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ROUNDTABLE: WOMEN AND CRIME

Women and Crime: Exploring the Role of Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Constructions of Female Criminality

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This roundtable on women and crime was inspired by a discussion at a CUNY Dissections Seminar in April 2021, where Gülhan Balsoy presented her work in progress on Ottoman crime fiction in the early 20th century. The focus of her paper was a popular murder mystery series called *The National Collection of Murders*, which had been published in Istanbul in 1914. The protagonists of this fictional crime series were a mother and daughter known as the Dark Witch and the Bloody Fairy, who led an underground criminal gang living in a secret subterranean world beneath the city of Istanbul. While reading her paper the night before the seminar, I could not help but notice striking parallels between this fictional Ottoman murder mystery and the sensationalized media coverage of a 1921 Egyptian serial murder case, popularly known by the name of its alleged perpetrators, Raya and Sakina.[1] In both the fictive Ottoman story and the Egyptian media coverage of a real crime, two sets of female relatives were presented as the respective leaders of a criminal gang that stole luxury goods from respectable families and turned their homes into human slaughterhouses. In both cases, the female gang leaders used "superstition" to deceive and trap their victims while continually outwitting the police, all against a backdrop of illicit sex.

The striking parallels between this Ottoman murder mystery and the media coverage of the Raya and Sakina case raise important questions about the extent to which the growing interest in crime fiction shaped the coverage of true crime in the early 20th century. One wonders to what extent Egyptian journalists had been influenced by crime fiction when attempting to weave fragmentary evidence of the serial murders into a coherent narrative. Had this Ottoman murder mystery become popular in Egypt? Were Raya and Sakina an Egyptian Dark Witch and Bloody Fairy? What do these parallels tell us about how and why female criminality was reimagined in the early 20th-century Middle East?

Intrigued by these connections, Gülhan Balsoy and I convened this roundtable to bring scholars working on women and crime in the Middle East into conversation with each other. We were particularly interested in exploring the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class in conceptions of female criminality across different contexts, and the role of transnational versus local developments in shaping these conceptions. Since discourses about female criminality often do not reflect social realities, they can provide valuable insight

[1] Shaun T. Lopez, "Madams, Murders, and the Media: Akhbar al-Hawadith and the Emergence of a Mass Culture in 1920s Egypt," in *Re-Envisioning Egypt, 1919–1952*, ed. Arthur Goldschmidt et al. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 371–97; Elena Chiti, "Building a National Case in Interwar Egypt: Raya and Sakina's Crimes through the Pages of *Al-Ahram* (Fall 1920)," *History Compass* 18, no. 2 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12607; Nefertiti Takla, "Barbaric Women: Race and the Colonization of Gender in Interwar Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 3 (2021): 387–405.

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into the gendered concerns produced by social, economic, and political transformations.[2] The roundtable builds on this overarching theme by highlighting how perceptions of female criminality differed between legal discourse and fiction, how consumerism and urbanization shaped popular depictions of women's crimes, how race informed conceptions of criminal agency, and how women's crimes were often attributed to their gendered corporeality.

Scholarship on women and crime in the Middle East suggests that perceptions of female criminality differed widely between fiction and legal discourse. In legal discourse, jurists tended to see women as victims of circumstance with limited agency. As Ebru Aykut shows in her study of women who poisoned their husbands in the 19th century, early Ottoman penal codes granted lenient sentences to those accused, considering the crime unintentional. Even after the new Ottoman penal code of 1858 condemned poisoning as a premeditated capital crime, judges rarely applied the death penalty to women, seeing them as too "weak-minded" to understand right from wrong.[3] Aykut suggests that patriarchal assumptions about the limits of female agency thus saved most female poisoners from harsh punishment. In contrast, Başak Tuğ argues in her contribution to this roundtable that the hesitance of Ottoman jurists to hold women legally responsible for adultery left the accused vulnerable to murder at the hands of male relatives, which was legalized by the 1858 penal code. The refusal to see women as agents of their sexuality and granting that agency instead to male guardians provided legal justification for honor killings. This suggests that the failure to ascribe criminal agency to women in legal discourse did not always work in women's interests.

Unlike legal discourse, fiction often sensationalized women's criminal agency. The murderesses described in several essays here were presented as evil and deceitful rather than as victims of circumstance. Although our contributors highlight this similarity in fictional accounts across time, it appears that industrial capitalism altered the depiction of women's criminal motives. In her contribution to this roundtable, İpek Hüner Cora discusses a 19th-century Ottoman story about a serial murderess in the vein of popular stories in the Muslim world about "women's wiles." In this particular story, a mufti's daughter uses deception to cover up her lust and preserve her family's honor, leading her to commit a series of murders. Gülhan Balsoy's contribution shows how, by the early 20th century, stories about women's wiles had fundamentally changed. In the Ottoman story of the Dark Witch and the Bloody Fairy, much like the Egyptian story of Raya and Sakina, women are deceiving the state rather than individuals, and the primary object of their lustful desire is material goods rather than men. They murder not to preserve their honor but to continually satisfy their lustful consumerism. Thus, the sympathy the reader might feel for the plight of the mufti's murderous daughter completely disappears when reading about the Dark Witch and the Bloody Fairy.

Shifts in popular perceptions of female criminality were also integrally tied to urbanization. Scholarship on modern cities has shown that major urban centers were often perceived as sites of gender and sexual transgression and danger.[4] In this context, concerns about

[2] As Hanan Hammad has shown in the case of interwar Egypt, although most scholarship on female criminality has focused on prostitution, evidence from security reports and prison surveys indicate that petty theft was the most common crime committed by women. See Hanan Hammad, "Disreputable by Definition: Respectability and Theft by Poor Women in Urban Interwar Egypt," reprinted in *Crime, Poverty and Survival in the Middle East and North Africa: The "Dangerous Classes" since 1800*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020), 65–77.

[3] Ebru Aykut, "Toxic Murder, Female Poisoners, and the Question of Agency at the Late Ottoman Law Courts, 1840–1908," *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 114–37.

[4] Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Martina Rieker and Kamran Asdar Ali, eds., *Gendering Urban Space in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Fariba Zarinebaf, *Crime and Punishment in Istanbul, 1700–1800* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010); Francesca Biancani, *Sex Work in Colonial Egypt: Women, Modernity, and the Global Economy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018).

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women and crime were frequently linked to anxieties about the fluidity of social boundaries. These concerns increased in the 20th century, when conspicuous consumption enabled subalterns to "pass" into respectable society.[5] As Balsoy illustrates in this roundtable, rapid urban expansion in the early 20th century heightened anxieties about the dangers of urban space, leading to an imagined subterranean criminal underworld filled with robbery, murder, and illicit sex. This criminal underworld was an integral part of the modern city, and yet it stood apart, seemingly posing a constant threat to the capitalist class structure and its gender and sexual order through seduction and deception. The female criminal who defied gender and sexual prescriptions was thus a key feature of the modern city.

In addition to the emphasis on urbanization and consumerism in modern stories about female criminality, 20th-century fiction racialized women's deceitfulness and tied it to the practice of "superstition."[6] Taylor Moore's contribution to the roundtable highlights how expertise in the occult was central to the trope of the Sudanese trickster woman in Out el Kouloub's 1947 novel, *Zanouba*. Set in Egypt at the turn of the 20th century, the story draws attention to women-centered knowledge of fertility rites and women's fears of infertility through the titular protagonist Zanouba's struggle to birth a son. All women in the novel possessed magico-medical knowledge and participated in the occult. Yet, Moore shows how only Behita, an enslaved Sudanese woman, was criminalized and ultimately punished for this knowledge after Zanouba's co-wife ordered her to procure and use abortifacient herbs to force the young girl to miscarry. A racial distinction was thus created between participation in and intimacy with the occult, reinforcing its association with blackness and Africanity. One could argue that, in this vein, women who used their knowledge and practice of "superstition" to deceive and harm others were approximating blackness. The fact that the Dark Witch and Bloody Fairy examined by Balsoy used "superstition" to entrap their victims raises the question of whether the "dark witch" was yet another example of the racialization of the occult in modern fiction.

The racialization of female criminality in the 20th century was also accompanied by an emphasis on white female victimhood in colonial discourse. In the early part of the century, European colonizers created a racialized dichotomy between the sexual deviant and the victim of sexual deviance. As Francesca Biancani shows in her contribution to this roundtable, whereas British colonizers initially spoke of European prostitutes in Egypt as morally degenerate, concerns about "white slavery" led to the reimagining of white women as innocent victims of racialized sex traffickers. Although "white slavery" was a transimperial discourse that emerged in the late 19th century, Biancani argues that its popularity in early 20th-century Egypt was a reaction to a growing abolitionist and nationalist movement that blamed the spread of vice on British colonialism. In the context of this newly perceived instability of the imperial order, young white women embodied the fragility of the imperial enterprise and the need to protect it, reserving discourses of moral degeneracy for black and brown bodies. In colonial contexts, the shifting boundary between female criminality and victimhood was shaped by imperial racial politics.

Throughout the roundtable, the association of blackness with sexualized crime appears across multiple contexts. Biancani notes that in 1913, the European press in Egypt paid significant attention to the case of a "Zanzibari" procuress named Raya Bint Hamid, whom they presented as a "white slave" trafficker. In a subsequent fictionalization of this case, the procuress was presented as a "dark-faced" Egyptian woman, maintaining the racialization of the sex trafficker. Similarly, Cora notes that in the Ottoman story about the mufti's murderous

[5] For cases of "passing" into respectable society, see Wilson Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 239; and Nefertiti Takla, "Murder in Alexandria: The Gender, Sexual and Class Politics of Criminality, 1914–1921" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2016), 186.

[6] For literature on the racialization of the occult in late Victorian fiction, see Sarah Willburn, "The Savage Magnet: Racialization of the Occult Body in Late Victorian Fiction," *Women's Writing* 15, no. 3 (2008): 436–53; and John T. Bliss, "The Racialization of the Occult in British Novels, 1850–1900" (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 2020).

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daughter, the man who took advantage of the young girl in her state of desperation was referred to as a "black Arab" and *zengi*. It was thus blackmail and sexual coercion committed by a black man that led the mufti's daughter down the path of murder. The racialization of sexualized crime in these stories raises questions about the nature of anti-blackness in different parts of the Middle East. What role did the trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave trades play in anti-blackness, and what role did European imperialism play? How did anti-blackness intersect with gender and sexuality in colonial vs. non-colonial contexts?

In the work of 20th-century intellectuals and social critics, gendered conceptions of female criminality have led to the creation of gendered solutions. As Cyrus Schayegh has shown, the Iranian intellectual Qadish Hijazi attributed female criminality to gender deviance and failed motherhood in the early 1960s.[7] Golnar Nikpour's contribution to this roundtable argues that this association between female criminality and failed motherhood was reflected in popular concerns about women's prisons in mid-20th-century Iran. As the number of incarcerated women increased over the course of the century, Iranian social critics expressed growing concern about the inability of incarcerated women to fulfill their duties as mothers. Nikpour shows that the Pahlavi state addressed these concerns by promoting gendered rehabilitation in prison factories. Through the performance of feminized labor, incarcerated women would learn to become citizen-mothers and citizen-wives, tying female criminality to gendered corporeality.

The association of female criminality with gendered corporeality also undergirds the work of feminist social critics. As Dalia Mostafa argues in her contribution to this roundtable, *The Women's Prison*, which was written as a stage play by Egyptian feminist Fathiya al-ʿAssal in 1993 and adapted into a television drama in 2014, presented incarcerated women as "imprisoned within their own feminine bodies." According to Mostafa, *The Women's Prison* suggests that at the intersection of patriarchy and class oppression, the female body and its emotions function as a prison, leading women to commit violent crime as a way of breaking free. In this sense, the refusal to accept patriarchal norms is a form of resistance rather than a form of gender deviance. Although this contemporary feminist reading challenges earlier conceptions of female criminality, it upholds the dominant tendency to attribute women's crimes to their gendered corporeality.

Although the roundtable explores what shifting conceptions of female criminality can tell us about broader historical changes, it leaves open the question of how these changes shaped women's lived experiences. How were criminalized subjects affected by anti-blackness, imperial racial politics, the sensationalization of women's criminal agency, and the gendered consequences of legal centralization? How might a historian recover these lived experiences? In cases where court records exist, "reading against the grain" can be useful. But as Moore suggests, "retrieving Black lives" from the silences of the archives requires new methodological tools that combine "rigorous historical and archival research with critical imagination and fictional narrative to refuse the limitations of the archive and highlight the historical subjects it disadvantages without reproducing its epistemic violence." Intersectional and decolonial approaches to the study of criminalized subjects require new ways of thinking about sources and archives through the adoption of interdisciplinary methodologies.

[7] Cyrus Schayegh, "Criminal-Women and Mother-Women: Sociocultural Transformations and the Critique of Criminality in Early Post–World War II Iran," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2, no. 3 (2006): 1–21.

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