Other Mothers
Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk, Klaver, Claudia C.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk and Claudia C. Klaver.
Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal.
The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27859.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27859

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1144906
CHAPTER 12

Distance Mothering and the “Cradle Lands”

Imperial Motherhood and Lady Duff Gordon’s Letters from Egypt

Cara Murray

In 1862 Lucie Duff Gordon left her husband, children, and home in England and headed for Egypt to recuperate from tuberculosis. For the next seven years, until her death in Cairo at age forty-seven, she wrote letters to her family in which she narrates her experiences in Egypt and offers motherly advice to her two youngest children; in effect, she conducts her mothering from a distance of 3,800 miles. In her letters Duff Gordon takes pains to represent herself to her family as a good mother to the Egyptians among whom she lives. To this end, she creates an Egyptian “family” which consists over time of an Egyptian servant named Omar, whom she affectionately calls her “son”; two European women domestic servants; and seven young slave “children.” Her mothering practices, I argue, offer a liberal critique of British imperialism, aimed at using maternal methods to improve upon it.

In the 1990s critics began to reconsider the roles that women played in imperial enterprises. Whereas the imperial practices of nineteenth-century women travelers to Egypt, such as Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale, and Amelia Ann Blanford Edwards have since been documented, Duff Gordon’s relation to imperialism remains underexplored.¹ This may

¹ See Jill Matus for a discussion of the ways in which Florence Nightingale and Harriet Martineau are implicated in colonialism. See Billie Melman for a broader discussion of the relations between gender and imperialism in the nineteenth century in the Middle East.
be because the liberal Duff Gordon was one of the strongest critics of British arrogance abroad in her day, and she persistently contradicted European claims that Arabs were lazy, unclean, and uncivilized. Faiza Shereen captures the refreshingly critical aspect of Duff Gordon’s work in her article in the *Dictionary of National Biography*: “A hundred years before Edward W. Said, Chinua Achebe, and Frantz Fanon, Duff Gordon was observing and recording some of the most pernicious aspects of European orientalism—and questioning some of the most dearly held views of her time” (162).

Still it is important to consider Duff Gordon’s relation to imperialism, especially since she makes the subject of how to better rule the colonies a theme of her work. Throughout her letters she attempts to controvert strategies of colonial rule that depend upon the use of crude force, such as those held by her contemporary in Egypt, the British explorer of the Nile, Samuel White Baker, who had asserted in his 1866 work, *Albert N’yanza*, that the Egyptians were “brutes” who should be conquered by the British (280). In contrast, Duff Gordon shows that Egyptians need not be conquered, just cared for. Duff Gordon’s representation of herself as a good mother to her Egyptian family offers a counterpractice to what she perceived to be the prevailing practice of the day, what she called “rule by the stick.” In place of heavy-handed paternal rule, she offers the ideal of the domesticating woman—who will care for the native with a woman’s touch, and who will replace the ideology of the stick with the subtlety of maternal manipulation.

Duff Gordon focuses her maternal goodwill on her household servants and slaves, whom she considers her family. It was not uncommon for Europeans living abroad to imagine familial and affective ties with their native household servants. Ann Laura Stoler demonstrates through a series of interviews with Dutch colonials about their home life in Indonesia during the colonial period that many nostalgically referred to the Indonesian domestic servants who worked for them as “family.” None of the domestic workers whom she interviewed, however, shared their bosses’ affection. Many of them could not even recall their employers’ names; they did, however, remember in detail the dull chores and hard work that they performed in the Dutch households. Stoler’s interviews reveal just what the word “family” can mask in the colonial setting.

Duff Gordon’s representation of her Egyptian household not only provides us with a rare glimpse of a Victorian family at work but also articu-
lates the relation between the workings of the household and the colonial enterprise. Anne McClintock shows how during the nineteenth century, as the number of female domestic servants in England swelled to become the second-largest labor category, the recognition of the economic value of domestic labor became socially taboo, resulting in the erasure of the female domestic worker from the field of representation.\(^2\) She links the denial of the value of women’s domestic labor in the industrial metropolis to the devaluation of colonized labor which happened in the same period (138). Further, she argues that because the economic value of women’s domestic labor in the metropolis could not be recognized, female domestic servants “were frequently depicted in the iconography of degeneration—as ‘plagues,’ ‘black races,’ and ‘primitives’” (42). In other words, because the female domestic servant imperiled the “natural” separation between private home and public market by carrying the “whiff of the market” into the drawing room, she was often represented as black (McClintock 164–65). Thus, her affinity with the undervalued colonized laborer was marked. McClintock’s insights into the racialization of women’s domestic work in England help us to understand Duff Gordon’s peculiar construction of her family of workers in Egypt, for as we shall see, Duff Gordon takes great pains to remove all of the female European laborers from her household and to replace them with an all-male group of African “maids” who are feminized by the work that they do. In constructing her ideal family as a group of male workers, she frees herself from the taboo of representing female domestic labor. The result is that she makes the hidden work of the Victorian family visible at the same time that she invites one to see domestic work in relation to colonial labor.

Duff Gordon’s construction of her Egyptian family does more than just reveal the erasure of the female domestic laborer. She displays a home which is distinguished by all sorts of erasures and disruptions of the “natural” order. Within her roomy apartment above the Temple of Luxor where she resides for the majority of her seven-year stay, for example, a woman directs and supervises the labor of men; European servants work alongside Africans; female Christian maids flirt with male Muslim “maids”; an aristocrat shares daily meals with a servant; and feisty European domestic workers disobey their liberal British master. The multiple modifiers that each actor within her household actually demands—“upper-class white British woman,” “young male African slave,” or “poor female German domestic worker,” for instance—suggest intersections between categories often dealt with as disparate. By shaping this diverse group of people into

\(^2\) See Anne McClintock, who writes that by 1851, 40 percent of wage-earning women were domestic servants and that female domestic workers were the largest labor category apart from agriculture (85).
a “family,” a process which involves inclusions as well as exclusions, Duff Gordon offers insights into the interworkings of race, class, gender, and religion in the colonial household.

This is to say that the relation of mothering to colonialism is complex and should not be too narrowly mapped. Limiting motherhood to its reproductive work, for instance, Melissa Lee Miller writes that mothering for the colonial woman becomes a way in which she could “simultaneously enact previously held beliefs and teachings specific to women and seek to create, or recreate the Other in the British/parental image” (230). One problem with such an argument is that it presumes that the British/parental image is a known entity and as such easily reproduced. By contrast, Stoler argues that the colonizer/colonized is a “historically shifting pair of social categories” (13); inclusion in or exclusion from these categories “required regulation of the sexual, conjugal, and domestic life of both European colonials and their subjects” (43). By setting herself up as a mother of an Egyptian family, Duff Gordon was well poised to regulate the domestic lives within. Simultaneously, she monitored the lives of her British children from afar. Using Stoler’s insights into the constructed nature of the colonizer/colonized, I argue that the mother’s work under colonialism was not simply to reproduce the colony in the image of the colonizer, but to help to construct the colonizer/colonized through her vigilance toward the family.

The centrality of the mother to Egypt’s modernization has been posited by Lisa Pollard, who argues that both the British colonialists and the Egyptian nationalists relied upon her work to reform the nation. The British justified the establishment of Egypt as a protectorate in 1882 by denigrating the Egyptian household. Elite Egyptian men were unfit to rule, British politicians reasoned, because of their backward domestic habits, polygamy being one of the most frequently cited. In order to fix the problem, the British advocated for the education of women. These educated women would become the mothers who would raise a well-behaved elite cadre of rulers. In the meantime, the British would mother the Egyptians until their leaders were ready to govern. The Egyptian nationalists similarly made the mother central to their reeducation plan; for them, the mother was the most able to nurture the new nation by reeducating its sons. Pollard, however, only considers elite mothers and sons. This relationship looks different when it is the nation’s working poor who are being mothered; neither the colonialists nor the nationalists ever expected them to govern.3 Duff Gordon exposes how the mother shaped Egypt’s laboring poor.

3 Evelyn Baring Cromer, for example, considered the fellaheen, who made up 90 percent of Egyptian society, to exist outside of the class structure altogether. He argued in Modern Egypt that they, like animals, could never be expected to rule.
Duff Gordon demonstrates to her English family that she is a good mother by representing herself as successfully mothering her Egyptian family. Her letters revolve around the relationship that she has with her Arab servant, Omar, who appears in just about every letter. Duff Gordon constructs a story in which she is a doting mother to an affectionate son. Although Omar nurses her around the clock, Duff Gordon pointedly shows her family how well she takes care of him—feeding him, clothing him, traveling with him, and even attempting to provide for him financially in the event of her death; indeed, she makes it appear as if she is indispensable to him. She demonstrates a mother’s love for him, claiming, “He is everything to me.” He, in turn, claims that she is “the mother he found in the world” (361).

In addition to Omar, Duff Gordon welcomes seven slaves into her family throughout her seven-year stay, often referring to them as her little boys. She depicts them happily at play, but more often than not, she shows them hard at work, ironing, cooking, and cleaning. Duff Gordon makes a point of never beating them, demonstrating how well children will work if properly treated. Duff Gordon slowly rids her home of all female influence, shedding her female slaves and her European domestic workers so that in its final and ideal form her household consists of one woman in charge of a gaggle of boys. She shows how through tender care her all-male family becomes an efficient work unit that eagerly picks up the slack, not only doing more work, but doing the work of women when she fires her female laborers and hires no replacements.

Duff Gordon pits the productivity of her newly created family against her own idle one, suggesting at every turn that her British children have something to learn from her Egyptian ones. We must understand her biological family in relation to her chosen one not only because her British children are encouraged to learn from her Egyptian ones, but also because it is only through the former that the latter become visible at all. Therefore, I will first consider Duff Gordon’s mothering of her youngest biological children, Urania (Rainie) and Maurice, and then turn to a discussion of her Egyptian family. Duff Gordon had one grown daughter, Janet Ross, whom I will not discuss, for she was already married and living in Alexandria at the time that Duff Gordon began writing.

4 Of the seven slaves who live with her throughout her seven-year stay, only two are female, Zeyneb and a slave whom she never names. Neither of them, however, stays with her for long, for she dismisses them soon after acquiring them.
5 Duff Gordon does mention one beating, which she treats as her motherly duty: “I was forced to flog Mabrook yesterday for smoking on the sly” (278). Mabrook was flogged for smoking, a cultural offense, she explains, for smoking by young boys is considered rude in Egypt.
I. Distance Mothering

1. Mother and Daughter: Rainie’s Moral Lessons

Duff Gordon’s letters have two audiences. Written for her family, whom she was aware she might never see again, they obtain a level of intimacy uncommon to the travel narrative genre. But they are also written for the general public. Prior to moving to Egypt, Duff Gordon lived for just under a year in South Africa with her maid Sally. When it was clear that the weather there was not improving her health, they returned home, and at her doctor’s behest, moved to Egypt. The letters that she wrote to her family from South Africa were published in 1864, only two years after she arrived in Egypt, suggesting that Duff Gordon recognized the value of her Egyptian letters for a wider audience than her immediate family. In 1865 her Egyptian letters, edited by her mother, Sarah Austin, were published. Indeed, the publication of all of Duff Gordon’s letters was mediated by her family. Her eldest daughter, Janet Ross, republished her mother’s Egyptian letters in 1875 to include those written in the last four years of her life to which Ross added a memoir of her mother. In 1969, her great-grandson, Gordon Waterfield, published a reedited version of those letters, adding to the front matter a drawing of an unnamed but suspiciously Duff Gordon-like woman cradling a baby while feeding it from a saucer. Such familial involvement in the packaging of all of the extant editions of Duff Gordon’s letters promises to keep her status as a mother at the forefront of her reader’s attention. Even those outside of the family stressed Duff Gordon’s “motherly” attributes, as did George Meredith when he wrote in his introduction to her letters that she benefited the Egyptians most by “giving these quivering creatures of the baked land proof that a Christian Englishwoman could be companionable, tender, and beneficently motherly with them, despite the reputed insurmountable barriers of alien race and relation” (xx).

Because Duff Gordon writes letters to her children and writes about them in her letters to her mother, husband, and grown daughter, her children have a regular place in her text. Whereas with her youngest daughter, Rainie, who was just four when Duff Gordon left for Egypt, she takes on the tone of a loving schoolteacher offering moral lessons that will guide her child through life, with Maurice, her son who was thirteen when she departed, she adapts an urgent and interventionist attitude, attempting to correct what she believes are poor educational decisions made by his father, Sir Alexander Duff Gordon. Duff Gordon conducts her letters to Rainie as lessons; for instance, when Rainie is learning to write she begins her letter by writing her own address in Arabic letters, explaining to her that “[i]t is
very difficult to learn them, and I think the little Arab boys, who sit in the courtyard of the Mosque, as the Church is called, with their slates must have harder work with their A B C than you have” (217). Although she is reputedly teaching her daughter a lesson about Arabic culture, she cannot refrain from inculcating industriousness by comparing Rainie to the Arab boys who work harder than she.

But at the core of Duff Gordon’s lessons is the creation of a liberal justification of empire through motherly acts of beneficence. She made her home the center of such acts of kindness, and the acquisition and treatment of household labor a favorite example. Portrayals of domestic slavery in the colonies were even rarer than depictions of domestic labor in the industrial metropolis. Duff Gordon, however, searching for a way to relate to her own children, reveals much about the practice of slavery in British households long after it had been abolished in England and in the colonies. She writes to Rainie about her acquisition of a young boy named Khayr:

A poor man, a traveller, was very ill and died in my house, and his black slave, a boy bigger than Maurice, is here still. He is called Khayr, but his name in his own village far away in the middle of Africa was Faragella. He was stolen by Turkish soldiers and can only speak a little Arabic yet. (219)

Only through her letter to Rainie does the history of Khayr creep into her account at all. Indeed, her desire to exhibit her mothering skills to her children necessitates the inclusion of her child slaves into her story.

All of Duff Gordon’s household laborers are depicted as children, irrespective of their age. Duff Gordon often tells her biological children that her slaves are just like them, only differing in that they are painted brown or black. Nevertheless, she makes it clear to her own children where they stand. In a letter to Rainie about Khayr, Duff Gordon writes, “When I heard you had been reading Robinson Crusoe, I wished to send him to you to be your Man Friday, when you play at Desert Islands” (219). Thus, she draws an affinity between the two families based upon ownership of labor through the imaginary transfer of Khayr between households.

Duff Gordon never depicts herself as actively participating in the slave trade. Like the rest of her slaves, Khayr arrives at her doorstep through somebody else’s misfortune or misdoing. And also like her other slaves,

---

6 It is true that British antislavery tracts describing the conscripted labor used by the French or Turks to build such projects as the Suez Canal, irrigation works, cotton infrastructure, and sugar factories are common; however, descriptions of domestic slavery are hard to come by.
Khayr begs her to keep him. She represents the purchase of Khayr as his desire rather than her own. Avoiding words that would intimate a financial transaction, such as “buy” or “purchase,” she instead uses familial words such as “inherit” or “adopt,” creating the illusion that it is her moral imperative to take in slaves. In Khayr’s case, this morality is simple enough for her seven-year-old daughter to grasp:

Khayr is black as ink and very ugly and his teeth were filed to sharp points like a dog’s when he was little in his own country, but he is a very good boy and I like him and shall be very sorry when he goes to his master who is a little boy of eight or nine and whom he means to take great care of and to work for, if his father has left him no money. But if his little master’s family sell him he wants me to buy him very much. (219)

The inclusion of Khayr’s story reveals how Duff Gordon teaches her daughter to accept not only her own reasons for keeping slaves, but also the British justification for their imminent rule in Egypt, for Khayr’s story has imperial parallels. It is important to remember that Egypt would soon come under British rule after England invaded Alexandria in 1882. By telling Khayr’s story, Duff Gordon provides a familiar context for other tales that she relates, such as the one of two sheiks who, outraged by Turkish rule, “begged me to communicate to the Queen of England that they would join her troops if she would invade Egypt” (245). Duff Gordon teaches Ranie that just as Khayr, stolen from his home by Turkish soldiers, desires to be restored a home by a kindly British woman, Egyptians, whose land has been invaded by the Turks, call out for their home to be restored by a kindly British queen. Thus, she not only provides a moral justification for a British invasion, but also a precedent for it in her own family.

2. Mother and Son: Maurice’s Sex Education

Duff Gordon devotes twice as much space to her son as she does to her daughter. Yet she spares no space on Maurice until she receives word that he is “idle” (334). After this she concentrates on wresting the responsibility for Maurice’s education from his father, eventually persuading him to send Maurice to Egypt for nine months during the last year and a half of her life. The fact that she felt compelled to bring him to Egypt demonstrates the major difference between the education of her daughter and son. While Duff Gordon was content to mind Rainie by post, she needed to educate Maurice in the flesh. To understand Duff Gordon’s urgent request for her
son’s presence, we can turn to Ann Laura Stoler, who writes that “what is striking when we look to identify the contours and composition of any particular colonial community is the extent to which control over sexuality and reproduction was at the core of defining colonial privilege and its boundaries” (39). In other words, colonial privilege was actively defined through the control of sexuality rather than passively granted based upon one’s race or nationality. I argue that Duff Gordon brings Maurice to Egypt in order to take control of his sexual education and by doing so initiates his colonial career.

Duff Gordon frequently complains to her husband that her son has become idle under his watch. By labeling Maurice with a term often reserved for the colonized and used to justify their subjection, Duff Gordon challenges Maurice’s presumed authority over them. Likewise, her accusations threaten to keep him from performing his duties in his family, for she reprimands him for his laziness by telling him that he is currently “unfit” to resume care for her in the event of her husband’s death. Duff Gordon sees Maurice’s idleness manifesting itself as hedonism and anti-intellectualism, and she targets his Eton education as the cause: “He is so deeply imbued with the idea that it is ‘snobbish’ to read and to know, and that nothing on earth is worth living for but animal pleasures. . . . I observe all the ‘Eton fellows’ of his age have exactly the same baronial views of life and hate the ‘cads’ who are base enough to read books” (352). Thus, she endeavors to persuade her husband to send Maurice to Dresden. Her husband, however, sends him to Brussels instead, a move of which she thoroughly disapproves: “I look upon Brussels as the most dangerous place possible with all the French and English vices and the idleness and kleinstädlerei [narrow mentality] of a provincial town” (294). Complaining to her mother she writes, “Oh! Why would he send him to such a sink of iniquity as Brussels?” (332).

Her husband’s latest error of judgment only strengthens her resolve to take Maurice’s education into her own hands, and her letters to her husband are increasingly filled with grim predictions about Maurice’s future. After sustained battle, she triumphs, and Maurice comes to Egypt. Upon arrival, Duff Gordon attempts to liberate Maurice from his companion, Monsieur Soubre, a tutor hired by her husband to accompany Maurice to Brussels and Egypt. Though Duff Gordon has reason to attack M. Soubre’s pedagogical practices, she instead focuses on the influences that he holds over her son’s sexual practices. To this end, she drops all sorts of sexual innuendos, including one about the tutor’s wife: “How was it, my dearest Alick, that you thought fit to have him with a tutor whose wife was like that?” (342). Again, she takes matters into her own hands, this time implementing a solution that reveals what she believes to be at the
core of Maurice’s education. When she learns that M. Soubre and Maurice are visiting prostitutes, she writes: “I told Maurice plainly that I dreaded the worst diseases and that if he must have an outbreak, I would give him a pound or two now and then to have a good dancing girl, rather than a lot of fourpenny women” (346). Thus, she redirects Maurice’s tutelage by taking financial and aesthetic control of his sexual exploits. A few days later she discharges M. Soubre.

Immediately after she dismisses M. Soubre, she registers a notable improvement in her son. Maurice, whom she only ever depicted as idle, is newly active, as she writes to her husband: “I wish you could see your son bare-legged and footed, in a shirt and a pair of white Arab drawers, rushing about with the fellaheen. He is everybody’s ‘brother’ or ‘son’” (350). From this point on, Duff Gordon depicts her eighteen-year-old son as merely a child. It seems that he gains entrance into her Egyptian family at the expense of the control of his sexual appetites.

While Duff Gordon searches for a tutor to replace M. Soubre, she takes the opportunity to taunt her husband with the hypocrisy of his race prejudices:

Would you be shocked if a nigger taught Maurice? One Hajji Daboos I know to be a capital Arabic scholar and he speaks French like a Parisian, and Italian also, only he is a real nigger and so is the best music-master in Cairo. . . . Maurice has no sort of idea why a nigger should not be as good as anyone else, but thinks perhaps you might not approve. (352)

Needling her husband about his failures in educating Maurice, she continues: “If you think Maurice would be better elsewhere I am not so selfish as to wish to keep him. Would he be less idle and might he not be dissipated if you again sent him to such places as Brussels?” (352), effectively silencing him on the matter. Yet Duff Gordon does not hire Hajji Daboos or any other well-qualified scholar; instead, she depends upon her own servant, Omar, to mind Maurice. And it is Omar, above all, whom she credits with Maurice’s transformation: “You would rejoice to see his fat rose cheeks and increased breadth and vigor. I never beheld such a change for the better in a human being. Really Omar has done good service in keeping him out of mischief and teaching him to be more careful of money” (350). Duff Gordon had no intention of hiring a scholar to educate Maurice. Yet the question remains, why does Duff Gordon cajole her husband into sending his only son to Egypt to be educated by an illiterate Arab servant?

We can begin to formulate an answer to this question only by considering the historical context. It is during particular historical moments that the subaltern could be posed as a model for the colonizer. Duff
Gordon’s keen sense of the period enabled her to pick up on one of its defining characteristics: an intensification of the competition for colonial resources. Many theorists of empire believe that the increased competition among industrial powers during the last quarter of the century propelled the “New Imperialism” that was characterized by the brutal grab for African land and resources during the 1880s. In Letters from the Cape, Duff Gordon shows how competition occurred on all levels in South Africa when she observes how the English, “Dutch, Malays, blacks, Africanders, and Hottentots” vied for resources (41), predicting that if the British could not learn to compete with these peoples, they would have no chance of economic success in the Cape. It is in this context that she first chastises the British for their laziness. She uses the example of the industrious Malays to discipline the idle British when she demonstrates how by dint of hard work the Malays gained a monopoly of the cart-hiring industry. If the English could not compete with the Malays, she proposes, it was their own fault. They needed to learn to work hard in the colonies. Duff Gordon continues this line of argument in Letters from Egypt by valuing a colonial work ethic and arguing against the importation of aristocratic behaviors. It is in this context that we can understand her desire to cure her son of his “baronial” views. And it is also in this context that we can see why she relied on Omar’s guidance. She needed his example to teach her son how to be competitive in the newly competitive world.

II. Imperial Motherhood

1. Making the Family Work: Omar and Sally

Omar Abu Halaway stars in Duff Gordon’s letters as her dearest child, her eldest son. While Duff Gordon mentions Maurice in approximately one in every ten letters, she does not pass up an opportunity to praise or relate an anecdote about Omar; he appears in nearly every letter. Omar is the character around whom her story unfolds. Upon arrival in Egypt, Duff Gordon employs Omar because she “found it quite impossible to get on without a servant able to speak English” (41). Originally he was hired to do the cooking and the shopping, but when she discovers how competent he is, he becomes her nurse, maid, language teacher, boat repairman, and navigator. “Omar turns out a jewel,” she brags, as she narrates the story of how Omar managed to procure her just the right Nile boat at a quarter of the going price (44). In addition to taking care of the household management, Omar fills Duff Gordon’s days as they shop, eat, and travel together.
When he visits his wife and child in Alexandria, she accompanies him and stays with his family. They rarely separate, and at times they seem more like husband and wife than son and mother.

Duff Gordon represents Omar to her family as a young son, in spite of the fact that he is already a father. When Omar chooses to stay with Duff Gordon in Luxor to nurse her through an illness instead of going home to visit his wife after the birth of their second child, Duff Gordon praises him, writing: “I don’t know why he is so devotedly fond of me, but he certainly does love me as he says ‘like his mother,’ and moreover as a very affectionate son loves his mother” (272). She incorporates Omar into her British family circle, depicting him as anxiously awaiting news about her children, writing to her husband: “Omar wanted to hear all the news you sent about the children” (66). Further, “You would be amused to see Omar bring me a letter and sit down on the floor till I tell him the family news, and then Alhamdulillah, we are so pleased, and he goes off to his pots and pans again” (127). Her mother, Sarah Austin, even writes a letter to Omar, which he “kisses” and keeps as a “talisman” (314).

Moreover, Duff Gordon depicts Omar as the centerpiece of her Egyptian family. While slaves and servants come and go, he remains with her throughout her seven years in Egypt, nursing her through every illness till the bitter end. Early in her stay, she represents him as comfortably at home in her Luxor apartment with her and her British maid, Sally, who accompanied Duff Gordon from England: “I am now writing in the kitchen, which is the coolest place where there is any light at all. Omar is diligently spelling words of six letters, with the wooden spoon in his hand and a cigarette in his mouth, and Sally is lying on her back on the floor” (175). She boasts that he has come to feel so comfortable there that he prays in front of them: “It is only lately that Omar has let us see him at prayer, for fear of being ridiculed, but now he is sure that it is not so, I often find him praying in the room where Sally sits at work, which is a clean, quiet place” (134). Her cozy depictions of family life stop abruptly, however, when to her surprise and dismay Sally has Omar’s baby. Even Duff Gordon was fooled by her portrayal of their familial relationship. Duff Gordon proves her love for Omar by immediately forgiving him. Sally she dismisses and sends back to England, accusing her of seducing Omar. She takes away Sally’s baby and gives it to Omar, for whom she arranges to have it put out to nurse with an Egyptian woman.

Given the prevalence of native rapist stories, it is surprising to learn that Sally was solely blamed for the affair. Why didn’t Duff Gordon accuse Omar? Sally, after all, was her beloved servant who had been with her for ten years. Sally’s case is important to consider because it shows that
colonial oppression was based upon more than just the racial oppression that the native rapist stories expose. Gordon’s decision to expel Sally from her family, while keeping Omar, demonstrates that Gordon was able to fall back upon a narrative that punished Sally’s class and gender at the same time that it upheld racist attitudes.

The narrative that Duff Gordon used to guide her understanding of Sally’s affair has to do with the sexual proclivities of working-class women: they were seen to desire sex with black men. According to McClintock, commentaries like that of Edward Long were not out of the ordinary: “[T]he lower class of women in England are remarkably fond of blacks” (23). Indeed, Sally’s fondness of blacks was what made her such a good servant in Duff Gordon’s eyes: “Sally has been an excellent traveling companion, and really a better companion than many more educated people; for she is always amused and curious, and is friendly with the coloured people” (Letters from the Cape 135). That Duff Gordon sees “friendliness” to blacks as a class trait becomes clear when Sally’s pregnancy causes Duff Gordon to swear off English maids for good, saying, “I find that these disasters are wonderfully common here—is it the climate or the costume I wonder that makes the English maids ravish the Arab men so continually?” (187).

Soon thereafter, she intimates that Sally’s German replacement, María, is also fond of blacks and dismisses her because of her flirtations. Yet, to see her dismissal of María only in terms of her flirtatious behavior would be to miss the point. While Duff Gordon discharges María because she fears that María may repeat Sally’s indiscretion, she also knows that María disturbs the status quo by refusing to cooperate with Duff Gordon’s family ideal: “An educated, coarse-minded European is too disturbing an element in the family life of Easterns; the sort of filial relation, at once familiar and reverential of servants to a master they like, is odious to English and still more to French servants” (265). María actively stirs up trouble, and she incites other servants to follow suit: “The European style of abusing me and making faces behind my back, and trying to set my household against me—in short, the vulgar servant view of the master as a natural enemy—struck absolute dismay among my hangers-on, paid and unpaid” (254). María is the last female to work for Duff Gordon.

Still another case to consider is that of Zeyneb, an eight-year-old African slave whom Duff Gordon gives away not long after acquiring her. Melissa Lee Miller uses the case of Zeyneb to support her theory that the function of the mother in the colonial setting is to “create or recreate the other in the British/parental image” (230). She argues that Duff Gordon seeks to create Zeyneb in her own image, but when the child asserts her Muslim identity by refusing to eat pork, Duff Gordon gives her away. The
problem with Miller’s reading, however, is that it ascribes Duff Gordon’s actions to cultural racism alone. Yet Duff Gordon permits her other slaves and servants to maintain their dietary and religious practices. Omar, for instance, remains a practicing Muslim throughout his employment. Zeyneb’s dismissal can be more fully understood if we consider it in terms of gender and class as well as race, for Duff Gordon dismisses not only Zeyneb, but all her female European servants. Shortly before Duff Gordon gives Zeyneb away, she also complains that Zeyneb has become sullen all of a sudden, saying: “[T]o keep a sullen face about me is more than I can endure, as I have shown her every possible kindness” (98). I am suggesting that Zeyneb was discharged for reasons similar to Maria’s dismissal: both refused to work with a smile, shattering Duff Gordon’s fiction of a happily working family.

Sally, who Duff Gordon reports worked even better after she gave birth, threatened Duff Gordon’s ideal in similar ways. Even though Sally was reported to be a good worker, Sally was even more of a threat than Maria and Zeyneb. Duff Gordon affectionately called Sally a real Arab, a compliment that meant that Sally, like herself, relished the company of Arabs. Until the incident with Omar, Sally reinforced Duff Gordon’s liberal ideals of inclusion. But afterward, Sally blurred the line between being a “real Arab” and being a real Arab. Sally represents the threat of the female domestic servant that McClintock outlines—the ability to cross lines imperceptibly and exist in two worlds simultaneously. Just as the female domestic servant challenges the neat notions of the public and private, a fantasy upon which the Victorian economy thrived, Sally threatened to break down the lines between the colonizer and the colonized. What is most disturbing is that she did it without detection. Duff Gordon had no idea that Sally, whom she saw every day, was pregnant until a week before the baby was born. She failed miserably in policing Sally’s body, showing just how uncontrollable the working-class body could be. Sally’s situation also warrants consideration alongside Maurice’s. On the one hand, Maurice’s case illustrates Stoler’s argument: Duff Gordon succeeds in making Maurice into the colonizer by seizing control over his sexuality. Sally, however, proves to be a much more slippery subject. Duff Gordon fails to control her sexuality, and thus fails to mark her colonial status. Sally is neither colonized nor colonizer. Duff Gordon has no option but to return her to England where her status is less ambiguous.

Duff Gordon may have had an additional motive for ridding her family of its women workers. While upper- and middle-class European males flocked to Egypt to profit from Ismail Pasha’s modernization schemes, working-class European women came in droves to be servants in the new
European households. There, they labored alongside Egyptians. We have little evidence of how these households functioned, yet Duff Gordon’s depiction of Omar and Sally suggests that relations may have been good: “You would be amused to hear Sally when Omar does not wake in time to wash, pray, and eat before daybreak now in Ramadan. She knocks at his door and acts as Muezzin. ‘Come, Omar, get up and pray and have your dinner’” (133). Maria also befriends her Muslim coworkers. Moreover, she allies herself with them, taking their side over her European masters: “She and little Ahmad are on the most affectionate terms and keep up a continual giggle. She won his heart by blazing at Ellen who beat the child” (235). Yet, soon after Maria leaves, Duff Gordon begins to revise the harmonious picture that she had been painting of labor relations in her household, claiming instead that the European servants tormented their Egyptian counterparts. While this may have been true, it is also clear that Duff Gordon feared the product of good labor relations: Sally and Omar’s “howling baby,” whom she swiftly had removed from the household, and Maria’s transmission of knowledge about class relations in Europe that menaced the status quo of her household. Even Zeyneb begins to assert her rights only after she returns from Janet Ross’s household, where Duff Gordon complains that she had too much contact with her daughter’s European maids.7

2. THE COMFORTS OF FAMILY: OMAR AND MAURICE

After Duff Gordon sweeps the women from her home, she settles into a comfortable life with her new family composed of boys. She represents this family as consisting of three children: Omar and a pair of slave boys. In this way, her Egyptian family mirrors her English one, with an older sibling, Omar/Janet, minding two much younger ones. Duff Gordon represents this part of her life as ideal, never depicting the type of strife that caused her to discharge Zeyneb, Sally, and Maria. Instead, she writes that her “little boys” comfort her: “I am better again now and go on very comfortably with my two little boys. Omar is from dawn till night at work at my boat, so I have only Mabrook and Ahmad, and you would wonder

---

7 I am not suggesting that the passing of knowledge between household workers was unidirectional. The British servants had to have learned as much, if not more, from their Egyptian counterparts as they learned from the British. I do, however, wish to call attention to the difference in the histories of labor movements in the two countries. See Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman for an excellent account of the history of workers’ movements in Egypt.
to see how well I am served. Ahmad cooks a very good dinner, serves it and orders Mabrook about” (276). She makes their tireless work seem like child’s play: “You would delight in his [Mabrook’s] guffaws, and the merry games and hearty laughter of my ménage is very pleasant to me” (276). She carefully intertwines scenes of work with scenes of play, and even when she is describing her slaves at their most industrious, her writing is characterized by a playfulness of tone: “What would an English respectable cook say to seeing ‘two dishes and a sweet’ cooked over a little wood on a few bricks, by a baby in a blue shirt?” (276). In this manner she familiarizes child labor, domesticating it and turning it into a family affair.

Omar plays the role of a big brother/mother who successfully teaches his younger siblings/children how to work:

> It is surprising how fast the boys learn, and how well they do their work. Ahmad, who is quite little, would be a perfectly sufficient servant for a man alone; he can cook, wash, clean the rooms, make the beds, do all the table service, knife and plate cleaning, all fairly well, and I believe now he would get along even without Omar’s orders. (303)

Ahmad, under Omar’s tutelage, has become nearly as efficient as Omar. Indeed, it is Omar who reproduces the labor in the household. Not only does he do so by having a child with Sally, but he trains the new boys to do the work of the women servants that Duff Gordon adamantly refuses to replace: “I have not got a woman-servant, but I don’t miss one at all; little Ahmad is very handy. . . . Omar irons and cleans the house and does housemaid” (258). Claiming that she has no need for a woman servant, for “[l]little Ahmad has grown very clever and Omar has developed a talent for ironing of which I was unaware, and we do very well indeed” (253), she insists that her “boys” can do the women’s work: “I go on very well with my two boys. Mabrook washes very well and acts a marmiton. Darfur is housemaid and waiter in his very tiny way” (330). Duff Gordon constructs an all-male family that not only does the work of women but works like women: they labor in the household where their work remains hidden and uncompensated.

Thus, when Maurice arrives in Egypt in November of 1867, he sees a smoothly running household of boys, headed by his mother. This well-working family is the crowning achievement of Duff Gordon’s philosophy of rule. Early on she had complained, “What chokes me is to hear English people talk of the stick being ‘the only way to manage Arabs’” (86), and now she has demonstrated that there is another way. Maurice is there to bear witness to it. Moreover, he learns its practice when he joins her house-
hold, and, like her other boys, prospers from Omar’s teachings. While they
learn, among other things, to make work look like play, Maurice learns
to make play look like work: “Maurice has got back his old round boy-
ish face; he eats like an ogre, walks all day, sleeps like a top, bathes in
the morning and has laid on flesh so that his clothes won’t button” (349). Por-
traying Maurice as a child, Duff Gordon disarms him of his sexuality. She
also makes it easier to imagine his tutelage under Omar.

Omar teaches Maurice the benefits of his mother’s model of colonial
rule. He demonstrates the value of ruling like a mother, and he inculcates
the advantages of implementing the family model of governance. Mother-
ing ensures cheap and loyal labor at the expense of a little kindness only.
Nobody demonstrates this better than Omar, whom Duff Gordon pays £3
a month, which is by her own admission the lowest wage in the region. She
sheepishly explains that the low rate is his wish: “I really feel as if I were
cheating Omar to let him stay on for £3; but if I say anything he kisses my
hand and tells me ‘not to be cross’” (162). When the traveler and author
of Cradle Lands, Lady Herbert, attempts to lure Omar away by offering
to triple his wages, Duff Gordon brags that he refuses to go. That Omar
stays is a testament to the success of Duff Gordon’s model. One wonders
why Omar works for so little, and one afternoon while he rubs her feet,
the answer becomes apparent. When she tells him that foot care is beneath
his dignity, he sings in response, “The slave of the Turk may be set free
with money, but how shall one be ransomed who has been paid for by kind
actions and sweet words?” (164). On a similar occasion, he says, “I am your
mameluke not your servant—you mammeluke” (153). Duff Gordon, who
understands “mameluke” to mean “white slave,” demonstrates throughout
her text that her filial relationship with Omar extends the “kindness” of
whiteness to him—in turn for his labors of love. Duff Gordon extracts
more work from Omar with her “sweet words” than Baker ever obtains
from his 1,645 Egyptian conscripts with all of his lashes.

The mothering model of rule is a communicative one. In place of the
inflexibility of Baker’s stick, it offers the subtlety of language. Duff Gor-
don learns Arabic from Omar, who then becomes Maurice’s language
tutor. Articulating the connection between Maurice’s linguistic training

8 Although a “mameluke” is a member of the regime established by freed white military
slaves which ruled Egypt from 1250 until 1517, and continued as a ruling military class
under Ottoman rule until 1812, by the mid-nineteenth century, many British travelers used
the word to mean only “white slave.” This popular use of the term is employed throughout
Burton’s translation of One Thousand and One Nights.

9 In 1869 Samuel White Baker came to Egypt on a mission to stop the slave trade. Ironi-
cally, he conscripted 1,645 Egyptians into his army in his war against slavery.
and his colonial career, Duff Gordon writes: “He is beginning to pick up a little Arabic, and has got a fancy to stay on with me and learn French, Arabic, and Turkish with a view to the Foreign office” (347). Indeed, learning Arabic is Maurice’s primary accomplishment in Egypt: “I had had ideas about colonial life for Maurice for decidedly the animal predominates so utterly over the intellectual activity that he will never be fit for any desk or book work. Not that he is stupid; he talks Arabic quite fluently which is rather a feat to achieve in seven or eight months” (353).

Omar also demonstrates the importance of a model of rule that relies upon the logic of the nuclear family. Household laborers are incorporated into the family, and in turn they are expected to be “at once familiar and reverential” to their masters/mothers (265). Duff Gordon’s familial model offers an antidote to labor relations at home, or what she calls the “vulgar servant view of the master as a natural enemy” (254), where servants are segregated from the family and taught to accept their difference. It also ensures that there would be only one source of female authority. In addition to all the other threats that Sally posed, she raised the specter of polygamy. With Sally’s dismissal, Duff Gordon makes it clear that there could only be one mother in the modern Egyptian family. By enforcing modern Western family practices, Duff Gordon participates in colonizing Egypt in the way that Timothy Mitchell describes. Whereas Mitchell argues that Europeans colonized Egypt by representing European institutions there such as the military and education, I am suggesting that Duff Gordon’s representation of the nuclear family was equally important to the process of colonization, for through the family, Duff Gordon imagines a way for workers in the colonies to amicably receive their colonizers, as opposed to their labor counterparts in Europe, who were increasingly forming political organizations to fight their oppressors.

That Duff Gordon’s model had applications beyond Egypt becomes clear with a story that she relates about a “queer little Indian from Delhi” whom she meets near Luxor:

I sent for him, and he came shaking in his shoes. I asked why he was afraid? “Oh, perhaps I was angry about something, and he was my rayah, and I might have him beaten.” I cried at him, “Ask pardon of God, O man.

It has been argued that during the nineteenth century, elite Egyptians increasingly chose Western and modern styles of marriage, defined by monogamous behaviors, nuclear families, educated wives, and affectionate and companionate relations. See, for example, Lisa Pollard, Beth Baron, Eve Troutt Powell, and Mona L. Russell for arguments about the adoption of modern marital relations, familial behaviors, and household habits in nineteenth-century Egypt.
How could I beat thee any more than thou couldst beat me? Have we not laws? And art thou not my brother, and the rayah of our Queen, as I am and no more?” “Mashallah!” exclaimed the six or eight fellaheen who were waiting for physic, in prodigious admiration and wonder; “and did we not tell thee that the face of the Sitt brings good fortune and not calamity and stick?” (325)

With half a dozen fellaheen as her witnesses, Duff Gordon demonstrates the benefits of her style of rule. The Egyptian peasants get a glimpse of what it would be like to be a colonial subject when they see that Duff Gordon treats the Indian as a “brother” and equal. That Duff Gordon has slipped into the role of the child and sister, reverential to her queen mother, exposes the ultimate use of her familial model, and recalls her story of the two sheiks who begged her “to communicate to the Queen of England that they would join her troops if she would invade Egypt” (245). The fellaheen also witness the Indian’s reaction to Duff Gordon’s kindness, for she concludes her account by relating that the Indian was “miserable when I left and would have liked me to have taken him as a volunteer servant” (325). Indeed, throughout her letters Duff Gordon offers a method for obtaining volunteers, from Omar who learns to iron and teaches her child Arabic without ever intimating a desire to earn more, to the many Egyptians whom she meets, who, like the sheiks, volunteer to fight in the queen’s army on the condition that she invade Egypt. In the end, Duff Gordon employs maternal methods of communication and cooperation learned in the family to invent a novel recipe for a volunteer colony.

Works Cited


