

EX POST FACTO

Journal of the History Students at San Francisco State University

VOLUME XVIII

2009

AT THE DOORS OF THE HAREM: IDENTITY, GENDER, AND DIFFERENCE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY EGYPT

Katrina Yeaw

IN 1842, Sophia Poole disembarked from the P&O steamer *Tagus* in Alexandria with her two sons, her brother Edward, and his wife Nefeeseh.¹ Spending the next six years in Egypt, she wrote *The Englishwomen in Egypt* during the first three years of her stay. Poole wore the *habare*, the local costume for women, wandered the streets of Cairo on a donkey, visited mosques, the public hospital, a public bath, neighbors, as well as middle class and elite households, and generally immersed herself in local culture. She observed the procession of the *Mahmal* and the *Dosa* as well as weddings and funerals, providing detailed descriptions of these celebrations, including entertainment, meals, and the richness of women's costumes in the harem. Although unique in the vividness of her descriptions, Poole was only one of many women to visit Egypt during the nineteenth century and write about her experiences.²

As a British woman traveling in the Middle East, Poole had privileged access to the lives of elite Egyptian women due to her gender, class, and nationality. Her standing also gave her the cultural authority to depict the women with whom she came in contact. In this context, she stood in for the 'West,' representing and speaking for the 'East.' At the same time, she reflected and constructed her own unique identity as a woman trying to negotiate Victorian gender roles within the context of the British Empire.

¹ The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, which was founded in 1837, is usually referred to as P&O.

² Azza Kararah, ed., introduction to *The Englishwoman in Egypt: Letters from Cairo Written during a residence there in 1842–1846*, by Sophia Poole (London: C. Knight, 1845; Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003), vii–x.

Identity and Colonialism

The notion that the colonizer represented, and in many ways constructed, the colonized has been explored extensively by Edward Said, and others. Although Said argued that Orientalism is also about the construction of the colonizer's identity and not just the colonized, interactions between metropole and periphery have largely been treated as unidirectional. As a result, the politics of the colony have been seen as having little effect on those of the metropolitan center. Therefore, the history of England was largely only written as the history of the metropole, with Britain's vast colonies, including India, being relegated to the sidelines and footnotes of England's historical narratives.

In contrast, a number of recent theorists have asserted that this relationship went both ways within the context of severely asymmetrical power relations. They have attempted to understand the relationship between the colony and the metropole, and the ways in which the colonies shaped the metropole and metropolitan culture. This has largely been the project of literary theorists evaluating the effect of empire on national literature and the influence of travel literature.³ However, there have also been a few historians that have engaged in similar studies, attempting to historicize the project.

India has been the primary focus of historical studies on the effects of empire on British identity. This is largely due to the fact that it was the longest held, richest, and most important British colony in the British Empire, circumstances which influenced other colonial encounters, modes of governance, and cultural forms. However, India was not the only location that helped to shape the British imperial imagination. Other localities were also important to a British understanding of the world and itself. For instance, Catherine Hall's research on the impact of colonialism in Jamaica on British identity focuses mainly on the construction of Englishness in relation to Baptists and other non-conformists from Birmingham between 1820 and 1867.⁴

Likewise, the necessity of placing Egypt and Britain within a single analytical frame, as stated eloquently by Fredrick Cooper and Ann Stoler, is the starting place of this paper.⁵ It argues that the identity of the

³ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and the Transcultural* (London: Routledge, 1992); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁴ Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁵ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tension of Empire: Colonial Culture in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 6.

colonizer and the colonized were constructed in relation to each other within asymmetrical power relations of British suzerainty, and later colonialism, in Egypt. Primarily, this paper focuses on middle-class British women in Egypt and their writings about upper-class Egyptian women during the nineteenth century. This relationship helped to shape the construction of Egyptian women's identities and the identity of the colonizer, which was essential to British concepts of Englishness, womanhood, and by extension, nineteenth-century feminism. More concretely, the aim of this paper is to address the following issues: How did British women conceptualize their Egyptian counterparts? How did this reflect on the identity of British women? How did this interaction shape the construction of British womanhood? And how did this colonial interaction mold the development of British feminism?

Specifically, this paper focuses on texts written by three women about their experiences in Egypt between 1842 and 1914: Sophia Poole, Emmeline Lott, and Elizabeth Cooper.⁶ Born in 1804, Sophia Poole was from a middle-class background, the daughter of a minister, and the sister of the noted British Orientalist and expert on Egypt, Edward W. Lane.⁷ Her work is presented in epistolary form, taking her authority from both her time spent in Egypt, and her gender-based access to Egyptian women. In the preface of the book, she claimed that it was written at her brother's behest and he was originally listed as a co-author of the book. This lent authority to the piece, but also undermined her own feminine voice.⁸ In contrast, very little is known about the life of Emmeline Lott except that she had to support herself by working as a governess and by writing. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, elite families in Cairo hired governesses, or tutors, to instruct their children. Lott was hired to look after Ibrahim Pasha, the son of Ismail Pasha, the Viceroy of Egypt in the 1860s.⁹ In contrast, Elizabeth Cooper was a professional writer, who traveled widely to research books on women and it is clear that she came to Egypt expressly for this purpose.¹⁰

⁶ Sophia Poole, *The Englishwoman in Egypt: Letters from Cairo Written during a residence there in 1842–1846*, ed. Azza Kararah (London: C. Knight, 1845; Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003); Emmeline Lott, *The English Governess in Egypt: Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople* (London: R. Bentley, 1867); Elizabeth Cooper, *The Women of Egypt* (New York: F. A. Stokes, 1914; Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1981).

⁷ Kararah, introduction to *The Englishwoman in Egypt*, vii.

⁸ Reina Lewis and Nancy Micklewright eds., *Gender, Modernity, and Liberty: Middle Eastern and Western Women's Writing; A Critical Sourcebook* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁰ It should be noted that Elizabeth Cooper is the only author referenced who is not English. For more on Cooper, see Lewis and Micklewright, 156–157.

There are a plethora of travel logs, letters, and missionary accounts from this period written in a number of European languages. These include accounts written by European women. However, the choice of these texts, all originally published in English, and primarily focused on the state of women in Egypt, necessitates a discussion of the state of women in the West. These texts also address a long enough period to allow for some discussion of the social and political changes in both Egypt and England, and how these shifts altered perceptions of gender in both localities.

In Egypt, the period from 1842 to 1914 was marked by foreign penetration, semi-colonialism, and finally full colonial control (1882–1920). After the expulsion of the French from 1801 until 1875, the country resisted formal foreign control, even as it became increasingly economically dependent on Europe. Muhammad Ali, who governed Egypt as *wāli* from 1805 to 1849, undertook a complete restructuring of the Egyptian state, reorganizing the economy, and initiating the process of integration into the world market.¹¹ This resulted in a shift from subsistence agriculture to cash crop cultivation, the creation of large estates, *‘izbahs*, in rural areas, and the importing of manufactured goods in lieu of local craft production.¹² However, heavy borrowing to purchase consumer luxuries, military equipment, manufacturing machinery, and equipment for the development of infrastructure and the Suez Canal, along with economic dependence eventually lead to bankruptcy and the imposition of Anglo-French debt management in 1875. This is considered the beginning of direct foreign control.¹³ In 1879, demonstrations broke out, followed by a revolt led by an Egyptian army officer, Urabi Pasha. Refusing to compromise with the burgeoning Egyptian nationalist movement, Britain took complete control of the country in 1882.¹⁴ Throughout the British *de facto* occupation of Egypt (1882–1922), the colonial government attempted to launch a number of modernizing reforms. These reforms were a continuation of the processes of modernization, Westernization, state centralization, and integration into the

¹¹ *Wāli* is an administrative title that was used during the Ottoman Empire to designate governors of administrative divisions. Under the rule of Muhammad Ali, Egypt remained nominally part of the Ottoman Empire.

¹² Helen Anne B. Rivlin, *The Agricultural Policy of Muhammad Ali in Egypt* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 171–190; Judith E. Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4, 29.

¹³ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 515.

¹⁴ Admiral Seymour F. Beauchame, “The Bombardment of the Forts at Alexandria,” *The Times* (London), 22 July 1882; Ronald Hyam, *Britain’s Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion*, 2nd ed. (London: MacMillan Press, 1993), 181; Lapidus, 515.

world capitalist markets begun by Muhammad Ali and other indigenous rulers in the nineteenth century. Colonial reforms had mixed results for the women of Egypt and intensified asymmetrical power relations between Egypt and the West.

There are a number of other locations within the British Empire that this study could have focused upon. The choice of Egypt is partially due to the fact that its colonial history is of particular personal interest. However, Egypt was also the first nation to be colonized in the Middle East by the French in 1798 under Napoleon Bonaparte, and also the first and most important British colony in the region, especially prior to the mandate system and the discovery of oil after World War I. The publication of the works of scholars who accompanied Napoleon's expedition to Egypt began an era of European transmission of material about the Middle East and the extensive use of Middle Eastern themes in European art and literature.¹⁵ With the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, Egypt became a key transit point en route to British colonies in India and Australia, which gave Britain "special interests in Egyptian affairs" and made it integral to imperial military strategy.¹⁶ By the late nineteenth century, Egypt was also important to the British economy as a major exporter of cotton for the British textiles industry, and as an importer of finished products, especially cloth.¹⁷ It was also a major destination for middle-class travelers in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ This meant that many westerners visited Egypt either as travelers, teachers, missionaries, advisors, and colonial officials, or as the wives of officers.

Difference and Colonialism

The issue of difference, the division between the "self" and "other" is essential to the understanding of identity within the colonial encounter. Edward Said argued that, since antiquity, the Orient was a European invention and a location of romance, exoticism, haunting memories and

¹⁵ Joanna de Groot, "'Sex' and 'Race': The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century," in *Cultures of Empire: A Reader; Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Catherine Hall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 46.

¹⁶ "Earl Granville to the Earl of Dufferin," Foreign Office, *The Times* (London), 11 July 1882; Lapidus, *Islamic Societies*, 515.

¹⁷ Hyam, 178–179.

¹⁸ Some of the most famous descriptions of Egyptian women in the Western imagination were written by the French writers Gustave Flaubert and Gérard de Nerval. For more information, see Gustave Flaubert, *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996); Gérard de Nerval, *Women of Cairo: Scenes of Life in the Orient*, 2 vols. (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1929).

landscapes, and remarkable experiences, as well as Oriental sexuality and despotism. The East was also the site of Europe's richest and longest lasting colonies, and the location of its "deepest and most reoccurring image of the other." Said went on to argue that the Orient has helped to define the West (Occident) in terms of "its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience."¹⁹

The location of interaction with the other takes place within "contact zones," a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt. According to Pratt, "contact" occurs when "peoples [who are] geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations."²⁰ These historical intersections, or in some cases clashes, often occur within locations of unequal power and are therefore the location of imperial and colonial encounters. It is within this interaction that subjects are "constituted in and by their relations to each other." Although these "zones" are places of "coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict," they are not defined by separation or apartheid. Instead, these are locations of interaction and improvisation, and the locations where identities are deconstructed and reconstituted in relation to each other.²¹ Therefore, these are sites in which the identity of both the colonizer and colonized are constructed within asymmetrical power relations.

The increased solidification of previously fluid identities often goes along with increased awareness of the other. Similar to Pratt, Jessica Benjamin's "contact zone" is characterized by ambiguities, friction, and uncertainty. According to Benjamin, the attempt to deal with this ambiguity and uncertainty can result in a transformation of the tension from interactions of mutuality and interdependence with relations of domination and servitude. This movement from mutuality to domination results in "splitting," or the attempt to separate the self from the other. It results in "a polarization, in which opposites—especially good and bad—can no longer be integrated; in which one side is devalued, the other idealized, and each projected onto different objects."²² Instead of recognizing the possibility of overlap of self and other, boundaries are rigidly drawn, carefully policed, and mapped onto the difference between good and evil. This tendency to split apart and then freeze difference

¹⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1–2.

²⁰ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and the Transcultural* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

²² Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love; Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 63.

into mutually exclusive polarized extremes is “the pattern for every form of domination,” including colonial encounters.²³

One final note on difference: Orientalist discourse is not simply a collection of myths or lies constructed by the West. In fact, Said argued that Orientalism is more of a sign of Euro-American power over the East than about the East itself.²⁴ Therefore, the purpose of this paper is not to debunk a collection of Orientalist interpretations and interpretations of Egyptian women, nor is it to provide a more accurate picture of their lives; rather, it is to address the way in which Western women constructed the idea of the Oriental women alongside the idea of British femininity.²⁵

Gender, Race, and Colonialism

The relationship between gender and colonialism is central to this paper. A number of feminist scholars have produced seminal works that have addressed the relationship between femininity, masculinity, and sexuality to the construction of empire and the nation. Sociologist Meyda Yeğenoğlu demonstrates the similarities between patriarchal (sexist) and colonial (imperialist) discourses, maintaining that the Orient “as it is figured in several eighteenth and nineteenth century texts is a *fantasy* built upon sexual difference.”²⁶ Yeğenoğlu’s explanation highlights the fact that asymmetrical power relations, colonial or otherwise, are often imagined in gendered terms. However, gender cannot be viewed as simply a metaphor for asymmetrical power relations, and colonialism cannot be reduced to a narrative of sexual difference, as noted by literary theorist Jenny Sharpe.²⁷ Gender must be viewed intersectionally in relation to identities of race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality.

Within European colonial discourse, women’s status became a major marker of difference and of a country’s level of civilization. In the case of Egypt, Lord Cromer, consul-general in Egypt from 1883 to 1907, argued that there was a “radical difference between the position of Moslem women and that of their European sisters.” The veil and the seclusion of

²³ Ibid., 216.

²⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 6.

²⁵ For more information on women in nineteenth-century Egypt, see Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*; for information about Orientalist writing on the harem, Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

²⁶ Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11. Italics in the original.

²⁷ Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 11.

women in Egypt exemplified this difference, which had a “baneful effect on Eastern society.”²⁸ He went on to claim that the position of women in Egypt was “a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilization.”²⁹ Lord Cromer mobilized what Leila Ahmed has called “colonial feminism”—concern over the plight of Egyptian women that was employed to defend Britain’s imperial practices by a man who opposed women’s suffrage back at home.³⁰ As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak put it: “white men saving brown women from brown men.”³¹ In addition, a common Orientalist trope was to compare political despotism in eastern countries with the perceived despotism of the harem.³²

During the period of high British imperialism, identities of race, gender, class, and sexuality were far from fixed aspects of industrial modernity. The language of class emerged during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries along with the growth of the development of an industrial economy.³³ The language of ‘separate space’ became a common way of discussing the issue of sexual difference during this period.³⁴ In addition, concepts of race were constructed through European slavery and the colonial encounter.³⁵ In some cases, racial construction came in the form of scientific racism. In other cases, conceptions of race were formulated around issues of culture, particularly within the framework of Christian universalism. However, both frameworks maintained the superiority of Western culture.³⁶

Discourses on sexuality and difference cannot be isolated from those of ethnic and racial identity because both are rooted in domination and

²⁸ Earl Evelyn Baring of Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 2:155.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:539.

³⁰ For more information on Lord Cromer and his view on women, see Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 151–155.

³¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 110.

³² Lott, 40; Jane Rendall, “The condition of women, women’s writing and the empire in nineteenth-century Britain,” in *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 103.

³³ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies of in English Working Class History, 1892–1982* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

³⁴ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

³⁵ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

³⁶ Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 16.

subordination.³⁷ Scientific theorization of difference and human variation depended heavily on analogies linking race and gender with women becoming racialized, and non-white men becoming feminized.³⁸ Similarly, class divisions were managed through discourses on race, with images of imperialism entering the British imagination.³⁹ According to Ann Stoler, it was the colonial encounter between colony and metropole that led to the modern bourgeois identities of the Dutch, British, and French. All of these nations constructed “their unique civilities, through language that drew on images of racial purity and sexual virtue.”⁴⁰ However, part of the tension of the colonial encounter was that these identities were constantly being reevaluated in relationship to each other.

Women in the British Empire

Traditionally, historians have viewed men, white men to be precise, as the major agents of empire because they served as the ship captains, soldiers, colonial officials, architects, planners, missionaries, merchants, and plantation owners who administered the empire. A number of feminist scholars have looked at the role of women in the empire. Among them, Catherine Hall acknowledges that men and women were both colonizers in the empire and at home.⁴¹ However, this is not to argue that both men and women experienced colonialism in the same way, or that any two colonizers were synonymous. In fact, colonial women had an ambiguous place within the colonization process.⁴² Women experienced the contradictions and privileges of imperialism differently than their male counterparts, due to the fact that they were barred from positions of formal power. Colonial women made none of the direct political, economic, or military decisions about the running of the empire, and the laws and practices decreed by men often bound them in positions of frustration and disadvantage. On the other hand, their position as white women often gave them power over the lives of colonized women and men. Therefore, women were not simply passive observers of the colonial project, but were ambiguously complicit, as their lives were both privileged and restricted.⁴³

³⁷ de Groot, 37–60.

³⁸ Nancy Ley Stephan, “Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science” in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 43.

³⁹ McClintock, 77.

⁴⁰ Cooper and Stoler, 3–4, 7.

⁴¹ Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 16.

⁴² McClintock, 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Women played a variety of roles in the British Empire as convicts, prostitutes, domestic servants, wives of colonial officials, teachers in remote missionary schools, and colonial settlers. Due to the nature of European imperialism and colonialism in Egypt, the majority of women came to the country from the ranks of the middle class as travelers seeking adventure, teachers in government schools or elite households, proselytizing missionaries, wives serving at the elbows of colonial officials, or as amateur ethnographers. A smaller number of working class women arrived in Egypt in other capacities, such as sex workers in foreign-owned brothels.⁴⁴

Middle-class gender roles in England stressed the concept of sexual difference, which was expressed through proper forms of masculinity and femininity. Women and men were to occupy separate spheres because of their natural differences and complementary roles, which were highlighted by discussions of *women's place* and *women's mission*.⁴⁵ Therefore, the primary responsibilities of many, especially the wives of officials, was managing the household and raising a family. This often helped to enforce the boundaries of the empire, the difference between European and indigenous cultures, and the construction of Englishness within the context of the colonial encounter. The concept of the "home" had even greater importance for preserving "civilization," proper gender roles, and defending the markers of Englishness within the periphery.⁴⁶

British women also collected and disseminated information about the empire to people back at home. They, therefore, became major sources of information about indigenous people for a popular audience, developing into early ethnographers as they wrote about specific indigenous groups or practices. Starting in the 1870s, women traveled abroad in increasing numbers and to more remote locations. Egypt became a major destination of middle-class and elite travel during this period. By the mid-nineteenth century themes of empire, war, travel, and mission were widespread in women's literature.⁴⁷

Women travelers had to deal with and negotiate the restrictions of patriarchal norms and values. In some ways, they defied their traditional gender roles as wives and mothers. However, their release from Victorian gender roles often stemmed from their authority over non-Western peoples. They also tended to reinforce other aspects of the British

⁴⁴ Tucker, 129–130.

⁴⁵ Davidoff and Hall, 149.

⁴⁶ Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 17; Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 95–116.

⁴⁷ Rendall, 105.

identity.⁴⁸ In addition, many British women travelers and ethnographers had ambiguous or even hostile relationships with the burgeoning feminist movement in England. The most prominent example of this is the British traveler, linguist, archaeologist, and Orientalist Gertrude Bell, who was hugely instrumental, along with T. E. Lawrence, in the post-war reconfiguration of the Arab states in the Middle East. She was a fierce opponent of the movement for women's suffrage, becoming honorary secretary of the British Women's Anti-Suffrage League. Bell argued that women's roles in society were fundamentally different from men's and that men should be the ones responsible for managing the nation and the empire.⁴⁹

Although English women had to negotiate patriarchal structures, middle-class women's moral and social influence extended beyond the home and into religious and philanthropic activities. Women had prominent roles in missionary activities in the empire due to their focus on marriage, divorce, polygyny, the raising of children, and other social practices.⁵⁰ Missionaries often preceded formal imperial encounters in Asia and Africa, which were driven by religious revivalism in England among evangelical Protestants. While emphasizing issues of social justice, they came to have considerable influence in British politics, especially involving issues like the British slave trade. In spite of their concerns about the plight of non-Europeans, missionaries were no less Eurocentric than their fellow colonialists. Due to their interest in the souls of those they proselytized, they were more intrusive into indigenous societies, arguing that Muslims needed "salvation through Jesus Christ" and without it, "the followers of the false prophet, must perish without light or the possibility of it."⁵¹ In Egypt, both boys and girls received modern educations from schools administrated by foreign missionaries in the nineteenth century, which educated more women than government schools even after World War I.⁵²

⁴⁸ Strobel, 36–37.

⁴⁹ Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 83.

⁵⁰ Mary Taylor Huber and Nancy C. Lutkehaus, eds., *Gendered Missions: Women and Men in Missionary Discourse and Practice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 2.

⁵¹ J. Martin Cleaver as quoted by Andrew Watson, "Islam in Egypt," in *The Mohammedan World of To-day: Being papers read at the First Missionary Conference on behalf of the Mohammedan World held at Cairo April 4th–9th, 1906*, ed. S. M. Zwemer, E. M. Wherry, and James L. Barton (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1906), 22.

⁵² Cooper, 356; Sir Auckland Colvin, *The Making of Modern Egypt* (London: Seeley, 1906), 306; Robert L. Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 343; Guity Nashat and Judith E. Tucker, *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Restoring Women to History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 82.

European Women on the Banks of the Nile

Over half a century separates Sophia Poole's and Elizabeth Cooper's visits to Egypt, a time marked by transformations in the country as it became increasingly modernized and Westernized. It was also a period of rapid political, economic, and social change in England and the West in general. Partially based on their individual circumstances, all three women writers have differing reactions to Egyptian women, varying from romanticized fascination (Sophia Poole), to frustrated contempt (Emmeline Lott), to nostalgia for an Egypt lost to modernity (Elizabeth Cooper). However, in spite of these differences, all three women focused on similar aspects and made similar criticisms of Egyptian society. These resemblances are largely based on the fact that all three writers shared similar assumptions based on their identity as middle-class women working within the British Empire, and evaluating Egyptian women in relation to their own gendered concerns.

One of the striking similarities between all of the texts is the way they wrote themselves into the narratives. All of the women clearly asserted their protestant identity in the contexts of living within or visiting a primarily Muslim country. Poole criticized the Christians in Egypt, and on hearing the Muslim evening call to pray, asserted that she wished for the "silent prayer of every Christian who hears them ascend to a throne of grace for mercy on their [Muslims'] behalf. They are especially objects of pity, because they have the light of Gospel in their land; but how is that light obscured!"⁵³ In this passage, she clearly asserted the superiority of Christianity over Islam and concern for the souls of Muslims, a sentiment shared by Lott and Cooper as well. Therefore, she also reflected the centrality of protestant evangelicalism to middle-class identity in England. Essential to evangelicalism was the idea of individual salvation through active struggle.⁵⁴ Although none of the texts explored in this paper were written by missionaries, the authors still shared a missionary ideal of bringing light to those who they believed dwelled in ignorance and darkness.

Egyptian Women through Imperial Eyes

One of the deepest and most reoccurring images of the Middle East and Middle Eastern women in the European imagination is that of the harem, often depicted as a sexualized realm of despotism, depravity,

⁵³ Poole, 109.

⁵⁴ Davidoff and Hall, 25.

cruelty, and excess. Male travelers to Egypt did not have access to the inner realms of households. As a result, they contented themselves with watching the “veiled Egyptian’s eyes” of women on the streets of Cairo, or by inventing elaborate Orientalist fantasies.⁵⁵ Unlike their male counterparts, Poole, Lott, and Cooper all had access to the women’s quarters in elite households in Egypt, and consequently devoted considerable time and energy to describing the lives of women within the harem. The starting point of these descriptions was the assumed superiority of Western culture, criticism of polygamy, and the seclusion of women. For all three authors, these characteristics marked the otherness and the backwardness of Egypt.

Of the three authors, Emmeline Lott is the only one to have actually lived within the walls of a harem as part of Ismail Pasha’s household. She viewed the harem as overwhelmingly negative, as she did almost everything with which she came in contact in Egypt. Familiar with past travel writings on the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, she largely repeated commonly held stereotypes about Oriental women while employing frequently used tropes. However, she did not depict Egyptian women as simple and charmingly childlike, as with other writers do, but instead characterized them as lazy and stupid. This criticism stemmed partially from the fact that she spoke neither Turkish nor Arabic.⁵⁶ For Lott, the harem exemplified the degradation of women under Islam. Employing images of the women of the house as, she referred to the harem as a “gilded cage,” and the women as “caged beauties of the East.” She even viewed herself as a “caged bird” inside the harem and the “the inmate of some prison in a foreign land.”⁵⁷

Elizabeth Cooper’s description of the harem was not much more positive than Lott’s. Replicating similar stereotypes, in the introduction she described the home as “the only world” that an Egyptian woman “knows or sees,” and that such women passed their lives “with not so much as a visit to a relative and friend” and were, at best, surrounded by idle gossip.⁵⁸ However, later on in the text she contradicted these statements, speaking about women’s gatherings, and the fact that some upper-class women were not only educated but also keenly “interested in the all the life of Egypt, especially political questions of the day.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Nerval, 3.

⁵⁶ Due to the influence of the Ottoman Empire, the elite in Egypt generally spoke both Arabic and Turkish.

⁵⁷ Lott, 39, 45, 72, 102.

⁵⁸ Cooper, 22–23.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

In addition, Cooper was the only one of the three authors who spoke about the ability of women to negotiate patriarchal structures in society, arguing, “home they are supreme.” Speaking about gender solidarity among women in a household, she maintained that it could be effective in obtaining what women desired from even the most strong-minded men.⁶⁰ Cooper’s interest in women’s agency was due to the influence of feminist politics at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Although she stressed the changes in women’s attitudes taking place in Egypt, for which she credited the influence of Westerners, she was also quick to note that there was neither feminist agitation nor the concept of the ‘New Woman’ in Egypt.⁶¹ The mobilization of feminism in defense of women against indigenous patriarchy and the perceived lack of feminist agitation within the country remains a major strand of Eurocentric feminist discourses.

Of these three writers, Sophia Poole had the most positive and the most accurate view of life in the Egyptian harem. Still, she clearly stated that the situation would be “revolting to the mind of an Englishwoman.”⁶² Viewing Egyptian women through an Orientalist filter, she argued that the customs of Eastern life perfectly contrasted with the “whole construction of European society.”⁶³ However, in opposition to the despotism that the other writers described, she highlighted:

... a stranger [cannot] form a just estimation of the degree of liberty enjoyed by the women without mixing in Eastern society . . . The middle classes are at liberty to pay visits, and go to the bath when they please; but their fathers and husbands object to them shopping, therefore female brokers are in habit of frequently attending the harem [sic].⁶⁴

Therefore, Poole dispelled some of the common Eurocentric stereotypes about women in the region by speaking about the relative freedom that women had within their segregated worlds. Nonetheless, she still viewed the harem as a marker of difference between the East and West, and as a symbol of Eastern inferiority.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 212. For information on the feminist movement in Egypt, see Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁶² Poole, 104.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶⁵ Although the harem became a marker of difference in the European imagination, seclusion was not unique to eastern countries. In 1913, Hadidjé Zennour published *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions* (London: Seeley, 1913), under the pen name Zeyneb

As amateur ethnographers, both Sophia Poole and Elizabeth Cooper were deeply concerned with the state of marriage in Egypt. This is not surprising given the fact that marriage was a serious economic and social building block of the English middle class. Men assumed the economic responsibility for the family, while women were granted full adult status. In addition, courtship and marriage were serious steps for both partners, and were not usually undertaken until the late twenties.⁶⁶ Given the late age of marriage and the importance of courtship in England, it is not surprising that both authors criticized the lack of romance in Egypt. In particular, both lamented the idea of arranged marriages, and in Poole's case, the lack of input from the prospective bride as to the choice of husband.⁶⁷ However, their concerns appeared to be more about the lack of knowledge about prospective partners than the lack of romantic or passionate love. These concerns were consistent with Victorian notions that love should cement a marriage rather than be central to mate selection.⁶⁸

Overall, Poole had a much more positive view of marital conditions in Egypt than Cooper. She argued against the idea that one could "look for those happy marriages" which were, in her mind, "most frequently found in England." However, she was "pleased to find the Eastern women contented, and without a single exception . . . so cheerful" that she was able to "naturally conclude" they were "treated with consideration."⁶⁹ Still, Poole clearly outlined the differences between marriage in England and in Egypt. She compared her perception of the reality of Egyptian marriages with an idealized version of British marriages, in spite of commenting on the happiness of marriages in Egypt. This was a trend common in travel literature.

In contrast, Cooper was slightly more concerned with love than Poole, reflecting the shifting ideas of marriage at the beginning of the twentieth century. She argued that marriage in Egypt seldom meant "real companionship between the men and women," it never meant "equality," and indeed, it did "not necessarily mean love."⁷⁰ Therefore, Cooper set up

Hanoum. She turned the Orientalist gaze back on itself in a provocatively titled chapter, "Is This Really Freedom?" about her experiences in London (78). She critiqued the limitations of Western women's liberation, arguing that the London Ladies' Club and Ladies' gallery at the House of Parliament were types of harems (185).

⁶⁶ Davidoff and Hall, 322–323.

⁶⁷ Poole, 89, 104.

⁶⁸ Michael Gordon, and M. Charles Bernstein, "Mate Choice and Domestic Life in the Nineteenth-Century Marriage Manual," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 32, no. 4 (Nov. 1970): 669.

⁶⁹ Poole, 116.

⁷⁰ Cooper, 212.

an even more rigid division between marriages in the East and the West, arguing that Egyptian marriages lacked the elements that were considered central to successful marriages in England.

Along with marriage, the issue of divorce was a major point of inquiry for these writers. In fact, all appeared to be surprised at the ease with which a divorce could be granted in Egypt. This is not unexpected, given the fact that in England, before 1850, divorce was expensive and could only be achieved by an Act of Parliament. In 1857, the passing of the Matrimonial Causes Act made divorce the responsibility of secular courts. However, the grounds on which the court would grant a decree were the same as under former ecclesiastical jurisdiction: a marriage could only be annulled due to bigamy, or certain kinds of mental or physical incapacity. Additionally, a husband could dissolve a marriage with proof of a wife's infidelity, as could a wife, but only if the infidelity was compounded by cruelty or abandonment. Therefore, a gendered double standard was written into the law in terms of women's sexuality, which was not altered until 1923, when the grounds for divorce were widened to include desertion, cruelty and incurable insanity.⁷¹

Although there were some shifts in opinion regarding divorce at the beginning of the twentieth century, fomented by the propagation of a series of divorce law reform societies, divorce was still largely a taboo subject in England during the nineteenth century. All of these writers reflected this attitude. Poole argued that the "the facility of divorce is a prodigious evil; often productive of want and misery,"⁷² and questioned, "who can defend it?"⁷³ In a similar vein, Cooper was surprised that it was not a disgrace to divorce in Egypt, and was shocked that a woman could be friends with her husband's ex-wife, or that a man could divorce his wife without stating a cause.⁷⁴ They also appeared to be amazed that a woman could divorce without ending up in utter destitution. This was due to the fact that women in Egypt retained the right to control their own property in marriage, as well as ownership over personal belongings, and part of their dowry.⁷⁵ In contrast, British a man acquired absolute control over his wife's personal property, including her earnings.⁷⁶ In the end, these attitudes around divorce reveal more about Englishness than about Egyptians.

⁷¹ Griselda Rowntree and Norman H. Carrier, "The Resort to Divorce in England and Wales, 1858-1957," *Population Studies* 11, no. 3 (March 1958): 188.

⁷² Poole, 92.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁴ Cooper, 215.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 217-218.

⁷⁶ Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 115.

Beyond issues of marriage and divorce, these women writers were immensely interested in the Egyptian method of child rearing. Motherhood was the ideal role for women in nineteenth-century England, and all women were expected to have innate maternal instincts. This is reflected in Poole's notion that "no love is so deep, no attachment so strong, as that of mother to child, and of child to mother."⁷⁷ There was scorn for the aristocratic habit of leaving children in the care of nursemaids, something for which missionary Annie Van Sommer also criticized Egyptian women.⁷⁸ Although an emphasis on motherhood was not unique to this historical period, middle-class women bore the emotional and physical brunt of child rearing within the context of autonomous, and at times isolated, nuclear families, which were responsible for raising the next generation.⁷⁹

During the nineteenth century, child-rearing practices became less authoritarian and harsh among the middle class, and children became viewed as companions to their parents.⁸⁰ Poole, Lott, and Cooper all spoke of the general concern that Egyptian women had for their children. They discussed "the number, health and age of each lady's children," which Poole described as a "darling theme of conversation."⁸¹ However, all three writers were united in the belief that children in Egypt were too spoiled and did not show respect for their parents.⁸² In particular, Lott depicted the indulgence toward her five-year-old charge, describing him as a little tyrant beyond reproach who was allowed to torture illegitimate siblings and, in one incident, fling charcoal in a servant's face.⁸³ It should be noted that no other author corroborated this incident concerning either the liberty given to children, or the amount of violence in the Ibrahim Pasha's household. Therefore, if these descriptions are accurate, they were exceptions and not the rule. However, this emphasis on spoiled children resulted from the importance that the English middle class placed on children being raised to be serious minded and disciplined.

Beyond the issues of family life, all of three of the authors were concerned with the ways in which Egyptians organized pleasure and amusement. The division between good and bad often takes place at the location of the organization of pleasure. Sociologist Slavoj Žižek argues:

⁷⁷ Poole, 68.

⁷⁸ Annie Van Sommer and Samuel M. Zwemer eds., *Our Moslem Sisters: A Cry from Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It* (London: Fleming H. Revell, 1907), 54.

⁷⁹ Davidoff and Hall, 335.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 335, 343.

⁸¹ Poole, 182.

⁸² Cooper, 293.

⁸³ Lott, 124.

We always impute to the “other” an excessive enjoyment; s/he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or has access to some secret . . . enjoyment. In short, what really bothers us about the “other” is the peculiar way it organizes its enjoyment: precisely the surplus, the “excess” that pertains to it—the smell of their food, their “noisy” songs and games, their strange manners, their attitude to work . . .⁸⁴

Of the three writers, Lott had the most negative view of Egyptian society. Most of her negative perceptions surrounded the organization of pleasure in Egypt, which became a marker of racial difference in her writing. Addressing herself to the reader, Lott claimed:

There I was, totally unacquainted with either the Turkish or Arabic tongues, unaccustomed to filthy manners, barbarous customs, and disgusting habits of all around me; deprived of every comfort by which I had always been surrounded; shut out from rational society . . . absolutely living upon nothing else but dry bread and a little pigeon or mutton, barely sufficient to keep body and soul together . . . a daily witness of manners the most repugnant, nay revolting, to the delicacy of a European female.⁸⁵

She had particular venom for Egyptian cuisine, which she claimed was unpalatable, complaining about the dryness of the meat and the lack of sauces, egg, butter, and wine.⁸⁶ She also found the Egyptian table manners revolting, and claimed that plates after a meal would make “the stomach of a cook-shop carver heave,” as they were covered with food that had been “mauled about in their fingers.”⁸⁷ Lott’s observations highlight the emphasis that the British middle class put on manners and etiquette. British meals were organized cleanly and consistently; courses followed each other in strict procession, which characterized proper decorum.⁸⁸ Although neither Poole nor Cooper found the food itself problematic, they also disparaged Egyptian eating habits, commenting on the excessive consumption of sweets by children. Poole claimed that this accounted for the “generally wretched appearance of the children.”⁸⁹

In addition to eating habits, there was a general anxiety over Egyptian sexuality. Ann Stoler argues that no topic is discussed more than sex in colonial literature or used more often to construct racist stereotypes of non-Europeans. The tropics provided the locations for pornographic

⁸⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “Eastern Europe’s Republics of Gilead,” *New Left Review* 183 (1990): 54.

⁸⁵ Lott, 104.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 22, 25, 47, 65, 77, 107.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸⁸ McClintock, 168.

⁸⁹ Poole, 60.

fantasies long before colonialism began, supplying lurid descriptions of licentiousness.⁹⁰ As pointed out by Joseph Massad, sexual desire has been key in evaluating the value of Arab civilization.⁹¹ Lott emphasized, in detail, the wanton sexual nature of Egyptian society. She claimed, “they regard women . . . of every nation and of all grades in society as the mere slaves to their sensual gratification.”⁹² Therefore, she trotted out a familiar Orientalist trope about the lascivious nature of Arab men. Later on, she was particularly disturbed to witness black women slaves in the harem cavorting with the eunuchs at night.⁹³

Unlike Lott, Poole did not mention the overall sexual nature of Egyptian culture. However, she was shocked by the nudity she encountered in an elite public bath where she saw “thirty women of all ages, and many girls and children, completely unclothed,” which she described as disgusting, and a fact that could not “fail to shock” the “feelings of propriety.”⁹⁴ In the Western imagination, baths came to symbolize both the over-sexualized nature of Eastern women and their propensity toward idleness.⁹⁵ Baths were often also perceived as the location of freedom for women’s sexual appetites, and in some cases, lesbianism, in popular imagination, literature, and art. It should be noted that bathing nude was actually rare and all other female travel accounts from this period to Egypt and the Ottoman Empire describe women as wearing linen-wrappers.⁹⁶

This interest in sexuality in Egypt was due to the Western discomfort with sexuality during the nineteenth century, which led them to label Arabs as lascivious and decadent. This depiction of Arab sexuality contrasts sharply with current attitudes that proclaim the prudish nature of Arab culture, which Josef Massad argues is due to an increase in sexual openness in the West.⁹⁷ This lends credence to the suggestion that discourses around sexuality in the East have far more to do with English men and women’s conceptions of themselves, and denoting different rather than of the actual practices of Egyptians.

Egyptians also appeared racialized in terms of their appearance, dress, and hygiene. All three of the writers had an obsession with the

⁹⁰ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁹¹ Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁹² Lott, 9.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁹⁴ Poole, 173, 175.

⁹⁵ Billie Melman, *Women’s Orient: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918; Sexuality, Religion, and Work* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 89.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁹⁷ Massad, *Desiring Arabs*.

hygiene of Egyptians. Poole and Cooper claimed that it was mostly the lower classes, including servants, who were dirty, disregarding sanitary laws, neglecting proper washing, and failing to change their clothing.⁹⁸ Lott extended this dirtiness to the upper classes, which she claimed were attired in “dirty, crumpled” dresses that were “breeders of vermin.”⁹⁹ These discourses on an alleged lack of cleanliness must be placed within the larger context of discussions of racism in the nineteenth century. Before the nineteenth century, clothing and bedding were only washed once or twice per year in most households in England. However, Anne McClintock argues that cleanliness became a “God-given sign of Britain’s evolutionary superiority” by the late nineteenth century. It was common for colonial writers to condemn the absence of “proper domestic life” and supposed lack of hygiene among colonized peoples as well as the unwashed masses at home. The European civilizing mission, therefore, employed the “commodity racism” of soap to solidify the “Victorian poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress.”¹⁰⁰ As a result, the division between the civilized and the backwards was situated in the domestic realm.

The Empire at Home: Imperial Feminism

Since British imperialism was intimately interlaced with metropole culture, there are a number of areas where the influence of British involvement in Egypt can be seen. Due to the centrality of gender and feminism to this analysis, the influence of the empire and imperialism in Egypt on British feminism is appropriate. British feminism developed in the context of Victorian and Edwardian imperialism at a time when Europe came to control 80 percent of the globe. Therefore, the language of imperialism, with its emphasis on racial and cultural difference, influenced the development of feminism. Due to this legacy, Eurocentric feminism, which claims to “give a voice to an essential womanhood (in a universal conflict with an essential masculinity) and who privilege gender over all other conflicts,” has been rightfully critiqued since the 1970s.¹⁰¹

Imperial imagery entered British feminism practically from its inception with the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the founders of feminist philosophy. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft argued that the

⁹⁸ Poole, 79; Cooper, 146.

⁹⁹ Lott, 104.

¹⁰⁰ McClintock, 207–214.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

“husband who lords it in his little harem thinks only of his pleasure or his convenience.”¹⁰² In this text, Wollstonecraft introduces the harem as a metaphor for the patriarchal control of women and a husband’s power over his wife. This theme was reproduced throughout nineteenth-century feminist literature. For instance, Margaret Mylne contrasted the freedom of the unveiled English woman with the imprisonment of the “poor Turk confined to the harem,” and argued that economic progress resulted in improvements to women’s status.¹⁰³ It was also common for feminist periodicals such as the *English Women’s Journal*, published from 1858 to 1864, to include articles on the state of women in the Ottoman Empire from a typically Orientalist perspective.¹⁰⁴

This theme also continued in women’s literature during the period. Charlotte Brontë’s most famous novel, *Jane Eyre*, published in 1848, is often viewed as an early feminist text due to its writing of a female self and the voicing of oppression, which are central features of contemporary discussions of agency. However, recent post-colonial scholarship has transformed the novel into a contested site between feminism and imperialism.¹⁰⁵ Joyce Zonana argues that in the struggle for female subjectivity, Jane transforms Mr. Rochester into a “Sultan” and herself into a “slave” in order to provide a way for her to critique his benign despotism.¹⁰⁶ While wrangling with him, Jane is drawn to an “Eastern allusion” proclaiming that she will “not stand an inch in the stead of a seraglio.”¹⁰⁷ In freeing herself from his control, she identifies as a missionary that will preach “liberty to them that are enslaved—your harem inmates among the rest. I’ll get admitted there, and I’ll stir up mutiny.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, she places herself within the British colonial project, positioning herself to free other women in the colonies. Although she and the women of Rochester’s harem all suffer from his patriarchy, she clearly differentiates herself from the other slaves as a European woman, who can liberate herself. In the novel, Brontë not only mobilizes the meta-

¹⁰² Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women, With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: Johnson, 1792; London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1891), 121, <http://books.google.com/books?id=qhcFAAAAQAAJ>.

¹⁰³ P. M. Y. [Margaret Mylne], “Woman and Her Social Position,” *Westminster Review* 35 (1841): 32, 25. It should be noted that during the nineteenth century, Egypt was nominally part of the Ottoman Empire and was ruled by a Turco-Egyptian elite. Therefore, Egyptians were often referred to as Turks.

¹⁰⁴ Rendall, 119.

¹⁰⁵ Sharpe, 31.

¹⁰⁶ Joyce Zonana, “The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*,” *Signs* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 592–617.

¹⁰⁷ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Century, 1906), 286.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

phor of women's enslavement through marriage but also the image of a concubine, symbolizing the ultimate sexual subjugation of women.

This metaphor of the harem as a symbol of the enslavement of Western women in marriage had not diminished by the late nineteenth century with the introduction of the idea of 'New Women' into Anglo-American culture. At the beginning of the 1890s, interest in the "women question" was reaching its peak in popular literature, influenced by the first American production of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in 1889. 'New Women' writers rejected some aspects of traditional feminine roles, often highlighting the way that marriage discriminated against women.¹⁰⁹ During this period, the harem remained a reoccurring image of this form of discrimination. In her 'New Woman' novel, *A Superfluous Woman* (1894), Emma Brooke spoke of marriage as a form of imprisonment and slavery. She wrote about "lovely girls . . . bought and sold in the London marriage market very much as Circassian slaves are sold to a Turkish harem."¹¹⁰ Therefore, images of the Middle Eastern women were foundational to the development of Western feminism.

Conclusion

Sophia Poole, Emmeline Lott, and Elizabeth Cooper all provided interesting glimpses into the lives of Egyptian women, especially elite Egyptian women. It is primarily due to their writing, along with that of a few upper class Egyptian women, that descriptions of women's lives in Egypt during the nineteenth century survive. These women helped to influence European perceptions about Egypt, and the Middle East in general, by providing information about Egypt to those in the West. Through the interactions of British women in the empire, and their male counterparts, British concepts of Englishness, womanhood, and by extension, nineteenth-century feminism were shaped.

This does not, of course, negate the Orientalist perceptions and colonial collaborations that were intrinsic to their texts. Moreover, it is important to resist the temptation to exclusively focus on their struggles with patriarchal English culture and applaud their ability to negotiate or resist gender roles. Within such a focus, Egyptian women become a simple backdrop for the exploration of the identities of these English writers and they would become almost invisible within the texts. It is their struggles that need to be explored in greater detail as well as their

¹⁰⁹ A. R. Cunningham, "The 'New Woman Fiction' of the 1890's," *Victorian Studies* 17, no. 2 (Dec. 1973): 178.

¹¹⁰ Emma Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman* (London: Heinemann, 1894), quoted in Lewis, 129.

resistance to patriarchy and exploitation. Even today, the voices of Arab women remain muffled in contrast to their European counterparts.

Katrina Yeaw holds a BA in Comparative Literature from San Francisco State University. She is currently in the process of completing an MA in Modern World History from San Francisco State, focusing on Middle Eastern History, and will be graduating in May 2009. In fall 2009, she will be starting a PhD program in Middle Eastern History at the University of California, Davis. Her interests include gender, colonialism, subaltern studies, and modern Mediterranean and North African History.