

**Creating the New Egyptian Woman:
Consumerism, Education, and
National Identity, 1863-1922**

Mona L. Russell

New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004. 237 pages.

In this tome, Russell examines four principal foci in her historiographic work on Egypt: “the rise of capitalism, the development of an indigenous bureaucracy, the creation of a modern educational system, and the evolution of the nationalist movement” (p. 5). The author compares and contrasts consumption rates between lower-, middle-, and upper-class Egyptian women and investigates how western patterns of capitalism paralleled and diverged from indigenous urban templates of consumerism. Against this backdrop, she frames women’s education “in a larger struggle for cultural and intellectual hegemony” (p. 7). Her engaging work is sprinkled with examples and analyses of Egypt’s societal “contact and confrontation with European thought and culture” (p. 8).

Russell’s volume is intended to be accessible to non-specialists as well as helpful to specialists in the field. Its sources include archival documents from the Dar al-Kutub, L’Institut d’Egypte, the Egyptian National Archives, the libraries of the American University in Cairo and the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, and other primary materials. An earlier version of this manuscript stemmed from the author’s doctoral research under the tutelage of Judith Tucker. Russell’s work is a noteworthy contribution to the fields of Middle East and women’s studies, communication, education, economics, and other related areas of inquiry.

The author’s introduction addresses Qasim Amin’s concept of the “New Woman.” Russell places the disparate views of Egyptian women in the context of growing consumerism and educational opportunities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter 2 discusses Khedive Ismail’s nation-building, chapter 3 studies urban patterns of consumption and economic development, and chapter 4 deftly analyzes the rise of consumer culture and advertising in the West in contrast to the development of robust consumerism in Egypt. Chapter 5 addresses “The New Egyptian Woman and Her Western Sisters,” and chapters 6 and 7 focus on female education. The politics of textbooks is reviewed in chapter 8, which is followed by the author’s “Conclusion,” detailed notes, and a helpful index.

An intriguing passage (p. 20) references the types of education received by male and female slaves in the royal harem. Russell explains that potential

suitors considered it an honor to marry former slaves of the royal family. Rising literacy rates in the nineteenth century helped to spur further societal development, including the advent of widespread advertising for home and health products that, in turn, fueled the rate of consumption. However, the author notes that the most significant change in the late nineteenth century was the expansion of Cairo's environs to the north and northeast via the newly developed modes of public transportation (p. 34).

Of particular interest are the chapters pertaining to women's education. In the nineteenth century, the Egyptian government was unable to keep pace with the pressing demands for primary education and, in particular, for schools for women. At this point, foreign mission schools were established alongside schools that had been created by the country's religious and ethnic minorities as early as the seventeenth century. Parents were faced with the choice of sending their daughters to traditional *kuttabs* (Qur'anic schools), foreign mission and other private schools, or government educational institutions. Russell remarks that "the existence of parallel systems of education fit neatly with the British notion of a bifurcated system of education based upon class, as well as elite Egyptian class interests" (p. 95).

The American Presbyterian Mission, founded in 1854, established schools to provide educational opportunities for Egyptian girls belonging to various socioeconomic classes. The author credits American mission schools, which "served to improve education in Egypt both quantitatively and qualitatively" (p. 114). She notes that "between the years of 1863 and 1879 alone, 129 private schools opened in Egypt, the majority of which were Presbyterian or Catholic" (p. 109). However, her cursory review of the American mission is limited to three pages (113-16), which is disproportionate coverage given the substantial influence that American mission schools had on the creation of other foreign mission schools and on the Egyptian government's decision to offer more educational opportunities for Egyptian girls. For example, Christine Sproul's unpublished dissertation "The American College for Girls, Cairo, Egypt: Its History and Influence on Egyptian Women: A Study of Selected Graduates" (University of Utah: 1982), is not mentioned in the author's research. In the conclusion to chapter 6, Russell states: "Over the course of the nineteenth century, the choices for girls' education dramatically expanded, and by 1900 they included a range of public and private facilities offering education from kindergarten to post-secondary" (p. 125).

Nevertheless, the author concludes that educational opportunities for Egyptian girls were bifurcated by economic and social class distinctions. Although elite women still struggled with gender barriers due to traditional

attitudes and androcentric practices, they had a wider array of educational opportunities from which to choose, including individual home instruction from skilled tutors. Girls of more humble origins typically had fewer educational options and confronted static understandings of gender roles. Educational reform in Egypt was characterized by cultural identity struggles between the British occupiers and indigenous peoples. In the late nineteenth century, reform was often equated with Anglicizing the curriculum. Beginning around 1906, the Egyptian government shifted its emphasis toward reclaiming the importance of Arabic language instruction and from this point on, Egyptian educators sought to nationalize the curriculum and focus on Egyptian history, Arabic, and religion (p. 129).

Russell's astute analysis of women's changing roles in modern Egypt is a significant contribution to Islamic thought. Her volume merits widespread classroom usage as well as additional research on the changing roles of women in contemporary Egypt.

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