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At Home in Southern Egypt: Lucie Duff Gordon's Life on the Nile

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Brought up in Germany, France, and England, Lucie Duff Gordon was a distinguished English translator of literary and scholarly texts with an atypical but rigorous education. Her intellectual and linguistic talents found a renewed purpose in Southern Egypt, where she spent the last seven years of her life. In search of a warmer, dry climate to improve her serious health conditions, she created a meaningful Egyptian life in Luxor where she connected with the community, learnt Arabic, practised as an amateur doctor, and studied the local culture, traditions, and religions. Her perceptive letters also bear witness to the controversial rule of the Khedive of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, to the poverty of the working classes, and to those forced to work on the Suez Canal.

Published during her life as *Letters from Egypt, 1863-65* (1865), her epistolary travel literature remains an original contribution to travel writing because it is distinguished by her gendered, multilingual, and intercultural perspective that does not suffer of what Duff Gordon herself claims to be “the usual defect – the people are not real people” (2021, 92) of nineteenth-century travel books. Her correspondence focuses on human interactions and interconnecting the local with the global. Moreover, her letters bring to light her transnational subjectivity, her abilities as a cultural mediator and compelling storyteller, as well as her inquisitiveness and intercultural knowledge. An acute and perceptive translator, this article posits Duff Gordon established a multilingual and intercultural home on the river Nile that challenged both nineteenth-century British and Egyptian expectations.

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suffrage" (2018-19) and "Celebrating women's football: past and present" (2019) (with Lincoln Central Library, Fawcett Society, University of Lincoln, Lincoln Mystery Plays, and other partners)

When the British writer Lucie Duff Gordon (née Austin, 1821-1869) travelled to Egypt for the first time in 1862, she was in search of a warm and dry climate to recover from tuberculosis, after an unsuccessful trip to South Africa the previous year. This time she headed to a country that did not call for a long, hazardous journey and where her oldest daughter Janet (1842-1927) lived with her husband, Henry James Ross (1820-1902). It was also a destination that “brought back all the magic of the *Arabian Nights* which, [she] had loved as a child” (Frank 2001, 126), and travel books she knew well such as Edward Willian Lane’s *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836), *The Englishwoman in Egypt: Letters from Cairo, written during a residence there in 1842, 3 & 4* (1846) by his sister, Sophia Lane Poole, and Alexander Kinglake’s *Eothen, or Traces of travel brought home from the East* (1844), a text she considered translating into German. She had a distinguished career as an English translator of literary and scholarly texts from the French and German, including the popular *Mary Schweidler, The Amber Witch* (1844), a novel whose German original was described as “incommunicable, [...], in any translation” by the reviewer of the *London Quarterly Review* (quoted in Burns 2016, 7). Egypt was not yet the popular British tourist destination it was in the 1880s, after the British occupation in 1882 and the establishment of British protectorate that lasted until the country’s independence in 1922. In *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (1987), John Pemble notes it became a favourite British winter tourist resort at the end of the nineteenth century after the Suez Canal opened in 1869, Thomas Cook established Nile cruises on steamboats, and the railway line reached Luxor and Aswan in 1898. Notably, in 1864 Duff Gordon settled in Southern Egypt, in a peripheral, rural community beyond the communities of British expatriates and travellers in Alexandria and Cairo, where she negotiated a new life away from her family. She learnt Arabic, studied local customs, storytelling, and the two predominant religions, Islam and Coptic Orthodox Church, and became Luxor’s hakeemeh (doctress).

This article studies her transnational subjectivity through her Egyptian letters by investigating how her fluency in Arabic and practice as the hakeemeh shaped her experiences in Luxor to demonstrate her ability to communicate and negotiate across languages and cultures. She had lived in multiple countries since childhood and constructed her identity across European borders by assimilating diverse modes of living within her British household. In *The Relocation of Culture: Translations, Migrations, Borders* (2021), Simona Bertacco and Nicoletta Vallorani identify “translational literacy” as a “critical literacy [that sees] translation as an experimental and epistemological condition of human life” (16). *Letters from Egypt* reveals Duff Gordon’s “translational literacy”; her capacity to move across cultures, languages and religions; to acknowledge difference and diversity in the world; and to find agency through translation as an interpretative tool. By applying translation as “a mode of thinking and seeing the world” (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021, 5), I highlight how she negotiated a new life as an intercultural agent in Luxor. Initially interpreted as “a palimpsest, in which the Bible is written over Herodotus, and the Koran over that” (Duff Gordon 2021, 56), Egypt becomes, after seven years of residency, her final home. She did not return to England to be with her husband and children but reassured them by writing that she could have been better looked after and wished to “die among [her] own people in the Saeed” (2021, 332),¹ who gave her the name Noor ala Noor,

¹ ‘Saeed’ is how Duff Gordon spells Sa’id, Upper Egypt. All quotations from her letters keep her spelling.

which, in translating the meaning of her first name into Arabic, aptly conveys her transnational identity.

Duff Gordon relocated in Luxor as a British woman (white, educated, Christian, and upper-class), raised and educated in England, France, and Germany and with a distinguished writing career as a translator. Her intellectual and linguistic talents and confidence, which often singled her out in the Victorian era, I argue, shaped her transnational subjectivity that, in the words of Homi Bhabha, is “off-centre” and offers “angles of vision and visibility” (2007, xi) which are tangential and enhanced by her translational literacy. Her letters bring to light her inquisitiveness, intercultural knowledge, and talent as a storyteller. They also denote her abilities as a translator who used to embark on original publishing projects at times built on her perspicacious assessment of the Victorian British readership. Thus, notably at the start, they reflect Western imperialism by seeing the Orient, as Edward Said points out in *Orientalism* (1978), as “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (2003, 1), contrasting the West to the East and identifying the latter as a subordinate other in need of Western leadership. Published for the consumption of Victorian British readers, her correspondence reveals that her liberal values are still underpinned by Victorian political and scientific colonial and racial discourses, as also demonstrated by Sara Mills (1991). As Cara Murray points out, even if “well-intended”, her liberal attitudes still “created a justification for the consumerist habits of imperialism” (2008a, 110), including economising on her household by having slaves instead of European maids. Sahar Abdel-Hakim maintains that Duff Gordon’s travel writing conforms to orientalism and “male discursive strategies” (2001, 120) by objectifying, sexualising, and domesticating the Egyptian. Conversely, Aglaia Viviani (2003) highlights Duff Gordon’s sympathetic view and suggests her travel writing contributes different parameters to conceptualising Egypt through Said’s orientalism. In the words of her mother her letters are “most interesting, full of acute observation, and original courageous reflections on all around her” (quoted in Waterfield 1937, 192), even when their language reveals limiting traits of Victorian imperialism and sense of superiority.

This study aims to go beyond these binary oppositions that often determine the lines for discussions of the problematic cultural, racial and class politics of orientalism to examine the lasting transnational legacy of Duff Gordon’s life on the Nile, demonstrated by contemporary writers such as the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif, whose acclaimed novel *The Map of Love* (1999) has echoes of Duff Gordon’s Egyptian life and writing through the character of Lady Anna Winterbourne, a British widow who relocated to Egypt in 1901.² Diane Robinson-Dunn explains how Ahmed Khaki’s selection of her letters translated in Arabic in *Rasāʾl fī Misr: Hayāh Lucie Duff Gordon fī Misr 1862-1869* (*Letters from Egypt: the Life of Lucie Duff Gordon in Egypt, 1862-1869*, 1976) and sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, asserts their relevance as historical documents. She concludes that Duff Gordon’s letters remain enticing because they capture how she “negotiated among multiple influences experienced both prior to and during her stay in Egypt, always recreating herself anew while maintaining previous ties.” (2010, xxxi). The complexities of Duff Gordon’s seven-year residency might not

² See Wynne, Catherine. 2006. “Navigating the Mezzaterra: Home, Harem and the Hybrid Family in Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*.” *Critical Survey* 18 (2): 56-66; and Heilmann, Ann and Mark Llewellyn. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

be openly articulated yet, her perceptive writing evinces her agency in navigating the borders between Victorian socio-cultural attitudes and Egyptian ones, between her Egyptian life and her readership's expectations, and between her own and her family's needs. Recent studies have provided information on how she established a life in Luxor as a female healer (Hassan 2011) and a writer whose letters were at times intercepted because they exposed the rule of Ismail Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt from 1863 to 1879, reporting on the poverty of the agricultural labourers, and of those families whose men were forced to work on the Suez Canal (Wilkinson 2020). In pursuing those traces that identify Duff Gordon's transnational subjectivity, I explore how she relied on her translational literacy to establish an active, intercultural life in Luxor, how she is both the "human interpreter" (in Duff Gordon 1997, xix) praised by George Meredith and the "dragoman of all the languages in the world" (Duff Gordon 2021, 128) admired by the Arab travellers who met her in the Valley of the Kings. An acute and perceptive cultural mediator, I posit, she established a multilingual, intercultural home on the river Nile that challenged both nineteenth-century British and Egyptian attitudes. It is her translational literacy that places her off centre and sets her travel writing apart.

Longing "to bore you with traveller's tales"

From her arrival in October 1862, Duff Gordon writes of her longing "to bore" her addressees (mainly her mother and husband) "with traveller's tales" (33); but she knew her epistolary account was to be published. A contract with Macmillan had secured the publication of her correspondence from South Africa before her departure, and the editors had showed an interest in the one from Egypt and planned to first issue a few letters in the weekly *Macmillan's Magazine* in view of a book-length volume. She appreciated the potential financial contribution publishing would make to her life in Egypt, a destination that was more expensive than South Africa, but it also caused her some level of apprehension, even after the publication of *Letters from the Cape* in 1864. As the volume's publication approaches, she articulates her angst regarding her Egyptian epistles to her husband, Sir Alexander Duff Gordon (1811-1872), by claiming she is "dreadfully disappointed" (2021, 182). They had worked together on two important translations of the German historian Leopold von Ranke's work; thus, he is a reliable and sympathetic correspondent with whom to share her doubts. Intertextual links also point to her doubts by revealing how well-known texts on Egypt weighed on her mind, including the volume by her cousin Harriet Martineau and that of Gustave Flaubert who, in 1850, resided in the same house she rented in Luxor. Nevertheless, released during her lifetime as *Letters from Egypt, 1863-65* (1865),³ her epistolary travel book was an immediate critical and commercial success and turned her into one of Luxor's attractions.

As anticipated, excerpts first appeared in the *Macmillan's Magazine*, starting with the 1865 January issue. Signed L. D. G. but without identifying an addressee or date, the title "Masr-El-Kahira (Cairo)" locates her writing and presents it as extracts "*from the Letters of Lady Duff-Gordon*" (1865, 177). A footnote reveals her mother as the editor of this piece that combines diverse extracts focusing on the city of Cairo, where Duff Gordon resided during her first winter in Egypt.⁴ Her health conditions and cold

³ It was followed by the posthumous *Last Letters from Egypt* in 1875.

⁴ Her mother, Sarah Austin (née Taylor, 1793-1867), edited Duff Gordon's the first edition of *Letters from Egypt, 1863-65*.

temperatures then prompted her to continue her journey south by travelling on the Nile in a dahabiyah, a houseboat, towards Wadi Halfa. This first piece, which was followed by other original excerpts and later some from the published volume until June 1868, significantly does not mention the trip to Upper Egypt that was a turning point in her life in the South. It presents instead a British romanticised, stereotypical depiction of Egypt. In the volume form too, her travel narrative starts with “all sunshine and poetry” but it also shows a desire to represent the “kindness and civility” (2021, 13) of its people and the hospitality they demonstrated to her. To use her own words, her letters do not suffer of “the usual defect [of nineteenth-century travel writing] – the people are not real people, only part of the scenery” (2021, 92). She associates their hospitality and kindness with the warmth of the South and interacts and converses with them. In Luxor, she resided by the side of archaeological sites but had no real interest in writing about the traces of Ancient Egypt. Her interest were those people that Martineau “evidently knew and cared nothing about” because she “had the feeling of most English people [in Egypt], that the difference of manners is a sort of impassable gulf” (95). Derived from her reading of *Eastern Life Present and Past*, these comments mark her different approach to welcoming and being welcome. As early as 1863, to the playwright and journalist Tom Taylor, she had announced with confidence her plan “to see and know more of family life than many Europeans who have lived here for years. When the Arabs feel that one really cares for them, they heartily return it. If I could only speak the language I could see anything” (2021, 46). During her first winter in Egypt, she understood that learning Arabic was key to her relocation and to her “ability to acknowledge and assess the translational aspects of the world around [her]” (Bertacco and Vallorani, 2021, 9). When she settled in Luxor, she started learning Arabic and, from then on, her writing is increasingly imbued with her interest in the Arabic language, in Islamic and Coptic religion, manners and customs.

Duff Gordon had demonstrated her ‘translation literacy’ as a confident translator. Her English translation of Wilhelm Meinhold’s *Maria Schweidler, die Bernsteinhexe* (1843), *The Amber Witch* transformed the original into “the leading German novel of its day” (Burns 2016, 2) and the author into a favourite of the Pre-Raphaelites, compared to Walter Scott and Daniel Defoe. Furthermore, it made her, as Barbara Burns maintains, “one of the first modern European scholars to produce a literary translation which led to greater fame for a work than it achieved in its language of creation” (2016, 8). In *The French in Algiers* (1845), she abridged and adapted the contrasting accounts of two soldiers, a German and a French lieutenant, who fought against the guerrilla resistance to the French led by Abd-El-Kader in Algeria, to create a volume that focused on a more sympathetic portrayal of the Algerian leader, a subject she was often asked about by people in Egypt. When she relocated to Egypt to deal with a debilitating illness, she applied her translation abilities to adapt, adjust and partake in the life of Luxor’s community in respect of their manners and customs. Her writing captures how her growing ability to speak Arabic feeds into developing a transnational ability. In a letter to her mother dated February 1864, she acknowledges the reciprocity that she sees as the basis of her life as a migrant to Luxor by describing how the local people “approve [her] unveiled face, and [her] association with men; that is [her] custom’, and they think no harm of it” (95). To her husband she demonstrates their “kindness to strangers” (90) by explaining how, within a week from her arrival, she is “on visiting terms with all the ‘county families” (89). With a title acquired through marriage, she is welcome by the elite on whom she depends for intellectual debates and conversations. Her networks widen when she is invited to

attend family and community occasions and engages with all social strata from the consular and the magistrate to the fellaheen, with whom she shares food at religious festivals. The biographer Katherine Frank fittingly points out how, whilst her family and friends in England thought of her life as “a light [that] had gone out” (2007, 207), in Luxor, in fact, it remained alight in her Arabic name Noor ala Noor, which retains the meaning at the root of first name, light. Chosen by the people of Luxor, it also signifies the essence of her transnational identity by capturing through difference her translational ability to travel across “the impassable gulf” she complains her compatriots perceive in interpreting geographical barriers as cultural ones. She confides instead in her translation literacy to move across cultures by learning Arabic, accepting her neighbours’ hospitality and support, being involved in their religious festivals, and making use of her medical supplies and tools as “the *Hakeemeh* (doctress) of Luxor” (Duff Gordon 2021, 134). Her knowledge of Arabic and medical practice are interdependent and at the origins of her emphasis on human interactions and of her writing’s intersecting of the local with the global.

Speaking the language “to see anything”

Brought up in Germany and France, as well as England in a radical and Unitarian family, Duff Gordon’s education was atypical, multilingual, and rigorous. Before enrolling at Miss Shepherd’s school at Bromley Common, from 1826 to 1828, she had attended school in Germany and then spent a short time at Dr Edward Biber’s “boys’-school at Hampstead” (Ross 1893, 432), where she studied “classics, mathematics, philosophy and ancient history” (Frank 2007, 45) showing “more taste for Greek than anything else” (Ross 1893, 432). Her mother contributed to her learning of Latin and German. The latter remained a connection between mother and daughter throughout their lives both at a personal and professional level,⁵ because they translated the same German authors. The recurring “Dearest Mutter” (2021, 13) in Duff Gordon’s correspondence shows how she associated her mother with German, a language she also used in her letters to her husband. More generally, her writing displays how she is also at ease with French and Italian. She engaged with some of the most influential thinkers of the time from a young age in her parents’ salon in London, Bonn, and Paris, and then in the one she established in London after becoming Lady Duff Gordon in 1840. Learning Arabic to interact independently is an obvious course of action on which she reflects from the opening letter noting that “[i]t would be very easy to learn colloquial Arabic, as they all speak with such perfect distinctness that one can follow the sentences and catch the words one knows as they are repeated”, and that, in two weeks, she has learnt “forty or fifty words already” (2021, 15).

Accompanied by Sally Naldrett, the maid who travelled with her to South Africa, Duff Gordon arrived at Alexandria in 1862 with no knowledge of Arabic but, with the

⁵ Sarah Austin was a prominent English translator whose translations of German and French scholarly works contributed to shaping the reception of and the debates surrounding modern German and French philosophical thought and political reform in nineteenth-century Britain. See Johnston, Judith. 2008. “Sarah Austin and the Politics of Translation in the 1830s.” *Victorian Review* 34 (1): 101-13; Johnston, Judith. 2013. *Victorian Women and the Economies of Travel, Translation and Culture, 1830-1870*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate; and Capancioni, Claudia. 2022. “Three Generations of British Women Translators: Sarah Austin’s Legacy in the Long Nineteenth Century.” In *New Perspectives on Gender and Translation: New Voices for Transnational Dialogues*, edited by Eleonora Federici and José Santaemilia, 33-47. New York: Routledge.

help of members of the international community to whom her daughter Janet introduced her, she employed Omar Abu Halaweh, a dragoman (interpreter) who spoke good English, and could deal with many duties, including hiring the crew for the dahabiyah, cooking, and tending to her when ill. Frank reckons this “was the wisest and most important decision of her life” (2007, 243), after marrying Alexander Duff Gordon, because he took care of her until her death. Abu Halaweh was her first interpreter and introduced her to Egyptian culture and Islam, but he did not read or write, and, by May 1863, she was frustrated by the limits of relaying on an interpreter and the difficulty in finding a teacher of Arabic who spoke European languages. In Luxor, she finally found her teacher of Arabic in Sheykh Yussuf, who had an authoritative religious and legal role in the town and became such a dear friend that he named a son, Noor, after her. She had converted to the Church of England when she was a pupil at Miss Shepherd’s school and her religious knowledge and faith sustained her relationship with both the Muslim and the Coptic communities. Helen Wheatley suggests that Yussuf “educated [her] in the ways of Islam” (1992, 98) and was keen for her to explain Islam was a tolerant religion and voice the difficult conditions of Egypt under Ismail Pasha. Her representation of Islam as tolerant and generous and her testimony to the Khedive’s controversial ruling and resulting dissent are original elements in her travel writing.

Duff Gordon started her lessons as soon as she moved to Luxor and, from January 1864, she wrote about her struggles, progress, and great enthusiasm for learning Arabic. A keen learner, she admits her initial difficulties with “the Alif Bay (A B C)” (2021, 87) declaring that writing Arabic “is very hard work” (87) and “no trifle” (98) and showing sympathy for the children who must learn such “a terrible alphabet” (91). What she returns to most is her “want of a dictionary” (96) because Yussuf does not speak English and, even with her knowledge of modern and ancient languages and determination, studying without resources was limiting. Her daily routine includes “an hour’s diction and reading of the story of the Barber’s fifth brother” (112) from the *Arabian Nights* with Yussuf in the evening. Her preconceived ideas derived from the English translation of this text are faced by the reality of its fictional form and her favourite childhood book ceases to be a means to translate Egypt or her neighbours’ ways of life and becomes instead an entertaining collection of folk tales and a tool to practice Arabic. Another central text is the Qu’ran that is very much present in the lives of those who are Muslim in her community, including Abu Halaweh and Yussuf, who are central characters in her letters and pray for her health. As her linguistic skills progress, the letters absorb more Arabic words and expressions, translations of idioms, and accounts of conversations and storytelling. Her hope in what the future may hold, for example, is captured by Inshallah and women are increasingly referred to as hareem, asserting the meaning of the word to expose the false views on the harem, the female domestic space it also refers to. A Turkish harem she visited in 1866 is interpreted through British ways of life and depicted as “a tea-party at Hampton Court, only handsomer, not as to the ladies, but the clothes, furniture and jewels” (254). This image reclaims the harem as an upper-class domestic space and remarkably states its superior beauty.

She balances her Egyptian life with her readers’ expectations by reflecting, for example, on the similarities between her Egyptian diet and the food described in the Bible and locating Queen Victoria into Egyptian culture as “the English Sultana” (105). Conversely, the Gregorian calendar can turn into the Islamic one, especially at the

time of Ramadan (227, 324). Writing to her husband, more than once, she humorously relates how she is reminded of the impropriety in referring to him as her husband instead of “‘O my Lord’ or ‘Abou Maurice’” (33) to identify him as the master of the house or Maurice’s father. The women, she explains, “pity and wonder far more at the absence of [her] ‘master’” (132) and her children. In the company of men, she is used to be accepted as a nominal man or a maternal figure, but among women the dynamics differ because their questions touch her at a more private level and bring to the surface issues of female propriety, motherhood, and sexuality that, as time passes by, she avoids and silences. In “Distance Mothering and the ‘Cradle Lands’”, Murray demonstrates how an image of herself as a good mother is crucial to Duff Gordon because she is a distant mother. She elects herself to a nurturing maternal role in her Egyptian household and her servants and slaves to that of children.⁶ The younger members of her household are associated to her children, her younger daughter Urania in particular, who was six when she settled in Luxor. If nurturing methods represent Duff Gordon’s solution to the existing colonial use of force, by fixing her household into a timeless childhood she also avoids reflecting on sexual desire. *Letters from Egypt* omits the relationship between Sally Naldrett and Omar Abu Halaweh that in 1865 resulted in the birth of a child, her dismissal and his inability to take care of her. The episode challenged Duff Gordon’s liberal values and, like the slaves in her household, shows conflicting tensions in her behaviour which are driven by personal and practical needs. Towards Abu Halaweh she demonstrated a leniency that she refused to show, even after family’s pressure, towards Naldrett, whom she previously admired for her ability to be transnational. Afterwards, she resisted having a maid and preferred a whole male household.

Letters from Egypt creates a homely family atmosphere for her life “à l’Arabe” (50) that sees her sitting on divans and cushions to have food with her fingers, pipe and coffee, and wearing Arab clothes. In a letter dated 1866, she recounts how, when Marianne North and her father Frederick entered her home, he “looked rather horrified at the turbaned society in which he found himself” (229). After her husband’s stay in 1864, writing to her mother, Duff Gordon reflects on how she “had quite forgotten how [her Eastern life] would seem to a stranger” (167). She reveals her disappointment and concern by acknowledging how her husband found it “to be very poor and comfortless” (167). There are no details of this visit, which was his only one but, by 1866, when writing to him, she shows more humour and a lightness of touch in describing how she looks by asking, “Would you know the wife of your bosom in a pair of pink trousers and a Turkish *tob*? Such is my costume as I write.” (237) Visualising her transnational subjectivity, she recognises how she is identified as other by her ever-more distant addressee who does not appear to be sympathetic. On the other hand, she also represents her sense of belonging, of “no longer [being] looked upon as a foreigner” (233) but instead being a “*Bint el-Beled* (daughter of the country)” (192) who feels “the rising Nile” (157) giving her new life and is sought after as the local healer. Subverting Orientalist stereotypes, she provocatively identifies herself as “a

⁶ Duff Gordon acknowledges issues of slavery but, when it comes to her household, she writes that they are young people who are left in her care by their owners or ask to work for her. On her household and slavery. See Murray, Cara. 2008. *Victorian Narrative Technologies in the Middle East*. New York: Routledge; and Murray, Cara. 2008. “Distance Mothering and the ‘Cradle Lands.’” In *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal*, edited by Ellen Bayuk Rosenman and Claudia Klaver, 248-67. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

‘stupid lazy Arab’” (162) when she is unable to write home because of her health conditions. Her deteriorating health is often dealt with wit until her final letters where she is keen on reassuring her family of her decision to die in Egypt. For example, she lightens up her being “oppressive company” by associating her mood with that of a beloved and amusing father figure imagined by Jane Austen, a favourite writer of hers, and declaring that she is “apt, like Mr Wodehouse [sic] in ‘Emma’, to say, ‘Let us all have some gruel’” (313). Interestingly her health conditions are effectively counterbalanced by her activities as Luxor’s hakeemeh, a role she affirms is awarded to her by Luxor’s community because she is not afraid of sharing her medicinal drugs and devises with them. In contrast to a deteriorating patient, her letters narrate how her “practice” (235) grows in parallel with her fluency in Arabic.

Being “the Hakeemeh (doctress) of Luxor”

Duff Gordon’s agency as an amateur doctor is a central motif that develops from her second letter. A health traveller who is well prepared to deal with her own medical conditions, she responds to the hospitality of the South with medical assistance. She is not a trained medical doctor; however, as Narin Hassan (2011) explains, she represents her medical knowledge not through feminine images of nursing or caring for her household, crew or community, but those of a courageous doctor who is not afraid of infections or bodily encounters. Her “doctoring business” (Duff Gordon 2021, 235) identifies her as an atypical woman traveller whose translation literacy facilitates a position that is in direct, intimate connection with the local communities and their bodies, and who breaks gender expectations as she practises medicine whilst her dragoman assists her. Her medical practice emphasises her authoritative function and simultaneously diverts from her private experiences of illness and physical decline as a patient who increasingly needs assistance. Indeed, she locates herself within a group of professional doctors whom she consults and collaborates with, such as De Leo Bey, who is the “surgeon-in-chief of the Pasha’s troops” (41) and receives women, and the author of *Egypt and the Nile Considered as a Winter Resort for Pulmonary and Other Invalids* (1867), Dr John Patterson who, in June 1868, advised her to visit Beirut. This trip was almost fatal because a Roman Catholic and a Lutheran establishment refused to assist her prompting her to emphasise how “Oman and Darfour nursed [her] better than Europeans ever do” (329). The community that she assists increasingly becomes the only one she trusts with her life. She listens to the advice of Dr Osman Ibraheem, a lecturer at the School of Medicine in Cairo, who believes in the benefits of sand baths (277), and takes a “mixture (consisting of liquorice, cumin and soda)” (300) Sheykh Abdurrachman prepares for her according to ancient Greek and Islamic medicine. She might not show the same enthusiasm for “doctoring” that she does for the Arabic language or Egyptian food; nonetheless the space she negotiates as the hakeemeh well demonstrates her ability to connect across differences and see ways to bring across what is most useful of diverse forms knowledge. In an intercultural atmosphere where different medical practices coexist, she prescribes castor oil and enemas to facilitate bodily functions and simultaneously her survival depends on Abu Halaweh “cupping” her (1969, 232); where she gives out Western drugs but prefers camel’s milk to cod-liver oil.

Her “doctoring business” is based on Western medicine and partakes in the “widening of Western medical authority” (Hassan 2011, 41), supported in Egypt through the establishment of schools for military physicians on the model of European

countries. Significantly, it “gives her greater access to everyday conditions and concerns” (44) of people who travel “twenty miles” (153) to see her. Following an epidemic in Spring 1864 when, confident it was not contagious, she gave medical support with her dragoman’s assistance to those who asked for help without discriminations, her fame grew giving her an active function in Luxor that connected her socially and culturally. Being able to assist her community motivates her: when others are ill, she is well and unafraid to enter the domestic spheres to diagnose symptoms and provide relief, even when the prominent religious figures advise against it. Her status as the hakeem is at the origins of her Arabic name and her confidence in shaping a transnational identity in Egypt. Her letters promote an innovative, professional image of the hakeem who dispenses, and tries to produce, “common drugs” (2021, 239) such as castor oil; who is so successful that by 1866 “she “should like to sell [her practice] to any ‘rising young surgeon” (235). She does not ask for payment but receives local produce from her patients who belong to all levels of society from the fellaheen to the government’s officials. She supports vaccination against smallpox and fights cholera outbreaks, but it is her ability to share her medical equipment with her patients that places her off centre. “The ‘lavement machine’ (enema) [she] brought” (1969, 155) is a personal devise that she is comfortable giving to anyone who needs it thus becoming a symbol of her intimate connection with Luxor’s community. She often associates her patients’ need for castor oil or the administration of an enema with fasting rules that prohibits animal food, demonstrating how the “lavement machine” is also symbolic of her ability to understand what causes her patients’ gastrointestinal symptoms because she shares their produce and food and partakes in their religious festivals.

As a healer, she has access to intimate family life in Luxor because the women rely on her aid for themselves and their children. Sahar Abdel-Hakim argues she “socialised mainly” (2001, 119) with the elite of male educated Arabs, thus building a sense of belonging based on reconstructing a milieu resembling her London male-dominated intellectual salon. Her letters, however, also allude to her enjoyment of female company that she associates with their conversations and storytelling: for instance, she is keen on listening to the stories of Abu Halaweh’s mother and wife but their presence is fleeting and without a voice. Her writing does not question gender dynamics but bases observations on marriage and sexuality mainly on male interlocutors. Yet, it includes, as Judith Tucker observed in reviewing the 1983 Virago publication of *Letters from Egypt*, references to women’s autonomy through images of women doing agricultural work and running farms, and earning “their independent livings as dancers, fortune tellers, or highly paid musicians and singers” (1990, 248). Furthermore, it is when she is finally accepted by the older women that she declares, “I now know everybody in my village and the ‘cunning women’ have set up the theory that my eye is lucky; so I am asked to go and look at young brides, visit houses that are building, inspect cattle, etc. as a bringer of good luck” (204). Their trust takes longer but it is most cherished because it means that they “bring their sick children” (239), providing her with opportunities to partake fully in the female nurturing community. In underlining the exceptionality of the confidence the women bestow on her, she complies with an image of female wisdom that pictures them as “ugly old women” who bore [her] with their aches and pains” (239) which also echoes her own concerns of being an aging, tiresome letter writer. She also portrays herself as an old woman who appears different to Victorian ideals of beauty and propriety and thus ugly. The women appropriate her professional representation of her medical practice by

associating her abilities with a “lucky eye” and their wider set of values and beliefs. Initially assisted by her dragoman, by 1866 Duff Gordon’s fluency in Arabic meant she could dispense with male interpreters and enter the domestic space where she can listen to her patients’ requests and stories independently. It is the knowledge the women share with her that she is “sorry that [she] did not persist and write” (330), as she states six months before her death suggesting her husband advised her against writing “on the beliefs of Egypt” (330) for fear of negative reception. She regrets she has not pursued her ideas for papers on beliefs, festivals and customs she has learned about emphasising how, “the learned know books, and I know men, and what is still more difficult, women” (331). In finally stating her gender difference, she stresses the value of the knowledge she learned from the women, a subject of studies she recognises to be underrepresented too late.

A married woman who lived on her own in Egypt, Duff Gordon was aware of being an atypical presence both in women’s and men’s company. Thought to be older because of her “gray hair” (78) and consequentially wise, she received respect in view of her class, education and otherness. Her scholarly and linguistic knowledge gave her uncommon opportunities both in England and in Egypt. Her enthusiasm for transnational intellectual discussions and debates resonates in her correspondence, a publication initially conceived to be a space for “traveller’s tales” at the border line between life and travel writing. As her health deteriorated and increasingly affected her mobility and ability to write, her need to bear witness to the injustice of governmental policies that, like forced labour, exacerbated the conditions of the agricultural labourers, whom she saw struggling because of poverty and malnourishment, and to the growth of national movements increased. Having carefully negotiated diverse perceived concepts of respectability in order to create some flexibility in constructing her transnational subjectivity as a woman writer, her regret is predominantly for unfulfilled projects that would have benefitted more from her expert skills as a translator with a passion for history, folklore and storytelling. Her *Letters from Egypt* remains remarkable because it does not dwell on her difficult health conditions but on her active, intercultural life in Southern Egypt through the tangential lenses of her transnational subjectivity. In 1875, her daughter Janet Ross published Duff Gordon’s letters from Egypt and South Africa in *Last Letters from Egypt, to Which Are Added Letters from the Cape*, including a memoir of her mother. Ross then collected her mother’s Egyptian letters from 1862 to 1869 in *Lady Duff Gordon’s Letters from Egypt*, a volume that, in 1902, presented an introduction by George Meredith and reissued her memoir. In 1969, Duff Gordon’s great-grandchild, Gordon Waterfield expanded and revised Ross’s 1902 edition in *Letters from Egypt 1862-1869 by Lady Duff Gordon*. These editions emphasise the personal, autobiographical line of narrative that identifies the author as a British health traveller in Egypt who writes home by drawing attention to the intimacy of family letters in which she negotiates the need to reassure her recipients of her health conditions with her desire to “amuse” (122) them and to engage with their lives in England as an absent mother, daughter, and wife. In 1983 and 1997 Virago reprinted the 1902 edition and so did Eland in 2021. This travel literature specialist removed the materials by Ross and Meredith and opted for a biographical afterword and notes inviting readings that go beyond a biographical lens and consider how, framed by those privileges that distinguished her in Egypt from both men and women as a British health traveller, *Letters from Egypt*

conveys a multilingual, intercultural atmosphere that recognises Duff Gordon's translational ability to relocate in the South as Noor ala Noor.

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