Yet Gaskell's willingness to let her heroines turn back into needy daughters suggests that as much as she believed in an ideal of feminine nurturance, she did not turn women into icons of feminine self-sacrifice. The current feminist revival of concepts similar to the Victorian idealization of motherhood has, it seems to me, founedered on just this question of self-care versus self-sacrifice. Gaskell cannot be relied on to break the impasse for us, but her work does point us back in the direction of needing to acknowledge women as individual selves with needs that sometimes conflict with the goals of nurturance. We can arrive at a fuller understanding of Gaskell's fiction if we see her in her full complexity: not as either a mouthpiece for Victorian patriarchy or a rebel against the cult of womanhood but, rather, as one of her own heroines—a nurturing woman who eventually comes to realize that her needs must matter too. We may then be able not only to return to the issue of feminine nurturance with a fresher perspective but also to strip away much of the mythology of the nurturing mother that has prevented us from acknowledging her human needs and, therefore, our own resemblances to her.

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Hegemonic Relations and Gender Resistance: The New Veiling as Accommodating Protest in Cairo

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Power invests [the dominated], passes through them and with the help of them, relying on them just as they, in their struggle against power, rely on the hold it exerts on them. [Michel Foucault]¹

The persistence of women's subordination throughout history and across many cultures presents a difficult puzzle; although women are clearly assertive actors who struggle for better conditions for themselves and for their families, their efforts often seem to produce limited or ephemeral results. The recent widening of opportunities for some women is unusual, and when placed in historical and cross-cultural perspective, its future seems uncertain.² In

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¹ Michel Foucault, quoted in Gilles Deleuze, Foucault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 27–28.

² There is a large anthropological literature countering the idea that women are oppressed by every society; for a recent example see the essays in Peggy Reeves Sanday and Ruth Gallagher Goodenough, eds., Beyond the Second Sex: New Directions in the Anthropology of Gender (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990). These

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this article, I explore the puzzle of women's persistent efforts toward change and the equally persistent presence of gender inequality—the puzzle of the resilience of power in gender relations. Part of the problem, I argue, is located in a style of struggle women employ to resist the constraints of power, a style I have called "accommodating protest."

Feminist theorists have long been interested in the part women play within relations of power. They have often cast women as victims, accepting the inevitability of domination. Others have portrayed women as consenting subordinates, relatively satisfied with a deferential role. More recently, to counter these images of passive victimization and active acceptance, feminists have depicted women as powerful wielders of hidden, informal influence. This latter view begins to deal with the nuances of power relations by detailing various forms of power and by arguing that women are both active subjects and subjects of domination. To continue this effort of detailing the complexities of women's part in power relations, I argue that women, even as subordinate players, always play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest—sometimes all at the same time. Power relationships should be viewed as an ongoing relationship of struggle, a struggle complicated by women's own contradictory subjectivity and ambiguous purposes. Such a perspective on power relations builds on the work of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist who tried to comprehend the puzzles of class consciousness and lower-class consent in modernizing societies. Here I extend his arguments on the complexity of consent to consider the problem of hegemonic relations and gender resistance.

The case of Middle Eastern women is particularly interesting with reference to this issue. From a Western vantage point, women in the Middle East are often pitied as the victims of an especially oppressive

counterexamples are intriguing as they push us away from thinking of women solely as victims and ask us to reconsider the different forms power relations may take; nonetheless, they remain exceptions, which forces us, without falling into essentialism, to think about the ways women's inequality is perpetuated in various cultural, class, ethnic, and national settings.


culture, generally equated with Islamic religion. Women are depicted as bound to the harem, downtrodden and constrained; the ultimate symbol of their oppression and their acceptance of inferiority is the veil. Yet this picture cannot be reconciled with the assertive behavior and influential position of women in many Middle Eastern settings. In Cairo, for instance, many women manage the household budget, conduct important marriage arrangements, and coordinate extensive socioeconomic networks. They are more than deferential partners, playing effective roles in their homes and the wider community, as demonstrated by the recent literature examining women's networks and the informal powers, bargaining tactics, or hidden strategies exercised by Middle Eastern women.6 By implication, although these women probably struggle to widen their options, they also play a real part in maintaining the social context, including power relations, that limit women's opportunities. The dichotomization in the literature on Middle Eastern women between women-of-the-harem victimization and behind-the-scenes-but-truly-powerful agency tends to produce arguments which flatten out the subtleties of women's subjectivity under power. Lost in either of these views, which stem in part from postcolonial discourses embedded within feminist theory, is the much more ambiguous reality of women's attempts to understand and act. Using the new veiling movement as an example, I want to draw attention to these ambiguities of women's simultaneous attempts to alter and to maintain, to protest and to accommodate.

My argument is based on a study of working women in lower-middleclass Cairo. These women form part of a new class in Egyptian society, one created in part by the revolution of 1952 that removed a British-supported monarchy and established a new state. The revolution, a military coup led by a group of army officers, evolved into an attempt to wed Arab nationalism with socialism under the leadership of Gamal Abdul Nasser, Egypt's new president and the Arab world's new popular leader. Nasser's authoritarian populism stressed social welfare programs, self-
determination in foreign policy, and pan-Arabic regional unity. His policies propelled Egypt into political leadership in the Arab world but also into a top-heavy and relatively unproductive bureaucratic regime. The new middle class that emerged from the peasantry through free education and guaranteed jobs in government offices is increasingly squeezed economically by the government's attempt to maintain a welfare state with relatively meager resources. The economic and social struggles of this new middle class frame the circumstances of women working as low-ranking clerks in the government bureaucracy. Indeed, the values and living standards of middle-class life assume a magnified importance for these women and their families in marking family position and individual identity. Although they have the example of upper-class women who hold political power or important jobs in the business and bureaucratic worlds, these women face the novel experience of being the first in their families' recent histories to pursue formal education and jobs outside the home.

In recent years, many of these women have embraced the controversial new veiling, a voluntary women's movement to abandon Western clothes in favor of some form of covered Islamic dress. My interpretation of the politics of this dress centers on its expression of a contradictory message of both protest and accommodation. While this ambiguous symbolic politics takes on the distinctive and dramatic form of veiled dress in Cairo, the argument it raises about women's part in power relations is suggestive for women elsewhere as well. For the new veiling in Cairo takes place not as a remnant of traditional culture or a reactionary return to traditional patterns, but as a form of hegemonic politics in a modernizing environment, making its meaning relevant to women in other such settings as well—settings in which, as Foucault reminds us, power and

resistance both reveal themselves in transformed and ever more subtle arrangements.

Choosing to look at women's use of the veil in an urban center in the Middle East and using that case study to reflect on women's part in power relations also illustrates some of the unresolved methodological dilemmas of writing about women and power in the Third World. The veil has been an obsession of Western writers from early travelogues to more recent television docudramas, serving as the symbol par excellence of women as oppressed in the Middle East, an image that ignores indigenous cultural constructions of the veil's meanings and reduces a complex and ever-changing symbolism into an ahistorical reification. Although a more recent literature on women's informal powers has revised this image, it has tended to so contextualize women's situation that the larger issues of women's subordination are sometimes left untouched. The polemics of global feminist discourse create a context in which it becomes difficult to talk about women's subordination at all without contributing to earlier stereotypes, yet avoiding the topic of women's subordination creates a feminism that celebrates difference but loses its foundation for ethical judgment. I have tried to contextualize the use of the veil for these women in Cairo and to emphasize their agency; however, I also examine the ambiguities at the heart of their use of the new veils, raising questions about the nature of women's agency and resistances more generally.

This study is founded on a close association with twenty-eight lower-middle-class households in Cairo, including about eighty-five women. Material was collected primarily through participant observation and informal conversations conducted during long visits with women and their families at home and with women in the workplaces. In later stages of the research, twenty-five younger women were selected for informal interviewing more systematically focused on working and veiling. Certainly, my own identity influenced my field research and writing considerably. First, my father is Russian and my mother is from Maine. I went to the Middle East for the first time to do field research for my dissertation; there I found that women accepted me as both Arabic and American, using my two identities as it suited their own purposes in different social situations. Other aspects of my identity, as a married woman and even-

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10 Actually, women's work outside the home has varied considerably, and families of this level might have had women workers in earlier generations, although not recently. On the realities of women's work in historical context, see Judith Tucker, Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
11 Two examples, in the interest of exploration, can be mentioned here. The use of the art to embody new ideas of women's role and identity can be a form of resistance, located in uniquely 'feminine' places. For instance, see Judith Lynne Hanna, "Dance, Protest, and Women's 'Wars': Cases from Nigeria and the United States," in Women and Social Protest, ed. Guida West and Rhoda Lois Blumberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 333-45. Yet, as with the new veils, arts such as embroidery or dance may also contribute to traditional stereotypes. Another example is women's important presence in religious movements; the African-American church and gospel singing, fundamentalist Christianity, or resurgent Islam all offer a place for women to express their ideas within a traditional and therefore safe space; yet this can serve to reinforce rather than alter women's inequality.

13 See the discussion of the discourse of difference and its "erasure of 'other' women" in Lazzre, who asks, "To what extent can Western feminism dispense with an ethics of responsibility when writing about 'different' women?" (340); Lazzre argues that we need to work toward the goal of promoting "intersubjectivity" in cross-cultural feminisms, emphasizing the subjectivity of both researcher and researched, a complicated task, but one to strive toward rather than reconciling ourselves to "difference," which may be only a mask for "indifference."
advocates the covering of the hair, shoulders, and upper arms and excluding oneself from inappropriate viewers; this advice refers, however, to the wives of the Prophet, who had both the religious and social status of an elite group and the special problem of being permanently in the public eye. The implications for other women are unclear and have been interpreted in a wide variety of ways depending on local needs, class interests, kinship structures, and women's endeavors.

Although the widespread concern with women's dress does indicate a cultural focus on modest behavior, veiling is a subtle and evocative symbol with multiple meanings that cultural participants articulate, read, and manipulate. Veiling may, for example, function to emphasize appropriate relations of familiarity and distance within the web of kinship bonds. Women may draw their covering dress closer about them or cover their face when in the presence of strangers, and then leave their face uncovered within the home or in front of certain male relatives. Indeed, as many families make the transition from village to urban settings, veiling may be extended as well as women are more often in the range of strangers' vision. Veiling can also be tied to class; often less feasible for poorer women laboring in the fields or outside the home, veiling tends to increase as class standing rises and families can afford the "luxury" of more seclusion for women. Thus, covered dress may signal higher prestige and status, making it more desirable to families moving to a higher class standing. Further, veiling may present overt political statements centered on cultural authenticity or political and religious affiliations. Finally, veiling may function as a mode of communication between the wearer and viewer, a public way of sending social or economic messages, perhaps about marital status, education, or village origin. The subtle alterations of how the veil is worn, what material it is made from, and which small decorations complement an outfit highlight the fact that veiling is a two-way mode of communication, not merely a form of dress imposed on women against their will. Women, to some extent, use veiling for their


own purposes—as attraction, as warning, as a reminder of kin and social obligations. Veiling emerges as an evocative sign of the intersection of domination and resistance, highlighting interpretive struggles over women's identity and role.

The importance of veiling as a symbol of power relations in Middle Eastern society is underlined by the history of veiling in Cairo. In 1923, Huda Shaarawi, an upper-class woman involved in the nationalistic struggles against British colonial power, launched a movement to abandon the face veil. This movement eventually triumphed and until fairly recently upper-middle- and upper-class women in Cairo have worn Western-style dress. On the other hand, lower-class women, both of rural and traditional-urban origin, have continued to wear various traditional outfits, which generally include long colorful dresses and a black outer garment and gauzy headscarf.

Yet, in the last fifteen years, many middle- and upper-class women are re-veiling—or more accurately, adopting new versions of Islamic dress ranging from fashionable turbans and silky gowns to austere head-to-toe coverings. The most interesting aspect of this changed dress centers on its emergence as a women's movement, a voluntary veiling initiated primarily by women. Not confined to Cairo, but a widespread movement with varying popularity throughout the Islamic world, the new veiling clearly has symbolic significance for many. However, its meaning varies from country to country, class to class, even individual to individual; it has been used to signal identification within political disputes, as in Iran before and after the revolution; to signal membership in Islamic revivalist groups, as in the universities in Egypt in the late 1970s or in Istanbul today; and to signal anti-Western or nationalistic sentiment, as in the occupied territories in the Palestinian intifada. The popularity of the new veiling movement among lower-middle-class working women in Cairo in the mid-1980s has its own specific and local meanings as well, to which we can now turn.

22 For a detailed description of the variations on these outfits, see Andrea Rugh, Revel and Conceal: Dress in Contemporary Egypt (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

24 Two interesting accounts of the lives of lower-class women, from whom lower-middle-class women seek to differentiate themselves, are Ummi Wikan, Life among the Poor in Cairo (London: Tavistock, 1980); and Nayra Aiya, Khul-Khul: Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1982).
25 See the articles by El Gundi.

Lower-middle-class working women and the new veiling

Cairo has grown in population in the last generation from about 2 million to about 12 million, swelled in part by an influx of rural families in search of work and a "more modern" life. These families, the foundation of the lower middle class, struggle to overcome poverty and reach for middle-class security. The women in these families with about eight living children in cramped apartments of two or three tiny rooms in the traditional quarters of the city. Their mothers are housewives who may raise ducks or chickens for extra income, and their fathers work as construction laborers, drivers, mechanics, or small shopkeepers. These families are the beneficiaries of the socialist programs of the Nasser era, especially the educational reforms that allowed children to attend school and guaranteed jobs to all graduates in the government bureaucracy. These jobs offer respectable working conditions for families very concerned with female members' reputations and the secure, if small, incomes.

Additionally, these jobs offer the prestige of middle-class status to families seeking to differentiate themselves from more recent migrants or from manual laborers, domestics, or street peddlers. Lower-middle-class women distinguish themselves from the "poor," the "peasants" of the lower classes, who follow "uncivilized" and "not modern" life-styles. With household incomes barely rising above the levels of lower-class families, who often follow less prestigious but more lucrative occupations, women from these families are hard pressed to pay for rent, food, commuting, and clothes.

Yet they emphasize the status and prestige of class differences, however subtle, which separate them from lower-class families and exaggerate their similarities to families with more resources. In these families, women's working not only affects their individual standing but also moves the entire family from the lower class to the bottom rungs of the middle class.

These women—educated, working, modernizing—have started to veil, abandoning the modest versions of Western dress that are the badge of their hoped-for class position and turning to the long dresses and headscarfs of the muhaggaba, the covered woman. This movement initiated as a political and religious statement in the universities after the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel and has over the years been transformed into a new movement with different adherents and reasoning. Women's stories
I illustrate some of the controversies which are provoked by this increasingly common pattern in lower-middle-class Cairo.26

Mervat graduated from a two-year institute with a degree in business three years ago; she works as a typist in a government office. She and her four roommates are all single and enjoy the chance to be out of the home which working affords. Since their duties are light, they tend to spend their day chatting over cups of sweet tea about family affairs, the clothes and furnishings they are saving to buy, or the men in the nearby offices. Like many of her friends, Mervat wears Western dress. She has most of her clothes made by her sister-in-law, which is less expensive than buying them ready-made, and she saves carefully to buy shoes on credit to match her skirts and blouses. She explains this effort as marriage strategy: "Men like women to look beautiful of course! So, if I wish to find a husband, I wear this kind of clothes." When asked about the higab, she expresses a typical sentiment: "I hope to wear the higab some day. Not right now, but I respect the women who have made this decision and perhaps I will feel in my heart that this is right too, God willing. Not everyone can make this decision at the same time; I don't think about these things very much now, but maybe I will in the future. It will be important to me, like it is for my sister. She has just decided to become covered and perhaps this decision will come to me too." On the other hand, Mervat's older neighbor, Sanayya, who is married with teenage children and also wears Western clothes, is quite adamant about never putting on the higab: "Some women wear this scarf over their hair, and that is alright for them, but for me, no. I will never put on those clothes. It's important to wear modern clothes and go to work and educate your children, not to cover yourself up. Clothes don't matter anyway, it is a fad for younger girls."

Aida is engaged, and she lives with her family in a traditional quarter in central Cairo. Aida's father is a migrant laborer who works as a driver in the Gulf states and has been away for many years; her mother is illiterate and a sitt al-bayt, a housewife, who has never worked outside the home. Some time ago, Aida broke off her engagement because her fiancé refused to consider Aida's working after their marriage. But Aida definitely wants to continue in her job; her reasons include the income she can earn, security, and the chance to socialize. Most important, however, is the need to be challenged: "I need to keep busy, and have something to think about and be doing all day. I can't just sit in the home and chat with neighbors and cook the meals; I know how to do all these things but I like to be out with people and working hard to accomplish something. Then, when my husband will come home at night, even though he says 'cook my dinner,' we are equal, we stand together, and this will make a marriage work better." In time, Aida was again engaged, this time to a man who agreed that she could continue working after the wedding. One day, while discussing her plans for the ceremony and the future, she mentioned her intention to become a muhaggaba, a covered woman. She planned to change her colorful Western outfits for a long modest skirt and a headscarf wrapping over her hair and shoulders. "See this beautiful hair," she laughed, "you won't see it anymore. Well, maybe you will see a little peeking out here and there, but I will wear the higab." When asked when she would put on this garb, she was vague: "Not right after the wedding, no, maybe a year, maybe two. I am not sure." About a year after the wedding, after giving birth to a son and resuming her work at the office, and despite her husband's objections, Aida indeed put on covering dress.

Husnayya is married and has three small children; she and her husband both work in government offices. Husnayya has been wearing the higab for several years now; family photos show her earlier Western dress now changed to ankle-length skirts, long sleeved jackets, and a scarf wrapped securely around her hair and shoulders. She explained the change this way: "Here in Cairo, we are Muslim women, and so we dress this way, with long sleeves and covering our hair and shoulders. Sometimes no kohl on the eyes even! But I wear kohl, just a little. No lipstick though, only for my husband in the evening in our house! Before we dressed differently, I don't really know why. But this dress is better, when I wear these clothes I feel secure, I know I am a good mother and a good wife. And men know not to laugh and flirt with me. So it is no problem to go out to work, or to shop, or anything. This is a good way to dress, it solves many problems."

From such accounts it is clear that women have many different reasons for the dress they wear, including religion, fashion, harassment, and family responsibilities; indeed women, families, friends, and co-workers spend long hours in amiable or contentious debate about what women should be wearing. Husbands and wives may not always agree, and sometimes men prefer women to wear Western dress, promoting their "modern" status. Women's dress, always symbolic in this society, provokes intriguing controversy.

Hegemony and resistance

Why would these women, who are educated, dedicated to working, and relatively successful symbols of modernization, return to a tradi-

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26 Numbers on women's status in the Middle East are notoriously difficult to acquire; I estimate that, in 1984, about one-third of the working women from Cairo's lower middle class actually veiled, and another third stated that they intended to veil at some undefined time in the future. These numbers increased to about two-thirds of the women by the summer of 1988.
tional symbol like the veil? Why agree to, or even encourage, what seems to be a return to an inferior status? These questions confront us with one of the central issues of any study of subordinate within relations of power: why do subordinate groups seem to aid the reproduction of power relations which function to their disadvantage?

In his Prison Notebooks, Gramsci considers the problem of the endurance of power relations and the puzzle of obedience within relations of class inequality: Why do people consent? Why do people seldom rebel? Why do people actually aid their own subordination? He develops the concept of hegemony as a characterization of power relations within modern societies where consent operates more obviously than force, eventually using the term to convey several different approaches to this web of problems. One interpretation portrays hegemonic interaction as the shaping of beliefs and behavior of a subordinate class by a dominant group. Consent is achieved by the instrumental molding of the common sense of subordinates, directed toward the interests of the upper class. This interpretation of hegemony essentially argues that the ruling class is able to structure a situation in which the lower classes are unable to perceive the ways they are subordinated. Certainly, the new veiling in Cairo initially appears a classic example of hegemony as defined, for in deciding to veil, women seem to reproduce their own inequality. Hegemonic relations, conceived in this manner, indicate that these women must be deluded about their true interests and duped into behavior which reinforces their own subordination; they are victims of a “false consciousness.”

Yet more recent studies of class relations encourage a more encompassing reading of Gramsci’s ideas and of subordinate’s behavior, viewing hegemony as ideological struggle rather than ideological domination.27 Focusing on an examination of what “consent” really amounts to in specific situations, scholars have discovered that the role of subordinate groups is a great deal more complex than the “false consciousness” model of hegemonic relations suggests. Consent, or the lack of overt and organized political opposition, is actually a blanket term that can cover a range of possible consciousness and political activity, from active support to passive acceptance to submerged resistance.28 Consent emerges as a more complicated interaction than it first appears, highlighting the need to rethink the question of such ideological struggle in cases of gender inequality as well.

In the case of lower-middle-class women in Cairo, two important signs reinforce the need to think of hegemony as a mode of political struggle rather than a process of top-down domination. First, these veils are a new kind of covering clothing. In Cairo, lower-middle-class women have been wearing Western clothing for some years now; Western dress signified modernity and women’s ability to be equal partners in aiding Egypt’s recovery and growth. Women are not simply clinging to the past; covering clothes have not been their normal dress for many years. Indeed, the dress these women are putting on is not even the traditional dress of their mothers or grandmothers but a quite distinct and new style, clearly distinguished from the traditional garb of lower-class women. The second sign of struggle is that this is a movement initiated by women themselves. Women have the right, which they exercise, to decide what dress they will wear; covering dress is considered a personal decision a woman makes in her heart and not a matter her husband can decide for her. So the new veiling cannot be explained as the maintenance of traditional ways or as the revival of a traditional symbol at men’s insistence. The controversies over voluntary veiling in lower-middle-class Cairo alert us to the complexity of women’s “consent” and lead to the question of what this new dress signifies as part of a hegemonic struggle.

Women’s dilemma and the new veiling

Although lower-middle-class women now leave the household for outside work, we cannot assume that this produces greater opportunities; in fact, many women complain that working carries considerable burdens.

27 Gramsci uses the term “hegemony” to convey several different approaches to this web of problems; see Gramsci (n. 4 above), as well as Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephan Hall, and Bryan Turner, eds., The Dominant Ideology Thesis (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980); Joseph Femia, “Hegemony and Consciousness in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci,” Political Studies 23, no. 1 (March 1975): 29–48; Ernesto LaClau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (Thetford, Norfolk: Thetford Press, 1985); and Anne Showstack Sassoon, ed., Approaches to Gramsci (London: Writers and Readers, 1982).

28 For example, looking at peasants in Malaysia, Scott argues that consent is actually not present among the lower class in the village to any appreciable degree; a range of resistance can be discovered in which peasants act against the upper class to present their own view of justice. Peasants’ “little tradition” offers an alternative interpretation of the great tradition, and its existence argues that a surface situation of obedience can be achieved despite ongoing submerged conflict. See James C. Scott, “Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition,” Theory and Society 4, nos. 1, 2 (January, March 1977): 1–38, 211–46, Weapons of the Weak (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), and Domination and the Arts of Resistance (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990). In an influential study of working-class boys, Willis argues that they do not believe in promises of social mobility and therefore they do not strive to better their situation. Instead they participate in the working-class counterculture of opposition to school values, ultimately guaranteeing that they will end up in working-class jobs. The existing class inequalities endure not through the boy’s active belief in the system, but through a very different kind of “consent” which partially penetrates the situation to see the impossibility of success. See Paul Willis, Learning to Labour (Westmead: Saxon House, 1977).
along with limited benefits. As one married woman with two young children complained: “Of course it is good now that we can go out of the house and go everywhere to work, but it is also hard. Each day I must go to work, ride the bus, shop for food, pick up my children, cook the meals, and clean the house. There is never enough time and I am always very tired.” This comment was echoed by many others who cited responsibilities that make working outside the home especially burdensome. The double load of working inside and outside the home is aggravated by women’s feeling that men do not, and indeed, could not, be expected to help with household labor in any significant way. In addition, everyone complained that the salaries they earn are far too low: “I spend each day here from nine until two [normal work hours], and look how little I earn, I should have more money for the work I do here!” Women complain that the government has encouraged their education and promised a good living, yet today their salaries are hardly meeting rising costs.

As for the work in the offices, women called their duties “boring and unchallenging” and “useless.” The government policy of hiring all graduates has produced a civil service that provides some economic security, but at the cost of overcrowding, inadequate equipment, and lack of productivity. A typical work day for one energetic woman named Hoda, for instance, involves making the appointments for a manager down the hall. Since two other women in her office are also responsible for the same task, they can easily cover for each other while one slips out to shop for vegetables, visit a sick friend, or pray. Each day, two or three appointments are recorded in a worn book, and the hours are filled by chatting and drinking tea. Some women stated that this lack of responsibility is an advantage, as they can save their energy for the work that awaits them at home, while others were frustrated. Clearly, this is not the kind of work that would offer women the skills or sense of accomplishment that might create a new, positive identity as worker or professional, even though it compares favorably with the work lower-class women must do as domestics, factory laborers, or street peddlers. Even ambitious and energetic lower-middle-class women have very few options for other jobs outside the public sector. Since the Infitab period (the opening) initiated by Anwar Sadat, the growth of a dual economy with a privileged private sector alongside the public has widened class inequalities. As one woman noted, “I would love to have a job typing or being a receptionist in a private travel agency. There I would make a salary which is three times the amount I make here. But I do not know how to get such a job, I think you must have connections to work there and also you must know English and even French. But I don’t think it is right that I make so little money, after all I need to buy the same things for my family that those women do.” Even equivalent secretarial positions in the private sector are generally available only to upper-middle-class women with foreign language abilities, appropriate social skills, and family connections. On balance, working is generally portrayed by these women as a progressive step for the increased mobility it provides but also as troublesome and tiring; it is not surprising that many women claim they would quit their jobs if they could. 29

These complaints point to an important problem women are experiencing as they move into the intersection of the two worlds of household and workplace; they face a deep dilemma of identity and role. Although many husbands maintain (at least in public) that they want a wife who stays at home, most women quickly state that this is impossible. “It is ridiculous! Today all wives have to work to help the family, it is not possible to pay for children, and rent and food without a wife working.” Women see their work as a trade-off for the necessities of middle-class status—a two room apartment, an electric fan, a refrigerator, and tutors for children. The economic pressures that push women into the workplace are reinforced by the ideological requirements of class standing. These are ambitious families with high expectations for a better life, expectations promoted by the policies of a welfare state that encouraged education, government jobs, and an increased standard of living. These values were fueled in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the consumerism accompanying the Infitab policies of the Sadat years. Families of this level have very high hopes for a better standard of living and are willing to work hard to gain their goals, which appear in enticing television advertisements of modern kitchens, labor-saving appliances, and ready-made clothes. In overwhelming numbers, these families choose to have female members enter the formal work force to gain the extra income.

Yet the economic ideology which pushes women into the workplace is countered by a gender ideology which frames women’s place within the home as mother and wife. Members of this class believe that women and men embody different natures that make them suited to quite different tasks and responsibilities. According to both women and men, women belong in the home, where their nature is fulfilled by caring for husband and children and managing the household. 30 One unhappy husband complained, “Before I used to get a hot dinner every night, my mother had it ready for me and my father as soon as we walked in the door. Now

29 In fact, few will have this opportunity due to economic realities, and more women than ever are attempting to enter the work force. Yet the government bureaucracy cannot absorb more employees, and women are being squeezed out by policies promoting women’s leaves and emphasizing women’s family roles.

30 For discussion of women’s nature in other Middle Eastern settings, see Fama Ait SABBAGH, Women in the Muslim Unconscious (New York: Penguin, 1984); in Cairo, see SAWAN Al-NESSIRI, Ilm Al-Balad: A Concept of Egyptian Identity (Leiden-Bill, 1978).
I have to wait and wait while Samira cooks the dinner.” This recollection of life before women left the home was echoed by her husband, busy cooking in the hot kitchen after the same long day in a government office and on the overcrowded city buses. “Before, my mother would have the whole day to go to the market and select the very best vegetables. Look at these awful things, they’re terrible, bad! But I only have time to shop on the way home from work, and to cook in a rush like this. I hardly ever have time to make good meals. I used to be a good cook, but now we eat macaroni all the time.” These comments are interesting, not only for the generalized belief that life in Cairo is getting more difficult, but for the underlying assumption that women really should be at home, that families would be better off if this were possible. The clash of gender beliefs with economic realities and ideology creates a compromising dilemma for these women: “I work because my income is necessary, look at this budget, how could we live here and eat and send my sons to school if I didn’t work? But I miss my sons very much, I know they are happy here with my mother every day, and I visit each afternoon. Still, a mother should be with her children. I want the hours to play with them and cook for them.” Women working outside the home feel they are neglecting their husbands and children despite the fact that they work, in good part, for their families rather than for personal satisfaction.  

This dilemma is reinforced by the intractability of the economic situation, which is worsening as high inflation eats away at income and raises the price of household goods. Rents especially have become an extremely difficult expense to meet, yet a middle-class apartment is considered a necessity for marriage and establishing a family.

Women’s double bind is intensified by the seeming immutability of gender roles. Since male and female natures are perceived as set, there is little hope of enticing men into helping with household work. Indeed, while some women wished their husbands would help out at home, many expressed the idea that the home was their domain and seemed unwilling to have it invaded. As one young wife emphasized: “Women are in charge in the home, yes, of course we do a lot of work, but on the other hand men don’t know how to do these things. You know, men can make tea perhaps or something small like that. But cooking a good meal, or arranging things properly, these are women’s matters. I am tired at the end of the day, but I want my husband to know what a good wife I am.” Individual men may more or less fit the qualities of male nature, but in general men act in certain ways and are responsible for certain tasks, as

are women. “Men will not change, they are rough and hard; they are not suited for doing things in the home. That takes a woman who is soft and feels things in her heart.”

Caught in a double bind of economic and gender ideologies, women face a loss of respect and resources despite small economic gains. It is in this context that many women have started to wear the new veils. When asked why they wear this dress, women overwhelmingly responded, “This is what Muslim women wear” Over time, as I came to know certain women better, they expanded on their original answer. “Now we have realized the need, where before we were in the dark,” answered one woman, a thought that suggested an awakening of insight inspired by a return to religious and cultural values. Beauty and dignity were common adjectives for the woman who veils: “I think a woman who wears the bigab is very beautiful, she shows her inner strength. I hope that I will feel in my heart the urge to wear this dress soon,” said one young woman wearing Western dress, with sincere admiration of her co-workers who were dressed in covering garb. Others felt it decreased attractiveness and stressed that a woman had better find a husband before putting on this dress. “I don’t wear the bigab because I want to look good, and show off a little, how else will I find a good husband after all?” The claim that this dress is a trend, “it’s what everyone does these days,” also emerged in many women’s comments. Fashions come and go, they suggested, and no one really knows why; some of the more thoughtful stressed that economic hard times and a sense of cultural crisis create a need to return to cultural roots in the face of an onslaught of Western consumer goods and television values. Overst religious sentiment was remarkable in its relative absence in women’s accounts; only a very few emphasized increased religious feeling as a reason for altering their dress, and affiliation with Islamic groups was rare. Neither did this dress seem associated with a given time of life; women cited “after I marry,” “after I have children,” “when I get a little older,” “when I feel the need in my heart” at times in the future when they would consider changing their dress, but no one said it was required in any way at particular stages of a woman’s life.

With no simple or settled answers about the meaning of this symbol, and with the controversy expressed in the media and in daily conversations, it seems unlikely that the meaning of this symbol is entirely regulated by political or religious groups (although both do try to control and manipulate its meaning). Women take veiling seriously as an important decision they must make about who they are and what women should be. One point women repeatedly made is that the dress makes a statement about their identity as wives and mothers. “This dress says to everyone that I am a Muslim woman, and that I am here working because my family needs me to. Not for myself! I am here because I love my family
and we need some things for our home." While individual women put on the new veils for many reasons, the new veiling seems to serve as a symbolic mediator for many women, expressing and ameliorating women's concerns arising at the intersection of work and family. Aïda, mentioned earlier, explained her desire to veil at some time after her marriage: "Life is like an account book, with columns of numbers on the credit and debit sides. Good and bad actions are weighed at the end. If I work after I am married, this is very bad, so I need to do something very good to make up for it." Working, Aïda maintains, is forbidden for women by religion and the Quran. However, working before marriage is not so terrible as working afterward, for then she would be neglecting her real duties as wife and mother to a far greater extent. To counteract this problem and still keep her job, she has made the personal decision to veil; her covering clothes will serve as compensation, righting the balance of her compromising behavior. Aïda's account illuminates a dilemma many women feel, that they violate their duties as wife and mother by working outside the home despite their families' need for their income. Her recognition of this double bind is acute: "I want to be able to buy nice things for my home. You see this refrigerator? I bought this for my mother after I started working, we never had one in the house when I was small. It is necessary to have one, for the food, and water. It saves work because we can cook a big meal and store the rest in there to eat for several more days. My mother could not do these things. She waits for my father to give her money, this is not secure. But she was always home with us as children, our home was a warm place. This is also very important." Many women expressed the idea that the veil in some way compensates for and even alleviates the dilemma they experience. "When I wear this dress, men will respect me," commented a young woman in her early twenties, who is hoping to marry a government employee like herself. "The hijab is a protection from annoying people on the street," mentioned a married woman who had a long walk to her office building; "I don't have to worry that men in the cafe or on the street are talking about me every day as I pass." In another vein, a married woman with three children commented, "This dress looks beautiful and shows people that I am a woman even though I am working. My neighbors feel that a real woman stays at home, but now their tongues are silent about me." In a sentiment echoed by many women, one woman said, "This hijab says I am a good Muslim woman, I can go out on the streets and to the office and no one can say I am not a good woman and mother." Women's answers, while stressing individual needs met by this dress, converge in their expressions of the need to make a statement about identity in a time of shifting norms.

As the veil has emerged as a mass-employed symbol rather than the outfit of relatively elite political actors as in the 1970s, its meaning has altered to suit differing political needs. These women object to the loss of their traditional identity, their valued and respected roles as mother and wife—crucial roles considering the extreme importance of the family in Egyptian society. "I don't know why my husband thinks I can cook meals and clean the house the way he would like when I am at work all day. It is not possible! Every night he is hard on me and upset." Another woman claimed, "These days men are not polite on the streets, before men left women alone, now they are always bothering women. I wear these clothes so they will know they should respect me." Through the veil, these women express their distress with their double bind; they want to reinstate their position as valued centers of the family but without losing their new ability to leave the home. Many agreed with the comment made by one woman: "It's wonderful now how women can go out visiting or to work. I would not want to return to the days of sitting in the house. I like to visit my sister in Imbaba and my cousin in Sayyida Zeinab and these days I can do this. With this dress it is easier." By emphasizing the dignity traditionally due to women for their valued part within the household, a respect eroded by women's current compromising behavior of working outside the home, the veil expresses women's concerns and makes a host of symbolic demands.

**Accommodating protest**

Women's accounts signal a much more complex story underlying what first appears as reactionary behavior. The assessment of voluntary veiling as an example of hegemony, narrowly defined as ideological domination, is misguided. Veiling involves a struggle over women's identity and role in society, a negotiation of symbolic meaning that women initiate. While hegemony is typically discussed as what dominant groups do to subordinates, it is evident in this case that women are hardly active consenters to their domination, nor even passive acceptors of societal arrangements. Instead, they attempt to control meaning on their own, advancing demands which revolve around transforming identity and widening opportunity in a changing Cairo. Although more familiar examples of protest such as strikes, demonstrations, riots, or revolutions are less equivocal statements, recent studies identify many less easily codified behaviors as forms of resistance and stress the submerged and subtle
ways subordinates may advance political demands, significantly widening definitions of protest and suggesting that the categories we use to think about consent, resistance, and protest may need to be reworked.\footnote{For example, Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven discuss suicide and other forms of deviance in “Hidden Protest: The Channeling of Female Innovation and Resistance,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 4, no. 4 (Summer 1979): 651–69; conversational strategies are considered by Rosen (n. 6 above); disbelief as resistance is discussed by Elizabeth Janeway in Powers of the Weak (New York: Knopf, 1980); Vaclav Havel in The Power of the Powerless (Armonk, N.Y.: Sharpe, 1985) discusses “living authentically” as resistance; walking in city streets as everyday protest as discussed by Michel de Certeau in The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); and various forms of “everyday resistance” are portrayed by Scott in Domination and the Arts of Resistance.}

Although the veil is employed as a form of protest, it is also true that women’s intentions in Cairo are more ambivalent; indeed, I argue that the veil conveys women’s desire to accommodate as well as resist. This accommodation could be read as subterfuge, a useful technique in power struggles often employed by subordinate groups, but women’s use of the new veils goes beyond disguise to a more intertwining and inseparable linkage of protest with accommodation. The dress of the muhaggaba expresses both a demand for renewed dignity and compliance. One accommodating aspect of the new veil, for instance, is the fact that this dress is often impractical. While covering clothes can be less expensive than numerous Western outfits, women also complained that they are awkward, heavy, and stifling in the summer. More significant are the ways in which veiling conveys women’s adjustment to and acceptance of existing conceptions of appropriate female behavior. One example is women’s expectation that veiling will help lessen the sexual teasing and harassment they receive on the streets and in the offices. As one woman stated, “I wear these clothes to show the kind of woman I am, and now these men on the street should respect me.” Another commented, “In the workplace men used to comment on my hair, and face and clothes, now they see that they should not discuss these things about me.” Rather than charging men with the responsibility for changing their unwelcome behavior, women accommodate by altering their dress to fit the prevailing norm that men cannot help responding to women as temptations. While this may be a helpful short-term policy for individual women, veiling thus reinforces the belief that women invade men’s world when they leave the home to work.

Veiling presents a double face; it both symbolizes women’s protest against a situation that threatens valued identity and status, and it signals women’s acceptance of a view of women as sexually suspect and naturally bound to the home. Protest is firmly bound to accommodation in a resonant public symbol, creating an ambiguous resistance, an accommodating protest. Although women clearly struggle to shape their identity and future status, and are not simply ideologically manipulated by dominant groups, the bare fact that such struggle exists is not in itself sufficient reason for optimism.\footnote{Lila Abu-Lughod argues against the “romance of resistance,” tracing power relations in a Bedouin community; she says that young people seem oblivious to ways their resistance to elders within the community backs them into more complex subordination to world economic and political powers. See Lila Abu-Lughod, “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing the Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women,” American Ethnologist 17, no. 1 (February 1990): 41–56.} Why would women mount their protest in what seems an ambivalent and compromised form? Numerous studies citing women’s active manipulation within difficult circumstances refute the possible conclusions that women are more constrained or more susceptible to ideological domination than other groups and thus more likely to “consent.” The recent focus on the complexities of consent in class analysis pushes us to reconsider what such “complicity” might mean in gender relations as well. It has been argued that for some subordinate groups such accommodations can be tactics, a disguise to mask the reality of hidden struggles;\footnote{See Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance.} yet this implies a straightforward and unambiguous subjectivity which does not seem to characterize women’s situation particularly well. In his Prison Notebooks, Gramsci discusses the “fragmentation” and “contradictory consciousness” of the working class as evidence of the need for a vanguard party and political leadership,\footnote{Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks (n. 4 above), esp. 326–27, 333.} but perhaps we could draw on these ideas to think about ambiguous subjectivity — and the necessarily ambiguous agency such consciousness would generate — without concluding that this implies a distorted or underdeveloped consciousness. Ambiguity can, after all, be productive and not simply undirected.

The linkage of accommodation with protest signals something of importance about the power relations in which women are enmeshed, as opposed to those of other subordinate groups. From the numerous possible reasons why women’s resistance might take this form, I raise three here for the purposes of exploration. The first centers on the distinctive situation that women occupy with respect to the relations of power that constrain their lives. For women, there is no clear-cut other to confront directly. Facing a layered and overlapping round of oppressors, women do not have the relative luxury of knowing their enemy. Relations with men, class relations, and the more distant realm of global inequalities all affect lower-middle-class women in Cairo, yet none is exclusively responsible for women’s subordination. Women see a web of cross-cutting power relations, and an ambiguous symbolic solution like the veil that speaks on different political levels suits the nature of these overlapping power constraints.
Another factor influencing women's style of protest centers on women's attempt to pursue different goals than other subordinate groups when resisting domination. For women's power relations are often enwined with other kinds of ties, such as romantic love or family bonds. Although a peasant may wish to be a landlord or a worker might wish to be a capitalist owner, the majority of women do not wish to become men, nor even to rid the world of men. Ideologies of opposition and inversion are less attractive when the end goal centers on creating a new relationship of cooperation or equality rather than eliminating the other. In Cairo, for example, most husbands and wives consider themselves partners in the family structure, and neither wishes to switch roles nor to dissolve the differences between male and female character. In such a context, the ambitions of women in power struggles necessarily become more complex. Further, women daily inhabit the worlds of their oppressors rather than only occasionally intersecting the lives of the dominant group. Women live with, among, and in some ways, as one of the dominant group; the everyday interaction, for example, of husbands and wives insures that women will often identify with their husbands, despite the times when these husbands act as oppressors. This identification should not be confused with simple ideological domination. Women truly do inhabit a unique position; accommodation is involved because women are part of both the dominant culture and the subordinate subculture.

A final reason women's struggles may take the form of accommodating protest centers on the constrained nature of choice. Working women of lower-middle-class Cairo have few viable ideological alternatives; any action they might take must be a choice which fits within their cultural tradition. Women's struggle is limited by the constraints of existing social discourse. For instance, women's descriptions of male character, which include the adjectives "hard," "rough," "stubborn," and "stupid," are interesting not only for their assertion that men are in many ways imperfect and even inferior to women, but for the underlying assumption that male character is set by nature and therefore unalterable. While these adjectives implicitly convey women's criticisms of male nature, and perhaps the potential of an alternative perspective which might motivate protest, women interpret their own adjectives within the constraints of existing discourse.

Of course there are other images available, but they do not attain the compelling state of the natural, remaining alternatives, but only in the sense of oddities. For instance, the Western woman is imagined according to the images available on television, including the women portrayed in imported shows such as Dallas and Flamingo Road; the glamorous women in commercials advertising cars, perfumes, and cosmetics; and the scantily clad singers featured in European nightclub shows. None of these images, focused as they are on women as sexual object and glamorous consumer, fit the lives of these women or offer an attractive alternative image. Further, in a postcolonial context, any images derived from the West are politically and culturally suspect. Images from within the Islamic tradition, such as stories about the active lives of Fatima or Aisha, are much more attractive and useful, but subject to the same ambiguities of interpretation the veil itself embodies.

Such limiting of discourse lies at the center of hegemonic politics, and it differs from the narrowed idea of hegemony as the obscuring of reality from subordinate participants. Hegemony can be understood as a symbolic struggle, a negotiation over meaning that involves constraints on imagination, where ideology is not so much a tool in the hands of a dominant class as an enveloping version of reality in which all social encounters are necessarily conducted. Such hegemonic struggles, and the accompanying constraints on political imagination, may be an especially common pattern in modern and modernizing cultures. Further, the constraints on imagination may tighten as local cultures are overtaken by mass-manufactured and Western popular culture. In Cairo, despite the opportunity opened by economic changes in everyday routines and habits, women and men remain enveloped in traditional ideas about male and female character, roles, rights, and responsibilities, enmeshed in a struggle where oppositional imagination cannot effectively engage reality.

In this context, women's veiling calls on the Muslim tradition, not as an indiscriminate recollection of all traditional values, but as a highly selective attempt to relativize and emphasize some of the old ideals. Yet

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35 There are strong feminist groups in Egypt, but often their goals seem distant to women of this class, and indeed their knowledge of such women's organizations is generally slight. On Egyptian feminism, see Akram Khater and Cynthia Nelson, "Al-Harakah al-Nisa'iyah: The Women's Movement and Political Participation in Modern Egypt," Women's Studies International Forum 11, no. 5 (1988): 465-83; Margot Badran, "Dual Liberation: Feminism and Nationalism in Egypt," Feminist Issues 8, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 15-34; and Beth Baron, "Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt," Middle Eastern Studies 25, no. 3 (July 1989): 370-86.

36 See Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance," for a fascinating example of this tendency in the Egyptian context.
there is always the danger of recalling not only the desired dignity which women hope to reinsert in the modern environment, but the accompanying emphasis on exclusion and constraint. Particularly for those who seek to recall the past not as holders of power, but as those constrained by power, the dangers need to be considered as well. The example of women's veiling recalls the Bakhtinian idea of the immense difficulties of appropriating language for new and oppositional uses. Women may choose to veil for their own reasons; yet the symbol maintains a somewhat separate life of its own, carrying both intended and unintended messages. The acquiescing and accommodating aspects of women's mode of hegemonic negotiation open the gates to possible co-optation.

Indeed, there are signs in Cairo that this co-optation is beginning to take place. For example, the character of this movement as women's personal decision is starting to be threatened; as husbands try to brow-beat wives into veiled dress, or neighbors argue that a woman should be more modest, or religious leaders sermonize on women's clothes and role as mother, the choice of dress may become the province of men, the family, or the state, and less the decision of women. In the end, the *bigab* operates as a symbol within a system where women's relations of inequality tend, more often than not, to be reproduced. The resilience of power relations can be explained, not as something which happens behind women's backs, but as the result, in part, of the way women struggle. Women's creative use of the new veils in lower-middle-class Cairo exemplifies the ambiguities which are the strength and the weakness of this style of resistance.

The idea that women's power relations may take the form of accommodating protest requires us to rethink our understanding of women's agency, rather than trying to fit women's actions within constraining categories or assuming a linear progression of consciousness from acquiescence to resistance to conscious protest. Once again, Gramsci's idea of hegemony can be useful, for he argues for the possibility of creating a counterhegemony, a working or popular class worldview which would combat, on the cultural front, the dominant class and create an alternative vision of social relations. While alternatives can emerge from outside the hegemonic discourse, such imported ideologies seldom answer local needs nor attain viability in their new environment. The crucial and difficult question is exactly how alternative visions might emerge from within a culture to engage belief in a way which allows alternative discourse and ultimately effective political actions. For women, then, the idea of accommodating protest does not imply that women will always be victims despite their struggles, but encourages us instead to think beyond the dichotomies of victim/actor or passive/powerful toward the more complicated ways that consciousness is structured and agency embodied in power relations. Suggesting that part of women's continued subordination results from women's actions may be uncomfortable, but examining carefully the ambiguities of women's accommodating protests in different contexts may offer a clarity about women's subjectivity under domination that we need to address questions of gender inequalities and political change.

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41 For an interesting discussion of the difficulties involved, see Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in Gramsci and Marxist Theory, ed. Chantal Mouffe (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), esp. 185–98. Also see LaClau and Mouffe (n. 27 above), esp. chap. 3 on antagonisms and hegemonic politics.