



**False Feminisms and Cultural Scapegoats:  
The Interaction Between Gender and Imperialism  
in the Subject State**

**A thesis submitted to  
The Honors Program at UDM  
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**by**

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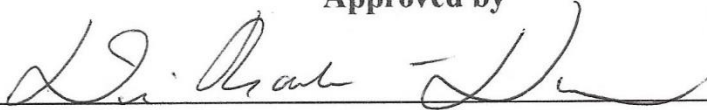
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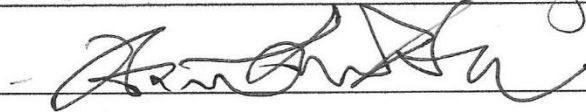
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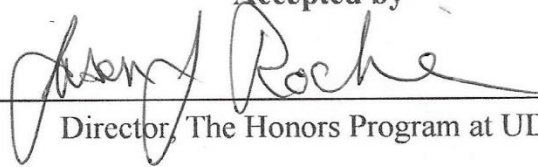


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# Preface

Though I had begun in architecture, I had been tossing around ideas for this Honors thesis for several years before finally switching to become a history major. During that time, I had wanted to examine the historical relationship between gender and imperialism, yet only vaguely articulated what I had meant by that. If anything, I barely knew what I had wanted to investigate until actually starting the process of writing the thesis itself. One of the first topics I explored was how non-binary gender identities were affected by imperialism, but this evolved for a variety of different reasons, ranging from access to sources and the need to focus geographically.

What I eventually decided to work on was the ways in which gender was affected in subject states like Egypt and India through their interaction with imperialism. This topic arose from a paper I had written for a class on the modern Middle East, where I found that feminisms from colonized countries tended to be pigeon-holed into one of two possible pathways: traditionalism or westernization. From there, I branched outward to discover other ways in which gender has been affected by the far reaching hand of the British Empire, both for the best and the worst

That thesis would come be part of the broader focus which has become my academic area of interest. What interests me most is not just the phenomenon of imperialism, specifically British imperialism, but also how that phenomenon intersects

with oppressive matrices such as racism, sexism, classism, and cissexism (the oppressive structure based around the idea that there exists a natural and biological binary divide between the sexes). My goal is to discover the ways in which those interactions shaped our contemporary world.

Perhaps the most rewarding moment in researching this thesis was when I discovered “Stray Thoughts of an Indian Girl” by Cornelia Sorabji, an Oxford-educated lawyer from India and the first Indian national to study at a British university. Reading her opinion on the Child Marriage Act was absolutely fascinating, and I hope to find such sources as I pursue this topic in more depth in the years to come.

# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Honors Program for allowing me the opportunity to explore a subject in-depth under the guidance of the talented and wonderful faculty here at University of Detroit Mercy. Though I do love and enjoy researching, the program provided the motivation to work deeply with historical material in a way personal motivation could not accomplish at this stage.

Also, I would like to sincerely thank Professor Robinson-Dunn for offering me guidance and help with both researching the topic and structuring my arguments. Without her, the thesis would not have had as deep an analytical thread, nor would it have had the proper structure and historical context. Also, I would like to thank Professor Hu and Professor Presbey for assisting in critiquing the thesis, providing me ideas, and giving support for the thesis. I am deeply indebted to these members of my thesis committee.

I would also like to thank the Women's and Gender Studies program for offering me the tools to discuss and research these topics. Without this uniquely intersectional and interdisciplinary program, I may not have found the area of interest that I have, nor may I have become more attuned to issues of gender.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for prodding me to pursue the Honors program in the first place, and for giving moral support throughout the endeavor. Going about this project alone would have been monumental and daunting, but with these, and others' help, I was able to complete it successfully.



# Abstract

Through the examination of how imperialism affects and alters a colonized nation's gender system, crucial insight can be gained into how contemporary gender systems exist around the world. These gender systems, which involve the gender roles, hierarchies, sexualities, and categories of gender within a culture, are not simply replaced with an imperial nation's gender systems, but transformed through the interaction of a dominant culture and a subordinate culture in colonialism. Colonialism created a fusion of race and gender by establishing related inferior and superior cultures in the subject and settler groups respectively. Through an examination of how several cultures, broadly Hindu Indian and Egyptian culture, changed throughout their experiences with British imperialism from about 1850 until independence around 1947-1952, the ways in which each culture's gender systems were altered can be observed. With the study of precolonial gender systems providing a control, the ways in which each gender system was altered through colonial interaction in the colonial and postcolonial periods can be discovered. Through this investigation, it was found that each culture's gender systems were fundamentally altered through their experiences with imperialism. Both systems incorporated race through colonial domination, and the application of Western feminism within a colonial framework linked perceptions of imperialism in with the question of women. Feminists and women's advocates had to navigate these synthesized gender systems often resulting in further entrenchment of the new system

# Introduction

The goal of this paper is to examine the relationship between imperialism and gender systems in subject states, and how gender systems can change through such an interaction. Here, I will focus on the British Empire's intervention in India and Egypt from the 1850s/1880s into the postcolonial period beginning in the 1950s. Though both subject states had differing experiences with imperialism and colonialism, since India was seen as the Crown Jewel of the British Empire, thus exhibiting explicit control over India, while Egypt was characterized as a Veiled Protectorate, meaning that the British controlled it officially though Egypt looked somewhat independent, they had the common experience of the British Empire and its policies.

Chapter 1 will give a broad overview of the concept of gender and gender systems, along with an introduction to the concept of non-binary gender systems. Also, it will briefly introduce how imperialism and gender, and race and gender, can interact. Chapter 2 will then present the precolonial gender systems in these areas, mainly Hinduism in India and Islam in Egypt, though India does contain a sizeable Muslim population, Hinduism will be the focus for the purposes of example. Buddhism in India will also be mentioned in order to give a detailed example of a non-Western gender system which would be unfamiliar to the West.

Chapter 3 will delve into the history of the period, and give an overview of some of the interactions, legislation, and people which are relevant for this analysis. This will be the major part of the paper, and contain some of the analysis. Chapter 4 will contain

the major part of the analysis of this period, and will address potential conclusions which can be drawn from the treatment of this paper.

Here, imperialism and colonialism are related terms which mean the ruling of one state over another, though in the frame of the British Empire, this is in reference to it ruling its overseas territories outside of England. Imperialism tends to encompass a larger colonial project, as the British Empire did come to be the largest empire in the world. Fundamental to imperialism is the exertion of supremacy of the ruler state, England, over its subjects/colonies, here being Egypt and India. The metropolises in England, usually specified as London, exert their hegemony, or superiority, over its peripheries, or its overseas territories. In terms of the exploitation implied by imperialism and colonialism, materials and labor were extracted from the peripheries for the benefit of the metropolises. For example, in Egypt, Egyptian subjects produced cotton to be processed in English factories so the English could control the textile market. This international power relationship would come to irrevocably alter all territories and peoples involved.

# Chapter 1: Gender Systems

Of the categories which divide and come to define many of us, gender has had a powerful effect in history. In the recent past, attention has been drawn towards this category, and as a result much has been learned about how it affects such phenomena as imperialism and colonialism. This paper shall address both the connection between these phenomena as well as the ways in which gender as a category within two particular cultures, Egypt in the Middle East and India, has been altered through this connection and interaction.

Given its fundamental importance to this paper, one must first establish what is meant by “gender,” and more broadly, “gender systems.” Gender consists of “(1) the social expectations about what behaviors and activities are appropriate... (2) the mental traits and self-understandings that individuals tend to develop under the influence of these expectations.”<sup>1</sup> Gender systems, then, are the systems by which gender is socialized and created as well as how it manifests.

Gender is a category which comes to define much of our interactions in the world, especially since it exists within a system of almost universal sexism, where men, as a category, hold power over women. Sexism manifests in the constraints which women have with regards to their opportunities and life possibilities. Men, as a category, are more free to pursue what they wish than are women, since men benefit from oppressing

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<sup>1</sup>Stone, Alison. *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007: 55.

women. Such benefits include being freed from housework and by extension having a kind of household servant and thus free to pursue other, often economically productive labor, being able to control reproduction and the family, having sexual access to half the population, not having to compete economically or otherwise with half of the population, power of authority over half of the population, and many other benefits which could be elaborated on *ad nauseum*.

While inroads have been made in the past, due to several “waves” of feminism across the world, it remains not only as a category of identification, but also as a system of oppression. It is a mistake to assert that women and others who do not benefit from gendered oppression (people who will be discussed in more detail later on) are better off now than they were in the past. Rather, it is much more complicated than that. In the past, depending on the particular cultural and historical context, women and others were better off in some ways, worse off in others, as will be shown below.

### *Social Construction of Gender*

The idea that gender is an inherent result of biology may seem straightforward, since there is generally seen a strict divide between men and women within Western society. Since there exist two distinct sets of sexual characteristics, and since people having one set of sexual characteristics tend to appear physically and mentally to be like those who have the same set, it would seem to follow that gender is inherently biological. However, such thinking is faulty, as most any experience with the historical record, or even just other cultures, tends to produce contradictions when gender is viewed as biologically determined. For example, Victorian English views of the fragility and

virginity of women (known as the Angel in the House) directly contradicts the views of 1920s America and Europe where women were seen as promiscuous and increasingly manly.<sup>2</sup>

If gender is produced by culture, how does this come about exactly? As gender is socially constructed, it is informed by many differing aspects of society and culture. Generally, gender is created during childhood, when certain activities, behaviors, and treatments are encouraged or discouraged by adults and culture at large. For example, a parent may look at a female-assigned baby and call her pretty, yet look at a male-assigned baby and call him handsome, despite both babies looking relatively the same. Eventually, these differences accumulate as each child learns what to do and what not to do based on how they are treated. This act of gender socialization continues throughout life as media, culture, religion, and other people treat each gender differently, and each person then performs their gender according to these signals. Though most people do stray outside the strict norms of gender, since very few could be described as the “stereotypical man” or “stereotypical women,” the effects of socialization are quite powerful, reinforcing male control over women in most cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Gender in many cultures is built upon the foundation of an individual’s sexual characteristics, but this fact of socialization undermines this foundation. Since gender is built upon an individual, and that it does not emerge out of an individual, the sex and

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<sup>2</sup> Roberts, Mary Louise. "Women Are Cutting Their Hair as a Sign of Sterility." *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1994. 69-73.

<sup>3</sup> Stone, 60-67.

gender link is severed to some extent. Though it is outside the scope of this paper to address how gender identity, or how one identifies with a particular gender or genders, manifests and is influenced by a gender socialization, it is crucial to understand how gender itself is socially constructed and not biologically determined. In theory, if one's gender socialization was altered in fundamental ways, one's behavior would be fundamentally different.

### *Binary and Non-Binary Gender Systems*

Even though gender in the West is exclusively presented, often unquestionably, as a binary, where roughly one half of the population is male, the other female, it does not follow that *all* gender systems are binary. In the Western, Cartesian-influenced tradition, there was and is a tendency to view things in terms of a dualistic binary, where one thing is opposed to its opposite. As with Good versus Evil, there is Man versus Woman. However, not every culture was influenced in the same way, and may come from a tradition which suggested ambiguity. Even though gender is often tied to be representative of biological sexual characteristics, such as the presence of a vagina or penis, a definition which lends itself to binarism, binarism is not something inherent to all definitions of gender. In fact, a variety of cultures, especially cultures outside of Western civilization, are non-binary in nature.

What does it mean for a culture to be non-binary, however? In the most simple definition, a non-binary gender system is one which has more than two genders,<sup>4</sup> outside

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<sup>4</sup> Though it is theoretically possible for a gender system with only *one* gender, this is extremely rare if nonexistent

of simply male and female. Often, gender identities outside of male and female are ceremonial or religious in nature, such as the *hijra* of Hinduism, who will be revisited later in this document. However, non-binary genders can also be practical or defined outside of religion, and can even be ways to explain transgender inclinations. However, even those definitions are lacking, as some systems contain as many as five or more separate and distinct genders.<sup>5</sup>

The implications of a non-binary system can be profound, though their power should not be overemphasized. Often, especially in contemporary times, these non-binary genders are especially marginalized, if not illegal. Also, it is important to keep in mind that non-binary gender systems can exist in tandem with patriarchal and sexist societies where men are the dominant gender in terms of institutional power. As such, non-binary systems often mirror binary systems in terms of power relations, though this may be more a symptom of a larger patriarchal culture..

However, non-binary systems create a situation where there exist possibilities outside of the binary where individuals can exist outside strict definitions of masculinity and femininity. In fact, non-binary societies can even create a freedom of gender not found in the West, where an individual can identify in varying ways. Often these identities even bring power to individuals who embrace them. Much like in the West, however, these identities are not fluid and thus can limit an individual. For example, with

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<sup>5</sup> In ancient Judaic culture, for example, there were up to six distinct gender categories. See: Fonrobert, Charlotte Elisheva. "Gender Identity In Halakhic Discourse." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. Web. 4 Mar. 2015



the *hijra*, in order to be assume such an identity, one has to be castrated, an obviously irreversible procedure.

In the Middle East, there were not explicit non-binary genders present in the Muslim world, however one could argue that eunuchs could be part of such a category. In particular, the use of eunuchs as guards and various other servants in the Imperial Harem of the Ottoman Empire supports this possible assertion. Since non-familial men were not allowed in the harem, eunuchs played the role as an intermediary between the two other genders. In essence, eunuchs could work in the harem since they lost the ‘manliness’ associated with men, and became non-masculine men, separate from both men and women. This implies a non-binary gender, though perhaps not as explicitly as with the *hijra*. The British in official documents did oftentimes refer to eunuchs as a “third sex” or non-binary gender.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the proliferation of non-binary gender systems around the world, it is clear to assume that when a binary system and a non-binary system meet, conflict results. In a more general sense, when one gender system meets another disparate one, a similar thing occurs. Given that one aspect of British imperialism, particularly in India and Egypt, was the attempted imposition of its culture onto the subject state, such conflict would arise.<sup>7</sup> As gender is a major, if not foundational, part of culture, the British attempted to apply the British gender system onto their subjects.

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson-Dunn, Diane. *The harem, slavery and British Imperial Culture: Anglo-Muslim relations in the late nineteenth century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006: 15.

<sup>7</sup> Midgley, Clare. *Gender and Imperialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998: 24-25.

### *The Intersection of Gender Systems and Imperialism*

When two peoples from two different cultures interact, one peoples' gender system does not simply overcome and replace the other's. Though one culture may dominate the other economically, technologically, and militarily, as the British did over Egypt and India, the cultures themselves would not interact and dominate each other. Gender behaves like culture in how culture is resistant to quick and dramatic changes in most cases. As a result, one gender system would not overcome the other and replace it completely. Rather, the two gender systems would be integrated in varying degrees with one another.

However, the ways in which two or more gender systems are altered can be different. In terms of such a power relationship as imperialism, the subject state's gender system would come to integrate the idea of inferiority to its ruler state. In the case of British imperialism, racism came to be the dominant system which would inferiorize the subject state. This was both a purposeful attempt by the ruler state in asserting its hegemony, as a people become easier to rule when they internalize that rule, but it was also incidental from the power relationship itself.

As race as a concept was being created and reinforced by race science and other means at the same time as imperialism, it would be a mistake to assume that race would not come to be part of the new gender systems which emerged out of imperialist ventures. Race came to define the interactions and legislation of the British Empire, as even the British Indian gentlemen were not completely English, even if they were British subjects, since they were not white. Yet gender was not a separate category from race. Rather,

gender and race combined as defining categories for the ways in which the British came to rule over their colonial ventures, especially in India, the Middle East, and other British colonial territories.

Race science came to create a hierarchy of the races, with Anglo-Saxon or Nordic white people on the very top creating civilization, and the others falling closer and closer to savagery, with Africans often at the very bottom.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it served to justify the imperialist ventures undertaken by the British and other Europeans. The supposedly superior intelligence and culture of the ruler was enough reason for them to rule over others. In addition, placing the imperial venture within the concept of race meant that the patriarchal relationship the ruler had over its subjects was one where the ruler was guiding the subject towards civilization. This would turn an outwardly negative domineering relationship into a kind of paternalism.

That patriarchal relationship with reference to race would be emulated along gendered lines. In particular, race was not a category which would come to exist parallel with gender, but was one which would intersect with it in many varying ways. Of interest here was that the intersection of gender and race would come to marginalize indigenous subjects further and reduce women and others further below men. Indeed, even British feminists would use this intersection to their advantage, as the extremely oppressed status of Hindu women came to be an oft repeated call for both imperialist intervention as well

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<sup>8</sup> Kapila, Shruti. "Race Matters: Orientalism and Religion, India and Beyond C. 1770–1880." *Modern Asian Studies* 41.03 (2007): 471.511-513.

as a launching point for feminist ventures at home.<sup>9</sup> Hindu and Muslim women would become a rallying cry for intervention and imperial dominance, a move which would undermine their position in their society, thus reinforcing gender oppression. However, at the same time, Hindu and Muslim men would be characterized as uncivilized animals who would oppress and cage women, as in the English argument that Indian men would entrap English women in the *harem* during the debate over the Ilbert Bill which allowed Indian judges to rule over the English settlers,<sup>10</sup> and thus gender would reinforce race.

This would manifest in the eventual entrenchment of male superiority over other genders. However, as these cultures met and changed the other, alternative gender identities would lose their position within Hindu culture to favor the binary gender system of the West, so instead it may be more accurate to say that it resulted in the entrenchment of male superiority over women alone, as other genders would be pathologized and marginalized. Since race served as another axis to oppress others, women of color, in this case Egyptian and Indian women as broad as those categories are, would be further oppressed and exploited, particularly by the West.

Since imperialism was an exploitive relationship in many ways, race came to be an exploitive category along with gender. Once again, this exploitive relationship was patriarchal as the ruler state would be father to the subject, both in guiding the subject

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<sup>9</sup> Burton, Antoinette M. "The White Woman's Burden: British Feminists and 'The Indian Woman,' 1865-1915." *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*. By Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992. 147-148.

<sup>10</sup> Sinha, Mrinalini. "Reconfiguring Hierarchies: The Ilbert Bill Controversy, 1883-84." Lewis, Reina, and Sara Mills. *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2003: 444.

and in ruling over the subject. Race would reinforce this relationship as would gender, with the result being an enforced patriarchy within each culture, but particularly in the subject state.

## Chapter 2: Pre-Colonial Gender Systems

Prior to the arrival of European colonialism and imperialism, both India and the Egypt had established patriarchal gender systems, each influenced by the religions and traditions which took hold in their respective areas. First addressed is the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, where Islam rapidly took hold in the seventh and eighth centuries. Afterwards, India shall be addressed, where several traditions existed in a fluid religious culture whose limits were only defined on the eve of colonization. Two major ones which shall be addressed are Hinduism, and Buddhism.

In this broad survey, the historical context of gender will be introduced, providing a background to place the changes which were undergone during the colonial period. With the later emergence of nationalisms, which often called back to the mythic past to establish both legitimacy and the culture which existed outside of colonialism, the position of gender in the pre-colonial period will become important. This is especially true given how nationalisms used the past to further a political agenda, and thus were not particularly careful about historical accuracy.

### **Islam**

As with Christianity in the West, Islam had a profound effect on gender relations within the Middle East. As it was created in the midst of a geographical area with many competing and fluid traditions and religions, including Christianity, it was in many ways a response to these systems. However this occurred, its scripture speaks of the egalitarian

nature of spirituality, and how any person, man or woman<sup>11</sup> could become close to God, and that each soul was equal in the eyes of God. However, despite the scriptural/spiritual equality professed, the practices of Muhammad himself and the “practical” voice of the Qur’an were oftentimes patriarchal. These, and the other legalistic prescriptions present in his teachings were embraced by the Islamic orthodoxy, to the exception of the spiritual equality present in the Qur’an.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, though it could be argued that many of the practices of Muhammad were practices meant for the time period in which Muhammad lived, often evidenced by the fact that he limited polygamous marriages to having only four wives, a prescription seen as a step towards monogamy as polygamy was widespread in the Arabian peninsula, patriarchal law and culture quickly took hold in Islamic society, However, this did not mean that women were now trapped in a severely misogynistic tradition, nor that men held ultimate power over their lives. In many ways, Islam was a progressive religion in terms of its treatment of women, as it mandated some inheritance, fair treatment by husbands, allowed female ownership of property, and a woman’s right to divorce. Depending on the interpretation, the prescription that co-wives be treated equally and that a husband must be able to support each one completely made the ability to have more

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<sup>11</sup> Islamic society was strictly gender binarist and sex essentialist, drawing a stark line between men and women biologically; see: Sanders, Paula. "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law." *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*. By Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991. 74-95.

<sup>12</sup> Ahmed, Leila. "Early Islam and the Position of Women: The Problem of Interpretation." *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*. By Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991. 59.

than one wife ethically impossible,<sup>13</sup> thus rendering polygamy effectively undone, and the allowance of polygamy implicitly impossible.

Also, given an emphasis on being able to read and recite the Qur'an, education was also within reach of a good number of women, whether formally or informally. It was much more common for women to be educated informally, often by attending lectures and classes without formally being part of them. Though there were periods of disapproval of this practice in certain parts of the Middle East throughout the pre-colonial period, education was often emphasized as being important to any Muslim, including women<sup>14</sup>, an aspect which would become an important point during the colonial period.

Gender in Islam, then, was often progressive in many ways in terms of gender equality, even if it was strictly patrilineal and patriarchal in practice. While women did have many opportunities, in terms of formal education and property ownership for the upper classes, in terms of opportunities outside the home for the lower classes, men still held immense power over women. While different schools of thought varied in terms of the extent of that control, it was evident that men had the lion's share of power. This can be represented strongly in the seclusion of women in the *harem*, where women were restricted to a life outside of the public sphere. While this was generally practiced by the upper classes, as women in the lower classes had to work to support their families, its existence starkly reduced the possibilities for women, at least in theory. It is debateable

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>14</sup> Lindsay, James E. *Daily Life in the Medieval Islamic World*. Greenwood Publishing Group. 2005. 196-198,



whether or not the *harem* was inherently or completely oppressive, but that is outside the scope of this paper due to the vast considerations for such a debate. Needless to say, Islam was not straightforwardly oppressive as it was conceived in the Western gaze.

It would be a mistake to paint Islamic culture as being purely patriarchal and misogynistic, as much as it would be to argue that it was entirely liberating for women. While its legal prescriptions largely ignored the spiritual equality professed in the Qur'an, daily life often operated outside of even these prescriptions. Even if women were legally discouraged from leaving the home unaccompanied, this did not stop lower class women from having jobs outside of the home. Women were often benefactors to mosques, and even within the *harem*, could exercise immense political control over the Ottoman Sultan. Often, the mother of the Sultan was said to be the true person in power, despite not being the public head of state.<sup>15</sup>

Islam was created within a context which was often patriarchal, and it responded to that particular context. The status of women within it would later become both a rallying cry for Egyptians as much as a tool against it. Aspects such as the veil and seclusion have been contested to have had an effect on the status of women, while inheritance laws and property rights expanded opportunities, especially as other cultures came against women owning property. When examining the cases of Hinduism and Buddhism, this complexity is important to keep in mind, especially as each tradition had

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<sup>15</sup>See Peirce, Leslie P. *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.

regional and local variations. However, women were almost universally<sup>16</sup> held to be lesser than men, and lacked power in most instances.

## India

The Indian subcontinent prior to the era of colonization was home to many different influences, power structures, and traditions. Among these were Hinduism and Buddhism, two religious traditions which predate Islam, another major tradition which played an increasing role in Indian culture. However, while Islam was and is a religion in the Western sense, where one identifies as a Muslim actively (exemplified by the first pillar of Islam, *Shahadah* where a follower exclusively believes in Allah), Hinduism and Buddhism were part of a fluid tradition where identity came culturally and ethnically, not religiously. Prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries during the early colonial period, Hinduism was not even described as a separate and all-encompassing tradition. An individual may use aspects of any of the traditions in India, yet these traditions can be addressed separately as each dictated disparate gender relations.

### *Hinduism*

Within Hinduism there exist several intersecting and overlapping textual and oral traditions, including the *Shruti*, such as the *Vedas*, *Smrti* such as the *Law of Manu* and the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and the *Puranas* which were the stories around certain gods or goddesses. As much as different schools and traditions often recognized the legitimacy

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<sup>16</sup> As with any historical document, making universal claims would create difficulties as there may have been women, such as Khadija, Muhammad's first wife, who were held in higher esteem than ordinary men.

of the Vedas and other Sanskrit texts, they often did not hold to them in practice. Unlike Abrahamic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, “sacred texts” did not hold as much weight in Hindu tradition, and many devotees did not read the “classics.” Also important to understand in Hinduism is the separation between castes, which were more rigid class structures headed and dictated by the Brahmin, the upper-caste priests who conducted the rituals which were to preserve the order of the universe.

Brahmin-centered traditions were decidedly patriarchal and androcentric, where women were utterly subjugated to the rule of men, and had to follow the various rites and prescriptions offered by their husbands. However, it would be a misnomer to completely disempower women under this system, as women had held political and religious power throughout the history of the Indian subcontinent, though to a much lesser extent. In addition, it can be shown that women possessed property, as they often contributed to temples and monasteries, comprising at least 10% of that patronage.<sup>17</sup> In general, though, as with many other gender systems, women held much less power than men who held the majority of the power.

However, there were strains of equality present, such as within the various tantric traditions which emerged, often professing equality between men and women. These tantric traditions often subverted the dominant brahmanical traditions<sup>18</sup> and while most

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<sup>17</sup> Orr, Leslie. “Women’s Wealth and Worship: Female Patronage of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism in Medieval Tamilnadu.” Bose, Mandakranta. *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000: 127,

<sup>18</sup> While the brahmin priesthood dominated political life and formal religious life, most religious (as much as this may be a flawed word to apply to even contemporary Hinduism) practice was done by lower caste individuals whose practices existed outside brahmin-traditions.

*Vedic* texts positioned gods far above goddesses, as goddesses were often only depicted as being the wives of the gods. For example, in many tantric traditions, the Goddess is the ultimate power in the universe, choosing to manifest as a woman despite the ability to appear however they like.<sup>19</sup>

In the general Hindu practice, though, goddesses were often the focus of worship, showing at least a recognition of female power, though this was often seen as devotion towards the motherhood of the goddess. This was true for such a powerful, violent, and often blood-thirsty goddess as Kali, who was worshipped for her protective capacity of a mother. As such, it can be argued that despite being worshipped, femininity and women were still seen to be mothers first and foremost.<sup>20</sup>

However, beyond these general aspects of gender which held that men were often superior to women, both in practice as within the texts and beliefs themselves, there were strains which defied Western conceptions of gender. Among these was the *hijra*, a non-binary (or third) gender category and community concentrated in Northern India in which male-assigned and intersex people could become a part of through ritual initiation involving castration. The *hijra* were considered a completely separate gender category from male and female, identifying as “neither man nor woman,” “being born as men but

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<sup>19</sup> Brown, C. M. “The Tantric and Vedantic Identity of the Great Goddess in the Devi Gita of the Devi-Bhagavata Purana.” *Seeking Mahadevi: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess*. Ed: Pintchman, Tracy. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001: 19-36.

<sup>20</sup> Menon, Usha. “Mahadevi as Mother: The Oriya Hindu Vision of Reality.” *Seeking Mahadevi: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess*. Ed: Pintchman, Tracy. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001: 37-54.

not men,” and “separate.”<sup>21</sup> They conduct rituals, often performing at functions which represent the transitions of life, including births and weddings, where they confer fertility and prosperity (or potentially curse a child or couple with infertility/impotence).<sup>22</sup>

Here, then, was a gender system which was not binary, though it is important to keep in mind that, at least recently, the *hijras* have been marginalized by society. But the existence of an institutionalized third/non-binary gender on level with the categories of male and female speaks to the differences which abound within various societies and traditions. *Hijras* were predominantly a Hindu people, but were often present in Muslim communities, among others. This would serve as a later point of contention when Western imperialism arrived.

### *Buddhism*

Though this paper focuses on Indian Hindu and Egyptian Muslim gender systems in relation to colonialism under the British Empire, establishing that there existed and still exist separate conceptions of gender within the influence of the British Empire is important. Since Western views of gender hold it to be essential and biologically determined, gender systems which reject this are important to examine. Particularly, Buddhism reveals the possibility for there to be a gender system which is not foundationally patriarchal and androcentric.

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<sup>21</sup> Nanda, Serena. “The Hijras of India: Cultural and Individual Dimensions of an Institutionalized Third Gender Role.” *Ritual and Belief: Readings in the Anthropology of Religion*. Ed. David Hick. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002: 360.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

Another tradition which emerged in India was Buddhism, a tradition which is like Hinduism in that while it has sacred texts, these texts do not form the foundation of the tradition. As with Hinduism, there existed many different schools and strains of thought, though Buddhism can be seen as being radically different in its conceptions of the purpose of devotion. While gods and goddesses are the center of several Buddhist schools, several do not focus on them, especially those within the monasteries.

Central to most Buddhist thought is the conception that one must rid oneself of the suffering, or *dukkha*<sup>23</sup>, caused by “craving” and the desire for things to be permanent in the face of impermanence. In addition to this concept of *dukkha* is the idea that there is no permanent self, and as such, no inner essence of people. Human beings are then formed by experiences and social conditioning, much like how gender is constructed in society. A Buddhist would then seek to cease *dukkha* through pursuing the eightfold path, eventually understanding and accepting impermanence.

One consequence of this idea is that one must remove the permanent categories people assign to the impermanence, including that of gender. Ideally, one accepts the concept of “emptiness,” where everything is empty of any inherent essence. Since people have no inherent essence, concepts like gender break down and cannot exist. Thus, Buddhism presents an egalitarian discourse since any idea that women are beneath men, or even that there are such concepts as “man” and “woman,” was constructed upon people and is not essential to anyone. In fact, in the effort to cease experiencing *dukkha*,

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<sup>23</sup> Suffering is not a perfect translation of *Dukkha* since it could also mean such concepts as anxiety or uncertainty

one would have to become androgynous, as the concept of being exclusively “masculine” or “feminine” would undermine the eightfold path.<sup>24</sup>

While this may have been the ideal in its inception and early in its history, most likely in an effort to legitimize itself and eventually gain patronage of state entities, a kind of institutionalized androcentrism and even misogyny emerged, resulting in the explicit rejection of this androgyny. This would result, for example, in nuns having to submit themselves to the supervision of monks, an explicitly patriarchal idea.<sup>25</sup> Thus, despite a discourse and core tenets which suggest the elimination of rule and categories like gender, in practice men still assumed a position higher than that of women.

Buddhism in many ways offered a discourse of egalitarianism, even presenting the possibility of a post-gender society, since gender was one of the many permanent categories causing *dukkha*. While this possibility still exists, and is being taken up by contemporary Buddhists, such as in the Sakyadhita movement, which is a Buddhist-centered women’s activist movement, Buddhism has become another tradition which had come to reinforce gender norms. Yet the presence of almost *de jure* egalitarianism and androgyny presents the possibility of undoing the harm caused by gender as a category.

Both Hinduism and Buddhism were created and exist within a culture which was androcentric, yet both presented the possibility of alternatives to androcentrism.

Hinduism’s non-binary genders and its presence of female goddesses, Buddhism’s

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<sup>24</sup> Sponberg, Alan. "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism." *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. By José Ignacio Cabezón. Albany, NY: State U of New York, 199. 8-13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

egalitarianism and implicit rejection of categories such as gender each created contexts within India which would come to interact with the arrival of direct Western intervention. These pre-colonial systems would continue to exist after colonialism, but would forever be altered.



# Chapter 3: Transitions and the Post-Colonial Period

Prior to the coming of the British Empire in India in 1858 and Egypt in 1882, both India and Egypt were under rule from various imperial forces immediately prior to Western imperialism. In India, this included the Mughal Empire which ruled the north of India from about the 1500s until the coming of the British Raj. In Egypt, this included the Ottoman Empire, which ruled it for about the same period. Uniquely for Egypt, it was ruled semi-autonomously by the Mamluks for much of this period, though they too were outside Turkish or Balkan rulers.

The British Raj in India was established after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, following the dissolution and absorption of the East India Company. The British occupation and resulting Veiled Protectorate came about in Egypt in 1882 at the invitation of the Khedive Tewfiq, a position similar to viceroy or ruler, who requested English military intervention to quell dissent as a result of internal troubles caused by the massive debts Egypt had accumulated. The difference between these two colonial occupations was that the British Raj was explicit rule over India by the British, whereas the Veiled Protectorate was more of a puppet state of England, where the Khedive had superficial control, but real control was held by such figures as Lord Cromer.

With the establishment of when and how the British came to intervene in these two areas, some of the specific ways in which gender and race came to interact with the states in their interactions can be examined.

## **Egypt**

As Middle Eastern states fell behind the technological progress of Europe, they sought to modernize according to European standards, which included not only technology but also culture. This brought a spotlight on women, as women came to represent the culture of such a Middle Eastern state as Egypt, a view compounded with the coming of colonialism by European powers. The spotlight was cast once again, with anti-colonialist parties focusing their efforts on the restoration of “tradition,” resisting Europeanizing influences by framing it within a need to resist all things European. In each of these cases, the state of women was fundamentally altered as their status was tied within the debate of the East versus the West, a situation which worked against the emerging feminists who sought to improve the status of women.

Despite centuries of flourishing civilizations, Middle Eastern peoples were beginning to be overshadowed by European powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who developed capitalism and modern warfare, and began to dominate various parts of the world. In Egypt, this domination was dramatized with Napoleon’s invasion in 1798, who introduced the first strains of Westernization to Middle Eastern states. During the brief period that Napoleon occupied Egypt, he introduced Western treatment of

women, including unveiling,<sup>26</sup> which received backlash once Napoleon left Egypt. Napoleon saw the supposed depraved status of women as proof of the need to bring the Enlightenment outside of Europe.

This served as direct proof of the need for Middle Eastern states to modernize to prevent European domination economically and militarily. This modernization was thought to also require adopting the culture of the Europeans, a process which became known as Westernization. Muhammad Ali of Egypt in the early 1800s became one of the first rulers, after Sultan Salim III of the Ottoman Empire, to initiate widespread Westernizing reforms, including modernizing the army and establishing Western-like industries to help make Egypt more independent.<sup>27</sup> However, along with these more technical reforms, he also began to adopt Western views of women, especially the view that women should be educated like men. One of his school director's, Rifa'ah Rafi' al-Tahwati argued for this need as he was "impressed by women's important contribution to the progress of civilization in modern societies," modern here meaning European.<sup>28</sup> Westernizing then became a process of bringing not only technology and the military up to European standards, but culture and women as well.

During the times of Westernization, particularly prior to direct colonialism by European powers, intellectuals and rulers stressed the importance of Westernizing, and

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<sup>26</sup> Keddie, Nikki R, *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 61.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

<sup>28</sup> al-Tahwati as cited in Ahmed, Leila, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 134.

repeated the often racist and Orientalist views of Europeans about Middle Easterners. Due to the increasing technological and military inferiority of Middle Eastern powers, there was a “conviction that countries could advance only if they totally Westernized. The ills of Muslim women and the correctness of Western gender relations were standard themes of colonial ideology”<sup>29</sup> Women became a focus of Westernization, as they became intricately tied in with culture. With negative perceptions of Muslim women and culture abounding, in addition to adopting Western culture, Middle Eastern powers adopted Western feminism.

This development had severe ramifications with the coming of colonialism by the French and the British in the mid to late nineteenth century. It was with colonial domination that there arose the “reorganized narrative, with its new focus on women... created out of a coalescence between the old narrative of Islam... and the broad, all-purpose narrative of colonial domination regarding the inferiority, in relation to the European culture, of all Other cultures and societies.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the supposedly oppressive nature of Islam towards women became a focus of this narrative of inferiority, a narrative which held the Veil as its symbolic object of oppression.<sup>31</sup> Colonial governments then began to call for unveiling in order to liberate and Westernize the women of the Middle East.

Here, then, would be a representation of racism intertwining with concepts of

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<sup>29</sup> Keddie, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Ahmed, 150.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 152.

gender. The symbolic Veil would shroud women from their own oppression and close them off from the world, according to the British and modernizing Egyptians. The act of unveiling became an act which was symbolically meant to free women, but it also served to separate an individual women from their own culture. The symbolic Veil, then, was the separation between the civilized and uncivilized. Islam was the uncivilized, the West civilized, and by removing the Veil, women would be freed from the supposedly oppressive and uncivilized Islam. Muslim women were seen as being somehow inherently more oppressed than Western women.

The language which the British used in Egypt when calling for the liberation of Egyptian women was appropriated from Western feminist movements, tying feminism in with colonialism. However, the supposedly feminist colonial governments were often composed of people who aligned themselves with anti-feminism. For example, Lord Cromer himself, the leader of the British colonial government in Egypt, was also “founding member and sometime president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage”<sup>32</sup> back in England. Despite often opposing feminism in the West, colonial governments used feminism as a tool to justify both the inferiority of Muslims and why the Europeans had to colonize and civilize them. Women became the justification for colonization, as their status was tied in with the larger ‘inferior’ culture. Thus, the colonial spotlight was cast upon women with severe ramifications for the emergence of Egyptian feminists in the twentieth century.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 153.

As the British were asserting a fundamental superiority over Egyptians, they were creating the conditions for the inferiorization of Egypt. A stark example of this was in depictions of supposedly inferior Egyptians in contrast with ordered and civilized Europeans within colonial Cairo, as discussed by Timothy Mitchell.<sup>33</sup> As shown with the modernizers above, Egyptians were already beginning to internalize that their culture was inferior to the West. This would soon manifest among feminists, especially those who would unveil, who would feel that their own culture was inherently more oppressive than the West's, and that the West was a model for the world. Not every colonized person objects to colonial rule since those mentioned here would see such colonial rule, at least on an ideological level, as the West was seen as working to lift up the Middle East. In addition, by characterizing Islam as being more patriarchal than it was, those living and especially growing up under this supposition would apply more sexism and oppressiveness to Islam than is justified. This would come to distort the message of nationalists, especially those sympathetic to the West, as their version of Islam would be more patriarchal than others.

When nationalism began to arise, and resistance against colonial rule grew, feminists had to traverse a careful line. Given how women became tied to questions of culture, women became tied into the debate about the East versus the West, and

“to a considerable extent, overtly or covertly, inadvertently or otherwise, discussions of women in Islam in academics and outside them... continue either to reinscribe the Western narrative of Islam as oppressor and the West as liberator... or, conversely, to reinscribe the contentions of the Arabic narrative of

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<sup>33</sup> Mitchell, Timothy. *Colonizing Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991: 184.

resistance as to the essentials of preserving Muslim customs.”<sup>34</sup>

To challenge the traditions regarding women meant challenging Muslim culture, something which compromise feminist positions, especially among nationalists. This split feminists into three camps which worked around this issue: the secularists who wished to restrict religion to private life, the Islamists who sought to work within an Islamic framework, and those who sought an Islamic revival and return to a pure Islam.<sup>35</sup>

However, they faced more than just the patriarchal culture of Islam as it was prior to colonization. Since imperial rule was a patriarchal relationship itself, especially as the British characterized themselves as a kind of father to Egypt, the gender dynamics of Egypt would be altered as patriarchy would be reinforced. Since many Muslims would come to internalize their own inferiority as prescribed by race science and their own subject status, Egypt would come to be more patriarchal than before. For example, the lawyer Qasim Amin, purported to be an early Egyptian feminist, argued that Egyptian women were backwards at the time and had to become more Western in order to become equals to men in the service of Egyptian nationalism.<sup>36</sup> A competing and more powerful patriarchy of the West would undermine and attempt to replace the patriarchy of Egypt, eventually resulting in a stronger patriarchy once independence was gained.

Perhaps in response to the colonial spotlight, Egyptian feminists often focused not

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>35</sup> Baron, Beth, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994: 121.

<sup>36</sup> Ahmed, Leila, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

upon women's liberation within a Western framework, i.e. having the same rights as men, but upon improving the situation of women within their traditional roles. Since this was a delicate time, as many resisted colonialism and sought independence and vilifying the West in the process, feminists had to be careful with what they were arguing for. By focusing on raising the status of women within the family, and "by emphasizing the complementary nature of gender roles and a gender division of labor, women did not threaten men, who already felt challenged by foreign competition,"<sup>37</sup> preventing critiques that feminists were attacking culture or adopting Western ideas. For those who wished for a return to Islamic values, they often looked to original Islam, the state of Khadija and Muhammad, idealizing the past in the hope that they could recreate it in the present, and avoid the question of colonialism completely.<sup>38</sup>

Given that women are considered the spiritual equals of men in the Qur'an, feminists emphasized the so-called spiritual voice of Islam over its practical voice. Many emphasized that many of the more oppressive aspects of Islam, such as polygamy, were practical conditions from the early times of Islam, and not "the Quranic ideal."<sup>39</sup> In a way, this frame avoided the pitfalls of other feminist frames of reference, as it removes the question of women's liberation or rights from colonialism, and thus existed outside the colonial spotlight. However, as much as this view could be seen as existing outside the colonial conditions of the day, and thus outside the ties between women, culture, and

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

<sup>39</sup> Ahmed, 140.



independence, their views still challenged traditional culture especially given the public and political involvement of these feminists. In addition, these views still existed within the colonial context, affecting their reception. Despite these challenges, women were able to make inroads in education, family law, and rights during and after the struggle for independence.

The colonial spotlight focused upon women as a way to justify colonial rule, and this spotlight was maintained on women as Egyptians reacted against colonialism. As such, women's liberation, or their "awakening," was intricately tied into larger questions of culture, colonization, and independence. This situation would impede their progress as women had to balance the demands of their anti-colonialist audience as well as their needs to seek advancement. By positioning their quest for rights within the very roots of Islam, they could frame it outside of Western feminism, and thus Western colonialism, theoretically saving their cause. By sidestepping the source of the colonial spotlight, Egyptian could liberate themselves both from a sexist patriarchy and Western intrusion.

## **India**

Much like in Egypt, nationalism came to both dominate and vilify feminism, and thus work against and even undo gains which women and their advocates had fought for throughout the history of Hindu women's movements. Like in Egypt, feminist and civilizing efforts were used by the British to justify their rule well into independence. As a result, these Western efforts, even if headed by Indian advocates, tainted the gender system of India.

As with Egypt, the British approached their Indian subjects under the influence of racism. The legislation and rule which would emerge under colonization would be characteristic of a society which viewed the one it ruled as being somehow inherently more oppressive and uncivilized than the West. The enforcement of these moralistic acts would demonstrate the implicit racism present in British rule which deemed aspects of Indian and Hindu culture as being both incompatible with British values and uncivilized.

Such acts as the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829, Criminal Tribes Acts of 1871 and onwards, and Age of Consent Act of 1891 interfered directly in the gender systems of India. The beginnings of the Indian woman's movements can be traced to the debates around the Age of Consent Act, where Indian women educated in England argued against its implementation and purpose. Cornelia Sorabji, an English educated Hindu woman during this time wrote an essay called "Stray Thoughts of an Indian Girl" which outlined the specific objections to the law, and provide interesting insights into the debate from the perspective of an Indian woman educated in England, and thus thankful for the opportunities it provided, yet resistant to imperialist overtones present in the law.<sup>40</sup>

Sorabji argued that while the efforts by the British to address the issue of child marriage were noble, it was approached in an overly imperialistic way, as it attempted to impose British gender values on Indian society. She argued that "India is the home of old traditions and long-founded beliefs, and we cannot ruthlessly raze the ancient structures

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<sup>40</sup> Full text available: Burton, Antionette. "'Stray Thoughts of an Indian Girl' by Cornelia Sorabji, The Nineteenth Century, October 1891." Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. *Feminism in India*. London: Zed, 2005: 94-102.

to its foundations. This is what many well-meaning reformers would do,<sup>41</sup> summarizing the main issue these laws raised. Sorabji even goes so far to point out the hypocrisy of the British saying, “how can law allow the Hindoo [sic] religion to be right for Hindoos and at the same time forbid what it enacts?”<sup>42</sup>

More broadly, these laws, particularly the Bengal Sati Regulation and Age of Consent Act (as well as the Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act of 1856) served to implement British values on Indian society, without much regard for the Indian context or Hindu peoples. While there were supporters of each measure in India, there was also much opposition both from conservative and liberal voices. Sorabji once again argued the issue of the British removal of context by saying that “the liberty of English girls is constantly being quoted in comparison with the infant-marriages of Indian children; but you might as well start a mission to clothe the children of tropical regions in *furs* [emphasis original], because English children suffer from the severity of a northern winter.”<sup>43</sup>

As the Indian nationalist movement grew into the twentieth century, women’s movements gained traction and recognition as they were absorbed into the larger nationalist movement. This may seem to counter what happened in Egypt and the Middle East, but this inclusion was often paternalistic and sexist, often valuing women below men. One organization which was founded during this period was the All India Women’s

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 98.

Conference, founded in 1927, and it professed many of these same views which spoke for women's liberation yet often professed sexist views which agreed with the wider androcentric culture. For example, when passing a resolution stressing the importance of female education, which was thought to be the key to improving the position of women, they emphasized the importance of "teaching in the ideals of motherhood." This was despite an effort made to remove this section "unless the teaching in the ideal of fatherhood were also included."<sup>44</sup> Thus, there was a discourse in which some women recognized the need to upset the dominate culture which dictated that women could only be wives.

Nationalists eventually came to be divided into Hindu and Muslim camps, an issue which would become more and more contentious as they approached independence. However, this resulted in a discourse which emphasized Hindu ideals, often in an orthodox Brahmanic light appealing to the canonical texts which were often not a feature in the majority of Hindu devotion. One particular figure, Sita, from the *Ramayana*, was idealized as the ideal woman throughout Indian history, yet she can be seen as an increasingly powerless figure, submitting to Rama's will and trials.<sup>45</sup> Nationalists referenced her as a model for women during the later stages of the independence movement, though they did reframe her as being a powerful actor, not bending to Rama's

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<sup>44</sup> Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. "The Indian Women's Movement." Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. *Feminism in India*. London: Zed, 2005:119.

<sup>45</sup> Hess, Linda. "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67.1 (1999): 1-32.

husbandly will.<sup>46</sup> However, her character was seen by many as being anti-woman, as she was still defined solely as a mother, and still passive and accepting even in defiance. Thus, nationalists called upon an image of Hindu womanhood which at surface level seems powerful and strong, yet still submits to the will of men.

Though it could be seen that women held those views themselves, having internalized them through the dominant gender culture, the presence of voices which disagreed with the wider culture of androcentrism showed that some women were aware of the issues with the culture they resided in. This could be due to ideas from Western feminism as well, though it would be difficult to establish the source of these thoughts, as various strains influenced each woman engaged in this political activism at the time. Regardless, it was clear that women's activists moved carefully with their positions, as Sarojini Naidu, as President of the Indian National Congress, clarified that female enfranchisement would not upset the gendered order, as "we realise that men and women have separate goals and separate destinies."<sup>47</sup>

Thus, women were in a delicate position, even if the Indian nationalist movement said to embrace women's rights as it neared independence, to the effect that gender equality was enshrined in resolutions by the various nationalist congresses at least as far back as the Karachi Congress Resolution of 1931, which specified "No disability in employment or trade or profession on account of religion, caste, or sex" and full adult

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<sup>46</sup> Kishwar, M. "Gandhi on Women." *Race & Class* 28, no. 1 (12, 1986): 43.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

suffrage.<sup>48</sup> As a result, women's activists had to be careful to not assert that women were above men (an issue even contemporary feminists grapple with) and that they were not repeating Western ideas. As a result, certain particularly negative images of women were carried over as the struggle for national independence took over the pressure for women's rights. Once independence was gained, women's issues, while enshrined in the constitution, were relatively forgotten until the 1960s and onwards, revealing the actually priority they had for the independence leaders.<sup>49</sup>

Sorabji herself, some decades prior to the fusion of nationalism and feminism in India shown above, held that Indian society was still far behind Western society in many senses, and felt (at least in print) that imperialism was a good for Indian society, and even women. She expressed that "thankful indeed ought the East to be (and it is) for the civilization and culture that the West brings it,"<sup>50</sup> yet she was critical of the imperialists while expressing thanks for it. During Sorabji's time, her main audience was the imperialists in England at the time debating the bill, so direct criticism of the system itself would have been counterproductive. Much in the same way, women in the nationalist women's movements were careful not to upset the men who would potentially secure their rights come independence.

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<sup>48</sup> "What Swaraj will Include Karachi Congress Resolution, 1931." Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. *Feminism in India*. London: Zed, 2005: 134.

<sup>49</sup> Sen, Ilina. "Women's Politics in India." Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. *Feminism in India*. London: Zed, 2005: 188.

<sup>50</sup> Burton and Sorabji., 100.

This would serve to become counterproductive, however, as each person had to work within the framework of the male nationalists or imperialists, despite the fact that their patriarchal ideas of male superiority (or colonial superiority) worked against them. This was not to fault them, since working outside of the dominant discourse would have left them powerless to make change since it would not have been recognized by those movements. The fact that they were able to not only secure formal rights<sup>51</sup> but to also secure endorsement by such leaders as Gandhi himself, who mobilized women as well as men in his civil disobedience campaign,<sup>52</sup> and to have sexual equality enshrined in many of the resolutions passed by the various nationalist congresses and groups, showed either the progress gained by this strategy, but also possibly the increased legitimacy and power of promising women rights and equality, even if the discourse of equality was itself divisive, sexist, and patriarchal.

Regardless of this accomplishment, the remnants of colonialism and the inertia of patriarchy served to shade the lived conditions of women and other people into post-independence India. As stated in Chapter 3, while the Criminal Tribes Acts of 1871 was modified and repealed by the new independent state, it still had dealt severe damage to the *hijra*, destroying their legitimacy as a non-binary gender group. For example, they have not been enumerated by the census despite constituting a separate gender category,

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<sup>51</sup> Even if those rights would not prevent the issues which continue to plague Indian women today as the promises of the Constitution were difficult to fulfill and are still being worked on.

<sup>52</sup> Kishwar: 43.

showing that they have lost recognition and have been stigmatized in the wider culture.<sup>53</sup> While it could be argued that they have faced marginalization in the past, the amount that the *hijras* have faced after the passing of the Criminal Tribes Act was severe, as many have been forced to rely on sex work to make a living, despite the foundation of their tradition being founded on asexuality.<sup>54</sup>

On a related note, as a remnant of colonial law, Section 377 of the penal code, created in the 19th century by the British, still remains on the books. This law outlawed homosexuality, and with a society which would view *hijras* as being male, by often having exclusively male clients, they would be committing this illegal homosexuality. As shown above, homosexuality was not endorsed directly by Buddhists and other communities, but it was not stigmatized to the point of criminalization, however. As such, the Hindu gender system of India has been altered by its interaction with an imperializing state which did attempt to implement its gender values and systems on it subject state.

Overall, then, women's rights advocates and feminists had to deal with the nationalist movements which were often anti-Western and thus potentially anti-feminist. While the gender system which emerged out of Hinduism was heavily androcentric and patriarchal, it did not necessarily reflect the status of women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as put forward by nationalists. While nationalists would eventually

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<sup>53</sup> Nanda, Serena. "The Hijras of India: Cultural and Individual Dimensions of an Institutionalized Third Gender Role." *Ritual and Belief: Readings in the Anthropology of Religion*. Ed. David Hick. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002: 359.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 365-366.



‘recall’ the true and untainted-by-imperialism Hindu woman in their rhetoric, this rhetoric was still influenced by the imperial culture which interacted with the Hindu Indian context. While the gender system was not entirely binary prior to its interaction with British colonialism, as the *hijra* were viewed as a legitimate non-binary gender, by the time that India emerged from direct imperialism they had become effectively binary.

While Hindu women certainly may have made gains through imperialism, as the direct efforts to ban such practices as *sati*, child marriage, and the prevention of widow remarriage were seen by women as positives, even if Sorabji and others viewed the method as flawed, their status became cemented in a mythic past which the nationalists evoked. In the struggle against imperialism, and the movement to independence, certain perspectives were pushed away in order to focus on the struggle for independence. As with Egyptian feminists, the delicate balancing act which Indian feminists had to perform would win ideological battles yet confound lived realities.

## Chapter 4: Analysis and Conclusions

### Comparative Analysis

These two disparate areas with differing contexts both present similar reactions to the rule of British imperialism with regards to gender. Egypt and India both had different experiences with colonialism, one experiencing it for a briefer period (Egypt), the other becoming the supposed crown jewel of the British Empire, yet both saw drastic alterations to their own domestic gender systems. It was impossible for any society to emerge unscathed, even England itself, which came to position itself as superior to its subjects.

Yet the most peculiar aspect of each subjects' interaction with British imperialism was how indigenous feminists in each area were adversely affected in several ways in their attempts to raise the status of women in their society. Similarly with the diversity of nationalisms, feminisms from each state could appeal either to a kind of mythic, egalitarian past, or embrace Western or modern influences. Both approaches would be compromised by the influence of those same nationalisms, especially as each nationalist movement would focus on independence over women's liberation.

For those feminists who embraced modern or Western advancement as a key to liberation, they lost the most. As nationalists came to become prominently anti-Western, feminists who may have been nationalists themselves lost power and influence to change their status by virtue of becoming Western enough to garner criticism and even ostracism from the larger nationalist community. As with the "colonial spotlight" mentioned above, Western-leaning feminists would become targets due to the logic that Western things

were automatically negative things since Westerners were the ones oppressing their subjects and preventing independence.

This could be characteristic of a potential unintended effect of Western imperialism. Given that the ideal presented by the British was that they would lead the East out of its supposed darkness into the civilized West, they may have failed at their mission. From their perspective, their former subjects would rebel against their guidance and thus abandon their potential to become “civilized,” instead opting to return to their former “savagery.”

That may have been the effect, but that effect came about perhaps because of how the ideal of spreading civilization and “leading” the East was a false ideal. As shown above, the gender system of the metropolises was drastically different from that of the peripheries, at least in terms of power. Importantly, the goal of imperialists was to empower and strengthen the metropole, not the periphery. The ultimate goal of imperialism was to extract and relocate resources from the world. Like how in patriarchy women were exploited by men, the British Empire was ultimately exploitive to its subjects.

Each subject did make gains in their interactions with imperialism. As mentioned above, such examples as the banning of *sati* and the establishment of schools for girls would ultimately benefit women and probably the society they inhabited since freer, more educated women theoretically would mean a more prosperous state. Yet despite the gains caused by imperialism to both sides, the very nature of the power relationship would prove to create many more negatives.

What would be important to examine, however, was how each subject differed in their interaction with imperialism. In particular, what can be seen as a fundamental way in which imperialism and gender interact generally, and what was dependent on the context it occurred? While generalizing can be difficult and even problematic in any historical study, here it can illuminate how exactly modern gender systems came about due to the fact of imperialism.

One important difference each context had which affected how gender came to be affected were the major traditions of each area. Buddhism and Hinduism, for example, had a negligible presence in Egypt, whereas Islam was present and had an effect in India (though that is not examined in this paper). Since Islam can be characterized as a religion, but Hinduism and Buddhism are traditions which can only problematically be characterized as religions, different interactions resulted. As a result of this particular distinction, different forms of flexible interpretations result. For Hindus, this could mean looking outside of the textual tradition, if not rewriting it, or even looking at personal interpretation. This would allow a more expansive form of interpretation, especially since it could include traditions which were not explicitly Hindu. For Muslims, the number of outlets for new interpretations and meanings would be far less than was available for Hindus, but could be equally expansive. As Islam is a more textual religion than Hinduism, its interpretations would be found within and consider the Qur'an, thus allowing for outside influences.

In relation to imperialism, Hindu feminists could be flexible in their interpretations, especially due to the large presence of Goddess worship throughout the

subcontinent. Though Hindu nationalists would appeal to the Orthodox canon, the average Hindu would have been so far removed from these texts, especially given their impenetrability to someone who did not know Sanskrit. However, for Muslims, knowing and reading the source text, the *Qur'an* was a central tenet of the religion. This manifested in the ways in which gender systems changed over the colonial period because schooling for girls and women had not only a precedent but a need in Islam, but was a secondary concern for Hindus and even Buddhists. As such, arguing for female education in Egypt had compelling religious reasons which were lacking in most of India.

Another contrast between these two subjects was in the presence of the caste system in India, something which does not exist in Egypt. Gender roles for one particular caste would vary from one to the other, thus providing different expectations for different women. For example, in the debate about the Age of Consent in 1891, much controversy arose due to Orthodox and high-caste families objecting to the interference with their tradition. One such argument against it was made thus by Sir Romesh Chunder Mitter: “In Bengal proper the Orthodox Hindus are guided by the interpretations of the Shasters given in Rughu Nundun Bhattacharjæ’s *Ashtubinghastti Tuttos*... we must refer to this work to ascertain whether the proposed measure would or would not interfere with the religious rites and duties of the Hindus of certain castes.”<sup>55</sup> It would be a mistake to insist

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<sup>55</sup> India: Imperial Legislative Council. “Amendment of Indian Penal Code and Code of Criminal Procedure, 1882.” *Abstract of the Proceedings of the Council of the Governor-General of India Assembled for the Purpose of Making Laws and Regulations*. Office of the Superintendent of Government Print., India., 1892: 15.

that there was a universal experience for women as varying kinds of oppressions intersect with one another, so caste would provide an influence which did not exist in Egypt.

Also, beyond the presence of eunuchs, Egypt did not contain as strong a non-binary gender system as Hinduism and India did, so that was another category which would diverge in this comparison. However, given how the British made the *hijra* an illegal category in India under the Criminal Tribes Act, it would be clear that when the British rulers encountered a non-binary gender system, they felt the need to correct the subject's gender system to become binary. Since the *hijra* are still heavily stigmatized today, it is clear that this stigmatization had a profound effect on the nature of the Hindu gender system.

Here then were a series of differences which must be addressed in order to understand the similarities in the ways in which each gender system was altered through their respective experiences of imperialism. Possibly the most overarching of these effects was how feminists ultimately lost in their struggles, at least temporarily, due to how nationalists would come to associate feminine empowerment with a Western attack on culture. This was due in part to the presence of an overtly androcentric and patriarchal culture in each area, both for subject and ruler. When women and others were working to undo that system at the same time as nationalists were seeking to liberate their culture from imperialism, nationalists saw the attempt to raise women and others up as an attack on traditional culture. Though Western feminism may have helped in creating better situations for women among the peripheries, it also hurt in its imperialistic,

condescending, and racist overtones. This left fewer options for feminists, as they had to approach their movement as a movement to revive culture as opposed to reforming it.

In essence, this was due to the entrenchment of patriarchy which resulted from British imperialism. As the British gender system was both reacting to and altering both the Middle Eastern and Indian gender systems, it strengthened their respective patriarchal cultures. Western ideas of gender were introduced and adapted along with their traditional ideas of gender, yet both would come to distort the gender system which existed prior to Western intervention. As seen above, this resulted in a new gender system and culture being asserted as the traditional one, despite the ahistorical nature of that claim. A kind of mythic tradition was created in the minds of nationalists and others as their hybrid and new system of gender, which would involve less freedom for women in terms of their roles as their cultures had modernized and Westernized.

The placement of a culture which positioned itself as above the culture it ruled further lowered the already lower status of women along the hierarchy of power. Prior to colonialism and imperialism, these cultures did interact with many other cultures which may have asserted themselves as being superior, but not to the same extent nor with the same power as the British. Particularly, the British not only asserted their superiority, but also by extension their subject's inferiority. Racial dynamics and racism would come to be crucial in not only the justification for imperialist ventures, but also in their acceptance by their subjects. The idea that the British had an inherently superior and fairer culture compared to the supposedly savage culture of their subjects would come to influence each respective gender system. For the British, this meant that they could use feminism,

education initiatives, and other such movements to justify their intervention, as they were “spreading civilization.” Also, it meant that the women of each subject state could serve as the call for a cause to be raised in the metropole, effectively using those women and demeaning them, and by extension, their cultures. Muslim and Hindu women were seen collectively as being a part of exceedingly repressive cultures which required Western intervention to advance.

This inferiorization involved the crucial link of race and gender which was developed during British colonialism and imperialism. As discussed above, race was produced and developed as an ideology in order to justify imperialist rule. As the British produced a discourse of both race and gender in its justification of rule and intervention, as they had to spread civilization to the savage and save their women, it necessarily tied the two together. Much like how nationalists had associated the women with culture, race came to be associated with gender. This development would carry with it complex and far-reaching effects for both the British and their subjects.

With race being integrated into each gender system, white men and women were positioned at the top of their respective cultures. The cost was that Egyptian and Indian women would be placed at the bottom of a hierarchy of both race and gender, as they existed below white men and women as well as below the men from their race. This would result in further exploitation of these women by both white and non-white men. Along with this exploitation would come an increased inferiorization of these women with resulting negative effects. In effect, their sexism came to be felt stronger. However, race would come to alter each gender system profoundly in another significant way.



As shown during the periods of colonialism and imperialism, the subject women would be used to justify colonial intervention. Speaking more broadly, by incorporating race in both Western and non-Western gender systems, Western nations could use this justification to intervene in any culture which oppressed women. For white feminists, the rooting of their feminism in the white savior complex could backfire, as their struggles could be belittled in reference to the indigenous women they belittled. For non-white women, however, this would mean that attempts to improve their situation could be seen as colonialist or Western interventions, or possibly the infiltration of Western thought in their culture, and thus their improvement would be seen as an attack on culture.

Focusing more on race, the already demeaned status of their entire culture through imperialist and racist exploitation, as the metropole extracted from the periphery, would result in a further downtrodden womanhood. Regardless of the potential historical basis for traditions of female exploitation within Egyptian or Hindu Indian culture, the present cultures which grew out of this exploitation would entrench those sexist and androcentric traditions. As Western whiteness became the higher, best exemplified in the British-Indian gentleman who attempted to assimilate into British culture, those deemed inferior by this racism would come to internalize that inferiority to some degree. An example of this would be found in how the West was seen by many subjects as a source of progress and a model for their own culture.

Though nationalists would come to assert their own independent traditions, even mythologizing and asserting superiority, they did so cognizant of the inferiorization which imperialism created. This was especially true of nationalists and feminists who had

internalized inferiority and looked to the West as a source of inspiration. They held that their race was inferior and had much to learn from the West, as they had internalized that. This was not necessarily true of every member of each culture, and some even fought back against this ideology, but it became an aspect of the larger culture. As stated above, this would result in women being trapped within a combination of the two systems, both Western and Eastern. Imperialists relationships were not simply divided by gender, but were divided along racial lines as well. This relationship would reduce the overall status of Egyptian and Indian women as they would exist below three distinct categories of people as produced in this sexist-racist system.

In broader terms, a patriarchy of race would intersect with a patriarchy of gender. Since the patriarchy of race would hold white, Western culture to be striven towards, the gender system would come to emulate, though not match perfectly, the gender system of the West. As this was a binary system, a binary system was crudely applied from the West and gradually changed from the non-binary system of the subject by the subject itself. Non-binary genders and gender roles which opposed Western gender roles would be stigmatized and marginalized, yet could not be completely eliminated. The patriarchy of gender would be reinforced and entrenched as it was both rooted in a mythical past and strengthened by Western patriarchy. Race would come to intersect, strengthen, and transform the gender system of the Middle East and India.

## **Conclusion**

With white civilization presented as the apex of civilization, Western culture came to be the goal for progress. Instead of the potential for improvements in the

conditions of women and the elimination of sexism lying along multiple pathways, feminists were restricted to much fewer paths. Each of the feminist movements discussed above ended up having to either aim towards Western gender relations or aim towards an idealized and mythic past. During periods of increased nationalism, the former would prove ineffective as feminists would be demonized as working to further Western colonialism.

In terms of the gender systems of these cultures, women and others would lose the potential to organically advance themselves and undo sexism and androcentrism. Though they could work towards adopting a more Western gender system, this would necessarily involve undermining their own culture, such as Islamic women unveiling or the stigmatization of the *hijra*, and exchanging one sexist and androcentric culture for another. In addition, working in such a system acknowledged the inferiority Westerners asserted towards Indian and Egyptian women, as race came to be integrated in each gender system under the influence of British hegemony.

However, the pre-colonial and non-Western alternative gender systems which existed and still continue to exist in Egypt and India, albeit modified along with the context they now exist, show alternatives to the dominant Western gender system. These aspects of gender include recognized or implied non-binary genders, egalitarian spirituality, female deities, and even the potential for the elimination of gender as a category altogether. Though they still exist, much of these systems were challenged and distorted. However, given the unique contexts existing in each culture, including these and other aspects of gender, it would be a mistake to assume that imperialist ventures

completely replaced or rewrote their respective gender systems. Even the English gender system would come to be altered through its interactions with gender, one new aspect being its ability to juxtapose itself against its supposedly inferior former subjects.

As shown above, imperialism brought two significant power relationships along with it. For one, the imperial state asserted itself as being superior to the subject state as it was able to dominate it, presenting a power relationship which would deem the subject inferior. This military power relationship which kept India and Middle East under imperial control during the colonial period would legitimize the superiority of the West and serve as proof of their superiority, whether unfounded or not. With the development of race science, superiority would be placed within biology and divine design. This would come to create, legitimize, and enforce race, resulting in the partial internalization of inferiority for indigenous subjects in India and Egypt.

As each of these power relationships were developed, gender was affected in fundamental ways. Instead of each culture's gender system existing independently, it would be compared and linked with the other. The West would look upon the East as a place of the uncivilized, a place to save and control, and a foil or dramatization of its own sexist issues. The East in turn would look upon the West as a potential model of progress and superiority, or as an oppressor and colonizer. Though these two characterizations are rather general, they summarize the gendered and raced effects of imperialism. When British feminists used the struggles of Indian and Egyptian women to advance their agendas, and when race scientists used those same struggles to enforce their ideas of race, they perpetuated Western superiority. When Egyptian and Hindu Indian feminists and

nationalists looked to the West to emulate it, they enforced the implication that their culture was inferior. Race enforced the gender hierarchies within each culture, resulting ultimately in the radical transformation of the gender systems from within each culture.

Though it is debatable whether or not these cultures lost more than they gained from the imperial relationship under the British Empire, it would be clear that their gender systems were radically changed. In India, the *hijra* currently face extreme marginalization, due in part to the stigmatization of the Criminal Tribes Act under the British Empire, despite holding a sacred place within some Hindu traditions. In Egypt, anti-Western nationalisms would link feminist movements with Westernizing influences and confound their efforts. Patriarchy became entrenched within a new mythic tradition which came to be as a result of the new interaction of imperialism, further working against efforts by women and others to undo sexism within their cultures. Those effects, along with numerous others, would further oppress and marginalize women and others under the control of men. Though imperialism brought benefits in some respects, it cemented racial dynamics and reinforced the patriarchal oppression of women.

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