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# Slavery at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Hudā Sha‘rāwī’s Memoirs as a Source of Social History?

## Introduction

In the last two decades there has been a growing research interest in slavery and the slave trade in Islamicate societies.<sup>1</sup> Given the nature of the primary sources that have come down to us, it is not surprising that the role of elite slavery has been investigated more often than that of non-elite slavery.<sup>2</sup> This scholarship has pointed out that slavery was a variegated micro-cosmos: for example, the position of white and black slaves was not homogeneous. Also, class played a fundamental role: elite slaves, who in some cases became very powerful and obtained extremely high administrative and political positions, could not be compared in any way to agricultural slaves.<sup>3</sup> Race and class also intersected with the gender of the enslaved person: being a man or a woman was certainly another axis of differentiation<sup>4</sup> and implied different roles, functions and forms of exploitation.

Most research on slavery has focused on the pre-modern period, with a number of recent exceptions that also looked at what happened to slavery dur-

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1 More recently see for example Babaie et al. 2004; Cuno/Walz 2010; Caswell 2011; Franz 2017; Gordon/Hain 2017. For slavery in the wider context of the Mediterranean, see Schiel/Hanß 2014. For “classics” on slavery in Islamicate societies see also Chafik 1938; Rosenthal 1960; Baer 1967; Pipes 1981; Hargey 1982; Mowafi 1985; Willis 1985; Lewis 1990; Ralph 1992; Savage 1992; Erdem 1996; Sagaster 1997; Toledano 1998.

2 More recently see for example Kunt 1983, 2014; Hathaway 2005; Zilfi 2010.

3 For an overview of the different kinds of slaves see Franz 2017.

4 This is something that was addressed by, for example, the ninth-century polymath Al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868–9). According to him ethnic group affected the status of eunuchs, comparing white (*ṣaqālība*) to black eunuchs. al-Jāhīz 1938, vol. 1: 119.

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**Note:** The idea of writing this chapter comes from Anke von Kügelgen’s interest in ego-documents, which is not only well represented in her research (see, for example, von Kügelgen 2006), but also in her teaching. During my first semester at the University of Bern, in the fall of 2020, she offered an MA seminar on “Autobiographien, Memoiren und weitere ‘Ego-Dokumente.’” During the same semester, I was offering an MA seminar on “Sklaverei und Abhängigkeit im Vorderen Orient.” Seeing the titles of the two courses one beside the other I asked myself how much we could learn on slavery from looking at autobiographical works and ego-documents, which is how I came to the idea of writing this chapter.

ing the transition to modernity.<sup>5</sup> When looking at slavery in the nineteenth and twentieth century there is one specific category of slaves that has been almost ignored, namely eunuchs. Indeed, research specifically focusing on eunuchs in Islamicate societies mostly looked at the pre-modern and early modern period.<sup>6</sup> However, even though eunuchs were seen by colonial officers and foreign doctors as a remainder of the past that needed to disappear as soon as possible, they still played a very important function in elite households.

This chapter will contribute to addressing this research gap. In the first part, I give an overview on slavery in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Egypt, focusing in particular on the legal path that led to its abolition. In the second part, I will look at medical sources on castration in modern Egypt, pointing out that eunuchs were seen in these sources as a sign of civilizational backwardness that had to disappear in the path to modernity. In the last part of the article, I focus on Saʿīd Āghā, a black eunuch who was part of the household of Hudā Shaʿrāwī (d. 1947), the leading Egyptian feminist and founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union (*al-Ittiḥād al-Nisāʿī al-Miṣrī*).

This chapter aims at contributing to the debate on the role that ego-documents, including memoirs, can have in reconstructing social practices of the past. Over the last twenty years, there has been a renewed interest in autobiographical and ego-documents documents in the Middle East. What Georges Gusdorf wrote in 1956, namely that autobiography has been proven to be a characteristic of Western societies and their focus on individuality,<sup>7</sup> has been shown to be wrong by a number of studies.<sup>8</sup> While the term autobiography has been object of numerous debates and critiques, the introduction of the term “ego-documents,” to refer to all kinds of “first-person narratives”<sup>9</sup> and to “encom-

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5 Toledano 1981; Ewald 1990; Cuno 2009; Zilfi 2010. Few studies on slavery in Egypt between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century have been published. Eve Troutt Powell, for example, has given a description of the discourses on slavery in the period 1881–1925 in the Nile Valley, but she was mostly interested in the construction of national and imperialist ideology rather than in slavery in itself. See Troutt Powell 2003 and 2013, but also Baer 1967; Børge 1977; Hargey 1998.

6 David Ayalon wrote a number of articles on the subject but his most important works in this field are probably Ayalon 1979 and 1999. See also Méouak 2004; El Cheikh 2005 and 2018; Kennedy 2018; Tolino 2018. For the Ottoman case see most notably Hathaway 2005; Kunt 2014; Junne 2016.

7 Gusdorf 1989 [1956].

8 Including Siedel 1991; Philipp 1993; Booth 2001; Reynolds 2001; Badran 2002; Enderwitz 2002; Elger 2003; von Kügelgen 2006; Reichmuth/Schwarz 2008; Elger/Köse 2010; Enderwitz 2019; Kiyannrad et al 2020.

9 Elger/Köse 2010: 7.

pass all texts with an ego talking about himself,”<sup>10</sup> has allowed to put some of these debates to rest. Memoirs, widely defined as non-fictional narratives based on the author’s memories, that do not necessarily span the entire life of the author but focus on specific moments, belong also to ego-documents. The focus in this chapter is not so much on the “self.” That would be impossible, because the memoirs were not written by a eunuch himself. However, looking at Hudā Sha‘rāwī’s memoirs can contribute to shedding light on how Egyptian nationalist elites understood slavery at the turn of the twentieth century.

## Slavery in Egypt in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century: The Path to Abolition

Slavery had been established in Islamic societies for many centuries well into the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> According to Baer, in the 1850s “the number of slaves in Cairo was 11,481, of whom 8,647 were females and 2,807 males.”<sup>12</sup> When looking at Egypt as a whole, Baer assumes that they were probably 20,000–30,000 slaves, and that the slave trade was still very much active and organized. According to him:

White slaves were brought to Egypt from the eastern coast and from the Circassian settlements of Anatolia via Istanbul. Brown and black slaves were brought (a) from Darfur to Asyut, directly or through Kordofan; (b) from Sennar to Isna; (c) from the area of the White Nile; (d) from Bornu and Waday via Libya and the Western Desert; (e) from Abyssinia and the East African coast through the Red Sea. The slave dealers in Egypt were mainly people from Upper Egypt and the Oases, beduin and villagers of the Buhayra province. They were divided into dealers in black and in white slaves and organized in a guild with a shaykh.<sup>13</sup>

The history of the abolition of slavery in Egypt, as in many other countries in the Middle East (and beyond), is strongly connected with the growing influence of Western powers in the region. During the second half of the eighteenth cen-

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<sup>10</sup> Elger/Köse 2010: 8.

<sup>11</sup> Slavery is an established legal institution in Islamic societies, but there is no clear-cut definition of it, and forms of slavery have been very different. Indeed, it has even been questioned whether it is appropriate to group so many different phenomena under the umbrella term of slavery (Franz 2017: 125; Brown 2019: 15–65). For general introductions to slavery in Islam see for example Toledano 1993; Marmon 1999; Franz 2017; Oßwald 2017; Brown 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Baer 1967: 423.

<sup>13</sup> Baer 1967: 441.

tury the influence of foreign authorities over Egypt grew enormously. Due to a number of overambitious infrastructural projects, especially during the khedivate of Muḥammad Saʿīd (d. 1863, r. 1854–1863) at first and later Ismāʿīl (d. 1895, r. 1863–1879), which included the construction of the Suez Canal, Egypt became more and more indebted towards European powers,<sup>14</sup> who imposed dual British and French control over the country.<sup>15</sup> The khedive Ismāʿīl's power gradually decreased until he was deposed in 1879 and succeeded by his more easily controllable son Tawfiq (d. 1892, r. 1879–1892). A few years later, in 1882, the British army bombarded Alexandria and invaded the Suez Canal as a reaction to the rebellion of the proto-nationalist ʿUrābī. Even though Egypt remained formally part of the Ottoman Empire, British authorities imposed de facto a form of colonialism that lasted at least until 1922, when Egypt formally obtained independence.<sup>16</sup> With the expansion of the foreign colony, consular offices gained importance and were able to exert wide influence on national politics. Foreign penetration would radically transform Egyptian history: one of the first effects would be the abolition of slave markets in 1854, followed by the approval of the Anglo-Egyptian Slave Trade Convention, which Egypt and Great Britain signed in 1877. With this convention Egypt agreed to stop the importing, exporting and trafficking of slaves.<sup>17</sup>

The approval of this convention should be seen as part of the anti-slavery global movement: in 1863 slavery was abolished in the United States, and there was a global public discourse on abolitionism, especially in the sphere influenced by the British Empire. However, the 1877 convention was mostly directed at the slave trade and not at slavery as such, which was addressed later in the Convention for the Suppression of Slavery and the Slave Trade in 1895,<sup>18</sup> signed by Lord Cromer for the British side and the Egyptian foreign minister Buṭrus Ghāli.

In this latter convention Egypt committed itself to prohibit the importing to, exporting from and transit through Egypt and its dependencies of different kinds of slaves (explicitly mentioning “white”, “black” or “Abyssinian” slaves). Moreover, the convention stated that not only slave traders but also buyers

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**14** Hunter 1998: 195.

**15** Hunter 1998: 195–196.

**16** However, the last British troops would only leave Egypt in 1954, two years after the 1952 coup d'état. For a concise but comprehensive overview of this phase of Egyptian history see Reid 1998 and Daly 1998.

**17** See Klein 2006: 377.

**18** This convention was based on the General Act for the Repression of the African Slave Trade, which was approved after a conference that took place in 1889–1890 in Brussels. See Miers 2006: 130–132.

would be punished and created an ad hoc court consisting of five members of the Appeal Court, including two foreigner judges. Last but not least, the convention stated that all slaves on Egyptian territory were entitled to their full and complete freedom and had the right to demand letters of enfranchisement whenever desired.<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding these steps, it would be naive to believe that slavery disappeared so easily, and this is also true for eunuchs. Eunuchs were mostly enslaved castrated men who formed an integral part of the ruling systems in different Islamic medieval dynasties. While it is well known that eunuchs were harem guardians, they were also established in other fields:<sup>20</sup> they were commanders, admirals, they had important positions in the police, in the administration, they were provincial governors, personal attendants of the caliphs and teachers of their sons, in a situation in which a strict closeness to the ruler meant power, but also guardians of the tomb of the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>21</sup> While eunuchs are often understood as a relic of the pre-modern period, we also have sources showing that eunuchs were important members of wealthy families well into the 20th century, as the case of Hudā Sha‘rāwī’s Memoirs shows.

## Eunuchs in Modern Egypt

Unfortunately, we do not have many studies on how the institution of slavery was dismantled practically, and even fewer with regards to eunuchs. Moreover, given the scarcity of sources written by eunuchs themselves, we need to reconstruct their life using sources written by people who lived with them or “observed” them. For example, we have a number of pre-modern sources that describe how the operation of castration was carried out in Islamic contexts, including for example the tenth-century medieval Arabic geographer al-Muqaddasī (or al-Maqdisī, d. 991/381).<sup>22</sup>

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**19** Convention between Great Britain and Egypt for the Suppression of Slavery and the Slave Trade, signed at Cairo, 21 November 1895, art. 5. In order to guarantee the implementation of this convention, Egypt adopted two laws, one on the convention itself and one on the establishment of the above-mentioned court.

**20** See Höfert/Mesley/Tolino 2018.

**21** Marmon 1996.

**22** He wrote that according to some people the penis and the scrotum were cut off at the same moment. According to others, the scrotum was cut and the testicles removed. Then a stick was put under the penis, which was cut off later. al-Muqaddasī 1906: 242.

The same is also true for the few modern sources, which describe not only how the operation was carried out but also what consequences it had for eunuchs from a medical perspective. For example, Antoine Barthélémy Clot (d. 1868), better known as Clot Bey, the Frenchman who became chief physician of the Egyptian army<sup>23</sup> and the mind behind the building of the Egyptian modern medical system, devoted a short part of his *Aperçu général sur l'Égypte* to women in Egypt. This chapter also includes a part devoted to eunuchs, who “are the only men to enter the women’s quarters, and are in charge of their virtue.”<sup>24</sup> Clot Bey stated that in his times, castration was carried out in particular in Asyut and Girga, in Upper Egypt, and that it was performed by Coptic priests.<sup>25</sup> He also adds that castration was carried on in autumn and that

the operators, or rather the executors, do not limit themselves, as it is generally believed, to castration; they cut with a razor all the external parts of the reproductive apparatus. After that, they pour boiling oil on the wound and insert a pipe in the remaining part of the urethra canal. They put then on the wound some henna powder. After that, they bury the patients till the stomach and they leave them for twenty-four hours. When they take them out, they put an ointment of clay and oil.<sup>26</sup>

Clot Bey also mentions that only one quarter of castrated men survived, and that they were, according to him, condemned to suffering for life, even though he recognized that “Muslims give them a big consideration.”<sup>27</sup>

Clot Bey was convinced that Western pressures would bring Muḥammad ‘Alī to abolish this practice, as “he is known for his docility to what is necessary and for his noble mind.”<sup>28</sup> Maybe he was too optimistic though: indeed, around half a century later, during the first congress of medicine that took place in Cairo in December 1902, the Italian doctor Onofrio Abbate Pasha (d. 1915), who migrated in 1845 from Italy to Alexandria to become director of the governmental hospital of the city, gave a passionate talk against castration. The paper he presented during the congress was then reworked and published in 1903 with the title *L’eunuchisme: notes physiologiques pour aider a son abolition complete*,<sup>29</sup> a source particularly worthy of attention because Abbate Pasha not only

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**23** For a short biography of Clot Bey see Burrow 1975. See also Abugideiri 2010, in particular ch. 2.

**24** Clot Bey 1840, vol. 1: 402.

**25** Clot Bey 1840, vol. 1: 403.

**26** Clot Bey 1840, vol. 1: 404.

**27** Clot Bey 1840, vol. 1: 404.

**28** Clot Bey 1840, vol. 1, 406.

**29** Abbate 1903.

examined many eunuchs but also performed autopsies on them.<sup>30</sup> He started his pamphlet by mentioning the difficulties that he had had in his research, because eunuchs were very reluctant to be put under observation or to be photographed.<sup>31</sup> Abbate Pasha makes clear that “eunuchism [...] is forbidden by Islamic law itself, and it constitutes a permanent danger for the women of the harem, from both a moral perspective, and for the terrible effects it has on the feminine organism.”<sup>32</sup> Later he explained that the cutting of the external sexual organs did not mean that eunuchs did not experience sexual arousal but rather the opposite, they felt continuously excited.<sup>33</sup> This sexual activity is probably what he thinks may affect also women’s health. He also argues that this is the reason why tribadism is completely unknown in harems.<sup>34</sup> He then goes back to the sources of Islamic law: he points out that the Quran does not mention this “barbarous custom”<sup>35</sup> and that Islamic law not only strictly forbids the castration of animals and human beings but also requires the complete *diyya* for it, which means that if the victim of this mutilation or his legal heirs forgive the person committing it, they would have to pay as much as in case of homicide.<sup>36</sup> He then gives a long historical excursus, arguing that the Greeks and Romans spread this practice to Byzantium and it then became widespread in the Islamic world, where it proliferated notwithstanding the religious prohibition.<sup>37</sup> After having presented how jurists dealt with eunuchs, Abbate Pasha goes back to the Quran and the Sunna, underlining that they both prohibit changing God’s creation.<sup>38</sup> After a description of the male reproductive system, he mentions the damage that castration causes to it and finally gives some information about

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30 Abbate 1903: 21

31 Abbate 1903: 6.

32 Abbate 1903: 6.

33 Abbate 1903: 25.

34 Abbate 1903: 25.

35 Abbate 1903: 13.

36 Abbate 1903: 15.

37 Abbate 1903: 9–10.

38 Abbate 1903: 14. The author says this happens in verse 4:18. In reality, he is referring to verse 4:119: “And I will mislead them, and I will arouse in them [sinful] desires, and I will command them so they will slit the ears of cattle, and I will command them so they will change the creation of Allah. And whoever takes Satan as an ally instead of Allah has certainly sustained a clear loss.” The prohibition about changing God’s creation is also mentioned in 30:30 (“So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know”). In both cases, Quranic exegetes often understood the change in God’s creation as a reference to castration. For the English version of the Quran, I am referring to the Saheeh International translation.

how the mutilation was carried on during his time. It was performed by the “djellabs” (*jallāb*, a term referring to the slave merchants), who “practice the cut doing a ligature with a particularly strong constriction, to guarantee the hemostasis. This ligature has the advantage to close simultaneously the veins that sometimes cause serious hemorrhages.”<sup>39</sup> Interestingly enough, this is one of the two methods for castration mentioned by the polymath al-Jāhīz ten centuries before. Abbate Pasha then gives us a hint about what ethnic groups were represented by eunuchs during his period: indeed, he mentions that eunuchs are only of “black or Abyssinian race,” and adds that he had heard that there were Circassian eunuchs brought to Constantinople but that he could not confirm this.<sup>40</sup> This may indicate that at that time in Cairo the *Ṣāqāliba*<sup>41</sup> eunuchs, coming from the Balkan region, were no longer very widespread in Egypt.

Abbate Pasha also mentions a *firmān* of Sultan Abdülmecid I for Muḥammad ‘Alī,<sup>42</sup> where the Sultan called him to make sure that his soldiers stopped this mutilation, referring to the conventions of 1877 and 1895.<sup>43</sup> He calls out reformists to suppress this practice, arguing that this is needed to respect the “modern notions of law and justice supported by the local religious laws and by

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39 Abbate 1903: 19.

40 “Gli eunuchi sono tutti di ‘razza’ nera od etiopica. Nella Cina, nel Giappone, nelle isole dell’Oceano indiano, ve ne sono o indigeni o dei neri trasportati. Tra le popolazioni musulmane se ne fa sempre una speculazione di contrabbando molto lucroso. Mi hanno assicurato esisterne dei casi tra le razze turcomanne, nel Lazistan, nella Circassia e portati a Costantinopoli o altrove. Non posso dire né se ciò é vero, né se sieno eunuchi propriamente o spadoni.” This passage is in Italian, as Abbate Pasha is mentioning a previous publication of his on the same topic. See Abbate 1903: 21–22.

41 The huge debate on the meaning of the term *ṣāqāliba* cannot be addressed here (see for example Mishin 1998) but it can be said that the term is more or less used in medieval Islamic sources to refer to Slavic and other peoples from the Balkan region.

42 Abbate Pasha erroneously attributes this *firmān* of 1841 to Mehmed II. In 1841, though, his son Abdülmecid I had already ascended to the throne. In this *firmān* he confirms the conditions of the former *firmān*, offering him also the provinces of Nubia, Kordofan, Sinnār and Darfūr. Moreover, he also adds that “from time to time it happens that some soldiers attack villages in these provinces, take young women and men as captives and keep them forcibly in exchange for a small payment. These things, if continued, will not only bring to the eradication and ruin of the people of these villages, but are also against our sacred and right Sharia. Both are not less bad than a thing that happens more frequently, namely the mutilation of men to guard the harem. This act is not conforming to our sublime will, and it is against the principles of justice and humanity as widespread nowadays, since I came to the throne of the Supreme Sultanate. So you should take these things into account and make sure they are not happening anymore.” Sāmī Pāshā 1928, vol. 2: 512.

43 Abbate 1903: 26–27.



its intellectual superiority.”<sup>44</sup> Abbate Pasha also sent a memorandum to the “big international powers” and a letter to the Grand vizier Mehmed Kâmil Pasha in which he appealed to the Quran, to the “sacred law of Islam” and to the exegeses to ask for the abolishment of this practice.<sup>45</sup>

We see here how Abbate Pasha tried to show how castration represents on the one hand a betrayal of the modern values of law and justice while at the same time calling on religious tradition to support his argument, something that would certainly resonate quite well with Egyptian contemporary reformists.

Abbate Pasha’s pamphlet confirms that, even though slavery had been abolished and castration prohibited, eunuchs were still present in Cairo. This is corroborated by other sources. For example, Kenneth Cuno pointed out that the harem of Tawfiq still contained sixty slaves and that his wife, Amīna, was said to receive the greetings of male guests through the chief eunuch of the harem.<sup>46</sup> The memoirs of Hudā Sha‘rāwī also confirm that eunuchs represented an important pillar of elite households.

## Hudā Sha‘rāwī’s Memoirs

Towards the end of her life Hudā Sha‘rāwī started to write her memoirs (*mudhakkirāt*), or rather to dictate them to her secretary ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Fahmī Mursī, and then entrusted her cousin Ḥawā’ Idrīs “to oversee the publishing of the memoirs if she died before her task was complete.”<sup>47</sup>

Hudā Sha‘rāwī was born in 1879 in Minya, in Upper Egypt, to a wealthy family. Her mother, Iqbāl, was a Circassian woman who arrived in Egypt after her father, a tribal chieftain, had been killed by the Russians during the invasion of the Caucasus. The family then fled to Istanbul, where they lived as refugees, until Iqbāl’s mother, ‘Azīza, decided to send the daughter to Egypt for her safety, under the protection of an Egyptian friend, ‘Alī Bey Rāghib, to live with her maternal uncle Yūsuf Ṣabrī Pasha, who, however, was on military duty at the time.<sup>48</sup> His wife, a freed slave of Circassian origin, refused to accept her. Iqbāl was then brought to ‘Alī Bey Rāghib’s house and lived with his family un-

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<sup>44</sup> Abbate 1903: 28.

<sup>45</sup> Abbate 1909: 657.

<sup>46</sup> Cuno 2003: 257.

<sup>47</sup> Shaarawi 1998: 1. On the memoir, see also Kahf 1998.

<sup>48</sup> Lanfranchi 2012: 1–2.

til she was married to Muḥammad Ṣultān Pasha, whose second wife had fallen into severe depression after the death of their son.<sup>49</sup>

Hudā's father, Muḥammad Ṣultān Pasha, was a respected and wealthy administrator, who rose up to the position of the Director of the Inspectorate for Upper Egypt, and later President of the Consultative Chamber of Delegates (*Majlis Shūrā al-Nuwwāb*),<sup>50</sup> but died when Hudā was only five. Before dying, he had nominated his sister's son, 'Alī Sha'rāwī Pasha, as guardian of Hudā, her brother 'Umar and his other children.<sup>51</sup> Sha'rāwī Pasha would later marry her.

Written in the early 1940s, Hudā Sha'rāwī's memoirs were published posthumously in 1981 by Dār al-Hilāl in Cairo. These memoirs "are considered one of the earliest (if not the earliest) nonfictional autobiographical works by an Arab woman to be published in modern Arab literary history."<sup>52</sup>

Hudā Sha'rāwī was mostly educated in French, and knew Turkish very well. However, she decided to write her memoirs in Arabic, even though this meant she needed the support of her secretary to do so, as she was prevented from learning Arabic properly: this has been defined as an act of "national awareness" but also as "at once a feminist and a nationalist act."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, it is impossible to understand her memoirs fully without taking into consideration her engagement in the nationalist and feminist struggles, which represent the two main aspects of her political engagement. While recounting her life, we come to understand when Hudā Sha'rāwī realized the discriminatory treatment she received in comparison with her brother, especially from another woman (her mother),<sup>54</sup> something that would shape her feminist consciousness. At the same time, her engagement in the nationalist struggle is central in the second part of the memoirs.<sup>55</sup>

As pointed out by Nada Ayad, there is a difference between a memoir and an autobiography: for example, Buss distinguishes a memoir from an autobiography stating that "memoir writers seek to make themselves part of public history, focusing on the times in which they lived,"<sup>56</sup> while according to Smith and Watson the key difference between the two genres is that "a memoir deals with

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49 Lanfranchi 2012: 2.

50 Lanfranchi 2012: 3.

51 Lanfranchi 2012: 7.

52 Al-Hassan Golley 2003: 36.

53 Al-Hassan Golley 2003: 37.

54 Al-Hassan Golley 2003: 40.

55 See in particular Badran 2002; Al-Hassan Golley 2003; Ayad 2017.

56 Ayad 2017: 120, quoting Buss 2002.

an exteriority of the subject, whereas the autobiography deals with interiority.”<sup>57</sup> This is less the case when looking at Arabic sources. Indeed, as Susanne Enderwitz wrote:

bevor in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts der Begriff *sīra ḡatiya* zur Bezeichnung von Autobiographien geprägt wurde, tauchte der Begriff *muḏakkirāt* (Memoiren) in der arabischen Literatur auf, ebenfalls eine moderne Wortschöpfung und vermutlich eine Lehnübersetzung aus dem Französischen, zumal in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts zahlreiche *mémoires* in Ägypten zirkulierten. Der Begriff ist heute zwar der Terminus für „Memoiren“, aber zugleich austausch- und kombinierbar mit *sīra ḡatiya*; außerdem können beide Begriffe auf fiktionale Werke angewendet werden, so wie man umgekehrt autobiographische Werke auch als *riwāya* (Roman) bezeichnet.<sup>58</sup>

Looking at Hudā Sha‘rāwī’s memoirs can give interesting insights into the social practice of slavery in a transition phase: indeed, slavery was formally abolished but slaves (or former slaves) were still considered part of the household, even in modernist and nationalist families like the Sha‘rāwīs. In the following part of the chapter, I will look more closely at her memoirs, and in particular at her relation with Sa‘īd Āghā.

## Hudā Sha‘rāwī’s Life and her Relation to Sa‘īd Āghā

We do not know very much about Sa‘īd Āghā’s life before he entered the Sha‘rāwīs’ household but we know that he played an important role in Hudā’s life, especially after the death of her father. Sania Sha‘rāwī Lanfranchi, Hudā’s granddaughter, tells us that: “Sultan Pasha’s two widows, however, continued to run the house from day to day with the assistance of the body of retainers left by Sultan Pasha, prominent among whom was Sa‘īd Āghā, the principal eunuch. Lala Sa‘īd, as he was affectionately known, was the family’s senior servant, whose duty was to keep the women safe.”<sup>59</sup>

Hudā mentions Sa‘īd Āghā in a number of other occasions. The first time we meet him is on one of the occasions that will make Hudā understand how different it is to be born as a male or as a female in a patriarchal society. She was taking lessons in Arabic, Turkish and French. “Our educator Sa‘īd Āghā,

<sup>57</sup> Ayad 2017: 120, quoting Smith/Watson 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Enderwitz 2002: 10.

<sup>59</sup> Lanfranchi 2012: 7.

who was accompanying us in every place, was present. The entire house was under his control, including the servants and our teachers.”<sup>60</sup> While Hudā was probably already fluent in Egyptian Arabic as a child, she soon realized she was not able to read classical Arabic, and in particular the Quran, and asked her teacher what was the reason for not being able to read without errors. When he told him that the problem was that she did not study the grammar, she asked him whether she would be able to read without errors, like him, had she learnt grammar. When he answered positively, she asked him to teach Arabic grammar to her. The following day, he brought a grammar book but when Sa‘īd Āghā saw it he asked the teacher what the book was. When he heard the answer, he told to him: “Take your book. She does not need grammar, because she will never become a lawyer.”<sup>61</sup> Hudā defines this as a trauma that had a violent impact on her, that made her hate the fact that she was a female as it represented an impediment to her education and her freedom.<sup>62</sup>

Sa‘īd Āghā used to call Hudā when she played after the sunset in the garden and order her with “a stern look” to change her clothes to go out for a walk with her brother.<sup>63</sup> They would then leave together, fearing that they had done something wrong and that either their teachers or the maids had complained to him. They used to go to Jabalāyya,<sup>64</sup> walking up the hill. If Sa‘īd Āghā had heard complaints about them, he would order them to find and bring him a branch and then to open their hands. He would then strike their palms till they cried. After letting them cry for a while, he would take a handkerchief and clean their tears, threatening them that if they did it again (whatever they had done wrong), they would receive a doubled punishment.<sup>65</sup> At this point a more nuanced portrait of Sa‘īd Āghā emerges. Unexpectedly, he then “acts as a child, plays with us, runs while we run behind him, and I was forgetting his badness thanks to the positive things that followed.”<sup>66</sup> ‘Umar, Hudā’s brother, usually resented Sa‘īd Āghā’s behaviour and informed his mother, saying “[t]hat *‘abd* has beaten me,” a term that could here mean both “slave” or “black.” When their mother had found out the reasons, she would then usually say: “This is your educator and does that for your own good.”<sup>67</sup>

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60 Sha‘rāwī 2012: 29.

61 Sha‘rāwī 2012: 29. For an English translation see also Shaarawi 1998: 40.

62 Sha‘rāwī 2012: 29. On this episode see also Troutt Powell 2013: 133.

63 Sha‘rāwī 2012: 34–35.

64 A part of the Cairene quarter of Zamalek.

65 Sha‘rāwī 2012: 35.

66 Sha‘rāwī 2012: 35.

67 Sha‘rāwī 2012: 35.

This may sound quite surprising to the modern reader: If beating a child was unfortunately acceptable and widespread as a means of education in that period, what is surprising is that Sa'īd Āghā could do that to the son of his master. This was somehow accepted by Hudā, who wrote: "I liked Lālā Sa'īd, because I felt his love and his loyalty, notwithstanding the severity he showed sometimes."<sup>68</sup>

He was seen, and probably also felt, as a member of the family. For example, Hudā recalls one case when they were on a carriage drawn by two Russian horses and the two horses started to gallop towards the Nile while crossing Qaṣr al-Nīl. Sa'īd Āghā hugged them and shouted: "Oh, children of my master!"<sup>69</sup>

Hudā takes this episode as a chance to tell us something more about Sa'īd Āghā and his origins that allows us to understand his position in the family better:

He was proud, self-confident, took pride in being part of our household. My mother really loved him and was extremely compassionate with him, because he was young when my father bought him, and then took care of his growing and schooling. He adored my father, and when he grew up, he redirected his love towards us. My mother appreciated his love to my father and to us after him. I grew up, appreciating and recognizing his great favor of educating us, and that had a big influence on me.<sup>70</sup>

Hudā was certainly living in an era of transition, but eunuchs were still very much in charge of enforcing what were considered proper behaviors for a woman. For example, Hudā describes the moment when she decided to buy clothes for herself for the first time. It seems clear that Sa'īd Āghā did not approve of that but he could not do anything, because Hudā had obtained her mother's permission. Still, he does his best to make her at least accept his rules:

That summer in Alexandria I had a first time experience. I had decided to buy my things from the Greek shops, notwithstanding the complains of Sa'īd Āghā, the disapproval of my household and their surprise. They were speaking about it as if I had disobeyed to the laws of Sharia. I had gotten the permission of my mother after a long struggle to persuade her, but I had to take with me my maids and Sa'īd Āghā, because it was not appropriate for me to go alone. I had to lower my headscarf over my eyebrows and to cover me so that nothing of my hair, my clothes or anything else could be seen. When we entered the shop the employees and the customers were surprised by this unfamiliar appearance, especially when they noticed the Āghā staring at them as if he were threatening them of the consequences of looking at us. The Āghā went quickly to one of the departments heads

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68 Sha'rāwī 2012: 35.

69 Sha'rāwī 2012: 35. For an English translation see Shaarawi 1998: 45.

70 Sha'rāwī 2012: 36. See also Troutt Powell 2013: 134.

and shouted: “Don’t you have a place for the ladies?”<sup>71</sup> The man indicated to him the ladies’ department and they called some female shop assistants to take care of me after putting a couple of screens to separate me from the other people in the shop. The youngest girl, seeing all of that, could not control herself and asked the Āghā from which village or family we came from. He stared at her very angrily and complained to the director for her baldness. The shop owner was about to fire her if not for me, because I begged him not to do that. I was extremely embarrassed for this behavior.<sup>72</sup>

Sa‘id Āghā seems here not only to be ‘protecting’ the women of the harem but also trying to enforce and reiterate patriarchal norms. Forcing the shop holder to put a screen between Hudā and the other clients, but also by his presence between her, her maids and the rest of the clients, Sa‘id Āghā seems almost to try to recreate a harem within the shop.

Sa‘id Āghā’s role as guardian of women’s proper behavior is also evident when he tries to convince Hudā, who at the time was 13, to marry his cousin and guardian ‘Alī Sha‘rāwī, who was 26 years older than her and already had a wife. The decision on the marriage was taken apparently after the khedive Tawfiq had expressed interest in choosing Hudā as the wife of one of his protégés. Hudā’s mother thought that promising Hudā to her cousin would be a valid excuse to avoid the khedive’s pressure and would save the family’s lands and estates.<sup>73</sup>

Hudā did not want to marry him, and Sa‘id Āghā had to intervene to convince her to accept the marriage:

Once a friend of mine came from Cairo to spend with me some days in Ḥilwān. I was very happy. I went out with her in the afternoon to show her all the splendor and beauty of Ḥilwān. We were going toward the station. Suddenly Sa‘id Āghā arrived with an angry face and told me: “Where are you going? Go back home immediately.” I complied unwillingly and we went back. Once I arrived home, I was surprised to find my Turkish teacher at the door. When I greeted her, I realized she had a white scarf in her hand. She immediately put it on my head and then put a *muṣḥaf* under my armpit. I did not get the sense of that. Then Sa‘id Āghā came followed by ‘Alī Bey Fahmy and by my aunt’s husband Sa‘d al-Dīn Bey. I ran to my room and when I saw them following me, I went towards the window giving them my back. ‘Alī Bey surprised me saying: “Your cousin ‘Alī Bey wants to marry you. To whom do you give the power of attorney?” In that moment I understood the meaning of all these preparations and all the strange things that were happening. I started to cry while giving them my back. After waiting for a while, Sa‘id Āghā came forward and whispered in my ears: “Do you want to make the spirit of your father angry and

71 In Arabic, *maḥall li-l-ḥarīm*.

72 Sha‘rāwī 2012: 59.

73 Lanfranchi 2012: 16.

destroy your sick mother? She is in her room suffering and crying and probably she would not cope with the shock if you refuse.”<sup>74</sup>

Whatever the reason, the marriage was effectively celebrated. However, one year later ‘Alī Sha‘rāwī went back to his first wife and had a child with her. Hudā separated from him for seven years,<sup>75</sup> and accepted returning to him only after he left his first wife. This happened in 1901, probably because Hudā had understood that her brother ‘Umar would never marry if she did not do go back to her husband, as he did not want to leave her alone with their mother.<sup>76</sup> Sa‘īd Āghā, a eunuch of the last generation of harem guardians, was somehow trying to fight to keep together a society that was slowly disappearing.

## Conclusions

This chapter focused on a specific category of slaves in modern Egypt, namely that of eunuchs, in a phase of transition. Even though slavery had already been abolished, it was still a very present institution. We do not know if something changed in Sa‘īd Āghā’s life after the abolishment of slavery in 1897. Certainly he remained part of the household as he had been before. Sa‘īd Āghā was not only a slave but also a castrated one. Eunuchs were considered by colonial authorities and foreign doctors as a strange phenomenon that could not be thought of as part of a modern society; the practice was supposed to be abolished as soon as possible but eunuchs were still part of local elites’ households, even those that were modernist and nationalist, like that of Hudā Sha‘rāwī.

When speaking about slavery in Islamic societies, it is very important to keep in mind the differences between different kinds of slavery. As put by Toledano when looking at the differences between domestic and agricultural slaves, which he defined as the most “slav-ish” of Ottoman slaves and officeholders, “it is quite obvious that what we are dealing with here is a continuum of various degrees of servitude rather than a dichotomy between the slave and the freeborn.”<sup>77</sup> Eunuchs were often powerful, respected, feared and seen as members of the household, at least to a certain extent. Still, they were in a clearly subordinate position. Certainly Sa‘īd Āghā had a certain authority in the family as he had, for example, the right to beat the son of his master in order to

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<sup>74</sup> Sha‘rāwī 2012: 49–50.

<sup>75</sup> Lanfranchi 2012: 20.

<sup>76</sup> Lanfranchi 2012: 30–31.

<sup>77</sup> Toledano 1993: 483.

‘educate’ him. From Hudā’s memoirs it is not clear whether he was considered a slave or not, but ‘Umar’s addressing him as *‘abd* seems to point in this direction.

Obviously, a source written by an elite woman can give us only a partial picture: for example, we do not know whether Sa‘id Āghā really saw himself as a member of the Sha‘rāwīs’ family, and we also do not know whether this was enough to balance the mutilation and the enslavement Sa‘id Āghā underwent. The scarcity of sources that have come down to us and were written by eunuchs and enslaved people makes it really difficult to reconstruct their lives. In this sense, autobiographical sources written by elite members, even though they cannot give a sense of what living as an enslaved person was like, can still contribute to reconstructing the complex picture of slavery in Islamicate societies.

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