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Within Empire's Shadow and Outside It: Lady Anne Blunt, Amelia Edwards, and the Victorian Female Traveler

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***Abstract*—This paper examines the travel writings of Lady Anne Blunt and Amelia Edwards, focusing on their contrasting portrayals of the Middle East and their different positions within imperial discourse. While both Victorian women contended with gendered constraints to assert authority as travel writers, their narratives reveal differing ideological orientations. Amelia Edwards, in *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* (1877), exemplifies the imperial gaze, privileging the ancient Egyptian past while marginalizing the present. It can be argued that Edwards' narrative reflects Orientalist essentialism, reducing modern Egyptians to a static and inferior "Other" and reinforcing colonial hierarchies. In contrast, Lady Anne Blunt's *A Pilgrimage to Nejd* (1881) foregrounds the Bedouin present, offering an empathetic depiction of Arab social life. Blunt resists the exoticizing and dehumanizing tropes common in Orientalist discourse, instead centering local voices and knowledge. The paper argues that while both writers operated within the shadow of British imperialism, Edwards's work reinforces dominant ideologies, whereas Blunt's narrative offers a subtle counter-discourse that challenges the binary logic of East and West. This comparison underlines the ideological heterogeneity of Victorian women's travel writing and complicates the notion that female travelers were uniformly complicit in the imperial project.**

***Index Terms*—Victorian travel writing, Orientalism, postcolonial criticism, Middle East in British literature, comparative literature**

I. Introduction

During the nineteenth century, increased colonial ambitions and the rise of commercial tourism to the Middle East contributed to the growth of a significant literary genre—the travelogue. These narratives were often authored by male travelers, many of whom were supported by academic institutions or imperial agencies (Kabbani, 1986). These writers often presented themselves as brave explorers who traveled through unknown and "uncivilized" places, describing their journeys as adventurous and morally meaningful.

Their accounts commonly reinforced imperial ideologies by portraying the Middle East as a region in need of Western control, while simultaneously perpetuating reductive stereotypes of Arab societies as sites of barbarism and sensual excess (Kabbani, 1986). Travelogues did more than entertain; they helped construct the Orient in the Western imagination, often buttressing what Said (1978) famously termed "Orientalist" discourse.

Orientalism, as defined by Said (1978), is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3). Victorian travelers' descriptions of Eastern lands and peoples thus became part of a broader colonial project of knowledge and power. Notably, this discourse was long assumed to be the domain of male adventurers and scholars, but recent scholarship has drawn attention to the women who also wrote about the East, revealing that their perspectives both intersected with and differed from male colonial narratives.

Victorian women travelers occupied a complex position. On one hand, they were part of the colonizing culture and often relied on familiar Orientalist tropes to describe the "exotic" scenes before them. As Billie Melman observes, once outside the domestic sphere, even intrepid women writers tended to "draw on conventional or culturally dominant images of the Orient" in portraying landscapes and public spaces (Melman, 1992, p. 210). On the other hand, women's marginality in a male-dominated society created subtle distances between their voices and the standard imperial gaze.

Mills (1991) notes that nineteenth-century women travel writers labored under significant "discursive pressures" imposed by Victorian patriarchy (p. 12). Simply by traveling—and worse, writing about it—a woman transgressed norms: they were "bringing upon themselves criticism for both the writing and for the travels which they represented" (Mills, 1991, p. 41). Such pressures meant that female travelogues often adopted a careful, self-effacing tone, and their authors sought ways to assert authority without overstepping gender expectations. Mills points out that, unlike their male counterparts, women could not easily speak as authoritative agents of empire: "whereas men could describe their travel as individuals and as representatives of the colonial power, women could only travel and write as gendered individuals with clearly delineated roles" (Mills, 1991, p. 103).

In short, as Mills concludes, "women travellers could not wholeheartedly speak with the voice of colonial discourse, at least not consistently" (Mills, 1991, p. 106). Their subordinate social status afforded them "few discursive places within Western colonial institutions" from which to write with unchecked imperial authority (Mills, 1991, p. 106). This delicate

position produced travel narratives that were often ambivalent—participating in the imperialist Orientalist project to an extent, yet occasionally critical of or resistant to it. Victorian women's travel writing, therefore, must be understood as a dialogic practice: these writers operated within the empire's shadow, constrained by prevailing ideologies, but could also position themselves outside it. It is within this field of Victorian female travel writing that Lady Anne Blunt and Amelia Edwards made their mark.

Among the notable Victorian women who journeyed to the Middle East, Lady Anne Blunt (1837–1917) and Amelia B. Edwards (1831–1892) stand out for both their prominence and their strikingly different approaches to the Orient. Both women were respected public figures in their time, yet their travel narratives differed in tone and ideology, demonstrating the range of stances a female traveler could adopt toward imperial culture.

Lady Anne Blunt was an aristocrat (granddaughter of the poet Lord Byron) who, along with her husband Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, ventured into regions of the Middle East rarely seen by Europeans. Marrying in 1869, the Blunts spent the 1870s and 1880s trekking across the deserts of the Arab provinces—from Syria and Mesopotamia to the heart of Arabia (Najd). Within the broader context of Victorian women travellers, Lady Anne Blunt holds a pioneering status as the first European woman to traverse the Arabian desert—an achievement that earned her considerable recognition and respect. Her published accounts, notably *Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates* (1879) and *A Pilgrimage to Nejd* (1881), chronicle these expeditions. In undertaking such journeys, the Blunts were not merely tourists but fashioned themselves as exploratory scholars of Arabian culture and geography. Furthermore, she drew extensively on her expedition notes and personal journals to inform the research underpinning her seminal work on the Arabian horse (Winstone, 2003, p. 141).

Melman (1992) characterizes Anne and Wilfrid as an "Orientalist couple" whose joint travel writing reveals telling tensions: between the authority of established Orientalist knowledge and the firsthand "individual gendered experience" of travel, and between "canonicity and the writing against canonical texts" (p. 276). In other words, Lady Anne Blunt's narratives oscillate between reinforcing received wisdom about the Orient and challenging it with her own observations. Crucially, the Blunts' personal political outlook set them apart from many contemporaries. Wilfrid S. Blunt was an outspoken critic of British imperial policy—a champion of Egyptian self-determination and Irish and Indian causes—and Lady Anne largely shared these sympathies. Writing as an "amateur" rather than an official colonial agent, she felt free to laud Arab governance and Bedouin autonomy at a time when European empires encroached on the region (Melman, 1992, p. 276). In sum, Blunt's writings, while couched in the Orientalist idiom of her era, carry an anti-imperialist undercurrent. She stands outside the empire's shadow in crucial ways, voicing respect for Eastern cultures and implicitly critiquing the notion of European superiority.

Amelia Edwards, by contrast, occupied a more conventional imperial vantage point despite her status as a female traveler. Edwards (1831–1892) emerged from a middle-class London family. Rees (1998, p. 4) notes that Amelia Edwards's father, Thomas Edwards, had served in the Peninsular War before leaving the army for health reasons and later supporting his family through a position at the London and Westminster Bank. An only child, Edwards received no formal education but developed an early fascination with travel literature. Rees (1998, p. 4) notes that in her youth, Edwards developed a fascination with exploration and antiquity, inspired by reading authors like Sir John Gardner Wilkinson and John Lloyd Stephens. Her passion for travel and antiquity later established her as a prominent figure in the field of Egyptology.

Edwards co-founded the Egypt Exploration Fund and became one of the leading figures in London's late nineteenth-century Egyptology circle (Youngkin, 2016, p. 11). As O'Neill (2009) asserts, "Edwards helped develop Egyptology as a discipline and was the person most responsible for fostering interest in ancient Egypt among Anglophones" (p. 44). The publication of her travel narrative *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* (1877) significantly contributed to her public reputation as a credible authority on Egypt and the broader Orient.

Edwards' travel writing reflects a dual commitment: a deep enthusiasm for ancient Egyptian civilisation, coupled with a noticeable detachment from the contemporary local population. Her narrative constructs an imperial vision that celebrates archaeological exploration while largely excluding the lived realities of modern Egyptians. Ancient monuments are portrayed as mysterious and alluring, while the people inhabiting the land are marginalised and rendered culturally distant.

As O'Neill (2009) notes, this narrative strategy enabled Edwards to transition from the role of a popular novelist to that of a respected cultural authority within Victorian intellectual circles (p. 45). Her focus on uncovering the remnants of ancient civilisation reveals an imperialist orientation. Her accounts largely neglect engagement with present-day Egyptians, whom she effectively erases from the cultural landscape of her narrative (O'Neill, 2009, p. 46). Edwards' writing thus shows a woman enthusiastically within Orientalist discourse, using it to advance both her personal ambitions and the broader imperial project of studying the Orient.

Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by several interrelated research questions: How did Victorian female travelers negotiate the dominant Orientalist discourse of their time? In what ways did their travel narratives reinforce or resist the imperial ideologies of the British Empire? And how did gender shape these authors' positions within—or outside—the imperial paradigm?

To address these questions, the study adopts a postcolonial theoretical framework rooted in Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and informed by feminist critiques of colonial discourse. Said's theory provides a foundation for

understanding how British travelers such as Edwards and Blunt constructed representations of Eastern peoples, and how these portrayals were shaped by the broader ideological structures of empire. In particular, Said's analysis of the binarism inherent in Orientalist discourse—the opposition between a rational, civilized West and a backward, exotic East—illuminates the ways in which knowledge production was linked to imperial domination.

At the same time, this study draws on insights from scholars like Billie Melman and Sara Mills, who foreground the role of gender in mediating women's travel narratives. Mills (1991), for instance, highlights how Victorian women writers were granted only limited "discursive places" within imperial culture (p. 106). Their outsider status, as women excluded from formal structures of imperial power, often required them to navigate carefully between conformity and critique. Consequently, women's travel writing frequently displays a hybrid position—operating within imperial discourse while also challenging it. This hybridity complicates traditional readings of female travel narratives as either wholly complicit or entirely resistant.

Through a comparative analysis of Lady Anne Blunt and Amelia Edwards, this paper contends that Victorian women's travel writing was far from monolithic. Edwards's narrative ultimately aligns with imperialist ideology and reflects an essentialist view of the East, affirming a classical Orientalist vision that emphasizes cultural inferiority. Her scholarly mission to recover and classify ancient Egypt exemplifies what Said (1978) describes as the Orientalist impulse to study, control, and "fix" the Orient within Western frameworks of knowledge (pp. 3-4). Edwards's text participates in a process of othering, wherein modern Egyptians are relegated to the background and denied historical agency.

By contrast, Lady Anne Blunt's account—though inevitably shaped by Orientalist conventions—embodies a more empathetic and open-ended mode of engagement. Writing from a position outside formal imperial institutions, Blunt privileges local knowledge and lived experience over textual inheritance and imperial authority. Her representations of Bedouin society resist the dehumanizing stereotypes common in colonial narratives and allow space for the *subaltern* voice to emerge, however incompletely (Blunt, 1881). Blunt's travelogue thus occupies a space of ideological hybridity—not entirely divorced from colonial structures, but not fully absorbed by them either.

Moreover, this paper builds on critiques of Said's model that caution against viewing Western representations of the East as uniformly hegemonic. As Osgood (2021) notes, Said's *Orientalism* overlooks key dissenting voices, including Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, a staunch anti-imperialist, and omits Lady Anne Blunt entirely (p. 49). This omission illustrates the need to refine the framework to account for ideological variation and the intersection of gender, class, and authorship.

In sum, while Edward Said's theory remains indispensable for tracing the structural dynamics of Orientalism, it must be expanded to accommodate the *gendered complexity* and *ideological heterogeneity* of Victorian women's travel writing. Edwards writes from within the shadow of empire, reinforcing imperial hierarchies through her authority as a cultural interpreter. Blunt, by contrast, offers a more dialogic and culturally responsive account that gestures toward resistance.

II. Discussion

Both writers embarked on their journeys with prior knowledge of the region filtered through earlier Orientalist texts. Edwards openly acknowledges her deep literary familiarity with Egypt before her travels. She writes, "As a child *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* had shared my affections with *The Arabian Nights*. I had read every line of the old six-volume edition over and over again. I knew every one of the six hundred illustrations by heart" (Edwards, 1890, p. 375). As Melman (1992) notes, Victorian travelers, regardless of class or gender, often "knew" the Orient literarily before they ever saw it in person (p. 63). Edwards's early exposure to writers such as Edward William Lane shaped her imagination of Egypt through the binary lens of ancient greatness and modern decline.

This binarism, which casts the past as noble and the present as degenerate, reinforces essentialist assumptions about cultural stagnation. Lane's ethnographic work often portrayed modern Egyptians as culturally inferior, and Edwards echoes this view by constantly comparing the splendor of ancient ruins with what she describes as the "rude and barbarous present" (Edwards, 1890, p. 158). Her narrative thus contributes to the exoticism and othering of contemporary Egyptians by rendering them culturally static and subordinate to their own ancient past.

In contrast, Lady Anne Blunt's relationship with Orientalist precedent is more critical. Reflecting on her arrival in Jebel Shammar, she recalls reading Palgrave's "romantic account" years earlier, which she had doubted: "how impossibly remote and unreal it all appeared... and how, later during our travels, we heard of Nejd and Hai'l and this very Jebel Shammar, spoken of with a kind of awe" (Blunt, 1881, Vol. I, p. 242). Rather than replicate Palgrave's Orientalizing fantasy, Blunt disrupts the inherited narrative and validates local perspectives. Her account challenges the notion of epistemological authority as the sole domain of the Western traveler.

Her interaction with Bedouin guides, particularly Radi—who "has travelled backwards and forwards over the Nefud for forty years" (Blunt, 1881, Vol. I, p. 197)—signals an attempt to decentralize the imperial gaze by acknowledging indigenous expertise. In doing so, Blunt undermines the colonial impulse to alter and possess the Orient as textual property, and instead foregrounds hybridity between cultures as a mode of knowledge production.

Edwards's engagement with local people is framed by distance and dehumanization. Her repeated characterizations reduce Egyptians to figures of mimicry, greed, or superstition. For example, she writes: "Our men talked incessantly; and their talk was always about money" (Edwards, 1890, p. 151). In another anecdote, a guide admits to deliberately leaving stairs unbuilt so that tourists would require assistance: "No, no, mademoiselle! Arab very stupid to do that... Arab man earn no more dollars!" (Edwards, 1890, p. 442). These moments construct local people as economically driven and

morally suspect, reinforcing their position as the racialized Other. Edwards's description of a Nubian child as "an impish boy" with the "blackest skin and the shrillest voice," who "skips and screams and grins like an ubiquitous goblin" (Edwards, 1890, p. 158), exemplifies the Orientalist tendency to dehumanize the subaltern subject through grotesque caricature.

Blunt's portrayal of locals contrasts sharply, favoring empathy over exoticism. She writes admiringly of one companion: "He is a curious creature, but we like him, and, robber or no robber, he has quite the air of a gentleman" (Blunt, 1881, Vol. I, p. 126). Rather than othering or essentializing the Bedouin, Blunt registers their individuality—even their contradictions. Her farewell to the women in the harim—"I went in to the harim to say good-bye to the rest of the family" (Blunt, 1881, Vol. I, p. 189)—reflects cultural respect and mutual recognition, resisting the imperial gaze that often renders indigenous women invisible.

Whereas Edwards interprets talkativeness as a sign of inferiority—writing of Egyptians as "very talkative," yet "dumb as mutes when they found we wished for silence" (Edwards, 1890, p. 14)—Blunt registers the same behavior as cultural etiquette. "Abdallah, our host, asked us at least twenty times after our health before he would go on to anything else" (Blunt, 1881, Vol. I, p. 120). Rather than trivializing this repetition, Blunt treats it as an expression of hospitality and social norms. Edwards's formulation imposes a colonial logic of contradiction: the native is at once verbose and submissive, mirroring what Said terms the exoticized Other—simultaneously loud and silent, unruly and obedient, thereby easier to dominate and manage.

This binary reflects an essentialist framework that equates verbosity with irrationality and politeness with servility. Such an interpretation reduces Egyptian sociability to a static cultural trait rather than acknowledging its contextual and communicative richness. By contrast, Blunt's reading deconstructs the essentialist notion that "Eastern" talk is inherently excessive or meaningless. Instead, she sees it as an integral part of social interaction and emotional exchange.

The concept of mimicry, as articulated by Homi Bhabha, is central to Edwards's account of her Egyptian guides singing "Yankee Doodle" and "God Save the Queen" atop the Great Pyramid: "which, however, we took the liberty to doubt" (Edwards, 1890, p. 442). This performative mimicry, rather than signifying cultural hybridity, becomes a spectacle designed for Western consumption. The colonized subjects are reduced to parodic reflections of the colonizer—never fully themselves, nor fully the Other. The musical performance here functions as a rehearsed compliance to colonial expectations, stripping the act of any authentic voice or agency. Edwards's tone further exacerbates this, casting doubt on the sincerity of the act and implying that the natives merely echo Westernness without understanding it. This kind of mimicry sustains a hierarchical distance between colonizer and colonized, where the latter is eternally trapped in an imitative role.

In contrast, Blunt's account of singing alongside her companions—"we galloped on singing the Shammar song" (Blunt, 1881, Vol. II, p. 178)—evokes a moment of intercultural hybridity. Here, music is not a performance for the colonial gaze but a shared cultural moment that symbolically disrupts the colonial hierarchy. Blunt's engagement reveals a form of horizontal interaction that transcends mimicry and opens space for mutual cultural recognition. This moment can be read as an act of symbolic decolonization—one in which music becomes a mode of relationality rather than domination. Her willingness to participate, rather than merely observe, emphasizes her resistance to the exoticizing gaze that renders local culture as spectacle. Instead of reducing the Other to a tool of imperial amusement, Blunt highlights music as a living tradition that fosters connection rather than submission.

Edwards frames Egypt as a frozen monument, a palimpsest of imperial significance waiting to be deciphered. She recounts "standing there close against the base of it; touching it; measuring her own height" (Edwards, 1890, p. 12), positioning herself as the symbolic custodian of Egyptian history. The living landscape and its people are backgrounded, subordinated to ruins. This spatial construction mirrors the Orientalist impulse to essentialize the East as timeless, exotic, and in need of Western stewardship. Blunt, conversely, describes the desert as a space of movement, not stasis. It is populated, known, and traversed—not mysterious or vacant.

Even when discussing ethnic identity, Blunt refrains from broad generalizations. She inquires how tribes distinguish one another and records her guide's detailed explanation: "each has certain peculiarities of dress or features... The Roala spears are shorter, and their horses smaller. The Shammar of Nejd wear brown abbas, the Harb are black in face" (Blunt, 1881, Vol. I, p. 203). By foregrounding local perspectives, Blunt resists the essentialist impulse to reduce diverse Arab groups to a single identity. Instead of assuming a homogenous culture, she acknowledges differentiation and alters the imperial norm of flattening cultural distinction.

Blunt's ethnographic attention illustrates an attempt to decenter imperial authority and amplify subaltern knowledge. Rather than positioning herself as an omniscient narrator, she allows indigenous voices to speak with authority about their own cultural categories—thus challenging the asymmetrical power dynamic of colonial knowledge production. This contrasts sharply with Edwards's sweeping claim that "for the life of the Beled repeats itself with but little variation wherever the Nile flows and the Khedive rules" (Edwards, 1890, p. 150). Such a statement collapses individual and regional differences into one static image.

Edwards's representation of Egypt is marked by a stark binarism between a glorified ancient past and a degraded modern present. This dichotomy culminates in her lament at the market in Aswan: "no relics of a past civilization; but, on the contrary, such objects as speak only of a rude and barbarous present" (Edwards, 1890, p. 158). The term "barbarous" reflects an essentialist assumption about modern Egyptians' supposed lack of cultural refinement, effectively positioning

them as inferior successors to a noble past. By denying historical continuity and rendering the present as culturally vacuous, Edwards implicitly justifies the imperial project of recovery, control, and "civilizing" intervention.

Blunt, by contrast, refuses this temporal hierarchy. She begins her book by writing, "Nobody here thinks of the past or the future, only of the present" (Blunt, 1881, Vol. I, p. 34). This emphasis on the present moment resists the Orientalist tendency to view the East only as a relic of the past. Her observation that "It is like a dream to be sitting here, writing a journal on a rock in Jebel Shammar… a happy land which nobody but [Palgrave] had seen" (Blunt, 1881, Vol. I, p. 247) reclaims space for the lived experience of Arab communities. It suggests a challenge to the imperial habit of temporal othering, which often freezes the Orient in an imagined historical past while denying its modern vitality.

Edwards consistently interprets the economic behavior of locals through a colonial lens of suspicion and contempt. "Our men talked incessantly; and their talk was always about money" (Edwards, 1890, p. 151), she complains, framing their concerns as petty and morally inferior. This portrayal reflects both essentialism and dehumanization, suggesting that material greed is an intrinsic and immutable trait of the colonized subject. Such language constructs Egyptians as inherently Othered: childlike, greedy, and incapable of higher ideals. This trope has a long colonial legacy, where native populations are seen as governed by base instincts, requiring European discipline and oversight.

In contrast, Blunt actively counters this Orientalist binarism**.** After a journey with two Shammar men, she writes, "Both these Shammar were exceedingly intelligent well-mannered men, with souls above money" (Blunt, 1881, Vol. II, p. 40). Her phrasing challenges the assumption that Arab subjects are economically driven caricatures, offering instead a dignified, humanized account. In recognizing honor and restraint, Blunt subtly undermines the imperial stereotype of the greedy native and affirms the agency of the subaltern as capable of ethical complexity and cultural depth. Despite emerging from similar cultural, temporal, and generic contexts, the travel narratives of Amelia Edwards and Lady Anne Blunt diverge sharply in tone, perspective, and ideological orientation. Both texts—*A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* (1877) and *A Pilgrimage to Nejd* (1881)—were authored by Englishwomen writing within the male-dominated genre of Middle Eastern travel writing. Their proximity in time, nationality, and gender makes them particularly valuable for exploring the layered complexity of women's positions within colonial discourse.

Gender is a central mediating factor in how both women navigate authority and authorship. Edwards constructs a voice of empirical objectivity that mirrors the scholarly detachment of male Orientalists. She reclaims space within the emerging discipline of Egyptology by foregrounding her archaeological interests and minimizing engagement with the living culture around her. Edwards's Egypt is not a place of lived experience but a landscape of ruins and relics—symbolic of a fallen civilization waiting to be recovered, ordered, and interpreted by the Western gaze. This method illustrates a classic binarism between past and present, civilization and barbarism, which Orientalist discourse uses to justify Western dominance.

This move, as Said (1978) argues, is central to the Orientalist project: knowledge becomes a mode of control, and the scholar a surrogate for imperial mastery. Furthermore, by dehumanizing the Egyptian population and reducing them to stereotypes, Edwards perpetuates a discourse of *othering* that renders the native subject mute, passive, and inferior.

In contrast, Blunt neither seeks scholarly distinction nor casts herself as an interpreter of a lost past. Her authority derives from immersion and observation rather than systematization or excavation. She embraces ambiguity, foregrounds the present, and willingly acknowledges what she does not know. This openness to cultural hybridity and her rejection of essentialist portrayals of Arab identity distinguish her writing from conventional imperial modes. Her respect for Bedouin knowledge, her descriptions of everyday life, and her openness to cultural differences reveal a mode of travel writing grounded in humility rather than hierarchy. Though she occasionally romanticizes her surroundings, her willingness to listen rather than lecture represents a significant departure from Edwards's method.

This divergence is also deeply rooted in class and political alignment. Edwards, a middle-class woman seeking professional legitimacy, finds empowerment by aligning with imperial institutions and Orientalist discourse. Her self-positioning as a cultural authority requires the marginalization of modern Egyptians, whose alleged indifference to their heritage justifies her role as protector of ancient glory. Blunt, with aristocratic privilege and anti-imperialist leanings, approaches her travels from a different angle. Her political sympathies with causes like the Urabi Revolt and her admiration for Bedouin social order make her less inclined to adopt the patronizing tone common in imperial narratives (Blunt, 1881).

Yet Blunt does not entirely escape Orientalism. Her depictions sometimes reproduce the trope of the noble Arab or exoticize local customs. This suggests the persistent allure of *exoticism* even in otherwise sympathetic accounts. Nevertheless, these moments are embedded within a broader ethos of mutual recognition. If Edwards (1877) flattens difference into stereotype, Blunt (1881) preserves it in detail. Her travelogue offers not just an alternative to Edwards's, but a subtle critique of the imperial mindset itself.

Both writers also reflect the complex tension between complicity and critique. Edwards reproduces many of the foundational tenets of Orientalism, yet her gendered position outside formal structures of empire complicates her authority. She constructs a scholarly persona that compensates for her exclusion from academic institutions, but in doing so, replicates the exclusions of Orientalist discourse itself. Blunt, by contrast, turns her marginality into a strength. By resisting the authoritative stance of the colonial observer, she creates space for subaltern voices and practices that challenge imperial presumptions.

These two narratives thus underscore the ideological heterogeneity of Victorian women's travel writing. Neither woman fully inhabits nor escapes the imperial frame—rather, they both exist in a space of hybridity, negotiating competing discourses of gender, empire, and authorship. Their writings invite us to move beyond reductive binaries and recognize the nuanced ways women navigated the cultural and political structures of empire.

III. Conclusion

This paper has explored how Amelia Edwards and Lady Anne Blunt, two Englishwomen writing within the same genre and period, negotiated their roles as travelers and narrators of the Middle East. While both operated within the ideological space of empire, their works diverge sharply in how they construct authority, engage with local cultures, and position themselves within Orientalist discourse.

Edwards's *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* (Edwards, 1877) embodies the epistemological and moral assumptions of Orientalism. Her text transforms Egypt into an archaeological spectacle, its living inhabitants relegated to the margins of historical relevance. Her mission to recover the past and "preserve" antiquity culminated in the establishment of the Egypt Exploration Fund (Youngkin, 2016)—an institution that not only legitimized British archaeological dominance but institutionalized the Western claim over Egypt's cultural heritage. Through her gaze, Egyptians are dehumanized, reduced to symbols of decay that validate the superiority of Western rationality and scholarship. Her travelogue is not merely a document of observation but a performance of cultural appropriation, where knowledge acquisition goes hand in hand with imperial possession.

By contrast, Blunt's *A Pilgrimage to Nejd* (Blunt, 1881) offers a counter-narrative rooted in attentiveness to the present and a willingness to engage with the complexities of Arab social life. Her authority arises not from textual inheritance or institutional backing but from embedded observation and sustained interaction. Rather than extract value from the region, Blunt sought to create connections—exemplified by her interest in breeding Arabian horses with English ones, a gesture that, while not devoid of hierarchy, suggests exchange over appropriation. Her text resists the reduction of the East to a static past, instead recognizing Bedouin autonomy and cultural richness in the present. In place of conquest and classification, Blunt (1881) models a different mode of engagement—one grounded in receptivity, reciprocity, and respect.

Future research might extend this comparative approach to include female travelers from other imperial or national backgrounds—French, Ottoman, or even Arab women writing in the late nineteenth century. It could also benefit from transregional analysis, comparing representations of the Middle East with those of other colonized spaces, such as India or North Africa. Such scholarship would continue the work of destabilizing the presumed unity of imperial knowledge and foreground the multiplicity of perspectives embedded within it.

Ultimately, the comparison between Edwards (1877) and Blunt (1881) illustrates that Victorian women's travel writing, far from being uniform, was shaped by complex negotiations of gender, power, and ideology. Their contrasting narratives demonstrate that imperial discourse is not monolithic but internally fractured—where strategies of domination, mimicry, and critique coexist. Within the shadow of empire, some voices reinforced its foundations, while others stepped outside its frame.

Notes:

1. All quotations from Amelia B. Edwards's *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* are taken from the 1890 A. L. Burt edition (via Archive.org). References to the publication year refer to the original 1877 edition.
2. All quotations from Lady Anne Blunt's *A Pilgrimage to Nejd* are taken from the 1881 John Murray edition (via Archive.org). References to the publication year refer to the original 1881 publication.

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