

# The "Maiden Tribute of Modern Egypt", White Slavery as a Gendered and Racialized Narrative of Imperial Crisis in Early Twentieth Century Egypt\*

*Francesca Biancani*

## Abstract

At the turn of the 20th century, a mass moral panic revolving around the figures of trafficked and sexually exploited girls and children known as the "white slave trade" spread across both the metropole and the Empire. In fact, it can be considered as an imperial construct indexing a whole set of racialised, sexed and gendered colonial anxieties about the degeneration - the term is not casual - of the imperial order. Building on a rich tradition of cultural studies focusing on the narration of late Victorian urban margins, this article aims at exploring issues of representation, power, and subaltern agency and their resignification in a colonial context by presenting the micro-history of a peculiar case of alleged child abduction in 1913 Egypt, the 'Nazifa Bint Omar' case. Drawing on discourse analysis methodology, the close reading of Nazifa's case, forcefully illustrates the ways in which a metropolitan discourse of moral panic and social control reinforced itself by migrating and playing on locale-specific cultural and racial elements. It also shows how a whole peculiar material configuration of gender, age, labour, and scarcity was totally obliterated in the process.

**Keywords:** Gender, race, White Slavery, Egypt, early 20<sup>th</sup> century

\* I presented parts of this article at the Virtual MESA Conference 2021 and in an invited talk at Duke University, NC, within the framework of the Seminar in Feminist Theory and Imperialism 2022/23, convened by Prof. Frances Hasso (Department of Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies), whom I thank sincerely. I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and the generosity they engaged the text with. Notes on transliteration of foreign terms: all foreign names are written as they appear in the sources. Arabic terms not contained in sources have been transliterated in a simplified manner, without diacritics. *ʾayn* and *hamza* are preserved in all cases, with the exception of the initial *hamza*, which is dropped.

## Introduction

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, traffickers, raiders of girl-flesh or "traders of virtues", as they were called, figured prominently in metropolitan tabloids as icons of moral degeneration and societal collapse. Together with prostitutes, *demi-mondaines* and pimps, traffickers played a central role in the public discourse on social and moral degeneration known as the "white slave trade" panic, as villains of the many lewd and graphic tales about the increasing dangers of urban life, part of a wider global classed and gendered critique of social change, human mobility, and growing interconnectedness (Walkowitz 1992; Laite 2017: 240).

The public outrage was heightened by the fact that, according to the many sensationalistic stories about trafficking featured daily by the press, children, in addition to young women, were routinely abducted. What could be said of a world, where a 7 or a 10-year-old child could be kidnapped, sold or pawned by their parents to evil traffickers for sheer profit, commentators asked, if not that society was on the verge of collapse and moral reform badly needed? Lay reformers and religious activists combined their efforts to mobilise public opinion against women's traffic and child prostitution, although articulating slightly different narratives. On one side, secular social reformers coupled their classist, moralistic and ideological concerns, generally rooted in bio-political biases about the actual viability of reformation of social "marginals", with a quasi-scientific sociological discourse, pointing to the social causes of the phenomenon. On the other side, religious activists crafted narratives of a Manichean clash between Evil and Good whereby children were normally depicted as hopeless victims exploited by ruthless people.

These distinct but equally essentialist representations were both integral to the process of normalisation of working-class female and juvenile sexuality and subalternity as they effectively legitimised bourgeois institutions of control and tutelage of working-class young girls (Finnegan 1979; 2004; Prunty 2017). As Debora Gorham (1978: 53) pointed out in her analysis of the debate about the age of consent in late Victorian England, the reason why reformers - both secular and religious - felt so disoriented about female juvenile sexuality was to be found in the contradictions between the bourgeois notions of childhood and adolescence as autonomous stages of an individual physical and psychological development emerging in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the reality of lower-class children's lived experiences (Gillis 1974). Working-class families could not afford to extend the period of dependence as middle-class families did and, as a result, their children had to become independent, that is adults, much earlier than their bourgeois counterparts. As far as girls were concerned, the social construction of gender combined with class in complicating matters: the social code designed to restrict middle-class women's mobility and preserve their chastity, and status, did not apply to working class girls, at least until purity reformers decided to act as their "tutors" through juridical practices and rehabilitation institutions. Horrific narratives of child

victimisation served the purpose to neutralise a liminality perceived as inconvenient and socially dangerous, that of working-class young girls, by framing it within a narrative of deviance, or damnation, and, more importantly, potential rehabilitation or redemption. Such dramatisation aptly obscured the contradictions inherent in the ideology producing these images. It allowed representing facts without addressing the reality of the unequal social relations they stemmed from – in that, by maintaining that these girls were victims, one did not have to see that they might engage in paid sex out of need – and to bridge the gap between the bourgeois desire to protect young girls and the enactment of coercive legislation curtailing individual agency.

Such mass moral panic revolving around the figure of sexually exploited girls and children spread across both the metropole and the Empire. As Cecily Deveraux (2002: 2) aptly remarks, the “white slavery scare” was an imperial construct that “can be seen to have emerged in the context of fiercely contested imperial expansion at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and to function more compellingly as an index of fears about the condition of dominant races and about gender and mobility within imperial space than as a sign of a real – or at least really widespread – traffic in young white girls”. A number of works (Doezema 2000; Attwood 2016; 2015; Irwin 1996; Levine 2002) in fact contributed to debunking the empirical evidence of the phenomenon, while highlighting its predominantly symbolic significance. Nonetheless, I argue that the prevalent narrative and metaphorical focus of these studies should not occlude paths of historical enquiry aiming at the investigation of the material contexts and agency of the actors involved.

Building on a rich tradition of cultural studies focusing on the narration of late Victorian suburban margins, issues of representation, power, an expansive concept of subaltern agency (agency can be considered as such even if non-emancipatory and “limited” to sheer subsistence) and their resignification in a colonial context are here explored through the micro-history of a peculiar case of alleged child abduction in 1913 Egypt, the “Nazifa Bint Omar case”. By comparing the ways in which diverse sources – court papers, the press and social purity literature – presented the case and/or fictionalised it, I hope to clarify some of the discursive strategies that advocates of different strands of social and moral reform used to craft their own agendas. Drawing on discourse analysis methodology, the close reading of Nazifa's case, the smuggling of a minor girl from Ottoman Syria into Egypt by a Zanzibari women trafficker which, I contend, was reworked into a “white slavery” narrative by N. W. Willis in a 1914 evangelical pamphlet entitled *Anti-Christ in Egypt*, forcefully illustrates the ways in which a metropolitan discourse of moral panic and social control reinforced itself by migrating and playing on context-specific cultural and racial elements. It also shows how a whole peculiar material configuration of gender, age, labour and scarcity was totally obliterated in the process.

### The Nazifa Bint Omar Case: "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Egypt"

In the summer of 1913, a famous case of child abduction made the headlines of crime news in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> On 14 August, a white slavery trial was opened before Mr G. G. Knox, Cairo Acting British Consul. A Zanzibari woman, Raya Bint Hamid, rested accused of attempting to smuggle a girl named Nazifa Bint Omar from Damascus to Zanzibar via Egypt. The woman had been arrested in Port Said, while she was about to leave with young Nazifa to her home country. Before that, the girl had stayed for 10 days in the Prince Hotel, Shari' Clot Bey, Cairo, and subsequently in the house of a certain Nur Bint Hassan, Raya's friend, where she had been taken care of by her servant Sadeq, while Nur and Raya had gone to Constantinople on a fortnight trip. Heard by the Court, the girl, who was not able to state her age but looked about 10, said she was originally from Syria. A fatherless child, she had lived with her mother until she went to work as a servant in the house of a certain Fayez Bey in Damascus. Nazifa had been working there for a year, when Raya, together with her daughter, grand-daughter, and her son-in-law, arrived in Damascus, approached her master and eventually took Nazifa away with her. They travelled to Aleppo, Beirut, Jaffa, Jerusalem and back to Jaffa where they embarked to Port Said and Cairo. While on route, she was introduced to people as a distant relative of Raya. She stated that she knew that Zanzibar was their final destination, but she did not know what would happen there. According to her testimony, she had not been mistreated while she was with Raya: on the contrary, she had been taken care of as "she also used to take regular meals with Raya" and her associates. Asked about her relationship with Raya, she said she would tell people they were in fact relatives, because "she did not want to show that she is liar [sic]". At an early stage in the preliminary examination, Crown prosecutor suggested that the court should communicate with the British Consul in Damascus, so that, if sufficient evidence was available there to offer a *prima facie* case against the accused, she might be sent to that court on the basis that the abduction had taken place in Syria. Meanwhile, it was suggested that the charge of sexual slavery should be changed into one of abduction or conspiracy to abduct, since no sexual abuse could be detected.

116

Not only did the case catch the attention of the reading public, it provided the idea for a story exemplifying how that genre of priggish and moralistic pamphleteering originally popularised in late Victorian England by the *Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* media sensation<sup>2</sup> travelled to the colony. In 1885, William T. Stead, a Pall Mall Gazette editorialist and a leading figure of the purity movement, published the first instalment of a six-part series investigating the underworld of child prostitution and commercial vice in Victorian London (Goodwyn 2018). With the help of Rebecca Jarrett, a 36-year-old regenerated prostitute, Stead managed to get himself a minor virgin in order to show that in London a man of means could easily buy a 13-year-old girl and start her off on prostitution. Young Eliza Armstrong was thus bought from her mother for five pounds, on the arrangement of going into service, and then

brought to a low boarding house where Stead pretended to be a customer willing to take advantage of her, before revealing her to be a journalist interested in exposing the moral turpitude befalling British society. The staged scoop inflamed public opinion. The *Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* case effectively compelled the government to pass specific restrictive legislations such as the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which raised the age of consent to 16 and fuelled a number of national and international civil society groups lobbying for moral regeneration and correction of vice (Attwood 2015). In this context, the notion of white slavery came to be re-signified. Before the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term, albeit containing an original racial reference to the whiteness of European captives in North African Barbary states in the modern period, pertained to the semantic spheres of abolitionism, socialism and radical labour rights as a critique of the forms of proletarian exploitation engrained in the capitalist system. The notion now came to be gendered and sexed, as the subjects implicated in white slavery were identified with young British girls trafficked for the purpose of prostitution in the brothels of regulationist European countries in the first place, or overseas. In other words, the more or less coerced sexual availability of unaccompanied European women worldwide came to signify the perceived disruption of metropolitan society and the dislocation of the colonial order with their class and racial underpinnings.

As such, the white slavery theme played a central role in the specular construction of both the metropolitan and the colonial order, well beyond the empirical evidence of international sex traffic. In the colonies, increasing circulation of people, fluidity in social and interracial relations, in short the perception of the fast-paced erosion of the hierarchies on which the imperial enterprise had been based, and of the demise of metropolitan hegemony, found expression in the public lamentation about the circumstances of thousands of young women freely roaming the globe, "a multitude of unchaste women" allegedly threatening the purity of the empire (Levine 2004; McClintock 1995; Fischer Tinè 2009). Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sensational narratives of moral panic about white slavery became exceptionally popular and spread globally, thanks to the emergence of modern tabloid journalism and a reading audience interested in pulp stories and scandals.

In 1914, in a book called *Anti-Christ in Egypt* and published in London by the Anglo-Eastern Publishing Company, the story was told of a lewd traffic of children sex slaves in Egypt, a "veiled" British protectorate since 1882, albeit on the verge of being formally put under British military rule at the outbreak of the First World War. Author N.W. Willis (1856-1922) was a rather picaresque character, a self-made man and former businessman and politician who left Australia to Singapore and then England in 1909 to escape criminal charges for fraud and conspiracy (Arnold and Doig 2015). Once in London, Willis started off as publisher of cheap pornography, his book "[d]ecorating the bookstalls with a series of gaily-jacketed books on prostitution, and gilded vice" (Pearl 1958: 80) and titillating the average reader's imagination with titles such as

*White Slaves in a Piccadilly Flat, Why Girls Go Wrong, Western Men with Eastern Morals* to name just a few in his white slavery series. His far from edifying past and intimate knowledge of the underworld in disparate imperial locations surely provided him with source materials for the many books in which, styling himself as a zealot of moral purity and invoking the support of a number of religious figures, he embarked on his disingenuous crusade against women's traffic and Levantinism, that is, the fear of physical and moral Western racial degeneration due to the erosion of metropolitan cultural hegemony over colonised people.<sup>3</sup> Such bio-political and eugenic themes are very central also to *Anti-Christ in Egypt*, a strong indictment of the capitulations, as a safe-conduct for any kind of illicit and immoral activity, especially prostitution, threatening the British imperial civilising and evangelical mission in the country.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Anti-Christ in Egypt, Sex, Gender, Violence, Race and the Erosion of the Colonial Order***

The book opens with a sustained lamentation on the bad state of morals in Egypt, a place where evangelists' efforts seem to be doomed by the very presence of hundreds of Christian women selling themselves in the open to men of every colour: "when the evidence of the harlotry of women of Christian nations is daily before the eyes, is it any wonder that the non-Christian people of Cairo evince no desire to embrace our faith" (Willis 1914: 21). While, on one side, local prostitution is unsurprisingly depicted as squalid and repulsive but somehow a foregone aspect of native atavism, Willis' tirade focuses on European prostitution, most of which went by unregulated and sanitarily unchecked under the purview of the capitulations. Cairene sex work, both regulated and clandestine – the latter especially in relation to minors –, relied on the existence of powerful networks of foreign bullies and pimps with close-knit connections within their national consulates. Consular authorities staunchly defending their sovereignty by resisting any British intervention ended up favouring all sorts of criminals shielded by legal immunity. Willis zooms then on human traffic, that is, the import of young women and girls into Egypt for the purpose of prostitution in Egyptian brothels or enslavement to local patrons and indulges in the narration of a personal encounter with a very young victim, a Christian girl from Jerusalem whom he happens to meet at the headquarters of Cairo City Police while being questioned by "kind-hearted, gentle natured" *Ma'amur* of Cairo Police George Philippides after her rescue: "[...] one of Christ's lamb, her little baby face was an emblem of innocence and purity of mind. She wore a dress, or a tunic, of faded and dirty print, while over her head was thrown the black veil or head-dress worn by the native girls. It was a pitiable sight to see that Child of Christ sitting within the huge police building at Cairo, alone and hundreds of miles away from her mother, who still toiled in Jerusalem in sight of the spot where He suffered death upon the Cross for all sinners" (Willis 1914: 85).

The narrative is crafted as a moral parable: the persuading aims of the author are

evident in the use of sentimentality and hyperboles, to the effect that an individual story becomes a segment of an eschatological battle between the forces of Good and Evil. The girl is described as an incarnation of purity, a veritable God's messenger, sent "[...] to tell the world the truth, so that good men and women may awaken to the work of the Devil's agents and save His lambs" (Willis 1914: 86).

Her story is told in detail to elicit a sense of realism, adorned by scattered biblical references and fairy-tale narrative tropes. The unnamed girl was an orphan living with her poor mother near the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. One day, on their way back home from work, they were approached by a dark-faced woman "from the land of Goshen", the biblical name of Egypt. With enticing words and by producing gold and riches in front of the girl's mother, the stranger eventually persuaded her to sell the child. The deal was sealed for 40 pieces of gold and the stranger swiftly left for Egypt with the girl. Once in Cairo, she was kept in a house on the outskirts of Cairo for some days. A number of men came to look at her until she was taken to the house of her new master: "what actually took place in the ante-room to hell is not clear, for at any reference to her entry in the room, tears filled the child's beautiful large eyes, her little mouth quivered and her speech was incoherent. It was with the greatest difficulty that the child was induced to whisper some of the horrors into the ears of the big hearted, sympathetic Philippides Bey, whose eyes moistened with tears of anger and shame as he listened to the child's statement" (Willis 1914: 88).<sup>5</sup>

The description of the girl's plight reaches a *crescendo*, before a quasi-divine intervention secures the happy ending. Alone in the room, the girl keeps invoking God by the local name of Allah to find some consolation, until "the prayers of this poor little lamb, already secured within the shambles for the butchering of the innocents, were heard. Her voice, ascending to heaven, awakened God's piety and, as though by a miracle, a native policeman passing by the lonely house, heard the child's supplication" (Willis 1914, 88-89).

The guard bursts into the place and rescues the child. Once again, the obnoxious idea of young Christian girls victimised by "depraved orientals" without Great Britain being able to intervene because of the unjust capitulatory legal system constitutes the core of the narrative, while other highly emotionally charged passages elaborate on the plight of baby-slaves imported from the Levant, Syria in particular, to end up deflowered and victimised by some local *beys*.

A number of conspicuous stylistic and structural analogies with Stead's *Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* narrative are all-evident. As Walkowitz discussed in relation to Stead's work (Walkowitz 1992: 84-85), sexual danger was used as a narrative lens through which an expanding middle and lower middle class reading public was mobilised to a certain political end, that is, in favour of an anti-elitist populist project based on moral reformation and puritanism.<sup>6</sup> This happened by skilfully exploiting the narrative pact central to some established and widely popular cultural forms - such

melodrama and literature of urban exploration in the first place - and experimenting with a novel genre such as New Journalism. Stead crafted a multifaceted textual space, whereby peculiar narrative styles, contents and forms were used to elicit certain emotional responses in the audience and enact a social drama exposing social divisions and unequal relations of power. As such, Stead's *Maiden* narrative became a critical site of public sphere formation. Very much like Stead's, Willis' pedagogical and political aims in *Anti-Christ in Egypt* are clear: the civic and moral duty of the committed social reformer-cum-writer is to inform and educate the public by exposing the truth, inciting the decent and honest citizens to take action and protest against the perceived danger of imperial social and civilisational collapse. Likewise, Willis' text is unstable, a *pastiche* of genres. The story of the victimised child is framed in multiple ways: it reflects a legacy of popular melodrama (see the stereotypical characters and the eventful final turn of events precipitated by fate or, here, by divine intervention) depurated by any radical social critique, it winks at late Victorian pornography, especially in the section evoking the torment of the child held captive, it draws on detective fiction and investigative journalism. In describing the girl's abduction, it employs fairy-tale images: the role of the villain is played by an overtly racialised working class women from the Horn of Africa before being transferred, with a class shift, to an undescribed Egyptian bey, epitomising everything despotic and barbaric about "the Orient". Also the stark contrast between the act of truth-revealing as performed through investigative journalism - with its realist effect - and the disorienting labyrinthine quality of the cityscape, whereby vice thrives behind locked doors in anonymous rooms scattered across the urban fabric, recalls the *Maiden* narrative albeit in an Oriental setting. While Stead's emphasis is on the mythological theme of the Minotaur and the labyrinth, Willis decided to exploit in full a biblical image, the lamb as a symbol of Christian purity, and its slaughter to signify the moral carnage purity activists mobilise against. This also testifies to the wide circulation of themes and images between the metropole and the colony, and their role in energising the constitution of a local public discourse on moral decadence, sexual danger and urban criminality as exemplified also by a notorious Egyptian press series against regulated prostitution entitled *Slaughterhouses of Virtues* (*Madhabih al-A'rad*) by Azharite and fervent nationalist Shaykh Mahmud Abu-l-'Uyun in 1923 (Biancani 2018: 158). More broadly, these local cultural appropriations bespeaks of the adaptive strategies of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian reformist nationalist elites of varying degrees of secular and liberal orientations and their attempt to shape their own version of the Egyptian nationalist project amid times of fast-paced order unravelling: as Samah Selim (2019: 172) puts it: "[c]olonial difference here collapses into the nuances of historical correspondence and the community of social interests across the imperial divide". A close reading of Willis' text allows us to argue that the previously exposed consular court case of Nazifa Bint Omar provided the factual basis for this narrative of sexual danger and imperial crisis. The Levantine setting, dates, the racial



characterisation of the procuress, which stands in contrast to the implied "whiteness" of the girl, the transactional element, all these elements corroborate the hypothesis that the fact narrated by Willis is a fictional re-elaboration of the Raya and Nazifa's case. Even more meaningful are the differences, though, as they foreground crucial rhetorical strategies. According to Willis, the abducted child was a Christian girl. Archival records instead point to the fact that the protagonist of the abduction case, Nazifa, was originally from the region of Malatya, an area in the south-eastern part of Anatolia, bordering on the Hatay region. She was most probably an Alevi Muslim girl of Turkish background, which may explain the use of the terms *mitwalli* and *nusayriyya*, *alawite*, to designate her, albeit incorrectly as Alevi and Alawite creeds are distinct if both based on the cult of 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, First Imam of the Shi'a and fourth Rightly Guided Caliph.<sup>7</sup> The theme of Circassian, that is, white Caucasian girls being in high demand as concubines (*sirriyeh*) across Ottoman lands and therefore being actively sought for by human traffickers like Raya, is also present in the archival sources. In short, Nazifa possibly was an Alevi Turk whose non-Semitic ethnic background and provenance from an Eastern Anatolian province, conspicuous in the presence of Caucasian communities - Armenians mostly - might account for her racial characterisation as white, thus explaining the interest that Raya Bint Hamid took in her. This could have well supported Willis' next rhetorical move, that is, the identification between the girl's "whiteness" and her Christian confession (Blum and Harvey 2012). The association with some Christian denominations could have been also eased by the fact that the child's region of provenance was characterised by the presence of Armenian communities subjected to late Ottoman genocidal policies from 1894 onwards. As widely investigated by a recent corpus of historiography, among the displaced were thousands of children who became orphans as a result of these persecutions culminating in the 1915 massacres. Some became the target of an emerging transnational humanitarian enterprise and were cared for by mostly foreign aid workers in various institutions, many others were left to fend for themselves in "the Levant". Many girls would be hired by the families of Ottoman officers, often as servants. They had their names changed, often converted to Islam and were integrated in the new households as a source of cheap labour and possibly sexual services contributing to reproduce the Ottoman sense of entitlement and privilege (Watenpaugh 2015: 134-135). In Willis' narrative, the abducted girl is not European, yet she is a Christian girl hailing from the Holy Land, no less. She becomes thoroughly Christianised and the readers' empathy is created through a familiarising technique relying on religious affinity. The danger expressed by incipient Levantinism is graphically rendered through the victimisation and oppression of an innocent and pure coreligionist at the end of lewd and amoral Oriental abusers. Aptly dramatised and adapted, a legal case of child abduction in between Ottoman Syria and Egypt morphed into a moralistic pamphlet on the erosion of the Empire *status quo*, the incumbent degeneration of the

imperial order and the dangerous Orientalisation of European moral norms. The logic underlying such narrative adaptation is in fact a sort of meta-discourse of the metropole on itself, whereby dominant anxieties of domestic social turmoil and imperial overreach are projected against the backdrop of a degenerated and racialised "Oriental" otherness. While Stead performed an immersion in the "exotic culture of the metropolitan underworld" (Walkowitz 1992: 97), in Willis the metropolitan underworld itself is decidedly displaced to "the Orient" in such a way as to evoke the blurring of differences between the metropole and the periphery, in short the very same undoing of an order, based on difference, racial and civilisational. Narratives of sexual danger and sexual violence here powerfully encapsulate the theme of race boundaries transgression in addition to previous metropolitan themes of class exploitation (aristocratic males exploiting working class girls). Again, sexual danger stands as a powerful metaphor of political disorder.

### Representation and Subaltern Agency

The interesting point, however, is how these dominant narrations, imbued as they were with middle class religious and moral zeal, were able to suppress vital information about the living conditions and worldviews of the working class girls involved in the trade, to the effect of turning them into docile objects of representation. From the legal report, then, we learn that, while the case was heard in Cairo, additional investigations were carried out in Damascus. Local witnesses were interrogated by the British consulate. Fa'iz Bey al-Ghussayri, former Ottoman *Kaimakan* of AkjaTagh kaza in the Sanjak of Malatya now resident in Damascus, stated that he had hired Nazifa Bint 'Omar as a servant in his household with a regular contract signed by him and the girl's father for 15 years three years earlier. Nazifa had previously worked at the service of an Ottoman officer in Malatya, at whose house Fa'iz Bey's mother-in-law had seen the girl at first. Nazifa - whose real name was in fact Ezzat - Bint 'Omar was originally from the village of Khanum Chiftlik, near Malatya. Her father repudiated her mother and re-married. Nazifa's step-mother ill-treated her and the girl escaped to Malatya, where she survived on begging before being taken in as a servant by the family she was staying with when Fa'iz Bey met her. On that occasion, she decided not to return back to her family and her father gave up every right over her for a period of 15 years in return for money. Once in Damascus, Nazifa stayed in Fa'iz Bey's house for about three years. One day, a Zanzibari woman named Raya Bint Hamid arrived in Damascus and stopped at a "Jerusalem Hotel"<sup>8</sup> owned by a certain Darwish Ibn Salih al-Bakri in the Suq al Khail. She said she wanted to buy a *sirriyeh*, a concubine, for her grandson living in Cairo and asked Darwish whether he knew of any suitable girl in town. Darwish Effendi spoke to Kamil Ibn 'Alı al-Hammamiyyeh, the owner of a barber shop close to his hotel, and he said he knew of an eleven-year-old girl, a *nesayriyyeh*

(*nusayriyya*, literally Alawite) called Nazifa who stayed at his neighbour's Fa'iz Bey. Her masters, he said, might want to get rid of her as she was always in quarrel with another girl-servant. The day after Darwish Effendi, al-Hammamiyyeh and Raya Bint Hamid visited Fa'iz Bey's house and drew up a contract with his wife and mother-in-law. Raya paid the women £T 40 and took Nazifa away. According to Fa'iz Bey's statement, the family soon regretted giving Nazifa away, protesting that the terms of the contract were not clear and that they did not want to give her up for life. Fa'iz Bey's mother-in-law went back to the Jerusalem Hostel offering to return the money she paid, but Nazifa preferred to stay with Raya. Such a claim was partially questioned by al-Hammamiyyeh, the barber, who said that Nazifa's sale was absolutely agreed upon by the two parties and that the reasons guiding Fa'iz Bey's family in drawing up the contract were purely economic: "[...] in actuality, it was only a real sale as the money was paid and the girl was never intended to be returned".<sup>9</sup>

In an attempt to dispel any suspicion about his connivance, al-Hammamiyyeh hastened to state that the "custom of selling girls is not common here but there are some brokers, very few, who could give one or two from the Mutwali or Nesayrieh [sic]if wanted".<sup>10</sup> Neither him nor Darwish Effendi had any active role in the sale and - although it seems very hard to believe - only the mother-in-law of Fa'iz and his wife gained from Nazifa's sale. Some light on the nature of the real motivations behind the selling of Nazifa and her status was perhaps involuntarily shed by Fa'iz Bey himself, when he told the consular authorities that, since they considered Nazifa as one of their children- they were willing to welcome the girl back and "[...] give back the money less her expenses for voyage back from Cairo and on *condition that she has not been misused*".<sup>11</sup> In other words, the merchandise had to be returned in perfect conditions. Complementing the brief information given by the local press, the trial papers are fundamental in giving us a broader sense of the agency of the people involved in the case. Despite the highly standardised and formal language used in court, if aptly interrogated these papers can give us a glimpse of the many stories and points of view intertwined in the case. More than the Manichean clash between the forces of Good and Evil described in evangelist narratives, where young innocent girls were invariably victimised and excruciated by ruthless villains, what it is conjured up here is a world far removed from bourgeois narratives of moral and social decadence, a world where childhood was commodified and made profitable as anything else in poor families' endless quest for survival. Under these circumstances, individual and collective perceptions of social constructs such as the notion of childhood and the family itself were dramatically different according to class. For many working-class children, the experience of being removed from families who could not care for them and enter another household as servants was probably acceptable as any other option enabling them to find some sort of shelter and means of subsistence.

## Conclusions

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a global moral panic revolved around the so-called "white slave trade", whereby "traffickers of virtue" became symbols of intra-class exploitation while at the same time exemplifying a sense of bourgeois uneasiness with the reality of working-class children's lived experiences. Far from being confined to the metropole, these narratives of sexual danger travelled to the colonies, where moral reformers' concerns with the erosion of colonial order were expressed via images of sexual danger and looseness. This comparative analysis of different sources available around a notorious case of child abduction in 1913 Egypt, the so-called "Raya and Nazifa" case, and how it was fictionalised in a 1914 moral purity pamphlet about vice in the empire, showed how dominant narrations of juvenile victimisation came to index deep anxieties about the colonial sovereign power. A close reading of 1914 N. W. Willis' *Anti-Christ in Egypt*, which, I contend, was a fictional version of the "Raya and Nazifa" court case, allowed us to locate in late Victorian media sensation *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* a powerful source of inspiration. Drawing on W.T. Steads' work, in fact, *Anti-Christ in Egypt* text became a critical site of public opinion formation by consciously exploiting multiple popular literary genres to the effect of alerting the readers to the danger of erosion of the imperial hegemony. The unravelling of the imperial *status quo* was expressed through images of gendered and racialised sexual violence, that is, by evoking the plight of Christian children trafficked into the country to satisfy the lust of local men of means. The literary adaptation of the "Raya and Nazifa" case while serving the basic political aim of the work, protesting capitulatory laws, transfigured into a cautionary tale of sexual danger a real life experience where the most basic violence was structural, that is, rested in the unequal power matrix in which working-class children would often be placed to fend for themselves.

124

Francesca Biancani is Associate Professor of Middle Eastern History and International Relations at the University of Bologna.

**Notes:**

1 - *The White Slave Trade Market- Zanzibari Woman Arrested*, "Egyptian Gazette", 14 August 1913 and 15 August 1913; *The Raya-Nazifa Case*, "Egyptian Gazette", 8 September 1913.

2 - William T. Stead, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, in "Pall Mall Gazette", 6-10 and 30 July 1885.. Primary source published with comment in Stead (2007).

3 - About the genealogy of the term "Levantinism" from its colonial usage to contemporary reconfigurations see Hochberg (2007: 20-43).

4 - An Ottoman legacy, the capitulations granted all European subjects resident in Egypt legal immunity. On evolving capitulations' historiography and the imbrication of consular jurisdiction and colonial hierarchies see Shlala (2018: 55-76).

5 - In fact, we have ample historical evidence to question the integrity and sympathy of George Philippides, or Philippides Bey, *Ma'amur* of Cairo City Police. On 27 November 1917, he was sentenced by the Court of First Instance of Cairo Governorate for corruption for taking bribes from subordinates, prisoners and politicians from 1913 to 1916, among which famous human trafficker Ibrahim al Gharbi, for a total amount of 784 Egyptian pounds. On 30 November 1917, Cairo criminal court sentenced him to five years imprisonment with forced labour. His wife Asma, who also played an active role in the affair, was sentenced to one year imprisonment. See Bakr (1987).

6 - See also Robson (1978). Other cultural studies showing how literary descriptions of the urban under-world were integral to the articulation and dissemination of shifting notions of middle-class identity in late Victorian times backing my analysis here are Koven (2004), Nead (2000), Nord (1995), Ross (1992) among others.

7 - The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA) Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 841/132, Statement of Kamil Ibn Ali al-Hamamiyyeh, barber, Ottoman subject, Haret el Ward, given to Dragoman Meshakha on 22 August, 1913. On the disambiguation between Alevi and Alawites see Sandal (2021).

8 - The name of the hostel Raya Bint Hamid stopped at in Damascus was "Jerusalem", while in N.W. Willis's story the trafficked girl was from Jerusalem.

9 - TNA FO 841/132, Statement of Kamil Ibn Ali al-Hamamiyyeh, barber, Ottoman subject, Haret el Ward, given to Dragoman Meshakha on 22 August, 1913.

10 - Ibid.

11 - Ibid. Italics mine.

## References

- Arnold J. A. and Doig, J. (2015), *William Nicholas Willis, Père, Fils and Family and the Anglo-Eastern Publishing Company*, in "Script Et Print", vol. 39, n. 4, pp. 197-220
- Attwood R. (2016), *Looking Beyond 'White Slavery': Trafficking, the Jewish Association's Representation of 'the Potential Victim', and the Dangerous Politics of Migration Control in England, 1890-1910*, in "Anti-Trafficking Review", vol. 7, pp. 115-138
- Attwood R. (2015), *Stopping the Traffic: The National Vigilance Association and the International Fight Against the 'White Slave Trade' (1899-c.1909)*, in "Women's History Review", vol. 23, n. 3, pp. 325-350
- Bakr A. (1987), *al-Bulis al Misri, 1922-1952*, Cairo, Maktabat Madbuli
- Biancani F. (2018), *Sex Work in Colonial Egypt, Women, Modernity, and the Global Economy*, London, I.B. Tauris
- Blum E. J and Harvey P. (2012), *The Color of Christ, the Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press
- Devereux C. (2000), *The Maiden Tribute and the Rise of the White Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century: The Making of an Imperial Construct*, in "Victorian Review", vol. 26, n. 2, pp. 1-23
- Doezema J. (2000), *Loose Women or Lost Women? The Re-emergence of the Myth of White Slavery in Contemporary Discourses of Trafficking in Women*, in "Gender Issues", vol. 18, n. 1, pp. 23-50
- Finnegan F. (2004), *Do Penance or Perish, a Study of Magdalene Asylums in Ireland*, Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Finnegan F. (1979), *Poverty and Prostitution, a Study of Victorian Prostitutes in London*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Fischer-Tinë H. (2009), *Low and Licentious Europeans': Race, Class and White Subalternity in Colonial India*, New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan
- Gillis J. R. (1974), *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations (1770-Present)*, London, Academic Press
- Goodwyn H. (2018), *A 'New' Journalist: The Americanization of W. T. Stead*, in "Journal of Victorian Culture", vol. 23, n. 3, pp. 405-420
- Gorham D. (1978), *"The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" Re-examined: Child-prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in late-Victorian England*, in "Victorian Studies", vol. 21, n. 3, pp.353-379
- Hochberg G. Z. (2007), *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of the Separatist Imagination*, Princeton, Princeton University Press
- Irwin M. A. (1996), *'White Slavery' as a Metaphor: Anatomy of a Moral Panic*, in "Ex Post Facto: the History Journal", vol. V
- Koven S. (2004), *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*, Princeton, Princeton University Press
- Laité J. (2017), *Traffickers and Pimps in the Era of White Slavery*, in "Past and Present", vol. X, n. 237, pp. 237-269
- Levine P. (2004), *'A Multitude of Unchaste Women': Prostitution in the British Empire*, in "Journal of Women's History", vol. 15, n. 4, pp. 159-163
- Levine P. (2002), *The White Slave Trade and the British Empire*, in "Crime, Gender, and Sexuality in Criminal Persecution: Criminal Justice History", vol. 17, pp. 133-146
- Mc Clintock A. (1995), *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, New York and London, Routledge
- Nead L. (2000), *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London*, New Haven, Yale University Press
- Nord D. E. (1995), *Walking the Victorian Streets, Women, Representation, and the City*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press
- Pearl C. (1958), *Wild Men of Sydney*, London, W. H. Allen
- Prunty J. (2017), *The Monasteries: Magdalene Asylums and Reformatory Schools of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland, 1853-1973*, Dublin, Columba Press
- Robson A. (1978), *The Significance of "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon"*, in "Victorian Periodicals Newsletter", vol. 11, n. 2, pp. 50-57
- Ross E. (1992), *Slum Travelers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860-1920*, Berkeley, University of California Press

- Sandal N. A. (2021), *Solidarity Theologies and the (Re)definition of Ethnoreligious Identities: The Case of the Alevis of Turkey and the Alawites of Syria*, in "British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies", vol. 48, n. 3, pp. 473-491
- Selim S. (2019), *Popular Fiction, Translation, and the Nahda in Egypt*, Cham, Palgrave MacMillan
- Shlala E. (2018), *The Late Ottoman Empire and Egypt, Hybridity, Law and Gender*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge
- Stead W.T. (2007), *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*, edited by A.E. Simpson, Lambertville, The True Bill Press
- Walkowitz J. R. (1992), *City of Deadly Delights, Narrative of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press
- Watenpaugh K. D. (2015), *Bread from Stones, The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism*, Oakland, University of California Press
- Willis N. W. (1914), *Anti-Christ in Egypt*, London, Anglo-Eastern Publishing Company