

The Harem, Slavery and British Imperial Culture: Anglo-Muslim Relations in the Late-Nineteenth Century

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This is a stimulating and engaging study that ticks a great many (postcolonial scholars') 'boxes'. Based on the author's PhD, it draws together debates on gender, notions about race, processes of identity formation, and discussions of 'Othering', and considers them within the context of late-nineteenth-century British high imperialism in general, and the linkages between England and Egypt in particular. The prism through which all these issues are addressed is that of slavery, a practice that persisted—legitimately—within Egyptian society until the end of the nineteenth century, and which came to generate enormous anxiety for both British officials seeking to suppress the slave trade in the region and the English public back home. The fact that the majority of these slaves were women, destined for the domestic harem, or private quarters within Egyptian homes, meant that the campaign that developed to end the practice 'became a focal point for a number of gender tensions and concerns within the British imperial system' (p. 16). Race was also at stake, since slaves in Egypt fell into different 'racial' categories according to skin colour, and the presence among them of white female slaves 'served as a powerful image that shocked English audiences and helped to highlight the connections between anti-slavery efforts abroad and gender politics' (p. 17) in the metropole itself. Indeed, one of the author's main priorities is to demonstrate the broad extent of the 'connections' that were taking place at the time. Hence, Robinson-Dunn also explores the extent to which ideas about 'Englishness' in the late-nineteenth century were influenced by contemporary perceptions about Islam drawn from the kinds of developments taking place in Egypt, though, according to her, identities that were

informed by new understandings of the relationship between Englishness and Islam were not simply produced and then exchanged in a fixed and stable form like a product shipped from one imperial port to another. Rather their creation, re-creation and exchange were interdependent on one another, constituting one complex process (pp. 3–4).

The combination of colonial interaction and circular processes of cultural exchange in practice created a complex 'borderland' that did not separate Britain from the empire in a neat, clear-cut fashion, but which existed everywhere that empire existed, and which meant as much in Britain itself as elsewhere in the world.

Following the introduction that sets out the theoretical bases and debates that underpin the study, chapter 2, 'From desert caravans to Red Sea coasts: the British anti-slavery campaign in Egypt', addresses, thematically as well as chronologically, the way in which, from c.1870 to 1900, the British assumed an active role in suppressing slave traffic in Egypt and its surrounding regions. This was not, according to Robinson-Dunn, simply an innocent activity spurred on by moral concerns, but was closely linked to the wider imperialist project that produced the British occupation of Egypt from 1882. British officials, informed by notions of English gender roles and patriarchy, repeatedly defined 'Englishness and Islam in relation to each other, and did so in gendered terms' (p. 31). This in turn resulted in the creation of a hierarchy with things English at the top and those Muslim much lower down the scale: 'Englishness and Islam were re-formed in relation to specific imperial political activities and developments' (p. 32). British abolitionist efforts pre-dated the occupation of Egypt, as, together with other European powers, Britain was putting pressure on the Ottoman government to limit slave-trading there from the mid-nineteenth century. Later, in 1877, the British government signed a convention with the Egyptian authorities prohibiting the importation and transportation of slaves in Egypt, Egypt's possessions in North Africa, and on the shores of the Red Sea, but, while this agreement had an almost immediate effect as far as black and Abyssinian slaves were concerned, the banning of the sale of white and family slaves was postponed for a further seven years. And though British officials encountered conflict and difficulties, for instance in policing the steamships and dhows of the Red Sea, it would seem that this did not lead them to question their activities. Rather, 'they ... became convinced further of the importance of their role in Egypt and that they were different in fundamental ways from those around them, whether they referred to them as Egyptians, Muslims or Arabs' (p. 36).

The real obstacle to progress, as Robinson-Dunn makes clear, was identified as the harem, a source of great frustration to many British officials who, as men, could not enter these private Egyptian worlds themselves to search for slaves. Similarly, the practice of wearing the veil was viewed as a barrier to their determining whether a woman was or was not a slave. Occasionally, British officials even separated legitimate wives from their husbands and detained them for months at a time when there was deemed to be insufficient proof that they were legally married, since

in a society in which wives could become slaves and slaves could become wives, the very decision to suppress slavery ... necessitated the British involving themselves in the private lives of Muslim families (p. 43).

But, as Robinson-Dunn points out, this reform was definitely not intended to undermine the authority of Egyptian men. Accordingly, in practice, the suppression of the slave trade necessitated efforts to restrict female independence and autonomy. Likewise, much of the discussion about what to do with freed female slaves reflected assumptions that these women, presumed to be low-class, would drift into prostitution and other immoral activities. A further consequence of Britain's anti-slavery activity in Egypt were efforts to influence and refashion the Islamic legal structures and procedures that operated there, moves that intensified following the 1882 occupation when British power increased, enabling an extensive British-dominated administrative structure finally to suppress the slave trade, and slavery itself, by the end of the century.

Having set the scene in Egypt, chapter 3, 'Networks of support: English activism and slavery redefined', turns the spotlight on another, parallel, aspect of the anti-slavery campaign to underline the extent to which this campaign influenced the development of a conception of English national identity that was 'defined in gendered, moral and imperial terms, and in contrast to the harem and Islam' (p. 70). In all this, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) played a key role, exploiting a supposedly widespread English belief in the immorality of slavery and the responsibility of the English to eradicate the practice, in order to raise public support 'at home' for the government's efforts abroad. Although the Society's origins lay much earlier in the nineteenth century when abolitionist attention was focused on the United States, following the

emancipation of American slavery in 1863 its attention shifted to the Islamic world and particularly the plight of its female slaves. Islam was seen as the root cause of this 'evil' practice, and so anti-slavery activists in their publications and speeches portrayed the Islamic world in this light, since

understanding Islam in this way served specific political purposes: it generated support for the anti-slavery cause by presenting it as a struggle between good and evil; and it also helped to create, or actually recreate in a new context, a sense of English national identity closely associated with liberal Enlightenment ideas (p. 74).

BFASS 'propaganda' should therefore be seen as part of the wider vilification of Islam and Muslims that gained ground in late-nineteenth century Britain. While the extent of anti-Muslim sentiment that circulated at this time is well established, Robinson-Dunn draws on new evidence to show how far Islam became inscribed as the predominant 'Other', a negative against which an English positive self-image could be developed and enlarged.

Gender, of course, remained central to the anti-slavery ideology created by the BFASS, and much of this third chapter is devoted to BFASS representations of the harem, which served 'to generate support for their cause while at the same time defining *proper* gender relations both for themselves and for the Egyptians' (p. 84). The establishment of the Cairo Home for Freed Women Slaves (CHFWS) in 1885, ostensibly a humanitarian undertaking, provided, on the one hand, an opportunity to advance ideas about appropriate feminine roles associated with English national identity, and, on the other, an issue that could galvanize support for the BFASS and reinforce its wider mission.

Chapter 4, "'The British Turk" and the "Christian harem": imperial ideology in English gender politics', introduces another link in Robinson-Dunn's chain of connections by exploring 'how beliefs about Englishness, English gender roles and Islam ... were recreated and understood in very different ways in the metropole' (p. 2). Drawing on a range of source materials, from feminist writings to those of Christian missionaries, it highlights how far debates in England on the 'woman question' were informed by the supposed plight of Muslim women, slaves or otherwise. In a similar vein to others who have examined how the anti-slavery movement brought women into contact with imperial issues, Robinson-Dunn here illustrates how English feminists manipulated understandings about the harem and female slavery in the Islamic world to draw attention to the injustices of womanhood closer to home: in effect, 'they evoked imperial images of the harem and the Muslim woman to describe gender inequalities in English society' (p. 123). At the same time, defenders of the status quo assumed that 'patriarchal English gender relations elevated the women of that country and would do the same for those of Egypt' (p. 124), and saw no incompatibility between promoting a conservative version of appropriate gender roles in England and the campaign to reform Muslim women's lives in Egypt.

One interesting dimension of the relationship between foreign policy and domestic gender debates that is raised here relates to prostitution. Inevitably perhaps, discussion of white slavery abroad connected with anti-vice activism in England, as those 'who tried to rescue and reform the English prostitute associated her with the female slave of the Muslim harem' (p. 132). For the National Vigilance Association (NVA), the rationale for 'treating English prostitution as something foreign or Islamic' made sense 'in the light of the many contemporary discourses which depicted the East, or the Islamic world, as a place of licentiousness and moral depravity' (p. 133). But, as Robinson-Dunn points out, there was another side to this coin as

some English people identified with the Muslim woman and used positive representations of her in order to present alternative beliefs about femininity generally and English womanhood specifically (p. 135).

In particular there were cultural feminists who placed great value on the preservation of separate feminine spaces, and for whom the harem was a prized centre of genteel and elegant femininity, shielding womanly

purity from the outside world. Yet, either way,

examining the use of the harem and “white slavery” in English domestic debates [undoubtedly] sheds light on how imperial identity politics functioned in English life, and served to construct and maintain boundaries defining the nation within the metropole of the British Empire (p. 145).

Chapter 5, ‘Islam in Britain’, changes tack somewhat. Robinson-Dunn here shifts her focus away from policies and debates connected with slavery and slave traffic in Egypt, and their knock-on effect in England. Instead, she considers how far the understandings of English national identity that they encouraged were challenged by the presence of Islam, in the form of established Muslim communities, within England itself, suggesting that there were ‘alternative ways of understanding the relationship between Islam and Englishness’ which opened up ‘opportunities for the creation of a place for that religion in England’ (p. 155). The chapter then provides an overview of the various Muslim communities that had taken root in different parts of England by the late-nineteenth century: working-class lascars (seamen) and ayahs (nursemaids) from the Empire, whose welfare, as Rozina Visram has already shown us, became a domestic as well as an imperial concern: the group of Muslim converts in Liverpool, led by the Manx solicitor-convert William Quilliam, who sought broader support by emphasizing the reasonableness of Islam as well as by tapping the temperance movement as a way of justifying the religion ‘in terms culturally available to the English’ (p. 166); wealthier sojourners from different parts of the British empire who came to England for educational and professional reasons, and who sometimes stayed on, such as Sayyid Amir Ali who became the loyal face of British Islam and sought to foster Anglo-Muslim loyalty, stressing the compatibility of Englishness and Islam; and, finally, the ‘Orientalist’ institutions that were set up in the small Surrey town of Woking in the 1880s where they embedded themselves as a central feature of organized Muslim activity and publications in England for decades to come. Even Sir Richard Burton’s well-known narrative of his pilgrimage visit in disguise to Mecca is included as an example of how ‘English Orientalist literature ... was able to foster an appreciation of Islam’ (p. 180). What the examples in this chapter all reinforce is the notion that identities, and the boundaries delineating them, were seldom firmly fixed. In other words, the border between England and the Empire was constantly shifting, and ‘the image of a unified, monolithic Islamic world’, which found its way so often into contemporary discourses, remained in reality a highly contested one (p. 187).

Much of the content of this study is very stimulating, if not always unfamiliar. But it is the pulling together of different strands of a story that connects imperial activity and ambition in Egypt with contemporaneous developments back in England that produces a novel twist on the way in which the connections between metropole and empire during this period have usually been approached and discussed. And many of the issues raised in it resonate with debates taking place elsewhere in relation to how empire needs to be studied—though it should be said that the last chapter does not seem quite as well-integrated as its three predecessors. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *The Harem, Slavery and British Imperial Culture* is Robinson-Dunn’s attempt to separate ‘Englishness’ from ‘Britishness’. The British Empire undoubtedly helped in the process of identity formation for the Scots, Welsh, and Irish, and it has become a well-established fact that ‘imperial participation and accomplishments provided a means through which to assert Scottish and Welsh identities’ (p. 20). But what is often overlooked, and consequently understudied, is how the English related to Empire, and how Englishness as an identity evolved in the context of the imperial relationship. It is the distillation of this, and Robinson-Dunn’s discussion of how far the debates that revolved around Islam in some form or other contributed to this process, that makes this contribution to today’s ‘interactive imperial historiography’ (p. xiv) a valuable one. Indeed, the fact that relationships between Englishness, Britishness, and Islam remain fraught, and are still being debated more than a century after the events dissected here, testifies to this study’s relevance to a wider readership than simply those pursuing another way of understanding what Empire used to mean.

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