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THE

Chapter 8



DISCOURSE

OF THE VEIL

QASSIM AMIN'S *TAHRIR AL-MAR'A* (THE LIBERATION OF woman), published in 1899, during a time of visible social change and lively intellectual ferment, caused intense and furious debate. Analyses of the debate and of the barrage of opposition the book provoked have generally assumed that it was the radicalness of Amin's proposals with respect to women that caused the furor. Yet the principal substantive recommendations that Amin advocated for women—giving them a primary-school education and reforming the laws on polygamy and divorce—could scarcely be described as innovatory. As we saw in the last chapter, Muslim intellectuals such as al-Tahtawi and 'Abdu had argued for women's education and called for reforms in matters of polygamy and divorce in the 1870s and 1880s and even earlier without provoking violent controversy. Indeed, by the 1890s the issue of educating women not only to the primary level but beyond was so uncontroversial that both state and Muslim benevolent societies had established girls' schools.

The anger and passion Amin's work provoked become intelligible only when one considers not the substantive reforms for women that he advocated but

rather, first, the symbolic reform—the abolition of the veil—that he passionately urged and, second, the reforms, indeed the fundamental changes in culture and society, that he urged upon society as a whole and that he contended it was essential for the Egyptian nation, and Muslim countries generally, to make. The need for a general cultural and social transformation is the central thesis of the book, and it is within this thesis that the arguments regarding women are embedded: changing customs regarding women and changing their costume, abolishing the veil in particular, were key, in the author's thesis, to bringing about the desired general social transformation. Examining how Amin's recommendations regarding women formed part of his general thesis and how and why he believed that unveiling was the key to social transformation is essential to unraveling the significance of the debate that his book provoked.

Amin's work has traditionally been regarded as marking the beginning of feminism in Arab culture. Its publication and the ensuing debate certainly constitute an important moment in the history of Arab women: the first battle of the veil to agitate the Arab press. The battle inaugurated a new discourse in which the veil came to comprehend significations far broader than merely the position of women. Its connotations now encompassed issues of class and culture—the widening cultural gulf between the different classes in society and the interconnected conflict between the culture of the colonizers and that of the colonized. It was in this discourse, too, that the issues of women and culture first appeared as inextricably fused in Arabic discourse. Both the key features of this new discourse, the greatly expanded signification of the veil and the fusion of the issues of women and culture, that made their formal entry into Arab discourse with the publication of Amin's work had their provenance in the discourses of European societies. In Egypt the British colonial presence and discursive input constituted critical components in the situation that witnessed the emergence of the new discourse of the veil.

The British occupation, which began in Egypt in 1882, did not bring about any fundamental change in the economic direction in which Egypt had already embarked—the production of raw material, chiefly cotton, to be worked in European, mainly British, factories. British interests lay in Egypt's continuing to serve as a supplier of raw materials for British factories; and the agricultural projects and administrative reforms pursued by the British administration were those designed to make the country a more efficient producer of raw materials. Such reforms and the country's progressively deeper implication in European capitalism brought increased

prosperity and benefits for some classes but worse conditions for others. The principal beneficiaries of the British reform measures and the increased involvement in European capitalism were the European residents of Egypt, the Egyptian upper classes, and the new middle class of rural notables and men educated in Western-type secular schools who became the civil servants and the new intellectual elite. Whether trained in the West or in the Western-type institutions established in Egypt, these new “modern” men with their new knowledges displaced the traditionally and religiously trained ‘ulama as administrators and servants of the state, educators, and keepers of the valued knowledges of society. Traditional knowledge itself became devalued as antiquated, mired in the old “backward” ways. The ‘ulama class was adversely affected by other developments as well: land-reform measures enacted in the nineteenth century led to a loss of revenue for the ‘ulama, and legal and judicial reforms in the late nineteenth century took many matters out of the jurisdiction of the shari‘a courts, over which the ‘ulama presided as legislators and judges, and transferred them to the civil courts, presided over by the “new men.”

The law reforms, under way before the British occupation, did not affect the position of women. The primary object of the reforms had been to address the palpable injustice of the Capitulatory system, whereby Europeans were under the jurisdiction of their consular powers and could not be tried in Egyptian courts. (The Capitulations were concessions gained by European powers, prior to colonialism, which regulated the activities of their merchants and which, with the growing influence of their consuls and ambassadors in the nineteenth century, were turned into a system by which European residents were virtually outside the law.) The reforms accordingly established Mixed Courts and promulgated civil and penal codes applicable to all communities. The new codes, which were largely based on French law, bypassed rather than reformed shari‘a law, although occasionally, concerning homicide, for instance, shari‘a law, too, was reformed by following an Islamic legal opinion other than the dominant opinion of the Hanafi school, the school followed in Egypt. This method of reforming the shari‘a, modifying it by reference to another Islamic legal opinion, was followed in Turkey and, later in the twentieth century, in Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia—but not Egypt—in order to introduce measures critically redefining and amending the law on polygamy and divorce in ways that fundamentally curtailed male license.¹

Other groups besides the ‘ulama were adversely affected by Western penetration and the local entrenchment of Western power. Artisans and small

merchants were unable to compete with Western products or were displaced by the agents of Western interests. Others whose circumstances deteriorated or whose economic advancement was blocked by British administrative policies were rural workers who, as a result of peasant dispossession, flocked to the cities, where they swelled the ranks of urban casual laborers. A growing lower-middle class of men who had received a Western-type secular education up to primary level and who filled the lower ranks of the administration were unable to progress beyond these positions because educational facilities for further training were not available. The British administration not only failed to provide more advanced facilities but responded to the problem by increasing fees at primary level to cut enrollment. Measures such as these, which clearly discriminated in favor of the well-to-do and frustrated the hopes and ambitions of others, accentuated class divisions.²

The British administration pursued its educational policy in the teeth of both a popular demand for education for boys and for girls and the urgings of intellectuals of all political and ideological complexions that the administration give priority to providing more educational facilities because of the importance of education to national development. The British administration espoused its restrictive policy partly for political reasons. Cromer, the British consul general, believed that providing subsidized education was not the province of government, and he also believed that education could foster dangerous nationalist sentiments.³

Even this brief outline of the consequences of the increasing economic importance of the West and of British colonial domination suggests how issues of culture and attitudes toward Western ways were intertwined with issues of class and access to economic resources, position, and status. The lower-middle and lower classes, who were generally adversely affected by or experienced no benefits from the economic and political presence of the West had a different perspective on the colonizer's culture and ways than did the upper classes and the new middle-class intellectuals trained in Western ways, whose interests were advanced by affiliation with Western culture and who benefited economically from the British presence. Just as the latter group was disposed by economic interests as well as training to be receptive to Western culture, the less prosperous classes were disposed, also on economic grounds, to reject and feel hostile toward it. That attitude was exacerbated by the blatant unfairness of the economic and legal privileges enjoyed by the Europeans in Egypt. The Capitulations—referred to earlier—not only exempted Europeans from the jurisdiction of Egyptian law

but also virtually exempted them from paying taxes; Europeans consequently engaged in commerce on terms more favorable than those applied to their native counterparts, and they became very prosperous.

Conflicting class and economic interests thus underlay the political and ideological divisions that began ever more insistently to characterize the intellectual and political scene—divisions between those eager to adopt European ways and institutions, seeing them as the means to personal and national advancement, and those anxious to preserve the Islamic and national heritage against the onslaughts of the infidel West. This states somewhat simply the extremes of the two broad oppositional tendencies within Egyptian political thought at this time. The spectrum of political views on the highly fraught issues of colonialism, westernization, British policies, and the political future of the country, views that found expression in the extremely lively and diverse journalistic press, in fact encompassed a wide range of analyses and perspectives.

Among the dominant political groups finding voice in the press at the time Amin's work was published was a group that strongly supported the British administration and advocated the adoption of a "European outlook." Prominent among its members were a number of Syrian Christians who founded the pro-British daily *Al-muqattam*. At the other extreme was a group whose views, articulated in the newspaper *Al-mu'ayyad*, published by Sheikh 'Ali Yusuf, fiercely opposed Western encroachment in any form. This group was also emphatic about the importance of preserving Islamic tradition in all areas. The National party (*Al-hizb al-watani*), a group led by Mustapha Kamil, was equally fierce in its opposition to the British and to westernization, but it espoused a position of secular rather than Islamic nationalism. This group, whose organ was the journal *Al-liwa*, held that advancement for Egypt must begin with the expulsion of the British. Other groups, including the Umma party (People's party), which was to emerge as the politically dominant party in the first decades of the twentieth century, advocated moderation and an attitude of judicious discrimination in identifying political and cultural goals. Muhammad 'Abdu, discussed in chapter 7, was an important intellectual influence on the Umma party, though its members were more secular minded; he had advocated the acquisition of Western technology and knowledge and, simultaneously, the revivification and reform of the Islamic heritage, including reform in areas affecting women. The Umma party advocated the adoption of the European notion of the nation-state in place of religion as the basis of community. Their goals were to adopt Western political institutions and, at the same time, to gradually bring about Egypt's independence from the British.

Umma party members, unlike Mustapha Kamil's ultranationalists or the Islamic nationalists, consequently had an attitude, not of hostility to the British, but rather of measured collaboration. Among its prominent members were Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid and Sa'd Zaghloul.

The colonial presence and the colonizer's economic and political agenda, plus the role that cultural training and affiliation played in widening the gap between classes, provided ample ground for the emergence at this moment of the issue of culture as fraught and controversial. Why the contest over culture should center on women and the veil and why Amin fastened upon those issues as the key to cultural and social transformation only becomes intelligible, however, by reference to ideas imported into the local situation from the colonizing society. Those ideas were interjected into the native discourse as Muslim men exposed to European ideas began to reproduce and react to them and, subsequently and more pervasively and insistently, as Europeans—servants of empire and individuals resident in Egypt—introduced and actively disseminated them.

The peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women had always formed part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam.⁴ A detailed history of Western representations of women in Islam and of the sources of Western ideas on the subject has yet to be written, but broadly speaking it may be said that prior to the seventeenth century Western ideas about Islam derived from the tales of travelers and crusaders, augmented by the deductions of clerics from their readings of poorly understood Arabic texts. Gradually thereafter, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, readings of Arabic texts became slightly less vague, and the travelers' interpretations of what they observed approximated more closely the meanings that the male members of the visited societies attached to the observed customs and phenomena. (Male travelers in Muslim societies had extremely limited access to women, and the explanations and interpretations they brought back, insofar as they represented a native perspective at all, essentially, therefore, gave the male point of view on whatever subject was discussed.)

By the eighteenth century the Western narrative of women in Islam, which was drawn from such sources, incorporated elements that certainly bore a resemblance to the bold external features of the Islamic patterns of male dominance, but at the same time it (1) often garbled and misconstrued the specific content and meaning of the customs described and (2) assumed and represented the Islam practiced in Muslim societies in the periods in which the Europeans encountered and then in some degree or other dominated those societies to be the only possible interpretation of the religion.

Previous chapters have already indicated the dissent within Islam as to the different interpretations to which it was susceptible. And some sense of the kinds of distortions and garbling to which Muslim beliefs were subject as a result of Western misapprehension is suggested by the ideas that a few more perceptive Western travelers felt themselves called upon to correct in their own accounts of Muslims. The eighteenth-century writer and traveler Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, for example, attacked the widespread belief among her English contemporaries that Muslims believed that women had no souls, an idea that she explained was untrue. (Montagu believed that many of the misapprehensions of her contemporaries about Islam arose from faulty translations of the Quran made by “Greek Priests, who would not fail to falsify it with the extremity of Malice.”) She also said that having herself not only observed veiled women but also used the veil, she was able to assert that it was not the oppressive custom her compatriots believed it to be and in fact it gave women a kind of liberty, for it enabled them not to be recognized.⁵

But such rebuttals left little mark on the prevailing views of Islam in the West. However, even though Islam’s peculiar practices with respect to women and its “oppression” of women formed some element of the European narrative of Islam from early on, the issue of women only emerged as the centerpiece of the Western narrative of Islam in the nineteenth century, and in particular the later nineteenth century, as Europeans established themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries.⁶

The new prominence, indeed centrality, that the issue of women came to occupy in the Western and colonial narrative of Islam by the late nineteenth century appears to have been the result of a fusion between a number of strands of thought all developing within the Western world in the latter half of that century. Thus the reorganized narrative, with its new focus on women, appears to have been a compound created out of a coalescence between the old narrative of Islam just referred to (and which Edward Said’s *Orientalism* details) and the broad, all-purpose narrative of colonial domination regarding the inferiority, in relation to the European culture, of all Other cultures and societies, a narrative that saw vigorous development over the course of the nineteenth century. And finally and somewhat ironically, combining with these to create the new centrality of the position of women in the colonial discourse of Islam was the language of feminism, which also developed with particular vigor during this period.⁷

In the colonial era the colonial powers, especially Britain (on which I will focus my discussion), developed their theories of races and cultures and of a social evolutionary sequence according to which middle-class Victorian

England, and its beliefs and practices, stood at the culminating point of the evolutionary process and represented the model of ultimate civilization. In this scheme Victorian womanhood and mores with respect to women, along with other aspects of society at the colonial center, were regarded as the ideal and measure of civilization. Such theories of the superiority of Europe, legitimizing its domination of other societies, were shortly corroborated by “evidence” gathered in those societies by missionaries and others, whose observations came to form the emergent study of anthropology. This same emergent anthropology—and other sciences of man—simultaneously served the dominant British colonial and androcentric order in another and internal project of domination. They provided evidence corroborating Victorian theories of the biological inferiority of women and the naturalness of the Victorian ideal of the female role of domesticity. Such theories were politically useful to the Victorian establishment as it confronted, internally, an increasingly vocal feminism.⁸

Even as the Victorian male establishment devised theories to contest the claims of feminism, and derided and rejected the ideas of feminism and the notion of men’s oppressing women with respect to itself, it captured the language of feminism and redirected it, in the service of colonialism, toward Other men and the cultures of Other men. It was here and in the combining of the languages of colonialism and feminism that the fusion between the issues of women and culture was created. More exactly, what was created was the fusion between the issues of women, their oppression, and the cultures of Other men. The idea that Other men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was to be used, in the rhetoric of colonialism, to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples.

Colonized societies, in the colonial thesis, were alike in that they were inferior but differed as to their specific inferiority. Colonial feminism, or feminism as used against other cultures in the service of colonialism, was shaped into a variety of similar constructs, each tailored to fit the particular culture that was the immediate target of domination—India, the Islamic world, sub-Saharan Africa. With respect to the Islamic world, regarded as an enemy (and indeed as *the* enemy) since the Crusades, colonialism—as I have already suggested—had a rich vein of bigotry and misinformation to draw on.

Broadly speaking, the thesis of the discourse on Islam blending a colonialism committed to male dominance with feminism—the thesis of the new colonial discourse of Islam centered on women—was that Islam was

innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies. Only if these practices “intrinsic” to Islam (and therefore Islam itself) were cast off could Muslim societies begin to move forward on the path of civilization. Veiling—to *Western* eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies—became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.

The thesis just outlined—that the Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriated the language of feminism in the service of its assault on the religions and cultures of Other men, and in particular on Islam, in order to give an aura of moral justification to that assault at the very same time as it combated feminism within its own society—can easily be substantiated by reference to the conduct and rhetoric of the colonizers. The activities of Lord Cromer are particularly illuminating on the subject, perfectly exemplifying how, when it came to the cultures of other men, white supremacist views, androcentric and paternalistic convictions, and feminism came together in harmonious and actually entirely logical accord in the service of the imperial idea.

Cromer had quite decided views on Islam, women in Islam, and the veil. He believed quite simply that Islamic religion and society were inferior to the European ones and bred inferior men. The inferiority of the men was evident in numerous ways, which Cromer lists at length. For instance: “The European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; he loves symmetry in all things . . . his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the Oriental on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description.”⁹

Cromer explains that the reasons “Islam as a social system has been a complete failure are manifold.” However, “first and foremost,” he asserts, was its treatment of women. In confirmation of this view he quotes the words of the preeminent British Orientalist of his day, Stanley Lane-Poole: “The degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten into the whole system of Islam” (2:134, 134n).

Whereas Christianity teaches respect for women, and European men

“elevated” women because of the teachings of their religion, Islam degraded them, Cromer wrote, and it was to this degradation, most evident in the practices of veiling and segregation, that the inferiority of Muslim men could be traced. Nor could it be doubted that the practices of veiling and seclusion exercised “a baneful effect on Eastern society. The arguments in the case are, indeed, so commonplace that it is unnecessary to dwell on them” (2:155). It was essential that Egyptians “be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of western civilisation” (2:538), Cromer stated, and to achieve this, it was essential to change the position of women in Islam, for it was Islam’s degradation of women, expressed in the practices of veiling and seclusion, that was “the fatal obstacle” to the Egyptian’s “attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilisation” (2:538–39); only by abandoning those practices might they attain “the mental and moral development which he [Cromer] desired for them.”¹⁰

Even as he delivered himself of such views, the policies Cromer pursued were detrimental to Egyptian women. The restrictions he placed on government schools and his raising of school fees held back girls’ education as well as boys’. He also discouraged the training of women doctors. Under the British, the School for Hakimas, which had given women as many years of medical training as the men received in the School of Medicine, was restricted to midwifery. On the local preference among women for being treated by women Cromer said, “I am aware that in exceptional cases women like to be attended by female doctors, but I conceive that throughout the civilised world, attendance by medical men is still the rule.”¹¹

However, it was in his activities in relation to women in his own country that Cromer’s paternalistic convictions and his belief in the proper subordination of women most clearly declared themselves. This champion of the unveiling of Egyptian women was, in England, founding member and sometime president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage.¹² Feminism on the home front and feminism directed against white men was to be resisted and suppressed; but taken abroad and directed against the cultures of colonized peoples, it could be promoted in ways that admirably served and furthered the project of the dominance of the white man.

Others besides the official servants of empire promoted these kinds of ideas: missionaries, for example. For them, too, the degradation of women in Islam legitimized the attack on native culture. A speaker at a missionary conference held in London in 1888 observed that Muhammad had been exemplary as a young man but took many wives in later life and set out to preach a religion whose object was “to extinguish women altogether”; and

he introduced the veil, which “has had the most terrible and injurious effect upon the mental, moral and spiritual history of all Mohammedan races.” Missionary women delivered themselves of the same views. One wrote that Muslim women needed to be rescued by their Christian sisters from the “ignorance and degradation” in which they existed, and converted to Christianity. Their plight was a consequence of the nature of their religion, which gave license to “lewdness.” Marriage in Islam was “not founded on love but on sensuality,” and a Muslim wife, “buried alive behind the veil,” was regarded as “prisoner and slave rather than . . . companion and helpmeet.” Missionary-school teachers actively attacked the custom of veiling by seeking to persuade girls to defy their families and not wear one. For the missionaries, as for Cromer, women were the key to converting backward Muslim societies into civilized Christian societies. One missionary openly advocated targeting women, because women molded children. Islam should be undermined subtly and indirectly among the young, and when children grew older, “the evils of Islam could be spelled out more directly.” Thus a trail of “gunpowder” would be laid “into the heart of Islam.”¹³

Others besides officials and missionaries similarly promoted these ideas, individuals resident in Egypt, for example. Well-meaning European feminists, such as Eugénie Le Brun (who took the young Huda Sha‘rawi under her wing), earnestly inducted young Muslim women into the European understanding of the meaning of the veil and the need to cast it off as the essential first step in the struggle for female liberation.

Whether such proselytizers from the West were colonial patriarchs, then, or missionaries or feminists, all essentially insisted that Muslims had to give up their native religion, customs, and dress, or at least reform their religion and habits along the recommended lines, and for all of them the veil and customs regarding women were the prime matters requiring reform. And all assumed their right to denounce native ways, and in particular the veil, and to set about undermining the culture in the name of whatever cause they claimed to be serving—civilizing the society, or Christianizing it, or saving women from the odious culture and religion in which they had the misfortune to find themselves.

Whether in the hands of patriarchal men or feminists, the ideas of Western feminism essentially functioned to morally justify the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe. Evidently, then, whatever the disagreements of feminism with white male domination within Western societies, outside their borders feminism turned from being the critic of the system of white male dominance

to being its docile servant. Anthropology, it has often been said, served as a handmaid to colonialism. Perhaps it must also be said that feminism, or the ideas of feminism, served as its other handmaid.

The ideas to which Cromer and the missionaries gave expression formed the basis of Amin's book. The rationale in which Amin, a French-educated upper-middle-class lawyer, grounded his call for changing the position of women and for abolishing the veil was essentially the same as theirs. Amin's text also assumed and declared the inherent superiority of Western civilization and the inherent backwardness of Muslim societies: he wrote that anyone familiar with "the East" had observed "the backwardness of Muslims in the East wherever they are." There were, to be sure, local differences: "The Turk, for example, is clean, honest, brave," whereas the Egyptian is "the opposite."¹⁴ Egyptians were "lazy and always fleeing work," left their children "covered with dirt and roaming the alleys rolling in the dust like the children of animals," and were sunk in apathy, afflicted, as he put it, "with a paralysis of nerves so that we are unmoved by anything, however beautiful or terrible" (34). Nevertheless, over and above such differences between Muslim nationals, Amin asserted, the observer would find both Turks and Egyptians "equal in ignorance, laziness and backwardness" (72).

In the hierarchy of civilizations adopted by Amin, Muslim civilization is represented as semicivilized compared to that of the West.

European civilization advances with the speed of steam and electricity, and has even overspilled to every part of the globe so that there is not an inch that he [European man] has not trodden underfoot. Any place he goes he takes control of its resources . . . and turns them into profit . . . and if he does harm to the original inhabitants, it is only that he pursues happiness in this world and seeks it wherever he may find it. . . . For the most part he uses his intellect, but when circumstances require it, he deploys force. He does not seek glory from his possessions and colonies, for he has enough of this through his intellectual achievements and scientific inventions. What drives the Englishman to dwell in India and the French in Algeria . . . is profit and the desire to acquire resources in countries where the inhabitants do not know their value nor how to profit from them.

When they encounter savages they eliminate them or drive them from the land, as happened in America . . . and is happening now in Africa. . . . When they encounter a nation like ours, with a degree of

civilization, with a past, and a religion . . . and customs and . . . institutions . . . they deal with its inhabitants kindly. But they do soon acquire its most valuable resources, because they have greater wealth and intellect and knowledge and force. (69–70)

Amin said that to make Muslim society abandon its backward ways and follow the Western path to success and civilization required changing the women. “The grown man is none other than his mother shaped him in childhood,” and “*this is the essence of this book. . . . It is impossible to breed successful men if they do not have mothers capable of raising them to be successful.* This is the noble duty that advanced civilisation has given to women in our age and which she fulfills in advanced societies” (78; emphasis in original).

In the course of making his argument, Amin managed to express not just a generalized contempt for Muslims but also contempt for specific groups, often in lavishly abusive detail. Among the targets of his most dismissive abuse were the rulers of Egypt prior to the British, whom he called corrupt and unjust despots. Their descendants, who still constituted the nominal rulers of the country, were championed by some nationalist anti-British factions, including Mustapha Kamil’s party, as the desirable alternative to British rule. Amin’s abuse thus angered nationalists opposed to the British as well as the royal family. Not surprisingly, Khedive Abbas, compelled to govern as the British wished him to, refused to receive Amin after the publication of his book. And Amin’s eager praise of the British also inflamed the anti-British factions: he represented British dominion in Egypt as bringing about an age of unprecedented justice and freedom, when “knowledge spread, and national bonding appeared, and security and order prevailed throughout the country, and the basis of advancement became available” (69).

In Amin’s work only the British administration and European civilization receive lavish praise. Among those singled out as targets of his abuse were the ‘ulama. Amin characterizes them as grossly ignorant, greedy, and lazy. He details the bleakness of their intellectual horizons and their deficiencies of character in unequivocal terms.

Our ‘ulama today . . . takes no interest in . . . the intellectual sciences; such things are of no concern to them. The object of their learning is that they know how to parse the bismillah [the phrase “in the name of God”] in no fewer than a thousand ways, and if you ask them how the thing in their hands is made, or where the nation to which they belong or a neighboring nation or the nation that occupied their coun-

try is located geographically and what its strengths and weaknesses are, or what the function of a bodily part is, they shrug their shoulders, contemptuous of the question; and if you talk with them about the organization of their government and its laws and economic and political condition, you will find they know nothing. Not only are they greedy . . . they always want to escape hard work, too. (74)

Those for whom Amin reserved his most virulent contempt—ironically, in a work ostensibly championing their cause—were Egyptian women. Amin describes the physical habits and moral qualities of Egyptian women in considerable detail. Indeed, given the segregation of society and what must have been his exceedingly limited access to women other than members of his immediate family and their retinue, and perhaps prostitutes, the degree of detail strongly suggests that Amin must have drawn on conceptions of the character and conduct of women based on his own and other European or Egyptian men's self-representations on the subject, rather than on any extensive observation of a broad-enough segment of female society to justify his tone of knowledgeable generalization.¹⁵ Amin's generalizations about Egyptian women include the following.

Most Egyptian women are not in the habit of combing their hair every-day . . . nor do they bathe more than once a week. They do not know how to use a toothbrush and do not attend to what is attractive in clothing, though their attractiveness and cleanliness strongly influence men's inclinations. They do not know how to rouse desire in their husband, nor how to retain his desire or to increase it. . . . This is because the ignorant woman does not understand inner feelings and the promptings of attraction and aversion. . . . If she tries to rouse a man, she will usually have the opposite effect. (29)

Amin's text describes marriage among Muslims as based not on love but on ignorance and sensuality, as does the missionary discourse. In Amin's text, however, the blame has shifted from men to women. Women were the chief source of the "lewdness" and coarse sensuality and materialism characterizing Muslim marriages. Because only superior souls could experience true love, it was beyond the capacity of the Egyptian wife. She could know only whether her husband was "tall or short, white or black." His intellectual and moral qualities, his sensitive feelings, his knowledge, whatever other men might praise and respect him for, were beyond her grasp. Egyptian women "praise men that honorable men would not shake hands with, and hate others that we honor. This is because they judge according to

their ignorant minds. The best man to her is he who plays with her all day and night . . . and who has money . . . and buys her clothes and nice things. And the worst of men is he who spends his time working in his office; whenever she sees him . . . reading . . . she . . . curses books and knowledge” (29–30).

One further passage about Egyptian women is worth citing for its surely unwarranted tone of authority. It is also interesting for the animus against women, perhaps even paranoia, that it betrays.

Our women do nothing of housework, and work at no skill or art, and do not engage themselves in the pursuit of knowledge, and do not read and do not worship God, so what do they do? I will tell you, and you know as I do that what occupies the wife of the rich man and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, master and servant, is one thing . . . which takes many forms and that is her relationship with her husband. Sometimes she will imagine he hates her, and then that he loves her. At times she compares him with the husbands of her neighbors. . . . Sometimes she sets herself to finding a way to change his feelings toward his relatives. . . . Nor does she fail to supervise his conduct with the servant girls and observe how he looks when women visitors call . . . she will not tolerate any maid unless the maid is hideous. . . . You see her with neighbors and friends, . . . raising her voice and relating all that occurs between herself and her husband and her husband’s relatives and friends, and her sorrows and joys, and all her secrets, baring what is in her heart till no secret remains—even matters of the bed. (40)

Of course, not many women would have had the wealth to be as free of housework as Amin suggests, and even wealthy women managed homes, oversaw the care of their children, and saw to their own business affairs, as I described in an earlier chapter, or took an active part in founding and running charities, as I will discuss in the following chapter. But what is striking about Amin’s account (addressed to male readers) of how he imagined that women occupied themselves is that even as he describes them as obsessed with their husband and with studying, analyzing, and discussing his every mood and as preoccupied with wondering whether he hates them and whether he is eying the maid or the guest, Amin does not have the charity to note that indeed men had all the power and women had excellent reason to study and analyze a husband’s every mood and whim. On a mood or a whim, or if a maid or a guest caught his fancy, they could find themselves, at any age, divorced, and possibly destitute. To the extent, then, that

Amin was right in his guess as to what women discussed when no men were present—and some women did endlessly talk about their husbands—perhaps those that did, did indeed need to be vigilant about their husbands' moods and conduct and to draw on their women friends for ideas.

On the specific measures for the "liberation" of woman that Amin called for, and even what he meant by liberation, the text is turgid and contradictory to a degree attributable variously to intellectual muddle on the part of the writer, to the intrinsic confusion and speciousness inherent in the Western narrative, which he adopted, and to the probability that the work was the fruit of discussions on the subject by several individuals, whose ideas Amin then threw together. Indeed, the contribution of other individuals to the work was apparently more than purely verbal: certain chapters, suggests Muhammad 'Amara, editor of Amin's and 'Abdu's works, were written by 'Abdu. One chapter that 'Amara argues was 'Abdu's is distinctly different in both tone and content and consequently will be discussed here separately. It may be noted in this context that one rumor in circulation when the book was published was that it had been written at Cromer's urgings. Given the book's wholehearted reproduction of views common in the writings of the colonizers, that idea was not perhaps altogether farfetched.¹⁶

Amin's specific recommendations regarding women, the broad rhetoric on the subject notwithstanding, are fairly limited. Among his focuses is women's education. He was "not among those who demand equality in education," he stated firmly, but a primary-school education was necessary for women (36). Women needed some education to enable them to fulfill their function and duty in life as wives. As Amin spelled it out: "It is the wife's duty to plan the household budget . . . to supervise the servants . . . to make her home attractive to her husband, so that he may find ease when he returns to it and so that he likes being there, and enjoys the food and drink and sleep and does not seek to flee from home to spend his time with neighbors or in public places, and it is her duty—and this is her first and most important duty—to raise the children, attending to them physically, mentally, and morally" (31).

Clearly there is nothing in this definition to which the most conservative of patriarchs could not readily assent. Amin's notion that women should receive a primary-school education similarly represented the conservative rather than the liberal point of view among intellectuals and bureaucrats of his day. After all, Amin's book was published in 1899, thirty years after a government commission had recommended providing government schools for both boys and girls and toward the end of a decade in which the demand for education at the primary and secondary level far exceeded capacity. In

the 1890s girls, it will be recalled, were already attending schools—missionary schools and those made available by Muslim benevolent societies as well as government schools—and they flooded the teacher-training college with applications when it opened in 1900. In 1891 one journal had even published essays on the role of women by two women from the graduating class of the American College for Girls. Amin's call for a primary-school education for women was far from radical, then; no one speaking out in the debate sparked by his book contested this recommendation.

The demand that was most vehemently and widely denounced was his call for an end to segregation and veiling. Amin's arguments, like the discourse of the colonizers, are grounded in the presumption that veiling and seclusion were customs that, in Cromer's words, "exercised a baneful effect on Eastern society." The veil constituted, wrote Amin, "a huge barrier between woman and her elevation, and consequently a barrier between the nation and its advance" (54). Unfortunately, his assault on the veil represented not the result of reasoned reflection and analysis but rather the internalization and replication of the colonialist perception.

Pared of rhetoric, Amin's argument against seclusion and veiling was simply that girls would forget all they had learned if they were made to veil and observe seclusion after they were educated. The age at which girls were veiled and secluded, twelve to fourteen, was a crucial age for the development of talents and intellect, and veiling and seclusion frustrated that development; girls needed to mix freely with men, for learning came from such mixing (55–56). This position is clearly not compatible with his earlier statement that anything beyond a primary-school education was "unnecessary" for girls. If intellectual development and the acquisition of knowledge were indeed important goals for women, then the rational recommendation would be to pursue these goals directly with increased schooling, not indirectly by ending segregation and veiling so that women could associate with men.

Even more specious—as well as offensive to any who did not share Amin's uncritical and wholesale respect for European man and his presumption of the inferiority of native practices—was another argument he advanced for the abandonment of the veil. After asserting that veiling and seclusion were common to all societies in ancient times, he said: "Do Egyptians imagine that the men of Europe, who have attained such completeness of intellect and feeling that they were able to discover the force of steam and electricity . . . these souls that daily risk their lives in the pursuit of knowledge and honor above the pleasures of life, . . . these intellects and these souls that we so admire, could possibly fail to know the means of

safeguarding woman and preserving her purity? Do they think that such a people would have abandoned veiling after it had been in use among them if they had seen any good in it?" (67).

In one section of the book, however, the argument against veiling is rationally made: the chapter which 'Amara suggests was composed by 'Abdu. 'Abdu points out the real disadvantages to women of segregation and veiling. These customs compel them to conduct matters of law and business through an intermediary, placing poor women, who need to earn a living in trade or domestic service, in the false and impossible position of dealing with men in a society that officially bans such dealings (47–48).

The section as a whole is distinctly different in tone and ideas from the rest of the work, and not just in the humane rather than contemptuous prose in which it frames its references both to women and to the Islamic heritage. As a result, some of the views expressed there contradict or sit ill with those expressed elsewhere in the book. There is surely some discrepancy, for example, between Amin's view that women are "deficient in mind, strong in cunning" (39) and need no more than a primary-school education, on the one hand, and the sentiments as to the potential of both sexes that finds expression in the following passage, on the other: "Education is the means by which the individual may attain spiritual and material happiness. . . . Every person has the natural right to develop their talents to the limit.

"Religions address women as they do men. . . . Arts, skills, inventions, philosophy . . . all these draw women as they do men. . . . What difference is there between men and women in this desire, when we see children of both sexes equal in their curiosity about everything falling within their ken? Perhaps that desire is even more alive in girls than in boys" (22–23).

Passages suggestive of careful thought are the exception rather than the rule in this work, however.¹⁷ More commonly the book presented strident criticism of Muslim, particularly Egyptian, culture and society. In calling for women's liberation the thoroughly patriarchal Amin was in fact calling for the transformation of Muslim society along the lines of the Western model and for the substitution of the garb of Islamic-style male dominance for that of Western-style male dominance. Under the guise of a plea for the "liberation" of woman, then, he conducted an attack that in its fundamentals reproduced the colonizer's attack on native culture and society. For Amin as for the colonizers, the veil and segregation symbolized the backwardness and inferiority of Islamic society; in his discourse as in theirs, therefore, the veil and segregation came in for the most direct attack. For Amin as for Cromer, women and their dress were important counters

in the discourse concerning the relative merits of the societies and civilizations of men and their different styles of male domination; women themselves and their liberation were no more important to Amin than to Cromer.

Amin's book thus represents the rearticulation in native voice of the colonial thesis of the inferiority of the native and Muslim and the superiority of the European. Rearticulated in native upper-middle-class voice, the voice of a class economically allied with the colonizers and already adopting their life-styles, the colonialist thesis took on a classist dimension: it became in effect an attack (in addition to all the other broad and specific attacks) on the customs of the lower-middle and lower classes.

The book is reckoned to have triggered the first major controversy in the Arabic press: more than thirty books and articles appeared in response to its publication. The majority were critical, though the book did please some readers, notably members of the British administration and pro-British factions: the pro-British paper *Al-muqattam* hailed the book as the finest in years.¹⁸ There were evidently many reasons for Muslims and Egyptians, for nationalists of all stripes, to dislike the work: Amin's adulation of the British and of European civilization, his contempt for natives and native ways, his insulting references to the reigning family and to specific groups and classes, such as the 'ulama (who were prominent among the critics of his book), and his implied and indeed explicit contempt for the customs of the lower classes. However, just as Amin had used the issue of women and the call for their unveiling to conduct his generalized assault on society, so too did the rebuttals of his work come in the form of an affirmation of the customs that he had attacked—veiling and segregation. In a way that was to become typical of the Arabic narrative of resistance, the opposition appropriated, in order to negate them, the terms set in the first place by the colonial discourse.

Analysts routinely treat the debate as one between "feminists," that is, Amin and his allies, and "antifeminists," that is, Amin's critics. They accept at face value the equation made by Amin and the originating Western narrative: that the veil signified oppression, therefore those who called for its abandonment were feminists and those opposing its abandonment were antifeminists.¹⁹ As I have suggested, however, the fundamental and contentious premise of Amin's work was its endorsement of the Western view of Islamic civilization, peoples, and customs as inferior, whereas the author's position on women was profoundly patriarchal and even somewhat misogynist. The book merely called for the substitution of Islamic-style male dominance by Western-style male dominance. Far from being the fa-

ther of Arab feminism, then, Amin might more aptly be described as the son of Cromer and colonialism.

Opponents with a nationalist perspective were therefore not necessarily any more antifeminist than Amin was feminist. Some who defended the national custom had views on women considerably more “feminist” than Amin’s, but others who opposed unveiling, for nationalist and Islamist reasons, had views on women no less patriarchal than his. For example, the attacks on Amin’s book published in *Al-liwa*, Mustapha Kamil’s paper, declared that women had the same right to an education as men and that their education was as essential to the nation as men’s—a position considerably more liberal and feminist than Amin’s. The writers opposed unveiling not as antifeminists, it seems, but as cogent analysts of the current social situation. They did not argue that veiling was immutable Islamic custom, saying, on the contrary, that future generations might decree otherwise. They argued that veiling was the current practice and that Amin’s call to unveil was merely part of the hasty and unconsidered rush to imitate the West in everything.²⁰ This perspective anticipates an incisive and genuinely feminist analysis of the issue of the veil and the accompanying debate offered a few years later by Malak Hifni Nassef, discussed in the next chapter.

Tal’at Harb’s nationalist response to Amin, in contrast, defended and upheld Islamic practices, putting forward a view of the role and duties of women in society quite as patriarchal as Amin’s; but where Amin wanted to adopt a Western-style male dominance, describing his recommendation as a call for women’s liberation, Harb argued for an Islamic patriarchy, presenting his views quite simply as those of traditional, unadorned, God-ordained patriarchy. Harb invoked Christian and Muslim scriptures and Western and Muslim men of learning to affirm that the wife’s duty was to attend to the physical, mental, and moral needs of her husband and children²¹—the same duty that Amin ascribed to her. Their prescriptions for women differed literally in the matter of garb: Harb’s women must veil, and Amin’s unveil. The argument between Harb and Amin centered not on feminism versus antifeminism but on Western versus indigenous ways. For neither side was male dominance ever in question.

Amin’s book, then, marks the entry of the colonial narrative of women and Islam—in which the veil and the treatment of women epitomized Islamic inferiority—into mainstream Arabic discourse. And the opposition it generated similarly marks the emergence of an Arabic narrative developed in resistance to the colonial narrative. This narrative of resistance

appropriated, in order to negate them, the symbolic terms of the originating narrative. The veil came to symbolize in the resistance narrative, not the inferiority of the culture and the need to cast aside its customs in favor of those of the West, but, on the contrary, the dignity and validity of all native customs, and in particular those customs coming under fiercest colonial attack—the customs relating to women—and the need to tenaciously affirm them as a means of resistance to Western domination. As Frantz Fanon was to say of a later battle of the veil, between the French and the Algerians, the Algerians affirmed the veil because “tradition demanded the rigid separation of the sexes” and because “*the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria*” (emphasis in original).²² Standing in the relation of antithesis to thesis, the resistance narrative thus reversed—but thereby also accepted—the terms set in the first place by the colonizers. And therefore, ironically, it is Western discourse that in the first place determined the new meanings of the veil and gave rise to its emergence as a symbol of resistance.

Amin’s book and the debate it generated, and the issues of class and culture with which the debate became inscribed, may be regarded as the precursor and prototype of the debate around the veil that has recurred in a variety of forms in a number of Muslim and Arab countries since. As for those who took up Amin’s call for unveiling in Egypt (such as Huda Sha‘rawi), an upper-class or upper-middle-class background, and to some degree or other a Western cultural affiliation, have been typical of those who became advocates of unveiling. In Turkey, for example, Atatürk, who introduced westernizing reforms, including laws affecting women, repeatedly denounced the veil in terms that, like Amin’s, reproduced the Western narrative and show that his concern was with how the custom reflected on Turkish men, allowing them to appear “uncivilized” and objects of “ridicule.” In one speech Atatürk declared: “In some places I have seen women who put a piece of cloth or a towel or something like that over their heads to hide their faces, and who turn their backs or huddle themselves on the ground when a man passes by. What are the meaning and sense of this behaviour? Gentlemen, can the mothers and daughters of a civilised nation adopt this strange manner, this barbarous posture? It is a spectacle that makes the nation an object of ridicule. It must be remedied at once.”²³

Similarly, in the 1920s the Iranian ruler Reza Shah, also an active reformer and westernizer, went so far as to issue a proclamation banning the veil, a move which had the support of some upper-class women as well as upper-class men. The ban, which symbolized the Western direction in which the ruling class intended to lead the society and signaled the eagerness of the upper classes to show themselves to be “civilized,” was quite

differently received by the popular classes. Even rumors of the move provoked unrest; demonstrations broke out but were ruthlessly crushed. For most Iranians, women as well as men, the veil was not, as a historian of Iranian women has observed, a “symbol of backwardness,” which members of the upper classes maintained it was, but “a sign of propriety and a means of protection against the menacing eyes of male strangers.” The police had instructions to deal harshly with any woman wearing anything other than a European-style hat or no headgear at all, and many women chose to stay at home rather than venture outdoors and risk having their veils pulled off by the police.²⁴

In their stinging contempt for the veil and the savagery with which they attack it, these two members of the ruling class, like Amin, reveal their true motivation: they are men of the classes assimilating to European ways and smarting under the humiliation of being described as uncivilized because “their” women are veiled, and they are determined to eradicate the practice. That is to say, theirs are the words and acts of men exposed to the Western discourse who have accepted its representation of their culture, the inferiority of its practices, and the meaning of the veil. Why Muslim men should be making such statements and enacting such bans is only intelligible against the background of the global dominance of the Western world and the authority of its discourses, and also against the background of the ambiguous position of men and women of the upper classes, members of Muslim societies whose economic interests and cultural aspirations bound them to the colonizing West and who saw their own society partly through Western eyes.

The origins and history, just described, of the idea of the veil as it informs Western colonial discourse *and* twentieth-century Arabic debate have a number of implications. First, it is evident that the connection between the issues of culture and women, and more precisely between the cultures of Other men and the oppression of women, was created by Western discourse. The idea (which still often informs discussions about women in Arab and Muslim cultures and other non-Western world cultures) that improving the status of women entails abandoning native customs was the product of a particular historical moment and was constructed by an androcentric colonial establishment committed to male dominance in the service of particular political ends. Its absurdity and essential falseness become particularly apparent (at least from a feminist point of view) when one bears in mind that those who first advocated it believed that Victorian

mores and dress, and Victorian Christianity, represented the ideal to which Muslim women should aspire.

Second, these historical origins explain another and, on the face of it, somewhat surprising phenomenon: namely, the peculiar resemblance to be found between the colonial and still-commonplace Western view that an innate connection exists between the issues of culture and women in Muslim societies and the similar presumption underlying the Islamist resistance position, that such a fundamental connection does indeed exist. The resemblance between the two positions is not coincidental: they are mirror images of each other. The resistance narrative contested the colonial thesis by inverting it—thereby also, ironically, grounding itself in the premises of the colonial thesis.

The preceding account of the development of a colonial narrative of women in Islam has other implications as well, including that the colonial account of Islamic oppression of women was based on misperceptions and political manipulations and was incorrect. My argument here is not that Islamic societies did not oppress women. They did and do; that is not in dispute. Rather, I am here pointing to the political uses of the idea that Islam oppressed women and noting that what patriarchal colonialists identified as the sources and main forms of women's oppression in Islamic societies was based on a vague and inaccurate understanding of Muslim societies. This means, too, that the feminist agenda for Muslim women as set by Europeans—and first devised by the likes of Cromer—was incorrect and irrelevant. It was incorrect in its broad assumptions that Muslim women needed to abandon native ways and adopt those of the West to improve their status; obviously, Arab and Muslim women need to reject (just as Western women have been trying to do) the androcentrism and misogyny of whatever culture and tradition they find themselves in, but that is not at all the same as saying they have to adopt Western culture or reject Arab culture and Islam comprehensively. The feminist agenda as defined by Europeans was also incorrect in its particularities, including its focus on the veil. Because of this history of struggle around it, the veil is now pregnant with meanings. As item of clothing, however, the veil itself and whether it is worn are about as relevant to substantive matters of women's rights as the social prescription of one or another item of clothing is to Western women's struggles over substantive issues. When items of clothing—be it bloomers or bras—have briefly figured as focuses of contention and symbols of feminist struggle in Western societies, it was at least Western feminist women who were responsible for identifying the item in ques-

tion as significant and defining it as a site of struggle and not, as has sadly been the case with respect to the veil for Muslim women, colonial and patriarchal men, like Cromer and Amin, who declared it important to feminist struggle.

That so much energy has been expended by Muslim men and then Muslim women to remove the veil and by others to affirm or restore it is frustrating and ludicrous. But even worse is the legacy of meanings and struggles over issues of culture and class with which not only the veil but also the struggle for women's rights as a whole has become inscribed as a result of this history and as a result of the cooptation by colonialism of the issue of women and the language of feminism in its attempt to undermine other cultures.

This history, and the struggles over culture and between classes, continues to live even today in the debates on the veil and on women. To a considerable extent, overtly or covertly, inadvertently or otherwise, discussions of women in Islam in academies and outside them, and in Muslim countries and outside them, continue either to reinscribe the Western narrative of Islam as oppressor and the West as liberator and native classist versions of that narrative or, conversely, to reinscribe the contentions of the Arabic narrative of resistance as to the essentialness of preserving Muslim customs, particularly with regard to women, as a sign of resistance to imperialism, whether colonial or postcolonial.²⁵

Further, colonialism's use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and undermine native culture has ever since imparted to feminism in non-Western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests. That taint has undoubtedly hindered the feminist struggle within Muslim societies.

In addition, the assumption that the issues of culture and women are connected—which informed and to an extent continues to inform Western discussions of women in Islam and which, entering Arabic discourse from colonialist sources, has become ensconced there—has trapped the struggle for women's rights with struggles over culture. It has meant that an argument for women's rights is often perceived and represented by the opposing side as an argument about the innate merits of Islam and Arab culture comprehensively. And of course it is neither Islam nor Arab culture comprehensively that is the target of criticism or the objects of advocated reform but those laws and customs to be found in Muslim Arab societies that express androcentric interests, indifference to women, or misogyny.

The issue is simply the humane and just treatment of women, nothing less, and nothing more—not the intrinsic merits of Islam, Arab culture, or the West.

I suggested in an earlier chapter that Western economic penetration of the Middle East and the exposure of Middle Eastern societies to Western political thought and ideas, though undoubtedly having some negative consequences for women, nonetheless did lead to the dismantling of constrictive social institutions and the opening up of new opportunities for women. In the light of the evidence reviewed in the present chapter it appears that a distinction has to be made between, on the one hand, the consequences for women following from the opening of Muslim societies to the West and the social changes and the expansion of intellectual horizons that occurred as a result of the interest within Arab societies in emulating Western technological and political accomplishments and, on the other hand, the quite different and apparently essentially negative consequences following from the construction and dissemination of a Western patriarchal discourse targeting the issue of women and coopting the language of feminism in the service of its strategies of domination.

True, reforms introduced by upper- and middle-class political leaders who had accepted and internalized the Western discourse led in some countries, and specifically Turkey, to legal reforms benefiting women. Atatürk's programs included the replacement of the shari'a family code with a code inspired by the Swiss family code, which at once outlawed polygamy, gave women equal rights to divorce, and granted child-custody rights to both parents. These reforms benefited primarily women of the urban bourgeoisie and had little impact beyond this class. Moreover, and more importantly, whether they will prove enduring remains to be seen, for even in Turkey, Islam and the veil are resurgent: militant Turkish women have staged sit-ins and hunger strikes to demand the right to veil.²⁶ Reforms in laws governing marriage and divorce that were introduced in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s, though not as far-reaching as Turkish reforms, have already been reversed. Possibly, reforms pursued in a native idiom and not in terms of the appropriation of the ways of other cultures would have been more intelligible and persuasive to all classes and not merely to the upper and middle classes, and possibly, therefore, they would have proved more durable.