conservative environments.

focusing on women's dress in an Islam-congruent way, and said that it was a requirement, but mostly they are proud women and want to show their beauty [i.e. hair] and indulge more in fashionable clothing. This is why they unveil. (Menna, 18.10.2017)

Menna considered herself to be empowered by means of the veil. However, she can also relate to and sympathise emotionally with women who reject the veil as a political symbol and who are seeking a beautified and beautiful version of themselves, which is only possible without the veil through revealing their hair. As will be demonstrated, the notion of beauty blends into debates about the veil, about unveiling, and about hair.

Returning to the case of my friend Huda who decided to wear the veil in her late 20s for religious reasons, and who decided to take it ("my veil") off, also for religious reasons, demonstrates the ambivalences she was confronted with. Moreover, taking care of herself and her inner peace eventually enabled her to decide against social expectations:

I have been thinking of taking the decision to take off my veil for years, but I didn't have the guts. I was not dedicated, not following the right dress code for Islamic women although I knew it is an obligation but deep inside I felt I am not able to do it, at some point I was afraid of what people would say if I take it off. But at that time I felt very stressed, not feeling ok and I didn't want anything to increase this stress – no more obligations towards anything. Additionally, my relationship with God is not judged only on wearing the veil. So I didn't care about anyone, or the surroundings. I just took care of myself, my inner peace, I bravely faced everyone in my family, my colleagues at work, neighbours. Although after taking the step I found a lot of people supporting me, others they didn't like what I did but they just showed it without talking, others used bad words but in the end it is my life and my decision. (Huda, 3.6.2017)

Emotional Stories / Veil(ed) Stories⁴⁸ – Fashion and Emotions

As I have elaborated regarding Qur'an circles in Alexandria, the *ḥiğāb* was a recurring topic in the gatherings from all perspectives (Franke 2020). Sometimes the religious atmosphere in the circles led to the deliberate absence of the subject, since participants did not want to hear from the teacher that the wearing of the *ḥiğāb* is *farḍ* (individual

⁴⁸ The title of this paragraph is in line with Lila Abu-Lughod who analysed hidden emotions among Bedouins in the Siwa-Oasis in Western Egypt. The veil can not only conceal the body but also sentiments (Abu-Lughod 1986).

religious duty).⁴⁹ Thus the avoidance of the topic of the *ḥiğāb* hints at its powerful relation in terms of religion and its lasting effect on society. Feelings of guilt and peer pressure are the most triggering factors given by my interviewees for putting on the *ḥiğāb*, even if they were not convinced of its obligatory nature. Interestingly, some of my interviewees also said that they decided to wear the *ḥiğāb* after many years of contemplation. It must be noted here, that the (un-)spoken rule, known to most of my interlocutors, clearly says that once the decision to put on the *ḥiğāb* has been made, it should not be revoked. This social imperative makes it very difficult for women who, on the one hand, decide to veil and simultaneously, on the other hand, decide to take it off. Those who took quite some time to decide to start wearing the *ḥiğāb*, concluded after several years of trial and sometimes years of hardship (due to negative behaviour from family, i.e. mostly husband, and friends) that it is impossible for them to continue wearing the veil and that they literally “have” to stop wearing it. In their religious argumentation, they try to explain to God why it is impossible for them. Moreover, they also try to appease their guilty conscience by repeating to themselves that they at least tried to wear it.

The *ḥiğāb* therefore is not only a piece of cloth that women wear for various reasons; it can be used for manipulative motives to exert power over others.⁵⁰ The effects this manipulation can have on the women who are the ones obliged to wear the veil are often ignored. This disregard is not only present in academic research on the subject, but first and foremost in the respective societies who expect the women to cope with and accept the (sometimes perceived) hardship of wearing the *ḥiğāb*.

Laila, a 42-year-old single woman and engineer working in the private sector, said in her biographical account, that she decided to put on the *ḥiğāb* when her mother was seriously ill. Laila was very emotional and cried during most of the conversation.

I was sitting next to her bed, she was badly sick, she had cancer, and I sat there, and I was praying, and I made a deal with God. I asked him to help my mother to recover. In turn I would put on the veil. As a sacrifice, as something my religion anyways asks me to do, but until then I hesitated and found excuses not to put it on. So that day, I made the deal and ever since I am wearing it. My mother unfortunately still died but I know it was for the best and, although I miss her terribly, I am not making accusations and blaming God. But I still keep my promise. And it is ok, it is not as hard as I thought. And you know what? The *ḥiğāb* protects us from the flies. Women are like candy, sugar and sweet and the men are attacking us like flies attack the sweets. But the *ḥiğāb* protects us from these unwanted attacks and without this sexual distraction, I can concen-

⁴⁹ “Islamic law distinguishes the individual duty (*fard ‘ayn*), such as ritual prayer, fasting, etc., and the collective duty (*fard kifāya*), the fulfilment of which by a sufficient number of individuals excuses the other individuals from fulfilling it, such as funeral prayer, holy war, etc.”, cf. Juynboll (2012). Accordingly, veiling is considered to be *fard ‘ayn*.

⁵⁰ On the discourse of the veil and power relations, see Wikan (1991) and Watson (1994).

trate on my relationship with God. I am not married, and I don't want to get married, I am too old now anyways. I am the one in the family who works a lot [she works in Dubai and travels home to Alexandria every weekend] and I also take care of my father. This is why I come home every weekend although the travelling is very stressful. But it is my duty to take care of him. (Laila, 1.3.2017)

In this depiction it becomes clear that her personal struggle to make a decision for or against the veil was solved by her mother's disease and the subsequent deal she made with God. For her, choosing the veil required time for her to think and evaluate oneself and the community one lives in as well as one's relationship with God. The veil, according to Laila,

...is a sign of discipline and a symbol of becoming closer and closer to God, an inner connection. It is commitment, appreciation, gratitude, and intention towards God. You know, Liza, although there are various reasons to put on the ḥiḡāb, if the good intention, the niyya [intention], is missing, it is all useless. And even we cannot see the real reasons from outside, God can see them, and he will judge us accordingly. (Laila, 1.3.2017)

The concept of struggle (of the self) in Islam, the ḡihād (ḡihād al-naḡs), is indicative of this perspective as well as of many other religious practices and debates. By means of the ḡihād and the niyya, the disciple can improve and purify their soul even if they fail. The intention, the trial, the attempt, the action itself is crucial and this will be evaluated on Judgement Day.

Despite the fact that most religious subjects are highly contested, I was asked to keep in mind that, as Farah, 36, non-working, with a university degree in education, married with three children, put it:

None of us really knows the truth, and actually our religion is not about this, it is about trying. Trying to be a good Muslim, trying to live a good life according to Islam and the will of God – which we can interpret according to the Qur'ān and Ḥadīḡ, but still, it is a trial. And all the different opinions and emotions that you get during your research here in Egypt, they only portray the colourful picture of us believers, but you will never find out the truth or someone who knows everything correctly. I am saying this to protect you, but also to protect us [believing Muslims]. I am sure you heard a lot of controversial, critical and even rejecting voices – but none of them will be valid. Islam is very individual and personal; we are all the same and many interpretations can coexist. Anā, I for example, I am trying hard regarding the veil, but I cannot put it on. Not yet. I fear my beauty to be gone and I am struggling with this self-centred position of mine. But what I can do is to otherwise dress modestly – as much as possible. (Farah, 18.11.2016)

This reference to “trying” and “doing one’s best” is something I encountered in many of the conversations I had with believing Muslims. Rania, for example, highlighted that, compared to paradise and the afterlife, our current world is also referred to as *dār al-imtīhān* in Arabic (house of trial) (Rania, 19.11.2016). According to her, this term refers to God’s mercy and that he gives everyone the free will and option to try to be a good human before being judged upon their death. Paradise then is only accessible for those who mastered the trials in this world, as tough and difficult as they may seem, passing the test(s) will offer everything to the successful ones. Talking about the notion of fairness, she clearly stated that this life has many different kinds of exams, “all designed for us humans to pass and not to give up and fail and choose the wrong path which will lead immediately to hell without detours”. She continued:

Yes, it is written that God is merciful, but it is also written that he decides on Judgement Day whom to allow entrance to paradise and who will be sent to hell. And this is just and fair – we all get tested during our lifetime and we know what to expect – it would be rather stupid and ignorant to not take responsibility for our actions. And although the veil may seem a minor test compared to others [i.e. sickness, death, poverty], it is a major test for me. Every time I leave the house, I am being tested again. I got used to it somehow, but the suffocating feeling of the fabric around my neck is still an assessment of my commitment and submission to God. (Rania, 19.11.2016)

The reference to the earthly material world as a testing ground for one’s faith and ethical behaviour is not only a means to differentiate between good and evil in the sense of justness, but also an anchor for all kinds of believers: those who are not too confident about their faith, those who are too weak to fulfil all the requirements, those who suffer and wish for a better life, but also for those who are sure of themselves and their devotion and who consider this world to be a passage to the hereafter. Among many other examples, the veil is just one, albeit a very prominent one. It serves as a bridge between ritualised practices and belief systems that are usually hidden.

However, this flexibility in vision gives space to various interpretations that can be misleading and sometimes even harmful if used to defame the wearer, or if governmental interests are imposed on the public by using and occupying such symbols in dominating or manipulative ways. It is upon the researcher to carefully look behind the obvious, and to try to grasp the nuanced meanings that the veil carries with it – either through detailed observations and/or cautiously conducted conversations and interviews. In the case of my research most interview partners were very open and confident about why they wear or do not wear the veil. Yet, in some cases I noticed that it is a sensitive issue, especially if the woman, like Neda, considers taking off the veil and is still insecure about her decision – not only from a social but also from a religious perspective, given that she is an assured believer and persuaded that the veil must be part of her religious duties. While she fears the effects of taking off the veil on Judgment Day, she also fears the reaction from her family and her husband in partic-

ular, who believes that it is his responsibility to encourage his wife to put on the veil and to make sure that she does not take it off again (as according to him, he will also be asked on Judgment Day about his efforts to ensure his wife's veiling). This emotional dilemma is rather dominant and occupies a lot of her worries, hesitation, doubts, and her thinking and assessing the pros and cons.

It is exactly this controversy that gives the veil its ongoing importance. On the one hand it can literally divide families (and societies) while on the other it can be a unifying symbol that fosters senses of belonging and can trigger religiosity in terms of a strong(er) belief in God (Kütük-Kuriş 2021: 33).

Beneath the Veil: Hair and Beauty

Religion, fashion, society, culture are not the only factors that influence the wearing and the debate about the veil. One very important issue is the topic of health; something that is equally ignored like psychological factors. Health and psychological factors can both be interlinked and turn into a very explosive matter. I agree with Ian Skoggard and Alisse Waterston who argue for an affective anthropology and evocative ethnography to convey "emotions and feelings of living, socially situated subjects [...] to the reader", that "[f]eelings matter. They are an integral part of human consciousness and behaviour. Human beings are as much feeling creatures as they are thinking ones. Hunches and intuition play a major role in reasoning and passion provides impetus for action" (2015: 109). The reference point here is that emotions are multidimensional and that they are *also* about social relations. As has been discussed above, the veil can have serious psychological effects on women's and men's identities and their behaviour.

From a visual perspective, the veil covers the head and the hair, the ears, and the neck, as well as parts of the chest – depending on which style of veil the woman chooses. Along with the veil, a woman's arms and legs are also covered with long clothing. Some women choose to wear the *'abāya* and the *niqāb* which also covers the face, with most of the wearers of these even covering their feet and hands, however this does not describe most veiled women in Egypt.

While these additional pieces of cloth can be considered a means of removing oneself from the male gaze (Gökarıksel and Secor 2014), they can also cause health issues.⁵¹ Moreover, the sweat and tight way of binding the veil can also lead to the loss of hair and eczema – a problem that is widely known about but rarely solved by doctors suggesting the removal of the veil for health issues. Some women notice hair loss which in turn makes them afraid of social stigma and prevents them from taking off the veil, sometimes even leading them to wear it more often, even indoors, thereby increasing the hair loss issue. This can result in a vicious cycle, that can rarely be solved by medica-

⁵¹ Cf. Studies on Vitamin D deficiency in Muslim majority societies: Guzel et al. (2001), Botros et al. (2015) and El Rifai et al. (2014).

tion alone. The loss of hair causes serious problems. On the one hand, because women in Egypt are proud of their hair and put a lot of time (and money) in the care of it. On the other hand, because the veil is said to protect women and their beautiful looks from the male gaze. Consequently, if they lose the beauty of their hair due to the veil, it becomes null and void in itself. Regarding the notion beauty here which will be discussed in the following chapter, it has to be noted that unveiled women are considered by many of my interview partners (both male and female, including both veiled and unveiled) to be more attractive and beautiful than veiled women, especially because of the showing of their hair; only secondly because of the way they can dress.

Therefore, hair is women's capital when it comes to aspects of attractiveness, beauty, and attention from their social environment (including women and men). It is one major reason why many women are hesitant about putting on the veil and why some vehemently reject the veil – they do not want, as Farah explained, to turn themselves into

...ugly beings, who are not woman nor anything else anymore, they are just called *ḥigābī* or *muḥaggaba*. This can be a stigma, and many of us are not willing or ready to make this sacrifice, not for society and not for God. I mean the religious statements regarding the veil are so diverse and contradictory, why should we not have God on our side and refuse the veil for our own well-being? Is this less important than some contested divinely advice? Is it not more valuable to be unveiled and have good intentions and a pure relation with God? (Farah, 18.11.2016)

Again, the aspect of well-being in terms of religion – here as the embodiment in form of a religious practice – is being mentioned and highlighted in relation to one's psychological state and in relation to God (Franke 2020). This well-being focusses necessarily on the body in combination with the mind – if one or the other is affected, the other is also influenced.

While Farah's questions are rhetorical, the issues that she raised do not remain in the individual realm but open up a wider social critique. How can women have a healthy and confident relation with God if they are suffering from the oppression being exerted on them in the name of Islam? My friend Neda experienced hair loss due to wearing the veil in combination with Vitamin D deficiency and anemia. Her overall mental state is very unstable, and she wished to take off the veil. "It is not only the veil. For me it is my entire life that is shattered and my marriage. I wish I could divorce, or at least that my husband marries another woman. But my kids are my priority, and they need their father, although they are almost grown-up now. It is a difficult situation in Egypt to be a believer and to wish for another life." (Neda, 4.4.2017). I can even perceive her frustration in my written version of her oral account.

As I noted earlier whenever we met and we went to places where we would not meet her neighbours or relatives by chance, she would take off the *ḥigāb* and continue wearing it as a scarf. As soon as we approached her neighbourhood, she would put it

back on, even if we were still in an Uber. She mentioned something concerning the *hiġāb* that caught my attention: she would want to take off the veil being with me and my friends in bars and restaurants in downtown Alexandria (the friends I met downtown are mostly unveiled) as a sign of belonging. As Neda said, the veil not only separates her from the male view, but also from a social sphere of people who go to bars, maybe even drink alcohol or go swimming at the beach on the weekend. For her, the veil limits her engagement and social interaction with them – not necessarily from the perspective of the unveiled women but from Neda’s perspective.⁵² She restricted herself from mingling with them freely because she felt different, due to her veil. Sometimes we would go to the beach together, and she would take off her veil there and would go swimming in a swimsuit. Her husband travelled a lot throughout Egypt and was unaware of her weekend activities. Thus, the issue of the veil also creates boundaries between her and her husband, it encourages concealment and silence and can even lead to lying.

Notions of Hair and Beauty: Emotions Matter, Beauty Matters

When talking about the veil, I think it is necessary to also talk about women’s hair, how it relates to the body and emotions, practices and social, individual, and religious meanings and expectations over the course of one’s life. Hair is symbolically complex and emotionally loaded in Alexandrian society. The different meanings attributed to hair vary according to age, social milieu, gender, religious beliefs, and political convictions.⁵³ These aspects are mingled in the debate about women’s head hair, women’s self-fashioning, and processes of individualisation.

Research on the notions of women’s hair and/or beauty in Muslim societies of the Middle East are scarce. Some relatively recent studies exist with a focus on hair in Turkey (Delaney 1994; Pfluger-Schindlbeck 2006). Yet these studies mostly analyse how hair is treated from three perspectives. The first is the religious context of normative sources, such as the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth. The second are concepts of the sexual body, focussing on purity rules according to Islamic norms, and thirdly, hair plays a role in the context of religious sacrifice (Pfluger-Schindlbeck 2006). These different approaches already hint at the multifaceted meanings of the notion of hair. As Pfluger-Schindlbeck notes: “Hair can be viewed in the context of individual versus society but also in the context of individual versus God” (Pfluger-Schindlbeck 2006: 72). While I can relate to her approach that hair needs to be viewed from both a religious and a social lens, I highlight that hair needs to be analysed especially through the lens of the individual. From the individual perspective, I argue that a focus on the everyday is

⁵² Although I would rarely see veiled women in these places, as they would not be allowed to enter bars that serve alcohol, but also because the “others” (guests) do not necessarily gather with veiled women.

⁵³ In this article I exclusively deal with women’s head hair, since this is the hair that is most relevant in relation to the veil. Other body hair is also important but a thorough discussion of it would be beyond the scope of this article.

important to shed light on the everyday *'azma* (Arabic for crisis; according to Neda: “everyone uses different vocabulary to describe their *'azma*” (Neda, 22.3.2021)) some women go through because of their hair. They struggle with the colour, length and state (curly, straight, thin, thick, soft, strawlike, dull, dry, oily) of their hair – almost daily. As well as an emotional cost (in the sense of hair shaming), and the cost of time, there is also the real cost of treatment and haircare products. So far, the academic veil debate has not paid sufficient attention to the attribute of hair, its role in society as part of women’s body, in relation to the veil. I argue that the veil as embodied practice, and women’s hair, can sometimes even be co-constitutive, in the sense that a woman’s hair can require the veil, because it was unkempt that day and she did not have enough time to take care of her hair before leaving the house and was relieved to be able to put on the veil, so she no longer had to think about the condition of her hair. As discussed above, the veil can have a negative impact on hair with it leading to thinner hair or even hair loss. This in turn can make it necessary for women to keep wearing the veil in order not to be ashamed in front of others, even if they have already contemplated the removal of the veil.

Hair and the veil can thus be an everyday struggle for many women who try to adhere to society’s perceived beauty standards. These perceived beauty standards are milieu specific, as Claudia Liebelt has analysed for the context of body practices and beauty salons among middle class milieus in Turkey (Liebelt 2016, 2019a, 2019b, and 2019c). Similarly, R. Arzu Ünal identifies in the self-fashioning and beauty practices of young Muslim women, that they cultivate their own styles and make-up practices to adjust mainstream beauty and fashion norms to their individual needs (Ünal 2019). The reference to middle class is also central for this present contribution, since notions of beauty, hair, and the veil are milieu specific in the sense that my interlocutors had the flexibility to invest time and money in their public bodily appearance. The decision to not veil can then be considered a privilege from an economic perspective, because these women can afford to visit the “coiffeur”⁵⁴ investing a considerable amount of time at home on their hair. Furthermore, going to the coiffeur became an event, because it was a “time-out” for the women from work, from their families and from their everyday life. Here they would meet other women, often friends, colleagues, or acquaintances.⁵⁵ It was their time to gossip and exchange information, and also to enjoy the beauty treatment and to relax. Such appointments were often booked before special work events or social gatherings like weddings, birthdays, dinner invitations or other (semi-private) gatherings. The women would feel special, more beautiful and equipped with a new haircut or styled hair, freshly manicured and pedicured nails (sometimes including make-up or the removal of facial hair), ready to appear in public; a public that is often perceived as critical towards their outer appearance. This is why my interlocutors would adjust their body, put on fashionable clothes (including

⁵⁴ The term “coiffeur” has been adopted in Egypt from the French which translates as hairdresser in English.

⁵⁵ This reinforced their ties with women of the same “veil status”, thereby reinforcing their choices.

the veil for some) and jewellery in order to become a “beautiful” social being in public. Many of the women I spent time with during my stay in Alexandria postponed or delayed appointments because they were still busy fixing their hair according to perceived beauty standards that determine women’s hair needs to be straight, tamed, and fixed.⁵⁶

In the context of my research, aspects of beauty (*al-gamāl*), hair, and the veil in the sense of fashion are likely adjusted to social expectations, religious beliefs, and individual needs. According to Refti Handini Listyani and Emy Susanti (2020) beauty can be identified as spiritual, physical, and ethical beauty. This categorisation illustrates that beauty can be subdivided into inner and outer beauty, with fluid boundaries.⁵⁷ Spiritual beauty in my understanding encompasses religiosities, beliefs, and one’s relationship with God. Physical beauty then focusses on bodily appearance, while ethical beauty highlights one’s behaviour and can contain the former two categories. In this conceptual analysis, women’s bodies manifest their own subjectivities, which is why the triangular approach should be amended by the fourth category of individual beauty. Indeed “beauty is such a personal and yet public and embodied aspect of the self” (Liebelt 2019b: 13), that the self will be focussed on in my analysis of the relationship between beauty, hair and the veil. This is especially important since “emerging literature on beauty practices and images worldwide has demonstrated that, in their quest for beauty, modernity or enhancement, bodies are shaped by particular, yet transnational body politics [...] and are embedded in culturally specific, collective fantasies that are neither exclusively local nor global, but may be both” (Liebelt 2019b: 1). These body politics with their multiple and varying meanings in specific settings are influenced by global and local fashion industries that try to objectify the body and the notion of beauty according to bodily beauty ideals (Jones 2010; Liebelt 2019a and 2019c). Beyond these norms or ideals are individuals who are perceived, assessed, and judged by others, but also by themselves. Beauty then is theorised in this article as an affective notion in the sense of a value that is complex, changing, and relational.

It is at this point that the notion of emotion merges into the field of beauty, hair, and the veil: the veil can be flexibly worn or taken off part-time; the veil covers or reveals (parts of) the hair; the (“un-made”) hair requires the veil (the merging of aspects of beauty, religion, and power relations). When receiving compliments from others on their appearance, many of my interlocutors – both veiled and unveiled – stated they felt flattered and accepted. In turn, they feared embarrassing questions if they did not adhere to these expectations and put in time and effort to avoid them. Regarding

⁵⁶ Among these pressures is also the emotional pressure of hair shaming for many women. Women’s hair must be analysed in relation to ideas of masculinity, social order, and patriarchal authority. Reactions to women’s public appearances can be manifold, complementary or competing.

⁵⁷ According to Qur’ān and Ḥadīṭ beauty and its underlying values have to be taken into consideration in the debate about the notion of beauty. Islamic teaching, with its multiple definitions and perspectives on the notion of beauty throughout history, goes beyond bodily appearances and attractiveness to be able to see the beauty of the world. It also deals with the love of God for beauty in this world as well as in the afterlife (Fahm 2020).

embarrassing questions or statements often expressed in joking irony during my field research that resemble the entanglement of emotions in the politics of social life, I will refer to situations where I was exposed to Egyptian beauty standards or expectations. My friends would sometimes make fun of my appearance, because I did not wear expensive brands or jewellery, and rarely wore make-up, and because I did not tend to wear my hair loose. To avoid such situations, my friends lent me their clothes, dragged me to the coiffeur with them to style (not cut) my hair. They would advise me on how to put on make-up, saying “you can’t go out like this [referring to my un-styled, wavy hair and to my “no-logo” clothes; I tend to dress inconspicuously on field research, which are both physical and emotional journeys, because as a tall, red-haired, foreign woman, I already attract a lot of attention]”. I would usually give in to the beautifying processes. However, at other times, I would excuse myself for not having had enough time to go to the coiffeur before the gathering and then my friends would reply “ma’liš, you are a foreigner, it doesn’t matter how you look or what you wear. For us it is different, people here talk a lot, and they judge us all the time.” In this example my role as foil for comparison in the field is demonstrated: my friends have reflected their problems by showing that it is not a problem for me as a foreigner.

The Veil as Part of the Body: Notions of Beauty, Perceived Prettiness and Guilt

The aspect of beauty and emotions in relation to the veil is also part of the following quotes mirroring select perspectives of the youth generation. These are excerpts from interviews and written conversations that I conducted in Alexandria with young Muslim women aged between 19–24. Initially, I met Noha (19) in my apartment building, where she lives on the 4th floor. We usually engaged in small talk about her studies in Agriculture, my children, the “bad” weather in winter, or the “horrible” traffic while in the elevator or when taking the stairs. After a few of these random encounters, I asked Noha if she wanted to meet me for an official interview about fashion. She agreed and we exchanged numbers and Facebook contacts to chat about details and my intentions. Soon thereafter we created groups on WhatsApp and Facebook to reach a wider audience and Noha invited some of her female friends, as well as friends of friends, to join. It was up to the women to decide what language to use in the groups and the interviews. They mostly chose a mix of Arabic and English, with a tendency to Arabic in the oral interviews and to English in the written conversations.⁵⁸

Marwa, a 19-year-old female who studied Interior Design, never used to wear the veil. For her, the veil is not an issue. She is indifferent to it and says that whoever wants

⁵⁸ The groups were perceived as safe spaces, because the women could participate with anonymous accounts (pre-paid numbers for WhatsApp and I created the groups on Facebook explicitly by enabling the function of anonymous comments). They were a space where it was possible to express emotions, thoughts, opinions, ideas and visions without having to fear social consequences, see also Knoblauch et al. (2019) on how to research emotions and corresponding usage of methods.

to wear it should wear it, but for her it is not an option. Marwa struggled with issues of belief or rather issues of non-belief in Islam:

My relationship to religion is characterised by major doubts, and I am interested more and more in atheism. At the same time I feel super guilty. I don't fast anymore during Ramadan. My family doesn't know about it, and I am even lying to them. I wish to tell everybody that I am not a Muslim anymore, we call it to be "ex-Muslim". However, I am worried how society around me might react. And very contradictorily, I don't believe in hell, but I am extremely scared of hell. I don't want to feel this way, but I cannot do anything about it, I am sure it has to do with my upbringing and indoctrination since a very young age. I wish I didn't have these feelings of guilt. And I wish I wasn't scared of hell. I just want to live in peace. (Marwa, 2.2.2017)

The doubts that Marwa described here are also shared by Amira, a 24-year-old, engaged, unveiled Alexandrian. She used to have arguments with her fiancé about how she dressed in public, an issue that is ongoing as they could not agree on a solution. Amira decided to avoid these struggles by dressing according to the expectations of her fiancé:

I have a wonderful relationship with a very nice man. But we have one major issue and that is the veil. As you can see, I am not veiled, and this is the problem. Or actually the problem is my way of dressing. As a non-ḥigābī girl, I can wear t-shirts, but he doesn't want me to show my skin in public. He doesn't want my body to be visible to others. We argue a lot about this issue, but I always have to do what he says. So I gave up and started dressing the way he wants me to dress, but I only do it for him, and I am not convinced. (Amira, 5.2.2017)

Others in the group also described conflictual situations in their families and arguments over the veil. The case of 19-year-old agriculture student Noha is an example of the hopelessness felt when facing the dominance and power her father exerts over her body:

My childhood was horrible. My father was very strict and controlling. He forced me put on the ḥigāb at the age of 10, even before puberty. He said because my hair is too beautiful. I hated it and cried every night. Now I am older, and I try to distance myself from him, but the veil is still between us and I can't talk to him about it, that I want to take it off. He says if I do, he will kill me. (Noha, 27.11.2016)

Huda, 24, grew up in a similar familial setting with dominant parents who insisted that their daughters veil at puberty. Huda, too, did not find it easy to be veiled and is still struggling with the veil, as well as the "choking" atmosphere in her family:

My parents are also very strict, and they made me get veiled although I didn't want to. I tried to accept it, but it is hard. The problem is not the veil, it is me. I feel trapped and choked. (Huda, 12.12.2016)

For Reem, also 24-years-old, things looked a bit different. She worked as a journalist and moved from Alexandria to Cairo. This spatial distance made it easier for her to un-veil, despite her parents' disapproval. With the removal of the veil came doubts regarding Islam in general. While she hesitated to label herself a non-believer, she gradually removed her trust in religion and in God. The only ritualised practice that she is not yet able to renounce is the prayer:

My problem is that I don't know what to do or what to think. Especially when it comes to religion. I am worried about my thoughts. I have faith and I believe in God. But I don't know if it's a loving or a punishing God. My faith in Islam is decreasing. Look around you, here in Egypt, where politics and religion became mixed, and people abuse religion for political interests. And actually worldwide, people abuse the Qur'an to kill other people. I don't think this is right. And this is why I took off my veil. It's not for me, and it's not me – the veil. People ask me if I regret it. But I don't. Yet, I am scared to accept atheist thinking and be curious about other ideas. Although some of their points, I understand. I don't like extremism, especially not in religion. The last "good" thing I am doing is praying. But I am not connected with my heart anymore. I cannot give up praying. It is the last thing I am doing. (Reem, 13.12.2016)

Ala'a, 19-years old, also came from a strict family, who, like Noha, cannot talk to her family about her intimate perspectives and her wish to remove the veil. In her account, the notion of beauty is also relevant in the context of the veil and her hair, which she considered to be her only beautiful attribute:

I think I am not very pretty. Only my hair is beautiful. But since I am veiled, I think I am really ugly, and I hate it. My parents are very strict, and I cannot talk to them about the veil or that I want to take it off. Although it affects me very much. Also, we do everything to cover our bodies, but it is useless, we still get sexually harassed. And the men still look at us. So it's all a lie to ourselves, the covering of the hair and the body because it does not protect us from them. It would be better if we stop this hypocrisy and enjoy life and our beauty, instead of hiding for false reasons. I really envy all unveiled girls *ḡasb 'annī* (against my will). (Ala'a, 4.6.2017)

The indoctrination that Ala'a and Noha expressed was also shared by Injy, who, like Reem, decided to remove the veil as soon as she moved out of her parents' house to study dentistry in Cairo. For her, wearing the veil was a physically suffocating experience, something that many of my interlocutors stated, even those who had voluntarily

chosen to wear the veil (and who do not take it off regardless of the feeling of suffocation).⁵⁹ Injy, who is 21-years old, regretted the time she was veiled, and unveiled she still felt connected to God and is aware of her belief, which she distinguishes from the practice of veiling:

My perspective has changed recently. I cannot wear the veil anymore. I only did because I copied people in my family, role models. Their influence on me is very strong, and now I am strong, and I want to change things. I regret wearing the ḥigāb, I was indoctrinated, I wouldn't have worn it if it was my choice. And this is disconnected from my relationship to God, my faith, and my belief. Physically the ḥigāb is suffocating me. But if we talk about society in general, change has to come from within, not from form or outside. (Injy, 4.6.2017)

Mona, a 22-year-old who is veiled, also refers to the notion of beauty in the portrayal of her body, which she did not consider “pretty”. Her meandering “belief journey” that led her through phases of certainty and doubt, ended with her entire loss of faith in God:

I really tried hard to live a life that God accepts, and I also tried to live without him. My state is now that I lost faith completely. Look, my body is not pretty, I am chubby. But I am also veiled. But I don't believe in it. I also lie to my parents, because I don't care about religion anymore and I don't consider myself to be a religious person. (Mona, 19.11.2017)

The non-belief in the veil was also shared by Noha. Now aged 19, she looked back to when she started veiling at the age of 11, and how she tried to combine the veil with “feeling beautiful”, since it was impossible for her to take off the veil:

The veil should make us confident and strong. But in my case, the veil makes me unconfident and doubtful. Since being “ānisa”, since puberty, I am wearing my veil. It was a big step and a major change in my life, and I was initially very excited to look like other female members and role models of my family and most importantly, from then on, my parents started to allow me to leave the house without them. I loved that new freedom. But that was wrong. After only a few months, I started to hate it. It's been eight years now, that I am veiled. And every time I go out with my friends, I wear non-veil-compatible clothes, like short dresses and I wear the veil “Spanish-style”, showing my neck and some of my hair. I did a lot of research about the veil and I consulted God and I prayed and prayed and prayed but I am not successful. The only solution is to take it off. But my father will never allow me to take it off. It's impossible. I would have to wait until I am married. (Noha, 5.5.2017)

⁵⁹ On the repeated mentioning of the veil to be suffocating, see also van Nieuwkerk (2020).

Riham, 23, described a different situation. She cannot understand why she should take off the veil, just because many other women recently started to unveil. For her, the veil can be disconnected from her way of dressing. Accordingly, the veil in her view is a religious marker of her relationship with God and not a fashionable attribute. Her other clothing is fashionable and thus contradicts what commonly is assumed to be “religious fashion”:

The issue of the *hiġāb* is very confusing. It is a trend now to take it off. And many people tell me I should take it off, because I don’t wear *hiġābī*-clothes. But I don’t understand why. I also smoke, but I don’t support drinking. So I don’t know where the problem is. (Riham, 3.2.2018)

While religion and the veil are compatible for Riham, this was not necessarily the case for Samar who, as a 22-year-old, veiled woman, expressed feelings of guilt, because she did not consider herself to be religious at all. Being religious is something she would like to be, while at the same time she also wanted to take off the veil. She was struggling to find herself in this intimate account, searching for who she in fact is:

Yes, I am veiled, but this does not mean that I am a religious person. I am not religious *hālis* [at all]. I am more interested in the rest of what is out there, the forbidden stuff, that which is *ḥarām*. It makes me feel guilty and I actually want to be religious, but at the same time I want to go out and take off my *hiġāb*. Who am I? (Samar, 15.5.2018)

The discussions in the groups and the interviews with young Muslim women show that I needed to look at individual wishes, doubts, aspirations, worries, and fears, as much as I needed to look at dogma and institutionalised Islam that infuses these dilemmas. In many of these intimate perspectives, the veil is not simply experienced and depicted as a piece of cloth, rather it is embodied emotions (and opens up an emotional spectrum). What is striking in the statements is that many of these young women consider the veil to be “their” or “my” veil. For many women this personalisation of the object makes it almost impossible to detach it from their body, since it “is a part of me”; it is not only a piece of cloth, a garment, a way of dressing – it is a part of their body, that literally “belongs” to them. The notion of embodiment thus enters another dimension here, that has “bodily” effects beyond aspects of practices and performances. Moreover, the veil is mostly debated in position or relation to something else, be it the familial background, religion, or society (protection from harassment, the male/female gaze, fashion) (see Gökarıksel and Secor 2014). It is, although part of the body, attributed with functionality and intention, not simply accepted as “being there”, but as being worn for one or many reasons. The reasons then are objects of mostly contestation or congruence and more rarely indifference. Interestingly, the fact that the veil is considered by most of these women to be a part of their body, does not automatically give them power over this part. They are often in the position of having

to defend and justify it. Even if they did not choose the veil themselves, some consider it part of their body, while for others it remains alien to them until the moment they can decide to take it off. Refusal of the veil and feelings of impossibility wearing it are common in Alexandria, as the examples above demonstrate.

The veil is not only a contested topic among women, but also among men.⁶⁰ While most men would consider it to be *farḍ* (individual religious duty), they would leave the sovereignty over interpretation of this religious duty (i.e. whether and when to put on the veil) to women. Some others would force or encourage the woman to put on the veil, while many others would not consider it *farḍ* and would even reject it as limiting, ugly, disgusting, fake, useless, reactionary, and retrograde, a sign of stupidity, opposition, traditionalism, Islamism, oppression, patriarchy, control, provision, dominance, even abuse (El Guindi 1999). Thus, while women are the one's wearing or not wearing the veil, it is not only a women's matter. Men have a position and say in this practice and also influence it, sometimes even more effectively than women (i.e. the social dynamics evoked by the Egyptian TV-preacher Amr Khaled, who was famous in the early 2000s also affected the wearing of the veil)⁶¹, in both public and in the private and intimate space of the family (Wikan 1991). The veil triggered and triggers heated debates among friends and family members, among public and religious figures (Kütük-Kuriş 2021: 33).

Noteworthy in this context is that the veil is a gendered symbol that invites, alongside religious debates, discussions about patriarchy and the positioning of women in the respective society, especially as the veil can, from Western as well as from in-society perspectives, be considered to be a means to subordinate women and encourage a two-layered society with men as dominating parts (cf. Ahmed 1992). I collected statements from young Egyptian men and women that included "the veil is a relic from the times of the prophet Muḥammad and it is actually not yet clearly stated that women should wear it. But most men (as well as women) use it to suppress women and to seclude them from male communities. In the name of Islam, men order women to wear it and thereby delete them from the visible public and push them aside as invisible appearances that are confined to the house and leave all power to the men." (Omar, 20.12.2016) What is striking here is the perspective that Islam as religious authority is being used to influence, manipulate, and control women's behavior (Watson 1994). In other words, it is not enough to have male dominance, but Islam has to be consulted and quoted as reference, i.e. as external expertise, that cannot be rejected or refuted. If, according to Islam, the veil has to be worn by women, then it is God's will, and his will must be obeyed. Thus, even, if some try to argue with patriarchal rulings regarding the veil, in the end God's orders are binding. By this argumentative tech-

⁶⁰ See Alvi (2013: 177–199) for a discussion of the veil and male perspectives with ethnographic data of the Pakistani Punjab.

⁶¹ On the influence of Amr Khaled on social dynamics in Egypt including the veil see Moll (2010). Nowadays other public figures and self-branding TV-preachers are well known in Egypt, such as Muşţafâ Ḥusnî (see Franke 2022b).

nique, namely, using an expert as reference, discussions are being avoided and silenced, since “God knows better” (Menna, 20.12.2016). Here, too the psychological effects of blaming and shaming are used, in the sense that ignoring God’s advice will lead to divine punishment. Religiously conformist behaviour and dress is again related to the afterlife as has already been demonstrated. The godly penalty will happen on Judgement Day – until then, every disciple has the chance in the here and now to prove his/her submission to God (Smith and Haddad 1975, 2002). Although this form of punishment is used as threat and oppression, it is not a proven fact and can still be doubted. Guilt and fear come into play here and are powerful emotions that can lead to behaviour that would otherwise be rejected. If misused, communities and larger societies can be lastingly influenced and changed, as the excerpts from the written conversations in the paragraph above demonstrated.

Extraordinary Fashion Styles and Extensions to the Veil: The niqāb and the ‘abāya

When analysing the veil or to be more precise the argumentative realm circulating the veil, one possible extension should not be forgotten – the niqāb. The niqāb, or face veil, is a piece of cloth in addition to the headscarf. With the niqāb comes the ‘abāya and sometimes the covering of the feet (with socks), hands (with gloves) and the eyes (with glasses or another gauze like material). Mostly, the niqāb covers the entire face without covering the eyes. Although not exclusively, women who wear the niqāb often dress in black or other darker colours. In written Islamic sources (Qur’ān, Ḥadīth) there cannot be found a text-based reference that directs/instructs women to wear the niqāb. Moreover, women are not supposed to cover their faces during prayer (ṣalāt), therefore they have to remove the niqāb when praying. My interlocutor, Rania, 53, with a medical university degree, non-working, and married with three children, told me that “in Egypt the spouses of military officers are not allowed to wear the niqāb since, according to the military, it is associated with religious fanaticism.” (Rania, 19.11.2016) She also said that “in Egypt some abuse the niqāb to commit crimes unrecognized, such as burglary, which is why in many parts of our society the niqāb is rejected, for society reasons and for ideology or religious reasons.”

The argument that, through anonymity, objectification and patriarchy re-emerge is very common among critics who deny that the covering of women (both ḥiğāb and niqāb) empowers any of these women: the only ones who are empowered and who may perpetuate their dominant position by means of the ḥiğāb and or niqāb are men.⁶² However, some women argue that the niqāb in particular offers a redefinition of their individual space in the public realm which allows them to roam as inconspicuously as possible and thus are freed from the inquisitorial male gaze. For many women the male

⁶² On the notion of empowerment and disempowerment in the context of the veil see Odeh (1993, especially 33–34) as well as Amin (1899).

gaze is more disturbing and intrusive than any said expressions or actions. The gaze is therefore more powerful and less controllable, as well as less obvious and provable (Herrera 2000). The sense of protection from sexual harassment in all of its forms is also a strong sentiment for most of the women wearing a niqāb (Al Manūfī 2008). To receive less male attention in public is desired, and a welcome by-product of a fashion that these women consider to be a symbol and a form of public expression of ultimate piety. Again, the niqāb can be analysed from a religious perspective, which can be subdivided into moral and religious aspects, and a gender perspective. The context must always be taken into consideration, as well as each person's opinion on the niqāb. Form and meaning, as stated above, are also decisive here (Badran 1995). Yet, the niqāb opens spaces for more extreme reactions, especially by those who reject it, than the veil. First, because the niqāb does not have any religious basis in the written sources. Second, the niqāb is considered an extreme form of religious and social interpretation. Third, the niqāb is a clear marker of (spatial) separation, and emotional proximity is difficult to develop without visible facial expressions (Zuhur 1992).

For some the niqāb is not only an embodied practice but is in fact a part of their bodies, the ideological aspect of identity is thus literally engraved in their physical appearance. In terms of identity, this is part of one's own personality, as well as a marker for a collective identity by being publicly acknowledged as part of the larger Muslim community (umma). It can thus be considered an element bestowed with meaning(s) for Muslim women and men. Moreover, the niqāb is a fabric that traverses the confines of the private body and conveys a message (regardless of how it might be interpreted) to the public realm. One's intimate space can thereby be publicly observable, recognizable, and subsequently judged in all its possible dimensions. The imagined becomes manifest in the embodied practice of the various forms of veiling and covering.

However, as much as the niqāb can invite the traversing of spaces, it can also signal the 'sacred' intimacy of the female body, and the constraints religious interpretations can bring. Although visible in public, the female body here is not meant for exposure or publicity; it weaves through the public space that is considered open, while itself is closed. This "invisibility" offers fully veiled women a protective shield, providing them with the option to remain unnoticed without being bothered, looked at, flirted with or worse, while also being a religious instruction that is said to open up a higher level in paradise. Many women are happy, and often relieved, to fully veil themselves in public:

For me, the niqāb is not a sacrifice and is not a burden. It is a solution for basically everything. I don't have to follow any rules, I don't have to think about anything. I can just be myself and do whatever I want to do. Yes, aside from men outside my family. Apart from that I feel that I get less harassed than my friends and relatives who wear only ḥijāb. (Jihan, 15.4.2017)

This relief that Jihan, 27, married and working as a pharmacist, described, is a relief from adhering to imagined fashion adoption, consumerism, a liberation from one's bodily appearance and the corresponding expectations from the fashion industry. The

freedom to be “properly” dressed in public without putting any effort into one’s looks may be considered a relief for many fully veiled women who felt pressured by others, and the advertising and fashion industries. Social media and mass consumption in terms of fashion are the most dominant in influencing dress codes and corporeal looks (Abaza 2007). The ‘abāya can be worn over anything, and the face veil does not allow for full make-up (except for the eyes if they are not covered). Since both are usually black the “matching-issue” that many veiled women have is not an issue for those wearing the niqāb. As such the niqābī way of dressing can be considered a way of resisting other gendered pressures. Resistance to the fashion industries and the pressure built up through social media to perform perfectly. Resistance to the male gaze that is centred around promiscuity. Resistance to socially and culturally conformist dress codes. Resistance to mainstream expectations and resistance to mainstream religious expectations. It must, nevertheless, be considered that not all women wearing the niqāb have this agency potential on their side, given the fact that some of them do not wear it out of free will, but because of pressure from patriarchal structures emanating mostly from their families (often implemented by women). Here modesty is a duty of women; men are thus not responsible for their desires, and women have to prevent and cover their bodies so as not to arouse men, similar to Menna’s opinion above regarding the veil. This exceeds the realm of fashion, beauty and looks and extends to the realm of behaviour and personality and enters the ongoing scholarly debate of honor and shame. In return women have power over men’s sexual attraction and being aware of that, the niqāb is no longer a restrictive boundary. Some women express that the niqāb in particular provides them with the freedom to interact with men, because it is unexpected and surprising. It can even be worn and perceived in a sexually attractive and even seductive way. Quite a few men told me that they are curious about the woman and her body behind the veil. They consider the fabric with a soft drape surrounding her arousing, even erotic, especially if the contours of the body can be roughly guessed. Mixed with the often-uncovered eyes and hands, the otherwise fully covered body leaves much space for imagination. Some women are aware of the desires their appearance can incite in men and deliberately play with this powerful inspiring element.

Moreover, pre- and extra-marital relationships, as well as sex work, can happen behind the niqāb, i.e. women can move inconspicuously from one house to another without being “seen” (Tolino 2016). The niqāb can thus be a cover for their relationships and or sex work – both are common yet officially unacceptable and taboo in Egypt (Ahmed 1992).

The tensions that this form of embodied practice can bring with it, particularly the view of the “West”, is often rejected on the grounds of “this is our country and our religion, and our culture, and we can do whatever we want to do here. Being in Europe it would be a different story, but here in Egypt we are free to live our religion according to our beliefs. Although we also have enough problems and many fully veiled or even ‘just’ veiled women feel discriminated against or not comfortable in parts of the city and among parts of society who dress differently”, as stated by Mira, 30, married with

three children, who worked as private Qur'ān teacher for children (Mira, 20.11.2016). Moral values can be conflicting here, and those who reject the niqāb often stated that those wearing it are generally not adhering to Islamic behavioural standards and are impolite, lie, or steal. These tensions around practicing Islam and Islamic dress code(s) and behaviour are prominent and extend to the notion of identity. Accordingly, identity is not built around citizenship but around religious idea(l)s. The rejection of the niqāb takes up this line of argument, and it blames Wahhābī ideologies that have flooded Egypt ever since Egyptians travelled to Saudi Arabia as migrant workers and returned, not only with petro-dollars, but more importantly with fundamentalist religious ideas that include a strict gender division and full seclusion of the female body in the public space. My male interview partners in particular who do not approve of the niqāb refer to Saudi Arabia's negative religious influence on Egyptians.

'Abāya fashion during Ramadan is a special form of Islamic attire that women can wear throughout the holy month, or just at prayer times, or when they gather for *Salāt at-Tarāwīh* (*Tarāwīh* prayer) which takes place after the evening prayer (*salāt al-īshā'*) and is an essential ritual during Ramadan focusing on the recitation of Qur'an.⁶³ Among many of the women I spent time with during my field work, the time of the *Tarāwīh* prayer was a special and precious time, which they usually enjoyed without their children or husbands. They would inform their female relatives and friends to meet up at a certain mosque for *Tarāwīh* prayer. The mosque was chosen based on the respective Imam preaching that night. During my stay in Alexandria, Omar Shalabi was rather popular and my interlocutors would go to one of the two mosques he was praying at: one was located in the sports club *nādī Sporting* and the other was located in my neighbourhood in central Alexandria (it was an informal mosque in a private villa right in front of my house; from two windows of my flat on the 8th floor I had a good overview of the mosque which, during Ramadan, expanded into the garden because of the rush of visitors, with the spatial separation of men and women).

The gatherings for *Tarāwīh* prayer that my friends and interlocutors attended were usually accompanied by a considerable amount of preparation, namely in terms of looks, beauty, and attire. This included applying make-up application (also often nail polish), doing one's hair (because the head cover, often a hood or a loose shawl was draped in a way that some of the woman's hair was visible), putting on jewellery and choosing a fashionable 'abāya, one that does not look like the ordinary, everyday 'abāyas of other women. Attention is also invested in the footwear/'abāya combination.

In June 2017, I was invited for *iftār* at the home of my friends, who were living in an adjacent quarter. A married couple with two little girls, the husband is in his mid-forties, and works as a doctor, while my friend, 35, was working in the human resources department of an international company. Once we finished the meal and started playing with the kids, my friend would leave the living room to get ready for

⁶³ While a moderate number of publications exist regarding 'abāya fashion in general, most focus on the Gulf countries (Abaza 2007, Al-Qasimi 2010, El-Bassiouny 2018, Lindholm 2013 and Shimek 2012) and not much has been written about 'abāya fashion during Ramadan.

Tarāwih prayer and the gathering with other friends. In the meantime, her husband and I chatted. Once my friend was ready, she entered the living room and frantically asked us for our opinions on which ‘abāya she should wear, and what shoes she should combine it with (my friend is known for being late and for being hectic and stressed because of her habit of being late). Upon seeing her, I said “wow”, because she looked unexpectedly dressed up. Her husband commented: “Yes, she always looks like she is going out on a date meeting another man, although she *only* goes for Tarāwih prayer downstairs.” My friend didn’t say anything, but just rolled her eyes and said: “I am already in a hurry (anā mist’agilla), so please help me choose quickly, which one looks more beautiful?” We helped her choose and she hurriedly ran downstairs to listen to the prayer, which had already started. The next day I would meet my friend again – alone. We would talk about how the prayer was and I had the chance to also ask her about the dress code, and why it was important for her to go to Tarāwih prayer in special attire. She replied:

Tarāwih prayer is a special prayer. Ramadan is already special, but Tarāwih prayer is even more special, it feels holy to me. In my normal life I do not wear an ‘abāya or even ḥigāb – I think it is ugly, and it makes me ugly. But for Tarāwih I can wear a beautiful ‘abāya – you know, some brands produce explicitly for Ramadan, and yes, every year I choose one or two new styles. I feel more pious, more religious, if I go properly dressed to the mosque. And then there are the other women who also dress up, and they look down on me, because we live in this building and not in one of the new and fancy apartment buildings. I always have the feeling they feel sorry for me and this annoys me. So, one side-effect of these gatherings is that I try to look extra beautiful. But the most important part is Islām. My religion. I don’t always pay that much attention to it, my life is busy, I work a lot and the kids need attention too. So, usually even when I pray, I pray in a hurry. During Ramadan, I can take more time for religion. And I like Tarāwih and to recite Qur’ān. And then, there is Omar Shalabi, he is a famous preacher. You can hear him – don’t you like his voice? It is so beautiful. He makes my soul feel beautiful, so how can my body not feel beautiful?

Ramadan is a special and festive time of the year for most Muslims. While many Muslims would focus on the contemplative aspect of the holy month, some, like my friend, would use this month to create a version of themselves that they are not willing or able to represent and to live in their everyday lives. It is a chance for them to feel religious and to feel beautiful at the same time – something that my friend said is impossible in reality, because the “ḥigāb makes women look ugly, because the veil covers their most beautiful part, their hair, and frames their faces and highlights their noses for example.” But during Ramadan, and for Tarāwih prayer in particular, it is an option for her, a temporal and thus limited option, that does not need to extend to her everyday life. She can try and experiment with the feeling of being veiled and with her

looks, albeit in rather special religious attire. Once Ramadan is over, she can return to her ordinary self and her usual unveiled fashion without feeling guilty.

‘Abāya fashion during Ramadan is thus a rather flexible and versatile fashion that allows women to experiment with different styles in a limited temporal context. A religious setting that is recurrent and connoted positively – most women enjoy Ramadan and the possibility to gather in a mosque every day for Tarāwih prayer.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed how processes of individualisation and the self are embedded in gendered discourses about the veil, beauty, and fashion. The larger debate also takes the reconfiguration of communities (often as “imagined communities”) into consideration, since processes of individualisation and the self can correlate with different, sometimes new feelings of belonging and social affiliations with others. Researching individual life worlds and trajectories, the focus of the present contribution, was on the multifaceted dynamics in Egypt, religious innovation, individual religiosities, and non-religiosities. Social and everyday practices are key in this development that resembles processes of individualisation much more than it resembles a normative debate or a “matter of doctrine” as Haenni and Holtrop discuss (Haenni and Holtrop 2002: 45).

As has been demonstrated, “the veil” as a prominent example of women’s fashion, as dress-code and embodied practice, is underlying social dynamics and political processes that influence the way women are covering and un-covering. These processes also have an impact on how the various forms of clothing are perceived and expressed by both men and women. Emotions are thus key in my analysis regarding the veil debate, which is a highly sensitive and contested debate. The appearance of so-called Islamic forms of fashion are as diverse and heterogeneous as the opinions behind the fabrics and its styles. Notions of beauty and fashion are entangled in debates about the veil. Hair as described as the most prominent beauty feature of women has largely remained unresearched in the context of the veil. It thus has been focused on explicitly in this contribution.

Justifications that are in favour of the ḥiğāb are mostly centred around pious motivations, religious obligations, or role models, as well as modesty and gender segregation. Afterlife and higher levels in ḡanna (Islamic concept of paradise) are then highlighted in the argumentative line of being a good Muslim which not only extends to behaviour and character but also to one’s way of dressing in the public space and in front of unrelated men. It has to be noted that fashion that conforms with Islam does not only include the ḥiğāb: for those who do not veil it can mean long(er) sleeves, skirts, trousers, the covering of the neckline, and loose clothes, less make-up and jewellery, lowering one’s voice, not laughing loudly in public. In essence, it depends on the interpretation of the written sources and the respective opinion of the religious

leaders that one follows, or one's own opinion. While divine commands for modest forms of garments can be found in the Qur'ān, there are no written sources obliging women to wear the niqāb, rather this tradition is based on the Sunna and is said to be following the example of the wives of the prophet Muḥammad.

Those in favour of clothing that covers in the name of Islam equip the women (themselves) with agency and power, while those rejecting the veil portray them(selves) as suppressed and powerless which is being aggravated by gendered segregation based on Islamic ideals – often implemented by women on other women. Apart from religious conviction and belief, generational relations, habits, doubts, experience, free will, pressure, peer groups, age, social milieu and political developments can play a role for deciding to put on or take off the veil, as well as being comfortable with it or feeling uncomfortable with it. As has been demonstrated, the form does not necessarily represent the meaning, thus the style of clothing is not in all cases informative of the meaning behind the veil. Although the veil is a recurring part of the dress code of many women, it underlies waves of being fashionable and unfashionable, depending on religious, social, and political developments.

All of this combined with the positions stated above, demonstrate the complexity of the veil that cannot be ignored. Every generation develops with its surroundings, and these influences lead to varying opinions – the veil of course is just one of them, but a conspicuous and powerful one.

While the ḥiğāb is a very visible practice, it does not necessarily resemble a religious symbol. The reasons for wearing it cannot simply be assumed, they have to be questioned and contextualized accordingly. For most women several reasons dominate their choice or rejection of the veil, and the relationship they have with the veil is complex. Some women might be ashamed of their looks or their job, while others consider their religious duty a valid reason to put on the ḥiğāb. The physical separation from men that almost simultaneously comes with the veil, is often intended, although this separation can be traversed and ignored by both men and women. Some women praise the fashionable aspect of the veil, others reject the fashion aspect because of its limiting factors.

The veil has significance bestowed upon it from various sides, such as the person wearing it, the person seeing it, and the person justifying or rejecting or being indifferent to it. This milieu specific significance varies according to time and space and can influence the social identity of the wearer: varying discourses surrounding the veil exist in society. As embodied practice the wearer can determine styles and times of putting on the veil – given that this form of agency is possible. Yet even those who are being forced to cover themselves have options to consciously make use of the veil for their own, yet limited, benefit.

However, the reaction to the veil in society can be manifold, complementary or competing as has been demonstrated above. Alexandria does not consist of a homogenous society, and across generations and neighbourhoods different social and religious behaviour is practiced and expected. The ḥiğāb is a very prominent example of how contentious religious practices can be, and how different interpretations of it

according to time and space can influence social dynamics and vice versa.⁶⁴ In other words, the veil can resemble a faith-based development – of the individual, i.e. in terms of improvement of *the self*, and of the collective, i.e. in terms of social dynamics, fashion and peer-pressure, which is in line with Foucault’s idea in “Technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988).

Thus, the wearing of the veil must be interrogated and, despite the fact that it is an old debate, with every woman’s veiling or unveiling, it becomes a different and actual debate that is also very much coined by men’s and other women’s (changing) opinions and their influence on women and the overall discourse. Moral aspirations and religious interpretations are mingled in this debate. The debate around this highly contested piece of cloth is not binary with strict demarcation lines, rather it has blurred boundaries and many facets. Added to the multifaceted dispute are not only facts and religious dogma and circumstances, but most importantly emotions and faith. The emotional and faith-based aspects are the ones that make this debate highly contested and ensure its survival and its relevance even today.

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⁶⁴ Social dynamics can also have an effect on religious practices, see the above paragraph on the influence Amr Khaled and his television show have had on the increase of the wearing of the ḥiğāb in Egypt. Today lay preachers are still popular in Egypt, especially the TV programmes and YouTube channels of Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī (Franke 2022).

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